

# The LARPs in Russia

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## Introduction

It is necessary to start with the point that Russia is a country with huge territory. It is quite hard if possible to talk about the larps in the country in general. The distances between cities are so huge, that larpers mostly do not have a possibility to go to the games somewhere on the other side of the country. That is why even when the author of this article is able to say that larps for example in Vladivostok exist, it is not really possible to say what they are like. So the following information will mostly concern the North-Western region of Russia (the cities of Murmansk, Petrozavodsk, Archangelsk etc), the Central Russia (triangle St Petersburg – Moscow- Yekaterinburg), the South-Western Siberia (Novosibirsk and Tomsk) and the South-West region (Krasnodar and Voronezh).

## History

The start to the larp scene in Russia was given by official clubs of science fiction fans that existed in the 80s in the Soviet Union. In the Soviet Union there was quite a rich choice of native and sometimes translated science fiction literature, but the genre of Fantasy was absolutely unknown.

In 1982 the first creepy translated edition of J.R.R Tolkien “The lord of the rings” was published in the Soviet Union. It was just one small book, the story was 3 times smaller because of cuttings, but it was enough to start the Tolkien-fever.

In 1988 the full translation was published.

Almost at the same time in different cities of the Soviet Union non-official community of Tolkien fans based on these clubs of science fiction fans sprang.

From 1987 to 1989 small games were sometimes organized by Tolkien fans. These games were small, quite creepy, but they could have been already called larps.

In the summer 1990 the first so called “Hobbits’ games” gathered Tolkien fans from all over the Soviet Union in the wood near by the city of Krasnoyarsk. About 130 players were involved in this larp. This larp is usually counted as a zero point of larp history in the former Soviet Union countries.

From 1991 to 1992 local larp communities in different cities appeared.

Soon game masters started to use not only books by Tolkien as the background in organizing local larps, but also made larps based on other books, movies, history situations.

In some cities future game masters had a bit of information what the larps in other regions were like and then made their own games, with this inventing their own style.

## Larps and commercial game industry

For a long time there was no commercial game industry officially working on the Russian market.

Commercial table-tops and pen-and-paper games didn’t exist in Russia when larps started.

Self-made or self-translated systems appeared in mid 90s.

The first official AD&D rule book in Russian was published in the year 2000.

The commercial game industry products never became really popular among Russian larpers. For example, vampire games appeared just a couple of years ago and never had a big success.

The lack of influence of official game industry on larps development in Russia can be considered as a reason for Russian larps mostly do not have plots that remind table-tops. Mixed fantasy backgrounds are also not used at Russian larps; every larp is based on a specific world, mostly taken from a published book or a movie, with its specified situation, characters, races etc. For example, the situation on a larp when a Viking meets a High Fantasy Elf is not probable, because they are “from the different fairytales”.

## **Campaigns vs. one character – one game**

In Russia no long-lasting larp campaigns exist in any countable amount. The tries to settle one up cannot be called successful. Russian larp campaigns are mostly dieing after the second or third game.

The absolute majority of larps has their own unique background which is not connected to any larp in before. Characters are created and played only for one larp that lasts several days. There is no possibility for characters to grow and develop from larp to larp.

In a situation when a character get killed on a larp most part of the larps allow to get another role after spending several hours in so called “land of death”.

## **Location**

From the point of view of a location Russian larps can be divided in 3 groups: indoor games, city games and open-air games.

*Indoor larps* are not mass. This larps are mostly running for not longer than 1 day and rarely gather more than 20 players. These are mostly so called “elite games” where game masters and players know each other personally. This kind of larps can have very stylish ambience and deep psychological play.

*City larps* are not very popular any more. These larps are basically played using the city as their playground and have anything from Nine Princes of Amber to the Mafia clans’ wars as the plot. Players just live their normal city lives, but when they meet each other they behave in-game. City larps are mostly possible to play in smaller cities where big percentage of larpers know each other personally and have fixed places for meeting. This kind of larps involves up to 50 players and can last for months.

The absolute majority of the larps in Russia are *open-air larps*. Most part of the further information will be dedicated to this kind of larps.

In Russia there are not so many castles and fortresses as in Europe. And those, that exist, are used by the state and are under the state protection. This fact makes a possibility to rent them incredibly low. Though there are 18-19<sup>th</sup> century palaces existing in older cities and some of them are available for rent, but mostly they are too expensive for the larpers.

Fortunately there are thousands and hundreds kilometres of free forests surrounding inhabited areas. By the law forests are state property and most of them are available for camping. For big events it is just necessary to inform the forestry officers.

## **Frequency of larps**

The forest locations and the climate are definitely the reasons that the most open-air larps are taking place in summer period. The indoor and city larps are played during the other seasons and are taken rather as ersatz of open-air larps.

In the big cities like St Petersburg, Moscow and Yekaterinburg there are several larps taking place every weekend from May till September. Larps in there last rarely longer than a weekend.

In smaller cities the situation is different. There are only 2-5 larps taking place every summer. But most of them are almost a week long. So every larp becomes a long-awaited event and larpers get prepared more carefully.

## **Amount of players**

The open-air larps differs much on the amount of players.

The small larps, that are concentrated on ambience, dramatic and deep psychological play, can involve approximately 50 to 70 players.

The biggest larps gather more than 3000 players.

Usual size larps involve 150-350 players.

## Genre

There are quite a variety of larp genres existing in Russia.

The first invented and still the most popular is the genre of *fantasy*. Starting with the larps based on Tolkien's world, continuing through the worlds described in Russian or foreign fantasy books, movies, sometimes even computer games, and ending with the worlds from the start created by game masters. Fantasy larps make about 50% of larps played in Russia.

*Historical larps* (anything from Ancient Egypt to Vietnam War) are a particularly popular alternative to fantasy. The background for historical larps is inspired by some kind of historical situation. Usually some players use real persons' biography as characters background. Sure the historical background is influencing the choice of costumes and props. Historical larps are not the replaying of the historical situation; players get their characters and game background and are free to act like they want. The most mass historical larps backgrounds are Middle Ages and Renaissance. Though the wars of 20<sup>th</sup> century, including the Second World War, are also popular.

The *cyberpunk* and *post-apocalyptic* larps form the third popular genre. There is a countable amount of players existing who prefer only this kind of larps.

## Rules systems

There are no unified systems of game rules existing in Russia. Every game has its own rule book. Some fixed game masters groups use their own rules systems that do not change much from one game to another.

There also certain "not written" rules, that are known by the majority of larpers. These rules differ from region to region.

## Ways of settling up the plot

Russian larps are variable according to how much a plot is influenced by game masters.

The amount of games where the game masters settle up a tough plot with lots of quests is not big. Russian larpers mostly prefer to have much freedom in their in-game actions and often are quite irritated with the game masters constantly influencing the game situation.

Some larps are made completely free from prewritten plots and game masters constant keeping up with the game process. In this kind of larps the game masters settle up the background and control the characters stories, but they interfere in the larp process only if something completely absurd happening. For example, on the larp on 15s century England, Irish Republican Army was formed and started active actions. These free from game masters control larps are especially popular in North-West Region of Russia.

Nevertheless on a big amount of Russian larps a prewritten plot exists and NPCs are used to control the game running.

## Settling up the character

In the majority of the situation players in Russia are free to invent their characters background by themselves. Game masters have to be informed about the characters that are going to be on their larp. Fairly often game masters provide help or sometimes even control in settling up the character. Situations when the game masters settle up all the characters background by themselves are relatively rare.

## Weapons

Concerning swords and other fantasy-medieval weapons, it is necessary to mention, that in Russia latex (buffer) weapons are not used. Larp weapons are mostly made out of hard plastic (textolite), aluminium or titanium. The older technology that is still used in some areas is to make weapons out of wood covered with tape or thermoplastic.

Game armour is designed not only to look nice, but also to provide a real protection for the body. This makes the gamers producing the armour that is very close to the historical prototypes.

There are also a few larps existing where the re-enactment steel weapons are used for playing. Relatively hard weapons and a mass of historical larps made the amount of female larpers who fight very small.

On the larps based on a background that imply the usage of guns, soft air guns with plastic ammunition are used.

The usage of the weapons that are less safe than the weapons common in Europe is possible partly because the game masters are not really legal liable for what happens on their larps.

Some few years ago several game masters' groups started to insist players to make special short-term insurance contracts before the larp.

## **Living conditions on larps**

As it was mentioned already the open-air larps takes place in the woods out of the city areas. That determines the living conditions on larps. Players use tents for sleeping, survive without hot showers and stationary toilets, and use wood to build in-game castles.

Some larp locations are out of reach of car roads, so it is impossible to transport much props. And anyway the percentage of Russian larpers who own cars is much lower than those in Europe. So players often use usual tourist tents and are mostly not able to transport the furniture.

The usual prices for the Russian larps are much lower than prices in Europe. Normal price is between 3 and 10 euros depending on the larp. But the food is not included; players should take care about food by themselves.

In-game all goods and services can be bought only with game money that can not be exchanged to real money. In this way larp economy is made independent from real economy situation.

## **Demography**

There are no studies on the amount of larpers in Russia made. But to make the situation understandable it could be said that in the city of Murmansk with the population 327 thousands inhabitants there are approximately 200 active larpers.

The average Russian larper is in his or her mid-20s. Underage players are not rare, because some start to larp being 15 or 16 years old. There are not much players older than 30-35 years old, since larping in Russia has an image of youth and student hobby.

The gender correlation in general is 50-50. But in North-West Region it comes to 40 females to 60 males. In Central Russia it, on the opposite, comes to 60 females to 40 males.

## **Organization**

Membership organisations exist, but they are absolutely not a must. There is a huge amount of larpers who are not members of any larp organisations.

Some official membership organisations receive funding from state youth committees.

The important mode of larp organisation is represented by fixed groups of larp organizers, who produce larps together year after year.

Talking about players it is necessary to mention temporary teams that are often formed for going on a larp. Players in a team make the camping together, take care of food and props together out-game, and represent an in-game community, for example, a village or royal court or a tavern etc. The background character stories of the team members are often connected, but it does not oblige the players to act together in-game. They are free to kill, betray or entertain themselves in any other way. Though teams are not the must and quite a lot of players prefer to go on the larps on their own. Contact between larpers is usually maintained through the Internet, by personal relations or institutions like the "larper beer on Wednesdays".

Larper's conferences are also quite popular way of information transfer. The biggest conference called "Zilandkon" takes place in the city of Kazan every November.

Larp press exists in Russia for more than ten years. The numerous magazines have mostly very low quality of print and are sold within the larp community avoiding official channels of press

distribution. Larp press never become really popular among the Russian larpers most probably because of the competition with such a mighty media as Internet.

### **Contacts with foreign larpers**

The larp scenes of Russia and some former Soviet Union republics like Ukraine and Byelorussia are not really divided. Open borders, one language and common larp history started in 1990 in Soviet Union can be considered as the main factors. In spite of the modern political situation, there are also good contacts with the larpers from Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia.

Quite close are the contacts with larpers from Israel, because of the great amount of the immigrants from former Soviet Union among Israeli larpers.

The contacts with larpers from EU are still few. The language barrier can be counted to be one of the main reasons, since there are quite few Russians, who can speak foreign languages fluently.