



Apostles of Violence

The Russian Orthodox Church's
Role in Russian Militarism

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Scars of war. The tragic aftermath of violence and aggression, as a church stands in ruins from the horrors of war in Bogorodichne, Donetsk region, a victim of Russian military action against Ukraine.

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Sammanfattning

Varför används den rysk-ortodoxa kyrkan av den ryska regimen som ett militaristiskt propagandaverktyg när så få ryska soldater är djupt religiösa? I denna rapport förklarar jag denna paradox som en funktion av att religiös propaganda (via det militära prästerskapet) kan bidra till förbandens sammanhållning (dvs. stridsmoralen) i de ryska väpnade styrkorna. Den ryska staten har sedan 1990-talet uttryckt i avtal med Kyrkan att de militära prästernas uppgift är att stödja framväxten av stridsmoral. Även om effekten på soldaternas moral i princip kan vara till hjälp för den ryska krigsmaskinen, verkar det dock i praktiken finnas begränsade historiska bevis för dess inverkan på resultatet av militära operationer. Anledningen till att det är rationellt för den ryska staten att investera i den andliga faktorn genom att inrätta ett militärt prästerskap är den religiösa symbolik som finns i Rysslands medier och samhälle. Detta är ett tillstånd som innebär att även människor med svag religiös tro kan känna sig överväldigade av rysk-ortodox symbolism som genomsyrar media och samhälle. Faktum är att även om en majoritet av ryssarna själva identifierar sig som rysk-ortodoxa, kan bara en minoritet kallas hängivna troende; men tack vare att riklig rysk-ortodox symbolik sprids av den ryska staten och dess medier övertygas de som har svaga religiösa övertygelser om att alla är troende. Och eftersom de väpnade styrkorna speglar samhället gäller liknande förhållanden där. I synnerhet höjer den religiösa symboliken som produceras av det militära prästerskapet tröskeln bland soldaterna för att uttrycka antikrigsstämningar. Det är därför troligt att det knappt tilltagna militära prästerskapet faktiskt har en (om än begränsad) positiv effekt på förbands-sammanhållning, det vill säga, på stridsmoralen.

Nyckelord: Ryssland, militarism, ryska ortodoxa kyrkan, militära prästerskapet, propaganda, förbandssammanhållning, stridsmoral.

Summary

Why does the Russian regime use the Russian Orthodox Church as a militaristic propaganda tool when so few Russian soldiers are deeply religious? In this report, I explain the puzzle as a function of the fact that religious propaganda (via the military clergy) may contribute to unit cohesion (i.e. soldier morale) in the Russian Armed Forces. Several agreements between the Russian state and the church since the 1990s state that the role of military priests is to support the morale of soldiers. Although the impact on soldier morale may be helpful for the Russian war machine in principle, in practice there seems to be limited historical evidence of its impact on the outcome of military operations. In the end, the reason why it is rational for the Russian state to invest in the spiritual factor via the institution of military clergy is the notion of the pervasive “ambient faith” in Russia. This is a condition that means that even people of weak religious faith may feel overwhelmed by Russian Orthodox symbolism through media and society. In fact, although a majority of Russians self-identify as Russian Orthodox, only a minority can be called devout believers; but through the “ambient faith” (i.e. ample Russian Orthodox symbolism promulgated by the Russian state and its media outlets) those who hold weak religious beliefs are convinced that everyone is a believer. And, since the Armed Forces mirrors the society, similar conditions apply there. In particular, the “ambient faith” in the Armed Forces, produced by the military clergy, raises the threshold for voicing antiwar sentiments among the soldiers. Thus, it is likely that the undersized military clergy does have a (limited) positive effect on unit cohesion, that is, on soldier morale.

Keywords: Russia, Militarism, Russian Orthodox Church, Military Clergy, Propaganda, Cohesion, Soldier Morale.

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I use the Library of Congress system for transcribing Cyrillic letters and the Oxford Reference System, both in slightly adapted form.

The PDF version has active hyperlinks in the footnotes and bibliography.

Pär Gustafsson Kurki

Stockholm, Sweden, 22 January 2024.

Table of contents

1	Introduction	8
1.1	Religiousness among Russians	10
1.2	Research puzzle	15
1.3	Data sources.....	17
1.4	Purpose and limitations	18
2	The Church as an organisation	20
2.1	A geographical overview.....	20
2.2	Hierarchy.....	20
2.3	Administrative divisions	22
3	The Church as a propaganda tool.....	24
3.1	The Church's theology.....	25
3.1.1	On killing	26
3.1.2	On war.....	27
3.1.3	On military service	28
3.1.4	A false doctrine: <i>Russkii mir</i>	30
3.2	The military clergy.....	32
3.2.1	Historical overview	34
3.2.2	Wearing two hats	37
3.2.3	The number of priests	40
3.2.4	Legality.....	41
3.2.5	Recruitment.....	42
3.2.6	Training	45
3.2.7	Conditions of employment	46
3.2.8	Work tasks	47
4	Reactions to the Church's position towards Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine	51
4.1	Conformity.....	52
4.2	Dissent	54

5	Why Orthodox propaganda when so few soldiers are religious?	56
5.1	Does spirituality work as a morale booster?	58
5.2	The Church and Russia: What next?	59
6	Declaration of AI use	61
7	Bibliography	62

List of Figures and Tables

Figure 1.	Self-reported belief systems in the Soviet Union and Russia, 1989-2022	10
Figure 2.	Is religion important in your life?.....	11
Figure 3.	Percentage of Russians attending church with some regularity, 2003-2022.....	13
Table 1.	Internal hierarchy of the Russian Orthodox Church	21
Figure 4.	Administrative divisions, below the Patriarch and the Metropolitans, of the Russian Orthodox Church.....	23
Figure 5.	A brief history of the military clergy in Russia, 1917–2023.	34
Figure 6.	The lines of authority that concern the military clergy in 2023	38

1 Introduction

Why is the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC)¹ used by the Russian regime as a militaristic propaganda tool when so few Russian soldiers are deeply religious? The research puzzle under scrutiny in this report is a rational-choice puzzle, given the seemingly disjunctive situation where, a) the Russian state's choice to invest in ecclesiastical militaristic propaganda, via its close relation to the ROC, which is manifested through the recreated military clergy, and b) the limited proportion of Russian soldiers who are deeply religious.²

This report builds on ideas presented in a previous study on the Russian understanding of soldier morale,³ in which I proposed that Russian spirituality (*dukhovnost*), a concept viewed as a positive value by a considerable number of Russians, is used instrumentally to suppress anti-war sentiments among Russian soldiers. Thus, it contributes to the cohesion of units in the Russian Armed Forces. When the state's propagandists, such as the military clergy, associate militarism (here: "the belief that it is necessary to have strong armed forces and that they should be used in order to win political or economic advantages")⁴ to *dukhovnost* (a belief in spiritual transcendence)⁵, the result is a potentially higher threshold for the target population to voice antiwar sentiments.⁶ A stable condition that makes militarism

¹ Hereafter the ROC or 'the Church'.

² An alternative optical lens, through which the same phenomenon can be viewed, is the concept of strategic culture. In this study, I propose that the concept of Russian strategic culture is a part of the decision-makers' beliefs that may explain their decisions, hence, the research puzzle. More on this in the concluding chapter. For an incisive treatment of the concept of strategic culture in the Russian context, see Dmitry Adamsky's book *The Russian Way of Deterrence: Strategic Culture, Coercion, and War*, (Stanford, Ca.: Stanford University Press, 2023).

³ Gustafsson, P. *Rysk syn på stridsmoral: Grundidéerna från 1990-talet till 2022*, FOI-R--5356--SE (Stockholm: Swedish Defence Research Agency, November 2022), Rysk syn på stridsmoral – Grundidéerna från 1990-talet till 2022, accessed 14 December 2023. In 2023, an English-language translation was published as Gustafsson Kurki, P. *The Russian understanding of soldier morale: Essentials of key ideas from the 1990s to 2022*, FOI-R--5481--SE, (Stockholm: Swedish Defence Research Agency, October 2023), The Russian Understanding of Soldier Morale: Essentials of key ideas from the 1990s to 2022, accessed 13 December 2023.

⁴ Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary & Thesaurus, MILITARISM | English meaning, accessed 21 August 2023.

⁵ Here: the belief that the spirit or soul "goes past normal limits" (i.e., transcends the material conditions of human existence). "Transcendence," in the Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary & Thesaurus, TRANSCENDENCE | English meaning, accessed 22 August 2023.

⁶ The individual (e.g., soldier) is exposed to narratives in which military values are associated with spirituality and the Russian Orthodox Church. This creates a cognitive dissonance if the individual at the same time holds and wishes to express antiwar sentiments. The individual can choose to reduce the dissonance by changing their view on war, or keeping his or her views hidden. I base this hypothesis on Leon Festinger's theory on cognitive dissonance; Festinger, L. *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance* (Stanford, C.A.: Stanford University Press).

as a propaganda narrative possible is the overwhelmingly positive attitudes in the Russian population towards the victory over Nazi Germany in the Great Patriotic War (1941–45).⁷

In this report, I examine the above-mentioned proposition about militarism and spirituality further. After the Soviet dissolution, the ROC, the Church, has grown into a powerful actor in the border zone between politics and the ecclesiastical in Russia. As such, it plays a key role in Russian state propaganda, often in conjunction with implicit or explicit militarism, at home and abroad.

Patriarch Kirill, the head of the ROC, has called Vladimir Putin’s presidency “a miracle of God.”⁸ Furthermore, the Patriarch has “the ear of Russia’s Foreign Ministry” and has a key role in the formulation and implementation of Russia’s foreign policy.⁹ The formalisation of the close cooperation of the Kremlin and the Church came in 2003, when a standing group was established, consisting of representatives of the Church and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The Foreign Minister, Sergey Lavrov, famously said that his ministry and the Church are “working hand in hand.”¹⁰ The Church’s main achievement in the area of foreign policy, a rare soft-power success, was the 2011 rapprochement with the Orthodox churches in Ukraine and Moldova.¹¹

The co-operation with the Kremlin does not stop at foreign policy. In the decade before the start of Russia’s genocidal invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the ROC developed into “an exceptionally active political actor,” domestically, “exerting a vast influence over the Russian society,” with a presence in the Armed Forces, public schools and universities, retirement homes and prisons.¹²

In this study, I examine the ROC’s role in Russian militarism. More specifically, the Russian Orthodox Church is considered from the perspective of its being a tool

⁷ “Which events and phenomena in the history of Russia evoke a feeling of pride in you?” In 2018, 87 percent replied, “The victory in the Great Patriotic War 1941–1945.” In 1999, the result was 86 percent. And in the years between (2003, 2008, 2024), the results were similar. Source: Levada Centre, “Dve treti rossiiian ustyidilis razvala SSSR i ‘vechnoi’ bednosti v strane”, accessed 13 December 2023, Левада-Центр : Две трети россиян устыдились развала СССР и «вечной» бедности в стране (levada.ru).

⁸ Reuters, Russian patriarch calls Putin era “miracle of God“, 8 February 2012, accessed 4 September 2023.

⁹ Blitt, R. C. “Russia’s orthodox foreign policy: The growing influence of the Russian Orthodox Church in shaping Russia’s policies abroad”, University of Pennsylvania Journal of International Law, Vol. 33, No. 2, 2011, 365.

¹⁰ Van Herpen, M. H., *Putin’s propaganda machine: Soft power and Russian foreign policy* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016).

¹¹ Lomagin, N. “Interest groups in Russian foreign policy: The invisible hand of the Russian Orthodox Church”, International Politics, Vol. 49, No. 4, 2012, 505.

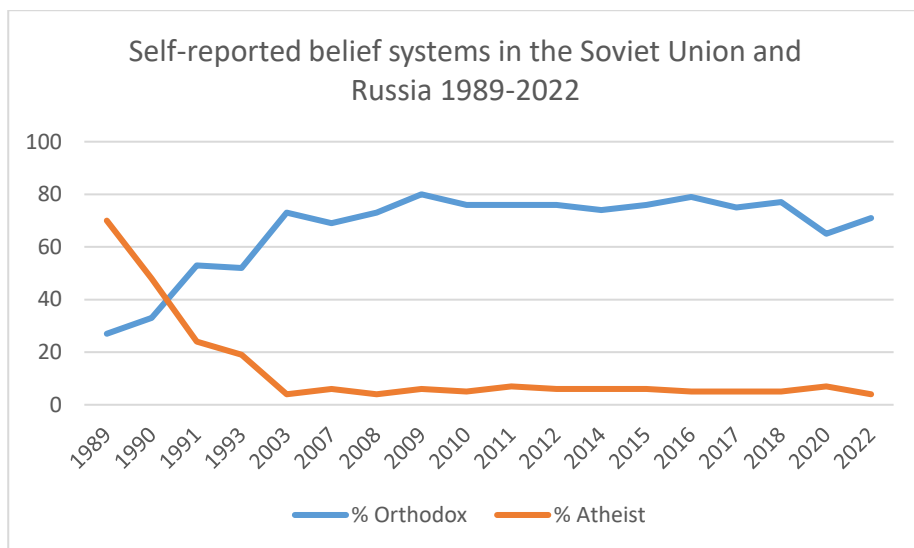
¹² Chakhanova, G.; Kratochvil, P. “The Patriotic Turn in Russia: Political Convergence of the Russian Orthodox Church and the State?” Politics and Religion, No.15, 2022, 133.

for militaristic propaganda aimed at the Russian soldier.¹³ Principally, I aim to explain the puzzle stated in the introductory sentence: Why is the Church used by the Russian regime as a militaristic propaganda tool when so few Russian soldiers are deeply religious?

1.1 Religiousness among Russians

To establish the background and context of the research puzzle, I begin with the question: Is there a receptive audience for spirituality-based propaganda in Russia? Since all military organisations are embedded in societies, I start with evidence about Russian society, for which there is ample data. Then I discuss the limited data available on Russian uniformed servicemen.

Figure 1.

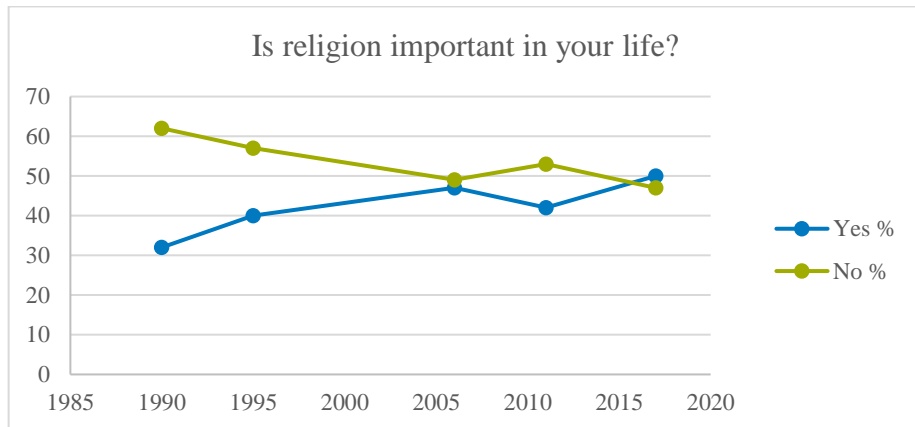


The chart was created by the author based on data drawn from tables in the Levada Centre publication on Religious Beliefs, 16 May 2023: Левада-Центр : Религиозные представления (levada.ru), accessed 12 December 2023.

¹³ A general conclusion put forth in the previous study by Gustafsson Kurki, 2023, is that the significance of *dukhovnost* for soldier morale is probably exaggerated. Some investments have been made in the reinstatement of the military clergy, but far from the actual need as it is perceived by the clergy itself. This suggests that although the regime recognises the propaganda value of *dukhovnost*, they do not wholeheartedly believe that it actually is a cornerstone of soldier morale. Rather, soldier morale depends on material factors such as efficient logistics and, as in all military organisations, the system of coercion based on the state's monopoly on force.

Survey evidence shows that *dukhovnost* is a positive value for about one in two Russians,¹⁴ and that there was a resurgence in Orthodox faith between 1989 and 2003. Figure 1 shows that in 1989, when the Soviet system was still intact, almost three-fourths of the population self-reported as atheist, in accordance with the official ideology. Yet, a considerable proportion of the population self-reported as Orthodox believers. Although the two belief systems virtually switched places after 1991, it is noteworthy that faith co-existed with atheism in the Soviet Union, but, post-1991, atheism can hardly be said to co-exist with faith. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume the presence of a genuine spiritual longing among the people, a longing that survived the Soviet-era repression. This conclusion holds even when the wording of the question is different.

Figure 2.



The chart was created by the author using data from several waves of the World Values Survey.: Inglehart, R., Haerpfer, C., Moreno, A., Welzel, C., Kizilova, K., Diez-Medrano, J., Lagos, M., Norris, P., Ponarin, E., Puranen, B. (eds.). World Values Survey, WVS Database (worldvaluessurvey.org), accessed 12 December 2023.

When the World Values Survey asks about the importance of religion in the respondents' lives (Fig. 2), the approximately 32 percent of the respondents (in the then Soviet Union) who in 1990 reported that religion is important, did so despite having lived through a many decades-long atheistic Soviet experiment.

Again, this suggests that *dukhovnost*, Russian spirituality, indeed remained a social phenomenon despite state-proclaimed atheism, although few Soviets were devout orthodox believers. Given the data in Figure 2, the number of respondents who believed that religion is important kept rising in the years between 1990 and 2017. This suggests that Figures 1 and 2, broadly speaking, tell the same story.

¹⁴ Gustafsson Kurki, *The Russian Understanding of Soldier Morale*, 2023.

As per Figure 1, the Orthodox faith remained the dominant self-reported belief system in Russia between 1991 and 2022. Its closest contenders are Islam (5 percent in 2022) and Atheism (4 percent in 2022). In 2022, 15 percent reported that they held no belief system, which might be interpreted as agnosticism.¹⁵ While atheism is characterised by a conscious rejection of God, agnosticism is the existence of doubt in both the theist and the atheist propositions. In other words, less than twenty percent of the population were either atheists or agnostics. Consequently, Russian Orthodoxy's dominance appears to have become reestablished in Russia.

Russian Orthodoxy as a belief system is a cornerstone of the current Russian regime's propaganda effort. As Sam Green, of King's College London, expressed it, Russian state propaganda is like a kitchen cupboard of ingredients with which a Russian national can mix his or her own version of the militaristic "Z-meal."¹⁶ For this reason, it makes sense to view the ROC as a key institution for the production and provision of the *dukhovnost* ingredient.

Although the Russian population expressed a spiritual longing, the actual influence of the ROC (as an institution) on political and social life in Russia has, since the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, been shifting. According to Irina Papkova, the influence of the ROC on voter choice was minimal in the Yeltsin period of the 1990s and none of the parties that she examined in her study had embraced a religiously inspired political programme, except possibly the Socialists and *Narodnaia Volia* (The People's Will), two marginal left-wing parties.¹⁷ A recent survey shows that only about a fourth of the population believes that the "ROC should have a say in politics," but 40 percent believe that "Russia's success is part of God's plan," a finding that resonates with the notion that spiritual transcendence is a positive value for many Russians.¹⁸

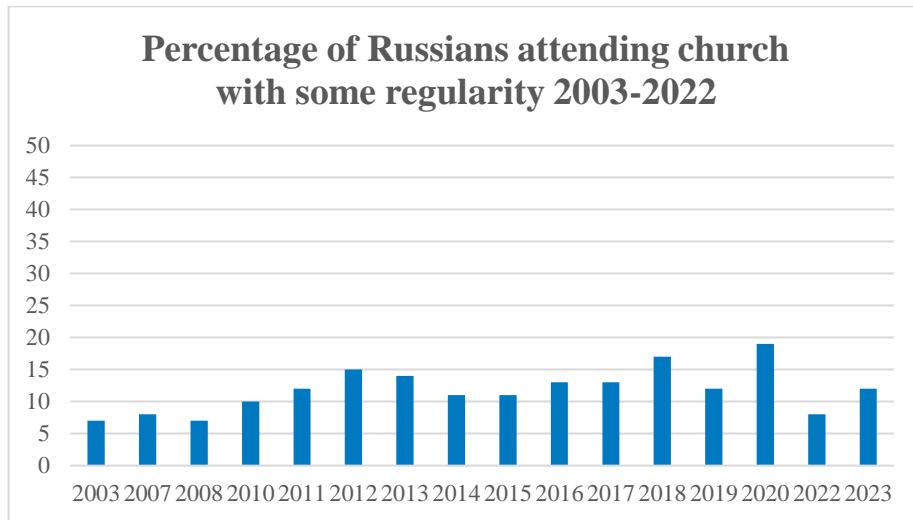
¹⁵ Levada Centre, Religiosity, accessed 12 July 2023, <https://www.levada.ru/en/2022/05/18/religiosity/>.

¹⁶ Greene, S. (@samagreene) on Twitter, 7 June 2023, accessed 12 July 2023.

¹⁷ Papkova, I. The Russian Orthodox Church and Political Party Platforms, Paper presented at the American Association for the Advancement of Slavic Studies (AAASS) in Washington D.C., November 2006.

¹⁸ Hale, H. "How conservative are Russians? Findings from the 2021 LegitRuss survey", PONARS, 12 September 2022, <https://www.ponarseurasia.org/how-conservative-are-russians-findings-from-the-2021-legitruss-survey/>, accessed 12 July 2023.

Figure 3.



The data in the figure shows the proportion of the population in Russia who attend church “several times per week” (stable at about 1 percent), “once per week” (2 percent in 2023), “two–three times per month” (4 percent in 2023), “once per month” (5 percent in 2023). The chart was created by the author based on data from a table in the Levada Centre publication on religious beliefs, 16 May 2023: Левада-Центр : Религиозные представления (levada.ru), accessed 13 December 2023.

Figure 3 shows that the number of Russians with some kind of regularity in their relationship with the ROC is relatively low. In the time series, about 12 percent per year, on average, attended church services regularly.¹⁹ Although the proportion of regular churchgoers is higher in 2023 than when the longitudinal data collection was started in 2003, the trend appears unstable. The spike in 2020 can, perhaps, be explained as an initial reaction to the coronavirus pandemic, but still less than twenty percent of the Russian population attended church regularly that year.

Finally, what do we know about religiosity and spiritual values among the uniformed servicemen in the Russian Armed Forces? Well, not so much. The most detailed information originates from a 2010 article published on the Russian Ministry of Defence website. In the article, “On the characteristics of the religious situation in the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation in 2010,”²⁰ the results

¹⁹ In Sweden, one of the world’s most secular countries, approximately 9 percent of the population attend church services. Teglund, S. 52 % kallar sig kristna – men få går i kyrkan, *Världen idag*, 4 June 2018, accessed 22 August 2023.

²⁰ These data were already 13 years old at the time of writing, but are to the best of my knowledge the only publicly available data on the Armed Forces. Sociological Research Centre of the Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation, “Kharakteristika religioznoi situatsii v Vooruzhennykh Silakh Rossiiskoi Federatsii v 2010 godu”, Ministry of Defence of the Russian

from a representative survey of all categories of servicemen in all branches of the military and in all military districts, including the fleets, are presented. In total, 1 200 respondents participated in the survey.

Sixty-four percent of the respondents reported that they are “believers.” In other words, they are self-reported theists. However, “what is characteristic for many of them is a superficial acceptance of religion, its values and beliefs.” According to the article, this will probably affect their level of religious motivation (for war).

Only 10 percent of the believers are “active” in the sense that they regularly attend church service; the junior officers are notably religious – 69 percent of them are believers. Eighty percent of the believers have submitted to the rite of Holy Baptism (or similar religious initiation) and a further 5 percent wish to do so. Seventy-one percent of the believers wear a crucifix. However, although a vast majority of the believers are Russian Orthodox, less than half of them claim that the Bible is the foundation of their faith, which may indicate that a considerable proportion of the believers indeed are spiritual but certainly not fundamentalists.²¹

In the article, the author draws the conclusion that about a fourth of the believers within the Armed Forces constitutes “a religious potential” there.

It is clear that the official agenda is to use this “religious potential” to strengthen the Russian military’s capability by raising soldier morale via the spiritual factor. An example of this policy at the time of the survey is the newly instated post of “assistant to the commander for work with religious service members” (*pomoshchnik komandira po rabote s veruiushchimi voennosluzhashchimi*). These posts are designated for the members of the military clergy, an institution I describe below. The survey asks about attitudes towards the new post, and while only 14 percent were against the reform, the results offer only limited support for the notion that the new post will help raise soldier morale.

When offered multiple-choice alternatives, thirty-four percent believed that the new post could raise soldier morale (*podniat moralnogo dukha*). Thirty-seven percent of the respondents believed that the new post might help create strong moral qualities (*vysokie moralnye kachestva*) among the servicemen. Thirty-one percent believed it would strengthen military discipline, and 25 percent believed it would lower the incidence of suicide among the servicemen. Twenty-four percent believed it would help create interethnic and interreligious tolerance and respectful relations towards co-servicemen. All of the above variables relate to the aim of maintaining the cohesion and combat effectiveness of the units.

Federation,

https://ens.mil.ru/science/sociological_center/army_in_numbers/more.htm?id=10372748@cmsArticle, accessed 13 July 2023.

²¹ An important caveat is that Tradition is important, for many Orthodox Christians, as a source of faith. I am grateful to Christoffer Wedebrand for this comment.

It seems that the servicemen are convinced that the new post of assistant to the commander will have some beneficial effects, but will not radically strengthen soldier morale. This suggests that there is some dissonance between the servicemen's subjective experience of everyday life in the military and the official agenda (as described in the article) of "creating a set of strong spiritual-moral qualities in the interest of increasing the warfighting capability of the Armed Forces."

There is some evidence of this dissonance in interviews with military servicemen. For instance, in an interview with *Gazeta.ru*, a former soldier explained: "Many of us wore crucifixes, but no one really talked about God. Everyone was longing for their girlfriends, mothers, relatives, and food. Every night we sang the brigade's hymn... Basically, it was all great fun, but no God in sight."²²

1.2 Research puzzle

Given the evidence discussed in the previous section, a puzzling correlation emerges between the use of the ROC for domestic militaristic propaganda²³ (e.g., present-day Russian military thinkers connect spirituality, *dukhovnost*, to soldier morale),²⁴ while at the same time only a very limited proportion of both the population as a whole and the uniformed servicemen in the Armed Forces are devout Orthodox believers.

Therefore, in order to provide an explanation, I examine this research puzzle: Why does the Russian regime use the Church as a militaristic propaganda tool when so few Russian soldiers are deeply religious?

To a certain extent, this has been attempted before. Per-Arne Bodin asked similar puzzling questions in the discussion section of a paper on the relations between the ROC and the state, but left them largely unanswered.²⁵

²² Ivanov, S. "Institut armeiskih sviashchennikov v Rossii poka dalek ot sovershenstva", 30 April 2016, *Gazeta.ru*, Институт армейских священников в России пока далек от совершенства, accessed 28 August 2023.

²³ This is true not only regarding internal propaganda. In 2011, Robert C. Blitt, in an extensive article on the growing influence of the Russian Orthodox Church in the formation of Russia's foreign policies, noted that "... the ROC's influence is increasingly evident beyond the realm of domestic policies. The Patriarch today enjoys the ear of Russia's Foreign Ministry and plays a key role in both formulating and advancing Russian interests abroad"; in Blitt, R. C., 2011, 365. It is noteworthy that Russia's 2000 National Security Strategy was the first to include "spirituality" as a basis for national interest (in author's translation): "National interests in the spiritual sphere include the preservation and strengthening of the society's moral values, traditional patriotism and humanism, and the cultural and scientific potential of the country." In: *Kontsepsiia natsionalnoi bezopasnosti Rossiiskoi federatsii*, No. 24, 10 January 2000.

²⁴ Gustafsson, *Rysk syn på stridsmoral*, 2022, 12.

²⁵ "Why is the Church needed when only a few attend services? Why is so much energy expended in staging these very elaborate rituals modelling the relationship between the state and Church?", Bodin, P-A., "Legitimacy and symbiopy: on the relationship between state and Church in post-

Below, I answer four guiding questions and address the research puzzle. First, consider the four guiding questions and the research puzzle (fifth):

1. What is the Church as an organisation?
2. How is the Church used as a militaristic propaganda tool against the Russian soldier?
3. How do the clergy react to the Church's militaristic doctrine?
4. What might the Church's propaganda against the soldiers mean for Russian warfighting?
5. The research puzzle, as presented above.

Question 1 is answered with a succinct description of the Church's organisation and hierarchy.

Question 2 is answered through a description of how the Church is used for various propaganda purposes. This includes an extensive account of its theology on war, killing, and military service, which can be understood as preparing the ground for generating and implementing religious militaristic propaganda. The main thrust is that the reinstated ROC institution of military clergy is a key tool for this kind of propaganda aimed at the Russian soldier.

Question 3 is answered in a descriptive account of conformity and dissent within the ROC in Russia.

Question 4 is answered by the formulation and discussion of a speculative argument about the effect on soldier morale of the ROC's militaristic propaganda, and the function that spirituality and the church have for the Russian Armed Forces in its war against Ukraine.

Fifth, the results are synthesised in order to explain the research puzzle that is reiterated throughout this report. In short, I propose that militaristic Orthodox propaganda is only one of many available propaganda ingredients, and the rationale for investing in the military clergy (ROC) as a propaganda tool against the Russian soldier rests on the existence of what the scholar Matthew Engelke calls "ambient faith." He writes:

Ambience is akin to what anthropologists have often called "context," which is itself indexed to the more general notion of 'culture,' but I want to distinguish ambience from context. For one thing, ambience often conveys a more distinct sense of what is in the background, especially in acoustical terms.²⁶

Soviet Russia". In: Bodin, P-A., Hedlund, S., Namli, E. (Eds.) *Power and Legitimacy – Challenges from Russia*, (London: Routledge, 2013), 231-232.

²⁶ Engelke, M. "Angels in Swindon: Public religion and ambient faith in England", *American Ethnologist*, No. 39, 2012, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1548-1425.2011.01355.x>, 155–170.

Drawing on Engelke’s work, for present purposes I define “ambient faith” as an environment rife with Orthodox symbolism that may overwhelm even those with weak religious beliefs.²⁷

1.3 Data sources

This study uses the following official documents on church policy:

- statutes of the ROC (ROC, 2000; 2008; 2011);
- the ROC protocol (ROC, 2007),²⁸
- the basis of the social concept (ROC, 2000);²⁹
- the regulations of the military clergy (ROC, 2013).³⁰

The above texts represent the Church’s official position on the subjects addressed. In addition, I use two books published within the ROC cosmos:

- “Orthodox Attitude to War and Military Service” by Georgii Maximov, 2015;³¹
- “Patriarch Kirill and the military clergy” by Boris Lukichev, 2016.³²

These books are written by authors who are relatively close to the leadership – Georgii Maximov – or definitely in a key semi-ecclesiastical role – Boris Lukichev – in the Ministry of Defence.³³ The former book concerns the rules of etiquette, hierarchy, titles and so on used in the Church. The latter book is a hagiography of Patriarch Kirill, which, apart from the glorification of Kirill’s

²⁷ An alternative optics for the same phenomenon is the concept of strategic culture. Those who use the concept of strategic culture in the Russian context tend to argue the case for functional continuity from the Tsarist era’s military clergy, via the Soviet political commissars, to the present-day military clergy. I am grateful to Dmitry Adamsky for this insight.

²⁸ Golovkov, M. *Tserkovnyi protokol*, (Moscow: The Council of Publishing of the Russian Orthodox Church, 2007), Церковный протокол, accessed 9 August 2023.

²⁹ ROC, *The basis of the social concept*, Chapter VIII “War and Peace”. In English translation by the Church, *The Basis of the Social Concept*, accessed 1 July 2023.

³⁰ ROC, *Polozhenie o voennom dukhovenstve Russkoi Pravoslavnoi Tserkvi v Rossiiskoi Federatsii*, (Moscow: ROC, 2013), Положение о военном духовенстве Русской Православной Церкви в Российской Федерации, accessed 2 August 2023.

³¹ Maximov, G. *Pravoslavnoe otnoshenie k voine i voinskому sluzheniu*, (Moskva: Izd. Pravoslavnoe missionerskoe obshchestvo imeni prepodobnogo Serpaniona Kozheozerskogo, 2015), Православное отношение к войне и воинскому служению, accessed 13 December 2023.

³² Lukichev, B. *Patriarkh Kirill i voennoe dukhovenstvo: O trudakh Patriarkha Moskovskogo i vseia Rusi Kirilla po vrozhdaiyu instituta voennogo dukhovenstva v Vooruzhiunnikh silakh Rossiiskoi federatsii*, (Moskva: FIV, 2016), ПАТРИАРХ КИРИЛЛ И ВОЕННОЕ ДУХОВЕНСТВО, accessed 14 August 2023.

³³ Previously, Boris Lukichev was the head of the Department for Work With Believing Servicemen, which is subordinated to the Main Directorate for Work With Personnel of the Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation.

struggle to reinstate the institution of military clergy, contains an abundance of information and mentions key documents on the said institutional rebirth.

I extensively use information found in Russian news media sources, both liberal media outlets in exile, such as *Meduza*; state news bureaus, such as *RIA Novosti*; and church-related online publications, such as *Pravmir*. I also draw on articles and press releases issued by the Church and the Ministry of Defence.

Statistical evidence from surveys institutes such as the World Values Survey, the Levada Centre and others is also used. It is well known that surveys, especially opinion polls, should be interpreted with caution in authoritarian countries. Under authoritarian conditions, polls become political tools. This is especially true of sensitive issues such as questions about Vladimir Putin's popularity or the so-called special military operation against Ukraine. It is reasonable to question their representativeness.³⁴ In this report, however, the surveys do not concern politically or legally sensitive issues. Caution is still warranted, as what people say in surveys may be what they are prepared to stand for publicly, not what they believe privately. However, this does not mean that statistical evidence from Russia is meaningless, only that we need to be cautious in our assessments and conclusions.³⁵

1.4 Purpose and limitations

This study focuses on a story that is significant from the perspectives of security policy and international relations. The story examined here revolves around the use of the ROC as a military-propagandistic tool aimed at the Russian soldier, which has implications for soldier morale. Soldier morale can usefully be defined as “the level of enthusiasm for the task.”³⁶

There is little doubt that the ROC fulfils meaningful spiritual functions in the life of Russian civilians who are practicing Christians,³⁷ while at the same time being

³⁴ Alyukov, M. “In Russia, opinion polls are a political weapon”, Open Democracy, 9 March 2022, In Russia, opinion polls are a political weapon | openDemocracy, accessed 15 December 2023.

³⁵ Rosenfeld, B. “Survey research in Russia: in the shadow of war”, Post-Soviet Affairs, 2023, Vol 39, No. 1-2: Conversations within the field: Russia's war against Ukraine and the future of Russian studies.

³⁶ Gustafsson Kurki, *The Russian Understanding of Soldier Morale*, 2023.

³⁷ See Anders Strindberg's memorandum, “En översikt över den rysk-ortodoxa kyrkans Moskvapatriarkat som påverkansoperatör”, FOI Memo No. 7865, En översikt över den rysk-ortodoxa kyrkans Moskvapatriarkat som påverkansaktör, accessed 13 December 2023, for an examination of the Russian Orthodox Church as an information-influence tool. In the report, Strindberg distinguishes between the ROC's leadership – those who are responsible for the church as an information-influence tool – and the laypeople, who are legitimate followers of Christ, not involved in shady dealings.

a militaristic propaganda instrument in the service of the Russian executive. In this study, I examine the latter aspect of the ROC, rather than the former.

A noteworthy limitation is that there is no possibility of access to respondents, such as Russian military servicemen or clergy, for in-depth interviews. Participant observation of sermons in situ is also impossible. For these reasons, I am forced to rely on written evidence from online sources only. Such sources can be used to gain key insights, but the actual micro-level social processes beneath the paper façade (in lieu of primary interview data) remains a matter of speculation.

For the above reasons, the limitations of the study suggest that the inferences and interpretations I make in the following chapters are akin to working hypotheses and testable propositions, rather than fully tested knowledge.

2 The Church as an organisation

This chapter provides background information on the ROC – a geographical overview, its hierarchy, and administrative divisions – in three sections, as follows.

2.1 A geographical overview

The Orthodox world consists of four ancient Patriarchates: Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch, and Jerusalem. For historical reasons, these Patriarchates (Churches) have a special position within Orthodoxy. Timothy Ware points out that “they rank first in honour.”³⁸

In Russia, Romania, Serbia and Bulgaria, the head of the Church is known by the title of Patriarch. In the other Churches, he (always a he) is known by other titles, such as Archbishop or Metropolitan.

The devastation of the ROC after the Bolshevik coup in 1917 lasted until the post-Soviet era. In 2007, the Act of Canonical Communion was signed between the ROC and the Church outside Russia, which fully restored communion within the Moscow Patriarchate.

The ROC Moscow Patriarchate has twenty-two local churches around the world, three autonomous churches (China, Finland, Japan), four self-governing churches (Latvia, Moldova, Ukraine, Estonia, and an ROC Abroad).³⁹ In Ukraine, there is currently a church that is subordinated to the Moscow Patriarchate, and another that is autocephalous, that is, with its own head.⁴⁰

2.2 Hierarchy

In order to be able to make sense of the administrative divisions of the ROC, it helps to be acquainted with its internal hierarchy. Below, I rely on the Russian Orthodox Church protocol from 2007 (hereafter, the ROC Protocol), which describes the Church’s regulations, formalities and hierarchy. It provides contextual information of use to a reader of this report. I also use the Church’s founding

³⁸ Ware, T. *The Orthodox Church: An Introduction to Eastern Christianity New Edition*. (London: Penguin Books, 2015 [1963]).

³⁹ Russian Orthodox Church, “Organizatsiia”, Official web-page of the Moscow Patriarchate, accessed 12 September 2023, Организации.

⁴⁰ This is an effect of the long-standing conflict between Russia and Ukraine, which intensified after Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. It is beyond this report to disentangle the complexities of the story.

document, the Statutes, which were adopted in 2000, with amendments in 2008, 2011, and 2013.⁴¹

Table 1. Internal hierarchy of the Russian Orthodox Church

White clergy (<i>Beloe dukhovenstvo</i>)	Black clergy (<i>Chernoje dukhovenstvo</i>)
	1. BISHOP (<i>Episkop, arkhieri</i>)
	Patriarch (Patriarkh)
	Metropolitan (Mitropolit)
	Archbishop (Arkhiepiskop)
	Bishop (Episkop)
2. PRIEST (<i>Sviashchennik</i>)	
Protopresbyter (<i>Protopresviter</i>)	Archimandrite (<i>Arhimandrit</i>)
Archpriest or senior priest (<i>Protoierei, starshii sviashchennik</i>)	Abbot (<i>Igumen</i>)
Priest (clergyman, presbyter) (Ierei, sviashchennik, presviter)	Hieromonk (Ieromonakh)
3. DEACON (<i>Diakon</i>)	
Archdeacon: senior deacon serving with the Patriarch (<i>Arkhdiaikon, starshii diakon</i>)	Archdeacon: senior deacon in a monastery (<i>Arkhdiaikon, starshii diakon</i>)
Protodeacon: usually in a cathedral (<i>Protodiakon, starshii diakon</i>)	
Deacon (<i>Diakon</i>)	Hierodeacon (<i>Ierodiakon</i>)

Source: The ROC Protocol, 2007.

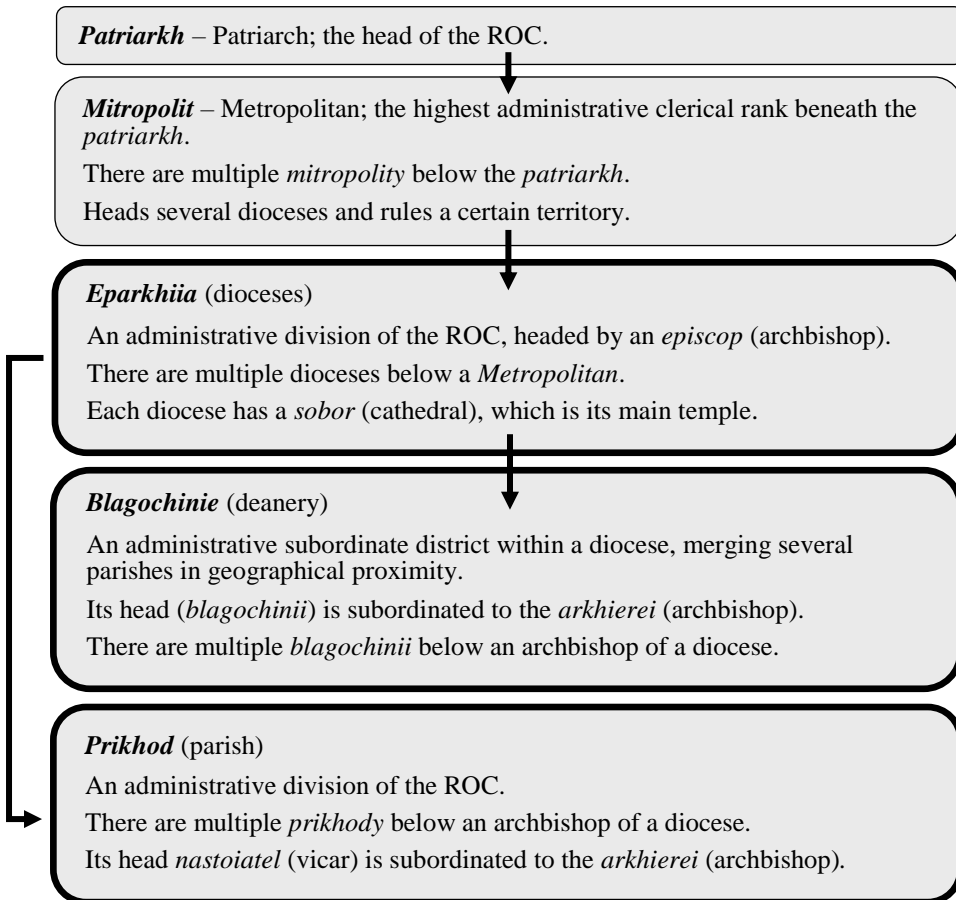
Table 1 (above) shows how the Church hierarchy is divided into deacons (*diakon*), priests (*sviashchennik*), and bishops (*episkop, arkhieri*), which are the three traditional categories of a Christian church. Furthermore, the Church is divided into white clergy (*Beloe dukhovenstvo*) and black clergy (*Chernoje dukhovenstvo*). White clergy are priests who are allowed to marry, while black clergy are not allowed to marry – in rare cases, black clergy live in celibacy.

⁴¹ In Swedish, the latter document is equivalent to *kyrkoordning*.

2.3 Administrative divisions

The Patriarch (*patriarkh*) is the head of the Church. A metropolitan (*mitropolit*) is the head of a group of dioceses (*eparkhiia*) and rules a particular territory. Each diocese is headed by a bishop, and consists of a number of parishes (*prikhody*). Figure 3 (below) clarifies the administrative divisions in relation to the titles discussed in Table 1.

Figure 4. Administrative divisions, below the Patriarch and the Metropolitans, of the Russian Orthodox Church



Source: Directive on deaneries [*blagochiniiakh*] (2018); Statutes of the ROC (2000; 2008; 2011; 2013).

Figure 4 (above) shows the administrative divisions of the Church, with a focus on the dioceses (*eparkhiia*), the deaneries (*blagochinie*),⁴² and the parishes (*prikhod*). A diocese consists of several parishes. A *blagochinie* exists within a diocese and also consists of several parishes.

⁴² This term is challenging to translate into both English and Swedish. In English, the equivalent is deanery. In Swedish, there is no single term that corresponds to *blagochinie*. Alexander Morath-Pereswetoff, Professor at Uppsala University, suggested by email correspondence that one should explain the meaning of it this way: “ett prosteri eller ett stort kontrakt”. I am indebted to Richard Langlais for help with the English translation of the term.

3 The Church as a propaganda tool

Given the ROC's near symbiosis with the Russian regime, it is apparent that it de facto functions as a willing religious tool that enhances the state's military-political propaganda. In this report, I consider its role in the propaganda apparatus aimed at the Russian soldier. A key argument is that the Church's theology is weaponised against the Russian soldier via the institution of military clergy (see separate section, below, after the section on theology).

As a whole, however, the Church's propaganda has several distinct audiences:

1. Russians who are devout followers of Christ, who are in a minority, as I have shown;
2. the general public in Russia;
3. the uniformed service members of the Armed Forces and law-enforcement agencies;
4. foreign countries targeted (with so-called "soft power") as a part of Russia's foreign policy.

Russians who are devoutly religious attend church services regularly and receive the Gospel and the Church's interpretation of it, which here is judged as being potentially militaristic propaganda. That which constitutes a militaristic component of the sermons is examined via the ROC's theological stance on matters such as killing, war, and military service (see the following section).

The recurrence of topics in Russian media relating to the Church and religion contributes to a sense of "ambient faith" in Russia, where orthodoxy and spirituality are "everywhere." Examples of such media reporting in recent years are articles on the military clergy and, in particular, events during the military campaign against Ukraine, such as the death in battle of a chaplain⁴³ (as reported by religious news media) and the story of a chaplain who describes himself as "truly a father" to his troops (in a major mainstream daily newspaper).⁴⁴ The general public, who tend to identify culturally as Russian Orthodox and may attend church services only infrequently (e.g., during Easter), is primarily reached via the ROC's presence in Russian media.

⁴³ Alekseeva, E. "V armii sviashchennik nuzhen bolshe, chem avtomat: Pamiati protoiereia Mikhaila Vasileva", 26 January 2023, Pravoslavie.ru, В армии священник нужен больше, чем автомат – the article is re-published from the original source: В армии священник нужен больше, чем автомат/Аналитика/ЖМПиЦВ, accessed 2 August 2023.

⁴⁴ Samodelova, S. "Voennyi sviashchennik rasskazal o sluzhenii v boevykh poriadkakh na spetsoperatsii: 'Stal dlia boytsov po-nastoiaishchemu otsom'", 25 December, 2022, MK.RU, Военный священник рассказал о служении в боевых порядках на спецоперации, accessed 2 August 2023.

All of the above-mentioned examples of propaganda are underpinned by the ROC's theology, in particular, the Church's theology on killing, war, and military service (see the following section).

3.1 The Church's theology

Any church expresses its theology (i.e., a particular belief within a religion) in both written form, such as official documents, and oral form, such as in pastoral care, sermons, and official speeches.⁴⁵ In August 2000, the Russian Orthodox Church published a founding document entitled, *The Basis of the Social Concept* (BSC; its translation into English is the Church's).⁴⁶ It was adopted by the Sacred Bishops' Council of the Russian Orthodox Church and presents the basic provisions of the Church's teaching on church-state relations and other socially significant phenomena, such as war and peace, which are dealt with in the document's Chapter VIII.⁴⁷ Here I examine Chapter VIII (hereafter, BSCVIII), with the purpose of determining its key features on the topics of killing, war, and military service.⁴⁸

To sum up my argument in this chapter, the Church's theology of killing, war, and perhaps to a lesser extent military service, is based on Christian canonical texts. It therefore constitutes legitimate Orthodox doctrine. On the other hand, the concept of *Russkii mir* (and the related ideas of a Holy Rus and Moscow as the Third Rome) should be regarded as a poisonous theology, or rather a politico-theological concoction used by propagandists, such as the military clergy, to justify wars of aggression.

⁴⁵ In this section, I examine Church documents in which the authors use Bible quotes. Thus, my quotes sometimes contain Bible quotes made from a Russian version of the Bible, which may not correspond exactly with, for instance, the Swedish version of the Bible, *Bibel 2000*. I am thankful to Tomas Malmlöf for this insight.

⁴⁶ Russian Orthodox Church, *The Basis of the Social Concept*, 2000.

⁴⁷ Although theological interpretations are always up for debate, it seems reasonable to conclude that the ROC's theology is thoroughly conservative; and that the Church seems to view dialogue and theological evolution as a threat against their perceived Orthodox identity and holy heritage. Some would argue that it is problematic to compare present-day Russia with Biblical Israel, as the proponents of the concept of Third Rome do. This, however, is not necessarily a unique aspect of the ROC. What does seem to be unique is the lack of present-day reflection on theological positions. I am indebted to the theologian Jonas Lindberg for these thoughts and interpretations.

⁴⁸ Any analysis of a foreign-language text benefits from a close reading of more than one version, since important nuances may emerge in every version. For this reason, I have read the chapter in its original language, Russian, as well as the church's own English-language version. I received some new insights in the latter reading. English-language quotes from the examined chapter are from the church's own translated version. In the event that I believe a clarification is needed, I have inserted a word in brackets [...].

3.1.1 On killing

BSCVIII clearly states that murder is wrong, that blood is sacred, and that whoever sheds blood shall be killed in turn:

Killing, without which wars cannot happen, was regarded as a grave crime before God as far back as the dawn of the holy history. “Thou shalt not kill,” the Mosaic law reads (Ex. 20:13). In the Old Testament, just as in all ancient religions, blood is sacred, since blood is life (Lev. 17:11–14). “Blood defiles the land,” says Holy Scripture. But the same biblical text warns those who resort to violence: “The land cannot be cleansed of the blood that is shed therein, but by the blood of him that shed it” (Num. 35:33).

In order to explain how it is permissible to kill in war, but not in our personal lives, the BSCVIII cites the Bible: “Christ is our God who ordered us to pray for our offenders and to do good to them. He also said that no one of us can show greater love in life than he who gives his life for his friends (Jn. 15:3)” and clarifies: “That is why we generously endure offences caused us as private people. But in company we defend one another and give our lives in battle for our neighbours. . .”

Thus, the BSCVIII tries to describe how our personal ethic (thou shall not kill) is replaced with something else (killing is permissible) when we are in the company of others. In other words, according to the ROC, being in the company of others erases the moral imperative not to kill.⁴⁹

This theological view on killing is also expressed by individual priests. For example, in a media interview, Sergei Uskov, vicar of the “Military Church in Honour of the Holy Great Martyr Demetrius of Solunsk,” was asked how the church relates to murder: Is it different to kill in wartime and peacetime?

Murder is murder. The taking of a life. Life is a sacred gift. Either way, murder is a sin. The Scripture says, “Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.” If a criminal breaks into my home and threatens the safety of my family and friends, I, as a man and protector of my family, of the people God has entrusted to me, must ensure that safety. Sometimes I have to do that at the cost of murder. Unfortunately.⁵⁰

It seems fair to say that Uskov relativizes killing.

⁴⁹ An illustration is the harrowing question asked by a user in a Russian Orthodox internet forum: “If you have been to war and killed people, can you be a priest?” And the priest, Mikhail Samokhin, replied: “It is possible, if you were a military serviceman in a unit at the frontline and you fulfilled an order from your commander.” Pravmir.ru, *Может ли человек, бывший на войне и убивавший там людей, быть священником?* accessed 1 June 2023.

⁵⁰ PrimaMedia.ru, “Chtoby sluzhit voennym sviashchennikom, neobkhodimo zhit zhizniu soldat – ierei Sergei Uskov”, 21 October 2022, *Чтобы служить военным священником, необходимо жить жизнью солдат - иерей Сергей Усков*, accessed 11 July 2023.

3.1.2 On war

War is defined in the BSCVIII as a symptom of man's fallen, sinful nature; as such, it is both an eternal and an evil phenomenon:

War is a physical manifestation of the latent [spiritual] illness of humanity, which is fratricidal hatred (Gen. 4:3–12). Wars have accompanied human history since the fall and, according to the Gospel, will continue to accompany it: “And when ye hear of wars and rumours of wars, be ye not troubled: for such things must needs be” (Mk. 13:7).

That war is inherently evil, and the result of the misuse of the free will granted by God, is unmistakably stated: “Just as the evil in man in general, war is caused by the sinful abuse of the God-given freedom; “for out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murder, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies” (Mt. 15:19).”

Having declared that war is evil and sinful and that killing is wrong, the BSCVIII nevertheless makes a complete turnaround: “While recognising war as evil, the Church does not prohibit her children from participating in hostilities if at stake is the security of their neighbours and the restoration of trampled justice.” On such occasions, “war is considered to be necessary though undesirable.”

Thus, war (or “hostilities” in the document, adding the claim that it is difficult to distinguish aggressive from defensive wars) is justifiable, according to the BSCVIII, if at least one of two conditions are met:

1. if the purpose is to protect neighbours from harm;
2. if the purpose is to restore justice.

Then, the BSCVIII explains that in Orthodoxy, there has always been “a profound respect for soldiers who gave their lives to protect the life and security of their neighbours” and the Bible is quoted to support this notion: “Greater love hath no man but this, that a man lay down his life for his friends” (Jn. 15:13).

Three principles of “moral justice” in a “Christian perspective” in international relations are outlined:

1. love one's neighbours, people and [Motherland];⁵¹
2. understand the needs of other nations;
3. possess the conviction that it is impossible to serve one's country by immoral means.

While also discussing St. Augustine's classic theory of a just war, the BSCVIII claims that the distinction between aggressive and defensive wars is “sometimes difficult” to make:

⁵¹ The official translation by the Church uses the English word “Fatherland.” I have chosen to replace it with “Motherland” to better reflect the etymology of the Russian word, *rodina*, which refers to a birthgiver.

The distinction between the two is especially subtle where one or two states or the world community initiate hostilities on the ground that it is necessary to protect the people who fell victim to an aggression (see XV. 1). In this regard, the question whether the Church should support or deplore the hostilities needs to be given a special consideration every time they are initiated or threaten to begin.

According to the BSCVIII, one of the most obvious criteria of a just war is the warfighting methods: “War should be waged with righteous indignation, not maliciousness, greed and [lust] (1 Jn. 2:16) and other fruits of hell.” The BSCVIII also maintains that whether a war is “heroic” or a simple “robbery” depends on the “moral state” of the warring parties.

Let me return again briefly to the above-mentioned interview with Sergei Uskov, vicar of the “Military Church in Honour of the Holy Great Martyr Demetrius of Solunsk.” In one of his replies, about the Church’s view on killing, he offers a theological definition and justification of war as an illness that requires a “surgical intervention” by God, the “doctor.”

Here we need to remember the biblical story. The first military conflict was in heaven when some angels rebelled against others. Some remained angels and others became demons. Wars come from the spiritual fall of men. An example of those events that developed before Christ’s birth is the Old Testament, where it is perfectly shown that the Lord allowed some calamities when people deviated from Him, morally fell. God is like a doctor. And there are different diseases. There are those that can be cured with a pill, and there are those that require surgical intervention. Probably, war is a surgical intervention.

It is unclear whether Uskov believes in man’s free will. War, in Uskov’s theology, is treated as God’s reaction to man’s moral deviation from him. As such, it actually seems that Uskov deviates from the BSCVII, but nevertheless offers a justification for accepting war in a way almost the same as how we accept weather, as something we, as individuals, can’t change and simply must endure.

3.1.3 On military service

Although not an ROC document with the same status as the BSC, the booklet entitled, “Orthodox Attitude to War and Military Service”, OAWMS, 2015,⁵² deserves attention for the following reasons. It is written by the deacon, Georgii Maximov, who is the head of the Orthodox Missionary Society named after St. Serapion of Kozheozersk. The Society was established by the Russian Orthodox Church under the leadership of Maximov and began to operate in 2008. The booklet in question takes the BSC as its point of departure, according to its author, Maksimov, and embarks on clarifying its position on war and military service. Thus, it makes sense to assume that its contents suggest a body of theological ideas

⁵² Maximov, *Pravoslavnoe otnoshenie k voine i voinskomu sluzheniu*, 2015.

that are fairly representative (or even agenda-setting) for the ROC's attitude to military service.

The OAWMS appears to be clearly aimed at practitioners: "the Christian attitude to military service is presented in a brief and accessible way." It is based on the Bible and the church fathers. Three key themes reappear throughout the text:

- the belief that every victory in battle both begins and ends with God's help;
- it glorifies the will to sacrifice oneself for the collective;
- courage is glorified.

God's help is seen as paramount in battle: ". . . if believers are faithful to God, and the enemy has come against them, then in such a case the Lord helps them to win the victory, even though the enemy is numerically outnumbered many times over." To support this claim, the author cites, among several passages, Zechariah 10:5 (Here: King James Version): "And they shall be as mighty *men*, which tread down *their enemies* in the mire of the streets in the battle: and they shall fight, because the LORD *is* with them, and the riders on the horses shall be confounded." Another key passage is 1 Macc. 3:19, which states: "For it is not from the multitude of armies that victory in war comes, but from heaven comes strength." Finally, Saint Nicholas of Serbia reported that a soldier instructed to carry out a lethally dangerous task said, "I'm going to die, the enemy is very near!" but Saint Nicholas replied, "Do not be afraid, the Lord is nearer!" a sentence that, the OAWMS claims, transformed the man.

The will to sacrifice is glorified recurrently. One of the first examples is a part of a longer quote of Saint Nicholas of Serbia: "Some have lost their bodies in war and others their souls. The former lost less. And some have regained their souls, and they are the true victors." At the end of the OAWMS, a "Prayer Before Battle" is offered. It includes the lines: "Joyfully I go to fulfil Thy holy will and lay down my life for the [Motherland]. Arm me with strength and courage to overcome our enemies, and grant me to die with firm faith and the hope of eternal blissful life in Thy Kingdom." Will to sacrifice, in other words, is intertwined with courage.

Courage is glorified through a number of historical examples of priests who performed their ecclesiastical duties in battle, praying for the wounded, comforting and arousing those who faltered, then sending them back into battle: "On 4 August 1914, under enemy fire, [the priest Andrei Arkadov of the 99th Ivangorod Infantry Regiment] administered the Blessed Sacrament to the severely wounded and encouraged other wounded men, whom he himself bandaged at the first opportunity." Although priests were strictly forbidden to carry arms, in some circumstances they nevertheless took charge of military formations in battle.⁵³ In the 18th century,

⁵³ It is noteworthy that recent reports of military priests carrying arms have surfaced in the war against Ukraine. See: Meduza podcast, "V RPTs poiavilis sviashchenniki, kotorye berut v ruki

the priest Ivan Okulov took command of 1 000 volunteers, crossed the Russo-Swedish border, and destroyed a Swedish outpost that had harassed the Russian border villages. In the First World War, many priests were awarded the Cross of the Order of Saint George. The image the OAWMS conveys is that even the arguably peaceful man of God is courageous in wartime, which perhaps suggests that even ordinary soldiers also ought to be courageous.

The mythologisation of courageous military chaplains reoccurs in mainstream Russian media, such as in an opinion piece by the former elite *spetsnaz* soldier, Sergei Kozlov, in the online business daily, *Vzgliad*: “There are many instances in Russian history when priests not only participated in attacks. . . for example, during the Brusilov breakthrough, but also swayed soldiers who were left without a commander to attack.” Kozlov takes the example of the regimental priest, Stefan Vladimirovich Scherbakovsky, who, on 1 May 1904, raised his cross high above his head and led the soldiers in a successful attack that broke through the Japanese defences: “The priests themselves, of course, never fired a shot – they are not allowed to kill people, even enemies.”⁵⁴

The title of Kozlov’s piece, “The Priest as the Conscience of the Military Unit”, is telling of a wider phenomenon that the military clergy functions as an alibi for the Armed Forces. The logic is that “we” have military chaplains, a reinstated military clergy, and therefore “we”, not “our” enemies, hold the moral high ground.

Finally, I note that in 2023, a Russian court judged that pacifism was incompatible with Russian Orthodox teaching and subsequently convicted an ROC priest for an antiwar sermon.⁵⁵ I delve into the details of this legal case in Chapter Four, entitled “Reactions to the Church’s position towards Russia’s 2022 invasion of Ukraine“, below.

3.1.4 A false doctrine: *Russkii mir*

So far, I have examined the Church’s position on strictly theological matters. The Church, however, promulgates a mix of conventional Christian theology (with an Orthodox twist) and political constructs. Of the latter, the concept of *Russkii mir*, the Russian world, is the umbrella term. In an open letter published in Public Orthodoxy, a publication of Fordham University, more than 1 500 Orthodox

oruzhie – khotia eto nesovmestimo s sanom. Kak voyna izmenila tserkov i chto s nei budet dalshe?” 1 September 2023, В РПЦ появились священники, которые берут в руки оружие — хотя это несовместимо с саном. Как война изменила церковь и что с ней будет дальше? accessed 9 September 2023.

⁵⁴ Kozlov, S. “Sviashchennik – eto sovest voinskogo podrazdeleniia”, in *Vzgliad – Delovaia gazeta*, 7 November 2022, ВЗГЛЯД / Священник – это совесть воинского подразделения, accessed 14 December, 2023.

⁵⁵ Meduza News, “V RPTs zaiavil, chto patsifizm nesovmestim s ucheniim pravoslavnoi tserkvi”, 11 June 2023, В РПЦ заявили, что пацифизм несовместим с учением православной церкви, accessed 1 August 2023.

scholars and priests (outside Russia) condemn *Russkii mir* as “a false teaching,” which is an example of “ethno-phyletist religious fundamentalism, totalitarian in character.” Ethno-phyletism is the conflation of faith and nation. It is not surprising that the Far Right, as well as Catholic and Protestant fundamentalists, have warmed to the concept of *Russkii mir*. Geographically, the concept of *Russkii mir* does not follow recognised state borders, but includes Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine in its typical definition. According to this view, there is one patriarch; one autocrat; one land, Holy Rus; one spiritual capital, Kyiv; and one earthly capital, Moscow. Moscow is in this view the ancestor of Rome and Constantinople; therefore, Moscow is dubbed the Third Rome.⁵⁶

Interestingly, the notion of Moscow as the Third Rome illustrates the continuity from the secular Soviet past (and more recent Russian ethno-nationalist political philosophies) to present-day ROC theology.

During the Soviet era, the militaries who are now the point of contact between the Ministry of Defence and the Russian Orthodox Church were members of the Soviet military propaganda apparatus, the so-called political departments. According to the scholar, Nikolai Mitrokhin,⁵⁷ they have preserved the same paranoid worldview, based on the Soviet experience. In this view, Russia is besieged by hostile states. In January 2005, at a conference on the military clergy, Colonel A. V. Vasilev, an operative of the Main Directorate of Educational Work of the Ministry of Defence, which is the organisational heir to the Soviet political departments, held a presentation on this theme. He said that even though the world had changed considerably after 1991, “spiritual security” was on the rise:

The increasing importance of the factor of spiritual security is due to Russia’s active policy of forming a multipolar world. In accordance with the Concept of National Security, the Russian Federation intends to consistently maintain its cultural and religious identity.

An analysis of the religious situation in Russia in the context of international relations shows that the Western countries, with the United States of America in the lead, carry out a purposeful stimulation of destructive phenomena for religious life. . .

The background of this U.S. policy becomes clear in the context of its desire to build a unipolar world, which, according to Zbigniew Brzezinski, an ideologist of American foreign policy, is impossible without weakening Russia by dividing it into three parts: European, Siberian and Far Eastern republics.

⁵⁶ “A Declaration on the ‘Russian World’ (Russkii mir) Teaching”, 13 March 2022, A Declaration on the ‘Russian World’ (Russkii mir) Teaching, Public Orthodoxy, accessed 1 July 2023.

⁵⁷ Mitrokhin, N. “Liubov bez udovletvoreniia: Russkaia Pravoslavnaia Tserkov i Rossiiskaia Armiia”, The Journal of Power Institutions in Post-Soviet Societies, No. 3, Любовь без Удовлетворения: Русская Православная Церковь и Российская Армия, accessed 14 August 2023.

This plan implies discrediting traditional values, undermining the moral foundations of national existence, and devaluing the cultural population, which is inextricably linked to the history of traditional confessions.⁵⁸

This is a mainly secular perspective that, nevertheless, overlaps with the Church's political-theological-worldview concept of Moscow as the "Third Rome."⁵⁹ Below, a typical account of the Church's view is expressed by Evstafiiia, the Archbishop of Chitinsk and Baikal, who spoke to priests and militaries at a symposium held in Buriatia:

By God's providence, Russia in the modern world occupies a position in many ways similar to that of Israel in Old Testament times. Orthodox Russia, the community of the Most Holy Mother of God, in the midst of a raging sea of heretical doctrines, paganism and Satanism. Russia is the Third Rome, saving the world from the coming of the Antichrist.⁶⁰

This illustrates the ease with which the ROC, via the institution of military clergy, could replicate the earlier role of the Soviet political officers via the Main Directorate of Educational Work. In fact, a recent colloquial Russian term for the military priest is "commissar of the soul," alluding to the 'political commissar' of the Soviet period.⁶¹ Simply put, the secular and religious ideas and concepts are converging. Dmitry Adamsky has arrived at a similar conclusion: ". . . the scope and frequency of clerical activities that foster patriotism, morale, and human reliability have made the priests almost equivalent to Soviet-era political officers."⁶² Thus, it is fair to say that the above quotes (derived from Mitrokhin's paper) suggest that there is, at least, an echo from the Soviet past among the present-day Russian Orthodox military propagandists.⁶³

3.2 The military clergy

In 2009, the then President Dmitry Medvedev took the decision to recreate the institution of military clergy (*voennoe dukhovenstvo*). Its predecessor in the Tsarist era had been abolished in 1918, ninety-one years earlier, as a consequence of the Bolshevik coup of 1917.

⁵⁸ Mitrokhin, "Liubov bez udovletvoreniia", 2005, 17.

⁵⁹ Mitrokhin, "Liubov bez udovletvoreniia", 2005, 16, 18.

⁶⁰ Mitrokhin, "Liubov bez udovletvoreniia", 2005, 18.

⁶¹ Samodelova, "Voennii sviashchennik rasskazal o sluzhenii v boevykh poriadkakh na spetsoperatsii", 2022.

⁶² Adamsky, D. *Russian nuclear orthodoxy: Religion, politics, and strategy*, 2019b, (Stanford, Ca.: Stanford University Press), 2.

⁶³ Or, perhaps, it was the Soviets who in the past draped a ROC worldview in secular robes. This is what scholars of strategic culture tend to think.

Although some scholars argue that the Russian state should be viewed as an example of a “network state”⁶⁴ in which formal institutions are less important, I believe there are reasons not to accept this notion of Russian exceptionalism. Ostensibly Western concepts, such as those from institutional theory, undoubtedly help us to understand the Russian state and its governance.⁶⁵ I will assume here that the existence of formal institutions matters, even if they are to some extent distorted by informal networks.

One should not underestimate the significance of the decision to reestablish the institution of military clergy in 2009. Although it could be argued that informal ties between the Church and the Armed Forces already existed in the mid-1990s, after the Soviet Union’s dissolution, the reestablishment of a formal institution has likely had considerable influence. Institutions provide rules that shape the allocation and use of resources. In doing so, they tend to provide a greater degree of stability, predictability and order that allows for deliberate (and sometimes effective) state policy.⁶⁶ Without such potential benefits, there would be few incentives for states to create formal institutions.

In the case of the reestablished institution of military clergy in Russia, I argue that it effectively set off a *systematic* weaponisation of the ROC’s theology and directed propaganda at the hearts and minds of the Russian soldier. Although the informal arrangements that already existed in the 1990s between the ROC and the military may have partly fulfilled this function earlier, the recreation of the formal institution likely provided a boost to the weight of militaristic religious-political propaganda. In the 1990s, according to the ROC, priests worked in military units on “bare enthusiasm” and their activities were regulated by agreements with “very vague wording.”⁶⁷ Over the years, after Medvedev’s decision in 2009, the funding, recruitment of clergymen, infrastructure for their training, and the legal status of their work were gradually clarified and further defined, at least, compared to the 1990s.

Below I concisely tell the story of the death and rebirth of the institution of military clergy in Russia.

⁶⁴ See, e.g.: Kononenko, V.; Moshes, A. (Eds.) *Russia as a network state: What works in Russia when state institutions do not?* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

⁶⁵ Davies, J. S.; Holm-Hansen, J.; Kononenko, V.; Røiseland, A. “Network governance in Russia: an analytical approach”, *East European Politics*, 2016, Vol. 32, No. 2, 131–147.

⁶⁶ See, e.g., North, D. C. “Institutions”, *The Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 1991, Vol. 5, No. 1, 97–112; Hodgson, G. M. “What are institutions?” *Journal of Economic Issues*, 2006, Vol. XL, No. 1, 1–25.

⁶⁷ An article in the *ROC Church Bulletin* explains that before the institution of military clergy was recreated, priests were perceived as mere “guests” in the Armed Forces, attending jubilees, the reception of new recruits, and memorials: Murzin, E. “Voennye sviashchenniki: trudnosti rosta”, *Tserkovnii vestnik*, 9 September 2012, *Военные священники: трудности роста*, accessed 18 August 2023.

3.2.1 Historical overview

Below, in Figure 5, I offer a brief overview of the history of the military clergy.

Figure 5. A brief history of the military clergy in Russia, 1917–2023.

1917/18	Bolshevik coup; abolishment of the military clergy.
↓	
1980s	Within Soviet state atheism, softened by <i>perestroika</i> , the Church nevertheless tries to reproduce the memories of spiritual tradition in the Armed Forces.
1991	Soviet Union dissolved.
1993	First official meeting between the ROC and the Ministry of Defence.
1994	Joint Statement signed on 2 March between Patriarch Aleksei II and Defence Minister Pavel Grachev.
1995	The ROC creates a Synodal Department for Cooperation with the Armed Forces and the Law-enforcement Agencies.
1996	Agreement on Cooperation between Patriarch Aleksei II and Defence Minister Igor Rodiunov.
2006	The Main Military Prosecutor's Office proposes a law on the recreation of the military clergy; no one supports it.
2009	Patriarch Kirill takes the initiative to write a Joint Letter from the Inter-Religious Council of Russia to the then President Dmitry Medvedev; on 21 July, Medvedev takes the decision to recreate the institution of military clergy.
2011	The position of assistant to the commander for work with believing servicemen is instated.
2014	Five military-command colleges begin training of military clergy.
2015–2023*	The military clergy is deployed in combat conditions in Syria and in Ukraine.

*Ukrainian war on-going at the time of writing.

Source: Adamsky, 2019b; Lukichev, 2016; Mozgovoy, S, " Vzaimootnosheniia Armii i Tserkvi v Rossiiskoi Federatsii", The Journal of Power Institutions in Post-Soviet Societies, Issue 3, 2005, Взаимоотношения Армии и Церкви в Российской Федерации, accessed 5 September 2023; RIA Novosti, 2013, "Armeiskie sviashchenniki TsVO: Stat avtoritetom i spasti soldata ot petli", Армейские священники ЦВО: статья авторитетом и спасти солдата от петли, accessed 31 August 2023.

Figure 4 (above) offers an overview of the contemporary history of the military clergy in Russia. In the aftermath of the revolution and Bolshevik coup in Russia, the military clergy was abolished and most of the 3 700 military priests joined the so-called White armies who opposed the Red (Bolshevik) Army in the civil war of 1918 to 1920.⁶⁸

Within the official Soviet atheistic framework, the Church's work was constrained. But in the 1980s, as a consequence of Mikhail Gorbachev's *Perestroika* policy, steps were taken to reproduce the collective memory of the spiritual traditions of the Armed Forces.⁶⁹ In autumn 1991, the Soviet Union was dissolved.

On 8 July 1993, the first official meeting between the then Metropolitan Kirill and the Defence Minister, Grachev, was held. Allegedly, the topic of the spiritual-moral education of uniformed military servicemen was discussed. The two sides agreed to prepare a joint statement that would present the aims and tasks of the cooperation between the Church and the Armed Forces.⁷⁰

On 2 March 1994, the Joint Statement (*Sovmestnoe zaiavlenie*) between the Patriarch, Aleksei II, and the Defence Minister, Pavel Grachev, was signed.

The key elements of the Joint Statement were:⁷¹

- To create a joint co-ordination committee for cooperation between the Church and the Armed Forces (hereafter, "Coordination Committee"). The chairmen of the Main Directorate for Work With Personnel (human resources) at the Ministry of Defence (GURLS) and the ROC Department of External Church Relations (OVTsS) represented the two sides.
- To task the Coordination committee to formulate a programme for the future in the areas of science, culture, and the spiritual-moral.
- To conduct research on the religious situation in the Armed Forces, for the purpose of preparing suggestions to the highest military command.
- To organise cooperative efforts in the area of Russian spirituality and traditional, faithful service to the Motherland, as well as social protection of uniformed servicemen and their families.
- To propose to the commanders of military units and corresponding ecclesiastical structures to co-operate in the area of pastoral visits and church services to Orthodox uniformed servicemen and their families in garrisons.

⁶⁸ Britannica, Editors of Encyclopaedia, "Russian Civil War", Encyclopedia Britannica, 20 October 2023, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Russian-Civil-War>, accessed 21 August 2023; Kovalyova, "V Rostovskoi eparkhii budut gotovit voennoe dukhovenstvo", 2022, В Ростовской епархии будут готовить военное духовенство, accessed 28 August 2023.

⁶⁹ Lukichev, *Kirill i voennoe dukhovenstvo*, 2016.

⁷⁰ Lukichev, *Kirill i voennoe dukhovenstvo*, 2016

⁷¹ A copy of the statement is on file with the author.

- To provide, upon request from commanders and personnel, spiritual literature and journals, and similar material.

In 1995, the ROC created the Synodal Department for Cooperation with the Armed Forces and the law-enforcement agencies. However, “as previously, priests were a rare guest at the command posts of military units, and even rarer in the barracks and on the ships.”⁷² And regarding the co-operation that took place: “... cooperation between the Army and the Church was, in particular, active on the tactical level, in other words, on the level of the land forces’ and fleets’ units and sub-units.” In other words, there was no national policy, since “These activities were, as a rule, carried out by parish priests, whose churches happened to be located near military garrisons and whose cooperation and social ties with the militaries were time-honoured.”⁷³

In 1996, as a result of the process triggered by the Joint Statement, *an Agreement on co-operation (Soglashenie o sotrudnichestve)* was signed between Patriarch Aleksei II and Defence Minister Igor Rodionov.

The key elements of the Agreement on cooperation were “in the interest of combat-readiness of the Armed forces” and in accordance with the “traditions of the Russia-Orthodox church”:⁷⁴

- To build on the Joint Statement and deepen the cooperation between the Church and the Armed Forces.
- To cooperate, in particular, in the areas of “patriotic and moral education” of the servicemen. Of five substantial areas of cooperation, “patriotic education of servicemen” is mentioned first, then “moral and spiritual enlightenment of the servicemen.” Thereafter, “social protection,” “satisfaction of demand for religion,” and “resurrection of churches.”
- Finally, the Coordination Committee is replaced by a Co-ordination Council. It will be headed by the chairmen of the Department of Cooperation with the Armed Forces and Law-enforcement Agencies of the Moscow Patriarchate; and from the Ministry of Defence, Main Directorate of Educational Work (formerly the so-called political department of the Soviet military).

In February 2006, the Main Military Prosecutor’s Office proposed a law on the reinstatement of the military clergy in the Armed forces for the purpose of “strengthening the discipline, increasing patriotism in the Army, and resolving the problem of the Army’s *dedovshchina* [hazing – author’s remark].” The proposal received no support from the Ministry of Defence, nor from the Duma Committee

⁷² Lukichev, *Kirill i voennoe dukhovenstvo*, 2016, 15.

⁷³ Lukichev, *Kirill i voennoe dukhovenstvo*, 2016, 13, 31.

⁷⁴ A copy of the agreement is on file with the author.

on Defence, which were the agencies that owned the right to take legal action in this situation.⁷⁵

Civil society representatives protested against the idea of a military clergy by referring to a number of legal contradictions. More about those contradictions is presented below in the section on “Legality“. When Vladimir Putin intervened on 8 May and pronounced that it is the duty of the military leadership to satisfy the religious rights of the servicemen, the wave of criticism allegedly calmed down considerably.⁷⁶

In July 2009, Patriarch Kirill took the initiative of a joint letter to the President from the members of the Inter-religious Council of Russia, with a proposal to recreate the institution of military clergy in the Armed Forces. As mentioned above, on 21 July, President Dmitry Medvedev took the decision to reinstate it.⁷⁷ Medvedev added that clergymen would be introduced to units where more than ten percent of the servicemen were of the faith.⁷⁸ Although a vast majority of all believing servicemen are Russian Orthodox, it was also possible, according to the law, for a clergyman to be an Imam, Rabbi or Buddhist priest.

In autumn 2014, five military-command colleges began the training of the military clergy. This was the first time military priests were given systematic training in a permanent educational institution.

Between 2015 and the time of writing, 2023, the military clergy was deployed in Syria and then Ukraine. These were the first missions in ongoing military conflicts. As I write this, the war against Ukraine is continuing in full force, with no obvious end in sight.

3.2.2 Wearing two hats

On 6 April 2023, Patriarch Kirill appointed an archpriest from Saint Petersburg, Dimitrii Vasilenkov, to the post of Chief Military Priest in the so-called “Special Military Operation” in Ukraine.⁷⁹ This means that the church took a more pronounced role in the management of the military clergy in wartime. But it also draws attention to the fact that the military priests are wearing two hats at the same time. One as clergymen under the canonical supervision of the dioceses of the

⁷⁵ Lukichev, *Kirill i voennoe dukhovenstvo*, 2016, 32.

⁷⁶ Lukichev, *Kirill i voennoe dukhovenstvo*, 2016, 34-35.

⁷⁷ The date for the decision was apparently not chosen randomly. On 21 July, the ROC celebrates the Mother of God of Kazan Icon.

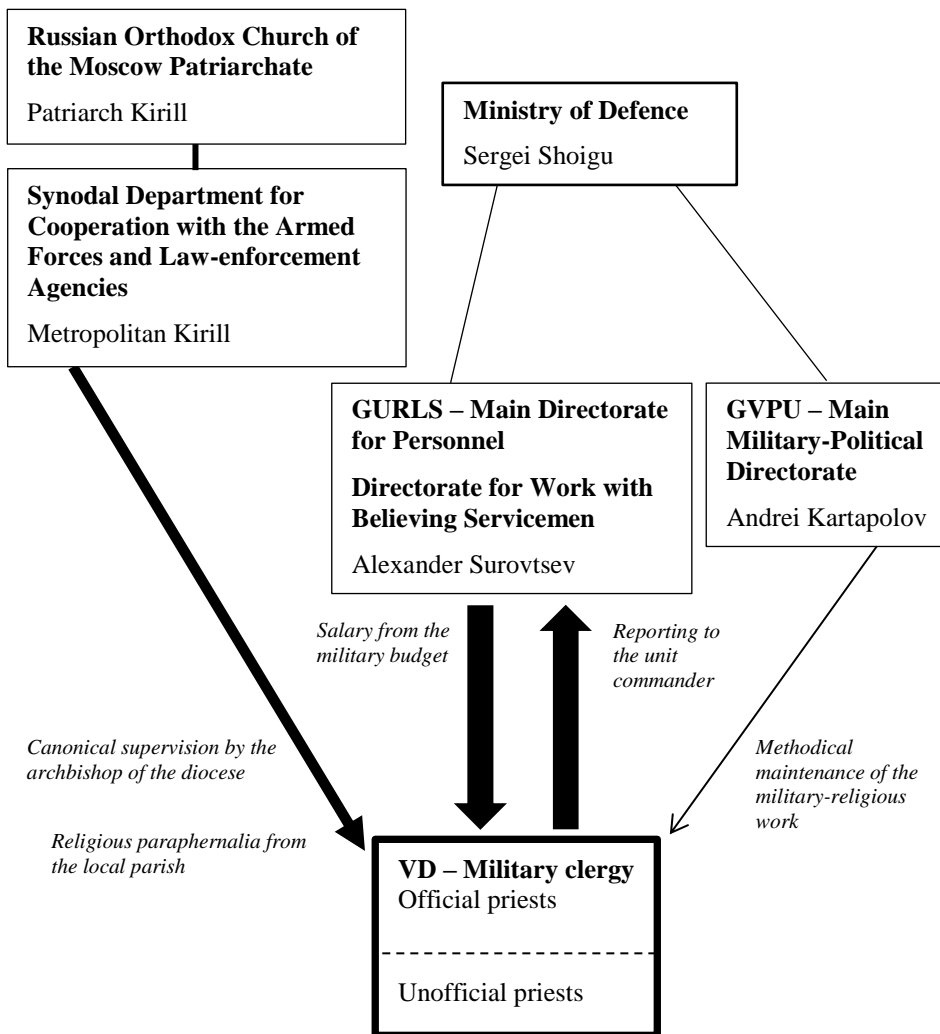
⁷⁸ Lukichev, *Kirill i voennoe dukhovenstvo*, 2016, 40-42.

⁷⁹ Plamenev, I. ”Patriarkh Kirill naznachal glavnogo sviashchennika v zone spetsoperatsii”, RBK, 6 April 2023, Патриарх Кирилл назначил главного священника в зоне спецоперации, accessed 21 August 2023.

Church, the other as secular assistants to military commanders, paid by the Ministry of Defence.

This type of two-pronged system of control is illustrated in the figure below.

Figure 6. The lines of authority that concern the military clergy in 2023



Sources: Gavrilov, Yu. "V Minoborony opredelili pravovoi status voennykh sviashchennikov, Rossiiskaia gazeta", 16 March 2010, В Минобороны определили правовой статус военных священников, accessed 16 August 2023; Adamsky, D. "Christ-loving warriors: Ecclesiastical dimension of the Russian military campaign in Syria", Problems of Post-Communism, 2019a, Vol. 67, No. 6.

Figure 6 (above) illustrates the present-day hierarchical position of the military clergy, and key lines of authority, in relation to the ROC and the Russian state (Ministry of Defence). The Synodal Department for Cooperation with the Armed Forces and Law-enforcement Agencies of the Russian Orthodox Church, founded in 1995, works with the practical management of military priests in the Armed Forces. Military priests are either official or unofficial priests. The former are usually what is meant by “military clergy.” The latter are a carryover from the informal arrangements of the 1990s: priests worked on a piecemeal basis through direct agreements with individual military unit commanders.

There are two relevant main directorates in the Ministry of Defence: GURLS and GVPU. GURLS (*Glavnoe upravlenie po rabote s lichnym sostavom*) is the Main Directorate for personnel under which the Directorate for Work With Believing Servicemen (*Upravlenie po rabote s veruiushchymi voennosluzhashchymi*) is located. The latter body was founded in 2010 and created to work with the management of the military clergy and their religious work in the Armed Forces.⁸⁰ The GVPU, the Main Military-Political Directorate (*Glavnoe voenno-politicheskoe upravlenie*), conducts methodical maintenance of military-religious work in the Armed Forces and maintains functional continuity with the political departments of the Soviet era. GVPU was founded on 30 July 2018, and is headed by Deputy Defence Minister, Colonel General Andrey Kartapolov.⁸¹ The exact division of labour between the Directorate for Work With Believing Servicemen and the GVPU is a matter for future research.⁸²

Thus, the two-pronged system of control is, in fact, more complex than it may seem at first glance. The priests in the military clergy report to the commander who recruited them to the unit. Their salary is paid from the Ministry of Defence’s budget. The military clergy gets canonical supervision from the archbishop in the diocese, and for religious paraphernalia, the priest is expected to turn to the local parish in which their military unit is located.⁸³

⁸⁰ Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation’s website, The Directorate for Work With Believing Servicemen (webpage), Управление по работе с верующими военнослужащими Главного управления по работе с личным составом Вооруженных Сил Российской Федерации, accessed 17 August 2023.

⁸¹ Global Security, “Main Military-Political Administration – GVPU”, 2018, Main Military-Political Administration (GVPU), accessed 17 August 2023.

⁸² Both directorates’ pages on the Ministry of Defence’s website mention religion-related tasks. I have the following hypothesis: It seems as if the former, the Directorate, is the point of contact with the ROC and caters to the moral-religious side of the military clergy’s work, while the GVPU, which is on a higher administrative level, monitors the military-religious side of the clergy’s work.

⁸³ Gavrilov, Iu. “V Minoborony opredelili pravovoi status voennykh sviashchennikov”, RG.RU, 16 March 2010, В Минобороны определили правовой статус военных священников - Российская газета (rg.ru), accessed 14 December 2023.

To an extent, the phenomenon of the clergymen wearing two hats reflects the tug of war between the ROC and interest groups within the Ministry of Defence and Armed Forces. In the hagiography of Kirill, the author, Boris Lukichev, explains from the Church's perspective how the then Defence Minister Anatolii Serdiukov applied the brakes to the process of appointing military priests. According to Lukichev, Serdiukov fully took advantage of his right to personally approve each new priest for employment in the Armed Forces. Although he could not end a reform that he seems to have disliked, he seems to have deliberately added to the difficulty of recruiting priests. Sergei Shoigu, as Defence Minister was in comparison deemed to be more church-friendly. Lukichev at least writes warmly about his arrival.

3.2.3 The number of priests

How many are they? Broadly speaking, the data on the number of priests in official (*shtatnye*) and unofficial (*vneshtatnye*) employment is unreliable. Official priests are those who were hired after the implementation of the presidential decision to recreate the military clergy in 2009. They participate in the daily life of the military unit. Unofficial priests are those that worked from the beginning of the 1990s, often on informal by-the-hour agreements between themselves and military commanders of nearby units. Both the number of official positions and the actual number of official priests in employment in a given year differ depending on the source. In 2005, the then Defence Minister Sergey Ivanov spoke of as many as 2 000 unofficial priests working informally with the Armed Forces.⁸⁴ However, the ROC's data seemingly differ from this account. According to the ROC Moscow Patriarchate, in 2017, there were 176 official priests and 45 candidates who were going through certification in the Ministry of Defence or diocese. This means that approximately 221 official priests ought to have been in service in 2018. According to the same source, there were at the same time 773 unofficial priests, working with both military- and law-enforcement units. It is unclear how large a proportion of those were working within the Armed Forces,⁸⁵ but it's clear that the number does not correspond to the claim (above) of 2 000 unofficial priests made by Army sources.

⁸⁴ For instance, the Defence Minister, Sergei Ivanov, in 2005, RFE/RL Daily Report on 6 January 2005, cited in Herspring, D. R. and McDermott, R. N. "Chaplains, political officers, and the Russian Armed Forces, Problems of Post-Communism, 2010, Vol. 57, No. 4, 55.

⁸⁵ Murzin, "Voennye sviashchenniki", 2012.; "RPTs predlozhila nadelit voennykh sviashchennikov lgotami kontraktnikov", News.ru, 26 January 2023, РИЦ предложила наделять военных священников льготами контрактников, accessed 21 August 2023.; Synodal Department of the Moscow Patriarchate for Cooperation with the Armed Forces and Law-enforcement Agencies, "Chislo shtatnykh voennykh sviashchennikov v Vooruzhennykh Silakh RF znachitelno uvelichilos", Pobeda.ru, 1 December 2017, Число штатных военных священников в Вооруженных силах РФ значительно увеличилось, accessed 14 December 2023.

It is possible, of course, that a larger number of informally hired unofficial priests were cut back after the military clergy was recreated in 2009. However, this does not add up, given the chronic complaints from all quarters about the shortage of clergy including unofficial priests, in the Armed Forces.⁸⁶ In 2023, there were apparently some units with a single official priest per thousand servicemen or more, while other units had none, and the number of official priests in all of Russia were no more than 250.⁸⁷ Another source reports, in the same year, that at any given time about fifteen to twenty-five official priests serve in the so-called “Special Military Operation” in Ukraine, while the number of unofficial priests is approximately the same.⁸⁸

3.2.4 Legality

In the years before Medvedev’s decision in 2009, a number of legal objections against the idea of recreating the military clergy were raised.

A major concern was that the idea of creating an institution within the state (i.e., the Armed Forces, as part of the Ministry of Defence) that would carry out military-religious work would conflict with the Russian constitution’s Article 14, Paragraph 2, which states that “Religious associations shall be separated from the State and shall be equal before the law.”⁸⁹ Clearly, the institution of military clergy is not separated from the state, but an integral part of it and, thus, the criticism is entirely valid. In 2005, Sergey Mozgavoy complained that commanders in the military units “look through their fingers with such rule-transgressions” and do not care about the consequences for the state of the rule of law.⁹⁰

Despite being unconstitutional, the law went into effect. And although unofficial priests had served informally in the garrisons since the 1990s and now were recognised legally, the “most important thing,” an observer in a Kremlin-friendly newspaper maintained, is “... that believing soldiers and officers have finally been

⁸⁶ See, for instance, Murzin, “Voennye sviashchenniki”, 2012; News.ru – “RPTs predlozila nadelit voennikh sviashchennikov lgotami kontraktnikov”, *Novosti, Rossiia, Obshchestvo*, 26 January 2023, РПЦ предложила наделить военных священников льготами контрактников, accessed 21 August 2023; See, also, Gustafsson Kurki (2023) for references to complaints about the shortage of military clergy.

⁸⁷ “Nuzhen li zakon o kapellanakh: Mneniia sviashchennikov i boitsov SVO”, *Obektiv Press*, 27 March 2023, Нужен ли закон о капелланах – мнения священников и бойцов СВО, accessed 16 August 2023.

⁸⁸ Pushkar, A. “Voennye sviashchenniki na peredovoi”, *Sviatye Online*, 2023, Военные священники на передовой, accessed 16 August 2023.

⁸⁹ The Constitution of the Russian Federation, 1993, Chapter 1, The Fundamentals of the Constitutional System, accessed 16 August 2023.

⁹⁰ Mozgovoy, “Vzaimootnosheniia Armii i Tserkvi v Rossiiskoi Federatsii”, 2005, 23.

officially granted the right to practice their religion, as they call it, without taking off their epaulettes.”⁹¹

The legally defined official position of the priest within the Armed Forces is called assistant to the commander for work with believing servicemen. This type of position is called *chaplain* in English-speaking countries; in colloquial Russian the word *kapellan* is used. Nonetheless, Archpriest Mikhail Vasilev, Vice Deputy Director of the Synodal Department for Cooperation with the Armed Forces and Law-enforcement Agencies, points out that this is not the right term. He clarifies that they are “assistant commanders” and “in fact, [they are] technical, civilian personnel, like drivers, storekeepers, or cleaners.”⁹² His way of de facto distancing the military priests from the ecclesiastical by saying that they are on par with cleaners is an illustration of the secularisation of the church that may, paradoxically, be a precondition for its immersion in state structures. Thus, if the church wants more power over the state and politics, it must become less religious in substance.⁹³ However, the trend is not clear-cut. In 2016, a source suggests, the military priests were treated as equivalents to the *zampolit* role in the military units; that is, akin to the assistant to the commander in political affairs.⁹⁴ Early in 2023, voices were raised in the State Duma to formulate a new law on military chaplains, for the purpose of raising the status of the military clergy to the level of uniformed military servicemen. This would mean that the priests who serve as assistants to commanders in the work with believing servicemen would get the title “military priest” (*voennii sviashchennik*) and receive the same social benefits package as the servicemen on contract.⁹⁵ The probable formalisation of the title “military priest” may suggest that the process of the formation of a “clerical ideology” is taking another step forward.⁹⁶

3.2.5 Recruitment

The process of searching for potential candidates and screening them for a job opening is a key element of any type of organisation. In the Russian Armed Forces,

⁹¹ Gavrilov, “V Minoborony opredelili pravovoi status voyennykh sviashchennikov”, 2010.

⁹² Priimak, A. “V armii prodolzhaetsia ‘bezotsovshchitsa’”, *Nezavizimaia Gazeta – Religii*, 2018, В армии продолжается “безотцовщина”, accessed 16 August 2023.

⁹³ For an exhaustive argument, see: Teper, Y. “How Civic Is Russia's New Civil Religion and How Religious Is the Church?”. In I. Information Management (Ed.), *Civic Engagement and Politics: Concepts, Methodologies, Tools, and Applications* (IGI Global, 2017, 1284–1307). <https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-5225-7669-3.ch064>.

⁹⁴ Ivanov, S. “Institut armeiskikh sviashchennikov v Rossii poka dalek ot sovershenstva”, *Gazeta.ru*, 2016, Институт армейских священников в России пока далек от совершенства, accessed 28 August 2023.

⁹⁵ Petrova, A. “Zakon o kapellanakh: tak li on nuzhen – mneniia sviashchennikov i boitsov SVO”, *RIA Novosti Krym*, 26 March 2023, Закон о капелланах: так ли он нужен – мнения священников и бойцов СВО, accessed 18 August 2023.

⁹⁶ Mozgovoy, “Vzaimootnosheniia Armii i Tserkvi v Rossiiskoi Federatsii”, 2005, 23.

the position of assistant to the commander for work with believing servicemen was instated in 2011, two years after the decision was taken to recreate the military clergy. In theory, a representative of any of the religious associations in Russia may be appointed to the position, although, in practice, the vast majority are Russian Orthodox priests. However, in the Western Military District, in 2011, the first Islamic mullah was appointed to the position of assistant to the commander.⁹⁷ And, in Buriatiia in 2013, the first Buddhist priest was appointed.⁹⁸ The number of Orthodox priests was, in any case, many times greater. This non-exhaustive list of criteria for recruitment to the military clergy was published by the ROC in 2012:⁹⁹

1. be a professionally educated specialist (e.g., Russian Orthodox priest, or rabbi, or imam) able to conduct work for the purpose of strengthening the “spiritual-moral foundations” of the military servicemen;
2. be a citizen of the Russian Federation;
3. not in possession of dual citizenship;
4. be state-educated to at least secondary (complete) general education;
5. provide a letter of recommendation from a relevant religious association (e.g. ROC);
6. undergo a medical exam with a positive result;
7. have at least five years of work experience in a relevant religious association, if applying for a supervisory position;
8. those who are appointed should undergo special military training in accordance with the procedure and under the conditions established by the Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation.

Objectively, it turned out that it was difficult to fill vacancies since the military clergy was established only in 2009. In addition, observers of the military clergy and the ROC itself tend to agree that there are too few priests in the Armed Forces and, in particular, on the frontline in Ukraine.¹⁰⁰ There seems to be a higher demand for pastoral care, consecrations and other religious ceremonies in the Armed Forces than the supply of priests (and imams) can meet. Therefore, recruitment is a bottleneck. Why has it been difficult to recruit new military priests?

One obvious reason is that the legal status of the military priest is far from clear-cut in terms of job title (it is secular) and, in particular, its weak social-benefits

⁹⁷ TASS, “V zapadnom voennom okruge poiavilsia pervyi islamskii sviashchennosluzhitelj”, 23 October 2012, В Западном военном округе появился первый исламский священнослужитель, accessed 1 September 2023.

⁹⁸ TASS, “V Buriatii nachal rabotu pervyi v Rossii voennyi sviashchennik-buddist”, 4 July 2013, В Бурятии начал работу первый в России военный священник-буддист, accessed 4 June 2023.

⁹⁹ Murzin, “Voennye sviashchenniki”, 2012.

¹⁰⁰ See, e.g., News RU, “V RPTs zaiavili o nedostatke voennykh sviashchennikov v zone SVO”, 7 January 2023, В РПЦ заявили о недостатке военных священников в зоне СВО, accessed 18 August 2023.

package (in comparison with soldiers on contracts). The ROC has raised the issue a number of times, most recently, for instance, in January 2023.¹⁰¹

Another reason, when applying to serve in the war against Ukraine, is the obvious physical risk involved in frontline duty as a priest. Several priests have paid the highest price for their religious work in the Ukraine campaign. Among them is Mikhail Vasilev, a well-known clergyman and senior priest in the Strategic Rocket Troops. Vasilev was killed on the frontline on 6 November 2022.¹⁰² Another victim in the same incident was Alexander Tsyganov, a priest of Pskov Diocese serving in the 76th Airborne Division, who died of his wounds in a military hospital on 21 November 2022.¹⁰³ These are not the only casualties, but illustrate well that serving in the military clergy is not only associated with a weak social compensation package, it can also be a deadly affair. In such circumstances, it is reasonable to assume that some potential candidates find that the cost of applying is potentially higher than the benefits of serving.

There are also other reasons for the recruitment problem that do not correlate with the war. Serving as a priest in a military unit is not for everyone (even discounting that not even all men of God wish to risk their lives). Before the military clergy was recreated, the then Patriarch Aleksey II, quoted in Mozgovoy's paper, said that ". . . I believe that God will send to the clergy new people, possibly from the pool of military servicemen."¹⁰⁴ It is probable that the Patriarch thought of the difficulty in finding and recruiting *suitable* candidates to the post of assistant to the commander for work with believing servicemen, in terms of their personal qualities, such as value orientation. In an interview, the late Mikhail Vasilev expressed that the necessary qualities in a military priest are, "First, to love people. Believing in God and loving people is the most important thing for any priest. And secondly, you need to love the Russian army."¹⁰⁵ This is the value orientation that apparently does not grow on (enough) trees in Russia.

A related observation that complicates the picture is that not all military commanders appreciate the priests – they think that the presence of too many priests in the Armed Forces is disadvantageous, because people of faith are focussed on

¹⁰¹ "RPTs predlozila nadelit voennykh sviashchennikov lgotami kontraktnikov", News RU, 26 January 2023, РПЦ предложила наделить военных священников льготами контрактников, accessed 14 December 2023.

¹⁰² "Otets Mikhail Vasilev: 'Vazhno, chtoby dusha cheloveka vo vsiakikh voennykh konfliktakh ne oskotinilas'", Miloserdie.ru, 7 November 2022, Отец Михаил Васильев: «Важно, чтобы душа человека во всяких военных конфликтах не оскотинилась», accessed 18 August 2023.

¹⁰³ "Umer popavshii pod obstrel v zone SVO sviashchennosluzhitelj", News RU, 21 November 2022, Умер попавший под обстрел в зоне СВО священнослужитель - NEWS.ru — 21.11.22, accessed 18 August 2023.

¹⁰⁴ Mozgovoy, "Vzaimootnosheniia Armii i Tserkvi v Rossiiskoi Federatsii", 2005.

¹⁰⁵ Vyshovets, T. "Esli ne budet zherstvennost, togda zachem vsiu eta?" Eparkhia Saratov, undated, «Если не будет жертвенности, тогда зачем все это?», accessed 31 August 2023.

eternity, rather than on medals and salaries. Thus, they can be difficult to manage and control, or at least this seems to be what some military commanders believe.

A solution to the problem of finding the “right” type of priest is to send former soldiers to the theological seminary in order to become priests who can then serve in the military clergy, or to send clergyman to first serve in the Armed Forces. For instance, the above-mentioned Mikhail Vasilev was an officer (even his father was an officer) turned priest. This means, however, that the process of identifying the right type of candidate is tedious. Which, in turn, may explain why it took several years to fill the vacancies in the military clergy after its establishment in 2009. This does not mean, however, that the demand for their services was saturated.

A key difference from the informal arrangements that were the norm in the 1990s is that appointment to the position of assistant to the commander for work with believing servicemen is complete only upon the arrival of a letter of support from the diocese (or other religious association),¹⁰⁶ a fact that further adds to the complexity of the recruitment process. But it is also a guarantee that the Church has a veto in the recruitment process. The secular side of the recruitment process is also rigorous, as the Defence Minister personally signs the paperwork for each military priest hired.¹⁰⁷

3.2.6 Training

In order to expand and reproduce an organisation it is necessary to create an infrastructure for the training of newly recruited personnel. In the 1990s, when informal by-the-hour contracts prevailed, the priests did not enjoy any systematic support from a proper training infrastructure. This changed after the recreation of the military clergy in 2009. Previously, the only educational facility for military priests was the Military University of the Ministry of Defence, and the courses tended to be theoretical. However, in autumn 2014, five military colleges (*Voennye vyshye uchebnye zavedenie*, or for short, *Voennye vuzy*), most of them command colleges, began to receive military priests, according to Alexander Surovtsev, the head of the Department of Work With Believing Servicemen of the Ministry of Defence.¹⁰⁸

One of the five military-command colleges that train military priests is located in Rostov-na-donu, in the Southern Military District. In an interview with the Vice-Chancellor of the Don Theological Seminary, the senior priest, Timofei Fetisov,

¹⁰⁶ Gavrilov, “V Minoborony opredelili pravovoi status voennykh sviashchennikov”, 2010.

¹⁰⁷ RIA Novosti, Armeiskie sviashchenniki TsVO: stat avtoritetom i spasti soldata ot petli, 1 March 2020, Армейские священники ЦВО: статья авторитетом и спасти солдата от петли, accessed 14 December 2023.

¹⁰⁸ RIA Novosti, “Voennye sviashchenniki v RF budut uchitsia v vuzakh Minoborony”, 14 July 2014, Военные священники в РФ будут учиться в вузах Минобороны, accessed 28 August 2023.

explains that the Rostov Cathedral has been appointed Main Temple of the Armed Forces in the Southern Military District. The Southern Military District's command post is also located in the city. And in 2013, a course on pastoral care in military service had already been entered into the curriculum of the seminary.

Military priests also receive basic military training. Father Timofei explains:

“There is no such thing as a cassock¹⁰⁹ in camouflage colours [smiles, sic] but an introduction to basic military training is mandatory. The priest may end up in combat. He must know how to take care of himself, know the basic tactical movements of soldiers. So, they all ran somewhere, but where to?”¹¹⁰

Every third year the military priests are expected to attend courses and pass tests held by one of the five military-command colleges.¹¹¹

3.2.7 Conditions of employment

Official (*shtatnye*) military priests have a permanent civilian position in the Armed Forces (or law-enforcement agencies), are subordinated to the Archpriest of the diocese, and sign a contract with the unit commander. Unofficial (*vneshstatnye*) military priests conduct their work under agreements between the unit commander and a diocese of the ROC.¹¹²

Reportedly, in 2013 a military priest on official contract earned 15,000 roubles per month, but, if one included the premium added for the number of years in service, and other benefits, the sum total reached approximately 30,000 roubles,¹¹³ which was approximately 940 U.S. dollars. Other sources speak of a range between 25,000 and 40,000 roubles, depending on the location of service. Reportedly, the salary of military priests is higher than the salary of civilian personnel. Among the benefits of the job is housing: military priests tend to live in the same barracks as officers, or in state-owned flats. Every military priest has his own office at the unit where he serves. Religious paraphernalia, however, is not paid for from the military budget. The priest must turn to the local parish for assistance.¹¹⁴

¹⁰⁹ A cassock is a full-length garment worn by certain Christian clergy.

¹¹⁰ Kovalyova, A. “V Rostovskoi eparkhii budut gotovit voennoe dukhovenstvo, Rossiiskaia gazeta, 30 August 2022, В Ростовской епархии будут готовить военное духовенство (Accessed on 28 August 2023).

¹¹¹ RIA Novosti, “Voennye sviashchenniki v RF budut uchitsia v vuzakh Minoborony”, 2014.

¹¹² ROC, *Polozhenie o voennom dukhovenstve Russkoi Pravoslavnoi Tserkvi v Rossiiskoi Federatsii*, 2013, Положение о военном духовенстве Русской Православной Церкви в Российской Федерации, accessed 2 August 2023, 1.4, 1.5.

¹¹³ RIA Novosti, “Sviashchenniki v rossiiskoi armii zarabatyvaiut do 30 tys rublei v mesiaty”, 29 October 2013, Священники в российской армии зарабатывают до 30 тыс рублей в месяц, accessed 2 July 2023.

¹¹⁴ Gavrilov, Yu., “V Minoborony opredelili pravovoi status voennykh sviashchennikov”, Rossiiskaia gazeta, 2010.

Despite Father Timofei's joke (above) about there not being any "camouflage cassocks," there was a display of olive-green cassocks in the Armiiia-2020 exhibition.¹¹⁵ It is unclear to what extent they have been implemented by the military clergy.

When the full-scale invasion of Ukraine was launched, the military priests had still not attained an even footing with contract soldiers. But, in January 2023, the ROC and the Ministry of Defence jointly proposed a law that, if accepted by the State Duma, would offer the military clergy the same social benefits package as soldiers serving on contracts.¹¹⁶

A taxing condition of employment is that the military priest practically wears two hats at the same time: a secular, and an ecclesiastical. Regarding "spiritual matters," he is subordinated to his religious association, for instance, the Russian Orthodox Church. In the "operative sense," he belongs to the Directorate for Work With Believing Servicemen of the Ministry of Defence and, on location, reports to his military unit commander.¹¹⁷

3.2.8 Work tasks

The ROC's theology is weaponised; that is, its justifications of militarism and war are communicated, explicitly or implicitly, via pastoral care, sermons in church services and prayers, and other types of tasks. According to the Directives on the military clergy, issued by the Church in 2013, the purposes of the military clergy are many:

- to hold church services and religious rituals;
- to perform spiritually enlightening work;
- to participate in events created by unit commanders for patriotic and moral purposes;
- to support the unit commander in crime prevention and the strengthening of discipline;
- to prevent unregulated relations (hazing) and suicides;
- to advise the unit commander in religious matters;
- to participate in the creation of relations based on Christian ethics within the military collective;

¹¹⁵ Nekhlebova, N. "Voenno-polevaia riasa, odeianie pravoslavnykh sviashchennikov", Kommersant, 21 August 2020, Военно-полевая ряса, одеяние православных священников, accessed 1 August 2023.

¹¹⁶ RBK – Obshchestvo, (2023). "RPTs i Minoborony predlozhili vvesti lgoty dlia voennykh sviashchennikov", rbc.ru, 26 January 2023, РПЦ и Минобороны предложили ввести льготы для военных священников, accessed 5 September 2023.

¹¹⁷ Priimak, A. "V armii prodolzhaetsia 'bezotsovshchina'", Nezavizimaia Gazeta, 21 February 2018, В армии продолжается "безотцовщина", accessed 8 June 2023.

- to support the creation of healthy moral climates in the families of servicemen.¹¹⁸

The main work task of the military priest, expressed on the web-page of the Diocese of Saratov, is: "... educational work in units and subdivisions of the Armed Forces, both among officers and young conscripts, and its goal is to 'spiritualise' military collectives."¹¹⁹ This view corresponds to what I elsewhere call the Russian model of soldier morale, which, to a great extent, focuses on communality (and spirituality) rather than individuality.¹²⁰

According to the Directive on military clergy, the military priest's duties are many:¹²¹

- He bases his work on the Holy Bible, the teaching of the ROC, and canonical directives, with the military traditions in mind.
- He conducts pastoral care, spiritually enlightening work, both with individuals and with the collective.
- He knows the basic rules of military law of the Russian Federation and is well-acquainted with the directives on religious work in military units and law-enforcement agencies.
- He participates in military rituals and ceremonies.
- He conducts rituals on demand from servicemen and their families.
- He gives necessary pastoral support to servicemen in difficult situations in life (e.g., illness and injuries). He is also available for the families of servicemen, veterans and invalids.
- He organises funerals.
- He supports the commander in the prevention of crime and guarding against a lack of discipline.
- He supports the harmonious relations of servicemen of different faiths.
- He advises the unit commander on religious matters. In particular, he supports the work against destructive religious (pseudo-religious) organisations.
- He upholds work discipline according to Russian law.
- He adheres to the law(s) on state secrets.
- He informs the diocese of disputes that cannot be resolved locally.
- If possible, he helps servicemen of other faiths to realise their constitutional right to practice their faith.
- He performs other duties as specified in the contract.

¹¹⁸ Russian Orthodox Church, *Polozhenie o voennom dukhovenstve Russkoi Pravoslavnoi Tserkvi v Rossiskoi Federatsii*, 2013.

¹¹⁹ Vyshovets, "Esli ne budet zhertvennost, togda zachem vsiu eta?"; undated.

¹²⁰ Gustafsson Kurki, *The Russian Understanding of Soldier Morale*, 2023.

¹²¹ Russian Orthodox Church, *Polozhenie o voennom dukhovenstve Russkoi Pravoslavnoi Tserkvi v Rossiskoi Federatsii*, 2013.

Pastoral care, which is mentioned as a key task of the military priest, typically consists of meetings in the priest's room, usually one-on-one, with soldiers. The purpose is to help the soldier with spiritual and psychological issues stemming from military service. One of the key tasks of the military priest is to prevent suicides. Many suicides are the result of so-called 'unregulated relations' among the servicemen. Informally, it is called *dedovshchina*, or hazing. According to a priest interviewed by *RIA Novosti*, the priest's task is to find and reach out to soldiers who suffer. To do this, the priest looks the soldiers in their eyes and chooses those who look sad and gloomy. If the soldier refuses to talk to the priest about his problems, he tells him: "You need to be in the Federal Security Service, FSB¹²²," a reference to the ability to remain silent. And adds: "If something is wrong with a person, he should open up and talk."¹²³ This is typical of the somewhat harsh attitude that is not uncommon in Russia's everyday culture.

Although the vast majority of the servicemen in the Armed Forces are Orthodox, there is a substantial minority that is Muslim. Russian Orthodox priests tend to provide pastoral care to those in need, no matter what faith they belong to. The military priest does not protect those who express pacifist tendencies, in order to encourage them to leave the Armed Forces.¹²⁴

The tasks of the military priest and the military psychologist seem to overlap, which is a source of competition between the professions. Igor Liakh, a military psychologist explains:

The priest saves the soul, and the psychologist explores, heals, in a sense. The Russian state is secular, not ecclesiastical, and in a secular state, psychologists and psychotherapists, psychiatrists, are responsible for the function of preserving the psyche.

Despite the words of Lakh, it is obvious, judging by the above description of pastoral care provided by a priest, that priests and psychologists are potentially competing for professional influence in the Armed Forces. Their tasks do partially overlap. And whether the Russian state can be said to adhere to its secular constitution post-2009, when the Church became integrated with state structures via the military clergy, remains in doubt.

However, the priest does things the psychologist cannot: celebrates religious holidays and conducts rituals. In an interview in *Gazeta.ru*, a young soldier in the Taman Division explained that soldiers, in his view, prefer to turn to the psychologist, and described a typical meeting with the priest:

¹²² In Russian, *Federalnaia sluzhba bezopasnosti*.

¹²³ RIA Novosti, "Armeiskie sviashchenniki TsVO: Stat avtoritetom i spasti soldata ot petli", 20 November 2013, Армейские священники ЦВО: статья авторитетом и спасти солдата от петли, accessed 31 August 2023.

¹²⁴ RIA Novosti, "Armeiskie sviashchenniki TsVO: Stat avtoritetom i spasti soldata ot petli", 2013.

Everyone goes to the parade ground, the brigade commander speaks on this or that issue. And then, for example, he says that today is such and such a holiday, the priest from such and such parish will speak to you. A priest comes out, congratulates the soldiers and sprinkles them with holy water.

This is a type of recurring task in the working life of military priests. But there is evidence that the traditional ceremonial duties are not the only tasks a priest deals with in the Armed Forces. According to a military priest, socialising with the troops is one thing that requires “specific skills” in addition to priestly ministry: “Well, for example, to be able to play the guitar or be a good storyteller.” The purpose of such work tasks is to “win people over.”¹²⁵ This, too, corresponds to the focus on communality of the Russian model of soldier morale.

Furthermore, although the military clergy serves on the frontline of the so-called “Special Military Operation” in Ukraine, they also fulfil tasks on the home front. On 24 April 2023, the Military Clergy of the Central Military District held an event at the military hospital in Ekaterinburg. Pupils from the Alexander Nevsky Novo-Tikhvin Convent’s Sunday School performed a concert for servicemen who were in rehabilitation from their war injuries. The concert was a part of the “I Wish You Health Campaign,” which was launched in 2022 by the Military Clergy of the Central Military District. During the event, the servicemen were commended for their “courage” and “heroism,” after which patriotic songs, accompanied by guitarists, were performed. After the concert, the servicemen were given small gifts and icons. As the press release on the Ministry of Defence website proclaimed, “The main purpose of [the campaign] is to maintain the [soldier] morale [*boevoi dukh*] of servicemen participating in the special military operation who are undergoing rehabilitation in a hospital.”¹²⁶

¹²⁵ Vyshovets, “Esli ne budet zhertvennost, togda zachem vsiu eta?”, undated.

¹²⁶ Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation, “Voennoe dukhovenstvo TsVO provelo pervuiu v 2023 godu aksiuu ‘Zdraviia zhelaiu’ v Ekaterinburge”, Press Release, 24 April 2023, Военное духовенство ЦВО провело первую в 2023 году акцию «Здравия желаю» в Екатеринбургe : Министерство обороны Российской Федерации, accessed 21 November 2023.

4 Reactions to the Church's position towards Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine

In the preceding chapters, I have described the theology that underpins the militaristic doctrine and explained how it is weaponised against the Russian soldier, primarily through the institution of military clergy. But given that the ROC is not a monolith, although certainly hierarchical, it is useful to ask what the response is to the Church's position on Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine.¹²⁷

Subsequent to Russia's launch of its full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, Patriarch Kirill's first detailed sermon was delivered on 6 March, which coincided with Forgiveness Sunday. In effect, this was the first clear proclamation of the ROC's position on the war. The sermon was to a great extent devoted to the Donbass and the rejection of "the so-called values that are offered today by those who claim world power." The test of such values, according to Kirill, was "gay parades."¹²⁸ Kirill has encouraged communities to pray in ways that actively support hostility, while blaming the war on the "evil" West and claiming that relations between the Russian and Ukrainian peoples are fraternal.¹²⁹ On 25 September, another sermon by Patriarch Kirill pronounced that Russian soldiers who die on the battlefield in Ukraine will have their sins "washed away":

The Church realises that if someone, moved by a sense of duty, the need to fulfil his oath, remains faithful to his vocation and goes to fulfil what his duty commands him to do, and if a person dies in the performance of this duty, then he undoubtedly commits an act tantamount to sacrifice. He sacrifices himself for others. And, therefore, we believe that this sacrifice washes away all the sins that a person has committed.¹³⁰

In other words, there remains little doubt that the ROC, its leadership, and probably at least some of its members lend their support to the war of aggression launched by Russia against Ukraine.

¹²⁷ Adamsky, D. "Christ-loving warriors: Ecclesiastical dimension of the Russian military campaign in Syria", 2019a, 434.

¹²⁸ Lotareva, A. "Molchaniem predaetsia Bog'. Kak v Russkoi pravoslavnoi tservki reagiruiut na voynu", BBC News Russkaia sluzhba, 22 March 2022, "Молчанием предается Бог". Как в Русской православной церкви реагируют на войну, accessed 1 September 2023.

¹²⁹ "A Declaration on the 'Russian World' (Russkii mir) Teaching", 2022.

¹³⁰ Novaia Gazeta (Baltiia), "Kak russkaia pravoslavnaia tserkov podderzhivaet voynu i chto delaiut sviashchenniki, s nei nesoglasnye", Politika, 21 December 2022, Как русская православная церковь поддерживает войну и что делают священники, с ней несогласные, accessed 19 July 2023.

The military clergy's support of the militaristic doctrine is no surprise, perhaps. The members have been selected and recruited for their positive views of militarism. But what can be said about priests who work in the ROC and are not military clergy? How do they react to the ROC's militaristic doctrine and the Patriarch's justification of the war against Ukraine? Below, I discuss examples of conformity and dissent.

4.1 Conformity

On the 26 February 2022, two days after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the liberal Russian exile media outlet, *Meduza*, interviewed ROC priests about their view of the war. Archpriest Nicholas Bandurin, Head of the Magdalene Church, in the village of Andreevo-Melentievo, Neklinovski District, Rostov Region, Russia, told the journalists:

It is high time to restore order there [in Ukraine] – and we must support our president! The Lord is with us, the Lord loves us. Everything that the Lord does not give us is for the best, and we must pray.¹³¹

Is Archpriest Bandurin's support of the invasion an anomaly? Probably not. In an interview with Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) in the summer of 2023, Kseniia Luchenko, a Russian journalist specialised in religious matters, assessed that, "There are those who suffered for their pacifist position, but the majority of the priests support the war; they are, so to speak, the 'Putin majority'."¹³² The expression, "Putin majority"¹³³ (*Putinskoe bolshinstvo*), was coined by the propaganda team behind Vladimir Putin's first presidential term. They later revealed that when they started to circulate the view that there was a "Putin majority" in the State Duma, there was actually no such thing. It only came into being gradually over the years. Thus, facts conformed to fiction through deliberate manipulation. For this reason, I believe that the journalist Luchenko's choice of words may signal that she thinks that some priests are not genuinely militaristic,

¹³¹ Reiter, S; Pertsev, A. and Shumkin, A. "Razdelenie – eto delo diavola" Pravoslavnye sviashchenniki iz Rossii i Ukrainy rasskazyvaiut o svoem otnoshenii k voine", *Meduza*, 26 February 2022, «Разделение — это дело дьявола» Православные священники из России и Украины рассказывают о своем отношении к войне, accessed 1 September 2023.

¹³² Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, "Mobilizatsiia 'Troitsy': Programma Sergeia Medveveva", Youtube channel, 5 July 2023, Мобилизация "Троицы", accessed 28 August 2023.

¹³³ There is of course an argument to be made about the possibility of so-called preference falsification. To what extent do the priests actually believe in the ROC doctrine on the war to which they are conforming? According to Timur Kuran, 1997, preference falsification occurs when individuals misrepresent their wants in response to perceived social pressure. There is little doubt that the clergy are aware of repressive Russian laws about "discrediting" the Russian Armed Forces and the existence of parishioners who are willing to report "traitors" to the authorities, because they believe the official narrative about the righteousness of the invasion. See Kuran, T. *Private truth, Public lies: The Social Consequences of Preference Falsification* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997).

but actually conformists, in the true sense of the word. They choose to conform to militarism because of the perceived and real costs of deviating from the norm. It would, however, be naïve to assume that all the conformists are only putting up a façade. Genuine supporters likely do exist, side by side with opportunists.

Although some of the clergy's conformity to the ROC's official position is probably manifested in the messages that they convey in the pastoral care and sermons they deliver to their parishioners, there are nevertheless other signs that they may be in agreement with militarism. A remarkable example is the developments in Saint Petersburg, where a parish in Kronstadt reportedly began to set up a private military company for the war against Ukraine. However, it turns out that the story that circulated in the media in 2022 was not as straightforward as they made it seem.

In 2017, representatives of the Naval Kronstadt Saint Nicholas Cathedral created the Saint Andrew's Cross Centre, a tactical training centre, with the blessing of the archimandrite, Alexey Ganzhin;¹³⁴ in November 2022, Russian media described the centre as the basis of the ROC's first private military company. Russian media described it this way because the parish's plans at that time included the creation of a voluntary battalion for the military campaign against Ukraine. In an interview with *Bloknot*, the director of the centre, Vladimir Khilchenko, explained that, "the concept [of the training at the centre] is survival in the difficult conditions of warfare, to prepare people for volunteer units, as well as to participate in various PMCs."¹³⁵ Khilchenko further explained that the costs of the training were being covered by the voluntary participants themselves, as well as through donations. The centre can train 70 to 100 volunteers at a time. The theoretical elements (such as basic first aid) of the thirty-day training course are conducted on Vasilev Island (a city district in Saint Petersburg), while the weapons training is conducted at the shooting range in Kronstadt (outside the city). Anyone with the aim of fighting in the "Special Military Operation" in Ukraine is free to join. According to *Bloknot*, applications are accepted through the Saint Andrew Centre's website.¹³⁶

A year later, in early November 2023, a flurry of news articles, all with the same message, were published: the Church has set up its first private military company. Immediately, the archimandrite of the parish gave an interview and clarified that, "There are people, parishioners, who sponsor, donate money for training. But these are the people who are going to defend our fatherland," and stressed, "This is not a military company."¹³⁷ The centre had been created in 2017, according to the

¹³⁴ Saint Andrew's cross is depicted on the flag of the Russian Navy.

¹³⁵ Kirianova, K. "Pri RPTs sozdaiut sobstvennuiu ChVK", *Bloknot.ru*, 11 November 2022, При РПЦ создают собственную ЧВК, accessed 1 September 2023.

¹³⁶ I have not been able to locate the website.

¹³⁷ Panchenko, L. "Nastoiatel sobora v Kronshtadte prokommentiroval soobshcheniia o 'ChVK pri RPTs'", *MK.ru*, 12 November 2022, Настоятель собора в Кронштадте прокомментировал сообщения о «ЧВК при РПЦ», accessed 1 September 2023.

archimandrite, when *ex-spetsnaz* soldiers (special forces soldiers) decided to prepare for a competition called “Marine Infantry.” At the time of the interview, the purpose of the centre was to prepare volunteers to fight in the war in various private military companies, such as Wagner Group, but not to create an ecclesiastical military company. The Cathedral’s centre gives basic military training courses for children and grown-ups alike. The children are prepared for military service in the Armed Forces, explains the archimandrite.

Thus, deliberately or not, the Saint Andrews Centre succeeded in generating a great number of media reports on their activities by alluding to the creation of the Church’s first private military company, on par with Wagner Group. Evidently, this was not an exact description of the organisation, but the PR success was already a fact.¹³⁸ They had effectively proclaimed faithfulness to the ROC’s militaristic doctrine.

4.2 Dissent

When the Russian Armed Forces crossed the border into Ukraine on 24 February 2022, there were, indeed, ROC priests who expressed dismay. Archpriest Georgii Mitrofanov of the Russian Orthodox Church, professor of the St. Petersburg Theological Academy, told *Meduza* of his unmistakably pacifist view of the invasion:

I treat any war as the greatest misfortune. I am convinced that this war could have been avoided. I can say one thing: in war, it is not different people who fight among themselves, but brothers, because all people are brothers.¹³⁹

Mitrofanov was not alone. In early March 2022, a group of approximately sixty ROC priests called for immediate peace in an open letter. They didn’t mince their words:

We remind you that the Blood of Christ, shed by the Saviour for the life of the world, will be received in the sacrament of Communion by those people who give murderous orders, not into life, but into eternal torment.

What happens to those who dissent?¹⁴⁰ In March 2022, Iuann Burdin, the former head of the parish church in the village of Karabanova, in Kostroma region,

¹³⁸ Delovoi Peterburg (2022) *Nastoiatel Morskogo sobora v Kronshtadte oproverg sozdanie pervoi ChVK pri RPTs, DP.ru*, 13 November, *Настоятель Морского собора в Кронштадте опроверг создание первой ЧВК при РПЦ (dp.ru)* (Accessed on 1 September 2023).

¹³⁹ Reiiiter, Pertsev, Shumkin, ””Razdelenie – eto delo diavola’ Pravoslavnye sviashchenniki iz Rossii i Ukrainy rasskazyvaiut o svoem otnoshemii k voine”, 2023.

¹⁴⁰ A paranoid atmosphere seems to have emerged in Russia, where people report on each other to the police or directly to the FSB, the Federal security service, for expressing antiwar statements. See, e.g., Dixon, R. “Russians snitch on Russians who oppose war with Soviet-style

delivered an antiwar sermon for which he was sentenced for “discrediting” the Russian Armed Forces. He was fined 35,000 roubles. It was one of his parishioners who reported Burdin to the police after his antiwar sermon.¹⁴¹

In addition to the sermon, Burdin had published a link on the parish’s website that led to a pro-peace petition at *Change.org*. After his trial, he was banned from the ministry. Although he then tried to transfer from the ROC to the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, Patriarch Kirill, of the Moscow Patriarchate, did not allow it.

A further illustrative outcome of the trial was that the court pronounced that “pacifism” is incompatible with Russian Orthodoxy. In fact, according to the court, it is as “heretical” as a number of other doctrines that had appeared throughout the history of the ROC.¹⁴²

denunciations”, Stars and Stripes, 27 May 2023, Russians snitch on Russians who oppose war with Soviet-style denunciations | Stars and Stripes, accessed 21 July 2023.

¹⁴¹ Meduza, “‘Priiti v khram i delat vid, chto nichego ne sluchilos, nevozmozhno’ – Kostromskoi sviashchennik Iuann Burdin – ob antivoennoi propovedi, za kotoruiu ego budut sudit”, Istorii, 8 March 2022, «Прийти в храм и делать вид, что ничего не случилось, невозможно» Костромской священник Иоанн Бурдин — об антивоенной проповеди, за которую его будут судить, accessed 12 August 2023.

¹⁴² Meduza, “V RPTs zaiavili, chto patsifizm nesovmestim s ucheniem pravoslavnoi tserkvi”, Meduza, 11 June 2023, В РПЦ заявили, что пацифизм несовместим с учением православной церкви, accessed 2 July 2023.

5 Why Orthodox propaganda when so few soldiers are religious?

This report began with a research puzzle: Why does the Russian regime use the Church as a militaristic propaganda tool when so few Russian soldiers are deeply religious? In essence, the puzzle is about the choice of strategic policy investment options. Here I draw on previous chapters for the explanation of the puzzle. Exceptions to the rule are footnoted.

In short, the Russian state relies on Orthodox spirituality-based propaganda through the military clergy because it believes that Orthodoxy can contribute to unit cohesion in the armed forces, as evidenced by the intentions expressed in the paper trail of agreements between the state and the Church from the 1990s to the present. The idea of the Church's role in creating motivated troops is ever-present in these agreements. Is this idea well-grounded? In short, the picture is mixed because there is a spiritually-receptive audience in the armed forces, even if few are devout believers. One of the main background factors is the loss of national identity after the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

Let us start from the early 1990s, when the Soviet Union and, with it, the officially proclaimed state ideology collapsed. This created a vacuum and a loss of identity among many Russians. Therefore, the Russian state post-1991 was seeking an identity, for itself and for the population.

The ROC had a ready-made identity to offer, thanks to its long and rich history.¹⁴³ The ROC was also seeking a place in the post-Soviet environment and sought to gain secular political influence. More than seventy years of atheist repression, a desperate desire not to be victimised again, and a wish to spread the faith among the Russian population were probably the reasons for the desire to gain secular influence. Although most Russians were not deeply religious, there was a large enough number of them who held that *dukhovnost* (Russian spirituality) is a positive value.¹⁴⁴ This meant that both the nominally secular Russian state, led by both Yeltsin and Putin, and the reborn Church, under Aleksey II and Kirill, had an incentive for a rapprochement. Therefore, the ROC earned a key role in the post-1991 process of identity reconfiguration¹⁴⁵ and increasingly became a political

¹⁴³ Elsner, R. "Ideological pillow and strategic partner: The Russian Orthodox Church and the war". In *Russian Analytical Digest*, 2022, No. 286, War and Church, Center for Security Studies, accessed 8 September 2023.

¹⁴⁴ An alternative optic for the same phenomenon is that a Russian "strategic culture of war" – an enduring and, perhaps, internalised notion of culture – shaped this outcome. For an incisive analysis of Russian strategic culture, see Adamsky, 2023, for instance, pages 10 to 12.

¹⁴⁵ Persson, G. "Russian influence and soft power in the Baltic states: The view from Moscow". In Winnerstig, Mike (ed.) *Tools of destabilization: Russian soft power and non-military influence in the Baltic states*, 2014, FOI-R- -3990- -SE.

player.¹⁴⁶ The 2020 constitutional amendments effectively turned the ROC into a national church.¹⁴⁷

The political leadership's rapprochement to the Church is comprehensible from the perspective of the perceived need to address the post-Soviet loss of identity, but why rely on the Church for propaganda when so few are deeply religious?

As mentioned in the report, Russian state propaganda, internal and external, is akin to a kitchen cupboard with ingredients. The ROC is a major producer of the good we can call Russian spirituality, *dukhovnost*, and, thereby, offers one of the ingredients that Russian citizens can find in the cupboard. This lends agency to the individual who, seemingly making informed choices, can pick and choose to assemble his or her own militaristic "Z-meal." Given its history, the ROC constitutes a powerful producer of a key ingredient, but non-believers are free to choose to trust secular justifications for imperial expansion or ethno-nationalist political justifications without needing (strong) references to religion. However, given that Russian Orthodoxy is pervasive in Russia's public life, there is a case for the existence of "ambient faith", which is a condition that influences the population's rational considerations. Ambient faith means that spiritual symbolism envelopes Russians, believers and non-believers alike, from all angles, and contributes to the individual's feeling that "everyone" is (culturally) Orthodox. Since the armed forces are by and large a cross-section of Russian society, the same conditions are likely to prevail there.

What, then, is the meaning of the military clergy? The military clergy is a manifestation of the rapprochement of the Church and state. While the military clergy is powered theologically by the priests (the Church), it is paid for by the Ministry of Defence (the state). It is a practical vehicle for the implementation of Russian Orthodox state policy; and, as such, a militaristic propaganda tool aimed at the heart and mind of the Russian soldier.

Publicly, both the ROC and the Ministry of Defence make a big fuss about the inception of the military clergy, which suggests that it is an ideological symbol of the Russian regime's militarism. However, the recreation of the historic military clergy is an underfunded reform. Complaints about the deficit of military priests have been voiced frequently after 2009. The demand for pastoral care, for instance, is greater than the supply of priests. This adds to the picture of the military clergy as serving a role of symbolic value.

The level of investment put into the institution of military clergy is, as is the case in other sectors of the state, a result of the balance of power among various interests. So far, the military clergy has been reinstated and developed, but the real

¹⁴⁶ Persson, G. "Vilka är vi? Rysk identitet och den nationella säkerheten", Nordisk Östforum, 2014, Vol. 28, No. 3, 199–214.

¹⁴⁷ Stoeckl, K. "The end of post-Soviet religion: Russian orthodoxy as a national church", 20 July 2020, The End of Post-Soviet Religion – Public Orthodoxy, accessed 4 September 2023.

bottleneck is the recruitment of suitably army-friendly priests. The recruitment bottleneck also suggests the important ideological symbolism of the military clergy; a process less constrained (by the aim to find the ideal priestly candidates) may more rapidly expand the ranks of military priests, but at the price of more ideologically unreliable representatives.

5.1 Does spirituality work as a morale booster?

Battlefield risk-taking, cohesion, discipline, overall military effectiveness; such morale factors are often believed to be positively correlated with religious faith. Russian military analysts in the decades before the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 proposed that soldier morale and spirituality are two sides of the same coin, and some even maintained that “no weapon can replace the soldier morale.”¹⁴⁸ Arguably, faith enhances the likelihood of obedience through a belief in war as a religious duty, and a tendency to accept the highest price, to be killed, and also, to kill. However, despite the intuitiveness of the argument, the empirical evidence in support of it is inconclusive, as Adamsky clarifies: “Although causality has not been scientifically proven, this belief has become widespread.”¹⁴⁹ The military clergy, however, as he suggests in a pioneering paper on the role of faith in Russia’s Syria campaign (2015–), are perceived to inject higher degrees of motivation into the units, and do provide genuine pastoral care that affects the prevalence of combat stress and post-traumatic stress disorder, PTSD, among the troops.¹⁵⁰ Thus, although military priests are used for over-the-top propaganda purposes in Russian state media, it is not entirely correct to call them a case of *pokazukha*, that is, just for show. They do provide genuine services to combat-worn servicemen, but their so far very low numbers, as shown in this report, suggest that their function for ideological propaganda aimed at the soldier and the Russian public is far greater than their actual impact as pastoral caregivers.¹⁵¹ Nevertheless, despite being few, they are the Russian state’s propagandists (under canonical supervision of the Church) who feed the toxic politico-theological concoction of *Russkii mir* to the Russian soldier.¹⁵²

¹⁴⁸ Gustafsson Kurki, *The Russian Understanding of Soldier Morale*, 2023, 14–16.

¹⁴⁹ Adamsky, *Russian nuclear orthodoxy: Religion, politics, and strategy*, 2019b, 251.

¹⁵⁰ Adamsky, “Christ-loving warriors: Ecclesiastical dimension of the Russian military campaign in Syria”, 2019a.

¹⁵¹ I am indebted to Dmitry Adamsky for pushing me to think deeper about the role of the genuine services offered by the military priests.

¹⁵² In the case of a crumbling power vertical with a weakening Moscow, the presence of military priests with strong ties to the Church in the armed forces is a factor worth considering.

Despite the above-mentioned favourable effects of military priests on the troops, there are some serious objections to the interpretation that the Russian military clergy has played a pivotal role for soldier morale (measured by the outcome of military operations). Mozgovoy points out that the military clergy of the Tsarist era reached its pinnacle of organisational power by the First World War, but failed utterly to maintain a high soldier morale among the troops.¹⁵³ After the Bolshevik coup and the abolishment of the military clergy, most of the 3700 priests joined the White armies who fought the Bolshevik troops, but failed to prevent the Whites' defeat in the Civil War. Thus, although Russian military analysts of today tend to promulgate the view that spirituality is a key factor for high soldier morale, the historical examples do not seem to support this view. Weak soldier morale has been an endemic problem for the Russian Armed Forces in Ukraine since 2022, and was likely a key reason for their setbacks in the first year of the war. In addition, the Second Chechen War (1999–2009) was fought successfully despite a lack of an institutionalised military clergy.¹⁵⁴ And the Syrian campaign, after 2015, has been deemed a success story without a fully funded military-clergy reform.¹⁵⁵ Thus, there are reasons for doubting that the military clergy's most important function is to maintain a will to fight among the troops.

In this report, I propose that a more limited function of the clergy is to suppress criticism of the war by linking a positive value (i.e., Russian spirituality) to militarism. In this restricted context, it does appear that the military clergy make a contribution to the cohesion of units in the Russian Armed Forces. However, other elements, such as territorial recruitment and logistics,¹⁵⁶ are likely to have a more substantial impact on soldier morale. Consequently, while the presence of military clergy does influence soldier morale, it cannot be considered the magic bullet for Russian warfighting, as asserted by Russian military analysts.

It is reasonable to hypothesise that, given the ongoing war and the recent destruction of much modern Russian military hardware and heavy human casualties, soldier morale will receive more attention in Russia, so that, consequently, the military clergy will reap an increase in investments in the coming years.

5.2 The Church and Russia: What next?

After more than seventy years of Soviet atheist repression, the Russian Orthodox Church has re-established itself as a Church and as a social and political force in Russia. The restoration of the institution of the military clergy in 2009 is a significant achievement in the security sphere. The Church and the state security apparatus have

¹⁵³ Mozgovoy, "Vzaimootnosheniia Armii i Tserkvi v Rossiiskoi Federatsii", 2005, 62.

¹⁵⁴ The fighting was most intense in the first few years, but the armed forces continued so-called anti-terror operations until 2009. This does not affect the argument I am making.

¹⁵⁵ Gustafsson Kurki, *The Russian Understanding of Soldier Morale*, 2023.

¹⁵⁶ Gustafsson Kurki, *The Russian Understanding of Soldier Morale*, 2023, 29-30.

come closer together, indicating a historical continuity shaped by rational considerations.

Military priests provide pastoral care and spiritual guidance, but they also promote state ideology. They extend the reach of the ROC into the armed forces, based on the Church's theology. It also refers to the false doctrine of *Russkiy mir*, which is used to justify the wars of aggression of the Russian state.

The bottleneck in the expansion of military priests is the supply of suitable priests who love both people and the Russian army. Former soldiers and officers are welcomed by the Church as candidates for the priesthood intended for the military clergy. The ongoing conflict in Ukraine may result in an increase in the number of qualified candidates who have experience on the front lines. The relationship between the military and the Church is expected to continue developing. Interestingly, the Church may face pressure to become less religious in nature as it becomes more integrated with the secular state's structures. This would be explained by the priest's need to adapt both work routines, values, and attitudes for work in the armed forces. However, at the same time, top-down pressure from the Church's leadership may work to uphold a strict theology.

Although the intensity of religiousness among military priests is still uncertain, the clergy is already contributing to the Church's production of the good of *dukhovnost*. This is a crucial element in the state's domestic propaganda. This role is fulfilled, partly, because the Russian Orthodox Church is present in various institutions, including educational facilities, prisons, elderly care units, and the armed forces. Thus, Orthodox religion in Russia today is a top-down ideological propaganda project. This is what I call "ambient faith". It gives the impression that everyone in society believes, which is likely to nudge those who are not already devout believers to conform to cultural Orthodoxy. Creating new devout believers through "ambient faith" may not be possible, but there is already a genuine spiritual yearning at the grassroots level. In the view of Russian military analysts, the ongoing war could be a catalyst for a greater sense of spirituality among the population.

It is unclear whether the described conditions could result in religious radicalisation of Russian society, leading to a situation akin to theocratic Iran where the Church and its religious values are comprehensively integrated into both the society and the state structures. But if it were to happen, it would have incalculable consequences for the morale and motivation of the Russian soldier.

6 Declaration of AI use

Although the author is fluent in Russian, he used DeepL for translating a few of the large Russian-language policy documents examined in the report, due to the superior speed in producing translations with the support of AI. DeepL turned out to be proficient in translating esoteric ecclesiastical terms from Russian into English. It is estimated that 40 work hours were saved in this manner. ChatGPT and DeepL have been used in a few passages in the report to check the English grammar and improve the flow of key sentences. In this sense, the AI apps acted as a force multiplier for the author of this report, not as replacements of his own language skills. Finally, the agency's usual procedures were followed. A human proofreader and editor, Richard Langlais, read the manuscript in its entirety.

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Why does the Russian regime use the Russian-Orthodox Church as a militaristic propaganda tool when so few Russian soldiers are deeply religious? This report unpacks this puzzle through an examination of attitudinal survey data, ecclesiastical documents, and a wide range of academic and Russian media sources. The deceptively simple answer is that the Russian state invests in ecclesiastical militaristic propaganda aimed at the hearts and minds of Russian soldiers because it may contribute towards unit cohesion and morale. A sufficiently large number of Russian soldiers self-identify as culturally Russian Orthodox (but not as deeply religious), which enables the Russian-Orthodox Church to function as a tool of militaristic propaganda. The vehicle for achieving this aim is the recreated military clergy, which promulgates an amalgamation of Orthodox Christian theology and toxic politico-ideological messages to the troops through religious ceremonies and pastoral care.