

WILLIAM CRAFT BRUMFIELD



# Journeys

THROUGH THE RUSSIAN EMPIRE

THE PHOTOGRAPHIC LEGACY of **SERGEY PROKUDIN-GORSKY**

JOURNEYS THROUGH THE RUSSIAN EMPIRE

BUY

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Northeast view from Svetlitsa village. Photo by William

Craft Brumfield. (*right*) Saint Nilus Stolobensky

Monastery (Nilova Pustyn). Northeast view from

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## CONTENTS

*Acknowledgments* ix / *Author's Note* xi

INTRODUCTION · An Unsentimental Journey i

### PART I Documenting Cultural Legacies of an Empire

Sergey Prokudin-Gorsky: Photographer of an Empire 13

The Intertwining Fates of Two Collections 27

THE SERGEY PROKUDIN-GORSKY COLLECTION, THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS 27

THE WILLIAM BRUMFIELD COLLECTION, NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART 33

### PART II Journeys

ONE · The Ancient Heartland 39

TWO · The West: From Smolensk Southward to Ryazan 101

THREE · The Northwest: From Lake Ladoga to the Volga Basin 167

FOUR · The Upper Volga: From the Valdai Heights to Torzhok 225

FIVE · The Volga from Uglich to Yurevets 277

SIX · From the Ural Mountains into Siberia 351

SEVEN · Central Asia—Turkestan 413

EIGHT · North to the Solovetsky Islands 473

CONCLUSION · Above the Abyss: A Reflection on Photography  
as an Instrument of Memory 497

*Index* 507

TO THE MEMORY OF ALEKSEY KOMECH  
(1936–2007)—*friend, mentor, guide to the study  
of architecture in Russia*

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To write an acknowledgements page for a book that covers five decades of one's work is a questionable exercise. To whom should I express my gratitude? Everyone, figuratively speaking. In Russia, to the hundreds of friends, colleagues, and strangers who made my life and work possible. To editors and publishers, to drivers and museum workers, to people who gave me shelter. Some perhaps remember, others probably do not.

In this country, to everyone who believed in my work, or simply gave me a pass. Friends, colleagues, strangers, institutions, foundations, universities, endowments. My parents, my sister . . . One person I will name is James Billington, Librarian of Congress from 1987 to 2015. The reasons for this would take more than a page.

I am forever indebted to the staff at Duke University Press and to Miriam Angress, my editor for two books. And to Richard and Betty Hedreen, whose generosity in support of my book is surpassed only by their understanding of why it is necessary. And to Tamara, who is always in my memory.

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## AUTHOR'S NOTE

The eight photographic journeys in this book are composites created to give a sense of discrete geographic regions in Sergey Prokudin-Gorsky's work and my own during our many expeditions. The maps at the beginning of each journey will convey the outlines of the respective regions.

In consultation with the editorial staff at Duke University Press, I have decided to reproduce the digital images of Prokudin-Gorsky's photographs without "corrections," that is, without cropping or retouching. They are presented here in the form produced by the Library of Congress during the digitization of the Prokudin-Gorsky Collection at the beginning of this century.

The foundation of this volume consists of the comparison of Prokudin-Gorsky's photographs with my own taken several decades later. Although broad in its scope, the book is not intended as a comprehensive study of Prokudin-Gorsky's life or his work. References to published sources are contained in the "History" section in part I, "Sergey Prokudin-Gorsky: Photographer of an Empire," but there is no bibliography. The information presented in the text that accompanies the photographs is derived from a myriad of Russian-language sources on regional architectural heritage as well as from notes compiled over decades of my documentary research and field work.

Russian words and names have been transliterated with a modified version of the Library of Congress transliteration system for the Cyrillic alphabet.



## INTRODUCTION

# An Unsentimental Journey

THE COLOR PHOTOGRAPHS of Sergey Prokudin-Gorsky—more precisely, the digital scans of his work made available by the Library of Congress—have launched an extraordinary wave of engagement and soul searching among the Russian public. Websites, blogs, and lavish albums seem omnipresent in Russia. The fascination with his work has led to an examination of virtually each image from a geographical point of view—where he placed the camera, and what is currently at the site that he photographed, or from which he photographed. Internet projects have offered exhaustive research and ingenious interpretations, often involving the participant's personal experience with a specific site. These personal, shared comments represent public expressions of devotion to local history on a national scale. For these participant-commentators, Prokudin-Gorsky's photographs deeply validate the reality of their specific locality in a national—indeed, global—context.

The grand unity of Prokudin-Gorsky's extraordinary productivity has increased a sense that the Russian Empire at the beginning of the twentieth century appears authentically in his photographs. Many photographers had worked in Russia before the revolution, but what is preserved of their work (in black-and-white) seems fragmented and localized in comparison with the scale of Prokudin-Gorsky's photographic sweep. The diversity and geographical range of his collection give the impression that he had captured the essential totality of the empire, although the collection does not





contain the two major cities, Saint Petersburg and Moscow. His purpose was to gather the provinces, both near and distant, in a visual record that could be (and was) presented to the metropolises, a unifying vision of the vast space they controlled—a space defined, as it were, by its periphery.

It could be argued that the trope of imperial “manifest destiny” lies at the basis of his collection, and that assumption must remain in the background of any appraisal of his work. To what extent did the subjects he photographed in Turkestan or the Caucasus consider themselves a part of “Russia”? Even if the collection is selectively limited to the Russian heartland, the current Russian engagement with the Prokudin-Gorsky Collection raises questions about the nature and uses of photographs in collective memory. The astonishment at the lush colors has undoubtedly added

Sergey Prokudin-Gorsky seated by the small Skuritskhali River on the outskirts of Batumi, a Black Sea city located in the Republic of Georgia. PHOTOGRAPH TAKEN IN MARCH 1912 BY ONE OF THE PHOTOGRAPHER’S ASSISTANTS. 21468.

to their impact as viewers struggle to connect with another time, another reality, another conception of Russia.

In a broader sense this struggle has occurred at least since the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. In a period of unsettling transformation many Russians began to contemplate an earlier cataclysm. There is no better example than the provocatively titled book *The Russia That We Have Lost*, published in 1991 by the director and social activist Stanislav Govorukhin. The following year Govorukhin released an impassioned documentary film with the same title. The essence of both can be summarized as an extended commentary on prerevolutionary Russia—its potential, its hopeful progress. Despite the ensuing controversy, the film was credited with opening a post-Soviet comprehension of the twilight years of tsarist Russia—in effect, the era of Prokudin-Gorsky. The polemical resonance of Govorukhin's film has lingered, and his recent death (on June 14, 2018) will undoubtedly extend the commentary.

Some two decades later, the same phrase—"the Russia we have lost"—was used, not coincidentally, in public commentary on a documentary film and subsequent television broadcast about Prokudin-Gorsky created by the television producer Leonid Parfyonov. The title of his widely distributed film, *Tsvet natsii* (2013) can be translated either as "color of the nation" or "flower of the nation," a word play on both Prokudin-Gorsky's color photography and a sense of the country's best representatives. Parfyonov wished to evoke a neglected heritage that promised much for Russia. Indeed, there are moments in the film when the pathos is exaggerated by the framing of views to convey the impression of overgrown monuments, abandoned sacred relics. Having photographed the same sites during a similar period, I can attest that there are other, clearer perspectives that show the sites in relatively good condition. Despite catastrophic vandalism and loss, a careful comparison with the photographs of Prokudin-Gorsky shows that much has indeed remained. To reveal those remnants is the purpose of my work on the following pages.

The hand of fate seems to hover everywhere in this volume. Most of Prokudin-Gorsky's photographic work occurred between two Russian revolutions—1905 and 1917—and between two disastrous wars—the Russo-Japanese and World War I. Born in April 1895, my father fought in the marines as part of the American Expeditionary Forces on the Western Front in that Great War. He was the first person I knew who had seen Russians, soldiers who formed part of a sizeable contingent provided by Nicholas II to bolster the French army. And in August 1918, just as my father's unit



Lewis Floyd Brumfield, private,  
United States Marine Corps.  
STUDIO PHOTOGRAPH TAKEN JULY  
1918 IN AIX-LES-BAINS, FRANCE.

Sergey Prokudin-Gorsky on hand-  
car with railway official near Petro-  
zavodsk (Karelia). Standing be-  
hind them are Austro-Hungarian  
prisoners of war used as construc-  
tion labor for railroad to port of  
Romanov-on-Murman (now Mur-  
mansk). PHOTOGRAPH TAKEN IN  
SUMMER 1916 BY ONE OF THE PHO-  
TOGRAPHER'S ASSISTANTS. 20245.

(6th Regiment, 4th Marine Brigade, 2nd Infantry Division) was fed into the maelstrom on the Marbache Sector of the front as a prelude to the Saint-Mihiel offensive, Prokudin-Gorsky had left his native land, never to return.

After the humiliating Treaty of Brest-Litovsk in March 1918, what was then known (briefly) as the Russian Soviet Republic lost much of the western part of the former Russian Empire. At this point the Russian contingent—formally no longer at war with Germany and probably suspected of Bolshevik contagion—were interned in French camps, where my father saw them in the latter part of 1918. He mentioned this encounter to me in the winter of 1952 (during the Korean War), and I consider these brief but sympathetic words to be the origins of a fascination with Russia that would one day launch me on journeys through the lands traversed by Prokudin-Gorsky.

To contemplate Prokudin-Gorsky's miraculous accomplishment is to summon further encounters with fate. In his driven efforts to photograph over such distances, did he ever sense a premonition that he was recording an empire on the brink of demise? Unlikely, and yet there are intersecting lines that intrigue on a subjective level. Among them are the photographs





of Solovetsky Monastery taken in 1916 (his last photographic expedition), a half decade before the beginning of the monastery's conversion into the prototypical gulag, the defining monument of the gulag archipelago. As will be seen in Journey Eight, these photographs were taken during Prokudin-Gorsky's documentation of a strategic war project, the building of a railroad north to a new port that would become Murmansk. Labor on that project included many prisoners of war from the Austro-Hungarian army.

Prokudin-Gorsky's documentary work has many components (ethnographic, transportation expansion, land development and amelioration in the Caucasus and Central Asia), but I believe that the heart of his project is historical architecture. Russia's architectural heritage not only gave meaning, value, and energy to the implementation of Prokudin-Gorsky's colossal project but also provided the artifacts and the structures whose existence inspired the creation of a visual record that he and I shared. The individuals that he photographed have long since gone. The development projects—whether northern canals or Central Asian irrigation systems—had little to offer in visual or cultural specificity and have since been transformed. The architectural monuments, however, remain as an expression of history, art,

and spiritual culture. For both of us, they have provided an aesthetic frame of reference, constant but subject to many variables: lens, sensitivity of film, angle of view, lighting, time of day, and season. And then there are the marks of human intervention over the decades that separate our journeys.

This book is not intended to be an exhaustive examination of the Prokudin-Gorsky Collection. That is an ongoing project that involves hundreds of participants, particularly in Russia and primarily through the internet. In the following sections I provide an overview of his work, as well as a brief description of the Prokudin-Gorsky Collection at the Library of Congress and my collection at the National Gallery of Art. That material is a prelude to the book's larger purpose: to examine and compare the intersections between Prokudin-Gorsky's photography and my own. To that end I have chosen to focus on the architectural heritage of two great cultural regions—the European Russian heartland and the ancient cities of Samarkand and Bukhara, located in what was then called Turkestan and now is Uzbekistan.

It must be emphasized that my documentation and study of Russian architecture has had its own dynamic and trajectory. It began with photographs taken during my first trip to Russia in the summer of 1970—long before I had heard of Prokudin-Gorsky. I became involved with the Prokudin-Gorsky Collection precisely because of my field experience in photographing Russian architectural monuments. While surveying his contact albums in the Prints and Photographs Division, I realized how frequently our photographic priorities overlapped. In some cases, this was to be expected for anyone with a serious interest in Russian architectural history—the twelfth-century cathedrals of Vladimir, for example. But other intersections in our journeys were entirely fortuitous, such as my trip to Uzbekistan in May 1972 as a graduate student engaged in dissertation research at Leningrad State University. In surveying Prokudin-Gorsky's photographs I realized that through a twist of fate I had seen and photographed the great monuments of Samarkand and Bukhara (now substantially reconstructed) in something like their condition when he documented them six decades earlier.

Acquaintance with the Prokudin-Gorsky Collection did not lead me to change my field itineraries simply to duplicate his journeys, nor did I set out to replicate his views. Often the visual logic of the location and the specific architectural structure resulted in a convergence of our perspectives. In other cases, the contrast is startling. Whatever the differences, the juxtaposition of our images, separated at least by sixty-five years and in some cases



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Author at Savior-Andronikov Monastery, Moscow. DECEMBER 21, 1979.





Author at ruins of medieval fort near Bukhara, Uzbekistan. MAY 13, 1972.

by a century, yields telling contrasts in the condition of architectural monuments and the history that surrounds them. It is this play of convergence and contrast that forms the crux of the book.

To illuminate this juxtaposition, I have structured a series of “journeys” through eight geographical regions. These journeys do not necessarily reproduce specific itineraries (either his or mine) but represent composites that allow me to organize the photographs in a logical sequence for the reader. The towns or sites in each journey are concisely described from a historical perspective, and each Prokudin-Gorsky image is placed within that context,



including information on the time of his visit. (I have written annotations for most of the images in the Prokudin-Gorsky Collection at the Library of Congress.)

The accompanying text provides commentary comparing his and my photographs. Each of my photographs is precisely dated as a basic means of documenting the differences noted in the comparative analysis of the respective photographs. From the parallels in our journeys through time and space, images and text raise questions about fundamental issues concerning the preservation of Russia's cultural heritage.

