

Moscow: Fortress City

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Тише, тише, тише, век мой громкий!

За меня потоки – и потомки.

– Марина Цветаева, 1931

Tishe, tishe, vek moi gromky!

Za menya potoki – i potomki.

(Quiet, quiet, my loud age,

By me, floods – and coming 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 your body? 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 realised 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...

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 take 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 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 each day 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 "Motherland". 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 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.*

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 they then try to 'purify' themselves of what I call "Москвоцентризм (*Moskvocentrizm/Moscowcentrism*)". How many times do 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 claim to rights to write about the city. But they are still only partly Muscovites. In Moscow these things mean a lot: whether you are *born* a Muscovite or you have only *become* a Muscovite. I.e., which generation immigrant are you?

You must be already wondering: what about this author? Does *she* have the right to write about Moscow because her name sounds Russian? Because she *is* Russian? Let me assure you: I have full right to write about 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 birthright) 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 the Muscovite attitude. One does not need to learn it, to mimic it, to wear it. Performance is *natural*, given by and absorbed through mother's milk. Muscovites can identify each other by smell, by gaze, by being the makers and the centre 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 *with* what Russians call “*without* accent”, that is, in the Muscovite accent, just as many Russian actresses and actors had to in order to work in Moscow. In order to call Moscow “theirs”. However, it *is* mine. By birthright. Mother, thank you. Moscow is my motherland. It is my mothertongue. It is the place I was born, the place I live in; the place I love.

Do not take me seriously. I am not expecting it. You know that when *woman writes*, she writes from 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: Русские не сдаются (*Russkie ne sdautsya/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 that? Think again, how many hopes and pleasures would be lost. 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. Let yourself go and do not feel guilty: I grant you permission.

Come to me, Moscow, Russia...

You must excuse me – I forgot another important part of my Muscovite existence, one that is becoming crucial in the next millennium. Let me introduce myself *properly* to ease our communication. I am Russian. I am not *just* a Russian citizen, not *just* Muscovite. I am ACTUALLY Russian. One hundred per cent. Though some of my Moscow friends claimed that my eyes are *a bit* Mongoloid, but much less than those of Yeltsin or Lenin, of course. Yet 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... BLONDE. I am *naturally* blonde, almost blindingly. Trust me – this is my *real* colour (I was 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 help you to understand, let me emphasise that my skin does not tolerate sun. As a test, observe 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 colour is grey-green; depending on the colour of my clothes and mascara it becomes greyer or greener. But of course the point about my eyes is that their colour is not dark; it is not brown. It is light.

When I was young and slim, I sometimes looked like Botticelli’s Venus.

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' *not reasonable*. We do not make sense, we can prove this to you on demand. Hence we must work on our reason urgently, otherwise we could be completely consumed by our 'essential' passion for the '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 doing so – isn't this obvious? We speak your language, we call ourselves your 'Great Other' (a child of 'Big Brother'). We can deconstruct *you* – but take your hands off *us*! You cannot possibly understand what it means to live here, to experience it, to possess a 'Russian soul'. It is irrational, it is maternal, eternally feminine. Today, 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. What those Communists had committed was 'sin'. What can save us now? God/the Russian Orthodox church and *solid, steady* thought. Thought that must survive centuries.

However, the mode of steady thought needs 'a man', a hero, a thinker and a protector of Russian culture. All cultural aspirations today are directed towards exactly 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 blond, he will be Russian... and he will, of course, live in Moscow. Perhaps *I* could be HIM...

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. Finally they all saw. Moscow has never felt more fertile and potent. It wanted more. It wanted to swallow the whole world. It was the mother of all poor and abandoned 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 hovers at our threshold. She/death is dark-skinned, she is fecund. 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 coming generations, your bright future.

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

Fortress City

[...] *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 birthplace that citizens of the world will never be able to experience without some sort of reactive bowel movement. As an abject mother of the 'Soviet monster', an embodiment of the spectre of Communism, totalitarianism, terror, etc., Moscow realised its dream of immaculate conception – of delivering the third Rome, the holy city, the New World.

From the early years of Moscow and its fortress the Kremlin, subsequent generations had been left with fortress consciousness. The Kremlin multiplied obsessively, expanding and enclosing in successive concentric circles, like a *матрешка* (*matreshka*, the Russian doll) into the surrounding regions. Every major Russian city was striving to have a Kremlin, or one semblance of it. Fortification also became 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. This was a series of southern *ostrogi* (forts) to defend off Tartar attacks, behind which despotic Ivan IV, '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 the 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 defence of Russians within an ever-growing Russian territory were 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 50 square miles a day over a period of 400 years, creating by 1914 a vast empire of about 8,660,000 square miles (constituting one-seventh of the total land surface of the earth). Inscribing the borders of the 'Russian way' or the 'Russian soul' meant that those who were incompatible with these were to be expelled from within fortress-Russia.

It is in the Kremlin that 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 implicated in this process. Up to today, the expression "сотый километр

(*soty kilometr*/100th kilometre)" remains familiar to Muscovites. It refers to the distance of 100 kilometres from the official borders of Moscow. A circle with Moscow at its centre, it is an area that former convicts and other officially prohibited citizens were not to enter. Russian identity, with Moscow at the core, has been fortifying itself in many different ways, and it seems many of those practices and discourses have been utilised for building Russia and the USSR.

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 etymology of 'Moscow', *моск/ Mosk*, translates as 'turbulent'). This momentum is realised in the centripetal expansion of Russia. Kremlin walls absorbed urbanisation 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 eloquently 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 being a means of ensuring that *only* Kremlin embodies Russia as such. The rest of Russia, *as a whole*, is residue, excess, discharge, is 'the rest'. Today more than ever. Anyone who valorises excess and margins must feel suffocated in this territory: all space outside Kremlin is negative; it is a shadow. So many domains, so many cultures and civilisations, 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 1,000-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 other *вход в укрытие (vkhod 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 feel compelled to constantly *defend* themselves, being in a permanent state of anxiety of all sorts and kinds. However, to not be desirable anymore is Kremlin's ultimate nightmare. If the fortress cannot sustain its attractiveness by all means at its disposal, those who belong within it lose more than those relegated outside. Defence of one's own 'way of life' does not know the boundaries of the word 'enough'. For this rationale, defence 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 certainly, in the 'Motherland' it took on monstrous forms.

Anyone who lives in Moscow or comes into Moscow for more than three days knows this word: *прописка (propiska)* or *регистрация (registrastiya)*. To be a Muscovite (temporarily or permanently) is to have *propiska* – best translated as "*inscription*" or "*writing through*". This practice today has at least two dimensions: spatial and legal. The

former is characterised by being allocated to a particular space, by being localised in a particular *home*, being fixed into a space and also being granted a space in which to place one's body. So it is a *spatio-corporeal inscription*. It provides control over the body and its movements in city space. To be a Muscovite in this sense is written through one's body; it is to have a *Muscovite body*.

It is well known that Russians – in order to sustain their identity as spatially and ethnically stable and homogenous – have historically employed movements, re-movings, deportations and re-placements of peoples. In the early period, the main target of this activity was the 'exchange' of the wealthiest native people with Russian merchants and the 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 driven out of their homelands. Peter the Great continued to use this policy in 1708 when, following his invasion of Dorpat in the Baltic region, its German citizens were forcibly relocated in long caravans to Vologda (their descendants are today known as 'поволжские немцы (*povolgskie nemtsy*/Volgian Germans)'). Russian national identity, based on the principle of homogeneity to be defended by fortification, found its earliest instantiation in such strategies of exile and deportation. *Propiska* is one of more modern means to keep нежелательные элементы (*neжелatel'nie elementy*/undesirable elements) from places of strategic importance, specifically Moscow.

Thus, those without *propiska* are to be constantly removed from Moscow, checked on, shifted around, deported, imprisoned, tracked, categorised and marked out in ethnic, racial, sexual and class terms: mainly prostitutes, non-whites (who in official Russian are defined as "persons with non-Slavic appearance"), 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, this means their passport. This stamp in its own turn is supported/backed by papers in local registration offices. Identity papers, inscriptions, pictures and stamps within them discursively mark out the 'sexualised' and 'ethnicised' bodies of non-Muscovites, and the exclusive bodies of Muscovites. It is also important to note that from the time of the break-up of the Soviet Union and the introduction of the new Constitution of the Russian Federation, the practice of *propiska* has become unconstitutional. It remains in force *only* in Moscow, and is today defined as "registration" instead of "inscription", most probably with intent to neutralise the terminology. The Moscow municipal government continues with it, despite constitutional and court orders. Moscow protects its own privileged status of exclusivity and desirability, making sure that the rest of Russia remains THE REST.

Let's imagine that this bureaucratic bastion of Moscow, *propiska*, soon falls. 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 generate new 'others': 'them', as opposed to 'us'. Historically it was the West or Asia; today it is 'Islamic terrorism', 'blacks from the Caucasus', and even

uncompromising sociological facts such as declines in the birthrates of ethnic Russians. Muscovites are “всегда готовы (*vsegda gotovy*/always ready)”, as announced by students in Soviet schools, to defend our Mother-land 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, to attract, and deliver ‘them’.



*I am home. I am fortress.
That's all I am. Да (Da/Yes)?*

Author's Note

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