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Why Is the Russian Orthodox Church Encouraging People To Volunteer in Occupied Ukraine?

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Left: A leaflet advertising the "Patriarchal Humanitarian Mission." Right: A Russian Orthodox Church clergyman with Russian soldiers. **Collage: The Moscow Times**

The Russian Orthodox Church has handed down yet another initiative to its dioceses. Called the "Patriarchal Humanitarian Mission: Together We Help People in Donbas," what looks at first to be a program to encourage devout Russians to support people living in occupied areas should be treated with suspicion given the country's looming manpower issues.

The complicity of the church in the war in Ukraine, which Patriarch Kirill calls a "holy war," is well known. But this time, it has decided to go a step further in its service to the fatherland. Or maybe it decided nothing at all: the party simply commanded that something must be done and Comrade Kirill replied, "Yes, sir!"

Dioceses have started circulating adverts to recruit volunteers, supposedly to help restore life in the Ukrainian territories occupied by Moscow. Not that there is anything left to restore after the Russian army passed through; nothing remains except scorched earth and buildings destroyed to their foundations. But the question remains of what these volunteers will actually be doing once they get to the Donbas.

The roles outlined look very much like online job ads on Avito that turn out to be contracts with the Ministry of Defence. Volunteers are not required to have special skills or experience. They just need to be 18 or older and willing to take part in offering social assistance to people living alone, restoring damaged private homes and helping in hospitals — including military ones.

Seriously? None of these areas requires skills or experience? If helping disabled and elderly people also requires no experience, then why do entire departments exist in universities and colleges to train specialists for precisely this work?

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The details from the advertisements are also interesting. They say that rotations will last about 7-24 days, with options to work for longer if the coordinator agrees. But that makes the volunteer dependent on the coordinator's mood. And who knows whether it will be possible to refuse to stay for a second rotation or longer?

Such coordinators are advertised as "experienced." That they are is in no doubt. The question is whether they are in fact commanders recruiting reinforcements for their rapidly shrinking units and will make these volunteers an offer they can't refuse under the guise of "volunteering and social work."

Or perhaps they won't even bother making an offer. Choice is an illusion when the front is so close and refusal so dangerous. They will load them up and send them off. Skills and experience really are not needed to go into a meat assault. All they need to do is die.

Positions are commonly advertised in the "rear" behind the front lines: Mariupol, Sievierodonetsk, Donetsk, Volnovakha, Tokmak, Skadovsk, etc. But in a war characterized by UAVs and missiles, these cities are well within striking range. Even Yekaterinburg, long thought in the safe far reaches of the Urals, is no longer immune to Ukrainian UAVs. Not to mention that these volunteers will be targets for Ukrainian soldiers who are more than motivated to liberate their occupied homeland.

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Do volunteers know that they are traveling to another country, violating its laws and borders? They probably don't even think about it. Moscow has done nothing but violate those borders since 2014 and has stopped hiding behind so-called local people's militias since 2022. Of course, the Moscow Patriarchate is in no hurry to inform the volunteers that neither it nor Putin's army can provide them with any guarantees of safety.

Plenty of volunteers have met a grisly end in the Donbas. In May 2014, two trucks of Russian volunteers were shot up during the first battle for Donetsk Airport. But at least those men knew they were going to kill, unlike some of the volunteers targeted by the church. The unfortunate part was that they were shot up by the very people they were going to help — militants from the pro-Russian Vostok Battalion, a group that has since been integrated into the Russian armed forces.

And who can guarantee, in any case, that the next round of mobilization — overt or otherwise — is not beginning right now with precisely these kinds of appeals? Obviously, this tactic will not recruit large numbers. But Putin is not in a position to be choosy and local authorities are more than ready to send anyone who can walk to the slaughter — especially voluntarily and with a hymn.

It would be right to say that until evidence emerges of these volunteers being sent to fight, this is just speculation. But what we know for certain is that Patriarch Kirill's loyalty to the maniac in the Kremlin is pathological. There is every reason to believe that there is no longer any depth to which the church's officials cannot sink.

The main thing is that whatever the party says, must be done.

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