



Hand of John the Baptist in Russia

Nick Paton Walsh in Moscow
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It was the only part of John the Baptist's body that Luke the Apostle could take away from the village where he was buried, and it has since been cited as the cause of miracles. It was given to the Russian royal family in St Petersburg to protect it from Napoleon's advancing armies and then whisked away to central Europe when the Bolshevik revolution broke out.

Now, as part of the Kremlin's bid to forge a national identity, John the Baptist's right hand, which Christians think baptised Jesus Christ, has returned to Russia for the first time in 89 years.

The return has been hailed by the Russian Orthodox church with great pomp and reverence. The head of the church, Patriarch Alexei II, welcomed it at a ceremony on Wednesday at the Church of Christ the Saviour in central Moscow. The hand will remain there until Friday, when it will be taken on a tour of Russia, Belarus and Ukraine before returning in July to Montenegro, its present home.

The Patriarch called on Christians to pray before the hand, according to the state news agency RIA Novosti.

The relic's return to Moscow is part of an orchestrated revival of the church, which is playing a central role in giving Russians a sense of spiritual and national belonging. The move was financed by a religious foundation chaired by Vladimir Yakunin, the head of Russia's vast state railways network who is frequently referred to as a potential successor to President Vladimir Putin.

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