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## Moscow and Berlin in the 20th century

### The fortunes of two cities

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Moscow and Berlin both look back to a century of dramatic developments, some of which are similar, some which are dramatically different. Both cities have been shaped by the excessive dynamics and violence of the 20th century, both have fallen out of the circle of truly great cities and are now ready to reclaim their place.

The fortunes of Moscow and Berlin in the 20th century are a broad topic indeed. Sceptics may even find it so broad as to verge on the vague. What could it involve? It could be a survey of the history of two European capitals in the century just past – though only as a sketch, a *tour d'horizon*. It could also be a history of the relations between Moscow and Berlin, which would surely usher in a history of German-Russian relations. Or it could conceivably be a combination of the two – a comparative “parallel history” of alternating *rapprochement* and rejection. In writing my book about Berlin as a meeting place for Russians and Germans I got an idea of how difficult it is to find an appropriate framework for describing such a rich, confusing, but also bloody chapter in the history of relations between Russia and Germany [1] So what am I to do?

Perhaps it would be best to show pictures: pictures of the grey Moscow *before*, and the Moscow *after* shining in all colours; pictures of the *Moskva* swimming pool and, on the same spot not ten years later, the rebuilt Cathedral of Christ the Saviour, proclaiming from afar to every Muscovite: I was, I am, I will be! And pretending always to have been there, although its precursor was blown up in 1932 to make way for the Palace of the Soviets.



Next, a picture of Berlin's Marx-Engels Square, the former Palace Square (*Schloßplatz*) whence, in 1951, disappeared the palace, whose reconstruction has still not got under way. One could show pictures of the ditches torn into Moscow's ground, and of the cranes revolving against the skies of Berlin. All this might convey a more exact impression of what Berlin and Moscow are today than words could evoke.

Therefore I would like, firstly, to speak about changes in today's Moscow and Berlin. My aim is not to give a complete picture but, in a sense, to obtain a viewpoint, a point of cognition allowing us to let our gaze ramble back across the 20th century. The aim of this operation is obvious: from that point we will be able to see something different than would have been visible in 1985 or 1991, when Moscow was still awaiting the radical changes which have since occurred there in the most incredible manner. Our perception of history has its basis in the present: in every city we see what interests us, and that is something different for every generation and every era.

Secondly I would like to take a brisk walk through the 20th century. How did each of the two cities become a scene for the century's history? Thirdly, is there anything that allows us to study both cities in a common context? The differences in the two cities' fortunes notwithstanding, is there a parallel movement, a sense of both belonging to a single horizon of time and experience?

And fourthly, in a postscript as it were, I shall return to my point of departure and try to answer the question of where the two cities find themselves today.

## **Moscow and Berlin in 2000**

**There are many ways of describing cities. The first impression is always very subjective, but it has the force and dignity of the first impression. What would I show someone to make him understand the great, radical changes that have taken place? Which places, which points would we visit to get the picture? What is the topography of the changes,**

**the topography of the new Berlin and the new Moscow? Where should we set out for?**

**Probably there are no better places than Potsdam Square (*Potsdamer Platz*) and the Brandenburg Gate to learn about all that has changed in Berlin. Where the Wall stood only a decade ago, now you can barely spot its traces. The divided city has dissolved and is reorganizing along the structures that defined the city before its division. Urban perspectives which had been obstructed for over a century are being restored. Empty stretches of land and fallow areas cut into urban space first by the war, then by the post-war cleansing and demolition mania, are being built upon. The two halves of the city, which had increasingly come to be planned and built against each other, are once again moving towards each other. The stations of this reorganization along the old lines and structures could almost be followed with the naked eye: the removal of the Wall, the restoration of streets of houses, the reopening of closed subway and suburban train lines, the rails and train stations being put back on line. Almost every day brought a surprise on the scale of the opening of a new perspective - usually a re-opening. This happened simultaneously in many places across town, and the result is a transformed city - transformed to the point of recognisability. Of course the reorganisation of physical topography - of the**

**streets, the communications network, the damaged facades, is only an indication of something much more substantial: the reorganisation of urban life itself.**

**The transformation of the city can be detected with the naked eye. The city's "personnel" is changing, as is urban society. A type of person is emerging which hadn't existed in Berlin for decades and which cannot adequately be described as "the Bonner". Conversely, another type is disappearing, or at least losing the dominant position it had long occupied. Since the division, Berlin has get-togethers with a different specific organic composition than could be seen in either insular West Berlin or the capital that was East Berlin. Post-division Berlin has lost industries that had survived longer than elsewhere due to the abnormal conditions of the division. The biotopes that could only thrive in a shelter zone in the shade of great political and economic events, are disappearing. The city has entered a new process of accumulation. It is collecting its *membra disiecta*, at least those of them that they are still within reach. It is looking around and holding court. It is testing whether it can once again, or still, keep up with the other big cities. Berlin is redefining proximity. What used to be unattainably distant is now in closest vicinity, and what used almost to be in the forecourt has now moved far away. As the new**

**Europe's system of coordinates has changed, so has Berlin's.**

**I could go on for a long time describing this rapid change that concerns all areas of life, and above all I could cite pieces of circumstantial evidence, micrological and macrological, by the dozens and hundreds. Here I must leave it at a thesis which takes in all these observations: spectacular as the pace, course and shape of these changes may be, they simply represent the end of the state of exception and its consequences, a return onto the track of normal urban development which Berlin, for well-known reasons, was taken out of in the 20 century. The acceleration is catching up with developments which elsewhere, under normal conditions, were allowed to take decades. All the talk about a new beginning is just concealing the re-establishment of civilisational normality, a process which in itself is quite a miracle for the end of the century.**

**Where would one go in Moscow to gain a lasting impression of what has been going on in the city over the past decade?**

**One could of course take a walk to where the golden cupola of the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour is now gleaming. An attempt to realise what happened in that spot would already constitute a**

**history of Moscow in the 20 century. The mightiest temple of the former coronation city was blown up in 1932 to make way for a planned 420 metre tall Palace of the Soviets that was never completed; a swimming pool was built in its place; then, in the space of three years, it was rebuilt. Such, in brief, are the breath-taking stages of a story which of course is not only about an edifice or about architectural history but about the spirit of an empire and the revolutionary passion of the movement of the godless, the ruthlessness of utopia and its failure, the banalisation of communism and the return of liturgical pomp, and the display of splendour by a church which almost acts as a new state church, a paradigmatic example of a constructed politics of history in the post-Soviet and post-modern era.**

**But probably Moscow does not have that one striking spot corresponding to Berlin's site of division, the Wall. All things considered, the parallels have only limited pertinence. Other than Berlin, Moscow was never destroyed by the war and its aftermath, the clear-cuttings and iconoclasm of Stalinists and anti-Stalinists notwithstanding. Moscow was never a divided city, unless between "those up there" and "those down there". Moscow's building activity is not concentrated in a particular spot; the whole town is in a construction frenzy, even after the crisis of 1998. Overall there is**

**likely to be more building going on in Moscow right now than in Berlin, which is so proud of being home to “Europe’s biggest construction site”. In recent years, whole areas all over Moscow have been built anew, house by house, street by street, district by district - one hardly believes one’s eyes.**

**Moscow has adopted different styles rapidly, perhaps too rapidly, and certainly uncritically. But the point is not to criticise styles but to stress the very will to build which seems insatiable and which, in the long run, will probably turn out to be the precondition for architectural innovation. The Dutch-Russian journal [Project Russia](#) has been documenting this impressively for several years. But once more I am not talking about construction or urban planning as such. They are only indicators of something more significant, which one is tempted to call Moscow’s becoming a city, the re-urbanisation of a large agglomeration of settlements.**

**It is not so much the buildings that are indicators of re-urbanisation - they even display allusions to the Empire Style of the new and old Empires, to a monarchic eclecticism - but the transformation of the *sovetsky obraz zhizni* [2] into a way of life such as has become common in big cities across the world. What is truly sensational in Moscow is what has turned it from a Soviet into a non-Soviet city.**

**What is that, for example? It is the fact that there is a phone book with yellow pages. That there are phone booths from which you can call abroad. That you can get the major world newspapers everywhere. That many things which had never cost anything - such as bread or public transport - finally have a price. That one has to pay more but no longer needs to queue for hours. That everything is available: all the books and writers who used to be inaccessible or prohibited; trips to Antalya and Miami Beach; the world wide web; mobile phones and credit cards. That there are now some house entrances which are being cleaned. That one finally has to pay for heating and hot water. Anyone who had experienced the Soviet metropolis may sense the bliss implicit in this unglamorous transformation.**

**Much more could be said here about inner-city migration, the formation of new socially segregated districts, the rise in status of apartments in old buildings and the loss of status of suburban high rise buildings, the transformation of Moscow's multinational society after the end of the Soviet Union, the development of new business communities and countless scenes. About the desacralisation of quasi-sacral places in the city - the Red Square, the Mausoleum -, the recapture of the city centre by the economy - banks and businesses -, about the re-civilisation and re-urbanisation of**

**urban territories which had been occupied and controlled by the state bureaucracy for so long. About the return of cafés, bars and discos. Once more, what matters is to formulate a thesis. This time my thesis is that at the end of the 20 century, Moscow is becoming a normal metropolis again, and chances are that it will advance into the league of global cities. The process is rough, extreme, and paradoxical, and has the city living in two centuries at once, in a dollar-based metropolis and the city of the *limitchiki***

**[3] but the point of no return has long been crossed. Moscow has left behind the process of its second modernization and urbanization, the model city of communism has become history - just like the heroic era of storm and stress from which it had emerged.**

**So what is it that one gets to see from the vantage point of this new Berlin and this new Moscow? What meets the eye that had been blinded out or repressed?**

**Only now that an era in urban development has ended, i.e. become part of the past, has a historicisation become possible. The cities have overcome a state in which they had been trapped and braked until very recently. Actually this situation does not lend itself to any description that uses the prefix “re-” because it has not existed**

**before. Berlin has become a capital once again, the capital of a new Germany such as has never existed. Moscow is the capital of a new Russia, such as has not been seen before.**

## **Berlin and Moscow - The Fortunes of Two Cities in the 20th Century**

**“A city’s fortunes” is a term coined by Karl Scheffler in the title of his great portrait of Berlin, which at the time had just become a metropolis [4] In 1910 he could not have known how true the term would turn out to ring for his city. This is no less true of Moscow: both cities, having stepped onto the scene of the beginning 20 century so powerfully and impressively, dropped out of the circle of great metropolises in two very peculiar and very different processes of self-destruction. In many ways the histories of these cities are the culminations of the histories of the countries and peoples whose capitals they were.**

**If one seeks to understand what happened, one has to go back to the point of departure, to the time before 1914, which, as is well known, was when the long 19 century ended. Our portrayal of the last days of the *Ancien régime* will not be entirely free of intimations of nostalgia and of a sense of a deep loss. Berlin and Moscow as 20 century metropolises**

**were born in the 19 century. The nervousness, the feverishness and the force of the two cities, both of them latecomers albeit with different starting positions, are rooted in the time of commencement and boom of the Wilhelmine period and the late Russian Empire. As we know, the beginnings of what was to attain a greater clarity and a radical stylisation only after a war and a revolution, in the legendary Twenties, lie in the much-maligned “Wilhelminism” and the Silver Age to which Russia owes the birth of its modern national culture. Whatever we may think of when hearing the lightning and thunder of the avant-garde and the overall new tone of the era - it all started long before 1917 and 1918, long before Russia’s October and Germany’s November, which were only catalysts helping to radicalise and giving a definite form to these new tendencies. No Soviet avant-garde without the Silver Age, no Weimar culture without Herwarth Walden’s *Sturm*, Peter Behrens, Ludwig Hoffmann. It had all taken a run-up in those dynamic times when Russia was dreaming of the “star of America” rising above Siberia (Alexander Blok) and Germany was dreaming the mass democratic dream of “a place in the sun”. We know what happened next. The ascent of millions to a better life ushered in the Great War of 1914, the struggle for a place in the sun led to the battle fields of Verdun and Galicia; the social mobilisation somersaulted into a military mobilisation, into the**



**first mass and popular war of modernity, which found its completion in total war less than thirty years later.**

**Berlin and Moscow in 1917/1918: cities of soldiers coming back from the war but not finding their way back into civilian life. It took several years, in Moscow at least, for war communism to recede and the routines of civilian life to become dominant once more. For Moscow, those were times of de-industrialisation, of regression to pre-urban conditions. Moscow loses its body of merchants and entrepreneurs. The authorities, the apparatus of the new state, are taking up residence in Moscow. Moscow is becoming the “fourth Rome” of the Communist International. The situations are incomparable: the Moscow of the Civil War was a city in civil war, with famine, depopulation, widespread deaths, a struggle for survival; Berlin, by contrast, was a city that the revolution had passed by despite expectations for a German October.**

**The differences become clear when, after 1920, a time of peace sets in. Moscow recovers quickly, but it remains the capital of a peasant country - all the more so since the Revolution gave land to the peasants. In NEP Moscow, the middle class, small entrepreneur, artisan element regenerates quickly. Moscow thrives in a way in which only a bazaar and**

**a black market can thrive. What could this Moscow have to do with Berlin, the capital of one of the most industrialised and developed countries on earth? Berlin has other things to worry about.**

**But Moscow does not escape the staggering changes that accompany the forced industrialisation and collectivisation after 1929. The Moscow of the merchants, of trade and textile industry magnates perished, not in 1917 but in the flow of peasants who migrate, or are swept, into the towns in the course of collectivisation. The old, pre-revolutionary Moscow is drowned by the wave of hyper-urbanisation which makes the population triple in the space of a decade. A new urban society emerges, a gigantic village of millions, where the old urbanity is dissolved, atomised, made to disappear. The hard Stalinist form into which Moscow is pressed in the 1930s - the General Plan of 1935 - is an attempt to structure and discipline this amorphous mass of millions of uprooted people. Hundreds of churches in exposed places are blown up, lanes and streets are widened to highways and large avenues; great tunnels and metro stations are constructed; Moscow is becoming monumental, magnificent. The time of experimenting with the modestly proportioned forms of construction of the 1920s is over. Now it is all about hierarchy, grand avenues, an architecture of power and intimidation, aggrandized forms of the**

**old Empire Style, culminating in the erection of the world's tallest building and a ring of sky-scrapers. Moscow outbids every other city in the world by its lavishness, its orderliness, and its careful planning.**

**But what had been planned as a home for the *New Man* becomes a city of domination which needs Soviet Men but no citizens. Moscow in 1937 is a city of comprehensive tutelage and boundless terror, of comedy film and entertainment in the newly opened Gorky park. It is a city of unbridled and commonplace violence, of fear. In Moscow a whole generation is learning to hush or speak softly, to mimic whatever guarantees survival, to use the language one needs to master in order to secure advancement. The old Moscow has perished, a new one is emerging out of the spirit of careerism and social climbing of the 1930s. The memories of this unprecedented ascent from all the way down to the summits of power and a more or less secure and good life are only going to die with this generation, in the 1970s and 80s. Moscow is bleeding dry and re-forming. Moscow is becoming impoverished, but it draws unimaginably strong energies from the rise of hundreds of thousands.**

**What about Berlin, assailed and overpowered as it is by the tide of the *völkische* revolution? Life there is going on rather normally - except for those who no longer belong to the so-called national**

**community; these are relatively small, precisely definable groups of racially and politically persecuted people: Jews, Gypsies, Communists, Socialists, professing Christians, homosexuals - not society as a whole. The “national community” is more or less entirely supporting this. This process can and need not be sketched here. Its consequence for the capital’s urban society is clear: purification, unification, homogenisation, uniformisation, impoverishment. After the Nazi revolution and the ruin of the city, Berlin has lost its old elites. They disappeared on the margins of society, in exile, in camps, in the gas chambers. The destruction of urban society corresponds to the physical wrecking of the city by the allied bombs, and by the plans for Speer’s *Germania*. After 1945, Berlin must form anew, not unlike Moscow after 1929 and 1937.**

**The post-war eras in both cities can be seen as long periods of accumulation during which their urban societies are gathering strength - periods of regeneration which, however, are counterbalanced by processes of emaciation and decimation: the destroyed Berlin is still haemorrhaging strength, through flight, domestic and international emigration, relocation, and a wait-and-see attitude. Moscow is nearing Stalin’s ghastly late years, and is transferring its strength to the provinces, to reconstructing the ravaged country. But on the**

**whole, the times after 1945 are, though not a “Golden Age”, certainly one of regeneration. The most important thing about these decades is the absence of war and the stability that are due to the Cold War. It is a long period of demobilisation, of a renewal of civil forces, a post-heroic age which sees the re-emergence of an urban society in the pores of the haggard capitals.**

**The end of the dictatorships has carried off their monumentalism, their great heroic gestures. Cities for common people are what is wanted now, which means housing construction most of all. Sweeping over all the differences, there is a hurricane of construction that is uniform to the point of being banal, of renunciation to any gesture of planning or architecture. What the dictatorships hadn't got done in destroying the historical city centres is now being accomplished by consumerism. Historical vestiges are being razed to the ground, unique specimens pulverised. Vulgar forms of Americanism and functionalism are raising their heads in a most depressing way. The result, which took definite shape by the 1960s, is well-known.**

**Confronted with these sad results of a second, banalised modernity, shocked by its gestures inimical to men and city, everything was drifting towards a turning point or at least a search for one. People were again allowed to think and even to**

**build the beautiful city. The return of the city and urbanity was put on the agenda. This was a deep-running change rather than just an aesthetic one: a recapture of the city and of urban culture would have been impossible without the rebirth or renewal of civil society. Or, put differently: the new interest in the city is deeply rooted in the dynamics of civil society. It was the citizens' job, first of all, and only then the architects', to regain urban places and spaces. So there would have been no new Potsdam Square and no new Manege Square (*Manezhnaya Ploshchad*) without the political revolution of 1989.**

**Here is the result of my sketch: Berlin and Moscow were cast out of the general track of urban development by the impact of social and political events of the 20 century. For a long time, they had lost their role as creative and innovative centres of European existence and culture. The times of closed or totalitarian society were also times of a provincialisation and decimation of what Kant had called the "vital forces". They needed a good half century to get back to where they had already been once - at the beginning of the century.**

## **Berlin and Moscow - At Home in Their Time**

**The relations between Berlin and Moscow are of a special kind, it seems: in this century of extremes,**

**they are both extremely close and extremely hostile. Perhaps the happiest times, when exchange and co-operation were operating unspectacularly, were those before the Great War - the times Stefan Zweig described in his *Yesterday's World* [5]. Other periods of great closeness - the 1920s, but also the time between August 1939 and June 1941 - are of a very different kind, mere stopovers before another clash. Great as the distance between Berlin and Moscow may have been at the time of their most intense relations in the early 1920s, there was something like a common experience of the present: the isolated position within the international state system on the one hand and the social, political and mental repercussions of the World War and the Revolution on the other hand. Russians coming to Berlin - be it as refugees or as temporary émigrés with a red passport - must have had a strong feeling of *déjà vu*: misery, hunger, insurgence movements, coup attempts by both the Left and Right, quickly alternating governments, a demoralised nation - all this looked familiar. In Berlin, which many of them knew from before the war, everything seemed possible; Berlin, an open city. Many of them had already gone through what seemed yet to await Berlin. Thus the basis of the Russian-German encounter is the simultaneity of an experience - Berlin and Moscow were "at home in the same time", in Ehrenburg's phrase [6]**

**But the alliances forming are alliances of the uprooted, they are inspired by entirely different if not incompatible ambitions. For Soviet Russia, since Rapallo, Berlin is the re-entry gate into the international state system, but it is also an outpost of the Communist International, which will later establish its headquarters in Berlin. The diplomatic elites are coming and going in Berlin, but Berlin is also the centre of a transborder underworld of secret services and conspiracies. The beaten White Armies have their representatives and canvassers here, a whole army in waiting, with excellent personal connections to German military circles from before the war. But Berlin is also a meeting place for instructors and generals of the Red Army, the place whence they depart for joint drills with the *Reichswehr* in Frankfurt/Oder. Berlin is the scene of two parallel terrorist acts: on 28 February 1922, Vladimir Nabokov, one of the leaders of the Russian liberals in emigration, is murdered here, as is Walter Rathenau on 24 June of the same year. In the first case the terrorists were Russians, in the second case they came from the German right wing, and there are links between the two.**

**Berlin attracts all those who have anything to do with the task of enlightenment in both German and Russian culture, but in Berlin there is also a longing for a “holy Russia” which no longer exists and which is believed to have fallen victim to a great**

**conspiracy. Berlin hosts the leaders of the pogroms on Russian soil as well as their victims who have found refuge here. Berlin is a port of call for the mature artists of the Russian Silver Age, but also for their Futurist challengers - thus it becomes an extraterritorial meeting point for a cleft Russian modernity. German circles had organised the sealed train journey intended to weaken the Tsarist Empire; now it is often the same people who would like to establish relations with the Empire's successors.**

**The Russian Connection is not only “hot” for the creative scene, but a *mixtum compositum*, a problematic and highly explosive mix. The connections and networks in this scene still await serious study; what seems clear to me is that it cannot adequately be described in terms of “camps”. A simple glance suffices to prove this: the coming of salvation from the East was expected not only, and perhaps not even primarily, by those who sympathised with Bolshevism or Soviet power, but rather by those who were interested in a restitution of the old order, a restoration of the *Reich's* structure. They felt that the light was coming from the East rather than from the West, that hotbed of a civilisation hostile to culture, of money and the press. In terms of foreign policy, the heart of this conservative restorationist Russophilia was the wish to revise borders, in other words to make the**

**Second Polish Republic disappear. For many “left-wing people from the right”, such as Moeller van den Bruck, the Dostoyevsky fan, even a red Russia was closer than a West which was identified with the “Versailles system” and modern civilisation [7]. Conversely, those who had been “comrades” throughout the decades of the Second International turned into irreconcilable enemies; German Social Democracy hated Bolshevism. Berlin’s theatres hosted a peculiar Russian culture struggle - between pre-revolutionary drama and the theatre of the new Russia, between the cinematic art of the late Tsarist Empire and Soviet cinema, which was conquering the world.**

**Part of this common experience was the experience that Soviet Russia was not out of reach or exotic. It could be reached by *Deruluft* four times a week via Königsberg and Riga, by boat via Stettin, or by train using the East-West Express or the Northern Express. This meant that there was a stream of people who could visit the country in person and had come back fascinated or disillusioned. Walter Benjamin is only one of them; among them are also Oskar Maria Graf, Klaus Mann, Arthur Koestler and many others. This meant that there was an audience for things Soviet in Berlin that reached far beyond supporters of Communism: for literature, social policies, pedagogy, cinema, art, drama, sociology, and Marxist aesthetics.**

**Then there were those circles who were simply interested in re-establishing normal relations: AEG's boss Felix Deutsch, who knew Russia well, the influential Otto Hoetzsch at Berlin University, book exchange accords between libraries, co-operation between natural scientists or joint geological expeditions.**

**Hardly anyone was left unimpressed by the freshness and vigour of the new Russia, and many were prepared to accept a decrease in culture and civility for the time being. On closer inspection Berlin was not actually a meeting point, if that means a place where strangers meet. Those who met here while handling the crisis came from a world which was still equally familiar to all of them, they were all *byvshie lyudi*, have-beens, yesterday people.**

**They shared not only the common horizon of war and revolution, but the experience of the era that had preceded them, the education, style and way of life which one used to grow up with in yesterday's world. The encounter of the 1920s and 30s still lived entirely off the civilisational base that had formed before the war. All those who met in the post-war and post-revolutionary period originated from a world undivided, with common standards, common norms, a common system of references if you will.**

**To speak of Berlin as a meeting point for Russians and Germans, is above all to speak of these foundations from before the great catastrophe of the First World War. Admittedly, Berlin is not always the centre that attracts the young Russia, it can also be Hermann Cohen's Marburg where Pasternak studies, Heinrich Rickert's and Wilhelm Windelband's Freiburg, or Max Weber's Heidelberg, where Nikolai Berdyaev, Fedor Stepun and Osip Mandelshtam had gathered. It can be the Darmstadt of the *Mathildenhöhe* and the Technical University, where great Russian engineers and the great El Lisitsky had studied. Or the Technical University at Charlottenburg, which had trained Russian engineers; the AEG, which had made Leonid Krasin, the future People's Commissar, its general representative for the Russian Empire; or Friedrich Wilhelm University, where about 150 male and female students from the Russian Empire were enrolled before the First World War, including great minds such as Vyacheslav Ivanov or the future People's Commissar for External Affairs, Maxim Litvinov. Old Russian travel guides prove that there had been a lively stream of Russian tourists visiting Berlin and Germany long before Mayakovsky's famous poem about the KaDeWe; that the *Hotel russe* in Friedrichstrasse had been the first stop for a visit of the imperial capital before travelling on to Elsterwerda, Teplitz or Bad Ems. Russians knew their way around Berlin - Vladimir Ulyanov in the**

**Royal Library, Oleg Pyatnitsky, who was in charge of smuggling revolutionary literature, in Wedding, the conductor Sergei Kusevitsky in the philharmonia. The rather inconspicuous functioning of business and travel communications, the presence of newspaper correspondents, the existence of bank branches, shopping tourism and a host of guest performances, all illustrate the workings of a live and relatively undisturbed connection.**

**In this world there thrived a culture which had no need for “cultural exchange” in order to communicate. This was a space which fostered the development of trans-national elites, and it is clear where these could be recruited: from the old dynastic connections, the formal world of diplomacy, internationalist Social Democracy, and Jewry. A polyglot, cosmopolitan, trans-national “discursive community” had grown up in the world of yesterday’s Empires, which was to be routed out by nationalism and social revolution. Those who personified these trans-national elites can easily be spotted in interwar Berlin.**

**Soviet power, too, despite its revolutionary gesticulation, was a power whose diplomatic personnel had grown up in the pre-war period and who mastered the formal behavioural code of the 19 century even if didn’t accept it. Georgy**

**Chicherin, the aristocrat turned People's Commissar, and the aristocratic ambassador in Moscow, Count Brockdorf-Rantzau, kept up their uncommon airs and graces and their passion for classical music even under revolutionary or democratic conditions. Karl Radek, that prototype of a world revolutionary, was at home everywhere: in Lemberg, Moscow, Vienna and Berlin; he even managed to strike a note which tempted the German Right. There were no problems between Rainer Maria Rilke and Leonid Pasternak, since their acquaintance was older and ran deeper than the revolution. Nikolai Berdyaev and Grigory Landau could plug into the discourse on Spengler's Decline of the West since they had conducted their decisive debate about it back in Moscow and had worked out their own position on it, e.g. in Sumerki Evropy. For Count Harry Kessler, meeting the dispossessed Russian press magnate Ivan Sytin was hardly exotic, since Sytin had been coming to the Leipzig book fair every year before the world war. The Mensheviks who found refuge in Berlin had good old acquaintances there from the age of the Second International, and principles which they were determined to cling on to in spite of a Russian revolution that had been contrary to their programme. Everywhere one meets people who knew each other in the old days - in the diplomatic corps just as well as at the General Staff (Hilger, Nadolny, Niedermayer). There is an abundance of**

**mediators who belong to German as much as to Russian culture - among them many Baltic Germans and German citizens who had been based in Moscow, such as Arthur Luther or Klaus Mehnert, working as interpreters or journalists.**

**The destruction of relations between Moscow and Berlin in the following years is tantamount to a dissolution of a space of experience and of its bearers. It takes place in several stages, beginning in 1914 and increasing until the collapse of 1945.**

**This connection is blown up in the First World War; we find it once again supporting the encounters of the 1920s; its place is taken by the rise of the masses who find their combat patrols in the totalitarian parties. The main cultural result of the failure of Russian-German relations is the dissolution, atomisation, destruction of the bearers of German-Russian relations who had been shaped by that common horizon of experience. By the time of the great finale of the Second World War the old elites had already been ousted or massacred - be it the old revolutionary guard in Russia or the diplomats of the old European school. A new phenotype who no longer knows anything about this common horizon is stepping onto the German-Russian stage.**

**We can follow the traces to see where the**

**representatives of the Russian Connection ended up. Marshall Tukhachevsky, de Gaulle's prison mate in Ingolstadt during the First World War, ends up before a Moscow military tribunal together with the other generals who had visited Germany, while those German generals who had become acquainted with the terrain during joint exercises in Russia would use their knowledge in preparing Operation Barbarossa. Ambassador von der Schulenburg, Berlin's consul in the Tsarist Empire, who had seen the 1939 pact as a way to avoid war and warned the Soviet leadership about the imminent German attack in 1941, will be hanged at Plötzensee. Richard Sorge, the enthusiastic student at Berlin University and the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research, will meet the same fate as a spy in Tokyo. The writer and influential anti-Bolshevik Russophile, Edwin Erich Dwinger, born from a German-Russian marriage, whose books about Bolshevism are best sellers in the 1920s, will travel to Russia with the SS and continue to be an influential and respected writer in West Germany after the war. The Mensheviks have found refuge overseas and are laying the foundations for Soviet Studies there. During the Second World War, Berlin is a metropolis of Russian forced labourers, and a prison for General Vlasov, at Kiebitzweg, 3. Berlin is a marshalling-yard for German foot soldiers on their way to Stalingrad, and the end point of the "storming of Berlin". Nothing remains in Berlin of**

**the rise of modernity, except an admonition and millions of lives taken, almost 30 million deaths in the Soviet Union, a country in ruins. Something has ended.**

**If there is a horizon of time which, viewed from today, looks truly utopian, then it is the successful time of unspectacular modernity in the pre-world war era before 1914. The great achievements of the German and Soviet artistic avant-gardes of the 1920s are also testimonies to a cultural overheating, to crisis and despair. There is much evidence that they had worn out before the dictators gave them the death blow or instrumentalised them. For what we need to explain is not why violence triumphed but why the forces that could have resisted it were too weak to keep it in check. The Russian Connection, incredibly rich in all respects as it may look to the present observer, was torn apart by contradictory interests and strategic ambitions; amid the uproar of the age, it proved too incoherent and fragmented to serve as a resting place or act as a consolidated centre against the menaces of revolution from above and from below. The civil forces - be they aristocratic diplomats, revolutionaries from among the intelligentsia, German anti-fascists in Moscow, Menshevik anti-Bolsheviks in German exile or patriotic army officers - were eliminated, outmanoeuvred, and the path was clear for**



**something unprecedented in German-Russian relations - I would even say for the end of German-Russian relations in the old sense.**

### **Postscript?**

**There is no way back to the pre-war era, and we have no reason for romanticising Berlin as a German-Russian meeting point in the first half of the century. For many people, the new beginning after 1945 starts with the experience of Liberation, but for even more people, the beginning is a common experience of war, scorched earth, imprisonment. There follows the experience of the Cold War, of a division which brought about two different horizons of life and experience. Berlin only became a meeting point in the strict sense of the word the moment the world was divided: a place where people met who, at first, were no longer linked by a common experience except the negative one just mentioned. Berlin, which was ruined as a base of intact communications, is recharging - or such at least is my hope. Much has grown again, especially during the forty years on the territory of the GDR, but also in what used to be the FRG. The time of division also had its German-Russian pioneers. For the generation that has grown up in the post-1989 world, the situation is completely different. We are observing the development of a new common horizon of experience and life, and the**



**question is whether the current generation will cope with its problems better than those who witnessed the heroic beginning and those who witnessed its collapse. Berlin and Moscow, or Germany and Russia, respectively, have yet to tackle what is most difficult - mastering normality. Whether they will manage, no-one can know.**

**This article is based on a lecture given in Bremen on 28 Feb 2000. A first version of the text was published in Sowi. Sozialwissenschaftliche Informationen, No. 1/2002, pp. 25-37.**

## Footnotes

- 1. See Karl Schlögel, Berlin Ostbahnhof Europas. Russen und Deutsche in ihrem Jahrhundert. Berlin, 1998.**
  
- 2. Soviet way of life [Translator's note]**
  
- 3. Soviet-era migrant workers who were allowed to settle in Moscow to work on non-prestigious jobs. [Translator's note]**
  
- 4. Karl Scheffler, Berlin - ein Stadtschicksal, Berlin, 1989 (first edition 1910).**
  
- 5. Stefan Zweig, Die Welt von gestern, Erinnerungen eines Europäers, Frankfurt/Main, 1970.**
  
- 6. Ilja Ehrenburg, *Visum der Zeit*, Leipzig, 1929, S. 70. [Originally: Ilia Erenburg, *Viza vremeni*, Moscow, 1929]**
  
- 7. Otto Ernst Schüddekopf, Linke Leute von Rechts. Die nationalrevolutionären Minderheiten und der**



EUROZINE

# **Kommunismus in der Weimarer Republik, Stuttgart, 1960.**