

Chapter 26

Six Ares of Land: Resilience of City Dwellers in Russia

Louiza Boukharaeva

Abstract Louiza Boukharaeva describes how small garden plots became a source of resilience for residents of the Russian city of Kazan during the social and economic chaos that followed the breakup of the Soviet Union. In addition to being the primary source of basic food items as the large collective farms collapsed, the gardens provided a source of solace for Russians who were confronted with an ugly and fearsome past.

Keywords Food security • Subsistence gardening • Urban gardening • Horticultural therapy • Russia

The Post-Soviet Crisis

Suffering, or profound sorrow, is a marked characteristic of the Russian people. After the Soviet Union was dissolved on December 8, 1991, this sorrow was accentuated by the ensuing social and economic changes. Perhaps most disturbing were the conflicts in Chechnya, and repeated terrorist attacks. In spite of this, the Russian people were able to face social and economic chaos with a relative calm.

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The **are** is a unit equal to 100 square meters used for measuring land area. It is identical to the Russian 'сотка' (сотка, 'hundredth'), which is used to describe the size of dacha or allotment garden plots or small city parks where the hectare would be too large. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hectare>.

L. Boukharaeva (✉)
Department of Philosophy, Kazan Technical University,
10, K. Marx Street, Kazan, Tatarstan 420111, Russia
e-mail: louiza.boukharaeva@msh-paris.fr

In the 1990s, the Russian individual and collective memory remained marked by the remembrance of the repeated famines of the 1920s, the Second World War, and 1948. The periodic reappearance of food cards during the Soviet era had reared the specter of a return of famines. Then, between 1992 and 1998, the production of large collective farms declined by more than half for all important food staples including grains, sugar beets, meat, and milk. Whereas the Soviet regime had guaranteed stable employment, the fear of not being able to survive and to support one's family resurged with the increase in unemployment resulting from the collapse of industries, and with the considerable decline of revenues. Furthermore, the opening of the archives and the liberalization of information brought to light aspects that until then had been hidden in the history of the Russian people. The social, political, and religious repression, and forced deportations of the past were revealed, whereas previously the memory of these events had been buried and made part of family secrets.

The social repercussions were grave—an outbreak of alcoholism, incapacity of the health system faced with the appearance of AIDS, depression, and emergence of the Russian mafia. Russia experienced a considerable growth in suicide, homicide, and accident rates, resulting in a decrease in life expectancy from 63.8 years during the 1960s to 59.0 years in 2000 for males, and from 72.4 to 72.0 years for females (Federal Statistical Service of the Russian Federation, Moscow 2008).

But if one compares these social consequences with the effects of crises at other time periods and in other regions of the world, one is surprised that they were not more severe. There were rallies and riots, but they did not aim at further destabilizing the society. This relative calm did not result from the supposed passivity of the Russian people. It was in part attributable to the satisfaction of the portion of the population that had access to new liberties. It also can be explained by the existence of a non-commercial exchange sector that served as a shock absorber to buffer the crisis.

Urban Gardening at a Large Scale

This non-commercial sector consists of patches of land tended by small rural farmers and plots used by urban residents. In 2008, the urban parcels numbered 24.4 million (up from 1.3 million in 1990), and covered an area of 2.3 million ha. They included 14 million gardens, 3 million kitchen or vegetable plots, 120,000 dachas, and 7.3 million parcels slated for construction of individual homes (Minister of Economic Development of the Russian Federation, 2008). To this must be added a large number of non-inventoried parcels in urban and peri-urban areas, as well as a growing number of rural land purchases by city residents. A reasonable estimate would be about 25 million urban families having access to space for gardening. Beginning in 1998, federal legislation provided legal status for these efforts.

A Shock Absorber in the Midst of Crisis

Large scale urban gardening helped urban Russians to surmount the post-Soviet crisis in two ways. First, it had a considerable psychological effect. One of the comments most often reported during interviews with the Russian gardeners was that the time spent in the gardens permitted them to forget for a short time all this chaos and to de-stress. In Russia, the garden plot is perceived as a space at the same time open and protected. Together the tranquility and contact with nature allow people to reconnect with their deeper self, their liberty, and their creativity.

Although there has not been an official evaluation of the services rendered by urban gardening, the Union of Russian Gardeners in St. Petersburg claims that people having access to a garden live longer than others, due to reduced alcoholism among men. More than one third of urban dwellers spend part of their vacation in these spaces, which can be educational for the children and promote family stability.

Urban gardening also allowed families to avoid food shortages. Those with access to a garden in 1990 launched into production of potatoes, fruits, vegetables and medicinal plants in spaces which previously had been only marginally cultivated. New collectives of kitchen gardens and individual gardens were created. Thus, faced with the collapse of the large collective farms, urban gardens furnished the majority of basic food stuffs consumed by urban dwellers during the 1990s.

Today, as a result of the 'amnesty of the datchas' legislation, about half of these parcels belong legally to their users. Russia has one of the highest numbers of small landholders in the world. And urban Russians have demonstrated their resilience to crises that have led to conflict and chaos in other parts of the world.

References

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