

Campaign Seeks to Rename Moscow Metro Station Honoring Regicide

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The Russian imperial family pictured in happier times, before Pyotr Voikov played a key role in their execution.

Long-running calls for the renaming of a Moscow district named after a revolutionary who played a part in the execution of Russia's last imperial family appeared to have made headway Thursday, when Moscow Mayor Sergei Sobyenin added his voice to the campaign to change at least the name of the metro station.

"I suppose we should think about [renaming] Voikovskaya metro station. It wouldn't lead to changing the surrounding addresses, so we should let people decide," he said Thursday in an interview with the Govorit Moskva radio station.

Pyotr Voikov — after whom a district, six streets and a metro station in northwestern Moscow are named — was a Bolshevik revolutionary who played a key role in the decision to execute the tsar, his wife, their five children and family servants in 1918. The family was shot and

bayoneted to death in the basement of a house in the Urals city of Yekaterinburg where they were being kept under house arrest. Voikov was also involved in the grisly disposal of their remains.

During the Soviet era, Voikov was hailed as a hero, but since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the idea of renaming the district has been raised repeatedly — but never with any result.

Voikovskiy is one of the rare Soviet place names in Moscow that somehow survived the large-scale renaming of the 1990s that saw Ulitsa Gorkogo become Tverskaya Ulitsa, Ulitsa Gertsena become Bolshaya Nikitskaya Ulitsa and Ploshchad Dzerzhinskogo become Lubyanskaya Ploshchad.

Even Sverdlovsk, as Yekaterinburg was renamed in 1924 in honor of Yakov Sverdlov — a Bolshevik politician who is also believed to have signed off on the shooting of the royal family — had its imperial name restored in 1991, while Voikov's memory continued to be immortalized.

Renewed Attempts

The most recent campaign to change the name was launched last week in the wake of a series of unofficial proposals to give the surviving descendants of the Romanov dynasty some sort of status in Russia, when a Voikovskiy district municipal deputy filed a proposal with City Hall to rename the area.

Alexander Zakondyrin, the deputy, suggested organizing an online referendum on renaming the district.

"I suggested five different alternatives to choose from: Volkovskiy, Kosmodemyanskoy, Nikolskoy, Aviatsionnaya and Peterburgskoy," he told The Moscow Times on Wednesday.

"We don't have resources to organize a real referendum, so I suggested to Anastasia Rakova [deputy mayor and chief of staff for the mayor and City Hall] the launch of an online vote via Aktivny Grazhdanin [an application designed by City Hall to get feedback from residents on various issues]," Zakondyrin said.

The deputy added that there might be a sixth option. "Right now no one knows where to put the monument to Prince Vladimir [that is currently being made]. We are ready to pick a location for it within the Voikovskiy district and call it the Vladimirskiy district — why not?" he said.

Diverse Support

His proposal hadn't elicited any reaction from the authorities as of Wednesday, Zakondyrin said, since deputy mayor Rakova is currently on vacation. Nevertheless he received widespread support — some of it from unexpected quarters.

Representatives of the former imperial dynasty unsurprisingly sided with the deputy's proposal the same day he filed it to City Hall.

"It's about time it was done. The names of those involved in repressions and the execution of

the tsar's family should be taken off the map of Moscow," German Lukyanov, an attorney for some of the surviving Romanovs, was cited by the Interfax news agency as saying last week.

On Tuesday, the Russian Orthodox Church — which canonized the imperial family as passion bearers in 2000 — expressed its support for the proposal, Interfax reported. Church spokesman Vsevolod Chaplin called for Voikov's name to be wiped off the city map and described him as "a terrorist and a destroyer" who deserves "eternal punishment and dishonor" rather than to have streets and metro stations named after him.

Prominent civil rights defender and head of the Moscow Helsinki Group Lyudmila Alexeyeva agreed with Chaplin.

"It's a rare occasion when I agree with the Russian Orthodox Church, but Voikov is an unsavory figure, his reputation is blotted, and his name shouldn't grace a metro station or anything else," she was cited by Interfax as saying Tuesday.

Residents of the district were also quick to express support for the change, and began enthusiastically discussing new names for the metro station and streets in numerous groups devoted to the neighborhood on Russian social network VKontakte.

"[Let's call it] Volkovsky. When I was a 6-year-old kid, I couldn't understand why we have a street [in the district] named after the cosmonaut Volkov while the metro station is Voikovskaya. I always thought it was some kind of mistake," Alexei Chernukhin, a local resident, wrote in a thread on the VKontakte group "Voika" dedicated to a possible name change.

"I studied at the MAI [Moscow Aviation Institute], so it would be cool to name the district Aviationsnyy [Aviation]," another user, Yevgeny Koshelev, wrote in the same thread.

Years of Pledges

But this is not the first time calls have been heard to rename the district. The saga began in 1997, when the state commission responsible for identifying the remains of the royal family found outside Yekaterinburg stated that Voikovskaya metro station should be renamed.

Since then, attempts have been made by the Orthodox Church, pro-monarchy residents and religious foundations every couple of years. In 2008, some monarchist activists held a few meager pickets in support of renaming all the places named after Voikov, but their efforts resulted in nothing.

The closest the campaign edged to success was in 2011, when Lyudmila Shvetsova, deputy mayor for social development and head of the commission responsible for naming city sites back then, mentioned in an interview to the Izvestia newspaper that City Hall would "consider the proposal" to rename Voikovskaya metro station.

Following the interview, Russian media exploded with headlines stating that Voikovskaya would definitely be renamed, but once again the story fizzled out, and the station kept its name.

'No' to Rewriting History

Far from everyone agrees with renaming the Voikovskiy district. The Communist Party has said it is an attempt to "rewrite history" and called on Muscovites to respect "the decisions our ancestors made to immortalize someone's memory," Valery Rashkin, a Communist deputy in the State Duma, told the Russkaya Sluzhba Novostei radio station on Tuesday.

"I categorically object to the renaming. We should look at the bigger picture, not at the opinions of some groups," he was cited by the radio station as saying. "We should consider our history from the tsarist era and Soviet period through to the present as a whole," he added.

Moscow City Duma Deputy Yevgeny Gerasimov, chair of the commission for culture and mass communications, agreed with Rashkin. "We should all calm down and preserve our history the way it is," Gerasimov told The Moscow Times in a phone interview Wednesday.

"It's about time we let go and stop renaming everything. Our history is too long and too versatile," he said. "Moreover, I'm sure lots of people don't even know who Voikov is," the deputy added.

Gerasimov also said that renaming the district, the metro station and several streets would entail too much bureaucracy. "Can you imagine how many documents Muscovites would have to redo due to the address change, and how much money that would require? It would be a great inconvenience for local residents," Gerasimov said.

Zakondyrin rejected that objection. "I'm surprised an experienced lawmaker would say such a thing," he said in a phone interview with The Moscow Times. "No one will have to redo their documents right away. If a document expires, the new one will contain the new address — it's a normal procedure," he said.

'Yes' to Changing Times

Several Russian historians polled by The Moscow Times were unanimous in their verdict: Voikov's name should be taken off the map.

"It's preposterous to have his name in the capital [of Russia] or anywhere else as the name of a metro station, [Voikov doesn't deserve to have] a public toilet [named after him]," journalist and historian Pyotr Romanov — no relation to the former imperial family — and author of the "Ostorozhno: Istoria" (Caution: History) educational project told The Moscow Times on Wednesday.

Grigory Revzin, an arts historian and journalist at Kommersant daily, agreed. "Voikov is a loathsome figure, and it's strange that something is called after him," he told The Moscow Times. "And those who fight 'the rewriting of history' are simply trying to declare their version of events the truest, and no one has ever managed to do that," he said.

Taking Soviet names off the map is a good idea, prominent historian and author of numerous history textbooks Leonid Katsva told The Moscow Times in a phone interview, but Voikov is not necessarily the most pressing example.

“We still have a small town outside of Moscow called Dzerzhinsky [after the founder of the dreaded Soviet secret police]. It also has a square named after Dzerzhinsky and a highway,” he said. “Why pick Voikov as a target while there’s still a large street and a library named after Lenin, and the mausoleum [containing Lenin’s embalmed body] is still on Red Square?” the historian said.

Rewriting history happens all the time and is completely normal and even useful, said Katsva. “Every piece of new research can be considered rewriting history,” he said. “When they renamed Bolshaya Kaluzhskaya Ulitsa into Leninsky Prospekt, that was rewriting history, when they renamed the Rumyantsevskaya Library into the Lenin Library, that was rewriting history. It’s inevitable, and I don’t think it’s harmful,” he said.

“The Communists started ‘rewriting history’ after the [1917] revolution, when they renamed most of the streets,” agreed Alexei Dedushkin, a well-known specialist in the history of Moscow and one of the founders of the Oldmos.ru city history project. “So they shouldn’t really complain,” he added.

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