

Abandoned USSR

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Russia

Mother Russia, the birthplace of Soviet Communism, witnessed a dramatic development in her history in 1917. In that year, the Red October Revolution, led by the Bolsheviks with Vladimir Lenin at their head, confirmed the collapse of the tsars. In 1929, five years after Lenin's death, another leader of great stature took power, Joseph Stalin. He extended the USSR's influence to its pinnacle, exerting an iron grip to which innumerable people fell victim. Successive leaders, from Nikita Khrushchev to Mikhail Gorbachev, added new chapters to the story that eventually led to the dissolution of the Soviet bloc in 1991.

In post-USSR Russia, places now abandoned bear witness to every aspect of the bloc's turbulent history: from the solemn grandeur of a ruined Orthodox church, to the propaganda, distinctly military in flavour, still visible in former Pioneer camps, via the frescos which still adorn the crumbling walls of former barracks, schools and factories, the many faces of patriotism have left their indelible mark on this vast country's heritage.

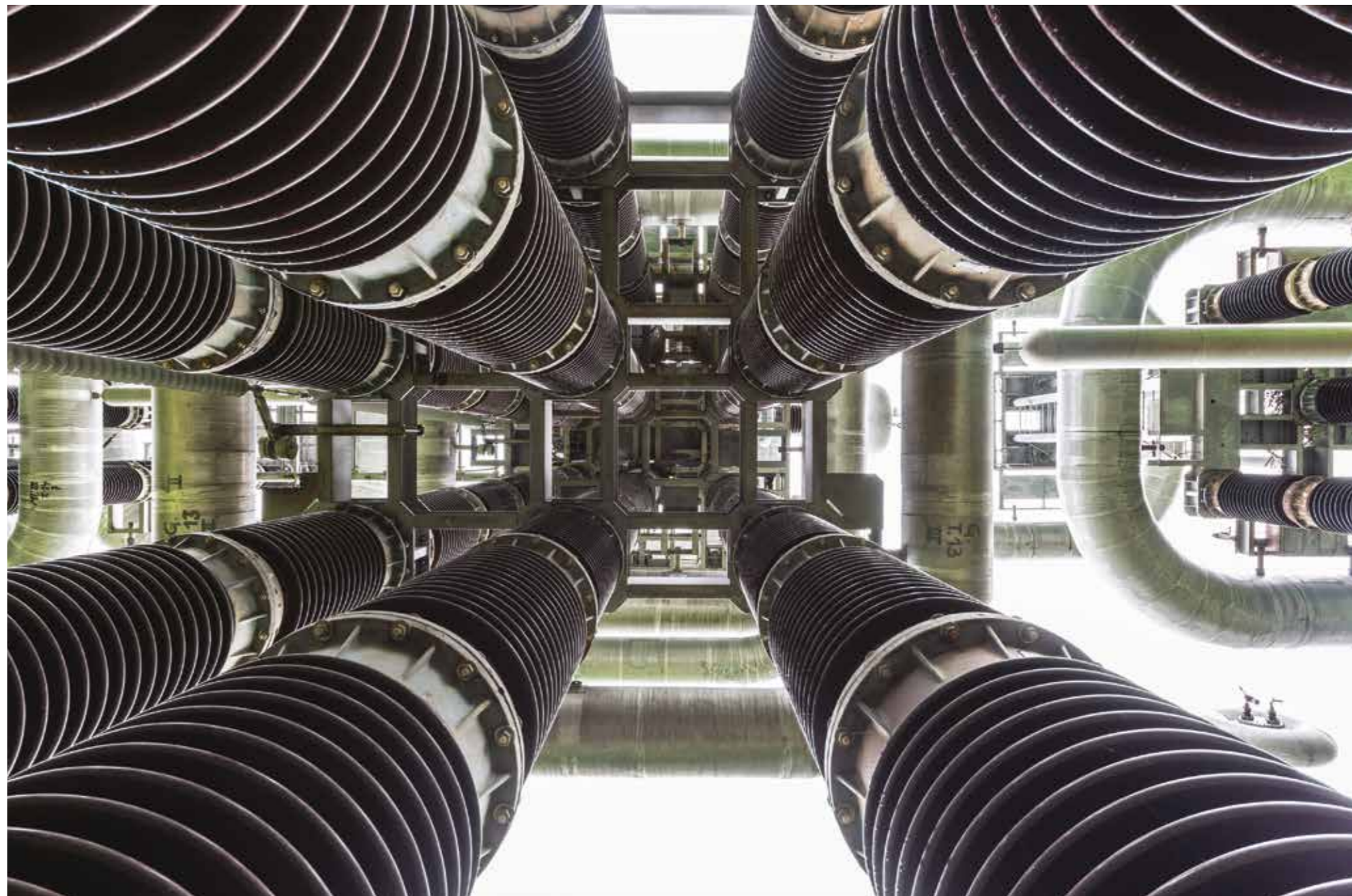
Visits: 2013 – 2018

A grand country house dating from the 18th century, built by Italian architects. Following the Bolshevik revolution, the manor house was brought into state ownership in 1918.





Prototype of a Tesla coil installed at the end of the 1970s in a research centre that was secret at the time. It was used to test insulators for the protection of vehicles, aeroplanes and electronic equipment against lightning.





The "Fairy Tale" Pioneer camp that became well known for its lavish decoration.



Dining hall at the "Fairy Tale" Pioneer camp.



Shop floor in a textile factory where machines used for making garments were installed.





Disused marine school in Riga due to be demolished shortly after the time of the visit.



The spa, built in 1838, was for a long time a popular haunt of Russians. A railway line was even built to establish a link with Moscow. The complex, shrouded in cold as the ice covering the pools testifies, is on the verge of collapse.



A school gym. Mishka, the famous mascot of the Soviet Union carrying the Olympic flag, takes centre stage.

Ukraine

In 1918, Ukraine became a Socialist Republic, some months after the government in power had been overthrown by the Bolshevik party and the proclamation of independence. Despite falling victim to the greed of various powers, in 1922 Ukraine joined the newly formed USSR, which continued to exploit it every bit as much as the Russian Empire had done previously.

A Pioneer camp that seems to have been deliberately set in isolation in the darkest depths of a thick forest, and a former theatre where nothing remains other than portraits of Stalin and Lenin, bear witness to Ukraine's tortured identity. Here, the slightest hint of nationalism was considered a betrayal of the Bolshevik ideal. In some places the feeling of being watched has not completely disappeared: you feel the need to sneak surreptitiously from one room to the next to avoid the watchful eye of the guards, while taking great care not to alert the dogs as you tread on the debris of broken glass littered across the floor. In other places, such as the bombed factories of the Donbas with their post-apocalyptic atmosphere, or the ghost town of Pripyat a few kilometres from Chernobyl, permanent silence prevails.

Visits: 2013 – 2018 – 2020

Baroque palace that was clearly requisitioned for conversion to an orphanage or Pioneer camp. Some of the original ornate decoration can be seen through the cracked paintwork of the walls. These are a far cry from the austerity of communism that replaced them.

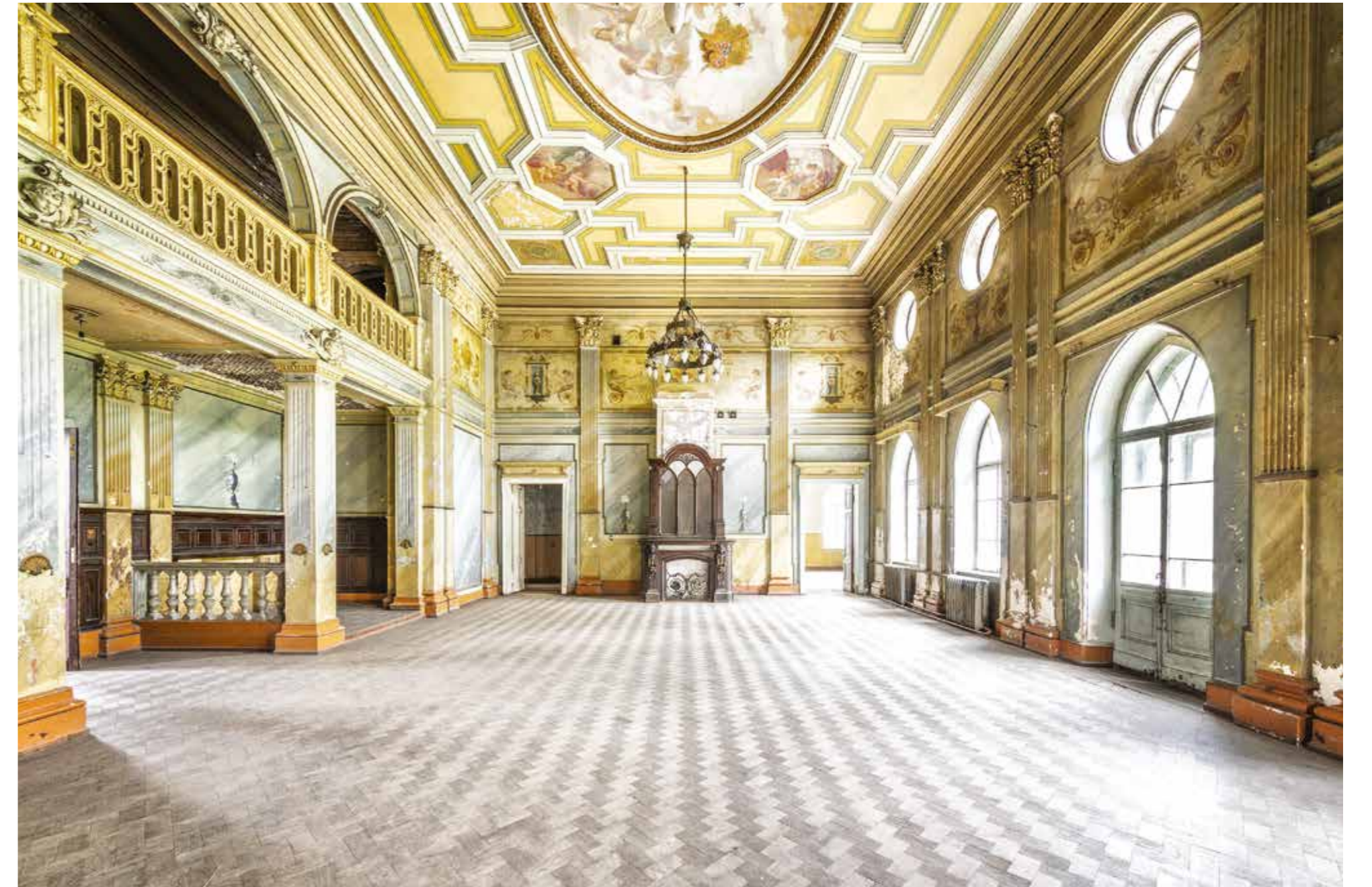




Salyut Pioneer camp reserved for children of the Kiev radio factory employees.



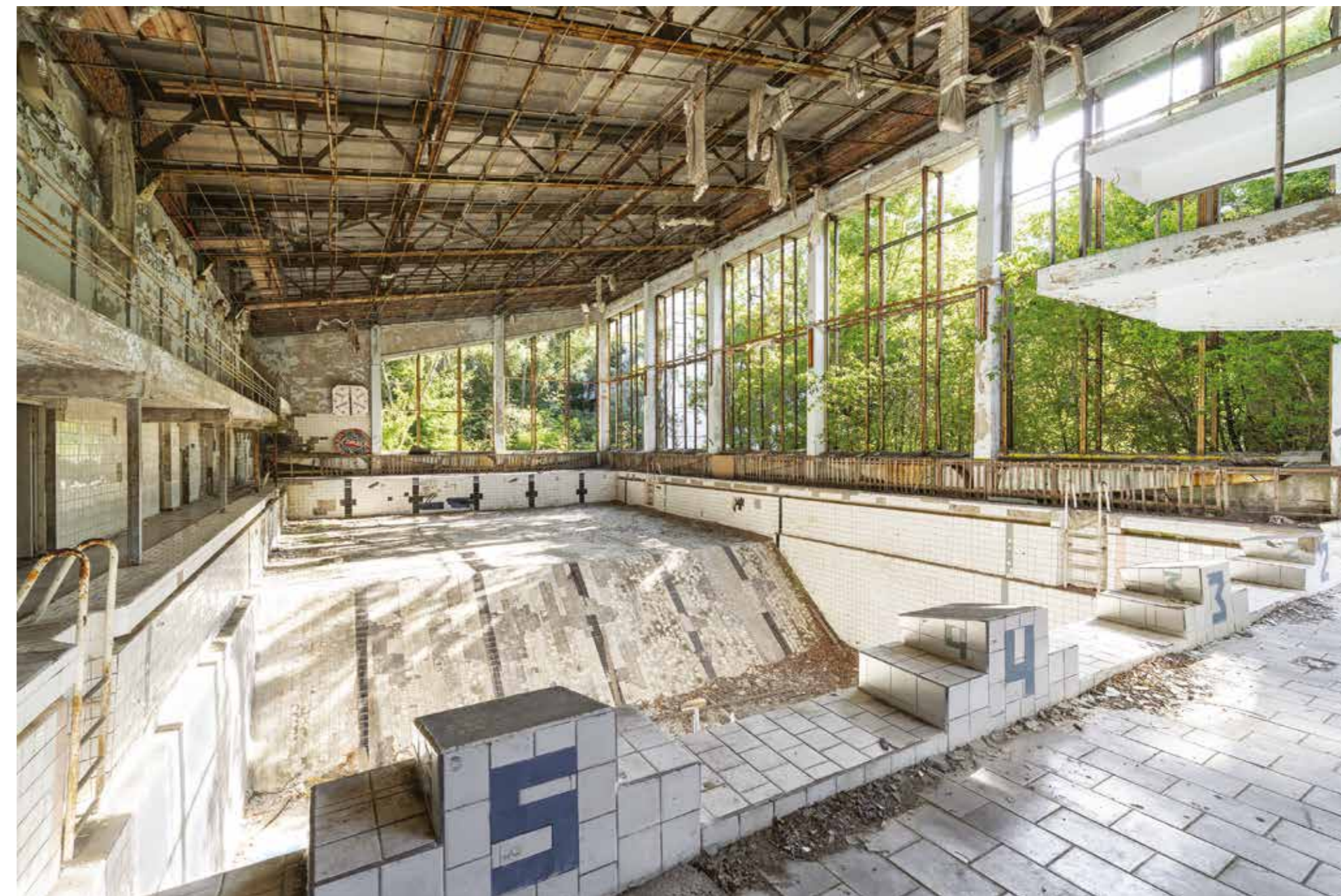
Theatre belonging to a sanatorium. The two medallions on either side of the stage show Lenin and Stalin in profile. In Ukraine depictions of Stalin became increasingly rare because he was responsible for the terrible famine that decimated the country between 1931 and 1933. Thus, most memorials bearing his image have been destroyed.



One of the Sharovski family's grand country houses. Built in the middle of the 19th century, it pleasingly blends the Neo-classical style with Russian Baroque. To the rear there is a large botanical garden.



"Pripjat 1970" at the entry to this town that sadly gained fame at the time of the explosion in reactor number four of the Chernobyl nuclear power plant 3 km away on 26 April 1986. This catastrophe resulted in the deaths of several tens of thousands of people affected by radiation. The consequences for flora, fauna and people will continue to be felt for millennia. Today the area, which is still contaminated, can be visited with a guide.



Pripjat swimming pool.



Dodge cars in the recreation area in Pripjat town centre.



The Pripjat Café.



The Energetik Palace of Culture in Pripyat.





Gas masks carpet the floor in a school in Pripjat, no doubt left this way by visitors, despite them having been strongly advised not to touch anything because of the risk of radioactive contamination.



Maternity ward in Pripjat.

Kazakhstan

The Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic became a republic of the USSR in 1936, and quickly became very useful to the central government. Its population had been decimated by a third as a result of the great famines of the 1920s, and it was therefore a highly suitable destination for deportees during and just after the Second World War. These included Volga Germans, Koryo-saram, Crimean Tatars and Chechens. It also served as a theatre for Soviet military experiments, and it was here that a centre for nuclear launch tests was set up, which remains almost completely inaccessible even today. The only people who are granted the prized authorisations needed to visit the site are nuclear engineers. It would take a journey of 200 kilometres plus four hours' driving to bring this play to fruition and find a way through ... The same goes for the *sanctum sanctorum*, the Baikonur Cosmodrome which hosted the Soviet space programme. It was from here that Yuri Gagarin was launched, making him the first man to go into space. The abandoned shuttles remain under close surveillance, so to have any hope of seeing what remains of the space adventure, it is essential to resort to devious means to avoid the watchfulness of the guards. Kazakhstan was the last country to gain its independence in 1991. It seems to keep a close watch over the relics of Soviet times, like this statue of Lenin which still stands in a half-abandoned village.

Visits: 2017 – 2019

Hammer and sickle lying at the entrance to a small enterprise in a place that now stands empty, a ghost village.





104

Statue of a woman found at the side of a road – her Eurasian eyes confirm she is a Kazakh. Her right arm is missing, but the garlands of flowers round her neck are still intact: tradition has it that when one of her garlands comes undone, the wish of the person who hung it round her neck will come true.



105

Roadside displays like this are typical in the area. The low wooden building is a general store and the monument next to it stands in honour of shopkeepers. The hammer and sickle above it link labour and the distribution of foodstuffs to the values of communism.

Georgia

Georgia came under Soviet influence in 1921, and later joined with neighbouring countries to form the Soviet Republic of Transcaucasia. As the birthplace of Joseph Stalin, this land enjoyed a privileged status following his rise to power. Members of the Russian intelligentsia in search of entertainment and relaxation were welcome guests there, and Georgia became synonymous with the pursuit of pleasures such as dancing and fine cuisine. Some of its once majestic establishments still retain a vague aura of their former grandeur, in spite of having fallen into a state of disrepair, such as the sanatoria of Tskatulbo, which are nowadays largely occupied by refugees fleeing the fighting in Abkhazia. Khrushchev paid particular attention to Georgia after the death of "The Father of Nations", enthusiastically dismantling Stalin's personality cult. The country was emancipated in April 1991, but conflicts quickly arose between the central authorities and certain regions seeking independence, namely Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

Visits: 2015 – 2016 – 2017 – 2021

The oldest funicular railway in Tbilisi carried up to 500,000 people a year from the city centre to Mtatsminda Park at the top. It was built in 1903, but it was closed down following a horrendous accident in 1990 in which 20 people died and 15 were injured. A renovation project has recently been completed.





Small private theatre within the sanatorium used by Stalin, now preserved as a museum.



Abandoned School of Art in the centre of Tbilisi. The cracks in the wall on the right were caused by the 7.2-magnitude earthquake that severely damaged the capital in 1991.



1 4 2

A monument to the unknown soldier is a feature of most Soviet towns. For once it is the stork's role to deliver a message of peace ...



1 4 3

Sculpture devoted to the Motherland, a favoured theme in the different countries that comprised the Soviet Union. It is a symbol of peace and an expression of the courage, strength and sadness of the nation's children.



The last station in the country with any Soviet trains. It is the end of the line for this Armenian CCCP locomotive. Towering behind it are the Iranian mountains, which long marked out a clear border between the USSR and the rest of the world.



Fountain at the former technical university in Gyumri. In 1988, it was destroyed by an earthquake that resulted in nearly 50,000 deaths. For the very first time, the USSR was forced to ask for international cooperation in a bid to resolve the situation.



The three pictures in an Armenian university basement are of Missak Manouchian, Friedrich Engels and Karl Marx.



Theatre at a smelting plant in the north of the country. The plant itself is still in use.



Palace of Culture in the Yerevan region that was used as an opera house. It is so well preserved that it looks like a museum piece.



Palace of Culture in a former Lutheran church. It was converted into a civic building at the time when the USSR banned all religious practices, depriving people of German origin of their place of worship. The layout of the building reveals the ghostly outline of what was once a church.

Abkhazia

The autonomous republic of Abkhazia that stretches along the Black Sea coast between Russia and Georgia, claimed independence from the latter in 1992. Officially it is still considered part of Georgia. The push for independence resulted in extremely violent armed conflict in 1992-1993 in which 30,000 lost their lives and 300,000 were displaced..

The former parliament building of the Republic of Abkhazia in Sukhumi was destroyed by fire during the civil war, resulting in the deaths of several hundreds of people. Today this building is a shell of its former self and is used as a public toilet.





An eye-catching bus stop in the Brutalist style. Nowadays it is only the cows hanging out nearby that derive any sort of excitement from it.





Large turbine room in Tkvarcheli power station.



Control room of a hydropower plant near the Chechen border. We had to walk more than 15 kilometres to get here. Surprisingly, it was a rather pleasant hike.

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Relics of the Soviet conquest of space, Moscow Pioneer camps, remnants of propaganda along a journey sparsely dotted with statues of Stalin or Lenin, from traditional Moldovan houses to ghosts of the Caucasian wars, by way of petrochemical factories in the Donbass ... this report invites the reader to relive, through its striking pictures, more than a hundred years of history, from the beginnings of the Soviet period to the legacy of a communist era now fast fading from memory.

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