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A Hundred Skeletons Found in St. Pete Dig

By Olga Khrustaleva

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St. Petersburg — The St. Petersburg History Museum has unearthed more than 100 skeletons while conducting archeological excavations at the SS. Peter and Paul Fortress in a spot where the mass graves of victims of the Red Terror are located. Now, however, the project has been refused financing for the continuation of the work.

The museum has appealed to various authorities, including the Culture Ministry, to provide the necessary funding for the excavations but has yet to receive any reply. Historian and archeologist Vladimir Kildyushevsky says the 2 million rubles ($71,500) that is needed to continue the work would cover not the excavation itself, which is usually done by volunteers, but "the processing of materials that have already been discovered and those that we are planning to find."

"It is for conservation, restoration, working with bone fragments, anthropological and, if necessary, DNA examinations," Kildyushevsky said.

So far, seven graves have been discovered, containing the remains of no fewer than 110 people showing traces of violent death — usually bullet wounds. Most of those shot were men aged 25 to 40, but the remains of at least five women and one teenager have also been found. In addition to human remains, fragments of uniforms, belts, buttons, silver and gold baptismal crosses and icons have been found, shedding new light on some of the darkest secrets from the turbulent time following the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution.

The term Red Terror is used to refer to the period in which Russian counterrevolutionaries and monarchists were arrested and shot en masse, beginning at the start of September 1918 and ending with dates ranging from the following month right through to the end of the Civil War in 1922. The SS. Peter and Paul Fortress was used as a prison at that time, and locals reported regularly hearing the sounds of gunshots there.

The remains of some of the grand dukes of the imperial Romanov family may be among the finds, people involved with the project say. Olga Palei, wife of Pavel Alexandrovich, a younger brother of the last Russian tsar Nicholas II, managed to escape from Soviet Russia after her husband's death and later published a book of memoirs in which she described her husband's last moments in detail..

"He [Pavel Alexandrovich] was told that he was going to leave, but that all his luggage was to remain there. They took him in an automobile to the SS. Peter and Paul Fortress; the other grand dukes were taken there directly. ... They were shut up in the black dungeons of the Trubetskoi Bastion. At 3 o'clock in the morning, two soldiers named Blagovidov and Solovyev made them go out, stripped to the waist, and led them onto the Place de la Monnaie within the fortress, in front of the cathedral. They saw a huge, deep common grave in which 13 bodies lay already. The soldiers made them stand in line near the grave and the abominable crime was accomplished. Some moments before, the old servant heard the Grand Duke utter out loud the words: 'God forgive them, they know not what they do ... '"

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