

# Selected Religious and Social Aspects of the Ukraine Conflict

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## Abstract

Anti-religious propaganda in the former Soviet Union was efficient; with a majority of young people being nonbelievers. Atheism was easily accepted after 1917 because religiosity was not as deeply ingrained as is sometimes supposed. The hypothesis is proposed here that a majority of today's churchgoers, priests and church officials in Russia are atheists or agnostics, habitually following prescribed ideologies. Selected psychological and healthcare-related aspects are discussed. The Ukraine war, having thwarted the internationally agreed status quo, has triggered conflicts in different parts of the world. An optimal solution would be a global leadership, centered in the most developed parts of the world, based on the principles of mercy and mutual help, aimed at preservation of life and health, and the humane attainment of a population size compatible with sustainable, healthy global ecosystems. Some predominantly Russian-speaking provinces of Ukraine may become parts of the Russian Federation if citizens really want it. New borders should be agreed by negotiations.

**Keywords:** Religion, Atheism, Cultural Psychology, Conflict, Demography, Russia.

## Introduction

Anti-religious propaganda in the former Soviet Union (SU) was efficient. Atheism has been easily accepted after 1917 not only due to the propaganda, but also because religion was not as deeply ingrained as it is sometimes believed. The faithful belonged predominantly to the middle class, which was largely destroyed by communists. The campaign to eradicate illiteracy in rural areas (known as Likbez), started in 1919, was atheistic. Soviet propaganda claimed great successes in tearing people away from religion [1]. In Ukraine, particularly in today's western provinces, which belonged to Poland and escaped the anti-religious activities of the 1920-1930s, the situation was different. Even in the Soviet part of Ukraine, Bolsheviks were alarmed by the religious renaissance in the late 1920s. Closing and demolition of churches, repressions of clergy and parish activists were implemented [2]. Then followed the famine (1932-1933), caused partly by governmental policies [3]. During the German governance (1941-1944), many churches were re-opened, church weddings and baptism becoming the usual practices [4]. The anti-religious campaign by Nikita Khrushchev met obstacles in Ukraine [5].

Apropos, the Khrushchev's anti-religious campaign went along with the closure of at least half of active Orthodox parishes [6].

Furthermore, communists demolished the seminary system. An increased turnover in the priesthood, largely ending the hereditary clerical estate, has been noticed. Priests were recruited from different social groups, overwhelmingly from non-clerical backgrounds, chiefly from peasantry with modest educational background [2]. Remarkably, a similar phenomenon has been observed with regard to another partly familial occupation, namely the medical profession. Medical faculties were extracted from universities with insufficient regard for the preparation of both students and lecturers, the latter often being Party, Komsomol activists or Nomenklatura protégées [7]. The accelerated training of "red doctors" resulted in errors in diagnosis and treatment [8, 9]. The social status and incomes of educated people had been decreasing in comparison with the rest of the population until the economic reforms of the 1990s, when incomes diversified.

The recent religious revival in Russia is partly insincere and superficial, being a matter of fashion and lately also of official policy. Some survey studies reported high percentages of self-identification with the Orthodox Church; but the knowledge of Scriptures remains at a low level [10]. Apparently, a majority of today's churchgoers, priests and church officials in Russia are atheists or agnostics, habitually following prescribed ideologies. This pertains also to the Patriarch of Moscow, who approves of the Ukraine invasion, demonstrating no willingness to seek peace and painting the war as an apocalyptic battle against 'evil forces' [11]. In fact, this is a continuation of the anti-American and anti-European (read: anti-Christian) policy of the Soviets [12]. The Ukraine war, having undermined the principle of internationally agreed status quo, has triggered a series of conflicts worldwide.

In Russia, many people understand only a small part of the liturgy, due to it being in Church Slavonic. Probably for that reason people are more affected by rituals and traditions than by preaching and Bible study [13]. The somewhat archaic language of the most widespread translation of the Bible (19th century) is hardly understandable in places. The English Standard Version is more comprehensible. The modern translation by the Bible Society is not uniformly accepted because many people are accustomed to the older version. The optimal solution would appear to be a distribution of bilingual Bibles. Standing at lengthy services is contraindicated, especially for some aged people. In other countries, churchgoers are seated with a text in front of them, understanding everything that is said.

### **The Ukraine Conflict**

The declared reason of the 'special military operation' (SMO), which began in February 2022, was the anti-separatist activity of Ukraine in the Donbas since 2014. This activity appears to have been exaggerated by the media. Combating separatism within national borders is justifiable, exemplified by Russian anti-separatist operations in the North Caucasus (1994-2009). The Ukraine voted for independence (~83%) in the 1991 referendum. The pro-independence vote varied from 95% in the west of the country to 76.5 % in the Donetsk area and 54% in Crimea [14]. The 1991 borders of Ukraine were recognized by all nations, including the Russian Federation (RF). The United Nations consider SMO to be a violation of territorial integrity and sovereignty, which is against the UN Charter. Admittedly, a majority of residents in the southern and eastern parts of the country are Russian-speaking and many people were disappointed that their region had not become a part of RF. Statistics on the ethnic composition of Ukraine are potentially misleading because some residents registered themselves as Ukrainians for reasons of convenience but continued sharing the Russian identity. Recent referendums in occupied territories were met with skepticism, as residents voted for the unification with RF to avoid trouble. The Soviet-trained collectivism has influenced referendums, elections and opinion polls. Almost everybody voted for the ruling party in the former SU. Some Russian-speaking provinces of Ukraine may become parts of RF if people really want it. New borders should be based on referendums under international supervision and agreed by negotiations. Along the same lines, some territories of East Galicia may become Polish in exchange for German lands in the west of the country.

### **Atheism in the Church and Society**

If a child goes to church, he or she may become a believer and carry faith through the whole life despite scientific education. The appearance of religious beliefs from within in an atheist is improbable, being formally compatible with a delusion. However, the prevailing psychiatric view is that religious beliefs are not delusional if they are culturally accepted [15]. The acquisition of faith by an adult is conceivable for 'holy fools', who tend to become more numerous when the Church makes compromises with secular authorities [16, 17]. The traditional image of the holy fool is associated with the venerable phenomenon of Russian religious culture: the longing for martyrdom [18]. A blessed idiot is simple in his judgments, interpreting Biblical passages literally, he might consider proclaiming anathema to the atheists wearing koukoulions to cover the fratricide. According to the Statement of the Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church of October 01, 1993, anathema should be proclaimed to those who shed innocent blood [19, 20].

Only a minority of Russians consider religion to have a significant role in their lives [21]. Preparing the end of the communist regime, the party and military functionaries, so-called Nomenklatura, sent their children to theological academies, some students being transferred directly from Marxism-Leninism faculties [7]. For inside observers it is obvious in retrospect that the Party leadership prepared the end of the communist regime since the mid-1980s at the latest, in order to privatize state property, which was in fact accomplished in the early 1990s. Considering the above, it can be understood why the Russian Orthodox Church and the Patriarch support the fratricidal war against the Christian nation: they follow the official ideology. The currently widespread militaristic interpretation of Orthodox Christianity is a part of official politics [21]. Psychological aspects of the Ukraine war and the bellicosity of some leaders have been discussed by [22].

### **The Role of Non-Christian Confessions**

Defensive behaviours may include attacking weaker persons and submitting to dominant ones [23]. The latter seems to be reflected by relationships of Vladimir Putin with Ramzan Kadyrov, head of the Chechen Republic, who is a dominant personality. There has been a stereotype of 'chechenophobia' in Russia [24]. Reportedly, Putin studied Sufism and is sympathetic to this Islamic teaching [25]. Some people would rather fraternize with non-Europeans and obey them, as was the case during Stalin's rule, or in the 1990s, when Chechens held leading positions among organized criminals, rather than build constructive relations with Western nations [24]. The most important topic in this connection is the inter-ethnic difference in birth rate and migrations, a subject which is avoided by Russian media and officials today. In November 2022, Putin awarded the Soviet-era medal for 'mother heroines' to Kadyrov's wife, who has at least ten children. There is a continuous migration of Chechens from mountainous to plain areas to the North of the Caucasian Mountains as well as to other parts of RF. Of note, the North Caucasus regularly receives federal donations: 70-88% of local budgets [26]. In addition, federal funds have been purloined on a large scale in the Caucasus [27].

Ramzan Kadyrov declared the war in Ukraine 'Big Jihad' and urged Russian Muslims to fight the 'satanic democracy' and

'demons'. Furthermore, he urged his supporters to lay waste to Ukraine and supported calls to wipe cities 'off the face of the Earth.' Kadyrov also vowed that anyone agreeing to take up arms and fight would get to kill 'shaitans', which is an Islamic term for demons: 'We will not capture those shaitans, but we will burn them' [28]. The Quran contains numerous injunctions regarding unbelievers: 'Smite at their neck at lengths; when ye have thoroughly subdued them, bind a bond firmly on them' (47:4). It is not permitted to a Muslim to kill a co-religionist (2:84; 4:92), but with regard to unbelievers other recommendations are given: 'Fight them on until there prevails faith in Allah altogether and everywhere' (8:39). About responsibility for murder, it is commented: 'It is not ye who slew them, it was Allah' (8:17). Contradictions between the Quran and modern legislation can be found: 'The law of equality is prescribed: the free for the free, the slave for the slave, the woman for the woman' (2:178) [29]. It can be understood that, instead of a criminal, an innocent from his kinship may be killed, woman for the woman, etc. Jihad, the holy war, is considered a religious duty.

Calls for punishments can also be found in the Old Testament: 'And thine eye shall not pity; but life shall go for life, eye for an eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot' (Deuteronomy 19:21). The words eye and tooth, used allegorically, can be understood differently in various cultures, so that the concept might lead to conflicts. Admittedly, the 'eye for an eye' principle can be seen as a limiting of retribution. Conflicting laws and injunctions cannot be valid at the same time and place. Considering the unpredictability and compromise-resistance of terrorists with religious motives, such motives should be regarded by the criminal justice as aggravating circumstances. This pertains also to the war propaganda [30, 31].

One more topic should be broached in this connection. Competition for the lebensraum arose as a result of the Jewish 'repatriation' to Palestine with its limited water and energy resources. Such arguments as historical patrimony are not necessarily acceptable to other peoples. Back in the 1860s, the number of Jews in Palestine was ~14,000 or 4% of the total population of 350,000 [32]. From 1948 to 2002 the population of Israel increased from 806,000 to 6.3 million, or 9.8 million if Palestine territories are counted. Combined with immigration, the populace of the arid land, largely dependent on foreign aid and water desalination, is likely to reach 16 million by mid-century [33, 34]. Despite existing beliefs, the fertility rate of Israeli and Palestinian women is comparable, being higher than in several Arab countries. More than half of the food consumed in the Middle East is imported. Shortages of freshwater and arable land are getting worse [35]. Due to the burning of fossil fuels for desalination, agriculture in Palestine is environmentally and economically unfavourable. Nonetheless, agriculture uses more than half of Israel's water [36]. The disparity between available resources and consumption is predicted to increase. In regard to the Ukraine conflict, the double standards should be pointed out: no sanctions have been implemented against Israel for comparable military operations. Apparently, it is inevitable that the global human population will become reduced during the present century. How this happens may be to some extent within our control. It will not remain so indefinitely [37].

It seems that certain ruling spheres on both sides of the Middle

East conflict have acted in ways that benefit both parties when they receive foreign help; some get it from the United States and Germany, while others receive it from oil-producing countries. Moreover, in the wake of Palestine conflicts, host governments of the Middle East gained control of the fossil fuels by 1976, followed by a dramatic price increase. This had been foreseeable, being probably a hidden motive of Arab-Israeli wars. The Soviets have readily assisted.

## Discussion

The world is still living off the moral capital invested by Christendom. If it will be used up we shall descend into immorality and ethical confusion [38]. Humanism owed great deal to Christian ethics. Religious pro-sociality is conducive to cooperation, also with strangers [39]. Outside religion, it is hard to see how the notion of what is right and wrong should provide a motive for doing right [40]. According to a widespread opinion, morals have no materialistic foundations worth respecting [41, 42]. Should the power in Europe shift to the East, it would come along with losses of some moral values. Disregard for laws and regulations, corruption and collectivism will come instead. Some of the above are known features of authoritarian regimes [43]. The quality of many services and products will decline: spoiled foods on sale, antibiotics in milk, falsified beer and wine, wrong price tags in shops, misquoting of legal codes by civil servants in their correspondence, backdating of official letters, embezzlement of registered correspondence, different types of misconduct in the healthcare system [44].

The intimidation policy with exaggeration of crime-related dangers is perceptible since the last decades. People have been systematically intimidated by the media, TV series, extortion e.g. by plumbers performing repairs in private apartments. The media factually propagandize criminal behaviour, among other things, approving of violence and lynching in prisons. In a popular TV series, the showman Leonid Kanevsky reiterates such phrases as: "He didn't survive his jail term. Prison inmates don't like such people". Adam, one of the sons of Ramzan Kadyrov, has been promoted and decorated after he had publicly beaten a prison inmate [45]. Adam's sojourn in prison was illegal but arranged by the authorities. Thereafter, Vladimir Putin personally met Adam. Vitaly Kaloyev was promoted to deputy minister having committed intentional murder. A petition was filed to the government in 2015 to dismiss Kaloyev from his position, reproduced as illustration in the article by [46]. In 2017, Putin signed a new law decriminalizing some forms of domestic violence. According to an estimate, the prevalence of family violence in RF during recent decades has been 45-70 times higher than, for example, in the United Kingdom and France [47]. Many people in RF live under supposed or real threat of assault and battery, comparable with corporal punishments of the 19th century. Intimidated citizens are easy prey for a dictator.

In conditions of the Soviet-trained collectivism and mass intimidation almost everybody has voted for the ruling party. This is psychologically explicable; but the solid vote makes the whole nation formally responsible. Homogeneity of thinking is a predictor of conformism that is conducive to dictatorship [48]. generalized about the national character: deification of authorities, low value of human life and personality, disrespect for laws, private property and education, envy of America. It is known that

envy may contribute to hostility. Envious people blame those who make them feel ashamed by comparison [49, 50].

The autocratic management style discourages criticism. In healthcare, attributes of this style include a paternalistic approach to patients, bossy management, and harassment of colleagues if they do not follow instructions. Under conditions of paternalism, misinformation of patients, disregard for the principle of informed consent, and compulsory treatments are deemed permissible [51]. The following has been reported: overuse of gastrectomy for peptic ulcers, of thoracic surgery in tuberculosis, bronchial asthma and other respiratory diseases, excessive and compulsory treatments of people with supposed alcohol use disorders. Millions of women in the former SU underwent Halsted or Patey mastectomy with removal of pectoral muscles without evidence-based indications, often without informed consent. Endocervical ectopies or ectropions (called pseudo-erosions in Russia) have been routinely cauterized without cytological tests; Pap-smears for early detection of cervical cancer have been performed infrequently and not up to international standards, cervical cancer being diagnosed relatively late. Numerous examples and references are in Jargin [52]. Training of medical personnel under the imperative of readiness for war has been one of the motives for overusing invasive procedures. Thanks to the Internet, foreign literature is now available in Russia, many guidelines being adjusted to international patterns. However, some published instructions have remained without due commentaries. Finally, the obstacles to the importing of drugs and medical equipment should be mentioned. Domestic products are promoted sometimes despite questionable quality and possible counterfeiting [53].

The development discussed in the preceding paragraph will be reinforced thanks to the growing Chinese influence. The war in Ukraine has rendered Russia increasingly dependent on China [54, 55]. Violations of human rights, political abuse of psychiatry and scientific misconduct in China are known [54, 56, 57]. Reportedly, over 80% of clinical trial data submitted to support new drug registrations in China have been fraudulent. As for psychiatry, the abuses seem to be comparable with those in the Soviet Union in the 1970-1980s and involve repeated incarceration of human rights activists, petitioners and people complaining against injustices by local authorities. The “patients” undergo physical maltreatment and compulsory medication [58].

In fact, Putin acts in Ukraine and on the international arena in the interests of certain non-European agent(s), as apparently did some initiators of the World Wars. European economies were adversely affected by the wars of the 20th century, contributing to industrialization of Asian countries, who started to profit by controversies between the East and West [59, 60]. The population explosion followed. Putin’s policies go on in the same direction. De-facto reproductive coercion is fostered by the government [61]. It seems that Putin is ready to share power with people of non-Russian ethnicity and citizenship just to preserve the privileges of the Nomenklatura, while the Ukraine war is used as distraction. Crises are used by oligarchy to distract from internal problems.

The high social status of war veterans is maintained today. There are misgivings that the veteran status has been awarded gratuitously to some individuals from the privileged milieu. Some of them will occupy leading positions without proper selection and training. Those who spent a short time in a troubled area may be registered as war veterans; relevant instructions are not always published, while decisions cannot be submitted for independent anti-corruption expertise [62]. Many real veterans had been factually maltreated in the period 1985-2005. The average life expectancy of men decreased to 58-59 years in the 1990s and early 2000s due to deterioration of health services and toxic alcohol surrogates legally sold in vodka bottles. It is known that some war veterans consumed alcohol [63, 64]. During the anti-alcohol campaign (1985-1989) they were forced to stand hours-long in queues at retail outlets and/or to drink surrogates. After the failure of the campaign, poor-quality beverages and surrogates were sold in vodka bottles through legally operating shops and kiosks. Child, elder abuse and problems associated with Covid-19 have been discussed in by [52].

Wars within Europe implicate bravery of soldiers and irresponsibility of some rulers. Winners of such wars are eventually those who stay outside. The history of the 20th century has proved this. “Intense anti-Westernism of the Kremlin rhetoric” (Turoma & Aitamurto, 2019) seems to lower popularity of the government thus being irrational and damaging. The westward animosity is framed as a defensive response to the “centuries of Western hostilities towards Russia” [65]. The Tatar-Mongol Yoke (1237-1480), the most efficient “hostility towards Russia”, has not been mentioned in the context, although it is a real perspective in view of demographic developments [66, 67].

## Conclusion

The nuclear threats and declarations of jihad have appeared against the background of Soviet atheism, while religious vocabulary is misused for political purposes. It can be reasonably assumed that many church officials supporting the war in Ukraine are atheists acting in accordance with political directives. Certain non-Russian subjects may be interested in a continuation of the current war, and there are misgivings that Vladimir Putin has come under their influence. The well-known ideologist Aleksandr Dugin opined: ‘Every civilization has the right to decide about... death, good and evil’. Indeed, some militarists have made such decisions. A preferred alternative would be a leadership centred in the most developed parts of the world, based on the principles of mercy, modesty and forgiveness, aimed at preservation of human life and health, and the humane attainment of a human population size compatible with sustainable, healthy global ecosystems.

## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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