

A Holy War?

The Religious Dimension of Russian Military Ideology

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This paper deals with the concepts contributing to the description of the full-scale invasion of Russia into Ukraine as Holy War, namely the Russian World and Katechon. Special attention is dedicated to the role of the Moscow Patriarchate in sacralising those concepts. The paper also considers the notions of heroism and sanctity, which are increasingly understood with a near-identical meaning. It analyses the effects of the cult surrounding soldiers and officers killed in action, who are presented as martyrs and saints by both secular and religious authorities in Russia. Finally, the paper shows how this concept contributes to legitimizing the present political regime in Russia.

Keywords: *Russian World, Katechon, Moscow Patriarchate, holy war, political religion*

The history of wars is as long as human history. However, not all wars have been considered holy by their participants or by historians. What is a holy war? It has been defined, for example, as sanctified violence in service to a deity or religious ideology.¹ The authors of the study “Sanctified Violence. Holy War in World History” suggest five criteria to define a war as holy. Firstly, it is a war fought for religious reasons, whereas a war is called “just” for a mixture of moral and political reasons. Secondly, while a just war is authorized by a political authority, a holy war claims to be justified by a deity, acting through a political authority. Thirdly, participants in a holy war perceive it as a struggle between a saintly army and a demonic one. Fourthly, the mood of holy warriors is one of religious zeal, in which they fulfil the will of a deity, rather than choosing the lesser of two evils, which is the case with a just war. Fifthly, the holy warrior expects a spiritual reward or even claims martyrdom if he dies in the battle.²

We are going to show that the Russo-Ukrainian war seems to correspond to all five criteria. Its ideological architects have no difficulties in defining it as a *Holy* or *Sacred War* (святенная война, *sviashchénnaiia*

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¹ Alfred J. Andrea and Andrew Holt, *Sanctified Violence: Holy War in World History* (Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 2021), X.

² *Ibidem*, XXIV–XXV.

voiná). While the support of the Moscow Patriarchate is fundamental, describing this war as holy may be an obvious thing to do. However, if we face the question to what extent the ideology behind the war is purely religious, the answer may not be so simple.

Do the Russian authorities demonstrate themselves as the instruments of God in the Russo-Ukrainian war? Indeed, they do. “It was the will of the Lord” to begin the invasion, said Vladimir Putin.³ According to Dmitry Medvedev, the Deputy Chairman of the Security Council of the Russian Federation and the former President of the country, today Russia confronts “the supreme ruler of hell, no matter what name he uses – Satan, Lucifer or Iblis.”⁴ A curious insight into the minds of the political elite is provided by the article “The Antichrist as Technology” by Andrei Ilnitskiy, then a member of the Council on Foreign and Defence Policy and advisor to the Russian Minister of Defence. The article, published in the official media of the Federation Council, discusses a conspiracy by globalists who, with the help of the Pope, seek to bring the Antichrist to power over the world. Russia is the “chosen people” and is now defending the Almighty, who is one for both Christians and Muslims.⁵ In a different sense, the invasion of Ukraine is a religious cause, as it allegedly aims to liberate the Ukrainian Orthodox Church – formerly a part of the Moscow Patriarchate – from the persecution by the Ukrainian state. The Russian states people see themselves in a position to determine, which jurisdiction in Ukraine is a canonical one, and which one is not.⁶ It is also common to

³ “Церемония награждения Героев России [Ceremonija nagrazhdenija Geroev Rossii],” kremlin.ru/events/president/news/76322, accessed December 1, 2025.

⁴ Дмитрий Медведев [Dmitriy Medvedev], “Почему наше дело правое. Ответы на простые вопросы в День народного единства [Pochemu nashe delo pravoe. Otvety na proste voprosy v Den’ narodnogo edinstva],” Telegram posting Nov 4, 2022, t.me/medvedev_telegram/206, accessed June 19, 2024.

⁵ Андрей Ильницкий [Andrey Ilnitskiy], “Антихрист как технология [Antihrist kak tehnologija],” (2024), pnp.ru/politics/antikhrist-kak-tehnologiya.html, accessed March 25, 2024.

⁶ E.g. “Комментарий официального представителя МИД России М.В.Захаровой об очередном витке гонений на Украине на священнослужителей канонической Украинской православной церкви [Kommentarij oficial’nogo predstavitelja MID Rossii M. V. Zaharovoj ob ocherednom vitke gonenij na Ukraine na svjashhennosluzhitelej kanonicheskoy Ukrainskoj pravoslavnoj cerkvi],” August 17, 2024, mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/1965856/, accessed September 10, 2024.

describe the Russian army as “Christ-loving”⁷ while the Ukrainian army is described as consisting of pagans and neo-Nazis,⁸ being a demonic force.

Looking at the expanded and codified declarations of *Holy War*, we may turn to the наказ (*nakaz*) of the VRNS – *The World Russian People’s Council* (Всемирный Русский Народный Собор, *Vsemirny Russkii Narodny Sobor*) – published on 27 March 2024. The Council is presided by Patriarch Kyrill, who was its founder in 1993, Metropolitan of Smolensk and Kaliningrad and Chairman of the Russian Orthodox Church’s Department for External Church Relations at that time. Although VRNS is not a church body, there is a significant number of bishops and priests among its members, and the vast majority of its lay members and participants, including the political and military elite, identify as Orthodox. One could say, that the Council aims to represent the Church in a broader sense, rather than merely the Moscow Patriarchate as an institution. The document says:

From a spiritual and moral point of view, a special military operation is a holy war, in which Russia and its people, defending the unified spiritual space of Holy Russia, fulfils the mission of “the one who restrains,” protecting the world from the onslaught of globalism and the victory of the West, which has fallen into Satanism.⁹

According to the same document, Russia is “the creator, supporter and protector of the Russian World”:

The Russian World includes all those for whom the Russian tradition, the holy shrines of the Russian civilization and great Russian culture are paramount and represent the meaning of their life. The highest purpose of existence of Russia and the Russian World created by it – their spiritual mission – is to be the world’s “Restrainer,” protecting the world from evil.¹⁰

⁷ E.g. “В Москве прошли торжества по случаю Ильина дня [V Moskve proshli torzhestva po sluchaju Il’ina dnja],” patriarchia.ru/article/111110, accessed September 20, 2024.

⁸ E.g. “Сатанистов и язычников заметили в зоне СВО [Satanistov i jazychnikov zametili v zone SVO],” news.ru/europe/satanistov-i-yazychnikov-zametili-v-zone-svo, accessed December 15, 2025.

⁹ “Наказ XXV Всемирного русского народного собора «Настоящее и будущее Русского мира» [Nakaz XXV Vsemirnogo Rússkogo Narodnogo Sobóra «Nastoiáshchee i budúshchee Rússkogo Míra»,]” March 27, 2024, patriarchia.ru/article/105523, accessed September 2, 2024. Translation by the author.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*.

Andrey Kordochkin

Apart from the description of the war as “holy,” there are two important concepts here, which we are going to look at more closely. The first one is the notion of the so-called *Russian World* (Русский Мир, *Rússkiĭ Mír*), further referred to as the RM), and the second one is the concept of the *Restrainer* (Удерживающий, *Uderzhivaiushchii*). We are going to analyze briefly how these two themes contribute to the sacralization of the war before moving forward.

The Russian World

The doctrine as such was born in the 1990s as a response to the political and social realities, following the disintegration of the USSR.¹¹ According to Ivan Timofeev, the Director General of the Russian International Affairs Council, at that time “the Russian citizen has lost himself, has turned into a marginalized person, even if he was among the wealthy minority”:

He was taken out of the Soviet context and at the same time understood that he was unlikely to become part of the West. He found himself an outcast both abroad and in his own country. His life in political society turned out to be meaningless. There was no energy behind him drifting into Western structures. He was not an ardent nationalist, as many former compatriots in neighbouring republics became. He even lost an enemy who could be demonized and blamed for his failures. At the same time, he himself turned into a scapegoat.¹²

The RM was a platform for Russia and its people, wherever they lived, that provided an alternative to feelings of shame and despair. In 1999 Piotr Shchedrovitskii, one of the architects of the doctrine, spoke about the RM and its impact beyond Russia’s political borders:

Over the course of the twentieth century, following tectonic historical shifts, world wars and revolutions, a Russian World was created on Earth – a network of small and large communities thinking and speaking in Russian. It is no secret that only half of this Russian world is within the territory of the Russian Federation.¹³

¹¹ See, for example, Marlene Laruelle, *The “Russian World”. Russia’s Soft Power and Geopolitical Imagination*. (Center on Global Interests, 2015), Ch. 2.

¹² Иван Тимофеев [Ivan Timofeev], “Российская идентичность. От Большой Европы к Большой Евразии [Rossiyskaya identichnost’. Ot Bol’shoy Yevropy k Bol’shoy Yevrazii],” accessed March 12, 2024, russiancouncil.ru/analytics-and-comments/analytics/rossiyskaya-identichnost-ot-bolshoy-evropy-k-bolshoy-evrazii/, Translation by the author.

¹³ Пётр Щедровицкий [Piotr Shchedrovitsky], “Россия: страна, которой не было” [Rossiia: strana, kotoroi ne bylo], saved copy, <https://web.archive.org/>

A year later, in 2000, he said that the RM is “a network structure of large and small communities that think and speak Russian.”¹⁴ Initially, the term RM was adopted by the Kremlin, reflecting this broader, global concept of the Russian community. For example, in 2001 addressing the World Congress of Compatriots Living Abroad, Vladimir Putin said that “from the dawn of time the concept of the Russian world extended far from Russia’s geographical borders and even far from the borders of the Russian ethnicity.”¹⁵ He used the term again in 2006, declaring that “the RM can and should unite all those for whom the Russian language and culture is dear [...] Use this term, Russian World, more often.”¹⁶

The *Russian Spring* (Русская весна, *Russkaia vesna*) – a pro-Russian unrest in the East of Ukraine in 2014 – gave a new meaning to the term. Vladislav Surkov, responsible for the policy of Russia in the East of Ukraine, said that the task the government had to confront, making use of the RM, was declaring its intention to expand.¹⁷ A year later, he wrote that sticking to the boundaries established by the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk – which resulted in the loss of control over the Baltic states, Ukraine, and other territories – was “boring and uncomfortable.”¹⁸ The annexation of

web/20101027082254/http://archipelag.ru/ru_mir/history/history99-00/shedrovicky-possia-no, accessed February 12, 2024. English translation by the author.

¹⁴ Idem, “Русский мир и транснациональное русское [Russkii mir i transnatsional’noe russkoe],” saved copy: web.archive.org/web/20101030063959/http://archipelag.ru/ru_mir/history/history99-00/shedrovicky-transnatio, accessed February 12, 2024. Translation by the author.

¹⁵ Владимир Путин [Vladimir Putin], “Выступление на открытии Конгресса соотечественников [Vystupleniye na otkrytii Kongressa sootchestvennikov],” kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/2135, accessed March 10, 2024, Translation by the author.

¹⁶ Idem, “Русский мир может и должен объединить всех, кому дорого русское слово и русская культура, где бы они ни жили, в России или за ее пределами. Почаще употребляйте это словосочетание – «Русский мир» [Russkiy mir mozhet i dolzhen ob’yedinit’ vseh, komu dorogo russkoye slovo i russkaya kul’tura, gde by oni ni zhili, v Rossii ili za yeye predelami. Pochashche upotrebyayte eto slovosochetaniye – “Russkiy mir”],” Российская Федерация сегодня [Rossiyskaya Federatsiya Segodnya], No 4. (2007): 158–59.

¹⁷ The interview was deleted from YouTube but may still be found here: Владислав Сурков [Vladislav Surkov], “ЧВК Пергов. Сурков и Бородай о будущем ЛДНР, Украине, Боинге, Байдене и чиновниках [ChVK Pegov. Surkov i Borodai o budushchem LDNR, Ukraine, Boinge, Baidene i chinovnikakh],” interview by Семён Пергов [Semion Pegov], *WarGonzo*, June 12, 2021, dzen.ru/video/watch/60c4a78ffec57a5bead2166e?sid=624953609180144046, accessed March 10, 2024.

¹⁸ Владислав Сурков [Vladislav Surkov], “Туманное будущее похабного мира [Tumannoe budushchee pokhabnogo mira],” *Actualcomment.ru* (February 2022), actualcomment.ru/tumannoe-budushchee-pokhabnogo-mira-2202150925.html, accessed September 25, 2024. Translation by the author.

Crimea and the breakaway Ukrainian republics, as well as the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, shows that Russia's official borders have indeed become relative – but not in the way the doctrine's original creators envisioned.

The Moscow Patriarchate played a vital role in sacralizing the RM, mainly through its identification with the Holy Rus. The nucleus of the RM today are Russia, Ukraine and Belarus, and Saint Lawrence of Chernigov expressed this idea with his famous saying “Russia, Ukraine and Belarus are the Holy Rus,” said Patriarch Kirill in 2009.¹⁹ At a rock concert in Kyiv a year before, he exclaimed: “Russia, Ukraine, Belarus – this is Holy Rus. Holy Rus’ is beauty! Holy Rus’ is strength! And we are all with you – one Holy Rus’!”²⁰ He describes the RM not just as a national community, but as a mystical one, born sacramentally in the Kyivan baptismal font.²¹ It is morally superior to the other communities because, unlike the West, it preserved “traditional values,” which have divine supernatural origin.²² Moreover, the trinitarian dogmatic language is used to describe the RM as “triune.” The RM forum of the VRNS in Sebastopol in July 2024 adopted a resolution that the doctrine of the triune Russian nation should be legally secured, and its discreditation should be considered a criminal offence.²³ Bishop Pitirim (Творогов) said that facing the image of the Holy Trinity the three brotherly nations should unite before engaging in the global confrontation with the united satanic forces.²⁴ The

¹⁹ “Выступление Святейшего Патриарха Кирилла на торжественном открытии III Ассамблеи Русского мира [Vystupleniye Svyateyshego Patriarkha Kirilla na torzhestvennom otkrytii III Assamblei Russkogo mira],” (November 2009), patriarchia.ru/article/96616, accessed March 20, 2024. Translation by the author.

²⁰ “Митрополит Кирилл на концерте в Киеве призвал к духовному единству [Mitropolit Kirill na koncerte v Kiyeve prizval k dukhovnomu yedinstvu],” (July 2008), ria.ru/20080727/114995505.html, accessed March 9, 2024. Translation by the author.

²¹ “Святейший Патриарх Кирилл: Русский мир – особая цивилизация, которую необходимо сберечь [Svyateyshiy Patriarkh Kirill: Russkiy mir – osobaya tsivilizatsiya, kotoruyu neobkhodimo sberech’],” (September 2014), patriarchia.ru/db/text/3730705.html, accessed July 6, 2024.

²² “Патриарх Кирилл: отсутствие общих ценностей у РФ и Запада привело к военному столкновению [Patriarkh Kirill: otsutstviye obshchikh tsennostey u RF i Zapada privelo k voyennomu stolknoveniyu],” (April 9, 2023), gazeta.ru/social/news/2023/04/09/20174887.shtml?utm_auth=false&updated, accessed May 15, 2024.

²³ Всемирный Русский Народный Собор (ВРНС) [Vsemirnyi Russkii Narodnyi Sobor (VRNS)], ed., “На форуме ВРНС «Русский мир» в Севастополе предложили принять закон о триединстве русского народа [Na forume VRNS “Russkii mir” v Sevastopole predlozhili priniat’ zakon o triedinstve russkogo naroda],” July 29, 2024, see vrns.ru/news/na-forume-vrns-v-sevastopole-v-sevastopole-predlozhili-prinyat-zakon-o-triedinstve-russkogo-naroda/, accessed August 18, 2024.

²⁴ Епископ Питирим (Творогов) [Episkop Pitirim (Tvorogov)], “Проповедь епископа Питирима (Творогова) в день праздника Святой Троицы. 04.06.23

icon of the Holy Trinity, painted by Andrey Rublyov, was transferred from the Tretyakov gallery to the Lavra of St Sergius on July 16, 2024. As it has never before been an object of popular religious devotion, this move, authorized by Vladimir Putin, is clearly a political one: the triune God from now onwards is in the spiritual center of the triune RM.

The *Katechon*

The origin of the concept of *Katechon* (*The Restrainer*) is the Pauline epistle (2 Thess. 2:6–8): “And you know, too, what is still holding him back from appearing before his appointed time. The mystery of wickedness is already at work, but let him who is restraining it (κατέχων, *katechōn*) once be removed, and the wicked One will appear openly.”²⁵ It is a commonplace in contemporary Russia to present the current war as a war against the Antichrist.²⁶ The notion of the *katechon* provides a biblical reference to the doctrine.

The concept of the “Russian” *katechon* has been around at least from the beginning of the XX century. Sergey Nilus, a Russian spiritual and mystical writer, mostly famous for publishing the so-called “Protocols of the Elders of Zion” in 1903, wrote that once the three great European monarchies - German, Austrian and Russian – which upheld the Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant churches, have fallen, there is nothing that can stop the global Jewish-masonic plot to bring Antichrist to the dominion over the world.²⁷ This vision of the monarchy as the *katechon* had been expressed in a similar way by John of Kroshtadt.²⁸ After the revolution this outlook was preserved in the Russian emigration, mainly within the ROCOR. The political regime in the USSR was defined as *Satanocracy*

[Propoved' episkopa Pitirima (Tvorogova) v den' prazdnika Sviatoi Troitsy],” posted June 4, 2023, by Скопинская епархия [Skopinskaia eparkhiia], *YouTube*, youtu.be/qMWnQChdmiQ?si=13i2Yk4a1U_XpYPU, accessed October 1, 2024.

²⁵ The New Jerusalem Bible translation.

²⁶ Андрей Кордочкин [Andrey Kordochkin], “Бог войны и демоны. Как идеологи придумали битву России с Антихристом [Bog voyny i demony. Kak ideologi pridumali bitvu Rossii s Antikhrustom],” *novayagazeta.ru/articles/2024/06/10/bog-voiny-i-demony*, accessed June 20, 2024.

²⁷ Сергей Нилус [Sergey Nilus], *Полное собрание сочинений в шести томах* [*Polnoye sobraniye sochineniy v shesti tomakh*] (Moscow: Palomnik), 2005, Vol. 5, 576.

²⁸ *Полное собрание сочинений настоятеля Кронштадтского Андреевского собора Протоіерея о. Іоанна Ільича Сергієва* [*Polnoye sobranie sochineniy nastoyatelya Kronshtadtskago Andreyevskago sobora Protoiereya o. Ioanna Il'icha Sergieva*], (Kronshtadt: Tipografiya gazety «Kotlin», 1903), 47.

(сатанократия, *satanokoratiia*),²⁹ communism was seen as the central manifestation of global apostasy,³⁰ while the Moscow Patriarchate was an “obedient instrument [...] totally enslaved to the godless communist power and serving the tasks and goals of the latter.” Stalin himself was called “the greatest persecutor of the Church of Christ and promoter of godless communism” by the bishop’s council of the ROCOR.³¹ Any attempt to see the Russian communist state as a successor to the old Moscow, the so-called Third Rome, was considered scandalous.³²

Today things look very different, Sergei Kurginyan, an influential political thinker and the leader of the movement *The Essence of Time* (*Sut’vremeni*), in 2013 declared that the world was doomed to collapse if Russia – the *katechon* – ceased to exist. His New Year wish was “See you in the USSR” – and he was certain that this would happen.³³ In 2017 he said:

The Russians stood in the way of the beast, and in this sense Russia is the *katechon* of the XXI century. We also must recognize that the Soviet Union was also the *katechon* during the war against fascism. We are waiting for this recognition also on the part of the official Orthodox circles.³⁴

By using the collective “we” (possibly referring to the authorities), this influential political thinker sends a clear message to the hierarchy of the Moscow Patriarchate, emphasizing the subordination of the church to

²⁹ Архимандрит Константин (Зайцев) [Arkhimandrit Konstantin (Zaitsev)], *Чудо русской истории [Chudo russkoi istorii]* (Jordanville: Holy Trinity Publications, 1970), 173.

³⁰ Idem, “Духовное состояние современного мира и задачи Русской Зарубежной Церкви [Dukhovnoe sostoi’anie sovremennogo mira i Russkaia Zarubezhnaia Tserkov’],” *Православная Русь [Pravoslavnaia Rus’]*, no. 11 (1962): 5.

³¹ ROCOR, ed., “Определения Архиерейского Собора Русской Православной Церкви Заграницей [Opredeleniia Arkhiereiskogo Sobora Russkoi Pravoslavnoi Tserkvi Zagranitsei, Determinations of the Bishops’ Council of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia],” *Церковная жизнь [Tserkovnaia zhizn’]*, no. 9–12 (1953): 55. Translation by the author.

³² Зайцев (Zaitsev), “Духовное состояние [Dukhovnoe sostoianie],” 7.

³³ Сергей Кургинян [Sergei Kurginyan], “Новогоднее обращение С.Е.Кургиняна к членам движения Суть времени [Novogodnee obrashchenie S. E. Kurginyana k chlenam dvizheniia “Sut’ vremeni”],” (December 2012), eot.su/node/14280, accessed Aug 7, 2024.

³⁴ “Кургинян: Россия во все времена – катехон на пути зверя” [Kurginyan: Rossiia vo vse vremena – katekhon na puti zveria], “*ИА “Красная весна” [IA Krasnaia viesna]*,” (March 2017), rossaprimavera.ru/news/kurginyan-pravoslavnye-dolzhy-priznat-cto-sssr-uderzhal-mir-ot-konca, accessed August 17, 2024. Translation by the author.

the state. The Stalin's regime, once described as *satanocratic*, is now often described in *katechonic* terms by the Moscow Patriarchate speakers and ideologists. Metropolitan Mitrofan (Badanin) of Murmansk, a former navy captain, wrote a book with the intriguing title "The Mystery of the Great War" ("Тайна Великой войны", "*Taina Velikoi voiny*") where he affirms that it was Stalin who assumed this messianic role of the *katechon* in WWII.³⁵ While the intellectual leaders of the VRNS do not explicitly equate Stalin's rule with the *katechon*, both Aleksandr Dugin and Konstantin Malofeev – prominent figures in the VRNS – continue to glorify him. Dugin asserts that Stalin "secretly lives" within each of us,³⁶ while Malofeev argues that true justice for ordinary people is only possible under autocracy, as was the case with the country under Stalin.³⁷ "Orthodox Stalinism" has been preached by some clergy, like Fr Aleksandr Shumskii,³⁸ while the figure of Stalin has also been praised by Bishop Augustin (Anisimov) of Gorodets.³⁹ On the Victory Day of 2024, Patriarch Kirill said:

Surprisingly, Russia, in a sense, today is a factor that keeps the whole world, the whole modern civilization from a terrible degradation, which could lead to the end of human history. Russia has always had a special responsibility for the world, for the existence of people, for the existence of the world. And this responsibility our country so valiantly realized during the Great Patriotic War, playing a decisive role in the defeat of fascism and in the liberation of Europe and the entire world.⁴⁰

³⁵ Митрополит Митрофан (Баданин) [Mitropolit Mitrofan (Badanin)], *Тайна великой войны* [*Taina velikoi voiny*] (Murmansk: Издательство Мурманской епархии [Izdatel'stvo Murmanskoi Eparkhii], 2020), 135, 140, 143.

³⁶ Александр Дугин [Aleksandr Dugin], "Великое «Да» [Velikoe «Da»],“ (Dec 1997), zavtra.ru/blogs/1997-12-1643, accessed September 4, 2024.

³⁷ Константин Малофеев [Konstantin Malofeev], "Константин Малофеев: «Для простого народа справедливость возможна только с автократором, как Сталин» [Konstantin Malofeev: «Dlia prostogo naroda spravedlivost' vozmozhna tol'ko s avtokratorom, kak Stalin»],” Interview by Anton Yulaev, *Business Gazeta* [Business Gazeta], January 28, 2022, business-gazeta.ru/article/537583, accessed August 9, 2024.

³⁸ Александр Шумский, священник [Aleksandr Shumskii, sviashchiennik], "Наступит ли эпоха «просвещённого сталинизма»? [Nastupit li epokha «prosveshchionnogo stalinizma?»],” (December 16, 2013), ruskline.ru/news_rl/2013/12/16/nastupit_li_epokha_prosvewennogo_stalinizma/, accessed September 28, 2024.

³⁹ Епископ Августин (Анисимов) [Episkop Avgustin (Anisimov)], "Епископ Августин: Россия должна предложить альтернативу капитализму и американскому глобализму [Episkop Avgustin: Rossiia dolzhna predlozhit' al'ternativu kapitalizmu i amerikanskomu globalizmu],” *Благодатный огонь* [Blagodatnyi ogon'], (Jan 2017), blagogon.ru/news/484/, accessed September 13, 2024.

⁴⁰ Пресс-служба Патриарха Московского и всея Руси [Press-sluzhba Patriarkha Moskovskogo i vseia Rusi], ed., "В канун Дня Победы Святейший Патриарх Кирилл

Although he does not use the word *katechon* on this particular occasion, the concept is implied. On other occasions he explicitly describes Russia as the *katechon*, saying the country defends the values which withhold apostasy, that is, the movement towards the end of the world under the power of Antichrist.⁴¹ At the second year of the war Patriarch Kyrill has spoken openly about the Russian state as “the last bulwark” and the *katechon*,⁴² and a year later, in January 2024 he said, addressing the Russian Federation council, that the country must lead the battle against the Antichrist.⁴³ On July 9, 2024 he repeated his message that Russia has become the *katechon* in the era, which began already in the XIX century.⁴⁴

Having been applied to WWII or the present war, the *katechon* doctrine is being shaped as a unifying force for society, devoid of Christian connotations – the language of confronting the Antichrist is being used by the Muslim leaders together with the Christian ones,⁴⁵ and Medvedev’s reference to “Iblis” is not accidental. It no longer exclusively represents Orthodox monarchy but instead embodies Russian autocracy and dictatorship in a broader sense. I have earlier attempted to show that the credit for this secularised version of the *katechon* goes the German political

возложил венок к могиле Неизвестного солдата у Кремлёвской стены [V kanun Dnia Pobedy Sviateishii Patriarkh Kirill vozlozhil venok k mogile Neizvestnogo soldata u Kremlevskoi steny],” patriarchia.ru/db/text/6127021.html, accessed September 13, 2024. Translation by the author.

⁴¹ “Святейший Патриарх Кирилл: От будущего нашего Отечества и нашей Церкви зависит, в полном смысле слова, будущее мира [Svyateyshiy Patriarkh Kirill: Ot budushchego nashogo Otechestva i nashey Tserkvi zavisit, v polnom smysle slova, budushcheye mira],” (November 2022), patriarchia.ru/db/text/5978803.html, accessed February 10, 2024.

⁴² “Святейший Патриарх Кирилл совершил освящение Андреевского храма одноименного скита Валаамского монастыря [Svjatejshij Patriarh Kirill sovershil osvjaszhenie Andreevskogo hrama jednoimennogo skita Valaamskogo monastyrja],” (July 2023), patriarchia.ru/article/82121, accessed January 13, 2024.

⁴³ “Выступление Святейшего Патриарха Кирилла на XII Рождественских Парламентских встречах в Совете Федерации РФ [Vystuplenie Svjatejshego Patriarha Kirilla na XII Rozhdestvenskih Parlamentskih vstrechah v Sovete Federacii RF],” patriarchia.ru/article/105298, accessed Jan 20, 2024.

⁴⁴ “Святейший Патриарх Кирилл: Нам нужно иметь мужество, силу и дерзновение возвещать Божию правду [Svjatejshij Patriarh Kirill: Nam nuzhno imet’ muzhestvo, silu i derznovenie vozveshat’ Bozhiju pravdu],” patriarchia.ru/db/text/6142972.html, accessed March 5, 2024.

⁴⁵ E.g. “Deshaitanization, desatanization, and the Satan’s ball. The Russian religious leaders’ involvement in propaganda,” (December 2022), imi.org.ua/en/monitorings/deshaitanization-desatanization-and-the-satan-s-ball-the-russian-religious-leaders-involvement-in-i49420, accessed March 21, 2023.

theorist Karl Schmitt through Aleksandr Dugin, who has been a reader of Schmitt since the early 1990s.⁴⁶

Biblical Justification

The Bible is an important tool for presenting the war as holy. According to Archbishop Savva (Tutunov), one of the most outspoken supporters of the war among the Russian hierarchs, in the Old Testament, the commandment “That shall not kill” may be found together with the commandment of Samuel to Saul: “Go and crush Amalek; put him under the curse of destruction with all that he possesses. Do not spare him, but kill man and woman, babe and suckling” (1 Sam. 15,3). He also recalls the words of Ps. 137,8–9: “Daughter of Babel, doomed to destruction, a blessing on anyone who treats you as you treated us, a blessing on anyone who seizes your babies and shatters them against a rock!” The words of the apostle Paul “It is not for nothing that the symbol of authority is the sword: it is there to serve God, too, as his avenger, to bring retribution to wrongdoers” (Rom. 13,4) are also used to justify military force.⁴⁷

The federal Orthodox TV channel *Spas* presented a film “The war and the Bible,” consisting of 16 parts, which altogether lasts about 8 hours. The purpose of the film was to show that the war is not contrary to the Bible, but, the opposite: it is sanctioned by God. In one of the episodes, entitled “Why God Sentenced Biblical Cities to Death,” we see the TV presenter Boris Korchevnikov and the rector of the church at MGIMO, the principal diplomatic school of Russia, Archpriest Igor Fomin. They talk in Volnovakha, a city occupied by the Russian troops in the Donetsk region, which was almost completely destroyed in the spring of 2022 during the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Explosions are heard periodically and a tank drives by during the interview. At the beginning of the film, Korchevnikov claims that the causes of all wars are “unholy life in times of peace, when man rebels against God” and recalls that in the Old Testament, God commands the Jewish people to slaughter the seven nations that were living in the Promised Land. The archpriest agrees that

⁴⁶ Протоиерей Андрей Кордочкин [Protoierej Andrej Kordochkin], “Бог войны и демоны. Как идеологи придумали битву России с Антихристом [Bog vojny i demony. Kak ideologi pridumali bitvu Rossii s Antihristom],” *novayagazeta.ru/articles/2024/06/10/bog-voiny-i-demony*, accessed August 21, 2024.

⁴⁷ Архиепископ Савва (Тутунов) [Archiepiskop Savva Tutunov], “Русская теология войны. Философский Собор, посвящённый памяти Владлена Татарского [Russkaia teologija vojny. Filosofskii Sobor, posviashchennyi pamiati Vladlena Tatarskogo],” min 50:00, posted April 17, 2023 by Солнце Севера [Solntse Severa], YouTube, youtube.com/live/, accessed August 16, 2024.

“God gives a direct command to the Jewish people to cleanse the land of these peoples.” Against the background of footage of the ruins of ancient cities, which are replaced by footage of burnt down houses in Ukraine, Father Igor Fomin argues that these entire “nations are disappearing into oblivion, and other nations are being installed in their place.”⁴⁸

If there is one biblical quote which is most frequently used by the apologists of the war, it is “Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” (Jn. 15:13). It had no military connotations until the 9th century, where it appeared in this context in the “Life Constantine the Philosopher, the First Preceptor of the Slavic People.”⁴⁹ These words of the Lord are continually referred to not only by the Orthodox, but also by the Protestant leaders in Russia, for example, by Sergey Ryakhovsky, the Chief Bishop of the Union of Christians of the Evangelical Faith, causing a debate among his faithful.⁵⁰ They were also quoted by Vladimir Putin himself at a mass rally dedicated to the anniversary of the annexation of Crimea,⁵¹ and repeatedly referred to Patriarch Kyrill in the context of the war.⁵²

Mobilized Saints

The saints are mobilized to fight this war alongside the living, to bolster the narrative of the holy war. Of course, the first ones among them are those who were warriors themselves – St George⁵³ or St Alexander

⁴⁸ SPAS TV, ed., “За что Бог приговорил к смерти библейские города? (5 серия) [Za chto Bog prigovoril k smerti bibleiskie goroda? (5 seriia)],” RuTube video, posted Nov 28, 2022, runtime ca. 02:00, rutube.ru/video/0f225bbb5fa998d009d6e17448b0fc22/?r=wd, accessed August 5, 2024. Translation by the author.

⁴⁹ Marvin Kantor, *Medieval Slavic Lives of Saints and Princes* (The University of Michigan: Ann Arbor, 1983), 39.

⁵⁰ Invictory, ed., “Епископ Сергей Ряховский опубликовал видео, где объясняет свои слова на круглом столе в Госдуме РФ [Invictory. Episkop Sergei Riahovskii opublikoval vidio, gde obiasniaiet svoi slova na kruglom stolie v Gosdumie RF],” (April 2022), invictory.org/news/church/32164-episkop-sergej-ryahovskij-opublikoval-video-gde-obyasnyat-svoi-slova-na-kruglom-stole-v-gosdume-rf, accessed August 7, 2024.

⁵¹ Дмитрий Ерусалимский [Dmitrii Ierusalimskii], “Путин процитировал Библию в Лужниках, говоря о Донбассе [Putin protsitiroval Bibliu v Luzhnikakh, govoria o Donbasse],” (March 2022), mk.ru/politics/2022/03/18/putin-procitiroval-bibliyu-v-luzhnikakh-govorya-o-donbasse.html, accessed September 13, 2024.

⁵² E.g. “Слово Святейшего Патриарха Кирилла на встрече с активом Комитета семей воинов Отечества [Slovo Svjatejshego Patriarha Kirilla na vstreche s aktivom Komiteta semej voinov Otechestva],” (December 2023), patriarchia.ru/article/105153, accessed March 20, 2024.

⁵³ “В Чите бойцов СВО позвали на крестный ход с мощами Георгия Победоносца [V Chite boitsov SVO pozvali na krestnyi khod s moshchami Georgiia

Nevsky.⁵⁴ However, other saints may also be pressganged into becoming patrons of the war, for example St Sergius of Radonezh.⁵⁵ Allegedly, he gave his blessing to Dmitry Donskoy and delegated two monks – Peresvet and Oslabia – to take part in the battle on the Kulikovo field. It has been shown by the scholars they were most likely not monks, and the meeting between St Sergius and Dmitry Donskoy probably took place on another occasion.⁵⁶ However, historical accuracy is not a priority in this case.

Even completely non-militant saints such as St Seraphim of Sarov have been assigned an important role in the war machine. Aleksandr Prokhanov, the leader of the *Izborsk Club* (Изборский клуб) and one of the leading Russian conservative ideologists, awarded a first class order of Saint Alexander Nevsky by Patriarch Kirill and a highest state award by Vladimir Putin, wrote:

Russia is a sacred, restraining country. It kept the world from perishing then, in the post-war years, when nuclear laboratories sprang up on the ruins of the Seraphim of Sarov monastery. Saint Seraphim, without leaving his defeated monastery, invisibly inspired the self-sacrificing scientists, hurried them, and they had time to create Soviet

Pobedonostsa],” *ИА “Красная весна“* [IA “Krasnaia viesna“], (June 2023), rossaprimavera.ru/news/41bb3aac, accessed Sept 20, 2024.

⁵⁴ Евгений Цоц [Evgenii Tsots], “Новый поход на Русь: что связывает спецоперацию и Невскую битву [Novyi pokhod na Rus’: chto svyazyvaet spetsoperatsiiu i Nevskaiia bitva],” (July 2022), regnum.ru/article/3647690, accessed September 20, 2024.

⁵⁵ Александр Одинцов [Aleksandr Odintsov], “Прп. Сергей и освобождение Руси: Верховный главнокомандующий, духовный стратег и победоносный тактик [Prp. Sergii i osvobozhdenie Rusi: Verkhovnyi glavnokomanduiushchii, dukhovnyi strateg i pobedonosnyi taktik],” (October 2024), topwar.ru/252571-prp-sergij-i-osvobozhdenie-rusi-verhovnyj-glavnokomandujuschij-duhovnyj-strateg-i-pobedonosnyj-taktik.html/, accessed September 20, 2024.

⁵⁶ Владимир А. Кучкин [Vladimir A. Kuchkin], “Дмитрий Донской и Сергей Радонежский в канун Куликовской битвы [Dmitrii Donskoi i Sergii Radonezhkii v kanun Kulikovskoi bitvy],” in *Церковь, общество и государство в феодальной России* [Tserkov’, obshchestvo i gosudarstvo v feodal’noi Rossii], под ред. Александр И. Клебанов [pod red. Aleksandr I. Klebanov] (Москва [Moskva]: Наука [Nauka], 1990), 103–22; Лидия В. Соколова [Lidiia V. Sokolova], “Как складывалось литературное предание о благословении Сергием Радонежским Дмитрия Донского на Куликовскую битву [Kak skladyvalo’literaturnoe predanie o blagoslovenii Sergiem Radonezhskim Dmitriia Donskogo na Kulikovskuiu bitvu],” in *IX Чтения по истории и культуре Древней и Новой России: Материалы научной конференции* [IX Chteniia po istorii i kulture Drevnei i Novoi Rossii: Materialy nauchnoi konferentsii] (Ярославль [Yaroslavl’], (25–27 сентября 2014), ed. Лариса В. Ухова [ed. Larisa V. Ukhova] (Ярославль [Yaroslavl’]: Ярославский ист.-архитектурный музей-заповедник [Yaroslavskii Istoriko-Arkhitekturnyi Muzei-Zapovednik], 2016), 63–90.

nuclear weapons, prevented its appearance of the outbreak of the last hour. This restraining role of Russia and the restraining role of Sarov are tangible even now. The axis of the world passes through Sarov, around which continents, peoples, historical epochs revolve. Russia even today does not let humanity extinguish in its striving for good, triumph, eternal beauty.⁵⁷

The idea that the atomic weapons were created under the spiritual patronage of St Seraphim “by the inexpressible Divine providence” was later repeated by Patriarch Kirill himself,⁵⁸ and the concept of the “nuclear orthodoxy” has become the subject of an excellent study.⁵⁹ The list of mobilized saints is a long one. Thus, the Prophet Elijah, for example, is appointed a patron of the Aerospace and Airborne Forces, St Barbara is put in charge of the Strategic Missile Forces, St Ilia of Murom patron of the Border Guard Service of the Federal Security Service,⁶⁰ while St Pimen of Ugresha was assigned to the penitentiary system, which hosts an important number of anti-war activists.⁶¹ St Andrey Bogolyubsky was appoint-

⁵⁷ Александр Проханов [Aleksandr Prokhanov], “Россия – «Удерживающая» [Rossiia – «Uderzhivaiushchaia»],” (June 2019), zavtra.ru/blogs/rossiya_uderzhivayushaya, accessed September 26, 2024. Translation by the author.

⁵⁸ Пресс-служба Патриарха Московского и всея Руси [Press-sluzhba Patriarkha Moskovskogo i vseia Rusi], ed., “В день памяти святителей Московских Предстоятель Русской Православной Церкви совершил Литургию в Храме Христа Спасителя и возглавил хиротонию архимандрита Никандра (Пилишина) во епископа Наро-Фоминского» [V den' pamyati sviatitelei Moskovskikh Predstoiatel' Russkoi Pravoslavnoi Tserkvi sovershil Liturgiiu v Khrame Khrista Spasitelia i vozglavil khirotoniiu arkhimandrita Nikandra (Pilishina) vo episkopa Naro-Fominskogo],” (October 2023), patriarchia.ru/db/text/6068625.html, accessed September 27, 2024.

⁵⁹ Dmitry Adamsky, *Russian Nuclear Orthodoxy: Religion, Politics, and Strategy* (Stanford: University Press, 2019).

⁶⁰ Главный Храм Вооруженных Сил Российской Федерации [Glavnyi Khram Vooruzhennykh Sil Rossiiskoi Federatsii], “Небесные покровители русского воинства [Nebesnye pokroviteli russkogo voinstva],” ghvs.ru/temple/patrons, accessed Sept 10, 2024. Also Виктор Болтиков [Viktor Boltikov], “Небесные покровители» [Nebesnye pokroviteli],” *Topwar*, topwar.ru/5379-nebesnye-pokroviteli.html, accessed September 10, 2024.

⁶¹ Федеральная служба исполнения наказаний Российской Федерации [Federal'naya sluzhba ispolneniia nakazanii Rossiiskoi Federatsii], “Святейший Патриарх Московский и всея Руси Кирилл благословил определить небесным покровителем работников уголовно-исполнительной системы Российской Федерации преподобного Пимена Угрешского [Sviateishii Patriarkh Moskovskii i vseia Rusi Kirill blagoslovil opredelit' nebesnym pokrovitelem rabotnikov ugovovno-ispolnitel'noi sistemy Rossiiskoi Federatsii prepodobnogo Pimena Ugreshskogo],” fsin.gov.ru/news/, accessed September 10, 2024.

ed patron of radiation, chemical and biological protection troops,⁶² while St Joseph of Volotsk was appointed patron of logistic troops. According to Bishop Stephan of Klin, at the time serving as the head of Synodal Department for Cooperation with the Armed Forces and Law Enforcement,

Joseph of Volotsk cared that the spiritual should come through the material. His monastery and associates understood that a person must be fed, watered, and warmed. This charitable function of the Russian Orthodox Church was considered a true spiritual cause for his monastery. The Logistics Troops are the main structure in the Ministry of Defense that provides servicemen with everything they need.⁶³

Not only the saints are turned into soldiers, but also soldiers are turned into saints. The ongoing war is marked by a radical shift in the understanding of holiness. Patriarch Kirill himself said:

If someone, driven by a sense of duty, the need to fulfil his oath, remains true to his calling and dies in the line of military duty, then he undoubtedly commits an act that is tantamount to a sacrifice. He sacrifices himself for others. And, therefore, we believe that this sacrifice washes away all the sins that person has committed.⁶⁴

According to the title of the conference “Holy War – Transfiguration of Russia” (“Священная война – Преображение России”, “*Sviashchennaiia voina – Preobrazhenie Rossii*”), held in Moscow in January 2024, it is through the war that the Transfiguration is achieved. In a homily, given at the feast of Transfiguration in a frontline blindage chapel, a priest said that just as the apostles did not want to leave the Mount of Transfiguration, one does not want to leave the war zone because the souls of the soldiers who kill the Ukrainians are being transfigured on the battlefield and

⁶² “Войска РХБ защиты обрели небесного покровителя [Voiska RKhB zashchity obreli nebesnogo pokrovitelia],” function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12300016@egNews, accessed September 10, 2024.

⁶³ “Преподобный Иосиф Волоцкий стал небесным покровителем войск материально-технического обеспечения [Prepodobnyi Iosif Volotskii stal nebesnym pokrovitelem voisk material'no-tekhnicheskogo obespecheniia],” (October 2019), z.mil.ru/spec_mil_oper/news/more.htm?id=12259837@egNews, accessed September 10, 2024. Translation by the author.

⁶⁴ Святейший Патриарх Московский Кирилл [Sviateishii Patriarkh Moskovskii Kirill], “Патриаршая проповедь в Неделю 15-ю по Пятидесятнице после Литургии в Александро-Невском скиту [Patriarshaia propoved' v Nedeliu 15-iu po Piatidesiatnitse posle Liturgii v Aleksandro-Nevskom skitu],” (September 2022), patriarchia.ru/db/text/5962628.html, accessed September 4, 2024. Translation by the author.

achieve the likeness of Our Lord in their sacrifice.⁶⁵ There is no longer any difference between a hero and a saint. Saints turn into heroes, and heroes turn into saints. A homily by a Valamo monk, published on the webpage of the monastery, affirms that the sacrifice in warfare is regarded as a form of martyrdom by the Church.⁶⁶ According to Archbishop Pitirim of Syktyvkar: “For the Orthodox it is so clear that to die for the faith and the fatherland is a holy duty and a holy obligation. Warriors so killed are saints [...] in Syria, in Afghanistan, or in Ukraine doesn’t matter – they are all saints if they act accordingly to military regulations and military science.”⁶⁷ Metropolitan Mitrofan of Murmansk said in a homily that the sacrifice on the battlefield is the highest possible summit of human existence, which provides the family with a heavenly intercessor.⁶⁸ Metropolitan Matthew of Pskov said in a homily:

With faith our soldiers go into battle kissing their icon and keeping it in their pockets. With prayer on their lips, rising from the trenches, they go on combat missions, and the Lord and the Mother of God keep them safe. And if they perish, they end up in paradise as martyrs who gave their lives for their friends.⁶⁹

Once again, we see a kind of militaristic ecumenism where the Muslims and the Russian Orthodox speak with one voice. Literally on the same day Apti Alaudinov, a commander of the Chechen unit “Akhmat,” ad-

⁶⁵ Протоиерей Петр Гриценко [Protoierei Piotr Gritsenko], “Праздник Преображения Господня в самом большом по площади блиндажном храме в зоне проведения СВО [Prazdnik Preobrazheniia Gospodnia v samom bol’shom po ploshchadi blindazhnom khrame v zone provedeniia SVO],” min 01:01, posted by Military Department of the Moscow Patriarchate, Telegram t.me/voennyotdel/6319/, posted and accessed August 19, 2024.

⁶⁶ Иеромонах Давид (Легейда) [Ieromonakh David (Legeida)], “Нет больше той любви, аще кто положит душу свою за други своя» (Ин. 15:13) [Net bol’she toi liubvi, ashche kto polozhit dushu svoiu za drugi svoia (Jn. 15,13)],” valaam.ru/publishing/11125/, accessed August 22, 2024.

⁶⁷ Владыка Питирим [Vladyka Pitirim], “Live,” Occasion and place, min 21:58, posted March, 21 2022, VK Video, vk.com/pitirim1961, accessed September 16, 2024. Translation by the author.

⁶⁸ Мурманская и Мончегорская Епархия [Murmanskaia i Monchegorskaia Eparkhia], “О тайне смерти [O taine smerti],” Occasion and place, min 08:02, posted Oct 12, 2023,youtu.be/IlzVhA5QX3o, accessed September 7, 2024.

⁶⁹ Митрополит Псковский и Порховский Матфей [Mitropolit Pskovskii i Porkhovskii Matfei], “Слово митрополита Псковского и Порховского Матфея на принесение чудотворного Казанского образа Пресвятой Богородицы во град Псков [Slovo mitropolita Pskovskogo i Porkhovskogo Matfeia na prinesenie chudotvornogo Kazanskogo obraza Presvatoi Bogoroditsy vo grad Pskov],” August 16, 2024, pskov-eparhia.ru/archives/, accessed September 7, 2024, pskov-eparhia.ru/archives/65980, accessed September 7, 2024. Translation by the author.

dressed some Russian mothers, who feared that their 18-years-old sons, conscripted to the army, may be killed: “No one will die who is not destined to die. If you die defending your motherland, your faith in God, you will enter paradise, and what may be better for a man, than paradise on the way of the Almighty?”⁷⁰

Taken together, these comments form a certain narrative that seems coherent in its own way. According to Aleksandr Dugin, who from being a fringe thinker became one of the most outspoken ideologists of the war, if the war against Satan is a holy, sacred war, therefore martyrs and heroes of this war are saints in the absolute sense of the word.⁷¹

The meaning of this cult is greater than only having a mobilizing effect. It has been said that “the appropriation of the war dead and their commemoration in rituals of national mourning and through the creation of memorials during and after the war has the effect of establishing social unity.”⁷² However, this unity is established not only by forming a community which venerates the martyrs, but also by identifying the communities which refuse to take part in their veneration. It has been said, that “martyrologies [...] function as a means of creating group identity, through sympathy or rejection of particular martyrs; martyrology demands people take sides.”⁷³ Once the sides have been taken, cleansing the society from the “traitors” becomes an easier task. Moreover, it becomes a sacred duty: if “our boys” are saints, dissent becomes sacrilege. It is no coincidence that Vyacheslav Volodin, the Chairman of the State Duma, said that the effect of the war is the consolidation of the nation around the President.⁷⁴ Cementing the dictatorship through repressions and political terror becomes the goal of the war, rather than being its consequence.

⁷⁰ Апти Алаудинов [Apti Alaudinov] «АХМАТ СИЛА – РОССИЯ МОЩЬ – АЛЛАХ ВЕЛИК!» [AKHMAT SILA – ROSSIIA MOSHCH' – ALLAKH VELIK!], min 03:15, posted August 18, 2024, Telegram, t.me/AptiAlaudinovAKHMAT/5337, accessed September 20, 2024. Translation by the author.

⁷¹ Александр Дугин [Aleksandr Dugin], Русская теология войны. Философский Собор, посвящённый памяти Владлена Татарского [Russkaia teologiya voiny. Filosofskii Sobor, posviashchennyi pamiati Vladlena Tatarskogo], min 34:20, posted April 17, 2023 by Солнце Севера [Solntse Severa], YouTube, youtube.com/live/5de-OuaAL2k, accessed August 16, 2024.

⁷² Sibylle Scheipers, ed., *Heroism and the Changing Character of War* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 5.

⁷³ Paul Middleton, “What is martyrdom?,” *Mortality. Promoting the interdisciplinary study of death and dying* Vol. 19 (2, 2014): 128.

⁷⁴ “Вячеслав Володин: создание эффективной и устойчивой экономики стало ответом Вашингтону и Брюсселю на давление и санкции [Vjacheslav Volodin: sozdanie jeffektivnoj I ustojchivoj jekonomiki stalo otvetom Vashingtonu I Brjusselju na davlenie I sankcii],” July 26, 2003, duma.gov.ru/news/57666, accessed April 30, 2024.

Conclusion

We can clearly see how the narrative of the *Holy War* is being constructed. The Russian authorities are fulfilling God's will, leading the saintly army, which confronts the demonic hosts. Those who die in this war are more than heroes, but are venerated as martyrs. However, there is an important aspect which is easy to miss for a Western observer. While in the West the expression *Holy War* brings associations with the crusades or with the *ji-had* in the Islamic tradition, in Russia the designation of the war as "holy" brings direct memories of the song "*Holy War*" ("Священная война"), also known as "Arise, Mighty Country" ("Вставай, страна огромная"), which is probably the most well-known song from the time of the WWII. Thus, it is a powerful tool to represent the current war as the continuation of the Great Patriotic War, the legitimacy of which is hardly doubted in contemporary Russia. It is the victory in this war that has been chosen as the focus of the new ideology, as the meeting point between what is Orthodox and what is Soviet. The Victory Day has become a "Civil Easter," the event from the life of an atheist state has become a biblical drama. Even Stalin has begun to be seen as a faithful Christian – at least in the post-war period. There is no longer antagonism between Orthodoxy and the Soviet ideology, as it was the same God, who was acting through the Russian authorities and army then and now.⁷⁵

For example, at the recent conference in Moscow "Holy War. Transfiguration of Russia," Metropolitan Kyrill of Stavropol, the head of Synodal Department for Cooperation with the Armed Forces and Law Enforcement, said that according to the state-wide census of 1937, the vast majority of the country considered itself to be Orthodox Christians. Marshal Zhukov took his daughter to the Lavra of St Sergius during the persecutions of the Khrushchev era, Marshal Chuykov had a prayer folded into his Communist party membership card after the battle of Stalingrad. While the General Staff was under the charge of Aleksandr Vasilevsky – a former seminarian and son of a priest, Zoya Kosmodemyanskaya, an iconic partisan war hero was a granddaughter of a priest. General Karbyshev

⁷⁵ See протоиерей Андрей Кордошкин [protoierej Andrej Kordochkin], "Другой огонь. Гражданская религия в России как продукт тоталитаризма [Другой огонь. Grazhdanskaja religija v Rossii kak produkt totalitarizma]," April 9, 2025, novaygazeta.ru/articles/2025/04/09/drugoi-ogon, accessed May 15, 2025, also протоиерей Андрей Кордошкин [protoierej Andrej Kordochkin], "Пока ты на брюхе полз, мы все такое видели! [Пока ты на brjuhe polz, my vse takoe videli!]," novaygazeta.ru/articles/2025/11/10/poka-ty-na-briukhe-polz-my-vse-takoe-videli, accessed December 5, 2025.

helped to save the Lavra of St Sergius from closure in the 1930s.⁷⁶ In a homily pronounced in May 2016 Patriarch Kyrill described the Soviet Army in the 1940's as "Christ-loving" (христолюбивый) – but not being aware of it:

The Christ-loving army always fights for truth, against evil, and even if the members of this army do not fully recognise themselves as Christians, the nature of the Christ-loving army does not change because of this [...]. And therefore our army, even if there were no priests in it and there was no common prayer (although personal, private prayer was performed by almost every soldier), can safely be called a Christ-loving army.⁷⁷

This curious presentation of the Red Army as "anonymous Christians" is visibly present in the "church of the armed forces."

The world consists of a visible part and an invisible part. The visible part is us, human beings, who perform labours and feats. But above us there are heavenly patrons who help invisibly, even when we are not aware of it. Those who are depicted below are not even aware of the fact that the heavenly host is above them, which makes them a truly invincible earthly army,

says archpriest Leonid Kalinin, the head of the artistic council for its construction.⁷⁸

In 2015, the Minister of Culture, Vladimir Medinsky, said that the Soviet war heroes should be treated as saints, and their lives should be treated as pieces of hagiography, while those who show any doubt in them will burn in hell.⁷⁹ Speaking about a partisan, Zoya Kosmodemyanskaya,

⁷⁶ Митрополит Ставропольский Кирилл [Mitropolit Stavropol'skii Kirill], "Международная научно-практическая конференция «Священная война: преображение России» [Mezhdunarodnaia nauchno-prakticheskaiia konferentsiia «Sviashchennaia voina: preobrazhenie Rossii»], min 53:00, posted January 26, 2024 by Департамент национальной политики Москвы [Departament natsional'noi politiki Moskvy], RuTube, rutube.ru/video/8b212a7ab1be1091dd649ff99da6dece/, accessed September 7, 2024.

⁷⁷ "Слово Святейшего Патриарха Кирилла в день памяти великомученика Георгия Победоносца после Литургии в Георгиевском храме на Поклонной горе" [Slovo Svjatejshego Patriarha Kirilla v den' pamjati velikomuchenika Georgija Pobedonosca posle Liturgii v Georgievskom hrame na Poklonnoj gore], May 6, 2016, patriarchia.ru/article/97608, accessed August 17, 2024.

⁷⁸ "«Кресты и красные звезды»: что скрывает главный храм Вооруженных сил [«Kresty i krasnye zvezdy»: chto skryvaet glavnyj hram Vooruzhennyh sil], (June 2020), ria.ru/20200622/1573327558.html, accessed August 17, 2024.

⁷⁹ BBC, ed., "Мединский: сомневающиеся в подвигах панфиловцев будут гореть в аду» [Medinskii: somnevaiushchiesia v podvigakh panfilovtsev budut goret' v

he said that the house in which she spent the night before her execution was a Golgotha, and “one can only treat her life as a life of saints.”⁸⁰ When asked “who is the most important hero of the Great Patriotic War?” he answered: “It is impossible to choose the most important hero here – just as it is impossible to choose the most important saint among the saints!”⁸¹ A “saint” is not a metaphor. While there is no public discussion of canonizing Marshal Georgy Zhukov, the *Foma* magazine published a hagiography-like article, presenting him as a faithful Orthodox Christian throughout his life.⁸² He is portrayed in a similar way by his daughter, who compares him to Suvorov in an interview published by the online portal *Pravoslavie* back in 2004, when the resource was run by Fr Tikhon Shevkunov, now Metropolitan of Crimea and the author of the book “Unholy Saints” (“Несвятые святые,” “*Nesviatye sviatye*”)⁸³ Danilov monastery in Moscow, which houses the Patriarchate headquarters, published an article dedicated to him, called “The Warrior of Christ” (“Воин Христов,” “*Voin Khristov*”), which compares him riding a white horse during the victory parade in Moscow in 1945 with the icon of St George, his patron saint, on a horse defeating the dragon.⁸⁴ A Bulgarian scholar Milena Benovska-Subkova, exploring the veneration of the dead – the war heroes and the saints – in the region of Tula, notes:

What is specific to the post-socialist context is the intensity and widespread nature of the (political) veneration of the dead. It follows that the political cult of the dead is not a Russian peculiarity, but there is

adu],” (Nov 2016), bbc.com/russian/news-38117988, accessed August 22, 2024.

⁸⁰ “Мединский назвал Зою Космодемьянскую и 28 панфиловцев святыми [Medinskiy nazval Zoju Kosmodem’janskuju i 28 panfilovcev svjatymi],” (November 2016), lenta.ru/news/2016/11/26/medinskiy_o_kosmodemianskoy, accessed August 22, 2024.

⁸¹ “Владимир Мединский: «Если мы лишимся наших героев - мы лишимся нашей истории» [Vladimir Medinskiy: «Esli my lishimsja nashih geroev - my lishimsja nashey istorii!»],” (May 2017), culture.gov.ru/press/news/vladimir_medinskiy_esli_my_lichimsya_nashikh_geroev_my_lichimsya_nashey_istorii, accessed April 3, 2024.

⁸² Марина Борисова [Marina Borisova], “Жуков: вера, чудеса и изгнание в жизни маршала Победы [Zhukov: vera, chudesa i izgnanie v zhizni marshala Pobedy],” (Nov 2021), foma.foma.ru/zhukov-vera-chudesa-i-izgnanie-v-zhizni-marshala-pobedy.html, accessed August 22, 2024.

⁸³ Мария Жукова [Mariia Zhukova], “Россия никогда не умирала! [Rossia nikogda ne umirala!],” Interview by Дмитрий Сапрыкин [Dmitrii Saprykin], *Pravoslavie* (2004), pravoslavie.ru/guest/zhukova.htm, accessed September 8, 2024.

⁸⁴ Мария Мономенова [Mariia Monomenova], “Маршал Жуков – воин Христов. К 120-летию со дня рождения [Marshal Zhukov – voin Khristov. K 120-letiiu so dnia rozhdeniia],” prihozhnanin.msdm.ru/home/pochitat/ob-otechestve/1566-marshal-zhukov-voin-khristov-k-120-letiyu-so-dnya-rozhdeniya.html, accessed August 22, 2024.

still reason to believe that its large-scale character and specific temporal and spatial context give it a certain Russian characteristic [...] What is specific to the country is the strategy of reconciling seemingly irreconcilable historical legacies [...] The monuments to communist leaders are intact and coexist peacefully with the temples being rebuilt or under construction and new sites of memory in general.⁸⁵

“Reconciling the irreconcilable” is a good expression to characterize the ideology of the *Holy War*. Not only does this ideology express a political myth as “a shared narrative shared by members of the political community, simplified and emotionally coloured narratives that reduce complex and contradictory historical processes to reduced and easy-to-understand schemes,”⁸⁶ but it also functions as a powerful legitimation tool. If the Russian President leads a *Holy War*, this raises his status from being a civil servant to that of a Divine agent, providing him not only with moral legitimacy, but sacralising his regime.

⁸⁵ Милена Беновска-Събкова [Milena Benovska-Subkova], “Мъченици и герои: политика на паметта и преоткриване на православието в постсъветска Русия [Muchenitsi i geroi: politika na pametta i preotkrivaneto na pravoslaviето v postsavetska Rusiia],” in *Българският XX век. Колективна памет и национална идентичност* [Bulgarskiiat XX vek. Kolektivna pamet i natsionalna identichnost], ed. Ана Лулева [Ana Luleva] (Sofia: Gutenberg, 2011), 254, 270–71. Translation by the author.

⁸⁶ Ольга Малинова [Olga Malinova], *Актуальное прошлое: Символическая политика властвующей элиты и дилеммы российской идентичности* [Aktual'noe proshloe: Simvolicheskaja politika vlastvujushhej jelity i dilemmy rossijskoj identichnosti] (Moscow: INIION RAN, 2015), 10.