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Theories Run Rife Over Blaze at Novodevichy Convent

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Firefighters spray water as they work to extinguish a fire at the bell tower of Novodevichy monastery in Moscow Mar. 15.

The fire that raged overnight at the bell tower of Moscow's iconic Novodevichy Convent may have been caused by a short circuit or gold thieves, Russian media reported.

A 300-square-meter blaze spread along the scaffolding which had earlier been erected around the convent's bell tower for renovations. The fire was extinguished at 1:23 a.m. on Monday after some 100 firefighters were dispatched to the scene, the press service of the Emergency Situations Ministry's Moscow branch said in comments carried by Interfax.

No one was injured in the incident.

According to Interfax's report, a short circuit could have occurred as a result of restoration work that had required the use of heat guns, tools that emit a stream of hot air and are used

for stripping paint and similar activities.

Deputy Culture Minister Grigory Pirumov cast doubt on this possible explanation for the fire, saying that restoration work on the bell tower had been completed some 12 hours before the blaze broke out and that workers had switched off all power sources.

"The heat guns had been turned off one week ago," Interfax quoted Pirumov as saying. "There were no power sources in [the bell tower.]"

A range of alternative theories about the origin of the fire have emerged in Russian media. The RIA Novosti news agency cited an unnamed source in Moscow law enforcement as saying that the fire could have been sparked by thieves who had climbed the scaffolding to steal the bell tower's gilded ornaments.

Pirumov added that the bell tower's interior had largely been spared from the flames and that private contractors would assume the cost of further restoration, Interfax reported.

The Ensemble of the Novodevichy Convent, one of Moscow's top tourist attractions, was added to UNESCO's World Heritage List in 2004. The convent was founded by Grand Duke Vasily III in the 1520s to mark the return of Smolensk to Russia from the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, according to UNESCO.

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