

# Remnants of Empire

## The Estates of Russia and What Became of Them

Jason Grant

*“... In the area of destruction the Russians had no equal. So in this grand fire perished everything which had existed for two centuries, and, as it fell on the people of Peter the Great’s time to be new builders of life, so we in a new desert see only oases of the past.”*

—Baron N.N. Vrangeli, 1910

THE EASY THING TO DO would be to blame it all on the Soviets. After all, they made no secret of their disregard for most everything associated with tsarist Russia. They went to great lengths to deprecate or outright eradicate many aspects of pre-revolutionary life and culture, everything from the Tsar himself down to a particularly offensive letter of the alphabet. At the same time, with close to a century separating us from the last Romanov, it’s easy to idealize those times, to think of, ahh, those golden days when Nicholas and Alexandra and their lovely daughters graced the halls of the Winter Palace, when the streets were filled with writers and artists, when civility and order reigned, vodka was never bitter, and everything was right in the Russian Empire, until oh that fateful day in 1917.

That would be the easy thing to do. But just another in a long line of easy, ignorant responses to the thorny questions of history.

The question, in this case, being the Russian estate and what happened to it. How could the country’s thousands of estates—some of them incomparable monuments of architecture and landscape—be reduced to: a few museums, some ramshackle collective farm offices and sanatoriums, assorted ruins, some piles of brick, and a lot of even less?

Well, there’s plenty of fingers to be pointed, but first let’s start with some history.

Bismarck famously remarked that “the Russians are slow to saddle up, but ride fast.” I’ve never ridden horses there, but this statement still seems remarkably perceptive. Russia has an unusual ability to go from being a complete backwater in any given area to a being a major force, and all within a matter of decades. Take music, literature, or science for example.

Or take estates. Up until the 18th century, they were a pretty primitive affair, not at all comparable to what already existed in Italy, France, or England. The rise of the estate in Russia really didn’t start until Peter the Great began reforming and westernizing society. His reign saw a huge influx of architects and craftsmen from Europe, and a general admiration and emulation of all things Western. Things peaked towards the end of the 18th century, during Catherine the Great’s rule. Russian largesse was front and center; everyone was gunning for Versailles. Catherine built incessantly—the Winter Palace, Tsarskoe Selo, and a number of other palaces owe most of their splendor to her—and each new “favorite” of hers was pretty much obliged to build something the likes of which the Empire and the previous, now passé favorites had never seen before. There was the requisite amount of genuflecting (statues and paintings of various goddesses frequently bore a suspicious resemblance to the Empress), but

it was all in good fun, the craftsmanship was splendid, and it all had I guess a positive trickle-down influence on the rest of the nobility. Opulence was in. (If you ever have the chance, I highly recommend you to see some of the last truly authentic 18th century interiors like the Chinese Palace at Oranienbaum or Ostankino in Moscow. *Simply incomparable.*)

But before we get too carried away here, I'd like to take a paragraph to point out a few subtle structural flaws in this system. Probably the most endemic one was the excessive theatricality of life at the top of Russian society. On a literal level, the richer you were, the less your estates served any agricultural function and the more they existed solely for show, diversion, and entertainment. Many of the wealthiest nobles kept large private orchestras, theater groups, performing midgets, and even more obscure or dubious entertainers. And the owners' lives were themselves a sort of theater. Court politics were volatile; Catherine's favorites turned over like actors entering and exiting stage. Someone could almost overnight go from being a fairly minor personage to being someone of extreme influence and wealth. And the same someone could go back to being a minor personage (or worse) with the same fantastic speed. Of course, this sort of rollercoaster lifestyle didn't lend much stability to the architecture created in its wake. Estates were absolutely breathtaking, but were also breathtaking money pits: they required huge sums of money and an army of laborers to maintain, and provided little in the way of return on investment if you're not counting some splendid parties and the satisfaction of having your own little kingdom. Life was a sort of light-hearted game. In other countries where things were taken a little more seriously, estates tended to be passed down from generation to generation. This happened in Russia too, but you were just as likely to go broke and have to sell, or fall out of favor and have your lands taken away, or just get tired of a place and move on to something new.

Of course, there were some external destructive forces as well. Fires were common, and Napoleon's 1812 invasion left a path of damage and upheaval extending all the way to Moscow.

The period following the Patriotic War brought a fundamental change in the character of estates. Many of the grandees of Catherine's time were dying off, sometimes leaving their splendid residences to decay and looting. Estates began to take on a more functional role as private orchestras and such were disbanded and the focus turned towards things like agriculture, horse breeding, and other types of production. This isn't to say that splendor was totally out the window, not at all. Wealthy princes and counts still built marvelous places and palatial stables, but the beginning of the modern trend toward functionality was evident. I should point out too that the estate wasn't at all the domain of the extremely wealthy; there was a bunch of more modest ones, and some were even downright squalid.

Here we should make a little aside and mention that Russia was run on a system of serfdom. Nobles could own land, and this land usually had some villages of serfs on it, and these serfs were also your property. You could buy and sell them, but for the most part, they sort of came with the land. Your stature as a land-owner was determined in large part by how many "souls" (yes, that's what they were called!) you had. Of course, these souls provided all the labor for agriculture, construction, and any other task or whim you might have. As with any such master-servant system, living conditions for the servants could vary considerably, with the average being: hard. Some owners were tyrants, and had nothing but abuse for their serfs. Others were nicer. Children of the house servants' were frequently educated along with the master's children, and especially promising young people were sometimes sent to St. Petersburg or Moscow to continue their education in music or art or architecture. A fair number of structures on the larger estates were built by serf-architects and artisans. The field peasants worked close to twenty hours a day during planting and harvesting seasons.

This era was a sort of second golden age of the Russian estate. The 19th century saw “the country life” immortalized in fiction by Russia’s new literary giants: Tolstoy, Pushkin, Turgenev, Gogol’. Most of the major estates housed extensive libraries and art collections; writers, poets, and artists were frequent summer guests. In general, estate life was extremely hospitable. If someone showed up at your place, you were pretty much honor-bound to take them in and provide them with room, board, and entertainment for as long as they cared to stay. This offer only applied to the gentry of course, and living conditions varied from place to place. But the larger estates would typically have a wing of the house or even a whole building reserved for guests, some of whom lived there on a more or less permanent basis. As you might imagine, a wealthy land owner was rarely without a few indigent distant relatives and other assorted hangers-on.

But a golden age is always preceded by decline, and sometimes by downfall. The estate would soon see both. And it wouldn’t be singled out by the events to come either; the forces of destruction and cataclysmic change would make little distinction between the estate and the rest of Russian society.

However, we’re only in the mid-19th century at this point in the article, and we’ve still got some time before all the destruction and whatnot reaches its final furious pace. All of that began rather more slowly. As the 19th century wore on, tensions were building between peasants and their owners, and the idea of some people owning other people became less and less tenable. The world was moving into the modern age, and slavery—and monarchies too for that matter—were on the wane. In 1861, by decree of Tsar Alexander II, the serfs were freed. It was a major and controversial event to be sure, but Russia seemed at the time to have gotten off pretty easy. After all, in the very same year the U.S. began a bloody civil war over this same question. In both countries, the abolishment of slavery promised an end to generations of injustice, and to what had become a particularly shameful aspect of society. But if slavery had always been anathema to the founding principles of the United States, for Russia it was the glue which held society together. After all, the relationship between a master and his serfs was essentially the same as between the Tsar and his people. Slavery was an ugly thread in the tapestry of Russian society; when it was pulled out, as it had to be, the rest of the cloth slowly began to unravel.

For the estate, emancipation had immediate consequences. Up until then, many a land owner had been coasting, relying solely on his superior social status to maintain his position of authority. What’s more, supreme social superiority doesn’t encourage good financial habits, and many of the nobles had blown through huge fortunes and were deep in debt by the 1860’s. With emancipation, the owners lost their source of free labor and the former serfs were now entitled to some of the estate’s land. This shock alone would have been enough to push many of the less solvent nobles out. And the ones who were left could no longer simply order the peasants around; they had to be competent managers and willing negotiators if they wanted to stay in charge and get a part of the harvest. Some estate owners made a successful transition into the new order, but many less able or less willing ones were weeded out.

So the estates began to be sold off in large numbers. Places that had been in a family for a few generations now had to go, and many were bought by the up-and-coming merchant class. Some estates fell into disuse and disrepair, others continued their existence more or less as before, just with new owners. Especially picturesque places near the capitals were hotly sought after by speculators and real estate developers who built rental cottages on the grounds or sold off the landscape parks piecemeal to city dwellers looking for a nice spot to

spend their summers. As always, little attention was paid to the possible historical significance of other people's "old stuff," and many structures and landscapes were significantly compromised during this period. Many elements of interior decor were sold or simply thrown out.

Meanwhile, the political situation in the country sped further and further out of control. Peasants' living conditions were no better than before abolition, and various anarchists, nihilists, revolutionaries, and terrorists were springing up like mushrooms after a rain. Alexander II had his legs blown off by a bomb; other ministers and government officials were targeted for assassination with increasing regularity. Alexander III undid many of his father's democratic reforms and increasingly used the secret police to keep opposition groups in check. In 1894 Nicholas II ascended the throne, and may have been a great guy, but proved an incompetent ruler and not at all the man who could have averted the country's looming political and social crisis. He wouldn't give the parliament any real power, refused to create a constitution, and sank pretty much the entire huge Russian navy in a disastrous and humiliating war against Japan's tiny fleet. Opposition to the government was increasing from all sides, and the Tsar's only response was the knee-jerk reaction of ever more harsh and paranoid security measures.

Things reached a head on January 9th, 1905, what became known as Bloody Sunday. A huge crowd of demonstrators packed Palace Square in front of the Winter Palace to petition the Tsar for reform. The assembly was largely peaceful, but Nicholas panicked and released his mounted guard on the people. A number of the demonstrators were shot or trampled, and mayhem ensued. Petersburg was locked down and police forces ran unchecked through the city, beating anyone who happened to be on the streets. News of this ugly event quickly spread beyond the capital, and soon insurrection and violence broke out around the country. Mobs of angry peasants swept through the countryside, laying waste to estates and any other symbols of power and the ruling class with particular relish. Blind and senseless rage fueled the destruction of anything that could be smashed, or broken, or set on fire, or killed. Some estate owners had to flee to the cities.

1905 proved only a dress rehearsal, however. The revolution was eventually quelled, and things returned to an uneasy peace. But it was a bad start to the 20th century. Things would get worse, and then much worse, and in between rarely any better. The 20th century would be little more than a fistful of long, sturdy nails for the coffin of the Russian estate.

The decade following 1905 was particularly interesting. I think there was a general feeling in the country that sweeping changes were close ahead, that things couldn't go on as they were. But for the moment, there was a respite, and society had a few years to reflect on the 300 years of the Romanov dynasty and Petrine Russia. The Empire spanned nearly half the globe. In the capitals and elsewhere, wonderful art nouveau architecture flowered with a poignant and tragic beauty, and a decadently sweet fin de siècle aroma. The horses were saddled and the horsemen—prepared to ride...

Here things start to happen fast, and get exceedingly complicated. Russia began World War I with the largest army in the world, but suffered colossal losses from the start: 1.7 million soldiers dead and another 5 million wounded in just two years. This greatly soured the mood in the country and wiped out any remaining confidence in the Tsar (many even suspected Alexandra was spying for the Germans). Amidst riots and discontent, Nicholas II abdicated. A temporary government was appointed, but a few months later, in October 1917, it was toppled by Lenin and the Bolsheviks, and the country descended into a ferocious civil war spanning the entire length of the former Empire. Something like 10 million people were

killed. By 1921 the White Army was largely defeated and the Bolshevik Red Army had control over most of Russia. The Soviet Union was founded in 1923.

Needless to say, much perished during the Civil War. Estates were ransacked and set ablaze, whatever members of the nobility who managed to survive were forced into exile as the Bolsheviks consolidated power. The few estates that were fortunate enough to stay in a family and be kept in good condition all the way up to 1917 were now finally and irrecoverably set adrift in the turbulent currents of Soviet history. 1917 marks the end of the Russian estate as an institution. Whatever structures continued to stand past this point did so through sheer architectural momentum.

### **Post-history**

As the smoke cleared from the Civil War, a few people began to notice that not all the estates had been destroyed. Like the period between the 1905 and 1917 revolutions, the 1920's brought a short renaissance in estate scholarship. In 1922 a group of Moscow scholars started the Society for the Study of the Russian Estate (OIRU in Russian) and began exploring the countryside around the city, studying and documenting what remained. Taitsy, 2002. Taitsy (1774–1775), 2002. They took photographs, wrote essays, published a journal. Some of the more opulent estates became museums; anyone could come and see the splendid interiors and the vast collections of art which the former owners had accumulated.

Stalin's rise put a quick end to this. OIRU was seen not as an organization of people interested in the Russia's rich culture and art, but as a hotbed of monarchists and tsarist sympathizers. In 1930 the director was brought before a firing squad. Subsequently most board members were also executed or died in labor camps. Many of the regular members were arrested and exiled. The estate-museums were closed, and anything of value was transferred to the central museums of Moscow and Leningrad, or simply went missing.

The remaining structures began to be re purposed for the "needs of the people," partially out of necessity (money and materials for new construction were scarce), but also out of a disdain for the estates and everything they represented. The Soviets had gone to great length to demonize the nobles, the land-owners, the Tsar, and most everything else that had existed before the Revolution, so people were happy to see this happen. Some fancier estates became vacation spots for party officials or the secret police, other popular options were rural schools, mental institutions, orphanages, collective farms, and sanatoriums.

However, no matter how hopeless the estate's situation might seem, things always found a way of getting worse. There's an old joke on Usenet that no discussion thread can be considered complete until Nazis are mentioned, and that's the point we've reached in our article here. For however violent and destructive the revolution and civil war had been, however dark the Stalinist Terror of the 1930's, in terms of wholesale devastation absolutely nothing would compare with the 1940's and the Great Patriotic War (how WWII was known in the Soviet Union). Germany invaded in the summer of 1941 and—once again true to Bismark's statement—the enormous Soviet military got off to a slow and astoundingly poor start. Hitler's blitzkrieg machine rolled over the Russian countryside with frightful speed and efficiency. Soviet troops frequently had to resort to scorched earth tactics as they retreated. Within a few months Leningrad was encircled and under siege; other divisions had nearly reached Moscow. The Nazis occupied large parts of European Russia, and with it many, many estates. If the Soviets themselves had little respect for the culture of their revolutionary ancestors, and the Nazis considered the Soviets to be hardly fit for slaves, then you can imagine how little admiration the Nazis had for Russia's historical architecture. And this is to say nothing of the actual fighting; bombs and artillery shells care little about their targets.

The estates and palaces outside of Leningrad suffered especially grievous fates. Virtually every one of them was under German control during the three year siege of the city. Many were used as military headquarters or barracks, or as garages for vehicles and munitions storage. The magnificent imperial palaces of Tsarksoe Selo, Peterhof and Pavlovsk had survived the revolution and civil war largely intact, but now the many treasures the Russians hadn't had time to evacuate were boxed up and sent back to Germany, or simply destroyed. When the Nazis retreated in 1944, they blew up what little remained of the palaces and mined the parks. Everything you see today is a reconstruction. The rebuilt palaces are museums today, and in every one you'll find a little display of "what this place looked like in 1944," a few black and white pictures set up on easels. The photographs are absolutely tragic.

Sometimes you only appreciate what you had once you've lost it, and the government's attitude towards pre-revolutionary architecture changed some after World War II. Many buildings had been wiped clean from the face of the earth, and would never be seen again. But others, especially the most significant ones, became part of a huge rebuilding and restoration effort which began shortly after the war. Partly because of limited resources and partly because of the colossal scope of the task, this effort took decades, and in some places continues even today (the legendary Amber Room was finished only in 2003). Major palaces were pretty well restored, but in most other cases only the exterior of a building was reconstructed, and maybe one or two rooms. For the most part, the rebuilt interiors were strictly utilitarian, as plain and unimaginative as those of any other provincial Soviet building. Interiors are really the soul of a building, but they're tragically ephemeral. WWII left many estates looking something like Lenin's body on Red Square: decent on the outside, but terribly hollow and artificial on the inside.

The structures returned to their pre-war, populist roles, and time passed slowly by. There were some ups (Stalin's death in 1953) and downs (a 1960's spike in demolition of pre-revolutionary architecture), but mostly, things were calm.

Calm, though, has a strange way of stoking Russia's manic tendencies, and it would soon be time to once again throw out the bathwater, the baby, and a few other items just for good measure. 15 years ago any schoolkid could go on and on about the varied and extraordinary virtues of Uncle Lenin. Now, many kids know as much about him as the average American kid knows about, say, Calvin Coolidge. I don't know which scenario is better, but I think, neither is good. At any rate, by the late 1980's a few scholars were beginning to research and document the remaining estates. OIRU was restarted in April 1992, just a few months after the Soviet Union was dissolved. There was a small but sincere interest in estates; the only problem was, nobody had any money.

All the estates were government property, the only kind of property there was in fact. After the fall of the Soviet Union, many of the sanatoriums and schools and whatnot that had occupied estate buildings sort of dried up and blew away, leaving the buildings vacant an essentially ownerless, even though many were and are "protected" (nominally!) by the government as historically significant structures. On the one hand, this did wonders for access: getting into many buildings became as simple as crawling through a window, foreigners too. On the other hand, the buildings were left very vulnerable to weather, to fire, and to the increasingly disaffected and depressed teenagers, whose only pastime in some wretched towns seems to be destroying what little beauty they have left in their surroundings. A decade of this has reduced a number of estates to little more than ruins.

And once again, as soon as much has been irrecoverably lost, people decide to do something about it. Starting in 2003 the government has begun changing some laws to clarify the legal ownership of estates and make the vacant ones, along with their parks and fields, available for sale. There's still some legal and political hurdles (you'd definitely have to know the "right people" to buy one) and plenty of red tape, not to mention the prohibitive restoration and upkeep expenditures, but the hope is that the corporation and the especially wealthy individual (yes, there are rich people, even fantastically rich people in Russia now) will be able to succeed where the government has failed and restore the Russian estate to its former splendor.

Who knows, maybe. The biggest effort so far—Putin's Konstantin Palace outside of St. Petersburg—was more of a rebuild than a restoration, and managed to turn a wonderfully desolate and enigmatic location into something decidedly more mundane. Torosovo, 2002. The Vrangal family estate (1870's). Torosovo, 2002. But after a couple years, the cracks are again beginning show—big chunks of plaster were missing from most columns in the fence last time I rode by—and maybe in a few years its thick atmosphere of history will return.

For now, though, I'll leave you with a few statistics. Once St. Petersburg province had about 2000 estates. Now I would estimate that only a few dozen exist. Sometimes you can tell by the trees or the vegetation that an estate used to be there, but I'm only counting ones with significant structures still remaining. Moscow province had even more; about 160 remain now. The numbers are similar for the rest of Russia.

In the early 20th century Baron Vrangal and others lamented the destruction and loss of the estate. They weren't whining either; much was indeed gone. But a decade later they seemed fantastically lucky, to have seen what they did. The situation OIRU documented in the 1920's was even bleaker, but its members seem no less fortunate; they were witnesses to a now-lost world. I started exploring estates in 2001. By last century's standards, there's hardly anything left, but somehow, I feel fortunate too.

If you're interested in this sort of thing, I can make some recommendations of related things to see and do:

### **Books**

- *Life on the Russian Country Estate: A Social and Cultural History* (Priscilla Roosevelt. Yale University Press, 1995) is about 350 pages and goes into much more detail about everything than my article does. It has a lot of pictures too, and is pretty enjoyable reading.
- *Lost Russia: Photographing the Ruins of Russian Architecture* (William Craft Brumfield. Duke University Press, 1995), a photography book. I think many of the pictures could have been a lot more interesting from a photographic standpoint, but the architecture is tremendous and the travelogue is interesting too.
- *Studio St. Petersburg* (Deborah Turbeville. Bulfinch Press, 1997), another photography book. This one is a good complement to Brumfield's since it has all the mystery and atmosphere that his photos lack.
- There are several good books in Russian, but none of them are translated into English as far as I know, so I won't list them here. You can contact me, though, if you really want to know. <http://nostalgicglass.org/>

### **The Web**

- There are a couple good Russian sites which have enough pictures to be interesting to someone who doesn't know the language. **Prosyolki** is a nice one, covering the Moscow

- region and central Russia. Then **Regionavt** covers the Leningrad region, as it's still called.
- **Northern Fortress** is concerned with military structures, and not really estates, but it's great nonetheless.
  - Then of course there's my site, the Nostalgic Glass.  
<http://nostalgicglass.org/index.html>

## Tourism

*If you're planning a trip to Russia, here's what I'd add to your list:*

- The St. Petersburg majors: the Winter Palace (Hermitage) and Pushkin, which used to be named Tsarskoe Selo and which has an unusual wealth of architecture and history for a small town. Tsarskoe Selo, 2002.  
Tsarskoe Selo, 2002. See the Catherine Palace and the Catherine and Alexander Parks; it's worth spending another day just wandering around the town. Many people like Peterhof and its fountains (if you take a car or bus there, you'll drive through Strel'na and past Putin's Konstantin Palace, which has been sarcastically dubbed "Putinhof"). Pavlovsk is very nice too. Oh, see the Yusupov Palace in St. Petersburg and wander down the Moika river past New Holland.
- Oranienbaum. The Chinese Palace (closed all winter) is the thing to see. Somehow this survived WWII intact and it's incredible, the closest you'll get in the Petersburg area to a real, minimally restored, 18th century interior. The park is pleasant too, comparatively obscure and neglected, and you can even see where Catherine II's "roller coaster" was. The palace used to be attractively dilapidated, till they covered the crumbling interior with drywall and cheap carpet. Ugh.
- Gatchina. Also a nice place, and less popular with the tourists. Be sure and take the tour of the tunnel leading from the palace to the lake and also visit the chapel (you don't have to buy a ticket to see this, just follow the signs and enjoy all the corridors they haven't had the money to restore since the war). The chapel, incidentally, is the only part of the palace which wasn't severely damaged in the fighting. Course, all the accoutrements are gone, but it's still a very interesting and authentic space.
- Moscow: Ostankino, Count N.P. Sheremetev's fabulous wooden theater-palace. Like the Chinese Palace, an exceeding fine and relatively untouched 18th century interior, just on a much larger scale. This is one of the most amazing buildings I've ever seen. It's closed during the winter due to excessive fragility.
- Then there's all the stuff in Moscow that I'm always planning to see, but for different reasons, never make it. The Sheremetevs' estate Kuskovo, the Ryabushinsky house (Malaya Nikitskaya, 6), and the Yusupovs' Arkhangelskoe (a little ways outside of town).

And finally, my "soundtrack" for writing this article was Shostakovich's 5th Symphony (1937). I think it's a wonderful distillation of the atmosphere of 20th century Russia. There are plenty of recordings, but the authoritative ones are Evgeny Mravinsky and the Leningrad Philharmonic, who premiered this and many other of Shostakovich's symphonic works.  
Copyright ©2005 Jason Grant.

## The Nostalgic Glass

*Photographical Exploration of the Ruined Historical Architecture of Russia & Elsewhere.  
Estates, Places : Their Histories and Fates.*  
<http://nostalgicglass.org/index.html>

Creative Commons License  
<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.5/>