



Geert Mak

Great Expectations

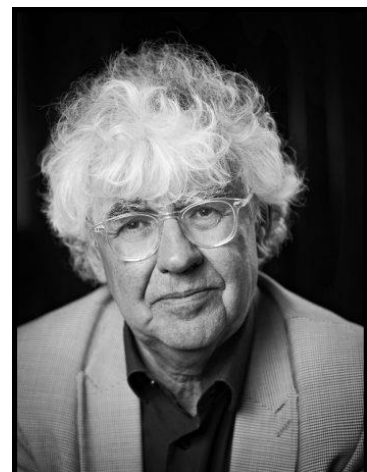
In Europe II 1999 – 2019

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Great Expectations is the long-awaited sequel to Geert Mak's immensely successful *In Europe* (2004). While *In Europe* dealt with the 20th century, the past and how the major events of that, in many ways, horrific period marked by two world wars has shaped us, *Great Expectations* examines the first two decades of the 21st century, and picks up where *In Europe* ends: in 1999. Mak sketches the climate and the mood at the turn of the century, the optimism that reigned but vanished along the way, the sentiments surrounding the implementation of the euro, the consequences of the September 11 attacks, the situation in Eastern Europe and Russia, the financial crisis, the USA, northern versus southern Europe, the refugees.

GEERT MAK was born in 1946. He is a journalist and writer. His books include *Amsterdam*, *How God Disappeared from Jorwerd*, *My Father's Century*, *In Europe* and *The Many Lives of Jan Six*. He has won numerous awards, including the Leipziger Buchpreis and the Prins Bernhard Cultural Fund Prize for his entire oeuvre. A tv-series based on *Great Expectations* will be broadcasted in the autumn of 2019 on Dutch television, radio and online. Geert Mak's work has been translated in twenty-two languages.



Great Expectations

by Geert Mak

Sample translation by David McKay

PROLOGUE

2018

Viewed from above, it is a grey-brown landscape. It is the moon just after a passing rainstorm. It is dented earth, with thousands of lakes and streamlets. It resembles the creeks and pools sketched in the mud twice a day by the retreating sea, forever and ever. It is lichens and rock and utter desolation.

We are almost there. A single tree, blazing yellow in the early winter. A bright red house. Out of nowhere, a few factory buildings, a large shipyard, a cluster of houses around a square, a few cranes, a harbor. The town. A trawler, entering the harbor from the sea of ice, blue and black – they catch king crabs here, monstrous beasts, prized by top restaurants throughout Europe.

It's nearly nightfall. The streets are empty and silent, except for the wind. The lights are on only in the town hall, and in the large Russian consulate with the barred windows. The restaurant offers whale steak or reindeer-and-mushroom pasta. Along the waterfront, the hardware

shop's full product line is on display: three aluminum ladders, one short, one tall, and one in between. In the little grocery store, two girls discuss their options at length. This is their outing for the week, so what will it be: a milkshake or the latest soft drink?

Before long the gate at the border, a few kilometers away, will be locked for the night. The soldier on this side will shake the hands of the two soldiers on the other side, taking care not to venture more than thirty centimeters onto foreign soil, as the strict rules of the ritual prescribe – they don't want any trouble.

Tomorrow is another day.

I must begin with distance. Distance in space and distance in time – or at least, as much distance as possible. There's something contradictory about writing the history of a period you're still in the middle of and a world you're still actively involved in. Historical writing requires distance; the passage of time is still what most clearly reveals the big picture. Not until well into the nineteenth century could historians assign Napoleon his proper place in European history. To this day, we debate the fundamental causes of the twentieth century's two great wars, the nature and consequences of colonialism, the frozen conflict of the Cold War, the collapse of the Soviet empire in 1989. And then comes our own era, the first two decades of the twenty-first century, in which the history factory is back in full operation and our tidy European world of peace, prosperity, and fair sharing appears to be tumbling down again.

Almost twenty years ago I wrote a book about twentieth-century Europe, which ended in 1999. It is crying out for a sequel: what has happened to that European world since the turbulent start of the twenty-first century? Of course, I would love to peer over the shoulder of a bright young history student writing a thesis about our times half a century from now, in 2069. It wouldn't be a happy story, I fear, but I know it would be interesting. After all, both the United States of America and, later, the European Union can be seen as historic projects, in which free citizens tried to take the course of history into their own hands instead of passively undergoing it. Projects born out of Enlightenment ideals, human rights: liberty, equality, fraternity – including the

fraternity of nations. So why are these glorious projects now being dismantled?

My young historian has a clear overview, thanks to his distance in time. I do not. I envy him.

Here in this northernmost outpost of Europe, everything is clear: if you don't watch out, you'll freeze to death. Spring, summer, and autumn go by in a flash. "The winter goes on forever, and then, boom, it's summer," they say here. "And then, boom, summer's gone again." The first cold days usually arrive in October, bringing snow that remains on the ground until May. In late November the polar night falls. Then the northern lights swirl across the black skies, as the whole world below drops to minus 20 or sometimes minus 30 degrees Celsius. On 18 January, if you climb one of the hills, you can see the first light. Everyone has the day off then, adults and children alike, and they celebrate as if it were a second Christmas. Then life returns to the daily rhythm of the mail boat – in the harbor, the shipyard, and the shops, at the border crossings, and in the airport. Everyone spends the rest of the time indoors. The Centrum Kafe, the talkative heart of the town, closes at five in the afternoon.

With little more than 3,500 inhabitants, Kirkenes is a speck on the map, yet this remote place is a geopolitical pressure cooker. It has an exceptionally strategic location, barely five kilometers from the Russian border. That makes it the northernmost ice-free port in Europe, at the mouth of the Barents Sea – which has a giant gas field on the Russian side – and the gateway to Murmansk, one of Russia's main ports. According to a provisional estimate, the polar region contains 13 per cent of the world's oil reserves and 40 per cent of its gas reserves, plus vast quantities of iron, copper, gold, and other minerals. Now that the polar caps are melting, it's only a matter of time before all sorts of things start happening, and everyone is getting ready. Huge investments are already being made, especially on the Russian side, and military activity is showing a similar increase.

On top of that, Kirkenes is a crucial port for the future Arctic maritime route from Asia to Europe, the alternative to the Suez Canal.

The mayor sees his city as a future Singapore: "I have a Chinese delegation visiting just about every week." The editor-in-chief of the local online newspaper, Thomas Nilsen, once described Kirkenes as "the center of the periphery of Europe." He sees the town above all as a testing ground for relations between Russia and Europe. "We experience any changes here first, long before they reach Berlin, Washington, or Moscow."

Today I'm walking around Kirkenes with a cameraman. The European journey I published a book about in 1999 took on a second life when the Dutch broadcasting network VPRO adapted it for television — although the book and the series remained completely separate projects. Now we're starting all over, but this time we're working together from the start. There's no time to lose.

We walk along the harbor. The trawler, the *Salaogriva*, comes from Murmansk. A closer view shows it to be a floating factory, a dripping chaos of cables, cranes, and crab traps; the men in their thick hoods are silent, as weatherworn as their ship and their nets. They sit in the corner of a work shed, waiting to sail out to sea again, wordlessly passing around coffee and watching the dancing girls on TV.

We climb the hill. The Second World War's not far away here. Once there must have been wooden houses with beautiful carvings all over Kirkenes, the kind you see in other Norwegian trading towns. But almost every house here was destroyed toward the end of the war. In a large-scale Soviet offensive in the polar region, aimed at gaining control of the nearby nickel mines and the strategic naval base in Kirkenes, the city was bombed more than three hundred times, and more than 60,000 soldiers died between Kirkenes and Murmansk. The townspeople survived for seven months, the whole winter of '44/'45, in the caves and mines. Twenty children were born. In the spring of 1945, only three houses in Kirkenes remained standing.

So all the clean white wooden houses and shops are new, and they make Kirkenes look a little like an American suburb. One of the oldest structures is a bomb shelter, now a memorial to the townspeople's courage. Nearby, high on his pedestal, is a Russian soldier. This liberation monument is still adorned with flowers and wreaths, freshly

braided plastic – real flowers wouldn't stand a chance in this climate. To this day, the Russians are still celebrated here as the town's liberators. When Stalin died, some people in Kirkenes wept.

We climb higher, past the wooden porches and the few sports fields, until we have a view of the harbor below. We sit down on a bench. The large, empty bay lies on the horizon, without a ship in sight; then we notice, far in the distance, the daily mail boat approaching. A man with a dog passes and checks his watch. "It's late today, at least fifteen minutes." Life is solid here; the cars and houses are bright and spacious, the town looks prosperous. Under a few solitary trees lies the cemetery, golden epitaphs gleaming in the sun. Modesty is the rule here; monumental tombs are nowhere to be found. We'll all be equal soon enough, before God – and in fact, we already are.

The mayor's name is Rune Ralfaelsen. He tells us about his grandmother. Her first husband died at the sawmill, crushed in a fall. No sooner had she remarried than her second husband died too, in a submarine attack. Rune's father was the youngest member of the Norwegian resistance, sixteen when he joined the Norwegian army. His uncle spent time in a prison camp and fell in love with a captive Russian girl on the other side of a barbed-wire fence. She disappeared, and he never saw her again; on his deathbed, he asked to see her. Rune himself grew up in a house that was groaning with people. "There was nothing left after the war. Everything had to be rebuilt from the ground up." That's the story of this place.

Tensions sometimes ran high in the Cold War, especially in the polar region. After all, for years this was the only direct border between Russia and NATO. In response to a NATO exercise in 1968, the Soviets showed up at the doorstep with an infantry division of two hundred tanks and five hundred combat vehicles. Still, Kirkenes stayed as idiosyncratic as ever, and its ties to Russia remained exceptionally close and heartfelt. The mayor tells me that settlement in the border area was always "flexible": "Sami [indigenous people of Lapland – GM], Norwegians, Finns, Russians, they all mingled here." And no one was scared of the Russians. "If they come, they'll take Oslo first, then Bergen,

and then Trondheim. And then they'll stop by Kirkenes for a cup of coffee." That was the general feeling.

Ralfaelen's whole life has been intertwined with that of his town. His office in the town hall is spare and simple, with the bars, camera, and antennas of the neighboring Russian consulate always in sight. The NATO presence, I should add, is at least as intimidating; a couple of times a month, a mysterious ship lays anchor along the waterfront, and even the mayor is not permitted to set foot on it. The *Marjata* may look like an ordinary passenger ship, aside from some extra antennas, but in reality it's one of the world's most advanced surveillance centers. "They suck all our phones and laptops dry," someone says at the Centrum Kafe. Meanwhile, Russian submarines are lurking around the undersea cables in the polar region, making the Americans nervous.

In Kirkenes you look down from the heights at Berlin, Brussels, London, and Rotterdam, all very far away. Yet recent European history has also affected Kirkenes time and again: the bank collapse in 2008, the crisis that followed, the Russian annexation of Crimea, the immigration crisis, Brexit, Trump.

The iron mine, once the mainstay of the local economy, went bankrupt in 2015, in the aftermath of the economic crisis; four hundred people lost their jobs. But the town took the bad news in its stride. The ice-free port of Kirkenes is now the main base of operations of the Russian fishing fleet, and the Russians provide the large shipyard with three quarters of its work. Tourism is also flourishing, with some one hundred thousand visitors a year from the cruise ships that stop there. The mayor says, "The town's become a gentler place."

He shows me his appointments for the week ahead. The kick-off of an "open screen" film festival in Murmansk – he's known the governor since 1992. A meeting with the mayor of Nikel – an old and close friend. The gay parade in Kirkenes, with a large delegation from Murmansk – where such an event would be unthinkable. He's fascinated with border zones and visits one whenever he goes on vacation.

Yet even in Kirkenes, relations with Russia have cooled. The Putin regime has become more oppressive, independent media have come under extreme pressure, Crimea and part of Ukraine have been

occupied, and the West has responded with severe sanctions. Here in Kirkenes, these changes have had immediate consequences. The Russian fishing fleet has run into difficulties, the cross-border soccer matches have been cancelled, and sales of French wine and cheese in the shops have skyrocketed because the sanctions prevent Russians from buying those products at home.

"At the regional level, it's business as usual," the mayor says. "But the atmosphere has changed. Before 2014 we had real kitchen-table discussions of all kinds of things, including politics. But these days, if I tell Russians I'm concerned about their country, they cut me short. 'I'm concerned about my grandmother,' they tell me. 'She needs medicine. So don't come to me with your stories about democracy.'"

Kirkenes has never been a city for populists. The future – that's what matters here. Only three countries have traditionally focused on the polar region: America, Russia, and Norway. "And everything always works here, even in the depths of winter," the mayor assures us.

The temperature's rising even around the pole – three times as fast as it is elsewhere, actually. Since 1971, the temperature there has risen by an average of three degrees. There are more and more permanent areas of open seawater. Everyone here has noticed that the landscape turns green in May now, instead of June, and this summer they had their first heat wave. In the meantime, the melting ice is changing the polar vortex, a vast low-pressure area in the upper atmosphere that influences weather not only around Kirkenes, but also in other parts of the European continent. Places further south can experience sudden, unprecedented cold snaps, while in the north, the weather is clearly becoming warmer and wetter.

While many Europeans are increasingly worried about these types of climate change, people in Kirkenes are also looking forward to new possibilities. By about 2030, the polar region will probably be navigable year-round, permitting ships to travel from Shanghai to Rotterdam in about twenty days, instead of thirty to forty by way of the Suez Canal. There are plans for a huge container port, and the mayor dreams of a direct railway line to Helsinki.

"This is the geopolitical focal point of Norway," he says. "Negotiations with Russia are well underway on the gas in the Barents Sea. Lavrov has visited many times. The Chinese are already talking about the new 'Polar Silk Road' through the Arctic. Nothing happens in Oslo; it all happens here."

And that is no more than the truth. At this very moment, October 2018, America has announced its intention to withdraw from the historic INF arms control treaty – without prior consultation with its NATO allies. Russia has taken immediate countermeasures. After thirty years of peace, the old arms race is starting all over again – and this time the competitors include China. The Americans have also sent an aircraft carrier to the polar circle for the first time in thirty years. Russia has reopened seven old Soviet bases in the area over the past seven years, and the first military icebreaker in decades is on its way here.

Meanwhile, the Norwegians and the Americans are building a brand new radar system, GLOBUS III, in the fishing village of Vardø to keep an eye on Russia's fleet of nuclear submarines. In February, the Russians carried out a mock attack on Vardø with eleven Sukhoi Su-24 aircraft, an act of intimidation that shocked the Norwegian intelligence service, because such incidents can easily get out of hand.

Sweden began using its old bomb shelters again this year and issued a new brochure about how it protects the public. Here's a sample: "If Sweden is attacked by another country, we will never give up. All information to the effect that resistance is to cease is false." In Norway, Trident Juncture is now beginning – the largest NATO exercise since the twentieth-century Cold War, involving 50,000 troops, 10,000 vehicles, 250 aircraft, and 65 ships. The burning question is, can British troops hurry to the aid of the Norwegians fast enough in the event of an attack? For years after the end of the Cold War, such questions went unasked. In Germany and the Netherlands, the exercise mainly involves testing roads and bridges. Are they still prepared for mass military movements? "A realistic stress test," the American commander calls it.

Once we thought Western freedom and democracy would gradually spread to the East and the rest of the world. Now we seem to be witnessing the opposite trend. Europe is uncertain, divided, and

weakened. Russia seizes every opportunity to sow new discord. China has rushed to fill the gaps left by Western Europe in Central Europe, the Balkans, and Greece. Still further West, the American president is pursuing much the same policy of destabilization as the Russians and rapidly dismantling the rules and institutions of the postwar world order. The old, transatlantic world of the late twentieth century is, in short, in the words of the *New York Times* columnist Roger Cohen, "gone, man, solid gone."

How could this happen to the optimistic Europe of 1999? Long ago, when I was a know-it-all student, an old journalist wrote to me, a former member of the Dutch resistance against the Nazis: "It's easy for you to talk, in the light of the present. But what were we supposed to do in the 1930s? We were wandering in darkness with only a candle, groping and stumbling, in a totally unfamiliar house." Now I'm the one with the candle, faltering ahead.

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Press quotes *In Europe*:

'Whoever follows Geert Mak through the Europe of the 20th century will hardly be able to take it all in.' - *Vrij Nederland*

'A rare example of a large work of nonfiction that fascinates the reader from start to finish.' - *Süddeutsche Zeitung*

'His genius as a historian is his instinct for human stories... Mak is the history teacher everyone should have had.' - *Financial Times*

'On one level, *In Europe* is the ultimate pub quiz reference book, on another a compassionate exposure of a world full of terror, hope, disaster and refinement.'
- *Sunday Express*

'A powerful, humane and serious mind.' - *The Guardian*

'Fascinating, informative, sometimes exhilarating, often painful, and quite impossible to summarise...Mak is a true journalist, a reporter with a keen eye for country and

cityscapes, for the oddities of human behaviour...a wonderfully rich journey through time and space, packed with vivid images, enlivened by conversations and stories. This is a splendidly panoramic picture of our common European home, a book to read through and then to dip into frequently...I thoroughly recommend his book.' - *Literary Review*

'An ingenious geographical-chronological structure... a big, original and pleasant user-friendly book, enlivened by bits of first-person narrative and some sharp observations of the present. Mak has a wry sense of humour and a nice turn of phrase...It's impossible not to get drawn into this book.' - *Sunday Telegraph*

'Moving across a vivid historical landscape, his portrait of Europe, in all her bloody barbarism and civilised glory, helps us confront exactly what we need to know....a timely book, and one we can't afford to ignore.' - *Daily Telegraph*

'His book has a photographic quality, at times resembling a selection of stills... *In Europe* is not so much a work of history, nor is it strictly a travelogue of the present; it is part of a growing genre that is sometimes referred to as the 'history of the present', but might just as well be the 'presence of the past'. It is undoubtedly a spectacular and beautifully crafted piece of such writing'. - *Sunday Times*

'Geert Mak is Europe's portrait-painter, its impressionist, its poet-musician, the reader of its peoples' minds. English readers! He writes too an an England without which Europe, his Europe, will not and cannot exist. Pray read his book!' *John Lukacs*

'Twentieth century history is sober business, yet *In Europe* is practically effervescent in its evocation of detail. That's because Geert Mak is the sort of journalistic historian who, in his inexorable hunger for meaning, is as liable to gain insight from the kid sitting next to him on the train out of Amsterdam as from the Treaty of Versailles. He doesn't write about Auschwitz and the ethnically cleansed alleys of Srebrenica so much as personally lead you through the concrete walls of these places that have shaped our self-awareness. This is an absorbing book and a valuable one' - *Russell Shorto*