

Julia Seeley-Hall

Tikhvin Cemetery and Alexander Nevsky Lavra: Intersections of Secularism and Religion in St. Petersburg

Many visitors to St. Petersburg would not consider their trip complete without a brief visit to the graves of such world-renowned figures as Fedor Dostoevskii and Petr Chaikovskii. These memorials, along with those of several other important cultural figures, are located at the city's Tikhvin Cemetery, officially known as the Necropolis of Artists.¹ Many casual visitors are likely unaware of the fascinating history of this site, which began as a monastery cemetery of Alexander Nevsky Lavra (Aleksandro-Nevskii Lavra), but which was made a museum under Soviet rule in order to survive. To better understand the impact this site has had on Russian culture, I conducted interviews in St. Petersburg with the curator of Tikhvin Cemetery Iurii Minaevich Birukta, and with Lidiia Ivanovna Sokolova, a parishioner of Alexander Nevsky Lavra who has written a book about another cemetery located on its grounds. I discovered that the relationship of Tikhvin Cemetery with religion is complex. Today, although it is still a secular institution, Tikhvin Cemetery has reclaimed many aspects of the Russian Orthodox tradition and in doing so illuminates the complicated role of religion in St. Petersburg today.

In order to understand Tikhvin Cemetery's place in Russian history, we must first begin with Alexander Nevsky Lavra, the monastery to which it originally belonged. The title *lavra* denotes a monastery with a particular rank in Russian Orthodoxy, a rank Alexander Nevsky Lavra did not attain until 1797.² For clarity's sake, I will continue to refer to it as Alexander Nevsky Lavra, despite the technical inaccuracy of this name for its early history.

¹ For the purposes of this paper, I will refer to the site primarily as Tikhvin Cemetery.

² "Istoriia." Sviato-Troitskaia Aleksandro-Nevskaia Lavra. Translated at WorldWalk.info/en/catalog/329

As a monastery of the Russian Orthodox Church, Alexander Nevsky Lavra first and foremost represents a connection to the Russian Orthodox tradition of monasticism. This connection carries such importance because it is implicit in the very nature of Alexander Nevsky Lavra; to ignore it would be to ignore the Lavra's identity.

Monasticism had been well established in Russia long before St. Petersburg was founded. Early Russian culture is inseparable from religion: in his article on monasticism in Russia, Scott Kenworthy writes that in medieval times “Orthodox Monasticism *was* Muscovite culture.”³ This is a sentiment the curator of Tikhvin Cemetery also echoed; he even went so far as to say that “Russian culture is inconceivable without the Orthodox Church.”⁴ Although other factors in the Lavra's history are certainly important, the influence of the Russian Orthodox Church would be difficult to overstate.

Alexander Nevsky Lavra was founded shortly after St. Petersburg itself. According to the Lavra's website, Peter the Great had selected the site for the monastery as early as 1704, only a year after the city was founded.⁵ As such, it was part of Peter the Great's vision for a new, Western city. Alexander Nevsky Lavra was designed to match the Western style of the rest of the city designed by Domenico Trezzini, who was responsible for many of St. Petersburg's most famous landmarks, such as the Peter and Paul Fortress.⁶ Alexander Nevsky Lavra therefore provides an example of competing Russian and Western influences in St. Petersburg. Although it is an institution of Russian Orthodoxy, it is also designed in a distinctly Western style and was chosen by Peter the Great himself to be a part of his new, modern city.

³ Scott M. Kenworthy, “Monasticism in Russian History,” *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 10, no. 2 (2009), 308. (Emphasis in original).

⁴ Yurii Minaevich Biriukta, Interview by Julia Seeley-Hall, Transcript, Translated by Julia Seeley-Hall

⁵ “Istoriia.” Sviato-Troitskaia Aleksandro-Nevskaia Lavra. Translated at WorldWalk.info/en/catalog/329

⁶ Dan Richardson. *Rough Guide to St. Petersburg*, New York: Rough Guides, 2008, 87-225.

Peter the Great's reasons for building a monastery in his new city of St. Petersburg were far from pious. As Iurii Biriukta explains, building Alexander Nevsky Lavra was one way for Peter the Great to consolidate Russia's position in the newly-conquered territory.⁷ Furthermore, the construction of Alexander Nevsky Lavra came at a time when Peter sought to curtail the power of monasteries in Russia.⁸ It therefore was born under the Tsar's new-found influence over monasticism in Russia. In this sense, it represents not only a link to Russia's ancient religious traditions, but also to the beginning of a new era for religion in Russia—an era in which the Tsar held more influence over the Church. Peter the Great further exercised this power by ordering that the remains of Aleksandr Nevskii, considered a saint in Russian Orthodoxy, be brought to the Lavra. This served not only to establish the power of the Tsar over the Church, but also to grant the newly-built monastery a higher status.

Alexander Nevsky Lavra therefore represents ties to the ancient traditions of Russian Orthodoxy, but also to Peter the Great's quest to create a new, modern Russia.

Established in the early 19th century, Tikhvin Cemetery is found in the midst of these competing influences. Like the monastery of which it was originally a part, Tikhvin Cemetery has an intrinsic connection to religion. Not only because it was originally a monastery cemetery, although that certainly plays a role, but also because any cemetery is considered a religious site in the Russian Orthodox tradition.⁹ Partly due to the legacy left over from the Soviet era, Tikhvin Cemetery is now a secular institution. Its history, as well as the continuing history of Alexander Nevsky Lavra, are useful in examining the exact nature of Tikhvin Cemetery's connection with religion.

The first cemetery in Alexander Nevsky Lavra was the Lazarus Cemetery. Tikhvin

⁷ Iurii Minaevich Biriukta, Interview by Julia Seeley-Hall, Transcript, Translated by Julia Seeley-Hall.

⁸ Kenworthy, "Monasticism in Russian History," 309.

⁹ Iurii Minaevich Biriukta, Interview by Julia Seeley-Hall, Transcript, Translated by Julia Seeley-Hall.

Cemetery was opened when the Lazarus Cemetery became overcrowded. At this period in history, the connection between Alexander Nevsky Lavra and Tikhvin Cemetery was not merely religious, but also monetary. For instance, plots in the cemetery could be purchased for an expensive fee paid to the Lavra.¹⁰ Because the money went to Alexander Nevsky Lavra, it is evident that the Lavra and its various cemeteries functioned as one entity.

All of this changed with the emergence of the Soviet Union. During the 1930s, when all the Lavra's churches were shut down, many of its valuables were taken.¹¹ The remains of Aleksandr Nevskii were taken to the Museum of Atheism, and only returned in 1989.¹² Although it has been reopened and much restoration work has been done, Alexander Nevsky Lavra is still not close to what it was at its height: of sixteen churches, only five are still open.¹³

The reopening of Alexander Nevsky Lavra reflects a wider trend of religious resurgence. As Stella Rock writes in her article for *History Today*, many monasteries in Russia have been revived and reopened since the collapse of the Soviet Union.¹⁴ She focuses on one in particular: the Ekaterinburg Novo-Tikhvin convent. Closed and used for storage during the Soviet era, this convent is open and flourishing once again.¹⁵ This shows that the success of Alexander Nevsky Lavra in post-Soviet Russia is not due solely to its cultural and historical significance, although those are factors which should not be discounted. In addition, it is a part of a religious tradition that has survived to this day.

It is here that Tikhvin Cemetery's path differs from that of Alexander Nevsky

¹⁰ Lidiia Ivanovna Sokolova, Interview by Julia Seeley-Hall, Transcript, Translated by Julia Seeley-Hall.

¹¹ "Alexander Nevsky Monastery," Zao St. Petersburg.com.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Stella Rock, "A Monastic Revival History Today 59, no. 2 (February 2009): 4-5, Religion and Philosophy Collection, EBSCOhost.

¹⁵ Ibid.

Lavra. The cemetery was not closed by the Soviet government, but instead allowed to exist in a drastically different form. Instead of a monastery cemetery, it was transformed into a secular museum park. Its name was changed from Tikhvin Cemetery, which references the Tikhvin Icon of the Mother of God, to the Necropolis of Artists.¹⁶ This drastic alteration in the cemetery's identity—from a religious cemetery to a secular museum—was done in order to save it from the threat of demolition.¹⁷ In spite of this, some of the graves associated with the Russian Orthodox Church were destroyed. Some restoration work has already been done to reverse this and more is planned for the future.¹⁸

Today Tikhvin Cemetery has retained the name Necropolis of Artists and continues to function as a museum. Despite this secularism, however, the cemetery has taken several important steps to reclaim its religious heritage. For example, regular prayer services are now held at the more well-known graves, such as Chaikovskii's.¹⁹ Even the name may one day revert from “Necropolis of Artists” to the original “Tikhvin Cemetery.” Iurii Biriukta, the curator of the Necropolis Museum, referred to the cemetery's current name as “ludicrous” and “the fruit of Soviet culture.” He also wants the name to return to Tikhvin for simple practicality. Since many of the earlier and more well-known graves were established under the original name, continuing to use the name “Necropolis of Artists” would be, in his words, “misleading.”²⁰ Thus, rather than being a straightforward secular institution, Tikhvin Cemetery continues to maintain significant connections to religion.

However, despite this reclaiming of its religious heritage, Tikhvin Cemetery today

¹⁶ Iurii Minaevich Biriukta, Interview by Julia Seeley-Hall, Transcript, Translated by Julia Seeley-Hall.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Lidiia Ivanovna Sokolova, Interview by Julia Seeley-Hall, Transcript, Translated by Julia Seeley-Hall.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Iurii Minaevich Biriukta, Interview by Julia Seeley-Hall, Transcript, Translated by Julia Seeley-Hall.

bears little deep resemblance to what it was historically. Now it is a museum and visitors have to purchase a ticket at the gate to stroll the grounds. Furthermore, there exists no legal connection between the cemetery and the Lavra; the Lavra no longer function as one entity.²¹ Their current relationship is complex but cooperative. For example, the Lavra holds prayer services at certain graves, but in order to do this, the Necropolis museum's administration has to grant permission.²² The Lavra has also raised the question of returning one of the museum buildings, which was originally a church, to its original function.²³ Whether this will happen remains to be seen. As Biriukta pointed out, while the Lavra may have a legitimate claim on the building, it has existed as a museum for the past eighty years and so finding a happy compromise may prove difficult.²⁴ Finally, although Tikhvin Cemetery and Alexander Nevsky Lavra are not legally connected, they do work to each other's mutual benefit, at least where tourism is concerned—visitors to the Lavra almost always visit Tikhvin Cemetery as well.²⁵

In summary, Tikhvin Cemetery exists in the midst of a complicated web of connections. It began its existence as a cemetery of the Alexander Nevsky Lavra, which was founded partly in order to cement Peter the Great's power. Thus, before Tikhvin Cemetery existed, the competing pressures of religious and secular concerns were already at war in the Lavra itself. During the Soviet era, the Lavra was closed and the cemetery was transformed. The legacy of the Soviet Union and the resurgence of religion in Russia since its collapse have left Tikhvin Cemetery straddling the two worlds of religion and secularism.

²¹ Lidiia Ivanovna Sokolova, Interview by Julia Seeley-Hall, Transcript, Translated by Julia Seeley-Hall.

²² Ibid.

²³ Iurii Minaevich Biriukta, Interview by Julia Seeley-Hall, Transcript, Translated by Julia Seeley-Hall.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Lidiia Ivanovna Sokolova, Interview by Julia Seeley-Hall, Transcript, Translated by Julia Seeley-Hall.

It could be argued that much of Tikhvin Cemetery's current association with religion is more a matter of location than anything else. Ever since Alexander Nevsky Lavra's reopening, any site located so near to it—and Tikhvin Cemetery is practically on its grounds—could not help but develop an association. The administrations of both sites would have to work together to a certain extent out of simple necessity, regardless of whether or not they shared similar goals. However, this argument ignores the fact that Tikhvin Cemetery began its existence as a monastery cemetery. The cemetery as the Necropolis of Artists may have been a Soviet invention, but it existed for many years before this. Furthermore, many of the people buried there were Russian Orthodox believers.²⁶ Tikhvin Cemetery's ties to Alexander Nevsky Lavra are much more than a mere matter of proximity.

Then there is the matter of St. Petersburg itself. The city is regarded world wide as a center of culture, and many important cultural figures, including those buried at Tikhvin Cemetery, lived and worked there. That so many creators of Russian culture (and those associated with said creators) are buried in St. Petersburg further cements that narrative of St. Petersburg as a center of Russian culture. Regardless of their level of association with the city during their lives, it is in St. Petersburg that these important figures are honored and remembered. In another sense, Tikhvin Cemetery, through its association with Russian Orthodoxy, also strengthens the link between Russia's religious traditions and the aspects of Russian culture that are not generally considered through the lens of religion (such as works of Chaikovskii or Dostoevskii). This religious connection also impacts the narrative of St. Petersburg itself. For a relatively young city, it too has ties to Russia's oldest religious traditions.

Tikhvin Cemetery, therefore, acts a link between Russia's most renowned cultural

²⁶ Iurii Minaevich Biriukta, Interview by Julia Seeley-Hall, Transcript, Translated by Julia Seeley-Hall.

figures and its religious traditions. Although it is a secular institution, it has deep roots in Russian Orthodoxy. It is true that individuals may have incredibly varied views on what exactly Tikhvin Cemetery is. Those who come simply to see the spot where a famous cultural figure such as Chaikovskii is buried may not regard it as a necessarily religious space, whereas those who come there to attend prayer services could not see it as anything but a religious space. Tikhvin Cemetery's position between secularism and religion allows it to be open to both believing and non-believing Russians, both of whom have a legitimate claim to the cultural achievements which are celebrated there.

In conclusion, the complicated history of Tikhvin Cemetery and the Alexander Nevsky Lavra shows a changing relationship between secularism and religion over time. Today, the Lavra is firmly a religious site, while the cemetery exists in both the religious and secular world. This combination of religious and secular influences connects both religious traditions and secular culture to the city of St. Petersburg. By its position between two worlds, Tikhvin Cemetery helps to unite the many multifaceted aspects of Russian culture.

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