

Driving a Wedge Into the Orthodox Church

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By Dave Haver

BIG SANDY, Texas—Like many of you, I have an interest in world history. It is intriguing for me to watch the role of religion in the affairs of the countries of this world. And it is fascinating to watch the role of religion when major nations of this world engage in conflict.

As we are watching a major conflict between Russia and Ukraine, I wanted to see how the churches in those countries viewed the ongoing crisis. After reading numerous articles about the matter, I chose to share some information with you. I submit the following four articles to you for your edification.



An article titled “Ukraine War: The Role of the Orthodox Churches” was posted at dw.com (Deutsche Welle) on March 9, 2022. Following is the article.

About 75% of Russians and 60% of Ukrainians profess to be Orthodox Christians. How are their churches responding to the war?

Russia’s war of aggression against Ukraine is driving a wedge into the Orthodox Church. While the head of the Russian Orthodox Church, Patriarch Kirill, has justified the war in Moscow, it has been condemned in the Ukrainian Orthodox churches, as well as by some priests in Russia.

“The Moscow Patriarchate had been silent about the war for a long time,” explains Thomas Bremer in a video interview with DW. The professor of ecumenical theology, eastern European church studies and peace research at the University of Münster adds that this position has now changed with Patriarch Kirill, who presents Vladimir Putin’s war as a legitimate resistance to Western values in his sermons in Moscow.

“He bases this on gay pride parades,” explains Bremer, “which he claims were intended to be imposed on the Donbass.”

In keeping with Putin's line and in accordance with the president's ban on reporting on the war or even calling it as such, the patriarch also did not use the word "war" for the invasion of Ukraine but spoke of "events" and "military actions."

Religious diversity in Ukraine

While the Russian Orthodox Church is the primary church in Russia, Ukraine is characterized by religious diversity. Orthodox Christianity has had a turbulent history in Ukraine, especially since Ukrainian independence from the Soviet Union in 1991.

Currently, two Orthodox churches exist in Ukraine. One is the independent Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OKU), led by Metropolitan Epiphanius. This church was recognized by Bartholomew I in Istanbul, who is considered the "spiritual leader" of the approximately 260 million Orthodox Christians worldwide.

On the other hand, there is the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOK), which is an autonomous church within the Russian Orthodox Church and has not often expressed itself politically in the past.

What is the position of the Orthodox churches in Ukraine?

Each of the two Orthodox churches in Ukraine has referred to the "war" by name and condemned it emphatically, Bremer said in an interview with DW. He added that while the OKU's reaction was to be expected anyway, even the patriarch of the UOK, which is after all a part of the Russian Orthodox Church, had spoken of an "invasion" of Ukraine on the very first day of the war and called on Putin to end it.

"The synod of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church even called on the patriarch in Moscow to use his influence on Putin and work for peace," Bremer notes. "But that was left out of the coverage in Russia. The horrors of war are not visible there at all."

Will there be a split in the church?

According to Bremer, the Moscow patriarch's failure to speak out for peace has led to many bishops of the UOK in Ukraine giving instructions to stop mentioning his name in prayer, as is customary. Even in northeastern Ukraine, on the Russian border, that is the case, he says. "In the church, this shows a great movement away from Moscow," Bremer analyzes. The Moscow patriarch has lost the trust of his brethren in Ukraine—and with it many practicing believers in the country, he said. He explained that about 12,000 of 38,000 parishes of the Russian Orthodox Church are in Ukraine and are part of the UOK: that is, almost one-third.

Resistance also stirring in Russian Orthodox Church

In early March, Russian Orthodox clergy and priests published an open letter calling for an end to the war. Written in Russian, the letter reads: "We, the priests and deacons of the Russian Orthodox Church, appeal on our own behalf to all in whose name the fratricidal war in Ukraine will end and call for reconciliation and an immediate ceasefire."

They spoke of the "ordeal to which our brothers and sisters in Ukraine are undeservedly subjected" and referring to the future added, "We are saddened

to think of the gulf that our children and grandchildren in Russia and Ukraine will have to bridge to become friends again, to respect and love one another." As of March 8, 2022, 286 priests and deacons have signed the letter.

"This is very courageous," Bremer says of these clerics, who make up a relatively small group out of around 36,000 priests in the Russian Orthodox Church. But they are now being subjected to reprisals and persecution by the Russian authorities and the Federal Secret Service (FSB), Bremer adds.

'Russian Orthodox' as a cultural identity

Professing to being part of the Orthodox Church in Russia can be both a religious as well as cultural affiliation. "There are people in Russia who call themselves Orthodox, but at the same time say they don't believe in God," Bremer explains. "This is also a matter of identity."

Orthodox Christianity is historically closely linked to Russia, the theologian elaborates, and Vladimir Putin is taking advantage of that. In a speech justifying "military actions" in Ukraine, for example, he even referred to the religious dimension when he falsely spoke of Russian Orthodox church members being persecuted in Ukraine.

Both Orthodox churches in Ukraine have rejected this narrative. What impact the war would have on the Orthodox Church, Bremer said, would depend on its further course—and who would win the war. Should Russia take Ukraine, it would mean the end of the independent Ukrainian Orthodox Churches (UOK), he predicts.

But the Russian Orthodox Church would already have lost many believers in Ukraine, and perhaps also some in Russia.



An article by Staff titled "Ukraine Orthodox Church Head: 'Killing Russian Invaders Isn't a Sin' " was posted at jpost.com on March 15, 2022. Following is the article.

Killing Russian soldiers isn't a sin, Metropolitan Epiphanius I of Ukraine, head of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, said Monday in a telethon, as reported by Ukrainian state media Ukrinform.

"We, as a nation, do not wish death to our neighbors," Epiphanius was reported to have said. "However, since they came to our land, we're defending our land. Protecting ourselves is not a sin."

The archbishop blessed the Ukrainian people in their fight against Russia.

This is not the first statement he has made regarding the Russian invasion of Ukraine: A previous statement in late February argued that "the spirit of the anti-Christ operates in the leader of Russia."

He claimed that the "signs" were revealed to indicate this, citing "Pride, devotion to evil, ruthlessness [and] false religiosity."

This “was [Nazi leader Adolf] Hitler during World War II,” Epiphanius claimed: “This is what [Russian President Vladimir] Putin has become today.”



An article by All Israel News Staff titled “Ukrainian Church Leader Gives Blessing to Fight ‘Russian Invaders’ ” was posted at jpost.com on March 16, 2022. Following is the article.

Ukrainian Orthodox Church leader, Metropolitan Epiphanius I of Kyiv, on Monday blessed his people to “fight against the Russian invaders,” according to reports released by Ukraine’s national news agency Ukrinform.

The archbishop also stated that killing Russian soldiers isn’t a sin.

“We, as a nation, do not wish death to our neighbors,” Epiphanius said. “However, since they came to our land, we’re defending our land. Protecting ourselves is not a sin. The [Orthodox Church] blesses everyone for this military feat.”

This was not the first time Epiphanius made strong declarations in opposition to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. In a statement last month, he wrote, “The spirit of the Antichrist operates in the leader of Russia. This was [Nazi leader Adolf] Hitler during World War II. This is what [Russian President Vladimir] Putin has become today.”

The church head further asserted that there are “signs” revealing the “pride, devotion to evil, ruthlessness [and] false religiosity” of Putin, just as it was for Hitler.

Epiphanius thanked Ukraine’s military for standing up for their God-given Motherland and the Truth of Christ.”

“Great honors and gratitude to all our warriors defending their native Ukraine from the aggressor as a living, reliable shield! Our hearts, sincere prayers, and support are always near you,” he said.

“I believe that God will hear our prayers and grant us a just peace—the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, together with millions of Ukrainians and people of goodwill around the world, pray for this every day.”

For centuries, the Orthodox Church in Ukraine has had historical ties to the Russian Orthodox Church, which set it apart from independent Orthodox churches, such as those in Georgia, Cyprus, Greece, Romania and other Eastern Orthodox Christian churches.

The Ukrainian Orthodox Church split in 2018 with the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate falling under Russian jurisdiction while the church that Epiphanius leads is the independent Orthodox Christian Church based in Kyiv.



An article by Scott Kenworthy titled “Why Is Russia’s Church Backing Putin’s War?” was posted at jpost.com on March 22, 2022. Following is the article.

Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the leader of the Russian Orthodox Church has defended Russia's actions and blamed the conflict on the West.

Patriarch Kirill's support for the invasion of a country where millions of people belong to his own church has led critics to conclude that Orthodox leadership has become little more than an arm of the state—and that this is the role it usually plays.

The reality is much more complicated. The relationship between Russian church and state has undergone profound historical transformations, not least in the past century—a focus of my work as a scholar of Eastern Orthodoxy. The church's current support for the Kremlin is not inevitable or predestined, but a deliberate decision that needs to be understood.

Soviet shifts

For centuries, leaders in Byzantium and Russia prized the idea of church and state working harmoniously together in "symphony"—unlike their more competitive relationships in some Western countries.

In the early 1700s, however, Czar Peter the Great instituted reforms for greater control of the church—part of his attempts to make Russia more like Protestant Europe.

Churchmen grew to resent the state's interference. They did not defend the monarchy in its final hour during the February Revolution of 1917, hoping it would lead to a "free church in a free state."

The Bolsheviks who seized power, however, embraced a militant atheism that sought to secularize society completely. They regarded the church as a threat because of its ties to the old regime. Attacks on the church proceeded from legal measures like confiscating property to executing clergy suspected of supporting the counterrevolution.

Patriarch Tikhon, head of the Church during the Revolution, criticized Bolshevik assaults on the Church, but his successor, Metropolitan Bishop Sergy, made a declaration of loyalty to the Soviet Union in 1927. Persecution of religion only intensified, however, with repression reaching a peak during the Great Terror of 1937-1938, when tens of thousands of clergy and ordinary believers were simply executed or sent to the Gulag. By the end of the 1930s, the Russian Orthodox Church had nearly been destroyed.

The Nazi invasion brought a dramatic reversal. Josef Stalin needed popular support to defeat Germany and allowed churches to reopen. But his successor, Nikita Khrushchev, reinvigorated the anti-religious campaign at the end of the 1950s, and for the rest of the Soviet period, the church was tightly controlled and marginalized.

Kirill's campaigns

The dissolution of the Soviet Union brought yet another complete reversal. The church was suddenly free, yet facing enormous challenges after decades of suppression. With the collapse of Soviet ideology, Russian society seemed set adrift. Church leaders sought to reclaim it, but faced stiff competition

from new forces, especially Western consumer culture and American evangelical missionaries.

The first post-Soviet head of the church, Patriarch Aleksy II, maintained his distance from politicians. Initially, they were not very responsive to the church's goals—including Vladimir Putin in his first two terms between 2000 and 2008. Yet in more recent years, the president has embraced Russian Orthodoxy as a cornerstone of post-Soviet identity, and relations between church and state leadership have changed significantly since Kirill became patriarch in 2009. He quickly succeeded in securing the return of church property from the state, religious instruction in public schools and military chaplains in the armed forces.

Kirill has also promoted an influential critique of Western liberalism, consumerism and individualism, contrasted with Russian "traditional values." This idea argues that human rights are not universal, but a product of Western culture, especially when extended to LGBTQ people. The patriarch also helped develop the idea of the "Russian world": a soft power ideology that promotes Russian civilization, ties to Russian speakers around the world, and greater Russian influence on Ukraine and Belarus.

Although 70%-75% of Russians consider themselves Orthodox, only a small percentage are active in church life. Kirill has sought to "re-church" society by asserting that Russian Orthodoxy is central to Russian identity, patriotism and cohesion—and a strong Russian state. He has also created a highly centralized church bureaucracy that mirrors Putin's and stifles dissenting voices.

Growing closer

A key turning point came in 2011-2012, starting with massive protests against electoral fraud and Putin's decision to run for a third term.

Kirill initially called for the government to dialogue with protesters, but later offered unqualified support for Putin and referred to stability and prosperity during his first two terms as a "miracle of God," in contrast to the tumultuous 1990s.

In 2012, Pussy Riot, a feminist punk group, staged a protest in a Moscow cathedral to criticize Kirill's support for Putin—yet the episode actually pushed church and state closer together. Putin portrayed Pussy Riot and the opposition as aligned with decadent Western values, and himself as the defender of Russian morality, including Orthodoxy. A 2013 law banning dissemination of gay "propaganda" to minors, which was supported by the church, was part of this campaign to marginalize dissent.

Putin successfully won reelection, and Kirill's ideology has been linked to Putin's ever since.

Russia's annexation of Crimea and the eruption of conflict in the Donbas in 2014 also had an enormous impact on the Russian Orthodox Church.

Ukraine's Orthodox churches remained under the Moscow Patriarchate's authority after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Indeed, about 30% of the Russian Orthodox Church's parishes were actually in Ukraine.

The conflict in Crimea and eastern Ukraine, however, intensified Ukrainians' calls for an independent Orthodox church. Patriarch Bartholomew, the spiritual head of Orthodox Christianity, granted that independence in 2019. Moscow not only refused to recognize the new church, but also severed relations with Constantinople, threatening a broader schism.

Orthodox Christians in Ukraine were divided over which church to follow, deepening Russia's cultural anxieties about "losing" Ukraine to the West.

High-stakes gamble

Kirill's close alliance with the Putin regime has had some clear payoffs. Orthodoxy has become one of the central pillars of Putin's image of national identity. Moreover, the "culture wars" discourse of "traditional values" has attracted international supporters, including conservative evangelicals in the United States.

But Kirill does not represent the entirety of the Russian Orthodox Church any more than Putin represents the entirety of Russia. The patriarch's positions have alienated some of his own flock, and his support for the invasion of Ukraine will likely split some of his support abroad. Christian leaders around the world are calling upon Kirill to pressure the government to stop the war.

The patriarch has alienated the Ukrainian flock that remained loyal to the Moscow Patriarchate. Leaders of that church have condemned Russia's attack and appealed to Kirill to intervene with Putin.

A broader rift is clearly brewing: A number of Ukrainian Orthodox bishops have already stopped commemorating Kirill during their services. If Kirill supported Russia's actions as a way to preserve the unity of the church, the opposite outcome seems likely.