

THE RUSSIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH AND THE WAR

The Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) of the Moscow Patriarchate fully supports the war in Ukraine, sharing responsibility for it with the Russian state. It participates in the conflict both through rhetoric and direct action.

Other Christian denominations face a stark choice: align with the ROC or face persecution. Most opt either for active support or, at a minimum, silence. Clergy and believers who disagree with the official positions of the Church and state—and who see it as a matter of Christian conscience to speak out against war and repression or support political prisoners—are subjected to punishment and persecution, both internally within the Church and externally by state authorities. Some have been forced to flee Russia; others have been imprisoned. Some have died.



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Introduction

In early March 2022, as Russian troops occupied Bucha and Hostomel, Patriarch Kirill declared during a sermon at the Cathedral of Christ the Savior: “Russia is waging not a physical, but a metaphysical battle against the forces of evil in Ukraine.” He framed this war as a struggle against sin, stating that it “has not only political significance” but is directly connected to the salvation of humanity—thus giving it religious and sacred justification.

Since then, the Church has engaged in the war on several fronts:

- 1. Propaganda and ideological support;**
- 2. Direct interaction with the military** and presence at the front — ‘mystical support’ involving sacred artifacts, prayers, and rituals to sanctify the war effort;
- 3. Diplomatic manipulation abroad** — advancing Russian interests within international ecumenical organizations, Orthodox countries, and through espionage activities.

Propaganda and Ideological Support

On ‘Spas’ TV channel, owned by the Moscow Patriarchate and included in the basic free television package available to all Russian households, there are regular broadcasts programs in support of the war. These broadcasts often feature hate speech against Ukrainians, labeling them ‘Ukronazis’ and ‘Banderovites.’

Several documentary films have aired on the channel—including [War and the Bible](#) and [God at War](#)—which portray military operations in Ukraine as a sacred and righteous mission. The war is glorified and sacralized. Similar films about clergy participating in combat and the spiritual dimension of the war are aired on Russia’s main state-run television networks—Russia Today and Channel One Russia.



Poster for the series ‘War and the Bible’. Photo: TV channel ‘Spas’

The ROC aids the state in conceptualizing the war, constructing a cohesive mythological narrative that delegitimizes Ukrainian statehood and justifies the forced ‘return’ of the ‘brotherly people’ to the Russian state.

A few days after the announcement of mobilization in September 2022, Patriarch Kirill gave a sermon in which [he stated](#) that anyone ***‘who dies in the performance of military duty sacrifices himself for the sake of others. Therefore, we believe that such a sacrifice washes away all sins previously committed.’*** This theological innovation, which has nothing to do with normative Christian doctrine, is closest to the Islamic concept of martyrdom (jihad), but the patriarch suggests that Russians should die not in a war with infidels, but in a war that he himself called [‘fratricidal.’](#)

The ROC fully endorsed the mobilization at every level, framing it as a pious undertaking. No video or photo from military recruitment offices—whether in major cities or remote villages—was complete without the presence of a priest. These priests sprinkled departing soldiers with holy water, handed out crucifixes, icons, and Bibles, blessed them to defend the homeland, and conducted special prayer services.

In parishes across Russia, ROC members have been actively engaged throughout the war in supporting frontline troops. They collect funds to purchase vehicles, thermal imaging devices, electronic warfare tools, and other military equipment. They weave camouflage nets, make trench candles, and have children in Sunday schools write letters and draw pictures for soldiers. This activity is documented on diocesan and parish websites, and compiled on a central church platform titled [The Church in the period of the Special Military Operation](#).

Bishops and priests bless weapons and military equipment. Clergy participate in propaganda events across all regions of the Russian Federation and regularly call upon parishioners during Sunday liturgies to enlist and go to the front.

Direct Interaction with the Military and Frontline Presence

According to official data from the ROC's Military Department, approximately 2,000 priests have served on the frontlines—roughly one in every 18 clergy members of the Russian Orthodox Church. Only 300 of them are officially designated as military chaplains within the Ministry of Defense. The rest are formally volunteers. These priests build bunker chapels in trenches and convert vans into mobile churches. They baptize soldiers before battle, deliver patriotic sermons, and travel with combat units into occupied villages and towns.

According to the independent initiative ***Christians Against War***, 12 ROC clergymen [have been killed](#) at the front. Two of them were posthumously awarded the title Hero of Russia by Vladimir Putin.

In mid-April 2023, when Putin visited the occupied territories of Ukraine for the first time, he brought with him two copies of the icon 'The Savior Not Made by Hands,' the original of which is kept at the Main Cathedral of the Russian Armed Forces. One copy was left at the headquarters of the Dnipro military group in Kherson Oblast; the other left in the headquarters of the "Vostok" group in Luhansk Oblast. In May 2023, an icon of St. Seraphim of Sarov [was flown](#) over Russian territories 'at potential risk from enemy drones' aboard an aircraft of the National Guard of Russia, accompanied by a priest from the Church's Department for Cooperation with the Armed Forces, Fr. Roman Bogdasarov. This airborne religious procession was meant to spiritually shield Russia's border regions from Ukrainian drone attacks. Such flights with icons have since become a recurring practice.

Diplomatic Manipulation Abroad

In March 2024, the World Russian People's Council—chaired by Patriarch Kirill—adopted a document titled ***The Decree (Nakaz)***.

Published on the official website of the Moscow Patriarchate, the document attempts to formulate a state ideology. It defines the 'special military operation' as a 'sacred war' against the 'criminal Kyiv regime and the collective West behind it.' A full section is dedicated to the concept of the 'Russian World,' the boundaries of which—'as a spiritual and cultural-civilizational phenomenon'—are described as 'significantly broader than the current borders of the Russian Federation or even historic Greater Russia.' In other words, the vision for expansion has no geographic limits. In the foreign policy section, the document explicitly labels Ukrainians and Belarusians as "sub-ethnic groups" of the Russian people.

The publication of this document provoked sharp reactions from many countries. The World Council of Churches (WCC)—the largest ecumenical body in the world, comprising 352 Christian churches across more than 100 countries and long considered a key international platform for the ROC since the Soviet times—[condemned *The Decree*](#) as incompatible with the 'biblical call for Christians to be peacemakers in times of conflict.'

Sanctions and restrictions have also extended to several ROC clergy in the European Union. Thus, Bulgaria and the Czech Republic expelled prominent current and former representatives of the ROC, as their national security agencies classified them as threats to their national security.

Anti-War Protest and Repression

Not all Orthodox clergy and laypeople support the Church leadership's stance or the Russian government's war policies. However, ROC clerics who publicly express dissent face persecution from both church and state institutions.

A new repressive system has emerged, in which the official Church has embedded itself into the state's machinery of pressure and punishment. These mechanisms complement and reinforce each other. Complete ideological loyalty to Patriarch Kirill and the Kremlin ensures career advancement within the ROC, while disloyalty invites severe reprisals. On March 1, 2022—just six days after Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine—an [open letter from Orthodox clergy opposing the war was published](#). The authors of this brief but powerful message affirmed the sanctity of every human life, stating:

'We remind you that the Blood of Christ, shed by the Savior for the life of the world, will be received in the sacrament of Communion even by those who issue murderous orders—not for life, but unto eternal torment.'

The letter ended with a plea: 'Stop the war!'

Nearly 300 priests from across Russia signed it—a profound act of both civic courage and Christian witness, given that public dissent could result in unpredictable consequences, including repercussions for their families. Some signatories were summoned by the FSB for questioning; others were reassigned to lower-ranking parishes for 're-education.' **In Kazan, Fr. Gleb Krivosheev** was charged under Russia's law against 'discrediting the army' and fined, based on a tip from the local FSB. In most cases, a signature on the letter became additional justification for canonical punishment if the priest continued to voice anti-war views.

In Kostroma, Fr. Ioann Burdin said during a sermon—attended by just ten people—that he was praying for peace in Ukraine. Within two hours, police were at the church, and he was charged with 'discrediting the armed forces.' Burdin continued posting anti-war messages on social media. Eventually, he was banned from priestly service and fled to Bulgaria to escape further persecution.

Beyond signing the letter or making public anti-war statements, refusal to recite the so-called '[Patriarchal Prayer for Victory](#)' during services has become grounds for punishment. In September 2022, the Moscow Patriarchate distributed this text to all dioceses and parishes. The prayer claims that "Holy Russia' is under attack" and "they have turned against those who want to fight," along with appeals to God to grant victory. This prayer functions as a litmus test for loyalty to the Church and the state.

Even substituting the word 'victory' with 'peace' has led to defrocking.

Fr. Ioann Koval from the Moscow region did just that—he prayed for peace rather than Russia's victory. Parishioners reported him, and a Church court under Patriarchal control stripped him of his priesthood. Following that, Koval and his children were subjected to harassment and threats. He was forced to flee Russia. In Turkey, he was received by Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, who reinstated him in priestly orders. He now serves in Antalya.

According to the initiative Christians Against War, which monitors clerical repression, more than 50 ROC clergy (priests and monastics) and believers [suffered persecution](#) between February 2022 and June 2025 due to their anti-war stance or opposition to Vladimir Putin's policies. Many were charged under newly introduced censorship laws added to the criminal code after the invasion.

Although exact figures are difficult to compile, available data show:

- At least 30 people faced administrative charges (19 were fined),
- 16 individuals faced criminal charges (12 were convicted),
- At least 19 were subjected to canonical sanctions via Church courts,
- At least 15 individuals fled Russia.

Additional Cases of Clerical Persecution:

- **Deacon Dmitry Baev, from Vyatka**, was defrocked and placed on an international wanted list for allegedly spreading "knowingly false information" regarding the Russian Armed Forces. He was also added to Rosfinmonitoring's list in connection with a case of 'discrediting the Russian army.'

- **Fr. Alexander Dombrovsky, a priest from Bryansk**, was defrocked and interrogated multiple times. He was informed that a case had been opened against him by the local department of FSB. He eventually left Russia.
- **Deacon Andrei Kuraev, a well-known Moscow cleric** and theologian (now living in exile in Prague), was designated a [‘foreign agent’](#) by the Russian Ministry of Justice. He is regularly fined for allegedly violating foreign agent laws, a tactic often used as a precursor to criminal charges.
- **Archpriest Andrei Lvov, from Ivanovo**, left the ROC on ideological grounds and joined the independent Union of Orthodox Communities of Apostolic Tradition. As a result, he was defrocked and declared a ‘foreign agent’ by the Ministry of Justice. He remains in Russia.
- **Fr. Maxim Nagibin, from the Krasnodar region**, was defrocked and prosecuted after delivering an Easter sermon in which he called Russia’s invasion of Ukraine ‘a shame and a crime.’ The case was later dropped.
- **Fr. Nikolai Savchenko, in St. Petersburg**, was arrested in his church after a service. He spent 14 days in detention for posting a photo on the social media site VKontakte in which he held a Ukrainian flag.
- **Hieromonk Ioann (Kurmoyarov)** was sentenced to three years in prison under Article 270.3, Part 2 of the Russian Criminal Code for ‘publicly spreading knowingly false information about the Russian Armed Forces.’ The charges stemmed from videos of anti-war sermons he had posted on social media. In court, he described himself as a Christian pacifist. He served 1.5 years in a penal colony, was released early, and left Russia.
- **Archbishop Grigory Mikhnov-Vaitenko**, of the Union of Orthodox Communities of Apostolic Tradition, was labeled a foreign agent and detained after conducting a memorial service for slain opposition leader Alexei Navalny. While in police custody, he suffered a stroke.

Many other priests have suffered exclusively at the hands of church authorities: they were defrocked or banned from serving, their families lost their livelihood, and their children were harassed at school. They have become social outcasts.

Persecution of Lay Believers

Lay believers have faced repression as well—often more severe than that imposed on clergy. One of the most harrowing cases involves two graduates of the Sretensky Theological Seminary and active readers in Moscow’s Orthodox churches: **Denis Popovich and Nikita Ivankovich**.

Both had expressed anti-war views in private, closed chats among former classmates—many of whom are now priests—and in conversations with friends. They were arrested under Articles 30, 205, and 222.1 of the Russian Criminal Code (‘preparation of a terrorist act’ and ‘illegal trafficking of explosives by an organized group’). According to the FSB, the two were allegedly acting on orders from the Defense Intelligence of Ukraine (GUR), tracking the movements of Metropolitan Tikhon of Simferopol and Crimea, and planning to plant a bomb in the Sretensky Monastery in Moscow, where his residence is located.

State media circulated videos showing their ‘confessions.’ Later, Popovich and Ivankovich revealed their confessions had been extracted by torture—subjected to electric shocks and other forms of abuse. Their lawyers maintain the men are innocent and that the evidence was fabricated.

Support Efforts and Rising Threats

In 2023, two priests in Germany—**Archpriest Andrey Kordochkin**, who left the ROC in protest over Patriarch Kirill’s wartime stance, and **Fr. Valerian Dunin-Barkovsky**—founded a support fund called [Peace to All Foundation \(Mir vsem\)](#). The fund assists Christian clerics, primarily priests, persecuted for their beliefs. Many of them fled Russia out of fear of prosecution and arrest and with no savings, no foreign language skills, and no alternative professions.

In its first two years, the Peace to All Foundation supported 30 persecuted Christians, both inside and outside Russia.

In May 2025, Yana Lantratova, Chair of the State Duma Committee on Civil Society and Religious Associations, appealed to the Prosecutor’s Office to designate the Peace to All Foundation as an ‘undesirable organization.’ In a parliamentary speech, she claimed that ‘former priests are creating an alternative religious movement under the external control of Western intelligence services.’

If granted, this status would mean criminal charges against the fund's founders, international arrest warrants, and the risk of prosecution for donors and beneficiaries under Russian law—for either financing or cooperating with an 'undesirable' organization. This would cripple the fund's ability to provide aid, especially to those still inside Russia.

Persecution of Other Christian Denominations and Confessions

The Russian Orthodox Church claims a monopoly over the religious sphere in the Russian Federation. In the late 1990s, it successfully lobbied for a privileged legal status in the newly adopted Law on Freedom of Conscience. This law enshrines the ‘special role’ of Orthodoxy in Russian society and establishes the concept of ‘traditional religions,’ which, alongside Orthodoxy, includes Islam, Judaism, and Buddhism—corresponding to major faiths practiced in Russia’s various ethnic regions.

Following this, the Interreligious Council of Russia was established, where representatives of these ‘traditional religions’ publicly support the ROC’s positions on social, cultural, and political issues.

De facto, the ROC has assumed the role of a state institution on religious affairs. As a result, other Christian denominations are forced to either align with the Church’s position or place themselves in an extremely vulnerable position.

Religious communities that maintain independence from state control face particularly harsh repression. These include Orthodox communities unaffiliated with the Moscow Patriarchate (such as the Jehovah’s Witnesses, Evangelical Christians-Baptists, Pentecostals, and Seventh-day Adventists). Relations between the ROC and the Catholic Church—and the status of Catholic communities in Russia—fall outside the scope of this report, as they are tied to diplomatic relations between Russia and the Vatican and the peacemaking efforts of the Holy See.

The ROC views so-called ‘alternative Orthodox churches’—small communities that have left the Moscow Patriarchate and are not recognized by global Orthodoxy—not only as ideological rivals, but as threats to its monopoly. Priests who join these jurisdictions are harshly punished, often with the involvement of state authorities (as seen in the cases of Kurmoyarov, Mikhnov-Vaitenko, and Lvov).

The Jehovah’s Witnesses, in particular, have faced extreme persecution. Jehovah’s Witnesses are officially banned in Russia, having been designated extremist.

As of March 2023, Jehovah's Witnesses constituted the largest group prosecuted under Article 282.2 of the Criminal Code ('participation in the activity of an extremist organization'). Their pacifist beliefs have led to additional prosecutions, including for refusing military service or conscription. Nearly 200 Jehovah's Witnesses are currently imprisoned in Russia. Several have died during persecution or while in pre-trial detention. The average sentence is six years in prison.

The Russian Protestant community has fractured since the war began. Some leaders—like their Orthodox counterparts—support the war and participate in state propaganda. Others have been targeted for repression. This includes Evangelical Baptists, Pentecostals, and smaller denominations. Dozens of believers, pastors, and preachers have been arrested or fined under administrative law.

One of the most tragic cases was **the death in custody of Pavel Kushnir**, a 39-year-old Baptist from Tambov. On July 27, 2024, he died in a detention center in Birobidzhan after a five-day dry hunger strike. Arrested for anti-war statements on his YouTube channel, Kushnir was held in harsh conditions that worsened his health problems. His body showed signs of physical abuse when returned to his family.

The case of Pastor Nikolai Romanyuk, a Pentecostal minister from Moscow, [demonstrates](#) how criminal law is used against Protestant clergy. Romanyuk was arrested and charged under Article 280.4 of the Criminal Code ('public calls for activities directed against state security') for a sermon in which he condemned participants in the military actions in Ukraine.

This case illustrates how broadly Russian authorities interpret 'state security'—now encompassing religious teachings that question military action and effectively criminalizing pastoral work that deviates from state-approved narratives.

Occupied Territories of Ukraine

According to [Novaya Gazeta Europe](#), after Russia annexed four Ukrainian regions, the number of functioning religious communities there dropped by more than half—from 1,967 to just 902. Along with Russian state institutions and legal systems, the **Russian Orthodox Church** followed the occupying forces, bringing religious life under centralized control.

Ukrainian religious communities in these occupied territories were forced to re-register under Russian law. Without this registration, a community is forbidden from conducting public activities: it cannot hold services outside private homes, rent or construct places of worship, put up signage, or distribute religious literature.

Clergy from the **Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC)** were pressured to come under the authority of the ROC, which was granted control over dioceses in the occupied regions. Bishops from Russia were assigned to some of these dioceses. Priests from the **Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU)**, **the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church (UGCC)**, and various Protestant denominations had no such option—they were outlawed entirely.

Clergy from the OCU were especially targeted. The ROC and the Russian state view the OCU as a ‘schismatic’ church, and its destruction was explicitly stated as one of the goals of the Russian invasion. Some priests who couldn’t escape were arrested or killed. **Fr. Stepan Podolchak**, an OCU priest from Kherson Oblast, was taken from his home with a bag over his head and later killed. The fate of many other clergy kidnapped by occupying authorities remains unknown.

UGCC priests **Fr. Bohdan Geleta** and **Fr. Ivan Levytsky**, from Berdyansk, spent nearly two years in Russian captivity. Geleta was arrested during a liturgy. Both were tortured—beaten and psychologically abused (their heads were shaved, and they were forced to listen to Soviet music around the clock). In the summer of 2024, Geleta was released in a prisoner exchange brokered by the Vatican. No UGCC churches remain in the occupied territories: all have been seized by the ROC, with clergy either fleeing or being imprisoned.

Priests unwilling to join the Moscow Patriarchate or promote the ‘Russian World’ ideology—which is now a mandatory part of religious life in the ‘new regions’—were either arrested or forced into exile. Novaya Gazeta Europe estimates that the number of active collaborators is roughly equal to those who fled or were arrested

Fr. Konstantin Maksimov, a UOC cleric who refused to cooperate with the occupation authorities or convert to the ROC, was arrested and sentenced to 14 years in a maximum-security colony on charges of espionage.

Fr. Volodymyr Saviyskyi, from Prymorsk in Zaporizhzhia Oblast, continued praying for Ukraine during the occupation. Russian soldiers pulled him from the altar during a service and searched his home. He was detained seven times and pressured to inform on parishioners’ confessions, promote pro-Russian propaganda, and switch allegiance to the ROC. He repeatedly insisted his bishop was in Kyiv. Eventually, Saviyskyi managed to flee to Europe.

Protestant Communities in the Occupied Territories

Protestant denominations have also been targeted under occupation. Russian authorities have forcibly closed and seized numerous Protestant churches, including:

- **The ‘Grace’ Church** (led by Pastor Mikhail Britsin)
- **The Melitopol Christian Church** (led by Pastor Viktor Sergeyev)
- **The ‘Word of Life’ Church** (led by Pastor Dmytro Bodiu) in Melitopol, Zaporizhzhia Oblast

Pastor Britsin reports that at least **13 Protestant churches were shut down in Melitopol alone**. He also testified to being interrogated by the FSB and subjected to bullying.

Occupying authorities treat all Ukrainian religious communities that lack Russian state registration as **illegal**. Nevertheless, many believers continue to gather in secret, risking their lives to preserve their faith and connection to their Ukrainian church structures. This includes Orthodox parishes that reject affiliation with the ROC, Greek Catholics, Baptists, Adventists, and others.

These communities face court cases for ‘illegal missionary activity,’ the confiscation of church property, the seizure of religious literature—including Bibles—and other repressive measures. **Jehovah’s Witnesses** are also persecuted both in Crimea and in territories occupied after Russia’s 2022 invasion.

The Russian-occupied regions of Ukraine are among the most dangerous places in the world today for religious freedom and freedom of conscience. These violations are **not incidental**—they are part of a **systematic campaign of religious repression** carried out by the Russian state in close collaboration with the Russian Orthodox Church.

In this campaign, the ROC does not act as a passive participant but as an active **beneficiary and enforcer** of state policy, particularly in advancing Russification and suppressing dissent. Whether through propaganda, front-line presence, international manipulation, or participation in persecution, the ROC plays a central role in the dismantling of religious pluralism both inside Russia and in the territories it occupies.

Sources of Data:

1. Human Rights Without Frontiers — <https://hrwf.eu/>
2. Forum 18 News Service — <https://forum18.org/archive.php?country=10>
3. SOVA Center for Information and Analysis — <https://www.sova-center.ru/>
4. Thou Shalt Not Kill — Christians Against War — <https://shaltnotkill.info/>
5. Report: Religious Communities Under Pressure: Documenting Religious Persecution in Russia, 2022–2025, by Sergei Chapnin, Director of Communications, Orthodox Christian Studies Center, Fordham University — <https://www.settimananews.it/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/Chapnin.pdf>



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