



# Brandeis University

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## External Reader's Report

**Kostoeva Viktoriia Andreevna, "The Architect Roman Verkhovskoy and Church Architecture in the U.S.A. in the 1930s-1980s," submitted for the Candidate Degree in Art Studies (Scholarly Specialization 5.10.1: The Theory and the History of Culture and Art)**

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Gregory L. Freeze".

**Gregory L. Freeze  
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9 October 2022**

As the excellent candidate dissertation by N.A. Kostoeva rightly points out,<sup>1</sup> scholarship on Russian Church architecture in America is extremely limited and marred by factual inaccuracies.<sup>2</sup> The scholarly neglect is due to a host of factors, not only the problem of accessibility for researchers in the Russian Federation, but also the dispersed and poorly preserved condition of primary sources in the United States. This is particularly true for the twentieth century, when much of the church building took place in the eastern part of the United States and involved the “second and third waves”<sup>3</sup> of Russian emigration. Although the scholarship on Russian emigration to Europe and specifically to the United States has grown in recent years, thus far it has paid scant attention to the religious dimension.<sup>4</sup> In particular, research on “global Orthodoxy” often includes America,<sup>5</sup> but it has ignored the question of Orthodox church construction and the contribution of émigré Russian architects.<sup>6</sup>

The dissertation by N.A. Kostoeva makes a major contribution and lays the foundations for future research. It draws upon materials from a host of repositories, including the archive of the Orthodox Church of America, the Bakhmeteff collection at Columbia University, the Tolstoy Foundation, the Holy Trinity Monastery (Jordanville), and churches in five states.<sup>7</sup> Some use is also made of the contemporaneous press.<sup>8</sup> The dissertation closely examines the “national-romantic” style of Roman Nikolaevch Verkhovskoy (1881-1968) and gives attention to ten other Russian architects active in Orthodox church construction in America (six traditionalists and four modernists). Verkhovskoy came from a noble family in

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<sup>1</sup> References in this report are to the English version of N.A. Kostoeva’s candidate dissertation.

<sup>2</sup> As a case in point, the dissertation cites (p. 15) the recent volume by A.V. Molodin, *Orthodox Domes of America* (Washington DC, 2021).

<sup>3</sup> There is some debate in American scholarship about the “waves,” especially whether one counts the influx before 1917 and sub-phases thereafter.

<sup>4</sup> Scholarship on Russia immigration has been expanding but still comparatively limited. Among the older works one might cite: V. Wertsman, ed., *The Russians in America* (New York: Oceana Publications, 1977). More recent publications provide a much fuller treatment, but continue to pay little attention to the Orthodox Church and none at all to the construction of churches: Paul Magosci, *The Russian Americans* (New York: Chelsea House, 1996); Paul Magosci, “Russian Americans,” in: *Gale Encyclopedia of Multicultural America*, ed. T. Riggs, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., vol. 4 (New York: Gale, 2014), 32-45; M. Raëff, *Russia Abroad: A Cultural History of the Russian Emigration, 1919-1939* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990); O. Budnitskii, *Drugaiia Rossiia. Issledovaniia po istorii russkoi emigratsii* (Moscow: NLO, 2021). One exception is a recent study, which, however, is focused on the period before that examined in the Kostoeva dissertation: A. Sarkisian, “The Cross between Hammer and Sickle: Russian Orthodox Christians in the United States, 1908-1928” (Ph.D. diss., Northwestern University, 2019).

<sup>5</sup> Ciprian Burlacioiu, “Russian Orthodox Diaspora as a Global Religion after 1918,” *Studies in World Christianity* 24 (2018): 4-24.

<sup>6</sup> The existing scholarship has focused almost exclusively on the ecclesiastical (political and administrative) history, with scant attention to the purely religious and cultural dimension. Such is true even of the classic works by Georg Seide: *Geschichte der Russischen Orthodoxen Kirche im Ausland von der Gründung bis in die Gegenwart* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1983); idem, *Die Klöster der Russischen Orthodoxen Kirche im Ausland in Vergangenheit und Gegenwart: 60 Jahre Exil 1920-1980* (München: Sagner, 1984); and idem, *Die russische orthodoxe Kirche im Ausland unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der deutschen Diözese* (München: Kloster des Hl. Hiob von Počaev 2001).

<sup>7</sup> Archival guides to repositories with materials on the Russian Orthodox Church are wanting. For a recent contribution, see: Natalia Ermakova, “The Russian Orthodox Church and Russian Emigration as Documented in the archives of the Western American Diocese of the Russian Orthodox Church outside of Russia,” *Slavic and European Information Resources* 21 (2020): 94-102.

<sup>8</sup> Newspapers and journals (both Orthodox and secular) paid considerable attention to these new Orthodox buildings. According to A.V. Zen’kovskii, “American papers and journals published 300 reproductions” showing the Jordanville church designed by Verkhovskoy. Citation from: P.V. Verkhovskoy, *R.N. Verkhovskoy* (New York, 1956), p. 10 (copy included in this unpaginated archival file: “Illarion Sergeevich Lanskoï Papers 9999,” Bakhmeteff archive, Columbia University).

Kostroma, received his formal education at the Imperial Academy of Arts, and completed some work prior to his military service in World War I. After the war he emigrated from Russia and continued his professional career in Serbia, where he left an impressive legacy of artistic creations. Eventually, in 1937, he emigrated to the United States and soon emerged as a leading figure in Orthodox church construction, even serving as the chief architect for the Russian Orthodox Church abroad. He was responsible for several prominent churches and played a key role in transferring Russian architectural styles to his new American home. The present dissertation provides a well-documented biography of his work and life up to his death in 1968 (using an unpublished manuscript to challenge widespread narratives about mental illness in his later years).<sup>9</sup> The dissertation is not limited to Verkhovskoy, however: it also examines what might be called his “school,” fellow émigré Russian architects who applied and adapted the multifaceted “Russian national” architecture to the new cultural landscape of America.

Structurally, the dissertation offers a comprehensive account of this corpus of Russian émigré architects and their work from the 1930s through the 1970s (with some attention to later years). After a systematic review of the specialized literature and survey of extant sources (chapter 1) and a concise overview of church construction in America before 1930 (chapter 2), the dissertation then presents its longest chapter – on the neo-Russian style of Verkhovskoy (chapter 3), followed by shorter chapters on “traditionalists” (chapter 4) and “modernists” (chapter 5). The text, including the conclusion, comprises less than half of the entire dissertation, and the balance consists of the bibliography and four extensive appendices: biographical sketches of Verkhovskoy and ten other émigrés; a list of their known projects; documents from five of the architects (22 pages); and an album of 78 illustrations (including 39 photographs showing Verkhovskoy’s legacy). The result is a comprehensive portrait of the “neo-Russian” style as it was adapted to the American landscape and religious life, to the impact of modernism, and to new construction technologies. Altogether, this dissertation suggests a dynamic development of Orthodox church-building and the emergence of an “American school” of Orthodox architecture.

To be sure, no pioneering work can cover everything, especially in a case where the existing scholarship is virtually nonexistent and the sources scattered across many repositories (when indeed preserved at all). Future research, building on Kostoeva’s work, might well explore three potential lines of inquiry.

First, insofar as the meagre source base permits, it would be highly desirable to offer more *microhistories* of individual church projects—like the fascinating work that Kostoeva conducted on the Trinity Monastery at Jordanville and the Spaso-Preobrazhenskii Cathedral in San Francisco. More microhistories will enable further insights and generalizations about such critical issues as financing,<sup>10</sup> construction costs, and the interaction between the architect and the “contracting party” (both ecclesiastical authorities and the community of lay believers). That can reveal (as they do in the Jordanville and Spaso-Preobrazhenskii case studies) the complex task facing the émigré architects, who not only had to bear in mind the rich legacy of the Russian national architecture, but the needs and wants of those contracting their services. Even so prominent an architect as Verkhovskoy had to adapt his work or even

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<sup>9</sup> Lanskoï, I.S., Biography of R. N. Verkhovskoy (Bakhmetev Archive), cited in Kostoeva, *Architect*, p. 200.

<sup>10</sup> The economics of church construction deserve close attention, particularly in view of the declining number of Russian speakers among the foreign-born: from 356,940 (1940) to 149,277 (1970), according to the official U.S. census data (<https://www.census.gov/library/working-papers/1999/demo/POP-twps0029.html>).

could meet outright rejection (with his projected blueprint shelved completely in favor of a different architect). Significantly, this was hardly unique to Russian Orthodoxy: other Christian faiths in America show a similar tendency toward lay empowerment, causing some historians even to call this assertion of local priorities and power a kind of “congregationalism.” Finally, microhistories (where the sources permit) can explore the role of the new church in community life, especially in promoting greater and more varied levels of engagement and observance.

Second, it is helpful to frame the analysis within a larger *comparative* context. How does the Russian church construction compare with other immigrant groups and other confessions? Apart from the case of non-Russian Orthodox churches in America,<sup>11</sup> comparative studies can suggest new insights, as in research on new approaches to Catholic church construction during this same period.<sup>12</sup> Most important, the Russian case appears to confirm a thesis advanced in American research that immigrants tended to foreground religion over ethnicity in their personal identity, which made it easier to “assimilate” in the polyconfessional American society.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, religion not only served as the primary marker in their identity but also shaped their expectations with respect to the functions and architecture of their local church. In the Russian case this helps to explain the strong preference for “neo-Russian” church designs, even if tempered with growing elements of modernism and more complex (and more American) demands on the functionality of the local church. Interestingly, the politics of anticommunism evidently did *not* play a role in the history of Orthodox church building. While the Cold War did trigger rightwing attacks on some religious organizations,<sup>14</sup> the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad – as the victim of Soviet antireligious campaigns – did not become the target of anti-Russian or anti-Soviet sentiment or policies.<sup>15</sup>

Third, in addition to the sources consulted here, it would be useful to examine the records of the local zoning boards. Zoning arose first in nineteenth-century Germany and by the early twentieth century had migrated to the United States, with influential zoning ordinances adopted in Los Angeles (1904) and New York City (1916), followed by national

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<sup>11</sup> For seven case studies (only one of which is Russian Orthodox), see Nicholas Denysenko, *Theology and Form: Contemporary Orthodox Architecture in America* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 2017), which describes the internal dynamics of community, examines the role of architecture in social and liturgical life, and shows how each building reflects the values of believers.

<sup>12</sup> Catherine Osborne, *American Catholics and the Church of Tomorrow: Building Churches for the Future, 1925-1975* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018).

<sup>13</sup> For a discussion and references, see: Charles Hirschman, “The Role of Religion in the Origins and Adaptation of Immigrant Groups in the United States,” *International Migration Review* 48 (2004): 1206-1233; and T. Smith, “Religion and Ethnicity in America,” *American Historical Review* 83 (1978): 1155-1185. On the role of the “national” in the growth of churches, see also: R. Finke and R. Stark, *The Churching of America, 1776-1990: Winners and Losers in the Religious Economy* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1992).

<sup>14</sup> As examples of the connection between churches and McCarthyism, see: R. Ericson, “The Role of American Churches in the McCarthy Era,” *Kirchliche Zeitgeschichte* 3 (1990): 45-58; M. Ruotsila, *Fighting Fundamentalists: Carl McIntire and the Politization of American Fundamentalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 113-46 (“Exposing Red Clergy”).

<sup>15</sup> The American Catholic press, for example, published reports about a strong “Christian underground” in Russia and specifically praised the “Russian Church-in-exile, which refuses to submit to the Patriarch of Moscow” (*St. Louis Register*, 3 December 1948). The same Catholic diocesan paper reported how the journal of the Moscow patriarchate attacked the Russian Orthodox Church in America precisely because the latter had “twice rejected offers of reconciliation with the Church in Russia” (*St. Louis Register*, 9 July 1948).

(“standard”) zoning models that three-fifths of all states had adopted by the 1930s.<sup>16</sup> The zoning aimed mainly to prohibit vast (especially tall) skyscrapers and to impede the residence of undesired ethnic or racial groups, but it also served to keep out the structures of unpopular confessions (the best examples being Mormon temples and Muslim mosques). Not until 2000, with the adoption of the “Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act” (RLUIPA) did the federal government prohibit zoning ordinances limiting or banning the construction of houses of worship (as a violation of religious freedom and the separation of church and state).<sup>17</sup> Until then, however, the construction of religious buildings was the subject of state and city ordinances and the decisions of local zoning boards. As a result, Russian émigré architects perforce had to obtain building permits and thus to cope with zoning statutes and committees to win approval for the size and even style of their projects.<sup>18</sup> It would therefore be very interesting to examine the interaction between the Russian architects and local zoning boards, which directly or unofficially, may have played a role in “Americanizing” or “indigenizing” the Russian national style.

The foregoing, however, are only suggestions for future research, and new scholarship will unquestionably have to begin with the pioneering work by V.A. Kostoeva. The present dissertation provides a valuable interpretive scaffolding, exploits a broad array of sources, and assembles fundamental information on “neo-Russian” church architecture and its development from the 1930s through the 1970s. The dissertation offers not only comprehensive reference materials, but also rich insights into the accomplishments of the Russian émigré architects and how their creativity evolved in response to changes in the cultural environment, technology, and the expectations and needs of believers.

Without qualification and reservation, I recommend that this superb dissertation be accepted for the candidate degree in art history (Scholarly Specialization 5.10.1: The Theory and the History of Culture and Art).

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<sup>16</sup> S. Meck, “Model Planning and Zoning Enabling Legislation: A Short History,” in: *Modernizing State Planning Statutes*, vol. 1 (Chicago: American Planning Association), 1996), 1-19. For the specific case of New York City, see: “City Planning History” (<https://www1.nyc.gov/site/planning/about/city-planning-history.page>).

<sup>17</sup> Religious discrimination only ended in 2000, with the adoption of a federal statute (“Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act”), which prohibits zoning exclusions on houses of worship as a violation of religious freedom and the separation of church and state. See: <https://www.justice.gov/crt/religious-land-use-and-institutionalized-persons-act>.

<sup>18</sup> Evidently, Russian church construction was not subject to national discrimination (as “Russian”), even during the Cold War: thanks to communist antireligious policies, the churches in American looked sympathetically on the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad, as a victim of communist antireligious policies