For most Russians, the year 1917 is associated with the Revolution. However, there is another centenary we can celebrate this year, too. Exactly one hundred years ago Nikolay Gumilyov, one of the best poets of the Silver Age of Russian literature, wrote this strange three-liner:

Hokka

This girl with gazelle eyes
Is going to marry an American...
Why did Columbus find America?!

Some experts in Japanese poetry may argue this is not a hokku but a senryu. Others may add that some attempts to imitate the Japanese poetry in Russia happened before Gumilyov. Well, let's find out who was the first and what came of it. The history of Russian haiku isn’t yet written although some historical facts have been mentioned in various works. I’ll try to assemble a more complete picture in this review.

Folk songs and Silver Age

Usually when I explain the origins of haiku I start with Russian folk songs. This approach isn’t quite academic. A true Orientalist would say that haiku come from hokku that come from renga that come from tanka that come from uta . . . Unfortunately, this kind of explanation, with lots of cryptic terms, would take us away from some basic feature of haiku that could be understood by people from other countries even if they don’t speak Japanese.

On the other hand, one can notice that ancient Japanese folk songs, uta, were similar to old Russian songs by their structure: they start with some bright image from nature followed by a story of someone’s
personal feelings. This similarity could be explained by common origins: folk songs originate from pagan prayers that used to begin with the calling of some local spirit (or a sacred tree where the spirit dwells) followed by personal problems or wishes. That’s why the structure of *uta* and tanka is easy to illustrate through some old Russian songs, like this one:

*Along the Murom Road*
three pines were standing green.
I bade farewell my lover
until the other spring . . .

Later this tradition of “natural beginnings” went from folk songs to classic Russian poetry of the 19th century: Alexander Pushkin and Afanasy Fet used this technique a lot. Even now, almost any Russian would instantly recall some of the classics just by the first line botanical reference: “Why do you stay swaying, slender rowan sapling . . .” (Surikov) or “Oh my bare maple, my ice-covered maple . . .” (Yesenin).

However, the industrialization and the growth of cities at the end of the 19th century brought many changes to traditional Russian culture. In painting, the answer to the accelerating tempo of life was Impressionism. Poets, too, were looking for new forms – more laconic, more effective.

“If you like some work of poetry and I would ask you: what was most impressive about it? – you would quote just some single verse. Isn’t it obvious now that the ideal for a poet must be that one verse which would give the reader’s soul everything the poet wanted to say?” These words were said in 1895 in the Novosti newspaper interview by Russian symbolist Valery Bryusov, the author of the famous one-line poem “Oh cover up your pale legs”.

No wonder the first examples to follow were found in French literature, but Japanese poetry was soon discovered, too. Its natural imagery was quite understandable for Russian poets raised on folk songs; at the same time, the briefness of Japanese verses helped to keep pace with modernity. In 1913-1918, several “tanka” and a couple “haikai” were published in Bryusov’s collection *Opyty* (*Studies*), together with other experiments in foreign genres.

So why is Gumilyov, not Bryusov, called “the first Russian haijin” in this article? In fact, Bryusov’s tanka and haiku were not original: he just rewrote the translations of well-known Japanese classics. One of his haiku was based on a tanka of Kiyohara no Fukayabu, the second was made of Basho’s *furuike ya*. Both these Japanese poems were published in 1904 in the Russian version of *A History of Japanese Literature* written by British diplomat and Orientalist William George Aston in 1899. The Russian translator of this book made a funny mistake that was later repeated in Bryusov’s version – making a plural of frogs:

*Oh the drowsy pond!*
Frogs jump into the depths,
The water splash heard.

In subsequent years, similar experiments in Japanese stylization were made by Andrej Belyj, Vyacheslav Ivanov, Samuil Vermel, Konstantin Balmont, Andrej Globa, Olga Cheremshanova and other Silver Age poets. But most of them preferred tanka: the five-line form was more suitable for the traditional techniques of Russian poetry — rhymes and rhythms. Besides, a fair amount of narcissism was typical of Silver Age poets: they tended to name their feelings explicitly (a common feature for tanka lyrics).
Even when these poets tried to imitate haiku formally (three lines, 17 syllables), their poems still contained a lot of “selfies”:

You know the sickle moon
is like an amber cup . . . I
want to drink from it!
— Olga Cheremshanova, 1925

Perhaps, of all the poets of Silver Age, the closest to Japan was Futurist painter David Burlyuk – both in his life (he spent two years in Japan) and in his poetry. Burlyuk’s haiku written in 1922 is remarkable not only by its content (a vivid haiku moment) but also by its form: omitted punctuation as a way to imitate Japanese language will appear in other countries’ haiku many years after Burlyuk:

Twilight is coming
We are alone on the porch
Along with the sea

“Japanese village” by David Burlyuk, 1921.
Soviet Time: Mitki and Verlibres

A new surge of interest in Japanese poetry in Russia happened in the 1960s, stimulated by honored translators Anna Gluskina and Vera Markova: their first popular collection of translated tanka was printed in 1954, followed later by some hokku books. Most were medieval classics, like Basho and Issa; the culture of later capitalist Japan was considered “inappropriate” for the Soviet people, with some rare exceptions for “ideologically correct” authors (like tanka writer and socialist Takuboku Ishikawa). For this reason, even in modern Russia the term “hokku” is more known than “haiku” introduced by Masaoka Shiki at the end of the 19th century and now used world-wide.

Another peculiarity of the translations of that time was excessive “russification” of Japanese poems: the classic metrical feet of 19th century poetry were used a lot, while homonymic metaphors and other features of Japanese originals were missed. The Russian language requires the strict agreement of words in the sentence by gender, number and case. That’s why it’s not so easy to create the simple juxtapositions that make original Japanese haiku look like an instant ink drawing or a photograph. Instead, the Russian translations of haiku often become linear “stories” where all the objects are connected by clear and unambiguous relationships. Here is a well-known Issa poem translated by Vera Markova (in a literal English translation):

```
Slowly-slowly climb,  
Snail on the Fuji slope,  
Upward, to the very top!
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Here we can see a pathetic third line that didn’t exist in Issa’s original:

```
Snail  
slowly climb up  
Mount Fuji
```

As a result, the translations of the Soviet period produced almost the same effect as those of Silver Age: many imitations and parodies with trite symbols of Japan (sakura, samurai, sake) appeared but the essence of Japanese poetry was missed.

Yet one community came to something deeper through parody: it was Mitki, the group of naïve painters from Saint Petersburg, a kind of Russian Beatniks. The very style of their life, with all its poverty, minimalism and independence, was close to Zen Buddhism even before they learned this term. Once Mitki learned about it, they couldn’t just ignore such a poetic genre where all the wisdom of the world could be expressed by a simple everyday image. Irony is always clearly seen in Mitki’s works so the results are rather senryu than haiku:

```
The night hid everything.  
The surf hisses in the dark.  
Shaking Maxim drinks water in the kitchen.  
— Vladimir Shinkarev
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April again!  
The wives of neighbours  
and first flies  
— Mikhail Sapego
```

At the same period, haiku was being discovered by some serious poets working in free verse style. Breaking the stereotypes of rhymed classics, some of them came in their own way to the minimalist forms of poetry, with simple natural imagery and without narcissism. For these poets, the discovery of haiku wasn’t about formal imitation. It was more like recognition of “an old friend” in the very essence. And, unlike parodists, many of these poets didn’t bother to call their vers libres “haiku” or “hokku”, using the more humble term “three-liner”. But in fact, it was exactly the case:

I walk for water
and chamomile heads beat
the bottom of my bucket.
—Vladimir Burich

A little feather
comes down from the sky.
But no bird seen.
—Arvo Mets

The higher to the ceiling,
The more entangled is
my gaze in the cob-web.
—Vera Anserova

AUTUMN PARK
The sun is gone.
An old lady walks
to a different bench.
—Oleg Osipov

Speaking of haiku among vers libres, it’s worth mentioning The Anthology of Russian Monostich collected by Dmitry Kuzmin in the early 1990s. Since Bryusov’s “pale legs”, the one-line poems remained a rare outsider in Russian literature. Yet gathered together, these one-liners remind us that haiku in the original Japanese transcription is a monostich, too:

Among the rain the lonely drops.
—Irina Dobrushina

Even in the graveyard, on the flowers of sorrow, bees collect honey.
—Eduard Pashnev

She left - a bitten apple blackens.
—Roman Soltsev

a street lamp turns on lights on icy branches of a plum
—Alexander Arfeev

Put a hand in the fountain: make a rainbow yourself.
—Ed. Varda

Setting sun makes shadows longer, us shorter.
—Asya Shneiderman

**Wild Nineties: Online Gardens**

Until the late 1990s, the rare authors of Russian haiku were not welcomed in conventional paper magazines; no haiku contests, clubs or any other platforms for their communication existed. The Internet changed the situation radically. The first website where many Russian hajjin met was Lyagushatnik (Frog Place), opened in 1997 (haiku.ru). Here are some poems from the first issues of this web zine:
Cold morning
Eau de toilette
Even colder
—Valeria Krestova

minus twenty
in my voice
father's tones
—Zinovy Vaiman

First snow came
A child stares back
At his footsteps
—Andrej Shlyakhov

Even from the gutter,
Even beaten and drunk—
I still admire the moon!
—Mikhail Baru

Dry autumn leaves
Softly stirred by the wind.
Old memories.
—Vladimir Gertsik

in the shadow of the tree
jumping
sparrow's shadow
—Marina Hagen)

summer cottage
the table leg is propped
by an old Playboy
—Konstantin Karabcheev

The Lyagushatnik web-zine front page.
As a chief editor of *Lyagushatnik* I also founded *Renguru*, an online poetic game where anybody could continue the chain poem by adding the next 2-liner or 3-liner via the interactive web-form. The game is still active on Vladimir Ischenko’s site (www.wowwi.orc.ru). It is perhaps the world’s longest-running *renga*, played for 20 years already.

However, *Renguru* was plainly linear: at each step, the sequence was continued by the first comer only. But Internet allowed us to build more branched hypertexts. This idea was applied also in 1997 by Roman Lejbov and Dmitry Manin in their project named *The Garden of Diverging Hokku* (hokku.netslova.ru). On this site, anybody can post a new 3-liner using the starting / ending line of the previous hokku as an ending / starting line for a new 3-liner; so it’s possible to grow several alternative “branches” or “roots” from any poem. The system automatically checks the number of syllables in every new entry: it must be 5-7-5.

Initially I was skeptical about the *Garden* for such a formal definition of *hokku* (any trash in 17 syllables). But later, something interesting happened: some poets began to use the project’s guestbook to post their poems that didn’t fit the formal rules of the game – yet those poems were much closer to actual haiku. It looked like this community re-invented the individual haiku the same way the medieval Japanese poets did playing the collective *renga*. Here are some popular authors from this project:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Valentine’s day</th>
<th>City lights,</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The mailbox freshly painted blue</td>
<td>Snowflakes melting on the black coat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>— Gleb Secretta</td>
<td>— Polina Strizhova</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the ice floe cracks</td>
<td>No one else</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>here is a fisherman</td>
<td>Would ruffle my hair so gently...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>there is his bottle</td>
<td>Spring wind . . .</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>— Grigory Borukaev</td>
<td>— Elena Afanasieva</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>more stars in the sky!</td>
<td>smell of fried herring</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>my friend throws fir paws into the fire</td>
<td>in the vietnamese dorm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>— Georgy Filonov</td>
<td>what a long evening!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nose by nose</td>
<td>— Natalia Sedenkova</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in the dark backstreet</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a boy and a marble dog</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>— Andrey Levit</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Another great interactive garden was grown in the *Versions* project by Vladimir Ischenko (www.wowwi.orc.ru/cgi-bin/shuttle/home.cgi). In this game, the collective hypertext is created by alternative translations of foreign haiku. For instance, here you can find 13 Russian versions of Jack Kerouac’s “A big fat flake”. Currently, the site contains 17792 haiku and 26810 translations, not only Russian ones:
The Noughts: back to paper

In the early 2000s, many new haiku sites appeared on the Russian Internet, including *Aромат Востока* (graf-mur.holm.ru) as well as poets’ personal home pages, blogs, communities in LiveJournal.com and in other social nets. But all of this poetic activity was still considered “unserious” (means: not printed in respected magazines). Some heroes tried to connect all that jazz with known Orientalists and quality publishing.

The biggest step in this direction was the All-Russian Haiku Contest (AHC) later retitled the International Haiku Contest in Russian language (IHC). The first was held in 1998, initiated by the Embassy of Japan. And it was literally “back to paper”: after the announcement in the popular newspaper *Argumenty i Fakty* more than 12,000 poems were received on paper postcards; being a member of the selection committee, I had a chance to dig into those endless mail bags.

Ten years later, the contest was resumed and became an annual. The entries are now accepted via Internet (haiku8.ru), while the award ceremony has become the major annual real-time meeting of Russian *haijin* and well-known experts on Japanese poetry. Here are some winners and honorable mentions of different years:

hospital alley —
slightly covered with snow
ashberry clusters
— Sergey Karnaukhov
date of may
the wardrobe door
creaks again
— Pavel Vorontsov

the sun is higher
a fisherman brushes
the scale from his hand
— Mikhail Lyablin

indian summer
the spider thread is torn
on my throat
— Natalia Levi

Heave snowfall,
Three snowmen in the park
And one glass.
— Yury Runov

In the early 2000s, we’ve seen some printed publications devoted to haiku. Four issues of *Triton almanac* edited by Dmitry Kuzmin (2000–2003) and four issues of *Haikumena almanac* edited by Dmitry Kudrya (2003–2011) were mixing haiku from web-zines with more academic reviews by well-known translators and the experts on Japanese literature. The winners and honorable mentions of IHC are now published in the almanac *Rossinki*, together with the judges’ comments. For example, in the 2012 issue the Orientalist Alexander Mescheraykov presented some frequency analysis of themes of the haiku submitted to the Contest: it turned out that Russian poets often write about “fallen leaves”, “sun”, and “stars” while these topics are not common in Japanese haiku. On the other hand, Russian haijin don’t write about drinking: neither vodka nor tea, so popular in other forms of art for depicting Russian life.
In 2006, the anthology of Russian haiku and senryu *Through The Silence* was printed: its editor Mikhail Baru gathered about a thousand poems by more than one hundred authors, mostly from web-zines as well. The anthology is available on the Web: haiku-anthology.livejournal.com.

As to modern projects, it’s worth mentioning the *haikai* poetry magazine *Ulitka* (ulitka.haiku-do.com) and the senryu and kyoka magazine *Yorsbik* (www.ershik.com). Both periodical electronic publications can be downloaded in print-friendly format (PDF) or e-book formats. Here are some poems from these e-zines:

Sunny spring day —
the retriever brings me a stick
thrown by someone else.
— Zhanna Korobova-Rader

First summer rain.
I open my umbrella... and close it.
— Felix Tammi

indian summer
children laughing
at the street preacher
— Vladislav Vassiliev

christmas lights twinkling
at the bottoms of the glasses
the leaving year
— Dmitry Kudrya
Oh mosquitos!
With you I won't believe
This world is an illusion!
— Ivan Krotov

In conclusion, it must be admitted that the interest for haiku in Russia has declined of late. Many haiku sites and communities are not currently active, and contest participants and journal authors are mostly of an older generation. It looks like Zen detachment and contemplation are not so catchy for modern multimedia-bended youth. Yet it’s possible they will reinvent haiku in their new media – say, as a fancy way to convey the impressions and feelings in their SMS and mobile chats, instead of uniform “smilies” and “likes”. But it will be a different story.

first chill
in my son's telescope
trembling moon
— Alexey Andreev