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Russian Imperialism and Byzantium (1801–2023): Architecture, Visual Culture, and Scholarship



Fig. 2.1: Moscow Oblast, Cathedral of the Resurrection of Christ, 2020. Photo: Sergey Sebelev/Wikimedia Commons (CC BY-SA 4.0 International).

In June 2020, the Cathedral of the Resurrection of Christ, the main church serving the armed forces of the Russian Federation, was consecrated near Moscow in the Patriot Park Kubinka (Fig. 2.1). The building had been completed on 9 May of that year, sealing in a tangible way the celebrations of the seventy-fifth anniversary of the Soviet Union's victory over Nazi Germany. The structure's ambitions, however, were even greater, as it was meant to stand as a tribute to the "heroic deeds of the Russian people in all wars."¹ During the construction of this monumental, ninety-five-meter-high building, information was leaked to the media about the mosaic-strewn interior, which was to depict Joseph Stalin as the victor of World War II and Vladimir Putin as the conqueror of

¹ Andrey Arkad'ev, "Glavnyy khram Vooruzhennykh sil RF poluchil status Patriarshego sobora RPTS" [The main Temple of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation received the status of the patriarchal cathedral of the Russian Orthodox church], *Telekanal Zvezda*, 2 June 2020, <https://tvzvezda.ru/news/2020261536-sD2Jb.html>.

Crimea in 2014. In the end, Putin's likeness was removed; according to the official version presented by the Russian media, this was done at his own request.²

The debate over the representation of the leaders of both the USSR and the Russian Federation has obscured what is, in my view, a much more significant aspect of this project, namely the visual language that was chosen for it. From the exterior, the cathedral reads like a synthesis of two key buildings of nineteenth-century Russia: Moscow's Cathedral of Christ the Savior, built as a celebratory monument to commemorate the victory over Napoleon (Fig. 2.2),³ and St. Petersburg's Church of the Resurrection of Christ the Savior on the Blood, built around 1900 on the site where Czar



Fig. 2.2: Moscow, Cathedral of Christ the Savior, 1839–83; photograph ca. 1890–1900. Photo: Library of Congress.

² “V RPC ob’yasnili situatsiyu s mozaikoy s Putinyim v khrame Vooruzhennykh sil” [The Russian Orthodox church explained the situation with the mosaic of Putin in the Church of the Armed Forces], *Ria Novosti*, 1 May 2020, <https://ria.ru/20200501/1570856062.html>.

³ Evgenia Kirichenko, *Moscow's Cathedral of Christ the Savior: Its Creation, Destruction, and Rebirth 1813–1997* (Moscow: Smashwords Edition, 2012); Karolina Foletti, “The Cathedral of Christ the Savior and Russia’s Self-Perception” (master’s thesis, University of Vienna, 2016).



Fig. 2.3: Saint Petersburg, Church of the Resurrection of Christ the Savior on the Blood, 1883–1907; photograph by Sergei Prokudin-Gorskii, ca. 1905–15. Photo: Library of Congress.

Alexander II was assassinated in 1881 (Fig. 2.3).⁴ Yet even more interesting than the overall architectural models for the church of the armed forces was the choice of glass mosaic to decorate it. That medium played a key role in the nineteenth-century buildings that served as its direct inspiration, but the technique is inevitably associated with the art of late antiquity and the monuments of the eastern Roman Empire (“Byzantium”), where its use persisted until the fourteenth century.

On a visual and conceptual level, Putin’s Russia was drawing explicitly on nineteenth-century czarist representations; implicitly, though no less emphatically, it was referring to the traditions of the “medieval” world. The cathedral’s visual appearance directly invites reflection on the relationship between artistic representations produced by the imperialism of the Russian Federation, the USSR, and czarist Russia, thus opening up the question of the role of history (and art history) in the quest for

⁴ Aleksandr Bertash, “Voskreseniya Khristova Sobor,” in *Pravoslavnaya Enciklopediya* (Moscow: Tserkovno-nauchnyy tsentr “Pravoslavnaya enciklopediya,” 2005), 441–45; Georgy Butik, *The Church of the Saviour on the Blood* (St. Petersburg: St Isaac’s Cathedral Museum, 1996).

power of particular regimes or political parties. The primary aim of this essay is to reflect on the nature and meaning of the Byzantine and Russian medieval visual legacies in czarist imperialism in the nineteenth century. It then discusses the Soviet Union's use of similar visual strategies (in a completely opposite ideological vein) before turning to the (mis)appropriation of the past in contemporary Russia. Throughout, Moscow's Cathedral of Christ the Savior, a building most emblematic of Russian imperialism, will serve as a unifying point. Built, destroyed, and rebuilt over the last two centuries, this monument is a true barometer of the use (and abuse) of the past by Russian and Soviet regimes.

Napoleon, the Russian Empire, and Byzantium in Culture and Architecture

Russian imperialism can be traced back to 1547 when Ivan IV, “the Terrible,” (d. 1584) acquired the title “Czar of all Russia.”⁵ The drive for expansion would become ever more present in Russian political strategies from that point onward and did not differ much from the efforts of other European powers. Every imperial power needs rhetorical weaponry to defend its ambitions; in Russia in the early nineteenth century, this manifested itself in an increasingly explicit claim of a special relationship with the “Byzantine empire.”⁶ Byzantium, the most powerful medieval Christian empire, was presented in Russian history as a guarantor of imperial legitimacy. Ivan, for example, received his title from the patriarch of Constantinople, while two centuries later the power rhetoric of Catherine II (“the Great,” Romanov; r. 1762–96) referred directly to the empire on the Bosphorus.⁷ What was known as Catherine’s “Greek dream” was based on a desire to take Constantinople from the hands of the Ottomans.⁸ Utopian as it was, this political fantasy yielded a concrete visual echo in a 1779 medal designed by Carl Leberecht and Johann Balthasar Gass for the birth of Grand Prince Constantine Pavlovich (Fig. 2.4). On the reverse, one sees the silhouette of Constantinople’s Hagia Sophia, the greatest church of eastern Christianity, next to the three theological virtues: Hope, Faith, and Love. There are crosses on top of the church’s dome and the

5 Isabel de Madariaga, *Ivan the Terrible* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 75–91.

6 Pavel Rakitin, “Byzantine Echoes in the Nineteenth Century Press and in the Writings of Russian Intellectuals,” in *Byzantium, Russia and Europe*, ed. Ivan Foletti and Zuzana Frantová (Brno: Masarykova univerzita, 2013), 98–109.

7 Hélène Carrère d’Encausse, “Le rêve grec de Catherine II,” in *La Méditerranée d’une rive à l’autre: Culture classique et cultures périphériques. Actes du 17ème colloque de la Villa Kérylos à Beaulieu-sur-Mer les 20 & 21 octobre 2006*, ed. André Laronde and Jean Leclant (Paris: Publications de l’Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres, 2007), 1–8.

8 Michel Heller, *Histoire de la Russie et de son empire* (Paris: Plon, 1997), 582–83.

two flanking minarets.⁹ This aggressive erasure of the building's Islamic identity (Constantinople was captured in 1453 by the Ottomans to become Istanbul) was an explicit manifestation of the adoption of Byzantium as the Christian polity that best expressed the current Russian imperial ambitions.¹⁰



Fig. 2.4: Carl Leberecht and Johann Balthasar Gass, Medal for the birth of Grand Duke Konstantin Pavlovich, 1779. Photo: Fritz Rudolf Künker GmbH & Co. KG, Osnabrück; Lübke & Wiedemann KG, Leonberg. Used with permission.

If the myth of Byzantium as the origin and guarantor of Russian power was alive and present in imperial rhetoric until the eighteenth century, the Russian aristocracy increasingly started to look toward Western models of power and cultural expressions.¹¹ After the fall of Napoleon in 1815, a newly found sense of independent sovereignty sharpened the debates as to whether Russia should be oriented toward the West or the East.¹² For some intellectuals—such as Pyotr Chadaev, who in 1836 published the influential and critical *Philosophical Letters*—the idea of Byzantium as the origin of Russian culture was to be rejected; for others, Byzantium registered retroactively as a promised land upon which Russian identity could and should be built.¹³

⁹ The obverse of the medal features Empress Catherine II herself.

¹⁰ Véronique Schiltz, “Catherine II, les Turcs et l’antique,” *Comptes rendus des séances de l’Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres* 154 (2010): 233–75.

¹¹ Georges Florovsky, *Les voies de la théologie russe* (Lausanne: L’Âge de l’Homme, 2001 [originally published 1937]), 249–54; Alexei Peskov, “La naissance du discours philosophique russe et l’esprit d’émulation (années 1820–1840),” *Romantisme* 92 (1996): 67–78.

¹² Heller, *Histoire de la Russie*, 661; Dominic Lieven, *Russia Against Napoleon: The Battle for Europe, 1807 to 1814* (London: Penguin, 2009).

¹³ Heller, *Histoire de la Russie*, 712–15; Robin Aizlewood, “Revisiting Russian Identity in Russian Thought, from Chaadaev to the Early Twentieth Century,” *Slavonic and East European Review* 78

With the accession of Czar Nicholas I in 1825, disillusionment with the previously idealized West, exacerbated by Napoleon's invasion of 1812, was quickly reflected in the visual self-(re)presentation of the empire. After years during which official Russian architecture imitated western seventeenth- and eighteenth-century models, the czar's entourage started to consider how the Russian Empire could be presented in a new light. The Cathedral of Christ the Savior in Moscow offers a case of this turnaround. Meant to celebrate Russia's victory over Napoleon, the projected building was designed in 1817 by Alexander Vitberg in a neoclassical style.¹⁴ Specifically—and paradoxically—its appearance was reminiscent of Soufflot's Panthéon in Paris (1755–90). But for the czar, a form predicated so explicitly on a French template became politically unacceptable. He therefore commissioned Konstantin Ton (1794–1881) to generate a new design for a building that was to be at once truly Russian and truly Byzantine. The construction stretched into the 1860s, yielding a church that (according to the architect) related as much to Hagia Sophia as to Russia's medieval architectural heritage.¹⁵ Yet a close look shows explicit references only to Russian medieval (and Renaissance) monuments, such as Moscow's Dormition Cathedral. The elision—in theory neo-Byzantine (imitating models from the empire of Constantinople) but in practice neo-Russian (inspired by local medieval production)—is not surprising; it shows how much, in the contemporary mindset, the notions “medieval Russian” and “Byzantine” overlapped. This visual style, which from the 1830s on became by czarist decree Russia's official national style, was thus intended to refer to the historic roots of the Russian Empire—at once imperial, Russian medieval, and Byzantine—and to legitimize Russia's modern expansionist ambitions.¹⁶ Nicholas I did not limit himself to defining a new official architectural style. Following Sergey Uvarov (1786–1855), a Russian aristocrat and national minister of education, the czar endorsed the notion that the new Russian state should stand on three pillars: Orthodoxy, autocracy, and nation.¹⁷ The Orthodox (Byzantine) tradition therefore became one of the foundations of state identity; even more, and in a way that had

(2000): 20–43; Georges Nivat, “Nationalité et nationalisme russes,” in *La question russe: Essais sur le nationalisme russe*, ed. Michel Niqueux (Paris: Éditions Universitaires, 1992), 5–14; and François Rouleau, “Le nationalisme slavophile,” in *ibid.*, 41–48.

14 Kirichenko, *Moscow's Cathedral of Christ the Savior*, 52; Karolina Foletti, “Cathedral of Christ the Savior,” 17–20.

15 Konstantin Ton, *Proekty tserkvey, sochinennye arkhitektorom ego imp. Velichestva, professorom arkhitektury Imperatorskoy Akademii khudozhestv i chlenom raznykh inostrannykh akademiy Konstantinom Tonom* [The designs of churches composed by His Imperial Majesty's architect, professor of the Academy of Arts, and member of various foreign academies, Konstantin Ton] (St. Petersburg: publisher unknown, 1844), 1.

16 “St. 218 Ustava Stroitel'nogo” [Art. 218 of the Building statute], in *Svod zakonov Rossijskoj Imperii. Ustavy putej soobščeniya, počtovyj, telegrafičeskij, stroitel'nyj, i požarnyj* (St. Petersburg: Tipografija Vtorogo Otdelenija Sobstvennoj E.I.V. Kancelarii, 1857), 12:415.

17 Heller, *Histoire de la Russie*, 718–21.

a fundamental impact on the following decades, it became a justification for the political and territorial expansion of the empire.

The Russian empire had already used a similar strategy in 1801 when it annexed Georgia. Russian propaganda presented the incorporation of this ancient Caucasian territory with its distinct culture as the logical consequence of a common Orthodox identity.¹⁸ Throughout the nineteenth century, Orthodoxy and its proclaimed continuity with the Byzantine empire became a recurring argument used to defend the czar's imperial, and often aggressively expansionist, policies. The supposedly common Byzantine past was deployed to justify the gradual annexation of the Caucasus and then the military interventions in the Balkans where the Russian Empire was (officially) protecting the "Orthodox brothers" against the "Ottoman infidels."¹⁹ Wars with the Ottoman Empire were further grounded in the desire to conquer Constantinople/Istanbul and reclaim it for the Orthodox world. Alexander II (r. 1855–81) declared that he wished to sit on the imperial throne of Czargrad, the Russian name for Constantinople that means "City of the Czars." His attempt to translate the Russian czarist dream into reality during the Russo-Turkish War of 1877–78 was stopped only by western powers led by France and Great Britain. Still later, Nicholas II (r. 1896–1917) entered World War I with a similar hegemonic project aimed at annexing Constantinople.²⁰

The use of Byzantine identity in Russian imperial rhetoric did not just serve political ends. Scholarly arguments supported the Byzantine-Russian imperial and cultural "filiation" from the mid-nineteenth century onward.²¹ The first scholars dealing with medieval art—both erudite amateurs and scholars—increasingly used visual evidence to argue for an indisputable continuity between the eastern Roman Empire and that of the Romanovs. Ivan Sakharov (1807–63) and Dimitry Rovinsky (1824–95), for example, promoted the view that the entire history of Russian painting descended from Byzantine art. According to them, forty ancient icons believed to be Byzantine, the oldest images preserved in Russia, were clear proof of this filiation.²² While their ar-

18 "Manifest k gruzinskomu narodu. 12(24) sentyabrya 1801 goda" [Manifest to the Georgian people, 12 (24) September 1801], in *Polnoe sobranie zakonov Rossiyskoy imperii s 1649 goda: 1800–1801* (St. Petersburg: Tipografiya 2 Otdeleniya Sobstv. e. i. v. Kancelyarii, 1830) 26:782–87.

19 Ivan Foletti and Pavel Rakitin, "From Russia with Love: The First Russian Studies on the Art of the Southern Caucasus," *Venezia Arti* 27 (December 2018): 15–33.

20 Heller, *Histoire de la Russie*, 928–29.

21 Maria Lidova, "The Rise of Byzantine Art and Archaeology in Late Imperial Russia," in *Empires of Faith in Late Antiquity*, ed. Jaś Elsner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 128–60.

22 Ivan Sakharov, *Issledovanie o russkom ikonopisanii* [Studies dedicated to Russian icon-painting], 2 vols. (St. Petersburg: Tipografiya Yakova Treya, 1841–49); "Sakharov, Ivan Petrovich," in *Great Soviet Encyclopedia*, ed. A.M. Prokhorov (New York: Macmillan Publishers, 1979), 23:233; Dmitry Rovinsky, *Istoriya russkikh shkol ikonopisaniya do kontsa XVII veka* [The history of the Russian schools of icon-painting, up to the end of the seventeenth century] (St. Petersburg: Tipografiya 2 Otdeleniya Sobstv. e. i. v. Kancelyarii, 1856); Hermann Goltz, *Alles von Zarin und Teufel: Europäische Russlandbilder. Die gesamten Rovinskij-Materialien für eine Russische Ikonographie* (Cologne: DuMont, 2006).

guments showed that scholars ignored what the authentic medieval production of the eastern Roman Empire looked like—the icons were covered by layers of restorations and darkened by the smoke of candles—their hypotheses nevertheless provided the basis for asserting the continuity between the two empires. In a similar vein, Grigory Gagarin (1810–93), a friend of the writer Pushkin who was a military officer and administrator but had been trained as a painter and architect, wrote an early history of architecture and decoration that united, through an audacious evolutionary line, late antique Ravenna with nineteenth-century Moscow.²³

Some decades later, early professional art historians offered parallel lines of reasoning. Nikodim Kondakov (1844–1925), the founder of modern art history in Russia, provided apparently robust scholarly arguments for the newly expansionist Russian political views.²⁴ In his studies on the art of the Middle Ages in the southern Caucasus, he contended that the region had always been a province of the Byzantine empire.²⁵ Such a claim is incorrect, especially with regard to architectural history, but it would strongly resonate in the very years when Russia was trying to unite the cultures of Georgia and Armenia into a single entity under its control.²⁶ Kondakov's attention to Macedonia had even more pointed political ramifications. With historical, artistic, and folkloric arguments, he argued that the country should simply be annexed to Bulgaria, an ally of the Romanovs' empire.²⁷ While it is difficult to determine whether such research was intentionally conditioned by politics or not, the scholarly arguments certainly supported Russia's hegemonic political goals in the region.²⁸

23 Grigory Gagarin, *Kratkaya khronologicheskaya tablitsa v posobie istorii vizantiyskogo iskusstva* [Brief chronological table in the handbook of Byzantine art history] (Tbilisi: Tipografiya Kanceljarii namestnika kavkaza, 1856); id., *Sbornik vizantiyskikh i drevnerusskikh ornamentov, sobrannykh i risovannykh knyazem Gr. Gr. Gagarinym* [Collection of Byzantine and Old Russian ornaments, collected and painted by Prince Gr. Gagarin] (St. Petersburg: Izhdiveniem S.-Peterb. centr. uchilishha tehn. risovaniya bar. Shtiglica, 1887); I. Foletti and Rakitin, "From Russia with Love," 46–50.

24 Irina Kyzlasova, *Istoriya izucheniya vizantiyskogo i drevnerusskogo iskusstva v Rossii*. F. I. Buslayev, N. P. Kondakova: metody, idei, teorii [The history of the study of Byzantine and ancient Russian art in Russia. F. I. Buslayev, N. P. Kondakov: Methods, ideas, theories] (Moscow: Izdatelstvo Moskovskogo Universiteta), 1985; Lyudmila Khrushkova, "Nikodim Pavlovich Kondakov," in *Personenlexikon zur christlichen Archäologie*, ed. Stefan Heid (Regensburg: Schnell & Steiner, 2012), 751–54; Ivan Foletti, *From Byzantium to Holy Russia: Nikodim Kondakov (1844–1925) and the Invention of the Icon* (Rome: Viella, 2017).

25 Nikodim Kondakov, *Opis' pamyatnikov drevnosti v nekotorykh khramakh Gruzii* [An inventory of ancient monuments in some temples in Georgia] (St. Petersburg: Tipografiya Ministerstva putey soobshcheniya, 1890); Nikodim Kondakov and Ivan Tolstoy, *Russkie Drevnosti v pamyatnikakh iskusstva. Vypusk chetvertyy. Khristianskie drevnosti Kryma, Kavkaza i Kiev* [Russian antiquities in art monuments. Volume four. Christian antiquities of Crimea, Caucasus, and Kiev] (St. Petersburg: Tipografiya Ministerstva putey soobshcheniya, 1891).

26 Ivan Foletti, "The Russian View of a 'Peripheral' Region: Nikodim P. Kondakov and the Southern Caucasus," *Convivium*, Supplement (2016): 20–35.

27 Nikodim Kondakov, *Makedoniya. Arkheologicheskoe puteshestvie* [Macedonia. Archaeological voyage] (St. Petersburg: Tipografiya Ministerstva putey soobshcheniya, 1909).

28 Ivan Foletti, *From Byzantium to Holy Russia*, 58–60.

Another aspect of Russian geopolitics is even more crucial for my argument that Russian imperialism translated into visual culture and architecture. Art in the service of power literally made the scholarly arguments developed in the czarist intellectual milieu visible. This point becomes clear from an examination of a series of buildings. Each is visually distinctive, but all are dedicated to Alexander Nevsky (1221–63), the legendary medieval prince of Novgorod who, after his canonization by the Orthodox church in 1547, became a symbol of Russian statehood.²⁹ In Tbilisi, for example, the construction of the Cathedral of Alexander Nevsky was begun in 1871 with the explicit intent of celebrating the subjugation of the entire southern Caucasus to Russian rule.³⁰



Fig. 2.5: Tbilisi, Cathedral of Alexander Nevsky, 1871–1897; photograph by Dmitri Yermakov, ca. 1881–1916. Photo: Wikimedia Commons; public domain. pastvu.com/174138 uploaded by rothast.

²⁹ Anna Navrotskaya, “Aleksandr Nevskii: Hagiography and National Biography,” *Cahiers du monde russe* 46, nos. 1–2 (2005): 297–304.

³⁰ Richard Wortman, “The ‘Russian Style’ in Church Architecture as Imperial Symbol after 1881,” in *Architectures of Russian Identity, 1500 to the Present*, ed. James Cracraft and Daniel B. Rowland (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), 101–229; id., *Scenarios of Power: Myth and Ceremony in Russian Monarchy from Peter the Great to the Abdication of Nicholas II* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 251.

The style chosen was the purest form of neo-Byzantine architecture: a cross-shaped plan with a dome supported by four half-domes (Fig. 2.5). Several elements refer explicitly to Middle Byzantine models, including the *katholikon* of Hosios Loukas in mainland Greece or, for the large dome, Hagia Sophia itself. Compared with Moscow's Cathedral of Christ the Savior, the Georgian structure therefore represents a major change: Byzantine architecture is no longer merely a conceptual and political inspiration but has become a concrete point of reference. The core of the idea, however, remains unchanged; here, too, Byzantine architecture makes Russian expansionism visible. Just as the Caucasus belonged to the Byzantine Empire, so must it belong to its Russian successor.

Another cathedral with the same dedication and stylistic morphology was completed in 1882 in Sofia.³¹ Bulgaria was not ruled by the Romanov czars, but it was under their protection throughout the second half of the nineteenth century. The official reason for this building in the capital city was to express gratitude to the Russian Empire for liberating the Bulgarian people from the Ottoman yoke. The neo-Byzantine structure associated with the national saint stood as a tangible proof of nineteenth-century Bulgaria's integration into the Russian sphere of influence just as medieval Bulgaria had been subservient to the Byzantine emperor. The church built in 1877 in Belgrade, Serbia and dedicated to Nevsky can be seen in a similar light. It commemorated the Russian volunteers who fell in the war against the Ottomans.³² The original form is unknown, but the current structure, begun in 1912, exhibits characteristics similar to other neo-Byzantine buildings. As in the other cases, architectural design, artistic style, and the dedication to Nevsky all proclaimed the czar's reach outside of the borders of the Russian empire.

The cathedral of Warsaw (1894–1912), officially built to accommodate the needs of the local Orthodox community, is a fourth major church dedicated to Nevsky (Fig. 2.6). The Kingdom of Poland was a rebellious part of the Russian Empire throughout most of the nineteenth century. After an uprising against Nicholas I in 1830–31, which was cruelly suppressed, it lost most of its political privileges. More than ten thousand Poles emigrated to the West; about eighty thousand were sent in chains to Siberia. A second major uprising in January 1863 had even worse consequences, culminating in the disappearance of Polish autonomy and a violent program of Russification.³³ The Russian domination inevitably affected the meaning of the cathedral. In style, it was neo-Russian rather than neo-Byzantine, with forms,

31 Igor' Kaliganov and Natal'ya Krashenninnikova, "Aleksandra Nevskogo Sobor v Sofii" [The Cathedral of Alexander Nevsky in Sofia], in *Pravoslavnaya Enciklopediya* (Moscow: Tserkovno-nauchnyi tsentr "Pravoslavnaya enciklopediya," 2000), 550–51.

32 Ivan Charota, "Aleksandra Nevskogo Sobor v Belgrade" [The Cathedral of Alexander Nevsky in Belgrade], in *Pravoslavnaya Enciklopediya*, 547.

33 See, for example, Stefan Kieniewicz, Andrzej Zahorski, Władysław Zajewski, *Trzy powstania narodowe: kościuszkowskie, listopadowe i styczniowe* (Warsaw: Książka i Wiedza 1994).



Fig. 2.6: Warsaw, Alexander Nevsky Cathedral, 1894–1912; photograph 1920. Photo: Library of Congress.

including the onion dome, explicitly referring to medieval Russian models such as the Cathedral of the Dormition in Moscow. The interior painted and mosaic decoration was commissioned from Viktor Vasnetsov (1848–1926), one of the major artists of late czarist Russia.³⁴ The chosen media connoted both Russian culture and Byzantine imperial authority. Mosaic, in particular, was not only associated with Byzantium (via the famous mosaics of Hagia Sophia) but also with medieval Russia because of its use in the early churches of Kyiv. As Iosif Gurko, governor-general of Poland, explicitly stated in 1893, the church in Warsaw—the tallest building in the city—had to manifest the Russification of the country.³⁵ The cathedral can thus be seen as a clear visualization of who was master in Warsaw and a declaration in no uncertain terms of where Poland be-

³⁴ Maria Gibellino Krasceninnicova, “Vasnetsov, Viktor Michajlovič,” in *Enciclopedia Italiana* (Roma: Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana, 1937), page unknown.

³⁵ Wortman, *Scenarios of Power*, 254–55.

longed politically and historically. It is no accident that in the mid-1920s after the declaration of Polish independence it was razed to the ground.³⁶

In churches of the second half of the nineteenth century, neo-Byzantine and neo-Russian architecture in combination with a dedication to Alexander Nevsky came to signify the Russian imperial project and mark its sphere of influence. A supposed shared past within the Byzantine world thus turned into a key argument for an expansive and aggressive geopolitics. In other words, at the end of czarist rule, Russia followed other world powers, notably Great Britain and France, not only in accepting imperialism and colonialism as standard political strategies but also in using art and scholarship as propaganda to justify territorial claims and defend expansionist interests.

Lenin, Hitler, Stalin, and the Blood of Liberators as a Pretext for Imperialism

After the October Revolution of 1917, the official attitude of the Soviet Union, successor to czarist Russia, changed in a significant way. The new socialist state did not want to continue with the imperialist past and, in line with Marxist doctrine, ended its participation in the First World War with its colonial ramifications.³⁷ But if at the rhetorical level imperialism was firmly rejected, Lenin's project of a "world revolution," popular in the early years of the USSR, bore in reality more than a superficial resemblance to czarist imperialism. Still, sustained critiques of past expansionist policies were not lacking, especially with regard to those concerning the Caucasus. These were echoed by the art historian Mikhail Babenchikov (1890–1957), whose book on the art of the south Caucasus is an outstanding document of the official rejection of czarist colonialism and imperialism. He wrote: "Czarism," according to the words of comrade I. V. Stalin, "constrained and sometimes simply abolished the local school, theater, and educational institutions in order to keep the masses in darkness. Czarism suppressed any initiative by the best members of the local population. Finally, czarism killed every activity of the people on the outskirts of the country."³⁸

³⁶ Antoni Mironowicz, "The Destruction and Transfer of Orthodox Church Property in Poland, 1919–1939," *Polish Political Science Yearbook* 43 (2014): 405–20. For more on the destruction of this building, see the contribution by Marcus van der Meulen in this volume.

³⁷ Alexandre Sumpf, *La Grande Guerre oubliée: Russie 1914–1918* (Paris: Perrin, 2017), 404–8. For the sources see *Proceedings of the Brest-Litovsk Peace Conference: The Peace Negotiations between Russia and the Central Powers 21 November, 1917–3 March, 1918* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1918).

³⁸ Mikhail Babenchikov, *Narodnoe dekorativnoe iskusstvo Zakavkaz'ya i ego mastera* [The folk decorative art of Transcaucasia and its masters] (Moscow: Izdatelstvo i tipografiya Gosudarstvennogo arkhitekturnogo izdatelstva, 1948), 14.

In the first years after the October Revolution, the USSR actively tried to regain the provinces of the czarist empire that had been lost, including Georgia, Armenia, and Ukraine. But, for most of the 1920s and 1930s, the Soviet Union was preoccupied primarily with domestic matters, renouncing (at least in appearance) any colonial ambitions.³⁹ This rise of a proletarian and, on the face of it, non-imperialistic state might seem to explain the radical disconnect between Byzantine studies and Soviet policy. In fact, the causes of the split were much deeper: Marxism-Leninism was profoundly anticlerical and references to a Byzantine Christian empire as a historical foundation of the USSR became widely unpopular.⁴⁰ Many Russian Byzantinists, such as the elderly Kondakov or the young Andrey Grabar (1896–1990), had to flee, while those who remained were more or less explicitly persecuted.⁴¹ Such ostracism was due to religious and political factors; a number of Russian Byzantinists had been particularly close to the czarist regime. In general, an aversion to the medieval past is increasingly evident in the historiography of those years, as if writing history and art history in the 1930s became a way of *judging* the past from a Marxist perspective.⁴² This emerges clearly from the writings of Nikolay Brunov (1898–1971), who in 1935 started his chapter on the history of Byzantine architecture with what he claimed was a direct quote from Karl Marx: “Constantinople is the Eternal City, it is the Rome of the East.” But he then continued: “The Byzantine Empire was a feudal, theocratic, strictly centralized monarchy that in many ways resembles oriental despotism In Byzantium, all areas of cultural activity were strictly subordinated to religion, which is typical of the feudal worldview.”⁴³ The tone, moralizing and anachronistic, is typical of Marxist historical critique and shows the distance the new regime wanted to put between itself and the (medieval/Byzantine) past. In the historical and art-historical literature of the

39 Andrew Andersen and George Partskhaladze, “La guerre soviéto-géorgienne et la soviétisation de la Géorgie (février-mars 1921),” *Revue historique des armées*, no. 254 (2009): 67–75.

40 Dmitry V. Pospelovsky, *A History of Soviet Atheism in Theory, and Practice, and the Believer*, vol. 1: *A History of Marxist–Leninist Atheism and Soviet Anti-Religious Policies* (New York: St Martin’s Press, 1987).

41 Ivan Foletti, *From Byzantium to Holy Russia*, 60–83; Ivan Foletti and Adrien Palladino, *Byzantium or Democracy? Kondakov’s Legacy in Emigration: The Institutum Kondakovianum and André Grabar, 1925–1952* (Rome: Viella, 2020); Irina Kyzlasova, *Istoriya otechestvennoj nauki ob iskusstve Vizantii i drevney Rusi 1920–1930 gody. Po materialam arkhivov* [The history of patriotic studies dedicated to the art of Byzantium and of ancient Russia, 1920–1930: Based on archival material] (Moscow: Indrik, 2000).

42 Aleksey Nekrasov, *Vizantiyskoe i russkoe iskusstvo: Dlya stroitelstva fakultetov vuzov* [Byzantine and Russian art: For construction departments of universities] (Moscow: Izdanie Gosudarstvennogo Universal’nogo Magazina, 1924); Nikolay Brunov, *Ocherki po istorii arkhitektury*, vol. 2: *Greciya. Rim. Vizantiya*. [Essays on the history of architecture in 3 volumes. II: Greece, Rome, Byzantium] (Moscow: Academia, 1937), 11.

43 Brunov, *Ocherki po istorii arkhitektury*, 11–12. I have not been able to find where Marx made the remark cited by Brunov

period, Byzantium essentially became again what it had been during the eighteenth-century Enlightenment: a symbol of perversion and corruption.⁴⁴

The key turning point in how the medieval past was viewed came in the summer of 1941 with the Second World War and the German invasion. The months of heavy losses that followed led the USSR to a radical change in its internal politics. After a decade of “internationalization” in the 1920s and another of “Russification” in the 1930s, the Soviet Union recognized the frustration of the non-Russian nations within the empire. This had been exploited by Hitler, especially in the Baltic republics and in Ukraine, and Stalin reacted by accepting a reversal of direction, one that liberalized religious worship and promoted national sentiments across the USSR.⁴⁵ Both were useful to wartime propaganda. The patriotic work of the Orthodox church during the early years of the war is not sufficient, however, to explain why Stalin in 1943 authorized the election of a new patriarch, effectively giving the Russian church unexpected freedom after decades of violent persecution. In the view of historian Adriano Rocucci, Stalin was by that date laying the groundwork for the Soviet Union’s future imperialistic expansion not only into its former territories but also into the Balkans.⁴⁶

In essence, during the era of the Second World War, a religious “national” Middle Ages was enlisted in a desperate attempt to reverse wartime misfortunes. That ideological construct also entailed the return of Alexander Nevsky. He had resurfaced into national consciousness before, notably in Sergei Eisenstein’s celebrated movie which boosted patriotic feelings by presenting Nevsky as a Russian hero fighting against Teutonic enemies (Fig. 2.7). The film was finished in 1938, but because of the Ribbentrop-Molotov pact (which prohibited anti-German propaganda) it was not released until after the start of the war in 1941. Anna Navrotskaya has argued that the rebirth of Nevsky—who thanks to the new medium became a “cinema icon” as well as a “mass-saint”—indicated a deep desire on behalf of the leaders of the USSR to reconnect with the glorious past in an attempt to erase the profound interruptions of the ’20s and ’30s.⁴⁷

In this context of national religious renaissance, it is not surprising that medieval and, in particular, Byzantine art also received more public recognition. During the war years, Viktor Lazarev (1897–1976) completed his monumental *Istoriya Vizantiyskoj Zhi-*

44 The philosopher Montesquieu, for example, pronounced in a publication of 1734 that “the Greek Empire . . . is nothing but a tissue of revolts, seditions, and perfidies.” Cited after *Montesquieu’s Considerations of the Causes of the Grandeur and Decadence of the Romans*, trans. Jehu Baker (New York: D. Appleton, 1882), 437.

45 Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin* (New York: Basic Books, 2010).

46 Adriano Rocucci, “Le tournant de la politique religieuse de Stalin: Pouvoir soviétique et église orthodoxe de 1943 à 1945,” *Cahiers du monde russe* 50 (2009): 671–98, at 672–76; Steven Merritt Miner, *Stalin’s Holy War: Religion, Nationalism, and Alliance Politics, 1941–1945* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2003).

47 Navrotskaya uses “mass-saint” to describe a saint whose popularity spreads through the mass media. For this notion and the entire historical context see Navrotskaya, “Aleksandr Nevskii,” 302–4.



Fig. 2.7: Alexander Nevsky in a still from *Alexander Nevsky*, dir. Sergei Eisenstein, 1938–1941.
Photo: Public domain.

vopisi (History of Byzantine Painting). This book, written from an unmistakable national perspective, countered previous imperialistic historiography by emphasizing the exceptional character and freedom of national painters, including Greek painters working in Russia and in the Balkans.⁴⁸ Other national Middle Ages, foremost those of Armenia and Georgia, returned at the same time to the forefront of official historiography in support of the “Great Patriotic War” (as the Second World War was called in the USSR).⁴⁹ The legalization of Orthodoxy and the new role played by individual nations, along with the uncontested authority of Stalin, quite unexpectedly resulted in the adoption of a political strategy that turned out to be very similar to that of the late nineteenth-century czarist regime. With only slight exaggeration one could say that the leadership of the Soviet Union reverted to Uvarov’s traditional slogan: Orthodoxy, autocracy, nation.

At the Yalta Conference in February 1945, Europe was divided between the Western allies and the Soviet Union. Thus, at the end of the war, Stalin, who had risen to the pinnacle of power through terrible purges and despite significant mili-

⁴⁸ Viktor Lazarev, *Istoriya Vizantijskoj Zhivopisi* [The history of Byzantine painting] (Moscow: Rossijskaya gosudarstvennaya biblioteka, 1947–48). On the connection with late tsarist rhetoric, see Ivan Foletti, “Belting Before Belting: From Moscow, to Constantinople, and to Georgia,” *Convivium*, Supplement 1 (2021): 18–25.

⁴⁹ Overview in Ivan Foletti and Pavel Rakitin, “Armenian Medieval Art and Architecture in Soviet Perception: A Longue Durée Sketch,” *Eurasiatica. Quaderni di Studi su Balcani, Anatolia, Iran, Caucaso e Asia Centrale* 7 (2020): 113–50.

tary setbacks, became what he had already predicted in 1943: the aging dictator of an empire (including satellite countries much beyond the borders of the USSR).⁵⁰ In 1945, the Soviet empire stretched from Siberia to the Baltic with Czechoslovakia, Poland, Hungary, and other states gradually falling within the orbit of its power. Architecture and art continued to be central to the political agenda.⁵¹ But if Byzantine studies, along with Orthodox faith itself, were experiencing a moment of revival, the same cannot be said about neo-Byzantine architecture. Modernist architecture, adopted right after the 1917 revolution, had given way to a deeply conservative movement that was couched in a grandiose style serving directly to promote Stalin's USSR.⁵² Moscow's neo-Byzantine Cathedral of Christ the Savior, a key symbol of pre-revolutionary Russia, was blown up on 5 December 1931. The Communists had decided that it should be replaced by the Palace of Soviets.

Dominated by a gigantic statue of Lenin, this skyscraper, planned in the early '30s, was to be the city's tallest building; it combined modernist elements with new socialist realist features, mainly in its decoration (Fig. 2.8).⁵³ War and structural problems eventually prevented the Palace from being built, but the new style developed for it became a major architectural inspiration in the first decade after the war. This period saw the realization of a Muscovite project that would become emblematic of Stalinist architecture and of the USSR's growing ambitions: the skyscrapers later known as the "Seven Sisters" (Fig. 2.9).⁵⁴

By their sheer size and through the images painted and sculpted on their exteriors and, especially, interiors—representations of the triumph of the working classes in scenes of factories, kolkhozes, and revolutionary events—these high-rise structures

50 For the perception of the war "from below" (that is, from the perspective of the local population), see, for example, the stimulating book edited by Emilia Koustova, *Combattre, survivre, témoigner: Expériences soviétiques de la Seconde Guerre Mondiale* (Strasbourg: Presses Universitaires de Strasbourg, 2020).

51 On the relationship between the Soviet regime and architecture, private and public, see Victor Buchli, *An Archaeology of Socialism* (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2000); Heather D. Dehaan, *Stalinist City Planning: Professionals, Performance, and Power* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013).

52 See, among others, Vladimir Paperny, *Architecture in the Age of Stalin: Culture Two*, trans. John Hill and Roann Barris (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Igor' Kazus', *Sovetskaya arkhitektura 1920-h godov: Organizatsiya proektirovaniya* [Soviet architecture of the 1920s: Design organization] (Moscow: Progress-Tradiciya, 2009); Danilo Udovicki-Selb, "Between Modernism and Socialist Realism: Soviet Architectural Culture under Stalin's Revolution from Above, 1928–1938," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 78 (2009): 467–95.

53 Karolina Foletti, "Cathedral of Christ the Savior," 39–44. For the general urbanistic conception of Moscow see Élisabeth Essaïan, "Le Plan général de la reconstruction de Moscou de 1935: La Ville, l'architecte et le politique: Héritages culturels et pragmatisme économique," *Les Annales de la recherche urbaine* 107 (2011): 46–57.

54 Jana Gazdagová, "Sedm Sester," in *Zápisky z cest: Moskva, Novgorod*, ed. Ivan Foletti, Karolina Foletti, and Martin F. Lešák (Brno: MUNIPRESS, 2017), 93–95; Nikolay Kruzhkov, *Vysotki stalinskoy Moskvy. Nasledie epokhi* [The Stalinist Moscow high-rises: The Legacy of an era] (Moscow: Tsentrpoligraf, 2014).

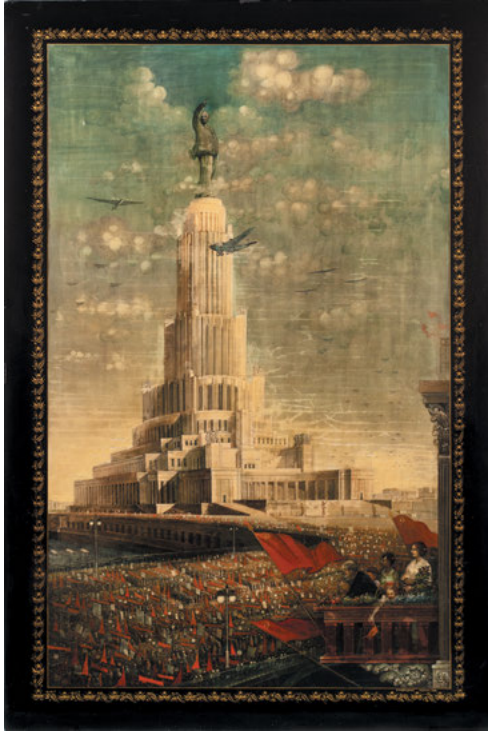


Fig. 2.8: Alexander Kotyagin, *Palace of Soviets*, 1938; the Palace was designed by Boris Iofan, Vladimir Shchuko, and Vladimir Helfreich in 1931–32. Moscow, All-Russian Museum of Decorative Arts. Photo: Wikimedia Commons.

were to embody in a very public arena the glory of the proletariat and, at the same time, materialize the power of the Soviet Union (the skyscraper, which had emerged as a radically new building type in America in the late nineteenth century, still was an architectural newcomer in the USSR). Combining a modernist structure with classicizing socialist realist decorations, the seven buildings served a variety of functions, including housing the Ministry of the Interior, Moscow University, a hotel, and a home for Soviet writers. The Seven Sisters became one of the most iconic building projects in postwar Moscow. It is therefore not surprising that they also became the face of power—of Stalinist power—and, as had been the case with neo-Byzantine architecture during the nineteenth century, a model for architectural colonization.



Fig. 2.9: M.V. Lomonosov, Moscow State University, 1949–53, one of the “Seven Sisters” buildings. Photo: Lynn Greyling (CCO public domain).



Fig. 2.10: Prague, Hotel Internacionál, 1952–56. Photo: Simon Leger/Wikimedia Commons (CC BY-SA 4.0 International).

Copies of the Seven Sisters were created in Prague and Warsaw in the 1950s (Fig. 2.10). Similar buildings, though smaller in scale, can also be found in Sofia, Rostov-on-Don, and even in Beijing.⁵⁵ Echoing the prototypes in Moscow, their composition and iconography stood as an official celebration of the working people. But I am convinced that they also served to proclaim the USSR's sphere of influence, in the same way that czarist Russia had used architecture to proclaim its dominion. Just as the neo-Byzantine style was the obligatory visual language for sacred buildings across the nineteenth-century empire, so the combination of socialist realism with classicizing structure created a visual semantic unit across the USSR and its satellite states to promote the glory of the proletariat.⁵⁶

While this kind of official Soviet architecture was removed from the czarist neo-Byzantine style, other artistic choices dictated by Stalinist cultural policy relate more closely to our story. Glass mosaic, notably, was the medium chosen for several stations of the Moscow subway built right before and after World War II. One of the most impressive examples is the Komsomolskaya station. Opened in 1952, its decorative program was directly inspired by a speech Stalin gave in November 1941 in which he evoked historical leaders of the Russian state who had inspired the country's army and secured great victories for its people. To this collection of episodes from the past and present, including depictions of the Soviet victory over Nazi Germany, were added figures from medieval history. Among them was the unavoidable Alexander Nevsky; represented as a medieval knight triumphing over the Teutonic Order, he was meant to symbolize victory over enemies of the country in general (Fig. 2.11).⁵⁷ To celebrate the recent defeat of Nazi Germany, a very nationalistic narrative of Russian history was therefore mobilized, one that used, surprisingly enough, the technique of mosaic. The medieval heritage and the Byzantine tradition (as well as their nineteenth-century revivals) were ever present in the visual rhetoric of the postwar Soviet empire.

The choice to build the Palace of the Soviets on the site where the Cathedral of Christ the Savior once stood, the use of imperial architecture to visually colonize satellite states, the revival of mosaics in triumphalist self-representations, and the Orthodox revival coupled with that of Byzantine-nationalist studies all clearly show how the Soviet system had adopted, at least after World War II and despite a sharp break in the official rhetoric, some key elements of the artistic politics of czarist Russia. The cult of the autocrat had of course been replaced by that of the party (and its leaders); essential traits of the former way of thinking, however, persisted.

55 Anatole Kopp, *L'Architecture de la période stalinienne* (Grenoble: Presses Universitaires de Grenoble, 1978); Paperny, *Architecture in the Age of Stalin*. Other case studies include Jörg Kirchner, "Die Lange Straße in Rostock (1953–58): Heimatschutzstil als eine Quelle der frühen DDR-Architektur," *ICOMOS* 58 (2013): 66–69; Věra Müllerová, *Hotel Internacional—Stavebně historický průzkum* [Hotel Internacional—Historical survey] (Prague: PSSPOP, 1995).

56 Udovicki-Selb, "Between Modernism and Socialist Realism."

57 Josette Bouvard, *Le Métro de Moscou: La construction d'un mythe soviétique* (Paris: Éditions du Sextant, 2005).

decades of proletarian dictatorship, the country was missing a clear ideology.⁵⁹ Given this situation, the Orthodox Church, now shining with the martyr's gloss acquired during the Soviet years, began to regain its former prestige. From the mid-1990s onward, if not earlier, a new linking of "throne and altar" can be observed. It led to a phenomenon that has been called "desecularization," meaning a strengthening of the Church without a corresponding increase in personal piety.⁶⁰

An explicit outcome of this development was the reconstruction of the Cathedral of Christ the Savior in Moscow between 1994 and 1997.⁶¹ The proposal to rebuild a monument demolished by the Stalinist regime originally came from the sculptor Vladimir Mokrousov (1936–2021) during the perestroika years in the late '80s.⁶² The religious confraternity he founded received permission from city authorities to erect a small chapel in memory of the destroyed cathedral. When, after 1994, both the Church and the state took control of the site, Patriarch Alexis II (1929–2008) dissolved the confraternity and commissioned a new, more ambitious building.⁶³ While the construction of the chapel resulted from Orthodox piety, this new project was mainly a political act. It is, therefore, not by chance that it received a "blessing" from President Boris Yeltsin (1931–2007) in words that made clear how religion was inextricably linked to political goals: "Today, Russia needs the Cathedral of Christ the Savior. It is a Russian national shrine and it should be revived. With it, it will be easier for all of us to find the way to social cohesion, to the creation of goodness, and to the creation of the life in which there will be less space for sin. With all my heart, I support your initiative."⁶⁴ A crucial, if controversial, figure in seeing the building come to fruition was the mayor of Moscow, Yuri Luzhkov (1936–2019).⁶⁵ As the actual patron of the whole enterprise, Luzhkov drew open criticism for the way he secured funds from

59 David M. Kotz and Fred Weir, *Russia's Path from Gorbachev to Putin: The Demise of the Soviet System and the New Russia* (London: Routledge, 2007); Allyson Edwards and Roberto Rabbia, "The 'Wild Nineties': Youth Engagement, Memory and Continuities between Yeltsin's and Putin's Russia," in *Youth and Memory in Europe: Defining the Past, Shaping the Future*, ed. Félix Krawatzek and Nina Friess (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2022), 75–83; Peter J. S. Duncan, "Contemporary Russian Identity between East and West," *The Historical Journal* 48 (2005): 277–94.

60 Vyacheslav Karpov, "Desecularization: A Conceptual Framework," *Journal of Church and State* 52 (2010): 232–70; Karolina Foletti, "Cathedral of Christ the Savior," 48–49.

61 Karolina Foletti, "Cathedral of Christ the Savior," 46–65.

62 Kathleen Smith, "An Old Cathedral for a New Russia: The Symbolic Politics of the Reconstituted Church of Christ the Saviour," *Religion, State and Society* 25 (1997): 163–75.

63 Karolina Foletti, "Cathedral of Christ the Savior," 59.

64 Boris Yeltsin, "Obrashchenie prezidenta rossiyskoj federacii k chlenam obshchesvennogo nablyudatel'nogo soveta po vossozdaniyu Chrama Christa Spasitelya" [Address of the President of the Russian Federation to the members of the public supervisory board for cooperation with the Cathedral of Christ the Savior], *Rossiyskaya gazeta*, 7 September 1994; cited in the translation from Karolina Foletti, "Cathedral of Christ the Savior," 50.

65 Donald N. Jensen, "The Boss: How Yuri Luzhkov Runs Moscow," *Demokratizatsiya* 8 (2000): 83–122.



Fig. 2.12: Moscow, Cathedral of Christ the Savior, 1994–97. Photo: Ted.ns/Wikimedia Commons (CC BY-SA 4.0 International).

sources close to the criminal sphere. Moreover, in a period of economic crisis and growing poverty, such an expensive building was understandably seen as a sign of arrogance.⁶⁶

To become a “Russian national shrine,” implicitly reconnecting it with the imperial past, the new construction was to follow the visual layout of the original building. In other words, the neo-Russian (or neo-Byzantine) tradition had to be restored. Yeltsin’s Russia was eager to hitch itself to the legacy of the Romanovs; only a few years later, in 2000, the last czar, Nicholas II, who had been murdered by the Bolsheviks, was canonized together with other family members.⁶⁷ It is as if seventy years of Communism had simply been erased. On a superficial level, the new Cathedral of Christ the Savior participated in this act of cancellation because, from afar, it looks like the original structure dating to 1839–83 (Fig. 2.12). In reality, things are more complicated, starting with the materials: concrete replaced the original brick; an alloy with a low percentage of gold took the place of the pure gold on the roofs; and bronze was used instead of marble for the sculptures on the exterior.⁶⁸ The most radical changes were, however, hidden un-

⁶⁶ Karolina Foletti, “Cathedral of Christ the Savior,” 59–62.

⁶⁷ “Nicholas II and Family Canonized for ‘Passion,’” *New York Times*, 15 August 2000.

⁶⁸ Ekaterina Gorelova, “V soznanii mnogich vosstanovlenie Khrama Khrista Spasitelya v Moskve nerazryvno svyazano s figuroy Il’i Glazunova” [In the minds of the majority the reconstruction of the

derground: a newly added basement that accommodates a six-hundred-car garage, a thousand-seat conference hall, a restaurant, and other purely utilitarian spaces.⁶⁹ These subterranean additions made the building particularly controversial because they were interpreted as an almost shameless union between the new Russian Orthodoxy and the new economic system, capitalism.⁷⁰ In short, an elegant, high-quality original building was replaced by a cheaper copy, but (importantly) one that was ready for the celebrations of the 850th anniversary of the city of Moscow in September of 1997.

Despite all the criticism, the restored building in the neo-neo-Russian style has become a symbol of a new chapter in the coexistence of church and state in the Russian Federation. José Casanova's concept of "public religion" is appropriate here, since it identifies religion as a type of collective identity that has nothing to do with personal faith.⁷¹ In the 1990s, 75 percent of Russians considered themselves Orthodox; paradoxically, only 40 percent classed themselves as "believers" and only a minority attended religious services.⁷² Thus almost half of the people who identified as Orthodox did not believe in God or participate in any sort of religious life. Such poll figures are very likely the result of the close links, following the fall of the Soviet Union, between the Orthodox Church and "ethnic Russians," people who consider themselves as inextricably belonging to the Russian nation. The architectural choice of a sort of "back to the future" for the Cathedral of Christ the Savior reconnected them with the imperialist past; this, in turn, facilitated tying the new Russian identity to deep-seated nationalistic elements. The nineteenth century and, filtered through it, the medieval past were thus used as instruments of ethno-aggregation and, inevitably, of exclusion of those who were not considered to belong to the Russian nation. Beneath that surface, however, a deep cleavage divided the identity discourse and the economic interests driving Russia's new "savage capitalism."

It is worth noting that, in the 1990s, Byzantine (and medieval Russian) studies experienced a rebirth as well. After seventy years of USSR censorship, it again became possible to do research on the prerevolutionary period, which was sometimes presented in almost heroic terms.⁷³ That scholarship is not without parallels to the newly

cathedral of Christ the Savior is connected with the figure of Ilya Glazunov], *Sankt-Peterburgskie vedomosti*, 22 November 1995.

69 Aleksey Denisov, "Ot Rozhdestva do Rozhdestva [From Christmas to Christmas]," *Architektura i stroitel'stvo Moskvy* 1 (1996): 26.

70 Karolina Foletti, "Cathedral of Christ the Savior," 61–64.

71 José Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); id., "Public Religion Revisited," in *Religion: Beyond the Concept*, ed. Hent de Vries (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 101–19.

72 Kimmo Kaariainen and Furman Dmitri, "Religiosity in Russia in the 1990s," in *Religious Transition in Russia*, ed. Matti Kotiranta (Helsinki: Kikimora Publications, 2000), 28–76.

73 See, for example, Olga Etingof, *Vizantijskie ikony pervoy poloviny XIII veka v Rossii* [Byzantine icons of the first half of the thirteenth century in Russia] (Moscow: Indrik, 2005), 23–32.

built Cathedral of Christ the Savior, down to the fact that Byzantine studies, while regaining momentum, lost in status (just as the church lost in quality materials). In the post-Soviet free-market world, the study of the past—and the medieval past in particular—became marginal because historical studies no longer held any of the prerevolutionary prestige (or, therefore, levels of funding).

Recently, the desire to reconnect with the “glorious” imperial past has picked up momentum. A growing number of churches are being constructed in the neo-neo-Russian (or neo-neo-Byzantine) style. Furthermore, at least from the 2000s onward, the imperial rhetoric, insisting on the importance of Orthodoxy for the state, has been increasingly present in the public sphere. Vladimir Putin and his entourage have endeavored to stress parallels between his “reign” and those of Byzantine emperors, reaffirming the tradition of Moscow as the “Third Rome” (the successor to the medieval “Second Rome,” Constantinople).⁷⁴ After his visit to Mount Athos in 2016, Putin was accused of having sat on what some (wrongly) believed was the Byzantine imperial throne; this opened a large debate in the media.



Fig. 2.13: Janette Rendeková, *Pussy Riot in the Cathedral of Christ the Savior, Moscow, 2012*. Photo: Used with permission of the artist.

74 “Igra v prestoly. Pochemu Rossiya bol’she 500 let ostaetsya v trende vizantijskoj politiki” [Game of thrones: Why Russia has remained in the trend of Byzantine politics for over 500 years], *Gazeta.ru*, 30 May 2016, https://www.gazeta.ru/comments/2016/05/30_e_8271917.shtml.

Another likely turning point was the “punk prayer” staged in 2012 by the group Pussy Riot in the very building we have been talking about, the Cathedral of Christ the Savior. During the event, the four women, wearing balaclavas as an emblem of anti-institutional protest, danced in front of the iconostasis (the icon screen separating nave from choir) and sang a prayer asking the Mother of God to drive out Patriarch Kirill and oust President Putin. The prayer, a work of performance art, sharply criticized the political alliance between state and Church (Fig. 2.13).⁷⁵ Unsurprisingly, the deliberately provocative event was denounced by the official media as a crime against the Orthodox Church, meaning against Russia. As a result, two of Pussy Riot’s members, Maria Alekhina and Nadezhda Tolokonnikova, were sentenced to two years in prison.⁷⁶

From then on, an increasingly aggressive political discourse amplified by the Russian state media targeted the Western world and its supposedly decadent values (the performance by Pussy Riot was presented in precisely those terms). By contrast, Russian values built on Orthodoxy and rooted in the medieval past were promoted as a positive alternative.⁷⁷ Drawing on a highly reductive interpretation of Russian philosophy and theology, especially as it developed over the nineteenth century, the country was now hailed by the government as the only possible Christian alternative to the decadent West.⁷⁸ At the same time, the past was and continues to be used to justify the neo-imperial ideology of the country’s leadership. This strategy became especially clear during the war in Georgia in 2008 and, even more so, during the first and second occupations of Ukrainian territories in 2014 and 2022. In that context of neo-imperial aggression, Russia’s medieval roots, stemming from the Byzantine empire, were systematically highlighted with the result that St. Sophia Cathedral of Kyiv ended up being presented as a cornerstone of Russian national identity.⁷⁹ At the same time, increasing tensions with the West have become evident since at least 2012. Particularly revealing of the current propagandistic climate is the production of big-budget films and TV series that highlight the heroic nature of Orthodox Russian and Byzantine identity; one thinks of the very successful series about Sophia Palaiologina, a princess from the imperial Byzantine family who went to Russia to marry the prince of Moscow Ivan

⁷⁵ Joachim Willems, *Pussy Riots Punk-Gebet: Religion, Recht und Politik in Russland* (Berlin: Berlin University Press, 2013).

⁷⁶ “Sud priznal uchastnits Pussy Riot vinovnymi v khuliganstve po motivam religioznoy nenavisti i vrazhdy” [Court Finds Pussy Riot members guilty of hooliganism motivated by religious hatred and enmity], *ITAR-TASS*, 17 August 2012.

⁷⁷ For a critical overview, see Cyril Hovorun, “Russian Church and Ukrainian War,” *The Expository Times* (2022): 1–10.

⁷⁸ Hovorun, “Russian Church and Ukrainian War.”

⁷⁹ Mikhail Tyurenkov, “Vladimir Vladimirovich Avgust. Rossiya mezhdu bonaputizmom i Imperiej” [Vladimir Vladimirovich August: Russia between Bonaputism and empire], *Pervyy russkiy tsargrad*, 8 June 2022; https://tsargrad.tv/articles/Vladimir-vladimirovich-avgust-rossija-mezhdu-bonaputizmom-i-imperiej_562187.

III.⁸⁰ This imperialistic-Byzantine rhetoric is promoted by Putin's entourage as a natural development of Russian identity; in reality, it was generated in reaction to sustained critiques, including the massive protest against his reelection to the presidency after the term of Dmitry Medvedev in 2012, and should therefore be seen as the result of an internal agenda bent on creating an external enemy.⁸¹

Conclusions

In conclusion, we can observe that for more than two centuries the Middle Ages served as a strong identity tool for modern Russia. At every moment of crisis, the medieval visual, intellectual, and religious heritage was mobilized to reassert the country's (fictional) historic lineage and bolster its hegemonic claims toward external territories, especially the Balkans, Armenia, Georgia, and Ukraine. If, in the reign of the last Romanovs, such claims to continuity seemed in some ways logical and in step with what was happening in contemporary (and competing) Western empires, more surprising and complicated is the use of the same past in the Soviet era. Presently, we are witnessing a return to cultural patterns which had peaked, in their core elements, during nineteenth-century czarism. Yet whichever form these historicist agendas have taken, the past as such was not of real interest: it was the present use of it.

It is within this framework that we can return to where we started. In Moscow's Cathedral of the Resurrection of Christ, all the visual and material elements mentioned in the course of this essay were brought together to construct an ideal narrative of Russian identity. The building refers all at once to the medieval past, its nineteenth-century revivals, and its mid-twentieth-century reuse. This is visible not only in the general neo-neo-Russian architectural layout or in the neo-neo-Byzantine (and at the same time neo-Soviet) iconography, but also in the very use of mosaics as the primary medium for depicting the monumentalized figures of Nevsky, Stalin, and Putin. The cathedral's celebrations of medieval and modern military leaders are an overt reference to Stalinist-era metro decorations and, through them, to an idealized image of the "glorious" national past. In light of the military invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the clever remodeling can be seen as one of the preparatory steps of the Russian Federation's expansionist and blatantly neo-imperialist aspirations. Here, visually and conceptually, the regime adheres to a message perpetuated by the mass media: Moscow, as the Third Rome, is the last bastion of Orthodoxy. Under its leader, it has a moral obligation to intervene, even with military force, against the

⁸⁰ The series is available at <https://smotrim.ru/brand/60541>. For information on it, see Kino-Teatr.Ru, "Sophia," <https://www.kino-teatr.ru/kino/movie/ros/118099/titr/>.

⁸¹ Daniel Sandford, "Russian Election: Biggest Protests Since Fall of USSR," *BBC News*, 10 December 2011, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-16122524>.

evil that is rampant in a West it calls “fascist” and a Ukraine it describes as “Nazi.” It is obvious that the aim of this huge propaganda effort ultimately is to make the Russian public forget the dramatic economic stagnation, the deep crisis faced by a variety of national institutions, and the systemic injustices caused by the Putin regime. It is equally obvious, however, how ineffective this propaganda is, considering how empty Russian churches are, no matter how powerful the Orthodox Church has become. The propagandistic tradition initiated in nineteenth-century czarist Russia that reused the medieval heritage, specifically the legacy of Byzantine art and architecture, has turned into a mere facade.

