

Watch Out, Art!

A new intolerance is sweeping Russia as religious and political fundamentalists attack artists, musicians and writers whose works they view as subversive

By Frank Brown

Newsweek International

May 17 issue - It wasn't the first time critics took clubs to art they didn't appreciate. Nor was it the first time they emerged as heroes, at least to some. But when six men barged their way into a Moscow museum last year, spray-painting and bludgeoning displays from a provocative exhibit called "Watch Out: Religion," it might well have been the first instance in recent times that art vandalism has officially been deemed a public good. Sixteen months after the attacks, the unpunished perpetrators are free—while the exhibit's organizers and three contributing artists prepare to stand trial. Their crime: inciting religious hatred, punishable by up to five years in prison. "It turns out that we weren't just the victims but the criminals, too," says artist turned defendant Anna Alchuk.

Russia is in the midst of a rollback of free expression that goes far deeper than the Kremlin's well-known crackdown on independent news media. In the realm of art and literature, in fact, it's all-out war. Religious and political activists have become increasingly vocal—and sometimes violent—in attacking the work of artists, singers and writers they perceive to be offensive. Among the most vocal is the 80-million-member Russian Orthodox Church, which some say has begun to behave like the censors of the old Soviet era. "These artists are rotten, disease-carrying bacteria, and society is using antigens to fight them off," says Father Tikhon Shevkunov, a powerful church leader (and President Vladimir Putin's spiritual adviser) who backs the offensive against "Watch Out: Religion" and its "blasphemy."

The new intolerance is not limited to Moscow. Last month, in largely Muslim Dagestan, a group of imams pressured the local government into canceling a concert by Boris Moiseyev. Orthodox protesters picketed another Moiseyev concert in Siberia. Why? The popular 50-year-old singer is openly gay, and neither the Russian Orthodox Church nor Russia's Muslim clerics can abide his flaunting it.

More ominously, the Orthodox Church has increasingly drawn support from the nationwide pro-Kremlin youth organization, Moving Together, a neo-fascist group that notoriously piled copies of Vladimir Sorokin's

novel "Blue Lard" in the square outside Moscow's Bolshoi Theatre two years ago—then dumped them in a huge makeshift toilet as pornography. (The book features Joseph Stalin and Nikita Khrushchev having sex.) A criminal case filed by the Moscow prosecutor's office against Sorokin fizzled in court, but Moving Together didn't disappear. The group has since gone on to attack Jehovah's Witnesses and Scientologists, favorite bugaboos of the church.

Russian courts seem to be colluding in the crackdown. In April a Moscow court banned "The Book of Monotheism," an 18th-century Muslim tract, on the ground that it promotes fundamentalist Wahhabism. The book falls on the wrong side of the "need to find a balance between freedom of speech and national security," says one Kremlin adviser on religious affairs. Yet as Criminal Case No. 4616, as it's officially called, heads to the courtroom in the next month or so, religious activists are calling for even more judicial intervention. One leading Orthodox parliamentarian, Alexander Chuev of the nationalist Rodina party, has pledged to push through a law that would make it a crime to defame or dishonor Russia's "traditional religions."

Ironically, Chuev was considered a dissident during the Soviet era, when religious believers were routinely persecuted. Yet now he and others in the church seek official support in stifling their own opponents. One of those who participated in the desecration of "Watch Out: Religion," Mikhail Lyukshin of the Committee for the Moral Revival of the Fatherland, goes so far as to advocate a return to Soviet-style controls, arguing that such an exhibition should never have been permitted in the first place.

Perhaps Russian liberals expected too much in the way of free expression after the collapse of the Soviet Union. After all, ordinary Russians generally weren't ready for the onslaught of pornography, television violence and inflammatory literature that emerged after communism. Most were raised in a closed and puritanical Soviet society that regarded such things as public kissing (not to mention radical art) as shameful. Exhibitions like "Watch Out: Religion" are the polar opposite, designed to confront, expose and provoke.

It's no surprise, perhaps, that last year's attack has since been duplicated elsewhere. In one disconcerting echo, vandals wearing camouflage and black masks burst into a St. Petersburg gallery in February and destroyed 30 works of art, including a near-naked Arnold Schwarzenegger painted as a religious icon. "This challenges the entire Orthodox Church and its centuries of culture," wrote one objector in the gallery's guest book, before smashing up the place. Perhaps the good news is that the artist, so far at least, has not been charged.

MORE FROM NEWSWEEK: INTERNATIONAL EDITIONS

[Next →](#)

Newsweek: International Editions Section Front

- Rumsfeld: No Good Defense
- Philippines: Ticking Time Bombs
- Competition: Rising Faster Than Japan
- Newsweek: International Editions Section Front

Newsweek TOP STORIES

- Fineman: Political winds are favoring Kerry
- Shadowland: The Iraqi Horror Picture Show
- Terror Watch: How Osama bin Laden Finances Terror
- Q&A: Ayatollah Fadlallah on Iraq and Bush
- Q&A: 'Trailblazer' Cellist Matt Haimovitz

 TOP MSNBC STORIES

- Rumsfeld visits Baghdad
 - Lawmakers view more photos
 - U.S. offered to help Berg leave
 - India's ruling party defeated
 - U.S. troops, Shiite militia clash
-