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Russian Food As an Identity Marker: Russian Periodicals in Latvia in the 1920s and 1930s

Abstract: The present research is devoted to the problem of representation of Russian cuisine, or *Russian food*, as it is described in the Russian-language periodicals published in Latvia (Riga) in the 1920s and 1930s. For the purpose of this research, several Russian magazines and newspapers, namely *Segodnya* and *Dlya Vas*, were reviewed. *Segodnya* (“Today”, Russian: Сегодня) was a Russian-language newspaper published in Riga from 1919 to 1940. *Segodnya* had a comparatively well-developed network of foreign correspondents and offered its readers an extensive analysis of European affairs. The newspaper was widely available to Russian émigrés and was the most significant Russian newspaper with circulation outside of the USSR in the 1930s. *Dlya Vas* (“For You”, Russian: Для Вас) was a Russian-language magazine published in Riga from 1933 to 1940. Russian emigrant writers and journalists published their articles, memoirs, and novels both in *Segodnya* and *Dlya Vas*. Their texts of different genres describe the shared atmosphere of Russian emigration. Russian authors/émigrés tried to preserve their national and cultural identity through mentions and descriptions of food and beverages. National cuisine is a part of national identity, which becomes more relevant and important in the context of emigration.

Keywords: gastropoetics; cultural identity; Russian periodic; Latvia; national cuisine

The very concept of Russian national food/cuisine deserves a historical comment and cultural explanation. In the context of the present study, we will highlight two periods in the history of Russian culinary tradition which are well represented in the emigrant gastronomic discourse of the 20th century. The first

period – the period of The Napoleonic Wars – relates to the French invasion of Russia, known in Russia as the Patriotic War of 1812 (Отечественная война 1812 года). During this period of time the concept of Russian national cuisine was formed. Close contact and confrontation with different cultures (in this case French) had reinforced the need to draw the distinction between the Russian and foreign (i.e. Other) gastronomy. This in turn became the reason for the merging of peasant and noble cuisines. The second formative period of the Russian national cuisine occurred in the middle of the 19th century. At that time the merchantry (Russian: *kupechestvo*, купечество) had gained a lot of strength in the Russian society. The merchants were characterised by a vivid expression of their *Russianness* (русскость)¹ and primordality, which manifested through everyday culture and daily routines. Moreover, Russian national cuisine was withdrawn from its historical foundation, denied the dialectology of medieval cuisine and highlighted the consumption of common foods. Therefore, the final synthesis of peasant (folk) and European (noble) cuisines occurred in the 19th century (Карпан, 2013). However, it is important to stress the paradox of this situation: the Russian national cuisine appeals to tradition and history, but is simultaneously based on the concepts of new culture and its demands.

We therefore will be correct to state that Russian national cuisine was necessary for building national identity based on everyday life. On the other hand, the national cuisine became a “visible” construct in a vast array of related concepts (for instance, the national genius, national epos, etc.), which made it possible to broadcast norms of national gastronomic culture. In other words, the gastronomic behavior/culture was included into an array of national phenomena that correspond with perceptions of high society culture (Hobsbawm, 1991).

Special attention was devoted to the symbolic meaning of food, i.e., which food products, dishes, and beverages were included into the concept of national cuisine as an element of cultural identity. The selection of these dishes and beverages is defined by the idea of *prestige* of the food included in it². The notion

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- 1 The *Russianness* of Russian cuisine is well described in travelogues written by the travelers who visited Russia and described their perception of Russian traditions, i.e., cuisine and food preferences. See more, for instance, Legras, J. (1910). *Au pays russe*. Paris: Armand Colin; Кабакова, Г. (2014). *Русские традиции гостеприимства и застолья*. М.: Форум-Неолит.
 - 2 As an example, dumplings with meat could be mentioned here: it is well-known that dumplings historically were taken from non-Russian cuisine. Moreover, in the 19th century, both

of prestige of the food should be investigated in its historical context. The notion of prestige is based, on the one hand, on the *internal perception*, and is a part of national identity. On the other hand, it is heavily influenced by *external perceptions* – how travelers and non-Russian dwellers saw and interpreted Russian food practices. In other words, the description of the national cuisine can be construed from the perspective of both autostereotypes and heterostereotypes that use the same ideas about national cuisine and its characteristics.

This paper focuses on the Russian emigrant discourse explored through emigrant texts, which reflect the stereotyped image of Russian cuisine as a part of national belonging. It is well known that the culinary identity of an individual is formed and manifests itself most clearly during their time in emigration (Kapkan, 2013, 23). We therefore have grounds to think that every description of a meal or an ingredient represents a bigger story and every reference to a national dish is part of a cultural narrative. Memories about eating and cooking food as well as rituals associated with food consumption are major components of any national identity (Laudan, 2013). Thus, the descriptions of eating habits and food practices are filled with ideological and/or religious connotations (de Solier, 2013).

This research is focused on the texts from the popular Russian-language newspapers and magazines published in Riga during the interwar period (from 1920 to Nazi and Soviet occupation in 1940). The interwar period was characterised by an influx of Russian emigrants to Latvia; Riga became one of the centers for the members of the Russian White movement that fled from Russia³. This enhanced the presence of Russian culture in Latvia, including its gastronomic aspect.

dumplings with meat and with turnips were popular among the dwellers of Russian empire. But only dumplings with meat were included into the list of Russian national dishes. That happened because of the higher, more *prestigious* status of meat, and the low status of turnip, a peasant product.

- 3 The White emigration was the first and biggest of the four waves of Russian emigration, with nearly two million people leaving the country between 1917 and 1923. The exodus led people in three directions: with General Wrangel's army – from southern Russia via Constantinople (Istanbul) to Yugoslavia and Bulgaria; with Admiral Kolchak's army – from eastern Russia to China and Australia; and to western Russia (Finland, Poland, and the Baltic provinces), where Russians unexpectedly found themselves with an *émigré* status because of changes in the state borders.

The newspaper *Segodnya* was an independent Latvian newspaper published in Russian language from 1919 until June 1940. It was one of the biggest and most influential Russian newspapers in the Baltic States. Officially, *Segodnya* was not Russian émigré press, because it was founded in Riga by local publishers of Russian and Jewish origin – Brams and Polak. However, many Russian émigré authors regularly sent their articles, stories, and verses to be published in *Segodnya* and in an illustrated weekly magazine *Dlya Vas* which was published from 1933 to 1940. Thus, both *Segodnya* and *Dlya Vas* can be viewed as megaphones for the Russian émigré discourse. The newspaper *Segodnya* had become a newspaper popular in all Latvian strata that were reared in the Russian language culture. Newspaper headings included a variety of topics: politics, economics, culture and a large section at the end of the issue was devoted to advertising. The newspaper served as an information platform for men of commerce (Abyzov, 1990–1991); therefore, a large section of the newspaper was allocated for advertising and commercial announcements – among them advertisements of restaurants specialising in Russian cuisine or events “in the Russian style”. Under the auspices of the *Segodnya* business group, the magazine *Dlya Vas* also began to be published. It printed entertaining stories, detective and sensational novels by European and American authors, as well as reprints of Soviet authors (Абызов, 1990–1991).

If we take a closer look at the Russian-language periodicals published in Riga, we can easily notice that there is a specific set of dishes and food products that are used to represent Russian national cuisine and are considered as a part of the national gastronomic code. On the one hand, the criterion for identifying national dishes is the frequency of their usage in various subjects of conventional texts. On the other hand, the contextuality of the use is of definite importance here. Clearly, the mere mention of a dish or product does not place it among national food symbols. Therefore, the principle of selection was based on the contextual approach. The gastronomic text manifests itself most vividly in the description of a festive situation, since during festivities the concepts of community and nationality are brought to the fore. In Russian émigré discourse, such key holidays are Christmas, Shrovetide (Russian: Масленица, Maslenitsa), and Easter. In the Slavic folklore tradition, these calendar holidays are described as being universal, nationwide, worldwide (Кабачова 2014, 92). In order to make the material more specific, within the framework of the article we will focus

only on one of the abovementioned holidays and, accordingly, stereotypical dishes associated with it. Thus, the description of the Maslenitsa holiday is not complete without the mentioning of pancakes. Pancakes (Russian: *bliny*) are a traditional Eastern Slavic dish, especially popular among Russians. Pancakes fit into the calendar (winter-spring) and family (wedding-funeral) rituals; in Slavic folklore, they are associated with the otherworld – death and heavens (ССД, 1995, 193–196). Over time, pancakes remained as a mandatory dish only in connection with the celebration of Maslenitsa, yet as E. Berezovich notes, a stable combination of “Russian pancakes” (just like “Russian caviar”, “Russian vodka”, etc.) is recorded in Russian and has correlations in many other languages of the world (Березович, 2012).

So, pancakes are one of the most popular dishes or treats mentioned in different conventional texts written in the interwar period. Pancakes in Russian-language newspapers and magazines published in Riga and in memoir prose written in the interwar period are described as a Russian national dish (though it is well-known that pancakes are common to various cuisines and their origin is hardly Russian). In fact, many authors reflected on the origins of pancakes, and it became a separate topic of many different feuilletons published in *Segodnya* and *Dlya Vas*. Let’s take a look, for example, at the humorous text “International Pancakes” (Международные блины) by Lery published in *Dlya Vas* in the late 1930s. Lery was the pen name of Vladimir Klopotovskiy (Владимир Клопотовский), Russian journalist, writer and poet, who was a popular permanent author of *Segodnya* and *Dlya Vas* (Абызов, 1996). In his feuilleton, Lery utilises the stereotypical concepts associated with Russian culture, the so-called *recognizable set* of Russian export goods, including the Russian ballet, vodka, and pancakes:

Шумит февраль, сверкают дали,
При пробуждении весны,
И в европейском карнавале
Дымятся русские блины.
Не только водкой и балетом
Прославлен старый русский быт –
И блин, являсь пред белым светом,
О русской славе говорит.

На блин теперь в Европе мода,
Блины везде в меню вошли,
Уйдя от русского народа,
И от своей родной земли.
Не только в русских ресторанах
Блины на масляной видны –
Едят во всех известных странах
Международные блины.
[...]
В другой стране дела такие,
Что в ней настал блинов закат,
И даже в глубине России,
блинов уж больше не едят.
Блин переправлен там в полпредства
Со всей зернистой икрой,
Являясь радикальным средством
Подкармливать прогнанный строй.
И в прочих городах всемирных
Блины теперь везде едят,
И от блинов румяных, жирных,
Стоит в Париже блинный чад.
Едят их русские шоферы,
Забыв про постный свой режим,
И барышни и офицеры
Блины с плиты подносят им.
Едят блины и в чудной Риге,
Хозяйки кои там и тут,
По старой поваренной книге
Блины прекрасные пекут (Лери, 1939).

[February is booming and the horizon is shining,
When spring awakens.
And in the European carnival
Russian pancakes are smoking hot.
Not only vodka and ballet

Are the glory of the old Russian way of life -
 A pancake brought to the beaumonde,
 Bespeaks Russian glory as well.
 Pancake has become popular in Europe now,
 Pancakes are everywhere on the menu,
 They have taken their leave of the Russian people,
 And of their native land.
 Not only in Russian restaurants
 Pancakes are present during the Shrovetide week,
 But they are eaten in all the famous countries
 As international pancakes.
 [...]

In other countries it appears
 That a pancake era has come to an end,
 And even in the very depths of Russia,
 Pancakes are no longer eaten.
 Pancakes with black caviar
 Have become attributes of embassies
 And are a radical way
 To feed the rotten political system.
 In other cities of the world
 Pancakes are eaten everywhere now
 Paris smells with golden and fat pancakes,
 Russian chauffeurs eat them,
 Forgetting about their lean regime,
 Both ladies and officers
 Serve themselves pancakes from the stove.
 They also eat pancakes in wonderful Riga,
 Where housewives bake excellent pancakes
 According to an old cookbook].⁴

The political subtext is very significant here, as Klepotovsky-Lery utilises the culinary discourse to draw the reader's attention to the topics of current interest, pointing out the increasing rates of poverty and hunger throughout Soviet Russia.

4 All translations from Russian are made by the author – S.P.

The description of the pancakes may be perceived as ironic, as the author's nostalgic feelings for a bygone world, which in this case refer to both his youth and pre-revolutionary Russia. Let us take a look at another example – a “Poem about Pancakes” (Поэма о блинах), also by Lery:

Февраль, балы и маскарады
Златые навевают сны,
Пришла пора, и люди рады
Вновь есть «широкие» блины.
Ах, блин с икрой и со сметаной
И масле, льющемся чрез край,
Не растравляй, о друг мой, раны,
И вообще не раздражай!
Была пора, без счет ели,
Блины и счастлив был едок,
Затем, что люди не имели
Тогда мучительных изжог
В течение масляной недели.
Пеклись блины, была икра,
И планетарные попойки,
И кутежи, и «гайда-тройки»
От вечера и до утра.
Давно забыт стиль этот блинный,
И дикий масляный размах, –
Блин ныне не наводит страх.
Но с розовой лососиной
Имеет европейский вид
И возбуждает аппетит... (Лери, 1938).

[In February, the balls and masquerades
Bring sweet dreams
The time has come and people are happy
To eat the “big” pancakes once again.
Ah, pancake with caviar and sour cream
With overflowing butter

My friend do not tease me,
Or provoke me in any other manner!
There was a time when we ate pancakes without counting,
And the eater was happy,
In those times people didn't have
The excruciating heartburn
During the Cheese-fare week.
Pancakes were baked, there was caviar,
There were large-scale drinking bouts,
And merrymaking, and troika rides
From evening till morning.
Such pancake style has long been forgotten,
Together with the wild sweep of the Cheese-fare week,
The pancake does not inspire fear any longer.
But is consumed with pink salmon
Has a European look
And whets the appetite ...]

In another text by Lery, “The Truth About Pancakes” (Правда о блинах), the author again uses the pancake as a nostalgic symbol of his bygone youth:

И лишь в туман воспоминаний, я погружаюсь — мне всегда
Оттуда светит блин в сметане
Как путеводная звезда.
Когда-то в «юности мятежной»
И для меня цвела пора
И привлекал меня блин нежный,
А с ним и семга, и икра (Лери, 1937).

[As I dive in the fog of memories,
From there, always like a guiding star,
Shines a pancake in sour cream.
Once in the times of “rebellious youth”
There was a time of blooming for me
When the delicate pancake appealed to me
As well as salmon and caviar]

It is also worth noting that it was customary to eat pancakes with fish on Maslenitsa. In the feuilletons of Klopotovskiy-Leri, and especially in the ironic article by M. Rizhskiy “How Pancakes Are Eaten in Riga” (Рижский, 1940), numerous fish garnishes served with pancakes are noted: in addition to “classic” caviar (red and black), there is herring, sprats, anchovies, salmon, as well as “local” sprats and lampreys. Such a combination of food may have folkloric roots: in Slavic traditional culture, fish and pancakes both function as dishes for memorial services and wake ceremonies (ССД, 1995, 196). This notion is preserved in the genre of Russian riddles as well: “The banks are iron, water is not water, fish without bones” (the answer is pancakes) (Даль, 1862).

As it is seen, the image of pancakes as a Russian national treat is constructed in the context of the Russian Shrovetide feast. Another popular local author, Irina Saburova (Ирина Сабурова), a Russian writer, poet, translator, and magazine editor born in Riga, published a story called *Forgiveness Sunday* (Прощенное Воскресенье, 1934) in the *Dlya Vas* magazine. Here the author focused on describing the atmosphere of Shrovetide, focusing on the gastronomic part and rituals:

Maslenitsa (Shrovetide) was celebrated cheerfully and noisily. After a lively debate about what kind of pancakes to bake – white or buckwheat – it was decided to make both of them, and the third portion—half-and-half. Uncle Petya especially insisted on the latter, eating forty or more of them, and the most surprising thing was that he did that without drinking. He didn’t consume vodka or wine, although he always walked with a blue nose. He himself went to the city for caviar and other food, moreover, bitterly reproached his grandmother, who made a long list:

- We lived to a ripe old age, but we didn’t grow any wiser. Five pounds of red caviar, five pounds of black caviar. It’s outrageous! Extravagance! There is a revolution in Russia, but you have caviar! No governor’s reception balls now, that’s enough. It is necessary to learn how to live, mother! Yes.

But when he went and brought twice as much, it was time for grandmother to be indignant. Who will eat that? But [eaters] were found. An unexpectedly large number of guests arrived. [...] But then there were very tasty pancakes, with a crust, soft, melting in the mouth... (Сабурова, 1934)

So, pancakes are also perceived as a festive treat (meal) eaten on Orthodox Forgiveness Sunday (Russian, Прощенное Воскресенье). Forgiveness Sunday

is the culmination of the Shrovetide week, it is the day before the start of the Great Lent (Fast). In the next quotation, pancakes are mentioned again in the context of a Russia lost, as a fragment of emigrant discourse: “Nina Pavlovna invites us for pancakes this Sunday. [...] Boring emigrant pancakes. We talked about Russia [...]” (Сабурова, 1934).

The cited excerpts mentioning Russian pancakes demonstrate a typical focal point of émigré discourse – national dishes and beverages take on nostalgic connotations, a longing for the past, which is brought to the fore in a festive situation. Such a standpoint is typical not only for the researched historical period and texts under consideration, but it can also be said that in general, food can become an object for memories and come to be associated with them. For example, nostalgia for the Soviet past is often fixed on food and drinks (Келли, 2011).

When discussing the Russian gastronomic traditions, it is important to mention the beverages as well as the foods. Often the authors of travel literature (travelogues) describe Russian Shrovetide or Orthodox Easter as a drinking competition. Foreign travelers of 18th–19th centuries, when talking about Russian traditional festivals, usually mention the copious amounts of alcohol (Кабакова, 2014, 52), most notably vodka. In the texts published in Riga in Russian-language periodicals, vodka is also portrayed as, on the one hand, a national beverage, and on the other – as a mandatory element of Russian festivities, like Easter or Shrovetide. Irina Saburova in her short story describes the Shrovetide feast celebrated by Russian actors in Riga:

It was decided to celebrate Maslenitsa in a small provincial theater, with poor, shabby, gray and tattered decorations, where all the “props” were placed in one room, where there were often not enough bulbs for spotlights and the temperature in the hall reached three degrees, but where there were young actors who were in love with their work and with each other, who had a great sense of vanity and not very great talents. [...] There were only several thin, cold pancakes on the plates. But lots of vodka. Almost no one drank from shot glasses. “We are actors” [...] they drank from table-glasses – in the amount of a matchbox. That was the measurement. Some put them upright [vertically], others on the side [horizontally]. It was poured accordingly. Both men and women, almost the same. That was the right way. It was very noisy, very inebriating and a little bit of fun.

Tragedians told jokes, comedians fell into lyricism and smashed dishes on this occasion. Without vodka, of course. (Сабурова, 1934)

The reader's attention is also drawn to the reviews of Russian gastronomic life in different émigré centers. Newspaper *Segodnya* regularly published articles on the topics of Russian culinary life abroad, i.e., in emigration. For instance, an article by Lery "The Exhibition of Gluttony. A letter from Paris" (Выставка чревоугодия. Письмо из Парижа) describes "the first exhibition of cooking and gastronomy" opened in Paris in 1927. The author particularly focuses the reader's attention on the description of the so-called *Russian booth*:

The stop at the Russian department turned out to be quite long. The French guests were able to ascertain that Russian gastronomy had not become scattered in emigration and appeared at the exhibition in a rather extensive form, in an independent pavilion. The minister and his retinue with visible pleasure had a shot of vodka russe and tasted caviar russe and other Russian products, which were cordially offered to them by the Russians. As a result, a strong "ministerial" handshake and gratitude to the secretary of the Russian department, Mr. A. I. Aga and Mr. Falik, the owner of a famous Russian sausage shop in Paris. The Russians are brimming with joy. (Лери, 1927)

As usual, the emphasis is placed on the *typical* Russian products, like vodka and caviar. Actually, caviar is one of the most popular products mentioned when discussing Russian national cuisine. Since the 17th century, foreigners often mentioned caviar and different ways of its preparation in their travelogues (Кабакова, 2014, 44–45). In the 18th and 19th centuries, caviar was not yet perceived as a luxury product, but rather considered an exotic Russian food. But in 19th and 20th centuries, it acquired the status of a very expensive meal, and became a symbol of Russian national cuisine – for both foreigners and Russians themselves.

Another aspect, which is reflected in the Russian-language periodicals published in Riga, is the political subtext that is also included in the culinary discourse. To illustrate our point, we look a look at a caricature published in *Segodnya* in 1921:

Широкая русская масленица в 1914 г.



в 1921 г.



In the caricature we see the Shrovetide celebration in 1914 (in Tsarist Russia before the Revolution) and the celebration in 1921 (in Soviet Russia); the caption below reads: “A wide Russian carnival / A great Shrovetide”. In the first picture we see an abundant festive table (with pancakes and caviar), and a couple sledding on a *troyka* (a type of carriage) to *Strel'na* (Стрельня, a popular vacation spot located near Saint Petersburg). And in the second picture we see the so-called Soviet Shrovetide: a long line of people waiting to get to a bread store and a woman pulling a coffin on a sled in the foreground. Thus, the gastronomic metaphors become a common trope of the emigrant discourse, and they are used to describe the political and cultural opposition between pre-revolutionary

Russia (rich, happy, abundant) and contemporary Soviet Russia (poor, hungry, and lacking basic foodstuffs). We can see this trope used in the memoirs of Andrey Sedih⁵. In his memoir *Where Russia Was* (Там, где была Россия), in his descriptions of life in Riga in the 1920s, the author writes about a chance meeting with a Soviet raftsman, who had come to Riga on a business trip:

[...] But when the rafts are driven to Riga and sold for sawing, then, the raftsmen have several days of rest and extra money in their pockets. On such days, raftsmen walk around the city, stop in amazement in front of the shop windows, look with greedy eyes at loaves of white bread, at boxes of eggs, hams, sausages, barrels of butter ... There is plenty of everything – there are no queues, no ledgers, you can go in and buy whatever your heart desires [...] (Седых, 1930, 30).

So, in conclusion, we see that the topic of Russian national food and cuisine is widely represented in the texts of Russian émigré press in Riga in the interwar period; it is an integral part of the concept of national identity. Obviously, within the framework of one article, it is impossible to discuss in detail all the dishes attributed to Russian national cuisine. The description of other key holidays for the Russian emigration, such as Easter and Christmas with their set of food symbols (paskha, kulich, etc.), were left out;

also, the study of Riga's Russian restaurants with their menus of national cuisine, which were popular during the period under review, was not included. A separate topic for research within the framework of the stated problematics may be publications under the heading *For Housewives* (Для хозяек) in the Russian-language newspaper *Evening time* (Russian, *Vechernyeye Vremya*). This section was devoted to culinary recipes, including Russian national dishes. Such culinary sections were also designed to maintain (preserve) national identity in the context of emigration.

On the one hand, the descriptions of dishes and references to beverages and food products do carry a nostalgic feeling. As Warren Belasco and Phillip Scranton have mentioned in their work *Food Nations: Selling Taste in Consumer Societies* (2002), national cuisine is not a purely gastronomic phenomenon,

5 Андрей Седых, the pseudonym of Yakov Cvibak (Яков Цвибак), Russian writer and journalist who emigrated from Soviet Russia and lived in Riga and Paris.

but rather a tradition that is created by using different cultural, political and marketing strategies. In exile, this tradition manifests itself even more clearly. Thus, the topic of Russian cuisine as an integral part of national identity is significant in the context of cultural and political exile.

Funding information: This research was supported by the Latvian Council of Science under the project “National Identity: Gastropoetic Aspect. Historical, International and Interdisciplinary Contexts”, No. lzp-2019/1-0294.

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