

Holy Rus' and Holy War

Historical Roots and Modern Guise of Apocalyptic Thought in Present-Day Russia

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In March 2024, the World Russian People's Council unanimously adopted a declaration in which the Russian invasion of Ukraine was glorified as a "holy war" and justified as part of Russia's eschatological mission to protect the world from the onslaught of Western Satanism and the rule of the Antichrist. What seems to be a weird and absurd idea at first sight, has in fact a long history in Russian religious thought. This paper shows how Patriarch Kirill's justification and sacralization of war and the idea of an eschatological mission of Holy Rus' draws from older sources, namely from the 16th-century state ideology of Russia. These ideas were then revived in the 19th century and are now applied by the hierarchy of the Russian Orthodox Church to Russia's war against Ukraine. Furthermore, the current support for the Kremlin's neo-imperialist policy by the Moscow Patriarchate was prepared over the last three decades by an increasingly close alliance of Church hierarchs with Russian ultra-nationalists and ultimately culminated in the present propagation of a specific theology of war.

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Religion and Violence

In our times the unholy alliance between religion and violence has unfortunately become a sad reality for many people. In various parts of the world, news of violence motivated or legitimized by religion is disseminated by the media almost daily. We encounter the militant politicization of religion and the sacralization of violence not only in fundamentalist Islam in the Middle East, but also here in Europe in the form of jihadist acts of terror. Furthermore, religion plays a central role in the context of the Gaza war, but also in acts of violence by radical Jewish settlers in the West Bank. Elsewhere, such as in Myanmar, a Muslim minority is itself a victim of bloody violence, which in turn is religiously legitimized from a Buddhist perspective.

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Christianity, too, has a long history of religiously legitimized violence. Since the so-called “Constantinian shift” in the 4th century, church and state have increasingly used violence against non-Christians, but also against Christian dissenters and schismatics, such as Novatians, Melitians and Donatists, Priscillians and Miaphysites. In the Christian Middle Ages, this ultimately led to the emergence of the idea of a “holy war” against those who profess another faith.¹ For this, Christian theology would refer to the Old Testament concept of Yahweh as a “warrior” or to the “wars of Yahweh” (Exod. 14.14; 15.3; 17.16; Num. 21.14; Deut. 20.3-4; Josh. 6, etc.), to the terms “Yahweh of hosts” or “Lord of hosts” (1 Sam. 1.3; Isa. 3.1; 6.3; Jer. 27.4, etc.), or to the extermination of worshippers of idols commanded by God. In the Middle Ages, the Crusades, the wars against the Cathars, and the Hussite wars were examples of such religiously legitimized violence.

Of course, in many, perhaps nearly all of these violent conflicts, religion was not the primary catalyst for war and violence. Instead these conflicts were usually based on tangible political interests – be it the takeover of power, the annexation of territories, the expulsion of ethnic or religious minorities, or something else. Unfortunately, it seems that religions are obviously a helpful instrument for legitimizing and sacralizing violent actions or for recruiting fighters and soldiers by proclaiming a “holy war.” Hallmarks of such a “holy war” are usually its attribution to a divine mandate, its religious purpose, such as propagating the true religion or enforcing certain religious or moral norms, and finally the fact that it is fought by pious and devout soldiers.²

Christianity in the late 20th and early 21st century may have briefly succumbed to the illusion that such a perversion of Christian faith to legitimize violence and war has been finally overcome, and that today, if at all, only fundamentalist Islam is still prone to “holy war” and militant jihad. Yet, unfortunately there are still various violent conflicts in which the Christian religion continues to play an important role. In Northern Ireland, for example, despite the Good Friday Agreement of 1998, violent clashes between Protestants and Catholics continue to this day, and even the mere advocacy of interdenominational schools can result in people having to fear for their safety and their lives. But one could also think of

¹ James T. Johnson, *The Holy War Idea in Western and Islamic Traditions* (University Park: Pennsylvania State Univ. Press, 2002); Alfred J. Andrea and Andrew Holt, *Sanctified Violence. Holy War in World History* (Indianapolis-Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 2021).

² Johnson, *The Holy War Idea*, 45.

the terrorist attacks by supporters of the “Christian Identity” movement in the USA or the Christian-syncretist “Lord’s Resistance Army” and its crimes in Uganda and other African countries.³

The Russian Orthodox Church and the War in Ukraine

However, with the theological justification of Russia’s full-scale war against Ukraine by Patriarch Kirill and other high-ranking members of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC), this unholy alliance of violence and Christian theology has suddenly and cruelly returned to general awareness. In the heart of Europe, a bloody war of conquest is taking place with hundreds of thousands of dead, and the head of the largest Orthodox Church in the world is repeatedly justifying and supporting this war with his pastoral words. Yet, when Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Rus’ delivered his first major war sermon in Moscow’s Cathedral of Christ the Savior on March 6, 2022, the “Sunday of Forgiveness,” he would not speak of a “holy war” but, in compliance with the Kremlin’s guidelines at the time, carefully avoid the word “war” for Russia’s so-called “special military operation.” Nevertheless, he legitimized Russia’s attack on Ukraine not only in historical, but also in theological terms and declared that this conflict had a “metaphysical meaning” and that it was a battle between light and darkness, between the law of God and sin. According to the Patriarch, the fight in Ukraine was “about the salvation of man” and whether “man will stand on the right or left side of God, the Redeemer.”⁴

Two years later, on March 27, 2024, and just five days after Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov announced that due to the Western intervention in Ukraine, the “special military operation” had actually become a “war,”⁵ the leadership of the ROC also altered its wording. On that day, the “World Russian People’s Council” (WRPC) led by Patriarch Kirill, which counts among its members more than 100 bishops and numerous

³ Andrea and Holt, *Sanctified Violence*, 155–57.

⁴ All websites in this paper last accessed on July 15, 2025. See Kirill’s sermon of March 6, 2022: Patriarch Kirill, “Патриаршая проповедь в Неделю сыропустную после Литургии в Храме Христа Спасителя” [“Patriarchal sermon on Cheesefare Sunday after the Liturgy in the Cathedral of Christ the Savior”], <https://www.patriarchia.ru/article/102978> (trans. R. F.). For a German translation see Joachim Willems, “Ein Diener zweier Herren. Patriarch Kirill und seine Kriegspredigten,” *Osteuropa* 73, no. 3–4 (2023): 235–38.

⁵ See the press release of March 22, 2024: TASS, “Special operation being turned into war does not mean state of war de jure – Kremlin,” <https://tass.com/politics/1763755>.

priests of the ROC,⁶ published a declaration (Russian: “Наказ”; “instruction”, “decree”) on the “Present and Future of the Russian World,”⁷ in which it is claimed that in “spiritual and moral terms” a “Holy War” is currently taking place in Ukraine. This declaration, which caused outrage worldwide – at least outside Russia – was unanimously adopted by the 488 delegates present in the Cathedral of Christ the Savior. Among them were more than 20 bishops, including six permanent members of the Holy Synod in addition to the Patriarch.⁸ Although this declaration is not directly a document of the ROC, the majority of the members of the ROC leadership gave it their ecclesiastical blessing nevertheless, and it was published on the official website of the Moscow Patriarchate.⁹

The fact that the Patriarch and the members of the Holy Synod now even used the term “holy war” was surprising and shocking for many non-Russian observers, especially Protestant and Catholic Christians.¹⁰ However, in contrast to their benevolent assessment neither the idea nor

⁶ These figures were given by Konstantin Malofeev at the WRPC meeting on March 27, 2024. The report itself has – for whatever reason – since disappeared from the WRPC website.

⁷ See WRPC, “Наказ XXV Всемирного Русского Народного Собора «Настоящее и будущее русского мира» (Москва, 27–28 ноября 2023 года)” [“Declaration of the XXV World Russian People’s Council «The Present and Future of the Russian World» (Moscow, 27–28 November 2023)”], <https://vrns.ru/news/nakaz-xxv-vsemirnogo-russkogo-narodnogo-sobora-nastoyashchee-i-budushchee-russkogo-mira/>; for an English translation, see https://risu.ua/en/order-of-the-xxv-world-russian-peoples-council-present-and-future-of-the-russian-world_n147334; for a German translation, see *Osteuropa* 74, no. 5 (2024): 79–85.

⁸ See the blog by Andrey Kuraev, “Зависимость убеждений от геолокации” [“The dependence of beliefs on geolocation”], <https://diak-kuraev.livejournal.com/4484544.html>.

⁹ See WRPC, “Наказ XXV Всемирного русского народного собора «Настоящее и будущее Русского мира»,” <https://www.patriarchia.ru/article/105523>.

¹⁰ See the statement by the WCC General Secretary on the declaration of the WRPC from April 12, 2024: Jerry Pillay, “WCC statement on Decree of XXV World Russian People’s Council,” <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/wcc-statement-on-decree-of-xxv-world-russian-peoples-council>. That Pillay had previously had a very different view of Kirill’s position is revealed by an epd-interview of January 25, 2023, in which he had declared: “In discussions with the leadership of the Russian Orthodox Church, it became clear that they do not support the war in any way. They condemn the war just as we do” (trans. R. F.), Jerry Pillay, “ÖRK-Generalsekretär Pillay hofft weiter auf Frieden in der Ukraine,” interview by Jan-Dirk Herbermann and Stephan Cezanne, epd, January 25, 2023, <https://www.evangelische-friedensarbeit.de/epd-meldungen/oerk-generalsekretaer-pillay-hofft-weiter-auf-frieden-der-ukraine>. Also the Moderator of the WCC Central Committee, Bishop Heinrich Bedford-Strohm, had made a similar statement on April 11, 2023: “Patriarch Cyril, for example, has explicitly stated that there can never be a holy war” (trans. R. F.), Heinrich Bedford-Strom, “«Wenigstens die Kirchen sollten Brücken bauen»,” interview by Felix Reich, April 11, 2023, <https://>

the “wording” was really new for the hierarchs of the ROC. The same is true for the WRPC declaration’s claim that “Russia and her people” would not only defend “the unified spiritual space of *Holy Rus'*,” but with this war would also fulfill “their spiritual mission as Katechon (Restrainer),” (2 Thess. 2.6–7) “protecting the world from the onslaught of globalism and the victory of the West that has fallen into Satanism.” And finally, the WRPC’s request that after the end of the war “all territory of modern Ukraine should enter into a zone of exclusive influence of Russia” is anything but surprising. Instead, in its declaration, the WRPC, founded by the ROC in 1993, called on Russian politics and society to “return to the doctrine of the triunity of the Russian people, which has existed for more than three centuries, according to which the Russian people consists of Great Russians, Malorussians and Belarusians.”

By promoting the idea of the triunity of the Russian people, the WRPC closely followed the guidelines of Vladimir Putin, who had already adopted this tsarist ideology in his 2021 programmatic essay “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians,” describing the Russian nation as “a triune people comprising Velikorussians, Malorussians and Belorussians.”¹¹ Furthermore, the Russian President had sharply criticized the “policy of artificial, forced division in this large Russian nation, a triune people of Russians, Belarusians and Ukrainians,” at the WRPC General Assembly in November 2023, which provided the preparatory work for the declaration of March 2024.¹² In order to implement this ideology in Russian legislation, the “All-Russian Forum” of the WRPC in Sevastopol, Crimea, has launched a “legislative initiative to enshrine the doctrine of the triunity of the Russian people,” in July 2024 whereby the ethnic and cultural unity of the Eastern Slavs should be enshrined in law and its denial or denigration should be made a criminal offence.¹³

reformiert.info/de/recherche/oekumenischer-rat-der-kirchen-will-russische-und-ukrainische-kirchenvertreter-an-einen-tisch-bringen-22031.html.

¹¹ Vladimir Putin, “Article by Vladimir Putin «On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians»,” (July 12, 2021), <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181>. For a German translation, see *Osteuropa* 71, no. 7 (2021): 51–66. The term “triune” Russian people was supposedly coined by Feofan Prokopovich (1681–1736) at the beginning of the 18th century.

¹² Idem, “Plenary session of the World Russian People’s Council,” (November 28, 2023), <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/72863>.

¹³ Press release “All-Russian-Forum”, WRPC, “На форуме ВРПС “Русский мир” в Севастополе предложили принять закон о триединстве русского народа” [“At the forum in Sevastopol of the WRPC a proposal was made to pass a law on the triunity of the Russian people”] (July 29, 2024), <https://vrns.ru/news/na-forume-vrns-v-sevastopole-v-sevastopole-predlozhili-prinyat-zakon-o-triedinstve-russkogo-naroda/>.

According to most Christian churches, the Russian Patriarch has not only crossed a red line with his proclamation of a “holy war” and his contestation of Ukraine’s right to sovereignty, but also with his theological legitimization of the death penalty, which he also propagated in the context of the Russian war against Ukraine. During a meeting with former participants of the “special military operation,” Patriarch Kirill explained that neither the Holy Scriptures nor the Church had ever rejected the death penalty. On the contrary, according to his exegesis, the death penalty is justified as a last resort in the fight against evil by the words of the Apostle Paul: “Uproot the evil one from among you!” (1 Cor. 5.13; Deut. 17.7). The Patriarch explained that even Jesus Christ himself “did not condemn the death penalty, although he himself undeservedly suffered the death penalty.” And after his unjust execution, the Apostles also did not protest against the death penalty and did not reject it as “a terrible and sinful thing.” Therefore, “the Church never condemned the death penalty when it was carried out according to the law,” nor has she ever “insisted that this penalty should be abolished.”¹⁴

A Historical Retrospective

In fact, both the term of a “holy war” and the idea that Russia is acting as an eschatological “Katechon,” which for the time being will “hold back” the rule of the Antichrist, have a long tradition in Russian thought that can be traced back to the 16th century. Closely related to this theological concept of Russia’s special role in history is the notion of *Holy Rus’*, the qualification of the Russian people as the “New Israel,” the propagation of Moscow as the “Third Rome,” and the sacralization of the autocracy of the Russian tsar. The oldest known references to the term “Holy Russian land,” “Holy Russian empire,” or “Holy Russian tsar” can be found in the writings of Prince Andrei M. Kurbskii (1528–1583) to Tsar Ivan IV (1530–1584),¹⁵ but it is quite possible that this idea had already emerged

¹⁴ See the Patriarch’s conversation with participants of the “Time of Heroes” program on November 3, 2024, Press Service of Patriarch Kirill, “Ответы Святейшего Патриарха Кирилла на вопросы участников программы «Время героев»” [“Answers by His Holiness Patriarch Kirill to questions from participants of the programme «Time of Heroes»”], <https://www.patriarchia.ru/article/112590> (trans. R. F.).

¹⁵ The term “Holy Russian Land” (“святорусская земля”) is used six times, the term “Holy Russian Empire” (“империя святорусская”) twice, and the “Holy Russian Tsardom” (“святорусское царство”) once; see Prince Andrei M. Kurbskii, *Сочинения князя Курбского* [Works of Prince Kurbskii], vol. 1 (Русская историческая библиотека [Russian Historical Library] 31), (St. Petersburg: Imperatorskaja arheograficeskaja kommissija, 1914), 136, 216, 267, 271, 303–07; see Mikhail Dmitriev,

in the second half of the 15th century.¹⁶ The idea of a “translatio imperii” from Constantinople to Moscow as the third and last Rome was, as is well known, formulated at the beginning of the 16th century by Filofei of Pskov (c. 1465–1542),¹⁷ but comparisons between the Orthodox Moscow Grand Princes and the apostle-like Emperor Constantine had already become common since the Union of Florence (1439) and then definitively after the fall of Constantinople (1453).¹⁸

After the fall of the Byzantine Empire, which, according to the belief of the Russian Church, was a consequence of the union with Rome and thus of the apostasy from Orthodox faith, the Russian ecclesiastical elites perceived the Russian Tsardom as the last stronghold of Orthodoxy. Its people saw themselves as a “Christian community ruled and protected by a Christ-like ruler, who is heading towards the end of times.”¹⁹ In this theological conception of history, a special role in the history of salvation was accorded to *Holy Rus'*, similar to Israel in the times of the Old Covenant. Not only the sacralization of the land, but also the chosenness

“Парадоксы «Святой Руси»: «Святая Русь» и «русское» в культуре Московского государства 16–17 вв. и фольклоре 18–19 вв.” [“The paradoxes of «Holy Rus'»: «Holy Rus'» and «Russianness» in the 16th- and 17th-century culture of the Muscovite state and in 18th- and 19th-century folklore], *Cahiers du monde russe* 52, no. 2–3 (April–September 2012): 321; Michael Cherniavsky, “«Holy Russia»: A Study in the History of an Idea,” *The American Historical Review* 63, no. 3 (1958): 621–22.

¹⁶ Alexander Soloviev, *Holy Russia: The History of a Religious-Social Idea* (The Hague: Mouton, 1959), 12–14, assumed an even earlier origin of this idea; idem, “Helles Russland – Heiliges Russland,” in *Festschrift für Dmytro Čyžev'skyj zum 60. Geburtstag am 23. März 1954*, ed. Max Vasmer (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1954), 282–89.

¹⁷ Hildegard Schaefer, *Moskau, das Dritte Rom: Studien zur Geschichte der politischen Theorien in der slawischen Welt* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1957), 204; Frank Kämpfer, “Autor und Entstehungszeit der Lehre «Moskau das Dritte Rom»,” in *Da Roma alla Terza Roma. IX seminario internazionale di studi storici. Relazioni e comunicazioni*, vol. 1 (Rom: Consiglio Nazionale delle Ricerche, 1989), 63–83; idem, “Die Lehre vom Dritten Rom – pivotal moment, historiographische Folklore?,” *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas* 49, no. 3 (2001): 430–41.

¹⁸ Wil van den Bercken, *Holy Russia and Christian Europe* (London: SCM Press, 1999), 139–41; Ihor Ševčenko, *Ukraine Between East and West: Essays on Cultural History to the Early Eighteenth Century* (Edmonton: Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies Press, 1996), 96: “He [i.e. Metropolitan Zosima, R.F.] called Ivan the new Constantine, which was routine, and Moscow the new Constantinople, which was said for the first time in recorded Russian History.”; Siarhei Salei, “Ivan the Terrible’s Imperial Title and Problem of its Recognition in the West and in the East,” in *Castrum, Urbis et Bellum: Збірник наукових праць*, ed. Genadz’ Semiančuk (Baranavičy: Baranavičskaja uzbuienaja drukarnia, 2002), 325.

¹⁹ Hildegard Schaefer, “Das Neue Israel Gottes: Neues und Drittes Rom. Einhorn und Doppeladler,” in *Rußland – Deutschland – Amerika. Festschrift für Fritz T. Epstein zum 80. Geburtstag*, eds. Alexander Fischer, Günter Moltmann and Klaus Schwabe (Wiesbaden: Steiner, 1978), 5.

of the people and their rulers were now conferred to Russia. In ecclesiastical literature, the Russian people was henceforth regarded as the “New Israel” and thus as the chosen people of the New Covenant.²⁰

But unlike in the case of Israel, Rome, and Byzantium, *Holy Rus'* would not perish until the Second Coming of Christ, provided that it remained faithful to its Orthodox faith. Ensuring this was the utmost duty of the Russian ruler. According to the 16th-century Russian sources, the Orthodox tsar was thus “responsible for the preservation of humanity, indeed of the world,” because, as there would be no “fourth Rome,” the rule of the Antichrist, which precedes the end of the world, would be the result of Moscow’s apostasy from true faith.²¹ This state ideology of *Holy Rus'* as God’s chosen people is most evident in the so-called “Step Book” (Степенная книга), which was probably written at the instigation of Metropolitan Makary of Moscow and All Russia (1542–1563; * c. 1482) in the 1560s. It presents the political success story of the Rurikids up to Tsar Ivan IV as fulfillment of the divine plan of salvation.

The Russian conquest of Kazan in 1552 marked the beginning of the transformation of *Holy Rus'* into an imperial power encompassing non-Christian territories as well. The church now provided theological legitimization for the Orthodox tsar’s wars of conquest. One expression of this was the creation of a new type of icon, “Blessed be the Host of the Heavenly Tsar.” It shows the soldiers returning from the conquest of Kazan, some crowned with a martyr’s halo, as they march towards the heavenly Jerusalem and the Mother of God enthroned there. At the center of the composition, at the head of the army, stands the Archangel Michael, followed by a military leader, who is thought to be the young tsar himself. According to Reinhard Frötschner, the “Orthodox tsar with his army [...] thus became a chosen agent in the divine plan of salvation and an instrument of God in the cosmic struggle between good and evil, which would continue until the apocalypse.”²² This “sacralization of the

²⁰ On the numerous references to the Old Testament in Russian liturgical and historiographical texts, as well as in art and architecture, see Daniel B. Rowland, “Moscow – The Third Rome or the New Israel?,” *The Russian Review* 55, no. 4 (October 1996): 591–614; Joel Raba, “Moscow – The Third Rome or the New Jerusalem?,” *Forschungen zur Osteuropäischen Geschichte* 50 (1995): 297–307.

²¹ Hans Hecker, “Propagierte Geschichte: Die «Stepannaja Kniga» (Stufenbuch) und die Herrschaftsideologie der Moskauer Rus' (16. Jahrhundert),” in *Von Fakten und Fiktionen. Mittelalterliche Geschichtsdarstellungen und ihre kritische Aufarbeitung*, ed. Johannes Laudage (Köln–Weimar–Wien: Böhlau, 2003), 381.

²² Reinhard Frötschner, “Das Bild des Krieges im Moskauer Reich im 16. Jahrhundert,” in *Das Bild des Krieges im Moskauer Reich und Polen-Litauen im 16. Jahrhundert*, eds.

war waged by the Moscow tsar as part of the cosmic struggle against God's adversaries" was to become a fixed topos in the further course of Russian history.²³ It was aptly supplemented by demonizing the enemy, by claiming that the conquered territories had previously belonged to the Russian Empire, and by telling stories of divine miracles that supposedly occurred during the military campaigns of *Holy Rus'*.²⁴ Almost all of these features can also be found in the current war rhetoric of the Russian President and the Patriarch.

In the 19th century, when the ecclesiastical and bourgeois intellectual elites of the Russian Empire were trying to define Russia's national and cultural identity in juxtaposition to predominant Western Europe, the idea of Orthodox *Holy Rus'* and its divine mission for the world was revived. Not only clergy, but also philosophers and writers contrasted "Holy Rus'" with Western Europe and its culture and postulated the cultural and religious superiority of the Russian civilization and its importance for the salvation of the world. In contrast to the revolutionary motto "Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité," Count Sergey Uvarov (1786–1855), Minister of Education under Nicholas I (1796–1855), propagated "Autocracy, Orthodoxy and Nationality" (or "Folkdom": народность) as the epitome of Russian values. Pyotr Vyazemsky (1792–1878) and Vassily Zhukovsky (1783–1852) emphasized the antithesis between *Holy Rus'* and "godless Europe" in their writings, and towards the end of the 19th century, *Holy Rus'* (along with the "New Israel") became a central concept of the emerging clerical-conservative Orthodox patriotism in Russia, which at the same time sought to sharply distinguish itself from the godless nationalism of Western Europe.²⁵ These ideas were taken up by Aleksey Khomyakov (1804–1860), Vladimir Solovyov (1853–1900),

Reinhard Frötschner and Markus Osterrieder, (München: Osteuropa-Institut, 1995), 25 (trans. R. F.).

²³ *Ibidem*, 27 (trans. R. F.).

²⁴ *Ibidem*, 29, 37–39.

²⁵ For the history of this debate in the 19th century, see Cherniavsky, "«Holy Russia»," 627–37; Oleksandr Zabirko, "Russkij Mir und Novorossija. Theologische und nationalistische Konzepte russischer (Außen-) Politik," in *Kampf um die Ukraine: Ringen um Selbstbestimmung und geopolitische Interessen*, ed. Heinz-Gerhard Justenhoven (Baden-Baden: Nomos – Münster: Aschendorff, 2018), 67–70; Anatolii Babynskyi, "Resentment, Ideology and Myth: How «Holy Rus» haunts the Russian Soul," in *The Churches and the War. Religion, Religious Diplomacy and Russia's Aggression against Ukraine*, eds. Yuri P. Avvakumov and Oleh Turiy (Lviv: Ukrainian Catholic University Press, 2024), 70–75; on the emergence of an "Orthodox patriotism" in the late 19th century see John Strickland, *The Making of Holy Russia. The Orthodox Church and Russian Nationalism before the Revolution* (Jordanville: Holy Trinity Publications, 2013).

and the Slavophiles, but also by Nikolai Gogol (1809–1852), Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821–1881),²⁶ and Nikolai Berdyaev (1874–1948), who summed up the evolution of this religious and philosophical debate of the 19th and early 20th century in his book “The Russian idea.”²⁷

Finally, Ivan Ilyin (1882–1954) must be mentioned in this context as well. Ilyin was forced to leave Soviet Russia together with Berdyaev in 1922 and has become one of Putin’s favorite philosophers in recent decades. In fact, his propagation of a monarchical-authoritarian form of government in Russia aligns perfectly with Putin’s rule.²⁸ In contrast to the aforementioned thinkers, Ilyin believed that violence is sometimes a necessary means to achieve political and religious goals. To this end, he referred – very similarly to Patriarch Kirill now – to the example of the Archangel Michael and the dragon slayer George, and, with regard to the Bolsheviks, coined the phrase “For we win when our sword will be love and prayer, and our prayer and our love will be the sword!”. In contrast to Tolstoy’s ethics, Ilyin wanted to “restore the ancient Russian Orthodox doctrine of the sword, in all its power and glory.”²⁹ His book “On Resistance to Evil by Force”³⁰ from 1925 is fully in line with the current patriotic enthusiasm for Russian warrior princes and for a militant Christianity, advocated not only by ultranationalists like Alexander Dugin and Yegor Kholmogorov, but also by hierarchs of the ROC. Besides the Patriarch himself, one has to mention Metropolitan Kirill Pokrovsky of Stavropol and Nevinnomyssk and Metropolitan Tikhon Shevkunov of

²⁶ Feodor M. Dostoevsky, *The Diary of a Writer*, trans. Boris Brasol, vol. 1 (New York: Octagon, 1973), 63 (1873, sect. 7): “Isn’t there in Orthodoxy alone both the truth and the salvation of the Russian people, and – in the forthcoming centuries of mankind as a whole? Hasn’t there been preserved in Orthodoxy alone, in all its purity, the Divine image of Christ? And, perhaps, the most momentous preordained destiny of the Russian people, within the destinies of mankind at large, consists in the preservation in their midst of the Divine image of Christ, in all its purity, and, when the time comes, in the revelation of this image to the world which has lost its way!”

²⁷ Nicolas Berdyaev, *The Russian Idea* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1948).

²⁸ William Peter van den Bercken, *Christian Thinking and the End of Communism in Russia* (Utrecht – Leiden: Interuniversity Institute for Missiological and Ecumenical Research, 1993), 77–85; Babynskyi, “Resentment,” 58–61.

²⁹ Ivan Ilyin, “Идея Корнилова (Из речи, произнесенной в Праге, Берлине и Париже)” [“Kornilov’s idea (From speeches delivered in Prague, Berlin, and Paris)”], in *Собрание сочинений* [Collected Works], vol. 5 (Moscow: Russkaya kniga, 1996), 223–27.

³⁰ Idem, *On Resistance to Evil by Force* (London – Zvolen: Taxiarch Press, 2018).

Simferopol and Crimea as the most outstanding representatives of this militant Christianity.³¹

A first attempt to formulate a Russian Orthodox theology of war was undertaken in the context of the Crimean War (1854/55) by Archbishop Innokenty of Kherson (1800–1857), who was canonized by the ROC in 1997. However, his treatise on the Christ-loving soldiers who go into battle to protect the Orthodox faith, the tsar, and the fatherland and who are willing to “lay down their lives for their friends” (cf. Jn. 15.13), was published only in 1907, five decades after his death.³² A few years earlier, in the context of the Russo-Japanese War of 1904/5, bishops and priests of the ROC had already begun to formulate criteria and arguments for a “holy war.” One basic prerequisite for such a “holy war” was that it was declared by a “legitimate” Orthodox ruler reigning by the grace of God, like the Emperor Nicholas II (1868–1918). Secondly, such a war should be waged in order to achieve a religious goal. Although it was undisputed that Russia had been attacked by Japan and that the war was therefore “just,” this war was apparently only about the domination over Manchuria and Korea. However, some clergymen interpreted this war against Japan as a means of divine providence for the propagation of Orthodox Christianity among the “heathens,” and this made it certainly “holy.” The third prerequisite was that such a “holy war” had to be waged, of course, by a “Christ-loving army” (cf. 2 Tim. 2.3–4) that had been

³¹ For Metropolitan Kirill see footnotes 90–93. For Metropolitan Tikhon, not only bishop, but also author and film director (“Fall of an Empire: The Lesson from Byzantium”, 2008; “Fall of an Empire: The Russian Lesson”, 2021, recalling Yegor Gaidar’s book “Collapse of an Empire: Lessons for modern Russia” from 2007), formerly known also as Putin’s personal confessor, see the interview he gave on May 15, 2023, to Ksenia Sobchak: “Тихон Шевкунов: о России, церкви и войне” [“Tikhon Shevkunov: On Russia, the Church, and the War”], <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zgxYomCL4d8>. In this interview Metropolitan Tikhon declared: “Empires don’t come back. It’s true, though, that the only thing Russians know how to build are empires. But this definitely isn’t what Russia is doing in Ukraine. It’s definitely not expanding its territory at the expense of another state. No, what we’re doing there is battling against savage, terrible, infernal fascism.” (trans. R.F.). For his anti-Western propaganda film from 2008, which was actually intended as a warning to Russia, the spiritual heir to Byzantium, see Michael Hagemester, *Der “Nördliche Katechon” – “Neobyzantinismus” und “politischer Hesychasmus” im postsowjetischen Russland* (Erfurt: Universität Erfurt, Religionswissenschaft [Orthodoxes Christentum], 2016), 5–10.

³² Archbishop Innokenty of Kherson, “Война и Христолюбивые воины” [“War and Christ-loving Warriors”], *Вестник военного духовенства* [*Bulletin of the Military Clergy*] 18, no. 13 (July 1, 1907): 398–405, and no. 14 (July 15, 1907): 434–40; cf. Betsy Perabo, *Russian Orthodoxy and the Russo-Japanese War* (London – New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), 75–79.

blessed by the church for its mission.³³ Ten years later, World War I and, later on, even more World War II were labelled “holy wars” by the ROC. As for the Great Patriotic War of 1941–1945, this characterization has become particularly widespread in Russia through the war hymn “Holy War” (Священная война), which is still played every year at the Victory Parade on Red Square.³⁴

Patriarch Kirill's Theology of War

The three preconditions for a “holy war” outlined above can all be discerned in the present statements of Patriarch Kirill. For him, there is no doubt that Vladimir Putin is a ruler chosen and sent by God. As early as 2012, in the run-up to Putin's re-election as President of Russia, Patriarch Kirill described Putin's rule as “a miracle of God” and added, “you personally played a massive role in correcting this crooked twist of our history.”³⁵ After Putin had begun to correct this “crooked twist” with the deployment of regular Russian Armed Forces in 2022, the Patriarch declared on the occasion of the President's 70th birthday: “The Lord has placed you at the top of power so that you can perform services of particular importance and great responsibility for the fate of the country and the people entrusted to you.”³⁶ In a sermon a month earlier, without mentioning the President by name, he had already given a theological legitimization to the present war, by declaring that,

if at the head of the Fatherland, at the head of the army there is a holy man, and maybe not a holy man, but a believer, an Orthodox, a baptized person, who is aware of his responsibility before God, the

³³ Perabo, *Russian Orthodoxy*, 6–10, 87–93, and 140–41.

³⁴ It was probably written in 1941 by Vasily Lebedev-Kumach (1898–1949) and set to music by Alexander Alexandrov (1883–1946). However, there is also the theory that in 1941 Lebedev-Kumach only slightly modified a text already written in 1916 by Alexander de Bode (1865–1939). For the ROC's sacralization of World War I and her propagation of the Russian soldiers' death as “martyrdom” see Dietrich Beyrau, “Projektionen, Imaginationen und Visionen im Ersten Weltkrieg: Die orthodoxen Militärgeliebten im Einsatz für Glauben, Zar und Vaterland,” in *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas* 52, no. 3 (2004): 406–15.

³⁵ Gleb Bryanski, “Russian patriarch calls Putin era «miracle of God»,” (February 8, 2012), <https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSTRE81722Y/>.

³⁶ See Kirill's letter to Putin of October 7, 2022: Patriarch Kirill, “Поздравление Святейшего Патриарха Кирилла Президенту России В.В. Путину с 70-летием со дня рождения” [“Congratulations from His Holiness Patriarch Kirill to the Russian President Vladimir Putin on his 70th birthday”], <https://www.patriarchia.ru/article/103742> (trans. R. F.).

Church, and the country, then the country is safeguarded from all kinds of military adventures.

Such a leadership, he continued, is “the guarantee that the country [...] will never commit war crimes” and that military force will only be used “when it is ethically, morally and even spiritually justified.”³⁷ And finally in July 2024, with regard to the Russian president, he declared that “God has sent us in this difficult time a man who is able not just to withstand a blow, but to mobilize the country so that it has the strength to resist the onslaught of total evil.”³⁸

According to this line of argument, also the second prerequisite for a “holy war” is fulfilled. As mentioned above, the Russian Patriarch has not only justified Russia’s territorial claim to Ukraine by pointing to their shared history and the unity of “Holy Rus’”, but he has also sacralized the so-called “special military operation” from the outset and stylized it into a fight with demonic forces, with the “spirits of evil,” and the “rulers of darkness” (Eph. 6.12). In his sermon on March 6, 2022, he declared that the fight in Ukraine had “not a physical but a metaphysical meaning,” because it was about “the salvation of man.” He said that the West was trying “to violently enforce the sin condemned by God’s law and thus to compel people to deny God and his truth.” Therefore, he concluded, one must now “stand with our brothers in Donbass, the Orthodox, so that they may preserve their Orthodox faith.”³⁹

In his sermons and speeches, the Patriarch repeatedly emphasized the apocalyptic dimension of this conflict and the divine mission that Russia has to fulfill for the world at present. On May 8, 2022, for example, he declared in the main cathedral of the Russian Armed Forces in Kubinka:

May the Lord help us not to deviate from the historical path that is destined for our people and our country, which is now a great power

³⁷ See Kirill’s sermon of September 12, 2022, at Danilov Monastery: Patriarch Kirill, “Слово Святейшего Патриарха Кирилла в день памяти благоверных князей Даниила Московского и Александра Невского после Литургии в Даниловом монастыре” [“Address by His Holiness Patriarch Kirill on the day commemorating the righteous princes Daniel of Moscow and Alexander Nevsky after the Liturgy at the Danilov Monastery”], <https://www.patriarchia.ru/article/103669> (trans. R. F.).

³⁸ See Kirill’s sermon of July 9, 2024, in Tikhvin: Patriarch Kirill, “Святейший Патриарх Кирилл: Нам нужно иметь мужество, силу и дерзновение возвещать Божию правду” [“His Holiness Patriarch Kirill: We need to have the courage, strength and boldness to proclaim God’s truth”], <https://www.patriarchia.ru/article/111529> (trans. R. F.).

³⁹ See footnote 4. For a short account of Kirill’s first wartime sermons see Nicholas Denysenko, *The Church’s Unholy War: Russia’s Invasion of Ukraine and Orthodoxy* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2023), 112–15.

that, in the words of the Apostle, undoubtedly protects the world from a terrible and corrupting godless civilizational development.⁴⁰

In a television interview on Russian Christmas, celebrated on January 7, 2023, Patriarch Kirill declared “we have before us an apocalyptic perspective,” and underscored the necessity of fighting against the global evil as follows:

Therefore, our struggle for moral principles, our struggle for the preservation of faith is a struggle for the future of all mankind, for the life of the world, nothing less. We are fighting for the life of the world. We are fighting for human civilization to remain viable. And as long as this work and this faith are preserved, the hope for the future will also be preserved. In this sense, of course, our country has a very special role.⁴¹

He is convinced that Russia has become “a real katechontic force” (cf. 2 Thess. 2.7), which can still “stop the coming of total evil, which according to the word of God is connected with the appearance of the Antichrist.”⁴²

Although one might surmise that the Patriarch is referring to a purely spiritual struggle, this is obviously not the case. In a liturgy in honor of the Russian Warrior Prince Alexander Nevsky (d. 1263), Patriarch Kirill explicitly stated that the struggle with which Russia is fulfilling its katechontic mission today is by no means only a spiritual one, but in fact also a political and military one.⁴³ The spiritual, “metaphysical struggle”

⁴⁰ Patriarch Kirill, “Слово Святейшего Патриарха Кирилла в Неделю 3-ю по Пасхе после Литургии в главном храме Вооруженных сил РФ” [“Address by His Holiness Patriarch Kirill on the Third Sunday after Easter, following the Liturgy in the main church of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation”], <https://www.patriarchia.ru/article/103236> (trans. R. F.). For a German translation see Willems, “Diener,” 247–51. In the same sermon, Kirill stated – with a gross distortion of historical facts – that Russia had never attacked anyone, but at most “sacrificed” sometimes itself “to help others.”

⁴¹ Idem, “Рождественское интервью Святейшего Патриарха Кирилла телеканалу «Россия 1»” [“Christmas interview with His Holiness Patriarch Kirill on «Russia 1» television channel”], interview by A. Kondrashov, *Russia 1*, January 7, 2023, <https://www.patriarchia.ru/article/104105> (trans. R. F.).

⁴² See footnote 38.

⁴³ Idem, “Патриаршая проповедь после Литургии в день памяти благоверного князя Александра Невского в Александро-Невской лавре” [“Patriarchal sermon after the Liturgy on the day commemorating the blessed Prince Alexander Nevsky at the Alexander Nevsky Lavra”], (Saint Petersburg, September 12, 2023), <https://www.patriarchia.ru/article/104886> (trans. R. F.): “Today Russia is facing the task to emerge victorious from the struggle that has been unleashed against us by the forces of evil. And we should not minimize the complexity of the moment! Today we need mobilization of all – both military and political forces, and, of course, first of all, the Church must be mobilized [...] We still have much to do not only on a national scale, but also, I am

between good and evil is thus intimately connected with the earthly, bloody war in Ukraine. According to the head of the ROC, the mobilization of the military and of politics must be supported by the Church through a spiritual mobilization. In concrete terms, this means that the ROC not only prays for the victory of *Holy Rus'* in every Divine Liturgy,⁴⁴ but also explicitly legitimizes Russia's military actions in Ukraine.

According to this "theology of war," formulated many years ago by Kirill Gundyayev and other hierarchs of the ROC,⁴⁵ military conflicts are interpreted as the earthly consequence of a "heavenly, holy struggle" and are thus ethically legitimized. As early as 2000 the document "Bases of the Social Concept of the Russian Orthodox Church" already states: "Generated by pride and resistance to the will of God, earthly wars reflect in fact the heavenly battle."⁴⁶ According to the Russian religious scholar Boris Knorre, this connection to a cosmic fight between divine order and satanic chaos "also gives the earthly wars, which are a reflection of the «heavenly holy battle», the nimbus of «holiness»."⁴⁷ Thus, the ROC is

not afraid to say that, on a world scale, in order to remain a catechontic force. And the Katechon is the one who does not allow the entire evil of this world to take over the entire human race."

⁴⁴ See the current prayer text prescribed on September 25, 2022, Patriarch Kirill, "Молитва о Святой Руси" ["Prayer for *Holy Rus'*"], <https://www.patriarchia.ru/article/103745>. For an earlier version of this prayer, in which the restoration of peace and the thwarting of the plans of the enemies was still prayed for, see the circular published on March 3, 2022: Metropolitan Dionysius of Voskresensk, "Циркулярное письмо митрополита Воскресенского Дионисия о молитве о восстановлении мира" ["Circular letter from Metropolitan Dionysius of Voskresensk on prayer for the restoration of peace"], <https://www.patriarchia.ru/article/102975>.

⁴⁵ For a critical view on this development, see Boris Knorre, "«Богословие войны» в постсоветском российском православии" ["«Theology of War» in Post-Soviet Russian Orthodoxy"], *Страницы: богословие, культура, образование* [Pages: Theology, Culture, Education] 19, no. 4 (2015): 559–78; idem, "The Culture of War and Militarization within Political Orthodoxy in the Post-Soviet Region," *Transcultural Studies* 12 (2016): 15–38; idem and Aleksei Zygmunt, "«Militant Piety» in 21st-Century Orthodox Christianity: Return to Classical Traditions or Formation of a New Theology of War?," *Religions* 11, no. 2 (2020): 1–17; Andrei Desnitsky, "Die Orthodoxie und die «Religion des Sieges» in Russland," *Religion und Gesellschaft in Ost und West* 43, no. 8 (2015): 14–16; Regula Zwahlen, "Krieg, Frieden und die Russische Kirche," *Religion und Gesellschaft in Ost und West* 50, no. 4–5 (2022): 5–8.

⁴⁶ Department for External Church Relations of the Moscow Patriarchate, "Bases of the Social Concept of the Russian Orthodox Church," (August 2000), Section VIII.1 (cf. also II.2–3 and VIII.1–4), <http://orthodoxeurope.org/page/3/14.aspx>. For a German translation see *Grundlagen der Sozialdoktrin der Russisch-Orthodoxen Kirche*, eds. Josef Thesing and Rudolf Uertz (Sankt Augustin: Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, 2001), 63 (cf. 18–19 and 63–67).

⁴⁷ Knorre, "«Богословие войны»" ["«Theology of War»"], 563 (trans. R. F.). Knorre adopts this idea from Mark Juergensmeyer, "Sacrifice and Cosmic War," in *Violence and*

transfiguring Russia's military action against Ukraine into an eschatological battle on behalf of God and his commandments. In Patriarch Kirill's view, Russia's war in Ukraine is preventing the dawn of the rule of the Antichrist. Not surprisingly, similar ideas can also be found in the writings of Russian ultranationalists such as Alexander Dugin, Konstantin Malofeev and Yegor Kholmogorov. They are convinced that Russia is in fact the eschatological "Katechon" mentioned in the New Testament.⁴⁸ Dugin and Malofeev, the owners of Tsargrad TV, even founded together an online journal called "Katechon". Dugin had first become acquainted with the concept of the "Katechon" as a political power that restrains the Antichrist and the chaos through the writings of Carl Schmitt (1888–1985).⁴⁹

Not only the Russian nationalists, but also Patriarch Kirill and President Putin have repeatedly demonized Ukraine and its Western supporters, thus following a strategy which had been already used in 16th-century Moscow. The Russian Patriarch, for example, called the current war in Ukraine at various occasions a war "not against blood and flesh, but against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against the spirits of evil under the heaven" (Eph. 6.12) and declared that there was "no prospect of life" in the Western world, but only "the death of civilisation", "same-sex marriages" and "pedophilia", and that "everything that is

the Sacred in the Modern World, ed. Mark Juergensmeyer (London: Cass, 1992), 112.

⁴⁸ Alexander Dugin, "Apocalyptic Realism," (April 20, 2022), <https://web.archive.org/web/20220421064756/https://katechon.com/en/article/apocalyptic-realism>: "And the main battle from now on unfolds between [...] the Russian Idea, the Catechon, the Orthodox Civilization, and the world of the Western Antichrist, coming at us. It is not us Russians who need Ukraine. It is Christ who needs it. And that is why we are there."; Yegor Kholmogorov, "Религии последнего времени," *Стратегический журнал* 2 (2006): 68: "In the Holy Tradition of the Church during the second millennium of Christianity a certain political concept was formed, assigning Russian statehood a special role as a continuation of the imperial statehood of Rome and Byzantium. This special role is the role of the Katechon, i.e. a political system, a political force that, by legal and military means, realizes the containment of the «mystery of lawlessness», i.e. an alternative political order, which has as its ultimate goal the enthronement of the Antichrist." (trans. R. F.; cf. also 67–71). For the context of this concept see David G. Lewis, "Apocalypse Delayed: Katechontic Thinking in Late Putinist Russia," in idem, *Russia's New Authoritarianism: Putin and the Politics of Order* (Edinburgh: University Press, 2020), 193–214; Maria Engström, "Contemporary Russian Messianism and New Russian Foreign Policy," in *Contemporary Security Policy* 35, no. 3 (2014): 356–79.

⁴⁹ Günther Meuter, *Der Katechon: Zu Carl Schmitts fundamentalistischer Kritik der Zeit* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1994); Felix Grossheutschi, *Carl Schmitt und die Lehre vom Katechon* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1996); Alfons Motschenbacher, *Katechon oder Großinquisitor? Eine Studie zu Inhalt und Struktur der Politischen Theologie Carl Schmitts*, (Marburg: Tectum Verlag, 2000).

presented there today as an ideal is from the Antichrist, from the demon and against Christ”.⁵⁰ Similarly, President Putin, in his speech at the celebration of the Russian annexation of the four Ukrainian oblasts, defended the “special military operation” as a means to protect the “Russian World” from the “overthrow of faith and traditional values” and the Western “perversions that lead to degradation and extinction” of humanity and to the rise of “Satanism.”⁵¹

The “Russian Doctrine”

The most comprehensive formulation of this Orthodox war theology in the context of post-Soviet neo-imperialism is certainly the “Russian Doctrine” (Русская доктрина), written by a group of about 70 authors and first published in 2005.⁵² Yegor Kholmogorov, the aforementioned proponent of Political Orthodoxy, is considered to be one of the initiators of this doctrine, which propagates the well-known triad of Orthodoxy, Autocracy and Nationalism.⁵³ Although this document is – like the WRPC declaration of 2024 – not an official church document, the ROC has

⁵⁰ See for example the two addresses in the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour on April 9 and April 30, 2023: “Святейший Патриарх Кирилл: Россия стремится сохранить свою самобытность, свою веру, свою систему ценностей” [“His Holiness Patriarch Kirill: Russia strives to preserve its identity, its faith, and its value system”], <https://www.patriarchia.ru/article/80972>, and “Святейший Патриарх Кирилл: Важно, чтобы наш народ сохранял свою внутреннюю свободу” [“His Holiness Patriarch Kirill: It is important that our people preserve their inner freedom”], <https://www.patriarchia.ru/article/81207>.

⁵¹ See “Signing of treaties on accession of Donetsk and Lugansk people’s republics and Zaporozhye and Kherson regions to Russia,” (September 30, 2022), <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/69465>. Already ten years earlier in a speech at the Valdai Forum on September 19, 2013, Putin had declared: “We can see how many of the Euro-Atlantic countries are actually rejecting their roots, including the Christian values that constitute the basis of Western civilisation. They are denying moral principles and all traditional identities: national, cultural, religious and even sexual. They are implementing policies that equate large families with same-sex partnerships, belief in God with the belief in Satan.” (“Meeting of the Valdai International Discussion Club,” <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/19243>).

⁵² A.B. Kobyakov, V.V. Averyanov, O.A. Platonov, eds., *Русская доктрина: Государственная идеология эпохи Путина* [*Russian Doctrine: State Ideology in the Putin Era*] (Moskau: Институт русской цивилизации, 2016); note the subtitle of this publication! The online version is currently no longer accessible. For a critical comment see Gerd Stricker, “Ein abstruses Programm: Ist die Russische Orthodoxie auf dem Weg in die antiwestliche Isolation?,” *Herder Korrespondenz* 61, no. 12 (2007): 624–29.

⁵³ Lena Jonson, “Russia: Culture, Cultural Policy and the Swinging Pendulum of Politics,” in *Cultural and Political Imaginaries in Putin’s Russia*, eds. Niklas Bernsand and Barbara Törnquist-Plewa (Leiden–Boston: Brill, 2019), 26.

been one of its sponsors from the outset.⁵⁴ It was Kirill Gundyayev, then Metropolitan of Smolensk and Kaliningrad, who ensured that this document, comprising almost 1,000 pages, was approved by the Moscow Theological Academy in 2006. The professors declared that its teachings “do not contradict the spirit and teachings of Orthodoxy,” and that therefore the church can bless the main Orthodox authors of the “Russian Doctrine.”⁵⁵ This observation is especially noteworthy, as the text explicitly propagates a revisionist and irredentist policy, committing itself to the “concept of the space of historical Russia” and the “natural territory of the Russian World.” The “Doctrine” clearly embraces the “path of Russian irredentism” and the “ideology of the return and reunification of those territories of historical Russia to which it has a historical and moral right,” which applies first and foremost to Belarus, Ukraine and Kazakhstan.⁵⁶ According to this document, the Russian state should become a sovereign empire once again, with the head of state following “the monarchical principle of the *unity of command*,” “uniting legislative, executive and judicial power in his hands.”⁵⁷ In the future, the “principles of religious policy” should likewise be changed, enabling the transition from a secular to a Russian Orthodox state.⁵⁸

But there is more to it. Metropolitan Kirill was also the one who pulled the strings in the background and ensured that an abridged version of the “Russian Doctrine” entitled “Transfiguration of Russia: Declaration of the Russian Doctrine” was approved by the WRPC in 2007.⁵⁹ This document repeatedly asserts that Russia is a “civilization of warriors” that

⁵⁴ Marlène Laruelle, *Inside and Around the Kremlin's Black Box: The New Nationalist Think Tanks in Russia* (Stockholm: Institute for Security and Development Policy, 2009), 64–65.

⁵⁵ See the Academy's statement, “Московская духовная академия о русской доктрине” [“The Moscow Theological Academy on the Russian Doctrine”], (March 3, 2006), https://web.archive.org/web/20240229041301if_/http://www.rusdoctrina.ru/page95538.html (trans. R. F.).

⁵⁶ *Русская доктрина* [Russian Doctrine], 368 (Section III.4.4; cf. https://web.archive.org/web/20240616062420if_/http://rusdoctrina.ru/page95626.html; trans. R. F.). On the ideology of the “Russian World,” see Reinhard Flogaus, “«Heiliges Russland» und «Russische Welt»: Zur Sakralisierung des Landes und zur Politisierung der Religion in Russland,” *Berliner Theologische Zeitschrift* 41 (2024): 310–16 and 321–27.

⁵⁷ *Русская доктрина* [Russian Doctrine], 326 (Section III.2.3; cf. https://web.archive.org/web/20240616062420if_/http://rusdoctrina.ru/page95614.html; trans. R. F.).

⁵⁸ *Ibidem*, 176 (Section II.2.1; cf. https://web.archive.org/web/20240616062420if_/http://rusdoctrina.ru/page95580.html; trans. R. F.).

⁵⁹ See the final protocol of the hearing on the “Russian Doctrine” at the WRPC on August 20, 2007: “Итоговый протокол Соборных слушаний Всемирного Русского Народного Собора по теме «Русская доктрина»” [“Final Protocol of the Plenary Hearings of the World Russian People's Council on the topic «Russian

follows a “militant ideal,” and that “Russia’s spiritual and political ideal” is “the ideal of a holy warrior and righteous fighter for the faith.”⁶⁰ The authors underscore that the Russian people is “a bearer and an instrument of divine power” and has to fulfill a special mission in fighting against evil, thus acting as the eschatological “Katechon.”⁶¹ The text even goes so far as to declare that Russia is

for its people a spiritual symbol that is on a par with God, the Church and the faith. The Symbol of Faith in Russia is the creed of the patriot for whom Russia is the highest jewel of his life, which gives life an ennobling meaning [...] The consent with the Symbol of Faith in Russia makes all people, in a sense, believers – *believers in Russia*.⁶²

The fact that Metropolitan Kirill and other hierarchs of the ROC belonging to the WRPC could agree with such statements, shows how much nationalist and revisionist ideas had already undermined the Christian faith and Orthodox theology at the level of the ROC hierarchy.⁶³ The above-mentioned “decree” of the WRPC on “The Present and the Future of the Russian World” of March 27, 2024, follows closely the “Russian Doctrine” of 2005/07.

The Christ-Loving Army and its Heavenly Intercessors

Moreover, also the third requirement of a “holy war”, namely that it is waged by an Orthodox, Christ-loving army, is of course fulfilled according to the Russian Patriarch. During a visit to injured soldiers at the Central Military Hospital in Krasnogorsk near Moscow in June 2022, he presented an icon of the “Archistrategos of God”, the Archangel Michael, and explained:

It is very important that our soldiers, our army, always stand on the side of the good. This will not only ensure them the full support of the people, but will undoubtedly help them to find divine support

Doctrine”], https://web.archive.org/web/20240413041704if_/http://rusdoctrina.ru/page95520.html and <https://www.patriarchia.ru/article/93016>.

⁶⁰ See Section 3.6 (https://web.archive.org/web/20241107132901if_/http://rusdoctrina.ru/page95784.html; trans. R. F.).

⁶¹ See Section 1.7 (https://web.archive.org/web/20241107130430if_/http://rusdoctrina.ru/page95782.html) as well as the glossary at the end (https://web.archive.org/web/20240616050225if_/http://rusdoctrina.ru/page95513.html; trans. R. F.).

⁶² See Section 1.7 (https://web.archive.org/web/20241107130430if_/http://rusdoctrina.ru/page95782.html; trans. R. F.).

⁶³ For the earlier relationship between Russian nationalism and the ROC until 1985 see Nikolay Mitrokhin, *Die «Russische Partei»: Die Bewegung der russischen Nationalisten in der UdSSR 1953–1985* (Stuttgart: Ibidem-Verlag, 2014), 379–407.

for their actions – support from the divine power, from the holy commander-in-chief of God, Saint Michael.⁶⁴

Another icon, “Our Lady of Augustów,” which goes back to a vision of Russian soldiers in 1914 shortly before a successful battle near this present-day Polish city, was presented by the Patriarch on March 13, 2022 to Viktor Zolotov, the commander of the Russian National Guard. The Patriarch gave him the icon with the words “May this icon inspire the soldiers to defend the Fatherland,” and Zolotov thanked him and answered “This icon will protect the Russian army and accelerate our victory.”⁶⁵

Since the beginning of the war, Patriarch Kirill has repeatedly emphasized that *Holy Rus*’ is under special “protection of the Queen of Heaven” and that it is the “heritage” of the Mother of God.⁶⁶ In a sermon on the occasion of the Feast of the Protecting Veil of the Theotokos, he declared that through “prayers before the Most Pure Queen of Heaven” Russia will also “achieve victory in the present” and be able to preserve its freedom, its independence, and its traditions. The patriarch compared the current situation, in which the Rus’ were under attack from the Western World, which sought to destroy Russia’s sovereignty and deprive her of freedom, with earlier “brutal invasions from the West,” such as the Polish invasion

⁶⁴ See the report about Kirill’s visit to Krasnogorsk on June 21, 2022: Press Service of Patriarch Kirill, “Святейший Патриарх Кирилл посетил Центральный военный клинический госпиталь им. А.А. Вишневого в Красногорске” [“His Holiness Patriarch Kirill visited the A.A. Vishnevsky Central Military Clinical Hospital in Krasnogorsk”], <https://www.patriarchia.ru/article/77388> (trans. R. F.).

⁶⁵ See the report of March 14, 2022: OrthodoxTimes, “Patriarch of Moscow: Gifted icon of the Theotokos to the army to win the war against Ukraine,” <https://orthodoxtimes.com/patriarch-of-moscow-gifted-icon-of-the-theotokos-to-the-army-to-win-the-war-against-ukraine/>, and of March 17, 2022: Regula Zwahlen, “Russland: Patriarch Kirill kritisiert Untreue der UOK,” <https://noek.info/nachrichten/osteuropa/russland/2371-russland-patriarch-kirill-kritisiert-untreue-der-ukrainischen-orthodoxen-kirche> (trans. R. F.). For a detailed analysis of this event see Vyacheslav Karpov, “The Theotokos as Commander in Chief: How Russian Orthodoxy Informs Imperialist Wars and is Twisted by Them,” in *The Churches and the War. Religion, Religious Diplomacy and Russia’s Aggression against Ukraine*, eds. Yuri P. Avvakumov and Oleh Turiy (Lviv: Ukrainian Catholic University Press, 2024), 84–117.

⁶⁶ See Kirill’s sermon of September 21, 2022, for the Feast of the Nativity of the Theotokos: Patriarch Kirill, “Слово Святейшего Патриарха Кирилла в праздник Рождества Пресвятой Богородицы после Литургии в Зачатьевском ставропигиальном монастыре г. Москвы” [“Address by His Holiness Patriarch Kirill on the Feast of the Nativity of the Most Holy Mother of God after the Liturgy at the Zachatievsky Stavropegial Monastery in Moscow”], <https://www.patriarchia.ru/article/103713> (trans. R. F.).

in 1612 or Napoleon's campaign 200 years later. In both cases, he asserted, it was the Mother of God who helped *Holy Rus'* to achieve victory.⁶⁷

Already in the early nineties, when he was still Metropolitan of Smolensk and Kaliningrad, Kirill had established close relations with the Russian Armed Forces. Since 1993, he regularly attended meetings with the Ministry of Defense and has continued to do so even after his election to Patriarch in 2009. Metropolitan Kirill was the initiator of the ROC's cooperation with the Armed Forces, and managed to set up a special synodal department for this purpose in 1995. Although it was primarily intended to provide "pastoral care and spiritual education" for the military, Kirill also used it to pursue the goal of educating young people in patriotism and promoting their readiness to defend the fatherland.⁶⁸ In 1995, Metropolitan Kirill had the 2nd WRPC⁶⁹ adopt a declaration "On the sanctity of military service and the sacred duty to protect the integrity, honor, and dignity of Russia," which states that the ROC is characterized "by a special type of holiness – that of the holy princes, defenders of the Fatherland and the Church." In fact, about half of the male Russian Saints are apparently soldiers or Warrior Saints.⁷⁰ With reference to Jn. 15.13, this declaration (like the "Bases of the Social Concept of the ROC" five

⁶⁷ See Kirill's sermon of October 14, 2022, in the Pokrovsky Monastery in Moscow: idem, "Патриаршая проповедь в праздник Покрова Пресвятой Богородицы после Литургии в Покровском монастыре в Москве" ["Patriarchal sermon on the feast of the Intercession of the Most Holy Mother of God after the Liturgy at the Pokrovsky Monastery in Moscow"], <https://www.patriarchia.ru/article/103809> (trans. R. F.).

⁶⁸ Regula Zwahlen, "Krieg, Frieden und die Russische Kirche," *Religion und Gesellschaft in Ost und West* 50, no. 4–5 (2022): 6.

⁶⁹ On the founding of the WRPC in 1993 and its further development see Kathrin Behrens, *Die Russische Orthodoxe Kirche: Segen für die „neuen Zaren“? Religion und Politik im postsowjetischen Russland (1991–2002)* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2002), 160–66 and 200–07; Kristina Stoeckl, "The Russian Orthodox Church and Neo-Nationalism," in *Religion and Neo-Nationalism in Europe*, eds. Florian Höhne and Torsten Meireis (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2020), 314–17.

⁷⁰ See Alexei Osipov, "Мир и меч: православный взгляд" ["Peace and Sword: An Orthodox Perspective"], http://www.odinblago.ru/pravoslavie/osipov_mir_i_mech/. On Osipov and other theologians and hierarchs who justified Russia's attack on Ukraine from the outset, see Cyril Horovun, "Deus ex Machina of the War in Ukraine," *Review of Ecumenical Studies* 15, no. 3 (December 2023): 545–48. For the phenomenon of Warrior Saints in Eastern and Western Europe see Liliya Berezhnaya, "Soldaten und Märtyrer: Zum Prozess der Militarisierung der Heiligen im östlichen und westlichen Christentum," in *Die Militarisierung der Heiligen in Vormoderne und Moderne. Militarization of Saints in Premodern and Modern Times*, ed. idem (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2020), 9–56.

years later), praises the sacrifice of a soldier's life on the battlefield as the highest Christian virtue.⁷¹

Since Kirill's enthronement as Patriarch in 2009, the ROC's cooperation with the military has become even closer. The main cathedral of the Russian Armed Forces in "Park Patriot" just outside Moscow, which was completed in record time in 2020, was built on his initiative. In its olive-green interior, this massive church building offers the visitor a kind of "military-patriotic history of salvation of Russia."⁷² On display are mosaics of Russian Warrior Princes of the Middle Ages, such as Dmitry Donskoy and Alexander Nevsky, but also of the Archangel Michael and Saint George, who looks down on the burning Berlin Reichstag. In addition to numerous Soviet generals and soldiers with machine guns and tanks, Stalin, Putin and Defense Minister Shoigu were originally also to be immortalized in mosaics, but after protests, their depiction was abandoned.

In April 2022, after the start of the full-scale attack on Ukraine, the Synodal Department of the Moscow Patriarchate for Cooperation with the Armed Forces published a promotional video in which the "special military operation" in Ukraine was described as a "great historical and spiritual mission," in which "Orthodoxy and Russian soldiers" would fight together against "transcendent hellish forces." According to this film, there are "cases of open Satanism and paganism" in the ranks of the Ukrainian Armed Forces, and among the "most radical Nazis" in the Ukrainian Army, even sacrifices would occur. For this reason, the video concludes, spiritual support of the units on the front line is of utmost importance. Incidentally, the name of the church website on which this video was published is "pobeda" – i.e. "victory."⁷³ After the mobilization

⁷¹ "О святости ратного служения и священном долге блюсти целостность, честь и достоинство России" ["On the sanctity of military service and the sacred duty to uphold the integrity, honour and dignity of Russia"] (March 1–3, 1995), <https://vrns.ru/documents/dokumenty-rassmotrennye-na-sektsiyakh-ii-vsemirnogo-russko-go-sobora/>; "Bases of the Social Concept," Section VIII.2; for a German translation see *Grundlagen*, 63–64.

⁷² Marco Besl and Simone Oelke, "In Ikonen gegossene Kriegspropaganda? Die neue Hauptkirche der russischen Streitkräfte bei Moskau," in: *Politische Macht und orthodoxer Glaube: Beziehungen zwischen Politik und Religion in Osteuropa*, eds. idem (Regensburg: Friedrich Pustet, 2023), 133–50.

⁷³ Synodal Department of the Moscow Patriarchate for Cooperation with the Armed Forces, "Военное духовенство" ["Military clergy"], Pobeda, April 17, 2022, <https://old.pobeda.ru/novosti/voennoe-duhovenstvo.html> (trans. R. F.). Essentially the same accusations of Satanism and neo-paganism had already been levelled by the ROC against the Germans during World War I, and the German emperor had even been demonized as "Antichrist", see Beyrau, "Projektionen," 410.

of the Armed Forces in September 2022 this was exactly what Patriarch Kirill had ordered his clerics to pray for – “victory” – and no longer “peace” as before. Anyone who dares to replace the word “victory” with the word “peace” or who simply omits the prayer in the Divine Liturgy must expect to be removed from office.⁷⁴

Two days after the announcement of the mobilization, the Patriarch called on the soldiers present in the military cathedral not to be afraid of war:

Christ is risen, and with him we shall all rise again and have eternal life. Therefore, go bravely to fulfill your military duty. And remember: if you give your life for your country and your friends, as is written in the Holy Scripture, then you will be with God in his kingdom, in his glory, in his eternal life.⁷⁵

Another two days later, when there were already nationwide protests against the conscription and long queues had formed at the state borders, the Moscow Patriarch went even further and stated that the sacrifice of a soldier who “dies in the performance of his military duties,” “washes away all the sins that this person has committed.”⁷⁶

With this statement, according to which not only the crucifixion of Jesus Christ has a sin-forgiving effect, but also the sacrificial death of a soldier, the Russian Patriarch has, in the opinion of many Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant theologians, crossed the threshold to heresy.⁷⁷

⁷⁴ On the consequences of refusing to pray for victory, see the report by Ksenia Luchenko, “Prüfung durch das Gebet. Welche Perspektiven haben die Kriegsgegner in der ROK?” (March 21, 2024), <https://noek.info/hintergrund/3274-pruefung-durch-das-gebet-welche-perspektiven-haben-die-kriegsgegner-in-der-rok>. Numerous cases of clergy of the ROC who have been disciplined or dismissed by the church in Russia and other states are documented at: Christian vision, “Persecution of Christians by Religious and State Authorities for Anti-war Stance or Support of Ukraine in Defence from Aggression,” <https://shaltnotkill.info/persecution-of-christians-by-religious-and-state-authorities-for-anti-war-stance-or-support-of-ukraine-in-defence-from-aggression/>.

⁷⁵ See the press release on Telegraf.news: “Глава РПЦ Кирилл призвал россиян не бояться умирать в Украине – «Вы воскреснете»” [“Head of the Russian Orthodox Church Kirill urges Russians not to fear dying in Ukraine – «You will be resurrected”], (September 24, 2022), <https://telegraf.news/world-news/glava-rpc-kirill-prizval-rossiyan-ne-boyatsya-umirat-v-ukraine-vy-voskresnete/> (trans. R. F.).

⁷⁶ Patriarch Kirill, “Патриаршая проповедь в Неделю 15-ю по Пятидесятнице после Литургии в Александро-Невском скиту” [“Patriarchal sermon on the 15th Sunday after Pentecost after the Liturgy at the Alexander Nevsky Skete”], (September 25, 2022), <https://www.patriarchia.ru/article/103723> (trans. R. F.).

⁷⁷ See for example Vassa Larin, “On «Heresy» and the Commemoration of Patriarch Kirill,” (April 12, 2024), <https://publicorthodoxy.org/2024/04/12/heresy-and-commemoration-of-pat-kirill/>. Due to her staunch criticism of Patriarch Kirill, Sister Vassa,

Nevertheless, this idea is not new, neither in church history nor in the history of the ROC. As early as 1095, Pope Urban II called on the Franks to take part in the First Crusade with the words: “So take this path to the remission of your sins; a never-fading glory in the kingdom of heaven is assured to you.” With similar arguments, both Protestant and Catholic theologians had tried to increase the number of war volunteers during World War I.⁷⁸ And the ROC’s social doctrine of 2000 also asserted such a connection between military death and eternal salvation, pointing to Saint Philaret of Moscow (1783–1867), who, in the face of the Napoleonic armies, exhorted his flock with the words, “If you avoid dying

originally a nun of the ROCOR, was reduced to a layperson by the ROCOR Synod on May 22, 2025, and is now a member of the OCU. She considers the idea of “holy war,” the propagation of the “Russian World” and the soteriological interpretation of the death of a soldier to be heretical. Similar views were expressed by the Ukrainian Orthodox theologian Serhii Shumylo, “«Orthodox Shahidism» and Moscow Patriarch Kirill’s neo-pagan theology of war,” (December 11, 2022), <https://orthodoxtimes.com/orthodox-shahidism-and-moscow-patriarch-kirills-neo-pagan-theology-of-war/>, and the Belarusian theologian Natallia Vasilevich, “Patriarch: Gefallenen Soldaten werden Sünden erlassen,” (September 26, 2022), <https://religion.orf.at/stories/3215269/>. Already in March 2022, more than 1500 Orthodox theologians had accused Kirill of heresy and blasphemy, <https://publicorthodoxy.org/2022/03/13/a-declaration-on-the-russian-world-russkii-mir-teaching/>, followed in April by 400 Ukrainian Orthodox priests, <https://publicorthodoxy.org/2022/04/26/open-appeal-of-uoc-priests/#more-11270>. In June 2022, Cardinal Kurt Koch criticized Kirill’s heretical views, www.katholisch.de/artikel/39899-kardinal-koch-wirft-patriarch-kyrill-i-haeresie-vor, and already in March the President of the EKD council, Annette Kurschus, had denounced Kirill’s justification of the war as “blasphemous,” <http://www.ekd.de/ekd-ratsvorsitzende-friedensethik-nie-richtig-oder-falsch-72636.htm>.

⁷⁸ See for example Adolf von Harnack, “Betrachtung und ein Gedicht ins Felde geschickt [aus «Christbaum und Schwert», Weihnachten 1915],” in idem, *Schriften über Krieg und Christentum*, eds. Bodo Bischof and Peter Bürger (Norderstedt: Edition Kirche & Weltkrieg, 2021), 230: “Den Sterbenden aber, die willig für uns sterben und hier auf Erden den Sieg nicht sehen, gilt das Wort: «Sie sind vom Tode zum Leben hindurchgedrungen; denn sie liebten die Brüder»”; Clemens A. Graf von Galen, “Fastenhirtenbrief 1.2.1944,” in idem, *Akten, Briefe und Predigten 1933–1946*, ed. Peter Löffler (Mainz: Matthias-Grünwald-Verlag, 1988), 1042: “Es steht ja nach der wohlbegründeten Lehre des hl. Kirchenlehrers Thomas von Aquin der Soldatentod des gläubigen Christen in Wert und Würde ganz nahe dem Martertod um des Glaubens willen, der dem Blutzügen Christi sogleich den Eintritt in die ewige Seligkeit öffnet.” For the German sacralization of war during World War I see Friedrich E. Dobberahn, *Deutsche Theologie im Dienste der Kriegspropaganda. Umdeutung von Bibel, Gesangbuch und Liturgie 1914–1918* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2022); Wolf-Friedrich Schäufele, “Der «Deutsche Gott» Kriegstheologie und deutscher Nationalismus im Ersten Weltkrieg,” in *Urkatastrophe. Die Erfahrung des Krieges 1914–1918 im Spiegel zeitgenössischer Theologie*, eds. Joachim Nagel and Karl Pinggéra (Freiburg – Basel – Wien: Herder, 2016), 35–76; Karl Hammer, *Deutsche Kriegstheologie: 1870–1918* (München: Kösel, 1974).

for the honor and freedom of the Fatherland, you will die a criminal or a slave; die for the faith and the Fatherland and you will be granted life and a crown in heaven.”⁷⁹ And recently, on the occasion of the 80th anniversary of Russia’s victory in World War II, Patriarch Kirill expanded his argument of the salvific meaning of a soldier’s death on the battlefield also to non-believers,

because saving others at the cost of one’s own life transforms the human soul and opens the doors of the Kingdom of Heaven for it. [...] We can say with confidence that in such a war, which takes on a sacred meaning, self-sacrifice becomes co-crucifixion, ascension to the Cross; and even for non-believers, military feats become feats filled with religious meaning.⁸⁰

The ROC and the idea of “holy war”

Already long before the WRPC’s March 2024 declaration, ROC members had defended the theological concept of “holy war.” Thus in 1998, the well-known Professor for Dogmatics, Alexei Osipov, criticized what he saw as a “deliberate discrediting” of the “idea of sacrifice for one’s people” and the “idea of a just, holy war.” In fact, according to Osipov, “from a Christian point of view, war can be a holy cause.”⁸¹

In 2015 it was the then head of the ROC’s Department for Relations between Church and Society and deputy chairman of the WRPC, Vsevolod Chaplin (1968–2020), who spoke for the first time of a “holy struggle” (священная борьба) with regard to Russia’s military intervention in Syria. This, however, met with rejection partly within the ROC, but especially within the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch. Patriarch Kirill himself initially called the Russian intervention in Syria only a “just action.” But a few months later, on May 6, 2016, three days before the commemoration of the Russian victory of 1945, Kirill not only explicitly called the Great Patriotic War of 1941–1945 a “holy war” that had been waged by a “Christ-loving army” for the “truth,” but now declared that also the current “war on terrorism” in the Middle East was such a “holy

⁷⁹ “Bases of the Social Concept,” Section II.2; for a German translation cf. *Grundlagen*, 19.

⁸⁰ Patriarch Kirill, “Доклад Святейшего Патриарха Кирилла на пленарном заседании XXVII Всемирного русского народного собора” [“Address by His Holiness Patriarch Kirill at the plenary session of the XXVII World Russian People’s Council”] (November 19, 2025), <https://www.patriarchia.ru/article/118370> (trans. R. F.).

⁸¹ Osipov, “Мир и меч” [“Peace and Sword”] (trans. R. F.).

war.”⁸² Given these statements, it is not surprising that already at the last official meeting between the EKD and the ROC in December 2015 in Munich, which was dedicated to commemorating the 70th anniversary of the end of the war, the then chairman of the Department for External Church Relations, Metropolitan Hilarion Alfeyev, underscored that, according to Christian understanding, there are of course “holy wars.” According to Hilarion, the Great Patriotic War had of course been such a “holy war,”⁸³ but also any future defense of the fatherland by true patriots would be a “holy war.”⁸⁴ And recently, on the occasion of the 80th anniversary of Russia’s Victory in 1945, Patriarch Kirill explained that it was the moral foundation of the Great Patriotic War

that allows us to consider the defense of the fatherland a holy war; and it is no coincidence that the song «Sacred War» became the unofficial anthem of our army and our people who entered into such a fateful confrontation. [...] The sacred nature of the war and victory is confirmed by the symbolism of the dates, which has been noted by many. After all, the attack on our country took place on 22 June 1941, when the Orthodox Church celebrated the Day of All Saints who shone forth in the land of Russia. [...] And on 6 May 1945, when German troops were resisting our victorious army for the last day, Easter was celebrated, heralding the resurrection of the world after the descent of war into hell; Easter, which also coincided with the day of St. George the Victorious. Every sacred event leaves its mark on history. And such an important event as victory in such a great, sacred war completely changed the course of human history.⁸⁵

⁸² See Chaplin’s characterization of World War II as a “holy war” on Soyuz TV on July 4, 2015 (<https://www.patriarchia.ru/article/96938>) and the Interfax release of September 30, 2015 on his statement on Syria (<https://web.archive.org/web/20151002214731/http://www.interfax-religion.ru/?act=news&div=60391>). Regarding Kirill’s statements on Syria, see his Christmas interview of January 7, 2016 (<http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/4327642.html>), his sermon on May 6, 2016 (<https://www.patriarchia.ru/article/97608> and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pJ96xqNGZxM>), and his defense of this statement in another interview on October 18, 2016 (<https://www.patriarchia.ru/article/53070>). On the whole complex, see Dmitry Adamsky, “Christ-Loving Warriors: Ecclesiastical Dimensions of the Russian Military Campaign in Syria,” *Problems of Postcommunism* 67, no. 6 (2020): 433–45; Perabo, *Russian Orthodoxy*, 177–78.

⁸³ Thus e.g. the website of the ROC’s Synodal Department for Cooperation with the Armed Forces about World War II appears under the heading “Священная война” [“Holy War”], <https://pobeda.ru/svyashhennaya-vojna-166>.

⁸⁴ I am grateful to Prof. Christfried Böttrich (Greifswald) for this information. At the time, the EKD delegation was led by Bishop Prof. Dr. Heinrich Bedford-Strohm, now Moderator of the Central Committee of the WCC.

⁸⁵ See footnote 80.

Already at the beginning of the Russian full-scale war in Ukraine, the reluctance to use the term “СВЯЩЕННАЯ ВОЙНА” started to disappear. As early as April 2022, the chairman of the Russkiy Mir Foundation and deputy of the State Duma Vyacheslav Nikonov, a grandson of Stalin’s foreign minister Molotov, declared that the “special military operation” in Ukraine was a “holy war” and a “fight between good and evil.” He emphasized that Russia must win at all costs against the “forces of absolute evil, embodied by the Ukrainian Nazi battalions.”⁸⁶ In early 2022, Ramzan Kadyrov, the leader of Chechnya, whose units have been deployed in Ukraine since 2014, and the Chechen Grand Mufti Salakh Mezhiyev spoke of “jihad” in Ukraine.⁸⁷ In September, Kadyrov also embraced a narrative which has become quite popular in the Russian media, namely that the conflict with Ukraine is not just about fighting “Nazism,” but also “Satanism.”⁸⁸ As a reaction to this, the Russian Orthodox Archbishop Feofilakt (Kuryanov) of Pyatigorsk and Cherkessia praised Kadyrov as an “example of an uncompromising attitude” for Orthodoxy in preserving and defending the traditions and culture of his people.⁸⁹

⁸⁶ Cf. the video of the broadcast with Nikonov on April 17, 2022 (Julia Davis, “Deputy of the State Duma Vyacheslav Nikonov,” via X, <https://x.com/JuliaDavisNews/status/1515786811825700872?s=20>) and the newspaper report of April 22, 2022 (Corsin Manser, “Es wird keine Gnade geben» – russische TV-Stars senden düstere Drohung in Richtung Europa),” <https://www.bzbasel.ch/international/ukraine-krieg-es-wird-keine-gnade-geben-russische-tv-stars-senden-duestere-drohung-in-richtung-europa-l2279105>. The EU imposed sanctions on the foundation and its chairman in the summer of 2022, see: *Official Journal of the European Union* L 193 of 21.07.2022, 189–90.

⁸⁷ For Mezhiyev see the report of February 28, 2022: Caucasian Knot, “Chechen Mufti treats his fellow countrymen’s involvement in Ukrainian conflict as jihad,” <https://eng.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/58364/>. For Kadyrov see the report of October 26, 2022: The Moscow Times, “Kadyrov Calls for Russian «Jihad» Across All of Ukraine,” <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2022/10/26/kadyrov-calls-for-russian-jihadacross-all-of-ukraine-a79192>.

⁸⁸ See the newspaper report from September 22, 2022: Tim Vincent Dicke, “Ukraine-Krieg: Kadyrow schickt Soldaten in «Kampf gegen Satanisten»,” <https://www.fr.de/politik/satanisten-ukraine-krieg-kadyrow-putin-russland-tschemtschenien-militaer-zr-91803315.html>. Already on July 17, 2022, Apti Alaudinov, the commander of a Chechen unit, had spoken on Russian television about the “holy war” against Europe’s “satanic values” and LGBT ideology: Davis, “Deputy,” <https://x.com/JuliaDavisNews/status/1548692871678664710>.

⁸⁹ See the news report from October 17, 2022: Radonezh, “В Русской Православной Церкви назвали Р.А. Кадырова примером бескомпромиссного отстаивания веры и традиций” [“In the Russian Orthodox Church Ramzan Kadyrov was named as an example of uncompromising defence of faith and traditions”], <https://radonezh.ru/2022/10/17/v-russkoy-pravoslavnoy-cerkvi-nazvali-ra-kadyrova-primerom-beskompromissnoy-otstaivaniya> (trans. R. F.).

In December 2022, a regional forum of the WRPC on the topic “Holy War – Transformation of Russia” (or, as in the case of the homonymous short version of the “Russian Doctrine,” “Transfiguration of Russia” – преобразование России) took place in Stavropol in the North Caucasus. The host, Metropolitan Kirill (Pokrovsky) of Stavropol and Nevinnomyssk, stated in his welcome speech that Ukraine is currently fighting “a war against Nazism, Satanism and the Antichrist.” More than 50 highly developed countries, he continued, were trying to dismember Russia and to extinguish its culture. Therefore, Russia must fight “for its soul and its sacred relics.” Like Patriarch Kirill, the Metropolitan of Stavropol then referred to the vices and the immorality of Western liberal societies and contrasted them – citing Dostoevsky – with the holiness of the Russian people.⁹⁰

After Kirill of Stavropol, who apparently had met the Patriarch’s expectations, was rewarded with the chairmanship of the Synodal Department for Cooperation with the Armed Forces in April 2023, he repeated his statements about a “holy war” in Ukraine and a “war against Satanism” at various occasions, including an “Anti-Fascist Congress” in Moscow on the topic of “Nazism in Ukraine.”⁹¹ On October 19, 2023, another WRPC regional forum was held in Stavropol under his auspices, where the movie “Holy War” by Andrei Afanasiev, military correspondent for the Orthodox television channel Spas, was presented.⁹² On January

⁹⁰ See the press release of December 14, 2022: Metropolitan Kirill of Stavropol and Nevinnomyssk, “Доклад митрополита Ставропольского и Невинномысского Кирилла на Пленарном заседании Ставропольского Форума ВРПС «Священная война – Преобразование России»” [“Report by Metropolitan Kirill of Stavropol and Nevinnomyssk at the Plenary Session of the Stavropol Forum of the WRPC «Holy War – Transfiguration of Russia»”], <http://stavropol-eparhia.ru/doklad-mitropolita-stavropolskogo-i-nevinnomyskogo-kirilla-na-plenarnom-zasedanii-stavropolskogo-foruma-vrns-svyashhennaya-voyna-preobrazhenie-rossii/> (trans. R. F.). For a critical examination of this current ROC narrative see Joshua T. Searle, “A Theological Case for Ukraine’s European Integration: Deconstructing the Myth of «Holy Russia» versus «Decadent Europe»,” *International Journal of Public Theology* 16 (2022): 289–304.

⁹¹ For this congress held from August 17–19, 2023, see: Митрополит Ставропольский Кирилл выступил на II Международном антифашистском конгрессе” [“Metropolitan Kirill of Stavropol spoke at the Second International Anti-Fascist Congress”], <https://www.patriarchia.ru/article/82601> (trans. R. F.).

⁹² See Kuban Metropolis of the ROC, “Митрополит Кирилл возглавил работу круглого стола «Служение духовенства в зоне СВО»” [“Metropolitan Kirill chaired the round table discussion entitled «The Ministry of the Clergy in the Special Military Operation Zone»”], <https://mitropoliakuban.ru/mitropolit-kirill-vozglavil-rabotu-kruglogo-stola-sluzhenie-duhovenstva-v-zone-svo/>. For the movie with war scenes from Ukraine see: Andrey Afanasyev, “Holy War,” published May 9, 2023 by SPAS TV channel, RuTube, <https://rutube.ru/video/f3ccc99bbb8d8e5ccd2b9f4c9c28c83a/>.

25, 2024, Metropolitan Kirill organized once more a congress on the topic “Holy War – Transfiguration of Russia”, this time at the Central House of the Russian Army in Moscow.⁹³ Two months later, on March 27, 2024, this development culminated in the publication of the WRPC declaration about the “Present and Future of the Russian World.” Under the presidency of Patriarch Kirill and with the participation of numerous clergy, including the majority of the ROC’s Holy Synod, the Russian war of conquest against Ukraine was declared a “holy war” in “spiritual and moral terms” and Ukraine was categorically denied the right to independent statehood.

Finally, in a recent address to the WRPC on November 19, 2025, Patriarch Kirill also embraced the Kremlin’s narrative of combating Nazism in Ukraine, and declared that Russia has to continue the – in this regard – uncompleted Second World War:

Attempts to erase the memory of the great victory of 1945, attempts to distort the role of our country – the victor over fascism and the liberator – are blatant attempts at revenge. Of course, the self-esteem of the champions of Nazi ideology has been wounded – their pride demands that the memories of the events of that Great War be erased from human memory as soon as possible, depriving the peoples of Russia of their aura of victors. That is why we are forced to perceive the events in Ukraine not only as the most severe tragedy of our people, divided by an evil external will, but also as a continuation of that uncompleted war in which we won the great victory in the spring of 1945, but failed to completely eradicate the evil of Nazism.⁹⁴

⁹³ See Synodal Department for Cooperation with the Armed Forces and Law Enforcement Agencies, “Митрополит Ставропольский Кирилл возглавил международную конференцию «Священная война: преображение России»” Metropolitan Kirill of Stavropol presided over the international conference <https://pobeda.ru/mitropolit-stavropolskij-kirill-vozglavil-mezhdunarodnuyu-konferencziyu-svyashhennaya-vojna-preobrazhenie-rossii-133> (trans. R. F.). On January 27, 2025, another conference chaired by Metropolitan Kirill took place at the Central House of the Russian Army, this time on the topic of “Greater Russia – a bond between times and generations,” ROC, Press Service, “В Центральном доме Российской армии прошла конференция «Великая Россия: связь времен и поколений»” [“In the Central House of the Russian Army a conference entitled «Great Russia: a bond between times and generations» was held”], <https://www.patriarchia.ru/article/23694>. According to this press release the audience agreed that Russia, as a “bulwark of Orthodoxy,” is currently engaged in a “holy war” (trans. R. F.).

⁹⁴ See footnote 80.

Conclusion

The sacralization of wars has a long tradition in the history of the ROC. The eschatological war ideology of the 16th century, according to which *Holy Rus'* would be the last stronghold of Orthodoxy, has experienced a geopolitical renaissance in post-Soviet Russia. For the ROC and her Patriarch, *Holy Rus'* is a katechontic force and her Christ-loving army is fighting against satanic forces in Ukraine in order to prevent the beginning of the rule of the Antichrist. In the last three decades, this myth of an eschatological mission of *Holy Rus'* became fused with the Anti-Occidentalism of 19th-century Russian religious philosophy, thus giving birth to the ideology of the "Russian World" with *Holy Rus'* as its spiritual center. This concept of an Orthodox civilization opposed to the Western World and its culture was most suitable to underpin Putin's irredentist and neo-imperialist aspirations.

Patriarch Kirill has been unreservedly endorsing Putin's efforts to re-establish a Great Russia, as this would also secure the long-term integrity of the canonical territory of the ROC and even enable him to regain jurisdiction over lost territories. With the WRPC the ROC had, even before Putin's presidency, created an organizational platform, which could be used to profile herself as a pillar of Russian national identity and culture in juxtaposition to the West. As the main strategy for strengthening Russia's national identity, the ROC chose to promote the narrative of the so-called "traditional Russian values" and the "Orthodox culture," which had to be defended against the onslaught of the liberal values of the West. Furthermore, the ROC did not only become a lobbyist for "traditional values" but also an advocate of Russian national patriotism and an agency for civic and patriotic education. This commitment of the ROC in the service of the Kremlin, however, led to a gradual "theological decorating" of her Christian message⁹⁵ and to the transformation of its leadership into a quasi-governmental organization.

With Putin's sharply anti-Western political course, the cooperation between state and church intensified even further. The ROC was a member of the board of trustees of Putin's "Russkiy Mir Foundation" from the outset, supported the elaboration of the ultranationalist "Russian Doctrine", and gave it her seal of approval. Even back then, the leadership

⁹⁵ See Kristina Stoeckl, "The Russian Orthodox Church as moral norm entrepreneur," *Religion, State and Society* 44, no. 2 (2016): 132–51; for the "theological decorating" see Regina Elsner, "Bedingt einsetzbar. Die Russische Orthodoxe Kirche in Russlands Außenpolitik," *Osteuropa* 67, no. 9–10 (2017): 217.

of the Moscow Patriarchate endorsed the revisionist goals of the Kremlin, i.e., the restoration of “historical Russia” as a unified state. When Russia started the full-scale war against Ukraine in 2022, the leadership of the ROC theologically legitimized the war as a fight for the Orthodox faith and against sin and Satanism. In 2024, with the blessing of the patriarch, Russia’s war against Ukraine and the accompanying continuous attacks on civilians were justified as part of Russia’s catechontic mission against the alleged Western Satanism and glorified as a “holy war.” This, along with the apotheosis of the soldier’s death as a co-crucifixion with Christ, certainly constitutes a serious perversion of Christian doctrine and is undoubtedly heretical. While pretending to fulfill her Christian mission to the world, the leadership of the ROC is in fact spreading the Kremlin’s imperialist propaganda and supporting a war that has brought death and despair for millions of people. It is to be hoped that after the end of this disastrous aberration, the ROC will be strong enough to repent and to renew itself completely.