The 2015 Lee Seng Tee Distinguished Lecture

On 26 February 2015, I had the honour of giving the annual Lee Seng Tee Distinguished Lecture at Wolfson. My title was 'Behind the Scenes at the Kremlin'. With many thanks to Dr Lee Seng Tee for his generosity in hosting the event, here is a written summary.

The year 2014 was an eventful one in Russian politics. It began, if I can take you back, with the run-up to the Sochi Olympics, a tense time during which a good deal was written and said about the corruption that drove up the cost of the games to a staggering $50 billion. The games themselves were a success, at least as far as sports fans were concerned, but in their second week attention shifted to Ukraine and the heightening crisis on the Maidan in Kiev. On 23 February 2014, the pro-Russian President of Ukraine, Victor Yanukovych, fled Kiev in fear of his life. It was the mass-killing of his own people that forced him out of town, but once he had gone even his own citizens were stunned by the evidence of his personal corruption, especially as they walked around his private mansion and personal zoo.

Yanukovych’s flight was swiftly followed by Russia’s annexation of the Crimea and the unfolding of the current tragic confrontation in Ukraine. The story has been so brutal and so sad – from the destruction of Malaysian flight MH 17 in July 2014 to the present tensions around Mariupol - that there has been little time to follow anything much else as far as Russian politics is concerned. But back in July 2014, just a couple of weeks after the civilian airliner disaster, Mr Putin made an announcement that rocked Moscow to its foundations. His proposal came in two parts. First, he seemed to be calling a halt to the reconstruction of an architectural complex in the Kremlin called Administrative Block 14.
This building – otherwise known as the President’s administration – had been under tarpaulin for four years (above).

At the time of Putin’s announcement, the bill for fundamental repairs had topped 8.4 billion rubles, and though at least one construction firm had been dismissed for its mismanagement, there was little sign of real progress. Such situations are perfect opportunities for the President, all dark glasses and staccato consonants, to intervene in person, and that was exactly what he did. Instead of pouring money down the black hole behind him, he suggested, nodding dismissively at the tarpaulin-covered block, the best answer might be to demolish the building and start again. There would be no objections from the staff, most of whom preferred the quarters in Old Square where they had been working for months since the repairs began. Putin went as far as to suggest that his own office could be moved, turning the entire Kremlin into a huge museum. That idea was a show-stopper. The President was offering to move out of the Kremlin, something that no-one had done since the days of Peter the Great. Weak leaders of Russia had always clung to it. Only the strongest and most visionary had ever felt that they could rule without the symbolism – and the physical protection – of those walls. The second part of the announcement, however, was more exciting still. As everyone in Moscow was about to be reminded, Block 14 had been built in the 1930s on the site of two demolished monasteries, the Chudov – or Miracles – men’s monastery and the women’s equivalent, the Voznesensky, or Ascension convent. Both had been part of Moscow’s history for centuries. The Chudov was founded in the fourteenth century by one of Moscow’s great religious leaders, Metropolitan Aleksii (overleaf top). The Voznesensky was a little more recent, but only by forty years or so, and was probably founded by the widow of Prince Dmitry Donskoi (overleaf below).
These monasteries were not single buildings. They were both mini-Kremlins, walled compounds stuffed with churches, monastic cells, crypts, treasuries and – in the Chudov’s case – a famous prison. Both had changed a good deal over six centuries. I don’t have to tell you in Cambridge how hard it is to build new things inside old walls, nor how awkward it is to choose between traditional and innovative architectural designs. The church in my picture of the Ascension convent, for instance, was particularly controversial. It was built in the 1820s in a very un-Russian gothic style, and the architect, Carlo Rossi, faced a good deal of criticism. But something had to be built quickly, because the convent had been ruined by Napoleon’s troops during the occupation of the Kremlin in 1812, and Rossi thought this design would send the right messages about tradition, elegance and sheer magnificence.
The monasteries have both disappeared, of course, and it was not the French who did the damage. In 1929, the Bolshevik government decided that the space that the two large foundations were occupying would be just the thing for a new artillery training school. It was an odd decision (and the idea of gunnery inside the Kremlin was soon abandoned), but the historic monuments – which were in fact treasure-houses of Russia’s entire history and culture - were knocked down in the space of a single winter (above). Ten months ago, Putin proposed to rebuild them. His choice of words was businesslike. In the face of doubts about cost, feasibility, authenticity, and even UNESCO approval, he just said: Let’s do it.

The papers carried the story the next morning. As the author of a book on the Kremin, I was delighted to find lots of eager pieces in the Russian press about the Kremlin’s history at last. And Russian readers generally welcomed the chance to turn the centre of Moscow into a giant museum-park. If anyone raised doubts on the obvious grounds that the buildings would be new-built fakes, they were answered with a stream of examples from Warsaw and Dresden to Carcassonne. The only problem anyone could see – a cloud no larger than a man’s hand at the time – was that there were no historic plans, no archive documents, and almost no pictures for the rebuilding team to work with. So whatever was going to be built, it could not be a faithful replica because no-one could say what they were copying. No-one had even managed to find the plans for Rossi’s nineteenth-century gothic church. Block 14 was the easy part.
Not many people felt strongly about it. And while there might be doubts about the rebuilding project, Moscow had seen several similar schemes since 1991, including the Palace at Kolomenskoe (*above*) and the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour (*below*), both of which had proved profitable and reasonably popular with a certain type of public. The Kremlin, however, would constitute a huge new development, a vast park rather than a single structure, and to make that work thought would need to be given to the project’s guiding theme. Given the current patriotic, ultra-Russian mood, the new museum was likely to project two overall messages. The first would be that power in Russia is a sacred thing, not measurable by the yardstick of western concepts like openness or human rights. The precedent for it is not Rome but Byzantium, an imagined utopia in which state power, at least as Russians now view history, was special and different and true, spiritually true, in a way that western democracies have never been.
The second message flows straight from the first, and it is that Holy Russia does not and it must not change. It stands alone, resisting all that enemies can throw at it. A patriotic Putin-era Kremlin museum could make this point by retelling the story of the seventeenth-century Time of Troubles, putting the emphasis on the moment when Poles occupied the Kremlin and the great patriarch Hermogen saved Russia by appealing to the spirit of the orthodox faithful as he starved to death in his cell. The Napoleon saga could also be retold, and though the Bolsheviks did a good deal more damage than anyone else with their dynamite, it is now possible to describe them as European in their origins, Marxist-inspired, and therefore not genuinely Russian at all. Survival, immutability, spiritual truth and beauty, destiny – these are messages that the masters of the Russian state have been trying to send for centuries. The Kremlin projects all of these. It is inseparable from the Russian idea of power.

The story is told beautifully in this Icon of the Tree of Muscovy (above). It was painted in 1668 by the court artist Simon Ushakov. Icons, of course, reflect God’s time, so we are looking at eternal truth. The Moscow in the painting is a holy image, and it is meant to make you think about the heavenly Jerusalem and the idea that Russian state power is a holy thing under the protection of the Virgin and heaven itself.

But if you look more closely you will see two characters in the centre of the scene. The one on the left as you are looking at it is meant to be metropolitan Peter, the fourteenth-century leader of the Russian orthodox church. The one on the right is the new prince of Moscow, Ivan I, and the two of them are shown planting the tree that will bear fruit – as we climb its branches - as the historic and blessed state of Muscovy. And the pair really did found a cathedral. The date was 1326, and in many ways it was a turning-point in the Kremlin’s fortunes as a religious and political centre. But what is not shown in the painting is
also interesting. The prince in the picture may well have been pious – we can’t be sure – but his main claim to wealth and power came through his skill at tax-farming.

In the 1320s, he bled his Russian orthodox neighbours white to pay protection money to the Mongols. The picture makes him look like the heir of Kiev and Byzantium, but in fact he had almost no connection to either place. In part, he owed his promotion to the fact that the Mongols – with whom he had very close connections indeed - considered him to be relatively weak and easy to push around. Those truths, however, were smoothed over and cancelled out by the building of that stone cathedral in Moscow’s wooden fortress, the prototype Kremlin. And when Metropolitan Peter died, also in 1326, he was buried in it, which gave the building, and Prince Ivan’s fortress, a special charisma that church and state promptly capitalised on by making him a saint.

It was not until the 1480s, however, that the Kremlin we know today was founded. It is that Kremlin, in fact, that Ushakov’s icon shows us, complete with those iconic redbrick walls and battlements. Secure though the structure was after that, the dynasty inside remained unstable. Even the infamous Ivan the Terrible was far from unassailable at the start of his reign, and it was the church that saved him, creating an aura of divine and predestined power, inventing a splendid but entirely fictitious genealogy for him, and devising a series of public rituals that brought the court out of the Kremlin and into public view.

One of the most spectacular of these was performed at Epiphany, which means early January, in the freezing Moscow cold. It was witnessed in the time of Ivan the Terrible by an Englishman called Anthony Jenkinson, who visited Moscow in 1558. What he saw involved the entire court, ‘all most richly apparelled with gold, pearles, pretious stones, & costly furres.’ The most striking moment came when the whole company, including both the tsar and the metropolitan, filed out on to the frozen Moscow river and stood around a hole in the ice. The metropolitan blessed the river water through the hole and then started sprinkling it on everyone, beginning with the prince himself. ‘That done,’ Jenkinson explained, ‘the people with great thronging filled pots of the said water... and divers children were thrown in, and sicke people, and plucked out quickly again, and divers Tartars christened: all of which the Emperour beheld. Also there were brought the Emperours best horses, to drink at the said hallowed water. All this being ended, he returned to his pallace again.’

So that was 1558. About a hundred years later, another visitor, this time a Syrian monk called Paul of Aleppo, witnessed exactly the same scene, complete with frozen river, oily hole, icy water and horses. And he was struck by the respect for historical continuity in everything at court from the Kremlin’s buildings and rituals to the dynasty itself. ‘The origin of this Imperial Family of Muscovy is believed, by persons who examine the truth of history, to have been from Rome,’ he explained. ‘Observe how this august race, from that age until now, has been preserved in uninterrupted succession!’

But that, of course, was just the point. There was no continuity at all. In the century that separated Jenkinson from Paul of Aleppo, Russia had torn itself apart and the Riurikid dynasty had been extinguished. Even the Kremlin had been reduced to a shell. Almost all the treasure – the sacred gold of Holy Russia - had been melted down to pay the troops or looted by the boyar court before the Poles arrived. Court records from the 1620s are particularly eloquent about the dereliction of the walls, to say nothing of the barrels full of salted human limbs that were discovered in the Chudov monastery yard.

The Kremlin was rebuilt, of course, and it was at this time that a fragile new dynasty decided to make its squat-looking towers look more impressive and more suited to the eternal Muscovite capital. If you look carefully again at Ushakov’s icon you can see the squat towers, which were now made to look more impressive – perhaps more Russian – by the addition of an extra feature (overleaf). The idea was to make the Kremlin look more Russian, more holy, and more historic, than it had ever done. The irony was that to do that the court not only had to build new things, but they also had to hire large numbers of foreigners. It may be a landmark of Russian architecture, but the famous Saviour Tower was probably designed by Englishmen and the clock, definitely, was created by a Scot. Overall, however, the work did just what was expected, which was to present Russia to the Russians as an enduring spiritual reality, and to present the new ruler in the Kremlin as part of a continuous line, which of course he was not.
We could say, then, that rebuilding is something that is part of Kremlin history (*above*). In the nineteenth century, for instance, while Nicholas I’s grand Kremlin palace was being built, the architects knocked down the historic red stair that had once led from the palace terrace to the square below. When a courtier protested, the architect assured her that a replacement would be created that would be more authentic-looking than the original. He kept his word, and indeed rebuilt it, but then – as many of you will know – the replica itself was knocked down by Stalin. This time, the demolition was a spiteful act intended to attack the old regime. The pretext was that people needed space for a canteen and some lavatories. But the structure was rebuilt yet again in 1994. Indeed, it was one of the first things that Boris Yeltsin’s government did when it was trying to create what it called the Russian idea. ‘How sad, really,’ Yeltsin confided to his diary in 1998, ‘that we have lost the … sense of wholeness and continuity of our history. How desirable it would have been to have all of this restored in our country.’

With all this change and rebuilding, it might be interesting to ask if we could design an alternative Kremlin museum ourselves. What might be included, and what might the overall message be? The thing about museums is that they can never really tell you what is missing, what was ignored, or what the designers themselves would prefer to hide, but I would like to convey those ideas in my imaginary new museum. It could be based inside the Grand Kremlin Palace (*overleaf*). To take a quick preliminary look at it, we will need to borrow the keys from the curator and to arm ourselves with pliers, for most of the interesting doors are likely to be sealed. Our path now lies through the handsome entrance and up the stairs past a pair of magnificent stone lions.

At the top is an enormous parquet hall and on the far side of that are some exquisite golden gates, for which we will need both pliers and key. On the far side is a dark, silent space, quite different from the brightly-lit hall. It is the church that seventeenth-century tsar Aleksei Mikhailovich loved most of all, and right in front of us are several icons painted by the great master, Simon Ushakov. These are world-class artworks, the sort of thing you see behind security glass in the National Gallery or the Louvre. But what is strange is that there is no glint of gold or silver in the mount. This is not usual for Russia, where every church glistens with the brightest precious metals. The point is that the antique silver iconostasis in here
was ripped out and melted down in the 1920s. The order came directly from Lenin’s office. The story may not fit into the current narrative of Russia’s past – the one where it is persecuted by Europe, for instance, but it bears retelling because it is still the country’s heritage.

Stepping over to a window, we can look out at the site of some of the buildings that Stalin demolished – including the most precious and ancient cathedral of the Saviour in the Forest – and while we are at it we can try to list the many buildings that would have to be rebuilt if the Kremlin were ever going to be restored in anything like an authentic or sensitive way. The picture here (above) shows what the Kremlin looked like in the early eighteenth century. There are so many towers and cupolas that even experts struggle to work out what every building is, especially as there are no plans and often no real records.

And then we start walking again, following miles of red-carpeted corridor and peering into several more dark ancient churches. Things start to get shabbier now, and eventually the place starts to feel less like a palace and more like the back room of a junk shop. We are on the ground floor, but there are stairs in front of us that lead down in a spiral. The carpet here is threadbare and the walls could do with some fresh paint. As we go down it becomes clear that we are visiting another church. This one was founded in the fourteenth century, but it got forgotten, lost during all the rebuilding that followed, and it was only rediscovered in the 1840s. That is itself an interesting thought, but what is fascinating is the sight of what is being stored – or forgotten - in the old building now.

The sacred walls have been whitewashed. In fact, there is a paint-spattered dust sheet in a corner and there are a few ladders leaning against the wall. But the church is also being used as a place to dump clutter. There are a couple of red flags, for instance. It is as if a selection of discarded versions of the Kremlin’s past had been assembled in a time-capsule, collapsing decade upon decade into one surreal space. Here is the truth that lies behind a good deal of the Kremlin fable. Here, too, as my museum will show, is the proof that Russia is not fated to follow any special path. The citadel does not contain some great archaic mystery of Russian power. Its occupants use it to project images that suit them in the short term, but the evidence of recent building-work and all the junk prove that each incarnation is short-lived and dispensible. When today’s Russian leaders talk about the mighty state, they are choosing a fable from the shelf, just as Yeltsin did when he opted for an imperial-style Kremlin, just as Stalin did when he turned it into a grey, looming fort. History has nothing to do with this at all. It is the decision of a small group of people operating mainly in their own interests. The centuries of precedent that the Kremlin seems to project are an illusion. As that discarded red flag attests, the current set of options could be thrown out in the future with as little thought as you might give to last week’s flowers.

To finish, however, I should report on what has happened about Block 14. The newspapers were full of it in late-December 2014. What they reported was that the old building would be coming down in February 2015. Since the new year, however, they have gone a bit quiet, so I asked a friend who works with the Kremlin buildings to tell me what was happening. His answer was that Block 14 may well indeed go very soon, but that the current plan is to replace it with a garden. As for the President, as far as he knows at this stage, there is no plan for him to go anywhere. His office will stay where it is.

*Catherine Merridale, 2 March 2015*