

Diversity of Shades of Silence: Russian Evangelicals during the War in Ukraine

NADEZHDA BELIAKOVA AND VERA KLIUEVA*

This article analyses the range of positions among Evangelicals in the context of Russia's attack on Ukraine. The "silence" characterizes evidence of the evangelicals' strategies that had long been developed in the context of continued marginalization of religious minorities by the Russian authorities, with the state's determination to create a loyal contingent of religious leaders. Some of the Evangelical leaders who were close to the centres of power were caught in a so-called trap of patriotism and have been compelled to demonstrate their support and solidarity to officials. However, public silence is far from heterogeneous and has many shades and nuances. This article analyses the anti-war statements of Evangelical leaders and shadow communication strategies in different evangelical communities. Particular attention is paid to a "guide" who suggested that Evangelical Christians-Baptists in Russia should take a consistent position, based on theological and political arguments, in Russia's war against Ukraine.

Keywords: *Evangelicals in Russia, Free Churches, Anti-War Movement, Christian Pacifism, War against Ukraine.*

Introduction

The current article analyses the range of positions among Evangelicals in the context of Russia's attack on Ukraine and the unfolding military conflict between the two countries. We focus on Russian Evangelicals, as their opinion is minimally represented in public space because in Russia, speaking against the war is restricted¹, while Ukrainian Evangelicals have criticized their lack of solidarity. The article provides an overview of the strategies that Russian Evangelicals use to express their position – in other

* Nadezhda Beliakova, PhD, Dr. Hi, Philipp Schwartz Initiative PostDoc Researcher Fellow, Department of History, Faculty of History, Philosophy and Theology at of the University of Bielefeld. Germany, Universitätsstr. 25 | D-33615 Bielefeld, Email: nadezhda.beliakova@uni-bielefeld.de, ORCID: 0000-0003-0470-4497.

Vera Kliueva, PhD, Dr. Hi, Independent Scholar, 625048, Kholodilnaya st., 15-104, Tyumen, Russia, Email: vormpk@gmail.com, ORCID: 0000-0001-5594-3952.

¹ For the views of Russian-speaking believers living outside Russia, mostly Orthodox ones, see: Anna M. Solarz and Iuliia Korniiichuk, "The Reactions of Orthodox Churches to Russia's Aggression towards Ukraine in the Light of the Postsecular Approach to

words, the various shades of silence peculiar to most Evangelicals in the context of increasing pressure on them within Russia.

We see it as important not to focus on evangelical leaders' public statements about the aggression and conflict, but rather on the shadow form of evangelical activity aimed at normalizing life, reducing conflict, and spreading the gospel, including through humanitarian activities. Thus, we pay special attention to the evangelicals who do not participate in the war: they consistently avoid participation in hostilities; they maintain relations with Ukrainians and develop their projects aimed at helping those suffering from the war, regardless of their religion. This approach is especially common to those evangelical communities that had previously been more radical in their attitude towards the Soviet state. After the collapse of the Union, they managed to maintain their transnational structures and distance themselves from state control in the post-Soviet context. These are primarily old Pentecostal unions, the Council of Churches of Evangelical Christian Baptists (ECB), and the ECB autonomous communities. We believe that consistent pacifism, more entrenched in historically "unregistered" evangelical communities, became particularly relevant during the war. It seems to have practical potential for grass-roots peace-making and reconciliation. The invisibility of that activity in the media space of the two countries can be explained both by the communities' unwillingness to attract hostile attention, especially dangerous in wartime, and the unpopularity of the concept of peace-making in the post-Soviet space.

Throughout the twentieth century, despite all of the social and political changes (the collapse of the Russian Empire, the formation and dissolution of the Soviet Union, the emergence of independent states)

IR Studies," *Religions*, 14, no. 4 (2023): 515, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14040515>, accessed November 20, 2023; Lena Surzhko Harned, "Russian World and Ukrainian Autocephaly: Religious Narratives in Anti-Colonial For the views of Russian-speaking believers living outside Russia, mostly Orthodox ones, see: Anna M. Solarz and Iuliia Korniiichuk, "The Reactions of Orthodox Churches to Russia's Aggression towards Ukraine in the Light of the Postsecular Approach to IR Studies," *Religions*, 14, no. 4 (2023): 515, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14040515>, accessed November 20, 2023; Lena Surzhko Harned, "Russian World and Ukrainian Autocephaly: Religious Narratives in Anti-Colonial Nationalism of Ukraine," *Religions*, 13, no. 4 (2022): 349, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13040349>, accessed November 20, 2023; Maija Penttilä, "Venäjän protestantit ja Venäjän sota Ukrainaa vastaan" ["Protestants in Russia and Ukraine"], <https://www.vartija-lehti.fi/venajan-protestantit-ja-venajan-sota-ukrainaa-vastaan/>, accessed November 18, 2023.

evangelical believers existed in a single space – communicational and geographical. A certain imbalance and mutual alienation began between Ukrainian and Russian evangelicals after 2014. However, strong ties were severed in 2022 due to Russian aggression against Ukraine.

As the war broke out, Russia's media published announcements by religious leaders in support of what is officially termed the “special military operation”. The appearance of Sergei Ryakhovsky, the head of the largest Russian Pentecostal association, the Russian Union of Christians of Evangelical Faith (ROSChVE), at a round table at the Russian State Duma in March of 2022 caused an enormous outcry.² Other announcements and actions by local/ regional church leaders in support of the war have also made the rounds. It was assumed that these pronouncements represented the position of the entire Russian evangelical community, and this therefore provoked a correspondingly negative/critical reaction from Ukraine, which was reinforced by the trauma of the war. The All-Ukrainian Union of Churches of Evangelical Christian-Baptists addressed the Russian Union of Evangelical Christian-Baptists leadership and churches, calling the position of many ministers of Russian Union of ECB churches unacceptable and irresponsible.³ Some Ukrainian evangelicals, losing patience with the lack of any criticism of Russia's politicians from their fellow believers, began writing about a break in relations with Russian evangelical associations and unions. On a personal level, there was a break in relations between many individual believers.⁴

² “Episkop Sergey Ryakhovskiy, kruglyy stol v Moskve o voyne, ubit’ vo imya mira i lyubvi v Ukraine” [“Bishop Sergei Ryakhovsky at a round table in the State Duma of the Russian Federation on the war, to kill in the name of peace and love in Ukraine”], filmed March 29, 2022; See here, minute 00:59: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uL21w9866wc>, accessed October 23, 2023. In April, S. Ryakhovsky, at the request of the Spiritual Council of Russian ChFE, <https://www.cef.ru/documents/docitem/article/1649389>, accessed June 14, 2023, delivered a “personal appeal” in which he explained his speech in the State Duma, saying that his words were taken out of context. See his personal appeal here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=duONR-SQCmWk>, accessed June 14, 2023. According to the available information, the video caused even more sharp and negative reaction than the previous one.

³ “Open appeal: The All-Ukrainian Union of Churches of Evangelical Christians-Baptists to the Russian Union of Evangelical Christians-Baptists leadership and churches,” <https://www.baptyst.com/do-rf/>, accessed June 14, 2023; “Vseukrayins’kyi Soyuz Tserkov Yevanhel’s’kykh Chrystyyan-Baptystiv” [“The All-Ukrainian Union of Churches of Evangelical Christians-Baptists”], <https://www.baptyst.com/do-rf/>, accessed June 14, 2023.

⁴ We can cite at least one such announcement: from Ukraine’s “Slovo Zhizni” [“Word of Life”], accessed 14 June, 2023; “Mega portal christskikh novosti” [“Mega por-

Russian voices opposing the war, describing it as a catastrophe both for Ukraine and for Russia, remain suppressed and go to this day unheeded. Yet, as early as March 2, 2022, there was a public “Appeal to compatriots”, in which evangelical church leaders called for repentance and for “an end to this senseless bloodshed”. In a few days, the petition had collected more than 400 signatures, but today, there are only 100 ministers-signatories mentioned.⁵ Due to the passing of the so-called “law on fakes” in March 2022⁶ signatures are no longer collected, and most of the surnames have been hidden. Even though there has been suppression, as recently as June of 2023, the secretary of the Russian Evangelical Alliance, Vitaly Vlasenko made an announcement condemning the fratricidal war.⁷

The leadership of other Russian evangelical unions did not explicitly condemn the war, but in the first days of the war offered to their fellow believers their prayers for peace. The leadership of the second-largest Pentecostal union, the Russian Church of Christians of the Evangelical Faith of Pentecostals, announced a prayer marathon for peace on February 26, 2022. Its superior Bishop Eduard Grabovenko spoke “to

tal of Christian News”], <https://www.invictory.org/news/church/32168-slovo-zhizni-ukrainy-sdelalo-otkrytoe-zayavlenie-v-svyazi-s-voennoj-agressiej-rossii>, accessed June 15, 2023.

⁵ The letter had been displayed on the “Mirt” Christian center’s website, but the page no longer exists. The text of the letter is available here: “Mega portal” [“Mega portal”], <https://www.invictory.org/news/church/31668-bolee-100-sluzhitelej-evangeliskij-tserkvej-rossii-podpisali-otkrytoe-obrashhenie-po-vojne-v-ukraine>, accessed June 14, 2023.

⁶ This is a reference to the Federal Law of March 4, 2022 No. 32-FZ: “On the introduction of amendments to the 6 Criminal Code of the Russian Federation and articles 31 and 151 of the Criminal Procedure Code of the Russian Federation.” This law makes it a crime to spread disinformation about the use of Russia’s military forces or to engage in any public actions aimed at discrediting the use of Russia’s military forces. Here, “discreditation” includes any anti-war statement. By November of 2022, more than 2,500 people had been charged under this law. Most of them were given fines, but some were sentenced to criminal liability.

⁷ “Vitaliy Vlasenko, general’nyy sekretar’ Russkogo evangelicheskogo al’yansa, prosit proshcheniya pered ukraintsami za vojnu” [“Vitaly Vlasenko, Secretary General of the Russian Evangelical Alliance, apologized to Ukrainians for the war”], <https://telegra.ph/Vitalij-Vlasenko-generalnyj-sekretar-Russkogo-evangelicheskogoalyansa-izvinilsya-pered-Ukraincami-za-voynu-03-14>, accessed June 14, 2023.

ask forgiveness from our brothers and sisters in Ukraine”⁸ On February 24, the Baptist Churches of the post-Soviet space, including Russian and Ukrainian churches, appealed to the President of Russia to “stop and sit at the negotiating table”.⁹ Some religious leaders left the country after opposing the war.

As we can see, even in February of 2022, the whole spectrum of opinions on the current situation were present within the evangelical community of Russia. At the same time, the realities of modern Russia are significantly different from the Ukrainian context, and Russian believers must constantly make a choice to support or not support the Russian government and its aggressive policies. We therefore identify the following key issues that we intend to address in detail: To what extent is it possible to talk about a united/coordinated position among Russian evangelicals? Can particular patterns of behaviour be identified among representatives of the different evangelical denominations in response to the progress of the war? How are evangelicals able to express themselves in Russia, in conditions where there is a state monopoly on the media, and legislation has been adopted that criminalizes the sharing of information about the war even on individuals’ social media pages?

The analysed data have been obtained during field observations and interviews of Russian and Ukrainian evangelical believers. Moreover, we used open sources – for example, reports on the official websites of churches and the YouTube channels of pastors. Some of our informants are quoted, with their permission, with full name, religious status and denomination. Others gave interviews on the condition of anonymity. In those cases, we will only indicate their denomination and status in the church/religious organization.

⁸ “Nachal’stvuyushchiy episkop RTsKhVE Eduard Grabovenko zayavil o tom, chto rossiyskie khristiane dolzhny prosit’ proshcheniya u khristian Ukrainy” [“The commanding bishop of the RC ChVE, Eduard Grabovenko, said that Russian Christians should ask for forgiveness from the Christians of Ukraine”], for forgiveness from the Christians of Ukraine,” <https://inlight.news/2022/07/08/eduard-grabovenko/>, accessed June 14, 2023.

⁹ “Obrashchenie k Prezidentu RF V.V. Putinu” [“Appeal to the President of the Russian Federation V.V. Putin”], <https://baptist.org.ru/news/main/view/article/1640387>, accessed June 14, 2023.

The specific nature of the position of evangelicals in Russia and Ukraine

During the Soviet era, most Protestant organizations were united under pressure from the authorities into one organization - the officially registered All-Union Council of Evangelical Christians and Baptists (AUCECB).¹⁰ Forced unification did not make the evangelical community homogeneous. Their theological affinity coexisted with strongly expressed and historically conditioned differences in everyday practices and traditions. The State openly used the registered structure to control and manipulate Soviet evangelicals. Existing outside of any legal framework was the Council of Churches of Evangelical Christians and Baptists (CCECB) and also other groups belonging to different denominations, the largest being the Pentecostals, who refused to register. In order to sow disunity among the illegal communities, the authorities allowed the registration of religious communities not as members of the AUCECB, but as autonomous organizations. During perestroika and the collapse of the Soviet Union there was an exodus of religious organizations from the AUCECB, which was replaced by structures within the new independent states: the Russian Union of Evangelical Christian-Baptists and the All-Ukrainian Union of Evangelical Christian-Baptist Churches. Until 2022, before the beginning of Russian aggression, these alliances were part of the Euro-Asian Evangelical Christian-Baptist Federation, which united evangelical Baptist believers from the former USSR.

Various associations of evangelical Christian-Baptists and Pentecostals were emerging in the post-Soviet space. For the majority of Evangelical communities, Ukraine remained a unique stronghold. Its population was highly religious throughout the Soviet era, and many Protestant leaders were from Ukraine. Neo-charismatic churches also appeared: they grew mostly from former Methodist and Presbyterian congregations, which recognized baptism by the Holy Spirit and speaking in tongues. Interestingly, in the context of the collapse of the Soviet Union, there were trends both towards and away from the centre. Thus, in August of 1992,

¹⁰ Nadezhda Beliakova and Vera Kliueva, "Special Features of the Evangelical Community in the Soviet Union: 10 Difficulties of Co-existence in Conditions of Harassment and Discrimination," *Religijski-filozofski Raksti*, XXIII (2017): 49-68, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22364/rfr.23>; Beljakova, "Evangelikale Christen und einige Prinzipien der radikalen Reformation im sowjetischen Nachkriegskontext," in *Ausstrahlung der Reformation* (Leiden: Brill, 2020) DOI: https://doi.org/10.30965/9783846764893_015.

“the United Church of Christians of Evangelical Faith of the CIS and Baltic States” (OTsChVE of the CIS and Baltic States) was established. Today, the United Church of Christians of Evangelical Faith (OTsChVE) is the only organization that unites the Pentecostal churches of the former USSR. Following the Soviet-time tradition of avoiding any contact with state bodies, the association does not have an officially registered structure. The OTsChVE is the successor to several conservative Pentecostal brotherhoods that refused official registration during the Soviet era.¹¹

The Council of Churches of Evangelical Christians and Baptists (CCECB), which was illegal in the Soviet Union, also retained its structure in the post-Soviet period and has now been renamed the International Council of Churches of Evangelical Christians and Baptists. It has brought together Evangelical Christian and Baptist churches from different parts of the world. At the same time, some “transnational” missions were established, and educational projects were implemented in the post-Soviet territory. One example is the Euro-Asian Accrediting Association (EAAA), which combined various evangelical (primarily Baptist and Pentecostal) theological schools.

Leaders of the evangelical unions had to develop relations with the new governments. Whereas some communities (particularly those that were not legalized in the Soviet era) endeavoured to keep their distance, other evangelicals were keen to cultivate relations with government bodies. For example, in Russia, in 1995 a faction of the community, headed by Sergei Ryakhovsky, who came from a Pentecostal family, broke away from the United Church of Christians of Evangelical Faith (OTsChVE) to form the Russian Union of Christians of Evangelical Faith (ROSChVE), which went on to become one of the main associations of Pentecostal churches in Russia. In Ukraine, evangelicals actively participated in public life and were even able to occupy senior government posts. Cooperation and the national orientation of those legal evangelical associations strengthened as the country’s leadership started to put democratic values into practice. The Ukrainian government’s weak social policy indirectly encouraged the development of the evangelicals’ social projects. In general, Ukraine had

¹¹ The head of OTsChVE is Bishop Giorgi Babii, who lives in Ukraine; his deputy is Vladimir Nozdrin, a Russian living in Krasnodar. The full name of the association is the *OTsChVE of the CIS and the Baltic States*. There are OTsChVE of Russia, OTsChVE of Ukraine, OTsChVE of Moldova, etc., within individual countries.

a much more democratic policy with evangelicals, and they were more represented in public space.

The opposite is true in Russia. Evangelicals have been gradually stigmatized and marginalized since the early 2000s. Although the ban on the activity of the Jehovah's Witnesses in the Russian Federation¹² did not directly concern the Protestants (as Jehovah's Witnesses are not evangelical believers), it was an understandable signal for believers: "they may come for you". Charismatic Pentecostal Churches came to be regularly attacked, and anti-cult rhetoric gained momentum. Despite this, evangelical congregations of all denominations have remained a fixed part of the religious landscape of Russia, though they are no longer given any media-publicity. Complicated legislation governing the activity of religious organizations and the increased fight against "religious extremism" have made them the constant object of negative attention.¹³

It cannot be said that Russian Protestants are completely excluded from dialogue with the authorities. The Pentecostal bishop Sergei Ryakhovsky has become the high-profile face of the Russian Protestant movement, easily recognizable and an active participant at public events. He became a member of the Civic Chamber of the Russian Federation in the early 2000s and is a permanent member of the Russian President's Council for Cooperation with Religious Associations. Ryakhovsky's membership in the State's public structures may have caused criticism, but at the same time, the very presence of an Evangelical within senior political circles has provided hope for the survival of evangelical congregations in Russia. Leaders of regional structures have also endeavoured to find a common language with local authorities. Interestingly, in modern Russia no public organization or media figure from the Baptist environment has appeared, while during the Soviet period, Baptists made up the majority of Evangelicals.

¹² In April of 2017, the Supreme Court of the Russian Federation banned the activities of Jehovah's Witnesses in the country, recognizing them as an extremist organization. The communities were then dispersed, the buildings confiscated, and some of the believers who continued to meet were arrested.

¹³ James T. Richardson, Galina A. Krylova and Marat S. Shterin, "Legal Regulation of Religions in Russia," in *Regulating Religion. Critical Issues in Social Justice*, ed. James T. Richardson (Boston, MA: Springer, 2004), 247-57; Jason Morton, *The Anti-cult Movement and Religious Regulation in Russia and the Former Soviet Union*, <https://www.uscirf.gov/publication/anti-cult-movement-and-religious-regulation-russia-and-former-soviet-union>, accessed June 15, 2023.

From attempt at a dialogue to collective silence

Since February of 2022, collective silence and consistent disassociation from politics have dominated the evangelical community of Russia. The position was formulated in March of 2022, a month after the beginning of the war, by pastor Mikhail Belyaev from the Voronezh ECB church “Source of Living Water”. Starting with the provocative statement: “Why are Russian Evangelical Churches silent?”, he concludes: “the Churches are not silent, they pray”.¹⁴ When asked directly about their position, an evangelical believer answers by indicating the need for prayer. This kind of behavior inspires the most criticism, as it allows for interpretation by pro-government analysts as solidarity with the authorities. The most striking examples are the publications of Roman Lunkin.¹⁵

Everything stated above does not mean that individual evangelical activists do not speak out on social networks like their personal pages or personal YouTube channels. Yet, by identifying such activists, we find ourselves in a difficult ethical position. At present in Russia, it is popular among both pro-government and opposition figures to categorize citizens in accordance with their positions on the war with Ukraine and to make lists.¹⁶ We believe that the keeping of lists is a practice that not only restricts free speech, but also strengthens civil confrontation and provides grounds for the further persecution of dissenters. In January 2023, the Ukrainian sanctions list appeared. It includes, along with 21 ROC MP representatives, Sergey Ryakhovsky.¹⁷

¹⁴ “Pochemu v Rossii tserkvi molchat?” [“Why are churches silent in Russia?”] filmed March 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VND5XQ61Zfo>, accessed June 16, 2023.

¹⁵ Roman Lunkin, “Mechty protestantskoj Rossii. Kak evangel’skie hristiane stali patriotami,” [“Dreams of Protestant Russia. How evangelical christians became patriots”] *Nezavisimaya gazeta*. January 31, 2023, https://www.ng.ru/ng_religii/2023-01-31/9_544_dreams.html, accessed June 15, 2023.

¹⁶ Russian religious scholar Roman Lunkin publishes in his telegram-channel lists of religious figures who have opposed the war in Ukraine. The Anti-Corruption Fund of oppositionist Alexei Navalny compiles and regularly adds to the “List of Corruptors and Warmongers,” where religious figures are also mentioned.

¹⁷ Decree of the President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelenskyi No. 26/2023: On the decision of the National Security and Defense Council of Ukraine dated January 23, 2023; “Fizichny osoby, do yakykh zastosovuyut’sya personal’ni spetsial’ni ekonomichni ta inshi obmezhuval’ni zakhody (sanktsiyi)” [“On the Application of Personal Special Economic and Other Restrictive Measures (Sanctions)”], https://www.president.gov.ua/storage/j-files-storage/01/17/09/ce55e4f8c480ed5abfd0b7f767e73ac2_1674508005.pdf, accessed 14 June, 2023.

In the summer and autumn of 2022, social media had already become the only space for public expression. After religious leaders supported Russia's actions, their statements circulated widely in the Russian media, and the believers opposed them on social networks. However, those who protested mostly left Russia. Thus, Vitaly Kogan, the bishop of the Association of Siberian Churches of Evangelical Christian-Baptists, who opposed Sergey Ryachovsky's pro-war (or, to be more precise) pro-governmental position,¹⁸ left for Germany in the summer of 2022. As a sign of disagreement with the actions of the Union's leadership and with Ryakhovsky personally, several bishops resigned their duties as superior bishop's plenipotentiaries.

Yuri Sipko is probably the most famous and authoritative Baptist who publicly opposes the war. In 2002-2010, he was the chairman of the Russian ECB Union, then stopped holding any official posts in the Russian Baptist Union, but remained in close contact with the current chairman, Petr Mickiewicz, and retained his moral authority in the brotherhood. From the beginning of the war, Sipko spoke daily about the unacceptability of war and strongly criticized the position of Patriarch Kirill. Yuri Sipko gave several interviews in which he detailed his position.¹⁹

Mikhail Sherin, the senior presbyter of Krasnoyarsk ECB before the war, consistently opposes the war on social networks. On November 26, he tried to explain on his Facebook page the absence of a consistent anti-war position among Russian evangelicals. He listed "the causes of criminal indifference and silence of many Russian Christians on the war in Ukraine":

¹⁸ The text of the letter can be read here in the comments to this clip: "Ot episkopa Ryakhovskogo stali otvorachivat'sya druz'ya posle ego zayavleniya v Gosdume" ["Friends began to turn away from bishop Ryakhovsky after his statement in the State Duma"], https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DFivRz5L_Y&t=0s, accessed June 14, 2023. And here V. Kogan tells why he wrote this letter "Ya prosto ne smog molchat'. Vitaliy Kogan o svoem pis'me Sergeyu Ryakhovskomu" ["I just couldn't keep quiet. Vitaly Kogan about his letter to Sergei Ryakhovsky"], <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PfeJ-nSp-KXc>, accessed June 14, 2023.

¹⁹ "Yuri Sipko: Chto my delaem v Ukraine ved' Bog skazal ne vozzhelay?" [Yuri Sipko: What Are We Doing in Ukraine, if God Said You Shall not Covet?], https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JHALMuq_Xj0, accessed June 14, 2023; "Yuri Sipko: o kompromissakh, strakhe, vlasti i tserkvi" ["Yuri Sipko: about Compromise, Fear, Power and Church. Direct Conversation"], <https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=KpC58rrx09Y>, accessed June 14, 2023.

1. Some people desire not to suffer; they fear to lose the remains of their former relative freedom.
2. People feel that the voice of the Protestant Church is not significant or important.
3. People divide the Kingdom of Heaven and the Kingdom of Earth. Some live on their “cloud”, not thinking much about the mission of the church on Earth. For others, this division has gone to another extreme. God’s Kingdom and Will are good for Sunday services. Everyday life is not different from the life of others. The same “zombie box” [the ironic name of the TV in Russian slang - Authors] forms our point of view more effectively than God’s Word, which is read superficially, without special application in life or is not read at all.
4. In recent years, there appeared many pseudo-believers who were “converted” by the gospel of social Christianity. And then it goes according to the Scripture: “yet he has no root in himself, but endures for a while, and when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately he falls away”. (Mt. 13.21)
5. The others are unable to withstand the majority pressure. When the people from the first four items of this list surround you, you need to have fundamental beliefs to oppose the opinion, or even the pressure, of those close to you. Become the “Galatian” who can say “anathema” to the false Gospel, confessed by authorities, be it the Apostle Paul or even “an angel from heaven”.²⁰ (Gal. 1.8)

The administrator of the evangelical newspaper Mirt, Roman Nosach, also opposes the war on social media, and his avatar bears the inscription “no to war”.

The examples given above are by no means exhaustive. As we have already written, we are strongly against compiling lists of anti-war activists. We only want to emphasize that the evangelical community in Russia has demonstrated a range of public attitudes towards the war in Ukraine. Without delving into a topic not directly related to modern warfare, we must mention, however, the role of “traditional values” rhetoric as well. Opposing “traditional values” to the liberal tendencies of the West is successful in evangelical circles; it influences the attitude to the war and shifts the focus from the aggression against Ukraine.

²⁰ Mikhail Sherin, [https:// www.facebook.com/permalink.php](https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php), accessed June 14, 2023.

It is necessary to remark as well that when contemporary evangelical activists create their anti-war narrative, they implicitly reproduce traditional evangelical accusations against the Orthodox Church. Opposing the militaristic agenda of Russian Orthodox leadership and promoting their “truly Christian, biblical” voice, evangelists blame the Orthodox Church for being “state-controlled”. But, despite occasional opposition, in the face of persistent media propaganda and prolonged war, evangelicals focus their daily lives on public silence.

Diversity of shades of silence

By the summer of 2023, it could already be said that for a large part of the Russian evangelical community, silence had become the most typical behavioural strategy. There may be several reasons for silence. It was most precisely formulated at the beginning of the war by Alexei Markevich, the academic vice-rector of the Moscow Theological Seminary for Evangelical Christians and Baptists (ECB), and pastor of the ECB “Salvation” church in Moscow. According to him: “[regional religious] communities are dominated by the attitude «let’s not talk about it». Since it dominates, it is therefore very difficult to understand why they are silent”.²¹ The war has a direct impact on the position of evangelicals within Russia. Now, the main request of the authorities is to keep silent and be as invisible as possible.

The campaign against the leaders of the “New Generation” Pentecostal churches was seen as such a signal to all evangelicals. As early as August of 2021, the Russian Prosecutor’s Office recognized the activities of the international Christian movement “New Generation” (Latvia) and the Spiritual Administration of Evangelical Christians of the Ukrainian Christian Church “New Generation” (Ukraine) as undesirable on Russian territory. Such a decision means that those organizations will not be able to establish their outposts in Russia, and will have to stop the activities of existing ones.²² At the same time, in Russia, 25 Evangelical

²¹ Interview with Alexei Markevich, the academic vice-rector of the Moscow Theological Seminary for Evangelical Christians and Baptists and pastor of the ECB. The interview was taken by N. Beliakova, on 22 August, 2022 on Zoom (Alexei was in Moscow).

²² “V Rossii priznana nezhelatel’noy deyatel’nost’ chetyrekh organizatsiy «Novoe pokolenie»” [“In Russia, the Activities of Four New Generation Organizations are Recognized as Undesirable”] <https://www.sova-center.ru/religion/news/harassment/intervention/2021/08/d44777/>, accessed June 14, 2023.

(Pentecostal) churches of the same name²³ operate that have nothing to do with the movement “New Generation”. During 2022, several pastors from different Russian cities (Chelyabinsk, Sochi, Anapa, Kemerovo, and Novokuznetsk) were arrested or fined. Their infraction was that they headed churches named “New Generation”.²⁴ These cases are well known to evangelical believers and are taken as an example of what can happen if one opposes the generally accepted version. Alexey Markevich directly says: “The action against «New Generation» is clear intimidation. It seems to me that was a signal to all evangelicals to «put up and shut up».”²⁵ Therefore, the fear of repression by the authorities and the unwillingness to put at risk those who are traditionally perceived in society as unreliable or as part of the fifth column, are among the reasons for the silence.

Our anonymous source from OTsChVE told us about the requirements that security agencies (the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the Federal Security Service (FSB)) impose upon Evangelical churches. The current principle is “at least keep a lid on it”, which means they are being asked not to go public with any comments on military operations. At the same time, there are not usually any complaints addressed to OTsChVE churches in this regard, as they never comment on political issues. The situation in relation to those who have received some form of government support (grants, for example) is more complicated. These organizations are required to affirm their loyalty. Our source expressed this as follows:

Because ROSChVE has begun to get support from the government and the authorities, the head of the Union had to make a statement about the potential for involvement in politics. That is why OTsChVE has always been wary of receiving government support because you always have to pay for any proximity to the authorities. It's better to stay out of it.²⁶

Another argument for silence is to try, by avoiding difficult topics, to reduce tensions and discussions within the community. The outbreak of hostilities on the territory of Ukraine, together with the adopted “fakes

²³ “O deyatel'nosti nekommercheskikh organizatsiy” [“About the Activities of Non-profit Organizations”], <http://unro.minjust.ru/NKO.aspx>, accessed June 14, 2023,

²⁴ “Challenges to Freedom of Conscience in Russia in 2022,” <https://www.sova-center.ru/en/religion/publications/2023/04/d47036/>, accessed June 14, 2023.

²⁵ Interview with Markevich.

²⁶ Interview with E.N., Pentecostal bishop of the United Church of Christians of Evangelical Faith (OTsChVE). The interview was taken by Kliueva on 25 August 2022 in Moscow (Russia).

laws” (Russia’s wartime censorship laws, March 2022), which envisage criminal responsibility for statements against the war, displacing alternative opposition media, has created an extremely specific situation within Russian society as a whole. The lack of space for public discussion and dialogue between the authorities and society has led to the unfolding tensions within the society breaking through on social networks. In this regard, the social networks of evangelicals are no exception. The radicality of messages in evangelical social media became prominent during the pandemic of Covid19 (when a number of restrictions were placed on the religious practices of believers). Even then social media outbursts began to be perceived by congregational leadership as a threat to the community. Church leaders are trying to ban believers from making statements, arguing such measures to prevent the division of communities and their politicization.

Our anonymous source inside the ROSChVE, who made anti-war statements on social media at the beginning of the war, has said there is no unanimous support within the Union for the “special operation”. Some are for, some against, but most leaders – bishops and senior presbyters - prefer to say nothing and not discuss the subject. The reasons for silence are fear and anxiety: “They are afraid for their church and for themselves and their families. They have something to lose - the church, people, their ministry.”²⁷ There is an assumption being expressed that if the Pentecostals start voicing an anti-war position, the Pentecostal movement might face the same fate as the Jehovah’s Witnesses: “Today it’s all too easy to bring a case against the Pentecostals as an extremist organization. Like what happened to the Jehovah’s Witnesses.”²⁸ Within particular local churches, ministers are introducing a ban on any discussion of political issues to avoid conflicts and splits between members of their congregations: “Inside the house of prayer, inside the church we don’t engage in politics. As soon as I provide a political evaluation of events there will immediately be a backlash.”²⁹

Alexei Markevich describes a similar situation:

²⁷ Interview with S.E., Pentecostal bishop of the Russian Union of Christians of Evangelical Faith (ROSChVE). The interview was taken by Kliueva on 17 August 2022 in Moscow (Russia).

²⁸ Interview with S.E.

²⁹ Interview with S.E.

As soon as there's any sign of tension or dissent on a topic in any of the churches there is virtually an official directive imposed: no one should give any opinion on social media and certainly not from the pulpit. I've experienced it myself. At one point, I arrived in a provincial town and gave a sermon in which I mentioned the Mariupol refugees who were staying with us. After the service, a woman came up to me with tears in her eyes and said, "thank you for talking about this. Here, no one says anything at all about this".³⁰

The motto "Church outside politics" also motivates silence. According to one of the leaders of one of the largest associations: "Our business is to preach the Gospel and not to make statements."³¹

Markevich characterized it this way:

It does not mean we support the government or approve of its policy as a whole (within evangelical circles there are tensions associated with the restriction on religious freedom, and that is not forgotten). But the idea that the 'collective West' is to blame does exist. All this ends with the words "we don't know the details, they are not telling us the truth. So we'll keep quiet".³²

One of the Pentecostal leaders told us that immediately after the announcement of the "special military operation",³³ he declared at a prayer meeting that political discussions belong outside the church walls, and that only prayer is allowed in church. In the fall of 2022, the ROSChVE Assembly (the governing body of ROSChVE) recommended that believers avoid political discussions, accepting the situation as inevitable:

We realize that some events happen and cannot be influenced. In these circumstances, clerics cannot afford to join in panic or confusion. It is unacceptable to involve ourselves in discussions that are purely political. It is a time of prayer, active service to people and awareness of what God does.³⁴

³⁰ Interview with Markevich.

³¹ Interview with S.E.

³² Interview with Markevich.

³³ Special military operation – a euphemism used in official Russian rhetoric to denote military action in Ukraine.

³⁴ "Itogovoe zayavlenie Sobora Tsentralizovannoy religioznoy organizatsii Rossiyskogo ob"edinennogo soyuza khristian very evangel'skoy (pyatidesyatnikov)" ["Final Statement of the Council of the Centralized Religious Organization of the Russian United Union of Christians of the Evangelical Faith (Pentecostals)"] <https://www.cef.ru/documents/docitem/article/1679993>, accessed 14 June, 2023.

In Russian OTsChVE Churches (a community descended from Soviet unregistered Pentecostals) one may be punished for speaking on political topics, or even excommunicated. Strict prohibitions on mentioning the narratives connected with Ukraine or military actions also exist in the churches of evangelical Christian- Baptists in the Central Asian republics and Belarus.

Our materials show that personal reasons for silence vary: some people worry about themselves and their loved ones, who are often found on different sides of the border, while others fear harm to their community/ church. As our evangelical friends told us, since March of 2022, FSB agents have been regularly coming to the church leaders, recommending that they not speak on “sharp political topics”.

The invisible part of the wartime context

Whereas the social media feeds of Ukrainian evangelicals are full of reports about their active social work, about tragic deaths, about the heroism of the defenders, new opportunities, support for their brothers in the faith and numerous international aid operations, Russian evangelicals, in contrast, are psychologically repressed and depressed. We see how their traumatic Soviet experiences—fear of persecution, the habit of keeping quiet and keeping one’s head down—have become dominant in their environment. Our sources often talked about the attention the security services pay them. The break in relations with their fellow believers in Ukraine has receded into the background against increased pressure at home.

Russian evangelicals “switched on” their longstanding latent fear of being seen as in the “fifth column”. There are grounds for this: evangelicals see the signals emanating from the security structures. For example, on August 14, 2022, news emerged of simultaneous searches carried out of members of the “New Generation” church across different regions of Russia: in Moscow, Kemerovo, Novosibirsk, Chelyabinsk, Sochi and Krasnodar, resulting in several arrests. State media called the church members a “sect” that supported the Ukrainian Azov battalion, which is banned in Russia.³⁵ In addition, on August 16, 2022, Interfax’s religious service reported the arrest of Nikolai Ulitin, the pastor at the

³⁵ See collection of media reports: “V neskol’kikh regionakh proshli obyski v tserkvyakh «Novoe pokolenie» po ugolovnomu delu o sotrudnichestve s nezheatel’noy organizatsiyey” [“In several regions, searches were conducted in «New generation» churches on

“Christ the Redeemer” Church of Evangelical Pentecostal Christians in Moscow.³⁶ Evangelicals regard these actions as signals and try even harder “not to provoke anything”. On the other hand, at the local level, municipal authorities are suggesting that evangelical churches help restore the infrastructure in Ukraine’s occupied territories, which causes various problems.

On the Russian side, we observe a strong tendency to resurrect late Soviet patterns of behaviour. However, the spread of internet and social networks has radically reshaped the conditions of communication within the community. At the same time, Russian evangelicals have proved defenceless against TV propaganda. Whereas in the Soviet era they avoided watching television, today this ban (or strong recommendation) is retained only among conservative Pentecostals. That said, Russian Baptists also recommend that members of their congregations limit how much television they watch. Volodymyr Antonyuk, the head of the All-Ukrainian Union of ECB Churches, commented on this topic as early as March of 2022:

He recalled the time of the USSR, when the church had the strength to oppose and to overcome, distinguishing God’s truth from the lies of the devil. But when freedom came, something tragic happened – people began watching television and the internet, and many pastors lost the ability to discern the dishonest plans of Satan. Christians in earlier times did not believe Stalin or Khrushchev, but now they put their trust in the ‘new defender’, Putin. Many among Christians and their pastors, unfortunately, have more faith in the ‘new Bible’ of television than in the testimonies of their brothers and sisters in the faith.³⁷

It is interesting that our anonymous source from OTsChVE also spoke about this. In his opinion, Russian conservative Pentecostals are protected from the influence of Russian propaganda by not watching television. “In our communities there is a clear disapproval of listening to news

criminal case of cooperation with undesirable organization”], <https://www.sova-center.ru/religion/news/harassment/intervention/2022/08/>, accessed June 14, 2023.

³⁶ “Challenges to Freedom.”

³⁷ “Volodymyr Antonjuk zasudyv movchannja sluzhyteliv slov’jans’kyh jevangel’s’kyh cerkov z inshyh kraï’n pro agresiju RF” [“Volodymyr Antonyuk Condemned the Silence of Ministers of Slavic Evangelical Churches from other Countries 28 regarding the aggression of the Russian Federation”], https://risu.ua/golova-baptistskogo-soyuzu-ukrayini-zasudiv-movchannya-sluzhiteliv-slovyanskih-yevangeliskih-cerkov-z-inshih-krayin-shchodo-agresiyi-rf_n127618, accessed June 14, 2023.

programs, media. It is not recommended to watch TV. Therefore, in my opinion, believers are protected from the influence of propaganda.”³⁸ -

Ministry to the suffering

During the war, evangelicals from both sides of the conflict have provided aid to the refugees. However, on the Russian side, this work was not noticeably advertised. If at the beginning of the war Russian evangelicals used to visit Mariupol, more recently, trips to the so-called Luhansk and Donetsk People’s Republics have become more popular. So, now they regularly visit destroyed towns in those territories, for example, Rubezhnoe. A. Markevich talked about the experience of evangelical Christians-Baptists:

In recent months, the idea of humanitarian aid for refugees has gained active support and there are visits to temporary accommodation facilities (TA facilities). Refugees are being sent to TA facilities in different areas where they are helped by members of local churches. I heard that somewhere they initially did not let Christians in, but now it’s the reverse; in many areas believers are actively participating in this voluntary work. Once people were shocked by the picture of a bombed Mariupol, many churches had the idea of visiting Mariupol and helping those in need there.³⁹

For some months (during the spring - summer 2022), evangelicals were running a project involving visits to the Taganrog temporary accommodation point for refugees.

This is one of the largest temporary accommodation points for refugees that people end up in once they leave the war zone. It is located in a large sports hall full of beds. Volunteers travel there and help people with whatever they need – from conversation to help with their groceries. There is also a warehouse there, where Christians collect and distribute items. The situation of evangelical volunteers is complicated: on the one hand, officials are pleased to have volunteers, but as soon as they start preaching, the officials get very agitated and warn them that they will stop allowing Christians in.⁴⁰

The OTsChVE churches also provide humanitarian aid. They have developed a strict rule that “humanitarian aid does not include what can

³⁸ Interview with E.N.

³⁹ Interview with Markevich.

⁴⁰ Interview with Markevich.

be used for military purposes. That means not helping with the purchase of helmets, bulletproof vests, weapons. These are solely food, essentials, and assistance in maintenance and repair of prayer houses”.⁴¹ Russian Pentecostals are also operating inside the Luhansk and Donetsk Districts. This is how humanitarian aid is organized within the Russian OTsChVE:

For example, there is a humanitarian convoy being organized – a number of large trucks are loaded with foodstuffs, water and all the essentials and sent to Mariupol. Those involved in the convoy – both the drivers and support workers, meaning those who will distribute the aid – are all active members of OTsChVE churches. Other congregations collect funds for them. We are certain that when we give money directly it doesn't go toward buying drones, meaning we are not financing armed units on either side.⁴²

Christian volunteers not only distribute aid, but also hold services, as there are virtually no clergy left in Mariupol.

Within Russia, refugees are not only helped to settle in, but also given support if they want to leave Russia for Europe. It was only possible to reach Russia via the humanitarian corridor from Luhansk and Donetsk, but from Russia, refugees are trying to get to EU countries. Pentecostals and Baptists provide such aid and support in St Petersburg, for example.

Even the volunteer activities of evangelicals from Russia are negatively assessed by outspoken Ukrainian activists. Volunteer activities in the occupied territories are perceived by the Ukrainian side not as assistance for suffering people, but rather as a “bayonet mission”, as if Russian believers are using the seizure of territories to spread their influence. Despite the attempts of the Russian side to coordinate their trips with Ukrainian evangelicals' representatives, this does not always work out, and tension persists. Moreover, within communities in the occupied territories, confrontation and division grow, while the fragility of the State's authority contributes to increased conflict within the communities as well.

Values of pacifism and recognition of war as unjust as the basis for the continuation of interaction across the front line

Within global Protestant community, pacifism and non-violence concepts diverge considerably. The fracture line is between those who are for

⁴¹ Interview with E.N.

⁴² Interview with E.N.

or against participation in war or in military service during peacetime.⁴³ In most European countries, this problem only appeared during the World Wars of the twentieth century, whereas for the Soviet Union and the post-Soviet countries, it arose in peacetime due to conscription. Cases of conscientious objection are common to many different denominations of believers, not only to evangelicals. The most consistent conscientious objectors have been Mennonites, true Orthodox Christians, Jehovah's Witnesses, Seventh Day Adventists, members of the EChB Council of Churches and Pentecostals (Christians of the Evangelical Faith).⁴⁴

Some basis for the pacifist beliefs of the evangelicals was laid in the early twentieth century in the Russian Empire, especially during the Russian Civil War of 1917-1921. The doctrine was formulated in the 1920s and became more common in the later Soviet time.⁴⁵

But under state pressure, all evangelical institutions recognized personal choice as a basic principle for military service. The declaration of compliance with civil duties, i.e. military service, was particularly important when building relations with the state and Soviet society. Only the Mennonites were consistently anti-militarist. Even the confessional researchers state that "in the whole history of Evangelical-Baptist brotherhood no question has brought so much confusion to the ranks of Baptists and Evangelical Christians as the question of military service

⁴³ Mulford Q. Sibley, "The Political Theories of Modern Religious Pacifism," *The American Political Science Review* 37, No. 3 (1943): 439-54, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1948927>; John Howard Yoder, *Nevertheless: the varieties and shortcomings of religious pacifism* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1992); Andrew Fiala, "Religious and Secular Visions of Peace and Pacifism," *Religions* 13, no. 11 (2022): 1121, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13111121>, accessed June 14, 2023; Daniel A. Dombrowski, *Christian Pacifism* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992).

⁴⁴ Tatiana Pavlova, ed., *Dolgiy put' rossiyskogo patsifizma: Ideal mezhdunarodnogo i vnutrennego mira v religiozno-filosofskoy i obshchestvennoy mysli Rossii* [The Long Path of Russian Pacifism: The Ideal of International and Internal Peace in the Religious, Philosophical and Social Thought of Russia] (Moscow: Institut vseobshchey istorii RAN, 1997), 115-21; Irina Gordeeva, "The Religious Roots of the Pacifist Movement in the Russian Empire and the USSR in the 20th Century", *Religiski-Filozofiski Raksti*, vol. 25 (2019): 242-64.

⁴⁵ Andrei Savin, "Alternativnaya grazhdanskaya sluzhba v Sovetskoy Rossii v 1920-1930-e gody: normativno-pravovoe pole i prakticheskaya organizatsiya", *Instituty grazhdanskogo obshchestva v Sibiri (XX - nachalo XXI v.)* [Civil society institutions in Siberia (XX - early XXI century)] (Novosibirsk: Institut istorii SO RAN, 2009), 71-93; Mikhail Yu. Krapivin, Aleksandr Ya. Leykin and Arthur G. Dalgatov, *Sud'by khristianskogo sektantstva v Sovetskoy Rossii (1917-konets 1930-kh godov)* [The Fate of Christian Sectarianism in Soviet Russia (1917-late 1930s)], (St. Petersburg: Izdatel'stvo SPbGU, 2003).

and conscription”.⁴⁶ An official history of the EChB in the USSR, published in 1989, claims that “Most Baptists and evangelicals, with few exceptions, went to the army and participated in the wars”.⁴⁷ Throughout the Soviet period, the evangelical community developed several strategies, ranging from absolute refusal of military/army service, refusal to serve with a weapon, or refusal to take a military oath, to participation in hostilities.

Pacifism and, in modern post-Soviet period, alternative civilian service have become markers of evangelical communities in confrontation with official authorities. That is equally true both for Russian and Ukrainian evangelicals. Their common position on participation/non-participation in the war kept the fragile unity of their confessional space. Though Ukrainian charismatic Pentecostals broke their relations with their fellow believers in Russia,⁴⁸ the structures of the Baptist MSC Union and the Pentecostal OTsChVE Union continue to exist.⁴⁹

A Bishop of the conservative Pentecostal Union, OTsChVE, spoke about what is being done in conservative Pentecostal environments to preserve fraternal relations in the face of war. Since February-March of 2022, the Church has been strictly banned from discussing political issues. In addition, conservative Pentecostals maintain a consistent position of pacifism. It is important to note that OTsChVE is headed by Ukrainian bishop Georgy Babiy, who in the early days of the war spoke

⁴⁶ Sergei N. Savinskiy, *Istoriya evangel'skikh khristian baptistov Ukrainy, Rossii, Belorussii (1917-1967)* [*History of Evangelical Christians Baptists of Ukraine, Russia, Belarus (1917-1967)*], (St Petersburg: Bibliia dlia vsekh, 2001), 27.

⁴⁷ *Istoriya evangel'skikh khristian-baptistov v SSSR* [*The history of Evangelical Christians Baptists in the USSR*], (Moscow: Vsesoyuznyy sovet evangel'skikh khristian-baptistov, 1989), 176.

⁴⁸ One example that can be mentioned is the letter of the Union of Christian Churches of Ukraine “The Word of Life,” where they report the termination of relations with the “Word of Life” movement of Russia due to the absence of any reaction of Russians to the statements of the ROSChVE leadership. See: “Pastory-cerkvej-dvizheniya-slovo-zhizni-ukrainy-prinyali-reshenie-prekratit-bratskie-otnosheniya-s-pastorami-dvizheniya-slovo-zhizni-rossii,” [“Pastors of the churches of the Word of Life movement in Ukraine have decided to end fraternal relations with pastors of the Word of Life movement in Russia”] <https://inlight.news/2022/05/30/pastory-cerkvej-dvizheniya-slovo-zhizni-ukrainy-prinyali-reshenie-prekratit-bratskie-otnosheniya-s-pastorami-dvizheniya-slovo-zhizni-rossii/>, accessed June 14, 2023. Although several pastors of “Word of Life” declared their withdrawal from ROSChVE, there was no public information about it. We were told about it by a pastor who left the Pentecostal Union.

⁴⁹ Unfortunately, in 2023 this structure is in a state of uncertainty. The religious leaders themselves suggest that it will cease to exist in the coming years.

to his fellow believers about the need to maintain a pacifist position. The Churches included in OTsChVE in Ukraine consequently also adhere to a position of non-interference in political issues. That is why our source said:

Even representatives of government bodies understand this position and respect it. At all points, Churches belonging to OTsChVE Ukraine have been able to support their members in Donbas and Luhansk, have preserved good relations with Crimea, and after 2014 continued to have contact with them.⁵⁰

Contemporary Pentecostal pacifism stems from the tradition, established in the Soviet era, of believers refusing to do military service. Today, the literal meaning of the commandment “thou shalt not kill” and “judge not, that ye be not judged” is used as grounds for pacifism. According to our source: “The conservative Pentecostal movement interprets these passages of scripture literally. And that is why we refuse on principle to get involved in politics, and by that we do not just mean participation in military service but any discussion of political issues.”⁵¹

At present, alternative civilian service is an option for maintaining pacifist views. Therefore, Russian and Ukrainian youth from conservative Pentecostal Churches, as well as from the International Union of Council of Churches ECB, claim their right to alternative civilian service during military drafts. A consistent adherence to pacifism means the authorities are aware of the attitude of believers to military service in advance and do not insist on mobilizing them:

According to those who visited Donetsk and Luhansk, there were no complaints on the part of the authorities about our members. Our church has always adopted a pacifist stance. We have never taken up arms, not in Soviet times, not when Ukraine was liberated and not even now when they have ended up on the territory of the self-proclaimed republics. Our views have not changed. If members of our congregation were prepared to take up arms yesterday, whereas today they say they are pacifists, such a change would provoke annoyance and a perception that, in this case, people are being disingenuous. In conditions of mobilization, stunts like that do not work.⁵²

Believers can provide help to the injured or work as volunteers.

⁵⁰ Interview with E.N.

⁵¹ Interview with E.N.

⁵² Interview with Markevich.

In September of 2022, when a so-called “partial” mobilization began in Russia, evangelical believers had to react quickly to new threats. According to our conversations with the believers, the autumn mobilization did not affect them much. Evangelicals usually have many children, and the enlistment offices have nothing to do with them (it was officially declared that men with more than four children are not subject to call-up). Some of the believers received a dispensation (*bron'* in Russian) or a respite from mobilization by working in sensitive enterprises (strategically important for the state), while some have left the country.

But most importantly, from the first days of the mobilization, lawyers from the religious community began to develop methods and step-by-step instructions on how to proceed in case of receiving a summons. Thus, Pentecostal pastors get a certificate confirming their status: “According to the internal canonical establishment of Evangelical Christians, is a priest of Evangelical Christians”. Among the characteristics that are recommended to be mentioned are “openly professes Christian faith and pacifist beliefs, promotes the corresponding way of life”. Those examples are given from the internal archive of the OTsChVE conservative Pentecostal union. This rapid reaction of religious associations allowed evangelical believers to avoid participation in hostilities. There were precedents when the court protected the believers’ right to alternative civilian service. Such a case occurred in the summer of 2022 in Gus-Khrustalny (Vladimir region) with Pentecostal Danil Zaitsev.⁵³ It is also necessary to mention several cases when believers have been prosecuted during the mobilization. However, in those trials, believers did not declare their religious beliefs, but asserted their rights as secular people. As mobilization continues, the number of requests for alternative civilian service is gradually increasing.

However, in wartime it is difficult to achieve the right to alternative civilian service. While in Russia believers are still able to exercise this constitutional right, in Ukraine they may already be prosecuted for refusal to perform military service. By May of 2023, six such cases had been reported. However, in Ukraine there is an unspoken practice of not interfering with evangelization and social activity of EChB and other

⁵³ “V Guse-Khrustal’nom prizyvniku-pyatidesyatniku udalos’ obzhalovat’ otkaz v prokhozhdenii AGS” [“In Gus-Khrustalny, a Pentecostal Conscript Managed to Appeal against the Refusal to Undergo Alternative Civil Service”], https://www.sova-center.ru/religion/news/harassment/harassment-protection/2022/05/d46741/?sphrase_id=1416254, accessed June 14, 2023.

evangelicals, and we are aware of cases when believers managed to avoid conflict with the state over non-participation in hostilities.

The document “Notes on the Church’s Reaction to Military Actions: Russian ECB Churches” is crucial in the development of common moral/ethical guidelines towards the war among Russian Evangelical Christians-Baptists. This important text was published on the portal “Christians against the war” in January of 2023, access to which from Russia is limited. However, it actively circulates within the community.⁵⁴ The authors from the Russian staff of the ECB educational institutions, who wished to remain anonymous, considered it necessary to analyze the models of the community’s attitude to the war that developed during the war year. The article recorded three basic reactions to Russia’s military actions in Ukraine: approval, condemnation and the attempt to remain neutral. The authors demand an explanation from those Evangelical-Baptist believers who approve of the war: “why typical war actions are not sinful (or, in different words: why they are less evil than something that would have happened in the absence of these actions)”.⁵⁵ The authors insist on not talking about the war abstractly, and they give a list of specific actions, inevitably committed by the participants during or because of war. They offered those who approve of the war a clear question to answer for themselves and others: “When a Christian himself shoots at another person or helps his fellow servicemen who kill and commit other violent acts, how exactly should he justify himself before God?”⁵⁶

The attempt to remain neutral, the statement that the “Church is outside politics” does not work in the conditions of war and appears to the authors of the text to be a trick. They argue that, while speaking of neutrality, Baptists should be mindful of freedom of conscience. Therefore, “If we insist on freedom of religion, we have to admit that the state has no right to mobilize a person whose beliefs are against the war. Moreover, we must support such a person in his refusing to fight”.⁵⁷ Despite its emotionlessness and modest title “note”, the document clearly leads the

⁵⁴ “Zametki o reaktsii Tserkvi na voynu: Russkie Tserkvi Soyuza EChB” [“Notes on the Church’s Reaction to the War: Russian Churches of the EChB Union”], <https://shaltnotkill.info/zametki-o-czerkovnoj-reakczii-na-voennye-dejstviya/>, accessed June 16, 2023.

⁵⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁵⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁵⁷ *Ibidem*.

reader to understand the trap of the neutral position. It appeals to the “Invitation to Christian Ethics: Moral Reasoning and Contemporary Issues” of Ken Magnuson, who suggested five types of Christian behavior: pacifism, pragmatic pacifism, passivism, the concept of just war, and militarism. Referring to that classification, the authors note that, in the situation of war we cannot get rid of two questions. The first question is theological: “What is the biblical theology of war?” while the second is political: “Can we consider the war in Ukraine just, and what is the basis for our criteria of justice?” After reflecting on biblical notions of war, the authors question the criteria of a just war on both sides: Russia and Ukraine. They concluded, “It is impossible to find a meaningful justification for Christians to participate in Russia’s war with Ukraine on Russia’s side. Militarism is not justified biblically, and this war by Russia has nothing to do with just war”.⁵⁸

Perhaps this document will go down in history as the most argumentative and articulated statement of the Evangelicals’ position. In any case, Russian evangelical leaders should not be perceived as passive victims. The Soviet experience gave them the skills to interact with unfriendly authorities, to find compromises with them, to develop survival strategies, including through their own international initiatives. Thus, another reason for silence was the emerging resumption of relations between the leadership of Russian and Ukrainian Baptist Union: “We refuse official comments not just because we are afraid, but not to ruin the process of restoration of our relations.”⁵⁹ The first step towards each other was made at the meeting in Turkey in early August of 2022, as reported to us by an interlocutor close to the leadership of the Russian ECB Union.

The war ruptured the unified educational space of evangelicals in the post-Soviet territory.⁶⁰ It was supported by the Euro-Asian Accrediting Association (EAAA) with an office in Rivne (Ukraine). However, the organization declared itself unable to function after the beginning of the war in Ukraine⁶¹ and in May of 2022 ceased to exist. The official statement

⁵⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁵⁹ Interview with Markevich.

⁶⁰ In recent years, evangelical educational organizations within Russia and Ukraine have generally operated independently of one another. One unique example of cooperation among Baptists in education was a program in Bryansk organized jointly by the Odessa and Moscow theological seminaries.

⁶¹ This organization was one of eight regional associations, which made up the International Council for Evangelical Theological Education (ICETE). This association

above all indicates cultural changes: changes in educational standards in theological education and wide dissemination of national languages, not only Russian. At the same time, there appeared discussions on the possibility of establishing new subregional associations. Thus, Central Asian educational institutions, which are small and hope to coordinate efforts, initiated a preliminary meeting in Almaty in July of 2022. In October, there was a constituent meeting online on the creation of a new educational association, which would include evangelical educational institutions of Belarus, Russia, Central Asia, and Armenia. In April of 2023, a general meeting was held in Kyrgyzstan. In the spring of 2023, the leaders of OTsChVE, including its Russian and Ukrainian representatives, held their first meeting in person since the pandemic (2020). The meeting discussed both educational activities and possible joint assistance to believers in the occupied territories.

Conclusion

A year after the outbreak of war, some preliminary conclusions can be made. As we see, the first period, when both Ukrainian believers and Russian authorities demanded from Russian evangelicals to declare which side they were on, has long been over. Now, Russian authorities have adopted a policy of preventive intimidation, developing another bill against religious associations. The experience of Soviet evangelicals has taught them to recognize such signals. Therefore, the majority of believers choose a strategy of silence – no public discussions at all.

After the announcement of mobilization in September of 2022, Russian evangelicals turned from resonant pro-war statements to words of support for the mobilized and their families. Only a few are still not afraid to oppose the war. Russian authorities have no intention to strengthen the anti-war movement inside the country. On the contrary, they broadcast

tried to introduce certain educational standards based on the Bologna Process. It had no ties whatsoever with state education systems and was not uniform even within itself. From its accreditation work, the EAAA ran CPD courses, for example, for seminary employees and teachers. After 2014, these meetings were held initially in Minsk (Belarus) and then in Chişinău (Moldova). During the pandemic, the meetings were held online. Once the war started, about 30 Ukrainian schools wrote a letter saying they wanted to wind up the association. Markevich commented: “The constitution does allow this possibility. A general meeting of the association was held on Zoom and two thirds voted for the dissolution of the EAAA. The main reason was the impossibility of working while there was a war on. Information about the dissolution has been published and the winding-up committee is currently doing its job.” Interview with Markevich.

the narrative that Russian evangelicals are loyal to the current regime and cooperate with the Russian administration in the occupied territories. Those local volunteer projects give evangelicals a prospect of missionary work, solidarizing them with their fellow believers. However, those projects inevitably make their participants dependent on the favor of local authorities. Therefore, Russian evangelicals appear in public spaces as instruments/conductors of the Russian regime, while actually being its hostages. At the same time, the war has given Russia a unique experience in building diversity and a new stage of civic-mindedness.

Another important feature of the war has been the internal tension within the evangelical community: the growth of conflict and intolerance. Last autumn the unity of Russian, Ukrainian, and Belarusian evangelicals, which started cracking in 2014, seemed to completely collapse. Nevertheless, we already see a roadmap within the Evangelical community, and there is still hope for a new relationship. Those evangelicals, who: a) hold a consistent pacifist position and b) create alternative spaces for communication beyond the war discourse play a major role in this process.