

# **Imperium Study Guide**

**Imperium by Ryszard Kapuściński**

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# Plot Summary

Ryszard Kapuscinski was a widely renowned Polish journalist whose work has been praised across the world for its striking realism and well-composed prose. His literary journalism is considered among the best of its time. In *Imperium*, Kapuscinski describes his encounters with the Soviet Union during the height of Stalinism and periodically until the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 and soon thereafter.

Kapuscinski is a critic of the Soviet regime though he rarely rails against it explicitly. Instead, he simply reports the horrific crimes perpetrated by the USSR's government on its own people and on the peoples of the other Soviet republics. He also focuses on the psychological effects of Soviet rule on all the peoples of the USSR. Kapuscinski displays an interest in post-colonial sociology or the study of the psychology of groups of people that were colonized by a greater power, their culture, language, nationalist sentiment, and the like, and that same psychology following the removal of the colonial power.

Accordingly, Kapuscinski focuses primarily on the effects of 'Sovietization' and the fall of the Soviet Union on the greater Soviet republics like Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Turkmenistan along with the peoples of particularly oppressed cities like Vorkuta. In Kapuscinski's view, the Soviet Union was one of the most terrifying and brutal regimes in human history who took advantage of the psychologies of peoples who were already inclined to bow to authority and live in fear. It is for this reason that Kapuscinski refers to the Soviet government as 'The Imperium.'

*Imperium* divides into three parts. Part I, *First Encounters (1939-1967)* describes Kapuscinski's first three encounters with the Soviet regime. Chapter 1, 'Pinsk '39', takes place in Kapuscinski's childhood in his hometown of Pinsk in what is now Belarus. Kapuscinski and his family were on the run from the Soviet government as were many of his fellow townspeople. Chapter 2, 'The Trans-Siberian' describes a trip Kapuscinski took across Russia on the Trans-Siberian railroad. Chapter 3, 'The South' describes Kapuscinski's extended journey across the southern Soviet republics, including Armenia, Georgia, Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan.

Part II, *From a Bird's Eye View (1989-1991)*, is by far the largest part of the book with twelve chapters. In Chapter 4, 'The Third Rome' Kapuscinski describes the weakening power of the Soviet government in 1989 and his visit to Moscow. Chapter 5, 'The Temple and the Palace' describes the building of The Temple of Christ the Savior and Stalin's destruction of it. Chapter 6, 'We Look, We Cry' focuses primarily on the history of the Armenian people, its domination by the Soviets and rising nationalist sentiment in the face of Soviet collapse. Subsequent chapters cover other Soviet republics, peoples and cities including Vorkuta, the Bashkirs, Kolyma, Azerbaijan and Drohobych.

Part III, *The Sequel Continues (1992-1993)* is simply an epilogue written in 1994 following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Kapuscinski explains how the events of 1985 with the rise of Gorbachev and the subsequent events following his rule led to the



collapse of the Soviet Union. He reflects on how the peoples of the Imperium have handled decolonization. Nationalist sentiment has arisen which is partly destructive and while there are many instabilities there are many good things as well. Kapuscinski thinks that the peoples of the Imperium have reason to hope for their futures.



# Part I, First Encounters, Chapter 1, Pinsk, '39'

## Part I, First Encounters, Chapter 1, Pinsk, '39' Summary and Analysis

At the end of September 1939, war is everywhere in Poland. Villages burn and everyone takes shelter from air raids. Refugees are all over the place. The author, his mother, and sister are on their way home to Pinsk, Poland when war breaks out. After traveling for several days, they are caught by Soviet soldiers. The author is seven years old at the time.

In the first grade, Ryszard must learn Russian and studies Leninism. His parents tell him not to ask any questions for fear of reprisal. The Soviets demand that the school children regularly wear Russian scarves with the faces of Russian leaders printed on them. Some classes are interrupted by gunfire and the beautiful Pinsk church is destroyed by cannon fire. This is a building that the Soviets first set their eyes on. One day, Ryszard sees trains full of people being deported and asks where they are going. His mother will not say where and cries.

Late one night, Ryszard's father returns. He has been imprisoned by the Soviets but he cannot stay the night as he is on the run. Red Army men burst into the house the next night and demand to know where her husband is. They eventually leave.

At school, the kids start to talk about the deportations. Many are being removed in their sleep, particularly if they are "bourgeois." You never know when they will come or for whom. Everyone is on pins and needles. The first in Ryszard's class to disappear is Pawel and one day their teacher disappears. They have a new teacher the next day. Hunger begins not too long after. Food is in short supply.

Pinsk suffers a terrible winter in 1939 and 1940. It is total hell. Many are being taken to Siberia where it is colder. Sometimes Ryszard and his friends roam the town looking for food. They once asked soldiers for food and were given tobacco in return, which they smoked. Eventually Ryszard's class decreases in half. He and his new friend Orion decide to go to the candy store, but it is closed until the next day. Many children stand in line all night in the cold, getting frostbite. In the morning, there is no candy or chocolate. There are only fruit-candy tins.



# Part I, First Encounters, Chapter 2, The Trans-Siberian

## Part I, First Encounters, Chapter 2, The Trans-Siberian Summary and Analysis

The second encounter with the Imperium comes in 1958 in the Asian steppes. The train of the Trans-Siberian Railway takes Ryszard to Moscow. They pass over several borders and Ryszard thinks to himself that too much blood has been shed over them. When they reach their destination in the border station of Zabaykal-sk, they see a barbed-wire barrier. Dangerous dogs come next to march them in. Sentries watch from everywhere. They are welcomed with red banners to the Soviet Union. The soldiers then search their goods and take their books, particularly English ones.

Those foreigners taken into the Soviet Union have three attitudes where they range from being absolutely enraged to those who imitate Soviet modes of thinking and acting and finally, those for whom everything is interesting.

After passing the border station, Ryszard sees Siberia in its icy and sinister form. The author notes that Northern Canada has the same weather but it is absurd to say, "Behave or they'll send you to Canada!" This is because the West is free. Everything is cold and immobile in the landscape. Everything is destructively white. By the fourth day of traveling, they have moved past Krasnoyarsk. Again Ryszard speaks about borders. He notes that the Europeans had a political philosophy that made their civilization capable of overcoming ethnocentrism. They want to know other civilizations.

Travelling continues through Novosibirsk, Omsk, and Chelyabinsk over the next two days. All sense of time is lost. The nights are long. One cannot start a conversation with anyone. Everyone is quiet, adjusting to life. In fact, Ryszard argues, the way of the Russian people, their genius, is their ability to endure almost any nightmare. The train moves next to Kazan but they are still far from Moscow. He wonders how the Imperium has affected the Russian soul where "every road ... seems to have no end." Russia's immensity has a negative effect on Russians because it does not demand concentration. From Kazan to Moscow, the train finally travels. Green appears.



# Part I, First Encounters, Chapter 3, The South, '67

## Part I, First Encounters, Chapter 3, The South, '67 Summary and Analysis

Ryszard's third encounter with the Imperium comes nine years later on an expedition across the seven southern republics of the former USSR. The trip is quick but it leads Ryszard to realize that despite the power the USSR had over the southern republics, they have managed to hold on to something of their traditions.

In Georgia, Ryszard saw the beautiful ancient Christian icons, the frescoes and remains of churches whitewashed by the Soviets in Tblisi. He speaks of local artists and winemakers. In Armenia, he travels off the beaten path with a sculptor named Benik and a composer named Aristakesyan. In Matenadaran, Ryszard encounters some of the Armenian ancient books and notes that the Armenian people have almost never had a state of their own, almost always living under others. They have created a culture that has lasted four thousand years old. In fact, Armenia is one of the original countries of man. Armenia became Christian in 301 and quickly translated the Bible and translated Aristotle by the 7th century. Entire libraries start to come into being.

In Azerbaijan, Ryszard sits with a medical student named Gulnara who prescribes flower sniffing for some illnesses. Many beautiful forms of architecture surround them in Baku. The city has been a trading post for one thousand years. It has been built in a haphazard way along with trade winds. Gulnara and Ryszard stand over a map observing how widespread Azerbaijan once was. It never had a centralized state but it is the threshold of Central Asia. Its religions are Zoroastrianism and Islam. The country houses many heretics and atheists, though. At night, Nik-nik takes Ryszard up to a mountain where he can look down on the city.

Next Ryszard goes to Ashkhabad, Turkmenistan. Tea is life in the city and being well-dressed in the heat is a mark of civilization. In Turkmenistan, unlike most other countries, it is the rich who live in the countryside. Only they can survive there. Nomadism is thus a privilege. Ryszard maintains that human civilization could not exist without the nomad. Ashkhabad grew out of a fort built by the Russian army in 1881.

The original people worshipped sacred stones and were concerned primarily with distributing water from the river nearby. However, the river started to vanish around four hundred years ago. An exodus began and this started the fratricidal wars of the Turkmen that lasted for centuries. On his last day in Turkmenistan, Ryszard travels to Mary, the second largest city in the country.

Tajikistan follows. Ryszard and his companion go to the Komintern kolkhoz to the director called Abdulkarin Sharipov. Many Tajik women see them. While they are





Muslim, they are freed from the veil. Hundreds of women who bore their faces are killed when the liberation began. In Kyrgystan, Rustam Umrain accompanies Ryszard. He does not speak much. Frunze, Kyrgystan's main city, resembles Ashkhabad but has a better climate. The city is European and Russian and has many young people. Ryszard spends the evening in the yurt of Dzhumal Smanov a few hundred kilometers from Frunze. They have a feast with a sheep's boiled head as the main course. The guest must eat the brain and in this way, the knots of brotherhood are created.

Uzbekistan is Ryszard's final stop. He finds himself in the fortress of the emir of Bukhara. In the main square, there are chaykhanas which are full of Uzbeks. A mosque is also in view and is made of wood, rare in Muslim architecture. It is called Bolo-Khauz and is only of the only surviving piece of eighteenth-century Central Asian architecture. Ryszard is enraptured by its beauty. Ryszard also enjoys local bazaars and visits the Mir-Arab Madrass built in 1503. He then travels to Samarkand which is very blue in sky and water. He finds it more abstract and beautiful than Bukhara. The area was created however by a cruel despot named Timur.

For Ryszard, Timur is just one example that man is capable of everything. It is interesting to note that Ryszard mentions this as an illustration that the Soviets would dare to crush the cultures of the nations visited in the chapter.



## **Part II, From a Bird's-Eye View, 1989-1991, Chapter 4, The Third Rome, Chapter 5, The Temple and the Palace**

### **Part II, From a Bird's-Eye View, 1989-1991, Chapter 4, The Third Rome, Chapter 5, The Temple and the Palace Summary and Analysis**

At the beginning of Chapter 4, Ryszard remarks that when the Berlin Wall fell in the fall of 1989, he began to hear of the Imperium's territories again. By this time, he had lost his contacts and knew little about the countries' current state. With all the new information coming to light, Ryszard decided Moscow would be worth a visit to see the great metamorphosis. Dictatorships were falling all over the world and the USSR's system looking like a relic.

Ryszard wants to cover the fifteen federal republics of the Soviet Union, a large area of the world. So much of the borders that were formerly covered by barbed wire would slowly open. Perhaps the metal would finally be used for knives and forks! The vision for his journey came from reading about perestroika. However, Ryszard does not want to focus on Moscow, given how different it is. Ryszard is last in the Imperium twenty years ago, during the Brezhnev Era.

Moscow is in many ways seen as a holy city, the capital of the world, outside of Rome. It is a "Third Rome." This is before 1812, however, when the Russians burned the city down to expel the French. Only the churches survive but the Bolsheviks, in their war with religion, demolished them. Stalin is the last who tried to destroy the old Moscow. Little is preserved. Walking in the streets of old Moscow, Ryszard feels that he can understand the October Revolution or the Bolshevik Revolution. The Bolsheviks triumphed by replacing the merchants who owned the stores with their clerks who would obey.

Moscow is vast and uncluttered. This is one of its most striking features. It contains ten million people and another ten million come daily to work and shop. Going to Moscow at the end of 1989 meant that you entered a world dominated by words. The gags and censorship were on their way out as frantic discussion began everywhere. Television exploded.

In Chapter 5, the Temple of Christ the Savior is built by Alexander I in 1812 to commemorate Providence's aid in repelling the French. Things did not get off the ground into 1836 however, due to design plans and finances. Construction proceeded without interruption for forty-five years. Nicholas I who began the project died in 1855. Czar Alexander II continued the work until 1881 and Alexander III had it finished. The



Temple was consecrated on May 26th, 1883. The interior of the Church produced rapture and admiration in visitors. The church was thirty stories tall and had forty million bricks. It held up to ten thousand devotees and used 422 kilograms of gold.

The church operated for forty-eight years until 1931 when Stalin destroyed it. The building was razed, while the jewels and precious metal confiscated. Stalin was otherwise busy with killing ten million people in the Ukraine through starvation. Yet he was still focused on destroying the temple which took four months.

The second act of the Temple chapter begins with a discussion of how to tear down the gigantic structure in the middle of the city. Dynamite was used, stick by stick, and meter after meter. The people said nothing and life went on. That was life. It was finally destroyed on December 5th, 1931. The Palace of the Soviets would take its place. Stalin decided to build a building superior to any in the greatest country in the world, the United States, creating a structure larger than the Empire State building. On June 4th, 1933, the Soviet Palace was designed to have a statue of Lenin that was three times higher and two and a half times heavier than the Statue of Liberty. In June 1933, the roads and fields of the Ukraine were strewn with tens of thousands of starved corpses. Starving women were eating their own children. All the while, Stalin promoted building a palace that would rival the United States.

The Palace was advertised on the ground that atheism now ruled and that a battle was being fought against religion. The previous Czar represented both man and God containing Russia's highest authority. The Soviet premiers would be the same except that it would not reflect God but be God. The construction was delayed by a brief flourish of resistance which had to be crushed to maintain legitimacy. For the next several years, Stalin executed his closest collaborators and annexed Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia. This was followed by a war in Finland and the Second World War. Soon after, the massive deportation of Poles, Lithuanians, Germans and Ukrainians to Siberia began. Stalin then had a stroke and died. The temple was never finished. Khrushchev instead built an outdoor swimming pool there.



## **Part II, From a Bird's Eye View, 1989-1991, Chapter 6, We Look, We Cry, Chapter 7, The Man on the Asphalt Mountain**

### **Part II, From a Bird's Eye View, 1989-1991, Chapter 6, We Look, We Cry, Chapter 7, The Man on the Asphalt Mountain Summary and Analysis**

At the beginning of Chapter 6, Ryszard is flying South to travel from Yerevan through Tbilisi and then to Baku. He is sitting next to Leonid P, a Moscow democrat that represents a new breed of people who are products of perestroika. They are not dissidents but instead members of the intelligentsia. The Moscow Democrat is different from the Western Democrat. He is interested only in how to defeat Communism. Many people also think that if Trotsky had beaten Stalin, democracy would have triumphed.

On the second half of the trip, his neighbor wonders whether Armenia would secede. Leonid prefers if the area would be democratic but would like to avoid secession. Ryszard is skeptical that an Imperium created through hundreds of years of conquest can be democratized. When the plane lands, many Armenians are reunited with their families whom they have not seen in a very long time. They are overjoyed. Ryszard is extracted from the crowd by his friend Valery Vartanian.

This is a new Armenia with "fedayeen" or local armed forces that control the area. The bazaars are now crowded and there is a cacophony of horns. All Soviet and Russian symbolism has vanished. Yet as the Armenians attempt to wipe out a culture entirely and start anew, their behavior is very similar to that of the previous Soviet regime.

A lot of the Armenian intelligentsia is concerned about maintaining Armenian culture. Ten million are spread throughout the world although many are emigrating. There is also the question about how to deal with the past and to make peace among factions. Ryszard discusses his meetings with various members of the local intelligentsia at various points in the chapter.

Now on his way to Tbilisi, Georgia, Ryszard reads a history of the medieval period of Armenia. A Russian patrol shows up half-way but violent clashes are avoided. In Georgia, a new alphabet has spread. Georgia has more wealth than Armenia with better homes, larger vineyards, betterlooking sheep, and the like.

In Chapter 7, Georgia has assumed a model of rapid economic development in Tbilisi and neglect of the countryside. The city has become crowded and of poor quality but it is



still much better than under communism. Ryszard discusses some of Georgians' unique cultural attitudes. He sees that they are friendly and hospitable but they are very quick to violence and rage. Often Georgians are involved in sit-ins demonstrating their demands and using a "very Eastern" form of protest. The sit-in is long -asting and requires stony patience, which is something people of the East have in spades.

The countries around the Caucasus are starting to boil over in repressed rage because they discover that they have competing interests and markets bring easy access to arms. Before, the USSR suppressed all interests other than that of the totalitarian state. Without the USSR, there are newly expressed interests but also no developed or formal legal institutions to adjudicate them and so force has become the method of supremacy or establishing any order. This is particularly true with respect to the minority population in Georgia known as the Abkhazia. Ryszard also visits this small region and visits churches there. One of the churches dates to the sixth century. Entering them is to be transported back in time.

The next day, Ryszard is on his way from Tbilisi to Baku through the Great and Small Caucasus with a fat and older driver named Revaz Galidze. Ryszard sees peasants along the roads. Approaching Baku, the smell of oil is in the air.



## **Part II, From a Bird's Eye View, 1989-1991, Chapter 8, Fleeing from Oneself, Chapter 9, Vorkuta—To Freeze in Fire**

### **Part II, From a Bird's Eye View, 1989-1991, Chapter 8, Fleeing from Oneself, Chapter 9, Vorkuta—To Freeze in Fire Summary and Analysis**

Chapter 8 starts in Baku where the woman housing Ryszard says that the city had fallen prey to aggressive armed bands. She says that policemen are everywhere. However, this statement is an exaggeration. The train station is a madhouse and getting to his lodging seems impossible. Nothing of antiquity lies in Baku. Everything is new. A woman Ryszard is staying with asks him his nationality, which leads Ryszard to comment to the reader that some who lived under the USSR grew up with no national identity. He calls these people the Homo sovieticus. The Soviet state determined the identities of these people and now they search for another identity. Ryszard explains how many of those relocated developed such an identity, as did those of mixed races. Some of those Sovieticuses have guilt over their former role as colonizers and so flee from their identities.

Ryszard likes Baku because it was built for the people and not against them. It has some very beautiful areas. He describes some of the locals and visits some of the intelligentsia in the area as well. A friend, Professor Mamedov, claims that after seventy-three years of Bolshevism, people do not want to work and live well, and do not know what freedom of thought is.

In Chapter 9, on the way to Vorkuta, Ryszard is briefly stuck at the Syktyvkar airport. It is full of people and disorganized. Here, as with everyone, Stalinism is alive in memory and its doctrine remains entrenched in the locals. Many of the locals refuse to ask questions and deliberately remain ignorant. Asking questions used to lead to imprisonment and even death so this habit of remaining quiet is still ingrained among the people. Only police interrogators asked questions. The art of formulating questions died. However, the civilization that does not ask questions is immobile and dies.

Eventually Ryszard leaves to fly to Vorkuta. Eventually they reach it but the temperature is minus thirty-five degrees Celsius. Getting out of the cold was a necessity for survival. He and others crowd on a bus to the Hotel Vorkuta. Ryszard has to enlist the help of a chambermaid to break the ice around his open window to pull down the glass. Vorkuta is horrific due to the combination of coal and Bolshevism. It came to represent a final destination for Soviet prisoners. Terrible labor was to be found in the coal mines. While in Vorkuta, Ryszard visits an old miner named Genady Nikolayvich who retired at fifty. Only 20 percent of miners in Vorkuta live that long. He has advanced black lung



disease. To Genady, there is little difference between prison camps and the rest of Russia. Russia only had varying degrees of oppression.

Ryszard visited Genady because a miners' strike was going on. He speaks with two young miners, Mikhail and Yevgeny and they take him to the Vargashovska mine where a meeting is going to be held. The strike had been called off. Before the meeting, they watch an old and half-broken television for sports.

The meeting is held in a large hall, and it is full. Many people are curious and anxious because they have great trepidations about rebellion. It is unclear who will lead the meeting. Ryszard observes a sharp division between the rulers and the ruled in Vorkuta. Even after the fall of the Imperium, social relations remain the same. The management enters and is clearly the upper class. They tell the workers that they have secured trade relations with the West which means lots of money. Everyone is excited. Ryszard knows however that it is false and regrets the people who are rejoicing. So the people vote to end the strike.

Vorkuta is also a holy place of martyrdom. Hundreds of thousands of people died in camps and no one knows how many. A railroad for coal shipment is constructed in part from Vorkuta and it is basically a long cemetery. While viewing the area, Ryszard recounts the observations of the philosopher Fiodorov who was a librarian in Moscow that never owned anything and walked everywhere. He died of pneumonia. He was a Christian who thought the most important idea in Christianity was that of the resurrection. However, it is not clear what a resurrected Vorkuta would look like.



## **Part II, From a Bird's Eye View, 1989-1991, Chapter 10, Tomorrow, The Revolt of the Bashkirs, Chapter 11, Russian Mystery Play**

### **Part II, From a Bird's Eye View, 1989-1991, Chapter 10, Tomorrow, The Revolt of the Bashkirs, Chapter 11, Russian Mystery Play Summary and Analysis**

In Chapter 10, Ryszard travels back to Moscow to find out what was happening among the summits of power. There are many 'great' people here whose goal is to make sure the Imperium endures and develops. A large elite class is concerned with the doings of the people at large. The people care about maintaining the Imperium in Russia, despite having almost no attachment to their interests. Many find the task of reforming Russia daunting because it is so large and they use its vastness to give up.

Before Ryszard can discover much, it became clear that a large city, Ufa, has been poisoned by phenol. Ufa is capital of the Bashkir Republic, which is an autonomous republic at the western foot of the Urals. It was once beautiful but the USSR converted it into a chemical practice range. Chemicals still leak. Local citizens have to wait for cisterns of water to come. So Ryszard travels to Ufa to see what is going on. Again Ryszard meets with local members of the intelligentsia but this time to figure out what it means to be Bashkir. Many people lament its lost glory. There are one million Bashkirs and they have nationalist aspirations. However, they are not sure what to do. They hardly have the will to shut down the chemical experiments that do not promote their interests. Nature has become a symbol for sanctuary from oppression in Bashkir. This is a theme that Ryszard discusses at some length. He also talks about local artists and writers.

Starting Chapter 11, Ufa begins Ryszard's Ural-Siberian journey taking him from Moscow to Ufa through Sverdlovsk, Irkutsk, Yakutsk, Magadan, and Norilsk before returning to Moscow. Everything is frozen though blood revolts fill the Caucasus. Nationalist movements like those of the Bashkirs are increasing everywhere and the people demand independence. The USSR's collapse seems to only prefigure the collapse of the original colonizing power, which is the Russian Federation.

Ryszard goes to see a play called A Word about Russia. It takes place in a beautiful old Orthodox Church turned into a Museum of Atheism. The best preserved churches were such museums that were permanent exhibits attacking religion. Foreigners were often horrified but at least the buildings were preserved unlike so many others. Between 1917 until the 1990s, at least twenty million religious icons were destroyed in Russia.





On stage, one of the actors delivers a kind of hymn for Russia who proclaims Russia's former greatness and holiness and argues that the October Revolution was an international conspiracy against the Russian nation. He claims everyone was in on it, including Latvians, Jews, Germans, the English, and so on. Jews enrage the man the most, as he claims that the Jews appropriate the Holocaust for themselves. He claims that excluding deaths caused by the Soviets, there would be three hundred million Russians instead of one hundred and fifty million. The best half of the country died. The Ideologue, as Ryszard calls him, complains that Russia is becoming depopulated but he maintains that Russia can be saved. He asks for Russians to return. Ryszard then raises some difficulties for Russian nationalism because if they are united by land, then they cannot be united by blood because of the Imperium.



## **Part II, From a Bird's Eye View, 1989-1991, Chapter 12, Jumping over Puddles, Chapter 13, Kolyma, Fog and More Fog**

### **Part II, From a Bird's Eye View, 1989-1991, Chapter 12, Jumping over Puddles, Chapter 13, Kolyma, Fog and More Fog Summary and Analysis**

At the start of Chapter 12, Ryszard is now in Yakutsk, a city full of gold and diamonds. It is also bitterly cold, so much so that a "great cold" often brings shining mist in the air. When the cold defrosts, entire neighborhoods' homes slide into the mud and become weak at their foundations. For them, spring is terrible due to flowing and muddy water. The neighborhood of Zalozhnaya, where Ryszard visits, represents an entire city of poverty in contrast to its natural riches.

Ryszard's hotel is miserable and cold. In the morning, no one speaks at breakfast. A fight randomly breaks out, without warning or reason. The waitress does not say 'Good morning' or 'How are you.'

That night, Ryszard sees Valdimir Fiodorov, an ethnic Russian and eminent cultural figure. Fiodorov is from the Russian republic of Yakutia which is populated and dominated by the Imperium. The Yakuts are a minority with only four hundred thousand people. The Imperium steals their diamonds and forces them into Zalozhnaya. Yakutia is painful to see and has many gulags here.

In Chapter 13, Ryszard gets stuck at the Yakutsk airport and must sit around in dreadful boredom for days. He speculates that many millions of the world's people simply live in such boredom. Eventually Ryszard is off to Magadan. He sits next to a woman whose son serves in the Red Army. The Red Army is in terrible shape, shrinking and full of horrendous initiation rites. It also has internal conflicts arising from the reassertion of national identities. Ryszard speculates on the fact that it contains many men who engage in impracticable sadism just because it gives them pleasure.

Magadan is run partly by the Caucasian mafia, one of three large mafias that have come to control the former USSR, along with the Russian mafia and the Asiatic mafia. These mafias contain hundreds of smaller ones. The members of the mafias do not work but live well and always square account. The mafia mentality arises from the October Revolution when millions of Russian children lost their parents and homes, and so the children wandered the roads of the country. They are called the "bezprizorny" and they survived through theft and robbery. The Mafiosi of today are the grandchildren



of these men. Their worldview sees the world as a network of mafias with a conspiratorial theory of history.

Magadan is the capital of the northeastern territory of Siberia called Kolyma. It is a land of cold and darkness inhabited almost only by nomadic tribes. The USSR created a gold trust there and that is the only reason anyone else inhabits it. Millions were also imprisoned there and a slave market operated. The goal was to destroy an individual through the greatest humiliations and sufferings. It consisted in cold, hunger, hard labor, lack of sleep, vermin, police sadism, terror of criminals, the feeling of injustice, homelessness, and fear.

Ryszard is unable to reach two of his three contacts. He finds out that two are dead and the third has been waiting years for his visit and is happy to see him. Ryszard cannot remember her name but he does remember the glee with which she spoke of how the Romanians decapitated their dictator, Ceausescu. She wants the same for the rulers in the Kremlin and demonstrates to Ryszard how to properly saw off a head. Her fury and violence is characteristic of the people there. They then reach the Bay of Nogyevev where millions are imported to the area to die. Ryszard describes the importation process at length.

Magadan is one part of a former "camp world" that included Vorkuta. It is full of squalor and extreme poverty. Crime is everywhere. The woman takes Ryszard to his friend Albert, a writer who studied that part of Siberia. No physical evidence of the violence of previous decades has been left. The great Russian philosopher, Shalamov, remarks that the East and West have distinct psychologies. The former is built on ruthless subordination to a higher power while the latter depends upon his own creative invention.



## **Part II, From a Bird's Eye View, 1989-1991, Chapter 14, The Kremlin, The Magic Mountain, Chapter 15, The Trap**

### **Part II, From a Bird's Eye View, 1989-1991, Chapter 14, The Kremlin, The Magic Mountain, Chapter 15, The Trap Summary and Analysis**

In Chapter 14, Ryszard returns to Moscow from Magadan through Norilsk. Back in Moscow, Ryszard immediately falls into many discussions, arguments, meetings and conferences. He then decides to go directly into the Kremlin. It is a large complex of modern and medieval buildings on a hill with twenty towers. Orthodox churches abound, but as museums. It is the most important place in the Imperium. The Kremlin can only be visited through a museum, a congress or a summons. Ryszard was on his way to a congress of Siberia's small nations. Everything was clean, bare, and desolate. The level of security was extreme.

Ryszard visits Stalin's old apartment where his wife, Nadiezdha Alliluyeva, killed herself. He also describes viewing other famous parts of the Kremlin and the tragedies that occurred there. When he moves up a street he sees many tired and hungry people who waited hour to see Lenin and are now in line at McDonald's.

In Chapter 15, Ryszard opens by informing the reader that he could not tell the story earlier because he would have endangered those who helped him. Before leaving for Yerevan, he met with Galina Starovoytova in Moscow, a professor at the University of Petersburg and an adviser to Yeltsin on nationalities. She helped him get a fake Soviet passport to fly to Yerevan.

Ryszard carries old Armenian chronicles with him, beautiful thousand-year-old text with stories of pain on every page. The Yerevan airport turns out to be a crowded mess. Complaints are lodged in a small and crowded room. Ryszard is nearly caught for having a false identity since he pretends to be a pilot in order to fly, but he narrowly avoids the situation.

The plane takes Ryszard from Yerevan to Stepanakert. The two regions are divided by the Nagorno-Karabkah mountains. The troops stationed there are units of the KGB. When Ryszard disembarks, he most avoid Russian soldiers. If accosted, he will speak Russian and pretend to be an American with an appropriate accent. It is still a risk, as he does not have any documents. Ryszard waits at the airport undetected but something has happened to his travel plan. Straovoytova is nowhere to be found.



Ryszard wants to travel to meet the inhabitants of the Nagorno-Karabakh, a small island of Christians who are to be exterminated and then replaced by Islamic fundamentalists. The plan is only delayed however. Eventually Ryszard's transportation comes for him and he receives civilian clothes. Ryszard can now meet the people of the Karabakh Committee, composed of Armenians. The meeting asks how the Armenians can survive and maintain their seventeen-centuries old Christianity religion.

The Karabakh area was once lively and populated until the Turkish-led genocide in 1920 depopulated it. Now it is surrounded by the Islamic Republic of Azerbaijan and will be soon overwhelmed. These people still see themselves as the tail end of Christian Europe but Europe has melted away. They live on the line of confrontation between Islam and the rest of the world. The Armenians have never made peace with this "lost" area.

When Starovoytova arrives, she says that she was arrested but ultimately released. She is responsible for trying to make peace between the Armenians and Azerbaijanis. The area is struck with the great plagues of nationalism, racism, and religious fundamentalism. This creates an irresolvable and irrational conflict.

After the meeting, Starovoytova returns to Yerevan and the Armenians must devise a way to get Ryszard back to the airport, which is made harder by the fact that Starovoytova's visit has spread around town. Troops will be coming. Ryszard is successfully transported and gets back to the airport and in a plane safely back to Yerevan.



## **Part II, From a Bird's Eye View, 1989-1991, Chapter 16, Central Asia, The Destruction of the Sea, Chapter 17, Pomona of the Little Town of Drohobych, Chapter 18, Return to My Hometown**

### **Part II, From a Bird's Eye View, 1989-1991, Chapter 16, Central Asia, The Destruction of the Sea, Chapter 17, Pomona of the Little Town of Drohobych, Chapter 18, Return to My Hometown Summary and Analysis**

Chapter 16 begins with the observation that central Asia is desert and more desert with a few rivers. The area was once Turkestan but it was split by the Bolsheviks into five countries in 1924. They are Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgystan, and Kazakhstan. Stalin repressed most of their Muslim clergy and intelligentsia. Khrushchev and Brezhnev appointed Russified locals to rule the area.

The republics have almost no water and cooperation and battles depend on shaky agreements over the balance of water. The Imperium brought in bulldozers in the sixties to turn half of the fertile oases into desert in Uzbekistan. Water from rivers was channeled away. Cotton was planted and sprayed with poisonous pesticides. Many people choked and went blind. The land changed and fields of rice and wheat, green meadows, and the like disappeared. There was only cotton. Millions went begging, without jobs. Uzbekistan was now a cotton factory and nothing more. Between 1970 and 1990, the Aral Sea lost a third of its surface area and two-thirds of its volume. Muynak, once a port town, is now nearly deserted and in the middle of the desert. Those who remain are ill, have jaundice, and get dysentery.

Half of Central Asia was ruined by the Imperium. Revival seems impossible. The Soviets cannot find jobs for two million people, except to employ them in bureaucracy doing ridiculous tasks.

In Chapter 17, Ryszard finds himself in Donetsk and travels across Siberia to Odessa. Some see Siberia as a place of sanctuary or a place to hide from view. Many dissenting groups survived there though no one knows where. Next Ryszard takes the train from Odessa to Kishinev in a dilapidated train. Today Kishinev is two cities with a newer city built over the last few decades that is growing and destroying old Kishinev, the enchanting southeastern town spread out over green hills. The next night Ryszard travels from Kishinev to Kiev stopping at Vinnitsa on the way, where a mass murder was committed in 1937 and 1938. Nearly ten thousand victims were shot to death.



In Kiev, Ryszard stays with an elderly woman, M.Z. and had his own room. His hostess was a translator. Kiev is one of the only cities in the former USSR whose streets can be strolled on. Kiev is warm, quiet and sunny. Much of the old medieval and Orthodox architecture is preserved though much Stalinist social realist architecture is there as well. That said, many people live very badly despite many lovely buildings. Ryszard then casually describes some of the buildings and events he sees.

In the Ukraine, de-Sovietization proceeds rapidly. Many seek to bring back their language. The Western Ukraine was less affected by Russification and Sovietization than the east and so is more identifiably Ukrainian. Many native Russians live in the East. In 1932 and 1933 Stalin murdered almost the entire Ukrainian intelligentsia murdered and several million peasants were starved and shot to death. When Ukraine received its freedom however, attempts were made to erase this memory. Democratic elections were held. The Parliament declared sovereignty, Pope John Paul II ratified the independent structure of the Ukrainian Catholic Church. On August 19th, 1991 the entire Ukraine declared sovereignty officially. To lose the Ukraine was a major loss for Russia.

The future of the country will develop in terms of its relationship with Russia and the West on the others. Ukraine might do quite well, becoming democratic and humane. Ryszard reviews the history of the Ukrainian famine imposed by Stalin which killed ten million people. The Ukrainians were grouped on farms and forced to meet quotas for food production that could not be met. When they failed, their possessions were seized and they were often killed or imprisoned. People disagree about why Stalin produced the famine, some saw it as an attempt to produce a docile population.

Ryszard takes a train to Drohobych to see where the writer Bruno Schulze lived. He wrote a book called *The Cinnamon Shops*, proclaiming that the Ukraine tale that the people were full of food and well-fed was an utter and insane lie.

In Chapter 18, Ryszard is now in St. Petersburg and introduces this region to the reader. It has a damp and muggy quality that makes it despondent. St. Petersburg was once the capital of Russian and features many old buildings representing that time. Ryszard is there to meet with Professor Aleksander Grevkov in Novgorod, south of Petersburg. Before Russian conquest in 1478, Novgorod was a free democratic city. Russians could have supported it rather than against it. The Sofia Cathedral is then described. Grevkov introduces many of the features of the Cathedral for him. Ryszard is impressed.

Ryszard next travels to Minsk for the congress of the National Front of Belorussia, which is an agricultura or a peasant country where the Belorussian language is preserved. Russification was waged there and the Belorussian intelligentsia was eliminated. The next day Ryszard travels to his hometown of Pinsk; at noon he went to church. Some of those leaving the church were his parents' students, older now by fifty years.



## Part III, The Sequel Continues, 1992-1993

### Part III, The Sequel Continues, 1992-1993 Summary and Analysis

The USSR died in 1991. History in Russia is an active volcano. Ideology cannot characterize the micro-scale changes in Russia. Many questions raise their heads, such as whether Russia will remain a superpower. All the questions are too abstract. The people want to return to the idea of Russia, which is something of a mystery and unique, unlike any other.

Originally, Ryszard only wanted to travel to the Caucasus as he had in the sixties. He was fascinated by it and wanted to see the process of mental and political decolonization first hand. First he would travel from Moscow to Georgia, then to Armenia and finally to Azerbaijan. New borders stopped him between Armenia and Azerbaijan. In Yerevan, he encountered Armenian liberation troops. This turned out to be a new organization. People were even disagreeing with Gorbachev on television. At that moment, Ryszard experienced the end of the Soviets. Only those who had experienced leadership under Stalin, Khrushchev, and Brezhnev can understand the dramatic change.

Ryszard then explains important events that occur in 1983. Communist parties in the West collapse, Poland's Solidarity movement is a success, and Moscow falls decisively behind in the arms race. The USSR is sapped of its strength and many leaders leave. Gorbachev becomes Secretary-General. Glasnost and perestroika are merely artificial lungs for the dying USSR. It survives only six more years. Gorbachev does not kill the USSR.

Perestroika brought a mass detoxification to cure fear and a collective journey into the world of information. The Soviet Imperium ruled by terror and fear and when that fear collapsed, the USSR had no legitimacy. Through these initiatives, more people gained access to information and could learn about the rest of the world.

By 1990, Gorbachev is losing energy and dynamism. He does not react to news of a coup d'etat. In 1991, Vilno and Riga occur, which challenge the power of the USSR. The coup is suppressed by Boris Yeltsin and people stop listening to Gorbachev entirely. History again is being made before Ryszard's eyes. In August, Gorbachev resigns. Yeltsin dissolves and bans the Communist Party while Ryszard is in Kiev. The people of Europe and America love Gorbachev. They finally can connect to Russia, after six hundred years. Russians however do not care much for Boris Yeltsin who gradually loses control. The Commonwealth of Independent States is created. The USSR ceases to exist on December 25th, when Gorbachev resigns. The red flag is removed. Ryszard describes viewing these events. He can barely comprehend it. He watches it all on television, noting that television helped bring down the Imperium. People no longer believe in mystical power.





The Soviet Imperium is not in transition to a new order. No one had ever predicted that the USSR would fall apart peacefully, none of the Sovietologists. Many bloodless revolutions occur. Only blind nationalism, racism, and religious fundamentalism produce bloodshed and they darken the sky of the twenty-first century.

The book was written in 1994. The USSR nomenclature is still in place, ranging from the Russian army to the KGB, middle and heavy industry-owned by the state, state landownership, old habits of thought, and an old legal system. Many are aware of terror and oppression. Between 54 and 110.7 million citizens of the USSR lost their lives between 1918 and 1954. Everyone is poor, many are demoralized, gangs grow, and the environment is in terrible shape. Various groups tussle for power. Many Russians want to concentrate power. Democratic voices are muted.

Of the future, Ryszard says little. Futurology has lost prestige due to the unpredicted collapse of the USSR. Three trends will probably dominate Russian life. The first is a battle between integration and disintegration forces, such as Nationalism. Christianity and Islam will confront one another. Islam will have a violent rebirth. Secondly, there will be a polarization of rich and poor with widening inequality with pseudo-capitalism. Finally, there will be development and it will be uneven.

Russians are debating their future. Some want to go back to old Russia, but others have a less idyllic picture of the past. The middle class was foreign. It is not clear how state and society are to relate. Russian land favors state power. However, one can be optimistic due to Russia's great internal strength. China has progressed, as have India, Brazil, and Indonesia. It can be done in large and complex countries. The West also wants to help.



# Characters

## Ryszard Kapuscinski

Ryszard Kapuscinski (1932-2007) was a famous Polish journalist, photographer, and poet who was born in Pinsk which was then in Poland. Kapuscinski's work is hailed as among the greatest literary journalism of the 20th century. In 1964, Kapuscinski started to serve as the only foreign correspondent for the Polish Press Agency and had to cover events in fifty countries. This led him to see wars, coups and revolutions across the world.

When Kapuscinski next came home, he had seen twenty-seven revolutions or coups, survived forty jail sentences, and endured four death sentences. Kapuscinski's books show great craftsmanship particularly with respect to narrative, psychological analysis, and the use of metaphor. Kapuscinski routinely spent months reading the literature of a country that he was to visit.

This mastery shows up clearly in *Imperium*. Kapuscinski demonstrates a deep familiarity with the cultures of the Soviet republics even in some of the most isolated peoples in the middle of Siberia. He knows Soviet history well and knows enough of the history of these republics to lament what the Soviets had destroyed. Kapuscinski has contacts all over the USSR and describes in detail those he meets and how they reflect the culture of their nations.

In the book, Kapuscinski does not talk about his own life or personality much, save with respect to his reactions to events, his appreciation for local literature, and the first chapter on his childhood. He primarily reports his experiences, gives historical context, and often litters these reports and descriptions with literary references.

## Josef Stalin

Kapuscinski does not have a constant companion on his journeys and there is no regular figure of import that is living in every period in the book. However, of all the people and peoples mentioned in the book, none receive more analysis or mention than Josef Stalin (1878-1953) who was the dictator of Russia from 1924 to 1953. Stalin brought massive changes to Soviet society through forced and rapid industrialization, purging leaders from the Communist party, repressing all dissenters and imposing terror upon everyone under his rule. A cult of personality surrounded Stalin, who was worshipped as a God for decades.

Stalin's forced collectivization of food production killed five to ten million people, most of those in the Ukraine. This is often referred to as the Ukrainian Genocide or Holodomor. This was probably, in Kapuscinski's view, Stalin's greatest crime, over and above the forced destruction of the distinct cultures of the Soviet Union. Stalin also did his best to exterminate the Russian Orthodox Church as a public institution of any kind with active



parishes shrinking from 54000 in 1917 to a few hundred in 1939. Tens of thousands of clergy were killed, with 100,000 killed in the purge of 1937-1938 alone. Stalin's regime can be attributed at least 10 million deaths and perhaps as high as 20 million people.

All of these events are discussed in the book but in a literary fashion. Stalin is portrayed as a vicious destroyer of culture, religion, nationality, liberty, peace, material possessions, bodily security, soul and life. He is in many ways the villain of the book who best represents the spirit of the Imperium.

## **Vladimir Lenin**

Lenin (1870-1924) was a famous communist who created the USSR through the October Revolution of 1917. He ran the Soviet State from 1917 to 1924 and was the intellectual father of Marxist-Leninism, the specifically Russian application of Marxist political theory to political life. Lenin is the creator of the Imperium.

## **Nikita Khrushchev**

This is the leader of the Soviet Communist Party from 1953 to 1964 following Stalin and Soviet Premier. In 1964, he was removed and replaced with Leonid Brezhnev.

## **Leonid Brezhnev**

Brezhnev led the Soviet Union throughout most of the Cold War, serving as leader of the Soviet Community party from 1964 to 1982. He led the USSR from 1960 to 1964 and 1977 to 1982. Brezhnev also led the Soviet Union during Kapuscinski's 1967 trip throughout the Soviet Union.

## **Mikhail Gorbachev**

This individual is the seventh and last leader of the Soviet Community Party, serving from 1985 to 1991. Gorbachev helped end the Cold War and helped dissolve the Soviet Union. He was given the Nobel Peace Prize in 1990. Kapuscinski paints Gorbachev as an increasingly tired leader interested in reform who merely prolonged the USSR's collapse.

## **Russians**

Kapuscinski has a great admiration for the Russian people. He constantly documents the history of the 'Russification' of the other Soviet republics, where Russians would deliberately colonize these countries and slowly alter their cultures in various ways.



## **The Soviets**

In Kapuscinski's terms, the Soviets are those who ran and supported the Soviet government and not the peoples of the Soviet Union.

## **The Bolsheviks**

This is the original party that came to power in 1917 and led the Bolshevik Revolution.

## **The Armenians**

Kapuscinski has a particular love for the Armenian people and Armenian culture, discussing their struggles at length.

## **Ryszard's Companions**

Kapuscinski had many travel companions during his trips across the Soviet Union, although no one particularly sticks out.

## **Local Members of the Intelligentsia**

When Kapuscinski would visit particular towns, he always sought out local members of the intelligentsia, such as artists, writers, and thinkers.



## **Objects/Places**

### **Russia**

This is the country from which the Imperium arose and which is the focus of the Imperium.

### **Siberia**

This is the brutally cold arctic area of Russian where many millions were imprisoned and died. Kapuscinski travels there several times.

### **Pinsk**

This is Kapuscinski's home town that was formerly part of Poland and now is in Belarus.

### **The Soviet Republics**

The USSR was not synonymous with Russia alone but instead also included many non-Russian peoples and republics. Kapuscinski visits and discusses at length these regions.

### **Moscow**

This is the capital of the USSR and location of the Kremlin.

### **St. Petersburg**

This is the capital of Russia prior to the October Revolution.

### **The Soviet Union**

This is the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics that existed in Eurasia from 1922 to 1991. It was one of the most repressive regimes in history. Kapuscinski calls it 'The Imperium' for this reason.

### **The Temple of Christ the Savior and Churches**

When Napoleon retreated from Moscow in 1812, Tsar Alexander I decreed that a temple would be built to Christ the Savior for saving the Russian people. Eventually a site and



plan were chosen in 1832 but the cornerstone was not placed until 1839. Construction lasted until 1860. Stalin had the temple razed in 1931 to replace it with the Palace of the Soviets. The Church was rebuilt in the 1990s and re-consecrated in 2000. The Temple is only the largest example of the incredible destruction Stalin imposed on Christian churches throughout the Soviet Union, along with Muslim Mosques. This was due to the Soviet state religion of atheism.

## **The Kremlin**

This is the historic complex near the heart of Moscow where the Soviet government is based.

## **The Imperium**

The Imperium is the government of the Soviet Union.

## **Russification**

This is the process that the Russians used in the Russian federation to make the cultures of other member states more Russian. The Soviets radically expanded this policy of deliberate cultural assimilation and annihilation.

## **Gulags**

These are the Soviet penal labor camps where millions were sent and killed.

## **Islam and Christianity**

These are the two major religions repressed by the Soviet Union that came to blows when the Soviet Union dissolved.

## **Servility**

The Soviet Union promoted an attitude of obedience and servility among all of its peoples.

## **Poverty**

The Soviet Union, due to its planned economy, was poor, particularly in the countryside. Kapuscinski saw poverty everywhere in his visits and saw things improving only in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

## **Mass Death**

The Imperium is directly responsible for tens of millions of deaths.

## **The October Revolution**

This is the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 that led to the creation of the Imperium.

## **The Fall of the USSR**

The USSR dissolved in 1991. Kapuscinski was there to witness it and was deeply moved to watch the Imperium die before his eyes.



# Themes

## Mass Murder

Ryszard writes about the peoples of the Soviet Imperium to explain who they are and to document their suffering. The suffering comes in many forms and shockingly, mass murder was regularly imposed upon them. The theme of mass death pervades the book from descriptions of death in the gulag, to the forced famine in the Ukraine, to the repression of clergy, middle-class peasants, and anyone who opposed Stalin.

Perhaps the worst example of mass murder was the collectivization of farming in the Ukraine in the late 1930s. Stalin required that the Ukraine meet food production quotas that were wholly beyond their abilities. Consequently, many not only starved but were murdered by the Soviets when they failed to meet the quotas. The events of the Ukrainian genocide probably led to between three and five million deaths in a single year. Other examples of mass death occur in the former Gulag cities, particularly mining towns like Vorkuta. The cities had dark and terrible complexions and psychologies that result in part from the soul-crushing despair that comes from living in a place where so many died so horribly.

The Imperium would stop at nothing to maintain control over the people even at the expense of the lives of millions. The mass murder is only the apex of the acts that demonstrated the brutal nature of the Soviet regime.

## Oppression, Fear and Power

While mass murder was the worst abuse of the regime, many other serious forms of oppression occurred. The goal of the Imperium was to maintain a communist empire. To do this, many different peoples with distinct languages, cultures, traditions, religions, and histories had to be suppressed and homogenized. The Soviets deliberately engaged in the 'Sovietization' of many societies. Millions of people were displaced and grew up knowing only their Soviet identity. They were totally disconnected from the lands of their birth and the land of their parents.

Stalin ruled by fear, controlling all dissent. The goal was to rule through pure intimidation. As a result, brutal repression and regular purges were necessary to maintain an effective level of dominance. One of the worst examples of Stalin's oppressiveness was the destruction of one of the most beautiful buildings in the world. This was the Temple of Christ the Savior, commissioned in 1812, finished in the late 19th century, and standing as one of the greatest churches in the world until Stalin destroyed it to replace it with a Temple of the Soviets. Not a single person protested. People simply went about their lives.

What was worst about the oppression, fear, and power of the regime was the way it destroyed the souls of the peoples of the Imperium. Many forgot how to engage in





commercial life, lost any sense of their culture, and even stopped engaging in conversation and asking basic questions about others. A sense of common morality was lost as social interaction was regulated by violence rather than public expectations of behavior.

## Liberation and Rebirth

Ryszard spends Chapter 3 documenting all the Soviet republics he traveled to in 1967, explaining their distinctive qualities to the reader, recounting details about their cultures, architecture, literature, religion and the like. Many readers will be shocked at the great level of diversities all of these lands continued to exhibit despite explicit attempts at Sovietization.

When Ryszard returned in 1989 through 1991, he found these republics coming to life again. Many were considering whether to declare sovereignty or not. Some did and were successful. When the Soviet Union fell, these countries reclaimed their national freedom. The Russian people were also changed, as for the first time they could talk out in the open, challenge the powerful and interact with the rest of the world.

Ryszard tells the story of his witness of the fall of the Imperium and recounts the events between 1985 and 1991 that led to a collapse that no one predicted. Ryszard was overjoyed. But he also points to various challenges that transition created. Nationalism, which had been repressed for sometime, quickly reasserted itself. Often it would become irrational and lead to wars. Religious fundamentalism, particularly from Islamic republics, became a major problem. And corruption was even more widespread than before the Soviet Union collapsed.

Despite these challenges, Ryszard believes that the peoples of the former Soviet Union can choose to make better lives for themselves and create better countries. This however requires relearning the practice of civilization and being willing to put aside differences.



# Style

## Perspective

Ryszard Kapuscinski was one of the most famous journalists of the 20th century. Serving as Poland's sole foreign correspondent during the Cold War, Kapuscinski witnessed over dozens of revolutions, wars, and coups and was imprisoned one dozens of occasions. He was even sentenced to death several times. Kapuscinski put himself into so much danger because he wanted to learn about the struggles of the peoples in the countries he visited. Kapuscinski indicates that he is particularly interested in how peoples psychologically cope and develop when colonized by a foreign people and how they react when those people leave.

In *Imperium*, Kapuscinski discusses how former Soviet republics like Armenia reasserted themselves when the Soviet Union weakened and tried to reclaim its religion and its culture. Kapuscinski obviously supported the attempts of nations to recover their lost heritage and considered himself an enemy of the Imperium. However, Kapuscinski often worries about three evils. They are religious fundamentalism, racism, and nationalism. Each of these issues threatens the post-Soviet republics in its own way. The atheism of the USSR crushed fundamentalism and its cosmopolitanism put a damper on violence due to racism. It also destroyed national cultures, depressing nationalism. When the Soviet republics reasserted themselves, these problems returned along with their liberation.

Kapuscinski does not seem to be a particularly religious man but he does seem to deeply admire the Christian churches and Christian history of many of the republics he visits. He seems cooler to Islam.

## Tone

Kapuscinski is a masterful literary journalist. Accordingly, the tones displayed in *Imperium* have deep and subtle variations. The most pervasive element of the tone is the sense of living in a dead and dying world among people who have lost all hope. The tone is not quite depressing. However, it is just empty and dead in many cases. Kapuscinski intends to reflect in his tone the experiences that he had viewing the peoples of the non-Russian republics as totally repressed and totally acquiesced to their circumstances.

In some places, Kapuscinski's tone takes on an element of muted horror. Kapuscinski has long been aware of Soviet crimes and knows that many Soviet peoples lived with that knowledge every day. In one scene, Kapuscinski is talking to some Japanese merchants in a hotel and notes that they have no idea that they are standing on human bones and that if they ran for yards, they would still be standing on human bones. Such



facts are stated with little fanfare to illustrate that such horrors are simply a fact of life in the Imperium.

Occasionally, Kapuscinski's tone turns brighter. Some people survive and live well and Kapuscinski admires them. Kapuscinski also expresses admiration for the beautiful cultures of the peoples of the USSR. Finally, towards the end of the book, Kapuscinski's tone turns hopeful. He thinks that the post-Soviet republics can have a bright future if they want one.

## Structure

Imperium is structured into three parts. The middle section comprises the bulk of the book. The first part, *First Encounters (1939-1967)*, documents Kapuscinski's three original interactions with the Soviet government. In Chapter 1, 'Pinsk '39,' Kapuscinski recounts his experiences as a young Polish boy under Soviet rule. Chapter 2, 'The Trans-Siberian' recounts Kapuscinski's travels through Russian on the Trans-Siberian railroad. In Chapter 3, 'The South,' Kapuscinski discusses his trips in 1967 into numerous southern Soviet republics, outlining each of their unique cultures and the origins of their cultures, along with how they are handling Soviet rule.

The second part, *From a Bird's Eye View (1989-1991)*, is comprised of twelve chapters that cover how the peoples of the Soviet Union adapt to the collapsing Soviet government. Chapter 4, 'The Third Rome,' explains Kapuscinski's firsthand observations of the weakening of the government in Moscow. Chapter 5, 'The Temple and the Palace,' explains Stalin's war on religion and his destruction of the Temple of Christ the Savior. Chapter 6, 'We Look, We Cry,' discusses the Armenian peoples and Chapter 7, 'The Man on the Asphalt Mountain' covers the small republic of Abkhazia and the city of Tbilisi.

Chapter 8, 'Fleeing from Oneself,' introduces Baku and Chapter 9, 'Vorkuta—To Freeze in Fire,' takes Kapuscinski to the miserable mining town of Vorkuta. Chapter 10, 'Tomorrow, The Revolt of the Bashkirs,' explains the Bashkir people to the reader and their current struggles against Azerbaijanis. Chapter 11, 'Russian Mystery Play' explains the reassertion of Russian nationalism in Russia. Chapter 12, 'Jumping over Puddles' reviews Kapuscinski's journey through Yakutsk, a Siberian version of Kuwait.

Chapter 13, 'Kolyma, Fog and More Fog,' takes Kapuscinski to Magadan and Kolyma, whereas Chapter 14, 'The Kremlin: The Magic Mountain,' discusses Kapuscinski's return to Moscow and his walk through the Kremlin. Chapter 15, 'The Trap,' explains how Kapuscinski secretly made it to meet with the Armenian minority fighting for its life against Azerbaijan in the Nagorno-Karabakh. Chapter 16, 'Central Asia-The Destruction of the Sea,' explains all the problems in the central Asian republics. Chapter 17, 'Pomona of the Little Town of Drohobych,' analyzes Siberia in detail. Chapter 18, 'Return to my Hometown,' takes Kapuscinski to Petersburg and Pinsk.



The last part is a single chapter, 'The Sequel Continues (1992-1993)' and is an epilogue that discusses the fall of the Imperium and how the former Soviet republics are handling their new freedoms, both good and bad. Kapuscinski speculates on their future and holds out hope.



## Quotes

"Before they'd taken a few drags on their cheap tobacco, they had already set up a cannon in the square and started firing at the church" (Chapter 1, pg. 7.)

"Where's your husband?" (Chapter 1, pg. 9.)

"How many victims, how much blood and suffering, are connected with this business of borders!" (Chapter 2, pg. 20.)

"Power is seriousness." (Chapter 2, pg. 23.)

"If there exists such a thing as the genius of a nation, then the genius of the Russian nation is expressed in, among other things, just this saying: 'Well, that's life!'" (Chapter 2, pg. 33.)

"Despite the stiff, rigorous corset of Soviet power, the local, small, yet very ancient, nations had succeeded in preserving something of their tradition, of their history, of their, albeit, concealed pride and dignity" (Chapter 3, pg. 38.)

"That which I have done no animal would ever do" (Chapter 3, pg. 79.)

"It is a fascinating moment, fraught with promise, when this spirit of the times, dozing pitifully and apathetically, like a huge wet bird on a branch, suddenly and without clear reason unexpectedly takes off in bold and joyful flight. We all hear the shush of this flight. It stirs our imagination and gives us energy: we begin to act" (Chapter 4, pg. 85.)

"Fur Russians prayed here at the sight of the holy city like pilgrims at the sight of Jerusalem. Yes, because Moscow was for them a holy city, the capital of the world—a Third Rome" (Chapter 4, pg. 90.)

"Stalin orders the largest sacral object in Moscow to be razed. Let us for a moment give free reign to our imagination. It is 1931. Let us imagine that Mussolini, who at that time rules Italy, orders the Basilica of St. Peter in Rome to be razed...Can we imagine such a thing? No" (Chapter 5, pg. 99.)

"I reply that, honestly, I do not believe one can democratize an imperium that was created through hundreds of years of conquest and annexation" (Chapter 6, pg. 111.)

"But how are you fleeing from? Is it not from yourselves?" (Chapter 7, pg. 138.)

"Communism...wrought the greatest destruction upon people's consciousness. People do not want to work well and live well. They want to work badly and live badly. After seventy-three years of Bolshevism, people do not know what freedom of thought is" (Chapter 7, pg. 140.)



"The sphere of questions-so vast and, it would seem, so indispensable to life-was not only a forbidden minefield, but an outright inimical and odious form of speech, and this was because in Soviet practice the monopoly on asking questions was reserved to interrogating police officers" (Chapter 8, pg. 145.)

"In short, following the disintegration of the USSR, we are now facing the prospect of the disintegration of the Russian Federation, or, to put it differently; after the first phase of decolonization (that of the former Soviet Union) the second phase begins-the decolonization of the Russian Federation" (Chapter 9, pg. 172.)

"The October Revolution was an international conspiracy against the Russian nation! The October Revolution was supposed to wipe Russia off the face of the earth! Russia, they wanted to put you to death!" (Chapter 9, pg. 175.)

"Because of Lenin a river of blood flowed in the Soviet Union, an ocean of blood was spilled. All this was done in the name of creating paradise on earth. Paradise! Ha, ha! And today we are walking around without pants" (Chapter 11, pg. 187.)

"The fact is that we are standing on top of human bones. And even if, as a result of this awareness, one were to spring back a step or even run several hundred meters, it would not matter: everywhere it's just cemeteries and more cemeteries" (Chapter 12, pg. 199.)

"Which will prevail within us, determine our relation to life, to reality? The civilization, the tradition in which we grew up, or the faith, the ideology that we possess and profess?" (Chapter 12, pg. 213.)

"Moving in the same direction, up Tverskaya Street, are the tired and hungry people who today stood in line for several hours to get into the mausoleum and see Lenin. They are now getting in a second line-the one for McDonald's, for hamburgers with ketchup and fries" (Chapter 13, pg. 229.)

"Our question is, How do we survive? It has been weighing on Armenians for hundreds of years" (Chapter 14, pg. 244.)

"The catastrophe began in the sixties. Two more decades were then needed to turn half of the fertile oases of Uzbekistan into desert" (Chapter 15, pg. 257.)

"We want Ukraine to be an enlightened, good, democratic, and humane state" (Chapter 16, pg. 283.)

"The majority of demographers and historians today agree that in those years Stalin starved to death around ten million people" (Chapter 16, pg. 285.)

"I had returned to my childhood home" (Chapter 17, pg. 304.)

"This is the end of the Soviets! For me, the Imperium fell apart then, in the fall of 1989, on the route from Moscow to Yerevan" (Chapter 18, pg. 311.)

"Heaven only knows where we are going, and heaven knows what is happening to us"  
(Chapter 19, pg. 331.)



## Topics for Discussion

Why does Ryszard travel to the Soviet Union in the 1960s, the late 1980s and early 1990s?

Name what you believe to be the three greatest crimes against humanity committed by Stalin that are listed in the book.

What effect does Russification and Sovietization have on the southern Soviet republics? Discuss three effects.

Give two of the most prominent reasons that Ryszard hated the Soviet regime.

How did the Soviet Union fall apart? How did it arise?

What are the three great threats to the post-Soviet republics?

Explain what you think Ryszard's true views are on the Soviet Union, communism, nationalism, and religion.

How does Ryszard's interest in decolonization structure the book?