

## OTHER NATIONS

## PROTEAN MOSCOW

**THE SOURCE:** “Irrepressible Moscow” by Paul Starobin, in *City Journal*, Winter 2013.

MOSCOW DOES NOT INSPIRE INDIFFERENCE: You either love it or hate it. In the 18th century, Catherine the Great called it the “seat of sloth” and complained that the city was “full of symbols of fanaticism, churches . . . and convents, side by side with thieves and brigands.” Konstantin Batyushkov, a 19th-century poet, praised Moscow as “marvelous, outrageous,

gigantic.” Leo Tolstoy fell into both camps, describing it as “a collection of robbers,” yet writing in *War and Peace* that “every Russian looking at Moscow feels her to be a mother.”

In *City Journal*, Paul Starobin, a former foreign correspondent who has lived and worked in Moscow, notes that even now, when “Moscow is subject to more Kremlin control than any other place in Russia . . . [it] is the cradle of the country’s street protests.” Muscovites launched the revolts that dissolved the Soviet Union, after all, and recently, “political theater has at times approached



TRETYAKOV GALLERY, MOSCOW, RUSSIA / THE BRIDGEMAN ART LIBRARY

Depicted here in *Red Square, Moscow, 1801* by Fedor Yakovlevich Alekseev, the *Krasnaya Ploshchad*, as Russians call it, did not get its name from the Communist Party or the color of its bricks. Though *krasnaya* now translates to “red,” it originally meant “beautiful.”

an art form.” This is where the punk rock band Pussy Riot staged its protest against Vladimir Putin last year—in the rebuilt Cathedral of Christ the Savior.

Starobin says such contradictions, and all of Moscow’s “flamboyant, jarring disharmonies,” not only define the city, but also give Moscow its “near-indestructibility . . . as an organic life-form.”

## Moscow has survived invasions by Mongols, France, and Germany, as well as draconian campaigns of urban renewal waged by its own overlords.

The city has survived invasions by Mongols (in the 14th century), France (in the 19th), and Germany (in the 20th), as well as draconian campaigns of urban renewal waged by its own overlords. In the early 18th century, Peter the Great managed to get rid of the markets of Red Square, which “reeked of sour beer, grease, and undrained cesspools . . . [but] couldn’t realize his larger ambition to remake Moscow.” Instead, he built a new city, Saint Petersburg, from scratch. With orderly, European-style urban

planning and a westward outlook, the new capital grew into Russia’s second-largest city and its cultural capital. But Moscow retained its unique dynamism and, in 1918, reclaimed its role as the national capital.

After Joseph Stalin’s rise to power, the Soviets also attempted to reshape Moscow—a city founded by Russian Orthodox princes—in their image. “Rote destruction was their method, and religious Moscow suffered most,” Starobin writes. “Still, like Peter before him, Stalin couldn’t forge [the city] into a uniform type.” In a Stalin-era subway station, Revolutionary Square, passengers rub the sculpture of a guard dog on the nose for good luck. A monument to modern, scientific socialism has become an object of superstition.

Today, Moscow boasts an official population of 12 million, though if you include the steady stream of migrants from the Russian periphery, the number is closer to 17 million. Some Muscovites fear for the city’s ability to handle its migrant workers, but, Starobin says, it has a long history of assimilating newcomers. Indeed, in 2011 police revealed that some Central Asian immigrants had given a new twist to the city’s oldest tradition: mixing past and present. More than 100 factory workers had constructed a town

of sorts in a Soviet-era bomb shelter, complete with “bathrooms, bedrooms, and even prayer rooms.”

Perhaps Moscow’s stubborn juxtaposition of past and present, good and bad, presents a “cheerful lesson,” Starobin argues. “If today’s Moscow were razed (as early Moscow was by fire, on several occasions), it would likely come back along similar lines, so resilient is its urban DNA.” ■

## JUMPED UP IN PYONGYANG

**THE SOURCE:** “A New Face of North Korean Drug Use” by Andrei Lankov and Seok-hyang Kim, in *North Korean Review*, Spring 2013

IF YOU LIVE IN NORTH KOREA, YOU SHOULDN’T be reading this. You get your news from a pre-set state radio installed in your home. Party propaganda serves to remind you: The state is always watching.

Or is it? North Koreans evince less concern about the police state than they used to. They flout the rules in all sorts of ways, such as tuning in to foreign news shows on shortwave radios and enjoying South Korean soap operas on pirated DVDs. They even have the temerity to try illicit drugs—and get hooked on them.

That’s right, defectors from the Hermit

Kingdom say the country is caught up in a methamphetamine epidemic, report Andrei Lankov, a historian at Kookmin University in Seoul, and Seok-hyang Kim, a sociologist at Ewha Womans University, also in Seoul, in *North Korean Review*.

North Korea is no stranger to dope. For years, the state specialized in the export of illegal drugs. The communist regime in Pyongyang cultivated opium on plantations and churned out potent methamphetamines at government-run pharmaceutical plants. It was a quick, if unsavory, way to fill the Dear Leader’s coffers.

But in the early 2000s, for reasons unknown, Pyongyang sharply curtailed drug production. Scientists and technicians who had fueled the operation lost their jobs. “Private entrepreneurs began to look for such people and give them money” to manufacture drugs, a North Korean defector recounts.

From being virtually unheard of before 2004 or 2005, methamphetamine use among North Koreans suddenly caught on in the regions around the shuttered pharmaceutical plants. According to interviews with 21 North Korean defectors, the drug hasn’t stopped spreading since. “It seems that the epidemic has reached remarkable proportions and