

The Kremlin's Unholy War



WEAPONISATION OF FAITH

- The weaponisation of faith in warfare is nothing new, but has become a staple of Russian military operations and strategic culture in Putin's Russia.
- During the Chechen Wars, the Patriarch urged the campaign to continue to "wipe out terrorism" while dismissing proof of indiscriminate tactics resulting in suffering of civilians.
- During the intervention in Syria, Church officials blessed weaponry, and described the intervention as a war against terrorism and in defence of Syrian Christians.
- In 2020, a new Church was consecrated commemorating the armed forces, with particular emphasis on operations conducted during Putin's tenure.
- The current conflict in Ukraine is no different; the Patriarch and his associates have alleged Ukrainian state involvement in the persecution of Russian churches and lent support to the Kremlin narrative of "denazification".

PATRIARCH KIRILL

- The current Patriarch of Moscow (below left hand image) has become a critical component of Putin's regime.
- It is reported his relationship may go beyond the spiritual; on occasion he has appeared sporting expensive watches.
- He has also been accused of acting as a KGB informant in the Orthodox community during the Soviet period under the codename "Malofyev".



Patriarch Kirill. Source, Putin's List.

"THE ORTHODOX TALIBAN": CHURCH AND STATE IN MODERN RUSSIA

- The Church and State have had a paradoxical relationship in modern Russia. During the USSR the state initially waged war on "the opiate of the masses", only to bring back the title of Patriarch during the Second World War.
- After the fall of the Soviet Union, a number of former KGB officials who entered politics and business (the Siloviki, "men of strength") claimed to have always been devout Orthodox Christians. Vladimir Putin himself claimed to President George W. Bush that he had been secretly baptised as a child.
- How serious these conversions were can never be fully ascertained, what is clear is that the Church has played an important part in providing legitimacy to Putin's state; providing cover for the repression of dissidents by suggesting they desecrate the faith and reinforcing the Kremlin narrative of Russia as a defender "traditional values" and of Orthodox Christianity globally.
- This has led some to refer to the Siloviki-Church alliance as "the Orthodox Taliban".
- The Church has also been utilised as an instrument of "soft power"; giving the Kremlin an avenue of influence through Orthodox communities all over the world through funding and via the traditional authority of the Patriarch. This is not unlike the methods used by the Tsars to gain leverage in Eastern affairs, particularly the Middle East.

SPEAKING OUT

- Not all of the Church are in lockstep with the Kremlin's narrative.
- Father Ioann Burdin of the Resurrection Church in Russia's western Kostroma region was detained for allegedly discrediting Russian military forces in his March 6 sermon after drawing attention to the military's indiscriminate targeting of civilians.
- Over 300 Orthodox priests have called for Patriarch Kirill's removal.
- According to Pew Research Center data, 78% of Ukrainian adults and 71% of Russian adults identify as Orthodox believers, causing consternation over the deaths of fraternal christian brothers and sisters; providing hope for an avenue through which to counter the Siloviki-Church's disinformation.