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INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Long-Lost Jesus Icon Returns to Kremlin Gates

By The Moscow Times

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The 16th-century icon was supposedly hidden in the '30s when the Soviets' anti-church campaign was at its peak.

An icon of Jesus embedded in a Kremlin gate used by Soviet leaders but bricked over in the 1930s during communist times was restored on Saturday to public view.

On a rainy and windy day of the Assumption in the Orthodox calendar, President Dmitry Medvedev and Russian Orthodox Patriarch Kirill unveiled the icon on Spasskaya Tower, or Savior Tower, that has been covered for more than 70 years and had been regarded as lost.

The icon could have been immured in 1937 — the exact date is unknown — when Soviet authorities celebrated the 20th anniversary of the coup of the Bolsheviks, who waged war against organized religion, destroying temples and icons across the country.

The idea to return the icon appeared in 2007, backed by the presidential administration and

the patriarch, and initially a hunt began to see whether it could be found hidden away in the archives of the country's museums.

When that failed, restorers began exploratory work on the spot where they thought that the icon had once been and discovered it last spring, hidden behind a metal grate that had then been plastered over.

The icon, which had adorned the tower since the 16th century, was deliberately hidden by unknown workers who presumably feared that it would be destroyed by the Bolsheviks. Their fears were not exaggerated, as the Bolsheviks once used the icon as target practice, firing cannons at it. All the shots were said to have missed the icon.

"We must remember those who assisted and helped in the restoration of this icon, including those who in a very difficult hour for this country — a period of godlessness, a period of hard times — risked not only their positions but their lives to save this wonder," Medvedev said.

In tsarist times, the icon was venerated and people dismounted and took their hats off as they entered the Kremlin through the gates of Spasskaya Tower.

A second mummified icon of St. Nicholas was also found and restored at the entrance to Nikolskaya Tower.

Medvedev, speaking from under an umbrella on Saturday, the day that marks the belief that Mary, the mother of Jesus, was taken to heaven, said the "Savior Smolensky" icon would provide moral support to Russia.

"Now that we've gotten the icon back, our country secures an additional defense," he said after Kirill, struggling to keep his cap on his head in a strong wind, anointed the icon with water.

The icon of Jesus is 2.2 by 1.5 meters wide and depicts Jesus holding open the New Testament with the Russian saints Sergius and Valaam below him. The icon was painted in commemoration of the siege of Moscow by Crimean Tatars in 1521.

The St. Nicholas icon shows him holding a sword in one hand and a church in the other.

Restorers plan to start working on the other Kremlin towers in the future in search of icons that were once there as well.

Medvedev's presence at the event is another sign of the growing influence of the Russian Orthodox Church, criticized by rights groups and some other religious confessions amid a trend toward consolidation of the church as a national force in the country.

The Orthodox Church has undergone a revival since the Soviet collapse almost 20 years ago ended decades of repression under communism, and Russia's leaders have endorsed it as the country's main faith.

"There is a special meaning in today's event — particularly, it's in the unity of the church and the people," Medvedev said.

(Reuters, MT)

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