The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Stop the Absurd Witch Hunt Against Halloween

By Michael Bohm

November 07, 2013



Omsk regional legislators moved to protect children from another "dangerous and morally corrupt U.S. cultural influence" last week. They banned Halloween celebrations in all schools. Moscow authorities supported the initiative, issuing a strong "recommendation" to all school directors to avoid Halloween celebrations.

The lawmakers, who were reacting to a complaint from a local parents group, cited three fundamentally flawed reasons for the ban.

Russian lawmakers believe Halloween is "extremist," causes

psychological harm and is an evil U.S. plot to morally corrupt Russians.

1. Halloween is "foreign to Russian culture."

In reality, Halloween is a lot closer to Russian culture than Omsk authorities would probably like to admit. Halloween-like rituals played an important role in Slavic paganism. They included lighting bonfires, painting faces and donning masks to ward off evil spirits.

Even after the Christianization of Kievan Rus in the late 980s, Russians never fully parted with these customs. For example, for centuries Orthodox believers celebrated Ivan Kupala Day in early July, which corresponded with Western Christianity's celebration of the Nativity of St. John the Baptist. On this day, it was believed, witches and demons are allowed to roam the Earth. To help drive these evil spirits away, Orthodox believers jumped through bonfires, threw straw figures into the flames, danced and chanted incantations. Many believers still mark Ivan Kupala Day in this fashion.

Even today, several elements of Halloween-like Slavic paganism are still evident in Russia's mass culture. Russian television is filled with popular, trashy series and pseudo-documentaries about ghosts, demons and other evil spirits that surround Russians in their everyday lives. These programs explain how to exorcise these spirits through ancient Slavic rituals or through the help of a thriving new class of self-proclaimed shamans, faith healers and exorcists.

But even if Halloween, was, in fact, "foreign to Russian culture," as Omsk legislators claim, so what? Is this really a reason in itself to ban it?

Notably, the Soviet Communist Party used the same "foreign to Russian culture" line when it banned Western rock music, jazz, most films and literature, abstract art and other "noxious and morally corrupt" Western cultural institutions.

The attack on Halloween shows how little some Russian officials have evolved from "The Dulles Plan," a crude Soviet government fabrication that claimed Allen Dulles, CIA director during the 1950s, deployed a secret CIA operation to recruit a subversive fifth column within the Soviet Union. The plan's mission, the Kremlin claimed, was to corrupt Russian art, theater, film, literature and other cultural institutions by introducing elements of violence, depravity and other moral vices.

In this way, Omsk lawmakers are taking a page from the classic Soviet playbook: The best way to appear patriotic is by demonizing U.S. institutions. Even American hamburgers are fair game for Russian politicians. Gennady Onishchenko, who recently left his post of chief sanitary inspector, urged Russians last year not to eat U.S.-style fast-food hamburgers because they are "not our food."

2. Halloween falls under the legal classification of "extremism" because it "propagandizes

the worshipping of death" and Satanism.

This is not the first time Russian lawmakers have creatively interpreted the meaning of "extremism" under the law. Take, for example, when Orlov region prosecutors filed extremist charges against opposition activist Mikhail Deyev in 2010 after he passed out flyers with the anti-Kremlin slogan "Down With Autocracy!" Or there was the instance in 2009 when authorities classified a caricature of Winnie the Pooh wearing a swastika as extremist.

Meanwhile, Liberal Democratic Party leader and State Duma Deputy Speaker Vladimir Zhirinovsky attracted little attention from prosecutors two weeks ago when he proposed on live, state-controlled television the extremist act of legislating the number of children that Muslim residents from the North Caucasus can have. What's more, few neo-Nazis are ever tried under the country's extremist laws when they shout "Sieg Heil!" and "Kill the Migrants!" and pass out fascist literature, as they did during the Russian March on Monday.

3. Halloween can cause "psychological, spiritual and moral harm" to schoolchildren.

Omsk lawmakers even cited "scientific studies" purportedly conducted by the local Institute of Family and Education to back up this claim. The argument that celebrating Halloween once a year can cause psychological damage to minors or drive them to become devil worshippers has as much merit as a similar claim made by those who favor banning gay parades. Duma deputies, who voted unanimously for the "gay propaganda" law in June, also believe that minors who might accidentally walk by a gay parade and catch a glance of a gay person dancing on a float will suffer permanent psychological damage by the event — and perhaps even become homosexuals themselves.

This is not the first time that bureaucrats tried to ban or cancel cultural events or works based on a supposed concern for Russians' psychological health. In January 2011, Kamchatka regional officials tried to cancel a theatrical performance of the fairy tale Cinderella based on the concern that the scene where the king turns the clock back an hour might evoke - "unhealthy emotions" among the viewers.

Similarly, Oleg Mikheyev, a Duma deputy from A Just Russia, sponsored a bill in December to limit the amount of "bad news" on television because he feared that too much negative information would result in dangerous levels of stress, aggression and damage to people's psyche.

In this spirit, Russian Orthodox Church archpriest Vsevolod Chaplin warned last week that young Russians could fall under negative influences if they played with "evil spirits" on Halloween.

St. Petersburg lawmaker Vitaly Milonov, best known for co-authoring the city's anti-gay law, went even further last week. He ordered the police to break up a Halloween celebration in a park in the city's Kupchino district. Addressing the celebrators, who were dressed in typical Halloween costumes and were singing, dancing and carving pumpkins, Milonov, a former Baptist who converted to Russian Orthodoxy, wrote on his blog: "We have managed to stop the witches' orgy. ... We are defending the cross."

Decision-makers who are engaged in this Halloween witch hunt should remember a valuable lesson from the Soviet period. The more that the authorities try to ban Western cultural institutions and impose atavistic moral values on Russians, the more popular these institutions will become. These influential Russians need to relax and be more tolerant of what they view as "harmful" U.S. cultural institutions and customs like Halloween.

Perhaps next year on Oct. 31, Milonov and the lawmakers from Omsk should dress up as goblins and ghosts, bob for apples and carve a few pumpkins. They might realize that, far from causing psychological harm, this exercise in Halloween folly and "U.S. decadence" once a year can actually have a positive impact on their psyche — or even exorcise some of their own "evil spirits" that they may possess.

After this, maybe they will finally be able to focus on drafting laws that the country actually needs.

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Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2013/11/07/stop-the-absurd-witch-hunt-against-halloween-a29342