

# **PUBLIC AND PRIVATE IN CONTEMPORARY RUSSIA: THE CASE OF GARDEN COOPERATIVES**

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## **Abstract**

Using the methods of the Goffmanian tradition, I explore the issue of public and private in contemporary garden cooperatives to answer the question how people perceive and use in their daily lives the new notions of public and private, which penetrated the sphere of legislation, politics and state ideology in Post-Socialist Russia. The results of my research allow me to describe the situation as a search for a new balance between individual privacy and collective solidarity in society; I also show the strong influence of the legacy of Soviet ideology and practices on this process. The thesis contributes to research on the public and private dichotomy in Soviet and Post-Soviet society.

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## Introduction

Public and private are central categories for Western cultures, widely used in everyday language, political and philosophical discourses. Soviet society had very different understandings of these concepts, which are now studied by historians, sociologists and anthropologists. The task of these scholars is even more complicated due to the difficulties of translating of these terms into Russian, which has no exact equivalents to them. After 1991 the political and economic regime in Russia changed to the Western type democracy and liberal market economy; forbidden private property was legitimized and such concepts as “private life” or “public sphere” start penetrating into the language and practice.

How the change of the notions of public and private in the sphere of legislation, politics and state ideology in Post-Socialist Russia has been adopted in the realm of ordinary people everyday life? This is the question I seek to answer in this research exploring how people perceive and use the new ideas of public citizenship activity, private property and value of privacy in their daily lives.

My research is based on my field-archive collected in 2007-2010 in several garden cooperatives around Saint Petersburg, the second largest city in Russia. A garden cooperative is a form of seasonal settlement of urbanites situated in rural settings around big cities in Russia<sup>1</sup>. In Soviet times the plots of land there were distributed through the trade unions to solve the problem of food-supply in the cities. Now the cottages in garden cooperatives are used in the same way as dachas, more traditional Russian type of summer dwellings, to spend holidays and relax in natural settings. I believe that garden cooperatives provide suitable research material for my task, because people there face the challenges of the new regime

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<sup>1</sup> Other forms of summer houses in Russia are dacha cooperatives and dachas of elite. In contemporary Russian language all these types and also summer houses in villages are called “dachas”, and I also will use this word for collective references to the phenomenon of Russian summer houses.

with a very limited mediation of state and being far from the state control have a freedom to make their own decisions according to their own needs.

I selected 13 interviews with those born in the period between the late 1930s and 1950s, because they were socialized in Soviet society, but being still in a more or less active age by 1990s, they couldn't avoid adopting new patterns of behavior. All my informants are of more or less homogeneous social background: well-educated professionals, mostly engineers, who followed different ways after the Perestroika with various successes, but none of them have become either very poor or very rich. Most of the interviews are focused on the history of a particular garden plot and its appropriation, where such important for the public and private topic issues as spatial organization and relationships with neighbors emerge naturally. I have also one expert interview with a woman who used to work as an architect of the city level in Soviet times; she provided me with valuable information on some regulations and standards of the Soviet period, which would be hard to obtain otherwise (Interview 6). I use the results of my observation in the field, including participant observation, recorded in my Field-notes as well. To reconstruct the history of garden cooperatives near Saint Petersburg I use legal documents, such as Decrees issued by the party and the government and Standard Regulations for garden cooperatives, and the protocols of the City Executive Committee of Leningrad for the period of 1960-1980s accessible in the Central City Archive of Saint Petersburg (TsGA).

The first chapter of the research contains a review of the previous attempts to distinguish public and private in Soviet and Post-Soviet society. I make only a brief reference to the general literature on the public and private dichotomy, citing the summary made by Jeff Weintraub (1997), which, I believe, is enough to outline the position of my research in this field of discourse. Some sociologists and anthropologists, who worked with this issue on the Soviet or Post-Soviet empirical material, offered their modifications of the dichotomy in order to fit it to the Soviet conditions; others used this data to elaborate methodological potential of

the dichotomy. The results of both groups serve as helpful theoretical and methodological background of my research.

The second chapter is divided into two sections. The first one tells the history of garden cooperatives since their establishment in 1949, which turns out to be the story of struggle for privacy, continued after the advent of private property in 1991. The issues of land privatization and self-management in Post-Soviet garden cooperatives are discussed in the second section. The legacy of Soviet property regime and of the ritualization of Soviet official public sphere creates crucial obstacles on the way of changes. Another obstacle for creating public sphere of citizenship in garden cooperatives is the commonly shared desire for privacy.

The third chapter undertakes a deeper investigation of the everyday practices in garden cooperatives. The conflicts about fence building described in the first section show that the common desire for privacy co-exists there with the strong influence of collective values; today the situation can be defined as searching for a new balance between the two, which was lost with the advent of new economic regime and the change of ideology. The second section discusses, how social inequalities are dealt with in garden cooperatives. The regime of public privacy and informal relations typical of garden communities serve to soften newly emerged inequalities on the basis of income, however other alternative distinctions are drawn there, reflecting the reactions of people to the process of social change.

## **Chapter 1**

### **Public and private in Soviet and Post-Soviet society**

The terms “public” and “private”, basically describing the relationships between an individual and a group, have diverse meanings in Western philosophical discourse and ordinary language depending on a tradition or context of usage. Jeff Weintraub in his summary of different discourses, where the public and private distinction plays central role, distinguishes two major discourse fields covering both academic and political realms. The first one combines “liberal-economistic model” dominating in legal and political spheres and the “civic perspective”. Liberal thinking allots public sphere to the state administration, designating as private civil society of individuals pursuing rational goals<sup>2</sup>. In the civic or republican view public sphere implies willing cooperation of conscious and equal individuals in political decision-making, and private sphere is confined to the market, while the state administration is analytically left outside the system (Weintraub 1997:36). The second major discourse entity comprises the approach in anthropology and social history developed by Philippe Ariés, Jane Jacobs, Richard Sennett and many others, which associates public sphere with an abstract meaning of sociability and private sphere with the meanings of domesticity and intimacy. Public sphere is characterized by open access and impersonal formalized relations, it is for strangers to meet and interact, while private sphere is highly personal and hidden (Weintraub 1997:18). A valuable contribution to this approach was made by Erving Goffman and his theorizing about the ways of creating and maintaining the public and private distinction on a microlevel of small interactions in social life (Goffman 1963; 1971, cited in: Weintraub 1997:6).

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<sup>2</sup> I am aware of the existence of other traditions of thinking about civil society, of which Weintraub selects only one for his summary, but detailed discussion of them is not relevant for the goals of this research, and Weintraub’s simplified scheme is sufficient.



Soviet society is a specific field of study in terms of public and private. The victorious socialistic order brought about very specific relationships between public and private domains. Private property was prohibited, communal values of collectively shared property and the priority of common interests and collective good dominated in ideology. Soviet political system offered some peculiar version of the public sphere of citizenship operating in the collectives of different levels, from co-workers and classmates to the local party cells. The common interest however was declared to be identical to the party interest, which represented the interest of the state, so the state control was omnipresent; any autonomous public activity was impossible, and the individual participation in the collective life was reduced to nothing but formal rituals (Shlapentokh 1989:9; Yurchak 2006). But still, it gave people some experience of collective decision making, which might influence their current attitudes to citizenship activity.

The researchers who have analyzed the Soviet system using the terms “public” and “private” as a reference point either tried to classify different levels of Soviet culture according to the Western understanding of the distinction, or elaborated the dichotomy itself and modified it to explain particular cases. They worked mainly in the second, anthropological discourse field of the two distinguished by Weintraub, but sometimes turned to the concepts from the first one as well. I would mention the book by Vladimir Shlapentokh (1989), which gives an extended account on the development of public and private spheres in the Soviet society between 1955 and 1985, and the essay on public and private in communist societies by Marc Garcelon (1997) among the works undertaking general analysis of the issue on a wide empirical basis, but without deep reflection about the terms. The main conclusion made by Shlapentokh is that the period between Stalin and Gorbachev is characterized by the process of “privatization”, which means that people invested all their energy into the realm of private interest and the significance of family, friends, and informal ties grew in all spheres of

society (1989:229). Garcelon justly points to the limited understanding of private in this work as private interest only: while the domestic sphere served as a retreat from the hypertrophied state, personal privacy was insecure due to the overcrowded living conditions and constant mutual surveillance (1997:323-324). This constant visibility was an organic part of ideology of predominating collective interest: a loyal Soviet citizen had nothing to conceal from his or her collective. Garcelon interprets this feature as a traditionalistic one, as the familial privatism opposed to the individualizing one of Western type (1997:324).

Sociologist Oleg Kharkhordin in his works searches for the possible Russian-Soviet lexical analogues to the Western terms “private” and “privacy”, exploring their use in documents and practices around them. The complicated Russian-Soviet terminology of “obshchii”/”obshchestvennyi”/”gosudarstvennyi”/”lichnyi”/”chastnyi”/”individualnyi” he translates, respectively, as ‘common’/’social’/’state’/’personal’/’partial’/’individual’ (1997:344). Being mostly interested in the process of individuation in the history of Russian Soviet culture, he focuses on the terms that both can be translated as ‘private’ into English: “chastnyi” (‘partial’) and “lichnyi” (‘personal’). While “chastnyi” was mainly associated with disgraced and prohibited private property and thus had only negative connotations of secret vices and crimes, “lichnyi” designated the family, domestic and self-improvement sphere of a person’s life, which should have been open to the public attention and subject to common care, because everyday life was announced as a field of class struggle (Kharkhordin 1997:343-344). A specific kind of public opinion is also present here, which looks close to the traditional mechanism of gossiping (cf. Garcelon’s evaluation cited above) but in Soviet conditions could well end up in a local party cell session with the issue of “a communist morality” in agenda. Issues associated with the private sphere of family and informal talks thus could be easily moved in the public sphere of formalized discussion. Such an atmosphere, Kharkhordin concludes, caused growing dissimulation that became constitutive

for the public and private distinction of Soviet type (1997:350). In Soviet society, he argues, the public and private distinction was replaced by the dichotomy of the social ('obshchestvennoe') comprising both public and open personal, and the concealed private (1997:360).

Different modifications of the Western dichotomy undertaken in order to fit it to the communist conditions reflect this trait distinguished by Kharkhordin: constant dissimulation need engendered the third intermediate level between the open public and hidden intimate private spheres, the level, which other researchers called "social" (Garcelon 1997), "private public" (Chikadze and Voronkov 1997), or "public privacy" (Gerasimova 2002).

Ekaterina Gerasimova in her research on Soviet communal apartments<sup>3</sup> seeks to reconstruct the "emic" category of privacy in Soviet culture and comes up with the bunch of local concepts: "one's own" ('svoi'), "familial/personal" ('semeinoe/lichnoe') and "closed/hidden" ('zakrytoe/skrytoe'), applied to both physical and symbolical space (2002:225). This adds to the criteria of visibility and interest, which Weintraub distinguishes for the public and private distinction (1997:5), the third criterion of control, which is actually implied in these two, but in this particular case it is so important that it can be singled out as a separate one.

Several works based on the empirical data of communist or post-communist societies elaborate methodological potential of the public and private dichotomy as a semiotic tool for cultural research. Linguist and anthropologist Susan Gal argues that while the meanings of public and private have been changing throughout the history of mankind, it is the distinction itself that remained unchanged and thus it can be called a cultural universal, and the concepts of public and private can be called universal categories with shifting meanings (2002). She

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<sup>3</sup> Communal apartments appeared in the USSR in the 1920s due to both practical (housing shortage in big industrializing cities) and ideological (the transformation of everyday life according to the principles of communism) reasons. A deep anthropological analysis of everyday life in communal apartments, touching upon the issues of public and private as well, is given in (Utekhin 2004). The similarities and differences between communal apartments and garden cooperatives are discussed in the Chapter 3.

concentrates on the communicative nature of the distinction, which makes it a semiotic tool labeling certain practices, artifacts or spaces (2002:80). Gal pays special attention to the intertwining character of public and private spheres and offers the term “fractal reiteration” or “recalibration” for further conceptualizing this feature. Evoking Goffman’s theory, she shows how the dichotomy is constantly recreated and redefined by people in the course of interaction. Some particular modifications can be fixed by rites, laws or customs, and it is here where the connection between the more or less transparent sphere of law and the shadow realm of everyday life with its unwritten regulations can be found (Gal 2002:85).

Another anthropologist with linguistic background Ilia Utekhin concentrates on the concept of privacy, taking it as an “etic” category universally applicable to any culture, and further develops the Goffmanian vision of privacy as a result of constant interactions between people in order to maintain each other’s “faces”, always connected with an access to information (2007:378). Utekhin points to the cultural specificity of a particular content of “face”, which can become the object of anthropological research (2007:379). He elaborates his theoretical statements using his empirical data from Soviet and early Post-Soviet communal apartments, and describes an episode of the constant struggle for the right to define the borders of public and private and respective rules of behavior typical of this kind of communal living (2007:382).

The cultural meanings of public and private in the post-communist Russian society have been rarely touched upon by researchers. All the authors cited above agree that after the collapse of state socialism private sphere strengthened, especially with the legal privatization of property. Gerasimova mentions that communal apartments with their specifically Soviet privacy regime still exist, but never touches the question what happened to the ideas of public and private there in Post-Soviet period (2002:211). Kharkhordin in his book “The collective and the individual in Russia” (1999) argues that it was the formation of concealed private

sphere in Soviet epoch that helped Russian society to accept easily the Western value of privacy in 1990s (Kharkhordin 1999:357). However he makes the statement about the acceptance of the value of privacy in Russia on the very narrow data about a group of businessmen of the early 1990s, which, I think, cannot be sufficient evidence. Similar empirical basis is used by Alexei Yurchak for his argument that it was the split of practices between official and non-official public spheres inherited from Soviet times that defined the specific nature of Russian business in 1990s (Yurchak 2001). It is convincing for the early years of Soviet business developing still in the conditions of socialism, but the practices of tax and customs evasions of 1990s, which Yurchak describes in the same terms, look too similar to the international experience. He finally comes to the same general idea that Soviet legacy helped certain segments of Russian society to adopt values and practices of liberal market economy.

The issue of public and private in contemporary Russia is discussed in several works on dachas and garden cooperatives among those few that exist so far. Naomi Galtz in her PhD dissertation written on the data collected during her field-work in Moscow of the late 1990s offers to see the discussions of the issues of common importance in garden cooperatives as “meaningful associational activity”, contributing to “meaningful experiences of publicness”; it implies that, even though these particular associations were created by the state, Russians have their own culture of civil society, the assumption questioned in some branches of Western scholarship (Galtz 2000:315). Melissa Caldwell eagerly supports Galtz’s cautious optimism about the role of dacha<sup>4</sup> experiences in the developing of civil society potential. Referring to the fact that at dachas and other natural spaces in Russia law and state regulations are widely ignored in favor of people’s own notions of how to behave, she argues that in natural spaces far from rigid state control the ideals of liberty, autonomy and civil association,

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<sup>4</sup> Caldwell doesn’t make clear distinction between dachas and garden cooperatives in her monograph, focusing more on their common role as natural spaces.

these new values of Russian democracy, must emerge and develop naturally, “organically”, in the very heart of people’s everyday lives. She concludes that it is probably the periphery of dachas, where the civil society in Russia should be searched for, rather than cities, traditionally seen in scholarship as cultural centers (Caldwell 2011:134-135, 161). Being far from state control has its disadvantages, though, as any liberty does: unlike in the cities, in the natural spaces of dachas people have to face the echo of economic and political changes without mediation of the state agencies. Caldwell points at the positive side of often negative experiences in dealing with the new content of the ideas of privacy, ownership or security: people learn “important lessons in market capitalism and democracy” (2011:149).

In broad strokes Caldwell draws the picture of the current perception of public and private distinction in dacha communities. Her informants describe life at a dacha as more secure, relaxed and meaningful, which together with perceived remoteness from the state mentioned above allows defining dachas as totally private sphere of intimate relations with self, nature and other people (Caldwell 2011:144). This special regime of privacy in garden cooperatives since Soviet times has been supported by the absence of fences between the plots. Caldwell describes the conflict about fences, which she observed during her fieldwork in a dacha cooperative near Tver in the mid 2000s. Suddenly a member of the community built a fence around his plot of land and was immediately boycotted by his neighbors and old friends as a disturber of dacha friendship intimacy (Caldwell 2011:164). The researcher interprets this conflict as an example of acute reactions traditionally caused by historical changes coming to the timeless realm of dacha (Caldwell 2011:166). I will discuss the case of fences later in my research and elaborate this conclusion. I should add that her findings make one think whether privacy values were so easily accepted in the Post-Soviet Russian society as Kharkhordin argues in his cited above book.

In this research I stick to the anthropological vision of the public and private terms as cultural universals and to the Goffmanian methodological framework elaborated by Gal and Utekhin. Still I discuss the concepts of private property and public sphere of citizenship activity, which belong to another discourse field, when I speak about the local reactions to these ideas, new for the Russian context. However I am mostly interested in the local understandings of these terms and in tracing the connection between them and the configurations of public and private reflected in the everyday life interactions.

In the following chapter I will give a brief account on the history of garden cooperatives and changes happened there after the collapse of state socialism. After that I will focus on the reactions of the members of garden cooperatives to the new legal patterns and notions and touch upon the issues of public and private in contemporary garden communities, which Galtz and Caldwell started to discuss in their works, on the basis of my empirical data and theoretical findings of other scholars cited here.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Garden cooperatives – the land of total privacy**

#### **2.1. From collective gardens to individual dachas**

After World War 2 the Soviet state faced several big challenges. One of them was the permanent food supply crisis; another was the growing necessity to prove the legitimacy of socialism as a dominating ideology, which meant that significant improvements of everyday life of Soviet citizens were urgent (Pleasures... 2010:14-15). The distribution of plots of land in garden cooperatives became a part of the solution to both problems, though their role as lower-class summer houses was ideologically contradictory and thus never officially admitted.

Collective gardens of “workers and office workers”, which in 1955 were organized in the form of garden cooperatives<sup>5</sup>, were established in 1949 with the officially announced purposes to solve the problem of food supply and provide workers with “healthy” and “cultural”<sup>6</sup> leisure<sup>7</sup>. The state gave large plots of land to the enterprises and institutions to distribute the shares among their workers. The cultivation of garden plots was compulsory, and there were special regulations concerning the amount of fruit trees, berry bushes and vegetables to grow on a single plot of land. The range of crops varied depending on the region, and potatoes dominated everywhere. Collective gardens were a part of the social welfare system offered by Soviet enterprises to their workers, so the organizations had a significant role there: they helped with funding and services to arrange such expensive tasks as project making or the building of electricity and running water networks. Garden plots

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<sup>5</sup> Literally “garden comradeships” (‘sadvodcheskoie tovarishchestvo’), I chose the word “cooperative” following Naomi Galtz’s PhD dissertation, where she argues that it was actually a form of cooperative, though not clearly articulated legally until 1988 (Galtz 2000:316); but it is important to remember that the original word “tovarishchestvo” refers to both a form of cooperative and the root “tovarishch”, ‘comrade’, evoking the connotations with collective intentions of state socialism, evaluated positively or negatively depending on a context.

<sup>6</sup> “Kul’turnyi”, about this concept in Soviet ideology see (Kelly 1998).

<sup>7</sup> Standard Regulations for a Garden Cooperative (1956); Standard Regulations for a Garden Cooperative (1985).



were distributed through local branches of the trade union for free, according to the elaborate system of benefits and privileges varying in space and time. A garden cooperative was administered by an executive committee, elected by the general meeting of the members of a cooperative. The committee was accountable to the general meeting as well as to the trade union branch of the respective enterprise<sup>8</sup>, and it often included a representative of the trade union, who was to control the gardeners and prevent violations (Interview 1). Thus, garden cooperatives depended on their enterprises and were controlled by the trade union branches.

A single plot was a share in the collective garden owned by an enterprise; its user enjoyed the right to cultivate it as long as (s)he was a member of the garden cooperative. A plot could not be bought or sold officially; if one wanted to pass his or her garden plot to someone else, s(he) gave it to the trade union and received back certain fees (s)he had paid, as well as the compensation of the expenses for the cultivation and construction. The “customer” paid the same sum to the trade union cash desk and received the right to enter the cooperative and use the plot<sup>9</sup>. Until the 1980s it was demanded that the land should be distributed among the workers of the respective institution only<sup>10</sup>. In practice this was often violated, and the actual procedure of passing the ownership was often conducted in the realm of shadow economy: a “seller” negotiated the price with a “customer” and got the money (or services) from him or her in the informal sphere; formally the first just left the respective garden cooperative, while the second one entered it (Interview 2; Interview 3). While not the property of its user, a garden plot still in many ways resembled private property and was often treated like one; this feeling was enhanced by the fact that the right to use it could have been handed

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<sup>8</sup> Standard Regulations for a Garden Cooperative (1985).

<sup>9</sup> Standard Regulations for a Garden Cooperative (1985).

<sup>10</sup> Standard Regulations for a Garden Cooperative (1966); Standard Regulations for a Garden Cooperative (1985).

down to its user's heirs and thus very soon left the narrow circle of a certain institution workers<sup>11</sup>.

The level of privacy available in a garden cooperative, though, was very low: fences between the plots were prohibited, and the fences along the streets had to be agreed with the executive committee<sup>12</sup>. One family was allowed to have only one 600m<sup>2</sup> plot of land, so it was impossible to enhance the distance from the neighbors through spatial extension. People chose their plots without seeing them beforehand, just by drawing lots, so any personal feelings towards the land were not supposed to exist. The restrictions are partly explained by practical reasons: the garden plots were initially designed for agricultural purposes only and not for spending much time nor for relaxation there, so everything was subjected to the agricultural needs and privacy was not a priority at all. In the very beginning even the division of collective gardens into individual plots of land was not envisioned; it was assumed that people would work collectively in a large garden and after share the harvest, but it was very soon forgotten, though the echoes of this initial idea are found in the documents as late as in 1962 (TsGA, Fund 7384, Coll. 41, File 299, May 3, 1962). Building of fences was limited, because even the shadow of a fence would have covered a significant area of a small 600 m<sup>2</sup> plot of land. The size of individual plots was counted also on the basis of agricultural products' need of an average family (first 600 m<sup>2</sup> or 1200 m<sup>2</sup>, and only 600m<sup>2</sup> later in 1980s) (Interview 4). Houses suitable for living were prohibited, because the size of land available and other conditions, such as the building materials or the absence of sewerage, didn't meet the housing standards; only small cottages (12-25 m<sup>2</sup> square by 1966, increased to 50 m<sup>2</sup> in 1988<sup>13</sup>) were allowed; well enough to store tools and spend a night or two in the summer, they were impossible to live in during the winter. At the same time the distance between the

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<sup>11</sup> Standard Regulations for a Garden Cooperative (1985).

<sup>12</sup> Standard Regulations for a Garden Cooperative (1966); Standard Regulations for a Garden Cooperative (1985).

<sup>13</sup> Standard Regulations for a Garden Cooperative (1966); Standard Regulations for a Garden Cooperative (1988).

newly established garden cooperatives and the home-city of gardeners was increasing from 50-60 kilometers in the early period to 100-120 kilometers in the 1980s, and the main means of transport available was a suburban train. I should add that it was strictly forbidden to allot good agricultural lands for collective gardens, so it was usually swamps and industrial wastelands, such as abandoned sand or peat pits<sup>14</sup>. Turning such lands back to agricultural fertility was an unspoken by-product of the collective gardens policy.

However, from the interviews and archive materials I explored I have an impression that neither garden plot users nor the officials who controlled them were aware of the practical basis of the restrictions. The first took them as an inevitable evil and the second spoke mostly of their ideological implications. The state officials and ideologists saw the capacity of garden plots to develop the dangerous feeling of private ownership in their users, and did everything to prevent the merging of garden plots in garden cooperatives with second houses or dachas, this traditional elite form of summer housing. Being designed not for agriculture, but for idle leisure, dachas offered much more privacy to their inhabitants than garden plots. Dacha plots of land were much bigger (from 1200 m<sup>2</sup> and more), dacha houses, usually built not by the owners themselves but centrally, were more or less suitable for comfortable living all the year round. The protocols of the City Executive Committee of Leningrad for the period of 1960-1980s accessible in the Central City Archive of Saint Petersburg (TsGA) provide much evidence of both the efforts of the authorities and the resistance of the gardeners: the officials constantly complained about such violations in garden cooperatives as the building of too spacious houses of stone or logs or other prohibited materials, the building of bathhouses and garages, the enclosures or unauthorized seizures of land, which they interpreted as attempts to

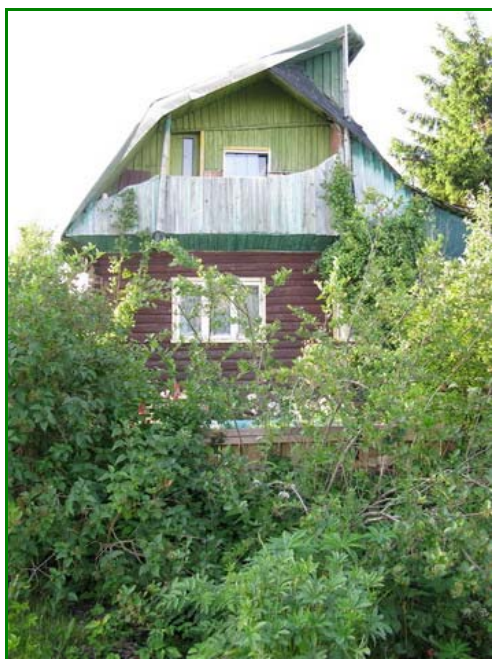
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<sup>14</sup> The Decree of the Council of Ministers of the RSFSR “On Personal Subsidiary Households of Collective Farmers, Workers, Office Workers and Other Citizens and Collective Gardening and Kitchen Gardening in the RSFSR” 623 (12.12.1977).

build “second houses” and to turn garden plots into proper dachas (see the Figures 1 and 2 for the differences preserved till now).



**Figure 1. A “proper” dacha in an old dacha settlement near Saint Petersburg, recently rebuilt. 2007.**



**Figure 2. A typical garden house. 2009.**

They evaluated it as intolerable and discussed measures to stop it (TsGA, Fund 7384, Coll. 47, File 143, October 14, 1974; Fund 7384, Coll. 56, File 684, April 23 and 29, 1985). But all in vain, and by the late 1980s garden plots had been normally referred to as dachas in

both daily speech and official documents (cf. TsGA Fund 7384, Coll. 60, File 129, April 3, 1989), and the practices of enjoying nature and gardening had become common for both garden plots and proper dachas.

If we follow the changes in the state policy on garden cooperatives since 1949 reflected in the four Standard Regulations for a Garden Cooperative (1956, 1966, 1985, 1988) and several intermediate decrees, as well as in archive documents, we will see the story of compromises and gradual softening of limitations, as the state admitted the growing role of garden cooperatives in the food supply, and the local authorities proved to be powerless to prevent all the numerous violations people committed in their desire to have proper summer houses. This is an illustrative quotation from the speech of the head the City Executive Committee of Leningrad recorded in 1974: “From these 85 thousand of garden houses more than a half have been built with violations, so we should think practically: we are not able to force all these dacha-people (“dachniki”) to make their houses smaller” (TsGA, Fund 7384, Coll. 47, File 126, July 20, 1974).

Another reason of softening the limitations was that after the 1960s collective gardens were founded farther and farther from the cities, so that their users had to stay there for the night and better living conditions were more necessary (Interview 4). In the 1980s, when the food supply crisis came to its climax, the number of garden plots distributed increased tremendously, and the collective gardens of this epoch were established within 100 and more kilometers distance from the cities; the last Standard Regulations of 1988 were the mildest: they cancelled any restrictions on fowl and rabbit breeding allowed in 1985, the size of a garden house was increased to 50 m<sup>2</sup>, individual projects were allowed. Moreover, garden cooperatives got the right to make contracts with other cooperatives, i.e. to make the profit. The law of 1988 “About cooperatives in the USSR” recognizes garden cooperatives as “a part of the cooperative system” (entry 52), which meant that garden cooperatives became

independent from their enterprises and the trade union. However in 1989 the Standard Regulations and all the decrees concerning garden cooperatives were cancelled<sup>15</sup>, and garden cooperatives operated according to the Civil Code of the Russian Federation until 1995, when the new Civil Code was issued, which didn't mention garden cooperatives at all, i.e. between 1995 and 1998 they didn't exist in a legal sense (Garden... 2007).

The new Federal Law of the Russian Federation about garden non-commercial cooperatives (issued in 1998) gives them large power in arranging their inner affairs. Situated on the territory of different municipalities, garden cooperatives are not subject to them and have the right to dispose their cooperative capital shaped by membership fees; all the infrastructure within the borders of a cooperative including roads and electrical and running water equipment is usually its property. In the 2000s additional regulations were introduced to make the tax payments, bookkeeper's records and the privatization of single plots in garden cooperatives easier<sup>16</sup>. Being small communities of rarely more than 400 people, garden cooperatives have all the opportunities to execute direct democracy during the general meetings and effective representation in the executive committee.

A significant difference of the new form of garden non-commercial cooperatives established in 1998 is that the membership is voluntarily, i.e. the membership in a cooperative was separated from the land ownership. Before the membership in a garden cooperative was a necessary condition to get the right to use a garden plot; being excluded from the cooperative one was deprived of the plot. Now one may enter the cooperative after (s)he has bought a plot, if (s)he likes. It means that those who privatized their garden plots are able to leave the cooperative and run their private households.

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<sup>15</sup> The Decree of the Council of Ministers of the RSFSR "On Recognition of the Decisions of the Government of the RSFSR on the Issues of Cooperation Repealed" 126 (19.04.1989).

<sup>16</sup> R.F. Federal Law "On the Corrections to some Acts of Legislation of the Russian Federation on the Issue of the Reductive Procedure of Registration the Rights of the Citizens to the Certain Real Estate Units" 93 (30.06. 2006);

R.F. Federal Law "On the Correction of the Entry 1 of the Federal Law on Non-Commercial Organizations" (29.11. 2007).

Privatization in garden cooperatives started in 1991 with the law of the RSFSR “On land reform”. Most garden cooperatives privatized their common lands then as their property as legal units and the rest as a collective property of a cooperative members, while the majority of single plots have remained unprivatized till now due to various reasons, mainly because neither officials nor garden plots users were ready for the procedure: nobody actually knew how this should have been done (Field-notes). It means that garden cooperatives, formally privatized and thus switched to the new economic model of market relations, actually preserved the features of the old socialist regime inside: being collective property, single plots cannot be either sold or handed down. The significant difference is that now they potentially can be privatized. The electricity-providing companies see a garden cooperative as one collective consumer, which means that they recognize only one collective counter and issue one bill for the entire community; it makes all the cooperative members mutually dependent and also creates incentives for abuse and electricity stealing, and thus leads many to privatize their land and even leave cooperatives (Field-notes; Interview 4).

Building in contemporary garden cooperatives is regulated by the Building Standards and Rules (BSR) issued in 1997. There are no size restrictions, only certain demands concerning the distances between buildings based on fire safety and sanitary code. Only netting fences are allowed between the plots to prevent shading, which is clearly explained. Solid fences are allowed along the streets with the agreement of the general meeting. The houses on garden plots are still designated as not suitable for living, and the official registration of living on a garden plot<sup>17</sup> is possible only if it is situated on the territory of an officially admitted settlement and the house meets all the requirements of a proper living house, a very rare combination for garden cooperatives<sup>18</sup>.

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<sup>17</sup> Official registration at the place of living is still demanded in Russia and absolutely necessary to enjoy even the most basic rights and social benefits.

<sup>18</sup> R.F. Constitutional Court: The Resolution No 7-II (14.04.2008).

The history of garden cooperatives is the history of turning the garden plots from agricultural units of collective use into private summer houses similar to dachas. The contemporary legal regime of garden plots provides many opportunities to enhance privacy: the plot can be made a legal private property and put outside a cooperative, it can be enlarged through buying more land nearby, and it can be surrounded by fence. There are also certain survivals of the socialist regime in the legal sphere, such as dependence on garden cooperative in terms of infrastructure use and maintenance, which complicates privatization of individual garden plots.

## **2.2. Total privatization and public sphere potentials**

Melissa Caldwell, in her monograph based on the research in different dacha communities in the period between 1995 and 2005, comes to the conclusion that dachas as any other natural spaces in Russia are perceived as totally private, which is expressed particularly in the typical neglect of any state regulations (Caldwell 2011:144). This statement refers to the dichotomy of public and private as state and non-state. I believe that the “privateness” of dachas is wider than just perceived absence of state control, and it underlies many peculiarities of everyday life and politics in dacha communities. I will turn to its role in everyday life in the Chapter 3, and here I will focus on the reactions of garden cooperative members to the advent of privatization and increased legal independence of their communities after Perestroika.

Land privatization is generally welcomed in garden cooperatives, especially after people realized that they were not able to sell or hand down legally their unprivatized garden plots. The problem is that they would like to keep the lands they occupied illegally. These numerous disputable cases, along with complicated bureaucratic procedures and expensive land measuring, made the process of single garden plots’ privatization very slow and difficult. Privatization is expected by many to bring the needful order into the chaos of informal



relations dominating in garden cooperatives, but its advent also evokes anxiety, because too many violations wait to be corrected and informal ties in the neighborhoods will be endangered (Interview 5; Field-notes). An important symbol of the order is the fence, and some people refuse to build it around their garden plots before privatization, because they are not sure about their borders (Interview 2; Interview 5).

To start discussing the peculiarities of public sphere in garden cooperatives I need to make another reference to Caldwell. She argues that at their dachas far from both state control and state services, Russians have learnt severe lessons of new market economy rules and also how to deal with such new concepts as privacy or civil society (Caldwell 2011:149). Garden cooperatives, almost totally relieved from the outer control after 1988, indeed became an appropriate area for testing the new realities of market economy, where people are able to express their understanding of the concepts of private property or civil society, make experiments and enjoy the results. However I would question the relevance of the interpretation in educational terms and suggest that probably the image of *bricoleur* offered by Levi-Strauss (1966) and elaborated by Certeau (1984) is more suitable here. Unlike the student, *bricoleur* doesn't seek to imitate the teacher, but adapts creatively the alien material to his specific needs. Looking at the results of such *bricolage*, one can assume the nature of the needs behind it.

During my fieldwork I came across numerous cases which can be interpreted as a too literal understanding of private property right. People often seize parts of common territories such as green zones, which were made initially for both fire safety purpose and as zones to relax and socialize, and joined them to their own garden plots without any legal permission. Another frequent example is the private use of common lands or constructions, such as deconstruction of fire reservoirs or drains and inclusion of these lands in one's own territory (Interview 5). Recently I heard a woman expressing her intention to buy the plot of land with

a fire reservoir in common use across the road from her own garden plot and a part of the road itself to make one big plot of land and prevent everyone else from passing by (Field-notes). Taking willingly the Western concept of sacred private property right, these people haven't adopted other ideas accompanying it, such as special regime of common property or the concept of public good. Evoking the image of *bricoleur*, I would suggest that these people probably don't need these concepts, because they have their own ones, emerging independently in their specific historical and cultural conditions and better suitable for them. In Soviet times commons in the cities such as a stairwell of an apartment-block or a courtyard, or the corridor in a communal apartment, were considered as a "no-man's land" (Boym 1995:141). It implied general neglect to these spaces and, in communal apartments, even occasional attempts to occupy parts of them. Probably the cases of commons appropriation described above show the influence of this approach.

The legal independence of garden cooperatives acquired after 1988 offers their members an opportunity to experience another important concept from the West, the concept of public sphere as a sphere of citizenship activity. Naomi Galtz, in the chapter of her PhD dissertation with an expressive title "Garden variety civil society", makes an interesting point (only partly seriously) that Post-Soviet garden cooperatives offer the basic conditions for functioning of the classical Habermasian public sphere model: temporarily equated people gather there to solve their common issues through the means of discussion (Galtz 2000:313). Galtz is cautious in her evaluations of the effectiveness and potential of this kind of public sphere, while Melissa Caldwell, developing her idea, sounds more optimistic and believes that dachas are those places hidden in the margins, where some organic grass-roots type of Russian public sphere will probably ripen (Caldwell 2011:174). Both researchers refer not to the system of cooperative management only, but to the atmosphere in garden communities generally favorable for collective actions. The applicability of the Habermasian model here is disputable

for many reasons: the content of the discussions, which is usually far from big political issues, and the local scale of the decisions taken can be mentioned. I will not develop this topic here, considering it to be a subsidiary one taking this empirical research too far into the theoretical speculations.

Now I would like to focus on the present form of self-management in garden cooperatives and the reasons behind its negative image dominating among the gardeners in particular. The evidence of ineffective management is quite obvious even for a stranger in many garden cooperatives: rubbish heaps at the borders of settlements, roads in need of repair and worn out electrical wires are typical. Being asked about it, the members of a cooperative tell numerous stories about cheating and abuse conducted by those in power (Interview 2; Interview 4, Interview 6, etc.). People are sure that everyone who goes to be elected in the executive committee pursues his or her private interests only, and talk much about the membership fees spent for the purposes unknown, as if they had no legal opportunities to influence the situation through the means of direct democracy available (Interview 5; Interview 7). Moreover, this trend of possession with private engagements is maintained by the common members themselves; even in more or less successful cooperatives people rarely pay proper attention to the general meetings: they don't try to understand what is going on and would like to turn to their own affairs back home as soon as possible (Interview 4; Interview 5). People are sure that everyone cares about one's own good only and they are not able to influence the decisions of common issues, so they take their participation in general meetings not as their civil right, but as a boring and senseless duty.

The calls for public works, such as drains cleaning or cutting the trees under electrical wires, made by the executive committee are often ignored or provoke irritation, though their benefit for everyone is obvious (Interview 3; Interview 8). Such works are still often called "subbotnik", following the Soviet tradition to devote a Saturday to public works, and this

word causes especially scornful reaction as a symbol of dissimulation and senseless public rituals of socialism (Interview 3). Another factor behind this irritation is the unwillingness to obey the directions of people in power, who are rarely held in any respect. Both my informants referred to above are good and diligent heads of their garden households, well aware of the necessity of these works, which they will most probably perform sooner or later; but they seem to be especially sensitive about their right to make independent decisions concerning their daily activities. This can be interpreted as another sign of the high desire for privacy typical for garden communities, adding to the general perception of dacha space as totally private.

The personal qualities of those in power, or more precisely their evaluations made by ordinary members of cooperatives, seem to be very important. The leaders of many unsuccessful garden cooperatives are commonly described as ignorant and dishonest people incapable to understand new laws and rules of the game; they are explicitly associated with the “old mentality” of Soviet past, which is strengthened by their inability to master new technologies such as computer and Internet, needed for modern bookkeeping and information search (Interview 2; Interview 4). I argue that these associations of a specific kind of people in power with the “old mentality” may cause a broader association of the whole garden cooperative management system with the Soviet official public sphere, which, in its turn, implies empty formal rituals and the network of private interests concealed behind them (Yurchak 2001; 2006). It explains why people do not take seriously any activity in this framework and do not believe that they are able to influence their lives through its means. Several more or less successful cooperatives (i.e. with infrastructure objects renewed and legal affairs ordered) I have observed were led by the people, who were well adapted to the new conditions and had more or less successful careers in the city; probably such people

better succeeded in destroying the negative image of cooperative management as a part of the Soviet official public sphere (Field-notes).

To understand better the attitudes in garden cooperatives toward both privatization and self-management, I conducted an interview with a group of people (4 women, between 50 and 70 years of age) from different cooperatives situated next to each other, who were in the process of privatization of their plots of land and about to leave their cooperatives. I was interested in the reasons why they wanted to reject their membership and how they saw the future of their property. Their position proved to be quite extreme. They told me that they would not like to depend on ignorant and dishonest people in their garden cooperatives, to pay them money and share the responsibility for the electricity payments with the whole community. They would prefer to make individual contracts with the service providers, as every consumer in a proper settlement does, without mediation of a garden cooperative. Moreover, they think that garden cooperatives should pass their electrical equipment to the companies, which provide electricity, because its maintenance is too complicated and expensive for average garden cooperative members. They also believe that garden cooperatives themselves should be dissolved and rejected as an outdated form of management, and garden plots should be subject to the authority of a local municipality on the same legal basis as all the villages and settlements around them (Interview 4).

Should it be interpreted as another case of an extreme understanding of Western values of individualism and private property, so that these people are ready to part with their unique right to manage their community? The oppositions between new Western and old communist values are frequent in their speech. They contemptuously refer to the existing cooperative management system as “kommuna” (‘commune’) or “kolkhoz” (‘collective farm’) using the terms for the specific Soviet forms of collective living. New Western values are defined as the domination of law and formality over the chaos of informal relations. The advantage of local

municipal authorities is the possibility to deal with them on the basis of law, and even if they abuse their duties, it can be solved legally (Interview 4). However, even though the people cited above expressed such a strong individualism, they have developed strong collective feeling and maintain the ties of mutual support in their small group, combined by the resistance to the garden cooperatives that don't want to let them out. Moreover I witnessed several successful initiatives of small groups in other neighborhoods, outside the framework of cooperative management, who joined together to book a truck of gravel to repair the part of the road near their houses or to make a playground for children (Field-notes).

The ideas obtained by my informants through the many years of experience in their garden cooperatives are very similar to those expressed in Richard Sennett's "The fall of public man" (1977). Sennett gives his version of the history of interaction between public and private spheres in the Western world since the 18th century and comes to the conclusion that nowadays the balance has moved strongly towards private sphere, so that informal personalized relations are generally expected even in the most impersonal realms such as politics. His attitude is that in a healthy and harmonious society public and private, formal and informal shouldn't be mixed together. It is echoed by my informants, when they declare that the management of a settlement should be executed by an exterior authority,<sup>19</sup> so that political and economic issues would not destroy informal relations in the neighborhood and would not spoil dacha days of relaxation. One interviewee expressed it with a very vivid image:

... Electricity networks and their maintenance must be passed to the state! And then we will live as in a village, stop voting, stop meeting N.<sup>20</sup> as an enemy; you will smile at her and say: "Hi, dear N.! Yes, yes, let's smell the flower, what a pretty one! Look, your small dahlia blossoms, how charming!" Proper dacha life will begin! And what do we have now? Political war! (Interview 4)

<sup>19</sup> The same idea was also suggested by the theorists of the management of commons: the law (sanctions at least) should be executed by someone from the outside of a community to keep the warm informal relations inside, see, for example, (Agrawal 2003:253).

<sup>20</sup> N. is a bookkeeper of a garden cooperative in the neighborhood and a symbol of the "old mentality" for this group of people. She stands strongly against privatization and for the preservation of garden cooperatives, so she tries to prevent the members of her cooperative from leaving it. This is why she is referred to as an enemy here.

I think that the situation in garden cooperatives only partly can be described as a process of atomization, pointed out by Sennett in the West possessed with privacy and obviously going on in Post-Soviet cities as well. The quotation above shows clearly that “proper dacha life” implies totally informal relationships, which are seen as incompatible with political and economic decision-making on a community scale.

The new political and economic regime established after 1991 allowed garden plots to merge finally with dachas as the spaces of total privacy, providing their owners with the opportunities to fulfill or legitimize what had been desired or practiced illegally for long time before. The form of cooperative, burdened with both structural and cultural survivals of socialism, is generally perceived as atavism and a significant obstacle to further enhancement of privacy desired by people, so its potential for the civil society or public sphere development is very limited, despite the favorable legal regime. It is clear that the disappearance of rigid state control hasn't encouraged people to engage in the public life of their communities and organize it in a better way, as some researchers of civil society would probably suggest is logical (Galtz 2000:277). Quite the opposite, people tend to care about their own business and their families only, because any civil activity in existing framework is associated with undesirable features of the past and, moreover, is seen as incompatible with informal atmosphere a dacha community. In such circumstances small initiatives of minor groups in the neighborhoods independent from the mainstream cooperative management are more probable to shape a local variant of public sphere.

In the following chapter I will turn to the everyday life in garden cooperatives and the tensions between different evaluations of the border between public and private existing there.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Garden cooperative – the land of public privacy**

#### **3.1. Public privacy and fences**

As I have shown in the previous chapter, since Soviet times people have associated their garden plots with more diverse purposes than gardening only; constantly maneuvering between the state regulations and the limitations of the economy of shortages, they invested incredible efforts to create cozy and secluded shelters on their land in order to relax after the noisy and crowded city life. They have developed a very deep affection for the land they cultivated and the cottages they built themselves, struggling through numerous obstacles to obtain building materials and solve construction tasks, often without any special skills. Despite all the restrictions, garden plots have offered them a higher degree of privacy than has been available in the city. An informant of mine, who had spent all his life in a communal apartment until he left for Germany, recalls that he used to go to his garden plot with a small cottage in the 1980s and 1990s just to have some rest after the total lack of privacy in his room, which he shared with his wife, daughter and mother-in-law (Interview 9).

The main advantage of a garden plot compared to a room in a communal apartment in terms of privacy is that the activities connected with the private life of a family such as cooking or personal hygiene take place not in a shared public space but within the borders of an individual garden plot. Nevertheless the privacy regime in garden cooperatives has important similarities to that of a communal apartment. Some of them are caused by the regulations, such as the prohibition of fences between the plots or planning requirements, which prescribed building a toilet and a wash-stand next to the ones of a neighbor; they were cancelled with the introduction of the new building standards in 1997, but their traces are preserved in the spatial arrangement of the garden plots established before. The main communal trait of garden cooperatives is in their layout: small 600 m<sup>2</sup> individual plots are not



able to provide enough isolation, and the interactions there are inevitably visible or at least audible (see Figure 3). This situation was nicely described by an informant of Melissa Caldwell with the metaphor of “soap opera”: one can always observe other people’s affairs from his or her own plot of land (Caldwell 2011:165). Many informants of mine show their discontent with transparency of different kinds (visual, acoustic, olfactory) typical of a garden cooperative space, talking about their irritation with loud music in the neighborhood, or constant presence of people near their borders and even occasional trespassing, or the smell of a neighbor’s fire coming to their plot (Interview 6; Interview 8, etc.). Some admit that they feel uneasy using their toilet situated close to the border with their neighbors and need to invent small tactics to avoid being seen (Field-notes).

As the evidence cited above shows, the term “public privacy” offered by Ekaterina Gerasimova for the privacy regime of a communal apartment characterized with “openness of personal life to public scrutiny and the location of everyday domestic activities in collectively controlled territory” (2002:224) is well applicable to garden cooperatives as well. The territories of domestic activities are not physically controlled by a collective in garden cooperatives but symbolic control caused by their openness to the public eye is still felt there. The inhabitants of communal apartments use different means of enhancing their privacy: curtains and other barriers, symbolical depersonalization of neighbors, etc (Gerasimova 2002:224-225).

In Soviet garden cooperatives people also felt such a need, but were restricted by the prohibitions. An informant of mine recollecting the Soviet past complains:

It was already a joy for people, you know, your personal plot of land, but there were troubles as well. They didn’t let us build a fence in those times. No, they didn’t! Look, I come there, I live in a communal apartment, and I have been dreaming of living separately for the whole of my life, you know, to hide<sup>21</sup>, as everyone wants, I think. To hide: how I live here, what I grow, and nobody should be around. So I come, and here is

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<sup>21</sup> *Zakrytsa*, literally ‘to cover oneself’ or ‘to lock oneself’.

my land, I want to build a fence so that nobody would steal a centimeter from me, God forbid! (Interview 9)

It is clear here that for this old man desirable privacy means not only hiding his personal life from collective scrutiny, but his ownership right and control as well. Possession and control expressed with the phrase “one’s own” was distinguished by Gerasimova as an important “emic” category of privacy specific for Soviet communal apartments (Gerasimova 2002:225). I believe that it can be extended to garden cooperatives as well, partly due to the experience of communal life of many gardeners but mainly due to the features typical for all kinds of communal living in cramped conditions.



**Figure 3. The garden cooperative, 600m<sup>2</sup> garden plots lie in two rows between the roads. View from a plane. The spring of 2008. Photograph by Natalya Goncharova.**

The derivatives of the word *svoi*, ‘one’s own’, have a significant role in the narratives concerning garden plots’ histories and practices: the cottages built and fruits grown there are precious, because they are *svoi*, and the process of cultivation of a plot is designated as *osvoeniye*, literally ‘making it one’s own’, the term containing a hint to the local ideas about ownership right (see also about it (Galtz 2000:302)). A garden plot and especially a cottage designed according to the needs and desires of their hosts can be seen as an extension of their

self. Being asked what they like most in their dachas, men often reply that it is the house they built themselves. An informant of mine incorporates in his answer a quotation from the Bible: “In the image and likeness of... according to my taste”, likening his relations with his garden cottage to the relations between the Creator and a human being (Interview 3). This is an important element of the perception of garden cooperatives as spaces of enhanced privacy compared to the city apartments of their inhabitants, where the means of self-expression are much more limited.

Nowadays there are no restrictions and formally nothing prevents gardeners from enclosing their plots of land and enjoying the feeling of total control and privacy there. But paradoxically enough, my field data shows that the issue of fences provokes much tension in the garden cooperatives around Saint Petersburg, and it is confirmed by the data of Melissa Caldwell from other regions of Russia (Caldwell 2011:165). This tension mirrors the lack of agreement in evaluations of privacy regime in garden cooperatives, which I believe can be extended to the scale of the whole society and defined as the general lack of a commonly shared system of values and thus may reflect the process of social and cultural change. One dominating point of view in garden cooperatives can be defined as individualistic; those who share it are not satisfied with the level of privacy available and try to modify their garden plots to increase it. They would prefer to enjoy solitude and silence, which they appreciate much after endless noise of the crowded city, rather than constantly observe and hear their neighbors (Interview 2; Interview 7; Interview 8). The opposite, collectivistic point of view is held by those appreciating community ties and informal relationships; they see the transparency of borders as highly favorable and believe that fences, especially solid ones, break the community (Interview 1; Interview 10) (see the Figures 4, 5, 6 for the examples of different kinds of fences).

However these two groups are not so easy to juxtapose, because the representatives of the former share the collective values of the latter, even their evaluation of fences: every time they told me about their intention to build a fence, they sought to justify this decision, most often with the need to control the unreasonable members of a community such as pets and small children unable to respect the borders (Interview 6; Interview 8), and they never expressed a desire to build a solid fence around their land. Both groups can be thus opposed to the third group of solid fence builders, who are usually new members of a cooperative, which means that they do not have ties in the community yet, and probably do not want to have in future.

Solid fences in garden cooperatives appeared only lately, probably in the last decade. The older residents share negative opinion about them, characterizing them in aesthetic terms (“ugly”, “terrible” (Interview 10)) but mostly in ethic or normative ones (for example, contrasting it to “decent” and “proper” wire nettings or other kinds of transparent fence (Interview 10)). A solid fence is ugly, because it hides views of trees and other greenery and flowers behind its artificial surface, which totally contradicts dacha natural aesthetics. It is “indecent” and “improper” because it discords with the collective ethics of dacha communities. Those who build solid fences around their garden plots are perceived as representatives of a different culture of rich “new Russians”, totally alien to their neighborhood. An informant of mine characterized her neighbor who built a solid fence as “mentally ill” (Interview 10), which stresses the depth of this assumed cultural cleft. Actually rich people do not often buy garden plots, which have always been a lower-class type of dacha; but a solid fence alone is enough to associate its owner with culturally alien *nouveau riches*, even if this is not true (Field-notes). The negative emotions towards solid fences in garden cooperatives are often accompanied by a suspicion that its owner has something evil to hide behind it; its roots can be traced back to the specific attitude to privacy in Soviet times

distinguished by Kharkhordin (1997:350): private sphere hidden from the public eye as opposed to the open personal one was created through the means of dissimulation, so the suspicion about everything concealed was quite logical within that ideology. As I have mentioned in Chapter 1, Kharkhordin pointed out the opposite consequence of such a form of existence of privacy in Soviet times: according to him, it helped a certain part of Russian society to accept the value of privacy easily, because they had already had the experience of it (1999:357). I think the discrepancy is explained by the social differences between his informants and mine: he worked with the interviews of newly emerged businessmen of early 1990s, a social group, very different from an average garden cooperative member.



**Figure 4. There is no fence between these two neighboring garden plots. The nearest trees and shrubs grow on the one garden plot, while the blue barrel behind belongs to the other.**

Using the metaphor of linguistic interaction, a solid fence is perceived as a very harsh anti-collective utterance; a transparent fence, which suddenly appears between the neighbors, also can be taken as a serious statement questioning good-neighbor relations, as it was in the case I was told about by an informant of mine. After she had built a netting fence around her garden plot, a neighbor became irritated:

She felt insulted and said: "Why do you fence from me?!" And I said: "It is not from you, Masha! The neighbors from that side and from that – everybody likes it, don't you see". Finally everybody liked it. We set the netting and so they got the fence along the border, you see, we didn't demand money from them. So the fence just helps us... You see it is not solid, the passage is very wide, there are no gates, nothing of the kind, welcome! Dogs and everything are welcome; we are not going to set gates. It was not because we wanted to fence off, but all the same, it is... better. For everyone. It is like... ordering the space (Interview 11).

This quotation not only represents different attitudes towards the fence in the neighborhood, it also illustrates nicely the contradictory position of the first group, which I have defined above as individualists. They would like to have their garden plots enclosed, but they are well aware of how it can be interpreted in their neighborhood, so they explicitly offer to see fences as a means to order the space and prevent conflicts only, i.e. not to harm but to help the community. The same informant of mine talks more about it:

Well, for example, a neighbor of mine... from the one side. Our border with her was overgrown with grass; nobody weeded it, neither she nor me. And after we have set the fence, now she weeds her side, now I weed my side, so it looks better [laughs]... It is convenient even from this point... yes, it is convenient. Before it was like we didn't want to trespass, you see... so... it is something like a border-mark. So we had no conflicts about the border with anybody (Interview 11).

The fence helped both neighbors to know their borders and weed the grass on their land without fear of committing a violation. Another woman hasn't enclosed her land yet, because it is not privatized, so she is not sure about her borders and fears to grab her neighbors' land accidentally (Interview 5). Other people admit that while the plot has no fence, any building on it looks as if it were provisional, so without a fence a garden plot looks unstable and only temporarily structured (Field-notes).





**Figure 5. A transparent fence between the neighbors (left).**

A fence is an important sign of more ordered and formalized relationships brought by the privatization as opposed to the chaos of the past, when precise borders and legal ownership rights were not so important because land was not subject to purchase and sale. The representatives of the individualist group would like both to enjoy the advantages of the new property regime and to preserve warm informal relationships in the neighborhood. The representatives of the second, collectivist group explicitly interpret fences as a sign of historical change:

...Firstly all of us lived in peace and friendship. Everybody, as friends. Then the time came when everybody fenced off, and people began to socialize only with old friends, or when the mobile shop came, only there they socialized. Then everyone went into one's shell, and the interest to collective life, socializing almost disappeared. Disappeared. (Interview 1)

The old man goes on to lament that 'garden comradeship', the literal translation for "garden cooperative", is not a comradeship anymore, because there is neither friendship nor collectivity; in his nostalgia he evokes the positive features of the Soviet period associated with the word "comrade" understood not as a formal address but literally. Fences for him are a symbol of the new relationships of alienation. Another informant of mine started speaking

about the coming of fences in her garden cooperative as soon as I asked her a question about the changes after Perestroika, and then immediately turned to the changes on a more global scale:

It is natural, you know, our entire psychology has changed. Everyone has started moving towards the West, to their liberalism, I mean, individualism. Of course it is dissociation. It is clear we are all moving to capitalism. Pro-Western attitudes different from the original Russian ones (Interview 10).

She interprets fences as a sign of the advent of new values, which she opposes to both socialist and authentic Russian ones, merged together in her nostalgia for the Golden Age of the past.

None of my informants associates the building of a fence with its direct function: security. Burglaries in garden cooperatives happen quite often, and it is a common topic of discussions, appearing frequently in interviews, but fences play no significant role in these narratives. In the several cases of theft I have heard about a fence was present and mentioned briefly but it never helped and even wasn't supposed to (Interview 6; Field-notes). A fence in a garden cooperative is not seen as a serious obstacle for criminals; it has a totally symbolical function of enhancing privacy and ordering the space and often also social relationships.

Despite the debates about fences, the values of collective solidarity are strong in garden cooperatives, and people often prefer employing more neutral means to enhance their privacy than building fences: they enlarge their territory buying more plots around to create "a buffer zone" (Interview 7) and plant trees and thick shrubs around their plots, often along a netted fence to cover it. Shrubs and trees hide a plot perfectly, in summer at least, helping to decrease the public privacy effects, and are perceived as absolutely neutral utterances, because they satisfy natural aesthetics of dacha.





**Figure 6. A transparent fence and greenery along the street.**

### **3.2. Public privacy, solidarity and inequalities**

Strong community ties in garden cooperatives are built on the basis of highly informal relationships and constant exchange of seeds, saplings, flowers, fruits, small services etc. Gardening, the commonly shared hobby in any garden cooperative, ties the community with a tight network of exchange relations, which goes beyond the borders of a single cooperative. Stories about a rare flower brought by someone and then spread all over the cooperative and in the several ones next to it, as neighbors shared it with each other, are common (Interview 6). Social networking is very active: the number of brief mutual visits per day is much higher in a garden cooperative than in the city, and the relationships between the people are seen as less alienated (Field-notes). However deep relations in the neighborhood are rarely developed, and people rarely meet in the city beyond dacha seasons.

The informality of relationships is supported by the unwritten standards of the garden cooperatives etiquette, which allow more relaxed behavior concerning visits (without a call in advance, for example), very casual style in clothing and less care of one's appearance than is appropriate for the city (no make-up for women, no shaving for men), see the Figure 7. It is

usually explained practically: people constantly work in their gardens, so any clothes are dirty very soon, and after days spent on the ground dirt is hard to wash off the skin (Interview 6). It also supports the regime of public privacy: people appear in public spaces such as streets, local roads or shops showing an exterior more suitable for private settings, not to mention such a quasi-private space as a garden around one's cottage, which is often more or less transparent for a passer-by, while the requirements for appearance there are even more relaxed (Interview 2; Interview 12, etc).



**Figure 7. A typical outfit for a garden cooperative.**

A higher degree of informality in relationships is typical for any space designated for leisure, such as a beach or a resort; it is engendered probably by the need to relax and have a rest after the formal rules shaping everyday life. Here the carnival tradition turning all the rules and social norms upside down can be evoked as another example of the need to change everything from time to time, common for all the mankind. I will not go into the theory of leisure any further here; to provide more connection with my data I will add that the majority of my informants eventually admitted that they needed their garden plots mostly to have some

alternative to their city life, and it was the change itself they enjoyed (Interview 5; Interview 12, etc).

The casual style in clothing helps to maintain informal relationships and it also creates the basis for the feeling of equality hardly possible in the city. I heard several stories about persons holding high positions who were taken for common workers or even paupers by their fellow garden cooperative members because of their shabby clothes and unshaven faces (Interview 6). Such stories serve as a tool to stress the equality people would like to see in their garden cooperatives, and to conceal existing economical inequalities obvious in the quality of building materials and cottages or the number of cars per family. There are alternative markers of status in garden cooperatives, which do not coincide with the signs of prestige typical for the city settings: personal diligence, skills and achievements in building or gardening. People who neglect their gardens are often disrespected in their neighborhood, especially by the older generation, who still make the majority of active gardeners (see also (Galtz 2000:285) about the “hierarchies of personal investment” and of “garden expertise” in garden cooperatives). Men who build their cottages themselves enjoy more respect among their peers than those who hire builders (Interview 1; Interview 13). This “natural” ideal of evaluation on the basis of personal achievements and diligence again fits well the natural aesthetics of dacha. Along with the desire to preserve community values dominating in garden cooperatives this can be interpreted as a compensatory answer to the process of change of social structure on the basis of income going on in the Post-Socialist Russian society, but also as an answer to the hierarchies of the city life in general.

I must add that despite the efforts of reconciliation (or concealment) cited above, social polarization has been visible in garden cooperatives since Soviet times. As I mentioned in the Chapter 2, garden plots were a privilege distributed on the basis of certain merits; some of my informants still remember with indignation that they had to buy their garden plots from those

who got the land for free with the only intention to sell it (Interview 2; Interview 7). Another obvious status marker of a garden plot in Soviet times was building materials, which were very difficult to obtain (though, as Galtz notes, building restrictions provided certain equality in the display of houses (2000:285)). Nowadays, along with advocating equality, people in garden cooperatives often construct social borders on different bases, which, again, do not coincide with the ones based on income. An old woman I talked to identified the inhabitants of the garden cooperative in her neighborhood as socially alien, because this cooperative had been established by a building organization, and the land was distributed among the builders of different ranks, while her own cooperative is mainly owned by architects, who perceive themselves as a higher caste. This assumed lower class status of the neighbors was enough for her to accuse them of littering in the street near her border.

Different ideas of privacy and its borders can also serve to draw social distinctions and a cause of conflicts. A garden cottage is the most private zone in a garden plot, while the grounds around are the transitional space between this island of solitude and real privacy and public zone of the street. There is no common agreement on the appropriate behavior in this space and the border of privacy. Enhanced informality of relationships in a garden community and the lack of fences complicate the situation. Some people believe it is acceptable to cross the border of a garden plot and approach the house without the permission of the host. Some assume it is polite to enter the house and knock on the rooms' doors, if the host doesn't show up. Others consider such behavior as absolutely unacceptable and think that the border of a garden plot is the border of privacy not to cross without permission, even if there is no fence, so a visitor should stay behind it and try to attract attention of the host shouting. The clashes between these different ideas on privacy may lead to open conflicts, which are sometimes interpreted in terms of social distinctions: those who behave too freely can be defined by their opponents as ill-mannered "commoners" ('prostye'), while the other side, which cares too

much of privacy, can be seen as neglecting the community ties. In such cases a fence is seen as a necessary means to establish social order and prevent “common” people from “misbehave” (Interview 2).

Everyday life in garden cooperatives presents a picture of complicated relationships between private and public. Perceived as a space of enhanced privacy compared to the city living conditions, a garden plot is embedded in the network of informal relationships in the community, which are opposed to a higher formality and alienation of the city life. Different senses of private clash here and engender tensions: private as solitude and private as personal, informal sociability. Nevertheless the regime of public privacy typical of garden cooperatives because of their cramped spatial conditions causes less tension than it does in a communal apartment. One of the probable reasons is that garden plots still provide more privacy than communal apartment rooms; another one is that a garden cooperative is a space of leisure, and thus implies enhanced informality and relaxed relationships, which help to ease the tensions. In communal apartments, on the contrary, the informality enforced by sharing the spaces of domestic activities rather intensifies tension than eases it. The conflicts between different attitudes about public and private express the search for a new balance between the values of individual privacy and collective solidarity after the advent of new ideology and economic order in the entire Russian society.

## Concluding Remarks

In my thesis I have shown how the changes in legislation, politics and state ideology in Russia after the fall of state socialism were adopted in the everyday life, using the field-data from contemporary garden cooperatives as a research material. Facing the new notions of public and private, people creatively select the elements, which satisfy their needs, and treat them according to their understandings based on their Soviet experiences. The general trend I observed in garden cooperatives is the new ordering of the borders between public and private spheres in the new conditions. The elements of formal official relations are forced out from garden communities to complete the process of their turning into the spaces of total privacy and intimate relaxed relationships. The privatization of individual land is welcomed, because it helps to this process on the individual level, but a new balance must be found between individual privacy and collective solidarity, which is still highly appreciated; the search for this balance is reflected in the acute debates about fences. Elaborating the conclusion made by Melissa Caldwell in her monograph (2011:164), I suggest that the desire to preserve informal relations and neutralize social inequalities in garden cooperatives along with the attempts to create alternative social borders can be interpreted as the reaction of people to the current changes in Russian society, but also more generally as the reaction to the enhanced formality and alienation of the city life. The adoption of such ideas as public citizenship activity or special property regime of commons in garden cooperatives meets serious obstacles, which are at least partly caused by their similarities to the centrally imposed and rigidly regulated quasi-public activity and omnipresent collective (perceived as no one's) property, these typical phenomena of Soviet times.

Exploring the public and private in contemporary collective gardens, I applied the modifications of this dichotomy made by Kharkhordin (1997), Chikadze and Voronkov (1997), Gerasimova (2002) for the Soviet empirical data. I found out that these modifications

fit well to the current Russian society as far as it concerns the generations socialized in Soviet times, and help to build hypothetical explanations for certain social paradoxes, such as the civic passivity or the cases of aggression towards enclosing in garden cooperatives. My research also allowed elaborating the discussions of certain issues of the Russian dacha culture started by Galtz (2000) and Caldwell (2011).

I must admit that my conclusions have a limited capacity of generalization to the scale of the entire Russian society. A very important distinctive feature of current garden cooperatives is that they are temporary seasonal settlements with the strictly defined purpose of spending leisure time. This implies a special regime of privacy and enhanced informality, supported also by their closeness to nature and remoteness from the state control. The fact that garden cooperatives turned out to be a part of both temporal (between Soviet past and Post-Soviet present) and spatial (between the dacha and the city) oppositions, I would like to keep for the further investigation. This special status has its own advantages for my current research: as I mentioned in the Introduction, the enhanced informality allows people to act more freely according to their own needs and desires. Moreover, the experience of life at a dacha is commonly perceived as more meaningful and authentic than in the city, which is confirmed by both my own observations and the evidence collected by Melissa Caldwell (2011). Probably it is dachas of different kinds, where people express their true needs and desires, and thus one should look there to understand them better.

The issue of civic passivity in Russia and other Post-Socialist countries is much more complicated and has many different forms and other contextual reasons. The explanation capacity of the conclusions made here is limited even for the scale of garden cooperatives, because the empirical basis is still narrow. But nevertheless it is a hypothesis, which may contain some minor part of the explanation, and is to be tested on other cases in other contexts.

Another serious limitation is the generational one. The attitudes of younger generations are very different from those expressed by their parents and grandparents; it could be a topic for another research, which would probably tell more about the future of Russian society, while this work is rather about its present and its current relationships with the past.

The comparison between garden cooperatives and communal apartments has proved to be especially productive and definitely needs a special research. The similarities between them are obvious, but, paradoxically enough, the conditions that cause constant tension and mutual hatred in communal apartments, are even welcomed and highly appreciated by many in garden cooperatives. Further investigation of these issues may bring new knowledge in the realms of Soviet and Post-Soviet culture studies, as well as the theory of leisure and human ethology.



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### **Interviews**

(including the gender and the year of birth of an informant and the district of Leningradskaya oblast', where his or her garden plot is situated)

Interview 1 – M, 1930, Luzhskii district;

Interview 2 – F, 1951, Luzhskii district;

Interview 3 – M, 1938, Volkhovskii district;

Interview 4 – the group interview: F, abt 1940 (expert); F, 1951, F. abt 1935, F. abt 1950, Luzhskii district;

Interview 5 – F, 1944, Priozerskii district;

Interview 6 – the group interview, F, 1931; F, 1937, Vyborgskii district;

Interview 7 – M, 1955, Priozerskii district;

Interview 8 – M, 1950, Tosnenskii district;

Interview 9 – M, 1937, Kirovskii district;

Interview 10 – F, 1955, Vyborgskii district;

Interview 11 – F, 1938, Priozerskii district;

Interview 12 – F, abt 1940, Priozerskii district;

Interview 13 – M, 1937, Priozerskii district.