

Russia: Fire in mental hospital kills at least 35

Clara Weiss**16 September 2013**

At least 35 people lost their lives in a fire early Friday morning in a mental hospital in the village of Luka in northwestern Russia in the Novgorodskaya oblast. Only 23 people could be saved, at least three of whom were injured and taken to the hospital.

According to officials, 59 people were in the building when the fire broke out, including two medical staff. As of Sunday, 35 bodies were recovered. Among the dead was a 44-year-old nurse, mother of four children, who had tried to rescue patients from the burning building.

The blaze broke out at 2:52 a.m. on Friday in the male division of the Oksochi hospital and spread to a space of 670 square meters. The exact cause of the fire remains to be established. The most likely version of events is that one patient set his bed afire when smoking at night. Medical staff reportedly saw a man in flames running out of his room.

The patients of the hospital were elderly handicapped, and mentally ill persons. At least 15 patients were confined to their wheelchairs or beds.

As a result of the fire, which was extinguished only at 6 a.m., the entire hospital building was burned down. Many bodies were destroyed beyond recognition. Most victims of the fire were burned alive or died from smoke inhalation.

The one-story building was made of wood and built in the 19th century. Russian authorities had declared the building "unfit for use" as early as March 2012, but according to baltinfo.ru the closure of the clinic was postponed by a local court to August 1, 2014, due to financial reasons. A criminal case has been initiated by the prosecutor's office to investigate if anyone in charge of the hospital could be found responsible for

the fire.

Tragedies like the one in Luka have become a regular occurrence since the restoration of capitalism in Russia. This year alone at least four fires, including the latest in Luka, took place in mental hospitals in rural areas.

Another major fire occurred only in April this year in psychiatric hospital No. 14 in the village of Ramensky near Moscow. The fire broke out at 2 a.m. in a wooden building from the early Soviet period and killed 38 people. Only two patients and one nurse survived. There was no fire protection in the building and firefighters had to take a detour and thus arrived an hour late.

According to Yuri S. Savenko, president of the Independent Psychiatric Association of Russia, one third of the country's psychiatric hospitals have been declared unfit for use since 2000. Small hospitals in rural areas are particularly neglected. The average pay for staffers here of \$170 is low even by Russian standards. Interviewed on the April fire, Savenko told the *New York Times*: "It is really terrible when 38 people burn alive; it shocks you. But over the last 25 years these catastrophes have taken on a regular character."

The roots of these tragic fires are to be found in the collapse of infrastructure and cuts in medical and social services following the restoration of capitalism in the USSR. Countless residential, official buildings and factories are decrepit, with no or insufficient fire provision. In 2010, there were only 5,000 fire stations in Russia, compared to 15,300 in much smaller Poland. The 5,000 Russian fire stations is a miserly small number given a population of over 140 million and the country's geographical magnitude. In 2010 and 2011,

official statistics recorded over 179,000 fires and 168,000 fires respectively.

While the death rate has been declining in recent years, dozens of people still perish in fires on a daily basis. As of 2008, the rate of deaths in fires in Russia was eight per 100,000 citizens. According to a report by the Geneva Association, this compares with a death rate in the United States, Britain or Greece of around one per 100,000. Over 30,000 people have died in fires in Russia since 2010, according to official statistics.



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