

Laura A. Victoir

# **The Russian Country Estate Today**

A Case Study of Cultural Politics in Post-Soviet Russia

With a foreword by Priscilla Roosevelt

# SOVIET AND POST-SOVIET POLITICS AND SOCIETY

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*Coverpicture:* Derelict country estate, late-1990s. © Priscilla Roosevelt

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*To Nicolas and my parents*



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## Foreword

### Of Houses and History

The fate of Russia's estate houses is low on the current list of national priorities today, and with some reason. For example, who would place their preservation ahead of the health of Russia's children? Yet a legitimate argument can be made that, even in the turbulent atmosphere of early 21st century Russia, more attention should be paid to this aspect of historic preservation. Dmitri Shvidkovskii, Russia's premier architectural historian, once told me that, according to his calculations, before 1917 about 60,000 substantial estates defined the rural landscape of the 50 provinces of imperial Russia. Of these, less than 5% still exist in any form at present, most of them in Moscow oblast. Russia's crumbling rural estate houses are the sole remaining secular reminder of a flourishing provincial past. These survivors of revolution, civil war, and Nazi invasion served the Soviet state for seventy years in a number of capacities. A small number of manor houses became museums; most were utilized as hospitals or tuberculosis sanatoriums, orphanages or insane asylums, or holiday oases for various unions, agricultural institutes, and state farm headquarters. Many elegant estates in the environs of Moscow became dachas for the Communist elite.

This system of re-use of Russia's grand rural houses broke down in the late 1980s, when the Soviet government ran out of money to pay for its elaborate web of social services. There simply was no cash to repair winter damage to these houses and outbuildings, to pay adequate salaries to their staffs, nor to subsidize the virtually free services they provided. In rural areas, many former asylums and sanitariums simply closed down, as rapidly rising costs for materials and labor made annual upkeep impossible, while inflation wiped out retirees' ability to pay the real costs of formerly subsidized treatment or vacations.

I first glimpsed the dimensions of the historic preservation problem these estate houses pose in 1992, when I accompanied Professor Shvidkovsky and his wife, Katya Shorban, for six weeks, touring the surviving estates around Moscow. For me it was an extraordinary, and disheartening, experience to see so many estates, whose past is well preserved in memoirs or photographs, in their present-day altered, dilapidated, or derelict condition. At Olgovo, the upper floors of the manor house had collapsed upon its foundations in the five years since Shvidkovsky's last visit. Marfino's interior was gutted; huge oak French doors lay precariously across rotting supporting beams. Harsh weather, endemic thievery induced by rural poverty, the inability of caretakers to find means for repairs, or, in some instances such as Marfino, a deliberate decision to abandon an old building for a newly built one, were some of the factors contributing to decay.

Laura Victoir's impressive, groundbreaking case study of estate preservation efforts in Moscow oblast draws together the numerous economic, social, and political factors that are today determining the fate of these old houses. In the decade since the publication of my book, a huge literature on the history and cultural importance of Russia's estates has arisen. Numerous conferences have addressed the preservation situation, and new foundations have been created with the goal of heightening public awareness and support for these houses' continued existence. But, as Victoir's book amply illustrates, while the staggering dimensions and the urgency of the estate preservation problem have become more evident, the obstacles to its resolution may also have multiplied.

Victoir's book, based on a wide spectrum of written sources as well as numerous personal interviews, vividly depicts the impact of the competition for influence and resources between preservationists, developers, and politicians, in the very difficult circumstances of present-day Russian existence. This competition lies at the heart of the problem; its outcome will determine whether or not some of these wonderful sites, silent yet eloquent witnesses to the Russian past, will survive for future generations. The many champions of the rural estates that shaped and defined Russia's cultural and economic past are for the most part academics with little political influence or financial support. They often find themselves at odds with the numerous and contentious governmental bodies claiming jurisdiction over these properties, not to men-

tion with the new real estate moguls and wealthy individuals with their own agendas.

This admirable study will be an asset to all who are actively involved with historic preservation in Russia, and I have no doubt that it will act as an incentive to improve the survival rate of Russia's manor houses.

*Priscilla Roosevelt*  
Washington, DC



Figure 1: The Bakunin Estate