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ARTICLE

The Dark Double: Russian Orthodoxy in Andrei Zviagintsev's *Leviathan*

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Abstract

This essay suggests that there are three crucial contexts that have been overlooked in the scholarship on Andrei Zviagintsev's film, *Leviathan*. First, there is the ecclesiastical history of the Russian Orthodox Church in the years following the election of Kirill (Gundiaev) as Patriarch of Moscow in 2009. The article demonstrates that Zviagintsev was keenly aware of Kirill's growing partnership with the Putin regime and that he was especially dismayed by the patriarch's response to the Bolotnaia protests and Pussy Riot affair. The second context is more theological and considerably lesser known. It concerns the notion of the church's "dark double", a concept developed in the mid-twentieth century by an obscure Gulag survivor and lay theologian named Sergei Fudel′. My main contention in the essay is that Fudel′'s conception of the "dark double" is the foundational theological idea in *Leviathan*—the idea that structures and underpins all of the film's religious scenes. Finally, the third context recovered is the religious thinking of Andrei Zviagintsev himself. For it turns out that the celebrated auteur director is comfortable discussing not only scriptwriting or cinematography. He also has much to say, both onscreen and off, about the clerics and faithful of the contemporary Russian Orthodox Church.

Near the conclusion of Andrei Zviagintsev's *Leviathan*, a small boy stands at liturgy in a new, unfinished church. From the soleas, in front of the altar, a high-ranking Orthodox bishop preaches forcefully about truth, power, and justice. All the while the boy gazes intently at a large and intimidating icon of Jesus Christ, "The Savior Not Made by Hands." Noticing this fixation on the icon, his father Vadim, the mayor of the town, hunches over and whispers in the boy's ear: "God sees everything, son."[1]

These are perhaps the most puzzling and disturbing words in the film. They are spoken by a man who has committed a litany of crimes—theft, extortion, assault, kidnapping, framing, and possibly murder—all apparently to build the new church in which he and his son now pray. God has seen everything, all of Vadim's deeds, and yet the mayor is neither fearful nor contrite. Vadim appears genuinely to believe that his deeds are acceptable to God and that he is justified in the eyes of the stern Christ who gazes down from the iconostasis.

What are we to make of this scene and of the depiction of religion in *Leviathan*, more generally? Is the film truly anti-Christian and anti-Russian, as many detractors claimed following its release? What inspired Zviaginstev to write and direct a film about the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) in the first place? And what theological concepts, if any, shaped his thinking while he worked on the project?

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[1] Leviafan. Directed by Andrei Zviagintsev. Non-Stop Production: Moscow, 2014. 2:21:27.

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In this essay, I suggest that there are three crucial contexts that have been overlooked in the scholarship on *Leviathan*. First, there is the ecclesiastical history of the ROC in the first few years following the election of Kirill (Gundiaev) as Patriarch of Moscow in 2009. As we shall see, Zviagintsev was keenly aware of Kirill's growing partnership with the Putin regime, and he was especially dismayed by the patriarch's response to the Bolotnaia protests and the Pussy Riot affair. The second context is more theological and considerably lesser known. It concerns the notion of the church's "dark double"—an idea developed in the mid-twentieth century by an obscure Russian Gulag survivor and lay theologian named Sergei Fudel′.

We can be confident that these two contexts shaped the making of *Leviathan* for one main reason: because Zviagintsev has repeatedly said so, both in the script notes to the film and in an extensive series of interviews that he gave following its release. Thus, the third context that shall be recovered in this essay is the religious thinking of Andrei Zviagintsev himself. It turns out that the auteur director is comfortable discussing not only scriptwriting or cinematography. He also has much to say, both onscreen and off, about the clerics and faithful of the contemporary Russian Orthodox Church.

Power and Powerlessness

There are two main plot lines in *Leviathan*. One is political, one is religious, and both are about power. The principal narrative is about an auto mechanic named Kolia who lives in an impoverished coastal town in the far Russian north on the Barents Sea. At the outset of the film, Kolia represents the dream of a free and independent Russian life. Over the course of the film, however, Kolia slowly loses everything because of the machinations of the town's corrupt mayor, Vadim.

Throughout the film, Zviagintsev lays bare the true nature of power in contemporary Russia. Democracy, rule of law, separation of powers: they are all shown to be an illusion, a simulacrum. The only real power structure is the *vertikal′ vlasti*, or "vertical of power": a mafia-style form of governance predicated on a hierarchy of personal connections, all connecting back to the power center in Moscow.[2] Kolia's longtime army buddy, Dima, is well versed in this "vertical of power." Now a hotshot attorney in Moscow, he ventures out to the provinces to help save Kolia's property.

The court hearing against Kolia proceeds precisely as Dima predicted. Reading the verdict in a monotone, rapid-fire voice, the judge rules to appropriate Kolia's property and deprive him of his home. Shortly thereafter, the mayor and his bodyguards travel to Kolia's home late at night and confront him in the driveway. The mayor's first words are emblematic of the power relations at the heart of the film: "You should recognize power, Kolia, when you see it." In a series of menacing remarks, the mayor tells Kolia that he is "an insect," "drowning in his own shit" who "has never had any rights, has no rights now, and will never have any rights in the future." Dima steps between the two men and informs the mayor that his visit is unwanted and illegal. At first, Vadim is baffled by Dima's legalese and his appeals to call the police. But he quickly brushes the threats aside.

Near the end of the scene, Dima abruptly switches strategies. He forsakes legal terminology and begins to speak to Vadim in the real language of power. "We have some business to discuss," Dima says, while looking down on the diminutive mayor. "Ivan Alexandrovich has told me a lot about you." The name Ivan Alexandrovich stuns the mayor. "Ivan Alexandrovich . . . who?" he tentatively asks. Dima wields the man's last name like a weapon: "Kostrov, from the committee, Kostrov." The name Kostrov hits the mayor like a punch to the face. He stumbles back in disbelief and looks up to the sky towards the heights of power, where Kostrov reigns over him.

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[2] On the "vertical of power," see Andrew Monaghan, "The *Vertikal*: Power and Authority in Russia," *International Affairs* 88, no.1 (2012): 1–16. Ben Judah, *Fragile Empire: How Russia Fell In and Out of Love with Vladimir Putin* (New Haven, 2013), 90–114.

The mayor enters the scene like a lion and exits like a lamb. All because of a single name: Kostrov. He remains anxious for several more scenes until he eventually learns the truth. The hotshot attorney is bluffing. He has dropped the name Kostrov, but this powerful figure does not truly stand behind him. And once the mayor learns that Dima is lacking this protection, his retribution is swift and brutal.

First, he and his thugs perform a mock execution of Dima and tell him to return to Moscow. Next, the mayor frames Kolia for murdering his wife, Lilia. The film intentionally leaves it unclear as to whether she commits suicide or has been murdered by the mayor's henchmen. Regardless, the result is the same for Kolia. He is found guilty, his home is bulldozed to the ground, and his son is adopted by family friends who later testify against him in court.

Mayor Vadim, meanwhile, learns about the guilty verdict while dining alone at an upscale restaurant. "Fifteen years," he says smugly into his cell phone. "Glory to God. That will teach him to know his place." Vadim appears to know that Kolia did not kill his wife. But that is beside the point. In the mayor's mind, the fiery mechanic is guilty of a far greater crime. Kolia failed to recognize power when he saw it. He refused to submit to the vertical of power. Kolia is sentenced to fifteen years in prison not for murder but for daring to defy the Leviathan.

The Sufferings of Job

Yet there is another crucial dimension to Kolia's tragedy, a religious dimension, and that leads us to the second major plot line of the film. Scholars generally agree that *Leviathan* is Zviagintsev's most overtly religious film. Indeed, no less an authority than Nancy Condee has written that Zviagintsev's main ambition in the film is to deliver a religious message: "We—Western scholars, Russian critics—may prefer it to be a political film rather than a religious film; Zviagintsev has a different view."[3]

Condee pinpoints the Book of Job as the film's predominant religious text and the evidence is compelling. Zviagintsev has confirmed that the film's title was taken from this biblical book, and the massive skeleton of a whale, or leviathan, is the film's most arresting visual image. Like the biblical prophet, Kolia suffers from a series of trials and in the depths of despair he cries out: "Why? What for, O Lord?" A few scenes later, Kolia confronts a village priest, Fr. Vasilii, and receives the answer to his desperate plea. The priest tells him the story of Job in an improvised and rather inaccurate form. Building on these parallels, Condee concludes that *Leviathan* is a narrative inversion of the book of Job, with all the suffering and none of the redemption.[4]

Julian Graffy likewise acknowledges the film's debts to the Book of Job. However, he argues that the primary religious subtext is not the Bible, but the novels of Fedor Dostoevskii. Focusing on *The Brothers Karamazov*, Graffy teases out several parallels between the film and the novel, mostly concerning the figures of Dima and Lilia and their dialogues about faith, reason, and guilt. Ultimately, Graffy interprets the film as a sweeping condemnation of Russian Christianity. This is "a country from which God has been banished," he writes, and "a church where Christ does not dwell."[5]

Other scholars have perceived other subtexts, ranging from the Psalms and prophecies of Isaiah to Hittite myths and Egyptian mythology.[6] Additional studies have theorized about the film's relationship to Thomas Hobbes' seventeenth-century political treatise, also entitled *Leviathan*.[7] One should also not overlook the substantial body of work devoted to the film's cinematic and aesthetic qualities, as well as to its broader political and cultural dimensions.[8]

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[3] Nancy Condee, "Knowledge (Imperfective): Andrei Zviagintsev and Contemporary Cinema," in Birgit Beumers, ed., *A Companion to Russian Cinema*, (Chichester, UK, 2016), 566.

[4] Condee, "Knowledge (Imperfective)," 572.

[5] Julian Graffy, "Leviathan," in *The Contemporary Russia Cinema Reader* (Brookline, 2019), 317.

[6] Bob Becking, "Leviathan at the Movies: Andrey Zvyagintsev's Film in Biblical Perspective," *Die Bibel in der Kunst*, Online-Zeitschrift 2 (2018).

Scholars may debate the meaning of the film's religious message, but they nevertheless share one trait in common. With few exceptions, they treat religion in Zviagintsev's films in a de-historicized and de-contextualized manner. This is a Christianity of biblical chapter and verse, Renaissance art, and western theological concepts. It is not the Christianity, in other words, of post-Soviet Russia. It is not the faith of the Russian Orthodox Church. And, in my estimation, it is not the version of Christianity that Zviagintsev sought to criticize in *Leviathan*.

Previous studies have neglected the film's native ecclesiastical context, and they have likewise overlooked the director's first-hand knowledge of Russian Orthodoxy. As a result, several of the film's key sequences have yet to be fully appreciated for the richness and complexity of their religious messaging. In my view, *Leviathan* is not simply a recasting of the book of Job, and neither is it a sweeping condemnation of all Christianity or even the Russian Orthodox Church. Instead, Zviagintsev is making a far more nuanced and concrete critique. He is criticizing a specific group of people and a specific strain of Orthodoxy—what is known in some circles as "the dark double of the Church."

The Dark Double

The term "dark double" was popularized by the lay theologian and Gulag-survivor Sergei Fudel′ in his book, *At the Walls of the Church*.[9] Fudel′ lived through a time of Soviet prison camps and KGB-agent bishops, and he coined the term to help explain how such evils could exist within the community of believers. Fudel′ insisted that the Orthodox Church should not be equated with the "dark" or immoral behaviors of its clerical hierarchy or individual believers. "Deception has always existed," Fudel′ wrote in the 1950s. "But those stronger people who opposed it always sought out, and always found, the true Church . . . All manner of evil done by men—who consider themselves to be part of the Church—is evil and sin not of the Church, but against the Church."[10]

In contrast to this darkness, Fudel′ wrote about the church as a mystical reality that revealed itself in the heart of believers. For Fudel′, this church was often hidden, like a pearl inside a shell, within the deeply flawed structures of the ROC:

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[7] Aleksandr Filippov, "Leviafan: Mezhdu uzhasom i priznaniem," *Vestnik Evropy* 44 (2016); Beata Waligorska-Olejniczak, "Mif Leviafana v tvorchestve Andreia Zviagintseva (na materiale fil′ma 'Leviafan')," *Studia Rossica Posnaniensia* XLI (2016), 253–62.

[8] Aleksandr Fedorov, "'Leviafan' i 'Solnechnyi udar' v zerkale rossiiskoi mediakritiki," *Mediaobrazovanie* no. 3 (2015), 105–33; Maria Hristova, "Corruption as Shared Culpability: Religion, Family, and Society in Andrey Zvyagintsev's Leviathan," *Journal of Religion and Film* 24, no. 2 (2014), at https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol24/iss2/1/ (accessed August 5, 2024); Robert Lagerberg and Andrew McGregor, "From Post-Soviet to Post-National: Domestic Space as Non-Place in Andrei Zviagintsev's *Elena* and *Leviathan*," *International Journal of Russian Studies* 7, no. 2 (July 2018), 127–41; Andrei Plakhov and Anton Dolin, *Dikhanie kamnia: Mir fil′mov Andreia Zviagintseva* (Moscow, 2019). Vlad Strukov, "Russian 'Manipulative Smart Power': Zviagintsev's Oscar Nomination, (Non-) Government Agency and Contradictions of the Globalized World," *New Cinemas: Journal of Contemporary Film* 14, no. 1 (2016), 31–49; Julia Vassilieva, "Russian *Leviathan*: Power, Landscape, Memory," *Film Criticism* 42, no. 1 (2018), https://doi.org/10.3998/fc.13761232.0042.101 (accessed October 7, 2024); Lisa Ryoko Wakamiya, "Zvyagintsev and Tarkovsky: Influence, Depersonalization, and Autonomy," in *Refocus: The Films of Andrei Tarkovsky*, ed. Sergey Toymentsev, (Edinburgh, 2021), 242–56; Susanne Wengle, Christy Monet and Evgenia Olimpieva, "Zvyagintsev's Leviathan and Debates on Authority, Agency, and Authenticity," *Slavic Review* 77, no. 4 (Winter 2018): 998–1024; Justin Wilmes, "From Tikhie to Gromkie: The Discursive Strategies of the Putin-era Auteurs," *Russian Literature* 96–98 (February–May 2018): 297–327.

[9] Sergei Fudel′, *U sten Tserkvi,* at www.azbyka.ru/otechnik/Sergej_Fudel/u-sten-tserkvi/ (accessed August 2, 2024). In English translation: Sergei Fudel, *Light in the Darkness* (Crestwood, 1989).

[10] Fudel′, *U sten Tserkvi*.

> A church service was ending in a suburban Moscow church. Everything seemed quite normal, the priest gave the final blessing. Then he stepped out of the sanctuary and began taking off his vestments. Suddenly there was dead silence and only his voice was heard, "For twenty years I have deceived you. Now I take off this attire!" People moved, some shouted, some cried. Everyone was upset, indignant…But suddenly a very young man stepped forward and said, "Why are we all so excited? Was it not always like this? Don't you remember Judas at the Last Supper? Somehow these words reminded people that in the long history of the Church there had always existed its dark shadow, its "double," and somehow this helped us to understand and to accept what took place.[11]

Fudel′ lamented how easily and how often the church's double was mistaken for the real thing. "The dark double of the church creates in history a terrible provocation," he wrote in his memoirs. "It creates in people the impression that no other Church exists, that there is only the dark double, and that the truth of Christ no longer exists on earth."[12] Fudel′ remained confident, however, that this darkness would not ultimately prevail: "We must speak about the church's double from the very beginning, speak clearly and simply, just as clearly as it is spoken about in the Gospels. We must know about [the double] and seek for Christ in the Church, seek only Him."[13]

My main contention in this essay is that Fudel′'s conception of the "dark double" is the foundational theological idea in *Leviathan*—the idea that structures and underpins nearly all of the film's religious scenes. But what evidence is there that Zviagintsev was familiar with this theological concept? From the outset, it should be stated that there are no extant records in which Zviagintsev explicitly mentions Sergei Fudel′ by name. His notes and interviews, however, are filled with direct references to the church's double. "There is a certain concept shared among faithful church people, a concept shared even by the priests who serve liturgy," the director wrote in the script notes. "This concept is 'the double of the church.' Double-ness encompassing an idea of falsehood, sickness, and even an inverted, infernal side. This concept helps believers to cope with the hypocrisy that often arises in church life."[14]

The director also repeatedly mentioned the "dark double" in interviews about the film. In fact, he shared slightly differing versions of the same story with several different media outlets:

> The resource *Pravoslavie i Mir* [sic] published several glowing reviews about *Leviathan* written by priests…In one of the reviews, the author discussed the "doubleness of the church" and said this danger to the church has always existed. It is like the False Dmitrii—not the tsar but an imposter tsar, like a simulacrum, a copy without an original. And in this doubleness there is the essence of evil, fakeness, and deception. Such an understanding of "the double of the church" is present in church circles. It was not invented by the creators of the film *Leviathan*.[15]

The review that Zviagintsev referred to here was written by Fr Viacheslav Perevezentsev and published on the Orthodox website *Pravmir* in January 2015.[16] "Life is complicated," the priest wrote in this online piece.

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[11] Fudel′, *U sten Tserkvi*.

[12] Sergei Fudel′, *Vospominaniia*, at https://azbyka.ru/otechnik/Sergej_Fudel/vospominanija/. (accessed August 2, 2024).

[13] Fudel′, *U sten Tserkvi*.

[14] Andrei Zviagintsev, Oleg Negin, Vladimir Moiseenko, Aleksandr Novototskii, *Stsenarii kinofil′mov Andreia Zviagintseva* (Moscow, 2020), 376.

[15] Maksim Markov (ed.), *"Leviafan." Razbor po kostochkam: Rezhisser Andrei Zviagintsev- o fil′me kadr za kadrom* (Moscow, 2021), 453.

[16] Vitalii Kaplan, "Moi Men′," *Zhurnal Foma,* at https://foma.ru/moy-men.html (accessed August 4, 2024).

> And the "double of the Church"—about which S[ergei] Fudel′ wrote so much—is not only present in life, but genuinely prevents people from coming to Christ. The theme of the "double of the Church" is very important. And out of gratitude for the fact that *Leviathan* presents this theme so vividly, we Orthodox viewers should say a special thank you to the director.

Speaking to an audience of film students, Zviagintsev alluded to this review once more. "One monk [sic] used the word 'double of the church,'" he told the aspiring filmmakers. "If you pay attention to the movie, you will see that this is precisely what the film is about. It is about doubleness, a double, a substitution . . . A man dressed in a cassock is not always a servant of God."[17]

As these excerpts make clear, Zviagintsev was aware of the theological notion of the church's double, both during and after the making of *Leviathan*. He stated on more than one occasion that the film was intended to expose the existence of this double in Vladimir Putin's Russia, and he insisted that this theological concept was not of his own devising but had existed for many decades within the Russian Orthodox Church. The director's remarks likewise demonstrate a strong opposition to the church's uppermost ecclesiastical elite. "Is it just to claim that *Leviathan* is an anti-Christian film, aimed against Christ?" Zviagintsev asked in a script note. His response was unequivocal: "Of course not! [The film] is not even against the Church of Christ. The film is against the church of the Hierarchs. This is the truth."[18] But what events had so turned Zviagintsev against the clerical elite of the Russian Orthodox Church? What had transpired that motivated him to make a film about the church's dark double?

Bolotnaia Square and Pussy Riot

The answer to these questions leads back to Moscow in 2011. In late September of that year, Russian President Dmitrii Medvedev announced that he would not seek a second term in office. In his place, he nominated Prime Minister Vladimir Putin to take his spot on the ballot as the candidate for United Russia, the country's ruling party. The decision appeared to confirm long-held suspicions that Putin never truly relinquished power and that Medvedev had merely served as a puppet ruler.

Two months later, in December, tens of thousands of Russians took to the streets of Moscow to protest the State Duma elections. The protestors gathered at Bolotnaia Square, where they alleged that United Russia had committed widespread voter fraud and demanded that the election results be annulled. These events ultimately culminated with the "March of Millions" on May 6, 2012. For the first time, Russian police in Moscow used extensive force to disrupt the demonstrations, injuring dozens of people and leading to the arrest of over 400 protestors.

The silence of the ROC in regards to these repressions infuriated Zviaginstev. "The [hierarchs] are not about Christ, they are about something else," he said in an interview in 2015.

> After the events in May on Bolotnaia Square when the "Bolotnaia affair" began, they started arresting young people, who were going out for sanctioned peaceful demonstrations . . . And not a single church hierarch criticized the authorities in defense of their own flock! They beat young people, and they were silent. They put young people in prison, and not a single statement from them . . . Is this really how a pastor should be?[19]

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[17] "Andrei Zviagintsev: 'Otkrytaia vstrecha u zakhytykh dverei': Akademiia Nikity Mikhalkova organizovala vstrechu s Andreem Zviagintsevym," *Realistfilm.info*, at http://realistfilm.info/news/otkrytaya-vstrecha-u-zakrytyh-dverej-akademiya-nikity-mihalkova-organizovala-vstrechu-s-andreem-zvyagintsevym.html (accessed August 4, 2024).

[18] Zviagintsev, *Stsenarii kinofil′mov*, 389.

[19] Markov, *"Leviafan." Razbor po kostochkam*, 485.

The protest that most inspired Zviaginstev, however, did not take place on the city streets. On February 21, 2012, five young women in brightly colored balaclavas entered the Cathedral of Christ the Savior in Moscow. The women were members of a feminist punk collective called Pussy Riot. They ran to the front of the church, where they began to dance, play electric guitars, and imitate the traditional postures of Orthodox prayer, such as making the sign of the cross and genuflecting. After being hustled out of the church by security guards, the members of Pussy Riot returned home and edited the footage into a music video entitled "A Punk Prayer," which they subsequently released online.[20]

The music video was a stunning indictment of Putinism and the post-Soviet ROC. In the song, the punk rockers repeatedly called on the Virgin Mary to "drive Putin away" and implored her "to become a feminist." The song was especially critical of the Moscow Patriarchate's relationship with the ruling regime. In one verse, the women sang that "the Church praises rotten leaders" and in another they declared: "Patriarch Gundiaev believes in Putin/Would be better, the bastard, if he believed in God."

The video was an instant viral sensation. Five days after its release, the state launched a criminal investigation. By mid-March, three Pussy Riot members—Masha Alyokhina, Katia Samutsevich, and Nadia Tolokonnikova—had been arrested and were awaiting trial in jail. The court case against Pussy Riot provoked a global outcry, with celebrities such as Madonna and Paul McCartney issuing statements of support for the punk activists. In the end, however, the courts sentenced Alyokhina and Tolokonnikova to two years in a Russian penal colony for "premeditated hooliganism" which was supposedly "motivated by religious hatred or hostility."[21]

The Conservative Turn

The "Punk Prayer" may have portrayed Kirill as a loyal supporter of the Putin regime, but the patriarch had not always been associated with authoritarian politics. In fact, throughout the 1990s and up to his election as patriarch in 2009, Kirill was widely viewed as the most progressive and open-minded hierarch in the entire ROC. In the year 2000, for instance, he drew the ire of the Kremlin by insisting that the church's seminal statement on church-state relations should encourage Orthodox Christians to defy the government if it ever "forced [them] to apostatize from Christ and His church or to commit sinful, soul-harming deeds."[22]

Further, when protests broke out at Bolotnaia Square in 2011, Kirill repeatedly called on the government "to correct its course."[23] Former church insiders report that he considered going to the square in person to show his support for the protestors, and in a sermon in mid-December he called on Putin to engage in meaningful dialogue with his political opponents.[24] It would be a mistake, however, to depict Kirill as a lifelong dissident or an advocate for democracy. Throughout his career, the churchman had shown himself to be a shrewd political operator. He was not a champion of one unchanging ideology. Rather, he was more like a weathervane, constantly shifting to indicate which way the political winds were blowing. In the Soviet era, he spoke the language of a Soviet bureaucrat and in the Boris El'tsin era he emphasized the democratic rhetoric of the times. What Kirill realized in late January 2012 was that the winds were beginning to shift once again.

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[20] On the Pussy Riot affair, see Eliot Borenstein, *Pussy Riot: Speaking Punk to Power* (New York, 2020); Masha Gessen, *Words Will Break Cement: The Passion of Pussy Riot* (New York, 2014).

[21] Borenstein, *Pussy Riot*, 2.

[22] "Osnovy sotsial'noi kontseptsii Russkoi Pravoslavnoi Tserkvi," at http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/419128.html (accessed August 4, 2024).

[23] "Interv'iu patriarkha Kirilla telekanalu 'Rossia-1,'" *Komsomol'skaia Pravda*, at https://www.kp.ru/daily/25814.3/2793185/ (accessed August 4, 2024).

[24] A. Shishkov, "Putin's Altar Boy: Patriarch Kirill and His Influence on the Russian Military Campaign," *Religioni et società* 37, no. 104 (2022), 65–71. Patriarch Kirill (Gundiaev), "Slovo Sviateishego Patriarkha Kirilla v nedeliu 27-iu po Piatidesiatnitse posle Liurgii v Bogoiavlenskom sobore g. Noginska," *patriarchia.ru*, at http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/1838647.html (accessed October 7, 2024).

Kirill met with Putin in the Danilov Monastery on February 8, 2012, for a televised event. There was not a trace of dissidence or disagreement in the patriarch's lengthy remarks. To the contrary, Kirill fawned over the president, declaring the period of his presidency to be a "miracle from God" and telling him that "all power is from God"—an insinuation that cast Putin as Russia's divinely appointed ruler.[25] According to members of Pussy Riot, it was this meeting that inspired them to perform the "Punk Prayer" in Christ the Savior Cathedral two weeks later. And from that moment forward—when the punk activists danced before the patriarch's own altar—the transformation of Kirill into a conservative public figure was complete.

Eight weeks later, on April 22, Kirill led over 60,000 believers on a public march around Christ the Savior in a "Prayer Service in Defense of the Faith." His rhetoric and posturing at the rally were unrecognizable from the man who had called the Kremlin to compromise only a few months earlier. During a fiery sermon, Kirill thundered against "traitors in clerical robes" and suggested that Pussy Riot's actions were reminiscent of the persecution of believers in Iosif Stalin's Soviet Union.[26] A former Moscow Patriarchate insider, Sergei Chapnin, later described the prayer march as "a performance for one man."[27] That one man, of course, was Vladimir Putin, who had just begun his third term in office. Since the protests at Bolotnaia, Putin and his team had made a pronounced conservative turn and Kirill wished to publicly signal to the president that the ROC had turned with him.[28]

A "Punk Prayer" followed by a "Prayer in Defense of the Faith": this was the context surrounding Zviagintsev and his co-writer Oleg Negin as they developed the script for *Leviathan*. It was this context that inspired them to include two oblique references to Pussy Riot in the film. The first reference appears during a television newscast playing in the background of Kolia's home, as he drinks vodka in despair following the death of his wife. The second reference occurs in the bishop's sermon at the conclusion of the film. During interviews, Zviagintsev revealed that these references are a "tribute" to the events that inspired him to make *Leviathan*:

> We shot the film in 2013, in the autumn, but we worked on the script in 2012. And the [references to Pussy Riot] are a tribute to the times, to the events, which at that time profoundly divided public opinion . . . And here is what happened: during the pre-election propaganda campaign, Patriarch [Kirill] turned sacred space into a political tribune. And then the political tribune moved up onto the soleas. And, in response, a punk prayer was then served from this sacred space: "Mother of God, drive Putin away"![29]

Zviagintsev further suggested that the inclusion of Pussy Riot in the film was yet another attempt to draw attention to the "double" of the church. "The decision to include in the context of the film a reminder about Pussy Riot was a tribute of respect to those people who in those days carried out a revolution in the consciousness of many people," Zviagintsev stated. "What they did, without a doubt, is a historical event in terms of showing what the double of the church really is."[30]

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[25] "Stenogramma vstrechi predsedatelia Pravitel'stva RF V. V. Putina so Sviateishim Patriarkhom Kirillom i liderami traditsionnykh religioznykh obshchin Rossii," *patriarchia.ru,* at http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/print/2005767.html (accessed August 5, 2024).

[26] "Slovo Sviateishego Patriarkha Kirilla pered nachalom molebna v zashchity very, porugannykh sviatyn', Tserkvi i ee dobrogo imeni," *patriarchia.ru,* at http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/2177868.html (Accessed August 5, 2024).

[27] God Save Russia. Directed by Alice Cohen. Strasbourg, France: ARTE, 2018. 56:00.

[28] On Russian conservatism, see Mikhail Suslov, *Putinism - Post-Soviet Russian Regime Ideology* (New York, 2024); Marlene Laruelle, *Is Russia Fascist? Unraveling Propaganda East and West* (Ithaca, 2021); Paul Robinson, *Russian Conservatism* (Ithaca, 2019); Mikhail Suslov and Dmitry Uzlaner, *Contemporary Russian Conservatism: Problems, Paradoxes, and Perspectives* (Leiden, 2019).

[29] Markov, *"Leviafan." Razbor po kostochkam*, 478–79.

[30] Ibid.

By now, it should be evident that *Leviathan* is a film about specific theological concepts, inspired by specific political and ecclesiastical events. In interviews and the script notes, Zviagintsev unequivocally stated that the film was a response to the Moscow Patriarchate's handling of the Bolotnaia protests and the Pussy Riot trial. At the same time, the director also insisted that his film was not a sweeping condemnation of all Christianity or the ROC. Rather, Zviagintsev made it clear that his film was intended to expose the "dark double" of the church. But when and where does this theological concept appear in *Leviathan*? How, in other words, does Zviagintsev depict the "dark double" on the silver screen?

The Last Supper

Zviagintsev announces the presence of the "dark double" early in *Leviathan*, during the mayor's first meeting with the bishop. At no point in the film is the bishop ever given a name. He is referred to only as *Vladyka*—the customary title for addressing church hierarchs—which has its etymological roots in the word *vlast'*, or power. The scene begins *in media res* while the two men are dining at a restaurant owned by the church. The metropolitan tells Vadim that he is worrying too much about elections, which are still a year away, and that he should not forget about the Kingdom of Heaven. Vadim starts to protest but the bishop interrupts him. "I know, I know, you give a great deal, generously," he says to the mayor. "Even today, you come from afar, bringing gifts."

The mayor pours another round of vodka and the hierarch continues. "I am telling you again: don't worry so much. All power is from God. If God wills it, you have nothing to worry about." Vadim remains unconvinced. "And does He will it? Who else can I ask, *Vladyka*, if not you?" The bishop dislikes the question but answers nonetheless: "He wills it, he wills it," he replies.

This brief scene presents a classic formula for the making of sacred power. A formula that Zviagintsev repeatedly described in the script notes as "pagan." The corrupt mayor—wearing a *Edinaia Rossiia* pin on his lapel—lays his sacrifice, his bribe, upon the altar in order to win the favor of the gods. The high priest accepts this sacrifice and gives the mayor what he wants in return: a guarantee from on high. All power is from God. God accepts the mayor's bribe. Thus, the mayor shall remain in power.

The mayor and bishop demonstrate their agreement on the matter by toasting vodka glasses, and at that moment the camera pans out to reveal a large fresco of the Last Supper on the opposite wall (Figure 1). Here is the symbol, the cinematic icon, of the dark double of the Church. The fresco on the wall is the "true church": the church of Christ and his apostles; the church of love, self-sacrifice, and communion. But what church prevails here on earth? The dark double of the mayor and the bishop—a church hierarchy that publicly blesses and praises a criminal ruling class in exchange for material perks and privileges.

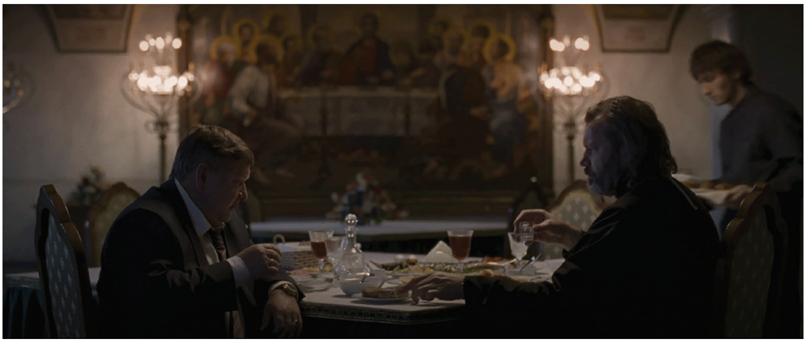

Figure 1. *Leviafan*, directed by Andrei Zviagintsev (Moscow, 2014), 0:24:21.

In an uncanny twist of fate, the meal shared by the mayor and the bishop was filmed in Christ the Savior Cathedral in Moscow, the very site where Kirill blessed the Putin regime and where Pussy Riot performed its "Punk Prayer." The script for the scene therefore makes no mention of a fresco of the Last Supper, since the biblical image was an unexpected, last-minute addition to the film. The idea only occurred to Zviagintsev while he was touring the underground banquet rooms of the giant church complex. "This [scene] is Christ the Savior Cathedral," Zviagintsev later explained. "There are a number of banquet halls there. We toured two or three large halls, and we specifically chose this one because of the fresco that you see at the end of the scene. We chose it specifically for the [fresco]."[31]

Zviagintsev likewise confirmed that the fresco image was intended to depict the mayor and bishop as a distorted or "dark" reflection of the original apostles. "It is the Last Supper," Zviagintsev said in the same interview. "In essence, they all sit together behind one common table. It seemed to me that this very strongly conveyed the idea of succession: here are the first apostles, and here are the new ones. For what else is the priesthood if not the followers of the apostles?"[32] Later in the same interview, Zviagintsev emphasized that Mayor Vadim is not a true believer:

> These are not people of the faith, they are so-called "believers." Even if the mayor, in order to fulfill his duty as the leader of the city, goes to church sometimes, and learns which hand to hold a candle in, and attends the required rituals, in fact his faith is insignificant. I judge them by their fruits. [Vadim] does not know the most important thing: the person of Christ.[33]

Co-Workers with God

The "dark double" is emphasized most prominently, however, during Vadim's second meeting with the bishop. At this point in the narrative the mayor is troubled deeply about the source of Dima's *kompromat* and its implications for his political future. He therefore decides to pay a visit to the church leader's headquarters and ask for advice. Once there, Vadim tries to share the details of his problems with the bishop, but the churchman quickly cuts him off. "Don't tell me anything, Vadim. We are not at confession . . . We are co-workers, of course, we are working on the same project, but you have your front, and I have mine." The bishop then reminds Vadim once more that God is the source of all earthly power. "I told you a few days ago and I repeat it now: all power is from God. Where there is power, there is also strength. If you are the power in your area of responsibility, then solve your issues yourself, with your own strength. Don't go looking for help from others."

At the end of the conversation, the mayor absentmindedly approaches the bishop for a customary blessing. As the hierarch makes the sign of the cross, the viewpoint abruptly changes to a profile shot and the camera slowly zooms in on a photograph, hanging above three bronze busts (Figure 2). The picture depicts an *Arkhiereiskii Sobor*, or a bishops' council. The central bust is of the crucified Christ, wearing a crown of thorns. It is flanked on both sides by the busts of two medieval princes. To the left is Prince Vladimir the Great, the baptizer of Rus', and to the right is an unidentified ruler, possibly Iaroslav the Wise. The photograph connects the metropolitan to a concrete institution and social class: the uppermost clerical elite of the Moscow Patriarchate. Here, in all of their pomp and glory, is the group of monastic men sometimes referred to as "princes of the church."

If we look more closely, moreover, we find that the gaze of Christ falls on a very special guest seated next to Patriarch Kirill in the center of the photograph. It is none other than

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[31] Markov, *"Leviafan." Razbor po kostochkam*, 94.

[32] Ibid., 95.

[33] Ibid., 181.

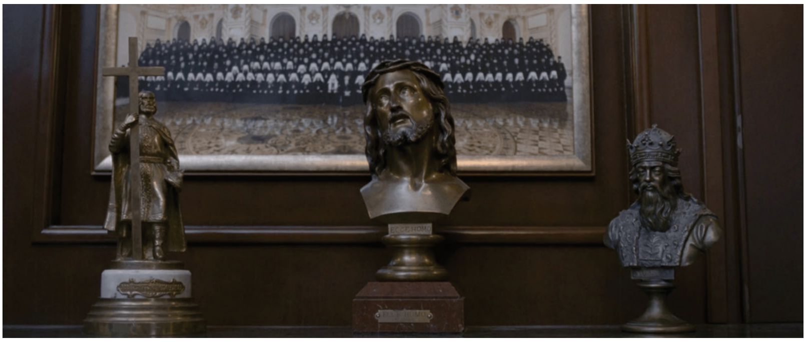

Figure 2. *Leviafan*, directed by Andrei Zviagintsev, (Moscow, 2014), 1:14:40.

Vladimir Putin. The crucified Christ is gazing directly at the Russian President. Zviagintsev later confirmed that he specifically chose a photograph with Putin for the scene:

> [The scene] was intended to have only the photograph of a Bishop's council, when all of the highest ranks of the Russian Orthodox Church gathered in the huge hall of Christ the Savior Cathedral for a collective portrait with Putin . . . The priesthood and the highest-ranking church hierarchs [are depicted in the photograph]. The focus, of course, is on Christ and the photo is slightly out of focus. Yet we nevertheless can guess that these are the ecclesiastical authorities. To the right of Putin sits Kirill . . . and, without question, [the bishop in the film] would be pictured among them.[34]

Ultimately, this provocative frame suggests that the bishops, the "princes of the church," do not draw their power and privilege from Jesus Christ. Rather, from the time of Prince Vladimir in the tenth century, they have attained it through their relationship with the state. All power comes not from God but rather from the Russian sovereign.

Thus, in Zviagintsev's view, *Leviathan* is not an anti-religious film because it does not attack the worshipping church, the communion of the faithful. Rather, it criticizes the ecclesiastical elite and their relationship with state power. The director emphasized this point in a lengthy script note devoted to the scene in the bishop's office:

> There are some who think that we accuse the whole church of hypocrisy. I want to remind these people that the church is not the property of the hierarchs. Rather, it is the assembly of all believers. The church is not the stones from which the building is made, and neither is it the priests of the cult. The body of the church is all of the faithful gathered together . . . The parishioners are not the main thing, however. God is their judge, and they will reckon with the contents of their own hearts. The main thing concerns the organization of this institution [the ROC], its practices and regulations, which allow for the abolishment of equality between "the children of God" and which create the temptation of power over "the slaves of God." If a spiritual leader forgets about God and a worldly ruler does not think about the good of the people, then what kind of country will we have?[35]

In this note, and in the scene more generally, Zviagintsev unambiguously identifies both Vladimir Putin and Patriarch Kirill with the "dark double" of the church. Yet the scene also contains more subtle allusions to post-Soviet church politics. The bishop tells the mayor that "all power is from God," for example, not only because it is a common refrain in post-Soviet ecclesiastical circles. It was also precisely what Kirill told Putin in their televised meeting on February 8, 2012—the very same meeting that inspired Pussy Riot's "Punk Prayer." Similarly, the bishop refers to Vadim as a "co-worker" because Zviagintsev heard a high-ranking cleric use the phrase during a television interview:

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[34] Ibid., 293, 296.

[35] Zviagintsev, *Stsenarii kinofil'mov*, 376.

> I heard this phrase on the program *Work Day Evening*, on the channel Rain, from the lips of Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk . . . One of the journalists asked him a question: "In what way does the church interact with the authorities?" . . . In his answer, Hilarion said, "We co-work together." I decided that this [phrase] must absolutely be in the film.[36]

The bishop may call Vadim his "co-worker" but the scene also reveals that the mayor rarely, if ever, attends church services. The bishop asks him if he has been going to church and Vadim replies confidently: "Every Sunday, without fail." But when the bishop inquires further, asking Vadim about which priest he goes to see for confession, the mayor's piety suddenly begins to falter. He cannot remember the name of his parish priest or confessor. "It is obvious that he does not regularly go [to church]," Zviangintsev said of this scene. "Precisely because he forgot the name of his spiritual confessor, it is clear that he has not been there for a long time. He is not a "practicing Orthodox Christian," which is how Metropolitan Hilarion (Alfeev) described Putin shortly after the elections of 2012."[37]

Icons and Porn Stars

The two meetings between the mayor and the bishop are the most explicit depictions of the church's "dark double" in *Leviathan*. Yet they are far from the only scenes in which Zviagintsev experiments with this concept. The "dark double" is visible, for example, in the car interior of the police officer, Stepanych, when he drives to his own birthday party out in the country. As the car speeds down the highway, viewers look out through the windshield at a vast panorama of the highway and the rugged northern landscape. Beneath the windshield, viewers see a triptych of icons—Jesus Christ, Mary, and St. Nicholas—which have been attached to the dashboard. Not far from these sacred figures, on a different part of the dashboard, viewers find a very different sort of Trinitarian image: a triptych of female porn stars, striking a variety of erotic poses.

The concept of doubleness is also apparent in the cinematographic framing of several other scenes in the film. One such instance, where the perspective and geometry of the shot are virtually identical, are the scenes of the court room verdict and the bishop's sermon near the end of the film. In this case, Zviagintsev creates two parallel scenes in order to present the courts and the church as two branches of the same corrupt Putinist system. It is worth noting that Zviagintsev chose to model the sentence reading at Kolia's trial on the way that the judge read the verdict at the Pussy Riot trial. "I asked actress Alla Emintseva to watch different video recordings on YouTube, in particular, the momentous sentence reading of Pussy Riot," Zviagintsev later explained. "This is [the context] which I was reacting to, when I decided it was necessary to read out the whole text in its entirety."[38]

Still another "double" involves heads without bodies. As we saw previously, during Vadim's meeting in the bishop's office, a bodiless bust of Christ gazes at a photograph of Putin surrounded by the clerical elite of the ROC. The bust does not appear in the script notes and Zviagintsev later revealed that he discovered it on set, while filming in the apartment of a wealthy Muscovite. "It appeared there by an accident of fate," the director said of the bust. "And this 'decapitated head' seemed even more important and stronger than the photograph [of Putin and the clerical elite]. Because it carried more interesting allusions and intellectual links. The hierarch has just blessed the mayor for some kind of deed. And it is they—[Christ's] new disciples and the successors of the apostles—who have turned the Word into a hardened bronze bust."[39]

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[36] Markov, *"Leviafan." Razbor po kostochkam*, 291–92.

[37] Ibid., 287.

[38] Ibid., 78.

In the script notes, Zviagintsev described this scene as a rebuke of the hypocrisy and cronyism of the ROC clerical elite. A similar rebuke occurs later in the film, in another scene with a severed head. Only this time it belongs to St. John the Baptist and not to Christ. Shortly after Lilia's death, a grieving Kolia stumbles into a ruined church, while looking for his son, Roma, amongst the teenagers gathered there around a burning fire. He does not find Roma, but what he does discover on the walls of the crumbling church is a fresco of the beheading of St. John. The icon shows the prophet's decapitated head being presented on a platter to Herod. The wicked ruler had ordered this punishment for the saint, after John had publicly castigated him for the sin of adultery.

During this scene, Kolia gazes up towards the cupola of the abandoned church, which was ostensibly destroyed by the Soviets. Later in the film, Zviagintsev creates a cinematographic "double" of this shot, when the mayor's son looks up at the still unpainted ceiling of the church that his father helped to build. The message of these scenes is not difficult to decipher. For Zviagintsev, the church of Christ is a church in ruins, a persecuted church, which remains illuminated from within by the fire of genuine faith. Unlike the "dark double," which cozies up to state power, this alternative church follows the path of the Baptist. It speaks truth to power and condemns evil to its face.

Feed My Sheep

Perhaps the only figure in the film who possesses such faith is Fr. Vasilli, who first appears only twenty-five minutes before the closing credits. After the death of his wife, Kolia goes to the market for more vodka and viewers see Fr. Vasilii packing several loaves of bread into a sack. Once outside the store, Kolia confronts the humble priest and angrily asks him why God allows him to suffer. Fr. Vasilli answers with a lengthy and slightly distorted paraphrase of the Book of Job. Scholars have attributed a great deal of importance to this interaction, but I wish to focus on what happens next. In the following scene, Kolia accompanies the cleric back to a deeply impoverished Orthodox parish, which the script tells us is named in honor of the Transfiguration of the Lord. This is the Orthodox feast day that celebrates the revelation of Christ's hidden glory on Mt. Tabor.

The church's name is not an accident because what happens next is also a revelation of hidden inner grace. Fr. Vasilii discretely gives one of the loaves of bread to a poor parishioner who tends to the parish's livestock. Suddenly, amidst all the darkness of the church's double, Zviagintsev offers a moment of light. Fr. Vasilii, a man who clearly lives in extreme poverty, spends what little money he does have to literally feed his flock. There is, it turns out, at least one righteous man left in Russia.

"This character fulfills a small but significant role," Zviaginstev said in an interview. "Significant, in terms of semantic content, because he is a kind of alternative to the bishop. To say it grandly: if you weighed him and the hierarch on the scales of God, [Fr. Vasilii] would be [the bishop's] counterweight . . . It was necessary here to have a kind of hero who could counterbalance the bishop, so that there was not a single unequivocal view of the church."[40]

God Sees Everything

This portrait of Christian charity is a stark contrast to the film's finale. Following the news of Kolia's prison sentence, the story cuts away to a crowded new church, where the metropolitan is delivering a sermon. According to Zviagintsev, the text of this sermon reproduces, word for word, a homily delivered by a real Orthodox hierarch that the director found on YouTube.[41] For this reason, the sermon is a textbook example of traditional Orthodox preaching.

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[39] Ibid., 296.

[40] Ibid., 451.

"Holy right-believing Grand Prince Aleksandr Nevskii once said: God is not in strength, but in truth," the bishop confidently declares. "And this is really so. He is not in strength, but in love. Not in cunning, but in divine wisdom . . . The most important thing in our day is that we never betray Orthodoxy. And that we tell the truth." Viewers of the film, however, know that the bishop is not telling the truth. Because earlier in the film, behind closed doors with the mayor, he delivered a very different message: "All power is from God," "Where there is power, there is strength," "Use your strength."

The full magnitude of the bishop's hypocrisy only becomes apparent after his sermon, when an aerial shot reveals the location of the new church. It sits on the exact location of Kolia's former home. Thus, the driving force behind Kolia's entire tragedy, it turns out, is the bishop himself. At the same time, the final scene is also the most compelling cinematographic "double" in the film since it precisely parallels the opening scene. "The wide shot [in the finale], of course, corresponds to the wide shot from the very beginning," Zviagintsev explained. "But we added height to the frame because the church is noticeably taller."[42]

This stunning revelation about the church's location instantly casts the bishop's meetings with the mayor in a different light. These two men were indeed "co-workers . . . working on the same project," as the bishop said, because they were partnering together to build a church. The price ultimately paid for the new church was the destruction of Kolia and his family. This is the reason that Fr. Vasilii does not stand in the company of the bishop and the other clergy during the consecration service. Rather, he stands in the back, with the people, away from the political and clerical elite at the front of the church. As the film's lone representative of genuine faith, Fr. Vasilii cannot help consecrate a sanctuary built on an innocent man's blood.

None of this, of course, appears to trouble the conscience of Mayor Vadim. And this leads back, at last, to the scene described in the opening paragraphs of this essay, when the mayor looks down at his boy and says, "God sees everything." As noted earlier, these are deeply disturbing words. A woman is dead. A child is orphaned. An innocent man is imprisoned. Meanwhile, the person responsible for it all stands in church, without fear or contrition, and asserts that God has seen it all.

This is the moment, in my view, when Zviagintsev captures the true essence of the "dark double." The problem is not that Vadim is simply a liar or hypocrite, saying things that he does not believe. The problem, rather, is that Vadim very much believes that he has done a good deed, just like the bishop told him during their second meeting. The dark double of the church, in other words, does not necessarily know that it is dark.

Conclusion: A Solid Lord for Solid Lords

The God of the Christian Gospels is traditionally thought to condemn murder, extortion, and theft. So what kind of God, and what kind of Christ, is Vadim telling his son about? In my view, it is the God of post-Soviet civil religion: the God who reigns as the supreme Boss, higher even than Putin, at the very pinnacle of the vertical of power.[43] Vadim has faithfully served this God—building his church and crushing his enemies—and it is this God who sees his deeds and is well pleased. Ultimately, for the mayor the term "Orthodoxy" does not connote a religion of personal ethics or mystical spiritual experience. It is neither the religion of the Last Supper nor the Last Judgement. Instead, it is something more akin to what Viktor Pelevin described in all capital letters in his novel *Generation P*:

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[41] Danila Gal′perovich, "Andrei Zviagintsev: U menia est′ polnoe pravo svobodno myslit′," *Golos Ameriki*, at https://www.golosameriki.com/a/andrey-zvyagintsev-on-russia-and-leviathan/2650802.html (accessed August 5, 2024).

[42] Markov, *"Leviafan." Razbor po kostochkam*, 575.

[43] On civil religion in Putin's Russia, see Cyril Hovorun, *Political Orthodoxies: The Unorthodoxies of the Church Coerced* (Minneapolis, 2018), 47–87.

> CHRIST THE SAVIOR
> A SOLID LORD
> FOR SOLID LORDS.[44]

At the time Zviagintsev was making *Leviathan*, it was still uncertain what the emerging civil religion of these "solid lords" would entail for the future of Russia. Ten years after the film's release, however, Kolia's suffering at the hands of the "dark double" has now assumed something of a prophetic quality. Zviagintsev intuited that the sacralization of state power would lead not to freedom and life, but to death and destruction. Yet even the director himself could not possibly have imagined how prophetic the final scenes of *Leviathan* would prove to be. For the icon that the mayor's son gazes upon—the icon of "The Savior Not Made by Hands"—later appeared on banners carried by Russian soldiers during their brutal invasion of Ukraine. Vladimir Putin, moreover, publicly donated a prized copy of the icon to the Russian Army and a team of clerics subsequently paraded the sacred image along the frontlines of the war.[45] Thus, just as the Metropolitan blessed Vadim in the film, the leaders of the ROC blessed the Russian invaders and reassured them with words that echoed a familiar refrain: "All power comes from God."[46]

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[44] Viktor Pelevin, *Generation "P"* (Moscow, 1999), 193.

[45] "Podarennuiu Putinym ikonu Spasa Nerukotvornogo dostavili voennym SVO v zone spetsoperatsii," *TASS*, at https://tass.ru/obschestvo/18453499 (accessed August 5, 2024).

[46] On the ROC's rhetoric during the invasion, see Sean Griffin, "Putin's Holy War of the Fatherland: Sacred Memory and the Russian Invasion of Ukraine," *The Russian Review* 83, no. 1 (January 2024): 79–92.