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## How the Russian Orthodox Church is Helping Drive Putin's War in Ukraine

### *Як РПЦ допомагає вести путінську війну в Україні*

*Автор книги "Вірити в росію - релігійна політика після комунізму" Д. Фаган на сторінках «Time» пише, що швидке та тотальне відчуження мільйонів українських православних - це колосальна ціна, яку Патріарх кирил заплатив за лояльність путіну, адже в Україні перебуває третина його парафій та монастирів. Міжнародний авторитет Патріарха також підірвано. Таким чином, на думку автора, вплив церкви, що скорочується означає, що путін не може використовувати його для відновлення вікової мрії про розширену "святую русь".*

<https://time.com/6167332/putin-russian-orthodox-church-war-ukraine/>

Led by Patriarch Kirill, the Russian Orthodox Church is one of the most tangible cultural bonds between Russia and Ukraine. The gilded domes of Kyiv's Monastery of the Caves and St. Sophia Cathedral have beckoned pilgrims from across both lands for nigh on a thousand years.

With religious rhetoric, Putin taps into a long tradition that imagines a Greater Russia extending across present-day Ukraine and Belarus, in a combined territory known as Holy Rus'. Nostalgic for empire, this sees the spiritual unity of the three nations as key to Russia's earthly power as an exceptional civilization. Encouraged by Putin's "special operation," Russian Orthodox nationalists are excitedly recalling the prophecy of a twentieth-century saint from Chernihiv, now one of Ukraine's beleaguered cities. "Just as the One Lord God is the indivisible Holy Trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit," this monk fortold, "so Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus together are Holy Rus' and cannot be separated."

Putin is not the first modern Moscow ruler to co-opt this idea in seeking to consolidate secular power. During the darkest hours of World War Two, Stalin reinstated the Russian Orthodox Church—having almost bled it dry—and replaced the communist Internationale with a new national anthem. Its lyrics asserted that the Soviet Union was "unbreakable, welded together forever by Great Rus'."

Around 2007 the Kremlin further advanced the allied concept of Russky Mir, or the Russian World, initially a soft power project aimed at promoting Russian culture worldwide and likened by Patriarch Kirill to the British Commonwealth. Putin, however—unsettled by mass protests against his authoritarian regime in 2011-12 as well as those that toppled his vassal in Ukraine in 2013-14—has since twisted both Holy Rus' and the Russian World to serve a more violent agenda.

Outsized emphasis now goes to Russia's tradition of warrior saints. It was by remarkable coincidence, Putin told thousands of flag-waving supporters at a recent Moscow stadium rally, that the military operation in Ukraine commenced on the birthday of Saint Theodore Ushakov, an eighteenth-century Russian naval commander famed for never losing a single battle. "He once said, 'This threat will serve to glorify Russia,'" Putin enthused. "That was the case then, is now, and ever shall be!"

Cast aside is an alternative Christian holy tradition of defiant passive resistance, exemplified by the first saints to be canonized in medieval Rus', the Kyiv princes Boris and Gleb, who accepted martyrdom at the hands of their brother. "They gave up without a fight," Putin once remarked in

disgust. “This cannot be an example for us.” With the attack on Kyiv’s current ruler, even small acts of Christian pacifism by Russians are quashed. A remote village priest was fined hundreds of dollars for publicly refusing to support the war and thus “call black—white, evil—good.” A young woman was detained outside Moscow’s main Orthodox cathedral for holding up a simple sign bearing the biblical commandment, “Thou shalt not kill.”

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In this Putin can count on the backing of a body of jingoistic opinion now dominating the Church hierarchy. Flanked by medal-laden Defense Minister Shoigu at the 2020 consecration of a cavernous black and green military cathedral, Patriarch Kirill prayed that Russia’s armed forces would never suffer defeat. This March, on the very same spot where Pussy Riot made their infamous protest against cozy Church-Kremlin ties a decade ago, the Patriarch presented an icon to the head of Russia’s National Guard—the same unit now reportedly suffering heavy losses in Ukraine—in the hope that this would “inspire new recruits taking their oath.”

Kirill is not an outlier in his support for the war, as no senior cleric inside Russia has expressed dissent. “Everything the president does is right,” one archbishop told local news agency Regnum in late March. “Speaking as a monarchist, I would personally place a crown upon Putin’s head if God granted the opportunity.” Similar fervor is found among respected Moscow parish priests. “Russian peacekeepers are conducting a special operation in order to hold Nuremberg trials against the whole of Europe,” one preached during a recent sermon, as he denied reports of civilian casualties. “What is the West able to produce? Only ISIS and neofascism.”

A cross and a dome of destroyed by shelling russian army of orthodox church in the recaptured by the Ukrainian army Hostomel city in Kyiv area, Ukraine, 06 April 2022 Maxym Marusenko-NurPhoto

This priest concluded his sermon with the hope that Kazakhstan, Moldova, and Georgia would be reunited with Russia, in addition to Ukraine. But if Putin is looking to burnish his legacy as gatherer of historical Russian lands, there is a problem. The inhabitants of Ukraine are not interested in being “liberated” by his operation to “de-Nazify” their country. “The Russian World has arrived!” one woman shouted sarcastically as she filmed invading troops facing off against a crowd of angry locals just 20 miles from Ukraine’s eastern border with Russia. “We are not waiting for you, so get out of here!” Within hours of the first missile strikes on February 24, even the the Orthodox Church in Ukraine that is under the Patriarch of Moscow turned indignantly to Putin. “We ask that you stop this fratricidal war immediately,” Metropolitan Onuphry implored. “Such a war has justification before neither God nor man.”

Putin’s is thus a spiritual, as well as military, misadventure. Similar to Stalin’s pivot at the lowest point in World War Two, his reliance upon the Orthodox Church over the last decade smacks of desperation. It hardly stems from personal commitment to the faith: while projected as a believer from the beginning of his presidency, for more than a decade Putin largely rebuffed the Church’s policy goals—such as mandatory classes on Orthodoxy in public schools—until his need for autocratic symbolism prevailed after his return to the presidency in 2011-12. Throughout his rule he has consistently spoken and behaved at odds with normative Orthodox Christian behavior, such as by claiming that choice of faith is unimportant since all religious categories are human invention, or when awkwardly greeting Patriarch Kirill with the gestures reserved for venerating a sacred relic or icon.

Bellicose rhetoric from Orthodox clerics does resonate with some devout Russians, but this is a narrow swath of the population. While a 2019 national poll found that over 60 percent of Russians older than 25 identify as Orthodox, those attentive to institutional Church life—such as

by attending Easter worship services—amount to only a few percent. The same poll found a precipitous drop in those identifying as Orthodox among the 18-24 age group—just 23 percent.

This contrasts starkly with Ukraine, where a quarter of the population attends Easter services and a majority of 18-24 year-olds define as believers. Swift and total alienation of millions of Ukrainian Orthodox is a colossal price for Patriarch Kirill to pay for loyalty to Putin, Ukraine being where a third of his parishes and monasteries are located. The Patriarch's international standing is also shot, as Orthodox abroad not gagged by the Kremlin's new ban on criticism of the Russian armed forces have condemned the war—including Kirill's own bishops in Estonia and Lithuania—along with Pope Francis and the Archbishop of Canterbury. Instead of a Russian World, the Moscow Patriarch may soon find his authority stopping at the borders of the Russian Federation.

The Church's dwindling reach thus means that Putin cannot use it to restore the age-old dream of an expanded Holy Rus'. Approaching 70, however, Russia's president has no long-term ambition to consolidate Orthodox spirituality—only his personal grip on power for however many more years God grants him.