

“Spirits of Malice:” Moscow Patriarchate and the Ukraine War

Dn. Lasha Tchantouridze, PhD

The Moscow Patriarchate has supported Kremlin's aggression against Ukraine from the very early days of the war. The bishop of Moscow Kirill, the primate of the Russian church, has played the most prominent role in backing Russia's war on Ukraine. However, Kirill's position and active public voice has not been widely followed within the Russian Church. At the same time, almost all members of the Russian clergy have remained silent on the topic of bloodshed in Ukraine, except about three hundred brave individuals. As Kirill's voice has become closely associated with the Kremlin war rhetoric, pressure has significantly increased on various parts of the Russian church, especially on its diocese and parishes operating outside Russia's internationally recognized borders.

The Russian government had a truly ambitious and criminal goal in Ukraine. The initial war objective was the destruction of Ukraine's statehood. President Putin of Russia called Ukraine an artificial state created by Vladimir Lenin, a leader of the Bolshevik revolution of 1917. As the invading Russian troops encountered heroic resistance from the armed forces of Ukraine widely supported by the Ukrainian people, Moscow's war objectives gradually became more moderate. However, the Russian forces have continued committing war crimes in Ukraine by killing and torturing civilians, targeting the civilian infrastructure of the country, exiling Ukrainian people to Russia, and separating children from their families. In all these, the Russian state has found a strong supporter in the person of Bishop Kirill Gundyayev and his loyal clergymen.

From the very early days of the war, Bishop Kirill found innovative ways to justify the war started by the Russian government just before the Great Lent of 2022. Among other things, he argued that "forgiveness without justice is a capitulation and weakness." Kirill declared that in Donbas "we [the Russians]

entered not a physical but a metaphysical struggle." According to him, the war in Ukraine is a result of the Donbas citizens refusing to accept the values of "world powers," for whom the main test of loyalty is hosting of "gay parades." Kirill Gundyayev has declared that the war in Ukraine is not a political battle but a struggle for "human salvation." In his March 6 2022, sermon, the Russian patriarch argued that Russia was fighting in Ukraine to save humanity from the sinful world obsessed with gay parades.¹ Gundyayev's *raison d'etat* for the war in Ukraine can be summarized thus: the West has been flirting with Ukraine, and Ukraine wanted to join the "free" and "happy" world of the West. To prove its loyalty to Western values, Ukraine was willing to host gay pride events. However, the Donbas residents do not want gay pride events, and because of that they are forcefully resisting the aggressors.

Bishop Kirill's declarations and pronouncements justifying the war have ranged from outright lies to bordering heretical. Early in the war, Gundyayev declared that in its history, Russia had never attacked anyone. In his May 3 2022 sermon, he implied that Russia was defending itself because Ukraine and the West was attacking it.² Essentially, he repeated the claim made by a top Russian official a couple of days before Russia attacked Ukraine. On February 20, 2022, Dmitriy Peskov, President Putin's spokesperson, denied that Moscow was getting ready for a full-scale war against Ukraine. Peskov, who acts as the top Putin propagandist, declared in his interview with a Russian TV channel "Rossiya 1:" "let me remind you that in its history, Russia has never attacked anyone."³ Four days later, the Russian armed forces launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

¹ "Патриарх Кирилл: 8 лет мировая власть подрывает Донбасс гейством," *Института религии и политики*, March 6 2022 <https://irp.news/patriarh-kirill-8-let-mirovaja-vlast-podryvaet-donbass-gejstvom/>

² "Почему слова о том, что "Россия никогда не начинала войну", – неправда," *Сибирь.Реалии*, May 5 2022 <https://www.sibreal.org/a/pochemu-slova-o-tom-chto-rossiya-nikogda-ne-nachinala-voynu-nepravda/31835365.html>

³ "Песков: Россия на протяжении всей своей истории никогда ни на кого не нападала," *Fontanka*, February 20 2022 <https://www.fontanka.ru/2022/02/20/70457459/>

In his subsequent sermons on the topic of the war in Ukraine, Bishop Gundyayev continued to justify the Russian aggression in Ukraine. When it became clear that the Russian armed forces were losing ground, Gundyayev started to act as a manpower recruiter for the Russian army. On September 21 2022, the Russian government announced the "partial mobilization" of civilians for the war in Ukraine. Tens of thousands of Russian men started to flee the country or attempted to avoid the mobilization for the Ukraine battlefields. To boost the state's military mobilization drive, Kirill Gundyayev delivered a sermon in the first week of the mobilization calling on Russian men not to be afraid to die in Ukraine. He promised them that "all their sins would be forgiven" if they died on the battlefield "while fulfilling their combat duties." Bishop Kirill compared the death of Russian soldiers in Ukraine with the sacrifice of Christ, who accepted death for the sins of humanity.⁴

Bishop Kirill's position has not been eagerly embraced by most members of the Holy Synod of the Russian Church. In a year since the start of the war, only two other bishops have openly supported the Kremlin's war in Ukraine: Sergei of Voronezh, and Evgeniy of Ekaterinburg.⁵ The Voronezh district of Russia borders Ukraine, and many residents there are Ukrainian. This has not stopped Bishop Sergei from becoming an eager supporter of the war against Ukraine.⁶

Among those who have opposed the war have been 294 signatories (as of January 19 2023) of the open letter to stop the war. They are priests, deacons, and monastics who serve under the Moscow Patriarchate in Russia, Ukraine, and elsewhere around the world. However, they are a tiny minority of the clergymen of the Russian Church, who number in tens of thousands. According to the 2019 data,

⁴ «Это смывает все грехи». Патриарх призвал россиян не бояться пожертвовать собой на войне," *The Moscow Times*, September 25 2022
<https://www.moscowtimes.ru/2022/09/25/pravitelstvo-zayavilo-o-nevozmozhnosti-alternativnoi-sluzhbi-pri-mobilizatsii-a24657>

⁵ Ivan Skriabin, ИНТЕРВЬЮ: Религиовед Николай Митрохин: в православной церкви есть и противники войны, и фашиствующее крыло, *Postimees*, June 9 2022,
<https://rus.postimees.ee/7539881/intervyu-religioved-nikolay-mitrohin-v-pravoslavnoy-cerkvi-est-i-protivniki-voyny-i-fashistvuyushchee-krylo>

⁶ Ibid.

there were more than 40,000 clergymen in the Russian church.⁷ In addition, the Moscow Patriarchate oversees around 1,000 monasteries, almost half of them male.⁸ Public protests and resistance to the war in Ukraine have been virtually absent among the Russian clergy and monastics even though the war instigated by the Kremlin kills Orthodox Christians just like them.

The most significant pushback to Moscow Patriarchate's role in the war came from clergymen of the Russian Church in Ukraine. In April 2022, about 400 clergymen of the Russian Orthodox Church in Ukraine addressed an open letter to the heads of the autocephalous churches worldwide. In the letter, its authors argued that Patriarch Kirill of Moscow had to stand a church trial for the moral crimes of "blessing the war against Ukraine and fully supporting the aggressive nature of Russian troops on the territory of Ukraine," and for heretical teachings related to the doctrine of "the Russian world" (sometimes translated as "Russian peace" or "*pax Russica*").⁹

Within days of Russia's attack on Ukraine, Moscow Patriarchate's ruling bishop in Ukraine, Onufriy, sent open letters of appeal to President Putin and Patriarch Kirill. He called for an immediate cessation of the attacks by the Russian military and characterized the war as a "disaster" and "fratricide."¹⁰ When Onufriy's appeal fell on deaf ears, the Russian church in Ukraine convened a

⁷ Внутренняя жизнь и внешняя деятельность Русской Православной Церкви с 2009 года по 2019 год, *The Moscow Patriarchate*, January 29 2019
<http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5359105.html>

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ "Pressure on Kirill intensifies – 400 priests call for condemnation by world Orthodoxy," *Orthodox Times*, April 14 2022, <https://orthodoxtimes.com/pressure-on-kirill-intensifies-400-priests-call-for-condemnation-by-world-orthodoxy/>

¹⁰ "Митрополит УПЦ МП Онуфрій підтримав ЗСУ і закликав Путіна припинити війну," *УКРАЇНСЬКА ПРАВДА*, February 24 2022, <https://www.pravda.com.ua/news/2022/02/24/7325464/>

council and declared its separation from Moscow.¹¹ As a result, in May 2022, the Russian Church lost about a third of its parishes.¹²

Other national churches operating under Moscow's omophorion soon followed Ukraine's example. In September 2022, the Latvian parliament separated the self-governing Church of Latvia from Moscow Patriarchate.¹³ The Church in Latvia has not voiced objections to this act. In the same month, the Latvian government entered into negotiations with Moscow so that the Russian Church would grant Latvia a tomos, i. e. recognize its autocephaly or independence.¹⁴ The leadership of the Church in Lithuania distanced itself from Moscow on the question of the war in Ukraine. However, the Lithuanian Church resisted changes in its subordinate status with Moscow until May 2022, when the government of Lithuania petitioned the Ecumenical Patriarch to intervene.¹⁵ To prevent that, Moscow agreed to form a commission to study options for granting more autonomy to the Church in Lithuania.¹⁶ Dioceses and parishes elsewhere, most significantly in other European countries, have also started processes that would eventually distance them from the Moscow Patriarchate.

¹¹ "Independence of the Church in Ukraine: Russia's War in Ukraine," *The Canadian Journal of Orthodox Christianity*, Vol. XVII, No. 2, summer 2022

¹² Skriabin, *Postimees*, June 9 2022.

¹³ "Orthodox Church of Latvia seceded from Moscow – It was a matter of national security, says the President," *Orthodox Times*, September 20 2022 <https://orthodoxtimes.com/orthodox-church-of-latvia-seceded-from-moscow-it-was-a-matter-of-national-security-says-the-president/>

¹⁴ "Правительство Латвии предложит Патриарху Кириллу выдать Латвийской православной церкви томос об автокефалии," *Global Orthodox*, September 20 2022 <https://gorthodox.com/news-item/pravitelstvo-latvii-predlozhit-patriarhu-kirillu-vydat-latvijskoj-pravoslavnoj-cerkvi-tomos-ob-avtokefalii>

¹⁵ "Русский православный Советский Союз: как во время войны с Украиной церковные общины отдаляются от РПЦ и даже выходят из ее состава," *Настоящее Время*, June 10 2022 <https://www.currenttime.tv/a/kak-vo-vremya-voyny-s-ukrainoy-tserkovnye-obschiny-otdalyayutsya-ot-rpts/31891841.html>

¹⁶ "Историческое событие: Православная Церковь Литвы хочет расширить границы своей самостоятельности," *LRT*, May 29 2022, <https://www.lrt.lt/ru/novosti/17/1704940/istoricheskoe-sobytie-pravoslavnaia-tserkov-litvy-khochet-rasshirit-granitsy-svoei-samostoiatel-nosti>

Since he outlined his vision of the causes of the war in Ukraine in March 2022, Kirill Gundyayev has not revised his position on the subject. According to him, the largest and bloodiest war in Europe since World War II is being fought over the right to hold gay parades in Donbas. However, the Patriarch of Moscow did react differently to the declaration of independence by the Church in Ukraine. After learning the Ukrainian Church council's decision, he declared that "spirits of malice" were damaging the church of Russia.¹⁷ Kirill Gundyayev did not identify the sources of these "spirits of malice." Still, he might have tackled the problem correctly if he was delivering that sermon in the spirit of confession or self-criticism.

Dn. Lasha Tchantouridze, PhD, is a member of the Holy Trinity Orthodox Church in Springfield, Vermont, U.S.A.

¹⁷ “Патриарх Кирилл исключил раздел православных «духами злобы поднебесной,» РБК, May 29 2022, <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/29/05/2022/629345c89a79474e6e8ccb1e>