

MOSCOW


A JOURNEY ACROSS EURASIA

This past summer fourteen students participated in the Columbia Global Scholars Program Summer Workshop on “Contemporary Cities of Eurasia: Berlin, Moscow, Ulaanbaatar, Beijing.” The course was a joint collaboration of the Harriman Institute, Weatherhead East Asian Institute, the Office of Global Programs, and the Columbia Global Center, East Asia. In four weeks the group traveled from Germany to China, exploring the theme of socialist and post-socialist cities. The course was led by Catharine Nepomnyashchy, professor of Russian literature and culture and chair of the Barnard Slavic Department, and Charles Armstrong, Korea Foundation Professor of Korean Studies in the Social Sciences. They were assisted by Edward Tjerman, currently term assistant professor in the Barnard Slavic Department. I was able to join them for part of the journey.



medieval city made up of ring roads and narrow lanes that Stalin punctuated with massive highways, Moscow does not always yield itself kindly to pedestrians. I arrive in Moscow ahead of the group and set off in search of our hostel. Although the hostel is close to the metro stop, no clear path reveals itself. Eventually, I find that if you travel through the tunnel of an underpass where the eternal babushka sells wild strawberries, ascend a flight of stairs, traverse the edge of an elevated highway, and descend another set of stairs, you will have effectively crossed the road. I'll later be reminded of this oblique route (and others) when a woman in Yekaterinburg quips, “In Russia, there are no roads, only directions.”

For dissident writers in the Soviet Union, the direction to go was west. In Moscow we have tea with Vladimir Voinovich, who emigrated to West Germany in 1980 and published his satirical works abroad. He tells us about how he helped to smuggle a microfilm copy of Vasily Grossman's novel *Life and Fate* from the Soviet Union to the West. But we are heading east. We are to travel by train to Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia, with a stop in Yekaterinburg in the Urals. In 1891, work began on the Trans-



BEIJING

BY
ROBYN
MILLER
JENSEN

View from the Trans-Siberian Railroad en route from Ulan Ude, Russia, to Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia. Photos by Robyn Miller Jensen.

Siberian Railway to connect the two Russian capitals with the Far East. While in Moscow, we meet with a delegation from Russian Railways, who have graciously secured our group tickets for the train. One of their plans for the future includes building a tunnel from Russia to Alaska to create a railway system that would connect Eurasia to America.

What is Eurasia and does it exist? Spanning two continents, Russia has often faced the question of whether it is European, Asian, or some third term that collapses the two. To insist on the difference between Europe and Asia suddenly became an ideological imperative for Russia during the westernizing reforms of the early eighteenth century. The Asiatic part of Russia was to be recast as the colonial periphery. But while other European empires were physically separated from their colonies by bodies of water, no distinct demarcation existed between the two landmasses. The geographer Vasily Tatishchev proposed that the border be drawn at the Ural Mountains, a natural boundary that lends a rather neat division to Russia.

We will cross the Urals to reach Yekaterinburg. After our first full day and night on the train, many of the students get up early in hopes of catching a glimpse of the obelisk at the

Europe-Asia border. They've been reading about it in Valentin Kataev's production novel *Time, Forward!* (1931–32) set in Magnitogorsk, an industrial city in the Urals. Suddenly I hear the boys chanting "ASIA! ASIA!" in the compartment next to mine. We've crossed the border. The others are disappointed that they missed it. But what has really changed? On either side stretches the same unending swath of trees, quietly unaware of a cartographer's markings.

In Yekaterinburg, we ask Lyudmila, who has offered to accompany us around her native city, what she thinks of the term *Evraziya* (Eurasia). I prefer *Aziopa*, she jokes, conflating the Russian words *Aziya* and *Evropa* in a way that belies the absurdity of these labels. We are technically now in Asia, but Yekaterinburg feels like Moscow, only more relaxed. It is a city famous for its Constructivist architecture, for being the site of the Romanov family's execution, and for the Ural Machine-Building Plant *Uralmash* that made Sverdlovsk, as it was then called, a closed city under the Soviets. At dinner, meanwhile, Lyudmila and her friends boast that Yekaterinburg has one of the shortest metro lines in the world. Their metro was opened in 1991, just a few months before the collapse of the Soviet



Clockwise from left: John Junho Kim peeks his head out the train window to look at the steppe; Mary Grigsby and Gabrielle Dressler in Gorkhi-Terelj National Park, Mongolia; students explore the Beijing hutong with Professors Catharine Nepomnyashchy and Charles Armstrong (front, far right), photo by Edward Tyerman.

Union. When we were in Moscow, the students had marveled at how the socialist realist statues and frescoes still remain part of the metro, that people daily encounter these icons of an ideology from a previous era.

Across the nine time zones of Russia, all trains run on Moscow time. And so even though our train is scheduled to leave Yekaterinburg at 2:00 a.m., this translates to an actual departure time of four in the morning. With time to spare and the prospect of not bathing for four days on the Trans-Siberian, we make a late-night visit to the banya. The banya holds a special place in Russian culture. *The Primary Chronicle* gives us one of the earliest descriptions of these bathhouses. In the first century, as legend has it, Andrew the Apostle journeyed as far north as contemporary Novgorod, where he observed the bathing rituals of the Slavs. Astounded by their practice of sweating in the steam room, beating each other with branches, and then dousing themselves with cold water, he remarked, “They make of the act not a mere washing but a veritable torment.”¹ The banya we visit resembles an old-fashioned wooden hut, but the complimentary leopard-print polyester towels are an undoubtedly post-Soviet touch. In the

steam room, we find the notorious birch branches. Dipped in warm water, the branches make a hushing, windswept sound as they hit your back—not at all the torment that Saint Andrew described.

Back on the train, the days begin to blend together. When discussion sessions aren’t being held in our small sleeping compartments, we can be found in the dining car where the view is better. The woman in charge spends all day watching Russian films on her laptop. It’s hard to imagine the eye not being drawn to the scene framed by the windows. I can’t even explain why—in many ways, the landscape is irrepressibly monotonous for much of the journey, and yet the eye wants more. One morning we wake up to a view of Lake Baikal. We travel along the shore for hours, and I think that I will never tire of the sight of the soft gray mist shrouding the water. When the train veers south at Ulan-Ude toward Mongolia, the landscape experiences a drastic change. If you peek your head out the window, you can see the front of the train cutting south through the steppe.

After four days, we step off the train in Ulaanbaatar where two dusty vans await to take us to the dormitory. Emblazoned on

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Students walk toward the Cathedral of Christ the Savior in Moscow.

the rear window is a motto about “VIP style” that ends with the line, “We’re trying to make your dignity more LUXURIOUS.” It is the kind of enigmatic message that only Google Translate could achieve, and yet when I read it I can’t help but think that it baldly reveals the mechanism at work in most consumer capitalist marketing techniques. After the revolution in 1990, Mongolia adopted a market economy, which has dramatically changed its nomadic culture. And as is often the case in times of transition, the city is being transformed to reflect Mongolia’s current vision of its history. When we visit Sükhbaatar Square in the center of the city, we learn that the toponym is currently the subject of debate. Damdin Sükhbaatar, one of the leaders of the People’s Revolution of 1921, with the help of the Red Army, ended the Chinese occupation of Mongolia. But now, after the democratic revolution of 1990 that ended socialism in Mongolia, there is a push to rename the square after Chingis Khan. A massive statue of the founder of the Mongol Empire now sits outside the parliament opposite the statue of Sükhbaatar astride his rearing horse. Just as Moscow once again embraces its imperial past, so too, it would seem, does Ulaanbaatar.

From Ulaanbaatar to Beijing we fly over the Gobi Desert. The reddish sands of the desert disappear as we approach Beijing and the thick smog obscures our view. We take a bus tour of part of the city, but it is nearly impossible to see anything at a distance. It is only later on an improbably clear day that we see how mountains surround us. We visit the studio of the conceptual artist Xu Bing, whose work explores the collision of traditional

Chinese culture with the transnational world of global capitalism. In a series called “Square Word Calligraphy,” Xu Bing uses the traditional brush strokes of Chinese calligraphy to write in English. What first appear to be Chinese characters are actually English phrases. In apprehending his work, there is something like the sudden revelation of the mountains circling the city, of a veil being lifted.

Walking around Beijing, I am reminded of Moscow. The city was once a maze of alleyways, called *hutong*, which connected the traditional courtyard residences. Since 1990, however, these *hutong* neighborhoods are rapidly being razed. But you can still occasionally slip into the narrow lanes hidden behind the grid made up of highways, skyscrapers, and a Tiananmen Square that is no longer a public space (you have to queue for hours to gain entry). When Walter Benjamin visited Moscow in 1926, he remarked: “There is one thing curious about the streets: the Russian village plays hide-and-seek in them.”² In the *hutong*, just as in the Russian *dvor* or courtyard, the life of the village lies tucked away from the din of the modern city. □

¹ Serge A. Zenkovsky, ed. and trans., *Medieval Russia’s Epics, Chronicles, and Tales* (New York: Meridian, 1974), 47.

² Walter Benjamin, *Moscow Diary*, trans. Richard Sieburth, *October 35* (Winter 1985): 67.