The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Russian Priests, Cossacks Negotiated Ukraine's Surrender During Crimean Annexation – Meduza

March 16, 2020



Besides convincing Ukrainian troops to surrender, the Russian Orthodox priests also hid pro-Russian militia and weapons inside their churches, Meduza reported. **Stanislav Krasilnikov / TASS**

Priests from the Russian Orthodox Church and Cossacks followed Defense Ministry orders to negotiate the Ukrainian army's surrender during Moscow's annexation of Crimea, the independent Meduza news website has reported ahead of the sixth anniversary of the land grab.

On Feb. 27, 2014, masked troops in unmarked uniforms seized the Crimean parliament building, leading to the installation of a pro-Russian government on the peninsula and a referendum the next month in which participants voted to be part of Russia. Moscow rejects the term "annexation" and denies reports of Russian soldiers being present on the peninsula ahead of the referendum.

According to Meduza, Orthodox priests and Cossacks joined the unmarked soldiers in

blocking Ukrainian troops from their military bases and negotiated the troops' surrender ahead of the Crimean referendum.

One of the priests involved in the negotiations, Father Dimitry Vasilenkov, told Meduza that he "was in Crimea through the Defense Ministry" but refused to discuss it further.

"The gates of the [Ukrainian] units opened because of [Father Dimitry]," an unnamed special forces veteran told Meduza.

The priests, Cossacks and unmarked soldiers delivered an ultimatum to the Ukrainian forces: Anyone refusing to join the "Crimean side of power" must lay down their arms or face an assault. Nearly all Ukrainian forces on the peninsula surrendered afterward.

The groups of Orthodox priests and Cossacks were formed in southern Russia's Krasnodar region and traveled to Crimean territory from there, Meduza reported. Archbishop Kliment, the head of the Crimean diocese of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, told Meduza that these priests had "followed orders given at the highest level."

Besides convincing Ukrainian troops to surrender, the Russian Orthodox priests also hid pro-Russian militia and weapons inside their churches, Meduza reported. Cossacks coming from Russia also lived and hid weapons inside church walls, Archbishop Kliment told Meduza.

Vasilenkov and other priests who negotiated with the Ukrainian military were later given state awards by President Vladimir Putin. Priests who helped hide Cossacks and weapons were also awarded and promoted.

The international community has largely refused to recognize the March 2014 Crimean referendum, which saw 95.5% of people vote in favor of joining Russia. Moscow's annexation of Crimea from Ukraine spurred U.S. and European sanctions against Russia and plunged Western relations with the Kremlin to their worst level since the Cold War.

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2020/03/16/russian-priests-cossacks-negotiated-ukraines-surrender-during-crimean-annexation-meduza-a69635