

[Tolstoy and the Russian Vegies](#)

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LIFESTYLE

Tolstoy and the Russian Vegies

Life for vegetarians in Russia is a lot healthier now than it was just after the Bolshevik Revolution, when abstaining from meat could mean death

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The first vegetarian society in Russia was established by the great Russian writer and mystic, Leo Tolstoy. Tolstoy accepted the idea of not using violence to resist evil, and he believed in reincarnation, although he was a Christian. The Russian Orthodox Church publicly excommunicated him for two reasons: His religious views were contradictory to those of the Church and, most importantly, he openly criticized the Church establishment.

From 1880 through 1882 Tolstoy and his St. Petersburg Vegetarian Society organized public vegetarian dinners and lectures. Vegetarian cantinas were opening in Moscow and St. Petersburg. Later, Tolstoy established vegetarian communities where people of all classes and educational backgrounds lived and worked together in the countryside. This had never been done before.

These people tended their land consciously and dedicated the results of their labor to God. They maintained total equality among themselves with absolutely no discrimination on social or religious grounds. When Mahatma Gandhi was organizing his ashram in South Africa, he corresponded extensively with Tolstoy and incorporated some of Tolstoy's ideas and experience into his work.

In 1882 Tolstoy wrote *What is My Faith?* and *The First Step*. In these works he stated his views on vegetarianism. This had a powerful influence on the Russian intelligentsia and society in general of that time. In one famous incident, one of Tolstoy's relatives who was visiting his home demanded meat for dinner, Tolstoy responded by acquiring a live chicken which he tied to her table and offered her a knife to slaughter it.

"How can one hope that peace and prosperity will be established in the world if our bodies are living graves where killed animals are buried?" asked the great writer.

Tolstoy died in 1910. His Vegetarian Society existed for 13 or 14 more years and published a number of books. Among them was a cookbook entitled *I Eat Nobody*, which gained much popularity at the time and was reprinted in the nineties. Besides Tolstoy's followers, there were some other Christian religious groups that were vegetarian.

What one eats and how one thinks and lives is a private matter. However, this right has not always been

respected in human history, and it certainly has not been in Communist Russia. After the Bolshevik revolution in 1917, Tolstoy's followers were persecuted. By the mid-1920s, all vegetarian communities were closed. Although they practiced Communism in essence—equality and brotherhood in action—a belief in God was a central tenant in their philosophy and lifestyle. And according to Marxism, "religion is opium for the masses" and should be suppressed and exterminated.

During the first years after the revolution many priests, rabbis, mullahs and lamas were killed. Others were forced to resign and give up their faith. After the general persecution of organized religion, the focus was shifted toward Tolstoy's followers, who were called "Tolstovtsi." Many were executed, and many were sent into Siberian labor camps. What remained of the Tolstovtsi had to go deep underground. So deep, that when I wanted to reestablish the Society in the late 1980s, it took me a few years to find any survivors.

One of them told me that during all these years nobody at his place of employment knew that he was vegetarian. He brought his veggie lunches to work but ate quietly and alone. There were a number of such "closet vegetarians." Despite continued suppression, some scientific research was done on

vegetarianism during the late twenties and early thirties. Among the very few published results was a study by M. I. Pefsnor, an expert in medical diet, who stated a "vegetarian diet is less toxic."

New interest towards vegetarianism arose in the seventies, when publications of Western naturopaths and dietitians, such as Paul Bragg, Herbert Shelton, Osava and Geoffrey, became available, mostly in underground translations and printings. In what was then the Soviet Republic of Armenia, works of the famous Iranian naturopathic doctor of Armenian descent, Arshavir Ter-Ovanesyan, sparked interest towards a vegetarian diet.

Also, in the seventies and early eighties several Hindu religious leaders visited Moscow. Among them were Swami Satchidananda of Yogaville, Bhaktivedanta Swami, founder of ISKON, and Swami Lokeshwarananda of the Ramakrishna Mission. The belief system and philosophy of these teachers, which included a vegetarian diet and nonviolence, influenced some of the Russian seekers of that time.

On the other hand, during the last years of the rule of the Soviet communist party, leaders such as Breznev in the late seventies, Andropov in 1982 and even Gorbachev in the mid eighties, there was another wave of persecution on religious grounds, this time mostly against Hare Krishnas. Since members of this group are strict vegetarians, one of the articles in the criminal code that was used in sentencing them was Article 231: "Harming the health of Soviet people by performing religious rituals."

One of my good friends was sentenced to three years in jail, convicted because of four "transgressions:" 1. He got up at 4:30 am. 2. He took cold showers, even in winter. 3. He was vegetarian. 4. He chanted mantras for at least two hours daily. All this was considered damaging for the health. Another religious activist, a pregnant woman, received four years in a maximum-security labor camp, where murderers and other serious criminals were serving their time. The child she gave birth to under these conditions died.

One doctor on a Russian television program entitled Warning stated: "Our diet should be rich with proteins and vitamin B12. A vegetarian diet is not sufficient and therefore harmful." Leonardo da Vinci, Socrates, Plato, Oscar Wilde, Pythagoras, to name a few geniuses of humanity, all were vegetarians, which certainly did not decreased their creativity and mental capacity.

After 1986, the human rights conditions in the USSR began improving slightly with Gorbachev, the new leader, who wanted to look good to the West. Fear, a large controlling factor in Russia over the past seventy years, was slowly dissipating and new ideas were coming to life. By 1989, all Hare Krishnas, Baptists, and followers of other religions were released from prison, and it became possible to practice religion without being jailed.

In 1987, I started to work on creating the Second Vegetarian Society. It was registered in 1989 under the umbrella of the Ecological Foundation of the USSR. It took a great deal of effort to find and assemble in one place a group of people who

were practicing vegetarianism. Some of these people were animal rights activists who disagreed with cruel treatment of animals in slaughterhouses and animal experiments in the scientific laboratories. Others had adopted a vegetarian diet for health reasons. Still others abstained from meat because of their religious convictions, like the Hare Krishnas, yogis, some Buddhists and Seventh Day Adventists.

One ironic incident occurred during that period. We desperately needed sponsors for our society, and one of the most willing organizations wanting to help us was Moscow's meat factory. They wanted to open a vegetarian cantina in their territory. Of course, we had to decline their assistance.

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the Second Vegetarian Society was closed and reopened again with a new name, the "Russian Regional Vegetarian Society." Today there are other regional societies in Russia. Each has its charter and local head.

Moscow's branch of the Vegetarian Society was very active in advertising a healthy and nutritional lifestyle during all these years. It created a Research Center that included medical doctors, nutritionists and biochemists on their staff. They published nine books and numerous articles on vegetarianism. Additionally, two doctoral dissertations were defended.

Now efforts are being made to open a vegetarian clinic in Moscow exclusively using dietary methods to treat even cardio-vascular diseases. A special vegetarian dietary regime, based specifically on personal medical needs, is tailored just for the individual. This approach was patented by Russian researchers and was based on the findings of naturopathy and "Russian space medicine."

Compared to old Soviet times, today's Russian markets feature a lot more vegetarian food products. In the past during the winter season, the main food items in stores were cabbage, carrots, beets, potatoes, buckwheat, millet and split peas, with a little more diversity in the southern parts of

the country. Now everybody knows about brussels sprouts, kohlrabi, soy products, etc. Mung beans and lentils are also easily available. More and more people are becoming interested in this "alternative" way of nutrition. In the eighties, a vegetarian cafe was opened in Leningrad (now St. Petersburg) which existed for some time.

Not too long ago, Moscow's first and only vegetarian restaurant, "Jagannat," was opened. It is called "the center of healthy food and communication." Despite the fact that smoking and alcohol are not allowed in this place (an exception in Moscow's restaurants), there is no shortage of customers. I visited the establishment during my recent trip to Russia in 2001. The atmosphere of Jagannat, located in the center of Moscow, is very friendly. Every evening there is live music with an emphasis on spiritual and Indian music. It also serves as a popular club, where a variety of spiritually oriented musicians, poets and teachers perform. There is also a section where groceries, soy products and spices are sold.

Times are changing in Russia. The future looks a lot healthier for vegetarians. When I was still living in Moscow and working at a hospital as an M.D., I would bring my lunches with me and share them with my colleagues. Then it was a novelty. I was the only vegetarian in the whole hospital. Now, with the availability of information and less restrictions on traveling, there is hope that Russians will again embrace a healthy lifestyle and diet.

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