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**OPINION**

# Russia is weaponizing Christianity in its war on Ukraine

by [Mark Morozowich](#)

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The decision to [close Lavra monastery](#) to clergy from the [Russian-controlled Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate](#) has been seized upon by the [Kremlin](#) and the Russian Orthodox Church as an attack on Christianity and religious freedom. This could not be further from the truth.

Rather, the decision reflects political reality. On one side, [Ukraine](#) has an independent Orthodox Church, recognized by the patriarch of Constantinople. On the other side, Patriarch Kirill of Moscow heads a separate, Russia-dominated Orthodox Church inside Ukraine. The Kremlin is weaponizing [Christianity](#) through this latter Ukrainian church, which has had intimate ties to the Kremlin dating back to the Soviet era, amplified in recent years by the cozy relationship between Russian President Vladimir Putin and Moscow Patriarch Kirill.

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For perspective, Kirill has blessed Russian soldiers heading to the front lines since the war began. On Sept. 25, 2022, the patriarch [stated](#) that sacrifice in military service “washes away all the sins that a person has committed.” Unfortunately, many of those soldiers who heard those words went on to [rape, torture, and kill Ukrainians](#).

Pro-Moscow priests in Kirill's Ukrainian church likewise offer prayers for Russia and Russian soldiers, and they even [refuse to perform funerals for Ukraine's defenders](#). The secretary of the National Security and Defense Council of Ukraine, Oleksiy Danylov, has [stated](#) that this

Russian church contains members of the "1st and 5th departments" of Russia's FSB. In Khmelnytskyi, a Ukrainian soldier entered one of these Russia-dominated churches and asked what it would take to turn the church away from supporting Russia. He was [beaten by the parish priest and deacon](#).

This disturbing spiritual support for Russia's war crime extravaganza in Ukraine drew the condemnation of Pope Francis, who warned Patriarch Kirill against becoming "[Putin's altar boy](#)."

Of course, Patriarch Kirill's behavior should come as no surprise, given his documented and verified [work for the KGB](#) during the 1970s and 1980s. Codenamed "Mikhailov," the mere Vladimir Mikhailovich Gundyayev was posted to Geneva in 1971 to infiltrate the World Council of Churches and manipulate it into denouncing the United States, while moderating criticism of the Soviet Union's lack of religious freedom.

How strange that some prominent Western commentators have now aligned themselves with false narratives woven by Patriarch Kirill and the Russian intelligence agencies. They have been misled into believing that Ukraine's defense of its sovereign territory and international law is somehow akin to waging war against Western values of freedom and democracy. If there is a war against Christianity, it comes from Russia, which is attacking Christians in a war right now.

The Russian Orthodox Church has been manipulated by the state to quash Ukrainian Orthodox autocephaly for centuries — since the time of Catherine the Great. In 1946, Stalin even dissolved the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church by force. Bishops and priests were arrested and executed, and the faithful were forcibly "reunified" with the Russian Orthodox Church.

These tactics continue today. Following the 2014 Russian invasion of Ukraine, many Ukrainian Orthodox sought recognition from the Orthodox Patriarch of Constantinople, the first among equals in Eastern Orthodoxy. He granted them independence in 2018, thus ending more than 300 years of enforced servitude. Tellingly, this decision was [angrily rejected by the Russian Orthodox Church](#) because it once again disproved its claim to be a defender of religious freedom.

In Russia, freedom of religion does not exist. There are several hundred thousand Eastern Catholics, as well as numerous Protestants, who cannot establish their own communities. This stands in stark contrast to the multiconfessional reality being lived in Ukraine, as demonstrated by the Ukrainian Interreligious Council.

Christians across America and particularly on Capitol Hill should unite behind Ukraine and implore Russia to end the war. The persecution continues in Russian-occupied parts of Ukraine, including the [arrest of two Ukrainian Greek Catholic priests](#) who have not been heard from since. This cannot continue.

Right now, we need to stand with the freedom fighters of Ukraine — to support our brothers and sisters who want the basic freedoms of speech and, most importantly, the freedom of religion.

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