

# Russia's Fortune

A Journey to the Loneliest People on Earth

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**p 35-38**

## Who's afraid of Moscow?

The new Moscow, the capital city of our Motherland,  
lives in the hearts of each one of us. From every corner  
of the world, trains speed, planes fly, cars race  
along motorways, and ships sail – to Moscow.

Here, the plans are made that are put into action  
throughout our land, a land that is forging ahead into the future.

*Yevgeny Osetrov, Moscow (a pop-up book for children), from the Dutch by G. Mijne, 1980*

I know two Moscows.

The first one is dead. It was the capital of the Soviet Union, the metropolis of communism worldwide. "The city of cities," as a 1980 pop-up book for children proudly announced. A city in which everything aimed to be "the biggest and the best in the world". A city full of red-scarfed pioneers in their sauerkraut-soup-scented holiday camps. A city with a welfare system that wrapped the individual in cotton wool from cradle to grave, even though this cotton wool bore a bewildering resemblance to a coffin lining. A city that promised its people "glorious heights", described by Aleksandr Zinovyev in a wonderful metaphor as "yawning heights".

A city of winding queues in front of almost empty shops, of drunks in the middle of unlit streets, of dangerous love for fifty dollars at The Starry Sky Hotel. A city full of concrete boxes, arranged geometrically and packed with human dolls. A city with boulevards as wide as rivers, with identical cars floating upon them. A city in many shades of grey: from dove grey to battleship grey to ash grey, as though everything had been quenched in molten lead.

The only colour on the streets was the red of banners displaying party wisdom, high up above the bearskin hats. The vast squares and proud streets gave the city an appearance of emptiness. Beneath this emptiness lay a hidden world, instilling a sense of fear, but also arousing curiosity.

In a hazy kind of way, I loved that first Moscow.

The second Moscow is a four-hour flight from Brussels or Amsterdam. It is the capital city of a powerful federation. A city that rapidly became the world's most expensive, most fashionable, most extravagant, most unpredictable and most lawless place. A heart ripped from a body, a synonym of insanity. A city through which the icy wind of capitalism has raced with greater ferocity than anywhere else. A city that revels in the biggest and the best. The pleasure garden of predatory capitalism.

The city that I remember as empty in spite of all of its grandeur is now overcrowded. It is as though the Russians under communism developed such a great fear of emptiness that they decided to take their revenge upon it. Everything disappears under the demolition hammer, only to rise again from the ashes the next day, ten times the size. Emptiness is associated with the taiga of Siberia, and Siberia is a distant and formidable hinterland, "not for us" (just so long as Siberia does not demand political independence).

Dove grey and ash grey have given way to bright and trendy. Facades are gleaming; frescos have been restored. Wrought iron, bronze and gold are everywhere. Towering office blocks with mirrored glass reflect one another, creating an endless series of buildings: a mirror within a mirror within a mirror. Kafkaesque infinity. Millions of ants scurrying along pavements, past fountains, down esplanades. There are facades of green, red and yellow. And bright-white facades too. The city at night is bathed in all kinds of colours. Advertising hoardings flash out the same brash, semi-pornographic images as in the West, pushing the same rubbish in the same trendy non-language that people swallow without question.

The sense of space is overwhelming, yet stifling too, creating the same sense of agoraphobia that can suddenly come upon you when you look upwards in New York and imagine that the skyscrapers are moving closer together and falling in on you. In Moscow, when you look into the distance from a certain height, it feels as though a noose has been placed around your gaze, growing ever tighter. You soon become dizzy and feel the noose around your neck.

The city's stranglehold is so strong that even the residents have to take refuge in their dachas, their country homes, from time to time. It's an exodus, one that they long for.

I was allowed to move into the apartment where I am writing these pages because the owner couldn't bear to stay there any longer during the dog days of summer. She gave me a list of strict instructions at the kitchen table and then left in great haste. Of course, she still pops by every now and then with her homegrown apples. If I'm not there, she leaves a note on the table: "Happened by your abode, dear sir, and wished to grant you a gift of the wonders of ecology." (I enjoy her use of language, with its formal tone.)

In my mind, Moscow is two cities with the same medieval name. Visiting Moscow is a little like going on a ghost hunt. I regret not taking more photographs during the Soviet era, but at the same time I think: what exactly should I have photographed? The few photos I did take were unable to capture the vast expanses, so they couldn't reproduce the emptiness either. Sometimes I would stick a number of photographs next to one another in an album in order to reconstruct the panorama of the "expanses of emptiness". In the same way, I now catch myself trying to capture the city's stifling hustle and bustle on the screen of my digital camera. That's futile too. Only words appear to succeed. Now I understand better than ever what is meant by "yawning heights".

People sometimes ask me: “You can’t really love Moscow, can you?”

Yes, you can, as long as you don’t stint on the hate.

“So what is Moscow then?” is the next question.

I’ll tell you.

Moscow is Russia and Moscow is anything but Russia. Since its birth, Moscow has been a collection of foreign lands: Byzantine, Mongolian, Persian, Italian, Dutch, French – you just name it – and, more recently, Anglo-Saxon. Moscow cannot be taken in with a single glance. This is partly because of its size, but mainly because of its chaotic diversity. Moscow has something of America about it, but with Asian panoramas and with qualities that a Russian national once referred to as typical of his own country: unruly feverishness, insolent pride.

Moscow is a female monstrum horrendum with a broad smile. Moscow is like the witch Baba Yaga in the Slavic folktales: evil to the core and yet good through and through. A variation on the tree of knowledge. In Moscow, the dividing line between moral extremes is as thin as a cigarette paper. The people of Moscow tasted the fruits of the tree of knowledge. After they had eaten, their eyes were opened and they saw the naked truth: the quickest way to make big money. When God returned and saw that his creatures had violated his commandment, he was lynched by those who dwelled in the city. On his throne they placed a golden calf, as in Exodus 32:4.

What is Moscow? Moscow is the end of the world and Moscow is the beginning of the world. As soon as I get there, I seek out certain places to make sure that they still exist.

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p 52-53

## *(A visit to Lenin’s mausoleum)*

(...)

I remember soldiers rummaging around as they searched everyone, the hissed whispers of other soldiers, who were trying to control the murmuring of the eager onlookers, and finally the silence in the semi-dark room with the glass coffin. Four soldiers from the guard of honour, still just whippersnappers, kept watch. They would defend the founder of their state with their lives if necessary. If it had been a dummy lying there, or if the body was a projected hologram, no one would have been able to detect the deception.

“To start with,” an anonymous Russian told me one evening after a few drinks in the bar at the Eagle Soviet Hotel, “the preservation of the body didn’t work too well. They closed the mausoleum to the public. Stalin held a competition: the man who looked most like Lenin would receive a generous reward. Thousands of Russians tinkered with their appearance and set off to see Stalin, hoping for the reward. The man who won the competition went into Stalin’s office, but he never came out again. New techniques had been invented by then and the reward for the most convincing look-alike was eternal fame, but it came at the expense of his own life.”

Another anonymous Russian suggested converting the mausoleum into a mechanical cuckoo clock. "Every hour, on the hour, the sleeping Lenin can pop out and the visitors will be able to see him without having to queue."

"Oh, let's just stick him in the ground and forget about him as quickly as possible," said a third Russian, even more anonymous than the previous two. (...)

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p 269-270

## In the train between Yekaterinburg and Novosibirsk, 14 May

Siberia...

A wild land that steals upon you and infects you. The oldest place on earth, promised land, virgin soil, synonym of endlessness. "Pure, sleeping land" in Tatar. They say this was the Garden of Eden.

I leave the Urals and drive to the capital city of Siberia, originally Novonikolayevsk (after the last tsar), now Novosibirsk ("New Siberia").

The surroundings alternate between winter and spring. I feel as lazy as a snake. Day and night follow swiftly on each other's heels. For a while, the train follows the coils of the river through the meadow-covered valley. Glistening, snow-dusted birch trees are everywhere.

I spend hours out in the corridor. There's only one window that does not stick. When the train stops, even before we've reached a station, I push the window open. Sometimes a signal engineer is standing in the doorway of the signal box, solid, dutiful, until the train departs again. I smell sauerkraut, onions, old greased leather. I see a frozen meadow full of ponds, covered with splintered ice like sheet glass. In the villages, damp, rotting houses stand alongside roads of mud. It is usually cold and windswept, but before long it will be hot here. I picture windowpanes inside frames covered with scraps of cloth, like thick lenses. Skinny dogs with shameless faces wander amongst smouldering rubbish on refuse dumps. In the graveyards, the holes for the graves have grown over and the crosses are leaning at angles. It looks as though some of the gravestones have been pushed up from beneath. "It's the dead themselves that do it," someone says, "tossing and turning in their sleep." Beside each grave is a tin-covered box, which serves as a bench, where the next of kin come to eat and to drink to the deceased. A drink is poured specially for the dead person as well.

And then, more birch trees, birch trees everywhere, with dripping icicles.

"For us, the birch tree is a blessing," says the provodnitsa, who has come over for a chat to relieve the loneliness. "Do you see its bark? It has the skin of a young woman. Did you know that they make kitchenware out of birch wood, so that the salt stays dry for longer, and the milk keeps fresh? In the Middle Ages, they used to write love letters on birch bark, like papyrus. You can drink birch sap too. The birch is a national symbol, a sign of our identity."

Later she says: “Did you know that emigrants who see a birch forest in the country where they are trying to make their new home will fall victim to an incurable melancholy?”

Later still, I am drinking a glass of Stary Melnik (Old Miller) beer in the buffet car. Escalope, shashlik, pelmen, it's all the same thing. The cook is a tanned Buryat woman in a large pair of glasses and an immaculate white headscarf. You can already see reflections gleaming in the darkening windows.

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p 310-315

## Vladivostok, 15 and 16 July

*(the author holds a going-away party in his small flat)*

(...)

Hours later, I am propelled into the position of shrink to Russia's angst-ridden generations. In Russia, drink and grief increase in direct proportion to each other. After a few drinks, not one of my guests manages to remain in a state of unqualified happiness. Quite the contrary, in fact. As the drink flows, they increasingly feel the burden of existence. I go in search of calm on my balcony, but by doing so I'm putting myself exactly where they want me: in lonely isolation, where the last layer of varnish is scraped away from the heart.

What lies beneath it?

(...)

The things I hear touch me to the core. When my guests come out onto the balcony to take a breath of fresh air or to smoke a cigarette, we get talking about the most trivial of subjects, but a strange combination of factors – my final hours in their presence, my constant questions about their past, my irritation with their intransigence, but also their Dostoyevskian desire to tell me the truth – suddenly renders some of them loose-lipped or courageous and they lay their long-suppressed sorrow at my feet. As though making a confession, they join their hands on the balustrade and lower their eyes, as though they personally are responsible for the disasters that have hit their families, their country and their history.

I listen to their tales, which exit their mouths in short bursts and clouds of smoke, like speech bubbles, floating up into the sky over Vladivostok. The party is a long way away.

I'll summarise the evening and note down their most important words (anonymously, at the request of my guests), as they are imprinted upon my memory.

“My father... was one of the thousands every year who were transported to Kolyma, the Gulag territory in the north of Siberia, which is named after the river that flows through it. Where they passed, they had to help to build docks. Most of the prisoners died in the mines. Who were they? They could be anyone: a teacher, a civil servant, an artist... My father was a civil servant. He had asked inconvenient questions. He had to work in a goldmine. He died in the stench of ammonia, coughing up his lungs. At that time, in the years of Stalin, Kolyma produced a third of the world's gold. Every kilo cost one human life. My father's life was worth one lousy kilo of gold ...”

“Can I really tell you this? Oh, what difference does it make? In the 1930s, in Kolpashevo, on the banks of the Ob, there was an NKVD camp. My grandfather, who, right from the very beginning, believed that the revolution would save the human race, was a warder at the camp. Before he died, he said that executed prisoners were buried in the garden there, in one of the mass graves.” (The Russian for “mass grave” is братская могила, or “brother grave”.) “When there was no space left in the garden, they shot the prisoners in their cells and buried them under the floor. Do you want to know how many people my grandfather killed? I’m not going to tell you. No one would believe it. Now it’s too late. My grandfather’s grave doesn’t have a cross on it, but a red star, and there are fresh flowers on it every week.”

“My uncle, who worked for the NKVD, told his secrets when he was an old man. He said that at some point his section had received instructions from above about how many people had to be killed. It was a kind of quota system: farmers and priests were at the top of the list. The sections competed with each other for the highest figures, and there were prizes for the winners. When my uncle criticised the system, he was dismissed.”

“My uncle was in prison for a while. I don’t know why. No one knew why anyone else was sent to prison. He was a political prisoner and they locked him up with murderers. He survived though. He told us some terrible things... Murderers who wanted to escape usually tried to persuade a political prisoner to go with them. It was their way of preparing for death by starvation. If it came to it, they would kill their companion and eat him. Do you know how much edible meat there is on a human body? My uncle said that one of his friends died that way.”

“My father received some kind of medal directly from Stalin, because he was such a productive worker. Then Stalin sent him down the mines. Can you imagine? Soon after Stalin’s death, in 1953, strikes broke out everywhere. The demands were very reasonable: that children and old people should be exempted from hard labour. They brought in the Red Army. The soldiers, young boys of rigid discipline, faced a crowd of singing prisoners standing shoulder to shoulder. My father was one of them. First, they shot into the air. When the prisoners kept on singing, the machine guns opened fire. For a few moments, the prisoners remained standing. Those who were still alive held the dead prisoners upright. A minute later, everyone was lying on the ground. Nobody knows what they did with the bodies.”

And so on, and so on... The list of stories is endless.