

How Putin found God

The Russian president is hardly the pious type, but does the Orthodox Church have a hand in his determination to take Ukraine?

By Juliet Samuel, Sunday Telegraph, 3 April 2022



Putin takes a dip in the water during Orthodox Epiphany celebrations at lake Seliger, Tver region, Russia January 19, 2018

It was a sodden spring day in May 2009. A small group of men trooped solemnly across a leafy cemetery in central Moscow. The priest in flowing black robes was Archimandrite (Abbot) Tikhon Shevkunov of the Sretensky Monastery. Obliging, he held a black umbrella over his honoured guest, President Vladimir Putin.



Much of the graveyard was filled with victims of the Soviet secret police, the Cheka, but it was not they he had come to see. The president was there to pay his respects to a philosopher called Ivan Ilyin, whose body had on his orders been dug up in Switzerland four years before and flown 1,400 miles to be reinterred in Moscow. He laid a bouquet of red roses before the black granite headstone and stood with Tikhon a short time, regarding the grave. Then he left.

This week, across Russia, devastated families also gathered to honour the dead. They were burying young men killed fighting for Moscow in Ukraine. At one funeral witnessed by The Moscow Times, the priest spoke of the deceased, a lad in his 20s: “He fought against evil, Satanic spirits: Ukrainian Nazis, created by American multinational corporations.”

Ivan Ilyin, circa 1920 CREDIT: Heritage Images

The young man in the coffin was separated by 80 years from the remains of Ilyin in that Moscow cemetery, but according to the Kremlin's increasingly strident ideological creed, the dead shared one important feature: they were part of the same God-given mission to gather up the scattered lands of mother Russia and rebuild its Christian empire.

Putin doesn't strike most of us as the pious type. He wears a £10,500 coat, reportedly owns a £500 million superyacht and is known the world over for vaguely homoerotic, topless photoshoots. He is brutal to the point of being labelled a madman or a psychopath. He spent the first 16 years of his career fulfilling a childhood ambition to work for the KGB, the secret police of a regime that persecuted Christians and preached atheism. And he is, in the words of various Western leaders and scholars, a "war criminal". Yet somehow, this billionaire Soviet gangster has become a leader beloved by the Russian Orthodox Church, held up as an ideal by a messianic, neo-fascist movement called Eurasianism and presented by his propaganda machine as the man who will establish the Third Rome of Christendom in Russia.

Western analysis, trapped in its own worldview, has tended to focus on arguments about Nato, the EU, resources or spheres of influence in the search for Putin's rationale. But this misses that the war in Ukraine is a conflict with an overwhelmingly religious and cultural dimension, in which the Ukrainian government is cast as a malignant tool of Satanic and degenerate Western forces. The Russian takeover of this land was to be the start of a great revival of the ancient Russian civilisation, welcomed by its virtuous Slavic inhabitants, and signal a precipitous decline for the decadent, doomed West.



"The Russian Orthodox Church is a major force around what's happening in Ukraine," says Artyom Lukin, associate professor of international relations at Russia's Far Eastern Federal University. "Putin started his career as [a] KGB [man], but now he's closely affiliated to the Church... [He] wants to recreate not the Soviet Union, but the Russian Empire."

Putin attends an Orthodox Easter service at the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour in Moscow on May 2, 2021 CREDIT: Sergei Guneyev

Somehow, while most of the West wasn't paying attention, Russia's nostalgia for Soviet greatness merged into a longing for the imperial father-king, the tsar, and Putin duly transformed himself from a ruthless but boring state functionary into a modern approximation of the old autocrat: an infallible messenger of God in Aviators. But how did this happen, how did it help to justify a bloody invasion of Ukraine and what will happen now that the venture has stalled and Russia is teetering on the cusp of bankruptcy?

Growing up poor in a dingy Leningrad tower block, Putin spent his youth chasing rats around the stairwell and dreaming of a future as a KGB strongman. He joined the secret police straight out of university, but it was not exactly a 007 existence. His first posting was in Dresden, a relative backwater in Soviet East Germany.

Accounts differ as to what exactly he was doing there - grooming agents to smuggle Western technology, fostering the growth of anti-Western terrorists or more humdrum work. Whatever Putin was up to, it gave him a front row seat on the collapse of the Soviet Union. After witnessing the crumbling of East Germany's Soviet government, he returned to St Petersburg (then Leningrad) to see the Soviet motherland succumb to the same disease.

When and how he left the KGB has never been entirely clear, but Putin quickly made himself indispensable to a wide array of politicians and officials. He moved from a job working for Anatoly Sobchak, the St Petersburg deputy mayor seen at the time as a pro-democracy liberal, to a role at the Kremlin, where he won President Boris Yeltsin's favour through mastery of his brief and zealous loyalty.

But when Yeltsin passed on the reins in 2000, he handed over a country that had just been through a calamitous economic depression, during which its economy halved in size, inflation took off, the ruble was devalued and the state went bankrupt. This was to be the experience that many Russians now associate with their brief period of "democracy".

Still, Putin quickly disappointed his authoritarian fans by adopting a firmly pro-Western stance, in particular supporting the US invasion of Afghanistan after 9/11. Russia's economy, buoyed by a rising oil price, recovered, and US president George W Bush declared that he had peered into Putin's "soul" and seen a good man.



That same year, according to the Eurasia Daily Monitor run by the Jamestown Foundation, readers of Russia's Izvestia newspaper might have noted a more relevant take on Putin's soul given by Father Tikhon, the priest.

"Vladimir Putin is indeed an Orthodox Christian believer... who confesses, takes Communion and realises his responsibility to God," said Tikhon. "Vladimir [is] placed at the head of Russia by God's will."

Putin with Father Tikhon, said to be the man who brought Putin to Christianity and hears his confessions CREDIT: Sergei Karpukhin

Even back then, Father Tikhon was no ordinary, run-of-the-mill Orthodox priest. Rumoured to be the man who brought Putin to Christianity and hears his confessions, he was also a rising star of a new generation of conservative imperialists in the Church, who openly advocate a return to Russia's monarchist days. "He's a very conservative cleric with an imperial mindset," says Lukin.

Tikhon is too young to have been a player in the Soviet heyday, but he is in many ways a natural successor to a generation of clerics eager to downplay decades of collaboration with the communist regime. Indeed, in a disturbing mirror image of the way ex-KGB and military men have taken over Russia's government, the most senior official of the Russian Orthodox Church, Patriarch Kirill, is also rumoured to have been a KGB agent back in the day. According to an account given to the journalist Charles Clover by Father Gleb Yakunin, a liberal, anti-Soviet priest excommunicated in 1997, the Church "has become a hive of former collaborators, who see the Orthodox Church not as a way to remember [Soviet crimes], but as a way to forget".

One way of forgetting is to reach back beyond the Soviet era to a much older period of history. In that vein, in 2008 Father Tikhon released a documentary on the collapse of the Byzantine Empire, called *The Lesson of Byzantium*. The film purports to be a straightforward history of the empire, although in interviews Tikhon admitted that it is also "propaganda" aimed at giving Russians a place in history and a spiritual mission.

The 70-minute film argues that Byzantium collapsed primarily because it failed to stay true to the Orthodox faith and abandoned a highly centralised model of imperial control that stamped out nationalist separatism. Instead it succumbed to the oligarchy, Italian finance and corrupting Western notions about the primacy of the individual over the collective.

Still, the empire did pass on an invaluable treasure to the Russian people: their Orthodox Christianity. "It was upon this treasure our forebears founded not banks... or pawnshops," Tikhon preaches. "They founded Rus, the spiritual successor of Byzantium." The "forebear" to whom he refers is, in fact, Prince Volodymyr (or Vladimir) of Kiev, a Viking ruler of a region encompassing much of modern Ukraine, who was baptised by Byzantine priests in the 10th century. Ukraine, in this reading, is simply relabelled as ancient Russia.

Despite its obscure subject, Tikhon's film was a runaway success, reportedly sparking more than 500 articles, many hours of radio and TV coverage as well as conferences and speeches. Fans of the film declared that Moscow must rediscover an ancient tsarist tradition of seeing itself as the Third Rome of Christendom.



Tikhon, Putin and Patriarch Kirill in 2017 at the Cathedral of the Resurrection of Christ and the New Martyrs and Confessors of the Russian Church CREDIT: Alexei Druzhinin

By 2013, the year before his invasion of Crimea, Putin himself took part in a state-produced follow-up film called *The Second Christianisation of Rus*, which positioned Russia's post-Soviet surge of interest in Christianity as a second iteration of Volodymyr's original conversion to Eastern Orthodoxy. The next year, in the midst of Russia's annexation of Crimea, state TV aired a reading of an essay by Fyodor Dostoevsky chastising Slavic tribes who were ungrateful to mother Russia. In addition to being a brilliant novelist, Dostoevsky was also a committed monarchist who believed that Russia would one day reconquer the Byzantine capital Constantinople (modern-day Istanbul).

In truth, according to Peter Eltsov, a professor of security studies at the US National Defence University, this obsession with Byzantium was hardly an ancient tradition: "It's a 19th century invention." The idea of Russia's spiritual Byzantine roots took off in this period as an explicit bulwark against the break-up of empire, just as the notion of national identity was taking hold in Europe. As the anti-Western, monarchist philosopher Konstantin Leontiev argued: "Whether we like this Byzantine foundation or not, whether it is good or bad, it is the only secure anchor not only of Russian but of all-Slavic preservation."

In both Putin's 2021 essay and 2022 presidential address on the invasion of Ukraine, there are clear echoes of the same strategy, appealing to an ancient religious bond between the peoples of Russia and Ukraine as a justification for war: "Ukraine is not just a neighbouring country for us. It is an inalienable part of our own history, culture and spiritual space," Putin wrote in 2021. "Since time immemorial, the people living in the south west of what has historically been Russian land have called themselves Russians and Orthodox Christians."

The Eastern Orthodox Church, in other words, is a way to stitch the Russian Empire together.

The heritage of Byzantium Rus was not the only idea to emerge in the dying days of the tsarist era with the aim of countering the appeal of the Western nation-state. Alongside a soup of conservative, religious and exceptionalist ideas of Russia, a new breed of Russian fascism was being developed. And that is where we return to our disinterred friend, Ivan Ilyin.

Ilyin was a conservative philosopher exiled from communist Russia for his opposition to the Bolsheviks. He washed up in Berlin just as the new ideology of fascism was taking off in Italy and Germany. Ilyin saw in Mussolini and Hitler models for the reinvention of a new Russian tsarism, in which a strong leader could abolish the individuality of his people and bind them into one spiritual, collective whole, free of corruption and impurities.

Putin is clearly no philosopher, but of all the intellectuals in Russian history, it is Ilyin whom he quotes the most. According to the Yale historian Timothy Snyder, just as troops were being readied to invade Crimea in 2014, the Kremlin arranged for all of Russia's senior officials and regional governors to be sent a copy of Ilyin's *Our Tasks*, in which the philosopher predicts the emergence of a "national dictator" who will be "the living organ of Russia".

Today, the task of popularising this sort of messianic fascism falls to a movement called Eurasianism, propounded by a zealous supporter of Putin named Aleksandr Dugin, who appears with regularity on Russian TV screens. Russia must rediscover itself as a Eurasian civilisation, according to Dugin, which means that it must impose upon the continent a new political model that is collectivist, religious and autocratic. For this task, he maintains, conquest of the old Russian Empire is essential.

Like Ilyin, Dugin casts this battle in apocalyptic and moral terms. He claims that it falls to Russia to save the world from Western degeneracy and nihilism, evidenced by phenomena like gay marriage and the transgender debate. In this, Dugin is at one with the Russian Orthodox Church.

On March 6, 10 days after the invasion had begun, Patriarch Kirill gave a sermon calling the war “a metaphysical struggle”. It was essential for Russia to intervene, he said, to combat the “so-called values” offered by the West, in which “you have to have a Gay Pride parade” to be a member of the club.

Putin, in his presidential address on the eve of the war, likewise blamed the West for trying “to destroy our traditional values” and replace them with “attitudes that are directly leading to degradation and degeneration, because they are contrary to human nature”.

But the hostility to Gay Pride is not just ideological. The opposition to anything seen to undermine the family, like feminism or homosexuality, is mixed up with a more worldly anxiety that Professor Eltsov believes is driving the war: demographic change.



Like much of Europe, Russia is undergoing a significant demographic shift. Its Muslim population is having more babies than its Christian population and, by some projections, Russia could become a majority-Muslim country in the foreseeable future. By taking over Ukraine, using largely ethnic minority, non-Christian conscripts as cannon fodder, Eltsov says “the idea was to get a bunch - 40 million people - who are Slavs and Europeans”.

Putin with Patriarch Kirill, the most senior official of the Russian Orthodox Church, who is rumoured to have been a KGB agent back in the day

In his 2008 film on Byzantium, Tikhon had explicitly linked the failure to have children and the rise of abortion to the empire’s spiritual decline and “demographic problem”. The obvious result, he noted, while showing footage of a modern Istanbul student smoking a cigarette, was that the city succumbed to Sulton Mehmed, a homosexual 21-year-old, who, in his telling, demanded the 14-year-old son of its governor as a lover immediately after his conquest.

Aside from demography, the Church’s anxiety has been exacerbated further in recent years by a direct threat to its authority: a schism.

In 2018, the chief patriarch of the Eastern Orthodox Church, Bartholomew I of Constantinople, decided to recognise a new, independent Ukrainian Orthodox Church. At a stroke, Ukrainian Christians were taken out from under Russian religious authority, changing an arrangement that had existed for centuries. Patriarch Kirill immediately cut all ties with Constantinople - the very seat of Byzantine Christianity from which Russia supposedly derives its entire spiritual heritage.

In a letter written to fellow Orthodox churches in mid-March this year, Kirill blamed the West for the war and emphasised that “the peoples of Russia and Ukraine, who came from one Kievan baptismal font, are united by common faith, common saints and prayers, and share common historical fate”. Kirill and his fellow clerics believed that the Ukrainian government had deliberately engineered the schism, and began to push for measures to undo this calamity with increasing urgency.

The Church was not the only authority feeling threatened by developments outside Russia. Putin himself moved further and further away from the liberal values he had talked about in the 1990s in response to a series of challenges. At first, he cracked down on Russia’s oligarch-owned media to avoid criticism of his mistakes, like his poor handling of the 2001 sinking of the Kursk submarine, in which 118 crewmen died, and the security services’ mismanagement of a 2002 terrorist siege in a Moscow theatre, which resulted in 170 people dying.

After that, the Arab Spring and the colour revolutions spreading across Eastern Europe unsettled the aspiring dictator. Faced with the need to legitimise his rule and consolidate power, he turned to the Church and the useful hodgepodge of imperialist, autocratic ideas floating around Russian military and intellectual circles. It wasn’t long before his regime was televising footage of priests sprinkling holy water over missiles bound for Syria.

Unfortunately, he appears to have spent too much time drinking his own Kool-Aid. He convinced himself that the story told about the ancient, spiritual union of the Russian and Ukrainian peoples was true. If Russia were bold enough to regather the land, the lost Russians of Kiev would soon come flocking back to the bosom of the motherland.

It hasn’t worked out that way. Vladimir Milov, a Russian opposition politician and supporter of Alexei Navalny, believes the sanctions now hitting the Russian economy pose a direct threat to Putin’s power. “Empty shelves in Russia are back. This will have a profound effect on Putin. He’s never confronted a difficulty like this and his public approval is down,” he told an event held by Chatham House recently. “A tsunami is coming that will be very hard for him to weather. Very soon, people will stop talking about [Ukrainian] ‘Nazis’ and Kiev and start talking about empty shelves.”

Still, there is not yet a general sense in Russia that the war and its consequences threaten Putin’s grip on the country. Sergey Utkin, a scholar of international relations at the Russian Academy of Sciences, is one of the few Russian academics brave enough openly to state his opposition to the war. But he does not believe speaking out will change anything. Hostility to the West is too deeply embedded to dissipate and ordinary Russians will simply blame NATO for the impact of sanctions, he believes. “What’s happening is catastrophic for Russia. It’s not opposition to what’s happening, but the nature of what’s happening that will reveal it was a terrible idea,” he says.

Nor are Western ideas likely to make inroads. Utkin used to call himself a liberal, but he has found “realist” models of international relations, like Samuel Huntington’s Clash of Civilisations, better predict the course of events. Similarly, Lukin says he is disillusioned by Western hypocrisy over Iraq and its mismanagement of Covid: “I used to be a pro-western guy but now I am very disappointed with the West... I’m thinking more and more about the China model as most suitable.”

Over in the US, however, Eltsov, a native Russian who grew up in Leningrad, sees the war as a pivotal turning point not just for Putin, but for Russia as we know it. His 2019 book, *The Long Telegram 2.0*, argues that for all of the weird and wonderful dogmas promoted by the Kremlin,

pg. 7

from Byzantium Rus to Eurasian fascism, at the base of it all is “absolute cynicism”. There is no truly unified Russian identity that could be held together by these ideas if the region weren’t ruled by a brutal autocrat, he argues, and sooner or later - sooner, given the impact of sanctions - he thinks Russia is likely to break up.

The prospect is surely stomach-churning, I suggest, given that Moscow controls the world’s second-biggest arsenal of nukes in the world. But Eltsov points out that a similar problem was resolved after the break-up of the Soviet Union. “It’s solvable,” he says, “but it’s frightening.” The future, he believes, lies not with Putin’s new Holy Russian Empire, but with the fragmentation of Eurasia. “Russia is over,” he says. “It’s the beginning of the end.”

© *Sunday Telegraph*