IVAN GRIGOREV

# THE CONTINENT

COMPLETE EDITION

Ivan Grigorev

# The Continent. Complete Edition

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# From the Author

I was born in nineteen eighty-five in Kaliningrad, in a country that no longer exists, and in a city that, after its disappearance, found itself in a rather strange position. The Kaliningrad region remained a separate piece of Russia on the Baltic Sea, cut off from the country's main territory by other states, and if you travel from here to Russia by land, you have to cross borders. As a child, of course, I knew nothing about exclaves, geopolitics, or the consequences of the collapse of empires; for me there was only Kaliningrad, the cold Baltic Sea, Poland and Lithuania across the border, and Moscow somewhere very, very far away.

My father worked as an electrical engineer at the Yantar shipyard. Before that he had graduated from the Leningrad Electrotechnical Institute; there had been about thirty people in his cohort, five had made it to graduation, and my father was one of them. There was a thoroughly Soviet sequence to this, which I understood much later. The state educated a person, gave him a profession, then sent him where it was needed, and from then on life was to a large extent clear in advance. My father was an engineer, worked at a shipyard, and could hardly have imagined that one day what would disappear would be neither his profession nor even the shipyard itself, but the arrangement in which all this made sense.

My mother worked as a railway carriage attendant and traveled to Moscow, and thanks to these trips I acquired toys that were modern at the time. Today it is rather difficult to explain to a child why anyone had to travel twelve hundred kilometers for an ordinary toy, but back then no one found it strange. Moscow existed somewhere far away and at the same time occasionally arrived at our home with my mother in the form of a toy car or some other thing that was not available in Kaliningrad. That was why I waited especially eagerly for my mother to return from a trip, although I had no feeling of poverty then.

In fact, I cannot apply the word “poverty” to my Soviet childhood, although by today’s standards we lived more than modestly. At home there was a Horizont television, a Sviyaga refrigerator, and a few other necessary things, and that almost exhausted the inventory of our possessions. About fifteen of us would come out into the courtyard, sometimes twenty, and there was not one among us who had anything at all that would allow him to consider himself rich. Wealth was measured by who had a good ball, whose father had managed to get boards for the hockey rink, and who had been brought a toy from Moscow that the others had not yet seen.

Kaliningrad was, after all, a maritime city, so some of the children’s parents went to sea and returned from voyages with things and food that the rest of us did not have. Someone would bring unusual sweets, chewing gum, a can of some foreign drink, or an object whose name we did not even know, and for several days it became the main event in the courtyard. Everything was examined, touched, tasted, and discussed, and then something else appeared and attention shifted. Any foreign thing was perceived a little differently then, because with it a piece of the world we ourselves had hardly seen entered an ordinary courtyard.

We had nothing much, but for a long time the thought of not having enough never entered my mind: everyone around us lived in roughly the same way, and there was almost nothing to compare it with. The difference became noticeable later, when one boy got a Dendy, another a Sega, someone’s father brought something back from sea, someone had good sneakers, and someone could already boast of his own tape recorder. It was then that an understanding gradually emerged that families lived differently.

Our parents worked, and today those words sound almost empty, but behind them stood an arrangement that I never saw again afterward. Work was not only a place to earn money but a part of the whole of life, because housing, the queue for it, kindergarten, holiday vouchers, job assignments, and a great many other things that now seem strange were tied to it. Our parents did not look for work or fear losing it; they simply

went there. The state was rigid, cumbersome, and often indifferent to the individual, but the system itself seemed permanent, and almost no one around us lived with the feeling that everything might disappear tomorrow.

Then little flags appeared with two words we learned before we understood them—glasnost and perestroika. Adults pronounced them with hope, and we repeated them after them and, of course, did not understand that everything around us had already begun to change.

The country disappeared, and we remained in the same place, only the place itself suddenly became different. From the western edge of a large country, Kaliningrad turned into a Russian island between Europe and the rest of Russia, and geography rather quickly became a way of earning a living. Poland and Lithuania were close by, Germany a little farther away, while the greater part of Russia now began beyond several state borders. Across those borders flowed everything on which money could be made: food, clothes, appliances, cars, spare parts, and things that cost more here than there.

People traveled to Poland and Lithuania for food, frankfurters, sausages, and small household items, and a shopping trip to another country gradually became something entirely ordinary. Used cars were driven in from Germany, first for personal use, then for sale, and then this turned into a business of its own, around which car delivery drivers, sellers, mechanics, transporters, and a multitude of people whose professions no one had needed only recently made their living. Cars went through Kaliningrad onward into Russia, goods from Europe moved along roughly the same route, and the region fairly quickly learned to earn money from its own separation.

The sea remained. For a long time the Kaliningrad region lived on fish, ports, ships, and processing, and also on amber, of which there was so much here that a separate world existed around it. Amber was extracted officially and unofficially, dug where it was permitted and where it was forbidden, sold, resold, and taken abroad, and alongside the legal industry there existed another life, which everyone knew about but which

was almost nowhere formally registered. In the nineties, a great deal worked that way.

After that time moved quickly, and we grew up along with the first things we could buy for ourselves: Love Is chewing gum, inserts, Turbo, cheap toys, and everything that gradually filled the markets. We kept the inserts, traded them, lost them in games, and sometimes fought over them. Adults at this time were already occupied with quite different things, because stalls had sprung up along the roadsides, markets had appeared, and alongside them came people who brought things in, resold them, and were called by a new word, “entrepreneurs.”

They stopped paying my father, and no one made any particular announcement that this was how things would be now. His wages failed to arrive for one month, then for several more, and then no one really kept count anymore. A man whom the state had educated, given a profession, and sent to work as an engineer at a shipyard continued to get up in the morning and go to work, only he no longer received any money for that work. This was probably my first real explanation of how rules could come to an end without warning.

We lived on what we grew in the vegetable garden, and I still remember well the taste of those potatoes. No one around us called what was happening a catastrophe, because so many people lived that way. When one person has no money, he begins to think that the problem lies with him, but when an entire factory has no money, it becomes ordinary life.

They were building a bridge across our river; they began it in one country and abandoned it in another, and it stood unfinished for as long as I can remember. For adults it was yet another unfinished construction project; for us it was a road to the other bank, a place to play, and at the same time a real border. Our neighborhood was called Ostrov, and the neighborhood on the other side was called Baza, and relations between the two banks were sometimes settled right there on the bridge.

I remember fights between neighborhoods, when about a hundred people gathered on each side and two crowds advanced toward one another.

People had clubs, brass knuckles, stones, and anything they could bring with them, while we were small and watched from a distance, because we were still too young to take part ourselves. I remember people falling from the bridge, I remember the two crowds moving toward each other, and what seems strangest now is that back then it was not perceived as anything unbelievable. It was frightening, it was interesting, adults forbade us to go there, but on the whole it all fitted into the life around us: today Ostrov fought Baza, tomorrow something else happened.

On ordinary days we climbed across that bridge ourselves to the other bank, making our way along beams without railings above the water, and knew where we could put a foot and where it was better not to, and this was dangerous, forbidden, and entirely ordinary. And across the river, above the city, stood another unfinished structure, only much larger: the House of Soviets. They had begun building it in the early seventies as the region's main administrative building, brought it as far as an enormous concrete shell, but never managed to finish it. The Soviet Union disappeared, the officials did not move in, and the building remained standing in the middle of the city for decades. We climbed into that too, of course. For adults it was Kaliningrad's main long-unfinished building project; for us it was simply another place we could climb into, and we went up through the floors, walked along empty corridors, and looked at the city through the window openings. None of us thought of it as some symbol of the era: there was an enormous empty building, it was possible to get inside, and so we went there.

Later other building sites were added to such places, no longer Soviet ones. Someone would start building, then go bankrupt or disappear, and the concrete shell would remain standing. We climbed all over them, knew the rusty reinforcement bars, the empty openings, the stairways that led nowhere, and at the time I saw nothing special in this, because it was all part of the city.

By ninety-six we already knew everything about gangsters that children probably did not need to know: who was in charge in the city, whose car was better left alone, whom it was best not to get involved with. The coach

at our sports club drove us to summer camp in his SUV, and no one particularly asked how the coach came to have an SUV, because he took children to the sea, treated us well, and the rest was considered none of our business.

Then the differences became more noticeable among us too. Someone got a Dendy, and half the courtyard could sit in one apartment in front of the television, passing the controller to one another, and then a Sega appeared, and that already seemed something entirely new. Today a child can play over the internet with a person on the other side of the world, while our entire network consisted of a few boys on the floor in front of one screen.

In ninety-eight I got my first cassette recorder, a perfectly ordinary one, and my first cassette was the band Kino, Viktor Tsoi, and I remember this well. Music was obtained differently then: people bought cassettes, copied them from one another, lent them out to listen to, and sometimes did not return them. Each such tape could have its own history, and to this day some songs are associated in my mind not with the music itself, but with a particular courtyard, room, tape recorder, and age.

By this time the courtyard was divided not only by neighborhood, but also by what you listened to, how you dressed, and whom you went around with. There were punks and there were rappers, and they could often be identified by their clothes, because the rappers were readily given away by their long, wide trousers. I did not particularly belong to either, but all this was happening around us constantly.

When one group met another, first the punks might beat up the rappers, then the rappers would gather and go to beat up the punks, then someone would bring acquaintances from another courtyard, and by then no one really remembered how it had all started. Music was only a pretext, and it was much more important to understand whom you went around with and who would come to stand up for you if something happened.

Somewhere around ninety-eight or ninety-nine I began to notice another side of the courtyard too. Some of my friends began drinking and

smoking, swearing had long since ceased to be something forbidden, some were sniffing glue, and among the boys with whom we had been running around together only recently there were now some who were already beginning to drink themselves into serious trouble. Back then this too was not seen as anything exceptional, because beer was an ordinary part of teenage life, smoking was considered a sign of growing up, no one thought much about health, and we ourselves drank beer and treated ourselves as though none of it would ever affect anything.

The street also brought us up in its own way. On the way home from school your money could be taken from you; there were fights at school, fights in the courtyards, fights at discos, one neighborhood went against another, and sometimes it was enough to look at someone the wrong way or give the wrong answer. We learned fairly early to understand where it was better to take another route, whom it was best not to look in the eye, when you needed to answer back and when it was better to leave, but none of this formed a separate picture of social distress in our minds, because we knew nothing else. The unfinished bridge, Ostrov and Baza, fights, cigarettes, cheap beer, abandoned building sites, the possibility of losing your money on the way home from school, and an older boy you were better off avoiding—all this was simply our ordinary life.

Sport saved me in many ways. I took up rowing, and by the age of fifteen I was so absorbed in it that I had a routine, training sessions, people who demanded something of you, and a clear goal. I did not think then that sport was saving me from anything; I enjoyed doing it, but now, when I remember where some of the boys from my courtyard gradually drifted, I understand that it mattered much more than it seemed to me at the time.

At fifteen I moved to a parachuting club and began jumping with a parachute, and there was a logic of its own here too. There was already plenty of danger around, but parachuting was different in that everything there depended on rules: you had to learn, listen to the instructor, know what to do in every situation, and the risk was real but understandable.

It was precisely then that the House of Soviets acquired another purpose for some of the boys. They climbed to the top with parachutes, filled the

canopy with air beforehand, and jumped down with the parachute already open, and now the very thought seems madness, but back then it fitted quite well into the life around us. In a city where children climbed across an unfinished bridge, neighborhoods met in mass brawls, and an enormous administrative building stood empty for decades, such things were perceived quite differently.

Sport did not make me more upright than the others or remove me from that environment, because we drank beer just as they did, thought just as little about health, and grew up on the same streets. I simply had one more place I had to go to, a training session, the water, a parachute, the next jump, and sometimes that is already enough for life to take a slightly different direction.

By the end of the decade the president had become a character in a joke, heavy, drinking, looking less and less like someone who controlled anything, and on the thirty-first of December ninety-nine he said goodbye. The phrase “I am tired, I am leaving,” which the whole country later remembered, he did not say; he simply said “I am leaving,” and popular memory supplied the rest. Then Putin came, and another era began, and my peers entered it almost grown up.

In the two-thousands Kaliningrad began to change again, although for a long time it continued to live on the momentum of the nineties. Cars were still driven in from Germany, goods moved from Europe into Russia, people traveled to Poland and Lithuania to shop, the ports worked, the sea continued to feed the region, and amber still fed those who knew how to remain close to that business. Europe was never an abstract concept for us; it began a few dozen kilometers from home, and the difference between the two worlds could be seen not on television, but by going to buy groceries and returning that evening.

I graduated from a maritime college and then enrolled in two institutes at once, and I did so not because I knew what I would become, but precisely because I did not. It was not only a matter of my own confusion: my generation as a whole had been given a rather poor explanation of what

normal life was now supposed to look like—the old points of reference no longer worked, and no one had really provided new ones.

All the former promises had been made to our parents and revoked before their eyes. My father did exactly what the former system had offered him: he received a serious technical education, became an engineer, and went to work at a shipyard; he fulfilled his part completely, and then it turned out that the system itself was already living by different rules. For my generation this was a lesson stronger than any words, because we looked not at what adults taught us, but at what had happened to the adults themselves. We were offered almost nothing in return; the most visible figures of the new era were the gangster and the businessman, and sometimes the difference between them was not obvious at all, both relied above all on themselves, on connections, on strength, on the ability to make arrangements, while anyone who wanted some third path had to look for it himself. That is probably why I enrolled in two institutes at once, not because I had too many plans, but because I did not have one clear one.

My generation lived through several different countries while hardly changing where we lived. First there was the Soviet Union, where much was difficult, inconvenient, and unfree, but the system itself seemed permanent; our parents knew where they would work all their lives, understood what they could count on, and built their lives on the assumption that the existing rules would not disappear tomorrow. Then came the nineties, and together with freedom came the discovery that the state could practically stop fulfilling a significant part of what only yesterday had been considered its duty, savings lost their value, factories continued to operate but stopped paying people, familiar professions lost their former value, and order increasingly depended not on the law but on who was stronger, who had more connections, and who could make an arrangement. In the two-thousands everyday life was once again filled with the presence of the authorities; money appeared, roads, shopping centers, mortgages, decent cars, the opportunity to travel, and a feeling that the hardest period was over and that now, at last, one could build a

life for at least ten or twenty years ahead, but this arrangement too proved not to be the final one.

Within a single lifetime my generation had to discover several times: the rules change faster than a person can rebuild his own life. Our parents' experience became our experience, although the circumstances were already different.

That is probably why I remember so well the unfinished bridge between Ostrov and Baza and the House of Soviets standing across the river. As a child, of course, I saw no symbol in them, because one was simply a place we crossed to reach the other bank and where the neighborhoods met to fight each other, while the other was an enormous empty building we could climb into and look down at the city. Later some of the boys from the parachuting club began jumping from it with parachutes, and even that did not seem entirely unbelievable then. Only many years later did I understand how precisely these two structures corresponded to the time in which we grew up. The bridge was supposed to connect two banks, the House of Soviets was supposed to become the region's main administrative building, and the state had invested enormous sums of money and human labor in both projects, but the state ended before its building works were finished. The people who designed and built them surely assumed that one day the bridge would open, officials would appear in the offices, and the city would continue to live according to the intended plan, but the plan disappeared, the concrete remained, and the next generation was already using these structures in whatever way suited it.

This is probably one of the distinguishing features of my generation. We became accustomed fairly early to living among things that someone had begun but not finished, among rules that someone had established and then revoked, among institutions that formally continued to exist although they already worked quite differently from what was written. That is why we learned not to count too much on ready-made structures and to adapt quickly to new circumstances. When wages stopped being paid, our parents grew potatoes; when familiar goods disappeared, people

went to Poland and Lithuania for them; and when the official economy offered no opportunity to earn a living, some drove cars in from Germany, some traded at a market, some went to sea, some dug amber, and some became those very entrepreneurs whose meaning we did not yet really understand. The state changed, laws changed, money changed, borders appeared where there had been none before, and a person still had to get up in the morning, feed the family, and decide what to do next.

That is precisely why, for me, this book is not an attempt to prove that one era was good and another bad. The Soviet Union gave a person stability and at the same time deprived him of an enormous amount of freedom; the nineties gave freedom and at the same time showed how little it is worth when there are no functioning institutions nearby; the two-thousands brought back a sense of order and the ability to plan for the future, but over time it became clear that this order too had its price and its limits. What interests me much more is something else: why, under entirely different political systems, leaders, economic models, and official ideologies, Russia arrives time and again at a situation in which a person is left alone before the state and does not understand where to go, who is responsible for the decision made, or whether there is anyone at all who is responsible for it.

I look for an answer to this question neither in slogans nor in an attempt to find a single person to blame for one hundred and twenty-nine years, because there is no such person. What interests me is the arrangement itself, how a decision is made, how it is passed down, what happens to it at the level of an official, a court, the police, an enterprise, a hospital, or any other state institution, and why at some stage responsibility almost always dissolves between offices. That is why this book will contain not only presidents, wars, revolutions, and reforms, but also a queue, a certificate, a perfunctory official reply, an engineer who continues to go to the factory although they have stopped paying him, an unfinished house of power, and an unfinished bridge across which children still make their way to the other bank.

There is no verdict here and no acquittal, because in one hundred and twenty-nine years the country has changed too many times for everything to be explained by one person, one ideology, or one historical mistake. Here is an attempt to take this structure apart and see what makes certain mechanisms reproduce themselves again and again as names, borders, money, leaders, and state symbols change. I do not expect anything to change after this book, but I want at least to understand why several generations of people time and again begin building a life within one system, become accustomed to its rules, fulfill their part of the contract, and then discover that the contract has once again been rewritten without their participation.

# Prologue. The Elevator

The elevator in this building was installed in the autumn of thirty-six, in a new, department-owned building with high ceilings and a broad staircase, where apartments were given to engineers, military officers, and employees of the people's commissariats, people for whom everything had worked out. The elevator was considered a luxury and a source of legitimate pride: a light oak cabin, a mirror, a polished brass handle.

A year later the residents had learned to listen to it. It started below with a muffled jolt, then a steady hum began in the shaft, by which the floors could be counted: third, fourth, fifth. People lay in the dark and counted, and if the sound passed by and faded higher up, a person breathed out and went on staring at the ceiling for a long time. If the elevator stopped on his floor, the longest minute imaginable began, because the footsteps on the landing might turn left, toward the neighbors, or they might turn right.

By day these same people went to work, submitted plans, laughed in smoking rooms, and raised their hands at meetings, and by night they listened to the elevator. No one spoke of it to anyone and no one admitted to it, but in a building where no one was guilty of anything, many had a small suitcase packed and ready with warm underwear, rusks, and soap. The neighbors' experience showed that there was no time allowed for packing.

A railway engineer lived in an apartment on the fifth floor with his wife and daughter, and in February thirty-eight the elevator stopped on the fifth. He left in what he was wearing; his wife thrust the small suitcase into his hands in the doorway, and the escorting guard did not object. A month later the family was moved to a smaller room one floor down, because the building belonged to a department and floor space was allotted to those who worked. An employee of a neighboring directorate moved into the vacated apartment, a man neither wicked nor mean, who had spent four years in the housing queue and whose turn had finally

come. He tried not to think about the former resident, and he almost managed it.

Here is the entire mechanics of the era, fitted into a single flight of stairs: at the top they decided, below they listened, and in between a person received the room that had become vacant and learned not to ask questions that no one would have answered anyway.

In the autumn of forty-one the elevator was switched off to save electricity, and then there was no time to think about it at all: the windows were taped in crosses, boys stood watch on the roof and threw incendiary bombs down. The postwoman carried death notices up the stairs on foot, and the residents of the stairwell learned her footsteps now, the same lesson, only in daylight. The arrested engineer's daughter dug antitank ditches outside Moscow alongside everyone else, and for a time the war made equals of those who before it had been divided into the untainted and the marked.

In forty-five people in the stairwell wept openly and embraced whoever came their way, and there seems to have been no other year like it in the century, and to this day no one in the building argues about forty-five.

In March fifty-three the stairwell wept again, and almost as sincerely, for the man under whom the engineer from the fifth floor had been taken away had died, and the engineer's widow stood in the crowd by the loudspeaker and wept too, unable to explain to herself why. And behind one door on the third floor that evening, two people had a drink together, quietly, without turning on the light, because there they had been waiting for their son to return from the camp for the fourth year and for the first time had allowed themselves hope. Two years later their son returned, aged by twenty years, with a rehabilitation paper from which it followed that he had been imprisoned for nothing, and no explanations were provided with that paper.

In April sixty-one the stairwell poured out into the street, and strangers embraced, for a man was in space and the man was ours. The joy was real, without any instructions from above, and it will have to be written about

as honestly as the elevator's nighttime stops, for the state that knew how to take people away at night also knew how to launch rockets, give out apartments free of charge, and educate workers' children to become engineers. This is not an offsetting of one against the other, but a condition of the problem the whole book seeks to solve.

By the seventies the elevator had worked loose and rattled, but it ran without incident, and its nighttime stops no longer woke anyone. People could still be criminally prosecuted for the wrong words, but for many fear took other forms: a spoiled character reference, a ban on travel, a stalled career. Life had become gentler, yet had not become free of persecution for one's beliefs. On the sixth floor people gathered on Saturdays: a kitchen of four square meters, a tape recorder, a hoarse voice on tape, conversations in low voices, and not because someone would come, but because the habit of speaking in low voices is handed down like crockery. The owner of the kitchen, incidentally, was a party member and gradually advanced in his career; one did not interfere with the other, and in this lay the essence of the era.

In ninety-one the elevator broke down completely, and there turned out to be no one to repair it, for the organization that owned the building had ceased to exist, and no one knew who owned the building now, including the state. For a month the residents walked up the stairs and swore, then pooled their money and hired a repairman, and this was the first decision in the building's history made without going through the authorities, from below and at their own expense. The repairman went on a drinking binge, the money was lost, they pooled their money again, and the second attempt succeeded, and freedom looked something like that.

By ninety-eight a neighbor from the fourth floor, one of the younger ones, ran two stalls near the metro and was saving for a larger apartment, but in August his savings turned into paper in three weeks. He went to no rally, but borrowed money, went to buy stock, and started again, and his faith in the state was not shaken for the reason that he had none. There was no faith, but there was a country, and one had to live in it.

In the two-thousands the building came back to life: renovation, an intercom, new residents with mortgages, a concierge, the courtyard grew crowded with cars, and a new elevator was installed in the stairwell—silent, with a mirror and a camera under the ceiling. No one discussed the camera, a camera was a camera, security, and there was no longer any reason or anything to listen for in the elevator, because now it was itself keeping an eye on the residents. This troubled no one, and perhaps it should have, or perhaps not, and the book will return to the camera under the ceiling.

In the autumn of twenty-two identical papers bearing the coat of arms landed in the stairwell's mailboxes, in all of them at once, according to lists, and in one mailbox the paper was meant in earnest. And a week later, at night, a young family from the sixth floor brought down two wheeled suitcases and a cat carrier, and the elevator ran silently, and there was nothing to listen for. The great-grandson of that engineer from the fifth floor was leaving on a morning flight with a connection, and in his suitcase, as more than eighty years earlier, lay warm clothes and documents, and the difference was that he had packed this suitcase himself.

The building still stands. The elevator runs. The book covers one hundred and twenty-nine years, while the history of this building begins later. Over the decades it has lived through, the state and its leaders changed, but the walls stayed in place. It was not the walls that changed, but what a person within those walls feared, hoped for, kept silent about, and considered normal, and this, rather than the changing of flags above the roof, is the subject of the book.

Now a qualification, required by honesty, and its place is here, on the threshold, before we enter. This building is not on the map: it is a composite scene, not the history of a specific address or the biography of one family. The nighttime elevator, the small suitcase by the door, the vacated room, the kitchen with a tape recorder, the vanished savings, and the call-up notice are brought together here by a literary device. The book

now moves on to historical analysis; its facts and the author's conclusions should be assessed separately from this setting.

And the building has already asked the question with which we enter this history. People lived in this building—different, talented, patient, people of every kind. And over the one hundred and twenty-nine years to which the book turns, the country passed through monarchy, revolutionary dictatorship, a totalitarian state, and the political orders that followed. And in different eras a moment came when a person began listening closely to the sounds outside the door.

Why is the question of the whole book, and it is not phrased as "who is to blame," for those to blame changed, while the listening remained. The question must be asked differently: how is a state arranged in which this keeps returning, and can one be built in which an elevator will be only an elevator.

# Part One. Power That Had No Time to Become Law

# Chapter 1. Master of the Russian Land

The census sheet was ordinary, printed, with fourteen fields, the same for everyone: surname, age, estate, religion, native language, ability to read, occupation. In late January 1897 Nicholas II filled out such a sheet in Tsarskoye Selo for himself, his wife, and his small daughter. In the emperor's occupation field appeared the entry "Master of the Russian Land."

Nicholas the Second was neither joking nor posing; he answered the questionnaire precisely, as he himself understood his work and as the law understood it. The Fundamental Laws of the empire stated the same thing without metaphor: the emperor's power was autocratic and unlimited, and God commanded obedience to it "not only out of fear, but also for conscience's sake." The questionnaire had no field for unlimited power, and it fitted comfortably into the field marked "occupation." The country in this entry is not a territory with citizens, but an estate, and the estate has a master.

The census itself, meanwhile, was a thoroughly modern undertaking, because a state that had stood for nearly three hundred years under one dynasty did not know the simplest things about itself, above all how many people lived in it. They counted by tax censuses, by governors' reports, by estimates, and the figures differed by millions. And so one hundred and fifty thousand census takers—teachers, students, retired officers—traversed the country from Warsaw to Vladivostok and recorded everyone on a uniform form, at one time, for the first time in history. Fifteen years earlier, during the Moscow city census, Leo Tolstoy had gone through the Khitrovka lodging houses as a census taker and brought back not tables, but a book with a question for its title, What Then Must We Do? A census can produce more than numbers.

In 1897 it produced numbers, and about one hundred and twenty-five and a half million people were counted, of whom almost nine in ten lived outside cities, while three quarters were recorded as belonging to the peasant estate. About one in five could read, among women about one in

eight, and the country proved enormous, peasant, illiterate, and very young, and it would have to enter the twentieth century within a single generation. For the first time the state saw itself in figures, but seeing did not yet mean being ready to draw conclusions from what it saw.

How did one man manage an estate of one hundred and twenty-five million souls? Through men in state service, and here begins the first uncomfortable discovery: the presence of administration across the realm was far sparser than Russian literature, populated with officials, would suggest. Below the district town, the state thinned out to one land captain, one police constable, one clerk over dozens of versts, and for the peasant each of them was not a representative of power but power in its entirety, so that a complaint against the constable could be made only to the constable.

This was how it had been designed, and there was not a single elected body in the country through which these one hundred and twenty-five million could take part in the affairs of central government. All political parties were prohibited by the very fact of their existence, workers' unions too, and since the factory law of eighty-six a strike had been considered a criminal act. The press appeared under censorship, in some cases preventive, in others punitive. The peasant was bound to his estate and commune, could not obtain a passport without the commune's consent, paid redemption payments for the land received upon emancipation thirty-six years earlier, and came under the jurisdiction of a volost court, which still had the right to sentence him to the birch.

One exception did nevertheless exist, because since 1864 zemstvos had operated in some provinces, elected institutions entrusted with roads, hospitals, schools, and statistics, carefully not entrusted with politics. The monarchy rejected requests from zemstvo members to crown the structure with national representation, and in his very first public speech the young Nicholas called such hopes "senseless dreams." But the zemstvo doctor, the zemstvo teacher, and the zemstvo statistician will appear more than once in this book, because where the state saw an estate, they were the first to begin seeing people.

In the spring of 1895 sixteen-year-old Semyon Kanatchikov, a peasant's son from the village of Gusevo in the Volokolamsk district, arrived in Moscow, and his father brought him himself, on a cart, as surplus hands are taken to the city. The family was not well-off, the land fed them poorly, and the father placed his son as an apprentice in the pattern shop of a machine-building factory, then went back to plow.

We know the life that followed from his own memoirs, a rare case in which a Russian worker of the early twentieth century described himself. They lived as an artel, pooling their money; the apprentice's wages went toward food in the common pot, they slept crowded together in tiny rooms adjoining the apartment, got up before the whistle, and stood at the machine for more than eleven hours. The foreman fined them for lateness, for defective work, for talking, and set the amount of the fine himself, while Sunday was divided between church, the tavern, the accordion, and sleep. And almost at once reading entered this life—at first whatever came to hand, then little books provided by cautious acquaintances, then those for which one could go to prison.

In the summer of 1897, between the census and the coronation anniversaries, an event of national importance took place in the lives of people like Kanatchikov: a law was issued setting the maximum length of an ordinary working day in manufacturing at eleven and a half hours. The law was considered a major concession and was one, but it came not from Duma debates, because there was no Duma, and not from newspaper campaigns, but from the Petersburg strikes of the two preceding years. While the workers asked, they were not heard, but when they stopped entire factories, they were heard.

Within the security service there were people who understood where this was leading, and the head of the Moscow security department, Sergei Zubatov, reasoned plainly: forbid workers to gather openly and they will gather in secret, and revolutionaries are already waiting for them in the secret circles, so better let them gather under the police. Thus legal workers' societies arose under the police wing, and the police organized the workers so that they would not organize against the state. It ended

predictably and nevertheless unexpectedly, because those under their care began behaving like the real thing, the authorities took fright, and Zubatov was dismissed. The Petersburg priest Georgy Gapon had managed to become his pupil, and where he would lead his society will be discussed two chapters from now.

Through what else did the authorities listen to the country? The security departments read other people's letters and maintained informants, which gave a picture of conspiracies but not of everyday life. The parish priest knew everything about his parish, but his knowledge did not travel upward, and what remained were the governors' most-submissive reports. A governor reporting trouble in the province entrusted to him was thereby reporting trouble in his own administration, so year after year a country noticeably calmer and more loyal than the one outside the windows rose through the official channels. The master of the Russian land knew his estate mainly from the words of managers who had something to lose from bad news.

All that has been said did not exhaust the empire at the turn of the century; it was not the frozen despotism of a textbook. Industry grew at rates Europe envied, the longest railway in the world was being built, the ruble had gone onto gold, zemstvo schools opened by the thousand, literacy among conscripts doubled within a generation, and the young country was rapidly learning to read. An intelligent defender of the empire will object that this country needed only thirty peaceful years and it would grow into a constitution by itself, without catastrophes, as the monarchies of Europe had done, and that Russia's misfortune lay not in autocracy but in its not being given time. The argument is serious, and the book will not pretend to know the answer in advance, so the question of whether peaceful evolution was possible will remain open until the chapters where dates and documents appear for it.

And Semyon Kanatchikov read—a self-education circle, conversations over tea, the first banned pamphlet, the first search, then arrests, exile, the Bolshevik Party, revolution, Soviet posts, a university, publishing houses, the literary bureaucracy. In thirty-seven he was arrested, and in

forty he died in a camp. A man to whom the empire had left not a single lawful way to take part in its fate became one of those who buried it, and the state he built in its place buried him.

Nicholas ascended the throne in 1894, and the coronation celebrations took place in 1896. They were overshadowed by a scene that will have to be shown, because I will refer to it until the end of the book. In May 1896, during the coronation celebrations, hundreds of thousands gathered on Khodynka Field outside Moscow for gifts from the tsar—a mug with a monogram, a bread roll, sausage. The field was pitted with holes and ditches, there were not enough distribution booths or stewards, and at dawn a rumor spread that there would not be enough gifts for everyone, the crowd moved, and within minutes, by the official count, one thousand three hundred and eighty-nine people died in the crush. That evening the young sovereign went to a ball at the French ambassador's, which it had been considered impossible to cancel for reasons of alliance and protocol, the chief of police was designated the guilty party, and the celebrations continued according to the program. The popular omen took hold at once and for the whole century, because the reign had begun with a crush for the master's gifts. And the crush at a distribution that the organizers had not troubled to calculate, after which the festivities continued according to the program, will return in this book under different names—coronation, the leader's funeral, a privatization voucher, a subsidized mortgage. How any authority arranges a distribution says more about it than its manifestos.

Among the fourteen fields of the census sheet there was no field for "can this person influence how he is governed," and for one hundred and twenty-five million the answer would have been the same, so there was no point in asking. The empire learned everything about its people, from age and faith to language, trade, and literacy, while the people still knew almost nothing about it. Eight years later they would carry a petition to the master, because no other way of making themselves heard above had been left to them.

## Two Misfortunes

Everyone in the country knows this saying: Russia has two misfortunes—fools and roads. Its authorship is attributed now to Gogol, now to Karamzin, now to Saltykov-Shchedrin, and the phrase has been found in none of the three. It is an apocryphal saying, a popular creation attributed to the classics to lend it weight, and in this alone it is characteristic, because the country diagnosed itself and then retrospectively presented the diagnosis as the opinion of an authority. The book will encounter this device at every level, including that of the state, while the saying took root as only something accurate can. Before letting the book proceed, we must examine both words of the diagnosis honestly, because both, as is usual with words that have taken root, are commonly misunderstood.

Let us begin with the roads, since they are measurable, and the country, the largest on the planet, lived through the entire century described here with a road network out of proportion to itself. At the beginning of the book, railways were a marvel and a strategy, and the Trans-Siberian Railway, a great and genuine achievement of the empire, drew a single thread across the continent, while an ordinary road remained a direction. Twice a year the mud season cut districts off from the world more reliably than any blockade, and the word “roadlessness” denoted not the state of the surface, but a season of life.

A century later the result is paradoxical, because the country that reached space from the chapter on the science town still had not paved itself. Most highways have a hard surface, but beyond the main routes the same dirt track begins. Thousands of villages from the chapter on the unpromising ones died in part because no road led to them, for the school closes, the bus cannot get through, life ends, and the route of extinction was not paved.

Those roads that were built, meanwhile, were built to a gold standard in the least advantageous sense. It is difficult to compare the price per kilometer directly. In a note published by the Higher School of

Economics, no Russian excess over the average level of Europe and North America was found in the sample examined. This is the result of a particular comparison, not a universal assessment of all roads or of 2026 prices: the road category, the composition of costs, and construction conditions must be taken into account. The difference worth discussing lies not in the price per kilometer, but in what is obtained for that money and how long it then lasts. A contract without competition, an estimate without oversight, acceptance without the client, because the real client of a road, the person who travels on it, never took part in the chain.

And they were built for events, for a summit, for the Olympics from the chapter on the Games, for an anniversary, because the authorities see the event, while no one making decisions sees the everyday road to the district center—they fly. A road in this country is an honest imprint of the vertical hierarchy of power, where the highways of authority are laid six lanes wide, while the capillaries of life lie axle-deep in mud.

Now about the fools, and here all the care this book can muster will be needed. It rejects the easy reading, “the people are stupid,” from the outset as simply untrue. A people who in a century have passed every test of ingenuity, from trench warfare to survival in ninety-two, from a six-hundred-square-meter garden plot to parallel imports, cannot be stupid.

The fool in the saying is not a diagnosis of a person but a role produced by the arrangement, and the Russian language, which gives everything away in this book, knows this better than sociologists. To play the fool, to put on the fool, a fool’s job—almost always a verb of behavior, not a property of the head.

The fool here is an intelligent person in a position where intelligence is punishable, and the official knows the bridge will collapse but signs the acceptance document, because not signing will cost him more. The peasant pretends not to understand in front of the constable, the director puts on a show from the chapter on the norm, the soldier does not reason, for reasoning means a tribunal.

A system in which feedback is punished produces the fool industrially, as a by-product of its main production. And this book is a catalog of such punishments, from the zemstvo statistician under surveillance to reports embellished for the pandemic. Every level reports upward not what it sees, but what survives, and on the top floor millions of individual instances of intelligence are assembled into the state stupidity at which historians later marvel. The fool in the saying is not the one below, but what emerges above when everyone below has been ordered to keep quiet.

And then the true structure of the proverb is revealed, for the sake of which this chapter was written, because in reality there are not two misfortunes but one, and roads and fools are two of its symptoms. A country governed from top to bottom across eleven time zones persistently prefers highways visible to the authorities over roads to people, and by the same logic turns the intelligent into fools, for intelligence directed upward is dangerous to it, while directed downward it is not requested.

Feedback—that is the word into which both words of the saying can be exchanged, for a road is precisely that connection in the physical world, the means by which an enormous territory communicates with itself. Where it ends in mud, communication ends, and there begins the very thing about which the people composed their second great formula, also about roads: God is high above, and the tsar is far away.

This book, having examined one hundred and twenty years of the country's misfortunes in its pages, will return to their common root with every chapter. And in its final blueprints it will try to design a country where one can get somewhere along a road and an intelligent person is allowed to finish speaking. The reader is entitled to regard this in advance as the second part of the apocryphal saying: Russia has two hopes, and they are the very same ones.

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