



Richard Ottinger (ed.)

RELIGIOUS ELEMENTS IN THE RUSSIAN WAR OF AGGRESSION AGAINST UKRAINE

*Propaganda, Religious Politics and Pastoral Care,
2014-2024*

ibidem

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Introduction

The Russian War of Aggression Against Ukraine: Not a War of Religion, but a Religious War

Richard Ottinger

The war that Russia has been waging against Ukraine since 2014 and dramatically escalated with the invasion in 2022 is not a religious war. Nevertheless, religious elements play a remarkable but often overlooked role in the genesis and course of the war. Isolated studies of religious facets of the war have already been conducted, but a systematic overview of the various religious aspects of the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine has yet to be compiled. This anthology aims to close this research gap and offers an interdisciplinary overview.

In the first article, theologian Johannes Oeldemann focuses on Ukraine and highlights that the conflict with Russia had already begun on a religious-political level long before the 2022 invasion. With the founding of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) against the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC), which belongs to the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC), a church dispute broke out in Ukraine in 2018 that remains unresolved to this day. Despite distancing itself from Russia and condemning the invasion, the UOC has not been able to convince its critics of the opposite, who continue to accuse it of loyalty to Russia. The result of this persistent mistrust is evident in a draft bill that contains a ban on religious organisations whose centre is located in an 'aggressor state'. This was adopted at second reading on 20 August 2024. Oeldemann denies the accusation frequently voiced by international observers of a comprehensive restriction of the human right to freedom of religion and belief in Ukraine, but points out the negative consequences of state interference in church matters and the danger to social cohesion.

Political scientist Andreas Heinemann-Grüder examines the power of the 'Russki-Mir ideology', which is disseminated via networks controlled by the Kremlin. The aim of this—deliberately vague—religiously induced propaganda is to bind people living outside Russia to the Russian state and its ideology. The various narratives of the 'Russian world' are held together by anti-Western justifications for the invasion and ultimately the aim of weakening the West by actively dividing their societies. The analysis shows the connections between the ROC and the Kremlin as well as their function in the context of spreading Russian propaganda.

The third article focuses on the consequences of the Ukrainian church dispute and the Russian war of aggression for world Orthodoxy. From an ecumenical perspective, Eastern Church expert Thomas Bremer shows that the impact of the conflict between churches has led to a split in the Orthodox Christian churches as a whole, far beyond the country's borders. The fault lines in the assessment of the church dispute and the invasion largely align with the old patriarchates (Alexandria, Antioch, Jerusalem) taking different positions. With regard to the communion of the world Orthodoxy, the unilateral withdrawal of the ROC is striking. Almost all other Orthodox churches remain in communion with each other despite their sometimes decidedly different stances on the war. Bremer's contextualisation makes it clear that Russia's invasion is part of a multi-dimensional aggression that began long before 2014 or 2022.

The Chief Rabbi of Moscow in exile, Pinchas Goldschmidt, describes the start of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 as the end of the renaissance of Russian Jewry. This paradigm shift for Jewish life in Russia is characterised by explosive anti-Semitism and, as a result, a mass exodus of more than a third of all Jewish Russians. He describes in detail the shift in power between the Jewish actors in Russia after the start of the invasion and the growing tensions between Russia and Israel. These developments sharply contrast with a Ukraine led by a Jewish president and in which people of the Jewish faith are naturally protected by the human right to freedom of religion and belief.

The journalist Ludwig Ring-Eifel provides a snapshot analysis of the Vatican's diplomacy in the context of the war. He notes that, unlike his predecessors during the Cold War, the Pope did not act as an ally of the West. He attributes this to the fact that Francis does not appear to see Russia as an ideological opponent. Whereas the Soviet Union was primarily atheist, Russia today, with the help of the ROC, is presenting itself aggressively as Christian. Instead of clearly naming the aggressor, Francis views the war more from the perspective of a 'prophet of world peace' and a 'world war warner'. Ring-Eifel examines the Pope's use or non-use of the Vatican infrastructure and describes the unusual situation in which the Pope's statements have to be regularly re-explained, from the press spokesman to the nuncio in Kiev. According to Ring-Eifel, it seems unlikely that the Pope will change his position in the near future.

In the following article, legal scholar Vladyslav Zaiets offers a comprehensive overview regarding the activities of often overlooked religious communities in Ukraine. He is particularly interested in the endeavours of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic, Roman Catholic and Protestant churches as well as the Muslim, Jewish and Buddhist communities in the country. It makes it clear that the smaller religious communities in Ukraine also make an important contribution to pastoral care and stand up for social cohesion. They enjoy high levels of public trust and are well connected internationally. The article also visualises the often overlooked religious heterogeneity of Ukraine and interprets the activities of smaller religious communities in the country as an integral part of Ukraine's support and reconstruction efforts. The Russian war of aggression also becomes recognisable here as a systemic struggle of religious freedom against religious unfreedom.

Theologians Joshua T. Searle and Oleksandr Geychenko also support this interpretation of a systemic conflict in their article on the free churches in Ukraine and Russia. In Ukraine, Free Church congregations can live out their claim to freedom, whereas in Russia they represent an oppressed minority which, unlike the ROC, is not identified with the Russian national image. The authors emphasise the role of the Ukrainian free churches in the creation of

Ukraine's new national and European identity. They cite the genuinely Free Church rejection of external control as the reason for the new resonance with the public and the support of the Ukrainian population, which took on a new meaning in the context of the Russian attack. Searle and Geychenko argue that the war between Russia and Ukraine also represents a conflict between a self-determined 'public Christianity' and an instrumentalised 'state-sponsored Christianity'.

The article by political scientist and Islamic scholar Andreas Jacobs also focuses on state-sponsored religion. He explains the foreign and domestic policy impact of Russian Islam policy and the contribution of Islam in the context of the invasion. Chechen President Ramzan Kadyrov stands at the core of Russia's Islam policy. His specific interpretation of Islam ('Kadyrovism') helps the Putin regime to control domestic political opponents and, analogous to the 'Russki Mir' concept, to proclaim Islam as constitutive for Russia and to provide fighters for the front. The Islamist and nationalist propaganda unites the anti-Western narrative. At the same time, this strategy also carries risks for Russia, as this specifically Russian Islam provokes jihadist terrorists and fuels internal Muslim rivalries.

Theologian Regina Elsner compares Ukrainian and Russian military chaplaincy on the front line. Interreligiousness and religious freedom are crucial for military chaplaincy in Ukraine. In addition, the role of chaplains and soldiers is strictly delineated in Ukraine, as chaplains are not allowed to serve in the armed forces and the promotion of patriotism is not part of their remit. In contrast, chaplaincy in Russia is characterised by a theology of war in which religious freedom plays no role, the ROC is prioritised and the focus is on the service to the fatherland combined with constant self-sacrifice. Elsner works out the structural differences between the opponents' views of the world and image of man. Her analysis highlights the front between Russian Orthodox imperialist propaganda and multi-religious support for the soldiers.

This anthology concludes with the ethicist Franz-Josef Bormann's examination of the connection between the traditional doctrine of 'just war' and the Russian invasion. Bormann clarifies how under-complex the equation of Christianity with pacifism is and points out the frequently repeated mistake of proclaiming an alleged contradiction between 'ius ad bellum' and peace ethics. According to Bormann, the model of just peace is neither a contradiction nor an alternative to the doctrine of just war. On the contrary, the former complements the latter with elements of a policy that prevents violence. The frequent accusation of Western double standards in addressing conflicts that take place in the immediate vicinity can be classified with Bormann's reference to the concept of the 'ordo caritatis'. By distinguishing between self-defence and emergency aid presented here, he provides ethical tools for an in-depth examination of the Russian invasion and the support of the attacked.

The variety of contributions in this anthology illustrates how religion functions in the context of war as a propaganda tool, a source of motivation and a source of hope. The religious elements in the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine are thus exemplary of the different roles played by religion worldwide. However, the anthology is also indicative of a continuously secularising West, which primarily emphasises the negative impact of religion and often overlooks or at least underestimates the potential of religion to pacify societies and international relations. At a time when signs of a possible shift in US policy towards Ukraine are emerging and when Volodymyr Zelensky is talking publicly for the first time about the possibility of ceding territory, it seems necessary to reflect again on the creative potential of religion for Ukraine's future. The high reputation, the proximity to the people in the country and the ability to address existential issues make churches and religious communities in Ukraine predestined partners for the management of a ceasefire and possibly a post-military conflict. An institutional starting point could be the 'All-Ukrainian Council of Churches and