



This article was published by F18News on: 30 March 2005

RUSSIA: Old Believers struggle for their historic churches

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18 News Service <<http://www.forum18.org>>

Old Believers in Samara have received no official response to requests for the return of their pre-1917 church building in the city. The municipal authorities orally told the parish that they should first meet representatives of the local Russian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate) diocese to ascertain its archbishop's position on the issue. "As a lawyer, I know that this is not legal," Old Believer parishioner Irina Budkina told Forum 18 News Service, stating that archive documentation proves the church was built in 1913-15 by Belokrinitsa Old Believers and later confiscated: "It has nothing to do with the Moscow Patriarchate." In 2004, Samara city administration acquired the church after its previous occupant, a machine-tool factory, closed down. Sergei Vurgraft, the Church's press secretary, told Forum 18 that when Old Believer parishes request their historical buildings, the local state authorities often promise to return them "as long as they obtain confirmation that the local Moscow Patriarchate diocese is not opposed". Knowing this to be unconstitutional, officials normally do this orally, he told Forum 18.

"Can you imagine anything worse for an Orthodox person than having no opportunity to pray in church?" rued an Old Believer website based in the Volga city of Samara in February 2005. The 150-strong Samara community belonging to the Belokrinitsa branch of the Old Believers, who are led by Metropolitan Andrian (Chetvergov), has so far received no official response to requests for the return of its pre-1917 church building in the city. The municipal authorities, who currently own the church, are failing to resolve the issue, the website claims, even while special police officers let parishioners worship in the building for the first time in over 75 years on 11 February and elderly members of the community - some of whom were baptised in the church - "are dreaming of living to the day when it will be reconsecrated; the younger ones are hoping to restore it."

Old Believer parishioner Irina Budkina complained that "nothing has changed" since a meeting on 17 February at which Valeri Troyan, an assistant to Samara's mayor, told parish representatives that they should first meet representatives of the local Russian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate) diocese to ascertain its archbishop's position on the issue. "As a lawyer, I know that this is not legal," she told Forum 18 News Service from Samara on 22 March, explaining that archive documentation proves the church was built in 1913-15 specifically by Belokrinitsa Old Believers and later confiscated from them: "It has nothing to do with the Moscow Patriarchate."

She noted that Council for Religious Affairs documents record Old Believer petitions for the church almost annually from 1945, typically rejected as "not expedient". According to Budkina, there was "no written response whatsoever" to such requests during the 1990s.

In 2004 Samara city administration acquired the church after its previous occupant, a machine-tool factory, closed down. In June 2004 the Old Believer community petitioned Samara Mayor Georgi Limansky for its return with no response. In September another of his assistants, Vladimir Parkhomenko, reportedly assured Metropolitan Andrian that "the process of determining conditions for using the premises" would begin soon. In December the metropolitan wrote to the city administration, again without response.

Budkina maintained to Forum 18 that the Moscow Patriarchate does not need the church, since it already has several historical and new church buildings in every district of Samara city. During the annual SS Cyril and Methodius Slavic literacy and culture festival in May 2004, however, the city authorities reportedly restored crosses to the domes of the disputed building - located at a prime city-centre site close to the Volga - under a 1999 agreement about restoring Christian holy sites with Samara and Syzran Moscow Patriarchate diocese. "It was a great photo-op - a happy mayor next to a happy archbishop talking about how the church nearly became a club but now spirituality was being revived," explained Budkina. Now, she believes, the city authorities are reluctant to offend the Moscow Patriarchate diocese by returning the church to the Old Believers.

In its report of the SS Cyril and Methodius festival, Samara city's official website notes that "thousands of the city's residents and guests witnessed a great holy event" and reports Mayor Limansky's receipt of a high church award from Patriarch Aleksii II for his contribution to spiritual revival in Samara.

On 25 March 2005 a spokesman at Samara city administration told Forum 18 only that the issue of returning the church claimed by the Old Believers was "in the process of being decided" while noting that "it needs restoring first". On 28 July 2004 national newspaper Russky Kuryer quoted Mayor Limansky as saying that there would be "services and a branch of the international

foundation for Slavic literacy and culture" at the church, which he described as "formerly yedinoverie". (This term describes parishes within the Moscow Patriarchate and thus subject to its hierarchy but permitted to worship according to the Old Believer rite.) On 21 February 2005 local newspaper Samarskoye Obozreniye quoted Valeri Troyan as maintaining that the disputed church would "remain municipal property - the city intends to preserve it as an historical and architectural monument."

Also speaking to Forum 18 on 25 March, the religious affairs official for Samara region, Dmitri Greshnov, stressed that since the church belongs to Samara city administration, "we don't interfere in such issues". However, he did acknowledge the church as formerly Old Believer by describing it as "of the Austrian trend", a term sometimes used for the Belokrinitsa Old Believers since their Church's nineteenth-century centre in Belaya Krinitza (West Ukraine) was then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

Speaking to Forum 18 on 25 March, the Belokrinitsa Old Believer Church's press secretary, Sergei Vurgaft, said that very little of its historical property had survived the Soviet period, but that "if we ask for churches which belonged to us they are usually given to us sooner or later." In some of the instances where a church has not survived - Vurgaft mentioned the town of Togliatti in Samara region - the local authorities have supported parishioners' requests for building land, he said.

In 2004 a former religious affairs official in Yekaterinburg told Forum 18 that, whereas the Council for Religious Affairs had calculated there to be 33 Old Believer and 31 Moscow Patriarchate churches in Sverdlovsk (Yekaterinburg) region in 1985, it now contains only six Old Believer churches but over 300 belonging to the Moscow Patriarchate. Vurgaft told Forum 18 that this state of affairs was indeed because Old Believer churches have regularly been given to the Moscow Patriarchate. He said the Old Believers have been much slower in organising parishes since 1990.

Vurgaft also told Forum 18 that, when Old Believer parishes request their historical buildings, the local state authorities often promise to return them "as long as they obtain confirmation that the local Moscow Patriarchate diocese is not opposed". Knowing this to be unconstitutional, officials normally do this orally, as in Samara, he told Forum 18, but in January 2005 an official from Cheboksary (Chuvashiya republic) administration wrote to the local Old Believer parish saying that they required the agreement of the local Moscow Patriarchate diocese for their building land application to be approved.

Vurgaft complained that in many cases the local authorities refuse to return Old Believer churches due to local business interests. In Moscow, he said, the Belokrinitsa Old Believers have had little success in claiming three churches privatised as a restaurant, a boxing club and offices of the Union of Rightist Forces political party.

For more background see Forum 18's Russia religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=509

A printer-friendly map of Russia is available at
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