

When the Crosses Fall in Silence

Raphaël Lopoukhine

Opened in 1926 next to a still active retirement house, La Maison Russe, part of the Cimetière de Liers in the parisian suburb of Sainte Geneviève des Bois, is the largest Russian cemetery outside Russia. Today, the thorny question of its preservation lies at the crux of the many complex issues regarding relationships between Russian Federation and what remains of White Russian descendants.

La Maison Russe, better known to the Russian-speaking world as Ste. Geneviève des Bois, is never crowded except on Pascha, when groups of people stroll around its 5,300 graves. Colored, jeweled eggs are pinned on men's and boys' evening jackets and dangle from women's earrings and necklaces. Typically the weather is perfect. It's spring. The air smells of turpentine and wet earth. From time to time you can even spot a squirrel jumping from one tomb to another. And when it rains, it's a gentle shower that seems to trickle down the leaves, leaving pearly drops on grandfathers' shoulders. Priests and altar boys carry censers among the crowds. People sing in Slavonic and French and greet each other: *Le Christ est ressuscité! En vérité il est ressuscité! Христос Воскресе! Воистину воскрес!* —Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!





All around the world, Orthodox Christians celebrate Pascha, the day of resurrection, at cemeteries. Ste. Geneviève des Bois is no different, and the famous names inscribed on the wooden and stone Orthodox crosses topped by light metal or slate covers remind those who care to stop momentarily that history is everywhere. Year after year, however, the groups seem a bit less numerous. As if, as time passes, the cemetery slowly becomes less a cemetery and more a site for historical sight-seeing. Of course, it can be both, and it will be both as long as descendants of the first-wave Russian immigrants still have the desire and the means to bury their loved ones at Ste. Geneviève and as long as they take care of their ancestors' graves. Therein lies the rub.

When the ancestors become more and more distant in time, when there are fewer and fewer carriers of the ancient family names, who is supposed to take care of the tombs?





The question is not a rhetorical one. One quick stroll in the oldest alleys is enough to realize the scope of the problem. Dozens of crosses lie on the ground while many others are in serious decay. Tombstones inscribed with historically significant names are cracked open while others are overrun by vegetation and suffer from obvious lack of care.

Officially, the cemetery is the municipal burial ground of the city of Sainte Geneviève des Bois, which means that it is not uniquely a Russian cemetery, even if Russian graves count for 75% of all graves. The city is responsible for the management and maintenance of all the graves—which is a problem, because Sainte Geneviève des Bois is a too small a

municipality to care for such a large cemetery on its budget alone. The Russian Federation contributes up to a point, but this help is not always welcomed by the descendants and by the Russian Orthodox community at large. “I find their manners to be highly unpleasant,” says Tatiana Cherinsky, a Nice resident, who is still bitter about the way the Russian Federation took the old cathedral away from its community after a long legal struggle. She also expresses her worries about the situation at Ste. Geneviève: “The Russian Federation tries to shoehorn itself everywhere into our heritage.”

What happened on February 26, 2016 in the Caucade cemetery in Nice, another historical Russian cemetery,

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¹ Benoît Vitkine, "Cent ans après la révolution de 1917, l'impossible réconciliation des Russes blancs," *Le Monde*, October 12, 2017, https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2017/10/12/l-impossible-reconciliation-des-russes-blancs_5199696_3210.html.

where officials from the Russian Embassy locked the gate overnight and prevented families from visiting the graves of their loved ones, did not create a very friendly precedent.¹ "Since then, every inhumation is getting more and more complicated for us," adds Ms. Cherinsky. Still, that situation is different, since the grounds where the Caucade cemetery is located were bought by the Russian Empire in 1867, whereas Ste. Geneviève is part of the munic-

ipal cemetery. Yet like the Caucade cemetery, it is a historical burial ground of Russian immigrants displaced by the Russian Revolution and Civil War and it is now at risk as a result of the community's gradual disappearance and of global claims of a "Russian World."

The problem becomes more and more acute as the crosses of the White Russian immigrants fall in silence.✱



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