The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Russians Flocking to Britain's Boarding Schools

By Des Brown

August 11, 2013



Wellington College is expecting a further intake of Russians from rich, well-educated backgrounds in September. **RTpeat / Flickr**

Come September, more than 2000 schoolchildren across Russia will be packing their luggage and decamping to the houses of the most traditional of British institutions — the boarding school — entering a world of prep and pastoral care, a world of Mr. Chips, the Eton Boating Song and Harry Potter.

According to the Independent Schools Council (ISC) census in 2012, there were 2,150 Russian students at British boarding schools. Only Hong Kong-China and Germany send more students to Britain, and there are more Russians at British independent schools than students from the U.S., Japan and India combined.

It seems a far cry from the Cold War confrontations of the past and would have been unthinkable 50 years ago. Then the only likely connection between Russia and Britain's public

schools were the defectors: Guy Burgess of Eton and Kim Philby of Westminster.

But what brings Russians in such large droves to Britain? The historical importance of the country's public school tradition appears to factor heavily in the equation, along with the prestige and possibility of university in the "West."

Wellington College in Berkshire, southeast England was founded in 1853 as a memorial to the Duke of Wellington and included among its former students writers George Orwell and Sebastian Faulks. Head of Sixth Form at Wellington College, Matt Oakman explained why the Russians are coming.

It is "only on the university front — that it is, with the desire to seek access to top level Britain and U.S. universities — that the majority of our Russian contingent come," he believes.

However, their desire is not always met by their competence: "They tend to have expectations that are above their ability level," Oakman said. "This is mainly due to their lack of understanding of the British system and because their English isn't as good as those from the Far East or Europe, which does hamper and hinder their progress."

Roedean is an independent day and boarding school for girls just outside Brighton in Sussex, southeast England.

Zoe Marlow, director of communications and marketing at Roedean, said 45 percent of the students are international, and of these, only nine students are Russian, spread across ages nine to 13.

There are no typical Russian students at Roedean "The girls come from Moscow, St. Petersburg and Novosibirsk. Their parents are from diverse backgrounds and have a variety of careers."

Marlow said Russian students integrate well into life at Roedean and to British life in general. "They often have family connections or property in London and therefore have a good understanding of, and interest in, British culture."

Typically, a very high appreciation of the arts has been present in past Russian students. Marlow is optimistic about parental reasons for sending their children to study in Britain.

"Parents recognize and appreciate the value of developing a global mindset, English language fluency and a network of contacts at the age where their child is most open to new ideas," she said.

Natasha Semyonova-Bateman is based in southern England and runs Usadba Britania (Britannia Manor) — "a small boutique consultancy" for rich individuals who move to live permanently in Britain, including providing advice on the selection of schools and preparation for entry. Her interpretation is more cynical, or realistic.

"We all know that Russians love brands: Sometimes these brands reflect the quality of the product, sometimes it's just a reason to show off. In both cases, Russians will see schools such as Eton as an equivalent of the Dolce & Gabana of education," Semyonova-Bateman said.

They might not know why, but they heard that British education is the best. Therefore, they want the best, at the least, the top 10, not 12th, thank you very much.

“I tend not to work with clients like this. I can’t help them, and to be honest, don’t want to. Very few kids make it to Eton, even less deserve it or will do well there. There will be other people who will tell you about them. Having said that, a son of one of my clients did get an offer, but he is quite extraordinary and unique.”

However, she suspects another reason may also be a factor in the influx of Russian students at some schools.

“Many struggling boarding schools market themselves in Russia, Kazakhstan and China offering to ‘educational agents’ cuts of their fees. As a result, schools are flogged to unaware parents who didn’t have time to do their research. You can’t afford D&G, so you go shopping in Primark. Often they look quite similar.”

Natasha is quite right. What Russian parents may not realize is that only a small number of boarding schools are really public schools; this means the historic schools of Eton, Harrow, Shrewsbury, Rugby, Charterhouse, Westminster and Winchester.

Eton may be one of the most highly acclaimed and oldest schools in Britain and one of the costliest, with fees of more than 30,000 pounds. As Russian parents strive to gain entry for their kids, it failed to “top ten” in the Financial Times list of the best schools in Britain in 2012, coming 17th.

Contact the author at artsreporter@imedia.ru

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2013/08/11/russians-flocking-to-britains-boarding-schools-a26654