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Behind locked doors at the Kremlin

Catherine Merridale, who this week won the Pushkin House Russian Book Prize, tours the 'Red Fortress'

The Kremlin is one of the most famous structures in the world. If states have trademarks, Russia's could well be this fortress, viewed across Red Square. Everyone who comes to Moscow wants to see it, and everyone who visits seems to take a different view.

I waded my hard-won cardboard pass at the armed guards at the Borovitsky Gate and swept past queues of early-bird tourists. Inside the walls, there is a pleasant quiet, and even now, in that land of diesel and cigarettes, the breeze carries a subtle perfume of incense. The library that I was heading for was high up in an annexe to the bell tower of Ivan the Great, which means the crowds stay far away.

Any sense of membership is relative, however, for this is not a normal research site. In the Kremlin, a visitor will see what she is meant to see. But there was one occasion when I managed to visit the local equivalent of an attic. The chance came as an unexpected bonus when a busy woman who directs one of the Kremlin's specialist research departments kindly offered to escort me round the palace on a private tour. The idea was to look at all the churches, and there are lots of them.

I arrived early, for I loved to spend a moment in the empty fortress, watching subtle autumn light play on the old limestone. My guide, whose office was located in an annexe of the Annunciation Cathedral, had not quite finished collecting her things, so we chatted as she made her thoughtful selection from a box of keys. I marvelled at each one as they were lined up on her desk. Some were long and

heavy, others intricate, and most were so ornate that they were hard to balance in one hand. I had no time to test them all, however, before the curator had finished rummaging in her cupboard and produced a pair of pliers. It turned out that their purpose was to break the heavy seals that safeguard the contents of the palace's numerous hidden chambers.

The first such seal awaited us at the top of a flight of polished marble steps. On the far side of an internal atrium, across a lake of gleaming parquet, we came upon a sealed pair of exquisitely wrought and gilded gates and beyond these, also locked and sealed, a pair of solid wooden doors. The pliers soon pulled off the wax, the long key turned with satisfying ease, and the wooden doors swung open to admit us to a 17th-century church with icons by the master Simon Ushakov. The first surprise was just how dim and even clammy the room seemed after the blazing chandeliers outside. We found the switch for the electric bulb, and by its unforgiving light I saw why the initial gloom had struck me with such force. Russian churches are meant to glint and shine, but this one had no gold or silver anywhere: the precious icons themselves were displayed in a crude-looking wooden iconostasis.

It turned out that the antique silver with which the screen had once been finished had been stripped and melted down in Lenin's time, ostensibly to buy bread for the people but in fact to keep the government afloat. As our tour took in more churches, more forlorn iconostases, and chambers unlit and uncanny in their emptiness, I discovered that the same fate had befallen treasures elsewhere in the palace.

But there was still plenty to see, and for some hours we wove back and forth, pausing at one point to peer into the winter garden that had once been Stalin's cinema.

My new friend was generous with both time and expertise, but she hesitated before we descended the final set of stairs. "Don't tell the fire department," she muttered. The corridor was narrowing; the carpets had not been replaced in a long time. We were on our way down to a 14th-century church that had been thought lost until it was rediscovered during building-work in the reign of Tsar Nicholas I. After more than 600 years (so many wars, so many fires, so many redevelopment projects) there is not much left of the church itself (the walls are whitewashed), but there was a good deal else to see. Along the corridor and down the stairs were ladders, tins of paint, and broken chairs in awkward-looking stacks. There was a red flag rolled against a wall, a gilded table quarantined from some themed exhibition-space, dust sheets spattered with whitewash, a chunky radio. The expedition down through Nicholas's palace, and Mikhail Romanov's, Ivan the Terrible's, and the renaissance foundations of far older chambers was not only an experience of going back in time, which is what

journeys into undercrofts are all supposed to be. I felt more 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 space.

Russian history is full of destruction and rebuilding; the country has seen more than its fair share of



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change. For complex reasons, not always the same ones, the state, in a succession of different forms, has almost always managed to achieve priority at the expense of popular rights. At every moment of crisis, a set of choices has been made, often in the Kremlin, and always by specific people with a range of short-term interests to defend. There is nothing inevitable about this, and the discarded options testify to the fragmented nature of the tale. When today's Russian leaders talk about the mighty state, the so-called traditions that they have dubbed 'sovereign democracy', they are making yet another choice. History has nothing to do with it, for precedent, as that red flag and those old chairs attest so well, is something that can be thrown out like last week's flowers. There have been many Russian pasts. In a culture that seeks to control history itself, it is an awkward survivor, a magnificent, spellbinding, but ultimately incorruptible witness to the hidden heart of the Russian state.

This is an edited extract of 'Red Fortress: The Secret Heart of Russia's History', by Catherine Merridale, which is published in paperback by Penguin on 12 May. The Pushkin House Russian Book Prize is run in association with Waterstones; pushkinhouse.org.uk



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The Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Cathedral (above); The Faceted Palace (left); SOVPHOTO/UIIG/GETTY; FINE ART/HERITAGE IMAGES



The view of the Kremlin from the Moskvoreskiy Bridge, as depicted by artist Pyotr Petrovich Vereshchagin. FINE ART/HERITAGE