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INTRODUCTION

Archaeology of a Vanished World

What will be presented here as the 'archaeology of a vanished world' does not set out to be a new history of the Soviet Union but attempts to imagine the history of this country in a novel way, certainly one that differs from many of the impressive histories currently available. The Soviet Union was not only a political system with a datable beginning and an end, but a form of life with its own history, maturity, decline and fall. With its practices, values and routines, it shaped the citizens of the nation for many generations to come.[1] I term this longstanding lifeworld 'Soviet civilisation', disregarding the validity or otherwise of its claims to be superior to the old world, capitalism or the West. Lifeworlds may be older and more stable than political systems and they may live on even after the end of a system has been proclaimed and established.[2] They leave their traces well beyond that end, as everyone who has lived in any of the states that have emerged from great empires knows: languages, the style of schools and administrative buildings, infrastructure and railway lines, manners, educational institutions and biographies, the hatred of or sentimental attachment to the masters of former years—these phenomena can be seen everywhere, whether in the former territories of the British Empire, the Ottoman Empire, the Danube Monarchy or even the German Reich. The situation with the Soviet Union is not very different. Its vestiges will persist—as physical traces and on the mental maps of inhabitants of what is now a postimperial, postcolonial world—long after the USSR as a political entity has passed away.

This is where archaeology comes in. It takes the territory of a former empire as its field of operations. It then inspects and secures the various traces; it sets up probes and carries out excavations—literally and metaphorically. Archaeologists do not dig in a haphazard fashion; they follow up clues that can lead to further findings. They

have their navigation tools and maps and, above all, entire libraries in their heads. What they are looking for are the remains of earlier generations. They lay bare one stratum after another, secure their findings, catalogue the fragments and take all steps necessary for subsequent conservation and analysis. Their findings are destined to inform them about a world that has ceased to exist. The fragments they have learned to decipher enable them to create a picture, the text of a past era. Each of these fragments has its own past and the trick is to make them speak. Together these fragments form a mosaic and the stories these lifeless objects yield up all come together to create what we think of as 'history'. On occasion, archaeologists unexpectedly encounter strata and objects that force them to reject interpretations, periodisations and contexts that have been handed down to them. These are their moments of epiphany.

Uncovering objects, rescuing them, making them speak—that is the archaeological path proposed here. It implies also a rather broader definition of a 'document', a 'source'. To imagine the world of a past epoch calls for more than merely written documents, reports, testimony, a collection of files, all of which are basically the objective products of human existence (if we ignore for the moment the accretions of nature). The world can be read via the history of things, the analysis of signs and modes of interaction, places and routines. The totality grows out of the details so that, if everything counts, the principal question in a project relating the history of Soviet civilisation is where to begin and where to stop. Do you start with the great buildings of communism or the little porcelain figurines of the 1930s, with the voice of the speaker on Radio Moscow or the parade of athletes, with Gorky Park or the camps on the Kolyma River, the building of a mausoleum or the beaches on the Red Riviera? This list is not uttered in the spirit of anything goes, nor is it a game involving a quest for the unusual and the exotic. It points to the infinite complexity of a society, particularly if that society is drawn into a sequence of war, civil war and revolution and if over great expanses of time life is no more than a struggle for survival. The history of civilisation aims at totality; it is not the history of politics or daily life, of the reign of terror or enthusiastic approval, of culture or barbarism, but both together and much, much more—often at the same time and in

the same place.[3] If we assert the idea of *histoire totale* as a desirable, albeit unachievable ideal, and if we are prepared to accept the risks implied, then for all our 'panoramic openness', we have to face up to the criteria for selection, the question of 'relevance'—in other words, the decision about what is envisaged in such a study and exactly what is to be analysed.

The present book is not a collection of essays assembled over the years, although some were written at different times. Instead the chapters listed in the table of contents represent a journey whose stages have been deliberately chosen by the author. This selection can of course never achieve encyclopedic completeness and whether it is plausible and convincing or artificial and even forced must be left to the reader to decide. I would like to have added a few more sections, had I not feared outstaying my welcome and overburdening the reader. For example, I would have liked to add chapters on the Artek camps, the summer camps for children, and examined their effects on childhood; also a chapter on the 1957 World Festival of Youth and Students in Moscow. Then there is Yury Gagarin, the glorious hero. No advance commentary can take from the individual chapters what only they can do, namely provide evidence. We are reminded of the awesome statement that Walter Benjamin concealed in the gigantic corpus of his *Arcades Project*: 'Method of this project: literary montage. I needn't say anything. Merely show.'[4] A statement he was himself barely able to satisfy, having developed from the flaneur of the nineteenth century into the refugee of the twentieth.

As can be seen from the structure of the contents, this book consists of around sixty individual studies of varying length, arranged in eighteen sections. They constitute the stages of a journey undertaken between the first chapter—a stroll through one of Moscow's flea markets at the end of the Soviet Union—and the final section, that amounts to a *musée imaginaire*, a museum of Soviet civilisation situated in a memorably central location, the Lubyanka, the heart of darkness of Soviet history. One line of inquiry could take its cue from Heinrich Mann's title 'An Age under the Microscope'. Another accepts the invitation to 'read time by looking at space',[5] with the two approaches coming together in what Mikhail Bakhtin calls the chronotope.[6] The different chapters address the major creations

of communism, what we might call the pyramids of the twentieth century. They range from the scent of the Empire, a brand of Soviet perfume, through the meaning of–49°C for the prisoners in Kolyma and the 'Ten Days That Shook the World', to other themes in which all the senses with which we perceive the world come into play. Even if there is no point in attempting to explain the relevance of each of these themes here or justify their inclusion, it is important to explain why these particular topics were chosen. The selection is based on the author's own first-hand experience. It is not the product of current academic controversies or of any change of direction in Russian or Soviet studies.

For someone such as me, who has spent a lifetime thinking about the world of the Soviets and has had almost three decades of direct experience of the Soviet system, it has long been clear which areas should be explored and which key points probed. Hence the problem was that of the book's 'architecture', the structure to be adopted, once I had abandoned any simplistic encyclopedic or chronological organisation of the key topics. These topics included my first impressions of the period of East-West confrontation, an alien world obscured by the smokescreen of the Cold War. Then there was the world of the 1960s, when it became possible to explore the USSR by moving from one campsite to the next. This was the time of the student movements, when I was able to study the world through the seminars held at the Free University's Institute of Eastern Europe in West Berlin, where the theory of totalitarianism had been superseded by a neo-Marxist approach. It was the world of the Soviet Union and its allies, whose tanks could be seen in Prague. And lastly, it was the world of the Soviet Union in the age of glasnost and perestroika, when things that had been inconceivable until then happened. In particular there was the return of free speech and living thought to the public sphere, an almost silent historical miracle just when the world had been prepared for the very worst—Stephen Kotkin caught the spirit of the moment with the title of his book, *Armageddon Averted*.[7] All these events amounted to a stock of experiences acquired by travelling through the country, by bus, train, boat and even hitchhiking. The subjects addressed in this book are based on that foundation, on my first-hand experience and the system of coordinates developed from that, so what decided whether something was significant and worthy

of analysis was not any preexisting discourse, nor any secondary material from books or the media, but my own direct perception—what I saw with my own eyes and what could serve as a basis for analysis. This book, then, deals only with places and things that I have seen for myself, whether dams, monasteries or the Costakis collection in Thessaloniki. Of particular interest were the 'common places' that Svetlana Boym first brought to the attention of academic researchers: the queues, the communal apartments, the public toilets, the parades, the large-panel prefabricated mass-housing estates and the Moscow kitchens. In each case the object concerned had a visible exterior that had been overlooked by academic researchers for decades, because they believed the search for the 'essence' or the 'system' to be more important than the description and analysis of the actual realities of life.[8]

However, it would fall short of the mark to think of the present project as no more than a personal story, a 'merely subjective' view, an account with some such title as 'My Soviet Union: Memories of a Vanished World'.

A generation that has passed through every conceivable academic controversy in 'Soviet studies' is well able to resist the fetish of 'subjective impressions' and a concept of 'direct intuition' that is as portentous as it is naïve. It was schooled in the debates around totalitarianism, 'bureaucratic degeneration' and the subtle distinctions and ramifications that have developed since the 'paradigm shift of social history'. Its members were after all the direct witnesses of the transformation of the Soviet Union itself, when the country found its own voice once more and began to get to grips with the 'blind spots' in its past.[9] If the figure of the flaneur—that is, the idea of excursion as a method—plays such a crucial role, then it is because direct experience and reflection coincide here in a way that is both unforced and compelling.

Mention must be made of a further factor that supports the methodology adopted here. The present book has profited from the revival of interest in a type of cultural history that aspires to foster an interdisciplinary approach. In Germany this approach is associated with such divergent names as Karl Lamprecht, Georg Simmel and Aby Warburg. It is built on the insight that all human socialisation expresses itself and becomes concentrated in cultural forms. This being the case,

the analysis of cultural and symbolic forms—in whatever genre—must move into the focus of attention. Analysis of this kind is very different from the analysis of 'culture' conceived as a separate subsystem, comparable to the economy or politics. Instead, it aims at the concrete exploration of cultural forms involving all the disciplines that have ever succeeded in contributing to them.[10] Who could deny that eclecticism and dilettantism are a danger here, all the more so since many of the essays in this book are just opening moves which still await a systematic analysis and cultural research?

Now, having identified the experiential space and the (intersubjective and transgenerational) frame of reference for the present studies, I would like to make two important reservations.

First, the end of an empire has epistemological consequences—and the USSR is no exception. We experience a shift in our viewpoint. The academic socialisation that has put its stamp on historians of Russia and the Soviet Union—and not just on me—was, as a rule, Russocentric and focused on Moscow or Leningrad. It operated in Russian, the lingua franca of the Empire. This points to a limitation of our competence that cannot be easily rectified. Here we can only take note and bear it in mind as we proceed. That a museum tour on the postimperial periphery of the former Soviet Union would in many respects look completely different is self-evident.[11]

Second, what began with the bazaar ends—unexpectedly for me and yet with something approaching inevitability—with the collection of objects in the museum where people, natives and foreigners alike, come together because they wish to imagine the Soviet world and enter into a dialogue—mediated by the exhibits—with generations who are no longer present and can no longer speak. The idea of providing Soviet civilisation with what André Malraux called a *musée imaginaire* or Matteo Ricci a 'memory palace' turns out to be the logical form into which the present research has flowed.[12] The book is an invitation; people can follow their curiosity, inclinations, their own interests. Visitors roam around autonomously, more as if through a labyrinth than in a linear fashion. No single lesson is provided, apart from any conclusions they may reach as they review the age, the places and the objects together with their history and destinies.

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