

means destroying the psyche of the Ukrainian people. The easiest way for the invaders to do this is to rape

them and commit atrocities against them, which will lead to the destruction of Ukrainian families. ✽



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STATE OF AFFAIRS

Unholy Marriage: Symphonia Gone Wrong

Inga Leonova

The story *du jour*—the scandal of the outright support for “scorched earth” war against Ukraine by the Russian Orthodox Church in the persons of its patriarch, most of its bishops, scores of its clergy, and the majority of its faithful—did not begin in February 2022 or March 2014. The modern roots of this horror lie in the choice made by Patriarch Alexey II and the then-Synod of the Russian Church shortly after the fall of the Communist regime and the ostensible liberation of the church to align its destiny, its politics, and its financial interests with those of the Russian government. As George Weigel points out:

As the Soviet Union was crumbling in 1990, two roads metaphorically

diverged in a Russian wood. One was the path of national renewal facilitated by an evangelically vibrant, intellectually open, and ecumenically engaged Russian Orthodoxy; the other was the more familiar road of Russian Orthodox subservience to state power. In this instance, the “road less traveled by” was *not* taken. And confirming the poet’s insight, that choice indeed “made all the difference.”¹

The Russian Orthodox Church that chose this road was the “Sergianist” church, born out of the pact with the devil made in 1927 by then-patriarchal *locum tenens* Sergius (Stragorodsky) and his greatly decimated synod. One could argue that by the 1990s, it had

¹ George Weigel, “The Russian Path Not Taken,” *First Things* website, May 4, 2022, <https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2022/05/the-russian-path-not-taken>.



A priest blessing Russian rocket launchers, Moscow, 2015. Photo: Moscow News Agency.

no internal spiritual wherewithal for a different choice. Perhaps the bishops, who had been carefully groomed by the iron hand of the Communist Party Committee for Religious Affairs, and who all had KGB code names, were simply not able to lead the church out of its spiritual captivity to the state.² Be that as it may—with many other contributing factors also at play, money and power chief among them—the choice was made. And that choice proved very lucrative for the Russian Church. It began steadily gaining back a tremendous amount of its property formerly expropriated by the Bolsheviks, it received access to the rich, golden vein of 1990s commerce via the duty-free exports of goods such as cigarettes and alcohol, and most importantly, it was essentially set up to replace Communist ideology in the public sphere. Orthodox schools, Orthodox camps, Orthodox army chaplains, Orthodox faculties in secular universities, and so on. The state did its job in promoting Orthodoxy as faithfully as it could in the chaos of the 1990s ideological wilderness.

Of course, all this came at a price. The Church had to play its part as the ideological bulwark of the New Russia, which as early as the late Yeltsin years began to define itself as a “Holy and

Mighty Russia” in spiritual opposition to the “corrupt West.” I have been told by trustworthy sources in the Patriarchate that when the city of Moscow began talking about rebuilding the Cathedral of Christ the Savior, Patriarch Alexey asked whether the money could instead be invested in rebuilding some destitute church properties where parishes or monastic communities were truly struggling. He received a clear and unequivocal “don’t even think about it,” because the personal ambition of Mayor Yury Luzhkov demanded a building of the stature of the former empire’s major patriotic cathedral. Of course, the Church acquiesced. It acquiesced also to restoring the cathedral’s unabashedly militarist iconography, including the uncanonical fresco of the Holy Trinity depicting God the Father as an old man. It received from the deal the ostentatious Hall for Church Councils in the undercroft of the cathedral, which has proven to be a lucrative space used for all kinds of secular and semi-secular cultural activities, including some borderline obscene dance performances by “church dancers.”

One can also mention the rise of various Orthodox patriotic organizations, and especially significant efforts put

² Viktor Potapov, “Молчанием предается Бог,” *Грани*, No. 166, 1992.

into the quasi-military education of young boys, particularly orphans, by such figures as the notorious Moscow priest Dimitry Smirnov, as well as the more nefarious groups of young men organized “to keep order and peace” in various Russian cities and towns. I knew a couple of young men who had left those groups because of what they described as a fascist bent. These groups have promoted as “traditional Orthodox values” machismo, homophobia, misogyny, and unquestioning obedience to their leaders.

To be sure, during the time of Patriarch Alexey II, the Church used the significant power it was amassing largely to deal with internal affairs. It worked tirelessly to solidify the “single order” at the expense of various fringe groups, especially more progressive movements, and to use the massive support of the state to cement the position of the Orthodox Church as the primary Christian religious institution of Russia. One can point to many new laws limiting the activities of other Christian denominations, from Roman Catholics to Protestants and breakout Orthodox groups not in communion with the Moscow Patriarchate. The cruelest persecutions, including the criminal prosecution of Jehovah’s Witnesses, did not start until much later, but the soil was already being well seeded.

Perhaps the most significant action of the ROC on behalf of the Russian regime was its role in bringing “back into the fold” the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia. I will not belabor this point, which has been eloquently discussed by Lena Zezulin. I will only say that it was an utterly political project by the Russian government to regain its foothold in the West and to gather the “Russian World,” and that the Church aided in this project’s success.

Outwardly, things changed noticeably with the election of Patriarch Kirill, just as they changed with the “succession” of Vladimir Putin presented to the astonished world by the ailing President Yeltsin. First and foremost, for all the rumored disagreements between Putin and Kirill, they understand each other very well, because they are men of a very similar formation. It is perfectly obvious to anyone who grew up in the Soviet Union and has ever heard Patriarch Kirill speak: he speaks like a Soviet bureaucrat. For all his shortcomings, Patriarch Alexey II had been born as Alexey Mikhailovich Ridiger, a descendant of Baltic nobility, and grew up in non-Soviet Estonia, in the proud White Russian immigrant church, although he ultimately betrayed its legacy. In contrast, Vladimir Mikhailovich Gundyayev, the future Patriarch Kirill, although a son and grandson of priests, was entirely a clergyman of Soviet formation. He is, essentially, nothing but a Soviet functionary. His was formed as a *chinovnik* of the Church. It is not for nothing that Putin likes to point out that Patriarch Kirill’s father baptized him (an unsubstantiated and unlikely claim). These men may not always pursue the same ends, but they certainly work well together.

One could go on at length about the ROC’s active ideological support for Putin’s regime under Patriarch Kirill. I would like to point out just a few important developments before getting to the painful issue at hand. First is the doctrine of the “Russian World” officially introduced and discussed at the Global Russian People’s Council in 2007, officially chaired by the Patriarch. The authors of this doctrine were leading nationalist conservative thinkers. Significantly, in declaring the absolute value of Russia’s leadership in a world where “the Anglo-Saxon project has failed,” it makes various

pronouncements in support of the defense of the “whole Russia,” including preemptive military operations.³ This doctrine has been thoroughly repudiated by the international group of leading Orthodox theologians shortly after the beginning of the current Russian invasion into Ukraine.⁴ Its impact on the ideological program of the ROC, however, cannot be overestimated. In the spring of 2011, Archpriest Vsevolod Chaplin, at that time chair of the Patriarchate’s Department for Relations between Church and Society, published a document entitled “Five Postulates of Orthodox Civilization.”⁵ This remarkable document, a bona fide fascist declaration, deserves special attention since at the time, Chaplin was one of the chief spokesmen of the Moscow Patriarchate and was widely understood to be a mouthpiece of the Patriarch. Those postulates are as follows:

1. “Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness” (Matt 6:33)
2. Society and, ideally, the state have a spiritual mission.
3. The Church, the people, and the state are one whole.
4. Strong central authority is called to consult the people.
5. A person is called to live in harmonious unity with others.

In his repudiation of the fascist, anti-Christian essence of this document, Daniel Struve quotes an important passage that underscores both Chaplin’s and, as history shows us, the Patriarchate’s position: “Sacrificing one’s own (and in the situation of defending the faith and the Fatherland *even another’s*) life, self-denial, surrendering one’s rights, freedoms, and property for the sake of one’s neighbor, one’s community and one’s people, is

the behavioral norm for an Orthodox Christian.”⁶ Struve correctly notes that in this doctrine Chaplin essentially commits the sin of Dostoevsky’s Grand Inquisitor, establishing the ideology of a Church without Christ, where Christ is replaced by “the Fatherland.”

In late 2011, following widespread protests in Russia against the falsification of the national election results, Chaplin published a political program for the preservation of Russian national sovereignty.⁷ He suggested that any form of internal discontent would be eagerly exploited by an “external enemy” to destroy Russia. Such a view is held by each and every dictator in the world, and is certainly championed by Vladimir Putin. Chaplin’s program was significantly more radical than the “Five Postulates,” in that it openly called for a nationalist government program, mobilization of the masses, strengthening of the military, police repressions against migrants and “corrupt businessmen,” and more. In other words, Chaplin was not only signaling the Church’s support for the government crackdown on the protests, but calling for even greater measures. At the same time, in the wake of the crackdown, Patriarch Kirill delivered an obsequious address in which he famously lauded Putin for working as hard for the good of the Russian nation as “a galley slave.”⁸

The next landmark event in the active cooperation between the Russian Church and the Russian regime came a couple months later in the Pussy Riot case. The “Punk Prayer” video filmed at the Christ the Savior Cathedral by the notorious feminist group called on the Theotokos to drive Putin out of power. It provoked an unprecedented joint response, amplified by both the state-run and the Orthodox media. Amid calls for all manner of cruel retribution for the “impious whores,” including some

³ Русская доктрина, *Русская Доктрина* website, 2007, <http://www.rusdoctrina.ru/page95507.html>

⁴ Declaration on the “Russian World”, *Public Orthodoxy* website, March 13, 2022, <https://publicorthodoxy.org/2022/03/13/a-declaration-on-the-russian-world-russkii-mir-teaching/>.

⁵ Всеволод Чаплин, «Пять постулатов православной цивилизации», *Политический класс* No. 2, 2007.

⁶ Даниил Струве, «Непраздничное: православный фашизм?», <https://d-st75.livejournal.com/230455.html>

⁷ Всеволод Чаплин, *ibid*.

⁸ Meeting between Patriarch Kirill and Vladimir Putin at Danilov Monastery, Moscow, February 8, 2012, <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/2004759.html>.

Orthodox suggesting corporal punishment and gang rape, the Church organized a “standing in faith” rally around the Christ the Savior Cathedral, an ominous spectacle in which hundreds of priests in blood-red vestments stood in military-like formation. While outrage against the performers was masked as the “offended feelings of the faithful” and swept even through many of progressive Orthodox circles, the Church’s organized reaction to a performance targeting Putin and his regime left little room for doubt about what was really happening. The trial and sentencing of two of the performers will go down in history as one of the most embarrassing spectacles of the Church’s obsequiousness to the state. From the caricature “witnesses” to “the crime” to the barely coherent public prosecutor’s ineptly invoking the canons of the Ecumenical Councils (a prosecutor coached by the previously-mentioned Father Dimitry Smirnov, no less), the process was a never-ending embarrassment. It is worth mentioning that the ROC has never officially interceded for the accused in any meaningful form, and was apparently quite content with the trial’s cruel outcome sentencing the two young women, one of them a recent mother, to two years in a penal colony.

The next important example of hand-in-hand collaboration between Church and state was the infamous “Law of Dima Yakovlev” prohibiting the adoption of Russian orphans into the West. In spite of the well-known atrocious conditions in Russian orphanages and the fact that Westerners tended to adopt a large percentage of children with significant health problems, most of whom had little chance of survival, let alone a decent life, in Russia, the Church enthusiastically campaigned for the ban. It spread outrageous rumors of the harm done to the Russian adoptees by their Western parents and helped spread

hysteria about “maintaining children’s ties to their motherland.” Official representatives of the Patriarchate declared the ROC’s unequivocal support for the law at a meeting in the Kremlin in the wake of its signing.

Finally, I must mention the significant support of the ROC for the law decriminalizing many types of domestic abuse. The Patriarchal Commission for the Defense of the Family, headed by the same late Father Dimitry Smirnov, became a staunch ally to the government as it overhauled the domestic abuse law. Church authorities tirelessly spread propaganda among the faithful that the strengthened protection against domestic abuse was a liberal Western ploy to weaken and even destroy the traditional family and the “divinely established” family order.

This brings me, at last, to the subject of the Moscow Patriarchate’s direct complicity in Russia’s war against Ukraine. This complicity did not begin in 2022. The cooperation between the Russian Church and the Russian government to subjugate the Ukrainian yearning for independence is an ancient affair, going back centuries, but its modern iteration has led to the greatest bloodshed so far. The most active period began with the Maidan “Revolution of Dignity”

The weapons of new recruits are blessed at a military base in Minsk, Belarus, 2013. Photo: Vasily Fedosenko/Reuters.



of 2013–14, Russia’s annexation of Crimea, and of course the subsequent granting of autocephaly to the Church in Ukraine by the Patriarchate of Constantinople in 2018. While the grant of autocephaly unleashed the most vitriolic and outright demonic rhetoric from Moscow toward Ukraine, as well as the ROC’s unilateral breaking of communion with Constantinople, it is worth noting that Moscow had already consistently lent its “spiritual gravitas” to the annexation of Crimea as the “cradle of Russian Orthodoxy” (a cradle that subsequently moved to Kyiv, in accordance with the Kremlin’s geopolitical focus). The Patriarchate has also been fully consistent in demonizing not only the autocephalous Ukrainian Orthodox, but also Ukrainian Greek Catholics, derisively called “Uniats.” The champion of the latter subject is Metropolitan Hilarion Alfeyev, who can barely deliver a speech without a jab at the “nationalist Uniates” and “Constantinople schismatics.”

In the months leading up to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, both the state and the Orthodox media ratcheted up their anti-Ukrainian rhetoric, decrying the licentiousness of the “Westernized” independent Ukraine, the ostensible crimes of the “Ukrainian Nazis,” describing the suffering of the innocents of Donbas at the hands of the “Ukrofascists”, and calling for the intervention of the Russian state on behalf of their “suffering brothers and sisters.” Namely, the notorious Kremlin loyalist priests Andrei Tkachev, Artemiy Vladimirov, and Andrei Novikov have been telling story upon hair-raising story from the ambo. One of the consistent themes of these stories, as well as the accompanying speeches by the Patriarch, is the horror of Gay Pride parades that have become part of the life of the “ungodly” Western societies. Another is the black market that ostensibly operates in

Ukraine, supplying human organs harvested from the innocents slaughtered in Donbas to the West. The successful implantation of these outrageous lies in the minds of the Russian people is apparent not only in Russians’ generally high support for the war, but in the unending repetition of these themes on social media, including in Orthodox circles, where they often dominate.

In the almost four months since the beginning of the invasion, Patriarch Kirill and many local bishops, to say nothing of the clergy, have regularly spoken up to express their unequivocal and enthusiastic support of the war and the bloodshed. Their rhetoric has not been tempered by the uncovering of horrific crimes perpetrated by the Russian occupants in Bucha, Borodianka, Irpen, or Mariupol. If anything, it is getting shriller. Permit me to quote some of their statements. Patriarch Kirill:

In the Donbass there is rejection, a fundamental rejection of the so-called values that are offered today by those who claim world power. Today there is a test for the loyalty to this new world order, a kind of pass to that “happy” world, the world of excess consumption, the world of visible “freedom.” Do you know what this test is? The test is very simple and at the same time terrible—it is the Gay Pride parade. . . . We have entered into a struggle that has not a physical, but a metaphysical significance.⁹

Today, two brotherly peoples have joined the conflict, but they are essentially one, Russian people. . . . Rus’ is one country, one people, but these people turned out to be too strong, and the neighbors, frightened of this power, started doing everything to divide these people,

⁹ Patriarch Kirill, Sermon on Forgiveness Sunday, March 6, 2022, <https://bitterwinter.org/patriarch-of-moscow-blesses-war-against-gay-prides/>.

¹⁰ Patriarch Kirill, Sermon on March 9, 2022, <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5907484.html>

¹¹ Patriarch Kirill, Sermon on April 3, 2022, <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5914188.html>

¹² Patriarch Kirill, Sermon on the Annunciation, April 7, 2022, following the official statement by Russian authorities that the killings in Bucha was the provocation of the West, <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5915151.html>.

to convince parts of these people that they were not one people.¹⁰

Today I offer a special prayer for our armed forces, our fighters in whom we place our hopes for security, for freedom, for the true independence of our country. . . . Our entire nation needs to wake up today, to become alert, to understand that a special time has come which may influence the historical destiny of our people.¹¹

Every one of you must know what dangerous events are taking place today in the land of Ukraine. Unquestionably, the Enemy of humankind is provoking the fratricidal war between brothers, members of one Church, who belong to the one Orthodox faith. There is nothing more abhorrent, terrible and disgusting than provoking a fratricidal war, but often enough people who find themselves under the powerful pressure of propaganda lose their sense of boundaries and fall so completely into the devil's snare that they cannot tell truth from lies, and are ready to act as the Evil One commands.¹²

Metropolitan Sergiy (Fomin) of Voronezh:

We all must support our President and his endeavor. It is very unfortunate that this task can no longer be accomplished without bloodshed. Even people in Ukraine

understand it, and we receive some of them here as refugees.¹³

The latter quotation brings up the subject of the ROC's complicity in the forced resettlement of hundreds of thousands of Ukrainian refugees who have been moved to Russia. There are reports, currently unsubstantiated by independent sources for lack of access, of monastic and diocesan administrations' active involvement in the separation of families and their relocation to distant areas. While the facts in these reports require careful verification, the rhetoric of some of the bishops from the regions bordering Ukraine about the "liberation" of these refugees from the "fascist" Ukrainian government points, at the very least, to their acquiescence to the alleged war crimes of kidnapping and resettling the civilians from the occupied territories.

The facts outlined here illustrate how the sin of prostituting oneself to worldly power—a sin the Orthodox Church seems to commit time and again—perennially leads to crimes against humanity. Never was the biblical maxim "the wages of sin is death" more starkly proven as when the Church in the persons of its hierarchy, clergy, and laity chooses to stand behind an aggressive invasion. And this, of course, shows all the more brightly the light of those clergy and faithful in the ROC who, in spite of significant personal danger, continue to raise their voices in opposition to the regime, both state and ecclesial. ✽

¹³ Metropolitan Sergiy (Fomin) of Voronezh interviewed in Прихожанин, April 13, 2022, <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5916614.html>



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