

# 'Wiggle your Wits!' Social Restructuring and the Transformation of Entertainment Genres in Today's Russia

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*Among print genres that soared in popularity after the fall of socialism, crossword puzzles have been prominent, with their monthly sales reported around 36 million copies in 2001–02. Drawing on ethnographic observation, interviews with crossword readers, traders and publishers, as well as on analysis of the puzzles themselves, I argue that the Russian crossword boom is an instructive case of how forms of popular entertainment are borrowed and re-appropriated to serve distinctively local cultural logics. More specifically, the recent popularity of crossword puzzles has to be viewed in the context of the sweeping changes in the social structure of the Russian society. In the face of multiple dislocations of postsocialism, of frustrated expectations and unfulfilled claims, the changed genre of crosswords, far less high-brow and encyclopaedic than its Soviet predecessor, offered a wide circle of Russians a vocabulary for articulating their claims of cultural competence and, increasingly, of moral worth, and allowed them to imagine themselves as a moral community juxtaposed to the hostility of the surrounding world.*

In the winter of 2001, commuters in the Moscow subway system could regularly hear the following jingle:

Greatest pastime for the nation,  
Pastime that expands your mind.  
Give to everyone a scanword<sup>1</sup>—  
The entire country will grow smart!

The jingle, which also played on several national TV and radio channels, was followed by text extolling the benefits of a particular weekly puzzle periodical, *Tri Semerki*

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(*Three Sevens*). With its circulation of 1,300,000 copies, this weekly was at the time the leading puzzle publication in the country, and in fact needed little commercial advertising, especially in the subway where one could hardly spend ten minutes without bumping into a passenger armed with a puzzle book and a pencil. Ready supplies of fresh puzzle collections were sold at every station and subway crossing, and were displayed in news kiosks more prominently than less colourful (and far less popular) regular daily newspapers. Market surveys reported 68% of all Russians to be to be occasional crossword solvers.<sup>2</sup> The puzzle craze was in full swing.

Given the scope of changes that have occurred in Russia over the past 20 years, a boom in crosswords' popularity pales in significance when compared with the major economic, political and sociocultural transformations that accompanied the fall of socialism. It is tempting, then, to consider it merely a curious anecdote, a cultural quirk which would, no doubt, fade with the passage of time. But this would only partially be true, or rather, this is only true if one ignores the many complex connections that tie any cultural trend to the economic and institutional realities of its time. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, the crossword puzzle industry was situated at the intersection of post-Soviet career trajectories, monetary flows, cultural deficits and moral and symbolic anxieties. When seen in this context, this industry and the cultural 'product' it generates become microcosms of issues and dilemmas that lie at the very heart of the postsocialist condition.

This paper proposes a sociological reading of the puzzle boom in postsocialist Russia by approaching it in the spirit of Wendy Griswold's (2004) 'cultural diamond', i.e. by concentrating on the interplay between four analytically distinct elements: the social world, cultural creators, cultural objects, and cultural audiences. The fieldwork from which it emanates took place in Moscow in 2001–02. It consisted of participant observation in public spaces where puzzles are sold and solved (public transport, stores and marketplaces, security posts, etc.), interviews with several editors and marketing directors of popular puzzle editions, collection and analysis of the puzzle periodicals themselves, and four focus groups with puzzle solvers, which were conducted in February 2003.<sup>3</sup> In order to situate the Russian puzzle boom in a comparative perspective, I have drawn on informal interviews and e-mail exchanges with several members of the American National Puzzlers League, including the editor of the *New York Times* crossword puzzles Will Shortz. The central focus of this paper, however, is on Russia, and while all face-to-face fieldwork encounters took place in Moscow, this study also draws on opinions and voices of puzzle aficionados from the Russian regions, whose letters are routinely published on the pages of puzzle periodicals.<sup>4</sup> The interpretations that it advances, therefore, can be expected to apply not merely to the puzzle boom in the Russian capital, but to the significance that this entertainment genre holds in postsocialist Russia more generally.

## A Brief Foray into Crossword History

*The Encyclopaedic Dictionary of the Russian Language* defines *crossword* as a ‘type of puzzle involving the uncovering of words’. The term itself, it seems, was still a neologism in 1954, when the monumental 5-volume dictionary was published; *The Users’ Dictionary*, published 19 years earlier, lacks this entry, although it abounds with other unexpected (and less historically successful) examples of linguistic borrowing, from *krossing* to *kross-kantri*. But while dictionaries may have been reluctant to embrace the new word, the practice itself traces its history in the USSR to 1929—a dark year, better known as the turning point in Stalin’s struggle with his opposition, and the onset of the first Five-Year Plan. It was in May 1929 that the first crossword puzzle was published in the thin popular monthly *Ogonek*; several years later, other magazines and newspapers followed suit and from late 1940s, the puzzle became a standard component of the last page in many periodicals (Zemliak, 2001).

Popular as they were, crosswords in the USSR never reached the level of puzzle mania recorded in Western Europe and the USA in the 1920s. American crosswords, which initially appeared in New York’s *Sunday World* in 1913, branched off into a separate industry in 1924 with the publication of the first edited crossword puzzle book, which soon triggered further puzzle collections and dictionaries, the debut of intercollegiate crossword tournaments and national clubs, and even the introduction of crossword-themed fashion shows.<sup>5</sup> The craze, which quickly spread to Great Britain and the Continent, was described by newspapers variously as a public menace and as a marvellous educational medium for the masses. It was, no doubt, in the latter capacity that crossword mania was taken up in 1925 by the Russian *émigré* community in France and Germany, where crosswords (or *krestoslovitsy*, as they were labelled by Vladimir Nabokov who, during his years in Berlin, tried his hand in their construction) became sites for the never-ending struggle of the emigration for the purity of the Russian language.<sup>6</sup>

But even if the success of crosswords in the USSR was somewhat less spectacular (at least when measured in the currency of national championships and themed fashion shows), this genre nevertheless occupied a solid place in the pantheon of methods for popular education—a project that was, of course, at the very forefront of Soviet cultural policy. The task of raising *kul’turnost’* (i.e. the cultural level of the masses) presupposed, in the eyes of the Soviet authorities, inculcating standards of good taste and civilized behaviour and broadening cultural horizons in all areas of life.<sup>7</sup> No practice was too minute or insignificant for the reformist project of *kul’turnost’*, and crossword puzzles provided ample opportunities for the kind of everyday cultural refinement that it prescribed.

By and large, the classical crossword puzzle was a modernist creation. Cultural principles of the Enlightenment—the cult of rationality, erudition, faith in the ultimate knowability of the world—found their graphic expression in Cartesian grids of intersecting words. The classical crossword rested on faith in strict and unambiguous correspondences between words and their definitions, in the objective

nature of knowledge, and in the reliability and irrefutability of positive truth criteria. Soviet-era crosswords were not fundamentally different in this respect from puzzles published in US newspapers between the 1950s the 1980s, and especially between 1977 and 1993, when the crossword tone was set by the *New York Times* puzzle editor Eugene Maleska.<sup>8</sup> In both cases, clues had a heavy academic bent and placed much emphasis on the knowledge of fairly obscure facts. The look of the puzzle, as well as the rules for approaching it, were fairly straightforward and uniform: the shape of the puzzle grid was symmetrical, the size of squares allotted for the letters—rather small (see Figure 1). Longish clues were listed on the side and demonstrated little inventiveness or adventurousness (usually they offered standard encyclopaedia-like characterizations through genus and specific variation), but offered few give-aways; the definitions presumed a certain level of erudition, and the few intersections any given word had with others did not give much material for second-guessing. The point was not to entertain, but to educate; in fact, the type of intellect this type of pursuit fostered was much safer for the stability of the Soviet order than an intellect of a more subversive variety; it hinged on accumulation of knowledge regarding a mass of unrelated facts, but hardly fostered critical thinking.

**Кроссворд**

**ПО ГОРИЗОНТАЛИ:** 5. Наука об устном народном творчестве. 7. Сильный ход. 8. Душевное качество. 11. Свинья или телёчья грудина. 12. Стихотворение М. Светлова. 14. Тонкая хлопчатобумажная ткань. 16. Мелконосая душистая трава. 18. Город и порт во Франции. 19. Повесть А. Kupрина. 20. Ценная лососевая рыба. 22. Небольшой грузовой автомобиль общего назначения. 24. Кусок или отрезок ткани. 25. Коллегиальный орган для ведения руководящей работы. 27. Действующее лицо оперы М. Мусоргского «Борис Годунов». 29. Сердечное, ласковое отношение, соединённое с гостеприимством. 30. Автор повести «А зори здесь тихие...». 31. Небольшая лесная птица. 32. Отрасль плодоягодного растениеводства.

**ПО ВЕРТИКАЛИ:** 1. Крупный железнодорожный узел в Белоруссии. 2. Повествовательное народно-повитческое произведение. 3. Деревянное укрепление в пограничной полосе древнерусских княжеств. 4. Персонаж комедии Д. Фонвизина «Недоросль». 6. Низовая административно-территориальная единица в ГДР, Болгарии, Югославии. 9. Станция Филевской линии Московского метро. 10. Полное согласие в мимиках, действиях. 13. Концентрированная жидкость для консервирования пищевых продуктов. 14. Река в Туркмении. 15. Плод фруктового дерева. 17. Лесоматериал в виде узких дощечек для паркета, бондарных изделий. 21. Иллюстрированный журнал. 23. Платиновый металл. 26. Смотр караулов перед отправлением их на посты. 28. Река, впадающая в Рыбинское водохранилище. приток Волги. 29. Марка телевизора.

**ОТВЕТЫ НА КРОССВОРД, ОПУБЛИКОВАННЫЕ 30 ДЕКАБРЯ**

**ПО ГОРИЗОНТАЛИ:** 5. «Перикла», 6. Мышление. 7. Ашхабад. 8. Халва. 9. Нолли. 13. Пикадор. 16. Омнибус. 18. Адаптер. 19. Театрал. 21. Ноктюрн. 23. «Сиверко». 24. «Детвора». 27. Корабль. 28. Унция. 29. Диана. 30. Пантера. 31. «Мосфильм». 32. Пелерина.

**ПО ВЕРТИКАЛИ:** 1. Перманент. 2. Плюшкин. 3. Бывалов. 4. «Риголетто». 7. Автобиография. 9. «Новоарбатский». 12. Профессор. 14. Альтитуда. 15. «Варриадис». 17. «Стено». 18. Алунд. 20. Свешников. 22. «Хованщина». 25. Кобальт. 26. Кларнет.

Figure 1 Soviet crossword puzzle. *Vecherniaia Moskva*, January 6, 1984. Published by *Vecherniaia Moskva*. Reproduced with the publisher's permission.

## The Hybrid Logic of Postsocialist Puzzles

The puzzles that flooded the market during the post-Soviet era may share their predecessor's name, but are, in fact, quite different in form and content. To begin with, contemporary puzzles are much easier to complete for a number of reasons. By virtue of destroying the cold symmetrical grid of classical puzzles, today's publishers provided for many more intersections between words, which creates cues and opens space for guessing (see Figures 2a and 2b). The definitions, which are typically put into the grid themselves, are kept short (the letter limit for definitions in *scanword*, the currently dominant variation on the crossword in which practically all puzzle space is filled with squares, is 33 characters). As a result, they are substantially sloppier with definitions, both because one can count on additional cues provided by the intersecting letters, and because there is no space for nit-picking in the definitions. It is not uncommon to come across clues that are, strictly speaking, wrong (such as, for example, 'a theorem vice versa'—the answer is supposed to be 'axiom') or at least, rather far from the mark ('depiction of nature' → 'view', 'theatre pit' → 'row'), relying much more heavily on loose associations than on knowledge and erudition. Other clues are practically give-aways: a photo or a sketch, first name of a celebrity whose last name is given, dots in place of a word in a well-known proverb or brand name, and so on. Yet another type are clues relying on stable linguistic associations: antonyms



**Figure 2a** Cover of a post-Soviet puzzle bestseller, *Tri Semerki*. 2001, no. 14. Published by Logos-Media. Reproduced with the publisher's permission.



**Figure 2b** Cover of a post-Soviet puzzle weekly, *Zolotaia Rybka*. 2001, no. 21. Published by Maks-M. Reproduced with the publisher's permission.

(‘heaven’ → ‘hell’, ‘maximum’ → ‘minimum’), synonyms (‘security’ → ‘guards’). The grid’s squares are much larger than those common for ‘classical’ crosswords, which makes them easier to fill in in the shaky cars of trains and subways. The quality of the puzzles’ design varies from the cheapest black and white 8-pagers of tabloid format to glossy colourful booklets. They tend to appear on a weekly and bi-weekly schedule and are relatively cheap (from 3 to 9 roubles, or 10–25 cents apiece).

To do justice to the postsocialist puzzles, it may be fruitful to compare them with their equivalents across the Atlantic. American puzzle publications can be generally classified under two categories: the high-brow puzzles like those published in *The New York Times*,<sup>9</sup> and the low-brow variety which are available in bound volumes at train stations and newspaper stands for anything between 99c and \$2.59. They have lower circulation rates, and neither of the two kinds has quite the extent of market

penetration that the Russian puzzles do (they publish 4–12 issues per year, as opposed to the 24–52 issues), but the real differences lie in form and content, not in scope.

While years ago, when edited by the legendary Eugene Maleska, high-brow puzzles used to resemble the Soviet-era crosswords in their orientation on erudition in the sphere of ‘legitimate culture,’ today’s puzzles, much under the influence of its current editor Will Shortz, are more adventurous, rooted in popular culture, and orientated to people who, to use Shortz’s own formulation, know who James Brown is just as well as they know who James Madison is.<sup>10</sup> There is, therefore, something of the Russian puzzles’ popular allure to them. However, just by virtue of their complexity, high-brow US puzzles are anything but mainstream popular entertainment. Rather, they function as sign posts of group membership in a relatively narrow and select circle endowed with broad cultural capital. The low-brow down-market American variety, in contrast, has no such pretensions. They announce their mission not as a ‘challenge,’ but as ‘fun’ and ‘relaxation,’ and choose titles that communicate this message directly, such as *Super Easy-to-do*, *Good ‘n’ Easy* and *Super Fun ‘n’ Easy Crosswords*.

By contrast to these two groups, the Russian puzzles very self-consciously represent a hybrid form that aims to partake from both of these worlds. In terms of their design, clues and the stock of knowledge that they draw upon, they come much closer to the low-brow puzzle variety. They tend to be colourful, even flashy, and are typically published in a journal or a tabloid format with about 10–20 puzzles per issue. Puzzles themselves are surrounded by jokes, quotations, bits and pieces of trivia information, letters from readers and photo illustrations (more often than not, photos of scantily dressed young women bearing no relation to the topic of the puzzle, nor to the readership of the publication<sup>11</sup>).

What we are dealing with, then, is a new form of mass entertainment, no longer a high-brow entertainment for egg-heads and encyclopaedists, but a relatively democratic variety, an occupation that does not require ultra-high intellectual investment, but is nevertheless capable of offering rewards. Importantly, however, contemporary Russian publishers do not walk this road to its very end, to produce puzzles of the *Good’n’Easy* kind. While the ‘fun’ aspect does figure prominently in the ways new Russian puzzles present themselves (take such titles as *Have a Break*, *The Paper of a Pleasant Leisure*), the motive of easiness practically does not (the closest I have seen a puzzle collection come to suggesting itself as easy was in a booklet published by *Mir Novostei*, but even there the message came through negation: ‘Solving without encyclopaedias or dictionaries’). The background assumption, on the contrary, is that the ‘pleasant leisure’ is also a cultured leisure (or, as one slogan put it, ‘Pleasant and good for your intellect’), and that reference materials and intellectual exercise are as much an integral part of the puzzle solving as they used to be for the ‘classical’ crosswords. If anything, the intellectual component of puzzle solving is put to the forefront, both by the publishers who explicitly emphasize it in their titles (*Wiggle your Wits*, *Smarty*, *Brainstorm*, *Erudite*) and slogans (‘*Krot*—Paper for the smart and the venturesome,’ ‘*Quiet Hour*—Paper of intellectual leisure,’

‘For your intellect, not for fashion, get the paper *Gvozd’ Sezona*’), editorial messages (‘We are warning you—only true encyclopaedists will reach the finish line’<sup>12</sup>) as well as in multiple letters to the editors published in some of the puzzle papers.

Unsurprisingly, such self-legitimation evoked much protest from crossword purists who suddenly found their identity markers colonized by ‘the masses.’ An example of such boundary anxiety is the response of an editor of the popular science magazine, *Nauka i Zhizn’* (*Science and Life*), Igor’ Lagovskii. During the 1960s, the golden years of *Nauka i Zhizn’*’s popularity,<sup>13</sup> Lagovskii led the section of games and puzzles which pioneered many puzzle formats, and which, he reminisced to me, ‘presented true challenges to logic, erudition and creative thinking.’ Like many other crossword masters of the ‘old school,’ Lagovskii dismissed the current puzzle publishers as mere industry technicians who ‘stamp these crosswords like buttons,’ and drew a sharp contrast between these mass-market products and the hand-crafted puzzles of yore.

Readers of contemporary puzzle publications tend to concur with Lagovskii in their assessment of contemporary puzzles as a notch less demanding than the crossword publications of the Soviet era. Many, however, see this increased accessibility of the puzzles as a step in the right direction; in the words of one solver, ‘there is no reason I should have to know the name of some insignificant creek in the Saratov region.’ Typically, readers solve puzzles sporadically, merely ‘to kill time,’ and frequently leave them unfinished. The proverbial resort to ‘encyclopaedias and dictionaries’ is a tactic of precious few, especially because the typical sites of puzzle-solving (transport, security posts, etc.) do not allow easy access to these resources. Furthermore, it is precisely the entertainment value that attracts puzzle solvers to particular publications, namely, those that pepper puzzles with jokes, anecdotes and caricatures, and ‘evoke a smile and help [the reader] relax after a hard day at work.’ This emphasis on entertainment was particularly explicit in how the younger solvers saw their hobby. The correct attitude to puzzles, as they pointed out to me over and over again, was that of light-hearted enjoyment. There was something ‘crippling,’ I was told, in dedicating one’s life to puzzles with too much seriousness.

And yet, this preference does not prevent solvers from seeing contemporary puzzles through the prism of their predecessors’ intellectual prestige. It is instructive in this context that scanwords, which comprise the lion’s share of the puzzle market and which are widely seen as the easier alternative to crosswords, are still typically referred to as *crosswords* in casual talk. Furthermore, solvers continue to credit them with the same qualities that are attributed to the old-fashioned Soviet-era crosswords: reliance on erudition, expansion of horizons and the training of memory. By extension, puzzle solvers consider themselves as a group to be significantly different from those who do not have interest in puzzles. In the words of a young male puzzler, ‘Harlequin-romance-reading housewives would not spend their time doing puzzles.’ An older female puzzle fan (who, ironically, might have well fallen into the above category on the basis of her reading preferences) put the distinction differently: ‘It is better to look into a crossword on the subway than to stare at one’s drunken fellow-travellers.’

As different as these two quotations may seem, both of them suggest that puzzle solving in Russia articulates an invisible but important boundary: intellectual in the first case, and moral in the second one. In order to understand how puzzles could have acquired such broad significance, one has to situate this cultural product in the context of sweeping social and cultural changes that transformed Russia in the 1990s.

### Puzzles and Cultural Capital

The rapid socioeconomic transformation that took place in Russia after the end of the socialist era triggered an equally rapid, and mostly downward, mobility of specific individuals as well as entire professional groups (Gerber & Hout, 2004). These social dislocations were in many ways inevitable, since the system of higher education in the Soviet Union was geared towards 'heavy' industry and produced enormous numbers of engineers, constructors and other technical personnel which could hardly be absorbed painlessly into a postsocialist market economy. But this did not make the shock of one's sudden professional irrelevance any easier to accept. As a result, working biographies of today's Russians contain multiple instances of demotion, loss of status and unpredictable social mobility. According to polling data,<sup>14</sup> about 40% of contemporary working Russians report having been forced *by circumstances* to change their field of occupation in the past decade (in Moscow, the proportion is 45%). More significantly, only 3% of these people report having gone through some form of professional re-education, which means that, for a large proportion of working Russians, a disjunction between their educational credentials and the jobs they have to perform is a daily reality. Furthermore, rapid inflation adds to the feeling of one's professional devaluation even in those cases when individuals retain their former jobs, as is the case with many teachers and medical workers.

In other words, a lack of fit between individuals' skills and cultural knowledge on the one hand, and the new reality to which these skills are to be applied on the other, was one of the most aggravating aspects of the postsocialist period. In this context, puzzle publications' marketing strategy, which emphasizes the intellectual challenge of the puzzling-solving task, acquires a particular significance. Taking up a crossword collection with a title like *Brain storm* or *Erudite*, an individual can feel (and show others) that her knowledge and cultural capital, although not easily convertible at the given moment, still deserve respect and recognition. The increased accessibility of the puzzles in the 1990s meant, essentially, that a greater share of the Russian population received an opportunity to make this claim comfortably through partaking in the puzzle phenomenon, and it is not insignificant in this respect that the public spaces in which crossword puzzles were most visible are security posts and points of retail, which happen to belong to the industries most heavily flooded by downward mobility.

Puzzle solvers themselves frequently draw a link between their employment history and their hobby. For some of them, puzzles serve as a remedy against forced idleness. One of the focus group respondents, who spent several years working as a night

watchman after his engineering firm fell apart, listed scanword puzzles as one of the small projects that allowed him to live through his long night shifts without feeling that he was losing time unproductively (his other hobbies included figuring out radio schemes and repairing small household equipment). For another solver, a woman in her forties with a degree in biology, puzzles proved to be a way of earning respect among her new co-workers:

I am currently working outside of my area of expertise (*rabotaiu ne po spetsial'nosti*). But there have been several occasions, when the girls were filling a puzzle in collectively, when some biological terminology came up, and it so happened that I could help them out. And before I knew it, I somehow developed an image of an erudite among them, although this may not be entirely accurate.

Readers' letters that are published in some of the most popular puzzle newspapers also bring up the theme of intellectual frustration and of inability to convert one's qualifications into a worthy compensation and a satisfactory lifestyle:

I have been buying *Russkii Krossvord* from its very first issue. And I was doing that with a mercenary goal. No, it was not the prize that I was interested in, but the training of memory, so as not to lose all these words and concepts I have learned in my life. In addition, I also widened my knowledge as I was solving your puzzles, and up to this day I keep learning something new with your help.<sup>15</sup>

We wish you great health and prosperity, and success in your work. It is truly noble [work], for you essentially make us flex our stagnating brain cells. And the fact that a great number of our compatriots succeed in doing this proves that smart people have not vanished in our country.<sup>16</sup>

The closing lines of the second quotation are telling, for they suggest that status anxieties are politically charged: the appreciation the readers express for their favourite puzzle edition is at the same time an invective against the unnamed forces responsible for the vanishing of the 'smart people' from 'our country.' This plane of moral economy is just as important a component of the puzzle genre as are status anxieties, and will be discussed below. But the discussion of unused cultural capital and tactics of its reconversion would be incomplete if it remained limited to the status anxieties of the puzzle consumers. An equally significant group affected by downward status mobility is that of puzzle producers: editors, puzzle-makers and marketers involved in the making of the cultural product.

Puzzle business seems to be more lucrative, in relative terms, in Russia than in the US. In 2001, when an average income in Moscow was about \$210, a rank-and-file puzzle editor earned about \$900 a month. By contrast, it is not uncommon for US puzzlers to leave the business because of their inability to make ends meet. But while in monetary terms, the Russian puzzle professionals may be better off than their American counterparts, they do not share the latter's personal dedication to puzzles and puzzling. In contrast to the American publishers who tend to be puzzle aficionados themselves, most of the crossword editors I met had little personal

interest in puzzles, and viewed their jobs as business rather than a hobby. The majority of them came into the puzzle business from journalism, a profession that they continued to see as their true vocation. While the transition was usually complete, many were reluctant to part with their journalistic identity, as did the main editor of Logos Media,<sup>17</sup> the biggest puzzle publisher in the country which at the time controlled 42% of the market, who corrected me when I asked him about his 'journalistic past' by saying defiantly, 'and present. And future.' Another puzzle editor heavily emphasised that she would not have gone into the puzzle business at all had she not needed to generate funds for her unprofitable, but 'real' newspaper *Moskovskaia Okraina*. She confided in an interview that she had little to say about her puzzle periodical since its popular allure was incomprehensible to her. However, she was more than willing to talk about her work as a struggling small newspaper editor and to share her writing philosophy and memories of her journalistic training.

The editors' status anxieties subtly transform the genre of crosswords in their own right. First, their journalistic identity accounts for many of the unique features of the puzzle publications, or, to be precise, for the inclusion of aphorisms, trivia, jokes and most importantly, readers' letters which contribute to the re-definition of the genre. Second, puzzle editors have their own investment into maintaining the educational aura of the puzzles (just as they have an interest in actually making the puzzle more simple and hence, appealing to a wider range of solvers). By highlighting the civilizing function of their product in the titles and editorial messages of their publications, as well as in the letters that they choose to print, they manage to lay claim on the status which they experience as lost or threatened, and thus partake in the mystique of enlightening the masses which was historically so important to the Russian intelligentsia. In the words of one puzzle editor, 'let them [the readers] not forget that words can have many meanings. If they do not read anymore, this is the least that we can do for them.'

### **Puzzles and Moral Economy**

If enlightenment and education of the masses was traditionally one of the central self-perceived missions of the Russian intelligentsia, moral advocacy and social justice was surely the other. It is thus of no surprise that the moral dimension of the puzzle-maker's task went hand in hand with the cultural one on the pages of scanword periodicals. Prizes and awards associated with correct submissions offered both solvers and creators an opportunity to present a particular moral persona.<sup>18</sup> Puzzle-makers did that through emphasizing the redistributory character of their competitions, as in the following editorial:

We frequently receive letters from people who have, to put it mildly, modest income. Alas, in our country such people constitute a majority. With our work, we try to distract our readers from depressing thoughts, and give them a chance to earn.<sup>19</sup>

A similar idea was voiced during an interview by an editor at Logos Media:

I know that German publications, for example, they have huge prizes, 500 DM, or \$500 or something. This is a different psychology. There you have some cashier in a supermarket, she sits there and dreams of finding herself on the Canary Islands one day. I am against this. I think we have to send to poor people some modest aid, you know 700 or 1,000 roubles,<sup>20</sup> that's what we need. But to more people. Instead of giving one person some silly dream like this. Let it be less money [*in our case—OS*], but it will be a tangible sum to a tangible number of people.

In their turn, puzzle solvers hardly ever mentioned the possibility of winning a prize among the list of the motivating factors that attract them to solving. The same was true of the readers' letters that were chosen for publication, despite the fact that most of them were presumably mailed as appendages to prize raffle coupons. In these letters, the motif of intellectual attainment and self-education not only predominated, but also was stripped of any connotations of competition, materialism or pursuit of profit—which, one would think, would be inevitable, considering the fact that, modest as they are, the prizes offered in puzzle publications amounted to one quarter of the average monthly wage. While the publications continued to insist formally on the availability of cash prizes (images of bags of cash, last names and even photos of the winners frequently grace the back cover of these booklets), the rhetoric of the letters displayed on their pages discounted monetary gain as a motivation that could be animating puzzle solving. If anything, the money was portrayed as an accidental by-product of a single-minded pursuit of knowledge, something that the prize-winners did not foresee or expect, and definitely did not pursue for its own sake:

Once the puzzle is solved, why not send you the answers. And suddenly, after many years of acquaintance, I found my name in the list of winners. Turns out it's a very pleasant thing—to win.<sup>21</sup>

Another correspondent, in rhyme, emphasized the intellectual value of puzzle solving which trumps over material gain:

I've given up on all: cooking and babysitting,  
Surrounded myself with books and dictionaries,  
Not just to have a result,  
But to replenish my head with thoughts<sup>22</sup>

(notice the euphemistic 'result' which refers to the prize that the paper, indeed, granted the author for the combination of filled-out puzzles and the winning verse). This contrast between the pursuit of materialistic 'result,' and the pursuit of pure knowledge introduces a new line of differentiation into what would have otherwise been purely a cultural distinction between the community of intellectually curious, versatile puzzle solvers, and the rest of the population. This differentiation is ethical, and has to do with the notions of dignity, self-reliance and moral worth.

In the examples above, moral rhetoric is directed against the cold pursuit of material gain, but its pathos reaches wider, into the denunciation of the entire sociopolitical order of postsocialist Russia in general. In puzzle solvers' accounts, as well as in the editorial text and in the published letters, the credibility and sincerity of the speakers' motives are frequently asserted through contrast with the repressive environment: 'There is so much deceit in the life around us that not all our readers believe in the possibility of receiving the prize,'<sup>23</sup> 'in our time of troubles, one lives without counting on any favours from anyone, and suddenly—your letter, as a ray of light in a dark kingdom.'<sup>24</sup> The mission of the publication here is presented to be not mere entertainment, but nothing less than restoration of justice and assertion of moral standards of behaviour. The publication represents itself—and invites the readers to imagine themselves as well—as an organic soulful community, a solitary island of morality in the sea of mercenary pursuits and injustice.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, this soulful community is often interpreted in kinship terms. The prominence of the family, and the extent to which it is considered to embody all things opposite to the alienation and injustices of postsocialism is readily apparent in the frequency with which family-related themes arise in the solvers' interviews and letters:

Crosswords are a family affair with us. Usually I would sit up with my daughter, and we would leave the words we don't resolve to my husband who is really meticulous. (Female, 48 y.o.)

To an extent, puzzles offer you ways to improve family relations. Especially if there are some pre-existing tensions or problems, joint solving is of great help. You ask each other's advice, share clues, and word after word, the tension is gone. (Male, 44 y.o.)

Correspondence to crossword publications is often signed as if it was authored by the family unit, and not a specific person. While in some readers' letters this family focus functioned as a background assumption,<sup>25</sup> feedback from others placed family solidarity at the very centre of crosswords' effect. A letter from a reader, O. Krasnov, published in the monthly puzzle collection, *Teshchin Yazyk*, thanked the publication for helping him reinstate peaceful relations with his mother-in-law by means of joint work on crossword puzzles.<sup>26</sup> Another reader reported that the prize she was hoping to receive from *Tri Semerki* would be used for purchasing a toy for her two-year old son Levka.<sup>27</sup> In a different issue of *Tri Semerki*, a reader from Kaluga disclosed that work on crossword puzzles helped her stay awake by the bedside of her elderly parents, closing her letter with 'without you, I don't even know what I would have done.'<sup>28</sup> Most strikingly, a letter from Valentina, Inna and other members of the Zelentsov family thanked the publication *Russkii Krossvord* for nothing less than helping them to 'keep going, getting over' the pain when 'our father Valera died' last Fall.<sup>29</sup> In this particular example, the very intimacy of the tragedy which the family was sharing with the paper pointed to the fact that the publication itself was

construed as a relative or a close friend who offered a helping hand in times of trouble.<sup>30</sup> Keeping with the same theme, another correspondent called the same paper ‘my best friend,’ asserting that prizes carried no significance for her because ‘friendship cannot be measured with money.’<sup>31</sup>

The stance of an advocate of the people’s interests and a forum for sincere and genuine communication is reinforced by many puzzle periodicals through inviting and publishing their readers’ photos in the home surroundings, often with children and pets (the editorial in *AiF-Davai* directly solicits photos where readers are depicted together with their ‘Home companions’), by publishing jokes, often supplied by identified readers, and even, as *Zolotaia Rybka* does it, by congratulating their correspondents on particular life events, such as weddings and anniversaries, in the pages of the paper. Kinship is specifically reflected in the titles of some publications, such as *Teshchin Yazyk* (which can be translated as *Mother-in-Law’s Tongue* or *Mother-in-Law’s Language*) and *Ziatek* (*Dear Son-in-Law*), as well as in slogans, such as *AiF Umnik: Crossword journal for the entire family*. In the meantime, the titles of other publications, such as *Russkii Krossvord* (*Russian Crossword*) or *Narodnyi Skanvord* (*People’s Scanword*), cast the net wider. They appropriate the terminology of nationhood, drawing on the longstanding tradition of the moral distinction between the Russian people and their corrupt rulers. Particularly notable in this context is the use of the term *narod* which the anthropologist Nancy Ries calls the ‘key word’ in the Russian discourse (1997, p. 27). Ries describes the word’s most common usage as

‘the people’ as distinct from those who have power or, as has been heard often in recent years, those with wealth—the new business classes. *Narod* always suggests by implication the opposite—all those who have power over, exploit, and do not take care or appreciate ‘the people.’ *Narod* may mean ‘the heroic people’ but it more commonly stands for ‘the victimized people. (Ries, 1997, p. 28, italics in the original)

The appropriation of this charged term by a scanword publication casts in new light the family and kinship metaphors discussed above. It suggests that there is more to the post-Soviet puzzle boom than a general shift from public to private concerns, as some commentators have suggested (Dubin, 2001). Rather, both family and national metaphors appear to conjure up an image of a certain moral community juxtaposed to the hostility of the surrounding circumstances.

Readers’ response to this invocation of a moral frame of reference appears overwhelming; according to the head editor of Logos Media, their editions receive 400–500,000 letters every month. Logos Media does, indeed, put an enormous effort into emphasizing the organic, soulful and spontaneous character of the relationship between its publications and their audience. A radio commercial for one of its publications went as follows:

Hello, my dear ones! And what are we doing at our leisure? New scanwords again? And don’t they all blur in your eyes? Don’t you think that they all look alike, like

twins? 'Cause they are made up by computer, 100 copies a minute. How can they differ here? [pause] But why waste time solving things no one asked?! Give up on computer scanwords! Choose *Teshchin Yazyk*—a unique scanword journal, created by the best authors in the country!

This led to the slogan of the entire series: '*Teshchin Yazyk*—Scanword, created with a soul.'

There is no need to mention that the offices of Logos Media are run by classical Western standards, and all of their puzzles are computer-generated. More important to us is that the theme of spontaneity, sincerity and authenticity (themes quite alien to the rationalized and modernist aesthetics of crossword puzzles as they were created and practised, in Russia among other places, until recently) commands much power in contemporary Russian context. The slogan—and the editor—are wrong, however, in claiming these properties to be unique to Logos Media products. Other publications exude a similar appeal: 'Only your paper speaks with us and helps us to live with a hope. Other papers keep a cold-hearted silence, ignoring their readers head-on,' writes S. Borisova to the scanword paper *Zolotaia Rybka*. 'For your soul—solve *AiK-Miks!*', suggests the corresponding puzzle, and immediately adds, turning from the moral to the intellectual, 'Erudites of the 21st century, unite!'

## Conclusion

Far from being a trite mode of entertainment, puzzles appear to function as powerful tools of individual and collective self-imagining. The most salient themes of the postsocialist experience—those of social dislocation, inability to translate one's educational credentials into income and social status, frustrated claims, breakdown or prior forms of collectivity and identification—are symbolically articulated on the grid of contemporary crosswords and scanwords. Maintaining their air of intellectual challenge and of organic and moral community at the same time, these puzzles can help voice two types of criticisms so frequently heard in contemporary Russia: the impossibility for an individual to realize his or her full potential under the current 'time of troubles,' and the moral degradation and atomization of society under the influence of 'wild capitalism.'

But the appeal of puzzles stems not only from their ability to give voice to these postsocialist discontents, but also in the possibilities they allow for resolving the tensions they articulate. Puzzles offer their readers tools for doing important boundary work. They provide individuals with easily accessible markers of intellectual attainment, thus setting their solvers apart from the crowd intellectually as well as morally (perhaps most importantly, in their own eyes more than in anyone else's). But at the same time, they also generate a language of sociability through which solvers create imagined—and sometimes actual—communities.

The exact lines by which these communities are defined vary. As the recurrent kinship metaphors suggest, its elemental prototype is a family unit which is not merely invoked, but is, in fact, strengthened and fortified by the practices of collective

solving. But the moral economy articulated around puzzle-solving also hints at a possibility of broader frames of solidarity, not only with the other solvers of this particular publication, but also with a broader circle of one's compatriots who, by virtue of their participation in solving, partake in the same moral and intellectual identities as oneself.

The two lines of distinction that this paper has outlined could be seen as potentially contradictory: it is not impossible that, eventually, the organic and (if we remember the Logos Media commercial) anti-technological rhetoric of a moral *gemeinschaft* may clash with the modernist ideals of intellectual development and accumulation of cultural capital—the ideals that today's puzzles have inherited from their 'classical' predecessors, without, however, inheriting the intellectual challenge they posed. However, at the moment, the moral and intellectual motives seem to coexist quite comfortably: puzzle magazines have no difficulty in addressing a hypothetical reader who is eager to grow intellectually and, at the same time, is a member of an organic soulful community. It is possible that the puzzles' popularity hinges, at least in part, precisely on this ability to let the solver 'have it all': to be smarter, more cultured and educated than one's compatriots, while at the same time, remaining at one with them in an imagined moral community of 'the people.' At a time when solidarity and distinction remain for many Russians equally problematic, one could hardly ask for more.

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### Notes

- [1] Scanword (or *skanvord*, as it is pronounced in Russian) is a variation on crossword puzzle which tends to be somewhat easier to solve than a 'classical' crossword.
- [2] I thank Leonid Sladkov for sharing the Gallup data with me. For comparison, *The New Yorker* reports that 50 million Americans, or about 17% of the population, solve crossword puzzles at least occasionally (Bilger, 2002).
- [3] I conducted two male and two female focus groups, organizing solvers by age (20–39 and 40–60). Income and educational level of participants varied, which corresponds to the Gallup-generated profile of the puzzle periodicals' readership (see Note 11 below).

- [4] In my interviews with the puzzle editors, readers' letters were presented as *vox populi* and as moral justification for the worth of the editors' craft. One puzzle editor, confessing to me his distrust of the more traditional market research methods such as focus groups and readership surveys, said that he started his day in the office, as a matter of principle, by reading a selection of readers' letters brought to him by the Letter Department. Such letters, he said, told him everything he wanted to know about the future of his many puzzle publications. Sitting on his desk, indeed, was a colourful tray with several open envelopes which he proceeded to read aloud to me. Most were more or less standard fan letters, one was a request for a copy of an old issue, and one, a request of financial help from a 'long-time reader and supporter' of the publication. But while I am inclined to believe the genuineness of most readers' letters published in puzzle periodicals, it is also important to keep in mind that they represent a small fraction of the correspondence these publications receive, and may be more informative of how the puzzle periodicals want to be seen than of what most readers write to them.
- [5] The first crossword puzzle book was published in 1924 by then-unknown Dick Simon and Max Schuster. It claimed to collect fifty 'best' puzzles from the *New York World*, and sold 400,000 in its first year. For more on crossword history in the US and Europe, see Millington (1974) and Amende (2001).
- [6] For discussion of crosswords in Russian émigré press in the mid- to late 1920s, and of Nabokov's role in them, see Yangirov (1997a; 1997b).
- [7] For more on the project of *kul'turnost'*, see Fitzpatrick (1992) and Kelly and Volkov (1998).
- [8] One exception to the rule where the more adventurous puzzles published in a popular science magazine *Nauka i Zhizn'* in the 1960s. These puzzles pioneered many techniques used by the more recent puzzles, such as the use of images as clues, and occasional punning and humour.
- [9] Now an undisputed trendsetter in the world of puzzling, the *New York Times* was initially reluctant to allow puzzles on its pages, and yielded only in 1943, when the first puzzle appeared on the pages of the Sunday edition. Crosswords became a daily feature in the *Times* in 1950 (Shackle, 2002).
- [10] *60 Minutes* special on Will Shortz on CBS, 5 January 2003.
- [11] According to the Gallup National Readership Survey for 2002, about 58% of the Russian puzzle readership is comprised of women. All ages and income groups actively partake in solving puzzles, with a somewhat greater proportion of those with 'average income', high school education and between 35 and 44 years of age. I thank Leonid Sladkov for making this data available to me.
- [12] *AiF-Davai*, no. 4 (22), 2001.
- [13] See the memoirs of Rada Adzhubei in Volkov, Pugacheva, & Yarmoliuk (2000).
- [14] See Kupriianova (1998).
- [15] Reader Shkalova, Moscow. In *Russkii Krossvord*, no. 16 (108), 2002.
- [16] The Storzhuk family from Nizhny Novgorod. Letter published in *Pole Chudes*, no. 9, 1998.
- [17] Logos Media's dominance is largely due to a structural advantage—the company started as a distribution network, and as a result, its 15 publications have a wider reach than the other 200–250 puzzle titles across the country. Many of the generic innovations, such as the use of readers' letter and prizes have been pioneered by Logos Media's titles before they became common practices across the industry.
- [18] In the eyes of British crosswords purists, monetary prizes corrupted the game, and were thus unacceptable (see the book by a legendary British master of cryptic crosswords D. S. Macnutt, a.k.a. Ximenes, 1966).
- [19] Editorial comment in *Zolotaia Rybka*, no. 2, 2001.
- [20] \$25 and \$35, respectively.
- [21] Reader Shkalova, Moscow. In *Russkii Krossvord*, no. 16 (108), 2002.
- [22] *Ogo!-Skanvord*, no.3, 2001.

- [23] Editorial commentary to the photo of the winner Mamonkina from Saransk, *Teshchin Yazyk*, no. 31, 2002.
- [24] From the letter of Borisova, Moscow, to *Zolotaia Rybka*, no. 32, 2002.
- [25] Many letters were written in a 'we' format and signed by family units, and even such puzzles' effects as their presumed role in 'extending lives' were phrased in plural terms, as in 'we eagerly anticipate every issue of your paper. Thank you for extending our lives by your creative activity' (in a letter from the Golovanov family from Moscow, published in *Tri Semerki*, no. 32, 1999. My italics).
- [26] Published in *Teshchin Yazyk*, no.5, 2000.
- [27] Letter from I. Kolodina from Ural published in *Tri Semerki*, no. 29, 1999.
- [28] Letter from L. Khaustova, published in *Tri Semerki*, no. 21, 1999.
- [29] Letter published in *Russkii Krossvord*, no. 4, 2000.
- [30] This attitude would also explain the frequency with which readers' letters closed with ritualized wishes of 'good health and well-being', which are usually used in personal correspondence to close friends.
- [31] Letter from E. Serebrennikova from Dzhizak, Uzbekistan, published in *Russkii Krossvord* no. 8, 2000.

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