

A Russian Orthodox Cathedral and Metropolitan Centre for Paris after 2012?

On 8 February, the Russian National Department for Property Management confirmed that Russia's tender for the purchase of 7,000 square metres of land in central Paris being sold by the French government had been accepted.

Competition for the land had come from Saudi Arabia, which wished to construct a diplomatic mission and mosque, the Canada Embassy Project and a group of private investors who planned to build a hotel. The average price for land in this area is about 7,000 Euros (\$9,569 / £6,191) per square metre. Thus, the approximate value of the lot would be 50 million euros (\$68 million / £43 million). Of course, the French government may simply have given the Russian Federation the land as part of some political and trade agreement. The Department is now carrying out all the legal and financial formalities regarding the sale of the land.

The land acquired by the Russian government is located in the 7th arrondissement between the Eiffel Tower and the Esplanade des Invalides, near the famous Pont Alexandre III, which was built in 1896-1900, on the eve of the Paris World Exhibition in 1900. Tsar St Nicholas II said it was 'in commemoration of the rebirth of the Franco-Russian alliance'.



Pont Alexandre III in Paris

One part of the land borders the Palais de l'Alma, built in 1861-64 and listed as a historical monument in 2002. It should be noted that the headquarters of UNESCO, l'Assemblée Nationale (the French Parliament), l'Hôtel National des Invalides, French government ministries and many foreign embassies are in this neighbourhood.



The Palais de l'Alma,

According to Alexander Orlov, the Russian Ambassador to France, the design of the Orthodox centre in Paris will be based on an architectural project chosen in an international competition. 'There are special requirements for this project. So we have decided to hold an international competition of architects so that a joint commission with members from Russia and France can choose the best project', he said in a television interview. Ambassador Orlov added: 'It has to be a really interesting project, which would be an adornment to the city of Paris and fit organically into its Parisian surroundings'. Under the terms of competition, building on the Orthodox Cathedral and centre could begin by the end of 2012.

If so, it is quite possible that it could be finished by 2014-5, when the Russian Church also hopes to have completed the restoration of the New Jerusalem Monastery and Orthodox centre outside Moscow. This was conceived of by Patriarch Nikon in the seventeenth century as a centre for all the Local Orthodox Churches. This was closed by the Bolsheviks after the Revolution, very seriously damaged by the German Invasion of Russia in the Second World War and then neglected by the Soviet Communist regime still in power.

The choice of Paris as the Orthodox centre for Western Europe is a natural one. In 1814 Russian troops freed Paris as part of the liberation of Western Europe from Napoleon's tyranny. After this the great Moscow Cathedral of Christ the Saviour was built in memory of the Russian Orthodox victory over the French atheistic revolutionaries and their invading Western allies. (This Cathedral was rebuilt in the 1990s after the victory over Soviet atheist revolutionaries). And after 1917 large numbers of Russians refugees arrived in Paris, ironically after the same French revolutionary ideas with German additions had been exported to Russia and brought down the Orthodox Monarchy there.

It seems clear that the new Cathedral will be an Orthodox centre not only for France, but for all Western Europe. We cannot help thinking that this will be the centre for the proposed Russian Orthodox Metropolia of Western Europe, which will only be created once the infrastructure for it is ready. Presumably, once ready, the Russian seminary, at present using rented buildings outside Paris, will move there permanently. Many Russians who at present fill the Paris Cathedral of the Paris Jurisdiction, as they have nowhere else to go, will no doubt go to the new Cathedral. At present the Russian Orthodox Archbishop's residence in Paris is little more than a

house chapel - yet in Western Europe there are ten Russian Orthodox bishops, hundreds of clergy and perhaps a million baptised.