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Witch Hunt Against Gays

By Victor Davidoff

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Over a century ago, Russian writer and former political prisoner Fyodor Dostoevsky wrote, "The degree of civilization in a society can be judged upon entering its prisons." Today, that assertion continues to be valid, but the brutalities of the recent past have shown that civilization should be judged by more than its attitude to just one minority group of prisoners.

On the evening of Oct. 11, a group of about 20 people in masks broke into a Moscow gay- and lesbian-friendly club called 7freedays, where they were celebrating their annual coming-out party. The attackers apparently knew how the club's alarm system worked. They immediately held a gun that fired rubber bullets at the barkeep, who was the only person with access to the police panic button. The attackers started breaking the furniture and beating up the clientele. More than 10 people were wounded, four of whom were hospitalized. Shards from broken glasses damaged one woman's eye. The police were called after the attackers left, and they arrived at the club, located in the center of Moscow, only after 30 minutes.

Unfortunately, attacks on gays have become as much of a national trademark as St. Basil's Cathedral. The first attacks on gay clubs took place in the mid-2000s, and since then gay activists have been regularly beaten up whenever they try to hold a gay-pride parade. Even

foreign activists have been hurt when they have come to support their colleagues. Volker Beck, a deputy in the German Bundestag, was roughed up right on Moscow's main street, Tverskaya Ulitsa, across from the mayor's office. As gay activist Nikolai Alekseyev wrote on his LiveJournal blog, "Not one person in Russia has been held accountable for homophobic crimes, and the people who attack gay parties know that very well."

There are, however, other opinions. Vitaly Milonov, a deputy in the St. Petersburg legislative assembly from United Russia, is co-author of the notorious law forbidding "promotion of homosexuality." He blamed the incident in the club on gay people themselves. He said in an interview with Snob.ru, that the incident was the "result of the obnoxious, crude and permissive behavior of the gay community. ... What other reaction could there be when, in response to democratic actions, they run around like jackals at consulates, beg for another grant and write letters demanding that the authorities be punished? This is a warning to the gay community so that they don't forget that they live in the Russian Federation, a country with a healthy historical and cultural legacy."

Sergei Rybko, a Russian Orthodox priest, spoke out more forcefully. "The Holy Scriptures instruct us to cast stones at all those guys with nontraditional orientation. As long as that scum is not banished from Russian land, I completely agree with people who are trying to cleanse our homeland of them. If the government won't do it, then the people will," he said an interview with Pravoslaviye i Mir (Orthodoxy and the World). He added that he regretted that because he is a priest, "he couldn't take part in actions of this sort."

To be fair to the Russian Orthodox Church, not all priests agree with Rybko. Archpriest Roman Bratchik, while not defending gays, considers the incident to be contrary to the main precepts of the faith. "Sodomy has existed in all eras, and we condemn this phenomenon," he wrote in Pravoslaviye i Mir, "but I would like to remind people that Sodom and Gomorrah weren't destroyed by people but by angels sent from God. The attackers only bring harm to Christian teaching. They won't create a country that lives a 'life of piety and purity'. With those methods they can only create a fascist country."

These words ring out like an alarm bell. Laws against "promoting homosexuality" — whatever that means — and the de facto absence of protection for gay people fostered by law enforcement agencies threaten everyone. This is a direct attack on the Constitution, which declares that all citizens are equal. And if you take away that cornerstone of equality, tomorrow the attackers might appear in a synagogue or the office of an opposition party. And then who could stop them from going out on the street and beating up anyone with different hair color or anyone they simply don't like?

In the Middle Ages, every witch hunt involved repression of Jews. In the 21st century, gays are the new Jews. They are visible, disliked by many in society and a very convenient target for fascists of all stripes. Countries with repressive political regimes are usually noted for their intolerance of homosexuality.

This might be a good time to recall the famous words of Pastor Martin Friedrich Niemöller, a prisoner in a German concentration camp: "First they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out because I was not a Jew. Then they came for the communists, and I did not speak out because I was not a communist. Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak

out because I was not a trade unionist. Then they came for me, and by that time there was no one left to speak out."

For Russians, who have suffered from such harsh repressions so many times, it might be a good idea to inscribe these words above every doorway — as a reminder.

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

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