



THE WORLD

Dust to dust: on the trail of Russia's vanishing churches



ALL PHOTOGRAPHS: ROBIN STUMMER

Thousands of beautiful churches – from Baroque to late Victorian – are rotting away in an empty countryside that was once the pride of a vast nation. With a government seemingly blind to the cultural and artistic worth of these huge masterpieces, their future looks bleak. However, there are the stirrings of a movement to save them, and, despite a shortage of skills, cash and manpower, there is enthusiasm. [Clementine Cecil](#) joined a small group on an autumn tour of just one region dotted with these ailing brick-and-plaster giants

Fifty miles north of Moscow and you already feel like you are in the middle of nowhere. The flat landscape is punctuated every now and then with a sprinkling of dachas, an unkempt farm or a decaying church, iron crosses bent and rusty against a grey sky. Svetlana Melnikova, the president of The Society of the Village Church, is telling us about their work: this is a small, grassroots preservation group who conduct emergency repairs on churches.

In Russia, this is a massive task. There are tens of thousands of churches standing empty and exposed to the elements. The exact number is unknown: also with us on the expedition was Ekaterina Shorban, a historian from Moscow's Institute of Art History which is conducting the first comprehensive survey of Russia's architectural monuments, a General Inventory. Twenty people are working on this inventory. Work started in the 1960s and will take several more decades. The institute knows that many of the buildings cannot be saved – but at least they can be recorded.

Shorban oversees the documenting of several provinces and regions, including Tver, where we were visiting. Tver province is roughly the same size as Ireland, and straddles the flat land between Moscow and St Petersburg. Barely two million people now live here, but it was once far more populous. It can easily take an hour or two's hard driving – preferably in a rugged 4x4 vehicle – to reach one church from another, such is the vast scale of the Russia countryside, and the poor state of many of the roads. That land is low-lying, often marshy, and dotted with birch and oak forest. Left "stranded" when the population dwindled in the mid-20th century were countless huge churches and religious buildings, many of them dating back to the late 17th century. Hundreds, thousands, of the villages and hamlets they served have vanished. "When we started out we thought there would be three volumes on the historic buildings of the Tver region," says Shorban, "but now it clear there will be nine or ten."

She now estimates that there are between six and eight thousand abandoned churches in this region alone.

Russia's perceptions of its own culture centre on Moscow and St Petersburg, so the meticulous and well-researched architectural history volumes being produced by the Institute of Art History have come as surprise to an academic community

Falling grace: facing page, The Church of Kazanskaya Icon of the Mother of God (1850s-60s), at Crudino village. This page, the interior and crumbling exterior of The Church of Vladimirskaaya Icon of the Mother of God (1793), Solimono



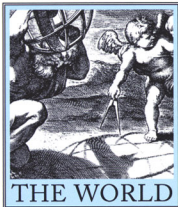
"THERE ARE BETWEEN SIX AND EIGHT THOUSAND ABANDONED CHURCHES IN THIS REGION ALONE!"



hitherto unaware of the sophisticated cultural legacy that survives in the provinces. The work of these architectural historians is contributing to a dramatic reassessment of the country's culture. Under Communism, Russia was barely visited by foreigners, and the few that did come saw only its

big cities. Here they were shown showcase "restoration" projects such as the Kremlin and the palaces of St Petersburg. Yet the country's provincial churches are as magnificent as anything Moscow has to offer in scale and workmanship.

The first church our party visited was The



THE WORLD

Right, The Church of the Icon of the Mother of God of the Sign, Teplovo. Abandoned in 1937, following the destruction of the Soimonov Estate, of which it was a key part. This superb example of late Palladianism is now on the watch list of the World Monuments Fund

Right (below), fading, peeling murals at the Church of the Epiphany, Eskey village. The paintings date from the 1840s



Church of the Icon of the Mother of God of the Sign. This is on the World Monuments Fund 2008 Watch List, and one the greatest threats to it is listed by them as "abandonment". This superb piece of Palladianism is attributed, on stylistic grounds, to the celebrated architect Nikolai Lvov (1751–1804). The church is in Teplovo (on the former estate of Tyoploye), in Klin District, about 70 miles from Moscow. It was built to serve the estate of the Soimonov family, founded here by Pyotr Alexandrovich Soimonov in the mid-18th century. Today, the church is a skeleton – but one that still inspires wonder. The plaster has fallen away to reveal brickwork of the greatest mastery. The fact that the church still stands at all is a testament to the skills of the architect.

Vladimir Yakubeni, a buildings conservator who accompanied us on the trip, believes that certain details in the construction – for example the use of three keystones in the arches – are evidence that



the architect was on site during construction, making The Church of the Icon of the Mother of God especially valuable. This enormous building, with both a "summer" and a "winter" church, once

served a large congregation, but it was closed in 1937. The village itself was wiped from the map in the Second World War. Now a small group of dachas comprises the only local community – the equivalent of holiday cottages in the UK.

At present the west wall of The Church of the Icon is in urgent need of support. Cement used in repairs in the early 20th century is causing damage to the brickwork, as is iron, now fast decaying, used in the original construction. The cornices need to be repaired to allow a temporary roof to be placed on the building or re-create the original roof. The window and door frames are in an advanced state of decay.

This church, and the others we visited over the following few days, were built during a time of great prosperity for landed gentry – following the decision of Catherine the Great to revoke obligatory military service for the nobles, thereby allowing them to improve their estates. It was a



period of great architectural achievement in the Russian provinces.

Although Neo-Classical in style, they maintained the traditional Byzantine form of Russian churches – centrally-planned with a domed square in the centre with two apsed and two flat ends. Churches often started as square “summer” churches with a separate belltower, but often “winter” churches were added later, joining the “summer” church and the belltower. Services were held here in the winter as the space was smaller and easier to heat. The “summer”

portion of the church was larger and grander.

Most of these churches were subjected to three waves of attack: the first, immediately after the Revolution, when many were stripped of valuables and closed down. The second wave came in the 1930s under Stalin as part of his organised War on Religion; and the third – which closed many of the churches that Melnikova deals with in the Tverskaya region – was in the 1950s when Khrushchev ordered a large-scale closing of churches despite a thaw in the relationship between the state and the church during the war.

“THE IDEA OF CONVERTING THESE BUILDINGS FOR OTHER USES IS DEEPLY UNPOPULAR IN RUSSIA”



Left, ploughing against the backdrop of the huge Church of the Epiphany, Esky village. Built between 1783 and 1818. Above, inside the Church of the Transfiguration – 1822-33 – at Zamitye village, some 120 miles north of Moscow

“Krushchev was cruel as he aimed to destroy,” says Shorban. “Churches became anything, warehouses, shops, houses of culture.” For this reason, the idea of converting them into bars, restaurants or private homes – often acceptable in the UK – is deeply unpopular in Russia.

Indeed, the question is not to do with the churches, for this new wave of interest in them comes hand in hand with a spiritual revival; it is more a question of who the churches are serving, for the countryside is emptying.

The village of Esky boasts a church that rivals Moscow and St Petersburg’s finest. Entering The Epiphany Church – 1783-1801, belltower 1818 – you are greeted by floor-to-ceiling wall paintings still glowing with their original translucency, despite years of neglect. It was the



Above, The Church of the Icon of the Mother of God of the Sign, Teplovo. The interior was stripped during the Soviet period, and nearby villages and towns 'relocated'.

Left, Svetlana Melnikova – a Russian Mrs Dance?



first time any of the party had seen the church; Vladimir Yakubeni had heard about it, but had not expected anything on this scale. In the places where the exquisite colours had faded, the original outline of the drawings beneath were visible, executed in one stroke.

Like most of Russia's rural communities, the village of Esky is now only semi-inhabited. Agricultural work is poorly paid and the young aspire to leave and work in the city. However, as we stood marveling in this rich interior, three members of the Minin Choir – one of Russia's most celebrated – came in to look at the church. One of them owned a dacha in the village and wanted the choir to stage a fundraising event to raise funds to save the church. They stood under the central cupola, feet crunching among bird

droppings and brick and plaster debris; for the first time in decades, the church was filled with the sound of a choir singing traditional hymns.

We next visited a church where repairs had started in 2006, when I first saw it. This was the church of St Nicholas, built in 1821, in the village of Nikolskoye-Tuchevskoye. A year ago its western wall was collapsing and the brick work of the roof exposed to the elements. One of the dacha owners in the village turned out to be the director of the bank which has put an undisclosed sum into the church's repair. Yakubeni is overseeing work and has employed an Armenian master stone mason; the carving will be of highest quality. This is a rare occasion when the work of the Village Church Fund leads to a full repair, rather than localised emergency work.

Sadly, knowledge of the importance of lime in traditional building work has disappeared in Russia; here we saw modern cement being mixed into the lime mortar and plaster on the inside of the "summer" church. Yakubeni says the building season, May to October, is too short to allow for the use of pure lime, and that there is simply no one with a knowledge of lime in Russia. It is to be hoped that the use of cement will not mean the same churches will need further repair in years to come. Encouragingly, Shorban and Melnikova were keen to hear about the SPAB's lime courses.

On our last evening in the countryside we had dinner with the official advisor to the Governor of Tver region. Worryingly, he had no concept of the architectural and artistic riches of his own region and, sadly, had little faith in reviving the churches. "If we restore them, people will loot them," he said. In response, Svetlana Melnikova cited examples where repaired churches have brought a sense of renewal and hope to Russia's ailing countryside.

Melnikova wants to see a state-sponsored repair programme for these churches. Her heroic organisation cannot cope with the sheer scale of the problem. Hopefully the vital work of the Village Church Fund and others will be rewarded by a change in state conservation policy. ■

Clem Cecil is an architecture writer, SPAB member, and co-founder of Moscow Architecture Preservation Society (MAPS) – www.maps-moscow.com.

See www.village-church.ru for information on the campaign to save historic Russian churches. Ekaterina Shorban will be giving a lecture, 'Rediscovering Russia's Churches', at the Russian cultural centre in the UK – Puskin House, 5a Bloomsbury Square, London WC1 on 7 May 2008 at 7.30pm, £7 for non-members. Details on 0207 269 9770, email bookings@puskinhouse.org.uk. A series of MAPS lectures on Russian architecture begins this year, on 19 December, at Puskin House.