

Containing Russia

Alexander Kluge, *Russia Container*, trans. Alexander Booth (Chicago: Seagull Books, 2022). 392pp., £27.50 hb., 978 1 80309 065 8

Russia Container is not a book about Russia. It's about the images and stories that East Germans had of Soviet Russia before the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and after. Alexander Kluge wrote it 'on commission' by his sister Alexandra Kluge, who, unlike her brother, lived in the German Democratic Republic after the separation of their parents. There Alexandra learnt Russian at school and read Pushkin as well as Russian fairy tales. After her death in 2017 Kluge collected some of her stories about Russia together with other (former East) German stories. The book shows the romantic feeling that East Germans had, and still have, for Russia. It also demonstrates how these passions spilt over to the 'western' part of Germany, or at least to Kluge himself. But the romanticism of the book is not one of exalted ideas of a nation or state, but rather of the individual human experience, which is in a fundamental conflict with abstract ideas and which tries to resist them.

Kluge received the final version of the English translation of *Russia Container* on the day before the Russian tanks invaded Ukrainian territory. He decided to include an introduction which is meant to serve as a 'reading aid'. After 24 February the reader might indeed need help reading *Russia Container* – a book that neither anticipates this event nor deals with other Russian interventions, operations and annexations before 2022. However, if the reader expects Kluge to make sense of the recent events, then the makeshift introduction fails. There Kluge chooses the form of diary entries, which begin with fantasising about the possibility of turning back time. The motive of turning back time suggests that something unamendable has happened, which history cannot rectify. Then he proceeds with a story of James Baker, who as the US Secretary of State travelled to Russia in 1991 with the abstract idea that Russia should not repeat the history of the German Empire after 1918 – humiliation and then total war. It is implicit in Kluge's story that not much was done to prevent this. This could be read as a suggestion that if time could be turned back, it should go to 1991 – although another story in the introduction suggests that

'what is happening in Ukraine' has been developing for over 100 years and that this is why we cannot readily understand what is now happening or why it hurts so much: 'The older [the crystal] is, the harder, the more unreal and more abstract'. The 'reading aid' also includes the opinion of a desperate civilian who suffered the war and who just 'wants peace', no matter who started it. If this was intended as an overview of stories on the war, then it is not representative of their variety. Indeed, there are no stories told by Ukrainians in Kluge's book. Their absence confirms that *Russia Container* is about German stories. In other words, the introduction doubles and reinforces the content of the book rather than offering aid in this traumatic and disorientating situation. It confirms that (East) Germans have not known how the Russian 'crystal' formed itself in relation to Ukraine.

Perhaps there could not have been a worse moment to publish such a book about Russia. But the anachronism of its publication reflects the artistic and literary form of the 'container'. A container for Kluge transports that which has been collected before it would be lost. *The Children's and Household Tales (Kinder- und Hausmärchen)* from 1812 is the most vivid example of a container. The Grimm brothers collected fairy tales at a point when the interest in telling stories had already faded. Fairy tales used to evolve, consolidate and renew their narratives and motifs through the process of oral tradition. The Grimm brothers tried to capture them before they vanished once and for all, thereby producing a written, literary culture of these tales. *Children's and Household Tales* is therefore merely a snapshot of the fairy-tale tradition and should not be considered as a finished work. Rather, it is precisely a container of stories, which came into existence in contexts that we do not remember anymore, and which had meaning that we now struggle to understand. Fairy tales are after-images of lost collective memories – a theory which is implicit in Kluge's and Oskar Negt's *History and Obstinacy* (2014, originally published in German in 1981). They are anachronistic in many ways. This is exactly how we could

understand the content of Kluge's *Russia Container*: an experience of Russia which is about to vanish.

The book consists of five chapters with many different sections which are not related to each other through narrative. Instead, a socio-historical theme is developed through a variety of different, unrelated stories by Kluge and by other, sometimes fictional storytellers. Thus, the theme appears as a simultaneity of stories. One example are the stories about the pinnacle of the Cold War in 1983, which tell how the US-Navy carried out a manoeuvre at the Soviet borders in the North Sea and how the Soviets learned about the US plans for 'decapitation' (*Enthauptungsschlag*), namely a nuclear bombing of Moscow. These stories are then followed by one from a former East German, who experienced the fall of the Berlin Wall – in his words, the 'annexation' of GDR by FRG – as a 'decapitation', and, as a consequence, began to vote for the nationalist party Alternative für Deutschland, and then moved to Russia. It continues with more stories about NATO manoeuvres near Russian borders and one report by a translator who was 'in Minsk'. What is meant are the meetings around the Minsk Agreements from 2015. The translator describes how the now former German Chancellor Angela Merkel was trying to read the Russian President Vladimir Putin's facial expression and his body language. The historical context of their encounter, namely the war in East Ukraine, is never mentioned.

The simultaneous, and thus non-causal relation of the stories to one another is emphasised by Kluge's own personal story that evolves as part of the Cold War theme: 'The most dangerous moment of the Cold War'. Kluge's contemplation of the sky and his worries about his newborn daughter are obviously unrelated to the events of the grand political stage and yet they appear at once. In 1983 Kluge received an award in Venice for his film *The Power of Feeling* (*Die Macht der Gefühle*). In *Russia Container* he is telling us about how he felt in that moment, namely, anxious that his daughter could catch a cold. This anxiety 'relates' to the anxiety around the Cold War. Putting the personal-individual anxiety together with the socio-political enables a retrospective interpretation of unrelated experiences as interrelated: to think that he sensed the danger of the *Cold War* through his worries about his daughter catching a *cold*. The book produces a side-by-side of experiences, asking the reader to suspend

the complexities of the political context.

Kluge's work is thus a plea for the recovery of the significance of individual experience. This plea is directed against rationality and rationalisation that is a key feature of capitalist, including socialist, societies, which tend to suppress the individual as Kluge conceptualises it, namely, as a reservoir of specific capacities. These human capacities are constantly being challenged and undermined by progress which is necessary for socio-economic development. As a result, humans have developed a resistance to withstand the constant threat of progress, which keeps divesting them from their learned capacities. Obstinacy is the flipside of history (see his and Oskar Negt's *History and Obstinacy*). The (re)collecting of individual experience and its juxtaposition with other individual experiences is important because it captures the way in which people deal with the social and its history.



The conflict between the social and the individual is dramatised in *Russia Container* in passages on the theme of the Stalinist Terror. Pavel Florensky – a theologian and mathematician was employed by Leon Trotsky to work on the project of electrification. Florensky was arrested in 1933 for his book on relativity theory and executed in 1937. As a mathematician he believed in numbers, and as a theologian he believed in the divine. The number as a cipher for the ultimate alienation is considered a result of abstraction and rationalisation. Presumably, Florensky believed that he could work on a project that tries to reconcile the holy light with the electric light, thus reconciling spirituality and rationalisation. This identification with what he thought the socialist project meant tragically brought him his death.

Florensky's story demonstrates how radical utopian thinking – namely, the idea that the individual can see

him- or herself fully reflected in the social – came into conflict with the state. This and the stories of many other citizens during the Stalinist Terror presumably stand for the impossibility of wiping out the resistance or obstinacy of individuals. Kluge's book begins with stories about the resistance of the Orthodox Christians to the reforms of Nikon in the seventeenth century, which tried to adjust the liturgy to the Greek tradition. The so-called Old Believers resisted and paid with their lives. Obstinacy is a key human characteristic for Kluge, and he understands history as such in relation to this obstinacy.

Individual experience conflicts with the social because the social tends to rationalise and abstract from the individual and his or her experiences. When the individual recognises his or her personal experience in social events or in the social as such, these moments are 'magical', because they are impossible, even though they happen sometimes. Kluge tries to stage or recreate precisely these magical moments in this book.

Russia Container does not describe Russia as a country that could potentially invade Ukraine, but it describes Russia as a country or empire that was itself invaded twice: by Napoleon's and then Hitler's troops. Kluge's chapter on imperialism ('The Plunderer's Eye Turned Towards the Map/The Principle of Abstraction') does not deal with Russia's imperialism but with British and German imperialism. The theme of imperialism is developed by Kluge as a juxtaposition of 'imperialism as love' and 'imperialism as abstraction'. It begins with the story of his sister Alexandra, living in the GDR on a territory conquered by the Soviet army, where she falls in love with Russian culture, with her conqueror. This is followed by a story of Kluge playing soldiers in his school yard. ('All of us students were moved by the prospect of receiving a knight's estate in the Crimea or – alternatively – a latifundium in German East Africa'.) It moves further to the British geo-politician Halford Mackinder, who considered the majority of the territory of the Russian Empire as the so-called 'heartland', which in his theory was globally the most important geopolitical territory and which is an expression of British desires to colonise Eastern Europe and Russia. It proceeds to a story about the

writer Rudyard Kipling, who was not a lover of 'his own green, sea-swept island', but a passionate lover of the British colonies, which even had bodily expressions, as if they were 'his own skin'. This passionate, albeit orientalist and in all ways problematic, 'love' is juxtaposed by Kluge to the abstract, cold and 'loveless' imperial conquest of Russia by Hitler's troops. The stories go that Hitler never visited Russia, implicating that he never had an orientalist vision. Furthermore, we are told that the Wehrmacht soldiers never knew exactly why they were invading Russia and never had a desire to live or work there. The image that is mediating the juxtaposition of 'hot' and 'cold' imperialism is the cousin of Yevgeny Onegin, who like Don Juan, was keeping books of his 'conquests'. 'Nothing more horrible, insistent, pitiless than a conqueror who does not want the conquered'. These stories about imperialism are obnoxious in the light of Russia's attempts to conquer Ukraine, but they also reveal something about the German and West-European colonial gaze towards Russia and Eastern Europe.

With Kluge's *Russia Container* we are dealing with a particular method of thinking with motifs, images and stories. The point that is made in the chapter on imperialism is not that we need to distinguish between hot and cold imperialism, but that such stories *did* circulate and some of them still do circulate even if in a different disguise. The motifs or images and certain compositions of those motifs and images retain their relevance and resonance when they are placed in a different context or story. Thinking in narrative structures and motifs is potentially perilous because it can easily be instrumentalised to manipulate readers. But unlike many stories that currently circulate in the press, academic and artistic talks, including Instagram 'stories', which juxtapose the current events with motifs of World War I, World War II, fascism, Hitler, Stalin, etc., Kluge's stories do not claim to be true. In contrast to politics, journalism and other spheres that operate with myths, motifs and narrative, Kluge's book uses images and literature critically, by containing them and by enabling the reader to perceive them as such.

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