

THE RUSSIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH AND CONTESTATIONS OVER HISTORY IN CONTEMPORARY RUSSIA

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Abstract: This article investigates the role that the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) plays in the politics of history in contemporary Russia. I suggest that the picture we are looking at is rather complex as the ROC is not a monolithic entity. While the ROC's top leadership appears to be united with the Kremlin in their common intent to uphold a "patriotic" and state-centered historical narrative, certain segments of the Church and the Russian secular establishment might differ in their appraisal of various episodes of the country's past. The article will demonstrate that the ROC doesn't have a unified and consolidated position on how to treat the controversial past, in particular the Soviet period. Rather, there are several church subcultures whose historical interpretations tend to clash. Yet, ultimately, it is the Patriarchy's stance that defines the official position of the Church. In this sense, the ROC hierarchy's willing participation in the Kremlin-led attempt at forging a single "true" historical canon makes church-state relations in Russia ever more problematic. Both sides stand to lose due to their excessive coming closer together. The Church's subservience to the state is likely going to cost it dearly in terms of moral stature and prestige. The state's ruling elites' casting of Orthodoxy

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as a “national religion” is counter-productive, if not outright dangerous in a multicultural and poly-confessional country.

Russia officially designated the year 2012 the Year of History. So it would seem proper that in early November 2012, on the eve of Russia’s Day of People’s Unity – a new national holiday introduced in 2005 to replace the November 7 celebrations of the lackluster Day of Accord and Conciliation (which itself was a post-Soviet replacement of the holiday marking the Great October Socialist Revolution) and to commemorate instead the ousting of the Poles from Moscow in 1612 as well as the Orthodox religious feast of the Icon of Our Lady of Kazan – the Moscow Patriarchate jumped at the chance to give a history lesson to the populace.

Speaking on November 3, in “The Pastor’s Word” television program on Channel One, Patriarch Kirill addressed the country’s dramatic experience in the final days of the *Smuta* – the Time of Troubles – in 1612. Yet the Patriarch’s treatment of past events betrayed a strong proclivity towards the crude instrumentalization of history. What was designed as a history lesson by the spiritual authority proved to be a perfect example of the forging of a “usable past” keyed to the vision – and the immediate political interests – of Russia’s temporal powers-that-be.

Having stated that the defeat of the Poles 400 years ago meant the “deliverance of our country and our people from perdition,” Kirill mused on how it was at all possible that the enemy managed to reach Moscow and enter the Kremlin without facing any serious resistance. At the heart of the 17th-century Russian catastrophe, according to him, was the betrayal of the elites. “Polish armies invaded the Russian land,” said Kirill.

But who invited them to Moscow? Who opened up this path to them? It was the [Russian] boyars, the elites who believed that the coming of [Polish] Prince Wladyslaw to the Muscovite throne would be a kind of modernization project for Russia.¹

Those traitorous elements of the Russian upper class allegedly held that the new power, being Western, would be more efficient and better educated; it would bring along a better organized and better equipped army, European level of education and culture as well as a “Western interpretation of Christianity.” In a word, concluded Kirill, “Many people in Russia tended to see all this as a way toward modernizing the country.” But this

¹ “Patriarkh o Smute i sovremennosti: Pochemu russkie liudi soznatel’no poshli na predatel’stvo,” *Pravoslavie i mir*, 3 November 2012, <http://www.pravmir.ru/patriarx-o-smute-i-sovremennosti-pochemu-russkie-lyudi-soznatelno-poshli-na-predatelstvo-video/>

was, of course, a dangerous delusion:

The best people in Moscow and in Russia at large understood that this would lead not to modernization, not to progress... but to the loss of sovereignty, loss of independence and [ultimately] to the disappearance of Russia.

Remarkably, Kirill went on, those past events have many parallels to present-day developments. In contemporary Russia, noted the Patriarch, there are also many people who think it's perfectly okay to "borrow alien models of socio-political development, to repudiate one's own originality and faith which... is deemed too retrograde, too conservative, an obstacle for the development of the country and the people." Today we also encounter "some people, who, not unlike certain Muscovite Boyars, set forth unacceptable scenarios for the modernization of our life and for the improvement of the living conditions of our people." For Kirill, there is only one correct response to such attitudes: "false ideas" should be uprooted. "Today," he said, "we should do our utmost to prevent *smuta* (confusion) in the people's minds."

It is noteworthy that speaking on the eve of the day when Orthodox Christians celebrate one of their most venerated icons – Our Lady of Kazan – Kirill mentioned both the icon itself and the Virgin Mary only briefly. Rather than being a true "pastor's word," his address, as some commentators noted, was the speech of a politician who treats history as merely one of the instruments in his propaganda toolkit and deploys it in a way that appears to have become mainstream among Russia's governing elites.² Hence the peculiar vocabulary of Kirill's address, flavored with such notions as *smuta*, *suverenitet*, betrayal, loss of independence, modernization vs. tradition, and patriots of Russia vs. rootless cosmopolitans kowtowing to the West. One might even wonder how he managed to resist the temptation to weave into his narrative the notion of "foreign agents." But the latter might well be represented by perfidious Russian Boyars – both the old and the new.

The same salient statist approach to the interpretation of Russian history can be easily perceived in Kirill's other numerous official pronouncements and texts.³ The ways the Russian Orthodox Church's

² See Vladislav Mal'tsev, "Tserkov' otkrestilas' ot modernizatsii," *NG-Religii*, 7 November 2012, http://religion.ng.ru/facts/2012-11-07/1_modernizacia.html

³ "Patriarch Kirill: Russkaia istoriia trebuet zashchity," *Pravoslavie i mir*, 1 October 2012, <http://www.pravmir.ru/patriarx-kirill-russkaya-istoriya-trebuet-zashchity/>; "Rech' Sviatishhego Patriarkha Kirilla na tseremonii prisuzhdeniia stepeni honoris causa Moskovskogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta," *Patriarchia.ru*, 28 September 2012, <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/2496952.html>

hierarchy and the Kremlin leadership choose to “conceptualize” Russia’s distant and recent past seem so similar that it is difficult to see daylight between them. In both interpretations, Russia appears as a distinct civilization quite apart from the West, with its own “cultural and moral code,” and a peculiar social and political system that privileges state interests over those of the individual. Solidarity and unity are seen as the powerful antidotes against chaos and discord: the most recent occasion in Russian history when the former triumphed over the latter occurred in the beginning of the new millennium when the *smuta* of the 1990s was replaced by stability and order. This was, in Patriarch Kirill’s words, a true “miracle,” worked with God’s help by none other than Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin.⁴

This article intends to investigate whether there is indeed a “meeting of the minds” – a kind of true “symphony” in church-state relations – as far as their respective views on history are concerned. I am going to suggest that the picture we are looking at is rather complex as the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) is not a monolithic entity. While the ROC’s top leadership appears to be united with the Kremlin in their common intent to uphold a “patriotic” and state-centered historical narrative, certain segments of the Church and the Russian secular establishment might differ in their appraisal of various episodes of the country’s past. The article will demonstrate that the ROC doesn’t have a unified and consolidated position on how to treat the controversial past, in particular the Soviet period. Rather, there are several church subcultures whose historical interpretations tend to clash. Yet ultimately it is the Patriarchy’s stance that defines the official position of the Church. In this sense, the ROC’s hierarchy’s willing participation in the Kremlin-led attempt at forging a single “true” historical canon makes church-state relations in Russia ever more problematic. Both sides stand to lose due to their excessive coming closer together. The Church’s subservience to the state – clearly reflected in the ROC’s senior clerics’ helping Russia’s secular rulers achieve historical legitimacy and in their reluctance to act as an independent moral force – is likely going to cost it dearly in terms of moral stature and prestige. The state’s ruling elites’ casting of Orthodoxy as a “national religion” is counter-productive, if not outright dangerous in a multicultural and poly-confessional country.

Putin the Historian

Russia’s ruling elites have a peculiar relationship with the past. Like most politicians they are mainly concerned with the present. They are interested in the past – and, more specifically, in the way it is represented – only in

⁴ “Obrashchenie Patriarkha Kirilla k V. V. Putinu,” *Pravoslavie i mir*, 9 February 2012, <http://www.pravmir.ru/vystuplenie-patriarxa-kirilla-na-vstreche-v-v-putina-s-liderami-traditsionnyx-religioznyx-obshhin-rossii/>

as much as it helps them to pursue their political ends. “Politicians who can convert past glories into symbolic capital in the present can not only woo supporters but also give an aura of legitimacy to their claim to be worthy wielders of power.”⁵ Moreover, politicians’ interest in the past usually fluctuates over time, coming in ebbs and flows. The Perestroika years saw an unprecedented upsurge in the interest in history – a veritable obsession with the past, in particular with the so-called “blank spots” of the Soviet period – as the opponents of the communist regime were keen to use historical exposes of Lenin’s and Stalin’s crimes to undermine the regime’s legitimacy. Yet the tide turned even prior to the Soviet Union’s implosion. Some scholars have noted that exploration of the Stalinist past “peaked” before 1991 and was on the wane following the Soviet collapse.⁶

There are several reasons why the tidal wave of soul-searching and truth-telling about the “dark past” started to fade away precisely at the moment when the glorious “victory over communism” was achieved. First, the harsh realities of the “wild capitalist” present forced the majority of Russians to shift their focus away from reflections on the past and toward crafting their survival strategies. Second, Russia’s victorious “democrats” believed – wrongly, as the subsequent developments have demonstrated – that the avalanche of “anti-Soviet” revelations in the late 1980s immunized the Russians against any Stalinist delusions. Furthermore, Yeltsin and his entourage considered that state-sponsored propaganda – be it a national ideology or a politicized version of the past – is an attribute of totalitarian regimes, an attribute that the builders of the “democratic New Russia” definitely did not need.⁷ Finally, and most importantly, the “Yeltsin democrats,” keen to bring Russia back onto the “highway of (Western) civilization,” came to perceive the Soviet past as a blind alley, a kind of historical aberration that forced Russia to veer away from the universal path of human progress. For Russia to become a “normal country” and “join the West,” the Soviet past should be viewed as an abnormal rupture in the country’s historical path and allowed to slip into oblivion. Thus, retrospectively, the late 1980s condemnations of Stalinism turned out to be a short-lived campaign whose course was defined by the immediate political aims of the “architects of Perestroika.” There have been no serious and comprehensive public debates leading to the understanding of collective responsibility for what had happened in 1917-1991.⁸

⁵ Kathleen E. Smith. 2002. *Mythmaking in the New Russia: Politics and Memory during the Yeltsin Era*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, p. 4.

⁶ Kathleen E. Smith. 1996. *Remembering Stalin’s Victims: Popular Memory and the End of the USSR*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press.

⁷ This belief in total de-ideologization was, of course, illusory, as Yeltsin’s new-found anti-communism and the critique of hegemonic ideology are, in themselves, an ideology of sorts.

⁸ Kathleen E. Smith. 2004. “Whither Anti-Stalinism?” *Ab Imperio*, no. 4: 433-448; Dina

To be sure, the political battles of the 1990s and the formidable obstacles encountered in the process of bringing Russia back into the “family of civilized countries” changed the situation. Having narrowly defeated its communist opponent in the 1996 presidential election, the Yeltsin camp arrived at the conclusion that there was an urgent need for some unifying idea that might help rally the nation around the powers-that-be. Speaking to David Remnick in the spring of 1996, Georgii Satarov, a Yeltsin advisor who would soon be charged with the task of elaborating the Russian national idea, made a revealing remark:

When totalitarianism was being destroyed, the idea of ideology was being destroyed, too. The idea was formed that a national idea was a bad thing. But the baby was thrown out with the bath water. Our Kremlin polls show that people miss this.⁹

By the time Vladimir Putin replaced the enfeebled Boris Yeltsin as Russia’s president in 2000, the governing elites were fully convinced that the “symbolic disorder of the country’s identity” or the “historic chaos” characteristic of the 1990s had to come to an end.¹⁰ The elites came to appreciate the usefulness of a “usable past” and were ready to deploy history as a powerful policy tool to forge broad coalitions and shape group identities. For Putin personally, as one astute analysis has noted recently, “the interpretation and reinterpretation of history is a crucial matter.”¹¹ According to a number of biographical accounts, history was Putin’s favorite subject in school, and he appears to have retained a keen interest in history to the present day. If we are to believe the president’s press secretary Dmitry Peskov, Putin remains a voracious reader, devouring scores of books on Russian history.¹²

Khapaeva. 2004 “Rossiiskoe goticheskoe obshchestvo,” *Russkii zhurnal*, 12 April, <http://www.russ.ru/pole/Rossiiskoe-goticheskoe-obschestvo>

⁹ David Remnick. 1996. “Hammer, Sickie, and Book,” *New York Review of Books*, May 23, <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/1996/may/23/hammer-sickle-and-book/?pagination=false>

¹⁰ Miguel Vazquez Linan. 2010. “History as a Propaganda Tool in Putin’s Russia,” *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 43, p. 167.

¹¹ Fiona Hill and Clifford G. Gaddy. 2012. “Putin and the Uses of History,” *National Interest*, no. 1, <http://nationalinterest.org/article/putin-the-uses-history-6276?page=show>

¹² Guy Faulconbridge and Gleb Bryanski. 2011. “Putin Invokes History’s Lions for Return to Kremlin,” *Reuters*, 1 November, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/11/01/us-russia-putin-heroes-idUSTRE7A024W20111101>. Remarkably, when the Russian Historical Society was “re-established” in June 2012 after an almost 80 year-long hiatus, Putin gave his consent to become head of the Society’s Board of Trustees. See Alyona Pol’skikh. 2012. “Uchrezhdeno Rossiiskoe istoricheskoe obshchestvo,” *Russkii mir*, June 20, <http://www.ruskiimir.ru/ruskiimir/ru/news/common/news31142.html>

But Putin, of course, is not just a modest student of history. He seems to aspire, as Fiona Hill and Clifford Gaddy argue, to be also a “manufacturer and manipulator of history.” In this tricky business of manufacturing and manipulating “useful history” Putin appears to be relying on his skills as a former case officer. What does a regular case officer usually do? He identifies, recruits, and runs agents, or, put another way, he seeks to win useful people over to his side so that they can serve his cause. As president, Putin cannot “recruit” Russian citizens on an individual basis. That’s how history comes into play: by crafting historical narrative, Putin hopes to co-opt broad social groups.

He determines which groups’ history is part of the inclusive myth and shows which groups are outside the collective history. This is a powerful tool. It allows for a definition of the us and the them, the nashi versus the chuzhiye.¹³

As political and social polarization is growing in Russia – the process reflected in the rise of the protest movement and in the general political stirring of wide segments of the population – the Kremlin appears to be seeking to consolidate what came to be known as the “silent Putin majority” and co-opt into this core support group as many people as possible. To achieve this goal, Russia’s governing elite is likely going to resort to experimentation with “national ideology” and manipulation of history ever more aggressively. Within this context, Putin’s December 12, 2012, state-of-the-nation speech is very symptomatic. The lexicon of the politician who is widely seen as a cool pragmatist (if not outright cynic) was heavily laced with the notions of spirituality, values and moral norms. Overall, “ideology” appeared to be a dominant leitmotif of what was meant to be viewed as a program for the new presidential term.¹⁴ Nikolai Zlobin, a Washington-based political analyst, has even come up with the concept that each of Vladimir Putin’s presidential terms had its own “governing idea.” The first was mainly about politics, as the Kremlin was striving to consolidate Russia’s “state sovereignty” and restore governability by forging the so-called “vertical of power.” The second was about economics as the Russian leadership was largely preoccupied with building state capitalism – beefing up the muscle of the country’s state-run energy majors with the aim of turning Russia into an “energy superpower.” Putin 3.0, Zlobin suggests, will be about ideology. In his third term, the Russian president

¹³ Hill and Gaddy, “Putin.” For a more detailed discussion, see their new book *Mr. Putin: Operative in the Kremlin*. Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2012.

¹⁴ See Vladimir Putin. 2012. “Poslanie Prezidenta Federal’nomu Sobraniyu,” Kremlin.ru, December 12, <http://www.kremlin.ru/news/17118>

will be seeking to consolidate his power in the present and secure his legacy for the future. Realization of these tasks will thus define his “moral and historic” stage.¹⁵

Zlobin’s scheme of the evolution and succession of Putin’s various “stages” is probably too neat to reflect a much more complex reality “on the ground.” Yet the observation that the Kremlin is increasingly focusing its gaze on ideology and history is correct. As Russia’s relations with the West continue to sour and, domestically, the legitimacy of the current political regime is being eroded while Kremlin rule is being challenged from below, we appear to be witnessing a momentous shift in the Russian governing elites’ approach to values and ideals. For the last two decades, Moscow’s official position was that it shared the West’s basic liberal values. If its interpretation of these values oftentimes differed from Western understandings it was mainly due to Russia’s special conditions. These days, however, this position seems to have been abandoned.¹⁶ Now the Kremlin has opted to uphold what it calls the “traditional national values” epitomized in the extremely opaque notion of Russian “spirituality” and vaguely defined “inner strength” found in Russia’s “thousand-year history.”

As mentioned above, Putin’s turning to history – not unlike similar practices of most politicians worldwide – is highly instrumental. The Kremlin ideologues’ task is to conceptualize Russia’s historical path in such a way so as to demonstrate that Russia’s trajectory differed markedly from that of the West and that the values and principles underlying the “Russian civilization” are home-grown values formed and shaped by centuries of Russia’s history. A good example of such conceptualization is a special issue of the magazine *Ekspert* that came out under the generic title “Russia: Five Centuries of Empire.” This publication, some observers believe, has become “a kind of barometer of the ideas of [Russia’s] ruling classes as well as the intellectual elite that serves the powers-that-be.”¹⁷ The issue’s editorial opened up with a programmatic statement: anyone who reads all the materials in this thematic collection would come to the conclusion that “Russia has developed and evolved as a *very special civilization*.”¹⁸

At the heart of Russia’s uniqueness and distinctness is its past, in which the country had to face choices quite different from Europe’s. “Russia had no choice between being an empire or a ‘normal European

¹⁵ “Russian Politics: A New Ideology for Political Ends,” *Economist*, December 15, 2012.

¹⁶ Dmitri Trenin et al. 2012. *The Russian Awakening*. Moscow: Carnegie Moscow Center, p. 4.

¹⁷ Yuri Afanasyev. 2008. “My – ne raby?” *Kontinent*, no. 138, <http://magazines.russ.ru/kontinent/2008/138/af11.html>

¹⁸ “Neprostaia sud’ba imperii,” *Ekspert*, no. 1, 2008, <http://expert.ru/expert/2008/1/>

democratic state.’ The choice was to be an empire or a colony.’¹⁹ Such a statement implies an important corollary: if Russia’s only alternative has been submission to foreign conquest or political upheaval, some forms of authoritarian rule could become inevitable. And here is how the Kremlin makes use of the “usable past” in asserting the legitimacy of the existing political system. “*Russian* democracy,” Putin contended in his state-of-the-nation address, “is the power of precisely the *Russian* people with its *own* traditions of popular self-government – and not the realization of standards imposed on us from the outside.”²⁰ For sure, fostering the notion of the Russian *Sonderweg* has been made easier by the social and political crisis in Europe as the ongoing turmoil within the European Union undermines the appeal of the European model and gives rise to skepticism about the norms and values upon which the entire European project is based.

The Kremlin and the Patriarchate: Seeing Eye to Eye?

There’s no question that the Kremlin’s official endorsement of the notion of a “Russian special way” and the championing of conservative elements in Russia’s national tradition appeal to the ROC’s hierarchy. In fact, celebrating “Russian traditional ways” and the vision of the “Russian civilization” as an eternal spiritual and political opponent of the West are the two main cornerstones of what can be described as the ROC’s historiosophic position. Calls to revive national traditions and return to Russia’s “original” forms of social life and cultural norms constitute a powerful theme constantly invoked in the numerous writings and sermons of the ROC’s top clerics. The bottom line of their argument is this: it is absolutely futile to look for a national idea somewhere overseas – in Western Europe or elsewhere. The Russian national idea lies in Russia’s glorious past. It is only when the Russians fully embrace the basic principles of national life, formulated at the time when their Orthodox faith was strong and pure, that they will be able to experience national revival. In the words of the late Patriarch Aleksii II,

In Russia’s history, which is more than a thousand years long, the main developments in church and state life have been basically the same flesh and blood. And today, as it had been in the distant past, Russia is being put together and built up on the basis of our fathers’ faith... It is precisely in the loyalty to our traditional spiritual path that the hope for a better future is rooted.²¹

¹⁹ Pavel Bykov, “Rossiia – pessimistam,” *Ekspert*, no. 1, 2008, <http://expert.ru/expert/2008/1/>

²⁰ Putin, “Poslanie Prezidenta Federal’nomu Sobraniuu.” Emphasis added.

²¹ Aleksii quoted in Vladimir, Archbishop of Tashkent and Central Asia. 2001. *Slovo rast-*

Patriarch Kirill echoes this idea. Speaking in September 2012 at a Moscow State University conference entitled “From Ancient Rus’ to the Russian Federation: A History of Russian Statehood,” Kirill dwelled at length on the significance of what he called the “foundations of the tradition of spiritual and cultural continuity.” Tradition, he argued impassionedly, is not something outmoded, unwieldy, cumbersome and basically useless. Tradition is the main conduit facilitating the transmission of values between generations.

The attempts to raze everything to the ground – including the destruction of tradition – and then build a new world upon the debris usually lead to nothing good and brings a nation right to the threshold of spiritual catastrophe. Russia’s history in the 20th century is evidence of this.²²

“A decent future,” Kirill contended, “can only be created on firm historic foundations.” In this sense, he concluded, “history is not merely the science of studying the past.”²³

As for the notion of “Russian civilization” that has become quite popular with Russia’s governing elites, it is itself a brainchild of the ROC’s ideologues. This concept was introduced into the church lexicon by Kirill when he was still Metropolitan of Smolensk and head of the Patriarchate’s influential Department for External Church Relations. In his and other Orthodox churchmen’s understanding, the superiority and uniqueness of “Russian civilization” mean above all its distinctness and superiority vis-à-vis the West.²⁴ The “Russian civilization” is superior to the Western one, the ROC’s ideologues argue, simply by virtue of its richer and more diverse cultural inheritance. Thus, according to Kirill, Russia belongs to the Wider Europe as it shares the latter’s two main cultural pillars – “the Greek and Roman philosophical tradition, and Biblical revelation.” These important elements of Russian culture were bestowed to the Ancient Rus’ by Byzantium, making it part of a sprawling European cultural sphere.

Yet while the Russians became the cultural and spiritual successors of Byzantium, they were striving throughout many centuries to carefully preserve their Slavic

vorennoe liubov’iu, Moscow: Moscow Patriarchate, p. 93.

²² “Rech’ Sviateishego Patriarkha Kirilla na tseremonii prisuzhdeniia stepeni honoris causa Moskovskogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta,” Patriarchia.ru, September 28, 2012, <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/2496952.html>

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Sergei Filatov, “Russkaia Pravoslavnaia Tserkov’ v poiskakh kul’turno-esteticheskogo natsional’nogo ideala,” in Wil van den Bercken and Jonathan Sutton, eds. 2005. *Aesthetics as a Religious Factor in Eastern and Western Christianity*. Leuven: Peeters Publishers, p. 327.

originality. The civilization whose foundations were laid by the genius and work of brothers Saints Cyril and Methodius harmoniously unites the European cultural and intellectual legacy with the Orthodox spirituality as well as with the Slavic ways and attitudes.²⁵

As Russia constitutes a distinct and highly developed civilization in its own right, there are absolutely no reasons why the Russians should be suffering from an inferiority complex and hell-bent on “catching up” with the West. Within this context, the notion of the “European way” of development should be understood as a mechanical reproduction of Western political and cultural models. However, warns Kirill,

Aping and copying are always inferior to [creating] the original as these lack genuine originality, a true authorship. With very few exceptions, the quality of a copy is lower than that of the original. Besides, he who creates a copy puts himself in a subordinate position vis-à-vis the author of the original... That’s why building a civilization on the basis of aping means defining one’s development in such a way that it will always be lagging behind those who created (and continue to create) the original. For adults to remain under lifelong tutelage is a dangerous proposition.²⁶

Furthermore, the concept of “Russian civilization” is skillfully deployed by the ROC’s hierarchy to adapt the controversial Soviet period as an inalienable element of the overall Russian legacy. For this tricky operation, a thesis advanced by Aleksii II – that in the course of Russian history the main developments in the church and state life have been “the same flesh and blood” – is key. It appears to imply that the *entire* history of the Russian people – from the baptism of St Vladimir up to the present day – is in some sense sacred.²⁷ To be sure, the ROC’s ideologues have long been struggling to locate within the Russian historical process a kind of “golden age” – the blessed period during which the ideals of Orthodoxy were realized most fully. The criteria used in these analyses are clearly formulated in the ROC’s *Social Concept*: historically, the ideal form of church-state relations “could emerge only in a state that recognizes the Orthodox Church as the people’s greatest shrine – in other words, in an

²⁵ “Rech’ Sviateishego Patriarkha Kirilla”

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Filatov, “Russkaia Pravoslavnaia Tserkov’”

Orthodox state.”²⁸ Some church writers would find this “golden age” in the pre-Mongol Rus’, others – in the epoch of St. Sergius of Radonezh, still others – in the times of the prayerful Tsar Alexei Mikhailovich the “Quietest.” It is noteworthy that the ROC appears to believe that the Byzantine notion of symphony in church-state relations was better realized in the Russian absolute monarchy than in Byzantium itself.

Unlike the Byzantine basileuses [who were the successors of the pagan Roman emperors], the Russian rulers had a different legacy. Therefore, and also due to other historical reasons, the relationship between church and state authorities in early Russian history was more harmonious.²⁹

As for the “evident distortions” of the Synodal period, they are explained, quite predictably, by Protestant influences. Remarkably, the *Social Concept* keeps mum about the even more evident distortions of the Soviet period: for sure, the communist and atheist USSR was no ideal Orthodox state. Yet the readiness to impart a “parareligious” meaning to the whole Russian history compels the ROC’s hierarchy to craft a narrative that “asserts the value of *all* historical periods” – including the Soviet one.³⁰

Russian secular authorities are struggling towards the same goal: to build social consensus on what the *Ekspert’s* editorial writers called a “more or less unified view of the country’s history.” They explained why such consensus is essential:

A country cannot be stable if half of its population believes that everything had been fine in Russia before 1917 and then the Bolsheviks came and spoiled it all, while the other half is sure that the USSR was virtually a paradise on earth and a beacon for all humanity and then the traitors and liberals made a mess of it.³¹

The Kremlin addresses this problem with what might be termed a Putin synthesis. As Putin put it in his 2012 state-of-the-nation speech,

To revive national consciousness, we have to tie up together [all] historical epochs and come to understand

²⁸ “Osnovy sotsial’noi kontseptsii Russkoi Pravoslavnoi Tserkvi,” Patriarchia.ru, June 9, 2008, <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/419128.html>

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Filatov, “Russkaia Pravoslavnaia Tserkov’”

³¹ “Neprostaia sud’ba imperii.”

a simple truth that [the history of] Russia began not in 1917 and not even in 1991, that we have a single continuous thousand-year history, in which we find the inner strength and meaning of national development.³²

So both the Kremlin leadership and the Moscow Patriarchate have “embraced *all* of Russian and Soviet history, refusing to judge any of it.”³³ Yet as Harley Balzer perceptively notes, “Embracing everything creates a moral vacuum.”³⁴

“Back in the USSR”

In Russia’s emerging metanarrative, the Soviet period is undoubtedly the most controversial element of the new Great Story. The ambivalent attitude towards the Soviet past can be explained by the fact that it hasn’t actually become the past: as the saying goes, it’s the past that refuses to pass: “Almost two decades after the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the specter of its moral, social, economic, and cultural systems still haunts Russia and its successor states.”³⁵ “The Soviet Union lives on,” Yuri Pivovarov argued in a recent interview. “It is living within us. To paraphrase a famous expression, the USSR hasn’t faded into the past – it has diluted in the future.”³⁶ The stubborn persistence of the *Soviet* in what has already been labelled as the *post-Soviet* needs to be explored in greater detail.

A pioneering research effort studying the characteristics shared by both the present-day citizens of the Russian Federation and the Soviet people was carried out by the Moscow-based Levada Center, a well-respected independent pollster. The study’s intent was to detect repetitive stable features that pierce through both periods across the 1991 divide. The research has singled out several basic features that are common to Soviet and post-Soviet Russians. These key characteristics, taken in their entirety, constitute a specific sociological model – a type – that appears to be represented by what came to be known as Russia’s “silent majority.” It is precisely this majority that provides the bedrock of the current political regime’s support.

The first feature characteristic of this type is the perception of

³² Putin, “Poslanie Prezidenta Federal’nomu Sobraniuu.”

³³ Harley Balzer. 2004. “An Acceptable Past: Memory in the Russian Extrication from Communism,” *Ab Imperio*, no. 4, p.466.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, n. 30.

³⁵ Thomas Lahusen and Peter H. Solomon, Jr. 2008. “Introduction,” in Lahusen and Solomon, eds., *What Is Soviet Now? Identities, Legacies, Memories*, Berlin: LIT Verlag, p. 2.

³⁶ Yuri Pivovarov, “U Rossii kak budto amputirovano budushchee,” *Novaya Gazeta*, February 11, 2011, <http://www.novayagazeta.ru/politics/7162.html>

power as above all a paternalistic power that is obliged to take comprehensive care of the population and of all individuals' needs: employment, income levels, pension payments, personal security, etc. Remarkably, most Russians hold that the authorities are not up to the task; that's why they constantly display their dissatisfaction and discontent with the bosses' performance. However, this discontent doesn't undermine the ruling regime's legitimacy: all complaints and demands addressed to the authorities don't clash with the "hegemonic ideology" of paternalism as the ultimate goal of popular claims is not regime change, but having the regime keep its promises.³⁷

The second feature is the widespread conception of power as a hierarchic structure headed by one person; while wielding enormous power, this person is basically not responsible for his actions. This "national leader" is not a real policymaker – his program is irrelevant and his actions are not judged in terms of usefulness or effectiveness. At the same time, there's a sense that the "leader" is omnipresent – his personal involvement might right all the wrongs done by the second- or third-tier bureaucrats who are seen as those responsible for the existing defects.

Finally, there is a persistent wariness of the outside world – a widely shared perception of Russia besieged by numerous enemies who want to do it harm. These attitudes should be seen against the following backdrop: more than half of present-day Russians don't consider themselves as "Europeans," while even larger numbers (up to two thirds) hold that the purposeful encroachments of Western culture threatens to destroy the original "thousand-year" Russian culture.³⁸

For her part, Catherine Merridale, an attentive observer and astute analyst of the Russian intellectual scene, has registered the persistence in the post-Soviet discursive field of distinctive Soviet (and even pre-Soviet) tropes, such as

a tendency to seek undivided truth... a fascination with charismatic authority, and especially with the personalities of leaders; an equal fascination with the irrational, and especially with the idea of miraculous deliverance; the hoped-for but elusive 'special path,' and

³⁷ See Lev Gudkov's remarks in "Politicheskaiia situatsiia v Rossii, osen' 2012: potentsial i perspektivy politicheskoi reaktsii," *Liberal.ru*, October 18, 2012, <http://liberal.ru/articles/5853>

³⁸ See Boris Dubin. 2012. "My po-prezhnemu zhivem v teni totalitarnogo rezhima," *Vestnik Evropy*, no 33, <http://magazines.russ.ru/vestnik/2012/33/d11.html>; Yurii Levada. 2004. "Chelovek sovetskii," *Polit.ru*, April 15, <http://www.polit.ru/lectures/2004/04/15/levada.html>; Valeriia Khamraeva. 2013. "Kollektivnoe mifotvorchestvo: mnogie rossiiane greziat sovetskim proshlym," *Nezavisimaa Gazeta*, February 7, http://www.ng.ru/politics/2013-02-07/100_myth.html

a taste for making extreme judgments about events.³⁹

As “the Soviet experience [is] still shaping [post-Soviet Russia’s] structures and practices,” Richard Sakwa has advanced the notion of “sociological communism,” by analogy with what Paul Preston has called “sociological Francoism” in post-authoritarian Spain.⁴⁰ It would appear, sums up one recent Russian comment, that over the long years of Soviet rule, the “regime has managed to create not only the new (albeit flawed) society but also the new Soviet people (*novy sovetskii narod*). This people constitutes the majority [of the Russian population] even today.”⁴¹

It’s clear that Russia’s symbolic politics cannot fail to be affected by the longevity of the “Soviet man” type. In the immediate aftermath of the Soviet collapse, the Yeltsin “democrats” were intent to make a clean break with the Soviet past – with Yeltsin even musing about making the Russian Federation a legal successor of the pre-1917 Russian polity. Yet already by the mid-1990s, they toned down their anti-Soviet rhetoric and opted instead for a policy of tolerance toward the Soviet legacy, which then evolved into the policy of cautious reconciliation.

Vladimir Putin’s rise to power ushered in a full-blooded reconciliation with all things Soviet and the new “patriotic mix.” As Hill and Gaddy would have it, Putin has acted as an astute politician and former case officer: first he finds out what people want and then cleverly tries to manipulate them. But that is only one part of the story. The thing is that the current Russian regime has problems with legitimacy. It lacks any project for the future and seems to be experiencing difficulties with managing the present. Furthermore, the mechanisms of constitutional legitimacy – through elections – don’t function properly. This leaves the Kremlin with only one option: to focus on achieving historical legitimacy. In Frederick Corney’s words, “Putin was offering a narrative of modern Russian history in which the turbulences of Russia’s past served merely as a backdrop to recent progress, an offer of *reconciliation without truth*.”⁴² As its support base consists of a broad coalition comprising heterogeneous social groups, the regime, in its quest for historical legitimacy, seeks to synthesize disparate elements of Russia’s different “pasts” into a kind of eclectic fusion. “It attempts to yoke, if uncomfortably, various idealized aspects of the

³⁹ Catherine Merridale. 2003. “Redesigning History in Contemporary Russia,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 38, no. 1, p. 22.

⁴⁰ See Richard Sakwa. 2012. “Anatomie einer Blockade: Stillstand im Doppelstaat Russland,” *Osteuropa*, no. 6-8, p. 45-54; Paul Preston. 2012. *The Spanish Holocaust: Inquisition and Extermination in Twentieth-Century Spain*. London: Harper Press.

⁴¹ Valentin Kudrov. 2013. “Vybor, ot kotorogo ne uiti,” *Nezavisimaa Gazeta*, November 13, http://www.ng.ru/ideas/2013-11-13/5_choice.html

⁴² Frederick C. Corney. 2009. “What Is to Be Done with Soviet Russia? The Politics of Proscription and Possibility,” *Journal of Political History* 21, no. 3, p. 276. Emphasis added.

tsarist, soviet and émigré pasts” and present this concoction as “history without guilt or pain.”⁴³ Ironically, the end result of this historiographical experimentation immediately brings to mind the mocking description of an “ideal Russia” in Vladimir Nabokov’s novel *Pnin* (1957). Nabokov referred to a “reactionary Sovietophile mix” in the heads of some of his Russian contemporaries, for whom the “ideal Russia consisted of the Red Army, the God’s anointed Sovereign, kolkhozes, anthroposophy, the Orthodox Church, and hydropower stations.”⁴⁴

It would appear that the rise of the protest movement has alarmed the Kremlin leadership and prompted it to rethink the importance of the individual components within the new “patriotic synthesis.” Of late, idealized elements of the Soviet past seem to have acquired new prominence and become more salient. Putin’s meeting with his presidential election campaign activists in Moscow on December 10, 2012, illustrates this shift. Addressing the decline of morality in Russian society, Putin explained it by referring not to the disappearance of religious moral norms, but to the decay of the Soviet ones. “After all, what happened after the fall of the Soviet Union and its prevailing ideology? We did not gain anything new in its place,” Putin said. Remarkably, the Russian president appears not to see a big difference between religious and Soviet moral norms. “What was the Communism Supporter Code about?” Putin asked. “It declared the same principles as the Bible or the Koran – do not steal, do not kill, do not covet your neighbor’s wife. It is written in and borrowed from those texts.” Even more curiously, Putin invoked Lenin and the controversial issue of his Red Square Mausoleum.

Many people argue about the Lenin’s Tomb, saying that it does not follow tradition. What does not follow tradition? Just visit Kiev’s Pechersk Lavra or go to Pskov Monastery, or Mount Athos. You will see hallows of holy people there. Go ahead, you can see it all there. Therefore, the communists continued the tradition even in that respect and did it competently, in accordance with the demands of those times.⁴⁵

The Kremlin’s recalibrating has an obvious *raison d’être*. “Putin has decided,” notes Moscow journalist Konstantin von Eggert, “that his most reliable support base is the former Soviet people who know little about

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 275.

⁴⁴ Vladimir Nabokov, *Pnin*, in Nabokov, *Sobranie sochinenii amerikanskogo perioda v piati tomakh*. St Petersburg: Simpozium, 1997-1999, Vol. 3.

⁴⁵ “Vstrecha [Vladimira Putina] s doverennymi litsami,” Kremlin.ru, December 10, 2012, <http://kremlin.ru/transcripts/17108>

the historic Russia and worship the USSR as the only available image of the past.”⁴⁶

The Russian Orthodox Church Confronts the Soviet Past: Three Church Subcultures

The ROC hierarchy’s reaction to Putin’s latest pronouncements is instructive. The Orthodox bishops pretended they didn’t hear the Russian president’s exegesis in which he boldly compared the leader of the world proletariat’s mummy with relics of Orthodox saints. But make no mistake: thousands of Orthodox faithful were enraged.⁴⁷ This incident raises a broader question of the ROC’s assessment of the Soviet past, in particular of its most controversial and somber aspects.

At first glance, the ROC’s position here should be crystal clear: “when the Church attempts to trace its twentieth-century roots, the only story that it can invoke is that of political repression.”⁴⁸ Indeed, if during the entire imperial period of Russian history the church was under state control, the Bolsheviks’ rise to power in 1917 led to a dramatic qualitative change – a total subjugation of the church to the state under Soviet rule resulting in the near destruction of Russian Orthodoxy. It’s no wonder then that the collapse of communism was welcomed by many Orthodox churchmen, including the ROC’s top leadership. First, the ROC wasted no time to declare its complete administrative independence from the state. Second, it has attempted to claim martyrs of the communist regime for itself. The 2000 Council of Bishops canonized scores of the so-called *novomucheniki* (the New Martyrs) – individuals who suffered for their faith under the Soviets, and the Synodal Commission for the Canonization of Saints continues its work, combing through police files to identify potential candidates for sainthood.⁴⁹ “By canonizing victims of the communist regime, the Russian Orthodox Church implicitly condemns the same regime.”⁵⁰

And yet, in practice, the ROC’s attitude toward the Soviet past is far from clear-cut: rather, it is very controversial and full of ambiguities. This situation should not, of course, come as big surprise. The Church is a complex social organism – a large community of bishops, clergy

⁴⁶ See Vladislav Mal’tsev. 2012. “Defitsit dukhovnykh skrep,” *NG-Religii*, 19 December, http://religion.ng.ru/politic/2012-12-19/4_skrepy.html

⁴⁷ Boris Falikov. 2013. “Pastukhi bez stada,” *Gazeta.ru*, January 6, http://www.gazeta.ru/comments/2012/12/28_a_4910601.shtml

⁴⁸ Merridale, “Redesigning History,” p. 19.

⁴⁹ For the discussion of canonization in post-Soviet Russia, see Aleksei Makarkin. 2012. “Chudesa i politika: praktika pravoslavnoi kanonizatsii v Rossii,” *Neprikosnovennyi zapas*, no. 6, <http://magazines.russ.ru/nz/2012/6/m7.html>

⁵⁰ Irina Papkova. 2011. *The Orthodox Church and Russian Politics*, New York: Oxford University Press, p. 198.

and lay believers – that does not speak with one voice. The Moscow Patriarchate represents the ROC's *official* position, but the latter doesn't exhaust the diversity of views among Orthodox faithful. Several recent works devoted to the study of the Russian Orthodox Church attempted to identify various "factions," "wings" or "subcultures" within the Church. Zoe Knox discussed the "official" and "unofficial church,"⁵¹ while Irina Papkova investigated the "conservative," "fundamentalist," and "liberal" wings within the ROC.⁵² Sergei Chapnin has advanced a vision of three relatively independent subcultures that have been evolving within the ROC over the last half century.⁵³

For the purposes of this paper, Chapnin's approach is deemed most useful as he distinguished between church subcultures on the basis of their relationship to Soviet legacy. Thus, the first subculture tends to view all things Soviet in a rather positive light, is ready and willing to embrace various elements of Soviet culture, and, in general, holds that "Soviet culture in its content is more Christian than the contemporary pop culture."⁵⁴ This is the largest group of the three; it comprises nearly all the neophytes as well as those who were ordained as priests over the last 15 years. Orthodox members of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation – the CPRF claims that they constitute up to 30 percent of party card holders – are also part of this group. It would appear that the prominence of this subculture within the ROC prompted Nikolai Mitrokhin, an author of a comprehensive analysis of the state of the Orthodox Church today, to conclude that "20 years after the collapse of communism, the church that had been the main 'non-Soviet' institution turned into the *church of Soviet people*."⁵⁵ To be sure, being part of a broader society, the Church is being affected by socio-political processes that take place within society at large – including those trends studied by the Levada Center and discussed above.

The generation that attends church now was brought up
in the age of television, mass enrolment in the Komsomol
(Communist Youth League), and mainly closed-down

⁵¹ Zoe Knox. 2005. *Russian Society and the Orthodox Church: Religion in Russia after Communism*. New York: Routledge.

⁵² Papkova, *The Orthodox Church*, p. 45-70.

⁵³ Sergei Chapnin. 2012. "Tserkov', kul'tura, russkii natsionalizm," in *Matritsa russkoi kul'tury: Mif? Dvigatel' modernizatsii? Bar'er?* Moscow: SVOP: 76-82. Chapnin is a well-informed liberal-minded "insider" as he is managing editor of the *Journal of the Moscow Patriarchate*.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 78.

⁵⁵ Nikolai Mitrokhin. 2009. "The Russian Orthodox Church in Contemporary Russia: Structural Problems and Contradictory Relations with the Government, 2000-2008," *Social Research* 76, no. 1, p. 299. Emphasis added.

churches. Successful entrepreneurs and officials under the current administration enjoyed equally successful careers in Soviet times. Therefore, the new generation of Orthodox Christians feels more sympathy and even nostalgia for the Soviet period in the history of the country.⁵⁶

The representatives of this “Sovietophile” subculture take active part in crafting a new national mythology at the center of which lies one paramount event – the Great Victory in the Great Patriotic War, which is viewed as the only “sacred” event in Russia’s 20th-century history. In fact, the cult of Victory appears to be evolving into a semblance of civic religion that seeks to foster public attitudes which are likely to be approved by Russia’s powers-that-be and resolutely disapproved by some other Orthodox faithful. (Among these attitudes are: the cultivation of the notion of ubiquitous “enemies of Russia,” the “heroization” of war at the expense of the portrayal of war as a tragedy, and the deployment of the “Victory myth” in order to justify atrocities of the Soviet period.) It is in this sense that Chapnin speaks of the growing rift between the post-Soviet (yet “Sovietophile”) civic religion and Gospel-inspired Russian culture.⁵⁷

The second church subculture comprises a segment of Russian Orthodox believers whose worldview can be described in a certain sense as fundamentalist.⁵⁸ This group hates all things Western – above all the United States, NATO and globalization, and is intent to root out the perceived fifth column within Russia – Jews, Masons, and liberals. Their view of the Patriarchate is largely negative: they consider the ROC’s leadership too ecumenical and too subservient to the post-Soviet secular authorities, who they claim to be anti-Orthodox. At the same time, the group advances an “un-orthodox” interpretation of some highly controversial figures of Russian history, whom they believe are worthy of sainthood. They seek canonization of Tsar Ivan the Terrible, Grigorii Rasputin and Josef Stalin, while some members of the group venerate Vasily Chapayev and Marshal

⁵⁶ Ibid. For a more detailed discussion, see Nikolai Mitrokhin. 2004. *Russkaia pravoslavnaia tserkov’: sovremennoe sostoianie i aktual’nye problemy*. Moscow: Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie.

⁵⁷ Chapnin, “Tserkov’”

⁵⁸ On Orthodox fundamentalists, see Konstantin Kostiuik. 2000. “Pravoslavnyi fundamentalizm,” *Polis*, no. 5, <http://www.politstudies.ru/fulltext/2000/5/12.htm>; Aleksandr Verkhovskiy. 2002. “The Role of the Russian Orthodox Church in Nationalist, Xenophobic and anti-Western Tendencies in Russia Today: Not Nationalism but Fundamentalism,” *Religion, State and Society* 30, no. 4: 333-345; idem, *Politicheskoe pravoslavie: russkie pravoslavnye natsionalisty i fundamentalisty, 1995-2001*. Moscow: Tsentri SOVA, 2003; Aleksandr Kyrlezhev. 2003. *Vlast’ Tserkvi. Publitsisticheskie stat’i: 1994-2000*. Moscow: Mediasoiuz; Anastasia Mitrofanova. 2005. *The Politicization of Russian Orthodoxy: Actors and Ideas*. Stuttgart: Ibidem-Verlag.

Zhukov as “informal saints.”⁵⁹ Some analysts argue that, notwithstanding all protestations to the contrary, this subculture in fact reproduces the “Soviet cultural matrix.” They stick with the style of Soviet propaganda, only replacing the “Holy Rus” for the “Soviet Union” and “Orthodox” for “Communist.”⁶⁰ Little wonder then that the members of this group – the bearers of sectarian thinking – constitute the bulk of various “Orthodox pickets” and “cross-bearing processions.”

By contrast, the third church subculture consistently rejects all things Soviet. Historically, this group seeks to maintain continuity with the church underground of the 1930-1950s and with those churchmen (most of whom came of age in pre-revolutionary Russia) who served time in the Gulag. This subculture is largely concentrated in two principal loci: several dozen large parishes in Moscow and St. Petersburg, and the parishes of the Orthodox Church in America as well as those of the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad. While this group positions itself as unambiguously anti-Soviet, it doesn’t harbor any illusions as to how long it might take to overcome Soviet ways, even within the Church itself. Some clerics belonging to this group bemoan the mistrust persisting within the Church and contend that it is a “painful legacy of the Soviet past.”⁶¹ Throughout the Soviet times, the group’s members were practicing what might be called a quiet spiritual and moral resistance. Their guiding principle was this: do not let Soviet ways penetrate your Self. They struggled to keep the “state” out of their private lives; in fact they learned to “live without the state,” fostering and cherishing the notion of privacy. It’s only natural that following the Soviet implosion, the representatives of this subculture became very critical of both their fellow Orthodox believers and the ROC’s leadership. They censure their brothers in Christ for their overreliance on the state and willingness to get from it as many benefits, gains, and favors as possible. They are also wary of the Patriarchate’s willingness to reciprocate and “repay” the state’s favors with providing a kind of “ideological cover” for the powers-that-be.⁶²

It is the clergy and laymen belonging to this church subculture who raise uncomfortable questions pertaining to moral responsibility, the Soviet legacy, and serious defects in church-state relations today. “*Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, ‘overcoming’ the totalitarian past, is the task that all nations that had to go through a totalitarian experience,

⁵⁹ See Papkova, *The Orthodox Church*, p. 195.

⁶⁰ Chapnin, “Tserkov,” p. 80.

⁶¹ “Prot. Vladimir Vorobeyev: Byt’ talantlivymi, umnymi, samostoiatel’nymi i trudit’sia dlia Tserkvi,” *Tserkovnyi vestnik*, March 31, 2011, http://e-vestnik.ru/church/prot_vladimir_vorobev_3103/

⁶² See Sergei Chapnin. 2011. “Sovetskoe i postsovetskoe v sovremennoi tserkovnoi kul’ture: obraz pastyria, svidetel’stvo, sluzhenie,” *Bogoslov.ru*, September 28, <http://www.bogoslov.ru/text/2005170.html>

theoretically speaking, have to face,” argued Sergei Sergeevich Averintsev not long before his death in 2004. “But actually not all of them realize the necessity of this process,” he added.⁶³ Historically, Averintsev noted, the very idea of overcoming the past – understood as a comprehensive critique of a whole nation in contrast to the analysis of merely the leaders’ actions – is relatively new. The emergence of this idea is directly connected with the reflections of Karl Jaspers on the “question of German guilt” in his celebrated 1946 essay “Die Schuldfrage.” In this work, Jaspers famously discussed the four categories of guilt. In a *legal* sense, only he who committed concrete criminal acts is guilty, and this guilt should be proved in the court of law. No collective guilt could exist in such a situation. However, *all* German citizens who lived under the Nazi regime are *politically* guilty, even those who considered themselves apolitical or were opponents of Nazism. Since they accepted the political system established by the National Socialists, they bear the collective political responsibility vis-à-vis the community of peoples. In terms of *moral* guilt, there are huge differences between those Germans who were adults during the Nazi era. The issue of whether one is morally guilty or not is decided individually, on the basis of individual conscience. And finally, Jaspers contends, there is a *metaphysical* guilt which is a “lack of absolute solidarity with people as people.” The experience of metaphysical guilt can and should change our self-consciousness. But no one can charge another with such an experience – it is only God who can decide in this matter.⁶⁴

Some scholars have long argued that human cultures differ in how they approach the issue of collective responsibility for sins and crimes of the past. According to the famous classification introduced by U.S. anthropologist Ruth Benedict, civilizations can belong either to “guilt” (“conscience”) culture or to “shame” culture. A culture of guilt (to which most Western Christian nations belong) puts a special emphasis on the individual’s internal conscience, while a culture of shame – on how one’s moral conduct appears to outsiders. Those nations that have a shame culture (for example Japan and some other eastern civilizations, according to Benedict) hold that under no circumstances can one lose one’s honor: all the family skeletons should be securely kept in the cupboard.⁶⁵ Averintsev,

⁶³ Sergei Averintsev. 2004. “Overcoming the Totalitarian Past,” *Religion in Eastern Europe* 24, no. 3, p. 29.

⁶⁴ See Karl Jaspers. 1947. *The Question of German Guilt*. New York: The Dial Press.

⁶⁵ Ruth Benedict. 1946. *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword: Patterns of Japanese Culture*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin. This same typology has been recently invoked by the leading Middle East historian Bernard Lewis in his latest book of memoirs. At one point Lewis suggests “interesting reflections regarding the general position and meaning of honor in different societies.” “Western society,” he notes, “is sometimes called a duty/guilt society, in which you are impelled by duty and feel guilt if you fail in that duty. In contrast, Islamic society had been described as an honor/shame society. What really matters is honor, and if your

too, argued that a culture of guilt is “evidently closely related to high appreciation of penitence, which is associated with the Christian tradition.” Ultimately, he contended, “the future of Europe’s freedom tradition will be conditioned by a culture of conscience.”⁶⁶

Remarkably, the issue of historical and moral responsibility appears to be becoming an important space of contestation – both between the church and the state in Russia as well as within the Orthodox Church itself. A consensual position of Russia’s governing elites on this issue is neatly reflected in the special “historical” issue of the magazine *Ekspert*. Its editors assured readers that not even one page of the publication contained calls for Russia to repent and reform itself, because “we are convinced: if world great powers do need to ‘repent’ and ‘reform’, Russia should be the last to do this. In Russian history, the bright spots by far outnumber the dark ones.”⁶⁷ Vladimir Putin seems to be in full agreement with this thesis as his remarks at the June 21, 2007, meeting with the participants of the All-Russian history teachers’ conference testify. Putin’s main message was twofold: “Past events should be portrayed in a way that fuels national pride” and “We cannot allow anyone to impose a sense of guilt on us.”⁶⁸ Symptomatically, this view appears to be widely shared within the ROC. “When a nation believes that it has to criminate some part of its past, it is always a sign of its weakness and defeat,” argued the archpriest Maksim Pervozvansky, an editor-in-chief of the Orthodox youth magazine *Naslednik*. “The process of repentance with regard to certain aspects of national history,” he went on, “is in fact a deeply intimate process for a nation.”⁶⁹ Speaking in October 2012 at the 16th World Russian People’s Council (tellingly entitled “The Frontiers of History – the Frontiers of Russia”), Patriarch Kirill suggested that today, as never before, “Russian history has to be defended.” According to him, there is more than enough reason to be alarmed, as “we are witnessing purposeful attempts to rewrite the history of Russia, to delete from people’s memory or blacken all its most crucial events.”⁷⁰

honor is violated the result is shame. Duty/guilt is obviously personal. Honor/shame affects one’s family and one’s group. One might distinguish it this way: duty/guilt is subjective and personal, in other words it is internal; honor/shame reflects how you are perceived by others, your reputation, your standing in the society to which you belong or of which you are a part. It is external.” See Bernard Lewis. 2012. *Notes on a Century: Reflections of a Middle East Historian*. New York: Viking, p. 248.

⁶⁶ Averintsev, “Overcoming,” p. 31.

⁶⁷ “Neprostaia sud’ba imperii,” *Ekspert*, no. 1, 2008, <http://expert.ru/expert/2008/1/>

⁶⁸ “Stenograficheskiĭ otchet o vstreche [Vladimira Putina] s delegatami Vserossiiskoi konferentsii prepodavatelei gumanitarnykh i obshchestvennykh nauk,” Kremlin.ru, June 21, 2007, www.kremlin.ru

⁶⁹ “Pochemu Rossiia ne smogla ‘perevarit’ bol’shevizm,” *Religiia i SMI*, May 4, 2012, http://www.religare.ru/2_94252.html

⁷⁰ “Patriarch Kirill: Russkaia istoriia trebuet zashchity,” *Pravoslavie i mir*, October 1, 2012,

This rhetoric, common to Russia's political and church leadership, seems to be strongly influenced by the "culture of shame." Yet there are indications of the presence within the ROC of the "culture of guilt" as well. While reflecting on the Soviet past, some clerics tend to focus not merely on the martyrdom of the church hierarchy and Orthodox faithful who were persecuted in the course of Soviet anti-religious campaigns, but on how communism became possible in Russia *at all*. Specifically, they pay particular attention to the role of the Orthodox Church, analyzing its moral failure to prevent millions of believers from falling into sin during the 1917 revolution, civil war and the ensuing years of communist dictatorship. At the center of their critique is the individual responsibility of the clergy. It is important to understand, says the archpriest Georgy Mitrofanov, that many *novomucheniki* (New Martyrs) who had enough time to reflect on their lives in the Gulag before they were executed, were not inclined to perceive themselves as innocent victims. Rather, argues Mitrofanov, who is a member of the Synodal Commission for the Canonization of Saints and professor of history at St. Petersburg Theological Academy, these clerics "had a clear understanding of how negligent they had been in fulfilling their duty if their flock had done such awful things."⁷¹ While comparing German Nazism and Soviet Communism, Mitrofanov and other like-minded religious thinkers and historians point out that the ability of the Germans to morally overcome their Nazi past is likely related to the fact that Christian culture was more deeply rooted in Germany than it was in Russia. The Russians still haven't learned how to apply Christian criteria either to their past or to the present. Thus Russia hasn't seen yet a spiritual rejection of communism that would be motivated by Christian ideals. That's why in Russia "we still have Orthodox Stalinism," while such a thing as "Catholic Nazism" is simply unthinkable in Germany.⁷²

The clerics belonging to the liberal church subculture are perfectly aware of what Papkova calls the "generally problematic nature of the memory of communism in the Russian Federation"⁷³ – the fact that it's not easy to draw a clear-cut line between executioners and their victims. Both the former and the latter could well happen to be members of one family. Furthermore, in the devilish atmosphere of the Great Terror, social roles could be swapped overnight: today's executioners would become

<http://www.pravmir.ru/patriarx-kirill-russkaya-istoriya-trebuets-zashchity/>

⁷¹ "Bol'sheviki ubivali pereimenovaniiami," *Pravoslavie i mir*, October 16, 2012, <http://www.pravmir.ru/bolsheviki-ubivali-pereimenovaniyami/>. For a more detailed discussion, see Mitrofanov's two recent books: *Tragediia Rossii: 'zapretnye' temy istorii XX veka v tserkovnoi propovedi i publitsistike*. St Petersburg: Mobi Dik, 2009, and *Russkaia Pravoslavnaia Tserkov' na istoricheskom pereput'e XX veka*. Moscow: Arefa, Lepta Kniga, 2011. Both studies provoked a heated debate among Russian clergy and laity alike.

⁷² "Pochemu Rossiia ne smogla."

⁷³ Papkova, p. 199.

tomorrow's victims. Whatever the existing difficulties and ambiguities, the liberal-minded clergy insist that the gravest historical and moral problem in today's Russia is that perpetrators are still not called by their proper name.

Every single person judges them individually. Some praise them, some denounce them. Yet so long as the communist regime and the entire communist period of our history have not been condemned, the statements to the effect that certain historical figures of that period are murderers are merely private opinions of individual citizens.⁷⁴

The moral imperative, setting forth a “sense of individual responsibility for every word and action”⁷⁵ as a method of dealing with the “difficult past” and the best antidote against a new totalitarianism, comes into clear conflict with the “patriotic mix” advanced by Russia’s political leadership and the ROC’s hierarchy – an eclectic synthesis offering “history without guilt” and “reconciliation without truth.” The liberal-minded clergy are deeply disturbed watching how the Orthodox Church is morphing into an element of state ideology. In Father Georgy Mitrofanov’s words, “the state is simply using the church: it deploys it as an instrument of its Agitprop, seeking to prop up the regime’s legitimacy with Orthodox paraphernalia.”⁷⁶ For their part, some representatives of the politically concerned laity contend that it is a “tragedy” that the ROC lacks the will to become a center for the consolidation of those segments of Russian elites who hold it is imperative to condemn the criminal Soviet past.⁷⁷

Conclusion

Seeking to achieve historical legitimacy, the Kremlin leadership (supported by the ROC’s hierarchy) attempts to build social consensus on the single “correct version” of Russian history. The latter is meant to serve as the main source of “national pride” and foster a sense of Russia’s “greatness.” By contrast, Russia’s liberal-minded publics (both laity and clergy) are highly skeptical about the usefulness of a single historical narrative.⁷⁸

⁷⁴ “Bol’sheviki ubivali.”

⁷⁵ Averintsev, “Overcoming,” p. 33.

⁷⁶ “Bol’sheviki ubivali.”

⁷⁷ Aleksandr Tsipko. 2013. “Bessmertnaia leniniana kak mogila russkoi dushi,” *Nezavisimaia Gazeta*, October 22, http://www.ng.ru/ng_politics/2013-10-22/14_lenin.html

⁷⁸ See, for example, two discussions co-organized by one Russian liberal media outlet and the Committee for Civic Initiatives in which a number of Russia’s leading scholars and public intellectuals took part: “Obraz istorii: zapros vlasti i interesy obshchestva,” *Polit.ru*, July 23, 2013, <http://polit.ru/article/2013/07/23/history/>; “Prepodavanje istorii: ot printsipov k reali-

Rather than being a source of pride or shame, history, they believe, is a set of problems that need to be discussed, analyzed and comprehended. If human history is seen as a multiplicity of choices individuals have made in the process of “making history,” then comprehending the “meaning of history” is a process of finding plausible explanations of why certain choices had been made and not others.

The Kremlin’s recent “rapprochement” with the Orthodox Church, some commentators note, is the regime’s last desperate attempt to legitimate its rule as all other ideological strategies have already been tried and failed.⁷⁹ Within this context, the notion of the “attack on the sacred” that is now being introduced into the political and legal sphere might well be extended to protect a new historical metanarrative upheld by the authorities. But one should not overestimate the effectiveness of the “unholy alliance” between the state and the church. The thing is that present-day Russia, as I wrote elsewhere, is a “country of simulacra.”⁸⁰ This characteristic fits the description of relations between Russian society, church and state. In Russia, as numerous polls demonstrate, millions of Russians just pretend *as if* they were true Orthodox believers, the Orthodox Church behaves *as if* it were the nation’s paramount moral authority and indisputable spiritual leader, and the Kremlin leadership treats the Church *as if* the latter were a powerful social institution whose help is instrumental in bringing about societal cohesion.⁸¹ In reality, students of the Russian Orthodox Church register a decline of interest in Orthodoxy as a *religion*: over the last 20 years the Church failed to significantly increase the number of churchgoers.⁸² For the overwhelming majority of Russians who

zatsii,” Polit.ru, September 18, 2013, <http://polit.ru/article/2013/09/18/history/>

⁷⁹ Aleksandr Rubtsov, “V poiskakh utrachennoi legitimnosti,” *Vedomosti*, January 11, 2013, www.vedomosti.ru/newslines/news/7884241/aleksandr_rubcov_v_poiskakh_utrachennoj_legitimnosti

⁸⁰ Igor Torbakov, “Russia’s Spooks Revealed as Just an Imitation,” *Financial Times*, July 5, 2010.

⁸¹ See Anatoly Cherniaev. 2012. “Fal’shivoe ispolnenie ‘simfonii,’” *NG-Religii*, October 17, http://religion.ng.ru/politic/2012-10-17/5_symphony.html

⁸² Nikolai Mitrokhin. 2013. “Slyshen zvon skandal’nyi,” Grani.ru, January 7, <http://grani.ru/opinion/m.210343.html>. Remarkably, some Russian religious thinkers such as Sergei Averintsev argued that a true believer should not be perturbed by all sorts of “ratings” and “statistics” generated by mass media as “the faith lives according to the laws of miracle and finds its way out of the grave.” Averintsev referred to the “valuable experience” of the Russian Orthodox people in exile, the men like Bishop Anthony Bloom (Metropolitan Anthony of Sourozh): “They found a way to preserve the treasure of faith when all illusions about ‘Orthodox society’ were completely shattered. More than that – they even managed to multiply this treasure, leading to Orthodoxy those who were not born as Orthodox Christian but who became one in the act of free personal choice, justifying the old saying of Tertullian: ‘One is not born a Christian but can become one.’ For Bishop Anthony, a desert of modern secularism was akin to that desert where ancient hermits resided. His soul was hardened by that desert. There’s a lot to learn here.” See Sergei Averintsev. 2004. “Kak vse tsennoe, vera -- opasna...,” *Kontinent*,

claim they are Orthodox, the latter is just one of the markers of national and cultural identity. This, in fact, might prompt one to suggest that the Kremlin strategy could be viable after all: by providing state support to the ROC, the Kremlin thus helps foster patriotic sentiment. In this symbiotic relationship, the “Orthodox ideology” acts as a substitute for a defunct communist one, while the Church’s hierarchy enhances its social stature as the overseers of ideological and cultural production.⁸³ Yet such an arrangement is fraught with a serious problem for the ROC’s moral authority. In fact, the Church finds itself in a Catch-22 situation. Its subservience to temporal power erodes the ROC’s credibility – a development that makes the Church, as an ideological instrument, less interesting to the Kremlin.⁸⁴ For their part, Russia’s governing elites are likely to face a different kind of problem: fostering Russian “national religion” in a multiethnic state cannot fail to escalate interethnic tension.

no. 119, <http://magazines.russ.ru/continent/2004/119/ser1.html>

⁸³ “Ot redaktsii: Gosudarstvo i tserkov’ – pochti sovetskaia model’,” *Vedomosti*, February 5, 2013, www.vedomosti.ru/newline/news/8738081/ponimanie_sovetskosti

⁸⁴ A November 2013 poll conducted by the All-Russian Center for the Study of Public Opinion (VTsIOM) demonstrated that Russian citizens hold that the ROC plays a rather modest role in shaping society’s moral climate: while only 18% of respondents believe the Church has a “significant impact” on Russia’s moral life, 50% expect the ROC to influence moral life of the entire society. See “Ot redaktsii: Vera v gosudarstvo,” *Vedomosti*, November 13, 2013, www.vedomosti.ru/newline/news/18677661/vera-v-gosudarstvo. Notably, not only liberal publics but also Russian nationalists are growing increasingly skeptical about the ROC’s ability to act as an independent and authoritative moral force in today’s Russia. “Speaking about the current state of the Orthodox Church, it is, I believe, just one of many ministries in the Kremlin government,” contends Andrei Kuznetsov, one of the leaders of Russia’s nationalist National-Democratic Party. See Andrei Kuznetsov, “Russkie natsionalisty – za integratsiiu s Evropoi,” APN.ru, November 14, 2013, <http://www.apn.ru/publications/article30526.htm>