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Custodians of heritage and faith: Orthodox Christianity in a Russian state museum

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Abstract

This article presents a case study of the ‘imperial temple’ of the former tsars’ palace in Gatchina, a state museum located nearby Saint Petersburg. It illustrates how top-level state policies have allowed professional focus on the religious materiality of the imperial past to become linked to the introduction of Orthodox Christian practice. This combination has also resulted from the actors’ specific life trajectories and ethical positions, from social relationships and group identities originated in the late- and post-Soviet periods, and from long-term local intra-Orthodox struggles over power and piety. The case study shines a spotlight on the emergence of a post-secular religious heritage complex in Russia. This complex is shaped simultaneously by a secular, formerly atheist, preservationist ethos and by a religious commitment.

Keywords: religion, museum, curators, Russian Orthodox Church, Northwest Russia

Résumé

Cette étude du cas du « temple impérial » de l’ancien château des tsars à Gatchina, un musée public situé près de Saint-Petersbourg, illustre la manière dont des politiques menées au plus haut niveau de l’Etat ont permis de lier le soin professionnel pour la matérialité religieuse du passé impérial à l’introduction d’une pratique chrétienne orthodoxe. Cette combinaison a aussi résulté des trajectoires de vie spécifiques et des positions éthiques des acteurs, de relations sociales et d’identités collectives issues de la période soviétique tardive et de l’ère postsoviétique, ainsi que de longues luttes intra-orthodoxes locales mettant en jeu pouvoir et piété. L’étude éclaire l’émergence d’un complexe religieux-patrimonial post-séculier en Russie. Ce complexe est modelé simultanément par un éthos séculier, précédemment athéiste, de conservation du patrimoine et par un engagement religieux.

Mots-clés : religion, musée, conservateurs, Eglise orthodoxe russe, Russie du Nord-Ouest

Introduction

The former palace of the tsars in Gatchina, near to Saint Petersburg (around 50 km south-west of Saint Petersburg), has the status of a museum-reserve (*muzei-zapovednik*) placed under state protection.¹ Relatively neglected as a cultural heritage site throughout the Soviet and early post-Soviet periods, Gatchina's museum-reserve began to change dramatically starting around 2010, when state funding started to increase under Vladimir Putin's policies to promote the imperial past and overall glorification of Russia's "greatness".² The renovated palace, the splendid park, and the numerous public events hosted by the museum feed into the collective self-esteem of the local inhabitants. Yet Gatchina's inhabitants themselves rarely participate in the guided tours to visit the numerous restored halls. Some residents who are more or less assiduous parishioners of Gatchina's churches and some who are best described as 'dropping in' to church do sometimes visit the palace to attend a church service in the palace's chapel. But only a limited number of the faithful are allowed inside. When the chapel starts getting crowded, museum curators prevent people from entering, and explain to those that wait outside that the heritage site can be damaged. Tourists are not allowed inside the chapel either; the curators claim that tourist visits could endanger the magnificent interior. The former imperial chapel, or "imperial temple" as it is officially called, located inside the palace, is considered a highly prestigious place particularly suitable for the celebration of baptisms and weddings. The weekly liturgy which takes place there is appreciated because of its pleasant, cosy atmosphere. Even though this Orthodox Christian chapel, fully restored thanks to state funding and long-term professional effort, is an integral part of the state museum, it serves only as a ritual space for occasions when Orthodox clergymen, belonging to the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC, Patriarchate of Moscow) are invited by a community of museum curators and restorers, themselves Orthodox faithful, to celebrate services which are only attended by a handful of local inhabitants (see **Figure 1**).

Several museum workers who form the museum's Orthodox community, some of whom started to work in the museum in the late Soviet period, have patiently restored the former chapel of the tsars with the help of renowned specialists from Saint Petersburg as part of the palace's overall restoration. At the moment of writing, the members of this small community continue to work as employees of the museum while also managing the chapel. As a place of worship, the chapel has been equipped in order to meet the standards of contemporary Russian Orthodox liturgical practice, as well as to accommodate the expectations of the believers from this region. But the ROC is neither the legal owner nor the symbolic master of the place. In managing the chapel, these Orthodox restorers and curators struggled to uphold the right to exercise their preservationist ethos against church pressure while allowing Orthodox worship to take place in the state museum. Through an analysis

1 The phrase *muzei-zapovednik* introduced by the Soviet preservationist authorities and actively used since the 1960s all over the Soviet Union (Kropotkine 2006), in the case of Gatchina also refers to the park surrounding the building of the former palace.

2 Gatchina has approximately 90,000 inhabitants. Several industrial plants and a major research institute for nuclear physics are located in the city's territory. Although these provide many jobs, a significant proportion of the population commutes to Saint Petersburg every day to work.

of their agency as simultaneously religious believers and state museum professionals, and by paying close attention to the political and historical conditions in which this agency has been deployed, we can gain an understanding of the practical making of Russia's post-secular era.



Figure 1. The imperial temple of the palace in Gatchina

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When the Soviet Union collapsed and its scientific-atheist doctrine was abandoned, the Church remained legally separated from the Russian state.³ But the state and the Church share the same imaginary about imperial greatness (Rousselet 2022: 89). While Russian society has continued to be deeply secular, religious – most notably Orthodox – arguments and symbols have pervaded public debates and spaces while secular ideas have been widely used in Orthodox discourses. This situation can be defined as Russia's post-secular era: there is neither a return to the pre-revolutionary official dominance of Orthodoxy, nor a continuation of Soviet secularism (Luehrmann 2011), but novel secular-religious entanglements in a highly secularised society (Stoeckl & Uzlaner 2019, 2020).⁴

The intersecting fields of Orthodox growth and state-museum curation offer a vibrant expression of the unprecedented ways in which the religious and the secular combine in Russia. But this intersection is by no means limited to Russia. In writing about areas other than Russia, Cyril Isnart and Nathalie Cerezales (2020) suggested that there has been a long-lasting impulse to preserve the past within Christianity, an impulse that has interacted with conservationist approaches.

3 Until the Bolshevik revolution of 1917, Orthodoxy was the state faith. In 1918, a decree introduced the separation of Church and state. This separation has remained enshrined in law to this day.

4 Zuzanna Bogumił and Yuliya Yurchuk (2022) called for a post-secular turn in memory studies, largely based on case studies from the former Soviet Union and Eastern-Central Europe.

This is what Isnart and Cerezales term the “religious heritage complex”, as “the continuity between the *habitus* of conservation of the past within religious traditions and a conscious *policy* regarding the care of the past in heritage contexts” (Isnart & Cerezales 2020: 6, emphasis in the original). The concept of the religious heritage complex can also be applied to Russia; nonetheless, the case of Russia challenges the idea of a linear continuity between religious tradition and preservationist policy. Soviet atheist policies simultaneously repressed religion and transformed it into aesthetically and historically valuable cultural heritage. As will be explained below, atheistic preservationist policies have fed into a specific conservation ethos. In the late-Soviet and post-Soviet periods, this ethos has sometimes combined with nascent Orthodox commitments, while in other cases it has remained fiercely opposed to the active religious use of heritage objects and spaces. At present, the professional ethos of care constantly sets limits on religious use while simultaneously making space for the expression of the Orthodox faith, whether the curators desire it as in the case of Gatchina, or dislike it as in other cases outlined below. The constantly negotiated intersection of curatorial and devotional approaches can be described as Russia’s post-secular religious heritage complex.

There is a variety of ways in which religious and preservationist drives support or limit each other, or conflict with each other. The case study from Gatchina is one instance of a plurality of configurations. Several other examples are reported below. My hypothesis is that this contemporary diversity is not the result of a political assignment. Top-level state and Church policies define a general frame. However, solutions on the ground are the highly dynamic outcome of grassroots arrangements with the legal framework, as well as legacies from the past, individual, and collective trajectories and commitments, notions of piety and curation, and past and current human relationships.⁵

Mary Bouquet and Nuno Porto (2005: 12–13) called attention to the agency of the museum curators. In responding to their call, I suggest that, in Russia, a variety of tensions and entwinements are at work between, on one hand, the curatorial commitment of state museums employees to preserve and validate the historical and aesthetic value of buildings and objects and, on the other hand, Orthodox engagement aiming to promote religious meanings and usages. Imperial greatness and belonging to Russian Orthodoxy are in Putin’s Russia two key components of what Laurajane Smith (2006) termed the “authorised heritage discourse”, that is, a discourse of experts that defines some materiality from the past as innately valuable. When funding for the restoration of the Gatchina museum became widely available around 2010, the “imperial temple” seemed to be a top priority, being both imperial and Orthodox. Yet the availability of funding does not explain why and how precisely the actors have created a specific entanglement of religious practice and heritage preservation. As Laurajane Smith further argued, heritage should also be considered as it creates “social networks and relations that themselves bind and create a sense of belonging and identity” (Smith 2006: 83). Besides top-level policies,

5 On the crucial role of local configurations and interpersonal relationships for the implementation of collaborative projects of the Russian state and the ROC, including for the restitution of formerly confiscated Church property, see Köllner 2021.

specific trajectories and relationships led to the embedding of pro-Orthodox stances into the actors' late Soviet and post-Soviet preservationist ethos. More generally, people's trajectories, relationships and agency have become key components of Russia's post-secular religious heritage complex.

Below, I outline some features of the relation between religion and professional care for cultural heritage in late Soviet and post-Soviet Russia. Then I turn to the emergence of the community of Orthodox curators in Gatchina's museum-reserve, paying special attention to their relationship to the Church. I propose an ethnography of the chapel and its uses, and the novelties introduced by the Orthodox team. I analyse the museum workers' emphasis on divine intervention in the process of restoration and how they actively 'invite' divine grace in this place through the introduction of two new icons. Some of the ethnographic data for this article are drawn from my fieldwork trip in October 2019.⁶ More broadly, my analysis is based on several fieldwork trips as well as my knowledge of religious life in Gatchina over the past fifteen years since my first year of ethnographic fieldwork in 2006-2007 which was focused on the transformations of the local Orthodox parishes.

Background: Soviet past and post-Soviet turns

The "imperial temple" of the palace in Gatchina was partly destroyed, but unlike many religious buildings this was not as a result of the Soviet anti-religious campaigns; it fell victim to post-revolutionary neglect and plunder and, most significantly, was damaged during and after the German occupation of the city (1941-1944) during the Second World War. Under Soviet rule, religion – meaning Orthodoxy and all the other faiths – was strongly repressed. The most intensive persecutions took place under Stalin in the 1930s and under Khrushchev in the late 1950s and early 1960s.⁷ At the same time, starting from the 1920s, numerous religious buildings and objects that had escaped destruction were turned into "cultural heritage" and thus preserved in specific sites, museums, and dedicated archives (Cantou 1961; Kropotkine 2006; Luehrmann 2015; Teryukova 2012, 2014). In her study of the fate of Orthodox churches in Leningrad throughout the Soviet period, Carriona Kelly (2016) demonstrated that destruction in the city was relatively limited, but so was restoration. A decisive criterion for deciding whether a church would be restored and transformed into a museum was its historical and aesthetic value as defined by heritage experts. Yet the definition of heritage varied greatly, and professional preservationists always struggled to "combine cohesiveness and inclusivity at the conceptual level, let alone to settle the pressing issues of legal enforcement and financial vitality" of such heritage (Kelly 2016: 263). An effort to re-define religion, in particular Orthodoxy Christianity, as Russia's ancient

6 The field research in 2019 was conducted within the framework of the French-Russian project "The religious marking of space: a comparative study of the presence of the Russian Orthodox Church in Russia and France", funded by the *Fondation Maison des Sciences de l'Homme* (2019-2022) and the Russian Foundation for Basic Research (2019-2021), grant 19-59-22006.

7 Regarding Orthodoxy, these involved the closing of churches and monasteries and often their physical destruction as part of the Soviet plan of thorough modernisation. During the periods of harsh repression, clergy and lay believers were killed, imprisoned, or sent to work camps. Most commonly, those who were left free were highly stigmatised and were denied access to socially and politically valuable positions. State policies started to change radically as late as the late 1980s.

cultural heritage was particularly strong and efficient in the north-western old cities of Novgorod, Pskov, and Vologda, as Victoria Donovan (2019) demonstrated. In the Brezhnev era, Orthodox architecture in these places was transformed by Soviet preservationists into an embodiment of Russian patriotism, a role they continue to play to this day. But even there, restoration and professional care for historical buildings was never systematic and inclusive, and a number of old churches suffered serious decay.

Throughout the Soviet period, the relations between Orthodox Christians and professional preservationists were antagonistic (Kelly 2012, 2016). For most of the time, the parish communities that were allowed to continue to worship in specific churches under strict surveillance found themselves in a paradoxical position. On the one hand, they had to take care of the church and the objects inside, thus being legally responsible for carrying the financial burden of restoration and upkeep. On the other hand, any possibilities to fundraise for the so-called “cultic buildings” were legally precluded and morally condemned. The material upkeep of some churches by the faithful became possible in a very limited number of cases thanks to modest and discreet individual initiatives (Kelly 2016: 185–186, 249–250). The very final years under Soviet rule saw the emergence of a specific category of intellectuals, including heritage professionals, who began to claim their Orthodox identity not as a component of their dissident political opinions, as was more common (even though extremely risky) in the 1970s, but as a marker of being an intellectual and a Russian patriot. Some of the very late Soviet professional preservationists converted to Orthodoxy during perestroika. This was also the case of several of my informants. Their professional habitus was initially forged by Soviet higher education which was, at least officially, fraught with scientific atheism. By the end of the 1980s, they invested this habitus into a commitment to caring for religion both as an aesthetically and historically valuable materiality, but also as a living faith. The Soviet experience of the heritagisation of Orthodoxy therefore laid the ground for the post-Soviet, post-secular re-emergence of religious practice, symbols, and discourses in public spaces.

In fact, in the immediate post-war era, occasionally, confiscated churches which had been turned into museums were, in one way or another, already being re-established as places of worship, engendering an uneasy cohabitation between museum authorities and parish members (Takahashi 2012: 335–341). The return of Church property confiscated by the Soviet regime was given an impulse in the late Soviet period. In 1983, Saint Daniel’s Monastery in Moscow was given back to the Church. Subsequently, it became the main residency of the Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia, the top leader of the ROC. With the liberal turn of the regime during the perestroika period, prominent members of the intelligentsia wrote open letters to the Soviet authorities. The use of open letters to express concern about religious heritage was a practice that already existed before perestroika (Donovan 2019; Kelly 2016). Famous intellectuals claimed that there was a pressing need to preserve Russia’s cultural-spiritual heritage embodied in ancient Russian monuments, and the best curator here, they argued, was the Church. Nationalist motives were tightly interwoven with pro-Church advocacy (Brudny 1998; Melnikova 2023).

Pro-Orthodox heritage stances increasingly started to become a marker of the cultural elite in the 1980s. This late-Soviet configuration can be considered as a specific form of the religious heritage complex (Isnart & Cerezales 2020). Yet the open expression of religious faith remained a strong marker of political dissent. A radical change occurred around 1988, when the Soviet state, hand in hand with the hierarchs of the ROC, pompously celebrated what became known as 'The Millennium of the Baptism of Rus'. This was also the time when some future curators and restorers from Gatchina's state museum started embracing Orthodoxy as part of a spiritual quest interwoven with their dedication to preserve materiality of the past.

During the three decades after the demise of the Soviet Union, Russian Orthodoxy has continued to exist as heritage preserved in museums while becoming increasingly a lived religion. This double status has turned out to be contentious. After Putin's accession to power in 2000, the promotion of monumental materiality pointing to the greatness of the state, both Soviet and imperial, has reached a new momentum (Deschepper 2017; for more about the popularity of the emperors in the eyes of post-Soviet Russians, see Koposov 2013).⁸ A combination of this policy, of the state's selective use of Church symbols, and the policies deployed by the Church as moral norm entrepreneur in its own right (Stoeckl 2016) has established a general frame that helps the Church to take possession, or control, of buildings and objects that were previously placed under the authority of state museums.⁹ The ROC has immensely benefited from the 2010 law on "The transfer to the religious organisations of property of religious significance (*religioznogo znachenia*) under state or municipal ownership".¹⁰ The law came into force in 2010 under Dmitrii Medvedev's presidency (2008-2012) and gave legal expression to Medvedev's publicly professed pro-Church positions.

Yet the process of transfer is not as hegemonic and unchallenged as it may seem from the analysis of top-level political statements and legal provisions (Köllner 2018). Projects to transfer valuable icons or buildings to the Church were interrupted due to resistance from the museums. In cases in which the transfer of buildings and objects did take place or in cases in which transfers were abandoned, in the end the practical arrangement found on the ground has led to the intermingling of professional curation and religious use. For example, the project to transfer the state museum and exhibition hall Cathedral Saint Isaac's in Saint Petersburg to the Church for 'temporary use' for a period of forty-nine years, the maximum period according to law, was vigorously opposed by city dwellers, and eventually abandoned.

8 In Russia, the politics of memory stressing imperial greatness have been used, in addition to other arguments, to legitimise the military aggression launched by the Russian Federation on 24 February 2022 against Ukraine.

9 This process is probably motivated by a certain rejection of the destruction and iconoclasm of the 1930s and 1950s. Simultaneously, the Church has become the major state-supported memory entrepreneur regarding the commemoration of victims of the Great Terror; it has canonised over 1800 so-called new martyrs and confessors, people who fell victim to Soviet repression (Christensen 2019). But critique of the responsibility of the Soviet authorities has been silenced under Putin's presidency, leaving the perpetrators outside of the Church and state memory agenda (Bérard & Jurgenson 2017).

10 The Russian Federation officially recognises the pluri-religious character of the country. The 1997 Law on the freedom of consciousness and religious association recognises four religious traditions at the federal level: Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and Judaism. In addition, at the regional level, other religions that have been historically present are granted official recognition as 'traditional'.

However, while the building has remained city property and entirely under city control, an arrangement with the Church was found, whereby priests belonging to the ROC celebrate services on a regular basis in one part of this particularly vast site. The faithful are let into the space through a special entrance without paying a visitor fee (Kormina 2020). Thus, Saint Isaac's has remained a place of art and history while also becoming, to a lesser extent, a place of religious worship.¹¹

Saint Sampson Cathedral in Saint Petersburg, a 17th-century building that was confiscated by the Soviet state in 1922 and declared a monument of culture, is another case in point. It illustrates a successful 'return' to the Church. In 2000, while still under the authority of the museum, the ROC was authorised to establish a parish community there. In 2017, the political authorities decided that the building be used predominantly for religious purposes by the ROC, in accordance with the 2010 law. Today, tourists can access the monument only at specific moments. While the parish members use icons and objects for worship, these objects, considered as valuable cultural heritage, have continued to be strictly checked by museum specialists. The latter regularly bring devices into the church in order, for instance, to check the levels of humidity. This cohabitation is fraught with tension (Krutyakova 2020). In these two cases of, respectively, an unsuccessful and successful transfer of a museum to the Church, in practice, a mixed solution was found in both.

The present case study illustrates yet another configuration. Gatchina's museum curators and restorers have devoted a great deal of energy to acquiring and restoring objects and staging a specific interior space. Financial support from the state for the palace and for the overall promotion of Russian imperial greatness and Orthodox symbols have been instrumental to the curators' endeavour. They continue to care for the restored heritage with deep dedication, while simultaneously infusing the chapel with religious meaning and upholding its religious use. Thus, this case study also points to the importance of the actors' religious engagement, of their personal biography, their relations to local parishes and the Church hierarchy, as well as the specificity of the place itself. It illustrates a situation in which funding for the preservation of heritage has become a prerequisite to the re-creation of religious life on the premises of a cultural heritage site. However, the restoration of the pre-Soviet chapel has not led to practices reminiscent of some pre-revolutionary religiosity, but to the creative introduction of the markers of local 21st-century Orthodox religiosity. In what follows, I trace ethnographically the practices, ideas, and past and current relationships that have shaped this original instance of Russia's post-secular religious heritage complex.

11 I am grateful to my friend and colleague Jeanne Kormina for the opportunity she offered me to visit Saint Isaac's by using the entry reserved for the Orthodox worshippers. I also thank her for having shared with me the contact of a curator from the museum in Gatchina who is not a member of the Orthodox community.

Religious practice domesticated

The palace in Gatchina was erected between 1766 and 1781 by Count Grigorii Orlov (1734-1783), a favourite of Empress Catherine the Great (1729-1796). It was transformed several times, first by Catherine's son Emperor Paul I (1754-1801) and later by his successors. The palace belonged to the Tsarist family until the Bolshevik revolution of 1917. It was given the status of state museum for the first time in 1918, thanks to which most of the buildings and objects were preserved. It was heavily damaged during the Second World War and also as a result of a fire right after the German occupation (1941-1944). Very shortly after the end of the war, the Soviet state gave the palace a radically different role, and it was transformed into a military school in 1951. Later, in one of the wings, the state created an institute consisting of research and experimental labs that were part of a large secret industrial plant. The institute left the palace for good in the early 1990s. The Soviet fate of the palace in Gatchina followed a general pattern, whereby property confiscated by the Soviet state, most typically taken from the nobility and from the Orthodox Church, had to host factories, dormitories, research institutes, schools, exhibition, and cinema halls. In other words, confiscated real estate was most commonly both symbolically and practically converted into infrastructure in the service of the new state.

Saint Petersburg (Leningrad between 1924 and 1991), known as Russia's "northern capital", once the capital of the Russian Empire, has occupied a special place in the Soviet politics of memory and heritage preservation since 1929 when Stalin, while launching collectivisation, decided to simultaneously promote a national narrative putting a strong emphasis on the greatness of the country and its former rulers (Amacher 2013: 18–21). Accordingly, in the following decades, albeit with changing intensity, impressive restoration works were carried out in heritage sites related to the imperial past. Notably, under Brezhnev (1964-1982), former buildings of the tsars, damaged under the German occupation of the Leningrad region during the Second World War, were restored and turned into major tourist destinations, symbols of the greatness of the country. In this period, "in particular the palaces of Pushkin (Tsarskoe Selo), Pavlovsk, and Peterhof", located in the surroundings of Leningrad, became "the objects of lavishly sponsored state restoration programmes" (Kelly 2013: 142; see also Kelly 2016: 18). As part of the Soviet preservationist turn initiated in the 1960s, in the second half of the 1970s, limited restoration began in some wings of the palace in Gatchina. In 1985, for the first time, parts of the palace were open for visits; by that time three halls had been restored, and in the late Soviet period, local pupils were brought for visits as part of organised school outings. Yet other parts of the palace had remained almost in ruins and were poorly supervised. A friend who was a schoolgirl at that time recounted how she enjoyed running with her friends in an underground tunnel of the palace leading to the nearby lake; the entrance to the tunnel was not well protected and local children knew how to get inside. However, these times of indeterminacy and relative disregard from the authorities were soon to come to an end.

In 1990, the palace in Gatchina joined the first list of Russian heritage sites recognised as Unesco world heritage sites as part of the “Historic centre of Saint Petersburg and related groups of monuments”.¹² Despite the fact that Soviet heritage professionals were actively in contact with Unesco experts during this period (Geering 2019), the final say on restoration and maintenance was still at the national level. In Gatchina, the lack of state support continued throughout the 1990s. The restoration was slow, hampered by the crisis which followed the demise of the Soviet state. Following the departure of the research facilities, the entire palace and its park came under the museum authority. By then, an enthusiastic team of young restorers and museum specialists had formed. Some of them had been involved in the restoration of the palace since the middle of the 1980s. Others joined the team at that time, embracing the mission of restoring the place’s original lustre. Despite their hard work, limited funding continued to be a major obstacle.

By 2010, a radical change occurred. The palace was recognised as a state museum-reserve of federal significance (*gosudarstvennyi muzei-zapovednik federal’nogo znachenia*). In the following years, the museum (including the park) has received great support from the state authorities in terms of funding, staff, and advertising, and by 2019, the museum-reserve with its park employed more than 200 people. Thanks to the generous support, it started to receive numerous visitors, both foreigners and Russians. It has been included in the standard tours proposed by tourist agencies of Saint Petersburg. The state’s engagement in glorifying Russia’s imperial greatness undertaken under Vladimir Putin finally reached Gatchina engendering a spectacular transformation. But the contemporary politics of monumental restoration of the imperial past imply politics of neglecting other pasts. No single attempt is made in the Gatchina palace to preserve traces of the Soviet school, the workshops and labs that once occupied significant parts of the buildings. However, when an elderly local person says: “I used to work in the palace”, this person is most probably referring to the Soviet workshops and labs that were local mass employers, not the museum. Even though the Soviet workers’ past is part of local collective memory, no single expert has been hired to preserve its materiality.

In 2006, friends who knew the museum’s curators took me to the former imperial family chapel for the first time. After a long walk through dark corridors, we reached a large, poorly lit room with grey concrete walls. A museum employee told us that there was a plan to restore the chapel. In the following years, priority was given to other parts of the palace. In 2019, I had the chance to visit the chapel again. To those who knew it in its earlier shape, the place had become unrecognisable. The brand-new paintings, the bright colours of the iconostasis,¹³ the refined parquet floor, and thick, soft carpets with no trace of candle wax, indicate not only that the chapel has been literally recreated, but also that, as a ritual space, it is not used as actively as other local churches. I was told that the restorers, with the help of renowned specialists from Saint Petersburg, used old paintings, and photographs

12 For information on Unesco world heritage, please refer to <https://whc.unesco.org/fr/list/540V>. The city centre of Gatchina was included on this list in 2021. See: <https://tinyurl.com/53dzt7a9>.

13 The iconostasis is a (usually wooden) wall of religious paintings and icons that separates the nave, where the general laity are allowed to stand, from the altar which is the sanctuary where only clergy and authorised male (in principle at least) lay persons are allowed.

from the 19th and early-20th-centuries to recreate the pre-revolutionary appearance of the chapel.

In the chapel, the first religious service after the revolution was celebrated in 1999 by the head priest of the local deanery (*blagochinie*).¹⁴ The chapel was then still undergoing slow restoration. Thereafter, it started to be used occasionally for religious purposes by the local clergy. Nine church bells have been in place since 1993, so that services can be held properly in accordance with Orthodox tradition. The first baptism took place in 2003 and an important religious celebration was organised, again presided over by the chief priest of the local deanery in 2004. The management of the museum was sympathetic to such initiatives. Yet such events were rare. They became more frequent after the restoration of the chapel was completed around 2015. From that moment, Gatchina's more or less active churchgoers have started to consider weddings and baptisms in this chapel as very prestigious. A weekly liturgy is organised on Saturdays, while additional religious services are celebrated only on the most important dates in the Orthodox calendar. "The local people who come here to attend the liturgy do not need to buy a ticket", a museum employee told me, stressing that the museum authorities distinguish between devotees who are allowed into the chapel for free, and tourists who must buy tickets and follow the usual circuit.

One of my close acquaintances from the town, a woman in her early 60s who occasionally visits one or another of the Orthodox churches in Gatchina, told me that she prefers to attend services in the museum's chapel because the limited number of burning wax candles makes it easier for her to breathe. In comparison, she finds it difficult to stand for more than two hours in the heavy atmosphere of the other churches during similar services. Moreover, the chapel is attractive because it is relatively small, completely renovated, warm, quiet, and clean. After the service, the possibility to have a walk in the park that surrounds the palace is also highly appreciated by the locals. However, the museum employees always try to limit the number of attendees and to reduce the number of events, claiming that the frequent religious use could easily damage the restored chapel. This restricted access makes the chapel even more desirable as a place of worship in the eyes of the local people. The director of the museum fully agrees with the religious use of the chapel, I am told. Actually, this use does not seem to have ever raised any disagreement. When the chapel started to gain in popularity among the local inhabitants, limitations to the flux of believers were not imposed on behalf of the director, but on the initiative of the museum curators, in particular those who are practicing Orthodox and who were eager to introduce religious life in this place.

An illustration of the curators' effort to uphold the coexistence of care for heritage and religious practice can be found in the basement under the chapel. Magnificent clerical vestments from the early twentieth century are exhibited in large, skilfully illuminated showcases placed in a renovated, comfortable, and warm room. Stairs led from this basement up into the chapel. In this room, the clergymen who celebrate services in the chapel can change into their ceremonial apparel. Neither tourists

¹⁴ The chapel was classified as *domovaia tserkov'* (literally 'domestic church') until the Bolshevik revolution.

nor local faithful are allowed here. By professionally exhibiting clerical vestments in precisely the room in which the clergymen get changed, did the people from the museum mean to intentionally remind the clergymen that the latter are only temporary guests in a place of professional care for the past? Or were the showcases already in place when the museum employees offered the priests the possibility of using this room for a pragmatic purpose? I do not have an answer. The asymmetry of meanings, actors, and uses is nonetheless striking, with the exhibition and the museum employees being permanent, and the clergymen being occasional passers-by invited by the museum workers. The asymmetry found in this room encapsulates much of the model that the community of museum curators and restorers has created and has struggled to maintain to this day. The small group of Orthodox museum workers fiercely opposed the official transfer of the renovated chapel to the use of the ROC. They stood up against strong church pressure, claiming that there cannot be a standard church in a state museum. How and why they have managed this far to maintain religious practice without encroaching on what, in their eyes, are the highest standards of a public museum, is discussed below.

From urban intelligentsia to Orthodox enthusiasts

The team of Orthodox museum workers was formed during the last years of Soviet rule and the early 1990s. Two of the group's most active members still work there at the time of writing. Vera, a woman in her early sixties and head of the museum's documentary fund, was a schoolteacher of Russian in the late Soviet period, but most of her career has unfolded in the museum. Igor, also in his sixties, is the most respected restorer.¹⁵ They have contributed to glorifying Gatchina's imperial past, each in their own way. Igor became known as the person who restored the throne of Emperor Paul I, the most important royal master of the place in the eyes of the locals. In 2021, a monument to the memory of Alexander III (1845-1890), another frequent occupant, was erected in the vicinity of the palace. President Putin paid a short visit on the day of the official unveiling of the statue. Vera, who ten years earlier had written a book about the life of Alexander III in Gatchina, gave public interviews on the occasion.

Vera, Igor, and some of the long-term museum employees, as well as some of their friends and relatives, are strongly involved in the promotion of Orthodox religious life in the city through heritage care and education. On numerous occasions over the years, my interlocutors, who are members of this network, described it as being composed of the city's intellectuals (*intellektualy*). In the late 1980s and early 1990s, these schoolteachers, curators, artists, and culture workers were 'seeking God', as Igor's wife, a schoolteacher who established the first parish school in Gatchina in the early 1990s, told me once. In an interview that I conducted in October 2019, a museum curator described the members of this network as "enthusiasts" (*entuziasty*). They belong to a social category known as *intelligentsia*, comprising teachers, writers, artists, and professionals in the sphere of culture. The members of Gatchina's very-late-Soviet and early post-Soviet intelligentsia had graduated from Soviet high education. They aspired to a spiritual renewal, away from scientific

¹⁵ The names Vera and Igor are pseudonyms.

atheism. Shortly before the collapse of the regime in 1991, the museum's Orthodox curators and restorers had started to think of themselves as a religious community. They chose as the community's spiritual counsellor (*duhovnik*) a former colleague, an art historian and restorer. This man had decided to leave his job at the museum to become a priest taking up his post in a village parish in the Pskov region in 1988. He continued to visit the museum to "feed the community spiritually" until his death in 2014. This information about the origin of the group of faithful museum workers is also included in a book sold in the museum's shop under the title *The imperial temple of the palace of Gatchina* (Kustova 2015: 39).

The trajectory of Gatchina's museum workers began as part of a wider process in late Soviet society. Members of the urban intelligentsia turned to Russian Orthodoxy as a source of spiritual fulfilment. There were various orientations and groups within Orthodoxy during the 1970s-1980s. As Kathy Rousselet (2015) argued, people's conversion to Orthodoxy in the 1980s stemmed from a variety of social logics. Some conversions were encouraged by the historical shifts, while others were motivated by dissent opinions, ethical quests, or family history. After 1988, the vast majority of those Russians who began to convert to their historic faith saw in Orthodoxy a way to subscribe to the dominant social norms and, soon after, to the authorised Church discourse that stressed continuity between the Soviet Union and the post-Soviet state (Rousselet 2015: 147).¹⁶ The members of Gatchina's intelligentsia of the late 1980s and early 1990s belonged to this majority of Orthodox converts. While they saw in Orthodoxy a response to their spiritual quest, they were also committed to preserving Russia's valuable past albeit without rejecting some Soviet values such as self-denial, love for the neighbour, and love for the homeland. For them, their religious quest was, and remains, in continuity with the highest Soviet moral standards which they cherished and aspired to revive as religious persons (Tocheva 2014; see also Agadjanian 2011; Luehrmann 2011).

The museum workers' passionate drive to care professionally for Russia's heritage and to simultaneously promote Orthodoxy was expressed through their participation in the rebuilding of the local Cathedral of the Holy Shroud throughout the 1990s. Similar grassroots initiatives were typical of the post-Soviet period (Kormina & Shtyrkov 2015). This rebuilding is now part of Gatchina's collective memory, and the experience has also fed into the identity of the museum's Orthodox community and has oriented their politics in local intra-Orthodox struggles. In the early 1990s, following the liberalisation of religious practice, the Cathedral of the Holy Shroud was given back to the ROC. It had formerly been confiscated from the Church during Stalin's persecutions in the 1930's; some of the clergy were killed, others were harshly repressed. The building was used for various purposes; in the final decades under Soviet rule, it was turned into a storage hall for salt, and as a result, the paintings were heavily damaged. Around 1991, a group of twenty lay faithful

16 As part of this diversity, in the 1970s and even more notably in the 1980s, in Moscow and Leningrad, some charismatic priests promoted more intense religious practice, and encouraged the members of their communities, who were mostly intellectuals, to develop a better understanding of the liturgy, as well as a closer relationship between the clergy and the laity (Agadjanian 2013; Kizenko 2012: 29). These Orthodox spiritual seekers differed from the larger mass of neophytes who were turning to Orthodoxy in the late 1980s and whose desire to embrace the Orthodox faith stemmed from patriotism.

(*dvadtsatka*) formed. This was a precondition laid down by the state authorities in order to authorise the return of this type of formerly confiscated churches to the ROC. A young lay man was chosen as the head of the lay community (*starosta*, elder). As the community itself took on the initiative of restoring the church and re-opening a parish there, its young lay head was an art schoolteacher and a painter. The young man in question descends from a family of clergymen, which seems to have been a decisive fact in motivating him to occupy this position. He played a key role in the reconstruction. When the reconstruction was completed, he was given the honour of painting the iconostasis. Vera, Igor, and other people with an older or nascent Orthodox faith, who actively helped in the reconstruction, have maintained connections with each other to this day. The community's lay elder, for example, became the godfather of Vera's daughter. Another element that created strong bonds among the rebuilders was the experience of working with scarce material resources but with great enthusiasm. In Gatchina, the Cathedral of the Holy Shroud became known as the suffering church, the one that has scarce resources, but which attracts strong believers (Tocheva 2017: 43–76).

Intra-Orthodox struggles in the making of the post-secular religious heritage complex

The struggle to determine what is the best use of the royal chapel, and the solutions found by those who prevailed, illustrate the sinuous trajectory of the post-secular religious heritage complex. Religious and preservationist drives combined in an unprecedented way. The Orthodox museum community's previous relationships, their experience in restoring the Holy Shroud, their perceptive claims to professionalism and piety, and their dual legitimacy as dedicated curators and knowledgeable, enlightened faithful allowed them to impose their desire for the chapel to be used as both a public museum and a ritual space under their personal control.

From the early 1990s onwards, the museum management has not seen any contradiction between the activity of the museum and the occasional organisation of religious services in the chapel. The head priest of the Cathedral Saint Paul, in his role as head of the deanery, seized upon this opportunity and has celebrated offices there on several occasions. Saint Paul's, first opened in 1852 and named after the heavenly protector of Emperor Paul I, has always been the city's central church. It is the centre of the urban deanery of Gatchina, which is headed by the rector of the cathedral. The head priest of the deanery agreed to give back three highly valued icons that originally belonged to the chapel but were transferred to Saint Paul's after the revolution and therefore escaped destruction.¹⁷ The museum ordered three new icons to replace the returned ones and offered them to Saint Paul's cathedral. This act of reciprocity was a sign of good relations, but there were tensions too. When the renovation was almost completed and the growing interest of the local inhabitants became evident, the deanery's head demanded that the museum's Orthodox community be transformed into a regular church parish and the chapel be given

17 The icons removed from the royal chapel were gradually returned from various museums. During the Soviet period, most of these icons were kept in Saint Isaac's cathedral in Saint Petersburg.

to the Church for use under the authority of his deanery. Following this assertion, tensions rapidly aroused. According to Vera, once the chapel started to look really beautiful, the head of the deanery sent a priest – “not the one we had asked for”, she said – suggesting that they would have liked to choose a priest themselves. “This priest [who was sent by the deanery] started to look around, trying to guess the price the museum had paid for this or that object, asking what would be his salary as a priest [in the future church parish].” Vera, Igor, and the other members of the museum’s Orthodox community understood that the deanery’s plan to take control of the chapel was in the process of being executed. As future parish members under the authority of the deanery priest, they would be expected to pay a salary to a parish priest. In the ROC, every parish is an economic unit; it must provide for the salaries of its priests and other official and unofficial employees, pay the bills for electricity and water, and be able to meet other expenses. The parish is also obliged to hand part of its income to those higher up in the hierarchy. Usually, parish income comes from church shops, payments for religious services according to an official price list, and donations. Usually, those church parishes that succeed in being actively visited, in celebrating a large number of rituals, and selling enough items in their church shops are able to pay their priests a decent salary. “Of course, a community of museum workers cannot pay a salary. And there is no place here to put a church shop. There should not be a church shop here! So, we asked him [the priest sent by Saint Paul’s] to leave”, Vera explained to me. To this day, the head priest of the deanery strongly dislikes the fact that the community runs this chapel autonomously and outside his control. The museum workers claim that the place must remain a museum, and that the carpets and the interior as a whole would be damaged by the candle wax in the case of permanent religious use.

The Orthodox museum curators were able to resist the deanery’s appetite thanks to a smart step already taken back in 2003, that is, more than a decade before the end of the restoration of the chapel. Vera and Igor, together with other colleagues from the museum, participated in the initiative of officially registering an Orthodox community (*obshchina*) of museum employees. The community was registered with the Metropolia of Saint Petersburg in 2003¹⁸ and is composed of a dozen active members who are also museum employees. Igor became its official lay leader (*starosta*) in 2003, chosen by the members. This small group became the *de facto* manager of the former royal chapel that was still under restoration at that time. They are placed directly under the authority of the Metropolia; the latter does not expect the chapel to turn into a regular church parish. This step reveals the fact that the curators masterfully used their connections with the church hierarchy in order to preserve their relative autonomy and keep the deanery at bay. The members of the museum community claim that for them as heritage experts this step was a precondition to the fulfilment of their basic duty to preserve this valuable cultural heritage.

18 The metropolia is the higher regional and hierarchical level above the parish, the deanery, and the eparchy. It is placed under the Patriarchate. According to the official announcement of the Metropolia of Saint Petersburg published in 2003, the community of the “imperial temple” was registered as a parish, even though there is no parish priest permanently affiliated with it. Nonetheless, the museum’s faithful prefer to refer to themselves as a community (*obshchina*), not as a parish (See: <https://tinyurl.com/mitropolia>).

The community invites priests from the rebuilt Holy Shroud church, with whom they feel particularly connected. But they reduce to a minimum the number of religious rituals, with a maximum of one or two baptisms or marriages usually held in the afternoon following the Saturday liturgy.¹⁹ When explaining to me why only museum workers must control the activities of the chapel and why privileging the preservation of the restored place does not rule out the expression of faith, Vera told me repeatedly: “The church is not faith, the church is an institution” (*Tserkov’ eto ne vera, tserkov’ eto institut*). Vera’s words were truly critical of the Church hierarchy. She meant that the Church as an organisation is confronted with worldly problems and therefore can not be a pure embodiment of the faith as the predatory attitude of the local deanery proved in her eyes. In spite of the anti-hierarchical message in Vera’s words, the community’s expert knowledge of the organisational structure of the Church allowed them to get an official affiliation to the Metropolia, that is, to be officially part of the Church without however depending on the local level of authority. They have thus retained the right to invite priests on some occasions; they always turn to priests from the Cathedral of the Holy Shroud whom they consider pious and honest, as it is a cathedral that they have helped reconstruct with their own hands. With a permanent parish priest, they would have been obliged to carry the burden of his authority and to provide his salary. Moreover, turning into a regular church would have meant a painful encroachment on their selfless devotion to caring for this valuable heritage site. For these craftsmen and craftswomen of the post-secular age, while the takeover of the deanery was stymied, the faith remained, and evidence of divine grace still abounds.

Images, temporality, and faith

The history of the chapel is a history of disrupted temporality, of destroyed and recreated materiality and, finally, of an obvious discrepancy between the religiosity of the former royal masters of the place, on the one hand, and that of its contemporary custodians and users, on the other. Against this background of destruction, loss, and transformation, the recreation of the interior does not seem to suffice to instil a sense of continuity for the restorers and curators. They have documented and invited expressions of divine grace that work as a thread between past and present. Although the chapel has been fully restored, it is not open to tourists; during guided tours, the guides do not even mention it. This does not mean, however, that the museum does not wish to communicate about it. One of the books sold in the museum shop, as mentioned above, is entitled *The imperial temple of the palace of Gatchina* (Kustova 2015). It is authored by one of the long-term museum curators, a particularly active member of the Orthodox community. Vera supplied photographs for the book from the documentary fund. The book, printed on high-quality glossy paper, narrates the history of the chapel from its creation in the 18th century to its restoration. The text, illustrated with numerous photographs, provides detailed information on the history of the chapel and the architects who designed it and transformed it; the attitudes and tastes of its royal users; the clergy; the significance

¹⁹ The money from payments for baptisms and weddings goes to these priests. The latter also prepare lay believers for baptisms and weddings. This preparation takes place on the premises of the church of the Holy Shroud.

and the fate of various precious objects and decorations; the post-revolutionary events; and the uneasy task of those who, since 1917, have tried to save and preserve what could be saved.

The book not only provides detailed information, typical of Russia's museum culture and evidence of the professional expertise of Gatchina's curators. It also speaks of a transcendental presence. The authorial voice suggests that divine grace is present in the chapel. She mentions the role of God in preserving the chapel and helping the restoration process. Thus, the book contributes to defining the chapel as a properly religious place. The author writes:

During the occupation of Gatchina by the fascists (1941-1944), there was an aviation military division in the museum. On 26 January 1944, the city was liberated. Four days later there was a fire in the palace. The interiors from the 18th and 19th centuries were destroyed, the Çeşme, Oval, and Pre-church galleries giving access to the temple, were devastated. Only the church, alone, survived thanks to divine providence. The fire stopped at the cast iron stairs. And even the iconostasis, plundered and damaged, continued to exist in 1945. Its further destiny has remained unknown (Kustova 2015: 33).

This narrative suggests that the chapel and the iconostasis survived thanks to "divine providence". In another section of the book, the author claims that divine intervention helped the restorers. The event in question happened in 1999, on the day of the first religious service since the 1917 revolution. The clergymen and the large group of those local inhabitants who attended the service had just left the chapel after the liturgy:

On this day after the service, walking around in the temple, the scientific staff noticed in the corner of one of the caissons of the altar's dome that a piece of paper covering the caisson was slightly removed and, underneath, a blue background on which a cherub's face was visible. It was known that 120 such representations used to decorate the vaulting. But no one knew in what state of conservation they were. In 2014, in order to clarify this issue, construction stairs were put in place. The specialists climbed on them to get access to the vaulting. After a detailed examination, it was made clear that there were 96 pieces of cardboard [in the caissons], that were covered with paper glued on the outside. After having liberated the paintings from their glued protection, the restorers saw that these paintings, made in the middle of the 19th century, were well preserved. (The representations of the cherubs were all different from one another.) The 24 missing paintings were recreated by the painter-restorer L. B. Karavaev in 2015 (Kustova 2015: 35).

According to this narrative, the unexpected discovery of the well-preserved cherubs on the dome upon the altar resulted from the celebration of the first liturgy in the chapel after the 1917 revolution. For the museum curators, "divine providence" had stopped the fire at the foot of the stairs during the war and thus neither the iconostasis nor the temple was damaged. Seven decades later, divine liturgy allowed the discovery of the hidden paintings. In the first case, an intervention from above allowed conservation. In the second case, it helped restoration: as if God had embraced the museum workers' dedication to caring for heritage. I have never heard local inhabitants mention the reported cases of divine intervention, but they are nonetheless part of the authorised heritage discourse about the chapel and are

now even included in the nice-looking book written by an authoritative museum professional.

Many new icons and objects that were not present in the chapel before 1917, were bought by the members of the Orthodox community of the museum who collected money among themselves. These new objects and icons were placed in the chapel with the agreement of the director of the museum; they are now harmoniously integrated into the chapel's interior. Two carved icons representing, respectively, Saint Ksenia of Petersburg (see Figure 2), placed on the left side of the altar, and Saint Seraphim of Vyritsa (see Figure 3), placed on the right side of the altar, stand out as strikingly anachronistic. These are precisely the icons that appeal most strongly to the contemporary north-western faithful. These icons were introduced by Igor who made them himself. The book *The imperial temple of the palace of Gatchina* recounts the creation of the carved icons, praising their talented creator and mentioning his role as a lay head of the museum's Orthodox community. The author then writes:

Since 2014, the workers of the temple (*sotrudniki hrama*) have started to collect testimonies about the spiritual and material supports received in response to prayers before these icons (Kustova 2015: 37).

These two carved icons represent two widely venerated local saints. Strings with small crosses and rings, *ex-votos* typically offered by worshipers, hang before Saint Ksenia's icon, evidence of her unchallenged popularity in the region. Veneration of Saint Seraphim rather is expressed through visits to his tomb in the nearby village of Vyritsa. Seraphim was a monk who retired in the village of Vyritsa where he lived in the first half of the 20th century after a successful career as a merchant. As a saint, he has been gaining popularity over the past three decades, but his fame as a helper is significantly lower than that of Saint Ksenia. Ksenia of Petersburg, who probably lived in the 18th century, is also known as Ksenia the Blessed, 'blessed' referring to her identity as a holy fool. Veneration of Saint Ksenia emerged in the 19th century and her popularity increased in the 20th century. Canonised officially in 1988, Saint Ksenia is by now the most widely worshipped saint in the Saint Petersburg region (Kormina & Shtyrkov 2011; Shtyrkov 2011). It is hardly conceivable that any member of the royal family or anyone close to them ever prayed to Saint Ksenia, and this would have been even less plausible in the case of Saint Seraphim of Vyritsa who became a monk in 1920, three years after the 1917 revolution, died in 1949, and was canonised in 2000. Nonetheless, the museum's Orthodox community is totally at ease with these anachronistic icons; nobody has ever claimed that they belong to the chapel's imperial past. The icons of these two saints speak to contemporary inhabitants of the Saint Petersburg region and this is the reason why they now belong to the chapel; they remind the visitor that this is a living ritual space. In making the icons and putting them in two particularly visible places, the lay leader of the museum's Orthodox community has integrated 21st-century north-west-Russian channels of divine grace into the meticulously restored pre-revolutionary décor of the chapel. Testimonies of divine presence in this place remedy fractured temporalities.

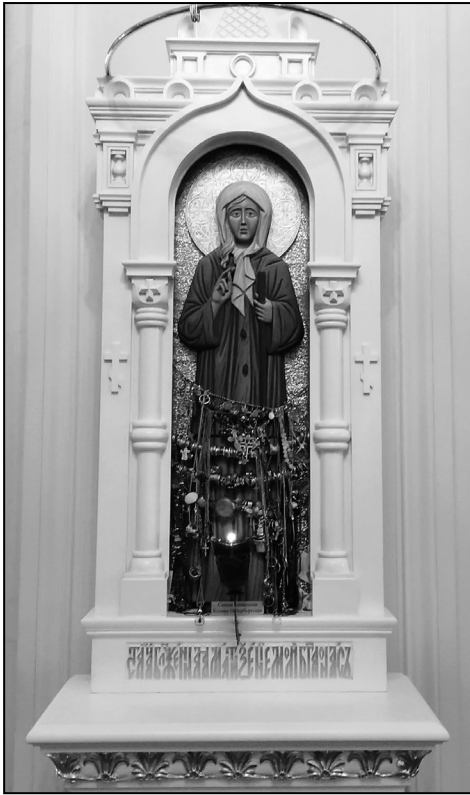


Figure 2. Carved icon of Saint Ksenia of Petersburg (also known as Ksenia the Blessed)

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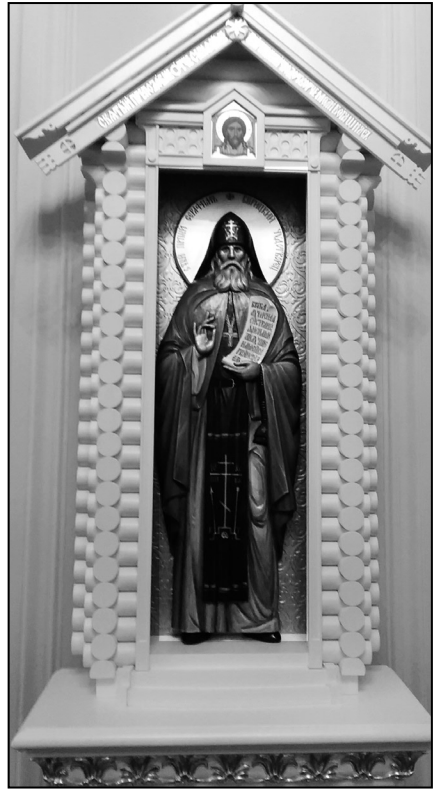


Figure 3. Carved icon of Saint Seraphin of Vyritsa

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Conclusion

The case of Gatchina’s Orthodox preservationists is not as unique as it may seem considering the national emphasis on a glorious past and the way in which the Orthodox faith meets the aspirations of heritage professionals who eventually produce novel, religious-secular entanglements. Victoria Donovan analysed the case of the “Society of Saint Ol’ga of Russia”, established in Pskov in 1991 by the woman who was at that time director of the Pskov Museum-Reserve Archive. Saint Ol’ga, the patron saint of Pskov, is associated with military and spiritual might. The Society received the support of prominent intellectuals and succeeded in establishing an annual pilgrimage to one of the churches that it rebuilt. In 2003, on the celebration of the 1100th anniversary of Pskov, President Putin sent a letter to the local inhabitants, praising their military and spiritual tradition as the descendants of Saint Ol’ga (Donovan 2019: 144–150). The endeavour of “a pious local lobby” (2019: 148), first established by a heritage specialist from a state museum, received national support.

The correspondence of local and national interests in this case secured the success of the Pskov-based initiative, permitting it a degree of prestige and visibility that would be unimaginable in other more politically contested cases [...]. Yet without the promotion of the project at the grassroots level, it would not have achieved the impact it did among the local community. The integration of Ol'ga's narrative in local cultural memory can thus be seen as a consequence of the close alignment of local and national rebranding agendas (Donovan 2019: 149–150).

A similar alignment of agendas occurred in Gatchina where, exactly like in Pskov, the agency of local preservationists turned out to be crucial. Ideological synergies between Church and state have created a pro-Orthodox climate that makes possible, and indeed increasingly common, the introduction of religious life in state-owned buildings, and Gatchina's imperial temple is a case in point. The museum employees' intimate knowledge of Church and museum has proven instrumental in establishing the current arrangement whereby living religion has been introduced into the state museum while being constantly controlled and kept within limits defined by an authoritative, professional curatorial team. In this article, I tried to grasp ethnographically the agency of the curators (Bouquet & Porto 2005). The way of tying up the re-creation of, and care for the religious materiality of the imperial past with the introduction of practiced, contemporary religion resulted from social relationships, individual and group identities, originated in the late Soviet and post-Soviet periods, and emerged from local long-term intra-Orthodox struggles. The glorification of Orthodoxy and the imperial past is a frame in which rank-and-file preservationists and clergy negotiated the ultimate, post-secular outcome.

Drawing on the concept of the religious heritage complex crafted by Cyril Isnart and Nathalie Cerezales (2020), I have proposed here to expand it to conceptually grasp the specificities of Russia's post-secular situation. In Russia's post-secular religious heritage complex, the relation between religion and heritage is not expressed as a linear continuity. This post-secular complex builds on a past comprising atheistic preservationist policies and a post-Soviet turn in which the formerly atheistic preservationist ethos was reshaped by a pro-Orthodox agenda in a variety of ways. As a result, the intersection of curatorial and devotional approaches is constantly negotiated.

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