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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.<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup> 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 Yuri 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.’<sup>4</sup> 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’,<sup>5</sup> with the two approaches coming together in what Mikhail Bakhtin calls the chronotope.<sup>6</sup> 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  $-49^{\circ}\text{C}$  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*.<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup>

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.<sup>9</sup> 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.<sup>10</sup> 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.<sup>11</sup>

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.<sup>12</sup> 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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**PART I**

**Shards of Empire**

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## CHAPTER 1

# ***Barakholka* in Izmailovsky Park, Bazaar in Petrograd**

It's only a few stations on the metro from the centre of Moscow to Izmailovo. You get out at Partizanskaya and follow the signs or even just the crowds of people moving towards where everyone wants to be: the bazaar, or the *barakholka*, as the flea market used to be called in Russia even before the Revolution, the market where second-hand articles are bought and sold.<sup>1</sup> Following the collapse of the socialist centralised distribution system, the entire country—indeed the entire former Eastern bloc—found itself covered by a network of thousands and thousands of such bazaars and flea markets in parks, at the last stations of the underground lines, with thousands and thousands of visitors and customers. Examples are the 'Seventh Kilometre' near Odesa and the market that spread itself out in the Luzhniki Stadium in Moscow. When the centralised distribution system collapsed, the value of the currency fell and a barter economy reemerged temporarily; these markets became the chief arenas for the struggle for survival, with millions of people travelling to and fro to do their shopping, shuttling back and forth like a weaver's loom, even across frontiers.<sup>2</sup> The bazaar in Izmailovsky Park was something special. This was because of its proximity to the city centre; in the 1930s it had been called Stalinsky Park and was Moscow's second largest park after Gorky Park, with a statue of Stalin at its entrance. It was where the Stalinsky Stadium was to be built. If it still attracts Muscovites and foreigners today, that has less to do with the magnificence of the parkland and gardens than with the attractions of this vast bazaar.

Svetlana Alexievich visited another street market and has described her walk through the Arbat in Moscow. She gives a sensitive account of how an entire world-historical era was being sold off on the cheap.

On the Old Arbat, my beloved Arbat, I found rows of pedlars, selling *matryoshka* dolls, samovars, icons, and portraits of the last tsars and the royal family. Portraits of White Guard generals—Kolchak and Denikin, next to busts of Lenin. . . . There were all sorts of *matryoshkas*: Gorbachov *matryoshkas*, Yeltsin *matryoshkas*. I didn't recognize my Moscow. What city was this? Right there on the asphalt, on top of some bricks, an old man sat playing the accordion. He was wearing his medals, singing war songs, with a hat full of change at his feet. Our favourite songs . . . I wanted to go up to him . . . but he was already surrounded by foreigners . . . snapping pictures. . . . They were . . . having a lot of fun. Why wouldn't they be? People used to be so scared of us . . . and now . . . here you go! Nothing but piles of junk, an empire gone up in smoke! Next to all the *matryoshkas* and samovars there was a mountain of red flags and pennants, Party and Komsomol membership cards. And Soviet war medals! Orders of Lenin and the Red Banner. Medals!<sup>3</sup>

There are and always have been bazaars, flea markets and street markets like this one in every town and city of the Soviet Union and what you can see there are the shards, the debris and the fragments of the world of objects belonging to the empire that has ceased to exist. There is nothing you cannot find there. Objects belonging to the world of generations long past change ownership and become the property of people living now. We witness the circulation of objectified forms and their reappropriation by others. You can find cast-iron irons that used to be heated up by charcoal and that may have come from a peasant house in the north of Russia destined to be torn down. But you can also see modern, electric irons that were perhaps handed out to the factory workers in lieu of the wages they had long since ceased to receive or which had become worthless during the 1990s. You can find individual sheets, still in good condition, of a Party newspaper, which was formerly printed in millions of copies. They have now become historical documents, thanks to the portrait of Stalin and the text of an important decree. You can find photograph albums documenting the stages of an entire life—the grandparents, the family, the pioneer years, school, the start of a working life, and perhaps even time spent in the army—in which the transition from one phase to the next is in-



**FIGURE 1.1.** As with marketplaces everywhere in the world, the entire inventory of past ages is spread out on display. And so it was in a bazaar in Moscow's Izmailovsky Park in the 1990s. © moscowwalks.ru.

dicated by the transition from sepia to black and white and, in the case of a long life, to colour prints. You can find postcards from holidays on the Black Sea. Happy days! You can see them all lying there, spread out in the dust, in plastic folders, just like other kinds of documents that register the toils of a life of work, such as the 'Arbeitsbuch' containing a person's employment record, with entries in elegant handwriting recording the stages of a working life.

Sometimes, when someone has died or a household has been broken up, you find a whole bundle of documents reflecting an entire life. There are photographs enabling us to get the measure of someone's appearance and their entire trajectory—their school reports, their sporting successes, their party membership and so on right down to the end of their life. In the bazaar you can find the sort of furniture the grandchildren don't know what to do with because it is too old-fashioned, insufficiently 'modern'. Entire libraries are to be found there testifying to the taste of past generations of readers. Many of the books contain underlinings and notes in the margins. The objects up for sale are absolute compendiums of past trends and fashions. Here you can see how a young generation that wanted nothing to do with the old turned its back on the world of yesterday with its leather jackets and sailor tops. Things that had previously been carefully stored and preserved until the end of people's lives—distinctions, work records, diplomas and even medals—all find themselves up for sale in the flea market once material needs have become sufficiently pressing and the sense of reverence has evaporated. Among the post-imperial junk you can find the wall rugs that have been brought from Central Asia and the radios people could not bring themselves to discard, since they might, after all, come in handy again one day. The expert connoisseur of graphic art can barely suppress his excitement when a clueless dealer offers him a valuable print. Plunder, junk, second-hand goods, unique items—it is all testimony of one sort or another. These markets all have something of interest to bored tourists, but also to highly specialised experts. In the battered biscuit tin they discover the design of the prerevolutionary confectioners founded by Theodor Ferdinand von Einem or the Mosselprom cigarette trust of the 1920s. On the bookstall they recognise the exquisite binding of the editions of the classics published by the Academy of



Sciences in the 1930s. In the chest full of hundreds of artfully designed bottles of scent, they search out the ones called ‘Red Moscow’ or ‘Lilac Eau de Parfum’. No one can match the expertise and aesthetic judgement of the dealers offering china figurines for sale. They know the designers, the factories and the signatures on the base of each piece. In such markets you can find specialists who know all about Dresden China, about the various incarnations of the Pathé gramophone and the endless sets of matchboxes and cigarette packets. Certain notorious relics of the Stalin period, such as the book about building the White Sea Canal, edited by Maxim Gorky and illustrated by Alexander Rodchenko, are particularly costly. There are still large numbers of collectors of memorabilia from the Soviet-German War—belt buckles, pay books and service records, helmets with bullet holes, the labour records of former ‘eastern workers’ as well as of German soldiers who never managed to return home—all these things are readily available. Entire collections are sold en bloc, ranging from those that have been sorted out systematically to those where everything is lumped together—tea mats, stamps and coin collections (especially those of the Civil War period with their dozens of competing local currencies). In the midst of all this, you suddenly come across class photographs from 1937, the year of the Great Terror.

Today’s barakholka has its predecessors.<sup>4</sup> We might even say that every great crisis, every revolution, the end of every era finds expression in bazaars where the shards of the vanished world are offered for sale on the cheap. ‘Fragment of an Empire’ is the title of a 1929 film by director Fridrikh Ermler, a masterpiece of the Soviet silent cinema.<sup>5</sup> A soldier in the Civil War who has lost his memory as the result of a wound regains consciousness in Leningrad, where he is unable to find his bearings. Everything has changed—the tempo, the faces, fashion and women. There are even skyscrapers to be seen (evidently the House of Industry in Kharkiv, only recently finished). The soldier wanders through the metropolis in his fur cap and peasant’s coat, trying to return to the city, but finding only shards, ruins and fragments. He finally succeeds in gaining access to the factory committee, the new masters of the city, and everything ends well. Ermler has staged the great transformations wrought by the war, Revolution and Civil War by presenting them as an age of splintering and fragmentation.

The age of turmoil was also the age of the barakholka. Class distinctions disappeared from the marketplace; deprivation and the struggle for survival made everyone equal, regardless of whether they were workers, former civil servants, members of the intelligentsia or just peasants. 'Grain was the absolute standard, the hard currency throughout all the years of the Civil War.'<sup>6</sup> The hierarchy of values was turned upside down. Mikhail Ossorgin describes this from the standpoint of a bibliophile: 'I found a complete first edition of Lavoisier's works. Extremely rare for Moscow. And I saw a curious little book on mathematics, with ecclesiastical print, dated 1682, the first I should think, ever published in Russia. The title was curious too: *A Convenient Method of Calculation whereby any Man may conveniently discover the Number of Any Kind of Things when Buying or Selling*. There are also logarithmic tables there that go back to the time of Peter the Great.' Editions from the time of Peter and Catherine can be more cheaply obtained than the latest editions of the Imaginists.<sup>7</sup>

In those days too, everything ended up in the marketplace if it helped to alleviate hunger and cold. The wealth of the entire capital, doomed to disappear, was up for sale often at throwaway prices. The postrevolutionary situation was one of unlimited squandering of riches accumulated over generations: one pair of boots in exchange for ten kilos of books or one uniform in exchange for one kerosene stove. A Rubens painting that had disappeared from a palace in exchange for a loaf of bread. For connoisseurs who had not emigrated, a moment of glory had arrived. During the Civil War, St. Petersburg/Petrograd must have been the greatest street market of European art. Furniture by Abraham Roentgen, paintings by Poussin, the most venerable examples of the goldsmith's art were all to be had by anyone who could offer a bag of flour.<sup>8</sup> This was the place for the poorest of the poor. During the Civil War everyone went there to barter. Money had ceased to have any value. Every social class was represented and you could buy whatever you wanted: porcelain figurines, chandeliers, telescopes, cameras with Zeiss lenses, chamber pots, Underwood sewing machines, ostrich feathers, volumes of *Niva* magazine, French perfume. Barakholka Petrograd—that would be the history of a place where a city devastated by the collapse of all social relations maintains its unity, a place for trade where everything merges: buying and selling, swindling, the activities of professional thieves, the

worldly expertise of art dealers, the meeting ground for everyone expelled from their habitual social roles and compelled to present themselves anew.<sup>9</sup>

There is plenty of testimony to the world of the open city of Petrograd with its palaces, libraries, art and painting collections, the everyday wealth that piled up in the dwellings of an affluent class. Literary reflections of the dispersal of this great wealth in the bazaars, second-hand bookshops and trading on commission can be found, for example, in Boris Pilnyak's *The Volga Flows to the Caspian Sea*.<sup>10</sup> There we find two Moscow antique dealers who buy up old furniture in Kolomna, a town flooded during the building of a new dam. The antique furniture stands for the Russia that has disappeared. About the church, where the goods are all stored, we learn:

The church looked like a pile of objects rescued from a fire. Round the walls were heaped cupboards, wardrobes, sofas and a vast number of sewing machines. . . . On a level equal to the height of three men a dinner table had been placed on two wardrobes; on it there was a chair together with a small table and a hammer for the auctioneer. Only a few people had collected in the auction room, where they were inspecting the goods, looking very business-like and loudly discussing the prices at which the bidding was to start; these, with the numbers of the lots, were posted up on the various wardrobes, beds, armchairs, sofas and sewing-machines. A dim light forced its way through the iron bars and the dust of the church windows. The professor, following the example of the others, aimlessly wandered from object to object. They were holding sales of goods that had not been redeemed from the pawnshops, sales brought on by misfortunes of every kind. Cotton cushions alongside brass bedsteads and lime wood dining-tables narrate the chronicle of Russian impoverishment.<sup>11</sup>

The room of the curator of the Museum of Antiquities in Kolomna is described as follows:

In his house, somewhat like a storehouse, there lay scattered about rare bibles, stoles, albs, cassocks, chasubles, patens, veils and altar cloths of the thirteenth, fifteenth and seventeenth centuries, and

amidst this dust there reigned a naked statue of Christ in a crown of thorns, a work of the seventeenth century taken from the monastery at Bobrenev. His study was furnished with antiques which had once belonged to the landowner Karazin. On the writing-table there stood a nobleman's cap in porcelain with red trimming and white crown, which served as an ashtray.<sup>12</sup>

Furniture items tell their own story.

The art of Russian mahogany furniture, started in Russia by Peter the Great, has its own legends. This art of the serfs has no written records, and time has not deemed it necessary to preserve the names of its masters. It has always been the work of individual and known men, in cellars in the towns, in small backrooms in the country, a work of bitter vodka and cruel solitude. Georges Jacob and André Charles Boulle, the French master cabinet makers, were their inspiration.

Young serfs were sent to Moscow, St. Petersburg, Paris and Vienna; there they were taught the craft. Then they were brought back from Paris to the cellars of St. Petersburg and Moscow, from St. Petersburg to small serfs' quarters on the estates, and there they created. For decades one of them would be employed in making a couch, a dressing-table, some small bureau or book-case; he worked, drank and died, leaving his art to his nephews, for a master was not supposed to have children, and the nephews either carried on their uncle's art or copied it. The master died, but what he created lived on in landowners' estates and private houses. People made love and died in their beds . . . in the secret drawers of the secretaries clandestine correspondence was kept; in the mirrors on the dressing tables brides gazed on their youth, old women on their age. Elizabeth, Catherine—rococo, baroque, bronze scrolls, fleurons, mahogany, ebony, rosewood, satinwood, Persian nut. . . . Under Paul it is a soldier's life with a soldier's Freemasonry, a calm severity. The mahogany is overlaid with a dark lacquer, there is green leather and griffons and black lions. Under Alexander I it is all Empire style, Classical and Greek. . . . This was how the spirit of the times was mirrored in the joiner's craft.<sup>13</sup>

Later on, too, the barakholka remained a fixture in everyday Soviet life. From time to time, it would be banned and it was always subject to controls and bureaucratic interference, but remained irreplaceable as a counter to the failings of the planned economy. The economist V. V. Sher thought of the Moscow bazaar as the rebirth of capitalism. ‘The Sukharevka is conquering Red Square in the name of transforming the whole of Moscow into a New York or Chicago.’<sup>14</sup> In 1936 Moscow also had the Yaroslavsky and Dubininsky bazaars where you could buy rubber galoshes, shoes, off-the-peg clothes, gramophone records, and more. The bazaars of the 1930s and 1940s existed side by side with the state shops.<sup>15</sup> In the 1940s, Aleksander Wat, the Polish writer banished to Alma-Ata [now Almaty] after the occupation of eastern Poland, wrote about the Tolkuchka bazaar:

I had to walk across the flea market, which played a certain role in my life, and so maybe I should describe it a little. An enormous square, perhaps as large as Red Square. By day it was Sodom and Gomorrah, a whirlwind of rags and people. Colorful. You could buy anything there. Nails, one rubber boot at a time, but there were also very substantial items—gold. They all held onto their goods for dear life. They slung them over their arms or held them in their hands, or the entire family would barricade them because *urks* cruised the market. And policemen too. It should be said that while in Russia the NKVD was a menace, the police were mostly undernourished and very anaemic, like sleepy flies in the late autumn. They hung around the market. Incredible shouting in twenty languages, dialects. That was by day.<sup>16</sup>

The flea markets and black markets were places that enabled people to survive, especially in the towns ravaged by war in the west of the Soviet Union before state supplies had been properly restored. According to Yury Nagibin, what you could find in the barakholka in postwar Moscow were old shoes, used clothing, soldiers’ overcoats, splendid furs, gold rings and antiques—from balalaikas without strings to accordions, pistols, medals, forged documents, padded jackets, priests’ robes, Brussels lace and American summer suits—in fact everything under the sun.<sup>17</sup> These markets acquired a rather

different meaning during the Thaw and the late Soviet phase. The Thaw generation did away with the furniture of the 1930s and 1940s—it had put behind it the fears and basic privations of the Revolution and the industrialisation phase. It discarded the cumbersome furniture that looked out of place in the new, modern homes; it threw out the complete works of Marxism-Leninism, while retaining the children's books by Korney Chukovsky and Arkady Gaidar, the Academy editions of the Russian classics and the great cookery book from the Stalin era. In the 1960s the 'organs of the state' took a harsher view of the flea markets because they saw in them a biotope for speculators, currency dealers and *fartsovshchiki* [illegal traffickers].<sup>18</sup>

However, the most serious clearing-out campaign took place at the end of the Soviet Union. The clear-out of the past became a paroxysm of hysteria, for a brief period at least. People could not rid themselves fast enough of the furniture, clothes and books of the Soviet era. But this phase is over and done with. Today the barakholka is fast disappearing from the post-Soviet consumer landscape with its super-malls, shopping centres with car parks and logistics complexes. What survives in the barakholka is what is unobtainable in the expensive modern consumer world focused on the latest fashions, namely the shards of empire.

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