

# Conservation Issues on UNESCO World Heritage Sites in Russia. From the Roerich Pact to Contemporary Challenges



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**Abstract** Nowadays Russia promotes different economic and cultural programs among which there is one of the most important sources of growth: the conservation of its vast cultural heritage. There is a particular importance in a profound study and wide accessibility to cultural heritage since the country has been experiencing fundamental social, economic and spiritual changes. Study and conservation of cultural heritage are necessary conditions for the dissemination of the national cultural wealth of Russia. Valorization of proper historical heritage helps to keep the spirituality of people so that authentic and ingrained culture doesn't get affected by false and ephemeral values. Cultural heritage basically represents the main form of existence of culture, if it is not represented to cultural heritage doesn't belong anymore to culture and at the end stops existing. In all their life, a person can valorize and internalize a small part of cultural heritage. It might be left for the other generations, so it can become a part of a heritage of the human community, but just if it's properly preserved. That's why cultural heritage protection is also a protection of the culture tout court. Issues on cultural heritage protection are common to all the societies and today Russia is facing it in a more systematic way. The history of Russian culture resembles more to that western rather than oriental: it was also followed by rather rough changes and solutions of continuity.

**Keywords** Conservation · Cultural heritage · Cultural landscapes

## 1 Background History

Its evolution was complicated by Russia's geopolitics position: being put between the west and the east, confusion was created. Russia was torn between the concept of western and oriental development, finding and affirming not without difficulty

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her own identity and originality. This is why the problem of protection and conservation of the cultural heritage has always existed, at times become rather intense.

One of the most crucial moments in history was during the reign of Peter the Great (1672–1725) who transformed Russia in a radical way, thanks to the reforms he turned the country toward the West, drastically complicating the problem of relationship with her past. Despite the whole radicalism of the transformations, Peter I didn't want to abandon completely the past of Russia, its cultural heritage. Instead, during his reign, for the first time, the protection and conservation of cultural heritage appeared as a concept of extreme importance and the first steps were taken to preserve it.

For instance, at the end of the XVII century according to the decree of Peter I, there were promoted several documentation campaigns of the ancient Buddhists temples in Siberia so they would produce a notable collection of illustrations and documents. There was also one noticeable decree that said that during the years when the constructions in stone were forbidden in the whole Russia, except St. Petersburg, Peter I issued a special permit authorizing the construction in stone in the city of Tobol'sk. It was specified that Kremlin of Tobol'sk should not be built for defensive reasons or for representation of the military strength, but it had to represent the greatness and the beauty of Russian architectural art instead. As well as the construction of the road which led to China through Tobol'sk, meant building a road for a nation that had always been and it would always remain a friend of Russia [1].

Peter's efforts were continued during the reign of Catherine II who promoted decrees on measurements, the collection of drawings, researches, and documentation of buildings of historical and artistic value through their layout and plans and the descriptions of ancient cities and the protection of main archaeological monuments.

The attention to the protection of natural and cultural heritage grew significantly in the XIX century when was established the law that forbade the demolition of the buildings made in the XVIII century or the reconstruction of unity that could alter the native image.

An important role in the protection of the natural and cultural patrimony has historically been developed by public scientific organizations: *the Archaeological Society in Moscow* (1864), *the Russian Historical Society* (1866), *the Society for the protection and the conservation of the art and the antiquity in Russia* (1909) and others. During their conventions, those institutions discussed problems related to the protection of the historical and cultural heritage, they dealt with the development of the legislation on protection of the monuments, and they encouraged the creation of government institutions for the protection of the cultural and historical values. Among these organizations, there is one in particular that has to be highlighted is the *Archaeological Society in Moscow*, that included archaeologists, architects, artists, writers, and art historians. The main purposes of the *Society* were not the only study of ancient monuments of the Russian antiquity and their protection from destruction, but also from wrong restorations during the works of remaking or rebuilding.

## 2 The Roerich Pact

On April 15, 1935, in Washington representative members of the USA and other twenty nations of the American continent signed an agreement “*On the protection of the artistic and scientific institutions and the historical monuments*” that later became famous in the international legal practice as Pact Roerich. From 1999, this day has been considered the *Universal Day of Culture under the Banner of Peace*, known also as the *World Day of Culture*, an observance held annually around the World to promote the protection of culture, the *Roerich Pact and the Banner of Peace* [1].

The idea to settle an organized preservation of the artistic and scientific world treasures belonged to the famous artist and Russian public character Nikolaj Konstantinovich Roerich, and appeared during the studies of the Russian antiquities at the beginning of the XX century. Roerich conceived the idea of the protection of artistic and scientific achievements of humanity, which he proposed to the *Society of Architects in Russia*. The artist traveled a lot in Russia, visited the excavations, studied the origins of the Russian culture. “The man who is not able to understand the past cannot think about the future”, Roerich wrote [2].

The Russian-Japanese war of 1904 made the artist think seriously about the threat that was hiding in the technical improvement of the means of destruction. In 1914, Nikolaj Roerich turned himself to the Russian government and the governments of other belligerent countries with a proposal to provide the conservation of the cultural treasures with the conclusion of an appropriate international agreement, but his plea remained unanswered. In 1929 Roerich prepared and published a draft of an essay on the protection of the cultural heritage, in various languages followed by a plea to the governments and the people of all the countries.

The signing of the pact was an important step in the history of humanity. The document contains the antimilitarist idea of Roerich called “*Peace through the culture*”, that implicates not only the protection of properties and cultural treasures for the future generations but also international responsibilities based on the principle of the inviolability of goods and cultural values belonging to the humanity. Roerich believed that all the cultural values bring a spiritual power and by destroying them humanity destroys the base on which it can spiritually develop.

The project of an agreement received a world recognition and had a huge impact on the international community. The idea of Nikolaj Roerich was defended by the most illustrious intellectuals of the epoch such as Romain Rolland, Bernard Shaw, Albert Einstein, Herbert Wells, Maurice Maeterlinck, Thomas Mann, Rabindranath Tagore. The *Roerich Pact* was the first international act dedicated to the protection of the cultural heritage and was the only agreement in that field that was adopted by a part of the international community before the Second World war.

In the picture of the *Pact*, there is an approved a distinctive mark proposed by Roerich, that would mark cultural objects. That mark was the “*banner of Peace*”—a white cloth with three red dots placed in a red-magenta circle on a white background which represented the past, present and future achievements of the humanity, surrounded by the ring of the eternity.

On the *banner of Peace*, Nicholas Roerich wrote: “*This sign of the triad which is to be found all over the world may have several meanings. Some interpret it as a symbol of past, present and future, enclosed in the ring of Eternity; others consider that it refers to religion, science and art, held together in the circle of culture, but whatever be the interpretation the sign itself is of the most universal character. The oldest of Indian symbols, Chintamani, the sign of happiness, is composed of this symbol and one can find it in the Temple of Heaven in Peking.*”

The Pact contains the general principles of protection of cultural values and on the respect that had to be shown. The protection of the cultural goods in the Pact exists in an unconditional way and is not weakened by the clauses of the military necessity that reduces the effectiveness of the protection of the cultural goods in case of armed conflicts.

At the Article 1 the Pact stated: “*The historic monuments, museums, scientific, artistic, educational and cultural institutions shall be considered as neutral and as such respected and protected by belligerents.*

*The same respect and protection shall be due to the personnel of the institutions mentioned above.*

*The same respect and protection shall be accorded to the historic monuments, museums, scientific, artistic, educational and cultural institutions in time of peace as well as in war.”*

The Roerich pact has developed an important role in the further formation of the international juridical norms and the public activities in the field of protection of cultural heritage. In 1949 on the 4th session of the general conference of UNESCO, it was decided to begin the works on the international legal regulation in the field of the protection of the cultural property in case of armed conflict.

On May 14, 1954, the UN “*Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the event of armed conflict*” was adopted in The Hague on May 14, 1954 (it became effective on August 7, 1956). The Roerich Pact was used as a foundation for this *Convention*. In March of 1999 on an initiative and with the direct participation of UNESCO, the second protocol of the convention in The Hague of 1954 was adopted. The text of the Convention of The Hague openly states the principles of protection of the cultural goods during the war, established by the Conference in The Hague in 1899, 1907 and in *Roerich Pact*.

### **3 Cultural Landscapes and Properties Inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List in Russian Federation**

On October 12, 1988, Russian Federation accepted the *World Heritage Convention* from UNESCO for the conservation and promotion of the heritage of humanity. Currently in Russian Federation, there are 26 properties that are inscribed on the

*World Heritage List* and considered as a universal outstanding value: 16 cultural sites and 10 natural sites [3].

Unlike the European Countries, where the formation of the juridical framework for the national cultural heritage protection had started in middle of the XX century, in Russia such legislative action was launched only in the 1978. The particular nature of Russia is the condition of historical-cultural stress that the society had lived in the centuries XX–XXI, followed by the destruction of an enormous layer of properties and cultural and historical (material, spiritual, mental) values, which had deprived Russia of its enormous potential in the field of the touristic and economic development.

The modern Russian system of protection of the monuments, either from a legal point of view or in terms of financial approach, has maintained the characteristics keys of the Soviet system, even if in comparison to the past times, state's ability of preserving and managing restorations of about ten thousand of historical and cultural sites, has decreased. According to experts, currently, the amount of the government funds spent on preservation and restoration of the monuments of federal importance doesn't go over 15% of the necessary requirement. Around two-thirds of the monuments of federal importance need restoration [4].

Currently, in Russia, there are two organizations that play a key role in the protection of historical and cultural heritage. The first one is the society for the protection of the monuments of history and culture also called *VOOPIK*. The society was founded in 1966 and is a public and voluntary organization that manages several programs such as "Russian estate", "Temples and monasteries", "Russian necropolis", "The Russian emigration".

The second is the *Foundation of the Russian Culture*, founded in 1991, finances a series of programs and projects, among which "Small cities of Russia". In 1992, to enhance the scientific side of protection, the *Russian Institute of research for the cultural and natural heritage* was founded. Its assignments include identification, study, preserving, use and popularization of the cultural and natural heritage.

In 1992 was founded a *Committee for the restitution of cultural heritage* with the purpose of resolving mutual pretensions between Russia and other foreign Countries.

Many cultural goods of ancient Russia are related to religion that was a center of the daily interest of Russian people. Currently, the *Russian Orthodox Church* is contributing to the reconstruction, restoration and renovation of churches and monasteries. Despite the destruction and the misfortunes that took place in the past, there have been preserved over 1200 religious sites.

Outstanding places, rich in cultural heritage, belong to noble Russians who took form on the latter half of XVIII–XIX century. The estates belonged to the family and were called "the noble nests". There were thousands of them, but only about ten that have remained; some were destroyed during the revolution and the civil war and others disappeared with the time and desolation. Among those which survived, Arkhangelskoe, Kuskovo, Marfino, Ostafyevo, Ostantino, Shakhmatovo; they have been turned into museums, reserves and nursing homes while other properties were

damaged and need to be repaired under a special programme of emergency assistance.

The role of Russian estates in the development of Russian culture was enormous. In the XVIII century, they were the base of the Russian Enlightenment; thanks to them the XIX century became the golden age of Russian culture.

The relative restoration and protection are essential steps for the conservation of cultural heritage. These problems were faced by the *Society for the study of the Russian estate* that was running in the 20s (1923–1928).

Another assignment which is strongly related to the mission of preserving Russian estates of a lesser importance is the rebirth and the development of the small cities of Russia. They are currently over 3 thousand small cities with a total population of around 40 million people [5]. Just like estates, they represent true Russian style of life, express the soul and the beauty of Russia. Each of them had a unique aspect and a proper style of life. There have been developed complete programs for rebirth of the historical and cultural environment of ancient Russian cities as Zarajsk, Podol'sk, Rybinsk and Staraya Russa and so many others.

The federal law “On the objects of the cultural heritage”, approved in 2002, allows, together with the government ownership, a private ownership of architectural monuments, but privatization of cultural heritage sites is not widely adopted as a best practice. The main difficulty is the lack of separation among federal and municipal ownership of monuments, absence of a clear definition on the subject of protection in the law since it is not entirely obvious to what particular element of the monument the regime of protection is applied. Generally, the protection of the cultural heritage in the modern Russian society is becoming more complex and intense and, for this purpose, it requires a constant attention and the development of specific heritage skills. The level of culture development of every nation should be evaluated according to the actions dedicated to their own cultural heritage because by preserving the past, it is possible to imagine a future of wealth and prosperity.

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