

How the Secretive Freemasons Stayed in the Kremlin's Good Books

The Moscow Times is keeping the author of this article anonymous because they remain in Russia.

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Annual Assembly of the Grand Lodge of Russia in Moscow in March 2025. **GRAND LODGE of RUSSIA / Instagram**

Russian history is a list of famous freemasons, from Alexander Pushkin and Mikhail Kutuzov to the tsars Peter III, Alexander I and Paul I. Despite that heritage, it has been a favorite target for the Russian state and Orthodox Church. That is, until today.

The world's oldest fraternity has been outlawed several times in Russia, and its members routinely exiled, arrested, harassed and accused — falsely — of just about everything from Satanic worship to global domination. The organization's secretive nature made it broadly suspicious in a country sometimes hostile to Western imports. Many wrongly presumed that

freemasonry hid sinister motives. During the 1991 coup attempt, nationalist groups also spread conspiracy theories of a Masonic-Jewish plot to bring down the U.S.S.R. from within.

The fraternity still has foes in modern Russia. In 2017, nationalist politician Vitaly Milonov called for the FSB to launch a [criminal investigation](#) into the Freemasons. Milonov falsely claimed that masons were “internal enemies” involved in illegal political activities and taking money from foreign governments.

Today, however, freemasonry may be one of Russia’s safest independent civic groups. The Grand Master of Russia’s Grand Lodge (UGLR), Andrei Bogdanov, [claims](#) the organization has “no issues” operating inside Russia. There is little to suggest he is lying. The men, mostly over 50, smoking in the mother lodge’s cigar room near Savelyovskaya metro station have avoided being labeled extremist, undesirable or foreign agents. Political pressure is practically non-existent.

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Freemasonry has been practiced since medieval times and was brought to Russia in the 1730s by British, French and German immigrants. Freemasonry has no coherent ideology or doctrine, only a commitment to self-improvement and brotherhood between members.

Its story and beliefs are rooted in the ancient craft of stonemasonry, with the symbols and practices offering life lessons in morality. Much comes from allegories of those who built the temple of King Solomon, its main architect Hiram Abiff, and the Temple’s design. Like ancient stonemasons, they identify each other and their level of mastery by secret handshakes. They wear aprons and gloves and use certain tools, like the compass, square and gavel.

In early modern Europe, guilds looked after their workers and eventually started admitting non-stonemasons through financial necessity. Members earned a higher living than most other trades, as the guild helped set wages and working conditions for its members. They also acted as social clubs for males, meeting in bars and taverns to study mathematics, measurements and geometry.

In the 1700s, membership almost entirely consisted of the gentry. Masons were now seeking lessons on morality around the peripheries of traditional religious doctrines and modern science. They discussed everything from science and esoteric currents to the Jewish Kabbalah and gnostic readings of the Bible. They were and remain secular, nonpartisan and egalitarian.

In Russia, freemasonry was first practiced in Moscow’s foreign neighborhoods before spreading to a slim number of St Petersburg nobles. Count Yakov Bruce and Archbishop Feofan Prokopovich were among them.

In the 1770s and 80s, Pyotr Elagin emerged as the country’s official masonic leader. Since then, Russian freemasonry has emulated the practices of English lodges. As historian Andrei Zorin notes, many bored noblemen viewed freemasonry as a form of Europeanization that would lead to enlightenment and distance them from Russia’s backward peasant culture.

Russian Freemasons did a lot for education and health care. They opened a philological seminary, a library, several schools, a free pharmacy and a hospital. However, its influence among the nobles, courts and foreigners alarmed Empress Catherine the Great. Prominent masons were exiled and the activities of all secret societies were banned among state officials. It was banned twice more, in 1825 following the Decembrist revolt and the 1918 Bolshevik coup.

The Orthodox Church equally despised those who swore oaths to other organizations, feeling that one could not honor the symbols of Solomon's Temple at the expense of Christianity and the church's authority. It accused freemasons of practicing rituals that openly denounced God and Christ, and neglecting the true path to salvation.

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Nowadays, their obscurity keeps them safe. There are an estimated 1,300 freemasons in Russia and 53 lodges, mostly middle-aged men in European Russia's biggest cities. The UGLR keeps an extraordinarily low public profile. The Grand Master is the only mason permitted to talk to Russia's press, where they are seldom mentioned. The UGLR also holds just two public events when the public's attention is firmly distracted.

On May 9, they lay wreaths at the tomb of the unknown soldier, and on May 24, flowers at the monument to the creators of Russian literature, Cyril and Methodius. It provides them with patriotic cover, along with singing the national anthem at banquets.

Additionally, most keep their membership secret to avoid discrimination and the Grand Master [never reveals](#) members' names. Lodges often [blur](#) members' faces on social media and leave few digital footprints. With that said, the UGLR does have a presence on all major platforms, even though Bogandov's [social media](#) is practically [empty](#).

The Kremlin also appreciates their nonpartisanship. Discussion of politics and religion is forbidden in masonic lodges. No public comments on any political issues are made by the organization or its members.

The UGLR also [claims](#) that no politicians, high-ranking businessmen or artists are members (although the rapper Ptakha briefly joined). The only known political figure is Bogdanov, who founded his own party and ran unsuccessfully for president in 2008. Critics claimed his run was to give the election false legitimacy and split the liberal opposition challenging Dmitry Medvedev.

Yet, the absence of dangerous ideas or polarizing figures builds immunity. Freemasonry's public image stays clean and the Kremlin has nothing to attack. Had someone like Alexei Navalny or even Sergei Lavrov been members, the public and state would feel differently.

In fact, the Kremlin quietly attempts to court Freemasons. Bogdanov received an official invitation to attend the 2024 inauguration ceremony of President Vladimir Putin in 2024. He also attended others and Dmitry Medvedev's. Few noticed and nobody made a fuss.

Of course, Freemasonry still has its problems. Insults and conspiracies persist online and people have been known to [burst](#) in and disrupt meetings. In 2017, Bogdanov said that Russian freemasonry must be entirely self-funded by member fees and donations to “help [us] avoid being declared foreign agents.”

But a small membership means limited funds. Expanding is equally tricky. Acquiring new lodge premises is not just expensive but can attract unwanted publicity. Local landlords and government officials have to sign off on plans and can easily kick up a fuss. Any huge or sudden membership increases would risk alarming the security services, too.

The Kremlin and Russia’s freemasons have reached a mutual understanding. They are happy to leave each other alone and maintain a distant, almost secret acquaintanceship. There is nothing to gain by rocking that boat. Maybe some things are best kept secret.

The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

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