

It's official—The Salvation Army in Russia

Organization obtains official status

by Karen Gleason –

After 10 years of multiple court cases and waiting, The Salvation Army in Moscow is now officially registered in Russia. The Department of the Ministry of Justice released the notification on the eve of Orthodox Easter 2009 (April 19, 2009).

After an absence of 68 years, the Army returned to Moscow in 1991. However, in 1997 their initial registration was revoked, under the new Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations (the “Religious Act”), which placed stricter requirements on Christian churches.

An appeal with the European Court of Human Rights won a unanimous ruling in favor of The Salvation Army in 2006.

“There remain many homeless and needy people in Moscow,” said Commissioner Willem van der Harst, territorial commander for Eastern Europe. “Religious freedom remains an ongoing journey as we endeavor to establish The Salvation Army in this society...with renewed strength to win the lost in the power of our Lord and Savior.”

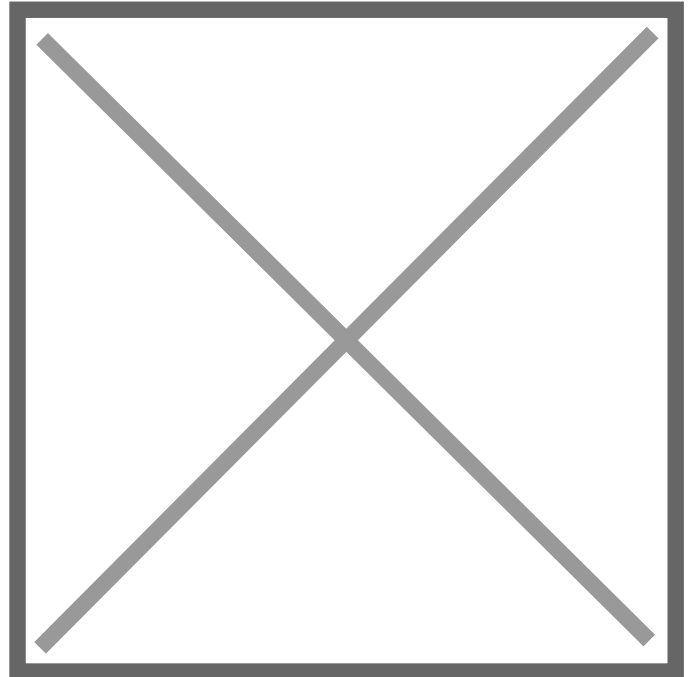
History of Army in Russia

The Salvation Army has endured a turbulent history in Russia, characterized by ups and downs in its official status there.

The Army worked in Russia from 1913 to 1923, when it was dissolved for being an “anti-Soviet organization.”

In 1992, it resumed its work there, registering as the Moscow branch of The Salvation Army and obtaining legal entity status.

In October 1997, the new Religious Act required religious organizations that had previously obtained legal entity status in Russia to conform to the new law and re-register.



The Moscow branch of The Salvation Army's application for re-registration was denied for various reasons, including the involvement of five nationals who had multiple entry visas but who lacked residence permits.

The time limit for re-registration expired on Dec. 31, 2000, and organizations that had failed to re-register were liable for dissolution.

Court proceedings

In September 2001, The Salvation Army lodged a complaint before the Constitutional Court, arguing that dissolution of an organization for failure to re-register was unconstitutional. The European Court (the Russian Constitutional Court) held that re-registration of a religious organization could not be made conditional on requirements introduced by the Religious Act, which had not legally existed at the time of the founding of the organization. The court also held that while dissolution could occur if the organization had ceased activity or engaged in unlawful acts, it should not be dissolved on "formal grounds" such as failure to re-register.

Although the dissolution order was dismissed, The Salvation Army was still refused re-registration. The European Court noted that this refusal had a significant negative impact on the Army, which was trying to function without the official sanction. In one case, it was unable to deliver meals to housebound elderly because a local official refused to work with them without the official registration.

Upon considering the Army's case, the Court examined "general principles," concluding that the right to form an association is an "inherent part" of the freedom of association guaranteed under the European Convention and further noting that associations are important for the "proper functioning of democracy."

The court reviewed arguments presented by Russian authorities to justify their refusal to re-register The Salvation Army because of its "foreign origin" and its "paramilitary" structure, finding these reasons neither "relevant" nor "sufficient" for denying the registration.

Today, almost three years later, The Salvation Army has regained its official status in Russia, which will allow it to more effectively pursue its mission of helping others and leading them to Christ.

Sources include *the June 20, 2009 issue of War Cry* and "*Salvation in Court: The Salvation Army v. Russia,*" from *The International Journal of Not-for-Profit Law, December 2006*