

Moscow: Fortress City

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Quiet, quiet, my loud age,
By me, floods—and future generations.
—MARINA TSVETAeva, 1931

I am the place of your birth, the birth of the New World, the only world.

Writing is auto-bio-graphy, auto-matically, physically. Does a city have such autobiography? Does it write? Does it leave marks? Has the place of your birth left marks on you? Marked you out? Marked you inside out?

Is your mother a place? Desire to desire, forgetting and remembering, playing fort/da,—you just know that you cannot take another step as soon as you have realized that you are THERE forever. Either UP there, or DOWN there, as they say. You can only confirm it. And you do. Just recollect your dreams.



...in many places Moscow looks as tightly sealed as a fortress.
—WALTER BENJAMIN, 1927

The Kremlin is not like any other palace, it is a city in itself; a city that forms the root of Moscow, and that serves as a fortress between two quarters of the world... —MARQUIS DE CUSTINE, 1839

Moscow acted out the primal scene of the 20th century, the place where it all started. A womb or birth-place that citizens of the world will never be able to experience without some sort of bowel movement. As an abject mother of the “Soviet monster,” an embodiment of the specter of communism, totalitarianism, terror, etc., Moscow realized its dream of immaculate conception of delivering the third Rome, the holy city, the New World.

From the early years of Moscow and the Kremlin, its fortress, subsequent generations had been left with fortress consciousness. The Kremlin multiplied obsessively, expanding and enclosing in successive concentric circles, like a matreshka (nesting Russian dolls) into the surrounding regions. Every major Russian city was striving to have a Kremlin or one semblance of it. Fortification also became

I know I can help you to move, for I do it every day and every night. When I read that you are “not able to return from” Moscow, Berlin, New York; from HOME/birthplace/mother tongue, that you are travelling, fleeing, running, writing, collecting,—struggling—I tell myself: yes, you are still MINE, and mine forever. Do I have a choice in having you or freeing you? Yes, ...yes,—I do.

Do I still want you? Want you inside myself? This question is with me, you know. If I leave you just for a while, just to give birth to you, just to teach you to make your first step, to walk, I know I leave you in-between birth and death. I even help you in teaching you how to substitute the word “birth” with the word “life,” so that you are left between “life” and “death,” and you think both belong to you. I made you think that way.

Always in place? In my body. Now...GO. Walk away. Find out for yourself. And by the way, call me not “yours” or “my birthplace.” Too many of you do it. I contain the army. I contain the nation. I contain all past and future heroes, the people, the matter, the air you breathe. If you want to be *special, different, not*



a primary operation in the domestication of conquered territory. For example, the Russian appropriation of the Siberian ‘body politic’ started in 1571 with Ivan the Terrible’s system of fortifications. It was a series of southern ostrogi (forts) to fend off Tartar attacks behind which Ivan the Terrible established peasant slobody (settlements). Fortifications were used to establish the boundaries of what was conceived to be Russia and Russian. Then, in addition to serving as places to deport “the depopulated” of Russia, these fortification towns and villages helped to clarify spatially and politically what constituted Russia.

Catherine the Great’s Russification policy used the fortress logic to build up identifiable borders of the Russian national identity using the language of French Enlightenment. It is noteworthy that in the first ukaz (edict) of 1764, this policy was articulated as a means of assimilating the Cossacks into the Russian population, and bringing them to ‘acceptable cultural standards’, since ‘they lacked social discipline and intellectual sophistication’. At the same time the issue of the protection and defense of Russians within an ever-growing Russian

the same—and this is what you have always asked for—if you want to be *the chosen one*, then this is the way to weave the words of the new world. New World: Is there something more trivial for the Muscovite ear? Trust me: I've imagined this world for you, and everyday you continue to rename me and yourself—anew, obsessed with the past.

Do not call me your “Mother.” Do not call me “Mother-Russia.” Do not call me “Mother-land.” Do not call me “Mother-Earth.” Unlearn these words before coming back—to your senses. This is my last lesson as a mother. I am your first word and your last word, never mind what is written there in your sacred texts. Calm down. Sleep. Eat, darling, eat. Sleep is good for you, food is good for you. I am good for you.

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In Russia everyone wants to belong to Moscow. Everyone wants to be able to claim: ‘I live in Moscow.’ Even though after such claims some are as ready to disclaim the use of it, its importance, and try to “purify” themselves of what

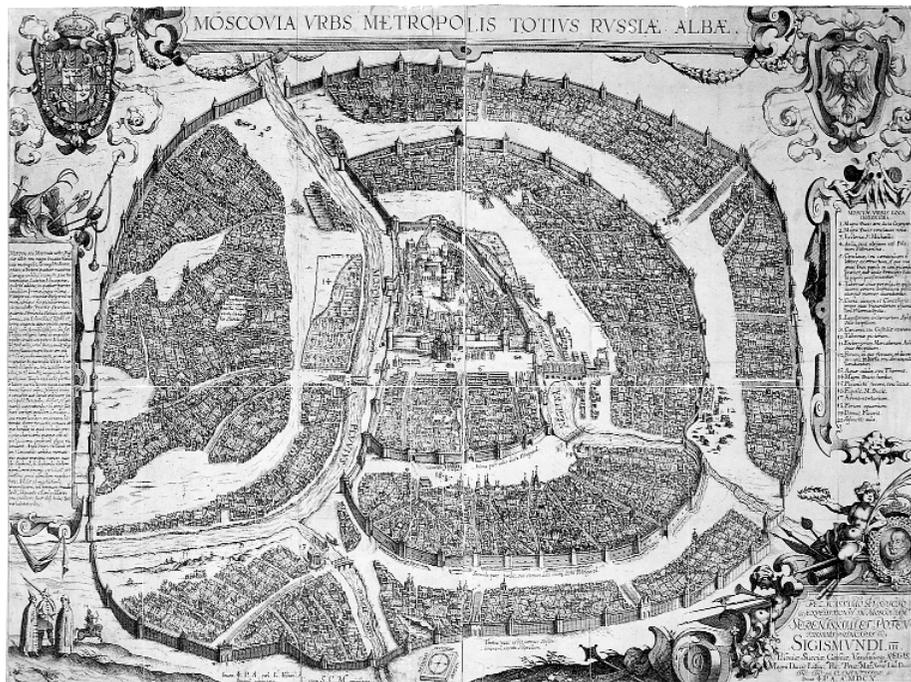


territory was addressed. It was estimated that the ‘original’ Russian state covered approximately 15,000 square miles in 1462, but had since then expanded at a rate of some fifty square miles a day over a period of four hundred years, creating a vast empire of about 8,660,000 (constituting one seventh of the total land surface of earth) by 1914. Setting out the borders of ‘Russian way’ or ‘Russian soul’ meant that those who were incompatible with it were to be expelled from within fortress-Russia. In some sense, it is in the Kremlin where one finds the roots of the Gulag. To claim that the Gulag is the result of Bolshevism or communism, as argued by Solzhenitsyn among others, is to be blind to Russian history and especially to the way in which Russian national identity has been historically complicitous in this process. Still today the expression “soty kilometr (100th kilometer)” remains familiar to Muscovites. “100th kilometer” refers to the distance of 100 kilometers from the official borders of Moscow, it is a circle with Moscow in the center; an area that former convicts and other officially prohibited citizens were not to enter. Russian identity with

I call ‘*Moskvacentrism* (Moscow-centrism).’ How many times you read: In “Moscow, Russia?” Let’s face it: Moscow=Russia. When you write of Moscow, you write of Russia by default. Many non-Muscovite Russians hate Moscow and Muscovites. Till they become Muscovites themselves. However, here again birth is significantly different from life. It is true that those who live in Moscow already lay claims to some writing rights. But they are still only partly Muscovites. In Moscow these things mean a lot: Whether you are born as Muscovite or you *only* have become a Muscovite. That is, which generation immigrant are you?

You must be already wondering: What about the author? Do I have the right to write on Moscow because my name sounds Russian? Because I am Russian? Let me assure you: I have full right to write on Moscow. I WAS BORN IN MOSCOW. I WAS BORN IN RUSSIA. I WAS BORN IN THE USSR.

Moscow is mine through and through. Full stop. Those who were not born in this place, will always be haunted by a desire to possess it, *in one way or*



another. Something that is given (as a birth-right) is experienced differently from something that is conquered. It means that one and one's parents do not need "to make it" to Moscow. One *has* Moscow. One has attitude. One does not need to learn it, to mimic it, to wear it. Performance is *natural*, given by and taken with mother's milk. Muscovites can identify each other by smell, by gaze, by being the makers and the center of the universe called the "Russian empire." Muscovites have that famous Muscovite accent that betrays me anywhere. Actually, that privileges me, marks me out as special, as some 'chosen one,' as the lucky one. One cannot buy an accent, one can only spend years or hours of hard work on trying to speak what Russians call '*without* accent,' that is, in Muscovite accent, just like many Russian actresses and actors had to do in order to work in Moscow. In order to call Moscow "theirs." However, it is mine. By birth-right: Mother, thank you. Moscow is my Mother-land. It is my Mother-tongue. It is a place where I was born, I live in; a place I love.

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Moscow at its center has been fortifying itself in many different ways and it seems many of those practices and discourses have been utilized for building Russia and the USSR as well.

*The fortification logic of Moscow, that has been essential for the constitution and territorial consolidation of the Russian nation, is of dual nature. On the one hand, it guards its borders and imagines itself to be in constant danger, ever vigilant to aliens of all sorts. On the other hand, Moscow propels itself outwards, feeding off its internal turbulence (after all, the root word for Moscow, *mosk*, means 'turbulent') that is realized in the centripetal expansion of Russia. Kremlin walls absorbed urbanization in 1147 once and forever. The rest of Moscow, as many have insisted, is a "big village." No matter how many Stalinist stone buildings have been erected and how Moscow parades its current construction work, it ultimately fails to be simply a city, one of the world's capitals. It is the city. The rest of Russia is destined to make sure that only Kremlin embodies Russia as such. The rest of Russia, as a whole, is residue, excess, discharge, is*

Do not take me seriously. I am not expecting it. You know when *woman writes*, she writes by her heart, pure emotions speak through her. Being Russian, woman doubles her lack. Lack of sense. Lack of reason. And if you want me/her...to remain “Russian woman”—*as you know her*—let me kill you, or let me sacrifice myself, or let me suffer. But remember: *Ruskiye ne sdaútsya* [Russians do not surrender]. So you have to let me remain certain, remain *standing* in my holiness. Or I would lose my identity, therefore you would lose yours. Do you want it? Think again, how many hopes would be lost, how many pleasures will not happen. Do not give me your questions. Just enjoy me, just experience me. I do not speak your language, and you cannot speak mine, even if both of us seem to speak the *same* language. Translations are strong aphrodisiacs: Feel it. Let yourself go and do not feel guilty: I allow you. Come to me, Moscow, Russia.

You must excuse me—I forgot another important part of my Muscovite existence that’s becoming crucial in the next millennium. Let me introduce myself



*“the rest.” Today, more than ever. Anyone who valorizes excess and margins must feel suffocated in this place: Space outside Kremlin is negative, it is a shadow. So much of space, so many cultures and civilizations have been systematically swallowed for this **one** to claim a special destiny, to claim its red purity, to “surprise the world.” To let THIS go, in order to wake up from a thousand-year old dream of wholeness and holiness, is, in the Russian imaginary, tantamount to treason. The dream clears all charges of responsibility.*

Entrances into fortresses are always ambivalent, as any vchod v ukrytie [entrance to shelter]: What makes a fortress a fortress is its simultaneous elicitation and frustration of the desire of those outside it. In Russia ‘fortress’ has been translated into mythology, into law, into language and culture, into national identity; most clearly exemplified by the fortress city, “Kremlin.” Russians are constantly defending themselves, being in a permanent state of anxiety of all sorts and kinds. However not to be desirable anymore is Kremlin’s ultimate nightmare. If a fortress cannot sustain its attractiveness by all means, those

properly to ease our communication. I am Russian. I am not *just* a Russian citizen, not *just* Muscovite. I am ACTUALLY Russian. 100 percent. Though some of my Moscow friends claimed that my eyes are *a bit* Mongolian, but much less than those of Yeltsin or Lenin, of course. Still others were suspicious of my nose: It was suggested within earshot that my nose was *slightly* Jewish.

With the latest Chechen wars this question has acquired a stronger meaning, and I am proud to assure you that I am not just ethnically Russian (I hope you believe me by now). I am...BLOND. I am *naturally* blond, almost blindingly. Trust me—this is my real color (I’ve been asked many times). I am *really* white though I am not using any whitening lotions. My skin is delicate, properly white, *naturally* white skin. To make you understand what I mean: My skin does not tolerate sun. As a test ask yourself: If your skin does tolerate sun, you are not *completely* white by Muscovite standards. Among my school friends those of not completely white skin were called “Gypsy-likes.” My eye color is grey-green, depending on the color of my clothes and mascara it becomes



who belong lose more than those outside. Defense of one’s own “way of life” does not know the word “enough.” Defense is the way to make sense of the world. It is not to say that somehow this siege mentality marks out Russia as a special case, but here it took on monstrous forms.

Anyone who lives in Moscow or comes into Moscow for more than three days knows this word: Propiska or registrastiya. To be a Muscovite (temporarily or permanently) is to have “propiska”—best translated as inscription or ‘writing through’. Without going too much into its history, this practice today has at least two dimensions: Spatial and legal. Spatial dimension is characterized by being allocated to a particular space, by being localized in a particular home, being fixed into a space and also being granted a space to place one’s body. So it is a spatio-corporeal inscription. It provides control over the body and its movements in a city space. To be a Muscovite in this sense is written through one’s body, it is to have a Muscovite body.

The fact that Russians—to sustain their identity as spatially and ethnically

greyer or greener. But of course the point is: It is not dark, it is not brown. It is light. When I was young and slim, sometimes I looked like the Venus by Botticelli. And you?

It is often said that ‘logos’ and rationality do not operate in Moscow, Russia, especially in our “irrational” post-Soviet era. We are “senseless,” we are losing our sense! There are claims that we lack a tradition of metaphysics and ‘proper’ phenomenology. We are “naturally” *unreasonable*. We do not make sense, we can show it to you (on demand). Hence we must work on our reason urgently, otherwise we could be completely consumed by our “essential” passion for a “strong hand,” our love for terror, for blood, for power. That is why we do not have anything to deconstruct. No, no! We are *scared* to even think of it: Have you not seen it? We speak your language, we call ourselves your Great Other (a child of the Big Brother). We can deconstruct *you*, but: Take your hands off me! You cannot possibly understand what it means to live here, to experience it, to have “Russian soul.” It is irrational, it is maternal, eternally feminine. Today



stable and homogenous—have employed movings, re-movings, deportations and re-placements of peoples is well known. In the early period the main target of this activity was ‘exchange’ of wealthiest native people with Russian merchants and deportation of conquered citizens to the interior of Moscow principality. For example, in 1486 merchants from Moscow replaced a few thousand people from Livonia. In 1656 ‘pro-Swedish’ subjects from Ingria, Finland and Karelia (about 8,000 families from the latter two countries) were forced out of their homelands. Peter the Great continued to use this policy in 1708 when on invading Dorpat in the Baltic region its German citizens were forcefully relocated in long caravans to Vologda (known today as povólgskie nemcy, Volgian Germans). Russian national identity, based on the principle of homogeneity to be defended by fortification, found its earliest instantiation in the strategies of exile and deportation. Propiska is one of more modern means to keep nezelayelnye elementy (undesirable elements) away from places of strategic importance, specifically Moscow.

more than ever it needs “borders,” “reason,” it needs a strong frame of metaphysics and rationality. At the end of the day, we say, that the Soviet period was alien to great Russia, holy Russia. It was “sin” what those communists had committed. What can save us now? The Russian Orthodox Church and *solid, steady*, thought. Thought that is to survive centuries.

However, steady thought needs ‘a man,’ a hero, a thinker and a protector of Russian culture. All cultural aspirations today are directed towards this: A great man, a new Russian hero. You just wait, wait, you will see. He will be strong, he will be a genius, he will be beautiful, he will be Russian, and...he will, of course, live in Moscow (I could be HIM if I were not HER). Before we can think through heterogeneity and diversity, before we can think *with* Chechnya, *with* Tatarstan, *with* Kolyma, *with* you, WE NEED ANOTHER RUSSIAN HERO.

See for yourself: It takes eight centuries to deliver into the world the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. They will all see; I will show them what we can deliver. At last, they all saw. Moscow has never felt more fertile and potent. It want-



Thus those without propiska are to be constantly removed from Moscow, checked-on, moved around, deported, imprisoned, marked out in ethnic/racial/sexual/class terms: prostitutes, non-whites, vagrants, migrants and refugees. This topographic inscription has an embodied power only if it exists as a stamp in a valid identity document—for Russian citizens, in their passport. This stamp in turn is supported/backed-up by papers in local registration offices. Identity papers, inscriptions, pictures and stamps within them discursively mark out the “sexualized” and “ethnicized” bodies of non-Muscovites and exclusive bodies of Muscovites. It is also important to note that since the break-up of the Soviet Union and introduction of the new Constitution of Russian Federation the practice of propiska has become unconstitutional. It remains in force only in Moscow, being called today “registration” in stead of “inscription,” most probably to neutralize it. The Moscow municipal government continues it despite constitutional and court orders. Moscow protects its status of exclusivity and desirability, making sure that the rest of Russia remains THE REST.

ed more. It wanted to swallow the whole world. It was the mother of all poor and left children. What's next? Today we, Muscovites, do not try to protect everyone, do not claim to love everyone who agrees with us. In the new millennium I want to protect *my own* children. They are in danger. We are in danger. The danger is near our door. She/death is black, she is more fertile. Our kin might disappear. I must bear more children with my blood, with my skin, with my eyes. I must be a responsible citizen. Once again, my sons, my children, behind you—Moscow, behind you—Russia. Fighting, you defend your mother, your children, your bright future.

Can you ever come back/to/from home, mother(land), Moscow, the USSR, Russia—ME?

I am home. I am fortress.

That's all I am. Da? ★



Let's imagine this bastion of Moscow, propiska, falls soon. Will it change things? Only to a certain extent: Muscovites (therefore, Russians) have learned that the only way to keep fortress identity alive and impregnable is to keep it expanding, innovative, to make new "them." Historically it was the West or Asia, today it is "Islamic terrorism," "blacks from Caucasus," and even declines in the birth rates of ethnic Russians. Muscovites are "vsegda gotov" (always alert) like student-pioneers in Soviet schools, to defend our Motherland and Fatherland, to defend our women and children, to defend ourselves. Fortress-Kremlin-Moscow-Russia still guards its limits.

I dream: Moscow will lose its identity, it will fail holy Russia, it will fail to surprise, to protect, attract, and deliver "them." ★