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RUSSIA: Orthodox pressure railway into cancelling JW congress

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18 (<https://www.forum18.org>)

The head of the missionary and catechism department of Yekaterinburg and Verkhoturys Orthodox diocese, Fr Vladimir Zaitsev, has pressured Sverdlovsk Regional Railway into cancelling a three-day congress of 5,000 Jehovah's Witnesses, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. It was due to happen in a railway-administered stadium, and Fr. Zaitsev requested, in a letter publicised on local state TV and seen by Forum 18, that the congress be barred. He names Russian and foreign academics and Russian state bodies and "numerous documents issued by the traditional Christian churches of Europe [unnamed]," who, he claims, see Jehovah's Witnesses as "a destructive religious organisation (totalitarian sect, destructive cult)." Zaitsev also wrote that they offered to collaborate with Hitler and so "you will agree that in the sixtieth anniversary year [of the end of the Second World War] our compatriots will find this [allowing the congress to happen] particularly provocative." Jehovah's Witnesses were the target of intense Nazi persecution, and it is estimated that about 10,000 were imprisoned for their faith in concentration camps.

Five thousand Jehovah's Witnesses arriving for a three-day stadium congress in the Urals city of Yekaterinburg this morning (8 July) were denied entry by the building's administration, apparently at the request of a local Russian Orthodox priest.

Speaking to Forum 18 News Service from near Locomotive Stadium on 8 July, Jehovah's Witness Andrei Kabalin said that the building's director, Stanislav Zagorodsky, had announced at approximately 8am that he was under orders not to admit the delegates. Explaining that the Jehovah's Witnesses have received no formal notification that their rental contract worth 90,000 Roubles (20,650 Norwegian Kroner, 2,620 Euros or 3,120 US Dollars) has been cancelled, Kabalin said that the gathering delegates then assembled on adjacent parkland until stadium staff announced via loudspeaker at around 11.30am that the building was closed for reconstruction. He added that Jehovah's Witness leaders are currently trying to contact Shevket Shaidullin, the chief of Sverdlovsk Regional Railway, which administers the stadium.

Shevket Shaidullin's telephone went unanswered when Forum 18 rang on 8 July, while his assistant, Pavel Vodoleyev, told Forum 18 to ring the railway's public information department, where there was also no response.

The sudden cancellation of the congress comes in the wake of a 4 July letter to the stadium's administration from the head of the missionary and catechism department of Yekaterinburg and Verkhoturys Orthodox diocese, Fr Vladimir Zaitsev. In the four-page document, of which Forum 18 has seen a copy, Fr Zaitsev requests that the congress not be permitted to take place at the stadium. As grounds, he names Russian academics and state bodies, as well as independent international researchers and "numerous documents issued by the traditional Christian churches of Europe [unnamed]," who, he claims, recognise the Jehovah's Witnesses as "a destructive religious organisation (totalitarian sect, destructive cult)." Zaitsev also states that the effects of the organisation's doctrines range from burdensome preaching obligations to child suicides.

Zaitsev also claims that the Jehovah's Witnesses offered to collaborate with Hitler in 1933: "You will agree that in the sixtieth anniversary year [since the Allied victory in the Second World War] our compatriots will find this [decision to allow the Jehovah's Witness congress to take place at Locomotive Stadium] particularly provocative." Jehovah's Witnesses were the target of intense Nazi persecution, and it is estimated that about 10,000 were imprisoned for their faith in concentration camps.

However, the letter does not refer to last year's court ban on religious activity by the Moscow community of Jehovah's Witnesses (see F18News 29 March 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=289) or the current situation in Moscow (see F18News 222 June 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=591).

The Yekaterinburg Jehovah's Witnesses first became concerned that their congress was in jeopardy when local state television broadcast "slandorous disinformation" about their organisation - including the contents of Fr Zaitsev's 4 July letter - on the evening of 6 July, local congregation representative Sergei Tantsura told Forum 18 late on 7 July. When attempting to clarify the situation with Shevket Shaidullin at Sverdlovsk Regional Railway offices on the morning of 7 July, he said, the congregation's representatives were told by Shaidullin's assistant Pavel Vodoleyev that he was busy and were asked to wait. After several minutes, however, the Jehovah's Witness representatives were reportedly told by several police officers to leave the building and return only once they had obtained entry passes. When they tried to do this, said Tantsura, the building's security guards informed the Jehovah's Witnesses that they were under orders not to admit them.

According to Tantsura, the two railway officials responsible for the signing and execution of the rental contract, Sergei Shvint and Sergei Karpets, told Jehovah's Witness representatives on 7 July that Shaidullin had informed them about Fr Zaitsev's letter and his decision to cancel the congress. Tantsura added that, while the representatives were also promised the return of their rental fee on 7 July, he was not aware whether it had yet been received.

Contacted on 8 July, Sergei Karpets asked why he was being questioned about the situation - "this is not within my responsibilities" - and referred Forum 18 to another number at Sverdlovsk Regional Railway where there was also no answer.

On 24 July 2004 the Yekaterinburg Jehovah's Witnesses were similarly forced to abandon their congress at a different stadium in the city (see F18News 27 July 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=377).

For a personal commentary by an Old Believer about continuing denial of equality to Russia's religious minorities see F18News http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=570

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 <http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=europe&Rootmap=russ>

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