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RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Pact of the Old Guard: Religion, Law, and Politics for a Russia at War

Kristina Stoeckl

Professor of Sociology, Luiss University, Italy
kstoeckl@luiss.it

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Abstract

This article examines the evolution of the Russian Orthodox Church's identities and political alignments from the post-Soviet era to the present in three chronological phases. First, the author explores the church's varied post-Soviet identities shaped by experiences of repression, collaboration, dissidence, and emigration from 1991 to approximately 2010. The author identifies key legislative and political developments between 2010 and 2021 that have aligned the Russian Orthodox Church with the autocratic state. Finally, the author analyzes the shifting stance of the Moscow Patriarchate on Ukraine from 2014 to 2022, including Patriarch Kirill's support for Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine since 2022, which is interpreted as a continuation of the church's historical role as a collaborator during Soviet times. The author argues that the church's contemporary role is confined to providing ritualistic and spiritual legitimization for state ideology, perpetuating a logic of authority, control, obedience, and dichotomous friend/enemy thinking reminiscent of Soviet-era security services. Through this analysis, the author reveals how the state and church leadership of the past decades has strategically positioned the church in preparation for conflict.

Keywords: Russia; Ukraine; Russian Orthodox Church; ideology; law; traditional values; war

Introduction

In mid-May 2023, the ecclesiastical court of the Russian Orthodox Church defrocked the priest Ioann Koval, age fifty-five, for changing one word in a prayer that the patriarch of Moscow had issued to all churches in support of Russia's war in Ukraine. The text of the prayer features the line "Rise up, O God, for the help of thy people, and grant us victory by thy power." Koval instead prayed, "Rise up, O God, for the help of thy people, and grant us peace by thy power."[1] The priest was denounced by a parishioner for replacing the word *victory* with *peace* and was punished for disobedience. Less than two weeks later, Patriarch Kirill suspended archpriest Leonid Kalinin from his position as head of the Patriarchal Expert Commission for Church Art, Architecture and Restoration and barred him from celebrating mass. The priest, age fifty-five, had opposed the decision to move the fifteenth-century Icon of the Trinity by Andrey Rublev from its location in the restoration workshop

[1] Sergei Chapnin, "An Act of Lighthearted Betrayal," *Public Orthodoxy* (blog), May 12 2023, https://publicorthodoxy.org/2023/05/12/act-of-lighthearted-betrayal/.

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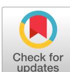

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of the Tretyakov Gallery to be placed on public display in Moscow's Christ Savior Cathedral on grounds of concerns over the safety of the artwork. Days before, Russian president Vladimir Putin had promised to return the icon, which had been confiscated by the Bolsheviks a century before, to church property.[2] These incidents are just two examples of the ideological closure inside the Russian Orthodox Church since the start of Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine in February 2022.[3]

By unleashing a war against Ukraine, the old guard—an entrenched, narrow circle of political and ecclesiastical leaders—has decided the fate of Russia and the Russian Orthodox Church. This old guard is not only old in age—for example, President Putin is seventy, Patriarch Kirill is seventy-six, and the former secretary of the Security Council, Nikolaj Patrushev, is seventy-one—but it is also steeped in a worldview guided by Soviet revanchism, nationalism, and militarism. The place of religion in this worldview is limited to the church as a provider of ritual and spiritual wrappings for ideology and as the arc of time that connects the past, present, and future of the Russian nation. The old guard does not have a place for independent religious thinking, and it follows a logic of authority, control, obedience, and friend/enemy distinctions that appears deeply indebted to the Soviet-era security services. Indeed, the old guard has prepared the church for war.

The era since the dissolution of the Soviet Union has been amply treated in academic literatures on the religious revival in Russian society,[4] religion-state relations,[5] Russia's conservative turn,[6] the legacy of the Soviet-era secret service mentality,[7] and processes of secularization and de-secularization of Russian society.[8] I do not suggest new empirics to the field; instead I recompose some of the main axes of interpretation in light of the war through the analysis of the role of key individuals, pivotal events, and central documents.

[2] Interfax, "Patriarkh Kirill zapretil v sluzhenii svyashchenika, zanimavshegosya voprosom 'Troitsy' Rubleva" [Patriarch Kirill banned the priest who dealt with the issue of Rublev's "Trinity" from serving], Interfax, May 27, 2023, https://www.interfax.ru/russia/903521.

[3] Russia's aggression against Ukraine started in 2014 with the annexation of the Crimea and Russia's support of separatist groups in Eastern Ukraine. For reasons I discuss below, the attitude of the church changed between 2014 and 2022.

[4] See, for example, the following: Andrew Greeley, "A Religious Revival in Russia?," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 33, no. 3 (1994): 253–72; Zoe Katrina Knox, *Russian Society and the Orthodox Church: Religion in Russia after Communism* (New York: Routledge, 2004); Christopher Marsh, *Religion and the State in Russia and China: Suppression, Survival, and Revival* (London: Continuum, 2011); John P. Burgess, *Holy Rus': The Rebirth of Orthodoxy in the New Russia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017).

[5] See, for example, the following: John Garrard and Carol Garrard, *Russian Orthodoxy Resurgent: Faith and Power in New Russia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008); Irina Papkova, *The Orthodox Church and Russian Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Katja Richters, *The Post-Soviet Russian Orthodox Church: Politics, Culture and Greater Russia* (London: Routledge, 2013); Alicja Curanović, *The Sense of Mission in Russian Foreign Policy: Destined for Greatness* (London: Routledge, 2021); Alicja Curanović, *The Religious Factor in Russia's Foreign Policy* (London: Routledge, 2012).

[6] See, for example, the following: the contributions in Mikhail Suslov and Dmitry Uzlaner, eds., *Contemporary Russian Conservatism: Problems, Paradoxes and Dangers* (Leiden: Brill, 2019); Kristina Stoeckl and Dmitry Uzlaner, *Moralist International: Russia in the Global Culture Wars* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2022); Alicja Curanović and Lucian N. Leustean, "The Guardians of Traditional Values: Russia and the Russian Orthodox Church in the Quest for Status," *Transatlantic Academy Paper Series*, no. 1 (2015); Dima Adamsky, *Russian Nuclear Orthodoxy: Religion, Politics, and Strategy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019).

[7] See, for example, Martin Kragh and Andreas Umland, "Putinism beyond Putin: The Political Ideas of Nikolai Patrushev and Sergei Naryshkin in 2006–20," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 39, no. 5 (2023): 366–89.

[8] See, for example, Vyacheslav Karpov, "The Social Dynamics of Russia's Desecularisation: A Comparative and Theoretical Perspective," *Religion, State and Society* 41, no. 3 (2013): 254–83; Paul Froese, *The Plot to Kill God: Findings from the Soviet Experiment in Secularization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).

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Multiple Post-Soviet Identities: Repression, Collaboration, Dissidence, Emigration

During the seventy years of the communist regime, from 1917 to 1991, the life of the Russian Orthodox Church was marked by four distinct experiences: repression, collaboration, dissidence, and emigration.[9] *Repression* at the hands of the Bolshevik revolutionaries in the 1920s and 1930s brought the Russian Orthodox Church to the brink of collapse through persecution of the faithful, executions of clergy members, the seizure of churches, monasteries and liturgical objects, and aggressive anti-religious propaganda.[10] Even during the later decades of the Soviet regime, when religious persecution had become less bloody, the church continued to be unfree and remained under constant threat of new repressive measures.[11]

Faced with an omnipotent and omnipresent state, quite a few figures inside the Moscow Patriarchate chose the path of *collaboration* with the Soviet authorities and secret police, often in the belief that only in this way would the survival of the church itself be guaranteed.[12] The current patriarch of Moscow, Patriarch Kirill, himself collaborated with the KGB under the cover-name "Mikhailov" when he worked at the Department of External Church Relations during the 1970s.[13]

On the other side, among the faithful and clergy there were those who chose the path of *dissidence*, criticizing the system and the church hierarchies that collaborated with the regime and bearing witness to Christian life in an environment hostile to all forms of religious expression.[14] Among them were, for example, the priest Gleb Yakunin, who denounced the collaboration of the church hierarchies,[15] and the priest Alexander Men', whose Moscow parish included many intellectuals, among them the human rights activist Andrey Sakharov.[16] The dissident voices could not count on support from the church hierarchies. Yakunin, in fact, was defrocked in the first half of the 1990s, and Alexander Men' was murdered under unclear circumstances in 1991.

Alongside these three models of religious life inside the Soviet Union there was a fourth experience that characterized the Russian Orthodox Church during communism, that of *emigration* to the West. Russian Orthodox immigrants to Western countries since 1917 frequently assumed the identity of guardians of the religious and cultural heritage banned from the homeland. Russian émigré theologians like Sergej Bulgakov and

[9] The argument about the four distinct experiences of the Russian Orthodox Church during communism is developed in greater detail in Kristina Stoeckl, *Russian Orthodoxy and Secularism* (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 15–27.

[10] Anna Dickinson, "Quantifying Religious Oppression: Russian Orthodox Church Closures and Repression of Priests, 1917–1941," *Religion, State and Society* 28, no. 4 (2000): 327–35; Philip Walters, "The Russian Orthodox Church and the Soviet State," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 483, no. 1 (1986): 135–45.

[11] John Anderson, Religion, *State and Politics in the Soviet Union and Successor States* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

[12] Adriano Roccucci, Stalin e il Patriarca. La chiesa ortodossa e il potere sovietico 1917-1958 [*Stalin and the patriarch: the Orthodox Church and Soviet power*] (Turin: Einaudi, 2011); Keith Armes, "Chekists in Cassocks: The Orthodox Church and the KGB," *Demokratizatsiya* 1, no. 4 (1991): 72–84.

[13] Elie Saikali, "Patriarch Kirill: The Politically Influential Head of the Russian Orthodox Church," France24, January 9, 2023, https://www.france24.com/en/europe/20230109-patriarch-kirill-the-politically-influential-head-of-the-russian-orthodox-church.

[14] The situation of Orthodox believers under Communism was monitored by several institutions in the West, who documented religious freedom violations and kept contacts with dissidents, for example the Keston Institute in the United Kingdom, G2W in Switzerland, and Russia Cristiana in Italy.

[15] David Kelly, "Nairobi: A Door Opened," *Religion in Communist Lands* 4, no. 1 (1976): 4–17.

[16] Michael A. Meerson, "The Life and Work of Father Aleksandr Men'," in *Seeking God: The Recovery of Religious Identity in Orthodox Russia, Ukraine, and Georgia*, ed. Stephen K. Batalden (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1993), 13–28.

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Georges Florovsky had a lasting impact on Orthodox theology.[17] In the first half of the twentieth century, Russian émigré theology had to reckon with both the adverse conditions under which the mother church lived in the Soviet Union and the rise of Fascism and Nazism in Western Europe. In the postwar period, the heirs to the first generation of the Russian emigration, like Alexander Schmemann, shaped the life and teaching of the Orthodox Church under conditions of religious pluralism in Western democratic and secular systems.[18]

The collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War allowed for a stocktaking of the various experiences that had marked Russian religious life in the past century: repression, collaboration, dissidence, emigration. In the face of these multiple experiences, different modes for defining its relationship with the state were available for the Russian Orthodox Church after 1991. The church could have defined its post-Soviet identity in several ways: following the model of the Soviet-era dissidents and taking its cue from the experience of the émigrés living the Orthodox faith in a democratic context, the church had the potential to be a witness to a flourishing faith under conditions of religious freedom, to advocate democratization alongside civil society, or to raise a critical voice vis-à-vis the government. Alternatively, reconnecting with the imperial past and upholding the ties with the state created during the Soviet period, the church could have opted for the model of a quasi-state church, take up the old Byzantine symphonic model and define itself more as a cultural than religious representative of Russia's civil and political identity after communism.

For the first two decades of the post-communist transition, the Russian Orthodox Church followed all of these potential paths simultaneously. Many scholars noticed the strong nationalist currents inside the church[19] and pointed out fundamentalist and obscurantist tendencies.[20] However, these existed alongside liberal trends[21] and theological innovation and religious activism.[22] For some time, the church leadership appeared to want to keep a balance between these different wings. In addition, the Moscow Patriarchate developed an active international agenda, which—albeit conservative—marked a departure from more traditional forms of anti-Westernism and anti-modernism inside the church.[23] Post-Soviet Russian Orthodoxy was characterized by a multitude of identities and a high degree of ambivalence and multivocality, oscillating between freedom and control, nationalism and

[17] Paul Valliere, *Modern Russian Theology: Bukharev, Soloviev, Bulgakov: Orthodox Theology in a New Key* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000); Brandon Gallaher, "'Waiting for the Barbarians': Identity and Polemicism in the Neo-patristic Synthesis of Georges Florovsky," *Modern Theology* 27, no. 4 (2011): 659–91.

[18] Kristina Stoeckl, "The Lesson of the Revolution in Russian Émigré Theology and Contemporary Orthodox Thought," *Religion, State and Society* 35, no. 4 (2007): 285–300.

[19] John B. Dunlop, "The Russian Orthodox Church as an 'Empire-Saving' Institution," in *The Politics of Religion in Russia and the New States of Eurasia*, ed. Michael Bourdeaux (Armonk: M. E. Sharpe, 1995), 15–40. See also, Alexander Verkhovsky, "Examining Counter-Extremism and Religion During the Late Putin Era," *Journal of Law and Religion* 39, no. 3 (2024) (this issue).

[20] Victor Shnirelman, "Russian Neoconservatism and Apocalyptic Imperialism," in Suslov and Uzlaner, *Contemporary Russian Conservatism*, 347–78; Anastasia V. Mitrofanova, *The Politicization of Russian Orthodoxy: Actors and Ideas* (Stuttgart: Ibidem, 2005). See also Anastasia Mitrofanova, "Apocalyptic Imagination and Civic Practices of Orthodox Fundamentalists in Contemporary Russia," *Journal of Law and Religion* 39, no. 3 (2024) (this issue).

[21] Knox, *Russian Society*; Alexander Agadjanian, "Reform and Revival in Moscow Orthodox Communities: Two Types of Religious Modernity," *Archives de Sciences Sociales des Religions*, no. 162 (2013): 75–94.

[22] Alexander Agadjanian, "The Social Vision of Russian Orthodoxy: Balancing between Identity and Relevance," in *Orthodox Christianity and Contemporary Europe*, ed. Jonathan Sutton and Wil van den Bercken (Leuven: Peeters, 2003), 163–82; Regina Elsner, "Questioning the Concept of 'Religious Activism' in Russian Orthodoxy from a Theological Perspective," *Religion, State and Society* 51, no. 1 (2023): 30–48.

[23] Kristina Stoeckl, "The Russian Orthodox Church as Moral Norm Entrepreneur," *Religion, State and Society* 44, no. 2 (2016): 132–51.

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transnationalism, conveying different images of itself to believers, the Russian state, global Orthodoxy, and international politics.

This multitude of roles was also reflected in church-state relations. Russia is a secular state by its constitution. In 1990, at the height of the reform movement known as *perestroika*, the government of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic passed a law on religious organizations that brought the country close to complete religious disestablishment and state religious neutrality. The law "prohibited the establishment of a state religion, and denied to the state any right of intervention in religious affairs. Churches and other religious organizations were permitted to freely engage in worship and mission activities, operate schools and seminaries, own property, and publish and distribute religious literature, all without the requirement of registering with the government."[24] After the break-up of the Soviet Union, this law on religion retained validity and, during the first half of the 1990s, guaranteed the revival of religious life in Russia, including the emergence of new religious groups.[25] It was precisely the emergence of rival religious communities and the work of missionaries from abroad that aroused the disapproval of the Russian Orthodox Church, which demanded a change in legislation. The 1997 Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations reversed the trend of disestablishment and implemented a model of selective religion-state cooperation similar to many other European countries.[26]

In reality, however, the formal and informal practices of religious establishment in Russia were more complicated. Three distinct models of church-state relations coexisted: an unofficial state-church model, an official cooperation model, and an unofficial grassroots-led disestablishment model.[27] These three models are exemplified by the multiple strategies that church leaders and activists have pursued against abortion. First, the Patriarchate of Moscow interacted with the Kremlin as if the Russian Orthodox Church was a state church and representative of the country as such by entering into consultative status for Russian public health legislation and by publicly siding with the Kremlin in its restrictions on abortion; second, ecclesiastical bureaucracy cooperated with state institutions as if the Russian Orthodox believers were a minority in need of protection and succeeded in implementing legal clauses granting medical personnel of Orthodox faith the right to conscientious objection from assisting in abortions; and, third, radical Orthodox activists saw themselves in a situation of disestablishment, in which the religious side was waging a culture war against the secular state and started a bottom-up referendum demanding a complete ban on abortions. The different strategies—collaboration, exemption, and contestation—used by different groups inside the Russian Orthodox Church in the case of abortion exemplify how divergent understandings of religion-state relations existed inside the Russian Orthodox Church. The church leadership composed of Patriarch Kirill and his circle stood for collaboration, but they represented only one (albeit powerful) factor.[28]

In terms of religious identity and religion-state relations, therefore, the first two decades after the end of communism in Russia were a period of different potential pathways and multiple roles for the church. The situation started to change in the third decade of post-

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[24] Derek H. Davis, "Russia's New Law on Religion: Progress or Regress?," *Journal of Church and State* 39, no. 4 (1997): 645–55, at 645–46.

[25] Froese, *The Plot to Kill God.*

[26] W. Cole Durham and Lauren B. Homer, "Russia's 1997 Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations: An Analytical Appraisal," *Emory International Law Review* 12, no. 1 (1998): 101–246; Davis, "Russia's New Law on Religion."

[27] Kristina Stoeckl, "Three Models of Church-State Relations in Contemporary Russia," in *Constitutions and Religion*, ed. Susanna Mancini (Camberley: Edward Elgar, 2020), 237–52.

[28] For more detailed discussion of the anti-abortion strategies, see Stoeckl, "Three Models of Church-State Relations in Contemporary Russia," 245–50.

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communism: the year 2009 saw the inauguration of Kirill as patriarch of Moscow; in May 2008, Nikolaj Patrushev was moved from his role as head of the FSB (the former KGB) to direct the Security Council of Russia; and in 2012, Putin took up office as president of the Russian Federation for a third time. Under their influence, the Russian state and the Russian Orthodox Church moved closer to each other in ways that had less to do with religion and more to do with legislation, politics, and power.

Consolidating Church-State Relations through Law

The 1997 Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations, which regulates the relationship between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Russian state, has remained substantially unchanged, but a series of other legislative provisions between 2010 and 2021 have defined the role and place of the Russian Orthodox Church vis-à-vis the Russian state in ever more narrow terms. The 1997 law distinguished between "traditional religions" and "non-traditional religions and sects"[29] and granted a protected legal status only to the former: Orthodox Christianity, Islam, Judaism and Buddhism. Recognizing in its preamble, "the special contribution of Orthodoxy to the history of Russia and to the establishment and development of Russia's spirituality and culture,"[30] the law explicitly identified Orthodoxy with Russian national identity and memory.

This definition and especially the term *tradition* subsequently became a recurrent theme in legislative texts, starting with Russia's National Security Concept. The initial version of 2000, prepared by the first presidential administration of Vladimir Putin, introduced a connection between traditions and state security: "Assurance of the Russian Federation's national security also includes protecting the cultural and spiritual-moral legacy and the historical traditions and standards of public life, and preserving the cultural heritage of all Russia's people."[31] In all the subsequent iterations of the National Security Concept of the Russian Federation—2009, 2015, and 2021—which were worked out under the leadership of Patrushev, "traditional Russian spiritual and moral values" are cited as an integral part of Russia's national security strategy.[32]

Besides *tradition* and *spiritual and moral values*, a new concept—*religious feelings*—was introduced in 2012 in the aftermath of the Pussy Riot case, when a group of female performers enacted what they called a "punk prayer" inside Moscow's Christ Savior Cathedral.[33] During the trial of the Pussy Riot group, the Russian penal code did not yet include a suitable paragraph on blasphemy, and the band members were thus convicted on charges of hooliganism. The Russian Duma subsequently amended article 148 of the Russian Federation Criminal Code "in the aim of protecting religious convictions and feelings of

[29] Wallace L. Daniel and Christopher Marsh, "Russia's 1997 Law on Freedom of Conscience in Context and Retrospect," *Journal of Church and State* 49, no. 1 (2007): 5–17; Marat S. Shterin and James T. Richardson, "Local Laws Restricting Religion in Russia: Precursors of Russia's New National Law," *Journal of Church and State* 40, no. 2 (1998): 319–41.

[30] Daniel and Marsh, "Russia's 1997 Law on Freedom of Conscience in Context and Retrospect," 8.

[31] Daniel P. Payne, "Spiritual Security, the Russian Orthodox Church, and the Russian Foreign Ministry: Collaboration or Cooptation?," *Journal of Church and State* 52, no. 4 (2010): 712–27, at 713.

[32] Kristina Stoeckl, "Russia's Spiritual Security Doctrine as a Challenge to European Comprehensive Security Approaches," *Review of Faith & International Affairs* 20, no. 4 (2022): 37–44. The latest edition of the Russian National Security Strategy can be found here: "Ukaz Prezidenta Rossiiskoi Federatsii ot 02.07.2021 N° 400 'O Strategii Natsional'noi Bezopasnosti Rossiiskoi Federatsii'" [Decree of the president of the Russian Federation on July 2, 2021 No. 400 On the National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation], The Kremlin, July 2, 2021, http://actual.pravo.gov.ru/text.html#pnum=0001202107030001.

[33] Dmitry Uzlaner, "The Pussy Riot Case and the Peculiarities of Russian Post-secularism," *State, Religion and Church* 1, no. 1 (2014): 23–58.

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citizens against insults." The amendment included a maximum penalty for such offenses: imprisonment for up to one year, and, if the offense was committed in a place of worship, up to three years.[34] In sociological categories, one could say that after semantically framing the Orthodox Church in macro-sociological terms as *tradition* and *spiritual and moral values*, this new legislative step added a micro-sociological dimension: *feelings.*

The law against insulting religious feelings strengthened the power-conforming, patriotic, and conservative camp inside the church and sidelined liberal or simply apolitical believers.[35] The law also had a disruptive potential that became apparent when, only a few years later, Orthodox extremists used the argument of religious insult to attack the film *Matilda* about the life of Tsar Nicholas II. The activists took issue with the portrayal of a love affair between the tsar (who has been canonized by the Russian Orthodox Church) and a ballet dancer. The offended believers, who in the previous case had huddled under the protective wing of the Russian state prosecutor, started to act on their own—to the point of an open confrontation with state and church authorities. In the *Matilda* case, the offended believers stopped being the silent majority under the supervision and protection of the church and state. They became a shouting minority that turned into a headache for both secular and church authorities, who started to distance themselves from the too-much-offended believers, insisting that they were not true believers, but "pseudo-religious radicals."[36] However, whether too-much-offended or too-little-offended, the law against hurting religious feelings gave the church leadership and the state an instrument to define who is a legitimate Orthodox believer and who is not.

The final legislative process that was central to defining Orthodox identity by means of law and politics is the constitutional amendment of 2020. The main purpose of the amendment to the Russian Constitution of 2020 was to guarantee Putin the possibility of two more terms, but the constitutional process was also notable with regard to the role of the church.

In the lead-up to the constitutional reform, Patriarch Kirill promoted the idea of including the word *God* in the preamble of the constitution, following the example of the national anthem of the Russian Federation.[37] The national anthem uses the melody of the old Soviet anthem, with a text from 2000 that includes the verse, "Russia—Our holy nation [...] God-protected homeland!," which echoes a passus in the Orthodox liturgy: "We pray to the Lord for our God-protected country."[38] The committee responsible for constitutional amendments was not ready to accept the suggestion and the preamble remained unchanged. Instead, a new paragraph 67-1(2) was inserted, which reads: "The Russian Federation, united by a thousand-year history, preserving the memory of the ancestors who passed on to us the ideals and faith in God, as well as the continuity in the development of the Russian state,

[34] "Amendment to Criminal Code and Certain Legislative Acts in the Aim of Protecting Religious Convictions and Feelings," The Kremlin [English version], June 30, 2013, http://www.en.kremlin.ru/acts/news/18422.

[35] Dmitry Uzlaner and Kristina Stoeckl, "From Pussy Riot's 'Punk Prayer' to *Matilda*: Orthodox Believers, Critique, and Religious Freedom in Russia," *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 34, no. 3 (2019): 427–45, at 434.

[36] "Legoida: sviazannye s fil'mom 'Matil'da' akty nasiliia ne mogut iskhodit'ot veruiushchikh" [Legoida: acts of violence around *Matilda* cannot be connected to believers], Tass, September 11, 2017, https://tass.ru/obschestvo/4553987.

[37] "Patriarkh Kirill predlozhil vklyuchit' upominanie o boge v Konstitutsiyu Rossii" [Patriarch Kirill suggests to include a reference to God in the Russian Constitution], Interfax, February 1, 2020, https://www.interfax.ru/russia/693665.

[38] "Russia Unveils New National Anthem Joining the Old Soviet Tune to the Older, Unsoviet God," *New York Times*, December 31, 2000, https://www.nytimes.com/2000/12/31/world/russia-unveils-new-national-anthem-joining-old-soviet-tune-older-unsoviet-god.html. For the full text of the Russian national anthem, see "Hymn," The Kremlin, accessed August 8, 2024, http://flag.kremlin.ru/anthem/. For the full text of the liturgical passus, see Morning Prayers, Diocese of Great Britain and Western Europe, accessed August 8, 2024, https://orthodox-europe.org/english/liturgics/prayers/morning-and-evening-prayers/.

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recognizes the historically established state unity."[39] Religion—faith in God—was defined by the legislator as a quality of "ancestors" and a part of national history.

Another constitutional amendment promoted by church circles was the definition of marriage as being only between a man and a woman, in order to create a barrier to the legalization of same-sex marriages.[40] The proposal came from Konstantin Malofeev, the conservative oligarch and, as of 2018, deputy chair of the ultranationalist organization World Russian People's Council. He was immediately echoed by Moscow Patriarchate spokesperson Vladimir Legoida, who added a fourth item to the church's list of constitutional desiderata, namely "traditional family values."[41] Both additions were included in the amended constitution. Paragraph 72(1) now includes "defense of the institution of marriage as the union of one man and one woman," and paragraph 114(1) enlists the "preservation of traditional family values" among the goals of the Russian Federation.[42]

To summarize this overview of the legislative steps that have defined the identity and role of the Russian Orthodox Church in Russian society between roughly 2010 and 2021: Despite the fact that the constitutional arrangement of Russia as a secular state with a regime of selective religion-state cooperation has remained formally unchanged since 1997, legislative and political processes have gradually tightened the normative framework around the Russian Orthodox Church and believers: the church has been defined as bearer of Russian statehood and national security; and at the same time believers have been framed as either potential victims of insult or potential extremists. Inside a church thus defined, there is no space for protest against the state, but instead ample room for patronizing and bullying of believers and clerics.

For the patriarch of Moscow, the narrowing down of options for believers and for the church's role inside society was probably a welcome result because it promised control over the messy and pluralist church of the post-Soviet decades. The political leaders in charge, President Putin and Patrushev, the secretary of Russia's Security Council and former FSB director (who was removed from his position in the Security Council in May 2024 and now covers another influential position as assistant of President Putin), could now rely on the church as a provider of a traditionalist agenda and edifying symbolism around Russian statehood. It is not my intention to over-personalize the events analyzed. The patriarch, the president, and the former security-council secretary were not solely responsible for the developments summarized above. However, the three men are representative of a leadership steeped in a Soviet logic of authority, control, obedience, and friend/enemy thinking. The old guard worked toward winding back the freedoms, imbalances, and contradictions that the end of the Soviet Union had created inside both Russian society and the church. They did so with repressive measures, information-control, and the creation of a new, all-encompassing ideology built around traditional values.

The Integration of Church and State through War

With hindsight, the autocephaly of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine in 2018 was the tipping point for the situation of relative openness of the Orthodox Church to different scenarios

[39] Konstitutsiya Rossijskoj Federatsii [Constitution of the Russian Federation], *Rossijskaja gazeta*, no. 144 (8198) (2020): https://rg.ru/2020/07/04/konstituciya-site-dok.html.

[40] "V Konstitutsiiu predlozhili vnesti polozhenie o sem'e kak soiuze muzhchiny i zhenshchiny" [Proposal to introduce a provision on the family as a union of a man and a woman into the Constitution], Interfax, January 30, 2020, https://www.interfax.ru/russia/693381.

[41] "V RPTs podderzhali ideiu o popravke v Konstitutsiiu po zashchite sem'I" [The Russian Orthodox Church supported the idea of an amendment to the Constitution to protect the family], Ria Novosti, February 14, 2020, https://ria.ru/20200214/1564802300.html.

[42] Konstitutsiya Rossijskoj Federatsii, paras. 72(1), 114(1).

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and roles inside Russian society. Prior to 2018, several church formations present inside Ukraine had tried, in vain, to be recognized as "canonical" by the other Orthodox Churches. In the absence of global Orthodoxy's support for these groups, the Moscow Patriarchate continued to claim exclusive canonical jurisdiction over Ukraine.[43] From 2014 onward, the annexation of Crimea and the war in Donbas fueled radical forces inside the Russian Orthodox Church.[44] The granting of autocephaly to the Orthodox Church of Ukraine by the Ecumenical Patriarchate in 2018 became the tipping point. The autocephaly of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine radicalized the ecclesiastical leadership. The Moscow Patriarchate entered into an open conflict with the Ecumenical Patriarchate and emerged, on the whole, weakened, despite the fact that most parishes in Ukraine initially remained with the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate.[45] With the onset of Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine in February 2022 and the display of unconditional loyalty of the patriarch of Moscow to the goals of the war ("the special military operation" in official language), the relative openness of the Orthodox Church to different scenarios and roles inside Russian society has ended. The arrests of believers and defrocking of priests who protested against the war are clear indicators that the multivocal Russian Orthodox Church, which was in the making since the end of the Soviet Union, has been put back into the bottle of tight ideological control.

Patriarch Kirill invested all of his authority in legitimizing the war in Ukraine. On March 6, 2022, Forgiveness Sunday in the Orthodox tradition, the patriarch of Moscow preached that the world is divided between two forces, one good and divine, the other evil and sinful. Powerful forces were threatening Russia and its Orthodox believers to stray from the path of righteousness by imposing on them a regime of liberties, the final and most terrible of which was the holding of gay parades. In the patriarch's eyes, Ukraine was the Orthodox world that was being threatened by the evil West, and Russia was coming to its rescue.[46] On February 27, 2022, the patriarch had already expressed the view that Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine were one entity: he used the medieval term *Rus'* to refer to the three countries. By defining Ukraine as Russia, the patriarch not only followed the viewpoint of the Russian president, who had denied Ukraine's sovereign existence, but he also defined Russia's attack on Ukraine as an act of self-defense of the Rus' against evil Western forces, allegedly at work in Ukraine. On April 7, 2022, the patriarch celebrated liturgy in the cathedral of the Russian Armed Forces in Moscow's Patriot Park. He said it was the role of the Orthodox to withstand the coming of the Antichrist and called on the nation "to wake up and recognize that a time has come that can determine the historic destiny of our nation."[47] In September 2022, he wholeheartedly supported the partial mobilization of Russian men to the armed forces and compared their fight with the struggle of the medieval Rus' against the Mongol Golden Horde of 1380.[48] He even promised soldiers the forgiveness of all their sins

[43] Nicholas E. Denysenko, *The Orthodox Church in Ukraine: A Century of Separation* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2018), 186.

[44] Cyril Hovorun, "The Church in the Bloodlands," *First Things*, October 1, 2014, 41–44.

[45] Thomas Bremer, Alfons Brüning, and Nadieszda Kizenko, eds., *Orthodoxy in Two Manifestations? The Conflict in Ukraine as Expression of a Fault Line in World Orthodoxy* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2022); Nicholas E. Denysenko, *The Church's Unholy War* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2023).

[46] "Patriarshaya propoved' v Nedelyu syropustnuyu posle Liturgii v Khrame Khrista Spasitelya" [Patriarchal sermon on Forgiveness Sunday in the Christ Saviour Cathedral], Moscow Patriarchate, March 6, 2022, http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5962628.html.

[47] "Slovo Svyateyshego Patriarkha Kirilla v Nedelyu 4-yu Velikogo posta posle Liturgii v glavnom khrame Vooruzhennykh sil RF" [Patriarchal sermon on the third Sunday of Great Lent after the liturgy in the main church of the armed forces of the Russian Federation], Moscow Patriarchate, April 3, 2022, http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5914188.html.

[48] "Slovo Svyateyshego Patriarkha Kirilla v prazdnik Rozhdestva Presvyatoy Bogoroditsy posle Liturgii v Zachat'yevskom stavropigial'nom monastyre g. Moskvy" [Patriarchal sermon on the Feast of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary after the liturgy in the Conception Stavropegic Monastery in Moscow]," Moscow Patriarchate, September 21, 2022, http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5961645.html.

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for their sacrifice in battle.[49] But the patriarch not only prayed for the Russian armed forces; he also exhorted believers to include President Putin in their prayers.[50] Also, in its external relations, especially with the Vatican, the Russian Orthodox Church was clearly in support of the Russian state—to the point that Pope Francis called Kirill "an altar boy" of Putin.[51] The patriarch has consistently shown support for the war through expressing and nurturing a worldview in which the war is not only legitimate but necessary and ultimately in accordance with God's will.[52]

The warmongering of the patriarch culminated in a declaration of the World Russian People's Council in March 2024, in which the war in Ukraine is called "a holy war." The organization World Russian People's Council is closely tied to the Moscow Patriarchate without being an ecclesiastical institution. With the patriarch of Moscow as statutory president and directed by Konstantin Malofeev since 2018, the council has a history of promoting ultrapatriotic positions. The declaration of March 2024 was in line with positions previously expressed by Malofeev, but it represented a new level of inflammatory language from the side of Patriarch Kirill. The document included the sentence "The special military operation is a Holy War, in which Russia and its people, defending the single spiritual space of Holy Rus', fulfill the mission of "the Restrainer" [Missiyu Удерживающего], protecting the world from the onslaught of globalism and the victory of the West, which has fallen into Satanism."[53] The term *restrainer* is a reference to the *katekhon*, from the Greek word meaning the one who withholds. The idea that the Russian nation is a modern day *katekhon* against Western liberalism and secularism has been a common theme for Russian nationalist ideology for over a decade.[54] This nationalist ideology has now become the official position of the Moscow Patriarchate.

Meanwhile, the Russian state has been delivering one document after another that ties Russian state ideology to the traditional values promoted by the Russian Orthodox Church. On November 9, 2022, Putin signed a decree, Fundamentals of the State Policy for the Preservation and Strengthening of Traditional Russian Spiritual and Moral Values. Among the aims laid out in the document was the cooperation of state bodies with the media and means of communication with the aim of popularizing and promoting traditional values and the creation of an image of the Russian state on the international stage as a "keeper and protector of traditional universal human spiritual and moral values."[55] This decree was

[49] "Patriarshaya propoved' v Nedelyu syropustnuyu."

[50] "Slovo Svyateyshego Patriarkha Kirilla v den' pamyati blagovernykh knyazey Daniila Moskovskogo i Aleksandra Nevskogo posle Liturgii v Danilovom monastyre" [Patriarchal sermon on the day of remembrance of the blessed princes Daniil of Moscow and Alexander Nevsky after the liturgy in the Danilov Monastery], Moscow Patriarchate, September 12, 2022, http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5958411.html.

[51] "Pope Wants to Visit Moscow to Meet Putin over Ukraine" Reuters, May 4, 2022, https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/pope-says-wants-go-moscow-meet-putin-over-ukraine-paper-2022-05-03/.

[52] Vebjorn L. Horsfjord, "Patriarch and Patriot: History in Patriarch Kirill's Sermons in the First Year of the Full-Scale War in Ukraine," *Religion, State and Society*, published ahead of print, May 23, 2024, https://doi.org/10.1080/09637494.2024.2353417.

[53] "Nakaz XXV Vsemirnogo russkogo narodnogo sobora 'Nastoyashchee I budushchee Russkogo Mira,'" Moscow Patriarchate, March 27, 2024, http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/6116189.html.

[54] Michael Hagemeister, *Der "Nördliche Katechon"—"Neobyzantismus" und "Politischer Hesychasmus" im Postsowjetischen Russland* [The northern *katechon*: Neobyzantinism and political Hesychasmus in post-Soviet Russia] (Erfurt: University of Erfurt, 2016), 34; Mikhail Suslov, "'Holy Rus': The Geopolitical Imagination in the Contemporary Russian Orthodox Church," *Russian Politics and Law* 52, no. 3 (2014): 67–86; Victor Shnirelman, "Russia as Katechon: Civilizationalism and Eschatological Discourse in Putin's Russia," RussiaPost, July 1, 2024, https://russiapost.info/society/katechon.

[55] "Osnov gosudarstvennoy politiki po sokhraneniyu i ukrepleniyu traditsionnykh rossiyskikh dukhovno-nravstvennykh tsennostey" [Fundamentals of the state policy for the preservation and strengthening of traditional Russian spiritual and moral values], The Kremlin, November 9, 2022, http://kremlin.ru/acts/news/69810.

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followed by a revised Russian foreign policy strategy, which included the strategic collaboration between the state, the Russian Orthodox Church, and other traditional religions.[56] In his speeches, Putin repeated the talking points regularly used by the patriarch in his sermons: the West's departure from traditional values; the destruction of family, culture, and national identity in the West; perversion and abuse of children, pedophilia, and same-sex marriages. According to Putin, "millions of people in the West" also thought that they were being led into a "spiritual disaster" and were looking to Russia with hope.[57]

After the inauguration ceremony for his fifth term as president of the Russian Federation on May 7, 2024, Putin and Patriarch Kirill convened at the Kremlin's Annunciation Cathedral for a solemn prayer, during which Kirill compared Putin to Saint Alexander Nevsky, the canonized prince and military commander who defended the Western border of the medieval Russian state against foreign invasion. The symbolism of their encounter was that of a modern-day symphony of state and church: Putin, like the rulers of the Russian Empire in the past, blessed by the patriarch.

Conclusion

The image of President Putin and Patriarch Kirill in the Kremlin's Annunciation Cathedral was emblematic for the pact of the old guard: the two men standing united at the top of a state without free elections and a church without freedom of prayer. Putin, Kirill, and the circle around them represent a worldview guided by post-Soviet revanchism, Russian nationalism, and militarism. In this worldview, the church is the provider of ritual and spiritual wrappings for autocratic, imperial politics. While the first two decades after the collapse of the Soviet Union was characterized by a multiplicity of forms of religious life inside the Russian Orthodox Church, the course of events from 2010 to 2022 has determined a dramatic closure of the potential pathways of Russian Orthodoxy.[58]

The Soviet period, by contrast, had marked the life of the Russian Orthodox Church in four different ways—repression, collaboration, dissidence, and emigration. These Soviet experiences have inspired different ways of living the Orthodox faith in the post-Soviet context. For example, Memorial, winner of the 2022 Nobel Peace Prize, was founded to keep the memory of repression alive. The organization was declared a foreign agent in 2015 and closed in 2021 at the behest of the Kremlin, which seeks to silence this part of Russia's collective memory. Orthodox priests and faithful continue to find inspiration from the example of dissidence, like the priest Ioann Koval who was punished for replacing the word *victory* with *peace* in a prayer. Finally, many Orthodox priests and believers who have left Russia after 2022 now make up the new emigration.[59] Of the potential roles for his church, Patriarch Kirill has pursued the one he knew best: collaboration. On the side of the state, Putin and his like also continued to do what they knew best: provide a state ideology, identify

[56] "Ukaz ob utverzhdenii Kontseptsii vneshney politiki Rossiyskoy Federatsii" [Decree on approval of the Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation], The Kremlin, March 31, 2023, http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/70811.

[57] "Presidential Address to Federal Assembly," The Kremlin [English version], February 21, 2023, http://www.en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/70565.

[58] Elena Stepanova, "Competing Moral Discourses in Russia: Soviet Legacy and Post-Soviet Controversies," *Politics, Religion & Ideology* 20, no. 3 (2019): 340–60; Alexander Agadjanian, "From Urban Landscape to National Culture: Russia's Conspicuous Religious Simulacra and Enduring, if Fragile, Secularity," *Social Compass* 68, no. 3 (2021): 392–409; Dmitry Uzlaner, "The End of the Pro-Orthodox Consensus: Religion as a New Cleavage in Russian Society," in *Orthodox Religion and Politics in Contemporary Eastern Europe: On Multiple Secularisms and Entanglements*, ed. Tobias Koellner (London: Routledge, 2018), 173–92.

[59] See, for example. Andrei Kordochkin, "Letter to Russia: The Importance of Finding Those Who Are United in Spirit," Public Orthodoxy, November 30, 2023, https://publicorthodoxy.org/2023/11/30/letter-to-russia/.

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an enemy, and sanctify the state. The pact of the old guard is backward looking, but for now it determines the future of Russians, Ukrainians, and the rest of the world.

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