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In Double Jeopardy: For Ukrainian Orthodox Church, A War on Two Fronts

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For centuries, Orthodox Christians beyond the borders of the present-day Russian Federation have maintained ties with the Patriarch of Moscow. Patriarch Kirill numbers up to 12,000 parishes in Ukraine as a third of his worldwide flock, a key component of his claim to lead the world's largest Orthodox Church.¹ President Putin has repeatedly referred to this spiritual bond when justifying military intervention in Ukraine. In the lead-up to his army's 24 February invasion, he characterized Russia and Ukraine as “essentially the same historical and spiritual space,” while lambasting the Kyivan regime for “reprisals against the Ukrainian Orthodox Church [UOC] of the Moscow Patriarchate.”² This was echoed by Patriarch Kirill on the day of the attack. Citing “the God-given commonality” between Russians and Ukrainians, he declined to condemn the invasion—termed “ongoing events”—and called for avoidance of only civilian casualties.³ His statement came in sharp contrast to that of Patriarch Aleksy II, his predecessor, on the day Russia invaded neighboring Georgia in 2008:

I call upon the warring parties to cease fire and return to the path of dialogue... I also make my ardent appeal to those who have gone blind with hatred: Stop! Do not let more blood be shed, do not let today's conflict be expanded many times over!⁴

Five hours ahead of Kirill's statement on 24 February—as Russian forces and many observers were anticipating the swift extermination of Ukraine's leadership and a Russian



Attack on St. George's Orthodox Church, Zavorychi, 7 March 2022
(Source: Ukrainian State Service for Ethnopolitics and Freedom of Conscience)

victory parade in Kyiv⁵—the head of the UOC publicly affirmed his commitment to Ukrainian sovereignty. “We turn to the President of Russia and ask that you stop this fratricidal war immediately,” Metropolitan Onufry declared. “Such a war has justification before neither God nor man.”⁶ Senior to Onufry, Patriarch Kirill bore ultimate pastoral responsibility for millions of UOC members, both civilian and military. On the fourth day of the war, the UOC's Synod therefore also asked Kirill to call upon Russia's political leadership to stop military action immediately.⁷

Patriarch Kirill's response, however, was to cement an exclusive alliance with the Kremlin and its invading forces. In mid-March, before the altar of

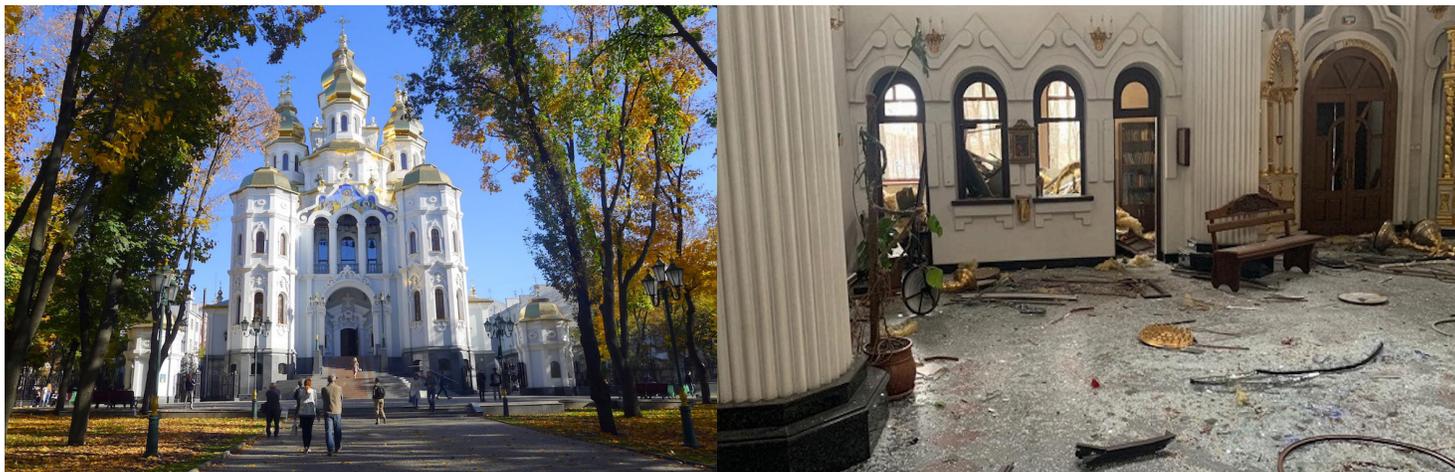
Moscow's Christ the Savior Cathedral, he presented an icon to the head of Russia's National Guard—which had just suffered heavy losses in Ukraine—in the hope that this would “inspire new recruits taking their oath.” National Guard head Viktor Zolotov apologized that completion of the Kremlin's “special military operation” in Ukraine was taking longer than anticipated, before adding that the icon would “protect the Russian military and hasten our victory.”⁸

Devastation

In Ukraine, meanwhile, scores of the Moscow Patriarchate's own churches were being damaged or destroyed in Russia's onslaught.⁹ These included the 19th-century Church of St. George in the village of Zavorychi, 25 miles northeast of Kyiv, reduced to charred embers after Russian forces fired at its dome. “That's the Russian World for you!” a neighbor quipped as he filmed the church in flames, making sarcastic use of the invaders' term for the exceptional civilization they claimed to be advancing.¹⁰

Buildings were not the only UOC casualties. During Russian shelling of the northeastern city of Kharkiv, a cleric, choir director, and relatives on their way home from Sunday worship were killed when a missile struck their car. During the northern assault of Chernihiv Region in March, the priest-monk in charge of Holy Trinity Church in the village of Grabovka died from shrapnel wounds. Closer to Kyiv, a parish priest was injured by a mine when attempting

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Downtown Kharkiv's Church of the Myrrh-Bearing Women in October 2018 (G. FAGAN) and interior after Russian shelling of the city in March 2022 (Source: UOC)

to evacuate Irpin in late March. He died five days later.¹¹ The UOC's website has documented these and similar casualties, including in the largely Russian-speaking southeastern region of Donbas.¹²

Silence

Yet the Moscow Patriarchate's main communication platforms—the websites of the Russian Orthodox Church and its Department for External Church Relations—have been all but silent about these incidents. They commiserated the deaths only of chaplains to the Russian armed forces, such as Protopriest Mikhail Vasilyev, whose funeral was led by Patriarch Kirill in Moscow's Cathedral of Christ the Savior on 9 November.¹³ This was while prominently reporting Patriarch Kirill's condolences concerning other violent loss of life during the same period, such as to President Xi of China following the crash of Flight 5735.¹⁴

To date, there has also been no specific word from the Moscow church leadership on the atrocities that came to light in Bucha, Irpin, and elsewhere following the withdrawal of Russian forces from northern Ukraine in late March. In Kyiv, Metropolitan Onufry expressed horror and sorrow at the violence as soon as the news from Bucha emerged. The day after Ukrainian forces liberated the town, Patriarch Kirill led a service at Moscow's Cathedral of the Russian Armed Forces and prayed "that the power of our armed forces might be multiplied."¹⁵

Kirill's post-invasion stance provoked a seismic reaction throughout

the UOC. It is typified by a mid-March video in which a representative of the largely Russian-speaking Odesa Diocese directs an emotional plea to his Patriarch:

Millions of people were looking to you; ears were straining to hear your words, something in our defense... . All our Orthodox Christians say one thing—that the Patriarch should have stood at the border, rent his vestments, fallen to his knees, and said, "Vladimir Vladimirovich [Putin], Volodymyr Oleksandrovyh [Zelensky], shoot me, do whatever you want to me... but I will not permit or bless you to kill my flock."

Instead, however, "they see only that your prayers and your blessing are directed somewhere completely different."¹⁶

This sense of spiritual dislocation intensified with another discovery among UOC faithful: that many brethren in Russia refused to believe accounts of their suffering. Cases included the priest of the Church of the Myrrh-Bearing Women in downtown Kharkiv—shattered by Russian shelling—and his own brother, also a priest, living in Russia.¹⁷ In early March the abbot of Kyiv's Trinity St. Jonah Monastery, Archbishop Iona (Cherepanov), implored his many social media friends and followers from Russia:

Yes, we are at war. Russia attacked Ukraine. Civilians are dying, children are being killed, our churches are burning. We were not waiting for any "liberators" and we did not request them. The people are

one and united against this terrible aggression. I don't know what else to say... that's the truth.¹⁸

By early May, more than a third of the UOC's 53 dioceses announced that they had stopped commemorating Patriarch Kirill during worship services, thus omitting a phrase honoring him as Church leader: "our great lord and father."¹⁹ Most of these dioceses lay in the particularly devout portion of Ukraine to the west of Kyiv. As Archbishop Iona later explained:

I often hear the phrase, "I don't want to pray for Patriarch Kirill." There is a significant difference between "to pray for" and "to commemorate." We are obliged to pray for him—especially those who have suffered from Russian aggression—in accordance with the Gospel command ("...pray for those who persecute you," Matt. 5:44). But to commemorate as "lord and father" during services is a different matter. No one can bring themselves to call someone "father" who has blessed the mass murder of his flock.²⁰

Waning respect

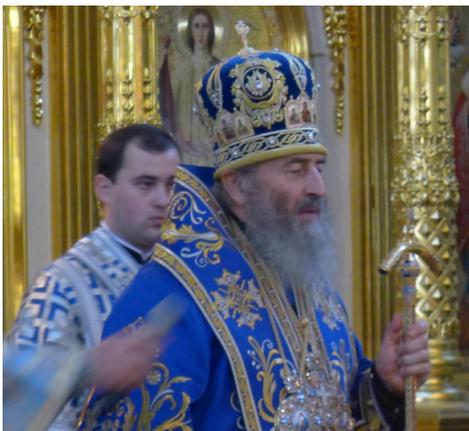
Respect for Patriarch Kirill within the UOC had been hemorrhaging even prior to the invasion.²¹ When a late 2021 national poll asked Orthodox declaring allegiance to the UOC whether they trusted various church leaders, an overwhelming 81 percent responded that they trusted Metropolitan Onufry, but only 55 percent vouched the same of Patriarch Kirill. (Even Metropolitan

Epifany—leader of the rival Orthodox Church of Ukraine [OCU]—scored 45 percent, while Pope Francis polled 48 percent).²²

With the invasion, support for Patriarch Kirill evaporated. On 27 May the UOC formally disavowed the Moscow Patriarchate. Despite the logistical challenges of wartime, a full Council of bishops, monastics, and laypeople representing all dioceses convened at St. Panteleimon’s Monastery near Kyiv—including representatives of 12 dioceses situated in parts of Ukraine not under Kyiv government control, who joined via online video link.²³ Led by Metropolitan Onufry, almost all delegates supported proposals to make the UOC fully independent of Moscow.²⁴

Before 27 May the UOC already enjoyed a high degree of administrative independence, having been awarded the right to self-governance by Patriarch Aleksy II in 1990.²⁵ While the term “autocephaly”—Orthodox ecclesial independence—was not used, this empowered the UOC to amend its own governing statutes. On 27 May the Council did so to remove all remaining subordinating ties to Moscow, key being:

- **commemoration during services of the Russian Patriarch as church leader by Metropolitan Onufry (this had not been compulsory for more junior clerics).**
- **participation in the Synod and Councils of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC).**
- **approval from Moscow for any future new leader elected by and for the UOC.**



Metropolitan Onufry (Berezovsky) of Kyiv and all Ukraine, October 2018
(G. FAGAN)

The changes were subsequently registered by the Ukrainian government.²⁶

The ROC’s Synod responded by insisting that its approval was required for such changes. However, it indirectly acknowledged the validity of the Council by accepting one decision that went in its favor: permission for UOC dioceses to act independently if they were unable to liaise satisfactorily with Kyiv due to military action. Several dioceses under Russian occupation consequently refused to abide by the decisions of 27 May. All dioceses in Crimea—along with Roven’ki Diocese in Ukraine’s southeastern Donbas region—were formally transferred from the UOC to the ROC.²⁷

Gray zone

Yet Moscow has not introduced any further sanction. Following the May Council the UOC thus finds itself in somewhat of a gray zone, operating as if autocephalous in all respects but without corresponding recognition from some 15 local Orthodox Churches. (The rival OCU has been recognized as autocephalous by only four of these since its formation in January 2019: Constantinople, Alexandria, Cyprus, and Greece.) This is while many Orthodox leaders have expressed support for Metropolitan Onufry and followed his rhetoric in condemning Russia’s invasion.²⁸ In Warsaw in late August, Polish Orthodox priest Fr. Doroteusz Sawicki explained to the *East-West Church Report* that “throughout history, autocephaly was never granted easily.” While the Polish Orthodox Church believes Ukraine has reached the stage where it should have an independent Church, he noted that “they first have to gather together by themselves—without allowing politics to interfere—and fully unite Orthodoxy in Ukraine... otherwise, there will again be disputes about who has autocephaly and who doesn’t.”²⁹

In practice, politics has played a crucial role in such recognition historically. For instance, the Georgian Orthodox Church’s own departure from the Moscow Patriarchate in 1917—along with a self-proclamation of autocephaly—was accepted by the Russian Orthodox Church only in 1943. This took place



Polish Orthodox Church aid delivered to St. George’s Orthodox Church, Zavorychi
(Source: D. SAWICKI)

under Soviet pressure, accompanied by an apology to Stalin from the then Patriarch of Moscow for the ROC’s “great power chauvinism” having hindered earlier recognition. Georgia’s Orthodox Church has been universally recognized as autocephalous since 1990.³⁰

Politics is also paramount in today’s Ukraine, as rejection of the 27 May Council’s decisions by diocesan administrations in Russian-occupied areas—as well as individual clerics outside them—is casting suspicion over the whole UOC. This is especially the case when such a stance coincides with overt support for the Russian state. Examples include the metropolitan of Luhansk Diocese and an abbot from Melitopol, Zaporizhzhia Region—areas both under Russian military occupation—who were among Orthodox clergy attending the Kremlin’s 30 September ceremony triumphantly marking Russian annexation of their regions along with those of Donetsk and Kherson.³¹ In the portion of Kharkiv Region under Russian occupation in July, the metropolitan of Izyum Diocese also endorsed the newly installed head of administration, before fleeing to Russia when Ukrainian forces recaptured the area.³² All of these clerics had previously rejected the decisions of the 27 May Council.³³

The UOC’s Synod dismissed the heads of Izyum Diocese as well as Romny Diocese in Sumy Region—who had also left for Russia—in late November.³⁴ Yet several senior clerics who have similarly argued to retain the UOC’s subordination to Moscow

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remain influential: Metropolitan Antony (Pakanich), UOC Chancellor and Synod member; Metropolitan Pavel (Lebed'), Synod member and abbot of the Kyiv Caves Monastery; Metropolitan Luka (Kovalenko) of Zaporizhzhia and Melitopol; and Vadym Novynsky, billionaire patron of and deacon in the UOC.³⁵

Zelensky's measures

Insisting that “we will never allow anyone to build an empire inside the Ukrainian soul,” President Zelensky announced a number of measures aimed at the UOC on 1 December:

- The introduction of legislation making it “impossible for religious organizations affiliated with centers of influence in the Russian Federation” to operate in Ukraine.
- The examination by Ukraine’s State Service for Ethnopolitics and Freedom of Conscience of the UOC’s legal statutes “for the presence of a church-canonical connection with the Moscow Patriarchate,” with corresponding legal measures if required.
- The verification of legal compliance by religious organizations located in the complex of the Kyiv Caves Monastery, a government-administered cultural heritage site.
- The intensification of counter measures against subversive activities by Russian special services in Ukraine’s religious sphere.³⁶

The UOC’s severance of organizational links with the Moscow Patriarchate on 27 May should put it in a strong legal position to refute any claims of affiliation with “centers of influence” in Russia. Yet media mischaracterization of the 27 May development means that Zelensky’s announcement has been widely assumed to mean an outright ban on the UOC: in some coverage, the UOC is erroneously identified as the “UOC MP” and “still answering to” or “tied to” Moscow.³⁷ As it serves both their interests, this argument is encouraged by both the ROC and the OCU.

Within days of Zelensky’s announcement, Ukraine’s SBU state security service announced financial sanctions against ten significant UOC clerics: Abbot Pavel of the Kyiv Caves Monastery, Deacon Novynsky, and bishops who had switched allegiance to the Russian Orthodox Church and/or fled to Russia.³⁸ (Notably, these include Metropolitan Platon of Feodosia in Crimea, identified by dissident KGB archivist Vasili Mitrokhin as agent *Karpov*, who followed KGB directions to replace “politically immature” priests in Yekaterinburg [then Sverdlovsk] Diocese in 1982.)³⁹



Kyiv Caves Monastery, October 2018
(G. FAGAN)

Several dozen UOC clerics have been subject to criminal proceedings for supporting Russia’s invasion, including a priest in Severodonetsk (Donetsk Region) sentenced to 12 years in prison for providing the Russian army with coordinates of Ukrainian military positions.⁴⁰ As scholar of the UOC Nikolai Mitrokhin points out, however, their number is a miniscule percentage of the UOC’s thousands of clerics, while other walks of Ukrainian institutional life—including regional government, the military, and the security services themselves—display

a proportionally greater number of collaborators. The UOC is also not the only religious organization to have fallen under suspicion: In December the SBU announced charges against a priest of the Roman Catholic Church’s Kyiv-Zhytomyr Diocese for publicly justifying Russian aggression.⁴¹

Police raids

Since late November the SBU has conducted raids on an array of monasteries and other UOC sites across Ukraine, including the landmark Kyiv Caves Monastery and Kharkiv’s Intercession Monastery.⁴² Parallel UOC fears that the Kyiv Caves Monastery might be seized and transferred to the OCU intensified with the announcement that the OCU had registered a monastic community with the same name. In December Viktor Yelensky—a former parliamentarian who lobbied for the creation of the OCU—was appointed new director of the State Service for Ethnopolitics and Freedom of Conscience.⁴³ Interviewed in Kyiv in late 2018, Yelensky told the *East-West Church Report* that transferral to the OCU of the lower portion of the Kyiv Caves complex occupied by the UOC’s monastic community was not an issue, but that he anticipated “pressure from society” for it to take place. (The UOC’s access to two churches in the upper portion of the complex—largely a museum—is more tenuous.) Yelensky also stressed that only individual religious congregations—not whole Churches—hold legal personality status according to Ukrainian law, so that an outright ban on the UOC would prove impossible.⁴⁴

So far, the Ukrainian government’s measures against the UOC thus appear to be aimed at specific elements sympathizing with the Russian regime. A non-surgical approach risks alienating UOC faithful, and so stoking conflict within Ukrainian society. Many UOC members in independent Ukraine are involved in humanitarian initiatives to support both Ukrainian civilians and the armed forces, such as Dnipro parish priest Fr. Andriy Pinchuk’s charitable foundation *Pomagaem* [Ukrainian: “We help”] and campaigns by Kyiv’s Trinity

St. Jonah Monastery to donate blood as well as generators and similar equipment to Ukrainian frontline troops.⁴⁵

Reflecting in late December on the UOC priest recently jailed for 12 years for assisting the Russian military, Abbot Iona of the monastery lamented:

Lord, have mercy on us and

forgive us! Our church, in which this person and others like him served, exchanging the service of Christ for the service of Herod. That includes those who recently voted for the theft of Ukrainian territories—a violation of the commandment “You shall not covet your neighbor’s house.” While

there are only a few of them, all UOC faithful in all regions suffer because of them.⁴⁶

Among those commiserating Abbot Iona was a fellow Orthodox Christian in Russia. “Even among the 12 apostles,” he commented, “there was one Judas Iscariot.” ♦



Examples of UOC humanitarian aid and support for the war effort: (l-r) Fr. Andriy Pinchuk and team assist civilians in a newly liberated part of Kharkiv Region, October 2022 (Source: POMAGAEM); generator supplied to Ukrainian army, Bakhmut, November 2022 (Source: I. CHEREPANOV); ambulance purchased by Kyiv and Volyn Dioceses for hospital in Izyum, December 2022 (Source: UOC).

Notes:

¹ “Patriarkh Kirill: prikhozhanami RPTs iavliaiutsia okolo 180 mln chelovek,” TASS, 28 October 2017, <https://tass.ru/obschestvo/4684885>; Ukrainian Justice Ministry statistics, 1 January 2017. At least 500 parishes have transferred from the UOC to the OCU since its formation in 2019: <https://harvard-cga.maps.arcgis.com/apps/TimeAware/index.html?appid=95a539b01f40431db45dd41c9b460362>.

² “Article by Vladimir Putin ‘On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians,’” 12 July 2021, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181>; “Obrashchenie Prezidenta Rossiiskoi Federatsii,” President of Russia, 21 February 2022, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67828>.

³ “Sviateishii Patriarkh Kirill vystupil s obrashcheniem k arhipastyriam, pastyriam, monashestvuiushchim i vsem vernym chadam Russkoi Pravoslavnoi Tserkvi,” Moscow Patriarchate, 24 February 2022, www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5903813.html.

⁴ “Appeal by His Holiness Patriarch Alexy II of Moscow and All Russia,” 8 August 2008, https://jordanville.org/news_080816_1.

⁵ Michael Schwirtz et al, “Putin’s War,” *New York Times*, 16 December 2022, www.nytimes.com/interactive/2022/12/16/world/europe/russia-putin-war-failures-ukraine.html.

⁶ “Obrashchenie Blazhenneishego Mitropolita Kievskogo i vseia Ukrainy Onufriia k vernym i grazhdanam Ukrainy,” UOC, 24 February 2022, <https://news.church.ua/2022/02/24/obrashchenie-blazhennejshego-mitropolitakievskogo-vseia-ukrainy-onufriya-k-vernym-grazhdanam-ukrainy/?lang=ru>.

⁷ “Obrashchenie Sviashchennogo Sinoda Ukrainskoi Pravoslavnoi Tserkvi ot 28 fevralia 2022 goda,” UOC, 28 February 2022, <https://news.church.ua/2022/02/28/obrashchenie-svyashchennogo-sinoda-ukrainskoj-pravoslavnoj-cerkvi-ot-28-fevralia-2022-goda/?lang=ru>.

⁸ “Bozhestvennaia liturgiia v Nedeliiu Torzhestva Pravoslaviia,” *YouTube*, 14 March 2022, www.youtube.com/watch?v=mceN4xNSoKE.

⁹ “5 months of Russia’s full-scale attack: 183 religious sites ruined in Ukraine,” Ukrainian State Service for Ethnopolitics and Freedom of Conscience, 24 July 2022, <https://dess.gov.ua/russia-ruined-at-least-183-religious-sites-en/>.

¹⁰ “Ot obstrelov prodolzhaui stradat’ khramy,” UOC, 7 March 2022, <https://news.church.ua/2022/03/07/ot-obstrelov-prodolzhayut-stradat-xramy-razrusheny-drevnie-cerkvi-v-selax-vyazovka-zavorochi/?lang=ru;www.facebook.com/val.shi.yan/videos/361584185974401>.

¹¹ www.ozerjanskij.kharkov.ua/27-02-2022/; “V rezul’tate obstrelov pogib klikir

Chernigovskoi eparkhii,” UOC, 2 March 2022, <https://news.church.ua/2022/03/02/v-rezultate-obstrelov-pogib-klikir-chernigovskoj-eparxii/?lang=ru>; “Umer ranenyi vo vremia evakuatsii iz Irpenia protoierei Vladimir Bormashev,” UOC, 29 March 2022, <https://news.church.ua/2022/03/29/umer-ranenyj-vo-vremya-evakuacii-iz-irpenya-protiierijvladimir-bormashev/?lang=ru>.

¹² “Vid obstriliv postrazhdav monastyr na Donechchini, poraneno iepyskopa Volnovas’koho Amvrosiia,” UOC, 28 March 2022, <https://news.church.ua/2022/03/28/vid-obstriliv-postrazhdav-monastir-na-donechchini-poraneno-jepiskopa-volnovaskogo-amvrosiya/>.

¹³ “Otpovanie i pogrebenie protoiereia Mikhaila Vasil’eva,” Moscow Patriarchate, 9 November 2022, <https://foto.patriarchia.ru/news/otpevanie-protiiereya-mikhaila-vasileva-v-khrame-khrista-spasitelya-v-moskve-2022-11-09/>.

¹⁴ “Soboleznovanie Sviateishego Patriarkha Kirilla v sviazi s gibel’iu liudei v rezul’tate krusheniia samoleta na iuge Kitaia,” Moscow Patriarchate, 21 March 2022, www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5910298.html.

¹⁵ “Sluchivsheesia v Buche – uzhasno,” UOC, 4 April 2022, <https://news.church.ua/2022/04/04/sluchivsheesia-v-buche-uzhasno-molyus-ob-umershix-ot-nasiliya->

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¹⁶ “Zachem szhigat’ Ukrainskuiu Zemliu?” *YouTube*, 13 March 2022, www.youtube.com/watch?v=LpkYjjsTxcI.

¹⁷ Matthew Luxmoore, “War Drives a Rift Between Two Ukrainian Brothers,” *Wall Street Journal*, 18 October 2022, www.wsj.com/articles/war-drives-a-rift-between-two-ukrainian-brothers-11666087695.

¹⁸ Archbishop Iona (Cherepanov), public social media post, 1 March 2022.

¹⁹ Andrei Arsen’ev, “Perekhod na antikirillitsu,” *Grani.ru*, 12 May 2022, <https://grani.ru/Society/Religion/m.285145.html>.

²⁰ Archbishop Iona (Cherepanov), public social media post, 29 June 2022.

²¹ See coverage in the *East-West Church Report*, vol. 27 (2019), no. 1, 4-9.

²² *Osoblyvosti Relihiinoho i Tserkovno-Relihiinoho Samovyznachennia Hromadian Ukrainy: Tendentsii 2000-2021rr.*, Razumkov Center, Kyiv, 2021, 65.

²³ “Slovo Predstoiatelia pered pochatkom zibrannia iepyskopiv, sviashchennykiv, monakhiv ta mirian UPTs,” *YouTube*, 27 May 2022, www.youtube.com/watch?v=rwROQHrXA3g&t=573s.

²⁴ “Kak prokhodil Sobor UPTs i kakie priniaty resheniia,” *Otrok*, 27 May 2022, www.otrok.org/kak-prohodil-sobor-upc.

²⁵ <https://dessa.gov.ua/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/2-Hramota-Oleksii-II.pdf>.

²⁶ <https://dessa.gov.ua/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/1.2-Statut-UPTS.pdf>.

²⁷ “ZHURNALY Sviashchennogo Sinoda ot 7 iunია 2022 goda,” Moscow Patriarchate, 7 June 2022, www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5934527.html; “Roven’kovskaia eparkhiia,” Moscow Patriarchate, www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/2698324.html.

²⁸ “Predstoiateli Pomisnykh Pravoslavnykh Tserkov vitaiut’ Blazhennishoho Mitropolita Onufriia z Dnem Anhela,” UOC, 25 June 2022, <https://news.church.ua/2022/06/25/predstoyateli-pomisnix-pravoslavnix-cerkov-vitayut-blazhennishogo-mitropolita-onufriya-z-dnem-angela>; “Uchwala Soboru Biskupow ws. wojny w Ukrainie,” Polish Orthodox Church, 22 March 2022, www.orthodox.pl/uchwala-soboru-biskupow-ws-wojny-w-ukrainie/.

²⁹ Author’s interview with Fr. Doroteusz Sawicki, auxiliary priest at the Metropolitan Cathedral of St. Mary Magdalene, Warsaw, 26 August 2022.

³⁰ Matthew Namee, “When Did Today’s Autocephalous Churches Come into Being?,” *Orthodox History*, 24 May 2022, [did-todays-autocephalous-churches-come-into-being; “Gruziia otkazalas’ot avtokefalii, predostavlennoi ei RPTs v 1943 godu,” Deacon Andrei Kuraev, 8 March 2020, <https://diakuraev.livejournal.com/2774005.html>.](https://orthodoxhistory.org/2022/05/24/when-</p></div><div data-bbox=)

³¹ “Vladimir Putin hosts a signing ceremony for the annexation of four areas of Ukraine,” *Sky News*, 30 September 2022, www.youtube.com/watch?v=yIuN6v_cmNM; Xenia Loutchenko, “Church Mobilized,” *The Wheel*, 15 October 2022, www.wheeljournal.com/blog/2022/10/15/xenia-loutchenko-church-mobilized.

³² Vladyslav Holovin, “Vidluchyls’ vid real’nosti,” *Forbes UA*, 3 December 2022, <https://forbes.ua/money/derzhava-planue-zaboroniti-upts-mp-chomu-lishe-teper-03122022-10233>.



Intercession Monastery, Kharkiv, October 2018—raided by police in December 2022 (G. FAGAN)

³³ “Mitropolit Iziumskii i Kupianskii Elisei (Ivanov) ne podderzhal reshenie UPTs,” *YouTube*, 12 June 2022, www.youtube.com/watch?v=3B71g-qHMx4.

³⁴ “Sinod prinial riad kadrovnykh reshenii, kasaiushchikhsia eparkhial’nogo upravleniia,” UOC, 23 November 2022, <https://news.church.ua/2022/11/23/sinod-prinial-ryad-kadrovnykh-reshenij-kasayushchixsya-eparxialnogo-upravleniia-23-11-22/?lang=ru>.

³⁵ Sergei Chapnin, “Pravoslavie v Ukraine: voina i eshche odna avtokefaliia,” *Public Orthodoxy*, 31 May 2022, <https://publicorthodoxy.org/ru/2022/05/31/православие-в-украине-война-и-еще-одна/>.

³⁶ “We will guarantee spiritual independence to Ukraine - address by President Volodymyr Zelensky,” Ukrainian Defense Ministry, 1 December 2022, www.mil.gov.ua/en/

news/2022/12/01/we-will-guarantee-spiritual-independence-to-ukraine-address-by-president-volodymyr-zelensky/.

³⁷ Marc Santora, “Zelensky Proposes Barring Orthodox Church That Answers to Moscow,” *New York Times*, 2 December 2022, www.nytimes.com/2022/12/02/world/europe/zelensky-ukraine-orthodox-church.html.

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⁴⁴ Author’s interview with Viktor Yelensky, Kyiv, 8 October 2018.

⁴⁵ “ITOGI Sviashchennogo Sinoda Ukrainskoi Pravoslavnoi Tserkvi ot 20 dekabria 2022 goda,” UOC, 20 December 2022, <https://news.church.ua/2022/12/20/itogi-svyashchennogo-sinoda-ukrainskoj-pravoslavnoj-cerkvi-ot-20-dekabrya-2022-goda/?lang=ru>.

⁴⁶ Archbishop Iona (Cherepanov), public social media post, 21 December 2022.

Geraldine Fagan is editor of the East-West Church Report.

Editor's note: The Moscow Patriarchate's siding with the Kremlin over the war in Ukraine has cast a shadow over its ecclesial structures in other former Soviet republics. Their role is highly sensitive in the three Baltic States, especially given Putin's recent comparison of his military campaign to the Great Northern War of the early 1700s, in which Peter the Great "returned and strengthened" territory which today belongs to independent Estonia and Latvia.¹ Where would the loyalties of local Moscow Patriarchate Orthodox lie should Putin turn his artillery towards the Baltics following a victory in Ukraine?



Dormition of the Mother of God Orthodox Cathedral, Vilnius, Lithuania (G. FAGAN)

In Lithuania, the Moscow Patriarchate has a single diocese with approximately 50 parishes. In March its leader Metropolitan Innokenty (Vasil'yev) publicly condemned the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Patriarch Kirill's "political statements about the war in Ukraine are his personal opinion," he maintained. "We in Lithuania are not in agreement."²

On 27 May the Russian Orthodox Church established a commission—headed by Patriarch Kirill—to consider a "change of status" for its Lithuanian diocese.³ The Lithuanian foreign minister, meanwhile, maintained that his government would welcome any transfer by local Orthodox to the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople, while stressing that this was a matter "for the communities themselves to decide in the first instance." His deputy visited the Ecumenical Patriarch in September.⁴

Orthodox Church addressed Patriarch Kirill with an almost unanimous request for autocephaly, following a similar appeal by the Latvian Justice Ministry.⁸

Estonia's autonomous Orthodox Church under the Moscow Patriarchate—a second Orthodox church in Estonia being linked to Constantinople—has approximately 40 parishes. Its leader Metropolitan Yevgeny (Reshetnikov) joined other Christian leaders in Estonia in signing a 17 March public statement condemning Russia's military action in Ukraine.⁹ Subsequently, however, he gave two interviews on Estonian television in which he noted that his church had succeeded in removing specific criticism of President Putin from the statement. He also stressed that he was unable to distinguish attacker from defender in the war.¹⁰

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“If we refuse to see the situation for what it is—to say black is black and white is white—then we are also failing to do our Christian duty”:

An Interview with Marrit Andrejeva and Irina Paert

In early September the editor of the East-West Church Report spoke about the impact of the war in Ukraine upon church life with several parishioners of St. John the Baptist Orthodox Church in Nõmme, a leafy suburb of the Estonian capital, Tallinn. The parish is under the Estonian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate.

Briefly, she spoke with Galina, a parishioner who hails from western Ukraine but who has lived in Estonia for many years. A Russian speaker, Galina related the shock and stress of having two brothers fighting in the Ukrainian armed forces while her Russian-speaking colleagues in Tallinn have proved divided in their response to the war.

The editor then spoke at length with Marrit Andrejeva, an Estonian interpreter and translator of English, Russian, French, and German. Irina Paert, a fellow parishioner, joined partway through the conversation. Originally from Russia, Irina is an associate professor at Estonia's University of Tartu, where she now focuses on the history of Orthodoxy in the Baltic region. Both are active in St. John the Evangelist School, an Orthodox high school founded by the parish. The interview took place in English.

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Marrit Andrejeva (Source: M. ANDREJEVA)

Andrejeva and Paert Interview *(continued from page 7)*

How did the invasion of Ukraine impact you and your fellow Orthodox in Estonia under the Moscow Patriarchate?

Marrit: It certainly threw us into a very deep crisis. Especially Estonians—the war broke out on 24th February, our independence day and a national holiday. Early in the morning many people go up to the Tall Herman Tower [a medieval tower in Tallinn’s Old Town]. It is usually very cold. As the sun rises, our national flag is raised and the national anthem sung. This year that day started on a very different note—it actually acquired the meaning it had initially. It resurrected some painful memories, for every [Estonian] family experienced deportation during the Soviet era, and now something similar was happening on that day in our own age.

After that we were all in shock for a while, just like everyone else in the world, but a little more so here because we are near to Russia and we could perceive ourselves in a similar situation to Ukraine. We were also holding our breath to see how our church would react. You expect the church to reflect the confusion and pain that is in your soul somehow, to bring some clarity to the situation, and to offer comfort. But the initial statement made by the Patriarch [Kirill] came like a second shock wave. Our Estonian parishioners have had a very hard time figuring out how to position themselves. None of us have come [to the Moscow Patriarchate] for political reasons, we just followed our priest and found something really deep there. For me personally, it was really the deepest crisis in my spiritual life, because I had always been able to

rely upon the church to offer me stability, a safe haven. Even if it had been an attack against us—from Russia or some other country—it would not have been as hard as seeing the church hierarchy backing the killing of people in another country.

What also characterizes this period for me: I don’t know what other Orthodox parishes think or what their priests think. On the one hand, you are kind of afraid to touch these issues, thinking it might come out that they have a completely different position, one I’d consider un-Christian. But you also don’t want to cut anyone off completely either. We should try to preserve our inner peace as the most important goal, to work with our own souls no matter what is happening, because if we all just become filled with anger and opinions and arguments, this isn’t Christian either. It neither helps the Ukrainians nor brings us closer to God.

My initial reaction, actually, was to be worried for dissenting Russians. For me it is clear that the Ukrainians are

victims, but Russians who do not agree with this war are made participants. I started to follow some who have been visiting us here: [Christian poet] Olga Sedakova, [Moscow priest] Fr. Aleksy Uminsky. What were they saying? Then I found [Moscow priest] Fr. Ioann Guaita—the first voice to come out of our whole church was that of an Italian priest! He gave a very short sermon on the war saying that St. John the Baptist was beheaded because he told the truth, whereas none of us is facing such a punishment. That was the whole sermon! [Editor’s note: Less than a minute, the 12 March sermon may be found at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=im4asuvx_RQ]

I felt I was living some sort of schizophrenia—I was just lost. If someone from the church hierarchy had said even two words, human words! Before performing the song “*Gorod Zolotoi*” [Russian: “Golden Town”] in concert [on 2 June], [Russian rock musician Boris] Grebenshchikov said: “I pray

that during this song at least one bullet would miss the target, and that no house would be destroyed.” It is so simple! When your soul is aching this much you need something to address it. You cannot just stick to the formulas and say, “We have always had wars...”. So it has been a major crisis—and it is still ongoing.

Are you aware of any parishioners who are very supportive of the war?

Marrit: A kind of awkward situation exists where you would not really discuss it. I do not think there are any really active supporters of the war, but I know there are some parishioners who have come from eastern Ukraine and brought out their family by now, and who say, “The Ukrainians went too far,” or “It was justified to an extent,” because they have seen suffering there. Once we are talking about war, I am

sure there are casualties and ugliness on both sides. Sometimes I ask local Russians such as taxi drivers, and there is a lot of the narrative that [Ukrainian] refugees are receiving privileges, taking away our jobs, and so on. Estonians, on the other hand, are very idealistic—we feel we have to help the Ukrainians, and we associate them with the Estonian refugees who had to flee [the Soviets] during and after the Second World War. We see the same situation repeating itself, whereas for the Russians there are many more shades of gray.

There are all kinds of people [among refugees], I am sure, but when you look at the bigger picture, there is nothing to justify what has happened. If we refuse to see the situation for what it is—to say black is black and white is white—then we are also failing to do our Christian duty, to follow the call of Christ. That is the main task in our Christian life, and here is a very critical situation where it is actually manifested. It is a situation that brings out the true maturity of our faith.



St. John the Baptist Orthodox Church in Nõmme, Tallinn, Estonia (G. FAGAN)

In our parish, the Estonian viewpoint is particularly strong. Estonians are a minority, but quite an active and committed minority. They are also pretty well known in Estonian society—we have actors, a film director, TV journalists, and Arvo Pärt [the internationally renowned Estonian composer] is also a member of our parish. Many of us actually found our way here via the Orthodox Monastery of St. John the Baptist in Essex, England—that is also how I found the Orthodox Church. We were all impressed at how this monastery has made it possible for different nationalities to come together in a universal Orthodoxy.

Have any Moscow Patriarchate clergy in Estonia voiced concern about the support of their leadership for Russia’s military campaign in Ukraine?

Marrit: Our [Estonian] priest, Fr. Toomas Hirvoja, has certainly mentioned it. He is a man of deep prayer. While he is not a politically minded person, he has always followed the news, and he has mentioned current events in his sermons since the war started. For instance, I remember him making a link to justification of this war when the Gospel reading was the passage saying that a time would come when people would think that by killing, they would be doing a good thing in God’s eyes [John 16:2, “They will put you out of the synagogues; indeed, the hour is coming when whoever kills you will think he is offering service to God.”] When Fr. Toomas recently consecrated crosses for our new school building, he also said that the message of the cross could not be spread with tanks and weapons.

Metropolitan Yevgeny (Reshetnikov), the head of the Estonian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate), added his signature to a 17 March joint statement by Estonian church leaders condemning Russia’s military activities in Ukraine.

Marrit: Yes. We were all immensely relieved—not only our parish, but also our school.

Irina: But he [Metropolitan Yevgeny] also gave some very unfortunate interviews.

Marrit: First he signed the declaration from all Estonian Christian churches. Then, a couple of weeks later, he sort of backtracked. He tried to say, “Well, we actually wanted to introduce this and that [wording], but they didn’t want to take it.”

Irina: And, “We can’t know the whole truth.” Then, due to media criticism, all parishes were supposed to read a prayer against those attacking the Orthodox Church!



Irina Paert (G. FAGAN)

Marrit: It is true that there is occasionally biased coverage in the mainstream Estonian media, when they ask for comment from people who are not familiar with the situation at all. They would just say, “Yes, I know that they pray for Putin’s victory in the Moscow Patriarchate churches.” So an unsubstantiated claim like that goes into the article, then it gets picked up by the editorial, with no proof whatsoever...

At the beginning of March you both signed an open letter with 120 Orthodox laity, asking Patriarch Kirill to appeal to President Putin for an immediate withdrawal of Russian troops from Ukraine and to “publicly condemn the deeds of those who support bloodshed.” Orthodox Lent had begun, and it questioned how aggressor and victim could celebrate Easter together or pray for peace without repentance, as proclaimed in Matthew 5:23-24: “If you are offering your gift at the altar... first go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift.”

Marrit: It was really just a call, before Easter, to remind everyone that Easter is a time when we embrace each other, but that we must first do *metanoia* [repentance]. Also, we have always tried to explain ourselves to the outside world, and there was a crisis in the sense of how our school would be perceived. We could sense that families were really worried once they heard the statements from the Patriarch, knowing that our parish is part of the Moscow Patriarchate, even though the school operates independently. First we thought, “It is obvious that we have never done anything like propaganda and they know us, so what is the point explaining that you are not a Russian agent? It would be ridiculous!” But more and more people were turning to us with questions about our position, so in the end we felt that we had to publish a statement saying that we do not agree with the Patriarch’s words. When we did, we could tell that this was a huge relief to very many people.

Irina: It was a call to stop the war, basically. It also brought a little bit of moral pressure to bear because Arvo Pärt signed it, which made it appear quite high profile.

Did you receive a reply?

Irina: An official response came after a few weeks, worded very typically as a polite but quite firm account of

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Ukrainian and Estonian national flags on Freedom Square, Tallinn, September 2022 (G. FAGAN)

Andrejeva and Paert Interview

(continued from page 9)

events of eight years ago. [Editor's note: In 2014, once protests on Kyiv's Maidan Square led to the ousting of the then pro-Moscow regime, Russian-backed separatists seized territory in the largely Russian-speaking Donbas region of southeastern Ukraine. As the Ukrainian military sought to restore control, they were widely blamed by Russian state media for civilian casualties. Referring to this context, a common refrain among supporters of Putin's 2022 military action asks: "Where have you been for the past eight years?"]

Some Orthodox I know commented similarly on my social media posts, saying, "Well, what about [NATO's 1999 bombing of] Serbia?" and "What about the children of the Donbas?" Well, if we are going to bomb the children of Mariupol, will it help the children of the Donbas? I think this is exactly what we should be thinking about when we go to church: What makes me Christian? What do I pray for? How do I formulate my prayer so that I am talking, not about this kind of retaliatory justice, but about truth?

Marrit: In hindsight, the open letter was mostly just therapy for ourselves—we were able to put into words what we were feeling. My husband sometimes says I am just getting dragged into political matters. But I feel that the church hierarchy has dragged me, because my church is doing politics, and so I have to react. I want to stick to my faith as I imagined it to be or longed for it to be. It is not as if I want all priests to go out and demonstrate or be activists.

Irina: This is also a time when people are really starting to adjust their identity. Those who identify themselves as Orthodox before everything else now have to think about



Icon in the assembly hall of St. John the Evangelist School, Tallinn, Estonia. It depicts St. Silouan the Athonite and St. Sofrony (Sakharov), founder of St. John the Baptist Orthodox Monastery in Essex, England. (G. FAGAN)

what their priority is. Do they identify themselves as Christians and only then as Orthodox? Christians as citizens, and only Russian or Estonian after that—I think that is very important. Then you can really think about the Gospel: about what Christ said and whether your church really thinks that way, about what your conscience tells you. Conscience is something people find very easy to put aside. They might say, "Well, this is what the television tells me, what my Patriarch tells me."

This is a real problem—in Russia there is so much emphasis upon the authorities, including spiritual authority; what this or that *starets* [Russian: spiritual elder] said. Somehow you do not see that the *starets* may be saying something very general, meaning that you should actually listen to your conscience first. There is a real problem

of faith and ethics here. There are many pious people—and they are absolutely pious—who simply have no ability to make ethical judgments, because their ethics are totally swallowed up by rituals and piety. How is it that people have not even managed to experience this kind of schizophrenia, as Marrit describes it? For them the picture of the world is totally in unison with what Patriarch Kirill says.

The pedagogy of our school aims at teaching children to get in contact with reality. In lessons they might be shown seeds that you put into the soil. They see how they grow—"Here are the seeds of the grape, and this is a grape." Then they read the Gospel. So they start with real things, and only then do they move onto the level of metaphor—not the other way around. You don't start with myth and then put reality into this myth. Maybe that is exactly the problem with this kind of bad Orthodoxy—this mythological understanding of ritual. It replaces the reality of Christ. ♦

Notes: (continued from page 7)

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⁸ "Latviiskaia pravoslavnaia tserkov' poprosila patriarkha Kirilla ob avtokefalii," *Meduza*,

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“We couldn’t report what was going on truthfully—with facts—without risking arrest”:

An Interview with Michele Berdy

British trade across the Baltic Sea led to the construction of an Anglican church in Riga—now capital of independent Latvia—in the mid-19th century. St. Savior’s is located on Anglikāņu iela [Latvian: Anglican Street] in Riga’s Old Town, next to an embankment of the sweeping Daugava River. During late Soviet rule the church building became a student’s club used for concerts and dances, before an English-speaking congregation was re-established once Latvia regained its independence in 1991. The two most recent chaplains have been women—currently Elīza Žikmane, a Latvian whose background is Lutheran.

Visiting Riga in August 2022, the editor of the East-West Church Report met a new member of the chaplaincy’s Council, Michele Berdy. Before leaving Russia in the wake of the 24 February invasion of Ukraine, Michele was an active member of the Anglican parish in Moscow. However, she is best known for her regular column in The Moscow Times, an independent English-language newspaper founded primarily for expatriates in 1992. In thesaurus fashion, installments of The Word’s Worth explore nuances in Russian-language expression of particular concepts. A recent example considered vocabulary concerning anger: www.themoscowtimes.com/2022/12/02/angry-welcome-to-the-zoo-a79566.

Michele Berdy in Riga (G. FAGAN)



You have extensive knowledge of the Russian language—is your background Russian?

I’m second-generation American. My mother’s family came from the Russian Empire—her mother from what was then Vilna [now Vilnius, Lithuania], her father from Ukraine. My father’s parents were Lemkos, the tiny ethnic group [now numbering some 75,000 in the border region of Poland, Slovakia, and Ukraine.] They immigrated to the United States. We don’t know much about my father’s father, but his mother and aunt took a boat in 1909. For reasons lost in family lore, my mother’s parents spoke Russian at home, and she spoke Russian. My father spoke Lemko with his mother. He was born on East 74th Street in New York, where many Lemkos lived. The Czechs lived on 75th Street, the Hungarians on another street, and so on. Everyone was part of that world. So they did a lot of “code-switching”: When they went to the Ukrainian neighbors they would all switch to probably not-very-good Ukrainian. Then they would switch to Polish, to Russian, to Czech, and sometimes to Hungarian.

Did that mean you grew up speaking Russian?

No, I had to learn it. I started a little bit in high school. I studied it in college—I really wanted to become a translator. In 1978 I went to study in Moscow for a semester and then found a job there. At that time there were three publishing houses that hired foreigners as English-language or foreign-language editors. My job was with one of them, *Agentstvo Pechati “Novosti”* [Novosti Press Agency], or APN. I stayed in Moscow from 1978 to 1982. After spending a couple of years in New York, I then started going back and forth as an

interpreter once things started opening up due to *glasnost*. For a while I had apartments in both New York and Moscow; I spent half the year in one place and half in the other. Then, in 1992, I packed up everything in New York, put it in a friend’s basement, and moved to Moscow. All told, I was there for 44 years, apart from some periods mostly in the States—so my entire adult life!

Did you have a Christian upbringing?

My brother and I were baptized in the Orthodox Church. We always had two Easters—American Easter and Russian Easter. But like many in that generation, my parents wanted to be “real Americans.” My father got a job with G.E. [the General Electric company] in Schenectady [New York State]. A couple of years after they moved there they joined a Presbyterian church. I remember once asking my mother why. She had grown up next to an Orthodox church in Stamford, Connecticut, where I think there were a lot of old-school priests. She said, “We always felt like we were sinners—but we didn’t feel as sinful as we were made to feel.”

So essentially my parents went from all the mystery of Orthodoxy to the most austere form of Protestantism! (Laughs.) My mother used to arrange the church flowers, and later on I realized, “Of course!” She was making icons out of flowers—she would make crosses out of lilies. Later on my parents also became interested in spiritualism—clearly, they did not quite get enough of the mystery part of faith in their Presbyterianism. Yet we remained a very Slavic household in a lot of ways. As I was growing up, we would go to Russian Orthodox churches. My parents also supported St. Vladimir’s

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Berdy Interview *(continued from page 11)*

Orthodox Seminary [Yonkers, New York State], and we would sometimes go there during the summertime. But my confirmation was in the Presbyterian Church.

For most of my adult life I wasn't really much of a churchgoer. But I read a lot—it was a very private kind of faith. Then a couple of years ago I thought, “Hm, this private sort of faith is lacking.” I started going to the Anglican Church, which seemed to me like the perfect place for somebody who has both an Orthodox and Presbyterian background! I felt very much at home. What I also really liked about it—St. Andrew's Anglican Church in Moscow is a very international church. There are a lot of diplomats, and it is one of the only places in Moscow where you see Asian people, Black people—there are a great many Anglicans in African countries. It is a very friendly and inviting place.

St. Andrew's has that typically Victorian church building not far from the Kremlin. *Melodiya*—the state recording company—used it as a studio during the late Soviet period, before Anglican worship resumed in 1991.

Even after that change had taken place, *Melodiya* didn't leave. They loved the acoustics. There was a huge ritual where they would move all their equipment to one side, services would take place, and then all the equipment would be moved back again. That went on for years, until they finally moved out. Interestingly, [prominent Russian rock musician] Stas Namin, who used to record his group's works there, became a real proponent of the church. His theater put on *Jesus Christ Superstar*, and they did benefit performances of it in the church, including for the restoration of the roof. That was just before the pandemic hit, when I had begun to get involved. Then Bible classes and so forth all moved to Zoom.

When I arrived here in Riga I thought that Malcolm [Rev. Canon Malcolm Rogers, St. Andrew's' current chaplain] must have called ahead of time. I was invited to the Anglican church here the very next Sunday. When I stood up to speak, I just blubbered! (Laughs.) I just could not speak at all.

You had left Moscow hastily following Russia's invasion of Ukraine on 24 February?

I left after 4 March, when they passed the “law on fakes.” You were not allowed to say the word “war.” You were

not allowed to say “invasion.” At first we [at *The Moscow Times*] didn't think it had to do with us [as foreign media]. Putin signed the law late in the evening, and for some reason I woke up at three o'clock the next morning. I went into the kitchen, where I had cable TV—CNN, BBC, France 24, and so on. I turned it on to find that CNN was gone. So I looked at my Twitter feed and saw that the BBC and CBS were leaving. I just panicked—I got onto the administrative part of *The Moscow Times* website and started scrubbing. When anything had the word “war,” “invasion,” or whatever, I would either

take out the word or change it. If I could not think of something, I just removed the article altogether! I also wrote rather hysterical letters to colleagues saying we had to close down the websites and get out. By that time a number of people had already left Russia. We did close down the Russian website immediately, but we kept the English site going.

[Editor's note: Under the 4 March legislation, public dissemination of “intentionally false” information about Russia's armed forces and/or criticism of their activity abroad may be punished with a heavy fine or lengthy prison sentence. Among some 5,000 administrative prosecutions to date are several where commentary on the war came from a religious perspective, such as anti-war posters quoting the Bible and the 17th-century metaphysical poet John Donne, “Any man's death diminishes me, because I

am involved in mankind.” (See Victoria Arnold, “RUSSIA: Administrative fines continue for Ukraine war protests,” *Forum 18*, 7 November 2022, https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2788.) Two priest-monks from the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad—a branch that did not reunite with the Moscow Patriarchate in 2007 and is headquartered in Odesa, Ukraine—are among some 150 criminal cases, which also include the 8.5-year prison sentence handed down to opposition politician Ilya Yashin on 9 December (see Victoria Arnold, “RUSSIA: First criminal conviction for opposing war in Ukraine on religious grounds,” *Forum 18*, 18 October 2022, https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2783.)]

Did you decide to leave simply because other foreign journalists were leaving? How important was it to you morally that you could no longer speak the truth?

Our job as a newspaper is to report what's going on.



St. Savior's Anglican Church, Riga (G. FAGAN)

And we couldn't report what was going on truthfully—without risking arrest. I mean, I called the last column I did while in Moscow, "The Russian Language of War." The war had just begun, and I was trying to figure out what on earth to write. So I did not write anything—all I did was list a series of quotations showing the escalation towards war. I thought, "That's now illegal, I could go to jail for 15 years for that. But I'm not going to not write that." So it was a question of safety, but the question of safety arose because we knew that we were not going to follow these new laws and rules.

And so you left Russia.

I was pretty much the last staff member to leave—I was trying to figure out where I could travel with a dog. At that point you could no longer fly west—you could fly to places such as Bishkek or Istanbul, or cross over land borders. So I chose Latvia—the only Baltic State I had not yet visited. A friend told me that there was a minivan service to the border. You would walk through the border zone and then be picked up by another minivan on the other side.

I had a suitcase, a computer bag, a handbag, my dog Riley, a bag with Riley's stuff... and of course some grandmother desperately wanted me to bring something for her grandson over here! What I had not counted on was it being 18 below zero [0 Fahrenheit]. The ground was covered in ice and the walk was over a mile—you had to haul your suitcases to one place, then to someplace else. We were kept waiting outside for about two hours. There were also two other dogs—one of them a very ill-tempered French bulldog called Frosya who kept lunging and trying to bite my dog. So it had a really nightmarish quality to it.

By the time we crossed the border, it was three o'clock in the morning. When I finally got my passport back, I said, "Okay, *kuda?* [Russian: "Where to?]" They said, "See those lights? That's Estonia." That was around 800 meters away—half a mile—hauling bags across this rough ice, switching hands. I think the Estonians are not allowed to help you, but by the time I got there, they just said, "Leave everything here. Don't worry."



Two of numerous protest posters opposite the Russian Embassy in Riga. In Latvian and Russian, the slogans read "The Russian World has killed the last Russian in Ukraine" and "Open up, earth! Putin, you will burn in hell." (G. FAGAN)



Opposite the Russian Embassy in Riga. The Latvian sign reads "Ukrainian Independence Street" with the explanation that the name of the street has been changed "in honor of the Ukrainian heroes who fought against the war initiated by the Russian Federation in 2022." (G. FAGAN)

So you crossed into Estonia first?

Yes. There is another crossing, but it is very busy. This crossing was quiet and also had a veterinary station.

Before you left Russia, was the atmosphere of increasing censorship similar to your experience of the Soviet era?

One of my Russian friends likens it to the late 1970s. He was arrested in 1979, essentially for dissidence. He had been passing around Solzhenitsyn texts and he also wrote a paper comparing the legal systems of Hitler's Germany, Mussolini's Italy, and the Soviet Union. That didn't go over well! First he was arrested and put in a [penal] colony. Then they decided he was just ill, so he was put in a psychiatric prison hospital. That was actually worse because they gave him horrendous drugs and the place was filled with truly psychotic people.

By the mid-1980s things were already becoming half-hearted in a lot of ways. But now it is clear that that was only outwardly the case—the KGB remained the KGB and kept on going. Under Andropov [Soviet leader from November 1982 to February 1984] there were KGB officers in every big industrial plant. When we were getting all excited about change in the 1990s, they were just cementing their positions.

How about the general population—did you observe any similarities there?

Because I have a dog I used to walk in the park twice a day. Our park had a very friendly dog community—it was always the same people. When the war began, even very intelligent, well-educated people were saying things like, "Ukrainians are killing Russians, they're murderers," "They're not a separate people, it was always Russian land," or "Why won't Biden let us live in peace?" I knew to shut up—I sort of went into Soviet mode. One group of dog walkers wouldn't mention it at all—even though their country was at war. I

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Berdy Interview (continued from page 13)

thought maybe they were being polite because they thought Biden was responsible, or maybe they didn't trust me.

One neighbor had gotten her college-age son out of the country on the night the war started. When she told me she was now figuring out how to follow with her daughter, she made a tapping gesture [used in the Soviet era to signal danger due to the possible presence of informants or *stukachi*, derived from Russian *stuchat'*, to tap] and said she had not told anyone else that she was leaving. So when I realized I was leaving, I also didn't tell anyone. The weird thing is—or maybe not, but these were neighbors I saw every day, spent holidays with, and so forth—that not a single soul has sent me a message. Again, is that because it is dangerous for them, or because they think I'm bad? I have absolutely no idea. Even that is just horrendous—how is it I can have no idea about people I spent so much time with? And they're nice people.

How have you adjusted to life in Latvia?

This is a great place to be, an absolutely lovely country. Riga is a beautiful city, both grand and cozy. It has a huge Russian community—they say about 45 percent are Russian. Almost everybody over a certain age speaks Russian, as do people in the service professions. It makes for a transition that is very comfortable.

Have you found that people here were also surprised by the war?

Less than we were. Because they had experience—the Baltic States have been saying, “Guys, we have been telling you this, and you have been pooh-poohing it for all of these years.”

I'm living in Zolitūde, a suburb of big brutalist Soviet-style apartment buildings. It is actually very green, with charming market gardens and grapevines climbing up the walls. It is a largely Russian-speaking neighborhood, and they have been watching Russian TV for all these years. Now it is blocked, but people have VPNs [virtual private networks], so they are still watching a lot of it. This is such a limited experience that it is not statistically valuable, but what I find a lot here is that there are many conspiracy theories to the tune of, “Everybody's bad.” I was recently talking to a Latvian cab driver, who insisted that the war was all about money; that everyone was in on it. As proof of this, he pointed to the fact that everybody hung out Ukrainian flags when the war began. He said, “They must have known ahead of time and printed them ready for this.”

How does St. Savior's in Riga compare with the Anglican community in Moscow?

It is much smaller. At St. Andrew's there would always be at least 50-100 people at services, and it was really

packed on holidays—you had to get tickets for the Christmas service a month ahead of time in order to get in. Here I haven't seen the diplomatic community—I don't know if it is just really tiny or if they're not churchgoers. As in Moscow, there are expats who came over for some reason, fell in love with the country, or got married. Then there are Latvians and Russians. Services are in English, but sometimes there is some Latvian—we've had a couple of christenings lately where the families were Latvian.

It is also a super-liberal church that welcomes absolutely everybody—I think it was all-inclusive from the moment it reopened. They told me there were demonstrations against it. [Editor's note: In 2005 the church hosted a service for participants in Riga's first Pride March, which was violently attacked by counter-demonstrators.]

How has the war affected the community here?

We don't really discuss it. That said, there is always a prayer for Ukraine—“We pray that the aggression in Vladimir Vladimirovich's heart will be...” I pray a little less kindly, I

have to say! We are also trying to start a group to provide fellowship and support to Ukrainian refugees. I posted a letter on the “Ukrainians in Riga” and “Ukrainians in Latvia” websites and received around 30 or 40 responses of “*Molodtsy!*” [Russian: Bravo!], “This is wonderful!”, “Absolutely right, we need support—this is a very difficult time, we are sleeping badly.” Yet they don't come—we haven't quite figured out how to get them through the door, but we will keep trying. One of the things we wrote was, “We are not really



Sign offering help and information to Ukrainians arriving at Riga Bus Station (G. FAGAN)

planning anything until you tell us what you need.” It could be lectures or excursions to get a sense of Latvia. Since school will be starting again soon, I thought of inviting teachers who could tell them what it will be like, so the kids can navigate it—they are not going to be able to speak Latvian.

St. Savior's also runs a soup kitchen.

Yes. That is a very necessary thing because they constantly have around 100 or more people coming. During the pandemic it was difficult because they had to pack up the food for people—they couldn't serve them directly. But it still went on throughout that entire period.

We also rent out space in the church to a project organized by one of our very active church wardens. It provides free English lessons to Ukrainian refugees. The reason we are trying to provide assistance to Ukrainian refugees is—that is what you do. It doesn't matter what their religion is—these are people in need, and you try to help them. This is an outreaching sort of church in general. Kind of low-key—not proselytizing or sign-you-up, but “We are followers of Christ and that means helping people” and “Do you need help? Okay, we'll try and figure out how to do it.” ♦

BOOK REVIEW

Dancing on Thin Ice: Travails of a Russian Dissenter by Arkady Polishchuk

Los Angeles, CA, DoppelHouse Press, 2018
352 pp., \$20 (paperback), ISBN 978-0998777078

SCOTT LINGENFELTER

At a point of deep disillusionment, Arkady Abramovich Polishchuk (1935-2020) found himself in Moscow’s Sokolniki Park, the haunt of Russia’s chess champions. He had been invited to see if a late October’s icy rain might make for good skating—it did. Trips to the park helped him dance his worries away. Even so, he knew he was on thin ice.

This story is a fine metaphor for Polishchuk’s memoir, *Dancing on Thin Ice: Travails of a Russian Dissenter*. Consisting primarily of dialogue, this first-hand account of human-rights work in the Soviet Union and beyond casts a zoom lens over the tens of thousands of people who were denied the right to emigrate in the 1970s. Soon after the signing of the Helsinki Accords in 1975, the Christian emigration movement—including some 30,000 Soviet Evangelicals (many being Pentecostals)—drew international attention to the U.S.S.R.’s human-rights abuses, surveillance, show trials, and forced labor. Polishchuk became a popular testimonial speaker for Amnesty International, and his work on behalf of human rights earned him the McWhirter Foundation Award in 1981. He then served as a broadcaster and correspondent for Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty in Washington, D.C., Munich, and Prague. Eventually, he made his way to Vienna and thence to Santa Monica, California. Quite a journey, all told.

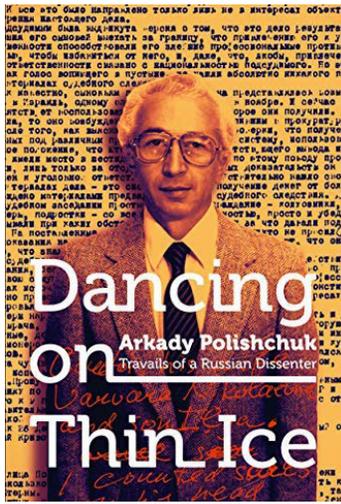
It began after graduation from Moscow State University with an advanced degree in philosophy. Twenty years as a journalist for Russian state-run media—notably, *Asia and Africa Today*—followed, with two books on Africa written along the way. Aside from twists of office politics, Polishchuk escorts the reader as he covers an anti-Semitic show trial; composes *samizdat*; is followed and arrested; and manages to collaborate with Jewish refuseniks—becoming one himself—in smuggling eyewitness testimony to the West. He admits that many of his colleagues were KGB operatives who meddled in international affairs, pushed Russian propaganda, and employed *kompromat* [compromising material] against enemies abroad along with *prpiski* (fake or inflated achievements) to make their way at home. His experience of Soviet Russia thus has a disturbingly contemporary ring. Still, if reminders of the particularities of Soviet life are needed, vivid examples also may be found here:

The Soviet citizen lived from paycheck to paycheck. Somehow the refuseniks continued to exist. People took up any job. Massive Russian corruption helped many to survive. A foreman and a plant manager enrolled his wife/mistress/niece to the post which was held by engineer Katz, expelled yesterday in disgrace. The work was still done by Katz and everybody was happy. A relative/mistress/friend received a salary and honestly gave half of it to the grateful Katz... doctors washed floors in hospitals, teachers gave private lessons, and a surgical nurse continued to work in the operating room with a salary of a cleaning lady” (116-17).

The Pentecostal experience in this context was more dire. Exile, beatings at school of children aged five and six, and psychological and chemical “interventions” in mental hospitals were all commonplace. Polishchuk sympathized with them and their circumstances, if not their theology. Pentecostals Nikolai Goretoi and Feodor [Fyodor] Sidenko figure prominently in this narrative. Polishchuk documents their experience and that of others in the Moscow Helsinki Group’s Document No. 23 (reprinted in the memoir), evidently compiled in the company of leading Soviet human-rights campaigners Andrei Sakharov and Elena Bonner. Document No. 23 was later recast, revised, and published by the Evangelical human-rights organization Door of Hope International, under the title *Pharaoh, Let my People Go*. The conservative U.S. publication *National Review* (which Polishchuk calls “the terribly reactionary American monthly”) published a related article of his on the persecution of Russian Christians in 1979 (287).

Excerpts from *Pharaoh, Let my People Go* are reprinted as one of the memoir’s appendices, a short collection of images and documents. There, Polishchuk is identified as “The Western Representative of [the] Christian Emigration Movement and [of the] Council of Churches of Evangelical Christians-Pentecostals (CCECP).” An illustrative portion of this excerpt reads:

Why do so many Christians, particularly Baptists and Pentecostals, want to leave the Soviet Union? The answer is simple, because of incessant persecution. The Helsinki Final Act has encouraged emigration requests in that its signatories promised to promote “free movement... among persons [from]... the participating



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states” and to abide by their commitments in other international agreements. The problem of the seven Pentecostal refugees, members of the Chmykhalov and Vashchenko families, sealed inside the Moscow U.S. Embassy since June 27, 1978, remains unsolved. The Soviet authorities are persistent in their refusal to permit them to emigrate and in their continuous harassments of the other members of these families in Chernogorsk and [of] Aleksandr Vashchenko in a concentration camp. The seven in the embassy are permitted no mail through diplomatic channels, cannot meet with reporters in the embassy building, and live in relative isolation.

Studies of the so-called “Siberian Seven” offer more context than Polishchuk’s memoir. His contribution to this important chapter of Russian church history is in the juxtaposition of Jewish and Christian emigration stories on a personal and family level—with some attempts at humor, as is his wont. The following passage gives a flavor:

[Pentecostals] had begun talking about emigration soon after the [Second World] war. But they didn’t know the mundane word emigration and called it an “exodus,” just like the exodus of the Jews fleeing the Egyptian Pharaoh. “Since that time,” said Nikolai Petrovich [Goretoi], “we have been ready for the miracle of a Christian exodus from the Red Pharaoh. He’s been trying to destroy our faith since he seized power. He’s putting us in prisons and madhouses, he’s taking away our children and sending them to orphanages.”

“To me the Jewish emigration is also a miracle,” I [Polishchuk] said. “It weakens this dragon. But you, you’re trying to kill it—you’re true fighters.”

“For Christ,” Feodor [Fyodor] Sidenko added.

And I made another discovery—they loved Jews. Nikolai Petrovich Goretoi, quoting the Bible from memory, was patiently explaining to me that the Jews were God’s chosen people and therefore should be particularly close to the heart of every Christian.

“Chosen for what?” I said. “For suffering?”

“I know,” he said, “you’re thinking about the persecution which the Jews were subjected to for the rejection of Christ.”

I could not help but observing, “If only for that! Jews had been persecuted millennia before Jesus came to this world. History has proved that there are more occasions to hate Jews than for a Russian to drink vodka.”

The ingenuous Feodor Sidenko laughed hoarsely, “Russians drink more than anybody else in the world.”

“Do you?” I asked.

“No, we don’t drink, don’t smoke, don’t steal, don’t swear, and don’t beat our wives.”

“Such a boring life!” I said. “Now you have convinced me that you are American spies and more dangerous for this society than Jews who do all that you mentioned, maybe—except beating wives” (194-6).

There is much else crammed into *Dancing on Thin Ice*: Polishchuk’s participation in the Brezhnev Reception Room demonstration in 1976, interactions with Sakharov, fulsome commentary on the emigration-related trial of Dr. Mikhail Stern, a chronicle of family members killed in Kyiv, anecdotes about visiting (and fasting alongside) unregistered Pentecostals, and tales of reunion with old friends in the United States. The result is a memoir that is novelistic but also rambling, gritty, stark, and scatological. This reader found it revealing, but not necessarily a pleasant read.

A Jewish refusenik instrumental in bringing the plight of Soviet Evangelicals to the world’s attention? An Africanist with an advanced degree in philosophy from Russia’s leading university, who survived the jungle of Butyrskaya Prison wiser about how to broadcast cutting-edge stories of dissent, suffering, and redemption? *Dancing on Thin Ice* reminds us that colorful compatriots may also be found in the Kingdom. ♦

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