The Moscow Times
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Russian Special Forces Are Turning to Paganism, Church Warns

June 08, 2018

Andrei Nikerichev / Moskva News Agency

Russia's athletes and military personnel are increasingly turning to ancient pagan beliefs, the head of the Russian Orthodox Church has warned.

The Orthodox church, a strong conservative force closely allied to the Kremlin, has expanded its presence in the Russian military with specially trained priests who are attached to individual units. The patriarch's words are the latest volley in the church's long battle against paganism, a tribal pre-Orthodox belief system.

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"The church's inaction often turns the promotion of a healthy lifestyle into a revival of pagan cults, including a pagan attitude toward the human body," Patriarch Kirill said at a patriarchal commission on sports this week.

The Orthodox leader said the church initially dismissed reports of pagan beliefs among athletes as a one-off, but grew alarmed after "a large body of information was collected" indicating the popularity of pagan ideas among athletes and special-forces troops.

Patriarch Kirill said "defenders of the fatherland, especially those who participate in dangerous military operations, need spiritual support," warning that "nothing good will come" of the new trend towards paganism.

"Man cannot turn into an animal. That's what always distinguished an Orthodox warrior from a pagan one," Patriarch Kirill said.

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