

Historic Mosque Demolished on 9/11 Anniversary

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Believers praying at the green-walled Cathedral Mosque earlier this year. **Igor Tabakov**

A century-old mosque that survived the Soviet crackdown on religion was demolished in downtown Moscow on the 10th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks.

The destruction was carried out on the instructions of Russia's top muftis, who said the wooden building had begun to collapse after heavy rainfall over the weekend. But architectural preservationists denounced the decision as an "act of unbelievable barbarity."

While the 9/11 timing appeared coincidental, the story highlights the disregard shown by building owners and the authorities toward Moscow's rich heritage and the problems of the city's some 2 million Muslim residents.

The Cathedral Mosque on Vypolzov Pereulok, outside the Prospekt Mira metro station, was destroyed Sunday. Architect Igor Tazhiyev told Interfax that a wrecking ball was used

to flatten the structure built in 1904.

Two minarets were all that was left standing Monday, towering above a heap of construction rubbish.

Russia's Council of Muftis [said](#) an old crack in a wall had started growing earlier this month, and part of the wall finally gave way following the downpour Saturday.

The council decided to knock down the three remaining walls to clear the way for the construction of a new mosque, it said in an online statement Monday.

The walls also started "deforming and caving in" after too many people crammed into the mosque during festivities celebrating the end of the holy month of Ramadan in late August, said Rafik Fattakhedinov, deputy head of the Spiritual Board of Muslims for the European part of Russia, RIA-Novosti [reported](#).

The mosque was, indeed, too small to accommodate all believers, thousands of whom regularly crowd into neighboring streets on Muslim holidays, disrupting traffic.

Not all Muslim clergy were pleased by the mosque's sudden destruction.

The date for the demolition — 10 years to the day after the four terrorist attacks by Islamist militants on the United States — "provokes bewilderment," said Albir Krganov, first deputy head of the Central Spiritual Board of Russian Muslims.

"They unexpectedly destroyed it without consulting the Muslim community," Krganov said by telephone.

Nonprofit group Arkhnadzor, which is waging a seemingly losing battle to protect Moscow's old architecture, also said the move was "outrageous" and "unbelievable barbarity."

Group activist Konstantin Mikhailov said in an interview that the last time city authorities destroyed a religious building was in 1978.

The Cathedral Mosque was located next to the Olimpiisky sports complex, built for the 1980 Moscow Olympics. Soviet authorities wanted to demolish the mosque ahead of the games, but the country's Muslim community, supported by Arab countries, managed to dissuade them.

Several independent Muslim organizations denounced the demolition on Monday, among them the Central Spiritual Board of Russian Muslims; the All-Russia Muftiyat, also known as the Association of Islamic Consent; and the United Islamic Center of Russian Muslim organizations, Russian Islamic Heritage, a nongovernmental group, [said](#) on its web site, oodrin.ru.

The groups denounced the development as an attempt by Ravil Gainutdin, head of the Council of Muftis, to "diminish the merits of the Tatar people in serving Russian Islam."

The demolished mosque was built with funds from Tatar pre-revolutionary merchant and philanthropist Salikh Yerzin.

Architect Igor Tazhiyev, who earlier drafted a plan to rebuild the mosque, said he only

envisioned a reconstruction, not a complete demolition.

"Even if they wanted to remake it, they could have disassembled it accurately and then reassembled it," Tazhiyev said, Interfax reported. "Every brick is holy there. It shouldn't have been turned to rubbish."

Apparently backpedaling, the Council of Muftis on Monday promised in its statement to "restore the historical part in the complex of the new mosque."

It added that it would have been impossible to preserve the old building because it had been built with unsafe materials in a mere three months and even lacked a foundation. Gainutdin also said last week that the mosque needed to be redirected to face the Kaaba, a Muslim relic in Mecca that defines the alignment of all mosques.

City legislation prevents the demolition of architectural heritage sites, but many old buildings have never been recognized as such and are cleared away by developers that build luxury hotels and residential buildings in their stead.

High-profile examples include 19th-century buildings on downtown Ulitsa Bolshaya Yakimanka and Bolshoi Kozikhinsky Pereulok, separately razed in May and August, respectively. Preservationists and locals campaigned against the destruction, even clashing with construction workers, but to no avail.

Part of the architectural ensemble of the protected Church of the Resurrection in Kadashi, also downtown, was spared demolition last year after a heated public campaign.

Hinting at his displeasure with the destruction, President Dmitry Medvedev urged City Hall in a City Day speech earlier this month to "preserve the historical center of the city, its rich cultural heritage."

In the case of the Cathedral Mosque, Medvedev implicitly touched on a drawn-out debate. The building made Moscow's cultural heritage list in 2008 but was removed the next year at the request of the Council of Muftis, which wanted to tear it down and build a new one.

Arkhnadzor was campaigning for it to be put back on the list, with a hearing pending in City Hall, Arkhnadzor activist Konstantin Mikhailov [told](#) Lenta.ru. He said the hearing should have prevented the demolition.

Last week, Talgat Tadzhutdin, head of the Central Spiritual Board of Russian Muslims, asked Mayor Sergei Sobyanin in an open letter to prevent the demolition, Izvestia [reported](#) Monday.

Repeated calls to the Council of Muftis and a faxed inquiry to City Hall went unanswered Monday. Neither Medvedev nor Sobyanin commented on the issue.

With the destruction of the Cathedral Mosque, only three mosques remain in Moscow, compared with 75 in Paris and 80 in Berlin, according to a count [reported](#) by Vedomosti in August.

But the Muslim community is struggling to build more.

The main problem is not funding but the displeasure of local residents who oppose the construction of mosques in their neighborhoods. In a recent example, plans to build a mosque in the Tekstilshchiki district in southeastern Moscow were scrapped last fall following public protests — including one on Sept. 11, 2010.

Admittedly, the issue is not necessarily linked to anti-Islam sentiment. In June, locals prevented the construction of an Orthodox Christian church in the northwestern suburb Strogino, saying they would rather keep a children's playground there.

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