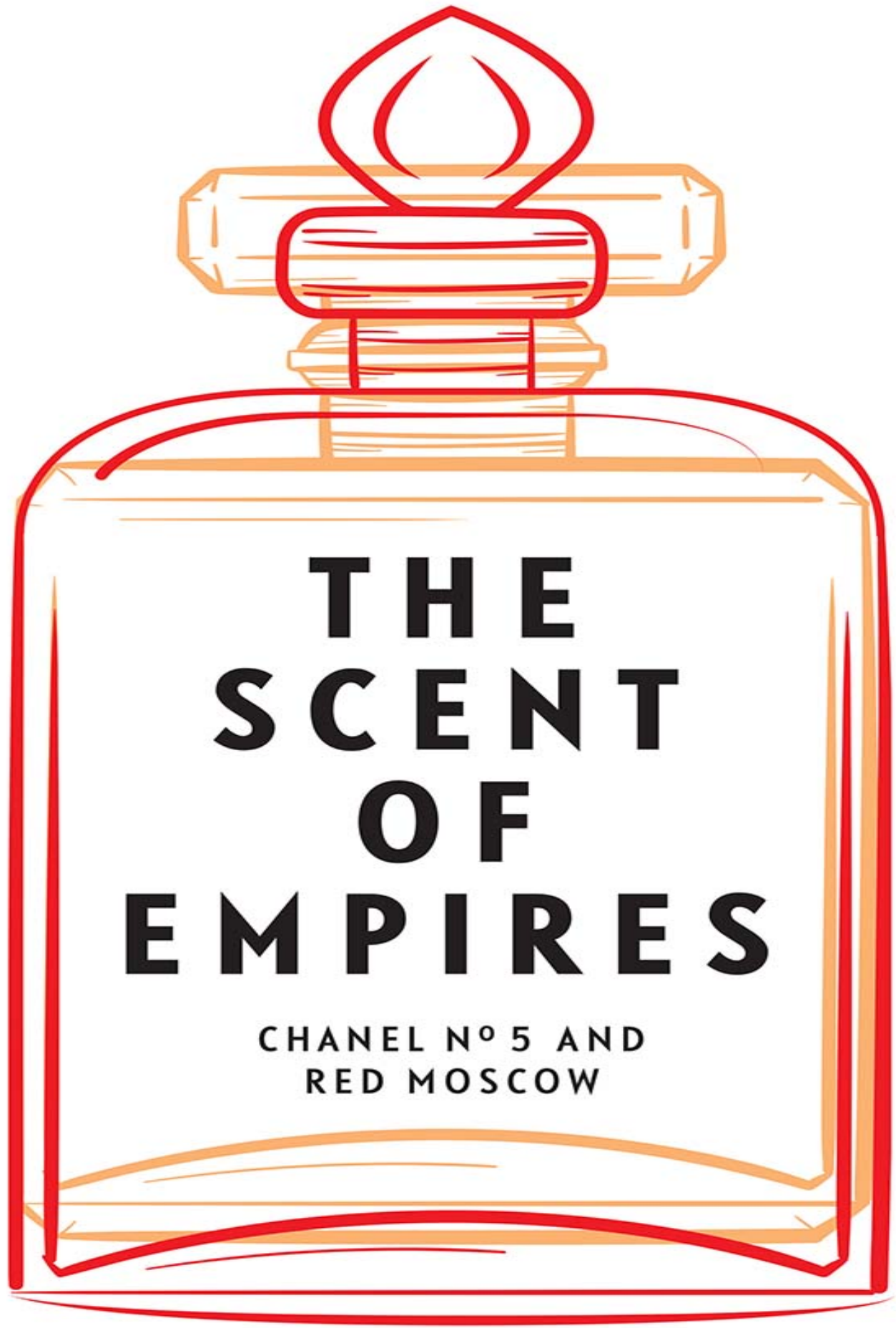


KARL SCHLÖGEL



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The Scent of Empires

Chanel No. 5 and Red Moscow

Karl Schlögel

Translated by Jessica Spengler

polity

Originally published in German as *Der Duft der Imperien. "Chanel No 5" und "Rotes Moskau"* by Karl Schlögel © 2020 Carl Hanser Verlag GmbH & Co. KG, München

This English edition © 2021 by Polity Press



The translation of this work was supported by a grant from the Goethe-Institut.

Polity Press
65 Bridge Street
Cambridge CB2 1UR, UK

Polity Press
101 Station Landing
Suite 300
Medford, MA 02155, USA

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ISBN-13: 978-1-5095-4660-2

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Schlögel, Karl, author. | Spengler, Jessica, translator.

Title: The scent of empire : Chanel no. 5 and Red Moscow / Karl Schlögel ; translated by Jessica Spengler.

Other titles: Duft der Imperien. English

Description: Medford : Polity Press, 2021. | Includes bibliographical references and index. | Summary: "How the turbulent history of the 20th century can be read in a vial of perfume"-- Provided by publisher.

Identifiers: LCCN 2020051784 (print) | LCCN 2020051785 (ebook) | ISBN 9781509546596 (hardback) | ISBN 9781509546602 (epub)

Subjects: LCSH: Perfumes--Social aspects. | Perfumes--History--20th century. | Perfumes industry--History--20th century. | Manners and customs--History--20th century. | Civilization, Modern--20th century.

Classification: LCC GT2340 .S3713 2021 (print) | LCC GT2340 (ebook) | DDC 391.6/3--dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2020051784>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2020051785>

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Dedication

In memory of Karl Lagerfeld (1933-2019)

Extracurricular activity

It was never my plan to delve into the world of smells and scents, much less perfumes. Like anyone who crossed the border at Friedrichstrasse in Berlin before the Wall fell, I knew that the divided worlds of East and West were divided olfactory worlds as well. But other substances and subjects topped my academic agenda. I had no project in mind, no intention of trying to fill a research gap or produce evidence of a new 'turn' in cultural studies. My understanding of the world of fragrance was modest at best, probably in keeping with the average experience of a man who knows the bare minimum about soaps, deodorants, creams and colognes. My contact with this world was marginal and occasional, occurring only when I traversed the perfume section of a department store (usually on the ground floor and almost impossible to avoid) or passed the inevitable duty-free shops in the airport on the way to my gate. What captured my attention was not so much the scent, or the peculiar mélange of scents, but rather the light and sparkle of crystal, the rainbow of colours, mirrors and glass, and the perfect make-up of the women who were not staff or salespeople here but models, living embodiments of elegance. This glittering world with its endless gradations of colour and nuance always felt very alien to me.

And yet, I had a strong urge to overcome my scruples and venture into this special universe, even without prior knowledge of it. It is an act of self-empowerment, in a way, to take the liberty of writing on a topic you previously knew almost nothing about. Any concerns were overridden by an initial impulse that proved to be more than just a fleeting impression. This impulse was to follow a trail in the kind of

pursuit that develops its own drive, its own pull, which is not exhausted and extinguished until the trail has been uncovered and the story has been told.*

In the beginning was a scent. It filled the air on every festive occasion in the Soviet Union – at the Moscow Conservatory, in the Bolshoi Theatre, at graduation ceremonies and weddings. The somewhat sweet, heavy aroma came to be associated in my mind with fairly staid crowds, polished parquet floors, luminous chandeliers, audience members circulating the theatre foyer during intermissions. I encountered this scent later on as well, in East Germany, usually at official receptions, in the context of German-Soviet meetings and at officers' clubs. My original thought was to track down the scent, maybe find out the brand name. Everything else just fell into place after that.

My initial research revealed that the scent was a perfume by the name of Red Moscow. We know the story of the wildly successful Chanel No. 5, but few know the history of the most popular Soviet perfume. As it turns out, both fragrances can be traced back to a common origin, a composition created by French perfumers in the Russian Empire, one of whom – Ernest Beaux – returned to France after the Russian Revolution and Civil War and met Coco Chanel, while the other – Auguste Michel – stayed in Russia, helped to establish the Soviet perfume industry and used a perfume known as *Le Bouquet Favori de l'Impératrice* as the basis for Red Moscow. Both perfumes represent the birth of new worlds of fragrance, radically different life stories, the cultural milieus of Paris and Moscow in the first half of the twentieth century, and the seductive scent of power that permeated two careers: that of Coco Chanel, who became involved with the Germans in occupied Paris, and that of the lesser-known Polina Zhemchuzhina, wife of Soviet Foreign Minister Vyacheslav

Molotov and a people's commissar in her own right, who, for a time, was responsible for the entire Soviet cosmetics and perfume industry. Coco Chanel temporarily settled in Switzerland after the war, while Polina Zhemchuzhina-Molotova was caught up in the antisemitic campaigns of the late 1940s and spent five years in exile, where she experienced the 'smell of the camps'. Chanel achieved success in the Parisian fashion scene of the 1950s, while Zhemchuzhina lived in seclusion with her husband in Moscow and remained a fervent Stalinist until her death in 1970. And a side track in my research led to the '*grande dame* of German film', Olga Chekhova, who was also a trained cosmetologist.

As popular as the perfume Red Moscow may have been, it had little way of countering the stagnation of the late Soviet Union and pressure of the global fragrance industry. But it returned to the market in post-Soviet Russia, and its very existence – much like the passion of those who collect perfume bottles – has become emblematic of a peculiar 'search for lost time'. Such a search is bound to turn up startling revelations, not least that the Russian avant-gardist Kazimir Malevich (anonymously) designed the bottle for the Soviet Union's best-selling eau de toilette before going on to paint *Black Square*, an iconic work of twentieth-century art.

There were long periods of research in which nothing much happened, but then another surprising discovery would propel things along again. When you rove the bazaars of Russian cities and start collecting bottles and pre-revolutionary advertising posters, you encounter amateurs everywhere who have turned themselves into experts. When you make a pilgrimage to the Place Vendôme and 31 rue Cambon to see the staircase where Coco Chanel presented her collections, you learn that the world of luxury is no less enlightening a subject of social analysis

than historical studies of the everyday life of ordinary people. The boutiques and perfumeries on rue Saint-Honoré offer a glimpse of the grandeur of craftsmanship and boundless imagination of artists and designers. This book might never have been written without the inspiration of the great Karl Lagerfeld. When you visit museums and archives that you never would have strayed into otherwise, you uncover networks and personal relationships that only become visible in the light of a specific constellation – Diaghilev as a contemporary of Coco Chanel; Malevich as a contemporary of Tiffany, Gallé and Lalique. And when you poke around on the internet, you find that Red Moscow is not just a nostalgic collector's item. You can order it online whenever you like.

Every age has its own aroma, its scent, its smell. The 'Age of Extremes' brought forth its own scentscapes.

Revolutions, wars and civil wars are olfactory events as well. The divided world of the last century can now be united and explored as a whole, *post festum* – by following our nose, as it were.

Berlin / Los Angeles, spring 2019
Karl Schlögel

Notes

* I first picked up the trail leading to Chanel No. 5 and Red Moscow when writing my book *Das sowjetische Jahrhundert* ('The Soviet Century').

The scent of the empire, or how Le Bouquet de Catherine from 1913 led to Chanel No. 5 and the Soviet perfume Red Moscow after the Russian Revolution

It all looks like a coincidence. Late in the summer of 1920, Coco Chanel met the perfumer Ernest Beaux in his laboratory in Cannes. The encounter had probably been arranged by Dmitri Pavlovich Romanov, a grand duke by virtue of his affiliation with the Russian imperial family, cousin to the last tsar, and Chanel's lover at the time. Exiled from Russia, he was now living in France.^{[1](#)} Like the grand duke – who was a close friend of Prince Felix Yusupov, the man who had orchestrated the murder of Rasputin in the winter of 1916 – Ernest Beaux belonged to the world of luxury and the fashions of the Russian aristocracy. Previously the senior perfumer at A. Rallet & Co., purveyor to the imperial court in Moscow, Beaux had returned to France after the Russian Revolution and Civil War and joined the French perfume house Chiris in Grasse, which had purchased Rallet. In 1913, he had developed Le Bouquet de Catherine for the 300th anniversary of the Romanov dynasty, but the fragrance was renamed Rallet No. 1 in 1914, since an homage to a tsarina from Anhalt-Zerbst was not expected to go down well with Russian

customers while Russia was at war with Germany. Beaux had taken the formula for this perfume with him to France, where he sought to adapt it to his new French circumstances. Presented with a series of ten fragrance samples in his laboratory, Coco Chanel chose number five, the scent that would later go by the brand name Chanel No. 5.



1 Le Bouquet Favori de l'Impératrice (1913)

Tilar J. Mazzeo, author of an *Intimate History of the World's Most Famous Perfume*, describes the scene as follows:

There in front of them were ten small glass vials, labeled from one to five and twenty to twenty-four. The gap in the numbers reflected the fact that these were scents in two different – but complementary – series, different ‘takes’ on a new fragrance. Each of these small glass vials contained a new fragrance innovation, based on the core scents of May rose, jasmine, and those daring new fragrance molecules known as aldehydes. According to the legend, in one of the vials a careless laboratory assistant had accidentally added a massive overdose of this last and still largely undiscovered ingredient, confusing a 10 percent dilution for the pure, full-strength material.

In the room that day, surrounded by rows of perfumer's scales, beakers, and pharmaceutical bottles, Coco Chanel sniffed and considered. She slowly drew each sample beneath her nose, and in the room there was the quiet sound of her slow inhalation and exhalation. Her face revealed nothing. It was something everyone who knew her always remembered, how impassive she could seem. In one of those perfumes, something in the catalog of her senses resonated, because she smiled and said, at last, with no indecision: ‘number five.’ ‘Yes,’ she said later, ‘that was what I was waiting for. A perfume like nothing else. A woman's perfume, with the scent of a woman.’²

When it came to the name, too – No. 5 – she seemed self-assured and free of doubt. “‘I present my dress collections on the fifth of May, the fifth month of the year”, she told

him, “and so we will let this sample number five keep the name it has already, it will bring good luck”.³

Many years later, in a speech given on 27 February 1946, Ernest Beaux recounted his own experience of the moment in which the legendary perfume was born:

People ask me how I managed to create Chanel No. 5. Firstly, I created this perfume in 1920, when I returned from the war. I spent part of my military deployment in the northern countries of Europe, beyond the Arctic Circle, under the midnight sun, when the lakes and rivers exude a particular freshness. I always remembered this characteristic smell, and after great struggle and effort, I managed to recreate it, although the first aldehydes were unstable. Secondly, why this name? Mademoiselle Chanel, who had a very successful fashion house, asked me to create a perfume for her. I showed her a series with the numbers 1 to 5 and 20 to 24. She chose a few, including number 5. ‘What should this perfume be called?’ I asked her. Mademoiselle Chanel replied: ‘I present the dress collection on the fifth day of the fifth month, meaning in May. So leave the perfume with the number it already has. This number 5 will bring it success.’ I must admit, she was not wrong. This new fragrance has been hugely successful; few perfumes have had so many imitators, few perfumes have been copied as persistently as Chanel No. 5.⁴



[2](#) Chanel No. 5 by Ernest Beaux, 1926

No. 5 was abstract. It no longer had any association with the traditional luxurious aromas of rose, jasmine, ylang-

ylang or sandalwood, but instead pointed to something new: the chemical production of fragrance and the work with aldehydes, ingredients that would 'change the smells of an entire century' and 'make Chanel No. 5 perhaps the greatest perfume of the golden era'. This was not the first time aldehydes had been used, but it was the first time they had appeared in a prominent perfume and in such great quantities, creating 'an entirely new fragrance family: the family known as the floral-aldehydic, the term for a perfume in which the scent of the aldehydes is just as important as the scent of the flowers'.⁵

The venerable art of perfumery, which had not yet entirely dissociated itself from its origins in alchemy and soap-making, thus collided with the chemistry of the industrial age. Aldehydes are molecules whose atoms of oxygen, hydrogen and carbon are arranged in a very particular way. They are a phase in the organic reaction known as oxidation, when alcohol is transformed into acid in the presence of oxygen. Aldehydes are said to be synthetic molecules because chemists can create them in a laboratory by isolating and stabilizing them during the oxidation process. These molecules can create a variety of smells: cinnamon, the citrus tang of orange peel, lemongrass. However, aldehydes are fleeting substances that dissipate quickly before vanishing altogether. They intensify the aromas of a perfume and trigger reactions in the nervous system, inducing a 'tingling freshness, a little frisson of an electric sparkle. They make Chanel No. 5 feel like cool champagne bubbles bursting in the senses.'⁶

This is the effect Ernest Beaux had in mind when he sought to recreate the aromas he had experienced as he fled from the Russian Civil War, crossing the snowy tundra of the Kola Peninsula inside the Arctic Circle. 'In the snows of the high alpine steppes and the blasted polar tundra, aldehydes appear today in concentrations sometimes ten times higher

than in the snows of other places. The air and ice in the frozen hinterland is sharper and more fragrant than in other parts of the world.' The stark aroma of snow and meltwater in Chanel No. 5 was balanced by an abundance of jasmine from the flower and perfume capital of Grasse, producing a sweet and exquisite fragrance with an equally exquisite price. 'This essential contrast – between the luscious florals and the asceticism of the aldehydes – is part of the secret of Chanel No. 5 and its most famous achievement.'⁷

There are a number of hypotheses surrounding the creation of Chanel No. 5. The theory that it was a mixing error on the part of an assistant is countered by the fact that the chord of rose and jasmine is perfectly balanced against the aldehyde complex, meaning it was the result of systematic studies. And the theory that it was inspired by the bracing arctic air is countered by the fact that Beaux had already used aldehydes in his Bouquet de Catherine in 1913, which was influenced by the popular Quelques Fleurs fragrance from the French perfumer Robert Bienaimé (1876–1960). The most likely scenario, therefore, is that Chanel No. 5 was a (modified) remake of Le Bouquet de Catherine from 1913, which Beaux had renamed and presented as Rallet No. 1 one year later.⁸

Chanel No. 5 is said to be composed of thirty-one raw materials. In the elaborate language of perfume experts who want to speak in a manner befitting their subject, the list of aromas might be described (or camouflaged) as follows:

The top note is dominated by the vividly fresh, lightly metallic-waxy-smoky aldehyde complex C-10/C-11/C-12 (1:1:1.06 %), with its typical echoes of waxy rose petals and orange peel. The hesperidic-citric facets are picked up and emphasised by bergamot oil, linalool and petitgrain oil. The heart note is spanned by an aromatic core of jasmine, rose, lily-of-the-valley (hydroxycitronellal), iris butter and ylang-ylang oil.⁹

Molecular analysis has ‘unequivocally’ proven the lineage of Chanel No. 5, but at the same time, the formula is said to have remained a secret to this day.¹⁰

Much about the perfume is shrouded in uncertainty, including how Chanel No. 5 developed from this point onwards. This has to do with the nature of an industry that relies on secrecy, as demonstrated not least by Patrick Süskind’s novel *Perfume*. But its composition alone does not explain the stupendous success of Chanel No. 5. Many other things had to happen for this to be possible, as we will see. Chanel No. 5 is the product of what Karl Lagerfeld refers to as the ‘Russian connection’ in his homage to Coco Chanel, meaning it is more than just the sum of Chanel, Beaux and Grand Duke Dmitri Pavlovich.¹¹ Ernest Beaux used his original Russian creation as a starting point, but he went on to develop a clearer, bolder fragrance.

It captured the scents of Moscow and Saint Petersburg and Dmitri’s gilded childhood. It was the exquisite freshness of the Arctic remembered during the last days of a fading empire. Above all, for Coco Chanel, here was an entire catalogue of the senses – the scents of crisp linen and warm skin, the odors of Aubazine and Royallieu, and all those memories of Boy and Émilienne. It was truly her signature perfume. Like her, it even had a past that was obscure and complicated.¹²

The perfume 'captured precisely the spirit of the Roaring Twenties' and ultimately 'shifted the paradigm' of the world of fragrance.¹³ There is no better expression of this paradigm shift than the design of the Chanel No. 5 bottle. The message it sends is that the era of flowers and floridity, ornaments and embellishments, is over and a new age has begun. Jean-Louis Froment, who staged a major Chanel No. 5 exhibition at the Palais de Tokyo in Paris in 2012, says this perfume is the embodiment of the 'quintessence of its time'.¹⁴

A 'paradigm shift' of unequalled brutality had taken place in Russia in yet another 'time of troubles' - a decade of war, revolution and civil war. In the midst of this chaos, factories were shut down and expropriated, their staff expelled and murdered, and changes in ownership led to archives being destroyed or scattered across the globe. Plants closed when their workers left for the countryside to find food, the supply of raw materials was interrupted in the turmoil of the Civil War and blockade, and the authorities considered discontinuing the perfume industry as a luxury sector altogether. Foreign experts had disappeared (Germans were considered 'enemy aliens' and fled as soon as the war broke out in 1914), and work discipline had collapsed, as had production. Large cosmetic and perfume companies, such as Brocard & Co. in Moscow, lost personnel; Brocard had employed 1,000 people before the revolution but only had 200 afterwards. Master perfumers and technicians fled, and factory buildings were repurposed. The former Brocard building was temporarily used to print *Gosznaki*, or Soviet paper money, while the successor to Brocard had to move into a former wallpaper factory. An opulent publication commemorating Brocard's fiftieth anniversary in 1914 shows that, at the time, the company had one of Moscow's most advanced factories and one of the largest perfume plants in the world.¹⁵ It is no surprise that, in the

general deprivation of the Civil War period – with paper in short supply and entire libraries winding up in the stoves known as *burzhuiki* – it was unthinkable that the impressive advertising posters that had made the company famous throughout the empire would continue to be used.

Private enterprises were nationalized and given new names. Brocard first became State Soap Factory No. 5 and was later renamed Novaya Zarya (New Dawn). Rallet & Co. became Soap Factory No. 4 and then Svoboda (Freedom) after 1924. The S. I. Chepelevetsky and Sons perfume factory was turned into the Profrabotnik (Trade Unionist) plant, while Köhler became Farmzavod (Pharmaceutical Plant) No. 12.¹⁶ If and when production resumed, it was to focus entirely on the toiletries urgently needed by the population. The perfume industry thus returned to its origins in soap-making – at least for a brief time. Priority was placed on the needs of Red Army soldiers who required basic toiletries to exchange for bread during their food procurement campaigns in the countryside. Soap and perfume became precious commodities in the barter economy, in which a single piece of soap could be equivalent to a life-saving loaf of bread.¹⁷

According to Russian researchers, it was primarily the workers and employees themselves who were responsible for ensuring that factories threatened with closure were able to resume operations. A worker and member of the Bolshevik Party named Yevdokiya Ivanovna Uvarova was appointed director of Soap Factory No. 5 (formerly Brocard) and made a personal appeal to Lenin himself on behalf of her factory.¹⁸ As a result, some of the valuable essences used by Brocard and other companies could be recovered and used to restart operations on a much reduced scale.

The materials left behind by Brocard and Rallet after the revolution and nationalization – the tools, machines and ingredients – were not the most important legacy of these companies. Their real heritage was their ongoing work and the knowledge and expertise of their specialists and managers. At Brocard (or Novaya Zarya), the head perfumer was Auguste Ippolitovich Michel, who possessed the formulas for Brocard's perfumes and knew how they were produced. Essential oils began to be imported again in 1924, and Auguste Michel set about composing fragrances. His first new creation was Manon in 1925. Krasnaya Moskva (Red Moscow) was developed in the same year. As described by the perfumer S. A. Voitkevich, it was composed of essential oils of orange blossom, lemon, bergamot and musk. The base note was alpha isomethyl ionone, which made up 35 per cent of the fragrance; another account claims that the perfume had sixty components, including iris, violet, clove, ylang-ylang, rose and ambergris.¹⁹ Though the scent was created in 1925, it was not launched on the market until 1927, for the tenth anniversary of the October Revolution.²⁰

For a long time, no one talked about Auguste Ippolitovich Michel in the Soviet Union, and his authorship of the fragrance was repeatedly called into doubt. Apparently even pioneers of the Soviet perfume industry who had been trained by him, such as Alexei Pogudkin and Pavel Ivanov, spoke poorly of the foreign perfumer. But in 2011, Antonina Vitkovskaya, director general of Novaya Zarya, declared once and for all that it was Auguste Michel who had 'created the famous Krasnaya Moskva'. She presented a bottle of it as a gift to Dmitry Medvedev, president of Russia at the time, saying: 'Krasnaya Moskva is a legend of Russian perfumery. A sample from 1913 was preserved in our factory . . . We give it to you so you can hold a piece of the history of Russian perfumery in your hands.' It was a

vintage flacon of the original perfume that had been renamed Krasnaya Moskva after the revolution. In the Moscow Museum for the Art of Perfumery at the Novaya Zarya plant, bottles of Bouquet de Catherine and Krasnaya Moskva were exhibited in cases next to each other.^{[21](#)}

In truth, the story is not so clear. While we know the details and trajectory of Ernest Beaux's life, Auguste Michel's biography is largely a mystery. Ernest Beaux, son of the head perfumer for A. Rallet & Co., purveyor to the tsar, was born in 1881 in Moscow. After studying and completing his military service in France, he returned to Russia in 1902 and became the chief perfumer at Rallet, where he achieved great success with his Bouquet de Napoleon in 1912, released to mark the 100th anniversary of the Battle of Borodino. This success was repeated in 1913 when he developed Bouquet de Catherine for the 300th anniversary of the Romanov dynasty. In 1914, the perfume commemorating Catherine the Great was renamed Rallet No. 1 for the sake of Russia's French allies in World War I. It was a modified version of this perfume that Beaux would present to Coco Chanel in 1920 after the end of the Russian Civil War. The information we have about Auguste Michel's life, by contrast, is scant and contradictory. Some say he was the son of a French perfume manufacturer who had migrated to Russia in the nineteenth century, but he himself claimed in an interview in 1936 that he had been born and raised in Grasse on the French Riviera. He said he had trained as a perfumer there and then joined Rallet in Moscow in 1908, where he was apparently poached by Brocard.^{[22](#)}

It is very likely that Ernest Beaux and Auguste Michel knew each other, and that Michel was aware of the fragrances being composed by Beaux. We know for certain that both men were students of Alexandre Lemer cier, the master perfumer at Rallet, and that both benefitted from the