

Kaliningrad

During the Cold War, the Soviet Union built the pan-Soviet workers' paradise of Kaliningrad atop the physical ruins of the historic Prussian city of Königsberg. Now Kaliningrad—capitalist, impoverished, drug-ridden, and physically cut off from the rest of Russia—is struggling to build a new identity atop the political and economic ruin of its Soviet past.

by Peter Savodnik

Toward the end of World War II, Soviet troops marched into the East Prussian port city of Königsberg, exiled, raped, or murdered the remaining Germans, and, in the years that followed, made the place their own. First they renamed it Kaliningrad. Then they rebuilt it in the image of their god, socialist man. Then they sealed off the city and turned it into a fortress. Geography served the Communists well: The port could be filled with submarines and battleships.

A once-vibrant trading center founded by the Teutonic Knights in the 13th century, the city sits in the tiny oblast of Kaliningrad, the westernmost region of Russia, cut off from the rest of the country by southwestern Lithuania and northeastern Poland. During the Cold War, Kaliningrad was part of a sprawling workers' paradise. The people who moved there were defined by their Sovietness, not their ethnicity or religion or their connection to any particular landscape. But when the Soviet Union lost control of its history, Kaliningraders' nationality was swept away in the rapids, and suddenly all the naval officers and fishing captains and the hundreds of thousands of proletarians who had built their lives in the postwar murk were forced to rethink who they were, now that they were no longer Soviets.

The women have been better at this than the men. They're the first thing you notice in Kaliningrad—all the beautiful girls, all the decidedly post-Soviet femmes fatales milling

around outside the bars and bistros on Mira Prospekt or in Kalinin Park, or wandering past Immanuel Kant's tomb or the House of Soviets ("the Monster," as locals call it). When the Red Army occupied the oblast in April 1945, it erased all forms of prewar life, blew up the castles and cathedrals, and repopulated the whole fallow swatch of farms and fisheries with Russians, Belarusians, Ukrainians, Tatars, Georgians, Uzbeks, and tens of thousands of other "transplant-patriots." That's why there are so many long legs, porcelain complexions, and steel-blue eyes in the region. Kaliningraders today are the beneficiaries of a grand coming together of peoples who elsewhere in the post-communist world are segregated according to ethnic, racial, and religious differences.

That, at least, was the party line—the new mythology—at the 2003 Miss Kaliningrad University Beauty Contest, where the 19- and 20-year-old contestants strode up and down a makeshift catwalk bathed in a frenetic rainbow light, to the beat of digital tom-toms and the shouts and shrieks of 500 student-comrades. "They all came together here," pageant organizer Laura Lukina explained after the show. "It was a real mix of nations." Or, as so many prefer to say of their oblast, which is separated from "mainland" Russia by more than 200 miles, "This is the United States of the former Soviet Union." True, Kaliningrad doesn't look like a place called the United States of anything. The buildings are low, boxy, and unfinished. The nightlife teems with turtle-necked thugs and



The brooding, abandoned House of Soviets looms over a newly married Kaliningrad couple.

Mercedes-Benzes with tinted windows. There are taxicabs and neon signs vaguely reminiscent of Times Square, but the air smells more dangerous than full of promise. It's capitalism, but it's a sloppy kind of capitalism, a bizarre, almost adolescent pastiche of images and signposts flashing sex, food, money.

For Marxists, each step in the historical process, we're told, marks a "positing," an arrival at a higher order of political organization, and, at the same time, a "negating," a refutation of that level of organization in anticipation of the next step toward stateless utopia. Lenin, whose statue still looms over Kaliningrad's Victory Square, most definitely would not have called the Miss Kaliningrad University Beauty Contest—to say nothing of the collapse of Soviet communism and the tentative emergence of a free market—a higher order of political organization. But the Soviet planners who turned the oblast into the headquarters of the Baltic Sea fleet, collectivized its agriculture, and built sprawling apartment blocks on the periphery of the city center might have been pleased to note that present-day Kaliningraders face the same challenge they once did: building a new society atop the ruins of an old one.

Just as the Soviets sought to construct civilization from scratch, those living in the oblast today are trying to make a new life, a post-totalitarian democracy, out of the scraps of a gradually receding past. The difference between the two reconstructions—between the Soviets' "noble experiment" and the post-Soviets' drive to catch up with the rest of Europe—is illuminating. The Communists had to rebuild the physical core of Kaliningrad, which had been devastated by Soviet tanks and British bombers. Today's Kaliningraders, by contrast, must reimagine the region's entire political identity, starting with a new mythology. History has not unfolded dialectically; it appears, rather, to have repeated itself.

Reimagining identity, piecing together a semblance of connection to something larger than this small and often gray and slushy parcel of space, will be much tougher in round two. In the 1940s, Moscow simply barged ahead. The orchestrators of the much-vaunted command economy decided to build Kaliningrad anew, and so they did, although what they came up with is a pale shadow of the city's East Prussian past, farcical and crumbling. In the 21st century, the new leadership—the reformers, the capital-

Kaliningrad



ists, the architects of the popular culture—is neither free nor able (nor, in some cases, willing) to weave its own social fabric and establish political and cultural affiliations in the vacuum of an ex-Soviet military colony.

Nothing better captures the complexity of identity building in postcommunist Kaliningrad than the recent brouhaha over Kaliningraders' right to travel freely between the oblast and mainland Russia. On a technical—that is, superficial—level, transit visas are the issue. In 2004, Kaliningrad's neighbors, Poland and Lithuania, are expected to join the European Union. The EU is worried that all the AIDS-infected heroin addicts who have descended on the oblast, as well as the drug dealers who supply them and the Russian mafiosi who run the show largely undisturbed by police, will take advantage of Europe's relatively open borders and emigrate not to Warsaw or Vilnius but to Berlin, Paris, and London. Hence, Poland and Lithuania have said that Kaliningraders should obtain visas to travel outside the oblast. But the administration of Vladimir Putin has strongly opposed forcing Russians to get visas to travel to and from Russia. In November 2002, Brussels and Moscow settled on a compromise: facilitated transit documents, or FTDs, which certainly look like visas but technically are not. Vilnius, meanwhile, remains leery of EU officials from larger and richer member-

states (such as France and Britain) cutting deals with the Kremlin that involve trains traveling through the Lithuanian countryside. So the current agreement could very well unravel once Lithuania formally "joins Europe."

More interesting and more telling than all the diplomatic maneuvering is Kaliningraders' indifference to the visas, which still generate lots of high-level bluster and closed-door summits but rarely, if ever, come up in conversation at local coffeehouses, brasseries, or Internet cafés. It's not that people are too busy building skyscrapers or tearing down monuments. The biggest thing they're building in Kaliningrad is a church behind the looming Lenin. (The oblast often looks and feels like a police state with a sense of humor.) There's a Möbius strip quality to Kaliningrad life, a life that seems to veer away from and then fold back into its former, totalitarian self. What's indisputable is that few, if any, Kaliningraders are waving the Russian tricolor and screaming about their right to free travel.

The obvious explanation is that their daily lives depend more on their European neighbors than on Russia. Most in the oblast, like most in the larger post-communist world, seem to intuit that the future lies to the west. They take far more trips to Warsaw or the Italian Alps than they do to Red Square; they rely on the "gray

>PETER SAVODNIK is a staff writer at The Hill in Washington, D.C., and the recent recipient of a German Marshall Fund fellowship to Russia. Copyright © 2003 by Peter Savodnik.



market” with Poland and Lithuania for everything from beer to cigarettes to Turkish antiques; and everyone in charge of a payroll knows that it’s easier to do business with Poles and Germans—the process is less fraught with corruption and bureaucratic knots—than with fellow Russians.

But few Kaliningraders say that Kaliningrad isn’t part of Russia. How could they? Until a few years ago, they were citizens of a vast people’s republic. Thousands of them spent all day defending that republic against powerful imperialist armies and navies. In fact, if the Warsaw Pact had ever launched a conventional assault on Western Europe—or, more likely, Kaliningraders say, if the West had ever attacked the “outer empire”—Kaliningrad would have been command central, the Soviet headquarters for World War III.



The 64-year-old governor of the oblast, Vladimir Egorov, is a near-perfect embodiment of the search for Kaliningrad’s political-spiritual-cultural whatness. Egorov must do everything he can to open up Kaliningrad’s markets to investors from Germany, Asia, and the United States; promote Kaliningrad’s cheap labor, relatively low taxes, and growing furniture-manufacturing and agricultural sectors; and keep government regulators in Moscow out of the hair of the region’s few entrepreneurs, who are his best

hope for reducing unemployment and generating much-needed revenue. In other words, Egorov has to be a free-marketeer, a democrat, and an American.

Sitting in the airy, light-filled annex to his office, surrounded by oil paintings of Kaliningrad’s main port, models of classic fishing vessels, and a ceramic-velvet collage of St. George on a white horse slaying a dragon, Egorov seems to be doing a pretty good job. He’s got plenty of glossy literature detailing all the progress the oblast has made; he soft-pedals some of Kaliningrad’s “social ills,” such as the recent explosion in AIDS cases, the drug bazaars, the widespread poverty; he talks about local businessmen building their way toward a better tomorrow. He even has recourse to a staple of Western politicians afraid of being misquoted or taken out of context: He makes sure one of his press people is in the annex to tape-record our conversation.

But Egorov is not an ideologue, and he’s not an investor or a small businessman. He’s unaccustomed to the uncertainty of polls or the nastiness of a global marketplace of big boards, analysts, computers, and corporate chieftains in New York, London, Hong Kong, a marketplace that drives consumers and voters (and the politicians who depend on them). Egorov is a manager, a “voice of honesty and goodness,” as one EU official put it, who spent more than 30 years in the Soviet navy defending the motherland against the capitalist-imperialist menace. He says he’s sorry the Soviet Union didn’t reform itself as China is doing now. He says many of the moral truths found in communist dogma can be traced to the Bible. He says that if perestroika hadn’t unleashed a velvet revolution and the Berlin Wall hadn’t come tumbling down, he’d probably still be in the military. And he says he can remember, vividly, hearing Mikhail Gorbachev announce on the radio, in December 1991, that there was no more Soviet Union. When they lowered the hammer and sickle for the last time over Kaliningrad’s harbor, Egorov was Admiral Egorov, commander of the Baltic Fleet, and he had no idea what was going to happen to him or his homeland. “A lot of people cried then,” he said. “I had tears in my eyes.”

Most of the elites shaping Kaliningrad’s future are less torn about the respective merits of socialist totalitarianism and free-

Kaliningrad

market democracy than the governor is. Max Ibragimov, for example, almost certainly did not have tears in his eyes when the Soviet Union collapsed. It's Sunday night at Planet, and Ibragimov, 46, is celebrating the 70th birthday of the father of one of his business associates. Dinner consists of black caviar on pancakes, goat cheese, salmon and avocado salad, duck in a glazed raspberry sauce, more caviar, more goat cheese, dumplings, tangerines, and banana splits. The guests sip cognac throughout the meal, alternating with shots of Flagman, Kaliningrad's very own vodka. There are also bottles of mineral water, with and without gas.

Planet, according to Miss Kaliningrad (victorious in a larger pageant than the university's), used to be the hottest restaurant-nightclub-casino in town. But for various reasons—too many mobsters, too many Germans, too many missionaries from Salt Lake sneaking in late at night—Planet lost its sheen shortly before Christmas. Now the place to go is Zaria or Universal. Miss Kaliningrad would never go to Planet. Max Ibragimov doesn't know about all that. Nor has he ever heard of Miss Kaliningrad. All he knows is that he comes from a tiny village in Uzbekistan, spent years on a fishing ship sleeping with rats and cockroaches, and is now the sofa king of eastern Europe—and if he wants to drop 8,000 rubles (about \$250) on a fancy dinner party, so be it. Unlike Egorov, Ibragimov doesn't mist up talking about lost empires.

Nor does Svetlana Kolbaniova. The 32-year-old television reporter is a celebrity all over the oblast. When she shows up at Zaria to sip Campari and smoke a few cigarettes, she inevitably runs into a friend, a source, or some local bigwig who loved her interview with the governor, the mayor, or that movie star from Moscow who was in town promoting his new flick, the one with the American actress. Kolbaniova is fluent in German and almost fluent in English, has traveled throughout Europe and Russia, and likes to cook French country cuisine. Recently she launched her own television cooking show, which is filmed in the kitchen of her apartment. Like the apartments of lots of successful people here, hers is in a building that

looks on the outside as if it belongs in Cabrini Green or the South Bronx. But the apartment itself is warm and inviting, furnished with Italian sofas, Japanese CD players, and posters (framed and matted) of angry British rock groups. Kolbaniova says people are kinder, more tolerant, in the oblast than elsewhere in Russia.

That's what Ludmila Bogatova says, too: "That was the reason we moved here. Because Kaliningrad is like the U.S.A." Bogatova, 53, has never been to the United States. Nor has her husband, Oleg Salnikov, also 53. Both are sculptors, and both came here, they say, for the same reason people go to America: to escape persecution. Before the 1917 revolution, Bogatova says, her family moved from Russia to Uzbekistan; Salnikov's family moved there in the 1930s, when gulags, food shortages, and five-year plans threatened millions of Russians. The two met at school, fell in love, made a life together—all in Uzbekistan. Then the Soviet Union collapsed, and the Muslim authorities began arresting, beating up, and otherwise harassing Orthodox Russians, even Russians who had been there for decades. The sculptors decided they'd better move, and they landed in Kaliningrad. As Salnikov served up some *plov*, a traditional Uzbek dish of lamb, beef, diced vegetables, and fried rice, he said, "I knew immediately this would be my home."

Kaliningraders are bound together by a feeling that they are different or special, disconnected from any political-cultural center. Many came to the oblast because they were in the military, or because their fathers were fishermen, or because they had nowhere else to go. They were a mix of Soviets who created a communist exclave for themselves out of the rubble of postwar Prussia. But now that the Soviet Union is gone and the connective tissue has melted away, they're not Soviets; they're post-Soviets.

Becoming a true post-Soviet, says Dmitri Vyshemirsky, means owning up to the Soviet past. Vyshemirsky's family came to Kaliningrad when he was three, in 1961, because in the 1940s his grandfather had been labeled an enemy of the state, and shortly after that his father was labeled a child of an enemy of

the state, and by the time Dmitri, or Dima, was born, it was clear there was no future in Russia proper. “My father had the feeling that he could kind of get lost here,” Vyshemirsky said. In Kaliningrad, Vyshemirsky’s father found work as a choir conductor, his mother as a classical pianist. Vyshemirsky, who says he’s part Russian, part Ukrainian, part Polish, and part Jewish, in that order, says Kaliningrad has been good to his family. He and his wife, Inna, are happy here. This is their home, even if the streets are full of craters and it’s cold nine months of the year and thugs with flathead haircuts loiter in the hotel lobbies, cafés, and casinos. But there is something that bothers Vyshemirsky: “There’s no cultural logic here.”

What he means is that for a half-century there was a lot of pretending in Kaliningrad. The official story was that the end of the Second World War was the beginning of history in the oblast. That’s when the Red Army changed the region’s name from Königsberg and honored Soviet president Mikhail Kalinin. That’s when the great proletariat liberation began. In recent months, Vyshemirsky, who is a photojournalist, has sought to expand the official history—from

50 years to 750—through an exhibition of 30 photographs titled *Königsberg, Forgive*. As the exhibition makes clear, there are vestiges of Germanness everywhere: from Kant’s tomb to prewar patches of cobblestone to whole neighborhoods of crumbling, once-stately German mansions now converted into apartments or government offices. The building that best reflects this German “ghost culture,” and is a kind of metaphor for it, is the House of Soviets, the so-called Monster. Like so many other Soviet palaces of culture and ministries of the people, the Monster is bold, ugly, imperious, frightening—a concrete monolith meant to convey the power of Sovietism and the inevitability of worldwide communist revolution. But since the 1970s, when it was completed, no one has actually worked in the Monster. The reason? Shortly after the building was finished, construction crews discovered that it sat on a centuries-old German castle that made the foundation unstable. Today the Monster has been taken over by tumbleweeds, graffiti, and rabid dogs. The only people who venture inside are addicts and the homeless.



Ludwig Hermann’s late 19th-century painting, *Königsberg*, shows a bustling seaport that was at the heart of the Prussian empire. Kaliningraders still struggle with what some call a German “ghost culture.”



The road to Svetlogorsk, a beach community nestled against the Baltic about a 40-minute drive north of the city, is lined with linden trees. The trees were planted by the Germans during the war to help conceal their military transports from Allied bombers. Kaliningraders call the trees the Führer's last soldiers because so many drunk drivers slam into them. To mark the trees where drivers have lost their lives, family members attach wreaths. There are many, many wreaths. Driving to Svetlogorsk, Dmitry Bulatov, the curator of special programs at the Kaliningrad branch of the National Center for Contemporary Arts, heaps scorn on *Königsberg, Forgive*. He calls the exhibition, and all the hoopla surrounding it, simple-minded, parochial, pedantic, self-righteous. And on and on. "Forgive?" Bulatov asks. "Forgive who? Who forgives? And what about the Lithuanians? They were here. Why not call [the oblast] Karaljavicus? Or the Polish? Krulevec. Why not Krulevec?"

Bulatov says that naming Kaliningrad Königsberg once again, as Vyshemirsky and a small minority of other Kaliningraders have proposed, would ignore the cultural-ethnic complexity of the place. He says that forcing Kaliningraders to confront the region's Prussian past is too neat, too easy: You can't just say there were people here before my people were here, and we have to pay homage to them, and now we can move on. Bulatov says you shouldn't worry about remembering. Remembering (all by itself) is meaningless. Why? Because it suggests that something has been done, that some good—some realizable good, like greater happiness or less misery—has been achieved. Bulatov shakes his head. The danger, he explains, is that people will focus on gestures and lose sight of the whole point of remembering, which is to be better human beings—who would not permit other Kaliningrads to be created. "I think the whole of Russian people should ask forgiveness for Soviet Union," he says, laughing. Why is he laughing? "Is impossible. Is ridiculous."

Bulatov sounds like one of those communist-era novelists and playwrights who spent their lives in exile or hiding or jail writing about the absurdity of socialist totalitarianism, with its loveless love, robotic censors, and activist street

sweepers. His sentences, sarcastic bits and pieces of a half-formed English, hint at underlying meanings wrapped in hopelessness, frustration, rage. Of course he thinks it's terrible that people died. Of course he thinks people should remember. But simply entertaining the sentiments won't change things. Like wreaths attached to linden trees, he says, the memories can't undo misery. Anyway, what's the point of building a new identity for Kaliningrad out of the old? Constructing a post-Soviet sense of place? What does that mean? He hates the abstractness of it all. Then he laughs again. "Forgive me, Königsberg, forgive."



Miss Kaliningrad is bowling at Babylon, one of the city's two or three trendy bowling alleys. She's not the best bowler in town, but she does know a little about the whole visa mess, and she thinks Vladimir Egorov is a nice man. He's a friend of her parents. None of the girls at Babylon have thought much about their political or cultural affinities. Miss Kaliningrad, who has spent the past four years studying economics at the state university, says she'd like to move to Moscow as soon as possible. "Is too small, Kaliningrad," she says, shortly before bowling her one strike of the evening.

Kaliningraders are trying to rebuild Kaliningrad—to clear away the debris of a half-century of lies and obfuscation. They want to forge an identity that makes room for their Russianness, their Europeanness, and their post-Sovietness, so the rebuilding and reimagining may well include new stories or mythologies about who is a Kaliningrader. But will they succeed where the Soviets failed, and actually manage to construct an identity (not just an idea, a political thesis) that endures? Russians are attempting to do that throughout Russia, of course, but nowhere, perhaps, is their Sovietness, or their lack of Sovietness, as profoundly felt as it is in Kaliningrad, which wouldn't exist if there hadn't been a Soviet Union. As long as there are Russians, Moscow and St. Petersburg will exist, as will Minsk while there are Belarusians and Kyiv while there are Ukrainians. But what about Kaliningrad? Kaliningrad was a Soviet military colony. What will it be now? □