

St. Basil's Cathedral (Moscow, Russia)

Gemlike monument commemorating a military conquest of Ivan the Terrible



"... a monument whose composition has no parallel in the entire history of... architecture."

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- ▣ Tsar Ivan IV commissioned St. Basil's after his victory over the Tatars and annexation of their territory.
- ▣ When St. Basil's was first built, it was not multicolored; its scheme was red brick enlivened by white plaster.

St. Basil's Cathedral, famous for its onion-shaped domes in many swirling colors, is probably the best-known building in Moscow. St. Basil's comprises nine individual chapels joined together in a single foundation, all grouped around one central spire.

The cathedral was commissioned by Tsar Ivan IV "The Terrible," and built between 1555 and 1561 to commemorate his conquest of the Tatar Khanate of Kazan. The decisive victory came on the feast day of the Intercession of Mary, the original name of the cathedral. It became known as St. Basil's after a popular saint, Basil Fool for Christ.

The original design of the cathedral featured eight chapels laid out in the shape of a star. Ivan IV's son, Tsar Feodor Ivanovich, added a ninth chapel in 1588 to house the tomb of St. Basil, who had been interred in the cathedral that formerly stood on the site. Legend has it that Ivan IV ordered the architect, Postnik Yakovlev, to be blinded after it was completed to keep him from ever again designing anything that would rival the beauty of St. Basil's. The truth of this is doubtful; Yakovlev went on to design several other structures when his work on St. Basil's was finished.

Compared with the extravagant exterior, the interior of the cathedral is relatively subdued and dimly lit. In the garden outside St. Basil's is a statue of two Russian heroes, Dmitry Pozharsky and Kuzma Minin, who successfully rallied a Russian volunteer army against the invading Poles in the early seventeenth century. The statue, erected in 1818, was originally placed in the center of the Red Square but was moved in 1936 because it was considered an obstruction during parades.

St. Basil's Cathedral has survived centuries of war and political upheaval to become perhaps the most recognized symbol of Moscow, built by one of Russia's most feared and successful rulers. **JF**

