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Pentecostal Church Looted, Razed

By Natalya Krainova

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A framed picture of the Holy Trinity Pentecostal Church with some of its 550 members standing Friday near the demolished building in east Moscow.

A telephone call woke up Natalya Cherevichnik, 25, a parishioner of a Moscow Pentecostal church, at about 3 a.m. A fellow worshipper told her that at that very moment, unknown workers, backed by the police, were knocking down their church.

Cherevichnik, a resident of the town of Shatura, 125 kilometers east of the capital, had returned home about 1 a.m. from a Wednesday evening service at the Holy Trinity Pentecostal Church in Moscow's eastern suburb of Novokosino.

She promptly took the 6 a.m. bus back to the city.

"When I arrived, I just burst into tears," Cherevichnik told The Moscow Times outside the church ruins Friday evening. "I couldn't believe that something that had been built over several years could be destroyed in a few hours."

The demolition, which sent shock waves through the country's Protestant community over the weekend, was ordered by city authorities determined to build a sports stadium on the site. But the decision, based on a court order, is raising fears that religious freedom is under attack from a government that has long shown preferential treatment to the dominant Russian Orthodox Church.

About 12:15 a.m. Thursday, a group of unidentified people in civilian clothing, accompanied by police, broke down the door of the church, located at 10 Ulitsa Nikolaya Starostina, where a young woman worked as a night watchman, said the church's senior pastor, Vasily Romanyuk.

The intruders tore out the telephone cable and seized the woman's cell phone. The police took her to the police station, where she was kept for three hours before being allowed to call Romanyuk.

Romanyuk and several of the church's 550 parishioners arrived at the site about 3:30 a.m. to find the gates around the building and yard ripped off their hinges and about 40 to 45 drunken young men in civilian clothing standing in two equal groups, one beside the gates and the other beside the church.

The men blocked the parishioners from entering, pushed them, shouted obscenities and threw stones at those who tried to take pictures, the pastor said. Police who arrived at Romanyuk's request watched impassively.

Soon construction machinery arrived and destroyed most of the church. After the construction machinery left together with the unidentified men, the parishioners discovered that many church possessions had disappeared, including furniture, musical and computer equipment, and even the communion cups and food from the canteen.

The church was razed by a construction company hired by city authorities after a Moscow court ordered its demolition because the church's land lease had expired and the church had refused to move out, said Andrei Ivanov, spokesman for the Eastern Administrative District, which includes Novokosino.

City Hall leased the plot, with an area of 1.3 hectares, to the Russian Union of Christians of the Evangelical Faith, which manages the church, for one year in 1999 on the condition that the organization draft design and budget plans for the construction of a cultural center, Ivanov said in a telephone interview.

The religious organization failed to fulfill the contract and constructed a three-story building without permission, he said.

But Romanyuk said the religious organization collected all the necessary documents for construction by 2000 and applied to City Hall for permission but was refused.

In April 2010, the Perovsky District Court ordered district authorities to demolish the building. The district prefect's office chose a contractor through a tender to demolish the church,

Ivanov said. He did not know the name of the contractor.

City Hall plans to build a large sports complex on the church's site for residents of Novokosino and a neighboring district and for Olympic athletes, he said. Ivanov could not immediately say when plans for the sports complex were conceived.

Construction will start in 2014 or 2015, according to the website for the office of the prefect of the Eastern Administrative District. The builder of the sports complex will be chosen through another tender, Ivanov said.

Sergei Ryakhovsky, head of the Russian Union of Christians of the Evangelical Faith and a Public Chamber member, said in an e-mailed statement that authorities were "right, de jure."

"Nevertheless, there is no law in Russia that allows scoffing at relics, trampling the pages of the Holy Bible into the dirt, breaking into safes and stealing church property," Ryakhovsky said.

Ryakhovsky has complained to the Public Chamber, which promised to keep a close eye on the case, as well as to Mayor Sergei Sobyanin, city prosecutors and investigators.

The Russian Union of Christians of the Evangelical Faith is the biggest grouping of Protestants in Russia, according to its website. It comprises 1,300 churches and more than 1,000 unregistered religious groups, which it says account for about 6 percent of all religious organizations in Russia.

A senior Russian Orthodox Church official, Vsevolod Chaplin, asked City Hall in a letter to personally oversee the situation with the demolished church.

"The feelings of believers about a building where they pray are worthy of respect and always need special attention," Chaplin said, Interfax reported. Chaplin said he wouldn't weigh in on legal aspects of the conflict.

Of the church's 550 parishioners, about 200 are children and 100 are teenagers and young people, Romanyuk said.

Parishioner Lyudmila Zhukova, 54, was distraught as she spoke to a reporter outside the church ruins Friday.

"We didn't seize this land. The authorities gave it to us," Zhukova said. "I am troubled about the way all this was done — barbarously and at night by people who weren't dressed in uniform."

Zhukova said the disappearance of the church's belongings amounted to looting.

"People who come on a court order don't eat chocolate from the canteen at 3 in the morning," she said.

Zhukova said she had no idea what she would tell her 5-year-old grandson if he saw the destroyed church and asked her what had happened.

"How can I raise him to be a patriot of this country?" she said.

The church's troubles continued Sunday afternoon when, at the end of a two-hour worship service for 300 to 400 adults on the site, several police officers took the pastor to the police station to question him about whether he had been holding an illegal rally.

Without the building, the worshippers had to meet outside and therefore fell under a new law backed by President Vladimir Putin that requires people who want to gather outdoors to obtain permits. The law came in response to large anti-Putin rallies in recent months.

City Hall didn't ask the church to vacate the land until 2005. In 2010, City Hall offered an alternative land plot to the church in the same district, at 4 Ulitsa Saltykovskaya, but the church refused.

"We offered a compromise but unfortunately couldn't reach an understanding," Ivanov said.

But Anton Krugikov, a spokesman for the Russian Union of Christians of the Evangelical Faith, said City Hall offered a choice between two land plots: one occupied with car garages and the other located in a protected zone where construction is forbidden.

Between 2007 and 2012, 80 buildings without proper documentation were razed in the Eastern Administrative District, most on a court order, Ivanov said. This effectively means that most buildings were torn down by city authorities against the will of the users of the buildings.

Another 60 buildings are being targeted by the authorities in the Eastern Administrative District, and courts have ordered the demolition of 44 of them.

"This is routine work, and the church's demolition is nothing out of the ordinary," Ivanov said.

Asked why the demolition workers arrived at night, who the men accompanying them were and why the church's property had disappeared, Ivanov said he could not talk to a reporter any longer because he had to go.

Ivanov told Izvestia that it was "strange" that the workers had arrived at night and recommended that church officials complain to the police about the property theft.

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