The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

New Book Chronicles the Heart of Russia's History

By Des Brown

October 30, 2013



The familiar red brick facade of the Moscow Kremlin watched the city for five centuries and many governments.

Recently published in Britain is "Red Fortress: The Secret Heart of Russia's History" by historian Catherine Merridale of Queen Mary's University in London. Told over 528 pages, it is nothing less than a history of the Russian seat of power, the Kremlin.

Built in the late 15th century and now a UNESCO World Heritage Site, the Kremlin overlooks the Moskva River and Red Square. It has been the center of Russian rule by tsars, general secretaries and presidents. Napoleon could not destroy it, nor could the Bolsheviks.

An immovable object while history changes around it, the Kremlin has always been shorthand for Russian government and power. It is a sort of Russian Vatican. The idea in "Red Fortress" is of the Kremlin really being a metaphor for layer upon layer of 500 years of political and religious history, from Ivan the Terrible to Putin.

Merridale specializes in Russia as a subject. Previously, she has written several books about Russia, including "Ivan's War," which detailed the experience of the Red Army during World War II. Merridale spend four years in total writing the book and gaining access to the Kremlin itself was not easy. "It took about year," she told me. "I do not think there is any objection to foreigners working there if they have the right credentials."

In the book, the Kremlin is described as "a place where myths are born," though the stereotypical idea that the country can only be governed by a strong, ruthless leader — from Peter the Great to Stalin to Putin — is something Merridale does not agree with.

"It is a myth: It is one of the ways that Russia projects itself from the Kremlin, but I don't think it's true." She thinks the myth, which has been repeated over and over again in history, probably started "back in the days of Ivan the III ... it goes back to the Time of Troubles."

The Bolsheviks moved in during 1918 and established their power base in the Kremlin. Why didn't the Bolsheviks destroy it?

"There were plenty of people within the Bolshevik elite who regarded the Kremlin as a national art treasure house," says Merridale. "They wanted to see the Kremlin preserved as a beautiful thing and a monument to Russia's history ... so they were looking to preserve the monument to the past because it's part of the peoples' heritage and that belonged to everyone, not just the Tsars."

But there was another faction that saw the Kremlin as "a fortified compound" and sought within its walls the security required to centralize power and govern the country.

During the early days of the revolution, there were many people in Moscow who had been interested in the Kremlin when it was not the seat of government

so when the revolution took place between February and October of 1917 there was a lot of talk among the artistic elite in Moscow about turning it into a museum.

"This was a very current idea: It no longer belongs to the Tsar because there is no Tsar, so we can have it and we can do something exciting with it, and there were all sorts of plans to turn it into a museum, of which a number of Bolsheviks wanted to put into operation," Merridale said. However, the Kremlin's utility as a fortified center of government ultimately outweighed its promise as a museum.

Lenin, then Stalin, moved in after the revolution. Under Stalin it could have been called the palace of paranoia — all secret tunnels and bugs. Like Russia itself during Stalin's time, it must have been turned into a disturbing place.

"Before his wife's suicide in 1932, it was full of people, 2,000 people living in it," said Merridale, describing how the complex was emptied after the death of Stalin's wife. Later on in the '30s and '40s, "if you walked across one of the courtyards, there were hundred of eyes watching you, but no visible people ... It was a place you did not want to get up close to."

Merridale has many happy memories of writing and researching the book and has a fondness for the Bell Tower. "I loved working in the library in the Bell Tower and its old chapel. What is nice about it is that everybody whose in there is working to preserve and to study this

wonderful place. You are doing something practical and important, and you're also in a very beautiful place with marvellous history."

As to the current state of British-Russian relations, Merridale is relentlessly upbeat due to her experiences in Russia. "I am not a diplomat and I do not have to deal with them on a government to government level, so my take is entirely about the way I get received in Russia, which is always unfailingly warm and in professional and personal terms, genuine."

Merridale noted that "Putin is not somebody who plays to the West," describing him instead as trying to protect Russia's dignity, similar to many of his predecessors in the Kremlin.

Doing a lot of publicity in Britain for the book, Professor Merridale, found the most interesting thing was that people did not know exactly what the Kremlin was. "We hear the Kremlin so often being used as a metaphor for government in Russia ... but it is surprising how even people who go to Moscow do not realize until they get there that it is a fortress and not a building and that it has a history."

She felt that in Western eyes "the Kremlin, because of Stalin, I think, still has a sinister feel to it but people would not be able to put their finger on what they think that's coming from, and also they do not know about the religious history or anything that goes back before the 20th century."

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Original url:
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