

## **A Perfect Place to Read: Transformation of Reading Space in Soviet and Post-Soviet Russia**

When I need to read, I take the Circular line, and I finish a book in ten or twelve circles. Moscow Metro is really the best place to read.

(From a private conversation, 2009)

On 29<sup>th</sup> December 1919 Vladimir Lenin launched a campaign to eradicate illiteracy (*likbez*: from Russian “liquidation of illiteracy”) among the population of Soviet Russia according to which every citizen from eight to 50 years was required to acquire literacy in their native language. The campaign was extraordinary successful and by the 1950s the Soviet Union had achieved nearly 100 per cent literacy, and from that time until the present Russians still consider themselves to be “the most reading nation in the world”.

The new campaign begot a totally new material universe for Soviet Russia: public places for reading. Four thousand “liquidation points” (*likpunkty*: from Russian “points for liquidation of illiteracy”) were built to serve as centres for reading and achieving literacy, nearly half of which were turned into public libraries. By the 1950s the libraries had become so popular that many film directors of the time used library space as shooting locations. However, at the same time an atmosphere of totalitarian censorship gave birth to a key form of dissident activity known as *Samizdat*, and characterized by hand-reproduction of censored publications and illicit transmission from reader to reader. This activity introduced a totally different—private—space for reading: kitchens, toilets, and ‘under-the-covers’.

This paper explores reading as an idea seen not through books and their contents but spaces and places of reading, and their material attributes: furnishings, decorations, etc. It follows the social life of reading, tracing the emergence of libraries and characters of readers in Soviet film, photography, architecture, and fiction. Finally, it will lead to a modern Russia, exploring the impact of the above-discussed tension between public and private reading space on the modern Russian readers, who still believe that even if Russia has lost its former status as “the most reading nation in the world”, it still can be proud at least of having the most reading metro in the world.

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