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# Refuge from Communism: A Monastery in New York Preserves Russian Orthodoxy

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# Refuge from Communism: A Monastery in New York Preserves Russian Orthodoxy

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research article

## Refuge from Communism: A Monastery in New York Preserves Russian Orthodoxy

—Cory McKenzie (Editor: Katy Sternberger)

New York's Herkimer County has a secret. On the surface, it seems like any other part of Upstate New York. The town of Herkimer, the county seat, sits along the Erie Canal and the New York State Thruway. South of the canal and the highway, buildings gradually give way to woods and hills. In the hamlet of Jordanville, less than half an hour away from Herkimer, the woods open to miles of rolling farmland. There is hardly a living creature in sight. The occasional farmer invariably smiles and waves at any and all passersby, as if to emphasize the infrequency of human encounters on these roads. Suddenly, in this heart of American farm country, the landscape is pierced by a most curious sight: the golden onion domes of a Russian Orthodox cathedral. The occasional farmer in blue overalls is abruptly replaced by a community of monks and priests wearing flowing black robes. People begin to speak Russian. Signs are written in both Russian and English. This is Holy Trinity Monastery. I will never forget my first glimpse of the monastery in the summer of 2011. It was as if I had stumbled into Russia in the middle of New York State.

### How I Found Holy Trinity Monastery

I did not find Holy Trinity Monastery by accident. I can only imagine what a surprising experience *that* would be! I had arranged to visit the monastery as a part of my Research Experience and Apprenticeship Program (REAP) project on Russian Orthodoxy during the twentieth century. I had taken History Professor Cathy Frierson's "Soviet Dreamers, Despots, and Dissidents" class during my second semester at the University of New Hampshire, and my past research in religious and philosophical topics caused me to pay particular attention to the Russian Orthodox Church's story during the Soviet years. Almost immediately after taking power in 1917, Lenin and the communists began to dismantle the long-powerful state church and execute priests and other religious leaders on a horrifying scale. While I read these accounts of persecution, I read elsewhere that the Orthodox Church has become an important force in twenty-first-century Russian society. How did Russian Orthodoxy survive communist rule to reassume a prominent place in Russian life? When I asked Professor Frierson about this turn of events, she suggested I visit Holy Trinity Monastery. Holy Trinity Monastery itself proved to be the answer to my questions. While Russian Orthodoxy was under siege in its mother country, this New York monastery served as a safe



*The author standing with Father Victor in front of the main monastery building. Behind them is an image of St. Michael the Archangel.*

haven where beliefs and traditions were preserved until the collapse of communism. The monastery received recognition for its historical significance on July 15, 2011, when it was added to the National Register of Historic Places.

I contacted Archimandrite Luke, the abbot of Holy Trinity Monastery, and received permission to visit the monastery and conduct interviews. Abbot Luke assigned Father Victor Lochmatow, a deacon who has worked at the monastery since 1956, to help me arrange the interviews. When I arrived at the monastery last summer, Father Victor stood on the front step of the main building waiting to greet me. He introduced me to Father Roman Krassovsky, a priest, scholar of the Church's history, and choir director at Holy Trinity Monastery. Father Roman discussed the history of the Church with me for nearly two hours.

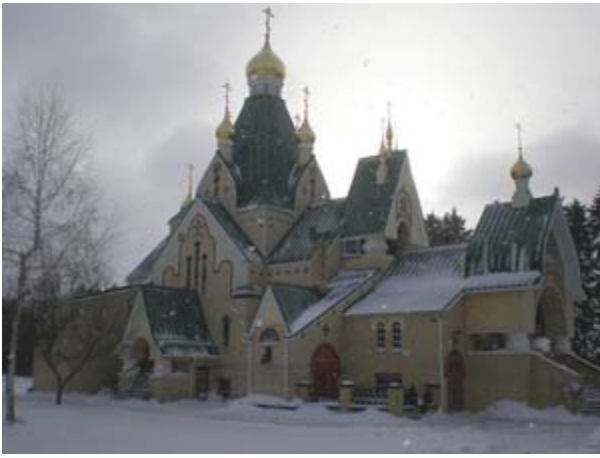
## **Communist Persecution of the Church**

The communists began to persecute the Russian Orthodox Church immediately after they rose to power in 1917. Between 1918 and 1920, the communists murdered dozens of bishops, thousands of lower-ranking clergy, and more than 12,000 laymen. In the 1930s, Stalin intensified the persecution. By 1939, there were only one hundred churches left in Russia. A mere four bishops could boast leadership over a diocese. Closed churches were desecrated. Open churches fell into disrepair. Some were transformed into warehouses. In 1931, Stalin dramatically demolished Moscow's iconic Cathedral of Christ the Savior (rebuilt after the collapse of communism). Even in the face of this persecution, Russian Orthodox Christians remained confident that they would ultimately prevail over the communists. "You cannot kill the Church," Father Roman argued. "The Church is built on the bodies of the martyrs." The Church would emerge from this struggle even stronger than before, with new heroes and martyrs to inspire the faithful. It was this hope—this confidence—that inspired the monks of Holy Trinity Monastery to preserve the traditions of Russian Orthodoxy.

When I discuss my REAP project with Americans of the Cold War generations, they are often surprised to learn about the Orthodox Church's opposition to communism and the persecutions it suffered as a result. They tell me they had the impression that "anything Russian" was an ally of communism. On the contrary, the Church had been a close ally of the old Russian monarchy. Russian Orthodox Christians view the murder of the last tsar, Nicholas II, and his family as one of the communists' most egregious crimes. For Father Roman, Nicholas II represents not only a pious individual, but a spiritual link between the Church, the state, and the people. His murder was, according to Father Roman, "not a political assassination; it was the beheading of an Orthodox monarchy, which is tied together with the Church and the people." There was no separation of church and state. Russian Orthodoxy encompassed all of Russian life, political and private.

## **Russian Émigrés Form a Separate Church**

Some Church leaders began to weaken in the face of persecution, prompting Russian émigrés around the world to form a separate church. In 1927, Metropolitan Sergius of Moscow attempted to stop the persecutions by professing loyalty to the Soviet government (a metropolitan is the bishop of a large city). Metropolitan Sergius controversially declared, "We wish to be Orthodox and at the same time recognize the Soviet Union as our civil homeland, whose joys and successes are our joys and successes, and whose failures are our failures" (Alfeyev, 270). Sergius' declaration angered Russian Orthodox Christians in Russia and abroad. Russian émigrés believed that the Church in Russia was no longer speaking the truth; its leadership had caved in to persecutions and was being controlled by the communists. It was bad enough that Russian Orthodoxy, once the guiding force of all Russian life, was being physically destroyed by the communists. Outward destruction, however, was far less worrisome than Sergius' declaration of loyalty to the communist regime. The moral authority of the Church had now come into question. Appalled, Russian émigrés separated from the Moscow patriarchate and formed the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia (ROCOR), an independent church that was still a part of the Russian Orthodox cultural tradition. Ironically, ROCOR was protecting a national religion that was being destroyed in its homeland.



*The cathedral at Holy Trinity Monastery in the winter.*

ROCOR began to create institutions to preserve Russian Orthodoxy. Established in 1930, Holy Trinity Monastery in Jordanville, New York, was one such institution. It quickly became one of the most important and active parts of ROCOR. To preserve Orthodoxy, the monks of the Jordanville monastery printed religious literature—prayer books, bibles, textbooks for seminarians, and so forth—to send to churches in the Soviet Union. These publications made "Jordanville" a household name among Orthodox Christians in Russia.

In 1981, ROCOR recognized the weakening of communism and provided what Father Roman called a "spiritual push." ROCOR canonized the Russian Orthodox victims of communist persecution. Among the martyrs were members of the royal family, including Tsar Nicholas II himself. During the

1988 millennial anniversary of Orthodox Christianity in Russia, President Gorbachev allowed Orthodox Christians to restore their desecrated churches. The communist government collapsed in 1991 amidst the reconstruction of the Cathedral of Christ the Savior in Moscow and the Moscow patriarch's acceptance of the victims of communism as saints and martyrs. ROCOR did not formally reunite with the Church in Russia until 2007, a milestone that still causes great excitement at Holy Trinity Monastery.

At Holy Trinity Monastery, the monks' life work was the preservation of Russian Orthodoxy so that they could one day restore the Church in Russia. The reunification was therefore a time of great joy at the monastery. Holy Trinity Monastery's own abbot, Laurus, was the leader of ROCOR in 2007. It was Laurus who traveled to the Cathedral of Christ the Savior in Moscow to sign the Act of Canonical Communion with the Moscow Patriarchate with Alexy II, the Patriarch of Moscow. Laurus and Alexy both passed away in 2008. People at the monastery place great store in the timing of their passing. Father Roman called the reunification "the crown jewel of their spiritual lives." A third person influential in the reunification was Russian President Vladimir Putin. President Putin gave an icon to Abbot Laurus on that occasion, which now adorns the left wall just inside the entrance to the main monastery building.



*Smolensk Mother of God, circa 1600. This icon is modeled after a well-known image of Mary presenting the Christ Child that was once housed in Smolensk's Assumption Cathedral. Mary with the infant Jesus is a popular theme in Russian iconography. (Museum of Russian Icons, Clinton, Massachusetts)*

## **Inside the Cathedral: Heaven's Unwavering Gaze**

After our discussion of Russian Orthodox history, Father Roman gave me a tour of the most stunning building at the monastery: the cathedral. On the outside, it is a large building made of light-colored bricks. Its pine green roof is adorned with golden onion domes topped with Orthodox crosses (distinguished by an extra horizontal bar at the top and a diagonal bar where Christ's feet would have been). Like most Orthodox churches, nearly every inch of its interior is decorated with icons: paintings of Christ, Mary, angels, and saints. While religious artwork has played an auxiliary role to faith in other branches of Christianity, in Eastern Orthodoxy it has been a chief component of church life for more than a thousand years. An Orthodox icon is an aid to prayer. Orthodox Christians do not pray to icons; they pray through them. Nevertheless, icons are not mere paintings either. They do not simply depict saints; they are an extension of them. The faithful believe they are actually looking into the faces of the saints. Indeed, the face is usually the centerpiece of the icon. Some icons are covered with gold and silver ornamentation that draws viewers' attention to the face, emphasizing that believers stand before heaven's unwavering gaze.

Since Tsar Peter I's westernization reforms in the eighteenth century, iconography had been a fading tradition in Russia. Russians began to view their traditional art forms as backwards and inferior to their Western European counterparts. The early years of the twentieth century witnessed a renewed interest in Russian iconography, however, as soot-covered masterpieces were restored and viewed for the first time in hundreds of years. Although the communists quickly quashed this fledgling revival in Russia itself, it continued to flourish among Orthodox émigrés. Not only did Holy Trinity Monastery preserve the traditions of iconography, it was blessed with one of the foremost iconographers of the twentieth century: Father Kyprian. Father Victor recalled Father Kyprian as a spiritual father to himself and many others at Holy Trinity Monastery, including the late Abbot Laurus. After touring the interior of the cathedral, we visited the tombs behind the church, where the iconographer shares his final resting place with Laurus and other abbots of Holy Trinity Monastery.

Inside the cathedral, I was so overwhelmed by the icons' variety of colors and ubiquity that I nearly fell over. One need not be an Orthodox Christian to feel the sheer power of thousands upon thousands of saints' gazes peering down from all directions. To celebrate the canonization of the victims of communism, Father Kyprian devised a very unique icon. Unlike the Smolensk Mother of God pictured here, Father Kyprian's icon depicts hundreds and hundreds of martyrs. Many of them are recognizable, such as Tsar Nicholas II and his family. Beyond the recognizable figures, Kyprian painted a seemingly endless stream of unnamed figures—the innumerable martyrs of communism whose names and stories have not passed down to us.

## A Timeless Lunch at the Monastery

After the tour, Father Roman invited me to eat lunch at the monastery. The dining area was dim and filled with wooden tables and benches. It slowly filled with black-robed monks and clergy. Numerous Russian-speaking laymen were also present, as well as several teenage boys from around the country who were spending their summer living at the monastery. Several women entered the building before I did, but they were nowhere to be seen inside. I later learned that there was a separate room for women to eat in. Although the food was already cooked and set on the table, no one touched it. Many were silent, although there were some murmuring in Russian. At precisely noon, the abbot himself entered the room. Everyone stood. The abbot led a chant in Old Church Slavonic, the ancient language of the Russian Orthodox Church. Amidst the chants, people would sporadically cross themselves in the Orthodox fashion, followed by a bow. When the chant had ended, everyone sat down and began to eat a traditional Russian meal. There were two metal containers; one held strong tea and the other scorching hot water. The water is used to dilute the strength of the tea to individual preference. There was a potato soup with vegetables and some of the driest bread I have ever eaten. In the Orthodox calendar, each day commemorates a particular saint, and during the entire course of the meal one young monk read aloud from a biography of the day's saint in Russian. Everyone else was silent. Another monk made the rounds of the room with the day's mail. A third rolled a cart with a box of plums around the room, handing everyone a single plum. The meal ended at precisely 12:30 p.m. It ended as it began, with an Old Church Slavonic chant.



*The coffins of Father Kyprian (left) and Abbot Laurus (right).*

There was something timeless about lunch at the monastery. The food, the language, and the traditions that surrounded it are as old as Orthodoxy. Mealtime could not have been much different for Russian monks a thousand years ago. Professor Frierson once told me that Russian monks viewed themselves as "islands" of Russian culture; Holy Trinity Monastery continued this island tradition. By steadfastly adhering to their faith and keeping its traditions alive in a foreign land, the monks of Holy Trinity Monastery were prepared to rebuild the Orthodox Church in Russia once communism finally collapsed in 1991. The monastery's printing press was beyond the reach of communism; its tireless efforts to preserve the literary traditions of the faith made Jordanville famous among the Soviet Union's persecuted Orthodox Christians. Finally, the

monastery's environment of spiritual reflection made it possible for such men as Father Kyprian to create some of history's finest works of iconography, even in Russian Orthodoxy's darkest hour. Holy Trinity Monastery was a refuge that preserved Russian Orthodoxy through the communist terror in an unlikely New York hamlet.

*I want to thank my mother for all of her moral support in this project and my father for joining me on the journey to New York. I am also very grateful to Professor Cathy Frierson for taking me on as a mentee for this REAP project. I would like to express my gratitude to Father Victor Lochmatow for his endless generosity before, during, and since my time at Holy Trinity Monastery and to Father Roman Krassovsky for his time and patience helping me to understand Russian Orthodoxy and its history. Finally, I want to thank the Hamel Center for the funding that made this project possible.*

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## Author Bio

**Cory McKenzie**, of Hampstead, New Hampshire, has always taken the road “less traveled by.” He is a sophomore history and philosophy double major, though he found his way into the philosophy department “quite by accident.” A member of the University Honors Program, Cory’s innate curiosity and love of reading have led him to study Japanese, theology, New Hampshire history, and Uechi-ryu karate, which he has practiced for nearly four years. “I seem to get interests and throw myself into them for a few years,” he says. However, no matter what roads he takes on his quest for learning, he revolves around history. His Research Experience and Apprenticeship Program (REAP) grant allowed him to complete his first “big” research project. Cory is appreciative of the skills he learned by researching Russian Orthodoxy, from learning how to sort through huge masses of information to being persistent. He would like to perform more research during the summer of 2012 related to New Hampshire court history. Cory will graduate in May 2014, at which point he will consider going to graduate school for either history or philosophy.

## Mentor Bio

**Cathy A. Frierson**, professor of history, has taught at the University of New Hampshire for twenty years, with a specialty in the study of modern Russia and the former Soviet Union. Dr. Frierson nominated Cory McKenzie for the Research Experience and Apprenticeship Program (REAP) and served as his mentor over the summer of 2011. She frequently mentors students, but Cory’s project was unique because of his travels to the Holy Trinity Monastery in Jordanville, New York, and the Museum of Russian Icons in Clinton, Massachusetts. Dr. Frierson used this mentorship opportunity to introduce Cory to the historical research process by helping him develop his interviewing and writing skills. She says that writing for *Inquiry* has helped Cory even further: “It is always useful for exceptionally bright writers with intricate minds to learn how to simplify their writing for a broader audience.” Cory’s research inspired Dr. Frierson in her own research projects, so REAP was an enriching experience for both student and mentor: “Cory is an astute observer with a richly articulated mind; his reports and our discussions were fascinating and fun.”