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Ellis H. Minns and Nikodim Kondakov's *The Russian Icon* (1927)

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Modernism and the Spiritual in Russian Art

New Perspectives

EDITED BY LOUISE HARDIMAN AND NICOLA KOZICHAROW

Modernism and the Spiritual in Russian Art

New Perspectives

*Edited by Louise Hardiman
and Nicola Kozicharov*

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8. Ellis H. Minns and Nikodim Kondakov's *The Russian Icon* (1927)¹

Wendy Salmond

In March 1922, Byzantine scholar and academician Nikodim Kondakov (1844–1925) arrived in Prague, an elderly, penniless émigré with little more in his suitcase than a massive book manuscript and a photo archive (fig. 8.1). Kondakov intended his book to be the definitive work on the Russian icon, his gift to the Russian people in a time of iconoclasm, when an entire culture of shared spiritual values seemed under threat.² It was the fruit, not simply of decades of laborious scholarly research, but also of an intimate familiarity with icon painting as a living craft still practised in late Imperial Russia. Kondakov had begun to write this last major work of his career in 1915, amidst a fierce polemic in the national art press that cast him as the exemplar of all that was outmoded in his generation of scholars. Begun in Petrograd, the 620-page manuscript was completed in Yalta in 1918, but continually reworked right up until the author's death in February 1925. Finding a publisher for the book became the central preoccupation of Kondakov's final years. If he failed in this, he believed, it would take fifty or sixty years before a work of its kind would appear again, and an entire body of knowledge would be lost.³

When it was finally published posthumously in 1927, in an abridged English edition by Oxford's Clarendon Press, *The Russian Icon* should have marked a watershed. It was the first monograph in English on the subject, written by a scholar of international stature; it was masterfully translated and annotated by Cambridge academic Dr Ellis H. Minns; and it was luxuriously produced, thanks in part to a subsidy from the son of the American industrialist and Slavophile, Charles R. Crane (fig. 8.2).⁴

1 I express my heartfelt thanks to Dr Rosalind Blakesley for her generosity in facilitating my stay at Pembroke College, Cambridge as a Visiting Scholar in August 2013; to Nicola Kozicharov and Louise Hardiman for inviting me to take part in the conference *On the Spiritual in Russian Art* in 2012; and to Pat Aske for her kindness in sharing the Minns materials in the Pembroke College Library.

2 On Soviet iconoclasm see, for example, Daniel Peris, *Storming the Heavens: The Soviet League of the Militant Godless* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998).

3 I. L. Kyzlasova, *Istoriia otechestvennoi nauki ob iskusstve Vizantii i drevnei Rusi 1920–30 gody. Po materialam arkhivov* (Moscow: Izd. Akademii gornykh nauk, 2000), p. 60.

4 For an excellent historical overview of British attitudes towards Russian icons see Richard Marks, 'Russian Icons Through British Eyes c. 1830–1930', in *A People Passing Rude: British Responses to Russian Culture*, ed. by Anthony Cross (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2012, <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0022>), pp. 69–88.

And yet, Kondakov's magnum opus failed to win an audience. Though it appeared just in time for a surge of popular interest in Russian icons abroad, it never became the book of choice for the English-speaking public seeking a guide through the 'dark forest' of the icon's history. In part the reasons were practical — at 105 shillings its purchase was a luxury few could afford, and the small print run further limited its influence.⁵ But what really doomed Kondakov's achievement to oblivion for much of the twentieth century was the widespread assumption that it represented an out-of-date and fundamentally flawed understanding of the icon, written by a man of nineteenth-century sensibility incapable of responding to the aesthetic demands and discoveries of the modern age.

My chapter offers some suggestions for why this crude caricature of Kondakov's work took hold in the 1920s and became axiomatic throughout the Soviet period. In particular, it considers the role that Minns's translation may have played, however inadvertently, in cementing this impression. Minns's interventions in and framing of the text highlight the turmoil and uncertainty of the 1920s, when the emerging history of the Russian icon was a touchstone for generational as well as ideological conflicts.

Writing the Text (1915–25)

Nikodim Kondakov came to the study of Russian icons relatively late in his career. After writing a pioneering dissertation on *The History of Byzantine Art and Iconography Based on Miniatures in Greek Manuscripts* in 1876, he spent a quarter of a century building an international reputation as "the patriarch of Byzantinists",⁶ "laying out the main paths for studying the artistic culture of Byzantium and the Slavic countries that came under the influence of the Byzantine Empire".⁷ His history of the Russian icon, by contrast, originated in a very practical concern with the contemporary state of icon painting in his homeland. A fact-finding trip in 1900 to the villages of Mstera, Palekh, and Kholui — the centres of icon production in late Imperial Russia — revealed the rapid decline of this ancient craft into a production-line industry, and raised fears for its survival in the new century.⁸ The experience prompted Kondakov to embark on a crusade to reconnect the contemporary icon painter with the history of his fast dying tradition.

Kondakov's official contacts at court and in the upper echelons of academia paved the way for the creation of the Committee for the Guardianship of Russian Icon Painting

5 By comparison, the English edition of Aleksandr Anisimov's *Vladimirskaiia ikona Bozhiei Materi* (*Our Lady of Vladimir*, trans. by N. G. Yaschwill and T. N. Rodzianko (Prague: Seminarium Kondakovianum, 1928)), also subsidised by John Crane, cost 35 shillings or \$8 ('S. P.', 'Review of Our Lady of Vladimir by A. J. Azimov, N. G. Yaschwill, T. N. Rodzianko', *The Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs*, 56, 327 (June 1930), 323).

6 The phrase is Gabriel Millet's, cited by Ellis Minns in his preface to Nikodim Kondakov, *The Russian Icon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1927), p. vii.

7 G. I. Vzdornov, 'Nikodim Pavlovich Kondakov v zerkale sovremennoi vizantinistiki', in *Nauka i restavratsiia: Ocherki po istorii otkrytiia i izucheniia drevnerusskoi zhivopisi* (Moscow: Indrik, 2006), p. 305.

8 See N. P. Kondakov, *Sovremennoe polozhenie russkoi narodnoi ikonopisi* (St Petersburg: Tipografiia I. N. Skorokhodova, 1901).

8.1 Portrait of Nikodim Kondakov by Princess Natalia Iashvil (ca. 1924). From G. V. Vernadskij, 'Nikodim Pavlovič Kondakov', in *Sbornik statei, posviashchennykh pamiati N. P. Kondakova. Arkheologiya, istoriya iskusstva, vizantinovedenie* (Prague: Seminarium Kondakovianum, 1926). Photograph in the public domain.

8.2 Title page of Nikodim Kondakov, *The Russian Icon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1927). Photograph in the public domain.

in 1902, of which he was *de facto* director. At his urging, the committee opened schools for young icon painters, and successfully lobbied Tsar Nicholas II for a ban on the production of icons printed on tin.⁹ At the same time, he had strong grass-roots links to the practical world of icon painters through his protégés Vladimir Georgievsky (1861–1923) and Grigory Chirikov (1882–1936), who shared his appreciation of the icon as a complex material artefact deeply imbedded in the liturgical and cultural practices of Orthodoxy.¹⁰ Seen from this perspective, no icon could be taken in isolation, for it was linked not only to its prototype, but also to innumerable other icons across time and place, part of a craft tradition that responded continually to external influences and events, and occasionally produced sublime works of art.

His first publication on icons, the *Iconography of Our Lord God and Saviour Jesus Christ* (1905), was specifically intended for use in the committee's schools as a *litsevoi podlinnik* — a visual primer containing the main iconographic and stylistic prototypes contemporary icon painters needed to keep the ancient traditions of their craft alive.¹¹ But as he moved on to explore the iconography of Mother of God icons, Kondakov's scholarly curiosity was piqued as he noticed that certain iconographic types emerging in Russia in the fourteenth century showed a new element of humanism and expressiveness he had not encountered in Byzantine prototypes. These qualities, he believed, could only be explained by Russian icon painters coming into contact with early Italian icons. This hypothesis was the crux of his emerging 'Italo-Cretan' or western theory, and its most vivid illustration was the *umilenie* or 'tenderness' type, best known in the celebrated Vladimir Mother of God icon in Moscow's Dormition Cathedral, which scholars then believed to be a fourteenth-century work.

Kondakov launched his theory in 1910, with a lecture to the Imperial Society of Lovers of Ancient Letters; that same year saw the first of his three projected volumes on Mother of God iconography, subtitled *The Links between Greek and Russian Icon Painting and Italian Painting of the Early Renaissance*.¹² As a radical departure from conventional wisdom on the 'backwardness' of the Russian icon, Kondakov's theory of western influences attracted a "storm of the most violent protests" from the official

9 See Robert Nichols, 'The Icon and the Machine in Russia's Religious Renaissance, 1900–1909', in *Christianity and the Arts in Russia*, ed. by William C. Brumfield and Milos M. Velimirovic (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 131–44; Oleg Tarasov, *Icon and Devotion: Sacred Spaces in Imperial Russia*, trans. and ed. by Robin Milner-Gulland (London: Reaktion Books, 2002).

10 Kondakov's enduring friendships with Georgievsky, Chirikov, and Aleksandr Anisimov are thoroughly documented in Kyzlasova, *Istoriia otechestvennoi nauki*.

11 N. P. Kondakov, *Ikonografiia Gospoda Boga i Spasa nashego Iisusa Khrista* (St Petersburg: Tovarishchestvo R. Golike i A. Vil'borg, 1905; reprint Moscow: Palomnik, 2001). It was the first volume in an intended series of illustrated icon primers (*litsevoi ikonopisnyi podlinnik*).

12 See N. P. Kondakov, *Ikonografiia Bogomateri: soiazi grecheskoi i russkoi ikonopisi s ital'ianskoiu zhivopis'iu ranago vozrozhdeniia* (St Petersburg: Tovarishchestvo R. Golike i A. Vil'borg, 1910). This was followed by N. P. Kondakov, *Ikonografiia Bogomateri*, 2 vols. (St Petersburg: Tipografiia imperatorskoi akademii nauk, 1914–15), <https://archive.org/details/ikonografiabogom01konduoft>, <https://archive.org/details/ikonografiabogom02konduoft>. The manuscript of the third volume was acquired by the Vatican in 1925, but remained unpublished until Ivan Foletti's translation of it appeared (*Iconographie de la Mère de Dieu III* [Rome: Lipa, 2011]). For the story of this long-missing work, see Ivan Foletti, 'The Last Kondakov: Rediscovery of a Manuscript', *Orientalia Christiana Periodica*, 74, 2 (2008), 495–502.

archaeological community.¹³ In response, he defended his theory with all the vigour of an explorer charting a path through virtually unknown territory — after all, in 1910 the vast majority of early Russian icons remained buried beneath layers of overpainting, dirt, and adornments, and their outlines and iconographic details were often the most legible information available, to be collated like points on an emerging map. Any attempt at building a coherent history required an act of archaeological sifting, imaginative reconstruction, and conceptual daring.

As a scholar who prided himself on the objectivity of his methods and deductions, Kondakov looked to the largest possible sample size to test his unfolding hypothesis of external influence and internal adaptation in early Russian icon painting. His emerging historical framework found its ideal demonstration in the collection of his friend Nikolai Likhachev (1862–1936), a diplomat and scholar whose enormous icon collection was purchased by the state in 1913 and formed the nucleus of the Department of Icon Painting (*drevlekhranilishche*) at the Alexander III Museum (later the Russian Museum) in St Petersburg.¹⁴

Likhachev spread his collecting net wide, to include not only aesthetically exceptional icons like the monumental Boris and Gleb (fig. 8.3) from Suzdal, cleaned by Grigory Chirikov in 1907, but also a wide assortment of what were considered run-of-the-mill (*remeslennyi*) icons from Byzantium, Crete, Italy, and Russia. Likhachev's own visual atlas of his collection, *Materials for a History of Russian Icon Painting* (1906), arranged by iconographic type, was a testament to the method of comparative typologies that he and Kondakov shared (fig. 8.4).¹⁵

Yet as these two senior scholars fleshed out their theory of western influences with increasing confidence, an entirely new view of the Russian icon's evolution began to emerge around 1910–14, in response to the cleaning of icons in private collections and of frescoes in the churches of Novgorod and at Ferapontov Monastery.¹⁶ In 1913, a spokesman for an alternative icon history emerged in the person of Pavel Muratov (1881–1950), a young critic who played a leading role in organising the watershed exhibition of cleaned icons held in Moscow's Delovoi Dvor that year.¹⁷ Muratov

13 In 1911 Kondakov's young protégé Aleksandr Anisimov wrote approvingly of his mentor's "objective truth" in the face of subjective prejudices, observing that "For Moscow archaeology the Italian influence on Russian icon painting is evidently still too new". Quoted in I. L. Kyzlasova, *Istoriia izucheniia vizantiiskogo i drevnerusskogo iskusstva v Rossii*: F. I. Buslaev, N. P. Kondakov: metody, idei, teoriia (Moscow: Izd-vo Moskovskogo universiteta, 1985), p. 236. He later rejected Kondakov's position, while retaining a deep respect for the latter's scholarship.

14 See *Drevlekhranilishche pamiatnikov ikonopisi i tserkovnoi stariny v Russkom muzee* (St Petersburg: Palace Editions, 2014).

15 N. P. Likhachev. *Materialy dlia istorii russkago ikonopisaniia: Atlas* (St Petersburg: Ekspeditsiia zagotovleniia gosudarstvennykh bumag, 1906).

16 See V. T. Georgievskii, *Freski Ferapontova monastyria* (St Petersburg: Tov. R. Golike i A. Vil'borg, 1911); V. V. Suslov, *Tserkov' Uspeniia Bogoroditsy v s. Volotove bliz Novgoroda, postroennaia v 1352 g.* (Moscow: T-vo tip. A. I. Mamontova, 1911); P. Muratov, *Novgorodskaiia ikona S. Fedora Stratilata* (Moscow: K. F. Nekrasov, 1916).

17 See *Vystavka drevne-russkogo iskusstva ustroennaia v 1913 godu v oznamenovanie chestvovaniia 300-letiiia tsarstvovaniia doma Romanovykh* (Moscow: Imperatorskii Moskovskii Arkheologicheskii Institut Imeni

exalted Novgorod icons and frescoes, now emerging in all their brilliance from under the restorer's knife, and pointed to Gabriel Millet's recent discovery of the frescoes at Mistra as confirmation that, far from being a provincial outpost, medieval Novgorod had been part of the so-called Byzantine Renaissance, the revival of Hellenic culture under the Palaeologan dynasty (1261–1453).¹⁸ Muratov defended this position in the volume on icons he wrote in 1914 for Igor Grabar's *History of Russian Art*; this was followed in 1915 by his catalogue of Ilia Ostroukhov's icon collection, a selection governed by the aesthetic criteria of modern art, and the very antithesis of Likhachev's encyclopaedic collecting method.¹⁹ Muratov's elegant prose and celebration of the icon's formal rhythms and structures, coupled with his pride in the discovery of a distinctive, world-class Russian art, made him the natural leader for a younger generation of self-styled aesthetes alienated by Kondakov's dispassionate objectivity and exhausting erudition. With increasing irritation, Kondakov watched the younger man assume the mantle of authority that had been his, while the scientific objectivity and holistic approach he prized fell victim to an "empty dialectic" that pitted aesthetes (lovers of form) against iconographers (pedants of subject matter).²⁰

In 1915, Kondakov began writing his own version of the Russian icon's history. Commissioned by Mikhail Tereshchenko, a wealthy trustee of the Russian Museum, the study was to be a scholarly guide to the museum's new icon collection (fig. 8.5).²¹ But it was also to serve as an antidote to what Kondakov perceived as the faddish, exaggerated celebration of Russian icons that had followed the 1913 Moscow exhibition.²² In his eyes, the upsurge of press coverage was just vulgar journalistic excess, based on nothing but the subjective projections of the writer, uninformed by historical fact and context. This irascible stance made it all the easier for Kondakov's young critics to paint him as a plodding factographer, immune to the emerging beauties and 'uniquely Russian' appeal of Novgorod icons, an intolerant patriarch ripe for toppling.

Imperatora Nikolaia II, 1913); Pavel Muratov, 'Epokha drevne-russkoi ikonopisi', *Starye gody* (April 1913), 31–38; 'Blizhaishchie zadachi v dele izucheniia ikonopisi', *Russkaia ikona*, 1 (1914), 8–12.

18 Gabriel Millet, *Monuments byzantins de Mistra* (Paris: Leroux, 1910).

19 P. Muratov, *Drevne-russkaia ikonopis' v sobranii I. S. Ostroukhova* (Moscow: K. F. Nekrasov, 1914).

20 Kondakov was dismissive enough of these new discoveries that in 1911 he refused Georgievsky's invitation to join him on an inspection of the newly cleaned frescoes by Dionisy at Ferapontov Monastery, instead making his regular summer trip to Italy to examine more Italo-Cretan icons. Irina Kyzlasova describes this as evidence of the "tragic discord" between Kondakov's theories and the wealth of new information emerging to challenge them. See Kyzlasova, *Istoriia otechestvennoi nauki*, p. 192.

21 See I. D. Solov'eva, 'N. P. Kondakov i Russkii muzei Imperatora Aleksandra III', in *Nikodim Pavlovich Kondakov 1844–1925. Lichnost', nauchnoe nasledie, arkhiv. K 150-letiiu so dnia rozhdeniia* (St Petersburg: Palace Editions, 2004), pp. 5–7.

22 Ivan Foletti contrasts the even-keeled tone of the *Ikonografiia bogomateri*, the second volume of which was completed in 1914, with Kondakov's irascible polemics against "the aesthetic school" in *The Russian Icon/Russkaia ikona*. See Ivan Foletti, *Da Bisanzio alla santa Russia: Nikodim Kondakov (1844–1925) e la nascita della storia dell'arte in Russia* (Rome: Viella, 2011).

8.3 Icon of St Boris and St Gleb (mid 14th century), Tempera on wood. 142.5 x 94.3 cm. State Russian Museum, St Petersburg. Photograph in the public domain. Wikimedia, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Unknow_-_St_Boris_and_St_Gleb_-_Google_Art_Project.jpg

8.4 Plate from N. P. Likhachev, *Materialy dlia istorii russkago ikonopisaniia: Atlas* (St Petersburg: Ekspeditsiia zagotovleniia gosudarstvennykh bumag, 1906).
 Photograph in the public domain.

8.5 Nikodim Kondakov (seated at left) with staff of the Department of Early Russian Art, Russian Museum, St Petersburg, 1914. Photograph © State Russian Museum, all rights reserved.

The 1917 Revolutions and their aftermath dispersed this fractious community of scholars, critics, and collectors engaged in the nascent study of icons. Many (including Kondakov and Muratov) ended up in Paris, Prague, Rome, or Berlin, struggling to continue their work in exile. Those who remained in Soviet Russia, however, paradoxically benefited from the Bolshevik nationalisation of the Orthodox Church's property by gaining unprecedented access to Russia's oldest icons. In summer 1918, a team of experts directed by Igor Grabar and Aleksandr Anisimov led a series of expeditions to the ancient towns and monasteries along the Volga to study and conserve their icons and frescoes. Cleaning revealed that some of the most revered miracle-working icons of Russian Orthodoxy, like the Bogoliubov and Maksimov Mothers of God, were several centuries older than previously thought. By the end of that year, the Vladimir Mother of God, around which Kondakov had constructed a key part of his western theory, would be revealed, not as the fourteenth-century work its

overpainted surface suggested, but as a twelfth-century Byzantine icon owing nothing to the humanist impulses of the early Italian Renaissance.

By October 1918 Kondakov was living in Odessa and had already completed the first draft of his icon manuscript, when word of these discoveries first reached him.²³ But, in the chaos of the Civil War, he was unable to return to Moscow to examine the conservation work in person, and he would hear nothing more from his friends in the capital for the next five years. In 1920 he set sail for Constantinople with his manuscript, his 'western theory', and hundreds of photos of icons in the Russian Museum collection, taken back in 1913. Ahead lay the bitter life of a pioneer banished from the epicentre of new icon discoveries, the Central State Conservation Workshops in Moscow overseen by Grabar and Anisimov.²⁴ Henceforth, Kondakov would be seen as a man for whom time had stopped at the moment of exile, his work the emblem of a vanished past.

Translating the Text (1921–25)

Dr Ellis Hovell Minns (fig. 8.6) was teaching paleography at Pembroke College, Cambridge when, in May 1921, he received a letter from Kondakov after a prolonged silence.²⁵ Twenty years earlier, while a student at Pembroke, Minns had spent two periods in St Petersburg studying South Russian archaeology of the Scythian period. He had warm memories of the vibrant scholarly world of late Imperial archaeology, and particularly of Kondakov's hospitality and support. A "painful scholar and learned antiquary",²⁶ with a gift for uncommon languages, Minns's reputation rested on a single book, *Scythians and Greeks* (1913), but it was one that even Russian scholars considered a fundamental text on the subject.²⁷ From his rooms at Pembroke College and his home

23 Letter from Grigory Chirikov to Nikodim Kondakov, 25 September/9 October 1918, published in Kyzlasova, *Istoriia otechestvennoi istorii*, p. 232.

24 Pavel Muratov stayed on in Moscow as an employee of Narkompros (the People's Commissariat of Enlightenment) until 1922. When he published his first works on icons abroad in 1923, he was able to integrate some of these discoveries smoothly into his own text, without in any way altering the picture of 1913–15. See P. P. Muratov, *Drevnerusskaia zhivopis'*. *Istoriia otkrytiia i issledovaniia* (St Petersburg: Bibliopolis, 2008), pp. 415–16.

25 Sir Ellis Hovell Minns (1873/4–1953) was in turn undergraduate, Fellow, Librarian, Professor, President, and Senior Fellow of Pembroke College, and in 1927 was named Disney Professor of Archaeology at the University of Cambridge. He was recognised as one of the founding fathers of Eurasian archaeology. He visited Russia in 1898–99 and again in 1900–01. Among Minns's papers in the Cambridge University Library is a draft report of his travels and study plans, dated 27 December 1900–7 January 1901. See Cambridge University Library, Department of Manuscripts and University Archives, Sir Ellis Hovell Minns: Correspondence, MS Add. 7722.

26 A characterisation of Minns from the *Pembroke College Gazette*, 1 (1927), 8.

27 Ellis H. Minns, *Scythians and Greeks. A Survey of Ancient History and Archaeology on the North Coast of the Euxine from the Danube to the Caucasus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1913). Minns was affectionately addressed by his Russian correspondents as "Il'ia Egorovich". His papers contain a letter from Kondakov dated 4/17 November 1913, congratulating him on *Scythians and Greeks*. On the

at 2 Wordsworth Grove in Cambridge he carried on a voluminous correspondence in six languages and received Christmas greetings in sixteen.²⁸ After losing touch with so many of his Russian colleagues in the chaos of the Civil War, Minns was delighted to learn that his former mentor was still alive, and he was eager to assist him.

8.6 Portrait of Dr. Ellis Hovell Minns, 1933 by Arthur Trevor Haddon. Courtesy of Haddon Library, Faculty of Archaeology and Anthropology, University of Cambridge. Photograph © Haddon Library, all rights reserved.

Now living in Sofia, Kondakov was desperate to find a publisher for his icon manuscript, and his letter to Minns was an appeal for help. In his reply Minns ruled out any prospect of finding an English press willing to publish a mammoth work on icons in Russian, citing the dire economic conditions of the post-war publishing

book's broad impact, see E. D. Philips, 'In Memoriam: Ellis Hovell Minns', *Artibus Asiae*, 17, 2 (1954), 168–73.

28 The correspondence that Minns received, written in Russian, Hungarian, German, French, Czech, and Latin, is housed in the Cambridge University Library, Department of Manuscripts and University Archives, Sir Ellis Hovell Minns: Correspondence, MS Add. 7722.

industry in Britain.²⁹ There was a slim chance, however, that Oxford's Clarendon Press would consider a short popular work, and Minns volunteered to translate an abridged version for the English market. After protracted negotiations, Oxford agreed to take the project on, and by June 1922 the contract was signed.³⁰ The following October, a subsidy from one of Kondakov's admirers, the wealthy young American John Crane (1899–1982), allowed for a longer text and an unusually luxurious presentation.³¹

Minns's generous and quixotic gesture was, as he put it, an *opus pietatis* (act of mercy) on behalf of an aging scholar whose last great work seemed fated to disappear without trace in a "godforsaken" post-war Europe.³² Even the barest outline would be an important contribution to scholarship, he assured Kondakov. In taking on the project, Minns was unaware that two works on medieval Russian art and icons written for a general European audience had just recently appeared — *Altrussische Kunst* (*Old Russian Art*), written by Austrian scholar Fannina Halle, and Louis Réau's *L'Art russe des origines à Pierre le Grand* (*Russian Art from its Origins to Peter the Great*).³³ Far from making his own work redundant, however, for Kondakov these popular surveys would simply have confirmed the need for a history written by a real expert. Not

29 Minns's response was the first of thirty-five letters he wrote to Kondakov between 1921 and 1925, recording the trajectory of the translation project. I express my deep thanks to Dr Michaela Kuthanová, curator of the Literární archiv Památník národního písemnictví in Prague (hereafter 'Literární archiv') for providing me with scans of the letters.

30 Through Minns a contract was drawn up in June 1922, stipulating a text of 60,000 words, one hundred illustrations (grouped in forty-eight plates), twenty author copies, and an honorarium for Kondakov of £105. "Given the current state of our book market, I am amazed that they agreed to such an expensive publication", he wrote to Kondakov (Letter from Ellis H. Minns to Nikodim Kondakov, 3 April 1922, Literární archiv).

31 John Crane was the son of Chicago industrialist and diplomat Charles R. Crane (1858–1939), an enthusiast for all things Russian and Slavic, and brother of Richard Crane, the first American ambassador to Czechoslovakia in 1919–21. In the 1920s John Crane was Czech president Tomáš Masaryk's personal assistant, and a regular attendee at Kondakov's lectures in French, as well as the private lessons on icons he gave to Masaryk's daughter Alisa. See Kyzlasova, *Istoriia otechestvennoi nauki*, p. 59.

32 Letter from Ellis H. Minns to Sergei Kondakov, 12 July 1927, Literární archiv. In an earlier letter Minns noted that he received nothing for his translation except for his author copies, almost all of which he sent to colleagues, including Likhachev (Letter from Ellis H. Minns to Sergei Kondakov, 19 October 1925, Literární archiv). However, Kyzlasova cites a letter of 27 October 1923 in which Crane reported paying for Minns's translation (Kyzlasova, *Istoriia otechestvennoi nauki*, p. 70, note 185). It may be that Crane sent money for the publication expenses through Minns as intermediary: in October 1923 he reported a visit from a protégé of Crane, come to inquire about the progress of the translation. (Letter from Ellis H. Minns to Nikodim Kondakov, 24 October 1923, Literární archiv).

33 Fannina W. Halle, *Altrussische Kunst* (Berlin: E. Wasmuth, 1920); also in French, *L'Art de la vieille Russie*, trans. by Maurice Bloch (Paris: Les Editions G. Cres et Cie, 1922). In addition to citing Muratov's volume six of Grabar's *Istoriia* and Charles Diehl's *Manuel d'art byzantin* (1910), Halle also referenced Dmitry Merezhkovsky's publications, *Tolstoy and Dostoevsky* ('Tolstoi i Dostoevskii', first published in *Mir iskusstva*, 1901–02) and *Tsar and Revolution* (*Le Tsar et la Révolution*) (Paris: Société du Mercure de France, 1907), and Kandinsky's *On the Spiritual in Art* (*Über das Geistige in der Kunst*) (Munich: R. Piper & Co. Verlag, 1912); Louis Réau, *Russian Art from its Origins to Peter the Great* (*L'Art russe des origines à Pierre le Grand*) (Paris: Henri Laurens, 1921).

only were both heavily dependent on Muratov's volume in Grabar's *History of Russian Art*, but each adopted a position antithetical to his own. Réau rejected Kondakov's Italo-Cretan theory out of hand, in favour of Muratov's idea of a rival Byzantine Renaissance, while Halle's book, with its references to Kandinsky's "inner necessity" and the "musical rhythms" of Novgorod icons, demonstrated the sort of mystical lyricism Kondakov loathed.³⁴ It was not until Minns was well into the project that he would have any inkling of the battle to tell the 'right' history of Russian icons in which Kondakov had been embroiled before the Revolution, and which was still very much alive in emigration.

Between May 1921 and February 1925, Minns wrote thirty-five letters to Kondakov through which we can trace the progress of their collaboration. As the first batch of typescript arrived at his Cambridge home in June 1922, Minns quickly saw that major changes were needed if Kondakov's work was to reach an English-speaking audience with scant notion of Russia and the world in which icons lived.³⁵ He cautioned against inundating this inexperienced reader with indigestible abstractions and an ocean of facts: "One must remember that our public, even the serious public, knows very little about the subject, and that we must avoid any conglomeration of material."³⁶ In instalments, the indefatigable Kondakov sent back a substantially revised book, his huge and unwieldy manuscript pruned down to half its original size. Yet comparing it with the complete, largely unedited Russian edition that would follow in 1928–32, it is remarkable how much of his original Kondakov managed to preserve.³⁷ Even in their condensed form, the first three chapters on the origins, function, and technique of the icon were dense with a lifetime's accumulated knowledge, a web of facts and observations that made every icon part of a living organism. These contextual chapters were followed by eight more that formed an historical timeline of the icon's evolution in Russia, from Kyiv to Palekh.

With the dogmatism of an expert setting the record straight, Kondakov continued to insist on his western theory as the key to understanding the 'Russianness' of the

34 In an earlier version, published as a special issue of *L'Art et les artistes*, Réau still accepted Kondakov's Western theory. See Louis Réau, 'Russie, art ancien', *L'art et les artistes* (June 1917), 39–40. For Kondakov's dismissive attitude to Halle, see *The Russian Icon*, p. 104, note 2. He was equally intolerant of the "mere arbitrary metaphysical speculation" and "similar far-fetched nonsense" of thinkers like Prince Evgeny Trubetskoi (*Ibid.*, p. 103).

35 See Marks, 'Russian Icons through British Eyes'.

36 Letter from Ellis H. Minns to Nikodim Kondakov, 6 February 1925, Literární archiv.

37 N. P. Kondakov, *Russkaia ikona*, vols. 1–4 (Prague: Seminarium Kondakovianum, 1928–32). The manuscript was purchased from Kondakov for 10,000 crowns by the Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs in honour of his eightieth birthday in 1924 with a view to publishing it. In 1927 this task was given to the Seminarium Kondakovianum, the institute formed to continue the late scholar's work. Two volumes of illustrations appeared first, followed by two volumes of text.

early Russian icon as it turned towards 'feeling and expression' in the late fourteenth century:³⁸

This streak of foreign influence, enlivening the decadence of the Byzantine schema and meeting the spiritual demands of the nation runs so clearly through the whole domain of Russian icon painting, that it is just the path which was wanted to lead us through its *terra incognita*. It gives us a definite historical landmark which enables us more or less to take our bearings and, the great thing, to get away from that domination of the mere *ipse dixit* which marks both barbarism and superficial aesthetic criticism.³⁹

That he himself was not immune to the dangers of "mere *ipse dixit*" can be seen in his own use of a stylistic 'compare and contrast' analysis to convey "a right idea of the first beginning and the independent development of Russian icon painting in the fourteenth century". A comparison of a Greek icon of St Athanasius and St Cyril of Alexandria with a Novgorod icon of the same subject was used to show the superiority of "expression, variety, free mastery" in the former work over the Russian icon's "restrained simplicity" (fig. 8.7).⁴⁰ In plate XIV he paired the famous Archangel Michael icon from Novgorod (formerly in the collection of Stepan Riabushinsky) with one of the Archangel Gabriel from Suzdal from Likhachev's collection (fig. 8.8), to the clear disadvantage of the former.

In the "charming" Suzdal icon, "the whole body is felt plastically under the clothes, whereas in the former there was no body, no solidity at all, just a flat scheme drawn out, and on it the folds are not all in straight lines, instead of their being wavy and rounded as they ought to be with a woollen material". While the former was still Byzantine, the latter "points to the art of Italy now coming into its own".⁴¹

Kondakov used his Introduction to lambast the uninformed dilettantism of all those who, before the Revolution, had "hastened to declare the Russian icon to be 'great art', the discovery of which would astonish Europe and which would claim a place as a 'new world-treasure'". He scoffed at the florid catchphrases bandied about by Muratov and his cronies — "free idealism", "Pure art", "Russian soul" — and concluded with this scathing note: "To show that this aesthetic theory is absolutely wanting in any scientific consistency or philosophical content there is no need to analyse it as a whole or in detail: it is sufficient to confront it with a statement founded upon history and an analysis of the facts."⁴² Still brooding on the conflicts of 1913–15, when his scholarly principles and years of erudition were so cavalierly dismissed, in trying to set the record straight Kondakov instead intensified the animosity of his opponents and perplexed potential readers confronting the dark forest of the icon's history.

38 Kondakov, *The Russian Icon*, p. 8.

39 *Ibid.*, p. 9.

40 *Ibid.*, p. 49.

41 *Ibid.*, pp. 71–72. The icon is now attributed to Pskov. See *Drevlekhramilishche pamiatnikov*, p. 171.

42 Kondakov, *The Russian Icon*, p. 10.

8.7 Comparison of two 15th-century icons of St Athanasius and St Cyril of Alexandria. From Nikodim Kondakov, *The Russian Icon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1927), plate VIII. Photograph in the public domain.

8.8 Icon of Archangel Michael (Novgorod School, 14th century) and icon of Archangel Gabriel (Suzdal, 15th century). From Nikodim Kondakov, *The Russian Icon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1927), plate XIV. Photograph in the public domain.

Despite Kondakov's impatience to see his revised manuscript in print, Minns made painfully slow progress on the translation.⁴³ Plagued by a tendency to procrastinate and get bogged down in minutiae, and already overwhelmed by teaching and family obligations, it took him a year to buckle down. He had no difficulties capturing the distinctive nuances of Kondakov's voice — "crisp, measured, at times rather ponderous".⁴⁴ But from the first pages he was confronted by the enormous challenge of rendering into English the arcane technical terminology of icon painting.⁴⁵ Minns wrote to former contacts in Russia for advice — to the elderly Likhachev in Petrograd, and in Moscow to the numismatist Aleksei Oreshnikov (1855–1933) and the archaeologist Aleksei Zakharov (1884–1937) (figs. 8.9 and 8.10).

Through Zakharov he was able to acquire many of the seminal pre-revolutionary works on icons that are now dispersed among the Cambridge University Libraries.⁴⁶ Gradually, Minns was able to supplement Kondakov's footnotes with a set of his own, addressing thorny questions that even today perplex those unfamiliar with icons and Orthodoxy. These included discursions on the *riza* (the metal icon cover); on the etymology of the words *risunok* and *pisat'* (drawing versus writing or painting);⁴⁷ the precise meaning of *umilenie*;⁴⁸ and the difference between the *dvuperstie* and the *imenoslovnnoe* blessings.⁴⁹ On occasion Minns would indulge his own scholarly interests by inserting short learned asides, as where he saw a parallel between the workshop practices of modern icon painters and the division of labour in Mughal painting, and observed that: "This is not the only point of resemblance between Russian and Indian art at that time."⁵⁰ He even allowed himself a small personal note: "I well remember the impression produced upon me by the beauty of these chapels [in the Annunciation Cathedral] which I visited at our author's recommendation."⁵¹

43 The translation was still not finished in time for Kondakov's eightieth birthday in 1924. Because of it, Minns turned down Georgy Vernadskii's invitation to write a scholarly article for a 1926 Festschrift, but he did write a brief tribute, the first appreciation of Kondakov to be published in English. (Ellis H. Minns, 'N. P. Kondakov: The Father of Russian Archaeology', *The Slavonic Review*, 3, 8 (December 1924), 435–37).

44 N. Beliaev, 'The Russian Icon', *Seminarium Kondakovianum*, 2 (1928), 364.

45 In her obituary of Minns, Elizabeth Hill described him as "the creator of the English terminology" of iconography (Elizabeth Hill, 'Sir Ellis Hovell Minns (1874–1953)', *The Slavonic and East European Review*, 32, 78 (December 1953), 236–08). Louis Réau had already created a French glossary of terms for his *L'histoire d'art russe* of 1921. It is an indication of Minns's initial lack of familiarity with the subject that he did not know of this work until Kondakov recommended it to him.

46 These included Grabar's *Istoriia russkogo iskusstva*, Anisimov's *Our Lady of Vladimir* (Prague: Seminarium Kondakovianum, 1928) and *Les Icones anciennes* (1930). Acquired in the pre-revolutionary period was Nikolai Likhachev's *Istoricheskoe znachenie italo-grechskoi ikonopisi, izobrazheniia bogomateri v proizvedeniiakh italo-grechskikh ikonopistsev* (St Petersburg: Izdanie Russkago arkheologicheskogo ob-va 1911), inscribed to Minns by the author and with an abstract handwritten by Minns, dated 1 October 1911.

47 Kondakov, *The Russian Icon*, p. 40, note 1.

48 "More often *umilenie* seems to be a sad tenderness, between love and pity: the verb *umiliat'sia* is 'middle' in sense, 'to be touched, to feel emotion', perhaps 'yearning' gives it fairly well". Kondakov, *The Russian Icon*, p. 75, note 1.

49 Kondakov, *The Russian Icon*, p. 49, note 1.

50 *Ibid.*, p. 42, note 2.

51 *Ibid.*, p. 159, note 2.

8.9 Photograph of Nikolai Likhachev inspecting an icon of the Mother of God, inscribed: "To dear Il'ia Egorovich Minns in remembrance, with heartfelt respect, N. Likhachev, 9. VIII. 1924." Cambridge University Library, Department of Manuscripts and University Archives, Sir Ellis Hovell Minns: Correspondence, Add. 9436/98. Photograph © Cambridge University Library, all rights reserved.

8.10 Photograph of Aleksei Zakharov and his wife, 1924. Cambridge University Library, Department of Manuscripts and University Archives, Sir Ellis Hovell Minns: Correspondence, Add. 7722. Photograph © Cambridge University Library, all rights reserved.

Minns's supplemental notes also acknowledged the changes occurring in Soviet Russia as he worked on the manuscript. Although Kondakov had cut most of his original references to the cleaning efforts he had participated in before 1918, or learned of from his Moscow contacts thereafter, Minns took a moment to note that "The new Government regards icons without any religious reverence merely as pictures; and if there is a good chance of discovering something interesting under later paint or varnish, the authorities have no shyness about it."⁵² He knew of Lenin's systematic campaign (begun in Spring 1922 and continuing into the following summer) to confiscate from Orthodox churches all valuables ruled "unnecessary to the cult" and turn them into hard currency through export or melting down.⁵³ In December 1924 he went up to London to hear Sir Martin Conway speak of his recent trip to the Soviet Union, where he had observed the stockpiles of confiscated icon covers and adornments.⁵⁴ Where Kondakov described Peter the Great's 1722 decree to remove "unnecessary additions" to icons in the form of precious adornments, Minns now added the note: "I hear that a similar stripping of *rizy* has gone on since the revolution and that it has exposed much interesting work". These laconic asides reinforced the book's sense of epochal transformations taking place in the icon's circumstances, even as its history was being written.

As he came to the end of his task, in early February 1925, Minns told Kondakov that he was writing a "Translator's Preface" to orient the English reader. "Your text is written for Russians," he pointed out, "and assumes that the reader has a mass of information and customs that our brother is ignorant of and can't find in any of the books available".⁵⁵ In retrospect, though, Minns's preface reads at least as much like an effort to contextualise Kondakov himself and to explain his perplexing tone, at once harshly polemical and oddly dispassionate. By this time Minns was well aware of the deep divisions surrounding the writing of the icon's history prior to 1917, and he explained it in the familiar terms of a rivalry between Moscow nationalists (Muratov and his supporters) and St Petersburg westernisers (Kondakov and Likhachev). He described the "extravagant enthusiasm" with which cleaned icons were first received in the Russian press, and how it had produced in Kondakov "a reaction, so that in this book his attitude towards icons is more critical than could be expected of a man expounding the art of his own country and the object of his long study. One might

52 *Ibid.*, p. ix.

53 On 23 February 1922 the decree, "On the confiscation of property without museum significance located in churches and monasteries" was issued. See *Treasure into Tractors: The Selling of Russia's Cultural Heritage, 1918–1938*, ed. by Anne Odom and Wendy Salmond (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2009).

54 Letter from Ellis H. Minns to Nikodim Kondakov, 8 December 1924, Literární archiv. Conway's book, *Art Treasures in Soviet Russia* (London: E. Arnold & Co., 1925) was an important and rare eyewitness account of how Soviet museums benefited from the church confiscations of 1921–22.

55 Letter from Ellis H. Minns to Nikodim Kondakov, 6 February 1925, Literární archiv.

almost say that the author undervalues the subject of his book, a thing so rarely met with that the translator must point it out".⁵⁶

With scrupulous fairness, Minns forewarned his readers that, where he was "conscious of any deviation from his author," he would append his initials (E. H. M.).⁵⁷ "In treating a new subject, the literature of which is singularly inaccessible," he wrote, "[the translator] has thought it his duty to warn the English reader that certain conclusions are not universally accepted, even though he has not space for setting out the full arguments on both sides." Introducing Kondakov as one of the "great supporters of a westernising theory of Russian art" he added: "We may perhaps take it that [...] our author, knowing the West well, saw too much of the West, while the Moscow school [by which he meant Muratov and his circle] has been too much inclined to minimise it."⁵⁸ In a long footnote appended to Kondakov's discussion of his western theory (page 82), Minns introduced Muratov as the main proponent of the opposing Byzantine Renaissance theory, inspired by the mosaics of Kariye Djami in Constantinople and the frescoes at Mistra. He followed this up on page 87 with the comment: "Our author seems too insistent in denying the possibility of any Greek influence upon Rublev, and upon the Novgorod school as well."

Minns faced a much greater editorial challenge when he became aware of the cleaning and new dating of the Vladimir Mother of God icon, whose identity as a fourteenth-century image inspired by Italian prototypes was a key part of Kondakov's western theory. He had only just completed the translation when, in February 1925, Kondakov died without seeing it published. Later that year, three new works appeared reporting on Anisimov's findings about the newly cleaned icon and accompanied by remarkable photographs.⁵⁹ Clearly concerned that Kondakov's work contained no mention of this ground-making revelation, that autumn Minns asked his Moscow contact Zakharov to put him in touch with Anisimov, and the latter obligingly sent photos of the icon, as well as of Rublev's Trinity (fig. 1.7).⁶⁰

Kondakov was in fact well informed about the conservation work being done in Moscow on the oldest Russian icons, having received letters from Georgievsky and Anisimov in 1923 confirming the magnitude of their discoveries. "The material we have

56 Kondakov, *The Russian Icon*, pp. vii-viii.

57 *Ibid.*, p. x. In one of his last letters to Kondakov, for example, he insisted quite firmly on "what I want to add of my own to the end of the chapter 'Russo-Byzantine Icon painting'" (Letter from Ellis H. Minns to Nikodim Kondakov, 29 May 1924, Literární archiv). In all, Minns added twelve of his own footnotes.

58 Kondakov, *The Russian Icon*, p. ix.

59 Minns lists these in a footnote: "P. P. Mouratov, *L'Ancienne peinture russe* (Prague, 1925), pp. 73, 85, f. 21, 89, f. 22; Oskar Wulff and Michael Alpatoff, *Denkmäler der Ikonenmalerei in Kunstgeschichtlicher Folge* (Hellerau bei Dresden: Avalun-Verlag, 1925), pp. 63-66; M. Alpatoff and V. Lazareff, 'Ein Byzantinisches Tafelwerk aus der Komnenenepoche', *Jahrbuch der Preussischen Kunstsammlungen*, Vol. 46 (Berlin, 1925), pp. 140-55 (Kondakov, *The Russian Icon*, p. 39, note 1.)

60 On Anisimov's difficulties providing his friends and colleagues abroad with photos of key restored icons, in defiance of Grabar's wishes, see Kyzlasova, *Istoriia otechestvennoi nauki*, p. 241. Georgievsky reported a similar problem. (*Ibid.*, p. 206.)

uncovered over this period is so significant in both quality and quantity," Anisimov wrote, "that it transcends everything known in this field up until now and forces us to reconsider absolutely anew, not just specific questions, but the entire history of early Russian painting, which incidentally hasn't really existed until this point."⁶¹ Anisimov sent him forty-three photos documenting newly cleaned icons, including the Vladimir Mother of God and Rublev's Trinity, and urged him to publish them together with the new findings. Kondakov replied on 8 August 1923, expressing his interest in Anisimov's analysis of the Vladimir Mother of God, but adding: "It's possible that this addendum will no longer make it [into the English edition], but in that case I'll add it to my big two-volume work on the Russian icon, which is still in manuscript."⁶² And indeed, in the abridged English text he limited himself to a cautious mention of the recently cleaned Bogoliubov Mother of God, citing the letter Chirikov had sent him in 1918 and concluding: "In time, when we can see [the icon] with our own eyes [...] we shall be able to tell how much of the twelfth century-original it preserves."⁶³

Kondakov's response to this seemingly devastating blow to his western hypothesis was surprisingly philosophical. While acknowledging that "The cleaning of Russian icons of first importance in age and artistic significance should of course have served as a guide for our present work," he hoped that, "since circumstances don't allow this, it must be hoped that the results of this cleaning will not prove to contradict it especially."⁶⁴ There was of course a practical dimension to his decision. Still expecting a speedy conclusion to Minns's translation, this fundamental revision to one of his key premises would have delayed the project still further. No less importantly, his scientific principles rebelled against taking someone else's word for such a monumental discovery, even that of colleagues as trusted as Chirikov and Anisimov.⁶⁵

For their part, working for the Central State Restoration Workshops in Moscow, Anisimov, Chirikov, and Georgievsky understood better than anyone the real complexity of the icon's unfolding history within the Soviet context and the inestimable value of the older man's vast erudition in making sense of the latest finding: "Your thoughts on the uncovered works cannot but be valuable, significant and useful in the process of developing scholarly knowledge in this area of specialty, as the opinion and thoughts of a person with an exceptionally broad outlook and exceptional experience,"

61 Kyzlasova, *Istoriia otechestvennoi nauki*, p. 240.

62 *Ibid.*, p. 246.

63 Kondakov, *The Russian Icon*, p. 62.

64 Kondakov, *Russkaia ikona*, Vol. 3, p. 7, cited in Kyzlasova, *Istoriia otechestvennoi nauki*, p. 228.

65 The necessity of studying the original artefact was an article of faith for Kondakov. He noted "how the determination of an icon emerges, not straight away, but only by comparing it in the original with other analogous works [...]. Judging an icon's age from photographs means risking a high degree of error". (N. Kondakov, 'Review of N. Likhachev, *Materialy dlia istorii russkogo ikonopisaniiia*', *Zhurnal Ministerstva narodnogo prosveshcheniia*, 8 (1907), 427–28.)

Anisimov wrote to him.⁶⁶ For these three men, at least, this was no crude competition between old and young, between the representatives of a discredited regime and a newly empowered one, but rather a collective crusade to uncover the truth about Russian culture independent of state borders.⁶⁷

Back in Cambridge, Minns was concerned that Kondakov's death had robbed him of the opportunity to incorporate the latest discoveries in his final great work. In a beautifully penned note congratulating him on his eightieth birthday in 1924, Minns had expressed his regret that he had not been able to complete the translation in time.

8.11 Addendum on the Vladimir Mother of God (12th century) by Ellis H. Minns with photograph of the icon after restoration supplied by Aleksandr Anisimov. From Nikodim Kondakov, *The Russian Icon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1927). Photograph in the public domain.

66 Letter of 21 August 1923, published in Kyzlasova, *Istoriia otechestvennoi nauki*, p. 243. In the same letter Anisimov called Kondakov "the teacher of our teachers and our common teacher, to whom both Russian and world scholarship is much indebted".

67 Irina Kyzlasova, the foremost scholar on both Kondakov and the history of early Soviet icon restoration, has consistently emphasised the "spiritual kinship" between Kondakov and his protégés, and their common goal of promoting a coherent national culture that transcended barriers of geography, generation, and method (Kyzlasova, *Istoriia otechestvennoi nauki*, p. 228.)

Now, he decided to intervene directly in the text, certain that Kondakov would have had to “revise some of his judgements” were he still alive. He inserted a lengthy addendum titled “Our Lady of Vladimir” and marked it with his own initials, explaining that the recent cleaning of the icon revealed that “it really is the icon brought from Constantinople for Andrew Bogolyubski about 1131”.⁶⁸ With the photos Anisimov had sent from Moscow to hand, he explained that “The results [of the cleaning] are so important that I have added an extra plate [...] showing the faces” (fig. 8.11).

Yet rather than locate the new text and image on page 88, where the Italo-Cretan theory and the Vladimir Mother of God were discussed in historical context, Minns chose instead to place it at the end of an earlier chapter on “the use and place of icons in Russia” as “the only place available”. It was an extraordinary decision: like a newsflash, the new text and image abruptly interrupted the book’s flow. Even now, it creates the effect of a disfiguring crack in Kondakov’s grand historical edifice, shaking his immense authority and drawing attention away from the epic panorama to focus inadvertently on human fallibility.

As it turned out, Kondakov would have had ample time to adjust his manuscript to the new discoveries, for a further two years would pass before *The Russian Icon* was finally published, released into a world profoundly different from the one in which it had been conceived over a decade earlier.

Reception and Reactions

In the reviews that greeted *The Russian Icon* when it appeared in 1927, there was warm praise for Minns’s achievement and indeed, there was a sense that it was as much his book as Kondakov’s. For the Paris-based émigré art critic, Vladimir Vejdle, Minns “has translated it so brilliantly, has provided a commentary of such value for the European reader, so full of knowledge and love of his subject, that it has truly become an English work on Russian icon painting”.⁶⁹ Robert Steele, a one-time follower of William Morris and inclined to take a dim view of Kondakov’s academic approach, noted that, “even before this book was published Prof. Minns was able to correct him in the very important case of the Vladimir Mother of God” and expressed the hope that Minns would write “the sort of truly useful and reliable book that English readers would like to read”.⁷⁰ André Grabar, who had been a member of Kondakov’s inner circle in Prague, also commended Minns for having “the happy idea to inform the reader of the result of new works dedicated to the Vladimir Mother of God. Similar

68 Kondakov, *The Russian Icon*, p. 39.

69 V. Vejdle, ‘Angliiskaia kniga o russkoi ikone’, *Vozrozhdenie* (26 January 1928), 4.

70 Robert Steele, ‘The Russian Icon’, *Quarterly Review*, 251 (1928), 146.

updates at relevant points figure quite often in the footnotes. We should be grateful to the learned translator of these indispensable corrections".⁷¹ Overnight, Minns had become *the* English authority on Russian icons.⁷²

Kondakov's star, on the other hand, having reached its zenith in 1924 on his eightieth birthday, began a rapid descent.⁷³ Far from being a celebration of his legacy, the posthumous publication of *The Russian Icon*, which Minns had undertaken as an "act of mercy", seemed perversely to signal his fall from grace. The vast edifice of his history, built from a myriad of hard-won facts, each one scrupulously researched and examined, seemed suddenly shaken by the forensic debunking of one stubbornly upheld hypothesis. The resulting impression of a largely unusable, unreliable, and outdated text was compounded by Kondakov's correlation of the Russian icon's evolutionary development towards "realism" and "expression" with Italian Renaissance art, at the very moment when 'the Russian primitive' was coming to the attention of western viewers attuned to modernist aesthetics. Minns's addition of a photograph of the recently cleaned Trinity by Rublev (provided by Anisimov) to offset Kondakov's own choice of a "mediocre" Trinity icon from the Russian Museum solidified the impression that he was "a man of erudition rather than one of keen aesthetic perceptions".⁷⁴

How quickly *The Russian Icon's* magisterial scope was reduced to the status of a failed hypothesis compounded by aesthetic gaffes can be seen in the attitude of the young American art historian, Alfred Barr, who spent the Christmas holidays of 1927 in the Soviet Union on a tour of cultural sites.⁷⁵ Barr brought with him a copy of Kondakov's just-published book, which he would later describe as "often misleading and irrelevant, for he [Kondakov] was able to include only two or three of the icons

71 A. Grabar, 'L'icone russe', review of N. P. Kondakov, *The Russian Icon*, trans. by E. H. Minns (Oxford, 1927), *Byzantion*, 6, 2 (1931), 915.

72 At the behest of Kondakov's followers at the Seminarium Kondakovianum, Minns checked the translations of the English captions for the Russian edition; he also went over the translation of Anisimov's *Our Lady of Vladimir*. In addition, Minns was a member of the organising committee for the 1929 Loan Exhibition at the Victoria & Albert Museum, as well as editor of the catalogue. For his reputation as an expert on icons, see Marks, 'Russian Icons through British Eyes', pp. 84–86.

73 For the new generation of Soviet critics, Kondakov's besetting sin was his disregard for the formal and stylistic qualities of icons, in deference to a narrowly defined iconography. Thus Fedor Shmit wrote of him and his generation that "they believed that in Byzantine art the dogmatic content, the religious theme (the iconography) was everything, the style only incidental" (Theodor Schmit, 'The Study of Art in the USSR (1917–1928)', *Parnassus*, 1, 1 (January 1929), 7–10). For Viktor Lazarev, Kondakov and Likhachev "narrowed down the concept of iconography to a mere question of the subject and remain silent on the problem of form. Since they hold that the style of a work of art is practically identical with its subject, their system of classification becomes wholly a matter of externals, which completely ignores the profound ideas expressed by the image" (Victor Lasareff, 'Studies in the Iconography of the Virgin', *The Art Bulletin*, 20, 1 (March 1938), 26–65, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00043079.1938.11408662>.)

74 Avrahm Yarmolinsky, 'The Art of the Russian Icon', *The New York Times*, 3 January 1932, BR13.

75 See Alfred H. Barr, Jr, 'Russian Diary 1927–1928', *October*, 7 (Winter 1978), 10–51.

cleaned since 1917, none of which he had seen. Unfortunately his is the only serious and comprehensive discussion of the subject in English".⁷⁶ Coincidentally, another book on icons for a non-Russian audience had also appeared in 1927 — Pavel Muratov's *Les Icones russes* — and Barr was able to borrow it from the library of the Ostroukhov Museum (now a branch of the Tretyakov Gallery), anticipating that "it will correct much of Kondakov". While the competing books of two émigré scholars might reasonably have seemed equally suspect in the atmosphere of the late 1920s, in fact Muratov's passionate nationalism and his focus on the icon's aesthetic rather than contextual, historical, or iconographic aspects made his approach more tolerable to western aesthetes and Soviet atheists alike.⁷⁷

For Kondakov's one-time protégés, Anisimov and Chirikov, now working at the epicentre of Soviet state-sponsored icon restoration, the common goal was "the salvation of those remains of Russian culture, without which the creation of any healthy national future is impossible", and Kondakov remained for them a towering authority and kindred spirit.⁷⁸ But as the Soviet Union moved towards the First Five-Year Plan (1928–32) and the cultural revolution that accompanied it, new isolationist narratives highlighting Russia's unique path came to the fore, while old ones stressing its historical place within a network of international connections and influences were suppressed.⁷⁹ Thus, while Ostroukhov's collection remained intact as a branch of the Tretyakov Gallery, and the elderly collector himself was appointed its curator, the very *raison d'être* of Nikolai Likhachev's enormous collection at the Russian Museum was effectively neutralised when the Italian schools were moved to the western European section of the Hermitage in 1923, with the Byzantine and Italo-Greek icons following them to the Eastern Department in 1930, 1931, and 1935.⁸⁰ As for Likhachev, his library and collections were confiscated, and after a period of imprisonment he was sentenced to exile.⁸¹

76 Alfred H. Barr, Jr, 'Russian Icons', *The Arts*, 17, 4 (January 1931), 307.

77 Ivan Foletti makes just this point (*Da Bizanzio alla Santa Russia*, p. 167).

78 Letter from Aleksandr Anisimov to Nikodim Kondakov, 11 July 1923, published in Kyzlasova, *Istoriia otechestvennoi nauki*, p. 239.

79 See Foletti, *Da Bizanzio alla Santa Russia*, pp. 167–69.

80 In all, two hundred and fifty works were transferred, with two hundred more going to Antikvariat. See 'Russkaia ikonopis' i prikladnoe iskusstvo', in GRM. *Iz kollektsii Akademika N. P. Likhacheva. Katalog vystavki* (St Petersburg: Seda-S, 1993).

81 Likhachev was one of Minns's principal contacts as he worked on the translation, although the aging and marginalised scholar was unable to offer him much concrete assistance. See Cambridge University Library, Department of Manuscripts and University Archives, Sir Ellis Hovell Minns: Correspondence, Likhachev, N. P. Letters to Sir Ellis Minns (1906–35) Add. 9436/87–108. Through Likhachev, Minns had a good idea of the worsening situation for scholars in the Soviet Union. Minns's papers include this note he jotted down from *The Times*: "End of January 1931. Platonov, Likhachev, Lubiavski, Tarle, all expelled from the Academy of Sciences for Anti-Communism. Likhachev had been in prison since 1930. A few days later Karpinski protested (aged 85) and will probably share

In the same spirit, the Soviet regime aggressively policed the lines of communication with the émigré world, especially where the icon was concerned. Whereas a state-sponsored travelling exhibition of icons abroad in 1929–32 could be countenanced if its message of aesthetic quality was carefully controlled, the 1928 publication of Anisimov's seminal study on the Vladimir Mother of God by the Seminarium Kondakovianum in Prague was seen as a treasonous act, with disastrous consequences for the author.⁸² That an émigré organisation hostile to the Soviet state co-opted one of Soviet scholarship's greatest cultural triumphs was bad enough; that Anisimov dedicated the work to Kondakov was the *coup de grâce*. As Director of the Central State Restoration Workshops in Moscow, where much of the revelatory icon cleaning was being carried out, Igor Grabar exerted a proprietary control over new information that exacerbated this isolationism, jealously guarding the distribution of photographs of restored icons. Émigré scholars either pursued alternative avenues of study (the theologically-based works of Evgeny Trubetskoi, Leonid Ouspensky, Stepan Riabushinsky, and the Icon Association (*Obshchestvo 'Ikona'*) in Paris), or found themselves hermetically sealed in a pre-Revolutionary state of knowledge, like Kondakov. Not even Muratov, now considered a leading authority on icons outside Soviet Russia, was exempt, as Minns pointed out in his review of Muratov's *Byzantine Painting* (1929):

Muratoff represented a definite stage in the study of Russian painting, a reaction against Kondakov's exaggeration of Western influence, but an exaggeration of the importance of Novgorod perhaps due to the fact that Novgorod had offered the earliest opportunities of seeing early frescoes and icons skilfully freed from later overpainting. Now that this process has been carried much further and extended to Moscow and Suzdal, Muratoff can no longer follow it with his own eyes, and he has done well to turn to the history of Byzantine art as a whole.⁸³

their fate." (Cambridge University Library, Department of Manuscripts and University Archives, Sir Ellis Hovell Minns: Correspondence, MS Add. 9436/102.)

82 On the exhibition, see Kyzlasova, *Istoriia otechestvennoi nauki*, pp. 287–89, 350–52. On its American venues, see Wendy Salmond, 'How America Discovered Russian Icons: The Soviet Loan Exhibition of 1930–32', in *Alter Icons: The Russian Icon and Modernity*, ed. by Douglas Greenfield and Jefferson J. A. Gatrall (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), pp. 128–43. Anisimov belonged to an entire generation of leading icon scholars and expert restorers repressed or killed in the 1930s. On his fate, and that of Grigory Chirikov and others, see Kyzlasova, *Istoriia otechestvennoi nauki*, pp. 291–397; and Shirley A. Glade, 'Anisimov and the Rediscovery of Old Russian Icons', in *Alter Icons*, pp. 101–03. On the related 'Slavists' Affair', see F. D. Ashnin and V. M. Alpatov, "*Delo slavistov*": 30-e gody (Moscow: Nasledie, 2000).

83 Ellis H. Minns, 'Review of *La Pittura Bizantina* by P. Muratoff (Rome: Casa editrice "Valori Plastici")', *The Slavonic and East European Review*, 7, 21 (March 1929), 757–58.

The Russian Icon Revived and Revisited

In his insightful 2011 study of Kondakov's career as an historian of Russian art, Ivan Foletti describes *The Russian Icon* (together with *Russkaia ikona*, the complete four-volume Russian edition published shortly afterwards) as "a sort of final manifesto of the Kondakovian method so heavily criticised by the partisans of Muratov".⁸⁴ Throughout the twentieth century this method, he argued, was "excised from history", while Kondakov himself was treated as a *damnatio memoriae* — a man deliberately erased from memory.⁸⁵ One reason, Foletti conjectured, was Kondakov's anti-nationalist approach to the study of icons, together with his recognition of them as religious objects. An alternative view, offered by Ivan Savitsky, whose father worked with Kondakov in Prague, was that Kondakov was the victim of a generational battle where extreme positions were the norm, with neither side interested in compromise. Kondakov and the generation born in the 1870s "simply spoke different languages", and this divide remained in effect throughout the Soviet era.⁸⁶

In recent decades, however, there have been definite signs of renewed interest in this 'dinosaur' of late imperial scholarship.⁸⁷ Kondakov's methodological approach and the questions he asked now seem strikingly, refreshingly contemporary. Always attuned to the cultural context in which icons functioned, he dreamed of conducting a statistical survey of icon types that could show "which icons were the most loved and adorned over the centuries".⁸⁸ Though he found late *kustar* icons aesthetically deficient, he never doubted their importance, "for artistic handicrafts present most difficult and complicated problems to historical interpretation and accordingly their study has been avoided".⁸⁹ No admirer of Novgorod icons, he could still appreciate that fifteenth-century Novgorod icons included "cheap shop-work" for the common people alongside "icons of wonderful refinement painted with extreme skill" for the

84 Foletti, *Da Bisanzio alla Santa Russia*, p. 141. Foletti is the only scholar to have looked in any detail at the two editions. Rather than use the original Minns volume, however, he consulted the French translation of the English reprint published by Parkstone in 2008. Not only are Minns's critical edits missing, but translation problems abound (Foletti, *Da Bisanzio alla Santa Russia*, p. 152, note 367), leading to some amusing online discussions among Russian readers, including a comparison of the resulting text to "a translation of Pushkin from the Vietnamese" that makes Kondakov sound like "a rather cuckoo foreigner". See 'Kondakov N. P. Russkaia ikona', *Forum proekta 'Khristianstvo v iskusstve'*, <http://www.icon-art.info/phpBB2/viewtopic.php?p=162872>

85 Foletti, *Da Bisanzio alla Santa Russia*, p. 166.

86 I. P. Savitskii, 'Akademik N. P. Kondakov v Prage', in *Mir Kondakova* (Moscow: Russkii Palomnik, 2004), p. 199.

87 The pioneering archival research of Irina Kyzlasova provided the catalyst for a reappraisal of Kondakov's legacy, in the face of scepticism from scholars like Gerold Vzdornov, who dismissed her high evaluation of *Russkaia ikona* as "exaggerated" (Vzdornov, 'Kondakov v zerkale sovremennoi vizantinistiki', p. 274, note 2).

88 Kondakov, *Russkaia ikona*, Vol. 3, p. 26.

89 Kondakov, *The Russian Icon*, p. 2.

higher classes, concluding: "The distinction allows us to some extent to gauge the popularity of different saints with different classes, and to note the beliefs connected with the icons of the various saints."⁹⁰ His attention to the regional specificity of pigments and to the increasing uniformity of dimensions as the production of icons expanded reflects his respect for the icon as the ultimate material fact. Throughout his descriptions, we find astonishingly vivid and expert comments on articles of dress, developed from a series of private lectures on Byzantine court dress that he prepared in Prague for Alicia Masaryk and John Crane.⁹¹ Finally, his extensive travels and keen eye for local detail allowed him to link the distant past with the present, an affirmation of his central premise that the icon continually evolved in response to its environment. Far from being fixed and unchanging, the history he wrote was alive with questions and connections, the outpouring of a restless, relentless, and endlessly curious mind. In the words of icon scholar Liudmila Shchennikova, the value of Kondakov's history transcended "all the critical judgments about wrong hypotheses and attributions. It is astonishing in its scale and unshakeable encyclopaedic foundation".⁹²

If translations can be seen as harbingers of cultural change, then the recent flurry of reprints of Minns's 1927 translation (unattributed, but virtually unmodified) in 2006, 2008, 2009, and 2012 is a significant event.⁹³ What is lost in these glossy publications, however, is the original translation's unique value as witness to a particular moment in the unfolding history of the Russian icon. For while Minns's notes are maintained in the English reprints (complete with his initials), nowhere is he identified as the translator, nor is his preface included. Gone are the carefully paired images upon whose stylistic and material differences Kondakov's arguments depended, their place taken by beautiful colour photographs that bear little relation to the text. No mention is made of the Vladimir Mother of God icon (though it is featured on the cover of the first, 2006 edition) or the once controversial revelation of its age and origins.

Just as the reprinting of the complete Russian edition, in 2004, reflected the post-Soviet resurgence of Orthodoxy and the patriotic embrace of émigré culture, for readers outside Russia the ready availability of the abridged English version coincides neatly with the interdisciplinary interests of our own day and the rejection of modernist aesthetic values for something more contextually layered.⁹⁴ In an homage

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 96–97.

⁹¹ For example, his meticulous description of the clothing of Boris and Gleb (pp. 64–65), and of Paraskeva's kerchief as indicating an early Christian deaconess (p. 100). See also his posthumous article: Nikodim Kondakov, 'Les Costumes orientaux à la cour Byzantine', *Byzantion*, 1 (1924), 7–49.

⁹² L. A. Shchennikova, 'N. P. Kondakov i russkaia ikona', *Voprosy iskusstvovedeniia*, 8 (1996), 551.

⁹³ N. P. Kondakov, *Icons* (London: Sirocco, 2006).

⁹⁴ On the 2004 facsimile of the four-volume Russian edition, see K. Stoliarov, 'Tat' ne kradet i cherv' ne tochit: Unikal'nyi trud akademika Kondakova vernulsia na rodinu', *Nauka i religiia*, 12 (2007), 30–32.

to Kondakov written in 1926, Georgy Vernadsky alluded to the scholar's position at the intersection of multiple disciplines, of which art history was just one:

To be sure, Kondakov was always engaged in Art History. He was deeply interested in the theory of art and aesthetics. But these problems by no means absorbed him entirely. He specialised in the domain of an entire group of sciences: Byzantine studies, History, History of Religions, History of Civilisation, Archaeology. It was precisely to this last sphere that his preferences and scientific studies gravitated. Without doubt, Kondakov is at one and the same time an historian of art, religion, civilisation, Byzantine history, but above all he is an archaeologist in the sense he ascribed to the word [...] the object of archaeology is the history of civilisation in the largest sense of the word. The archaeological method applies to the study of human civilisation's material monuments, considered as symbols, intermediaries between the researcher's awareness and the civilisations he studies.⁹⁵

Written in the twilight of Imperial and Orthodox Russia, repeatedly revised in emigration, and compressed and simplified to meet the needs of an audience for whom it was never intended, Kondakov's *The Russian Icon* was predicated on the continued existence and evolution of the icon and the world that nurtured it, long after any passing fad for the 'Russian primitive' had blown over. With the introductory section on "the contemporary state of icon painting" refashioned into a final chapter labelled "Decadence", the book now ended on this unintentionally elegiac note:

The hope for the future would seem to be to raise the artistic nature of the craft to such a level that religion would help it to rise to free and personal artistic creativity. The Russian people [...] deserves, like other European nations, to have given it a period of education on the basis of [...] personal artistic creativeness.⁹⁶

As the worst period of Militant Atheism and the wholesale destruction of icons began in 1928, the bitter irony of this long-awaited book's appearance was clear. Kondakov's tragedy was not, after all, the very public demolition of his cherished western theory — a natural victim of the scientific method that he would certainly have taken in his stride — but the fact that his book came out too late for the Russian people to use as he intended. In the twelve years it took to write, translate, and publish *The Russian Icon*, the world Kondakov described with such expert authority was effectively destroyed. Minns's translation — a work of deep piety towards a venerated teacher — was a work imprinted with the deep uncertainty of a decade that witnessed both the discovery of select icons as works of art and the destruction of the culture for which icons had been produced. Increasingly distanced from the

95 G. V. Vernadskij, 'Nikodim Pavlovič Kondakov', in *Sbornik statei, posviashchennykh pamiati N. P. Kondakova. Arkheologiya, istoriya iskusstva, vizantinovedenie* (Prague: Seminarium Kondakovianum, 1926), p. XXX.

96 Kondakov, *The Russian Icon*, p. 203.

urgency and exigencies of twentieth-century cultural politics, contemporary readers can find in this remarkable book both the accumulated knowledge of an entire era of Russian scholarship and a poignant reminder of that knowledge's vulnerability to ideological pressures.

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