

Internationalizing Soviet Preservationism: A New Perspective on the Practices of Heritage Conservation in Russia

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English Abstract:

This review analyzes the book by Corinne Geering *Building a Common Past: World Heritage in Russia under Transformation, 1965–2000*. Based on a multi-layer approach, the author presents a comprehensive history of the late Soviet and early Russian state practices of heritage preservation from an international perspective. The monograph constitutes a valuable contribution to the historiographies of many historical fields, reconsidering the boundaries of a national framework and the Cold War narratives.

Internationalisierung des sowjetischen Denkmalschutzes: Eine neue Perspektive auf die Praktiken der Denkmalpflege in Russland

German Abstract:

Diese Rezension analysiert das Buch *Building a Common Past. World Heritage in Russia under Transformation, 1965–2000* von Corinne Geering. Die Autorin präsentiert darin eine umfassende Geschichte der späten sowjetischen und frühen russischen staatlichen Praktiken der Denkmalpflege aus einer internationalen Perspektive. Die Monographie stellt nicht nur einen wertvollen Beitrag zur Historiographie verschiedener historischer Felder dar, sondern überdenkt auch die Grenzen eines nationalen Rahmens und das Narrativ des Kalten Krieges.

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The existing scope of the historiography on cultural heritage protection has been characterized by a Eurocentric perspective on the development of state-run efforts to preserve monuments. The experience of the non-Western and, particularly, former socialist and post-colonial world had been largely neglected by scholars until the recent past. The heightened academic interest in heritage conservation in the respective regions resulted in the rapid growth of studies on the topic (Nelly Bekus and Kate Cowcher: “Socialism, Heritage and Internationalism after 1945: The Second World and Beyond.” *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 26.12 (2020), p. 1123-1131). This monograph by Corinne Geering, postdoctoral researcher at the Leibniz Institute for the History and Culture of Eastern Europe (GWZO) and alumna of the University of Giessen, on heritage conservation in late and post-Soviet Russia contributes significantly to this growing field of literature.

The book presents a *longue durée* viewpoint on the state preservation in the context of international cultural cooperation, asking, “how Soviet world heritage in Russia was re-interpreted as UNESCO World Heritage and re-integrated in a changed international setting following the disintegration of the Soviet Union” (p. 24). To answer this question, the author reconstructs the non-linear history of the Soviet system of heritage preservation considering its international dimension on the basis of a broad range of archival sources. Following a multi-level approach to sources, reconstruction integrates the developments on four levels: the level of international organizations, the state level within the Soviet Union, the level of federal subjects, and the local level of museum-institutions. This enables the researcher to present a comprehensive and conceptually sensitive study located at the crossroads of scholarship on the (global) histories of international organizations in the fields of culture and heritage

conservation, historic and environmental preservation in the Soviet Union and the Russian Federation, tourism and the cultural policies, as well as international cooperation and exchange during the Cold War.

The book consists of six chapters organized under chronological and thematical principles. Following the first, introductory chapter, the second chapter traces cultural cooperation between the Soviet Union and UNESCO during the Cold War's divide as well as the Soviet perspective on the conservation of heritage inside and outside of the country. The third chapter presents the development of the Soviet heritage conservation system during the post-war period through the lens of such notions as monuments and historic towns, the open-air museums, *muzei-zapovedniki* (heritage site museums), and ecology of culture. The author argues that the understanding of these concepts was shaped by the international exchange of experience between experts during conferences, collaborative projects, and by an adaptation of international legislation in Soviet conservation practices. The following chapter develops this argument by portraying the institutional structure of heritage conservation in the Soviet Union. The culminating moment in Soviet preservationism during the final years of the Union's existence is described in the fifth chapter. During *perestroika* reforms in the middle of 1980s the system of heritage preservation underwent a considerable transformation that resulted in the ratification of the World Heritage Convention and the creation of a positive climate for the incorporation of Soviet heritage locations into the ranks of UNESCO World Heritage sites. In the final chapter, the author elaborates on the internationalization of the sites in the early post-Soviet period in the Russian Federation, presenting the challenges of the implementation of the UNESCO World Heritage Convention in the country.

A minor weakness of the book could be traced to the second chapter, when the author discusses the acquisition of political legitimacy through conservation in the Soviet Union, arguing that "the state's protection of cultural heritage was associated with claims of superiority over other political systems" (p. 101). Indeed, the state's protection of cultural heritage was associated with attempts to overthrow symbolically this or that political system, but it also was heavily dependent on the ideological context which facilitated or severely suppressed endeavors to protect historic sites. For example, following the academic purges of 1921-1931 during Stalinism, conservation of heritage and, particularly, *kraevedenie* (local studies) was equated to counterrevolutionary activity and considered a potential source of opposition to Moscow's

hegemony (Catriona Kelly: “The Shock of The Old: Architectural Preservation in Soviet Russia.” *Nations and Nationalism* 24.1 (2018), p. 88-109, here: p. 93). Although Geering does not elaborate in this and the following chapters on the reasons behind the repression of heritage preservation from the late 1920s until the Great Patriotic War, this point is worth nuancing for understanding the dynamics of state attitudes towards monuments’ protection. Beside this criticism, the book impresses with the richness of material, consistent narration, the painstaking reconstruction of events, and crystal-clear structure. Geering’s monography as a pioneering study of heritage conservation in the Soviet Union from a long-term international perspective uncovers the history of a considerable number of organizations, institutions, experts, and collaborative projects, laying a solid foundation for future research.