

“HIDDEN IN SILENCE”:

NAVIGATING MOSCOW WITH MICHEL DE CERTEAU

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HAUNTED PLACES

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“There is no place that is not haunted by many different spirits,” Michel de Certeau writes in *The Practice of Everyday Life* (de Certeau 108). Passing by a house or a street corner, a walker makes a mental note: “*Here*, there used to be a bakery,” or “*That’s* where old lady Dupuis used to live” (de Certeau 108). While those spirits are “hidden in silence” and may or may not be invoked, de Certeau continues, “[h]aunted places are the only ones people can live in—and this inverts the schema of the Panopticon” (de Certeau 108). Extending Michel Foucault’s critique of the structures of power, de Certeau emphasizes the “contradiction between the collective mode of administration and an individual mode of reappropriation”; he argues that “spatial practices in fact secretly structure the determining conditions of social life” (de Certeau 96).

Inspired by the writings of de Certeau, this paper discusses the official and unofficial meanings of Lubyanka (short for Lubyanskaya Square)—one of Moscow’s most perplexing spaces, known primarily as the site of the KGB (now FSB) headquarters. In the Soviet period, an imposing statue of Felix Dzerzhinsky, the founder of the original Soviet secret police, dominated the square’s elevated centre. The statue was removed during the 1991 coup, but the memory of it continues to haunt the space. In more recent years, the toppled Dzerzhinsky has ignited heated political debates in the Russian parliament. The statue’s removal also had a profound impact on the walker’s relationship to the square. Paradoxically, its absence, or rather the presence of its absence, has proved more difficult to deal with than its actual presence.

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Lubyanka Metro Station, Moscow.
Image by Elena Siemens.

OLD LUBYANKA

The tall Dzerzhinsky statue was erected on Lubyanskaya Square only in 1958. In the nineteenth century, the square's elevated centre was decorated by an attractive fountain by I. P. Vitali, who had designed another landmark fountain on the neighbouring Theatre Square. Vladimir Gilyarovsky, a contemporary of Chekhov and the author of the engaging *Moscow and Muscovites*, writes that the space around the Lubyanka fountain was used largely by coach drivers parking their carriages, the city's principal means of transportation. While the coachmen ate and drank tea at nearby diners, the horses were left unattended, the piles of hay around them attracting swarms of pigeons and sparrows (Gilyarovsky 148).

Further down the old Lubyanka, a wooden circus stood in the contemporary location of the stately Politechnical Museum, constructed in the 1870s on the direct order of Tsar Alexander II to promote Russian science and technology. The museum's spacious lobby is still used for various cultural gatherings, a tradition made famous by Vladimir Mayakovsky's poetry readings and exhibits of his Futurist art staged in the early twentieth century. Gilyarovsky describes how in the distant past before the emancipation of serfs in 1861, an enormous elephant escaped from the old circus, demolishing a large part of the makeshift structure, terrifying a crowd of bystanders. Just as the elephant managed to shake off one of the logs to which he was chained, turning then to charge the crowd, the police brought in reinforcements, bringing down the beast with several shots fired from their cannon (Gilyarovsky 152-53).

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In the 1890s, the centrally located Lubyanka attracted a number of affluent insurance companies which built here their imposing offices, as well as profitable residential tenements. Following the Bolshevik Revolution, one of the imposing insurance buildings located on the square's north side was taken over by the Cheka, the precursor of the KGB. It was subsequently remodeled by a prominent Soviet architect Vasily Shchusin, who also designed the striking Kazan Train Station in Moscow. Shchusin added an extra wing, which, Maria Kiernan writes, was distinguished by its modern architecture (Kiernan 52). During the 1930s redevelopment, the old fountain that had been the square's focal point was removed. In its place, the state eventually erected the imposing Dzerzhinsky statue seen as a more appropriate counterpart to the reconstructed square. The unwanted fountain was placed discreetly near the Academy of Science on Lenin Avenue.

URBAN UTOPIAS

The Soviet redevelopment that began in the 1930s and continued through 1950s followed a number of unique conventions. In his essay "In the Shadow of Monuments: Notes on Iconoclasm and Time," Mikhail Yampolsky writes that the "urban utopias" built under Stalin, and later on under Khrushchev, were designed to juxtapose, on the

one hand, “streets and avenues along which there is a ceaseless movement of people and cars,” and, on the other hand, squares adorned by statues, where the “movement is dried up into an immovable atemporality” (Yampolsky 98). Placed within this “immovable” environment, the Soviet monument served to organize the “hierarchy of social signs”; rather than imitating “one or another person,” it aimed to “express the idea of not being subject to time” (Yampolsky 98).

A prime example of this strategy, the Dzerzhinsky statue aimed to capture the overall figure, rather than providing an accurate portrayal of its subject. The statue was best observed from a distance, from where the viewer could perceive only its foreboding outline. For obvious reasons, Russian authors were more reluctant to refer to the monument of the secret police founder than their Western counterparts. Edward Alexander’s *Opus* contains the following passage describing one character’s encounter with the statue: “Phil was looking at a statue some twenty feet away in the
402 centre of the square. It was of a solitary figure in a long coat standing on a pedestal, its back to the [KGB] building” (Alexander 11). The character observes the statue from a distance, as was intended by its sculptor working within the Socialist-Realist mandate. Seeing it close up would most likely produce less impact. That second option of seeing it closely was not even available to the viewer.

Designing the Dzezhinsky statue, the sculptor Evgeny Vuchetich, the author of several other important Soviet-era monuments, simultaneously pursued two divergent objectives. In addition to commemorating Dzerzhinsky, the statue aimed to resolve a practical problem. Specifically, it aimed to help regulate the heavy flow of traffic on and around Lubyanka. The six-metre-tall Dzerzhinsky mounted on a high pedestal was placed at the intersection of nine streets colliding at Lubyanka in order to serve as a kind of lighthouse for the motorists. The flip side of this was that, while aiding the motorists, the statue remained completely inaccessible to pedestrians.

TOURS AND DETOURS

According to de Certeau, the walking of passers-by “offers a series of turns (tours) and detours” that can be compared to stylistic figures, including asyndeton (de Certeau 100). Related to synecdoche which “names a part instead of a whole which includes it” (for example, “sail” is taken for “ship”), asyndeton suppresses “linking words such as conjunctions and adverbs, either within the sentence or between sentences” (de Certeau 100). Applied to walking, asyndeton “selects and fragments the space traversed; it skips over links and whole parts that it omits” (de Certeau 101). Illustrating this, De Certeau describes how when visiting Paris, a friend from Sèvres gravitates towards the rue de Saint-Péres and the rue de Sèvres, “even though he is going to see his mother in another part of town” (de Certeau 104).

Because of its location in the middle of several traffic lanes, the Dzerzhinsky statue itself invited the walker to skip over it. Its imposing size also contributed to this. Contrary to their intended objective, Yampolsky writes, “monuments rarely become objects of a genuine cult or even of admiration”: their high pedestals violate “the obligatory placement of the object in art at—or slightly above—the passerby’s eye level” (Yampolsky 93). As a result, monuments become “almost indiscernible from up close” (Yampolsky 93). Moreover, the monument possesses a “sacral zone,” a special area which surrounds it. The transgression of this “sacral zone” produces shock, and this, in turn, keeps the worshipper at a distance.

The “sacral zone” around monuments, Yampolsky explains, resembles Ervin Goffman’s “personal reserve,” and the “zone of bodily self-manifestation described by Merleau-Ponty” (Yampolsky 94). The difference is that the personal protective zones “are situated around living beings and not images carved out of stone.” Nevertheless, Yampolsky continues, “when we look upon workers installing or dismantling a monument, their physical contact with the object subconsciously shocks us” (Yampolsky 94). In some instances, the transgression of those protective zones “enters into the very functioning of the monuments.” Yampolsky illustrates this with the example of the Mamai’s burial mound in Stalingrad by Vuchetich, the sculptor of the Dzerzhinsky statue. The mound, Yampolsky writes, was designed to place the visitor in a “traumatic proximity” with its immense statues (Yampolsky 94).

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The Dzerzhinsky statue welcomed no transgressions. Surrounded by traffic lanes on all sides, it was completely fenced in “by means of the repressive authority of the traffic police” (Yampolsky 1995: 106). Muscovites joked that one had to pay a fine to place flowers near the statue. In *Friday’s Rehearsal*, Anatoly Gladilin gives a revealing account of the restrictive atmosphere of the Soviet-era Lubyanskaya Square. While passing Lubyanka, one of his characters notices a large car containing an important KGB official. As the car appears on the square, all of the traffic lights at once turn red, and two unsuspecting taxis and a diminutive Zhiguli end up on the sidewalk (Gladilin 32).

POISON INTO BREAD

Because of its grim symbolism and prominent location in the centre of Moscow, the Dzerzhinsky statue became a prime target of the people’s fury during the 1991 coup, in which the Gorbachev and Yeltsin factions collided, bringing down an already crumbling Soviet Union. Dealing with the unrest on Lubyanka, the authorities brought in a crane supplied by the American embassy to help the protestors topple the statue safely. In *Mythmaking in the New Russia: Politics and Memory during the Yeltsyn Era*, Kathleen E. Smith writes that unlike its Bolshevik predecessor, the new Russian government “neither rushed to destroy the old regime’s monuments nor hastened to replace its symbols” (Smith 104).

Initially, the statue's tall pedestal was left standing, because, the government claimed, it had originally belonged to the pre-revolutionary monument of General Skobelev, a hero of the Russian-Turkish war of 1877-78, and it therefore possessed a legitimate historical value. Yampolsky points out that the "pedestal without Dzerzhinsky is unique in that it continues by itself to designate a place of accumulation of time as pure abstraction" (Yampolsky 106). An empty pedestal, he argues, reverses the "usual value relationships" between the statue and its base in that it increases the value of the base and emphasizes the "complete depreciation of the figure" (Yampolsky 107).

404 Eduardo Galeano, the celebrated author of *Open Veins of Latin America*, makes a similar observation with regard to the toppled statue of Cuba's former president Estrada Palma, which once stood in the centre of Havana near the Casa de las Americas. In the entry entitled "The Clash of Symbols" in his *Book of Embraces*, Galeano writes that an infuriated people have toppled the dictator's statue, leaving behind only a "pair of bronze shoes atop an enormous pedestal." He adds poetically: "Through alchemy or the devilry of the people, symbols resolve their contradictions and poison is turned into bread" (Galeano 127).

In Moscow, that empty pedestal was eventually moved to the Park of Arts, nicknamed the "Graveyard of Fallen Monuments," near the Central House of the Artists on Krymsky Val, where it was reunited with the rest of the statue. Yampolsky argues that at its new location, among a host of other Soviet-era monuments, the Dzerzhinsky statue was transformed "from a symbol of intransience into a symbol of vanity and the inevitability of destruction" (Yampolsky 107). Svetlana Boym, who describes her tour of the Park of Arts in her book *The Future of Nostalgia*, too points out that the relocated Dzerzhinsky "reflected only its own fragile materiality" (Boym 2001: 84). Boym writes that the statue carried only a cryptic note, and that this had, in effect, erased the "monument's material history," as well as the history of the 1991 coup (Boym 87).

AFTER DZERZHINSKY

With the removal of the Dzerzhinsky statue, Lubyanskaya Square has become a more democratic space. Its Soviet-era name, Dzerzhinskaya Square, was discarded in favour of the historical Lubyanskaya Square. The square now serves as a site of gatherings and demonstrations coinciding with important state holidays. It is closed to traffic for some of these celebrations, including May Day, when people can freely navigate its entirety. Lubyanka has also acquired a new monument—a commemorative stone in honour of the victims of the KGB repression. The stone was brought directly from the Solovetsky Islands, the location of the first Soviet labour camp. Placed in a small garden in front of the Politechnical Museum, the new monument was unveiled

at a time when the Dzerzhinsky statue was still standing, contrasting with it both in content and form. The second monument, Yampolsky comments, “signified that the organization founded by Dzerzhinsky was criminal, which, of course, irrevocably compromised the founder himself” (Yampolsky 106).

The old statue’s disappearance has produced a less favourable effect on the square’s architecture. When asked about the consequences of its removal, the director of the Park of Arts answered that the tall Dzerzhinsky “really held together the architectural ensemble of Lubyanka,” and that without it, the square now “looks orphaned” (Boym 87). On at least two occasions, in 1998 and in 2002, there were calls to return the statue back to its original location. Debating the proposed relocation, Duma officials focused on political rather than architectural concerns. The conservatives argued that returning the statue to Lubyanka would send an important message that the Russian state “was taking a strong stand against lawlessness” (Smith 173). Alexander Yakovlev, the “architect of perestroika,” objected strongly to this proposal. He saw it as “evidence of a creeping Communist revanche,” and warned that such nostalgia represented a “threat to democracy” (Smith 174).

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Other post-Communist cities have also been forced to account for the remaining “architectural fabric which bears witness to the traumas of a former repressive regime” (Leach 90). Discussing the situation in Berlin and Bucharest, Neil Leach distinguishes two alternative strategies of dealing with “monuments of evil,” namely their “physical eradication,” and, its opposite, the “symbolic re-appropriation” (Leach 81). The rationale behind the former strategy, which Leach terms the “Berlin Wall syndrome,” is that to “attack a monument associated with a particular regime is to attack—symbolically—the regime itself” (Leach 84). Conversely, the latter strategy termed the “Bucharest syndrome” recognizes that “monuments have an important role in keeping the memories—the lessons—of the past” (Leach 84).

Leach writes that the experience of Bucharest, where the palace of the former Communist president Nicolae Ceausescu has been converted into the democratic House of the Parliament, suggests that the physical demolition of unwanted monuments may not be necessary and that their symbolic re-appropriation itself contributes to “the constructive re-use of those buildings” (Leach 90). However, the case of Bucharest also indicates that “there is nothing to guarantee that the true memories and associations will be retained” (Leach 90). Leach argues that “the very shift from one temporal context to another necessarily involves a change in meaning” (Leach 90). Seen as a monument, the remains of the Berlin Wall, he continues, acquire a different signification in comparison with “the Berlin Wall as Berlin Wall.” Leach further cautions that within the contemporary “culture of simulation,” which undermines our “potential to grasp the ontological reality of the past,” the Berlin Wall “is likely to be perceived as the ‘Berlin Wall Experience’” (Leach 90).

Dealing with the unwanted Dzerzhinsky statue, Moscow has implemented a peculiar hybrid of the two strategies discussed by Leach. Having removed it from Lubyanka, the authorities nevertheless preserved the statue, relocating it to the Park

of Arts on Krymsky Val, where it acquired a different meaning. Meanwhile, the statue's former place on Lubyanka has remained vacant and continues to ignite debates between conflicting points of view. As a possible way out of this impasse, one Moscow newspaper proposed jokingly to replace the Dzerzhinsky monument with a statue of the Moscow mayor Yury Luzhkov as a street cleaner (Rudneva 1-2). Another creative solution came from the émigré artists Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid, who, Boym writes, suggested that the Dzerzhinsky statue could be supplemented "with bronze figures of the courageous individuals who climbed onto its shoulders and wrapped a noose around its neck on that historic day [in] August" (Boym 90).

LARGE PSYCHIC SPECTER

406 The removal of the Dzerzhinsky statue also had a profound impact on the walker's relationship to the square. In the past, the statue's inaccessible location in the middle of several traffic lanes invited the walkers to skip over it. Paradoxically, its large size, Yampolsky demonstrates, also contributed to it being excluded from the walker's field of vision. Following the statue's removal, walkers are instead confronted with a looming emptiness in the square's centre and are now forced to deal with the statue's ghost, possibly a more perilous undertaking than dealing with the actual statue.

Boym writes that in the wake of its almost complete destruction, the Berlin Wall has also produced "a large psychic specter" (Boym 178). In his essay "The Urban Aesthetics of Absence: Pragmatist Reflections in Berlin," Richard Shusterman observes similarly that in spite of its physical absence, the Berlin Wall continues to maintain a "vivid presence." He suggests that "absence may be an essential structural principle of city aesthetics in general, a paradoxical part of their economy of plenty" (Shusterman 739). The Wall's presence, the critic continues, becomes apparent in "the differing visual cultures of East and West," specifically in their conflicting architecture and interiors. Describing East Berlin's distinctive interiors, he refers in particular to its "oilcloth table coverings, artificial flowers, and regimented white lace curtains" (Shusterman 739).

Shusterman further indicates that to the "frequent dismay of motorists and public transport commuters," the disturbing presence of the disappeared Berlin Wall can also be felt in the "chaos of continuing traffic changes" necessitated by massive construction in the new unified city of Berlin. The critic points out that, for instance, during its recent reconstruction Potsdamer Platz, one of Berlin's most prominent squares, reasserted the absent wall "by being not only a constructed obstacle of monumental scale but an international tourist attraction as Europe's largest building site" (Shusterman 739).

Following the removal of the Dzerzhinsky statue, no significant architectural changes have been introduced to Lubyanskaya Square. Frozen in time, it continues to direct people and traffic along the old trajectories. As in the past, motorists have

to follow the same ceremonial circle around the square's centre, even if the circle is now empty. Except for special occasions when it is closed to traffic, walkers are still prohibited from crossing the square and must instead use underground crossings, a long and convoluted route, or follow the sidewalks encircling the square, also a lengthy undertaking. Ironically, those same restrictions that once helped to skip over it now contribute to keeping the memory of the statue alive, reminding the walker again and again of its absence. When the statue was in place, these restrictions made sense. Now that it has been removed, they are made all the more noticeable because they no longer seem to be needed.

De Certeau, who argues that urban spaces "are like the presences of diverse absences," cautions that the "spirits" of those disappeared signposts—be it a bakery, or an old house—remain unrevealed and instead their memory is passed on only in secret, "just between you and me" (de Certeau 108). In the case of Lubyanka, this provision acquires added significance. To acknowledge publicly the void in the middle of the square would mark one as a member of the old guard and detractor of the democratic process. In the past, walkers kept it to themselves that it was the local metro station, or the Children's World department store, rather than the Dzerzhinsky statue, that defined Lubyanka for them. Today, with the values having been reversed, they must also keep it to themselves that the toppled statue still lives in their memory as an old familiar signpost. The fact of the statue's disappearance is what makes it feature so prominently in the walker's imagination.

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THE SUPERNATURAL

De Certeau's work focuses on the walker circumventing various restrictions imposed by the official city. He acknowledges the darker side of this effort, describing the places that people inhabit as "symbolizations encysted in the pain or pleasure of the body" (de Certeau 108). However, the overall tenor of his forceful, also lyrical, argument is still that of promise. The experience of navigating the contemporary Lubyanka with its hollow middle is somewhat less encouraging. Roman Jakobson discusses Russia's long-standing tradition of attaching "supernatural, unfathomable power" to statues (Jakobson 322). Tracing this attitude in Russian literature from Pushkin to Mayakovsky, Jakobson points out that the Orthodox tradition "severely condemned the art of sculpture"; it regarded the sculpture as "pagan and diabolic vice" and "did not admit it into churches" (Jakobson 362).

Precisely the Orthodox tradition, Jakobson writes, "suggested to Pushkin the close association of statues with idolatry, with devilry, with sorcery" (Jakobson 362). In Pushkin's *The Bronze Horseman*, the protagonist Evgeny loses his beloved Parasha to a violent Petersburg flood. Stricken by grief and "sudden madness," he confronts the equestrian statue of Peter the Great, a famous Petersburg landmark known as the "Bronze Horseman." The revolt of the commoner, who sees Peter as the "real culprit"

of his tragedy, brings the statue to life, which then chases the terrified Evgeny to the outskirts of the city, where he eventually dies (Jakobson 325).

In addition to *The Bronze Horseman*, Jakobson discusses two other works by Pushkin—*The Stone Guest* and *The Fairytale of the Golden Cockerel*, both featuring a combat between a human and a statue. Like *The Bronze Horseman*, they too end in tragedy. In the latter work, the golden cockerel leaves its spire and pursues Tsar Dadon. Jakobson writes: “The light ringing (legkij zvon) of his [cockerel’s] flight echoes and simultaneously softens the Bronze Horseman’s heavy gallop (tezhelo-zvonkoe skakanie). Dadon perishes” (Jakobson 325). In the equally dramatic finale of *The Stone Guest*, the tomb statue of Donna Anna’s late husband also comes to life: the “animated statue, which has left the monument, grips Don Juan’s hand ‘heavily’ in his ‘stone right hand’; Dona Anna vanishes from him; the man perishes” (Jakobson 325).

408 Jakobson points out that Pushkin’s symbolism of the statue has continued to surface in other Russian authors, whose work “constantly points to its creator” (Jakobson 363). In Mayakovsky, who parodies Pushkin, this motif “acquires particular vigor.” In his poem “Jubilee,” in which Mayakovsky “invites Pushkin down from the pedestal of his monument, the statue’s hand does not oppress the man; rather the man’s hand oppresses the statue” (Jakobson 364). The poet inquires: “I squeezed too hard? It hurts?” In contrast to Don Juan from *The Stone Guest*, to which this poem alludes, Mayakovsky remains unscathed and in a position of power. Jakobson writes that this “attack against bronze and marble” is found even in Mayakovsky’s farewell poem “At the Top of My Voice,” which refers to Pushkin as well (Jakobson 364).

EXPOSED

A similar mystical quality also characterizes the experience of walking on Lubyanka, where walkers, on the one hand, search anxiously for the removed statue of Dzerzhinsky, that familiar signpost, and, on the other hand, avert their eyes from the empty centre generating some dark, otherworldly energy. This uneasy flux of emotions is reminiscent of the “architectural uncanny” defined by Anthony Vidler as “a fundamental insecurity brought by a ‘lack of orientation,’ a sense of something new, foreign, hostile invading an old, familiar, customary world” (Vidler 23). According to Vidler, the “uncanny” derives its force from “its very inexplicability, its sense of lurking unease, rather than from any clearly defined source of fear” (Vidler 23). In the case of Lubyanka, the source of unease is defined somewhat more clearly and is associated with the removed Dzerzhinsky statue that continues to haunt the square.

With the removal of the old statue, the elevated centre of Lubyanka has acquired the opaqueness usually associated with marginal spaces, or, to use de Certeau’s term, “recesses” of the city. Conversely, the square’s margins have been made more open and welcoming to the tourist. The once abandoned back alleys behind Lubyanskaya

metro station that in the years of perestroika and glasnost resembled Eugene Ateget's people-less images of old Paris have now been gentrified. The metro station itself with its two characteristic oversized arches also received a new coat of paint. Next to it looms a new Western-style luxury shopping mall which has replaced the old maze of souvenir kiosks and makeshift produce stands.

This shift of the centre of gravity from the square's middle to its margins has contributed to the revitalization of Lubyanka and its surroundings. However, this same transformation also made the walker less at home here. The new and improved margins no longer offer a shelter where the walker can find refuge from the square's vacant and foreboding centre. The feeling of unease still persists here, even if today the source of this unease comes from a mystical, rather than a real world. Navigating the contemporary Lubyanka, walkers find themselves more exposed. In the past, the tall Dzerzhinsky statue performed an important function, marking the boundary between official and unofficial, public and private. Whereas now, the entire square is on display: everything is public and there is nowhere to escape.

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