



Soviet Colonialism Reloaded: Encounters Between Russians and East Central Europeans in Contemporary Literature

Miriam Finkelstein

City of Prussians and city of Turks, city of Russians and city of Jews, daydreamers and snobs, city of Poles and city of Americans, city of salsa dancers and city of gays, tubby workers and uniformed saleswomen, city of dogs and garbage, city of unemployed artists and city of overworked *Halsabschneiders*. The Babylonian tower cracked that we might learn nothing, and out of ruin and oblivion, Berlin might grow. (Aleš Šteger 2015, 130)

INTRODUCTION

In a series of essays on Berlin as he experienced it in the early 2000s, the Slovene writer Aleš Šteger makes an intriguing observation on the relationship between Russians and Slovenes. After an enjoyable visit to a Russian shop, he remarks: “Slovenians don’t really understand Polish, Czech or Baltic *ressentiment* for a Slavic Gulliver. We were not close enough to hate” (Šteger 2015, 117). Disregarding the question whether

M. Finkelstein (✉)

Institute of Slav Studies, University of Graz, Graz, Austria

e-mail: miriam.finkelstein@uni-graz.at

© The Author(s) 2023

S. Huigen and D. Kołodziejczyk (eds.), *East Central Europe Between the Colonial and the Postcolonial in the Twentieth Century*,

Cambridge Imperial and Post-Colonial Studies,

https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-17487-2_10

231

these assessments really apply to Slovenian attitudes, the issue I will address in this chapter is the way in which contemporary literature by writers from Russia, East Central, and South-eastern Europe reflects upon the relationship between Russians and those who, like Šteger claims, hate or hated them. I will focus on reciprocal representations of current and former citizens from the Soviet Union and post-Soviet Russia and different Eastern and East Central European states in order to demonstrate how contemporary writers from the Czech Republic, Poland, Russia, Slovenia, and other countries reflect upon relationships between representatives of the aforementioned states; especially when they meet abroad and come to share the same space, in this case, Berlin.

While recent scholarship on migrant literature(s) has mostly focused on the relationship between the migrant and the host society, frequently depicting it as a homogeneous body (Fachinger 2001), the main assumption here is that anywhere they go in the West, migrants encounter highly heterogeneous societies that consist, to a considerable degree, of other migrants (Breinig et al. 2002, 23). Thus, this article seeks to answer the following questions: what happens when former nationals of the Soviet Union, the colonising power, and individuals from the formerly colonised East Central and Eastern European states meet outside their respective home countries, years after the fall of the Iron Curtain? Does the history of colonisation of these states by Russia/the Soviet Union determine present time encounters and relationships and, if so, in what ways?

To a large extent, these questions are triggered by recent scholarship on Russian migrant narratives. Employing Homi Bhabha's concept of hybridity (Bhabha 1994), scholars have argued that by combining elements of two cultures, Russian migrants successfully construct a new, hybrid identity, such as "Russian-American" or "Russian-German" (Furman 2011, 2015; Senderovich 2015). This identity, as Yelena Furman points out in both her articles, is different and distinct from both the Russian and the American. However, it does not always eradicate elements of the initial Soviet-Russian one. I therefore argue that residues of the Soviet imperial and colonial "mindset" are vividly present in Soviet-Russian migrants narratives and that this legacy effectively determines their perception of "Others," particularly East Central- and Eastern European "Others." I will demonstrate that Russian-German fiction about Berlin frequently engages in what can be called an aggressive occupation,

a re-colonisation of the city space by Soviet-Russian migrants.¹ Furthermore, I will show how Russian-German writers like Wladimir Kaminer et al. conceptualise Berlin as an international melting pot, but continually exclude East Central- and Eastern Europeans from it.

Furthermore, I will discuss texts by writers from East Central-, Eastern-, and South-eastern Europe, who promptly react to these Russian neo-colonial aspirations (Kołodziejczyk and Şandru 2012, 113–116) and analyse the strategies used by Carmen-Francesca Banciu (Romania/Germany), Jaroslav Rudiš (Czech Republic), and Serhyj Zhadan (Ukraine) in the sense of a postcolonial “writing back” (Rushdie 1982; Ashcroft et al. 1989), so as to demonstrate how they, in turn, deny Russian claims to authority, exclusivity, and dominance of space. Ultimately, I will discuss a third perspective, namely the one of writers from non-European countries, who register the tensions too, but also emphasise the utopian potential of these encounters to create a whole new Central cum Eastern Europe.

CITY OF EXILES: REPRESENTATIONS OF BERLIN IN WORLD LITERATURE

After the end of World War II, West Berlin, on which my discussion is focused, began to gain the attention of Western artists and intellectuals as early as 1962, when the New York-based Ford Foundation decided to finance an annual “Artists-in-Residence” programme in Berlin, which is better known today as the “Berliner Künstlerprogramm des DAAD” (Berlin Artist’s Programme).² As a reaction to the threatening isolation, only two years after the erection of the Wall, internationally acclaimed artists, musicians, and writers (e.g. Iannis Xenakis, W.H. Auden, Igor’ Strawinsky) were invited to create a cultural bridge between West Berlin and the rest of the world. The insular city was to become a prominent centre on the world’s cultural map and an intersection between East and West. From the very start, therefore, the organisers invited

¹ In what follows, I will frequently refer to the Russian-German writers as “Russians.” I do this for reasons of brevity only, and do not mean to describe them as ethnic Russians or citizens of Russia.

² <http://www.berliner-kuenstlerprogramm.de/en/chronik.php> (last accessed 13 January 2017). Since 1966 the programme has been financed and run by the Deutscher Akademischer Austausch Dienst (DAAD), the German Academic Exchange Service.

artists and writers from East Central and Eastern Europe to be part of the project. Between 1962 and 1989 approximately one hundred guests from Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Poland, Romania, and Yugoslavia, among them prominent figures like Witold Gombrowicz (1963), Zbigniew Herbert and Krzysztof Penderecki (both in 1968), György Ligeti, (1969), and Stanislaw Lem (1979) participated in the project.³ These efforts established West Berlin as a meeting point, a platform for intellectual exchange not only between the representatives of different arts, but also for those of different nations, many of whom were separated from each other not only geographically but also ideologically, by a deep political (as well as economic and cultural) divide that came to be known as the Cold War. For many of them, the sojourn in this city was the only opportunity for an encounter with colleagues from other countries.⁴

After the fall of the Berlin Wall and the reunification of the city, a whole new era began yet again. Hundreds of thousands of people from across the globe settled down in Berlin. Artists, students, writers, and scientists were attracted by the prospect of “discovering” the unfamiliar and “exotic” Eastern part of the city hidden for decades behind the Iron Curtain, by the cheap living space and low cost of living. To a large degree, however, it was the unique atmosphere of a city in the state of emerging and the prospect of witnessing and participating in a rare historical event, the (re)building of a modern capital, that attracted many people. At the same time, Berlin became home to a huge number of migrants and refugees, mainly, if not exclusively, from the former Soviet Union (after 1990) and from ex-Yugoslavia (after the disastrous wars had begun there). According to official numbers, between the years 1991 and 2004, 220,000 Jewish “quota refugees”⁵ and approximately 1.9 million ethnic Germans from the Soviet Union and its successor states settled down in Germany, many of them in Berlin. After the enlargement of the European Union in 2004 and 2007 and especially after 1 May 2011, when mobility restrictions were lifted by Germany and Austria, they were

³ Among the invitees were both émigrés and those who stayed in the respective countries. For a full list of guests see <http://www.berliner-kuenstlerprogramm.de/de/gaeste.php> (last accessed 13 January 2017).

⁴ An inexhaustible source of information about Western musicians, artists, etc. in Berlin is Stuart Braun’s book *City of Exiles. Berlin from the Outside In* from 2015.

⁵ Numbers according to the Central Council of Jews in Germany <http://www.zentra.lratjuden.de/en/topic/154.html> (last accessed 25 January 2017).

joined by many permanent and seasonal labourers from different East Central and Eastern European states, particularly from Poland but also from Romania, Bulgaria, and other countries.

The sheer presence of people from all continents gave rise to the idea of Berlin as a melting pot, comparable to New York or London, which is clearly reflected upon in contemporary literature. Dozens and maybe even hundreds of literary texts, novels, short stories, and poems about the old and the new German capital have been written by authors from all parts of the world, leading in effect to the creation of what can be called, to borrow Vladimir Toporov's famous notion, a new international "Berlin Text."⁶ A prominent feature of this body of texts is the celebration of the city's unique atmosphere in the 1990s and 2000s.

The characteristic that distinguishes post-Wall Berlin from other European and non-European metropolises is the combination of internationalism with a special spirit of creativity and experimentation, and the easy-going lifestyle of a bohemian society untroubled by financial considerations and unrestricted by the demands of free market economy. Moreover, numerous writers from all around the world were and still are captivated by the tension between the city's difficult past and present on the one hand and on the other, between its twofold experience of totalitarianism, its destruction during World War II, the painful division into two separate entities, and the creation of a new city that is supposed to represent a democratic, liberal, and peaceful modern Germany. Novels like *Allerzielen* (*All Souls' Day*, 2001) by the Dutch writer Cees Nooteboom, *Lifnei Ha-makom* (*Upon a Certain Place*, 2007) by the Israeli Haim Be'er, *This Must Be the Place* (2008) by the American Anna Winger, *Book of Clouds* (2009) by the Mexican Chloe Aridjis, and *Ladivine* (2013) by the French writer Marie N'Diaye, to name but a few, reflect the simultaneous search for appropriate (both material and immaterial) forms of conservation, reconstruction, and representation of the past and for solutions to the multiple economic, political, and social problems of the present.

⁶ Vladimir Toporov, one of the most prominent scholars of Russian literature of the twentieth century, suggested speaking of a *Petersburg Text of Russian Literature*, implying that over the centuries a huge body of texts about the city was written and these texts share a number of recurrent motifs or *topoi* that wandered from generation to generation (Vladimir Toporov 1995, 259–367).

However, the emergence of this new international “Berlin Text” was not *only* the result of the writers’ personal interest in and individual engagement with the city. To a large degree, literary texts about Berlin are *also* a result of intensive institutional efforts to establish and solidify Berlin’s new image within the international intellectual and artistic community. Unlike New York, London, or Paris, whose attractiveness does not need special explanation or further enhancement, after its reunification Berlin had to be actively “advertised”: it had to *actively attract* people. The reasons for the “image-improvement campaign” were both of a political and an economic nature; they were meant to accumulate symbolic and real, i.e. financial, capital. In many European neighbour states, the reunification and especially the transferring of the capital from Bonn to Berlin gave rise to fears that Germany could become the largest economic power in the EU and as a result come to dominate other states. To dispel these fears, an image of a particularly peaceful, multicultural, and tolerant Berlin had to be created. At the same time, this image was necessary in order to attract more and more visitors, since tourism was and still is one of the city’s central sources of income. In both instances, state-sponsored cultural politics were to play a key role.⁷

Apart from the DAAD programme, which after 1990 directed most of its attention to the late Soviet Union and its successor states,⁸ from the early 1990s some of the most prominent East Central Europeans and Russian writers were also invited by the “Literarisches Colloquium Berlin” (Literary Colloquium Berlin). Like the DAAD “Artists-in-residence” programme, the LCB was established in 1962 and originally financed by the Ford Foundation too. Like the DAAD, it was a post-Wall transnational effort to invigorate West Berlin’s literary life. Since 1993, the LCB too, was developed into an international meeting place. The programme “Autoren aus aller Welt” (authors from all over the world) invites and brings together internationally acclaimed writers who then reside in the grand mansion on Wannsee for a year. Ever since, it has hosted some of the most illustrious contemporary writers from all continents, with many

⁷ The efforts encompassed all spheres of cultural life: not only literature, but also music, theatre, etc.

⁸ It continued, however, to invite guests from East Central Europe too, numbering more than 130 individuals between the years 1990 and 2017.

East Central and Eastern European authors among them.⁹ Remarkably, several of the texts about Berlin that are discussed here, as well as many others, were written during such a stay or afterwards; no less remarkable is that several of the invited authors had already written such texts before being invited.¹⁰

Apart from these two institutions, countless others have done their share to bring the famous, but also the young and the promising to Berlin by granting them stipends, scholarships, and fellowships.¹¹ Thus, ever since the 1960s and especially since the early 1990s, a great number of spaces, or in Mikhail Bakhtin's terms, *chronotopes* of encounter, and intercultural exchange have been created in Berlin.¹²

However, as the texts I will discuss in the penultimate part of this article clearly demonstrate, these efforts made by Berlin cultural institutions to make space and time for a productive and fruitful exchange of opinions between East Central Europeans and Russian literati were met by them with reservations. In other words, the institutionalised idea of mutuality and sharing is most frequently met with resistance, a resistance expressed by many writers in highly ironic depictions of such staged encounters. But before turning to them, I will first look at texts

⁹ Among them Svetlana Alexievich (Belarus/Russia), Andrey Bitov, Vladimir Sorokin, Dmitry Prigov (all three from Russia), László Marton (Hungary), Jáchym Topol (Czech Republic), Paweł Huelle (Poland), Tomas Venclova (Lithuania/USA), Georgi Gospodinov (Bulgaria). For a full list, see <http://www.lcb.de/gaeste/>.

¹⁰ Serhyi Zhadan was a guest at the LCB in 2005, two years after his book *Big Mac and Other Stories*, in which Berlin plays a prominent role, was originally published in the Ukraine. Jaroslav Rudiš's novel was published in Prague in 2002 after the two-year stay in Berlin (2001–2002); in that time, he was awarded the European Journalists Fellowship at the Free University in Berlin. In 2006, he was invited by the LCB. In the same year, further East Central and Eastern European poets and writers resided at the LCB, among them Mojca Kumerdej (Slovenia), Valzhyna Mort (Belarus/USA), Tadeusz Dąbrowski (Poland), Juri Andrukhovych and Taras Prochasko (Ukraine), and many others. Aleš Šteger, whose book *Berlin* was published in Slovenia in 2007, was invited by the LCB in 2010, a year after its German translation was published (2009). While this issue cannot be discussed here at length, it would appear that at least to some extent the contemporary international "Berlin Text" is an artificial creation of the German cultural industry that specifically promotes this genre.

¹¹ First and foremost, educational institutions like the Free University, the Humboldt University, etc.

¹² For the term chronotope, see Mikhail Bakhtin's seminal study *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (Bakhtin 1981).

about non-orchestrated, contingent encounters between Russians and East Central Europeans in other Berlin spaces.

A RUSSIAN CITY: RUSSIANS IN BERLIN AND THEIR INVISIBLE OTHERS

In Wladimir Kaminer's first book, *Russendisko* from 2000 (English edition *Russian Disco* from 2002), which became the cornerstone of Russian-German literature,¹³ a strange discrepancy became evident. On the one hand Berlin is presented as a utopian melting pot inhabited by people from all continents: from Asian and African countries, the Middle East, Turkey, and so on. Here, migrants from post-Soviet Russia encounter visibly different and culturally distant Others and these encounters are said to be unproblematic. Moreover, the relationship between different groups of migrants is explicitly characterised as one of solidarity. In the story "Suleyman und Salieri" (Suleyman and Salieri), the xenophobia of the German society of the early 1990s is said to create a strong sense of solidarity and togetherness between different groups of "foreigners" such as Arabs, Jews, Chinese, Turks, or Ethiopians, who are all affected by discrimination (Kaminer 2002, 67–68). Existing racial and/or political conflicts between the groups (e.g. between Arabs and Jews) seem to fade away and disappear in the face of shared problems.

A group of people excluded from this utopian universe is made up from East Central and Eastern Europeans. Thus, there are no protagonists from Poland,¹⁴ the Czech, and Slovak Republics and very few characters from former Yugoslavia (Kaminer was writing his stories at a time when thousands of refugees from ex-Yugoslav states lived in Germany). Furthermore, on the rare occasions where individuals from East Central and Eastern Europe do appear, they are subjected to ridicule: in "Die neuen Jobs" (The New Jobs), the scientist that is derided in this story because of his bizarre invention (he is said to have invented a fully automatic gynaecological chair that is supposed to replace gynaecologists and

¹³ For further discussions of his texts, see Uffelmann (2009) and Wanner (2011). I concentrate my discussion on Kaminer, since the strategies he devised that are relevant to my context were employed, without significant modifications, in all later Berlin texts by Russian-German writers.

¹⁴ Which is particularly significant because Polish migrants constitute the second largest group of migrants in Berlin.

that communicates in different languages) is a Pole. The identity of the very few migrants mentioned is itself a subject of doubt: in “Das Mädchen und die Hexen” (The Girl and the Witches) a woman who claims to be from ex-Yugoslavia is strangely unaware of the war in her homeland, which makes her life story implausible; in “Geschäftstarnungen” (Business Camouflage) Bulgarians pretend to be Turks. Thus, these characters appear to be (at least potentially) dishonest and untrustworthy. Unlike them, the protagonist, a Russian Jew, never denies his identity and never disguises it. His honest demeanour combined with his intellectual abilities elevates him morally above all others and makes him an authority that other people, migrants or not, turn to when looking for help and support. Thus, the hierarchy of nations prevalent in the Soviet Union and within the Socialist Bloc—a hierarchy that assumed the superior position of the Russian nation and the Soviet state (Tlostanova 2012, 132)—is transferred by Kaminer with little modification to Berlin. Here, the relationships between the representatives of individual nations are structured accordingly—the Russian (migrant) always being better and cleverer than all Eastern and East Central Europeans. Furthermore, the omission of the latter serves to make the Soviet experience of totalitarianism and that of the dissolution of the communist state look unique; Russian migrants can therefore lay claim to the role of sole authorities on the history of the whole of East Central and Eastern Europe and act as “spokesmen” for the entire former communist bloc.

The overall presence of Turkish, Vietnamese, and other migrants notwithstanding, Kaminer’s Berlin seems to be, as Sandor Gilman has pointedly observed, Russianised:

[...] Kaminer’s most successful creation of a utopian Berlin multicultural world in which all of the ethnicities and nationalities blur into a Russian-coloured world. This is the hybridity in which the solvent is vodka. (Gilman 2006, 217)

Moreover, the city space is shown to be actively and purposefully (re-)conquered and colonised by Russian migrants. Several stories demonstrate their progressive movement through the city space from the margins to the centre. In “*Die erste eigene Wohnung*” (A First Apartment of My Own), the protagonist moves from the poor suburb of Marzahn to the centre, Prenzlauer Berg, a district soon to become the most fashionable in Berlin, and his sporadic jobs lead him to the posh district of Mitte. The

stories “*Alltag eines Kunstwerks*” (The Everyday Life of a Work of Art) and “*Berliner Porträts*” (Berlin Portraits) describe how Russian migrant artists inscribe themselves in the city, leaving their traces everywhere and virtually overwriting the city surface with their art. In the first story, a strange sculpture by a Russian artist “travels” through Berlin (and other German cities), constantly changing its location until numerous places in the city become associated with it. Similarly, in the second story, a German painter is so impressed by the face of a Russian migrant that he paints it in countless fashionable bars and restaurants. These places become, in Lefebvre’s terminology, Russian *espaces de representation* (Lefebvre 1974, 39–43), spaces that make the Russian presence in Berlin visible. In “*Bahnhof Lichtenberg*” (Lichtenberg Station), a poor Russian migrant starts his business selling beer and Coca-Cola at the Lichtenberg train station at the city’s eastern periphery. Thanks to commercial talent and perseverance, he soon owns a chain of Russian food stores. This successful expansion does not, however, satisfy the businessman, who plans to leave for America to quench his “imperialistic ambitions” (Kaminer 2002, 120). While these expansions from the–eastern–margins to the centre are only implicitly reminiscent of the Soviet Army’s progress from the eastern outskirts to the Reichstag at the very heart of the city during the last days of World War II, a new and no less aggressive conquest of Berlin is made fully explicit in “*Stadtführer Berlin*” (Berlin Guidebook). Rich Russian tourists are invited to conquer Berlin and fly their own flags over the Reichstag: “Fly your own personal flag over the new German Reichstag – experience and conquer Berlin!” (Kaminer 2002, 142).

Later Berlin narratives by Russian migrant authors have inherited many of the narrative strategies of exclusion and denigration of East Central and Eastern European Others as they were devised by Kaminer. Very much like Kaminer’s book and like Berlin texts by other non-Eastern European writers, these texts depict Berlin as a melting pot, a place where people from all around the world come together. Novels like by Nellja Veremej *Berlin liegt im Osten* (Berlin is in the East, 2013), Olga Martynova’s *Sogar die Papageien überleben uns* (Even the Parrots Outlive Us, 2010), and, most recently, Kat Kaufmann’s *Superposition* (2015) focus on encounters between the protagonist, typically a Russian or a Russian-Jewish immigrant, and different Others. Hereby, two tendencies are visible: while

Martynova and Kaufmann depict the protagonist as a member of intellectual and artistic circles of writers, musicians, actors, etc.,¹⁵ Veremej (and Kaminer) tells the stories of people who, once in Germany, struggle to achieve some degree of social recognition and financial security, living under precarious circumstances, working in menial jobs, etc. These differences notwithstanding, all the texts depict the circles in which their respective protagonists move as distinctly *international*. The world of home attendants, cleaning ladies, and shop assistants is no less international than that of (more or less) famous and well-to-do actors, musicians, and writers; both consist of characters from Germany, Russia, North or South America, Western Europe, etc. What all these texts have in common is that these circles rarely include individuals from Central or Eastern Europe.

CITY OF RUSSIANS? IMAGES OF RUSSIANS IN BERLIN BY EAST CENTRAL EUROPEANS WRITERS

In one way or another, the Russian presence in post-reunification Berlin has been acutely registered by the vast majority of writers from all the different countries of East Central and Southeastern Europe. For some, like émigrés from post-Yugoslav Croatia and Serbia Dubravka Ugrešić and Bora Ćosić, the city is strongly associated with the Russian émigrés of the 1920s who they think of as moral and literary role-models (Finkelstein 2015, 387–391). Others, like Šteger, choose to focus on contemporary Russian-speaking migrants. Their representations of the latter offer a broad range of highly heterogeneous assessments and opinions about the former citizens of the Soviet Union; similarly, Russian migrants fulfil many different functions in the narratives. Admittedly, however, a positive and unresented acknowledgement of the Russian presence in Berlin such as the one in Šteger's book, whose lines are quoted at the very beginning, is rather rare.¹⁶ Far more frequent are ambivalent and outright negative modes of representation.

¹⁵ The same applies to texts about Berlin by Russian non-émigré writers, such as Andrei Gavrilov's long poem *Berlinskaja flejta* (The Berlin Flute) from 2002 or Igor' Klekh's short story *Krokodily ne vidiat snov* (Crocodiles Don't Dream) from 2004 (Finkelstein 2015, 365–399).

¹⁶ Another example of a favourable representation is the collection of short stories *Konstruktionen im Haus oder Iwan Iwanjtsch am Fenster. Bagatellen und Novellen*

An example of a most far-reaching critique of Russian migrants can be found in the novel *Nebe pod Berlinem* (The Sky under Berlin, 2002¹⁷) by the Czech writer Jaroslav Rudiš. At first, Rudiš accuses them of unfounded claims to an exclusive authority on Eastern European history and authority on the history of communist totalitarianism *in toto*, only to strip them, in the next step, of all such rights. Like Kaminer's, Rudiš's Berlin is also a multicultural melting pot, an international meeting place (in this case of losers). Both the German characters and the migrants from Russia and Eastern Europe are individuals who have aspired to creative professions and have either failed, or, for different reasons, have been forced to give them up. Notably, the first place in Berlin that the Czech protagonist and his German friend visit is the *Klub der polnischen Versager* (the Club of Polish Losers) (Rudiš 2002, 13–19). The club is a multicultural microcosm where different people, mostly Czech, Polish, and Russian migrants, peacefully interact, talk, drink, and dance together. The only character disturbing the picture is Igor, a Russian Jew from Moscow. In very aggressive tones, he talks about nothing else but Bautzen, the infamous prison in the GDR, where dissidents and political prisoners were detained. At first, Igor's introduction into the novel seems to suggest that he is or will be ascribed an important and positive function in the narrative, that he is the only one to uphold the memory of the totalitarian past and to remind the others—who come to the club in search of fun and parties—of the political repressions and the crimes committed by the communist regimes. Based on the experience of his own family, one half of which was killed by Hitler and the other by Stalin, he claims to be an authority on the history of totalitarianism in general. His interest and his sympathy are seemingly extended to the victims of totalitarian oppression not only in his own country but in others too. His educational objective, his wish to enlighten others about these histories, is directed primarily at people from post-reunification Western Germany, people whom he believes to have no personal experience and little knowledge of Eastern European history in general and of communist crimes in particular (Rudiš 2002, 14). However, as Igor's real positions are revealed, Rudiš strips

(*Constructions in the House, or Iwan Iwanytsch at the Window. Bagatelles and Novellas*) by the Polish-German poet and prose writer Iwona Mickiewicz (2011).

¹⁷ The book is available in Belarusian, German, Italian, Polish, Swedish, and Serbian translations, not, however, in English. As the title suggests, the novel's major pretext is Wim Wenders' film *Der Himmel über Berlin*.

him of his authority on interpreting and explicating history. When Igor finds out that the protagonist is from the Czech Republic, and thus does not need to be lectured on Eastern European history, he demonstrates a completely different understanding of history, an interpretation diametrically opposed to the one suggested by the previous lines. Igor's account of the invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 by the states of the Warsaw Pact under Soviet leadership follows official Soviet propaganda in an unreflected and unfiltered way (Rudiš 2002, 18). His approval of the invasion and the crude idea of a "Slavic solidarity" which does not take the Czech (Czechoslovak) position into account uncovers and exposes his reactionary and Soviet-nationalistic understanding of Eastern European history.

Far more complex and ambivalent than the clear-cut assessment by Rudiš is the position towards Russians taken by the Romanian-German writer Carmen-Francesca Banciu in her collection of autobiographical essays *Berlin ist mein Paris. Geschichten aus der Hauptstadt* (Berlin is my Paris. Stories from the Capital) from 2002.¹⁸ Similarly, as in all the texts discussed above, her Berlin is a multicultural space too, to a greater degree even than that of the other writers. The essays depict encounters with Germans and non-Germans: Americans and Africans, Brazilians and Portuguese, Italians, fellow Romanians, etc. All are treated with equal respect and sympathy by a narrator who explicitly and continuously states her interest in all the people she meets and in their stories. But beneath the shiny surface of mutual understanding and cordial solidarity, tensions become tangible. The essays roughly cover the decade between 1990 (the year when the narrator first arrived in Germany) and sometime after 2001 (09.11.2001 is referred to), very much the same time in which thousands of Russian-speaking migrants came to live in Berlin. And Russian does in fact make its appearance in the essays. In "Babuschka maja" (My Grandma), the narrator encounters a middle-aged man with a dark complexion, dark eyes and a prominent moustache, dressed in shabby clothes, a man whose appearance fully answers the German cliché

¹⁸ Banciu, Carmen-Francesca. 2002. *Berlin ist mein Paris. Geschichten aus der Hauptstadt*. Berlin: PalmArt Press. For more information about the author and her books in English see <http://www.banciu.de/en/content/2017-berlin-ist-mein-paris-new-edition> (13 January 2017). The term "Romanian-German" implies here that Banciu (b. 1955 in Lipova, Romania) writes not only in her native Romanian but also in German; she does not belong to the German minority in Romania, like e.g. Herta Müller.

of a migrant. As he tries to help an elderly lady to board a bus, the man is rebuked by her in harsh terms, precisely on the grounds, so we are made to understand, of him being a foreigner and thus potentially dangerous. The man is startled by this fierce reaction and tries to calm her down by addressing her in Russian: “Babuschka, babuschka, milaja maja” (Grandma, grandma, my dear) (Banciu 2002, 87).¹⁹ Significantly, however, the language is devoid here of the eponymous nation. The man proves to be an Armenian, a representative of a nation colonised by the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union for many decades. Furthermore, he is a refugee from Nagorno-Karabakh, an immediate victim of (early) Soviet colonial policies in the Caucasus that eventually led to the bloody conflict in the late 1980s.

In the essay “World Literature and Language Anxiety,” Robert J. C. Young suggested three different possibilities for the choice of a post-colonial language, the first being to continue using the language of the coloniser(s) but modifying it so as to make it more local (Young 2013, 34). In a continuation of Young’s argument, I suggest that, in Banciu’s essay, Russian, the language of the colonial power, is “made more local” in the sense that it is now dissociated from all aggression, violence, hatred, etc. From a language of the oppressor, that was aggressively enforced in Armenia, in the mouth of a former colonised subject it turns into a language of empathy and compassion, a language of selfless help that is willingly extended to anyone, anywhere. Banciu’s subtle criticism of Soviet colonialism results in an admission to her Berlin universe of its victims and in the banishment of other Russians.

Whereas in her writing Banciu at least allows for the presence of the Russian language, if not, however, that of ethnic Russians, in his collection of short stories *Big Mac ta inshi istorii* (Big Mac and Other Stories, 2003),²⁰ Serhiy Zhadan, one of the most prominent contemporary Ukrainian writers, chooses an even more radical approach. Several of the eleven stories depict the narrator’s journeys to different Western European cities, the first and the last being dedicated to Berlin. As so often, the first story, “Берлін, який ми втратили” (Berlin as we lost it), describes the city as a colourful multicultural space, the last, “Втрати, які нас

¹⁹ In this story, the Russian words appear in non-academic German transliteration; the word “maja” (my) is misspelled by the author (instead of the correct “moja”).

²⁰ The book was translated into Czech, German, Polish, and Russian; there is no English translation.

роблять щасливими” (Losses that make us happy), as the place myriads of East Central and Eastern Europeans dream of and go through immense hardships to reach. However, both stories exclude the Russian language and Russians altogether.²¹ Not only are present-day Russians, migrants or not, absent from Zhadan’s Berlin, he has also—markedly—omitted the famous Russian émigrés of the 1920s. Unlike Dubravka Ugrešić and Bora Ćosić, who considered themselves to be political refugees and imagined themselves explicitly as heirs to political émigrés like Vladimir Nabokov, Viktor Shklovskii, Andrei Belyi and others, the Ukrainian writer has no interest in Russian predecessors. Like Ugrešić and Ćosić, Zhadan imagines Berlin as a city of exiles too, a city with a long-standing tradition of offering refuge to those who had to flee their home country. The crucial difference is that he substitutes the tradition of associating Berlin with Russian émigrés with a different one and this substitution has very clear postcolonial undertones. The Ukrainian protagonist and his Czech friends, Silvi and Gašpar, aspiring young artists, travel together to Berlin to meet a much-acclaimed sculptor, Rudi, whose recognition and support they seek. He is an old émigré, not Russian, however, but Czech. Like the man in Banciu’s essay, he too is a victim of the Soviet regime and its imperialistic and colonial policies. A non-conformist artist and a friend of Havel’s, after the Soviet invasion of 1968 he became a dissident; under pressure from the Soviet authorities, he is forced to leave Prague and emigrates to West Berlin. Furthermore, Zhadan painstakingly emphasises some fundamental differences in the way exile is experienced by Rudi and his Russian non-predecessors. He negates the near-cliché image of an exiled poet/writer/artist as a poor and suffering individual²²: Rudi is exceptionally successful; his works are widely exhibited and sell well. Whereas many Russian émigrés dream about returning to their home country, Rudi doesn’t want to return to the Czech Republic. For him, space cannot be divided into familiar and foreign, space is: “[...] either free or not free, do you understand? I couldn’t give a shit about where I live, the only thing that is important is how I live. And here I can live any way I want” (Zhadan 2011, 26). Thus, Zhadan’s narrative strategy is basically identical to that of Russian-German writers like Kaminer, Veremej,

²¹ Except for a very brief reference to Russian-speaking men at the beginning of the first story, who are, however, said to have a Belarusian accent.

²² However, many Russian émigré writers in Berlin indeed suffered severe poverty.

and others, who banned East Central and Southeastern Europeans from their texts. He, in turn, does the same with Russian characters, excluding them from his Berlin and ignoring all memory of an earlier Russian presence.

THE CHRONOTOPE OF STAGED ENCOUNTERS: KAMINER, ŠTEGER, AND BE'ER

As already discussed above, in Wladimir Kaminer's multicultural Berlin universe the Russian protagonist hardly ever encounters East Central and Eastern Europeans. The only exception to this rule is the story "*Nie wieder Weimar*" (No More Trips to Weimar) which describes a journey the protagonist undertakes together with Polish, Czech, and Ukrainian artists to a cultural event, a "festival" in Weimar. Significantly, the encounter only takes place and the bonds between the artists are only established because a cultural institution, in this case the "Literary Society of Thuringia," *arranges* it and brings them together. The purpose of the gathering itself, a discussion on the processes of transformation in Eastern Europe, suggests that these people have something in common, an idea vehemently denied by the narrator, who emphasises that only the consumption of large quantities of vodka prevents physical violence within the group:

Invited by the *Literary Society of Thuringia*, for the first time in my life I went to Weimar in order to take part in a festival called "Transformation in Eastern Europe through Revolution and Counterrevolution". Together with two dozen other Eastern European artists, Poles, Russians, Czech, and Ukrainians. Already on our way there it became clear just how different our transformation was. Therefore, our group was a rather poisonous mixture. Only the warm Ukrainian vodka provided for a minimum of tolerance. (Kaminer 2002, 97)

If not for the effort of the "Literary Society," so we are meant to understand, an encounter such as this would never have taken place; commonalities between these individuals—such as them all being from "Eastern Europe" and having first-hand experiences of allegedly similar transformation processes—are only products of the German imagination. The highly ironic depiction of this encounter also points to another aspect, namely the opposition to an apparatus of the state (as represented

here by the Literary Society), typical for so many artists and intellectuals with first-hand experience of the Soviet (and any other) totalitarian regime(s). For Kaminer, this organised and state-sponsored gathering appears to be uncannily reminiscent of Soviet-style internationalism celebrating the brotherhood of socialist states. It is just as arbitrary and artificially imposed upon these artists, forcing them into mutual solidarity and recognition. Placing himself in the tradition of Soviet intellectuals-dissidents and staging himself (implicitly) as their descendent, Kaminer shows the reverse poetics of resistance to such programmed togetherness by foregrounding this gathering as a zone of conflict.

However, it should also be added that the creative potential inherent in conflicts in general and in this one in particular, and the potential for a new discussion that could grow out from the conflict, is not realised here. After completing the compulsory programme and their joint performances in Weimar, the protagonist and the other participants immediately go their separate ways. They do not appear to be interested in each other or in a continuation of the conflict conversation begun earlier on the train. Moreover, on his strolls through Weimar, the protagonist soon meets other Russians and spends the rest of his time in Weimar in their company, in the company of “his own people.” Thus, it can be said that Kaminer’s criticism of state-organised culture turns out to be superficial because it does not go beyond the stating of dissatisfaction with and protest against imposed togetherness and commonality. No other options are suggested, no creative means to subvert and undermine the institutional policies are devised. In short, denial and refusal are not followed by any particular strategies or actions.

In a similar way, Aleš Šteger describes his stay at the LCB in the last chapter of his Berlin book called “The House of Ghosts,” in particular, life and communication among the writers-in-residence. Instead of the animated and stimulating discussions about literature that a naïve reader might have expected, they discuss money issues and watch pornographic movies;²³ in general, the atmosphere between them is no less poisonous than the one Kaminer described:

²³ This is aimed at the French writer Michel Houellebecq, author of the famous novel *The Elementary Particles* (Šteger 2015, 120).

The presence of so many bulky writers and critics, dressed in grey suits, stirring up the language early in the morning, was terrifying. (...) The act of sipping chamomile tea and licking fingers sticky with honey (...) would shield an author's face, distorted with creative strain, from contact with some Icelandic, Argentine, or Irish grand master slumped at a neighbouring table. The place was endlessly comparative. On the ground floor were photographs of those Stockholm one-point-three-million-dolares-nortamericanos-before-tax recipients who spent only a day or night there but set the bar so high. Competition was followed by post-breakfast business chats: grants, awards, royalties, publishers, contacts (...). No wonder Heinrich Kleist shot himself right here (...). (Šteger 2015, 119–120)

Writers from Eastern Europe are depicted as grotesque characters, gargantuan alcoholics with no future. They seem to have no interest in any kind of exchange or cooperation. Instead, they avoid the house entirely and frequent the trashy local pub, where they stuff themselves with fatty food and alcoholic beverages: “[...] exuberant consumption of the bar's high-fat cooking and spirits, held in the trembling hands of many an Eastern European writer, opened the door to predictable ruin and the road to inevitable downfall” (Šteger 2015, 121). Like for Kaminer, in Šteger's depiction, the carefully arranged space and time for intercultural dialogue fail to fulfil their purpose. The irony in Šteger's depiction here resonates with that of Kaminer, while the question of whether or not Šteger's critical attitude has the same or similar roots as Kaminer's needs closer scrutiny. Taken together, these two examples could point to a tendency that many writers from former communist states actually do have in common, namely a critical attitude towards state-sponsored cultural institutions as well as their scepticism and reluctance towards orchestrated intellectual/artistic exchange as facilitated by these institutions.

The efforts to establish Berlin in general and the LCB in particular as places of intellectual exchange were also registered by non-European writers, such as the Israeli novelist Haim Be'er. On a quest to learn more about the persecution of Jews in Nazi Germany, the protagonist of his novel *Lifnei Hamakom* (2007), an Israeli writer and alter ego of the author, visits Berlin in the year 2006 and stays at the LCB, the same year in which Jaroslav Rudiš and many other East Central Europeans writers

also lived there (see footnote 15).²⁴ There he meets the latter, Mojca Kumerdej, and Tadeusz Dąbrowski. Unlike in Kaminer's and Šteger's texts, a serious (and friendly) dialogue does indeed take place between them, but they never talk about literary issues or their countries' past. The (only?) ground, more or less neutral terrain on which they can all meet to have an earnest and relaxed conversation, is something else entirely, namely Germany's Nazi past. But even on this issue, as Be'er makes clear, the differences and the tensions between them are great and no common position is ever achieved. However, on the ruins of the past, an attempt to imagine a future is undertaken by Rudiš. Strikingly, this future is founded on a sense of commonality, if not even solidarity. The writers present are compared to the sons of Noah and thus constitute something of a brotherhood; they are joined by a common language (English), equally foreign to all of them, and a common task:

Jaroslav (Rudiš–MF) said that here we were like Noah's sons, who, after the flood was over and the water sank, were sitting at the lake next to Mountain Ararat. Like them, we have one and the same tongue and language since none of us were native speakers of English. And who knows, maybe at that moment, without realising it, we were constructing the foundations for a new Tower of Babel (translation is mine–MF.) (Be'er 2007, 73)

Considering that the biblical story ends with the punishment of the people, the idea of the construction of a new Tower of Babel is hardly a truly utopian one, but even so, the other writers are reluctant to share in Rudiš's vision. Dąbrowski is said to be "not happy at all with the alliance his Czech colleague was pulling him into" (Ibid.), while Kumerdej openly disagrees with Rudiš and claims that he is mistaken. Ultimately, even a most tentative attempt to establish commonality fails. Even among East Central Europeans (with no Russians present), the conversation thus ends, as it very often does, with open disagreement and no prospect of reconciliation.

CONCLUSION

As of today, three elements of the "Berlin text" in contemporary world literature appear to be of utmost significance: 1. The (nearly mandatory)

²⁴ Whereas Be'er himself was never a writer-in-residence there.

depiction of the city as a multicultural and tolerant universe, a meeting place for people from all over the world. 2. Therefore, the narrative structure of the texts is most frequently based upon encounters between the protagonist(s) and other characters in this universe. 3. The encounters themselves are depicted either as spontaneous or as prearranged and organised by a third party, most frequently an official cultural institution.

The question central to my investigation is that of the choices authors make in regard to the inhabitants of this universe. In other words: whom are the protagonists allowed to encounter, who is relevant, who is welcomed into this Berlin space, who is made visible and heard—and who is not? In the texts by Russian-German writers, people from East Central and Eastern Europe present a significant lacuna. In the perception of Russian migrants (authors and protagonists), who register—most naturally—the presence of people from Turkey, Africa, Asia, etc. Poles, Czechs, Ukrainians, and Belarusians are insignificant Others that are rarely seen and encountered; no serious relationships to these are entertained, the few individuals who are mentioned are ridiculed and denigrated. The attempts of German cultural organisations to encourage dialogue and exchange are resisted, any kind of similarity (assumed or real) between the two groups is refused.

This exclusion is further complemented by a very particular mode of appreciation of city space. The descriptions of the Russian presence in Berlin, often containing aggressive undertones, amount to a (renewed) occupation of the city. Similar to the way the Soviet Union looked to colonise Eastern Europe, impose its ideologies, and leave an everlasting imprint upon its neighbours (Moore 2001, 111–128), former Soviet citizens look to “Russianise” Berlin and mark it as a decidedly Russian city. Ironically, the most enduring imprint the Soviet state ever made, it would appear, was that upon its own citizens, who now transfer and resume, spatial and temporal distance to their country of origin notwithstanding, Soviet practices of colonisation to the diaspora.

In turn, East Central and Eastern European writers like Banciu, Rudiš, or Zhadan are acutely aware both of Soviet colonial history and of today’s Russian migrants’ colonial desires. I therefore suggest reading their texts about Berlin as postcolonial in a twofold sense: they imagine a free life in a tolerant and multicultural place and, at the same time, criticise the former colonial power, very much in accordance with Salman Rushdie’s famous dictum “The Empire writes back to the centre” (Rushdie 1982). Moreover, they are well aware that in spite of the demise of the Soviet

Empire, traces and residues of the colonial “mindset” still survive in Russian migrants’ texts and attitudes. Unsurprisingly, German efforts to establish a dialogue and instal a sense of solidarity between the parties are met with fierce resistance by them too. Resistance to the establishment of any kind of similarity between the former colonisers and the colonised (e.g., “transformation processes”) is more than understandable. When and where a real dialogue, an exchange not orchestrated by third parties and unburdened by their expectations will take place and whether it will take place at all remains to be seen.²⁵

REFERENCES

- Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin. 1989. *The empire writes back: Theory and practice in post-colonial literatures*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Bakhtin, Mikhail. 1981. *The dialogic imagination: Four essays*, trans. C. Emerson and M. Holquist. Austin: University of Austin Press.
- Banciu, Carmen-Francesca. 2002. *Berlin ist mein Paris. Geschichten aus der Hauptstadt*. Berlin: PalmArt Press. English edition: Banciu, C. 2016. *Berlin is my Paris. Stories from the Capital* (trans: Mancini, E.). Berlin: PalmArt Press.
- Be’er, Haim. 2007. *Lifnei Hamakom. Tel-Aviv: Sifria Le’Am*. German edition: Be’er, Chaim. 2010. *Bebelplatz* (trans: Birkenhauer, A.). Berlin: Berlin-Verlag.
- Bhabha, Homi. 1994. *The location of culture*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Braun, Stuart. 2015. *City of exiles. Berlin from the outside in*. Berlin: Noctua Press.
- Breinig, Helmbrecht, Jürgen. Gebhardt, and Klaus Lösch. 2002. *Multiculturalism in contemporary societies: Perspectives on difference and transdifference*. Erlangen: Universitäts- Bibliothek.
- Ćosić, Bora. 2001. *Die Toten. Das Berlin meiner Gedichte*. Berlin: DAAD, Berliner Künstlerprogramm.
- Fachinger, Petra. 2001. *Rewriting Germany from the margins: “Other” German literature of the 1980s and 1990s*. Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press.
- Finkelstein, Miriam. 2015. A common place, a contested space: Reciprocal representations of Russian and Eastern European migrants in their Berlin narratives. *Zeitschrift Für Slavische Philologie* 70: 365–399.
- Furman, Yelena. 2011. Hybrid selves, hybrid texts: Embracing the hyphen in Russian-American fiction. *Slavic and East European Journal* 55: 19–37.

²⁵ This chapter was written before the begin of Russia’s full scale war against Ukraine on 24 February 2022 and therefore could not take more recent developments into consideration.

- Furman, Yelena. 2015. Telling their hybrid stories: Three recent works of Russian-American fiction. *Slavic and East European Journal* 59: 116–124.
- Gavrilov, Andrei. 2002. Berlinskaia fleita. *Oktiabr'* 2: 3–27.
- Gilman, Sandor L. 2006. *Multiculturalism and the Jews*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Isherwood, Christopher. 1960 [1939]. *Goodbye to Berlin*. London: Hogarth Press.
- Kaminer, Wladimir. 2000. *Russendisko*. München: Goldmann. English edition: Kaminer, W. 2002. *Russian Disco* (trans: Hulse, M.). London: Ebury Press.
- Kaufman, Kat. 2015. *Superposition*. Hamburg: Hoffmann&Campe.
- Klekh, Igor. 2004. Krokodily ne vidiat snov. In *Povesti. Rasskazy*, 231–281. Moscow: OLMA Press.
- Kołodziejczyk, Dorota, and Cristina Șandru. 2012. Introduction: On colonialism, communism and East-Central Europe—Some reflections. *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 48: 113–116.
- Lefebvre, Henri. 1974. *La production de l'espace*. Paris: Anthropos. English edition: Lefebvre, H. 1991. *The Production of Space* (trans: Nicholson-Smith, D.). Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Martynova, Olga. 2010. *Sogar papageien überleben uns*. Graz and Wien: Droschl.
- Mickiewicz, Iwona. 2011. *Konstruktionen im Haus oder Iwan Iwanytsch am Fenster. Bagatellen und Novellen*. Berlin: Hanani.
- Moore, David C. 2001. Is the post- in postcolonial the post- in post-Soviet? Towards a global postcolonial critique. *Proceedings of the Modern Language Association* 116: 111–128.
- Rudiš, Jaroslav. 2002. *Nebe pod Berlínem*. Praha: Labyrint. German edition: Rudiš, Jaroslav. 2004. *Der Himmel unter Berlin* (trans: Profousová, E.). Berlin: Rowohlt Berlin Verlag.
- Rushdie, Salman. 1982. The empire writes back with a vengeance. *The Times*, July 3.
- Senderovich, Sasha. 2015. Scenes of encounter: The “Soviet Jew” in fiction by Russian Jewish writers in America. *Prooftexts: A Journal of Jewish Literary History* 35: 98–132.
- Šteger, Aleš. 2015. *Berlin*, trans. B. Henry, A. Covač, and F. Gander. Denver: Counterpath.
- Tlostanova, Madina. 2012. Postsocialist ≠ postcolonial? On post-Soviet imaginary and global coloniality. *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 48: 130–142.
- Toporov, Vladimir. 1995. Peterburg i „Peterburgskii tekst russkoi literatury.” In *Mif. Ritual. Simvol. Obraz. Issledovaniia v oblasti mifopoeticheskogo*, 259–367. Moskva: Kul'tura.
- Uffelman, Dirk. 2009. Paradoxe der jüngsten nichtslavischen Literatur slavischer Migranten. In *Ost-West-Problematik in den europäischen Kulturen und*

- Literaturen. Ausgewählte Aspekte. Problematika Východ – Západ v evropských kulturách a literaturách. Vybrané aspekty*, ed. Helena Ulbrechtová and Siegfried Ulbrecht, 601–630. Dresden: Neisse.
- Ugrešić, Dubravka. 2002. *Muzej bezuvjetne predaje*. Zagreb and Beograd: Konzor/Samizdat B92. English edition: Ugrešić, Dubravka. 1998. *The museum of unconditional surrender* (trans: Hawkesworth, C.). London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson.
- Veremej, Nellja. 2013. *Berlin liegt im Osten*. Salzburg and Wien: Jung und Jung.
- Wanner, Adrian. 2011. *Out of Russia: Fictions of a new translingual diaspora*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.
- Young, Robert J.C.. 2013. World literature and language anxiety. In *Approaches to world literature*, ed. Joachim Küpper, 27–39. Berlin: De Gruyter.
- Zhadan, Serhiy. 2011. *Big Mac ta inshi istorii*. Kharkiv: Folio. German edition: Zhadan, Serhij. 2011. *Big Mac. Geschichten* (trans: Dathe, C.) Berlin: Suhrkamp.

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

