

Beyond Borders – A book Club, co-hosted by Tempe Public Library and Arizona State University’s Melikian Center: Russian, Eurasian and East European Studies.

(This and other short reading guides available at <https://melikian.asu.edu/research-and-partnerships/projects-and-initiatives/reading-group>)

May 8 2023 – *Time Shelter*, Georgi Gospodinov (2022) translated by Angela Rodel

Time Shelter is Bulgarian author Georgi Dimitrov’s third novel. His previous novel, *The Physics of Sorrow* (2015), was awarded the 2019 European Angelus Award and the 2016 Jan Michalski Prize, among other honors. In Angela Rodel’s translation, *Time Shelter* is finalist for the 2023 International Booker Prize.

The Booker reading guide, including a short synopsis, guide to the characters, and a good set of discussion questions, is here:

<https://thebookerprizes.com/the-booker-library/features/reading-guide-time-shelter-by-georgi-gospodinov-translated-by-angela>

And a fuller interview with author Georgi Gospodinov is here:

<https://thebookerprizes.com/the-booker-library/features/georgi-gospodinov-interview-time-shelter>

You can also see a rich discussion between Gospodinov and Valentina Izmirlieva, a Columbia University Professor, putting the book in the wider context of Gospodinov’s work, here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZCy-9Bmy9y0>

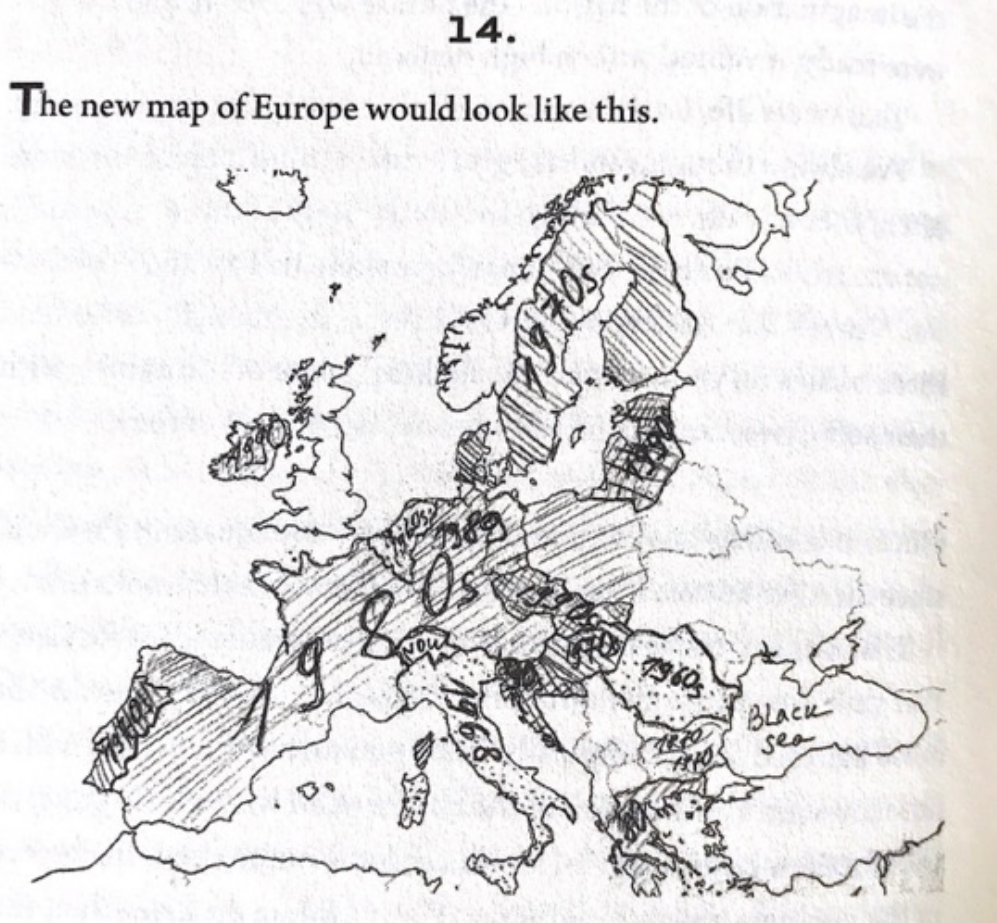
Gospodinov describes himself as a poet, as much as a novelist: and relates (at around 44:00) first inventing the character of Gaustine in the 1990s, which he calls a “good time for invention” in Bulgaria, which was coming to terms with the end of 40+ years of close alignment with the Soviet Union, and the toxic legacies of communist rule. He tells Izmirlieva that Gaustine, who appears in earlier books, represents “everything that I couldn’t be because of my limited body and time.” In *Time Shelter*, Gaustine can flit between times, in particular serving as an eyewitness to the rise of Hitler in the 1930s. He serves as a writerly double, endlessly inventive. Gospodinov gives Gaustine some of the more direct criticisms of where 21st century political culture may be heading: for example, in I.29, Gaustine expresses the fear that with the rising costs of global dementia (in 2014, [estimated for the UK alone at 26 billion pounds](#)):

Some politicians there will soon think to ride this wave, they’ll stir up unrest, nobody wants to pay huge amounts of money for people *with mental disabilities, who are just a burden on society, terminally ill, in need of a merciful death*, they will demand radical health policies, some kind of realpolitik in medicine.... You’ve seen this before, that rhetoric was developed and applied back in the 1930s. (Gospodinov 2022:94)

Gospodinov offers as motivation for *Time Shelter*, his feeling that 2016 marked a fundamental turn in human history away from planning for the future to longing for the past. (2016 saw the UK’s Brexit referendum; and the elections of US President Trump and Bulgarian President Rumen Radev, who like Trump [centered his “strongman” campaign around a populist, anti-](#)

[immigration message](#)). Gospodinov's response, he reports, was to write about perishable things, creating a "time capsule" to ensure their survival for his daughter's generatio

From the documented and observed increase in rates of dementia—noted also by journalists like Nicci Gerrard, in this [moving piece documenting her slow loss of her father](#)—and his observation of the weaponization of nostalgia in politics, (author) Gospodinov created a narrative arc in which the past operates like a virus, spreading through Europe (the main focus) from dementia patients and clinics (Part I) into broader society (Part II). After (narrator) Gospodinov observes the cosplay of Bulgarian elections in which two parties celebrate different pasts (Part III), the infection reaches its climax in part IV (219-250) "Referendum on the Past," with a continent-wide but nationally-organized vote to select the decade in which a majority of citizens would choose to live. The outcome is a new map of Europe on p.246).



In Professor Izmirlieva's insightful reading (at minute 59:00 of the interview), Part V charts, from within, the narrator's own slow descent into dementia, and fragmented recollections, as if in a disjointed film montage.

As Gospodinov (author) has communicated in interviews in the past year, reality caught up with his book. *Time Shelter* was published in the original Bulgarian in the first week of pandemic

lockdown, in Spring 2020. And in his interview with Izmirlieva, Gospodinov notes that in eerie parallel to how he wrote (V.37) about the repetition of World War I—when a reenactment of the shooting of Archduke Ferdinand in Sarajevo ends with real bullets being fired and the Austrian actor killed by his Serbian counterpart—the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 began at precisely the same time of day -4.45am—as the 1939 invasion of Poland, launching World War II.

The book is organized into numbered sections. Here, a passage from each section that stood out for me (along with so much more!), any of which could serve to prompt a discussion.

I.35 Reflections on the Odyssey, which ends with Gospodinov imagining the untold story of Odysseus grown old with dementia, setting out one night to try to and connect with all the adventures that made him.

“Telemachus finds him in the morning, collapsed by the boat, only a hundred yards from home, with no idea what he is doing there and where he had been heading. They take him back to a house with some woman he no longer remembers.” (114)

II.1 On the spread of the epidemic.

“Yes, the past is contagious.... No one died, of course (at least not in the beginning), yet the virus was spreading. It wasn’t clear whether it was transmitted by aerosols, whether the very spray of spit when somebody shouted, *Germany (or France or Poland...) über alles, Hungary for the Hungarians, or Bulgaria on Three Seas*, could pass on the virus. It was most quickly transmitted through the ear and the eye (121).

III.19 Reflecting on the referendum in Bulgaria, where the “Soc” party’s attempt to counteract the nationalism of the “Hajduks” (who evoked 19th century rebellion against Ottoman Turkish rule

“The left’s myth remains fundamentally impoverished. It can keep going, so that the glue of the myth holds, but they have to forget quite a few things. Forget the terrorist attack of 1925 in that church. Forget those that were murdered and buried in mass graves immediately after any coup. Forget those who were beaten, stomped under heavy boots, sent to camps. Forget those who were surveilled, lied to, separated, banned, humiliated... all must be forgotten. And then forget the very forgetting... Forgetting takes a lot of work. You have to constantly remember that you are supposed to forget something. Surely that’s how every ideology functions.” (207-208)

IV.2 The economy of nationalist grievance.

“Why part with unhappiness, when it’s the only wealth some nations have—the crude oil of sorrow is their only inexhaustible resource. And they know that the deeper you dig into it, the more you can excavate. The limitless deposits of national unhappiness.” (220)

V.39 The consolation of literature

“Everything sooner or later ends up in a book, as Mallarmé put it in that quote so beloved by Borges. Which, when you think about it, is not such a bad result.” (289)