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Eyewitnesses Describe ‘Bomb Jokes’ Moments Before Cafe Blast That Killed Military Blogger

By Giovanni Pigni

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Damage to St. Petersburg's Street Food Bar No. 1. **Alexander Demianchuk / TASS**

Russian military blogger Vladlen Tatarsky was laughing about bombs with his apparent assassin at an event in St. Petersburg minutes before he was killed by a bomb hidden inside a gifted statuette, eyewitnesses told The Moscow Times.

Daria Trepova, who gave Tatarsky the golden figurine of himself, told the pro-war blogger in front of the dozens of attendees that security guards had blocked her from bringing her present into the room because they were worried it could contain a bomb, according to Marat Arnis, a local journalist who was at the event.

“She was laughing as she said it, so the audience and Vladlen laughed with her,” said Arnis. “Everyone took it as a joke.”

In response, Arnis recalled Tatarsky saying: “No worries, bring it here, we'll check it."

With Tatarsky’s permission, the golden bust was then brought inside so Trepova could formally hand it to him.

Minutes later, it exploded, killing Tatarsky and injuring about 40 others in Street Food Bar No. 1, a popular venue with pro-war activists and meeting place for ultra-nationalist movement Cyber Front Z.

The events immediately before and after Sunday’s dramatic attack have been the subject of intense interest in recent days, with speculation over Trepova’s exact role — particularly whether she knew the bust contained a bomb — and who organized the hit.

Russian authorities detained Trepova, 26, the following day and she was formally charged with terrorism on Tuesday.

Russia’s Investigative Committee and its National Anti-Terrorism Committee have claimed supporters of jailed Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny and Ukrainian fighters used Trepova to kill Tatarsky, a bank robber, ex-Ukrainian rebel and vociferous cheerleader of Russia’s military campaign in Ukraine who had over half a million online followers.

St. Petersburg real estate agent and war supporter Eduard Omelchenko, who was present at the event, told The Moscow Times he remembered Trepova pointing at the statuette and joking: “That is not a bomb.”

Video footage from immediately before the blast — including a clip shot by Arnis, a former reporter for state-owned broadcaster Channel One — does not show Tatarsky and Trepova laughing over the bomb threat.

But it does include the moment when Tatarsky asked Trepova to take a seat in the front row.

“I am shy,” she can be heard saying in response, although she agrees to sit a few meters to Tatarsky’s left, on the other side of him opposite the golden bust.

According to Omelchenko, 55, it looked like Trepova knew what she was doing.

“The body language indicates she was waiting for something to happen,” Omelchenko said.

Trepova sat at the back of the room for most of the event, according to Arnis, as Tatarsky described what it was like to be a war reporter and answered questions.

“She looked very nervous,” he said.

After several hours, Trepova asked Tatarsky a question about “Russia’s ideology,” Arnis said, and then asked the blogger whether he recognized her.

“She reminded him of a recent event in Moscow when she had given him some drawings she had done,” Arnis said.

At that point, according to Arnis and Omelchenko, Tatarsky seemed to remember who she was — although he can be heard on videos of the event referring to her as “Nastya.”

After inspecting the statuette, which he unwrapped and removed from a cardboard box, Tatarsky seemed pleased.

“What a handsome guy,” he can be heard saying in the footage.

Representatives of Navalny have denied being behind the blast that occurred moments later, instead accusing the Federal Security Service (FSB) of being responsible.

Ukrainian presidential adviser Mykhailo Podolyak tweeted Sunday that “spiders are eating each other in a jar,” apparently a suggestion that the blast was staged by a faction of the Russian security services.

While Tatarsky, whose real name was Maxim Fomin, was an enthusiastic supporter of the invasion of Ukraine, he had also criticized the Russian military.

In a video of Trepova being questioned by Russian police released Monday, she can be seen saying she “brought the statuette [to the bar] where it exploded.” She does not say that she knew there was a bomb inside, or reveal if someone gave her the statuette.

When the explosion happened, it caused chaos, filling the bar with dust and scattering shrapnel among the audience.

“I couldn’t see anything. Something started crumbling over my head. I felt pain on my face, on the torso and hands,” said Omelchenko.

When the smoke cleared, Omelchenko saw Tatarsky’s body lying on the ground.

“His hands were torn off, the belly was ripped apart and he had glasslike eyes,” Omelchenko said. “It was clear he was already dead.”

After recovering from the shock and exiting the bar, Arnis grabbed his phone and started filming.

In this video, which he later posted online, a woman who appears to be Trepova can be seen standing next to the exit and then leaving in the direction of the city center.

“She was the last to come out from the bar,” Arnis said.

Another eyewitness, Marcus Godwyn, 64, who arrived at the venue a few minutes after the blast, told The Moscow Times he had never seen so many people bleeding.

Godwyn, a British musician and longtime St. Petersburg resident, said he entered the bar through the smashed windows to look for his friends.

“Some of them were lightly injured with little burns on their faces, others were not injured at all depending on where they were sitting,” he said.

In the days since the blast, the authorities have been quick to respond, with St. Petersburg Governor Alexander Beglov promising financial compensation to the injured on Monday.

Yevgeny Prigozhin, the leader of mercenary group Wagner, which is closely linked with Cyber

Front Z, held a meeting with activists in the ruins of Street Food Bar No. 1 on Tuesday in which he also pledged compensation to the victims.

Russia's lower house of parliament observed a minute's silence Tuesday in memory of Tatarsky.

In recent months, Street Food Bar No. 1 has become a popular venue for ultranationalist and pro-war events, hosting a "patriotic-oriented" discussion club every weekend.

Speakers included pro-Kremlin propagandists, political analysts, far-right activists and combat veterans.

Cyber Front Z member Godwyn, who supports the Russian of Ukraine, said the cafe should be reopened as quickly as possible.

"It's not going to be closed down just because some f***er puts a bomb in it," he said. "Otherwise they'll win!"

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