

Going Down in Flames

Incompetence, neglect and rash reforms are undermining Moscow firefighters' ability to tackle major fires.

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Bojemoi Art

It was the deadliest blaze in Britain's recent history. Earlier this month, a malfunctioning refrigerator set fire to Grenfell Tower, a public housing complex in London. Soon, the flames shot through the building's 24-stories, most likely aided by the structure's highly flammable aluminum composite cladding.

Two-hundred and fifty firefighters battled the blaze for 10 hours — but to no avail. The building burnt nearly to the ground, and a plume of smoke billowed into the sky for hours more, a grim reminder of the terrible tragedy. At least 80 people are presumed dead or missing as of July 3.

London Metropolitan police have already determined the cause of the fire: A refrigerator

exploded in one of the apartments. It is assumed that the flame then spread unusually quickly because of the building's cladding and other violations of fire safety regulations. In the ensuing two weeks, the UK authorities have inspected more than 600 buildings across England and found seven with similarly flammable cladding. They are now working to ensure this tragedy does not repeat itself.

Moscow is no England in that respect — and Grenfell has left Russian firefighters worried. Russia's fire service, currently part of the Emergency Situations Ministry, has been paralyzed by a deep internal crisis, several firefighters and rescuers told The Moscow Times on condition of anonymity.

The firefighters, who were not authorized to speak on internal matters, fear organizational dysfunction has left the fire service largely helpless in the face of major blazes like Grenfell — a serious problem in a high-rise city where fire safety regulations are often not followed.

"We've long been on the verge of falling into the abyss," a firefighter told The Moscow Times. "And it's not getting better. We're only stepping closer and closer to the edge."

Glory days

During the Soviet era, firefighting was somewhat more efficient. It was a militarized entity within the Interior Ministry. Only highly qualified professionals worked as firefighters, perpetually passing their knowledge and skills down to younger generations. This force was bound by values, traditions and, most importantly, accountability, firefighters say.

Every death in a fire and every unusual incident was thoroughly investigated. These investigations were meticulously analyzed and used by authorities and the fire service to prevent similar deaths and dangers.

"I can still teach young servicemen with Soviet fire analyses, that's how good they were," an experienced firefighter told The Moscow Times. "If a firefighter died in a fire, heads would roll. Everyone knew that, so it was a rather rare occurrence."

Construction standards were strict, and government oversight of fire safety regulations was relentless. Moreover, the fire service would frequently test fire safety. "In new buildings, they would pick out an apartment and set a controlled blaze in it to analyze potential scenarios," a firefighter told The Moscow Times.

But those glory days died with the Soviet Union. In the early 1990s, economic crisis took its toll, firefighters recall. For some time, the service barely received any funding, and servicemen saw their wages shrink and lost motivation to work. Many left the profession.

"Those who stayed survived a very dark period. Some of them resorted to drinking, including on duty," a firefighter said.

Around the same time, a young and zealous bureaucrat named Sergei Shoigu took charge of the State Committee for Emergency Situations, which was transformed into the Ministry for Emergency Situations (MChS) in 1994. Currently Russia's defense minister, Shoigu cut his teeth on Emergency Situations. Veterans working in the fire service at the time recall that

Shoigu immediately had his eyes on the fire service.

By the end of the 1990s, the crisis in the fire service started to die down, and the situation began to improve, sources say. But in 2002, Shoigu got his way. The 278,000 staff members of the fire service officially became part of MChS. That is when the downfall began, firefighters say.

According to a veteran firefighter who has been working in the fire service since the 1970s, one of Shoigu's first moves was to purge the old guard at the top of regional branches of the service.

Generals who "knew what firefighting was about" were replaced with Shoigu's own military cadres, who had "little to no experience in firefighting."

With them in charge, inefficiencies began metastasizing throughout the system, the veteran firefighter says. Almost every operational process was affected — from training firefighters to dealing with major accidents and deciding on firefighting tactics.

Related article: [Young Volunteers Are Putting Out Russia's Hidden Forest Fires](#)

Ultimate price

For some time, the Russian fire service lived off its strong Soviet legacy, but that is now unsustainable, sources say. "Firefighting as a science hasn't developed in Russia in recent years," a firefighter with nearly 20 years of experience says. "We're two decades behind the rest of the world."

Sources complain that the education firefighters receive these days is, at best, outdated. At worst, it prioritizes military rituals — "like marching in file with hands over each other's shoulders" — over teaching the science of fighting fires. They say educational and training facilities were being shut down due to lack of funding.

The number of experienced professionals — the kind who would pass knowledge on to younger firefighters — has also fallen sharply. A sweeping optimization in recent years saw thousands of people laid off, including those who had reached the 45-year age limit. There are now 58,000 unfilled vacancies across the system, a firefighter says.

"Those 45-year-olds were the most experienced," a firefighter says. "Once they were sent packing, the fire service lost its institutional memory."

Unsurprisingly, this has greatly undermined the force's effectiveness and the management's ability to make right calls, sources say. A wrong tactical decision can lead to putting a fire out in five hours instead of 30 minutes. Disorganization in procurement may result in buying a large firefighting vehicle that is not suitable for densely populated urban areas.

Sometimes, visits from management can get in the way of putting out a fire. A current firefighter recalls an episode in which a firefighting squad, en route to a house fire, was turned around because a minister was coming.

“I had to drive to that fire from another district,” the firefighter said. “The [other] squad would have been there 10 minutes earlier and would have contained the fire.”

In that instance, people lost their home, and no one was held accountable for it, he said.

Management can also cause chaos at the scene of a fire, says another highly experienced rescuer. The larger the fire, the more high-ranking commanders arrive at the scene and start overriding each other’s orders: “They don’t listen to advice, they can change the tactics at any time and any way they see fit.”

Sources claimed that this situation — combined with low salaries — was pushing skilled firefighters away from the profession. “Management doesn’t need professionals — it needs soldiers who can quietly follow orders,” an experienced firefighter says.

According to both current and former firefighters, the service is being “held together” by the few professionals it still has. They help younger colleagues learn their ropes, beg foreign colleagues and even buy necessary equipment on eBay out of their own pockets. Sometimes they turn a conscience blind eye to unhelpful new regulations in order to save people from fires.

And they sometimes pay the ultimate price for deficiencies in the system. Several firefighters referred to a September 2016 fire in a Moscow warehouse, which killed eight of their colleagues. The men became trapped in the inferno after a roof fell in.

According to one experienced firefighter who was present at the blaze, much more could and should have been made to ensure the safety of the team. The roof was near collapse when the team arrived, he says — the building had already been burning for several hours. Cranes or ladders could have been used for the rescuers to attach themselves to and avoid collapsing together with the roof, but squads at the scene didn’t have the time or the equipment for it, the veteran firefighter says.

Instead, people were sent in with few safety precautions. Because of extreme staff shortage, these were firefighters from squads that had never worked or rehearsed maneuvers together, he adds.

“There were about 20 of them. Twelve made it out, the rest didn’t,” the veteran firefighter says. Had they been allowed to let the building burn down, and prioritize work on keeping the fire from spreading, the firefighter is sure his colleagues would have survived.

According to our survey of past and present firefighters, this was far from being an isolated case. “How can I entrust a service with saving lives if it can’t even protect their own?” the veteran firefighter told The Moscow Times.

Related article: [Russia’s War Against Greenpeace: When Local Resistance Turns Violent](#)

Vicious circle

On paper, the Emergency Situations Ministry is still a knight in shining armor. The Moscow Times reviewed stats published on the organization’s official website and found that, over the

past five years, the number of fires has been slowly but surely decreasing (from 162,975 fires in 2012 to 139,703 fires in 2016). So has the number of deaths (from 11,653 in 2012 to 8,760 in 2016) and injuries (from 11,962 in 2012 to 9,909 in 2016) in fires.

But these figures don't necessarily reflect reality, current and former firefighters told The Moscow Times. MChS cares a lot about its image and has found ways to distort its official statistics, they argue.

It is true that the Ministry now calculates the number of deaths during a fire differently than before. According to an Interior Ministry decree from 1994, anyone who died within 90 days of being rescued from a fire was included in the count. The Emergencies Ministry decree from 2008 doesn't include that norm.

"Right now if a person was alive when I shut the ambulance door behind them, they are not counted as killed by the fire even if they die right then and there in that ambulance," a former firefighter said.

MChS officials sometimes discount deaths not directly related to fire. For example, a woman who died after jumping out the window of a burning building was not counted as a fire death, a firefighter said. The situation with firefighter deaths is even worse: There are no statistics or analysis at all. "All we are usually told about our colleagues killed in fires is that they passed away as heroes," a firefighter said. "No one talks about what could have been done to prevent those deaths."

Ministry officials exert pressure to make sure annual statistics show improvement, sources say. One firefighter told The Moscow Times that he was once summoned to a meeting during the New Year holiday and told not to report any more fires "because we already exceeded the previous year's number."

Manipulating statistics has created a vicious circle, the veteran firefighter adds: "If everything is fine — and on paper it is — there is no reason to improve things."

Russia's Grenfell towers

The Ministry's press service did not respond to The Moscow Times request for comments on staff shortages and manipulating statistics by the time this article went to press.

The Emergency Situations Ministry has issued official statements saying the fire service is consistently improving. MChS spokesman Alexei Vagutovich claimed earlier this year that the optimisation boosted the system's overall effectiveness, which led to a decrease in the number of emergency situations, fires and fatalities. Minister Vladimir Puchkov recently said "unprecedented steps" were taken to develop the fire service last year. He added that the ministry was paying close attention to training qualified specialists and ensuring safety for firefighters.

But according to people who have seen the system from the inside, fires like the Grenfell Tower blaze would be difficult to put out, given how poorly qualified many firefighters are today. There are also questions about the safety of newer complexes built in the post-Soviet construction boom, like the new Moscow City financial cluster in the east of the city.

“Extinguishing a fire in a tall building is an extremely difficult process on its own, and we’ve seen what a challenge it can be when [skyscrapers in] Moscow City [were] on fire,” a former firefighter says.

The fact that many developers ignore construction regulations and MChS does not have enough resources to oversee buildings only increases the risk, firefighters say.

Russia has actually experienced tragedies even worse than Grenfell Tower. In 2009, a fire in a nightclub in Perm in 2009 took the lives of 156 people. But while the fallout from Grenfell in England is likely to result in a serious re-examination of safety norms there, Russian firefighters say their institutions learned little from the Perm disaster.

“It was a combination of extreme fire safety negligence and the unpreparedness of the local firefighting squad,” the firefighter says. “The local garrison could have saved at least 50 people if it had enough men trained to deal with toxic smoke and equipped with breathing apparatuses.”

Local firefighter commanders were dismissed, and the whole government of the region stepped down. Minister for Emergency Situations Shoigu initiated sweeping inspections of nightclubs across the country to ensure they comply with the safety regulations.

But in the more substantive matter of fire safety practices, little changed. Disregard for safety regulations is still common, and there are still not enough specialist equipment or trained teams at hand.

This is why smaller tragedies — which take several lives here and there — add up to Moscow’s own never-ending Grenfell Tower, a former firefighter says.

“The Grenfell Tower fire attracted attention in Britain because it was so big and deadly,” he says. “But if all our smaller ones were properly reflected in official statistics, you’d see how many of Grenfell Towers we’ve had.”

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