

Preface

I belong to a post-nostalgic generation. A day before the coup that triggered the collapse of the Soviet Union in August 1991, I was on a brief return visit to Moscow, having recently moved to a unified Germany with my parents. What drew me to this topic was a wish to understand the way people feel about the disintegration of empires, and what the political consequences of such a feeling might be.

I was sentimental about friends, relatives, games, and certain tastes, but had no concept of states or nations at this point. For my parents and their circle of academics and publishers, on the other hand, the previous decade had been a time of interesting changes. The international 'Republic of Letters' had already become more permeable in the 1980s, as the Iron Curtain started to go. At the time, George Soros was supporting numerous academic initiatives in eastern Europe. One evening, he visited our apartment, and my mother took this as a welcome opportunity to provoke some doubts about things that I had been exposed to at school. 'Do you know who this uncle is?' she whispered. 'He is a capitalist!' More confusions were soon to come. In 1990, my parents were finally allowed to take up academic scholarships in Germany, which they had received in the late 1970s but were not allowed to pursue at the time. Now they were free to see the objects and hear the languages, which they knew in great detail from slide shows and books but never imagined they would see in real life. The formal dissolution of the Soviet state was a promise of freedom, which many understood in terms of geographical mobility and the opportunity to travel to places where, in a sense, European culture had been produced.

They began in northern Italy. During the odd four-hour visit to the Uffizi, I was puzzled by their exclamations like: 'Oh, I didn't know this Fra Angelico was so small. In the reproductions it always seemed very big.' In Florence, a policeman kindly let us drive the wrong way up a one-way street because he thought we were exotic. In Fiesole, on the way to the European University Institute, my father tried to order food in Latin only

to find that nobody understands him, after which he had to resort to imitating the sounds of various animals that he wanted to eat. Even an elderly monk who got a ride up the hill with us told us that they ‘only speak Latin in the Vatican’.

In Liguria, the great theorist of nationalism, Ernest Gellner, who had been our guest in Moscow in the 1980s, hosted us in his little house of stone, boiling water on an old stove that we call in Russian ‘burzhuika’, the ‘bourgeois one’. Perched against a rock above the small village of Glori, near Imperia, the house boasted an incredible view of the Mediterranean, with the contours of Corsica somewhere in the mist. In 1992, Soviet Russia began to recede into the distance, like Corsica. Meanwhile, Moscow was taken over by rampant capitalist slogans such as ‘Moscow property will always have value’.

In central Europe and the United States, ironic nostalgia for the lost Soviet civilization had become a commercial product and a successful model for making works of art. In another attempt at education, my mother decided to take me to *documenta X*, Germany’s most celebrated modern art fair at Kassel, where I saw Ilya Kabakov’s installation *The Soviet toilet*, perhaps the first piece of ironic counter-nostalgia that I am aware of. It was simply baffling to me at the time that someone could take an object of use that was still fresh in my memory, supply it with a neat German label, and have hordes of international tourists pay to visit it. Even disgusting toilets, especially those, had become important in this collective Anatomy of Nostalgia, which eventually saw numerous expressions like the Museum of Communism in Prague, *Café Das Kapital* in Moscow, books like Alexei Yurchak’s *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More* (2006), and transnational post-Soviet Balkan fusion bands like Gogol Bordelo.

The first time I could try out my own version of a post-nostalgic story of a state that is no more was when I had to teach Marx’s *Capital* in an introductory course in social theory called ‘Power, Identity, and Resistance’ at the University of Chicago. To a group of undergraduates from the American Midwest, China, and Nigeria, born after the Cold War, the fact that I was born in the Soviet Union suddenly began to form part of my package of curiosities in European culture. I even saw Ilya and Emilia Kabakov there once during an event organized by the Renaissance Society. But he no longer wanted to talk about toilets, his wife and manager asserted: his new subject was ‘utopia’.

The political influence of people who, living in the aftermath of the First World War, imagined themselves as a rare, soon to be extinct, species from a past world interests me because I have lived in three societies in which

'leopard identities' – to allude to Lampedusa and Visconti – play an important role: Russia and the Russian community abroad; Germany, particularly East Germany; and the United Kingdom. In each of these communities, it is common for intellectuals to think of themselves as mediators to a bygone world, be it the Soviet Union, divided Germany, or the British Empire. At the same time, in Germany and later in Cambridge, people around me had grown up being unequivocally enthusiastic about the European Union. Looking back at the 1990s and early 2000s, European integration then seemed to hold a palpable promise of progress, untarnished by the crises of economic inequality and migration. The people in my book inhabited a world that combined impressions of Europe's imperial past with visions of its future, with all the ideological baggage that such a combination entails. Trying to understand them helped me understand the messy, contradictory connections between empire and utopia, which remain alive in Europe today.

Studying imperial memory academically unexpectedly opened up a humorous connection between the different kinds of memory and nostalgia I had encountered in German and Russian society. As a PhD student in Cambridge, I was once seated next to the wife of the master of Peterhouse, Lady Wilson, whose grandmother was the Baltic Baroness Moura Budberg. After I explained that one of the subjects of my research was a Baltic German nobleman called Hermann Keyserling, she exclaimed to her husband: 'Please meet Dina. I just found out that we are related!'

I began to reconstruct an image of Europe that I had only known from my own grandparents' accounts of their past. What they have in common with that of the nobles I studied is the international, or at least interregional, geography that underlies their memories. Two of my Jewish grandparents were nostalgic for the peripheral cosmopolitanism of central Europe, of Odessa on the Black Sea and Czernowitz in the Bukovina. My grandfather from Azerbaijan reminisces about the cosmopolitan city that was Baku, and his house, which used to belong to a Caucasian princely family, the Utsmievs, but after the Soviets took over, was filled with many different families of German, Armenian, Jewish, and Russian descent. My Russian grandmother, daughter of a *kulak* who lost everything in 1929 and saved his family by landing a job as an accountant for Moscow State University, also has an 'international' kind of nostalgia. She came to Austria with the Soviet military on 16 May 1945, at the age of 19. The four years she spent there working as a stenographer for the Allied Control Council gave her a very vivid sense of the imperial past that was still haunting the city. Somewhere between these two aftermaths of empires, the post-Soviet and the post-Habsburg, are the contours of this book.