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Fighting by Proxy: New Russians Send Their Dogs into Battle

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Entertainment is often a reflection of society. In a country where rival criminal groups fight it out for control of territory and thuggish-looking individuals are a common sight, it's no surprise that forms of entertainment involving blood, violence and brute strength are catching on fast.

One of Russia's latest popular pastimes is dog fighting. Pit bull terriers top the list of preferred fighting breeds. They are known for their aggressive character, leading to their banning in some countries.

Even if Russia were to introduce a similar ban, getting a pit bull wouldn't be a problem. With the right money everything is available in this country. At the moment, getting a pit bull requires no more than a visit to Moscow's "Ptichii Rynok" ("bird market"), a crowded, chaotic open-air market.

Crammed among the motherly women cuddling kittens are men whose stocky builds and thick necks resemble the physiques of the pit bull puppies they sell.

One seller who gives his name only as Aleksei, says that requests for pit bulls are increasing considerably. "The demand for this dog is growing every year, and the number of dogs is growing in response," he says. He thinks the number of pit bulls kept at home has risen 20-fold in the past few years. "Owning a dog has always been fashionable in Moscow, and today the dog du jour is undoubtedly the pit bull. All kinds of cool guys are buying them, guys who can appreciate the breed's strength, endurance, and bravery," he says.

The rise of the pit bull in Russia undoubtedly coincided with the appearance of a new human breed: the so-called "New Russian." For this cooler, wealthier stratum of society, the pit bull is not a mere house pet, but a reflection of a new philosophy and lifestyle.

And now that New Russians have added the pit bull to their collection of chic accessories - cell phones, black Mercedes, Zippos, and Rolexes - youngsters buy the dogs to emulate their upper-class idols.

But social status is not the only attraction-many people buy the dogs for fighting or to breed for

fighting. A 24-year-old who gives his name only as Sergei has come to the pet market to buy a pit bull. Sergei has definite plans for his young canine warrior: "I want to raise one to be strong and brave. When she is grown, I want to put her in the ring and give her the chance to prove she is the strongest." He does not plan to have any tender feelings when raising his pupil, he says, and is prepared to beat the dog if necessary. "The dog must become accustomed to everything," he says.

Pit bull breeders come to the pet market at weekends to sell the puppies of their fighting dogs. A pit bull puppy fetches several hundred dollars minimum, more if it has a good fighting pedigree. "Of course, our clients are mostly new Russians. Some of them buy these dogs to guard their dachas or homes, but most buy them to fight," says one salesman who wishes to remain anonymous. "Many of them will pay even thousands of dollars for a puppy of high pedigree. A mid-range price is about \$800."

Hidden away in the Serebryani Bor (Silver Woods) park in Moscow, is a ring where training fights or fights with low stakes take place on weekends. Sometimes up to ten fights are held a day and as many as fifty people will gather to watch the action. The fact that dogs can die in the course of the fights does not deter onlookers, and even children come to watch.

Peter, 34, came one day with his 5-year-old son. He finds the event amusing and sees no reason why it would not be appropriate for his son. "Life in general is violent," he says, "big fish eat little fish, the world we live in is cynical and cruel. I want my son to adapt to this from the very beginning of his childhood. ... Maybe the sight of these dogs fighting will instill in him the determination to fight for his place under the sun."

Dog fights are not illegal under Russian law. The only exception is in Moscow where they have been banned. But the Moscow law does not provide for any punishment. Despite the fact that most dog fights are perfectly legal, few people are willing to talk openly about them. Aleksandr Semenovskii, a referee and organizer of fights, says, "Stakes on a serious match can exceed \$10,000. In this country, where people make pennies, you can imagine what kind of people can put up this kind of money. It isn't in their interests to end up on a television screen or the front page of a newspaper." According to him, although over 100 fights are registered a year in Russia, big-money fights rarely take place in cities before a large crowd. Most fights are discreet affairs, held at remote dachas or at least on private property with a minimum number of observers. Usually only the owners, the referee and close friends are present, says Semenovskii.

Dog fighting is not confined to Moscow's nouveaux riches, either. It is also becoming a fad in small towns among people with much less money. In Belgorod, for example, a town with a population of around half a million, about 70 people own and raise pit bulls. At a remote dacha about 50 miles outside of town, tournaments take place twice a year. The fights draw the crowds and the whole bloodthirsty show turns into a real social event and family outing complete with children, wives and old friends.

Several months before a dog fight, owners sign a contract that specifies weight limits for the dogs - the maximum excess weight allowance is 200 grams. The dogs are in excellent physical condition. "A good fighting dog is nurtured from childhood. Trainers spend a great deal of time showing dogs real fights, so that the dogs can better understand and zero in on their opponents' weaknesses," says Semenovskii. "For instance, there are dogs that orient themselves completely on the opponents' paws. These are among the strongest."

Before the match, owners carefully clean the dogs. "This guarantees absolute honesty. You know, the owner could cover his fighter with a kind of ointment that weakens the other dog's will to fight," he says.

"I remember one fight that lasted 5 1/2 hours. It was, of course, a record-breaking event. ... Usually they are around one hour," he says. "Periodically, the dogs are separated so they can lunge at each other, this so-called 'skrech' [imported from English "scratching"] demonstrates their wish to fight on. A good fighting dog never leaves the ring, it struggles to the very end. This characteristic distinguishes a fighter from ordinary mutts. A dog is considered a coward if it fails to stand up for its reputation even one time."

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