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## Patriarch and patriot: history in Patriarch Kirill's sermons in the first year of the full-scale war in Ukraine

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### ABSTRACT

The leader of the Russian Orthodox Church, Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and all Rus, has correctly been seen as a staunch supporter of the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. However, explicit statements of support for the war are rare in his public sermons and speeches, and it is worth exploring the mechanisms of his support in some detail. The article presents an analysis of all the patriarch's sermons and speeches between February 2022 and February 2023 and shows how the patriarch uses references to history to nurture a worldview that makes the war both legitimate and necessary. Using Duncan Bell's notion of a mythscape, the author argues that Kirill infuses secular history with divine meaning in order to give indirect divine legitimation for the war in Ukraine. He further relates this to Stoeckl's contention that the Russian Orthodox Church's promotion of so-called traditional values functions as civil religion for today's Russia and suggests that Kirill's use of history nurtures this civil religion further.

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## Introduction

Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the leader of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC), Patriarch Kirill, has been seen as a staunch supporter of the war.<sup>1</sup> The patriarch reaches a large audience through his two to three sermons or public speeches per week on average. Direct and indirect references to the war in Ukraine appear regularly. In this article I will explore one specific aspect of Kirill's sermons and public statements during the first year of the current phase of the war in Ukraine, namely the role of history. I will ask: How does Patriarch Kirill use history to nurture a worldview according to which Russia's invasion of Ukraine becomes legitimate or even necessary? In other words, I will explore Kirill's mnemonic strategies, and I will show how he uses lessons from history as heuristics for understanding today's situation (Soroka and Krawatzek 2021, 362).

If a church's success is measured in growth or influence in society, the growth and repositioning of the Russian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate) since the fall of the Soviet Union is among the greatest church success stories in recent history. Since the early 1990s the number of parishes, monasteries, priests, and monks has increased

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manifold, and from 1991 to 2015, the proportion of the population that identifies as Orthodox has grown from 37% to 71% (Horsfjord et al. 2022, 200). At the same time church attendance has remained relatively modest. Some scholars have argued that Orthodox self-identification is as much about Russianness as about active participation in the life of the church (Kolstø and Blakkisrud 2021; Skladanowski and Smuniewski 2023, 4).

Scholars often point to 2012 as the beginning of the current phase of Russian church-state relations in which church and state – and patriarch and president – have grown increasingly close (Kilp and Pankhurst 2022b, 3; Østbø 2017, 202, 205; Stoeckl 2020b, 54). In 2012 Vladimir Putin returned to the presidency after four years as prime minister and significantly reinforced a value conservative political agenda with close affinity to the ROC leadership's long-held, but steadily growing, concern for so-called traditional values (Chapnin 2020). New legislation in 2013 on 'gay propaganda' (Wilkinson 2014, 366), and 2017 on domestic violence (Stoeckl and Uzlaner 2022, 7), and constitutional amendments banning same-sex marriage in 2020 are examples of this agenda furthered through close collaboration between church and state. Even before this, church and state collaborated in promoting an agenda of traditional values on the international scene (Curanović 2012; Horsfjord 2017; Hovorun 2022; Soroka 2022; Stoeckl 2016, 2020a). In 2015 protection of traditional values was included in Russia's official security doctrine, and similar concerns are present in the national security strategy from 2021 (Østbø 2017, 200; Soroka and Krawatzek 2021, 362).

At the centre of the recent history of the Russian Orthodox Church stands the current patriarch, Kirill (Gundiaev), who, according to Hovorun (2022), was the main shaper of the church's relationship with the state long before his election as patriarch in 2009. Hovorun describes Kirill's personal trajectory as one from 'open-minded hierarch [...] to the protagonist of reaction', and suggests that a desire for personal power is among the patriarch's main driving forces (2022, 4).

Moscow's Cathedral of Christ the Saviour (*Khram Khrista Spasitelia*), consecrated in 2000, may stand as an illustration of the Russian Orthodox Church's history and recent growth (Horsfjord et al. 2022). However, the Main Cathedral of the Russian Armed Forces (*Glavnyi khram Vooruzhennykh sil Rossii*), consecrated in 2020, provides an even better impression of the Moscow Patriarchate's role vis-à-vis the state at the eve of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine: In it, traditional Orthodox iconography merges with iconic commemoration of Russia's military victories, chief among which is the Great Patriotic War (known in the West as the Second World War) (Kolov 2021). Kolov's study of Patriarch Kirill's and President Putin's speeches and public statements at the opening of this church, shows how church and state provide each other with 'mutual legitimation'. History is told as a sequence of foreign attacks against which Russia has defended itself, and '... nation, State and faith are characterised by a high degree of overlap, where the defence of any of these three amounts to the protection of all the rest' (Kolov 2021, 8). Thus history, patriotism, traditional values, and church/faith become closely intertwined in public discourse. The patterns that Kolov finds in Kirill's statements a couple of years before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, are readily visible in much of Kirill's commentary on the war in 2022 and 2023.

### *Theoretical perspectives*

Stoeckl (2020b) uses the concept of *civil religion* to understand the current relationship between the Russian Orthodox Church and the state. She suggests that the amended constitution (2020) 'turns the traditionalism promoted by the Moscow Patriarchate into a civil religion' (48) and sees the Main Cathedral of the Russian Armed Forces as 'home to the symbol of Russia's new national civil religion' (55). This understanding of civil religion builds on Cesari (2018, 109) who draws lines from Rousseau and emphasises the role of the state rather than a notion of shared beliefs. This corresponds to what Clark – in the context of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict since 2014 – has called 'a thicker conception of civil religion' (2019, 17). Stoeckl underlines that this new civil religion does *not* imply a de-secularisation of Russian society, nor necessarily that the general public adopts the church's convictions, but rather that church and state find common ground on which 'the church collaborates with the state and pragmatically provides the social teaching most suitable for the politics of the Kremlin' (2020b, 48). This role, I suggest, has become even stronger since February 2022.

Our understanding of how the Russian Orthodox Church and its traditionalism provide a civil religion to Russian society can be enhanced by giving attention to certain mnemonic strategies that are widespread in Russia and employed by the patriarch in specific ways. Soroka and Krawatzek (2021) claim that strategies for public remembering of the past tend to be different in Russia from those employed in the West. They claim that whereas the hegemonic mnemonic strategies in Western Europe and North America are 'cosmopolitan', Russian strategies employed in the public realm are often 'centred on heroism, imperial glory, and vertical state-society relations' (2021, 362). History is at the core of patriotism and patriotic education of younger generations. At the centre of Russian official remembering stands the Great Patriotic War. Soroka and Krawatzek contend that whereas the Holocaust is the paradigm for remembering the Second World War in the West, Russia's victory over fascism forms the officially sanctioned Russian paradigm (2021, 362). This paradigm promotes an understanding of Russia as different from, and better than, the West (Kratochvíl and Shakhanova 2021). Thus, these mnemonic strategies feed into the larger stories of how Russia is at the centre of a civilisational struggle with a decadent West which is at the core of Stoeckl's civil religion.

When Kirill in the material under study gives attention to historical events, his aim is to interpret and give meaning to the present. Bell's notion of *mythscape* can throw light on how this works. According to Bell, a mythscape is 'the perpetually mutating repository for the representation of the past for the purposes of the present' (2003, 66). The mythscape is constituted through spatial and temporal dimensions (Bell 2003, 75). Subaltern voices as well as those in power may draw on this repository which is therefore constantly contested and negotiated.

In the analysis of Kirill's use of history and in the subsequent discussion, I will explore both spatial and temporal dimensions of the mythscape on which he draws and to which he contributes, and I will show how such moulding of a *usable past* (Brooks 1918) is also a dimension of a civil religion.

## Materials and methods

The material under study in this article consists of the sermons and speeches given by Patriarch Kirill in the year from 24 February 2022. The material has been harvested from the Moscow Patriarchate's official website and subsequently translated into English.<sup>2</sup> In the period Kirill gave 95 sermons and an additional 16 speeches on various occasions.<sup>3</sup>

The sermons and speeches have been subjected to a detailed content analysis with elements of a discourse analytical approach (Franzosi 2008; Wodak and Meyer 2009). They have been coded for a range of different topics that they discuss, such as explicit references to Ukraine/Kiev, traditional values, patriotism, and (of greatest relevance in this article) references to historical incidents or epochs. After a first overall sifting of the material, relevant passages have been analysed further, and elements of interest have then been traced within individual texts and across the material under study.

In his sermons, Kirill most often relates very explicitly to a topic given by the (liturgical) year and/or the church in which the sermon is given. Thus, sermons often revolve around a Bible reading or the story of a saint. This may be one reason why the sermons have quite varying characteristics. The patriarch has a broad repertoire of talking styles and topics. He may focus on politics and the long lines of Russian history, but just as often he speaks about everyday interpersonal relationships, life in the parish, or encourages a devout lifestyle on the individual level. The Bible and church history naturally provide a reservoir from which he draws lessons for listeners, but he can also make references to daily life experiences and to modern science and technology towards which he is most often positively inclined.

Kirill's broad repertoire of styles and topics is an important background for a significant initial observation: The war in Ukraine features (even indirectly) only in around half of his sermons during the first year of the full-scale war. The other half includes occasional references to topics of interest such as traditional values and Russian history, but many have no content that can meaningfully be related to the ongoing conflict. Further, in the sermons that refer to the war, this topic often takes up only a small part of the total text. It is important to appreciate this fact, lest one convey the impression – which cherry-picked quotations from his sermons might give – that the war dominates Kirill's sermons. Quantitatively speaking, that is not the case.

In western media two of Kirill's sermons have gained particular attention. On 6 March 2022 the patriarch referred to a perceived threat that gay pride parades might be forced on the people of Donbas as a sign of obedience to the West. This, in Kirill's understanding, justified the Russian invasion (Kilp and Pankhurst 2022b; Krawchuk 2022, 20). On 25 September 2022 (at the time of partial mobilisation of Russian men to the armed forces) he promised forgiveness for sins to those who fall in battle. I will contend that although true to Kirill's overall concerns and thinking, these two examples are *not* typical for his way of addressing the war.

Before delving into how Kirill speaks about Ukraine and the war, it is important to note what he *does not* say. Firstly, nowhere in the material is there an explicit and unequivocal statement that commits the patriarch to the invasion, although there are numerous hints that the war is necessary (to which I will return).

The previous point is indirectly related to the fact that the war (even in the form of a 'special military operation') is never described in concrete terms. There are no

weapons, tanks, supplies, or war strategies in Kirill's sermons. Nor is there any reference to suffering apart from that which affects those in Donbas who are assumed to welcome Russian interference. The actors in and around Ukraine (such as President Zelenskiy and other Ukrainian officials, western leaders etc.) are never explicitly named.<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, there is also no reference to there being a Nazi regime in Kiev, a favourite topic of President Putin's. Among critics of ROC and Kirill, much attention has been given (rightly) to the concept of the Russian world (*Russkii mir*). It is therefore also worth noting that as a term, *Russkii mir* appears very rarely and makes its first appearance three months into the war, on 23 May 2022. That is not to say that the ideas associated with the term are not important to Kirill (Hovorun 2022; Kilp and Pankhurst 2022b).<sup>5</sup>

Although Kirill speaks less about the war than some seem to think and does not offer explicit statements of support, I suggest that much of the criticism lavished on him regarding his stand on the war is justified. Kirill's support is first and foremost through his nurturing of a worldview in which the war is not only legitimate, but necessary and ultimately in accordance with God's will. This is in line with observations made by Kilp and Pankhurst who show how the church supports the war by providing a 'legitimizing narrative' (2022a, 11) and Kolov who maintains that the church 'legitimizes the regime mainly through (re)producing certain knowledge about Russia and the world in general' (2021, 8).

### Results: history in Kirill's sermons

Some of the essentials in the worldview Kirill nurtures are most likely shared by many in the Russian elites and presumably by many ordinary Russians. They consist of convictions both about a legitimate Russian sphere of interest that goes beyond the current borders of the Russian Federation and about continuity through history that both grounds the sphere of interest and preserves an essence of Russianness through the ages. Kirill's specific contribution, which is of great value to President Putin's cause, is his anchoring of such a worldview in the divine will.

The clearest indication of how Kirill understands his own role as an interpreter of history is found in the patriarchal sermon on 21 September which begins and ends in the battle of Kulikovo (1380, see below) and deals extensively with the situation in Ukraine:

This is an excursion into history from our ecclesiastical point of view. This point of view is not present in secular historical research, which is a shame, because it is this approach to history that highlights the most important thing – the spiritual dimension in the life of the people and the state [. . .]. (21 September 2022)

Kirill suggests that his version of history is the same as that told by (secular) historians but interpreted from a specific perspective in which spiritual aspects become decisive as both causes and effects.

The most important way Kirill adds a spiritual dimension to the worldview that nurtures war in Ukraine is via his attention to (one might be tempted to say obsession with) the schism in Ukraine in the wake of Patriarch Bartholomew's formal recognition of the Orthodox Church in Ukraine (OCU, *Pravoslavna tserkva Ukraini*) in January 2019.<sup>6</sup> In the understanding of the Moscow Patriarchate the hierarchy and members of the OCU have

turned away from the true church and thus the spiritual unity of Ukrainians and Russians has been broken.

At the centre of Kirill's mythscape is the notion of 'Holy Rus'. This spiritual-mythical entity – which comprises the territories of today's Russian Federation, Ukraine, and Belarus – is seen as a constant throughout history since the tenth century (see below), apparently essentially unchanged by changing political circumstances. The threat to the unity of Holy Rus represented by the schism in Ukraine provides the most significant lens through which Kirill interprets the current situation. One typical example from the early phase of the war is from 9 March, when Kirill explains that 'those who sought to divide the peoples began with the division of the Church, fomenting a schism in Ukraine'. Keeping Ukraine close to Russia is an overall aim because it ensures spiritual unity and the unity of the church in all of Holy Rus.

In the following sections I will focus on examples of Kirill's treatment of specific incidents or epochs in history and how he understands and uses them. I will give attention to how he describes the problem in the situation, the actors, the solution that was found to the problem, and the lesson he draws for today's situation. I will also for each case explore how he describes the relationship between church and people or church and state/ruler. I will present the cases in historical chronological order.

### ***First millennium parallels***

Most of the historical parallels Kirill draws are from what he takes to be the history of the Russian people. However, on 13 March 2022 he goes further back in history. It is the 'Sunday of Orthodoxy' and the celebration of the victory over iconoclasts, and Kirill draws a parallel between the Byzantine church in the eighth century and the current situation in Ukraine. After some general observations about the church's struggles through the ages, Kirill introduces the topic of iconoclasm: 'The entire history of the church is marked by many examples of the pressure of external forces. The history of iconoclasm testifies to how the life of the church depended on the position of the emperor, on secular power'.

The notions of external forces and secular power are central in Kirill's subsequent retelling of the history of iconoclasm after the Seventh Ecumenical Council (Nicea 787 CE). After the council's decisions on icon veneration, there came an emperor who 'under the influence of various political circumstances, including the experience of other monotheistic religions which do not know icon veneration, decided that in order to consolidate a multinational empire, it was best to abandon icon veneration'. The (true) church rebelled and was persecuted, not by pagans but by iconoclastic co-religionists. Fortunately, 'the Lord showed his mercy', and Empress Theodora (c. 815–867) reinstated icon veneration.

To Kirill, the pattern is clear: An emperor (who is a secular power) made decisions regarding the church that were not guided by faith, but by political expediency. The true church suffered persecution, but thanks to its faithfulness, God brought things back to order through a pious ruler. The immediate lesson is that the church should not depend on those who have political power.

This lesson is then applied to today's situation: 'It would seem that all this is in the past. Not at all! My heart bleeds when I think about what is happening in Ukraine. Isn't it the same as once in Byzantium?'. For political reasons, Kirill explains, Ukrainian authorities

have sought to sever the relationship between the Orthodox faithful and the Russian Orthodox Church. Some have allowed themselves to be pressured to obey these state powers, but the true faithful have withstood the pressure and suffered persecution and oppression.

In this example, Kirill makes the current relevance of the historical incident so explicit that there is hardly need for further analysis. An interesting aspect is the absence of any reflection on how the Russian Orthodox Church relates to political power in Moscow. The parallel is not developed by Kirill, but it would have been possible to elaborate on Empress Theodora's role in ending iconoclasm and to hold this up as an example of benign secular power for which Kirill might also find parallels today.

### ***Prince Vladimir and the baptism of Kiev***

Arguably of greatest relevance of all historical times to the current situation in Ukraine in Patriarch Kirill's view is the so-called baptism of Rus, or baptism of Kiev, in 988 CE.<sup>7</sup> This incident, when Prince Vladimir – according to the *Tale of Bygone Years* (the *Primary Chronicle* or *Chronicle of Nestor*) – had the entire people of Kiev accept Christianity through their baptism in the river Dnieper, is in Kirill's optic the founding of Russia.

Although exceptionally significant, references to 988, Vladimir, and the baptism are often short and in passing. On 9 March 2022, in the third week of the full-scale invasion (and the first week of Great Lent), Kirill's sermon in the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour relates these events explicitly to today's conflict:

We are now going through a conflict between Russia and Ukraine. Let's think about it, what can really divide us? We are practically one people bound by historical fate, we all came out of the Kiev font together, we are united by faith, our saints, one hope, and the same prayers. What can divide us?!

A few paragraphs later he elaborates further:

Again and again, I will remind you of the words of the 'Tale of Bygone Years', our historical chronicle, which tells 'where the land of Rus came from', and then, there is a narrative about Kiev. Rus is one country, one people, but this people turned out to be very strong, and its neighbours, frightened by its power, began to do everything to divide this people, to convince parts of this people that you are not one people at all. And we know what a terrible climax the consequence of this suggestion is now reaching, when someone in his brother does not see his brother but sees the enemy.

Here, the reference to Kievan Rus serves to emphasise the essential unity of what is today Russia and Ukraine (and elsewhere he underlines that Belarus is included). It also becomes clear that the threat to this unity comes from outside. This is a recurring point in Kirill's analysis: Ukrainians do not (and cannot) on their own initiative stand up against Russia or Moscow. When they do, it is necessarily instigated by outside forces with their own agendas, in this case, fear of the strength of the unity of the countries that make up Rus.<sup>8</sup>

Unlike many other historical incidents, Kirill never (in the material under study) retells the story of the baptism of Kiev or of Prince Vladimir's conversion to Christianity. It is rather evoked as a story that the listeners can recall in their minds simply by hearing the words 'Kiev baptismal font' or the like. It is used to ground two distinct but interrelated motifs: First, the spiritual unity of Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus, and second, Russia as the



heir of Vladimir, that is, the historical continuity of Russia since the tenth century. It also serves to identify the beginning of Russian history with its Christianisation, thus further reinforcing the idea of *spiritual* unity and continuity. In other words, the baptism of Kiev nurtures essential elements both of the spatial (unity of Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus) and temporal (historical continuity) aspects of the mythscape that gives meaning to the war.

Concern about the schism of 2019 is often closely related to mentions of the Kiev font. The schism breaks the spiritual unity and is seen as a direct precursor to the current war. The close identification of church and people, and the notion that the schism was an intentional attempt to weaken Russia, is found again for example in the sermon on 20 March which also contains references to 988:

[. . .] because first of all the blow was dealt to the Russian Church as the guardian of faith and national identity. It is the church that is at the heart of Russian culture, the history of the church is at the heart of the history of the Russian people.

In several of the quotes above, various vague formulations are used to describe the origin of the threats to (spiritual) unity: 'the blow was dealt' (in a passive voice) and 'those who sought to divide the peoples'. In the slightly broader contexts in which the Kiev baptismal font is important, these forces are described with vague expressions such as 'the enemy of the human race', 'political forces', and 'those who are not interested in peace on the Ukrainian land'. Similar expressions are found repeatedly in the material, and especially 'the enemy of the human race', which seems to be a favourite expression of Kirill's. These terms are never explicitly linked to named actors on the current geopolitical scene. Thus, Kirill maintains an ambiguity (that may be intentional) concerning the identity of the actors in the current conflict. It becomes hard – or impossible – to distinguish between political and cosmic forces.

Merging all of the tendencies I have highlighted here, Kirill in a Christmas sermon on 8 January 2023 uses even harsher language about his opponents in Ukraine when he says that '[. . .] there will be no trace of the schismatics, because they are fulfilling the evil, devil's will, destroying Orthodoxy in the land of Kiev'. Identifying 'schismatics' in Ukraine (i.e. the leaders of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine) as those who do the devil's will, and predicting their complete eradication, is the furthest Kirill goes anywhere in the material in regard to his opponents in Ukraine. And he does so with a reference to the need to protect the 'all-Russian font of baptism'.

### ***From Kiev to Moscow***

Whereas the baptism of Kievan Rus is a foundational event but rarely elaborated in Kirill's sermons, the next phase of (Russian) history represents a reservoir of historical episodes that are given a prominent place in the mythscape from which the patriarch can draw lessons for today's situation. This happens regularly throughout the year.

On 6 September 2022 Kirill recollects the transfer of the seat of the leader of the church from Kiev via Vladimir to Moscow. Kiev had become unsustainable as the centre of Russia because it was too vulnerable to foreign attacks. There was a need, explains Kirill, for the primate of the church to reside in the same city as the secular power. St Peter (Metropolitan of Kiev and Moscow to whom the

feast day is dedicated) ensured this move for which he receives praise from his successor:

In a sense, this act of St Peter was providential, because the city of Moscow, although twice conquered by external enemies, never bowed before the enemy and never damaged itself as the capital of all Rus, but, on the contrary, showed an example of courage, bravery, daring, love for the Fatherland and love for the Church.

By telling this narrative Kirill manages both to discredit Kiev (not for any fault of its own, but for its vulnerability), and to underline the close relationship between church and state and between church and people – who in the same act show love for the Fatherland and the church.

The conflict in Ukraine is not mentioned in this sermon, but Kirill elaborates on Moscow's special role in standing up against forces that relativise good and evil. Thus Kirill places the Russian Orthodox Church, and implicitly the conflict in Ukraine (by underlining Kiev's weaknesses), within the framework of a global culture war (Stoeckl and Uzlaner 2022), and at the same time suggests that today's situation fits into a historical pattern of outsiders' attacks on Russia which it, with God's help and by fulfilling God's will, manages to resist. The sermon ends in a prayer for the people of Rus: '[M]ay the Lord help to overcome the disagreements, most often provoked from the outside, which today threaten the unity of all our people'. Today, as then, threats to the unity of Russia come from outside, and Kiev is their entry point.

### ***St Sergius and Dmitry Donskoy***

In 1380 forces from various principalities in today's Russia under the command of Prince Dmitry of Moscow fought the army of the Golden Horde at the battle of Kulikovo on the river Don. Dmitry is since known as Dmitry Donskoy, and the battle is seen as the beginning of the end of Mongol rule and the starting point for Moscow's ascent to become Russia's most influential city. Dmitry is a saint of the Russian Orthodox Church, and his spiritual father, St Sergius of Radonezh (c. 1314–1392) is among Russia's most revered saints. Sergius, Dmitry Donskoy, and the battle of Kulikovo belong to Kirill's mythscape and are frequently referenced in Kirill's sermons, sometimes in passing, sometimes in more elaborate arguments.

On 18 July 2022, on a day dedicated to St Sergius, Kirill elaborates on his story. St Sergius was concerned, the patriarch explains, 'that his Fatherland, Holy Rus, was under foreign authority' and he prayed and worked relentlessly against this. It was his blessing that gave Dmitry strength to fight and win over a seemingly stronger enemy, Kirill explains. Therefore, it was not primarily a military but a spiritual victory, and Russians learnt always to turn to God when Russia is under threat. Based on this, Kirill immediately draws a lesson for today about standing firm in patriotism and faith against foreign threats to Christian values:

But in our evil age, there are many other ways to crush people, to deprive them of national identity, to deprive them of faith, to deprive them of a sense of patriotism. We know that today many forces are working to influence our people and our country in this way. Why? Because we continue to be different. In 'enlightened' Europe, faith in God is banished, educated people are ashamed to admit to being believers, and this is a fact.

Continuity with the past is underlined in the claim that Russia *continues* to be different. As is typical for Kirill, the enemy is the vague ‘many forces’. Also typical is the juxtaposition of faith and patriotism in the first sentence.

St Sergius’ feast day on 8 October 2022 almost coincided with Vladimir Putin’s seventieth birthday the day before. Kirill (who had fallen ill with COVID-19 and thus was prevented from celebrating liturgies or giving sermons) issued a greeting containing many of the same topics as seen above. Having related the story of Sergius and Dmitry he draws the lesson: ‘In modern times, we see something similar: External forces, turned against Holy Rus, dividing and destroying the one people’. And he announces prayers for Putin with these words:

With my blessing today, on the feast day of St Sergius, who once blessed the holy Prince Dmitry Donskoy and the army to fight the enemy who wanted to dismember the Russian Land and encouraged internecine strife in its people, prayers are offered in all the churches of our country for the head of the Russian state, so that the Lord would grant him health and longevity, confirm him in wisdom and spiritual strength.

Thus, he more than suggests that the relationship between himself and Putin parallels that of the two revered saints in a situation that is also structurally similar to theirs.

In the historical examples above, the threat to Russia comes primarily from the Mongols in the East. That does not make Kirill shy away from drawing parallels to today’s situation when the perceived threat comes from the West. However, in a sermon on 6 December 2022 he explains that threats from the West are more sinister than those represented by the Mongols. It is the feast day of St Alexander Nevsky, and Kirill recounts the story of how Alexander went out to fight the invading Swedes. This was a time, says Kirill, when Russia for the most part was oppressed by the Tatar-Mongols. Why, he asks, did Alexander not engage in the same way in a fight against the Mongols? It was because the young prince understood that the enemies from the east, although they sought to take Russia’s material wealth, were no threat to Russia’s religion. Those who attacked from the west, however, had other interests:

[They] did not need our tribute – they needed our souls, our reason, our political will. And this danger was seen by the young Prince Alexander Nevsky who realised who he needed to fight without sparing his life. Having at the outset no chance of winning he completely defeated the Swedes. This was indeed a great victory that protected the Russian land from occupation which could damage its spiritual life.

In one respect the pattern is the same as that seen before: By the grace of God, through a faithful ruler, Russia wins against an enemy that is perceived to be stronger. However, the western powers, which Sweden represents, are painted as particularly dangerous because their interests are in the realm of the spiritual rather than the material.

In the remainder of the historical examples I will explore, the threat to Russia always comes from the West.

### ***Encounters with the West: from Peter the Great to the Great Patriotic War***

On 17 and 23 May Kirill talks about Peter the Great on the occasion of the 350<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his birth. Peter is one of Russian official history’s great heroes, but he is also remembered as the tsar who abolished the office of patriarch and brought the church

under stricter state control. He was a moderniser who sought to westernise Russia. He thus represents a challenge for Kirill, who strikes a balance by claiming that, at the time, opening Russia to the West was a good thing: There was a shared European, Christian culture, building on 'common Christian values'. The problem today is that 'the West' denies its Christian heritage and embraces moral relativism. This has led to arrogance, pride, and destruction of trust. Russia should not close the window to Europe which Peter opened. However, the relationship between Russia and Europe must be mutual and respectful and not based on ideological dictates from one side which 'traumatise our identity and deprive us of legitimate pride in our country, in our history, in our culture' (17 May 2022).

Although opening Russia towards the West was not in itself wrong, the West is almost always out to threaten and attack Russia. Napoleon is paid visits as a representative of the West on 18 July and 14 October:

The entire West turned against Russia. This is not just Napoleon, with a group of armed French soldiers, but this united Europe attacked Russia to seize our Fatherland, to reformat our lives, to tear us away from the sources of our faith and turn us into a kind of colony of powerful western powers. (14 October 2022)

Kirill's analysis (or use) of history is again entirely concordant with his claim (above) that the West's main aim is spiritual rather than material: They want to 'reformat' Russian's way of life and attack their faith. In addition, we should note how 'the West' is seen as one homogenous and unified entity with one will (directed against Russia) without any regard for the fact that Napoleon met fierce resistance in Western Europe and was eventually defeated by British and Prussian forces.

A similar pattern of absence of interest in the details of historical power struggles further west is also on display in Kirill's reference to the First World War on 8 May. He speaks about 'the West's' dislike for the 'Russia-loving' Serbs, and how 'the West' wanted to eradicate them. No specific western powers are named, and thus there is also no room for recognising that Russia formed an alliance with rather significant parts of 'the West'.

More than any other conflict of the past, it is the Great Patriotic War that forms the paradigm for interpreting current international relations, or to be more accurate: The current situation is understood in the light of a specific interpretation of this war that is being advanced in many spheres of Russian society. In the year from the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Kirill refers to the Great Patriotic War in close to one in ten of his sermons and speeches.

On 6 May 2022 (23 April in the Julian calendar) Kirill gave a sermon on the occasion of the feast of St George. This day almost coincides with the celebrations of the Great Patriotic War on Victory Day (9 May), and Kirill weaves together the celebration of St George and Victory Day in what amounts to the most theological interpretation of the war within the material: St George is 'deeply, ontologically connected with our great victory in the Great Patriotic War', he concludes. This theological reading of history is also evident when he likewise says: '[...] for us, called to understand the signs of history and the signs of the times, everything that happened in 1945 was an undoubted testimony of God's mercy to our people'.

During a visit to Belarus on 6 June 2022, Kirill explains that in the Great Patriotic War the enemy sought to 'sow fear, confusion and loss of orientation in people's souls', in

accordance with the pattern identified above of seeing in threats from the West a spiritual as much as a material threat. Similarly, six months later in yet another reference to the war, he explains that the Russian soldiers ‘defended not only the wealth of our land, not only political sovereignty, but also our spiritual sovereignty, our faith, our tradition, the spiritual foundation of our personal and public life’ (6 December 2022).

On New Year Day, 1 January 2023, Kirill’s sermon revolves around moral and spiritual threats and gradually approaches such topics as outlined above. It culminates in the following reflection:

At one time, it was Russia that saved the world from the terrible plague of fascism, and first of all thanks to the Russian sacrifices, victory was achieved. Perhaps today the Lord, without calling us to such terrible sacrifices, calls us so that with our spiritual life, our faith, the combination of faith with knowledge, and the penetration of faith into all spheres of social life, we will help the world to find salvation as we did by defeating fascism. And perhaps the Lord chooses our Fatherland, towards which the angry and evil gaze of those who do not share our convictions, who are alien to us both in faith and in moral principles of life, turn today.

In this quote almost all the tendencies identified above come together: Russia is given sole credit for victory over Nazi Germany; the victory is explained by faith and spirituality; today there are new threats from unnamed forces – whether political or cosmic is hard to tell – and God has bestowed upon Russia the task of defending spirituality and morality and thus of guiding the world towards salvation. This, I contend, is the core of the mythscape that provides divine legitimation for the war in Ukraine, as I will explore further in the next section.

## Discussion

All the examples of historical references in Kirill’s sermons and speeches which I have presented and analysed above, are used by him to interpret or throw light on the current war in Ukraine. They serve in a very direct sense as a *usable past*. All are rooted in historical events the outward facts and general outline of which academic historians can easily recognise and often confirm, but they also have the character and serve the function of myths in Bell’s understanding; they are part of a Russian *mythscape* (Bell 2003, 66).

In the temporal dimension of the mythscape (Bell 2003, 75) Kirill’s mythmaking contributes to continuity of a Russian identity through the millennium since 988 CE. Despite changing political circumstances, there is a recognisable Russian essence which binds today’s Russian Federation to political entities of the past, and today’s events in the (geo) political sphere to those of the past. This temporal continuity has immediate consequences for the spatial dimension which otherwise would have been somewhat awkward given that the story begins in Kiev. However, Kirill repeatedly insists that today’s Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine make up one spatial entity or territory whose centre has moved, but whose outer boundaries are mostly unchanged. The immediate impact of this understanding on the interpretation of the war in Ukraine is obvious: It places Ukraine within the spatial reach of ‘historical Russia’.

In Kirill’s telling of history – or mythmaking – there is a recurring pattern: Russia was threatened from outside and seemed to be the weaker party in a conflict. However, through steadfastness and courage Russia prevailed and the enemy was driven back.

Russia or Russians are always both innocent victims and heroes. I have also pointed out how, although some of the examples feature Mongol enemies from the East, Kirill explains that the West is the more dangerous enemy, and for the last 500 years, the threat has only come from there. He seems thereby to confirm the contention made by Kratochvil and Shakhanova that Russia tends to see itself in relation to the West, both seeking its recognition and underlining distance from it (2021, 443).

In what I have summed up so far, Kirill's version of history is not substantially different from that generally told in Russia. The patriarch's mythscape is, for the most part, the same as that drawn on by other actors who promote patriotism in today's Russia. What Kirill adds to this is a layer of spiritual interpretations, or rather: He infuses history with spiritual meaning and thus also gives spiritual meaning to the current war in Ukraine.

In the above examples, the external threat to Russia is always also a spiritual threat, and the solution that sees Russia safely through is a spiritual solution. It is faithfulness to God and to the church that gives the people or the army the strength to persevere in their trials. God works in history on Russia's side, not through blatant supernatural intervention, but rather by giving strength and courage.

God's involvement in history through human agents is in line with much Orthodox understanding of history, but it also has two discursive consequences that are beneficial for Kirill. First, it means that his version of history does not diverge much from a secular rendering of history. God's workings are mostly found in people's hearts and minds. Although such a spiritual understanding of history in Kirill's view is a better understanding, it can easily coexist (and even be reinforced) by a secular rendering of history since the outward facts are mostly the same. Second, such a version of history places the church at the centre of events as an interpreter of contemporary affairs and as the mediator between the people and God both of the people's loyalty to God (and church) and of God's strengthening of the people.

Also invisible to the secular eye but taking centre stage when Kirill infuses history with spirituality, is the cosmic dimension of all conflicts. The enemy is – or is serving – 'the evil one', 'the enemy of the human race' and the like. But, like God, this cosmic enemy does not work by supernatural means. Although the stakes of conflicts may be cosmic, their outward expressions are strikingly mundane. There is nowhere in the material descriptions of a cosmic Armageddon or the like. Rather, the devil's work is seen for example in disagreement over Ukrainian ecclesiastical property.

God has chosen Russia, as we saw Kirill explain, and given it a special mission in the world. This mission may even be described as helping the world towards salvation. Both in the material under study and elsewhere, Kirill ties the issue of Russia's mission in the world to the struggle for so-called traditional values against a decadent West (Stoeckl 2020b). He is well aware that this specific struggle is not found throughout history – as he says explicitly in his discussion of Peter the Great – but by identifying struggles both past and present as cosmic battles, the past is tied to the present even if the concrete substance of the conflicts may have varied. Analysing earlier statements by Kirill, Kolov has observed something similar and finds in Kirill 'the image of the ever-present heuristic enemy who desires to put an end to the Russian statehood' (2021, 10).<sup>9</sup>

In Bell's understanding, mythscapes are tied to nationalist discourses (Bell 2003, 69), and others who have addressed Russian constructions of a *usable past* have highlighted its application in the patriotic discourse that has emerged in Russia over the

last couple of decades (Kratochvíl and Shakhanova 2021). Kirill's mythscaping to a large extent corresponds to that which has been observed in many parts of Russian public discourse. The added value that Kirill's brand of mythscape-based patriotism brings to this discourse is a spiritual dimension and the positioning of the church at the centre of history.

By adding a spiritual dimension to the Russian mythscape, assuring listeners that God is steadfastly on Russia's side as long as the people are faithful towards their Motherland (and by implication its leader), the church, and the traditional values which the church promotes as the core of Christian teaching, Kirill strengthens the Russian Orthodox Church and its value agenda as a civil religion for Russia. He provides teaching that is most suitable to Kremlin's interests (cf. Stoeckl, above) and indirectly sacralises Russian aggression in Ukraine (Krawchuk 2022). His contribution to the Russian war effort in Ukraine does not consist in explicit statements of support for violence, but in nurturing a divinely sanctioned understanding of historic and contemporary affairs in which the war makes sense, and in which it is a Christian and patriotic duty to be loyal to the current political leadership.

## Notes

1. The author wishes to thank the two anonymous reviewers for their comments that were very helpful in the revision process.
2. All texts are available on <http://www.patriarchia.ru/patriarch/38019/>. This online collection of sermons and speeches is organised chronologically. I will reference individual texts by providing their date. Since the texts under study have been made publicly available by their author, the current project does not raise significant research ethical questions concerning consent.
3. The patriarch also issues a large number of short statements and greetings, often several in one day, for example in order to congratulate Russian officials, ROC bishops, and other (mostly Orthodox) church leaders on the occasions of their birthdays, saint's days etc. In most cases these are insubstantial, and I have not submitted them to a detailed analysis.
4. See also Hovorun (2022, 8) and Kilp and Pankhurst (2022a, 14; 2022b, 18) who find this pattern in material from the first few months of the current war; the tendency continues throughout the year.
5. Kirill is of course aware that the concept of *Russkii mir* is controversial and comments on this in a rare mention of the term on 18 October 2022.
6. It is important to note that the schism is declared only by the Moscow Patriarchate, and representatives of the Patriarchate of Constantinople may be reluctant to see in it a schism. Since the article mostly discusses how the situation is understood in Moscow, I use 'schism' without further qualification in the text.
7. In recent years the spelling of the name of the Ukrainian capital has been infused with political meaning, and it is now common to write Kyiv rather than Kiev in English texts in accordance with transliteration of Ukrainian spelling. I agree with this in principle. In this article, however, I work with sources in Russian and discuss what the world looks like from a Moscow perspective. It would have been possible to write 'Kiev' in direct translations from Russian and when referring indirectly to Kirill's sermons, but 'Kyiv' elsewhere in the text. However, that might be both tedious and confusing. I therefore use 'Kiev' throughout the text and employ the same principle with Prince Vladimir (Volodymyr) and the river Dnieper (Dnipro).
8. Similar treatment of these topics is found for example in sermons on 20 and 29 March and 4 November 2022.

9. We may observe here that in one important aspect Kirill and Putin do the opposite: While Putin finds Nazis everywhere, Kirill generalises the Nazi enemy to be the enemy everywhere.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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