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With Kazan Murders, Church Shames Itself Again

By Victor Davidoff

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Russia has the distinction of being Europe's record-holder for the number of murders per 100,000 people, and its murder rate is more consistent with that of Mexico or Paraguay. Given the high numbers, even vicious murders are often not reported outside the crime pages of local newspapers. But the double murder in Kazan committed at the end of August made the headlines of all the country's major newspapers and news agencies. The reason was not the crime itself — a 38-year-old woman and her elderly mother were stabbed to death in their apartment — but the message painted on the wall, purportedly by the murderer. "Free Pussy Riot" was written in English and apparently in the blood of the victims.

The story was broken by the tabloid news site Lifenews.ru, which is believed to have connections with the organizers of Kremlin smear campaigns. The headline read: "Supporters of Pussy Riot Killed 2 People in Kazan." The website of the youth division of the United Russia party announced, "Two women were sacrificed in the name of Pussy Riot." Even the once respectable newspaper Izvestia led with the unequivocal headline "In Kazan, 2 people Were Murdered for Pussy Riot."

The sensation lasted all of two days. Credit should be given to the Kazan Police Department, which quickly found the alleged killer and evidence of the crime: the knife that killed them and the victims' cell phones. The suspect admitted that he committed the crime for mercenary ends and wrote the message on the wall to throw off the investigation. What's more, to the embarrassment of conspiracy theorists, he turned out to be an Orthodox Christian and, according to his mother, considered the actions by Pussy Riot to be "amoral hooliganism."

It's not entirely fair to blame the media for crossing the line of journalistic and personal ethics in their quest for sensation. The tone of the coverage was set by people who should — theoretically, in any case — make efforts to prevent mass hysteria, including leading clergy of the Russian Orthodox Church. Archpriest Dmitry Smirnov, head of the Synod department for relations with law enforcement agencies, announced his verdict as soon as news of the crime was made public. "This blood is on the conscience of the so-called society, which used its authority to support the criminals from Christ the Savior Cathedral," he said.

The views of Smirnov on the punk group are well-known. He has already proposed that its members be stripped of their parental rights, have their citizenship revoked, and be exiled from the country. There is nothing in the current legislation that would allow this, but apparently Smirnov is citing a different criminal code. These punishments were meted out to religious dissidents in the Soviet Union.

Smirnov posted on his site a list of "people who have the blood of the Kazan victims on their conscience." The list of 203 names is a kind of Who's Who in Russian culture. It includes prominent writers Boris Akunin and Lyudmila Ulitskaya, film directors Eldar Ryazanov and Andrei Konchalovsky, and actors Chulpan Khamatova and Sergei Yursky. The archpriest did not make up the list himself. This list of "Russia's Enemies" has been circulated on anti-Semitic sites for a while now, although it usually has notes after each name to define the "enemy," such as "Jew," "half-Jew," or "Western intelligence agent."

It seems that the flock follows the shepherd. "Orthodox patrols" have appeared in cities throughout the country. Although they say that their job is to "protect churches, sacred places and objects," their actions have strayed well beyond the churchyard. The warriors in one patrol attacked a passenger on the express train to Sheremetyevo Airport and ripped off a T-shirt bearing a message of support for Pussy Riot. Another patrol tried to break up a performance of the troupe Teatr.doc, which was discussing the Pussy Riot trial. In Rostov-on-Don, a mob attacked and nearly lynched a small group of Pussy Riot supporters who were on the street protesting the verdict. The police prevented a pogrom, but none of the instigators was arrested.

Writer Viktor Shenderovich maintains that due to the actions of the Russian Orthodox Church, "the line of public dissent has changed beyond recognition. It is no longer people who protest the Kremlin or honest people who oppose corrupt authorities, but godless liberals and patrons of murderers who oppose Orthodoxy and the Russian state. If someone is against the president, then he's against God and Russia." Recent events are extraordinarily reminiscent of Russian history a century ago, when the government officially supported clerical extremism, and the Black Hundreds abandoned their church processions for pogroms.

But there are significant differences in society. The public attitude today toward the religious fundamentalism preached by the Russian Orthodox Church differs greatly from that of their great grandparents. Polls consistently show that while 75 percent of Russian citizens consider themselves Orthodox Christians, 9 percent are practicing Orthodox and only 4 percent regularly attend church services and take communion.

This year, schools are introducing a mandatory course in the "Basics of Religious Culture and Secular Ethics." Parents may choose between a course in religious ethics based on "traditional religions" or secular ethics. While there is considerable regional diversity, the overall picture is clear. The number of parents choosing "Basics of Orthodox Culture" doesn't exceed 7 percent, and 88 percent prefer to enroll their children in "Basics of Secular Ethics."

These parents are people who have lived the most part of their lives in post-Soviet Russia, and they want their children to make their own choices. They don't want anyone telling their children what to do, whether it is the Communist Party or the Orthodox Church. No matter how hard the Russian Orthodox Church fights against what it calls "aggressive liberalism," in the 21st century it is bound to fail.

Victor Davidoff is a Moscow-based writer and journalist who follows the Russian blogosphere in his biweekly column.

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