

Extract from **Amelie Lanier** at **Context XXI**

<http://contextxxi.org/--amelie-lanier--.html>
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Contemporary Moscow

Part One

■ AMELIE LANIER

When I first came to Moscow I was with a friend from Leningrad, Igor, who had offered to show me Moscow, and I had consented. That was a big mistake. The most inappropriate person to introduce you to Moscow is someone from 'Peter', as Petersburg has always been called. We got out of the train and he started to complain about Moscow: 'I hate it. It's a big village. Everybody comes here only for shopping!'

With his remark Igor referred to the fact that in Soviet times almost the only place where you could eventually get rare articles not obtainable elsewhere was Moscow. So everybody from another part of the country who was on a business trip to Moscow, or on a holiday, even visiting relatives, would get a list of things – from friends, relatives and colleagues at work – to look for in the capital. 'They robbed the whole country in order to supply Moscow and Leningrad!', a man in Irkutsk exclaimed to me in anger, 8 years after the fall of Soviet Union.

The Soviet era consumption paradise: The GUM



BILD: AMELIE LANIER

The most famous shopping mall of Moscow is the GUM (= State-run Universal Shop) on Red Square. It was built between 1890 and 1893 by the architect Alexander Pomerantsev. The building was financed by a joint stock company, whose majority was constituted by merchants who had had their stands in the building that stood in this place before and had proven too small and of bad quality.

Apart from the architectural splendour of the building it proved innovative in so far as it was the first place in Russia where price tags were displayed, thus restricting the possibilities for bargaining. Until the revolution the name of this building was the 'Upper Trading Rows'. After the revolution it was used for administrative purposes. In the time of the NEP ('New Economic Policy') it became a shopping mall again and got the name used today. Again it presented an innovation: The introduction of female shopkeepers, unknown in Russia up to that day. After the NEP was called off by Stalin and his government the building again became an office building. In 1932 Stalin's second wife was laid out there after she committed suicide. Later there were plans to tear down the building and build a new office building, but for lack of funds and then because of the war these plans were given up. After the war there were plans for a victory monument in the place of the GUM. Finally the original purpose was restored to the building, it was renewed and opened again as a shopping center in 1953.

One of the most popular meeting

places in Moscow is the fountain inside the GUM. It was only installed in the course of the reconstruction preceding the opening in 1953. In Soviet times the GUM was the magic place where all scarce goods could be obtained. At least people believed that.

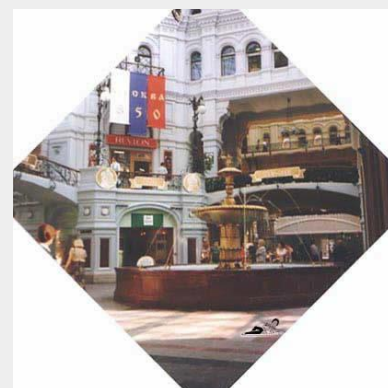


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Someone from Moscow told me he once nearly got squashed inside the GUM because he made the mistake to go there when there was a big trade union conference in Moscow. People had come from all over Soviet Union and at the first possible moment everyone rushed to the GUM to look for scarce commodities, forcing their way in without mercy.



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The GUM is still called GUM though the abbreviation is incorrect nowadays: It isn't state-run any more, but has been privatized like any other valuable asset in Russia. This spring it was sold to an Italian company. The shops are been rented out to various private enterprises, most of them from western countrys, and the GUM has become an ordinary shopping center where you get the same fashion junk as everywhere else in our globalized world.

Me and the fellow from Leningrad went to see the Kremlin. He pointed at it and said: 'There you see our ruin.' 'Why?' – I asked. 'Here power is located', he said. 'Everything bad comes from here.' When I went inside the Kremlin, then considered the Centre of Communism, I was astonished to find out it was full of churches. It must be a very strange kind of communism that tolerates these symbols of religion in its very heart, I thought. A communism based on nationalism that preserves these monuments of Russian history and identity as part of its heritage.

Nowadays the churches have remained, even multiplied, religion is respected and enjoys state support, and the only thing that has remained from the whole communist 'achievements' is the Secret Service, strong and influential as in the times of Stalin.

The source of all evil: The Kremlin and its surroundings



Alexander's garden beside the Kremlin wall.

It was laid out after the victory over Napoleon in the Patriotic War in 1812. It's named after the tsar Alexander I.

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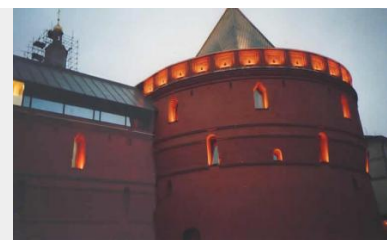
For the 850th anniversary of Moscow a new shopping center was built by the side of the garden. First I heard with delight that there was a fire there in 2004. Then I found out that it was the historical building beside it that was built almost in the same time that Alexander's garden was designed that caught fire – as rumours go, not quite accidentally. I think it's the building in the back, at th right. It seems to have covered valuable real estate space someone was keen to use differently. When Moscow celebrated the 850th anniversary of its first mentioning, in 1997, everything was fixed, the facades renewed and illumination was taken care of. Moscow was then one of the brightest lit cities I have ever seen.



One side of the Red Place,

showing the back side of the Historical Museum and the statue of Marshal Zhukov, one of the most important commanders of the Great Patriotic War (= World War II).

BILD: AMELIE LANIER



One of the towers inside the Kremlin Wall.

BILD: AMELIE LANIER

The Moscow Kremlin, in old – medieval – times, was a kind of fortress to where people fled in times of turmoil. The Russian fortresses – or 'kremls' – were places both of clerical as of governmental dedication, as the church and the government were interconnected completely, especially in the times of the 'Mongol yoke'.



Is this really what you expect in entering the Kremlin?

And this picture was taken in 1990, when I first visited Moscow and when Soviet Union still existed. There are more churches in the Kremlin like that, I don't even bother to give their history.

BILD: AMELIE LANIER

Moscow is a city of big dimensions and of great extremes. It covers an area of more than 1000 square kilometers, and houses more than 8 million people. I have experienced this city in times of incredible scarcity and of overwhelming abundance. Nowhere you can see so many expensive fur coats, buy so many luxurious foodstuffs as in Moscow – if you have the money. On the large 6 to 8 lane streets that were built for parades in Soviet times cars from Western Europe and Japan are either caught in

traffic jams, or they rush along at a speed as if they were on a highway, making it impossible to cross these streets.



BILD: AMELIE LANIER

Meanwhile on the sidewalks homeless children, often in the company of abandoned dogs, are trying to make their way through the city jungle, organising themselves in gangs. There are more homeless kids now in Russia – in Russian called the 'not-cared-for' – than after the Revolution, in 1921, when the phenomenon appeared for the first time in Russia on a large scale. Moscow is the city with the highest consumption of heroin per capita in the world. A large part of the Afghan opium ends up here, a kind of late revenge for the war. It is supplied predominantly by Chechen drug dealers, – another revenge for another war.

Horrible things have taken place in Moscow and all of Russia since the fall of communism and the introduction of 'wild capitalism'. Children were stolen from the streets and sold abroad, presumably for adoption or as spare parts for organ transplants. Elderly people have been killed because they lived in valuable apartments in central locations. Great masses of hobos have appeared on the streets and in the underground, divided by the Russians into two categories: The 'bomzhi', who are just people without homes who still might find their way back into society if they don't die before that, and 'bitchi', former intellectuals or people who occupied leading positions who never can recover from the privation they have been cast into, and to whom

homelessness is just the last stage before death.

20th century Moscow: From the Tsars till Postcommunism



The Belorussian Station, more precisely:
the left wing of it.

BILD: AMELIE LANIER

The train stations are monuments of a special kind in Moscow. When railroads started to be constructed all over Russia about 1860, Moscow was not a priority of the Russian government. Railroad construction around Moscow therefore relied on private initiative. It was the wealthy merchants of Moscow who played an important role in the planning and financing of the railroad net around Moscow, and the train stations should be visible proofs of their wealth and social importance. The precursor of the building now known as Belorussian Station was built in 1870 and called Smolensk Station, as Smolensk was the first city to which this train line lead. Later it was called Brest Station, as the line had been extended till Brest. In honour of the 100th anniversary of the Patriotic War (the war waged against Napoleon in 1812) and the Tsar who led and won that war it was renamed Alexander Station. After the Revolution it was called the Belorussian-Baltic Station, and finally in 1936 it received its present name. The original building was completely reconstructed about 1910 according the plans of the architect Ivan Strukov. It opened again in 1912, in its present form. As it was one of the first buildings constructed from steel and concrete it also constituted a landmark in the development of Russian architecture. The Belorussian Station has had her moments of glory: In 1928 Maxim Gorki arrived here, returning from exile, and was welcomed by politicians

and popular masses. So was the reception in 1937 for the pilots Chkalov and Gromov who had flown to America across the North Pole and returned by train to Moscow. The most important arrival, though, was that of the first soldiers-victors coming home in 1945 from Germany. A film has been made where this moment is commemorated, and its title is 'Belorussian Station'.



The Kazan Train Station at sunrise.

This is the first impression I got from Moscow when I first arrived there in 1990.

BILD: AMELIE LANIER

The Kazan Station, as it presents itself now, had a precursor in the 19th century which was torn down to give room to a bigger and more extravagant building. This happened in 1913. The Kazan Station is a specimen of the Russian 'Modern' style, incorporating elements of traditional popular architecture, in this case of the city of Kazan that is mainly Tartarian.

A lot of contemporary artists were called into the team planning and constructing this new Kazan Station: Nikolai Rerikh, Serebryakov, Kustodiyev, and so on. It was meant to be more a work of art than a train station. The whole project was disabled by the outbreak of World War I, then by the October Revolution. It was only finished – to a certain extent – in 1940.



BILD: AMELIE LANIER

Only in 1997, in the wake of Moscow's 850th anniversary, the station was renewed again, allegedly finally the thoughts of Shchusov were put into practice entirely. These pictures, though, were taken in 1990.



BILD: AMELIE LANIER

Jaroslavski Station was built in in 1903-05 by the plans of Fyodor Shekhtel. It is also a product of the Russian Modern Style, that was based on similar principles as the secession style in Western Europe. The model for this building may have been peasant architecture. A friend of mine exclaimed, when he saw the photo: Looks like Smurf Village!



Street along the bank of the Moskva river.

To the left one of the Stalin-era skyscrapers.

BILD: AMELIE LANIER



An architectural cross-section

While the green-white buildings to the left seem to be prerevolutionary, the building on the right was constructed in Stalin's times. The white building in the back is a 'krushchovka', the type of residential buildings that were quickly erected, in bad quality, in the 50ies and early 60ies, in order to ease the housing shortage. The yellow building on the left, in the second row, seems to be recent.

BILD: AMELIE LANIER



A part of the Moskva banks called Frunze-Quay.

The guy after whom the quay is named was an important commander in the Civil War and the first military theoretic of young Soviet Union.

BILD: AMELIE LANIER

Moscow has had at one time more than an estimated one million illegal inhabitants, refugees from the civil war-struck regions of the Caucasus, or Russians from other former parts of the Soviet Empire where Russians have been persecuted since these regions turned into independent states. In Soviet times and until recently one needed a permit, issued by the working place, to be allowed to settle in Moscow, and whoever had no working place was illegal, prey to corrupt law-enforcement institutions who hunted them in order to obtain either money from them – if they could pay the bribes – or rewards from their institutions for presenting them as 'dangerous' illegals. The residence permit regulations – the need for the 'propiska' – have been first abolished, then reintroduced, the manhunt goes

on, presumably even increased due to the control regulations in the wake of the 'fight against terrorism'.

continuation
The Moscow Underground

Amelie Lanier: Jahrgang 1961, Studium der Mathematik, Geschichte und Philosophie an der Universität Wien, dort Promotion zum Doktor der Philosophie 1988. Dissertation: „Über die Widersprüchlichkeit von Moralphilosophie am Beispiel Friedrich Nietzsches.“ Seither freie Forschungstätigkeit über die Geschichte Osteuropas und des österreichischen Kreditwesens. Publikationen zum Transformationsprozeß nach 1989 und den neueren Entwicklungen im Bankwesen. Wohnort: Zell am See. Motto: „Wenn die Pforten der Wahrnehmung gereinigt würden, würde alles dem Menschen erscheinen, wie es ist: unendlich.“ (William Blake, Die Hochzeit des Himmels und der Hölle)

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Part Two
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- **Prerevolutionary Moscow**
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- **The Moscow Underground**
(<http://contextxxi.org/the-moscow-underground.html>)
- **The Ring Line (Koltsovaya) – Part One**
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