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Russia's Largest Cinema Chain Cancels 'Mathilde'

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Yuri Smityuk / TASS

Russia's leading cinema chain will not screen a controversial film on Tsar Nicholas' affair with a Polish ballerina after receiving religiously motivated threats to its theaters, the chain told Interfax news agency Tuesday.

A vigilante group called "Christian State -- Holy Russia" sent letters to dozens of cinema managers in February, saying "cinemas would, burn, maybe people will even suffer" if "Mathilde" was shown.

"The leadership of the united network 'Cinema Park' and 'Formula Kino' decided not to screen the picture," the chain told Interfax in a statement, citing "frequent threats to theaters."

It also pointed to several "unlawful actions" that opponents of director Alexei Uchitel's biopic carried out in recent days in a number of Russian cities.

Two cars outside Uchitel's lawyer's office in central Moscow were set on fire on Monday in an apparent act of intimidation ahead of the film's general release in late October.

Russia's National Film Foundation later that day canceled the film's screening to meet an Oscars consideration deadline "due to technical reasons."

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The cancellation followed a vehicle attack and explosion at a Yekaterinburg movie theater last week in opposition to "Mathilde," and the torching of Uchitel's St. Petersburg studio with Molotov cocktails on Aug. 31.

The film depicting the Tsar's affair with Mathilde Kschessinska catalyzed opposition among Russian Orthodox activists. The activists, including State Duma Deputy Natalia Poklonskaya, say the film offends religious believers. The Russian Orthodox Church canonized Tsar Nicholas II in 2000.

An elderly widow of the Tsar's nephew has sued the director's studio over the film.

The "Cinema Park" and "Formula Kino" chain owns a combined 25 movie theaters in Moscow and 15 in St. Petersburg, and others in more than 20 Russian cities. It stressed that the canceled screenings were a "forced decision."

"The high profile surrounding the film against the backdrop of the latest events may have raised its commercial potential, but the safety of our viewers remains our priority."

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