The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Ukraine's Rebels Worship the Past, Not God

By Geraldine Fagan

August 13, 2014



Orthodox East versus secular West. The conflict in Ukraine, some on both sides would have us believe, is a pitched battle between two opposing moral systems.

In particular, separatists in eastern Ukraine claim they are defending the frontier of Russian Orthodox civilization. "This is a holy, Orthodox war," one of their female volunteers maintained to Newsweek. "We are all going to fight and bring icons to the battlefield."

If the rebels have any higher allegiance, it is to the Soviet past, not God.

The separatist forces even include the so-called Russian Orthodox Army, headquartered in rebel-held Donetsk. In promotional videos, its soldiers rail against Kiev's "fascist junta" full of "homos" — but how the contradictory elements of fascism and homosexuality co-exist

is not explained. Mostly, they say they are fighting to protect their land, families and homes.

Yet nowhere do these warriors mention Orthodox Christianity as the motivation for their armed struggle. In one video, they form a Kalashnikov-tapping chorus to the Orthodox Army's own rap. But other than the refrain "Russian Orthodox!" (Russkaya Pravoslavnaya!), the rap is silent about the Orthodox faith.

Even the Orthodox Army's religious symbolism is shaky. When one fighter is filmed bare-chested in a gym, his lack of a baptismal cross — usually worn around the neck by Russian Orthodox — is also laid bare. A commander goes by the name "Demon," a pseudonym unthinkable for an Orthodox Christian. The Russian Orthodox Army has failed even to choose a distinctively Orthodox cross for its banner.

Still, the constitution of the separatist Donetsk People's Republic, or DPR, proclaims Orthodoxy as the territory's "primary and prevailing" faith, just as it was in the Russian Empire.

In an attempt to enforce this, Igor Strelkov, the DPR's military commander, banned his troops from swearing. "We call ourselves an Orthodox army," his July decree read. "The use of swearwords by soldiers is blasphemy." As The Guardian's Shaun Walker tweeted, however, "on the basis of 99.8 percent of my interactions with them recently, this could prove problematic."

But the style of Strelkov's decree banning swearing is perhaps more revealing. Much like his use of a June 1941 decree to execute a man for stealing clothes, the ban on swearing owes more to Stalinist rigidity than to the tsars.

If the rebels have any higher allegiance, it is to the Soviet past, not God. "I want to go home," one Orthodox Army fighter admits in his personal YouTube video, "to the U.S.S.R."

The U.S.S.R., of course, was not a state known for its encouragement of the Orthodox faith — or any other. So it should come as no surprise that the more Sovietized east of Ukraine is in fact far less religious — including less Orthodox — than the country's west. Annexed by the Soviet Union in 1939, Ukraine's westernmost regions were spared the anti-religious onslaught of the 1930s.

Invading central Ukraine in 1941, the Nazis sought local support by opening thousands of churches earlier closed by the Soviets. Most of these remained open even after the Red Army reclaimed the territory: Stalin dared not risk a backlash by closing them again.

In 2010, as most recently measured by the Kiev-based independent Razumkov Center, the number of religious communities per capita in easternmost Ukraine was still less than half that of central regions and only about a quarter that of western Ukraine.

Most religious communities affiliated with Ukraine's three rival Orthodox factions, including the Moscow Patriarchate's own Ukrainian Orthodox Church, are also concentrated west of Kiev.

Even the Donetsk and Luhansk regions — separatist strongholds — have lower-than-average allegiance to the Moscow Patriarchate. While containing about 15 percent of the population,

they account for only 8.5 percent of the Moscow Patriarchate's parishes in Ukraine.

Given its loyalty to the Russian Patriarch Kirill, the Church under the Moscow Patriarchate might be expected to back the Kremlin's side in the current conflict. The constitution of the Donetsk People's Republic, after all, professes the Orthodox faith of the Moscow Patriarchate specifically.

Yet the Church has shunned the rebels. Far from resisting a "fascist junta," as Russian television dubs Ukraine's government, Metropolitan Onufry, the caretaker leader of the Moscow-affiliated Church, greeted Petro Poroshenko's May election to the presidency as a "sure victory" reflecting his "deep credibility and trust" among Ukrainian citizens.

As conflict flared in his diocese, the same Church's Metropolitan Ilarion of Donetsk appealed not for recruits to the Russian Orthodox Army, but for a period of strict fasting and intense prayer for the fighting to stop: "God's blessing will not be upon those who violate the commandment, 'Thou shall not kill!'"

Ukraine's various Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant churches certainly have their disputes, particularly over property. But they have adopted a common position on the current crisis as the All-Ukrainian Council of Churches and Religious Organizations. A typical statement from March blamed Russian government officials for "the possibly irreversible consequences of military conflict on Ukrainian soil."

The same month, flanked by Catholic and Orthodox clergy, Mikhailo Panochko, the Council's veteran Pentecostal representative, urged demonstrators amassed on Kiev's Independence Square to uphold Christian principles.

Far from being an expression of the dissolute secular West, political change in Kiev is backed by local and largely conservative faith communities — including the one most closely identified with Moscow.

Geraldine Fagan is author of "Believing in Russia — Religious Policy After Communism" (paperback, 2014).

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