

INTRODUCTORY

THE architecture of Russia has not been allowed the place it deserves in the history of the architectures of the world. In general histories such as those of Fergusson and Rosengarten, it is described as a debased Byzantine, owing something to the Tartars, but nothing more than its very degeneration to the Russians themselves.

The first to make known the Russian style to the Western public was Viollet le Duc who, in a volume published in 1877, set forth his conclusions as to the derivation of Russian architectural forms from eastern sources. Viollet le Duc's attitude was tolerant, even appreciative; but his conclusions were entirely mistaken. Never having set foot in Russia, he could work only on second-hand materials sent from Moscow; moreover, it is said that his approach was not free from Slavophilic bias, which led him to exaggerate the Asiatic at the expense of the European connections in Russian art. Viollet le Duc's work, therefore, has little value at the present time, and since this, together with Fergusson's inaccurate and recklessly critical account, were the only materials available, until recently, bearing on the Russian style, it is not surprising that the architectural world has remained either uninformed or grossly misinformed on the subject.

Even in Russia itself the national style of architecture provoked no serious study until the end of the last and the beginning of the present century, and no literature sufficiently palatable to appeal to the public appeared until Grabar's great work began to be published in 1909. Intensive study of all aspects of the national life and culture in Russia was an outcome of the Slavophil movement. This study brought in its train a crop of literature on the arts, and active publication was in full swing when the War and Revolution intervened. A number of works, then actually in course of publication, were interrupted, and their concluding volumes never saw the light. Now, fortunately, there is some

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Excerpt

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prospect of publication being resumed. Since the revolution a few books have appeared in French and in German, but the English language remains without literature on the subject of Russian Architecture.¹

Few students of architecture, possessed of material from which to judge, could now deny the interest and value of this much neglected study. But it can still be argued that the Russian style is one of the world's lesser expressions of artistic genius. Loukouski, indeed, speaks of it in these words:

(The study of Grabar's volumes) nous révèle que la Russie renfermait tout un monde de rêves artistiques qu'elle savait réaliser avec un élan et un génie qui la placent, sinon au même rang que la France et l'Italie, du moins à côté de l'Angleterre, l'Espagne, et l'Allemagne.

There cannot be many, however, who will admit such a comparison between our own great cathedrals and even the finest creations of Russian genius. One must acknowledge that such heights of architectural achievement were never reached in Russia.

It is not difficult to find reasons for this deficiency. There prevail in Russia general and almost inevitable geographical conditions inimical to the development of a great art: diffuseness of the population; paucity of urban centres; their immense distance apart and the difficulty of communications. Moreover, historical and religious causes conspired to isolate Russia from the general stream of cultural evolution which affected the whole of western Europe. The adoption by Russia of the Greek, rather than the Latin Church, meant the creation of a permanent barrier between herself and her western neighbours. These causes together contributed to the retardation of Russian civilisation centuries behind that of western Europe.

Russia's own internal history was, however, the most potent of

¹ There are two chapters in *The Russian Arts* by Rosa Newmarch (Herbert Jenkins, 1916) and a short account in the fourteenth (but not in any previous) edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*.

INTRODUCTORY

3

disturbing influences, both in the general progress of her civilisation, and in the development of a national style of architecture. Each architectural centre was in turn destroyed and abandoned, and the art grew up anew in some other province; the greatest of these breaks, that of the Mongol invasion in the thirteenth century, resulted practically in loss of the building art, and the new style of Moscow grew up slowly and laboriously with the help of architects from abroad, and from north-west Russia, which had escaped the disastrous onslaughts of the Mongols.

Later on, it was the Russian Church itself which hindered the free and natural development of the arts. The Church, essentially and above all things conservative, saw with hostile eyes the new architectural features—derived from the old wooden architecture of north Russia—which began to usurp the place of traditional Byzantine forms about the beginning of the sixteenth century. In the middle of the seventeenth, just when the national style was showing its greatest originality and fertility, Nikon, the Russian Patriarch, forbade the use of conical towers, and other attractive innovations of the time, as contrary to Church tradition, and attempted to standardise the “sacred five-domed church” on a square plan. Only in far northern Russia, where the builders of wooden churches felt relatively secure from the Patriarch’s censure, was the development of architecture left for a time unhampered. This ecclesiastical edict of 1650 is largely responsible for the monotonous omnipresence of the five-domed church, a uniformity one is apt wrongly to attribute to lack of initiative on the part of the Russian builders.

The final blow to Russian architecture came at the beginning of the eighteenth century, when Peter the Great prohibited all building in stone anywhere but in St Petersburg. Petersburg he built on the model of a west European city, introducing mostly inferior architects from the western countries to work there. Since the foundation of St Petersburg, a sort of neo-classical architecture, the so-called “Empire” style, was used in Russia. It was followed in the middle of the last century by a

1-2

revival of the national architecture brought to light by the Slavophiles, and a number of unsatisfactory creations in a “pseudo-Russian” style appeared in Moscow and elsewhere.

Since the Revolution a new style again has become rooted in Russia, as widely different from the neo-classical as was that style from the traditional Russian. It shows the same general tendencies as the modern architecture of Germany and other European countries, and of America; whether anything distinctively Russian will develop from it, remains to be seen.

It appears, then, that architecture in Russia has had a somewhat discontinuous and cataclysmic history. That steady, uninterrupted development which can be traced in most of the western countries has no counterpart in Russia. One does not find, as in the West, an abundance of monuments of all periods spread widely over the country. On the contrary, in restricted areas and for brief periods one sees outbursts of building activity, to be succeeded by long periods of decay. Always, however, the art was resuscitated somewhere, and an orderly process of evolution can be and has been traced, linking up the isolated fragments of Russian architectural history into a connected whole.

From the earliest centre of culture in what is now Russia, the principality of Kiev on the River Dnieper, the style, differing little at that stage from the typical Byzantine of Constantinople, spread to two new centres where it survived the downfall of the mother country. These were Novgorod in north-west Russia, and Vladimir, on an affluent of the Volga to the east of Moscow. In the first of these areas architecture ran a long course of evolution, but at Vladimir it survived scarcely a hundred years, for the Mongol incursion of 1238 put a final stop to building activity all over that part of the country.

With the emancipation of Russia from the Tartars in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries a new period of building began, centred in the rising city of Moscow. This period was to see the development of a truly national and original style, compounded of various elements, but rooted

INTRODUCTORY

5

essentially in two traditions: the Byzantine tradition of Constantinople, much modified though it was in the architecture of Vladimir, and the wooden tradition of north Russia, which gave the Moscow style its most distinctive character. Not until the sixteenth, and, more especially, the seventeenth century, did any style find a really wide distribution in Russia. But at that time the style of Moscow spread far and wide over the whole country, and it remains an essential and inseparable part of the Russian landscape.

From a consideration of the many consecutive styles that have flourished in Russia, there emerge some general characters common to them all. The buildings are small. Excepting some of the earliest churches of Kiev and Novgorod, which were built by Greeks, and a few of the latest, dating from the seventeenth century, most Russian churches seem by our exalted standards mere chapels, however often dignified with the name of “cathedral”.¹

There are churches in Moscow and Yaroslavl which may be described as large, or even enormous. But they are so only by local standards. It is certainly true that the tendency in Russia was always to build many small churches, rather than to concentrate all the efforts of the community on a single great church, as was the frequent practice in western Europe. This does not mean that the conscious intention of the Russians was to sacrifice quality to quantity. The fact is explained by the widespread custom in ancient Russia of building churches privately—large or small, elaborate or severely simple, according to the means of the builders. There was much individualist competition in church building. Every guild of traders or artisans, every individual citizen of wealth and position, would build a private church in a spirit of rivalry. Thus has a large proportion of the innumerable churches in Russia come into existence.

Many small towns, especially those of the north, which have long lost the importance they once enjoyed as trading places, contain a quantity of churches out of all proportion to their population. Most of them are

¹ See Note on Transliteration at the beginning of this book.

6

RUSSIA

due to the initiative of individual traders; some are large and imposing, the majority small and insignificant. There seems sometimes to have been a sad want of resource, and one may find two churches of identical design standing side by side. Often in such cases the beauty of a place lies not in the individual buildings, but in the *ensemble* as seen from a distance. The many towers and cupolas disposed in clusters or scattered singly along the horizon, give to such little towns as attractive a sky-line as can well be imagined.

Wonderfully picturesque groupings are common in Russia, especially where religious and secular buildings are closely associated, as in a fortified monastery, or a well-filled Kremlin. There are many Kremains (fortresses) in Russia, but the Kremlin of Moscow, with its three cathedrals, its picturesque wall with towers of all shapes, and the great belfry of Ivan Veliki dominating the whole, is no doubt the finest of them all [see Plates 64, 65].

Monasteries are scattered throughout the country, and many are strongly fortified, like those which fringe the southern outskirts of Moscow, and which in mediaeval times served to protect the capital from the ever present danger of attack from the south. Other famous fortified monasteries are those of the north—Solovetski on an island in the White Sea, Belozerski and Prilutski in the Government of Vologda—and many others.

One feature of their religious architecture the Russians inherited from the Byzantines and preserved almost unchanged until their national style expired at the end of the seventeenth century. This is the simple quadrangular plan, in which four central piers arranged in a square support the principal cupola. It was probably derived from a cruciform plan in which the corners had been filled in to give support to the walls of the four arms; mechanically the type is a very perfect one, for all thrusts¹ are efficiently counteracted. The four extra domes, when present, are arranged on the corners, not on the arms of the cross.

¹ The outward pressure exerted by a dome or other vault, as distinct from the vertical pressure, or load.

INTRODUCTORY

7

This plan follows a type which appeared first in Constantinople in the Nea or “New Church” built by the Emperor Basil I;¹ thence it was no doubt introduced into Russia, where it became quite universal, so much so that any departure from it was apt to be frowned upon by the Church.

The Russians indeed were not original in this matter. They quickly rejected the more complex plan seen in the cathedrals of St Sophia at Kiev and Novgorod. Having made this simpler form their own, they never altered it in any essential particular. (See pp. 22 and 31 for the simpler plans at Novgorod and Vladimir.) The only considerable exceptions to the rule are the wooden churches of the north and in the Ukraine, together with those in brick which take after them most directly, and are therefore almost independent of the Byzantine tradition.

Outwardly the Russian churches are always tall, tending to be much taller in proportion than those of the Byzantine style proper. Bell towers also abound, and in this the Russian style differs markedly from the Byzantine of Constantinople and the Balkans. It has been said that dwellers in flat countries always tend to build high, a theory certainly substantiated on the endless plains of central Russia.

Architectural effect was aimed at only outside. The interiors of these churches form no part of the general conception, and do not vary greatly. They are always dark, a feeble light entering by slit-like windows. They are always short but lofty, and the eye is led upwards to the central cupola; there are no long vistas as in western churches.

Since the fifteenth century a characteristically Russian structure, the *iconostas*, was used in all churches. This is a screen completely separating the body of the church from the sanctuary (*bema*). It is penetrated by three doors, the central one being the “Royal” or “Holy” door, through which only priests may enter. Originally there was nothing more than a low barrier or balustrade dividing off the sanctuary. This came to be used as a stand for icons (whence the name *iconostas*); icons were added in successive rows, one above the other, until a high screen

¹ See pp. 84 and 100.

resulted. In the richer churches it was sumptuously ornamented in silver and gilt [Plates 47–9].

In decoration one may observe the common eastern tendency to diffusion over wide surfaces, rather than concentration on particular elements in the structure, to which it is desired to give prominence. Characteristic, too, is the lavish use of colour, whether on the outside walls or within, where every available space is often covered with fresco. Whether the Russians took the path of least resistance, adopting the simpler forms of surface decoration in preference to carving in hard materials, is doubtful. Their choice was governed largely by the material they had to deal with, and by certain features of their churches inherited from Byzantium, and preserved by conditions in Russia. Their material was brick, and this they covered with plaster or stucco. Stone was seldom available, and, except at Vladimir, practically never used. The Byzantine tradition provided churches with small windows and large wall space, and this feature naturally remained, in fact was intensified, in a country of cold winters and hot summers. Mosaics were abandoned in favour of frescoes, and this, again, was probably the simple result of the scarcity in Russia of materials appropriate for mosaics.

I must refer finally to that most conspicuous feature, which first and last strikes the foreigner as characteristic of and essential to the Russian churches—the bulbous dome. In spite of theories, both old and new, which affirm the contrary, there can be no reasonable doubt that this is a truly native creation, adopted first in the brick buildings of Novgorod about the twelfth century; the account of Novgorod will give an opportunity for the elaboration of this subject. The “onion” dome is, in any case, the most universally popular of architectural forms in Russia, and there can be scarcely a church in the country, stone, brick, or wooden, without it.

In a Russian church the worshippers stand, or else they kneel, to prostrate themselves repeatedly with foreheads to the ground. Before their eyes the complex ceremonial of the Eastern Church proceeds. The long-haired priest and deacons in their gorgeous robes emerge and

INTRODUCTORY

9

retreat through the Holy Door, or move among the congregation to swing a censer before every sacred shrine and picture. Clouds of incense hang in the air, rendering yet more mysterious the dim recesses of the church.

Perhaps one should say that these things were so, for even now they are ceasing to be, and before long will be of the past alone. The Church drags on with difficulty in these times; even the old drop away, while a new religion and a new ideal are set before the young. But we are thinking here of the Church as it was, with power unchallenged from outside, and holding the people, for good or ill, in unquestioning submission. Undoubtedly the Church did minister to the spiritual and emotional needs of the populace; their life would have been poorer without it, poor though was that life at best.

The sombre lighting, allowing little to the gaze of the congregation but the gorgeous *iconostas*, dimly lit by candles, helped to create a strange atmosphere of unreality in these Russian churches. The sonorous chanting of the priests; the marvellous sound of the choir, singing unaccompanied; the scent of incense in the air—all this added much to a scene whose almost theatrical splendour was alone enough to draw a congregation too used to the commonplacenesses of life. The church was a place of escape from surroundings often colourless and sordid.

It cannot be said that the Russians as a race were successful builders. They repeatedly relied upon foreigners. Nor have they ever become real masters of building technique. The surviving specimens of their art may very commonly be seen slanting dangerously from the perpendicular, and to this day the Russian builders seem unwilling to waste their time in the laying of solid foundations. A certain slovenliness, a want of thoroughness, a love of display rather than of sound construction, seem ever to have been the weaknesses of Russian craftsmen. The facts of history and geography provide a ready and sufficient explanation.

The Russian style embodies much that fails to appeal to western taste. Evidently it has never made much impression on foreign peoples,

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for no other style in the world has been influenced by it. It has absorbed much, but has given nothing. One must admit that this style does not live up to many abstract principles of “good art” and “good taste”. It certainly conforms to few or none of Fergusson’s “true principles of beauty in art” heavily elaborated in his *History of Architecture*. Perhaps the undoubted fact that the Russian style did appeal to the taste of vast populations, and even now at times calls forth the admiration of a Westerner, is proof enough that Fergusson’s principles are fallible, his intolerance and contempt uncalled for. One prefers Viollet le Duc’s attitude, thus expressed in the concluding paragraph of his pioneer book on Russian architecture:

It is not necessary that every race, in order to take part in the common effort of human progress, should possess the same feeling on every point, the same means of expression. Variety is no obstacle to harmony, it is in fact one of its essential conditions; and complete understanding between all nations—if ever established—will come from free expression of the tastes and tendencies of each one.



Stone carving from St Dmitri, Vladimir, representing the Ascension of Alexander the Great