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“Wooden Church Architecture of the Russian North, XIX-early XX
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External Review

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E.V. Khodakovskii
“Wooden Church Architecture of the Russian North, XIX-Early XX Centuries”
External Review
Gregory L. Freeze

The 1990s marked the beginning of a new period in the study of religion and the Orthodox Church in Russia.¹ After decades of physical destruction² and denigration, the Orthodox Church has begun to rebuild its churches and scholars have begun to reassess its history³ in the modern era. Significantly, that new scholarship has included particular attention to the wooden churches that were the glory of medieval Rus’ and that continued to prevail in the countryside until the very end of the empire in 1917. In contrast to the Soviet era, where the regime’s antireligious imperative fostered a negative assessment of the wooden churches, especially in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the new scholarship has offered a more “objective”—i.e., unbiased and positive—assessment of the wooden church architecture.⁴ The doctoral dissertation by E.V. Khodakovskii represents a major contribution to this new scholarship, a pioneering and synthesizing study that offers an original reassessment based on intensive archival and field research.

The dissertation is clearly framed, geographically and chronologically. It focuses on the “Russian North,” defined as the area encompassing three provinces (Arkhangel’sk, Vologda, and Olonets) in the imperial period. To be sure, these provinces varied significantly in their social, economic, and ethnographic profiles; in terms of population density, for example, the population in Arkhangel’sk diocese was exceptionally sparse, producing parishes that were small in membership but immense in territorial dispersion.⁵ Chronologically, the dissertation examines the period from 1800 (beginning with Paul’s ban on wooden church construction, 25 December 1800) to the revolution of 1917, but includes some attention to the late eighteenth century and to the early 1920s (when, despite the Bolshevik’s antireligious campaign, wooden church construction initially continued).

¹ In the West too scholarship suddenly showed an entirely different view of religion and its role in modern society. Current research rejects the “secularization” thesis that had long prevailed, with its assumptions about inexorable and ubiquitous dechristianization. The “desecularization” of scholarship emphasized the transformation of lived religion, where processes of privatization and laicization prevailed—encapsulated in Grace Davie’s famous formula, “believing without belonging.” See: Grace Davie, *Religion in Britain since 1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994); idem, *Oxford Handbook of Religion and Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Handbook, 2022).

² For a graphic description, see: Д.О. Шидковский, *Русская церковная архитектура накануне революции* (Москва: Архитектура-С, 2018), с. 5.

³ The scholarly neglect of religious life in Russia was characteristic of both Western and Soviet scholarship, as the data on dissertations demonstrates. Prior to 1991, for example, a bibliographical search shows 18 American dissertations and just 6 Soviet dissertations on the Russian Orthodox Church. Since 1991 then an analogous search yields 117 American dissertations and 779 Russian dissertations. Those data are derived from an online search of Proquest (for U.S. dissertations) and the Russian State Library (for Soviet and Russian dissertations). The numbers here are only approximate (specific tallies vary somewhat depending on the indicators and criteria used), but reflect the phenomenal upsurge after 1991.

⁴ For a detailed review of the more “objective” scholarship in recent scholarship, see: Е.В. Ходаковский, «Деревянное церковное зодчество Русского Севера в отечественном искусствознании начала XXI века» *Вестник Санкт-Петербургского университета, Искусствоведение*, 2021, №4, с. 696-714; Е.В. Ходаковский, *Деревянная церковная архитектура русского севера XIX-начала XX в. Летопись храмостроительства* (Санкт-Петербург: Издательский дом «Коло», 2020), 15-26.

⁵ In 1869, for example, the territory of the average parish varied considerably in the three northern provinces examined here: 2,684.2 sq. versts in Arkhangel’sk diocese, compared to 496.3 square versts in Vologda diocese and 523.8 sq. versts in Olonets diocese. That same year the average number of parishioners also varied, but less dramatically: 1,102.1 in Arkhangel’sk diocese, 1,380.8 in Vologda diocese, and 1,160.2 in Olonets diocese. Российский государственный исторический архив [далее: РГИА], ф. 804, оп. 1, р. 1, д. 18, л. 17.

Substantively, the dissertation emphasizes the architectural style and structure of the churches, but also pays attention to its interior and décor, thereby producing a multi-dimensional perspective on the churches that continued to be built from the mid-1830s onward.

The research is truly impressive. It includes substantial use of unpublished materials from the main Church and state fonds at the Russian State Historical Archive (St. Petersburg), the Russian State Archive of Ancient Documents (Moscow), five oblast archives (in Arkhangel'sk, Vologda, Murmansk, Novgorod, and Petrozavodsk), and several manuscript collections (Russian Academy of Sciences and Russian Institute of Ethnography in St. Petersburg; State Historical Museum and the Shchesev State Museum of Architecture in Moscow). Given the fact that so many wooden churches are no longer extant (not only because of Soviet antireligious policy, but also because of natural weathering, fire, renovation, and rural depopulation), archival records provide a crucial source for reconstructing how wooden churches once appeared.⁶ In addition, the research included the standard legal collections: Полное собрание законов Российской Империи (собрания 1-3) and Свод законов Российской Империи (multiple editions).⁷ Some use is also made of the voluminous diocesan gazettes (*епархиальные ведомости*), which began to appear from the 1860s and which often included historical materials in the supplement (*Прибавления*) that accompanied each issue. Particularly impressive is the extensive field work, which enabled first-hand visits to 104 churches (p. 7); the *in situ* visits enabled not only first-hand inspection but also resulted in a huge collection of illustrations (119 of which appear as an appendix to the text). In short, the dissertation is a rich mine of information that can lay the groundwork for future research.

The dissertation offers several important theses (summarized on pp. 23-24). First, north Russian wooden churches 1800-1917 represent an important, positive stage in the development and diversification of church construction. That flourishing followed the hiatus of 1800-1835 (from Paul's 1800 ban on the construction of wooden churches to its annulment in 1835), but also occurred in spite of state regulation (with exemplary models—образцовые чертежи—and bureaucratic reviews of construction plans). As this dissertation demonstrates, one should not exaggerate the impact of administrative control, as the mind-boggling diversity of the new churches attests. Significantly, as shown here, the construction of 1835-1917 continued the earlier traditions of wooden church architecture, but also admitted the

⁶ The high rate of loss for wooden churches is not unique to Russia: even in Norway only 3% of the wooden churches have survived from medieval times to the present. E.V. Khodakovsky, "Introduction" in: *Historic Wooden Architecture in Europe and Russia: Evidence, Study and Restoration*, eds. E. Khodakovsky and S. Lexhau (Basel: Birkhäuser, 2016), 12.

⁷ The dissertation does cite the single Synodal volume of published resolutions from the 19th century—the collection of resolutions for 1825-1835: *Полное собрание постановлений и распоряжений по ведомству православного исповедания Российской империи. Царствование Государя Императора Николая I*, 1 том (Петроград: Типография 1-й Петр. Трудовой Артели, 1915). For policy antedating Paul's decree in 1800, historians can make a systematic study of Synodal decisions for the entire eighteenth century, which were published in a total of 18 volumes: *Полное собрание постановлений и распоряжений по ведомству православного исповедания Российской империи, 10 тт.* (Санкт-Петербург: Синодальная типография, 1869-1915); *Полное собрание постановлений и распоряжений по ведомству православного исповедания Российской империи. Царствование Государыни императрицы Елисаветы Петровны*, 4тт. (СПБ: Синодальная типография, 1899-1912); *Полное собрание постановлений и распоряжений по ведомству православного исповедания Российской империи. Царствование государыни императрицы Екатерины второй*, 3 тт. (СПБ: Синодальная типография; Типография Штаба Отд. Корпуса Погр. Стражи, 1910-1915); *Полное собрание постановлений и распоряжений по ведомству православного исповедания Российской империи. Царствование государя Павла Первого* (Петроград: Типография М.П. Фроловой, 1915). Valuable too is the very detailed summary descriptions of the Synodal archive, but unfortunately most of the volumes cover only the first half of the eighteenth century: *Описание документов и дел, хранящихся в архиве Св. Прав. Синода*, 31 тт. (СПБ: Синодальная типография, 1869-1916).

changes that give a unique “identity” (*идентичность*) to the new era of wood churches. The dissertation highlights the originality and contributions by peasant master craftsmen and emphasizes their productive collaboration with professional and amateur architects. In short, contrary to previous scholarship, which tended to denigrate the significance of wooden church architecture in late imperial Russia, this dissertation presents a systematic evidence of its high quality and ties to a rich tradition.

It is important to consider the broader implications of these findings. Above all, it demonstrates the strength of the parish, especially the laity, in late Imperial Russia: despite exemplary models and bureaucratic oversight, parish preference determined the architecture and interior form of new and reconstructed churches. That power was partly rooted in the traditional economy: the local community, not the institutional Church or the state, bore the burden of construction costs—which inevitably validated parishioner prerogative. Parish power was not new; it had prevailed before the gradual bureaucratization of the Church in the Synodal period. However, the principle of parish power gained new impetus from the mid-nineteenth century, when central Church authorities—like their peers in the Western churches—embraced the strategy of lay empowerment as a tool to mobilize believers and combat disbelief and indifference. In the Russian case, that strategy was central to the ecclesiastical reforms of the 1860s, especially the parish statute of 1864 establishing the попечительство (originally called “приходской совет”)⁸ to institutionalize and mobilize parish power, with the specific responsibility for the local church building (along with the tasks of supporting parish schools and local clergy). Parish assertiveness steadily gained momentum in the following decades, as the laity sought to reclaim its earlier control over the appointment of clergy and over the use of parish finances.⁹ Significantly, those latter demands—control over parish finances and appointment of clergy—dominated the “parish question” from the 1860s to 1917. It is indeed worth noting that the parish’s authority over the church itself was uncontested: this issue does not even appear in the discourse about the “parish question” or at the Church Sobor of 1917-1918.¹⁰ It is therefore not surprising that, regardless of exemplary models, civilian architects, and state regulations, it was parish preference—“ancestral memory” (p. 148)—that prevailed in the construction and renovation of *their* local church. Accordingly, individual parishes made changes as they saw fit, especially with respect to space and the need to accommodate larger memberships resulting from natural demographic growth. By extension all this suggests why the Bolshevik campaign to confiscate church valuables and parish buildings provoked such fierce resistance: the Bolshevik antireligious campaign directly violated the parish’s proprietary claim. In the most literal sense, the parish church belonged not to the Church or clergy, but to the parishioners themselves.

The dissertation confirms, moreover, that wooden churches were clearly the preferred option for parishioners in the village. Despite the durability of stone buildings, these entailed not only higher construction costs, but also other problems, especially the procurement of materials and availability of qualified masons. While stone had understandably become mandatory in cities (given the threat of contagious fire and large-scale destruction), that was beyond the means of many rural parishes, especially those in remote areas with small flocks.

⁸ Freeze, *Parish Clergy*, 252-254.

⁹ G.L. Freeze, “All Power to the Parish? The Problem and Politics of Church Reform in Late Imperial Russia,” in: *Social Identities in Revolutionary Russia*, ed. Madhavan K. Palat (London: Macmillan, 2001), 174-208; А.Л. Беглов, «Православный приход Российской империи на рубеже XIX-XX вв.: состояние, дискуссии, реформы», докторск. дисс. (Москва, 2019).

¹⁰ The question of parish church architecture does not emerge, significantly, in the section devoted to the “parish question” at the Sobor in 1917-1918. See: Беглов, А.Л., ред. *Документы священного собора православной российской церкви 1917-1918 годов*. Т. 14: *Протоколы заседаний и материалы Отдела о благоустройении прихода* (Москва: Изд-во Новоспасского монастыря, 2016).

Interestingly, at the empire-wide level, the proportion of new churches that were wooden rather than stone significantly increased: from 44.9% in 1844 (96 of 214 new churches) to 66.6% in 1914 (269 of 404 new churches).¹¹ As the annual reports from the chief procurator¹² for sample years (1850, 1860, 1870, 1888, 1888, 1900, and 1914) in these northern dioceses show, most new churches were wooden: 85.1% in Arkhangel'sk diocese (23 of 27 churches) and 80.4% in Olonetsk diocese (37 of 46), with a much lower proportion of 23.1% (6 of 26) being reported only in Vologda diocese.¹³ The construction of less expensive wooden churches helped the Church to cope, at least partly, with the enormous demographic growth of imperial Russia, where the official number of believers jumped from 44.7 million (1843) to 98.4 million (1914).¹⁴ Although the Church actively increased the number of religious buildings (including parish churches), the population growth outstripped the construction, with the result that the average number of parishioners per parish church in the empire steadily rose: from 1,565.9 (1843) to 2,414.1 (1914). As the following table shows, the average number of parishioners in the three dioceses examined here increased as well, but remained at a much slower level, especially in the case of Arkhangel'sk diocese.¹⁵

Average Number of Parishioners per Parish

Year	Diocese			Empire
	Arkhangel'sk	Vologda	Olonetsk	
1843	1,078.3	1,207.4	1,088.3	1,565.9
1914	1,100.3	2,196.9	1,500.3	2,414.1

«Извлечение из отчета... за 1844 год.» (СПБ: Синодальная типография, 1845), приложение, с. 10-13, 27-29; «Всепопданнейший отчет... за 1914 год» (Петроград: Синодальная типография, 1916), приложение, с. 6-9, 26-27.

The intensive construction of wooden churches (cheaper, easier access to materials and craftsmen) was therefore of major importance. First, it served to mitigate the impact of the explosive demographic growth in Imperial Russia in the 19th and early 20th centuries:

¹¹ During those same years the proportion of newly constructed church in the three northern dioceses (Arkhangel'sk, Vologda, and Olonetsk) increased from 25% (2 of 8) to 83% (10 of 12) during those same years. Извлечение из отчета обер-прокурора Святейшего Синода за 1844 год (Санкт-Петербург: Синодальная типография, 1845), приложение, с. 22-24; Всепопданнейший отчет обер-прокурора Святейшего Синода по ведомству православного исповедания за 1914 год» (СПБ: Синодальная типография, 1916), приложение, с. 8-10.

¹² «Извлечение из отчета по ведомству духовных дел православного исповедания за ... год» (СПБ: Синодальная типография, 1837-1863); «Извлечение из всепопданнейшего отчета обер-прокурора Св. Синода по ведомству православного исповедания за ... год» (СПБ: Синодальная типография, 1866-1884); «Всепопданнейший отчет обер-прокурора Святейшего Синода по ведомству православного исповедания за ... год» (СПБ: Синодальная типография, 1886-1915).

¹³ Данные в приложениях к отчетам обер-прокурора: Извлечение из отчета обер-прокурора Святейшего Синода за 1844 год (Санкт-Петербург: Синодальная типография, 1845), приложение, с. 22-24 «Извлечение из всепопданнейшего отчета» за 1860 год, за 1870 год; Всепопданнейший отчет... за 1881 год, за 1888 год, за 1900 год, и за 1914 год.

¹⁴ Извлечение из всепопданнейшего отчета за 1844 год (СПБ: Синодальная типография, 1845), с. 9-19, 28-29; «Всепопданнейший отчет» за 1914 год (Петроград: Синодальная типография, 1916 г.), с. 38. For other years see: И. Преображенский, «Отечественная церковь по статистическим данным с 1840-41 по 1890-1891 гг.» (СПБ: Типография Э. Арнгольда, 1897), с. 38.

¹⁵ To be sure, one must beware of the "temporal unilinear fallacy": trends were not inexorable and did not form a straight line, but proved susceptible to considerable oscillation (like that, for example, caused by the 1869-1884 attempt to merge small parishes into larger units). For an overview of the policy and the problems that it caused and that led to its repeal in 1884, see: G.L. Freeze, *Parish Clergy in Nineteenth-Century Russia: Crisis, Reform, Counter-Reform* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 315-319, 363-383, 417-33. For a statistical summary, see Преображенский, *Отечественная*, 17-19.

despite that increase, the Orthodox Church was able to provide religious services to an ever growing population. In a word, Russia was not being “de-churched”, and this helps to explain why religious observance (measured, for example, by confession and communion rates) remained much higher in Russia than in Western Europe, where “de-churching”—measured by plummeting rates of observance—proceeded at a dramatic pace. Moreover, wooden church construction also helps to explain the Church’s capacity to conduct missions against confessional challenges (especially from the Old Belief and sectarianism) and to promote conversion among indigenous, non-Russian populations (such as the Lapps in the Russian North).

As important as numbers are, so too are the narratives: one can learn much from a systematic analysis of the discourse about the traditional wooden church and why it appealed to the laity. This doctoral dissertation offers valuable material from parish documentation, and that is bolstered by the author’s scholarly articles providing microhistories for the construction history of individual churches.¹⁶ One would doubtless profit not only from further microhistorical inquiry into such texts but also from a close analysis of discourse in the press. That is an enormous project in its own right, and this pioneering dissertation lays the foundations for such research.

Without qualification and reservation, I recommend that this superb dissertation (E.V. Khodakovskii, “Wooden Church Architecture of the Russian North, XIX-Early XX Centuries”) be accepted for the doctoral degree in art history: scientific specialty: 5.10.3 Types of Art (Fine Art, Decorative and Applied Arts and Architecture).

¹⁶ Е.В. Ходаковский и Е.А. Мелюх, «Преображенская церковь в Нименьге и деревянное церковное зодчество Беломорья XIX века», *Архитектурное наследство*, вып. 59 (2013): 157-167; А.Б. Бодэ, Т.В. Жигальцова, Е.В. Ходаковский, «Нименьгский приход онежского уезда архангельской губернии: строительная история», *Ученые записки петрозаводского государственного университета*, т. 42, № 6, с. 40-49; О.А. Зими́на и Е.В. Ходаковский, «Казанская церковь в деревне Большая Фёхтельма в Поонежье: материалы к творческой биографии архитектора А.А. Каретникова», *Academia. Архитектура и строительство*, 2020, № 2, с. 31-39; Е.В. Хомяковский, «Деревянное церковное зодчество Русского Севера в отечественном искусствознании начала XXI в.», *Вестник Санкт-Петербургского университета*, серия: искусствознание, 2021, т. 11, вып. 4, с. 696-714; О.А. Зими́на, А.Г. Носкова, Е.В. Хомяковский, «Деревянное храмовое зодчество Каргополя второй трети XIX века: Оди́гитриевская церковь в Малой Шалге и Георгиевская церковь в Замошье», *Архитектурное наследство*, вып. 70 (2019), с. 116-133.