

Russian comeback: Continuity of faith

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [November 17, 2009](#) issue

My trip to St. Petersburg, built in 1706 to be Russia's window to the West, showed me that the city has recovered from the horrific Nazi siege of World War II and from years of communist neglect to reclaim its heritage as a center of education and the arts. St. Isaac's Cathedral, with its signature golden dome, was used as a vegetable warehouse under the communists but now is open as a museum daily and as a church on special occasions and is on its way to becoming a working church. When I visited Kazan Cathedral, one of the churches the communists allowed to function, I watched as a long line of people waited to pay homage to a famous icon of the virgin and child.

Among the materials I consulted for my visit to Russia was John Burgess's article in this magazine, "Orthodox resurgence: Civil religion in Russia" (June 16). He notes that since the fall of the Soviet Union the number of monasteries in operation has increased from 22 to 804, and the number of Orthodox churches open for services and other church activities in Moscow has jumped from 40 to 872. Scholars like Burgess are pondering the meaning and implications of the resurgence of Russian Orthodoxy for Russian identity and nationalism, ecumenism and religious diversity.

There are few Protestant churches in the country. St. Peter's Lutheran Church in St. Petersburg was established by German workers imported to help build the city in the early 1700s and is still serving a Lutheran congregation. But as Burgess observes, generally the Orthodox Church and the Russian people regard Protestants, and to a degree Roman Catholics, as intrusions into Russian life and culture.

Though some showcase churches remained open during the communist era, all churches were severely confined: no education, no publishing of religious materials, no evangelism, no charitable work and, of course, absolutely no comment on or criticism of the regime. All the church was allowed to do for some 70 years was hold worship—with very few people in attendance, mostly older women with little to lose

and willing to risk the disapproval of authorities, neighbors and family. They were known as the Babushkas.

Our tour group visited the newly rebuilt Cathedral of Christ the Savior in Moscow on World Communion Sunday. Stalin had dynamited the building, the soul of the city, and built a public swimming pool on the site. The cathedral was rebuilt by the government and the Orthodox Church, with help from donations from all over the world. A service was in progress during my visit. I left the group and edged to the front of the crowd of a thousand standing in the nave.

A beautifully vested priest was preaching. Other priests joined him as the deep-voiced all-male choir sang. The Gospel was carried in procession and the Words of Institution were said. Although the service was in Russian, I knew what the priest was saying. People came forward to receive the bread and wine, spooned carefully into each mouth—even for the tiny babies being held by their parents. And then singing began, soft as a murmur. It was the Babushkas, singing a traditional hymn.

I couldn't help thinking of all that the Russian people have been through over the years. And I couldn't help but be moved by this evidence of the continuity of faith.