# Introduction

BY KEITH GESSEN

In the mid-to-late 1990s, while living mostly in Moscow, I managed to travel through a good part of the former Soviet Bloc. It was a surprising experience after reading so many articles in the press about the supposedly uniform "consequences of decades of Communism." In fact, while the Russians weren't adjusting very well—or, as Dubravka Ugresic points out here, some Russians were adjusting much too well—to the new conditions, and Ukrainians were adjusting slowly, and cautiously, to not being Russian, everyone else simply went back to what they'd been doing for the past 500 years. Romanians seemed stuck in the middle ages (there were horse-drawn buggies on the road), and everyone was drunk (the horses knew where they were going), and there was a kind of elemental menace and ruin and beauty to the place. Prague really was lovely, no matter how many people came to see it, but the Czech Republic seemed hard-pressed to know what to do with its independence (except get more of it, by breaking up with Slovakia). Meanwhile Budapest, a few hours away, was already easily on its way (with the help of Hungarian native George Soros) to replacing Vienna as the intellectual capital of Central Europe. Interestingly the Poles, perhaps the most fervent and certainly the longest-serving Russia-haters in Europe, had ended up in Warsaw with the most Soviet capital city in the former

Bloc. In Tallinn, Russian teenagers roamed the streets starting fights with Estonians, but there was no question of their leaving that gem-like little Baltic town. It was, in other words, an entire multifarious universe, most of whose inhabitants were pretty sure the Soviet period was just a blip in the much longer historical process their countries were destined for.

A decade later, in these essays and stories from the post-Soviet period from all across the former Soviet Bloc, you can see that universe created all over again—though you can also see it more clearly. Some of these countries are well on their way to integrating with Europe; they write about the Communist period as something bad that happened, even something very bad, but it was something that happened *to* them and now it's over. These places—Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic—have moved comfortably into post-history. Or so—as we see in Péter Esterházy's remarkable confession on page 136—they'd like to think.

But there are other places where everyone knows that history is not yet done. You would not get the sense, from Mircea Cărtărescu's scabrous story of a young man (though not as young as he would have liked) finally losing his virginity, that Romania has turned into a pleasant model of European normality, and you'd be right. You *might* get that sense about Russia from Vladimir Sorokin's charming essay about standing in line in Soviet times, but you'd be wrong. The account of the troubles of post-Soviet Georgia in Irakli Iosebashvili's authoritatively titled story, "The Life and Times of a Soviet Capitalist," tells you a lot about what's going on in Georgia now, when the streets are once again filled with protesters demanding the ouster of their crazy president.

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The post-Soviet period, the period covered so well in this book, is over. You can tell it's over because no one wants to hear anymore about how terrible Communism was. Russians sure don't, and not just because Communism was all their fault. For them, rather, talk of how terrible Communism was is associated with the Russian 1990s, when it was cover for abandoning millions of people to simply die. Communism was bad but starving was also bad. And so is the Putin regime bad, a mixture of Communist control of the political sphere with integration into world markets—the worst or best of both worlds, depending on where you sit.

Intellectually and politically, the post-Soviet period was about settling accounts with the Soviet past. Different countries did this in different ways: almost all of the countries in Eastern Europe (but, of the former Soviet republics, only the Baltic states) adopted limited lustration, with the Czechs and the Germans taking it the most seriously; the Russians, who couldn't possibly have done this, settled for years of anti-Communist rhetoric from their leaders, and an ironic attitude to some of the excesses of the Soviet regime, which persists even in the neo-Soviet present. But the best pieces in this book suggest how difficult settling accounts really is, in the end. There is a great moment in Mircea Cărtărescu's story where, after the trial and execution of the dictator Ceaușescu and his elderly wife (now available, like Saddam's execution, on YouTube) and the fall of the regime, an old friend comes to ask for help despite having worked for the regime—"I began to moralize like an idiot," says the narrator. "I expected her to look down, [put] her chin to her chest and weep in expiation, but suddenly she threw me a proud and ironic look . . . It was as though a great dark power remained underneath the desperation of her circumstances." We know now how thoroughly naive it was to think that the people who'd held power for so long, not out of conviction, anymore, but purely out of cynicism, would simply disappear—that the great dark power they'd wielded would not remain in their hands, to be used again when the time was right.

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This is a fascinating and useful book. There are some old masters working at the top of their form here, and you can spot them from approximately the first sentence, but there are also some writers who are young and unheard of outside the cities where they live. The collection is full of curious cross-border exchanges: Wladimir Kaminer is a Russian-born writer living in Germany, writing a story in German (but in the spirit of Victor Pelevin) about a fake Paris built in Kazakhstan by the Soviets; Cărtărescu is a Romanian who in "Nabokov in Brasov" has written a story that reminds me of nothing so much as Milan Kundera's great first novel, *The Joke*, about the ways in which sex and memory are more powerful than Communism (and anti-Communism)—though not at all in the way that one would like. This collection has Poles traveling to Vienna, Georgians to Moscow, East Berliners to West Berlin, capturing one of the essential novelties of the post-Soviet

period: the sudden access to everywhere else, including the East. For a few years there it seemed like the entire continent was in motion, back and forth, and not just because they had a meeting at the European Parliament in Brussels—or, later, at the International Tribunal for War Crimes in The Hague.

Because there was one place you didn't go in those years, and that was the former Yugoslavia. The nasty civil wars that everyone kept claiming hadn't happened in the post-Soviet space were, in fact, happening—in Azerbaijan, Tajikistan, Georgia, Chechnya, and, of course, Afghanistan. That was something people expected. What no one expected, as Muharem Bazdulj writes in the remarkable memoir that concludes this collection, was that the most cosmopolitan, open, and least Soviet country in the entire Soviet Bloc would end up suffering the greatest amount of damage once the Bloc collapsed. "So go fuck yourselves, Nineties!" was, he tells us, the refrain from a popular Yugoslav rock song of a few years ago. That would be an alternate title for this collection. The wall, you know, wasn't entirely inside your head.



# THE WALL IN MY HEAD

# Paris Lost

**BY WLADIMIR KAMINER**
(TRANSLATION BY LIESL SCHILLINGER)

One evening [my Uncle Boris] told me about his trip to Paris. This was when his wife was still living. He was working in his business, and despite his rehabilitation, and twelve years' hard labor, he didn't dare dream of such a trip. But at the beginning of the seventies, it suddenly became a reality. Back then, every child knew that our Socialist Fatherland was beloved by all the peoples of the world, and only imperialist governments were against us. They spread lies about our daily life behind the Iron Curtain, and tried to make us look like warmongers. But we were for freedom and understanding among peoples. Besides, our government was very generous with its citizens; it couldn't be compared to an imperialist regime. And so, each year a hundred of the best proletarians were singled out—laborers, construction workers, army officers, miners or mothers with numerous offspring: they all were given a (nearly) free trip to Paris, sometimes even a trip to London, too. Naturally, on the condition that all the candidates were members of the Party.

The chosen had to agree to undergo a few routine health checks, and receive instruction from the security organs on how to conduct themselves abroad. They had to sign documents stating that they would keep to themselves everything that they saw in Paris or London. And then they could exchange two hundred rubles into foreign currency and prepare for their departure. There was only one catch. Naturally, the government could not actually send its people to France or, even worse, England. The Soviet workers would be unable to resist the temptations of the capitalist world. Besides, the evil imperialists were lying in wait just for Soviet citizens to show themselves abroad, and had different traps and provocations prepared for them, in order to be able to spread even more lies about our country. And so, such trips could exact a huge financial cost on the state treasury.

Thus, the government hit on a comparatively economical, if less exciting solution: it was to build their own "Abroad" in the Steppes of southern Russia, near Stavropol, with a real city, and many inhabitants. It served in the summer as Paris, and later, in the fall, when it began to rain and the clouds appeared, after a quick overhaul, it became London. The project had top secret status, only employees of the state security agency lived and worked there with their families. They were specially trained; in summer, they were required to speak only French among themselves and in the fall, only English.

The season began in June. The tourists would be picked up from "Orly" or "Heathrow" airport by bus and driven to hotels. In small groups, led by two travel guides, they would explore the clean-swept streets of the foreign country, buy pretty sweaters and unknown types of cheese, stare at the foreign cars that drove up and down the street, and laugh at the Eiffel Tower or Big Ben, which did not compare to Soviet monumental art. But on the whole, they found Abroad pretty neat. It was nothing special, but they weren't disappointed, either. The food in the hotel tasted strangely foreign, and the native French or English people, who were mostly unemployed, sat in their cafés all the time drinking vodka with beer, naturally not in the huge quantities we had back home, but in tiny little glasses. They greeted the Soviet tourists very kindly, and almost every one of these unemployed foreigners understood a few Russian phrases. After three or four days, the Russians flew back to their families.

My uncle really wasn't ever supposed to see this Paris because of his past, but back then there were no computers, and even the sharpest state apparatus makes a mistake every now and then. When Uncle Boris was honored a second time for his excellent work in the rubber business, he was given a three-day trip to Paris. The news spread quickly, and all the neighbors came to say goodbye. Euphorically they made up lists of presents that they

wanted Uncle Boris to bring back from Paris. He himself had only one wish, which sounded very childlike: to get "drunk as a lord" on the Eiffel Tower. Everybody laughed about his dream.

Boris took a bag of Soviet canned food with him, and a Russian-French dictionary. The flight to Paris lasted six hours. The first two days, my uncle tried to get away from his group. Every time they gathered below in the Hotel lobby, Uncle Boris went to the bathroom and sat there as long as he could, in the hope that the group would go into town without him. But when he'd come out they'd all be standing by the bathroom, waiting patiently for him. After that, they drove together in the bus to the center, to go shopping.

On the third day, Uncle Boris finally lucked out. While the group was browsing in a sweatshirt shop, and the tour directors had briefly lost sight of them, a bus stopped directly in front of the store. Without pausing for long, Uncle Boris jumped on. The bus was almost empty except for a pair of crumpled Frenchmen. A bottle of vodka and a phrasebook were in my uncle's pants pocket. Now he only had to find the Eiffel Tower.

The bus driver looked at him in a friendly way. "Salut, Russo turisto!" he greeted him. My uncle thought to himself, I've seen that man once before, someplace, this plump, eyebrowless face, and this grin.

"Were you ever in Kazakhstan?" my uncle held up his phrasebook: "*D'où êtes vous?* Kazakhstan?"

"No," said the bus driver. "*Je suis de Marseille, comprenez-moi?*"

"I've seen you before," my uncle said again, but on the quick he couldn't find the words.

"*Est-ce que nous allons passer devant la Tour Eiffel?*"

"*Bien entendu*," said the bus driver, and grinned again. The Frenchmen on the bus all began to smirk. Out the window, Uncle Boris caught a glimpse of the Eiffel Tower.

"Stop here," he called out to the bus driver. "I'm getting out here, *merci pour tout et bon voyage*."

"Take care of yourself, Grandpa," murmured the bus driver, and put on the brakes.

My uncle jumped out of the bus. In front of him was a typical Parisian street: French coffee drinkers sat in two small bars, housewives did their shopping, a grandmother pushed a stroller in front of her. Through an open window, you could hear music. Suddenly a man stuck his head out the window and called out something in loud French. The whole street got up and started to walk quickly toward the Eiffel Tower. The first tourist buses were arriving. And a tour guide from my uncle's group was there. He ran to him, out of breath and grabbed him by the sleeve. "What shit are you pulling? Where were you trying to go?" His voice was high with agitation.

"Nowhere," Uncle Boris responded. At once, he knew where he'd seen the bus driver. It was the guy who used to drive him to work every morning, twenty years earlier, when he was still a rubber plant director, living in a dugout. The group flew back to Kazakhstan that same day, and Uncle Boris drank his vodka not on the Eiffel Tower, but in his hotel room, along with the pair of worthy workers that he had shared the room with, and a woman with numerous offspring, who had happened to drop by.

"It may be that I've missed out on a lot in my life, that I was in the wrong place at the wrong time and that I was unjustly sentenced, but all the same—I was in Paris. And that experience I'll take with me to the grave," Uncle Boris told me proudly and laughed. At the time, his story seemed absolutely unbelievable to me.

Years later, after Perestroika, as ever more unbelievable stories out of the dark past of the country came into the open, I had to change my opinion. I read the reports from eyewitnesses of people who had built "Paris" and lived there for years. Also, many novels and stories had been written about it. So I arrived at the conviction that my Uncle Boris had told me the truth after all. His Paris was a chimerical city, erected as a kind of ideological condom to protect the population from the tainted charms of Western civilization. Such methods work, but they never last; the truth comes to light sooner or later.

The Russian Paris lasted no longer than five years. During a trip through Russia at the end of the seventies, a clever Dutch journalist came across a pair of photos that a young dairymaid in a kolkhoz showed him: there she stood with her mother, a worthy dairymaid of the Soviet Union, under the Eiffel Tower, and smiled at the camera. To the Dutchman, the Eiffel Tower in the photos had a strikingly Socialist air. He put the young, naïve woman under pressure, and in the end convinced her to accept his valuable, but on a dairy farm totally useless, dictation machine, in exchange for her photos. The Dutchman vaunted the machine as a "foreign speaking machine, a true wonder of technology" and practically ripped the photos of the Eiffel Tower out of the girl's hand.

One of them turned up a few months later in the features section of a Dutch newspaper. At first nobody in the West took the story of the picture

seriously, everyone thought the whole thing was a joke. But the then head of the KGB, Andropov, did not find the photo in the foreign newspaper funny at all. He ordered "Project Paris" to be torn down to the last stone in the shortest time possible. Many construction worker brigades from the congress and the Interior Ministry participated in the destruction of the French capital. It had to go down quickly, almost overnight.

According to reports of eyewitnesses, the KGB needed more money for the planning of the destruction of Paris then had been needed earlier for the building of the city. Beyond that, as a consequence of the hastiness of the demolition work, many valuable objects were lost. The whole Parisian infrastructure ended up by the roadside: among other things, more than five hundred Philips televisions, several hundred refrigerators, a few cars, and countless doors and windows. In spite of strong controls, entire houses disappeared this way: "It was stolen," was the refrain. The heads of the KGB followed the thieves, but not far; they just wanted their Paris buried and the history to be forgotten as quickly as possible.

Afterward, the fall of the city had a rather positive influence on the architecture of many villages in the southern Russian steppes. Travelers still marvel at the chic glass doors and unusually wide windows on one pigsty or another. Even ten years on, a four-meter-long broken Big Ben with its hour hands snapped off still lay in a bend in the road of the city Inosemzevo. The natives consider it one of the best sights to see in the area. They have no idea where the thing came from, but the giant clock has come to be called "Monument to Lost Time."

# From *Omon Ra*

**BY VICTOR PELEVIN**
(TRANSLATION BY ANDREW BROMFIELD)

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The first time in my life I drank wine was during the winter when I was fourteen. It was in a garage that Mitiok took me to—his brother, a pensive, long-haired type who had tricked his way out of army service, worked there as a watchman. The garage was on a large fenced-off lot stacked with concrete slabs, and Mitiok and I spent quite a long time clambering over them, sometimes ending up in astonishing places entirely screened off from the rest of reality that were like the compartments of a long-abandoned spaceship of which only the carcass was left, strangely resembling a heap of concrete slabs. What's more, the streetlamps beyond the crooked wooden fence burned with a mysterious and unearthly light and a few small stars hung in the pure empty sky—in short, if not for the empty bottles of cheap booze and the frozen streams of urine, we would have been surrounded by cosmic space.

Mitiok suggested going in to warm ourselves up and we set off towards the ribbed aluminum hemisphere of the garage, which also had something cosmic about it. Inside, it was dark: we could make out the dim forms of cars that smelt of petrol. In the corner was a planking hut with a glazed window, built up against the wall: there was a light on inside it. Mitiok and