

Deus ex machina of the war in Ukraine

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A muddy torrent of quasi-theological apocrypha, dicta, narratives, sermons, etc. contributes to what the Russians apply the euphemism “special military operation” in Ukraine. It is being poured out from the quills and lips of senior Orthodox hierarchs, including the Russian patriarch himself, and smaller figures constituting an eco-system within and around the Moscow Patriarchate, including priests, lay theologians and activists. This torrent is quite sizeable and powerful enough to rotate the millstones of war.

Indeed, in my judgement at least, the *machina* of the Russian war has its own *deus*. This *deus ex machina* is a quasi-Orthodox quasi-theology. It helps rationalising the *raison d'être* of the “special military operation,” if it is at all rationalisable. Without at least a rudimentary rationalisation, the “operation” does not make sense to an even average Russian lowbrow philistine. The mentioned quasi-theology provides such a rudimentary rationalisation. It has also become a popular and indeed a populist ideology of sorts. When zoomed out, it substitutes the Soviet ideology, which was based, by the way, on the denial of religion. When zoomed in, it tries to explain, for example, why the Russian mothers should be thankful to the state for their sons having become cannon fodder thousands kilometres away. If we take, for instance, the Soviet war in Afghanistan (1979-1989) and the ongoing war in Ukraine, however different their rationales and methods might be, for most Russians they are very remote and not related to their personal lives.

Ideologies mobilise masses and make them ready to sacrifice for the sake of remote wars. This is one of many differences between the Russians and the Ukrainians in the context of their war. The Ukrainians do not need any ideology to fight this war, because it has come to almost every Ukrainian home in the most immediate way. In other words, they do not need *deus* to be present in the *machina* of the war. In contrast to them, most Russians desperately need such a *deus*. The Russian Orthodox Church provides them with one.

After the fiasco of the Soviet ideology, the Russian church reemerged from the margins of the post-Soviet public square and occupied its centre. Its ambition was to give a *homo post-Soveticus* a completely new *raison d'être*. This ambition ended up in providing a new *raison de mourir* in the war. During the post-Soviet transition, what promised to be a theology of life turned to the ideology of death.

Such an ideology was intended for mass consumption by ordinary people. However, even its demiurges seem to have a desperate *ananke* to consume what they produce. They intended to gaslight masses but eventually became victims of their own manipulations. In result, even Vladimir Putin does not seem to be able to explain this war to himself without the narratives produced by his counterpart in the church. The church wanted to be just useful to his regime by offering theologised ideologies or ideologised theologies. Instead, it became indispensable in selling the war to both the Russian people and elites.

Since his boringly verbose February-2022 sermons on the reasons of the war delivered through the Russian television, the only permanent thing about his rationalisations of war has been that they permanently changed. The more he tries to explain the war publicly, the less convincing he sounds. One has an impression that he really struggles to explain the war to himself. The more he struggles,

the more metaphysical or quasi-theological his arguments turn. These arguments are like Ovid's metamorphoses: they change with a dizzying kaleidoskopicity, but there is always a deity underneath them. And this deity is usually not compassionate with the human beings.

Even before he waged his war against Ukraine in 2014, Putin had adopted quite a few lexemes coined by the church. They originated from the limbo which is between the sacred and profane narratives. One of them is the lexeme of the "traditional values." This lexeme is an elaboration on the concept of "values," which was designed in the 1970s as a vehicle to smuggle some religious ideas through the well-guarded walls of secularism. In the 2000s, which some (such as Jürgen Habermas) perceive as an era when post-secularity replaced secularism, this concept effectively became an alternative to liberal democracy. With this new rationale, it was appropriated by the emerging autocracies in China, Russia, Hungary, and elsewhere across the globe. In 2022, Putin made "traditional values" a law in Russia. The law is called "On the approval of the Fundamentals of State Policy Regarding the Preservation and Strengthening of Traditional Russian Spiritual and Moral Values" and was signed by the Russian president on November 9, 2022.

Putin did not stop at half measures in exploiting theological languages. He advanced to a fully-fledged biblical and theological hermeneutics. In its spirit, while addressing a crowd at the Luzhniki stadium in Moscow in February 2023, he drew a parallel between the Russian world "otechestvo," which is best rendered by the German "der Vaterland," and the Lord's prayer: "In this phrase, he stated, in these words, there is something powerful, huge, I would even say, mystical and holy. No wonder, therefore, that one of the most famous prayers begins with the words 'Our Father.'"¹

In the same spirit of theological hermeneutics, the Russian president from 2008 through 2012, Dmitriy Medvedev, is even more theologising than Putin. In trying to rationalise the war, he seems to particularly like referring to demonology. Thus, he published on the social network popular in Russia, Telegram:

We have the ability to send all enemies to the fiery Gehenna (here Medvedev apparently implies using nuclear weapons), but this is not our task. We listen to the words of the Creator in our hearts and we obey them. These words give us a *sacred* purpose (as a footnote, I would like to stress the word "sacred" in Medvedev's wording about the war).

The goal is to stop the supreme lord of hell, whatever name he uses: Satan, Lucifer, or Iblis.²

In the Muslim demonology, as you know, Iblis is a chief of demons. In Medvedev's imagination, he is also the chief of the Western powers. Speaking of which, in another post on his Telegram channel, Medvedev refers to his former European colleagues in the positions of political leadership as "entirely miserable amateurs, terry Russophobes and intellectual pygmies."³

Russophobia is a key word here and in zillions other messages emitted by the Russian propaganda. The real driving force of Russophobia, for many Russians, is hatred to Orthodox Christianity. Their logics is the following: Orthodoxy is the only true religion. Satan, who lurks in all Western political institutions and churches, hates truth and therefore Orthodoxy. He moves the West to attack Russia, but his ultimate goal is to destroy Orthodoxy. Most western politicians, therefore, without necessarily realising this, serve the Satan. Either consciously or unconsciously, they execute his will. Russophobia, therefore, is something like a Western original sin. In the words of an Orthodox lay activist of some fame, Kirill Frolov, "Pacifism and Russophobia are sins against the Orthodox teaching."⁴ In tune with Frolov, a professor of the Moscow Theological Academy Archpriest Vladislav Tsy-pin, in his recent article "The Special Military Operation in the Light of the Christian Teaching On War and Peace," mentions the saying attributed to the former United States National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzeziński:

¹ <https://tass.ru/politika/17119147>

² https://t.me/medvedev_telegram/206

³ https://t.me/medvedev_telegram/267

⁴ <https://t.me/orhoresistansse/18391>

After the defeat of the USSR in the Cold War, the main enemy of the “free world” became the Orthodox Church, together with other traditional religions that have not embarked on the path of modernist liberalisation, and all the adherents of traditional moral values.⁵

It has been proven that this statement by Brzeziński is a fake,⁶ but this does not matter to the Russian propagandists, who keep “quoting” him.

As for the real statements by American politicians regarding Russia, I cannot resist referring to the debates between Barack Obama and Mitt Romney during the presidential campaign in 2012.⁷ Then they famously diverged on how to assess Putin’s Russia. For Romney, Putin’s regime was as early as in 2012 America’s “Number one geopolitical foe.” For Obama, in contrast, Russia was a mere “regional power,” which was better to ignore.⁸ The latter assessment proved to be wrong⁹ in many senses, including how the Russians themselves perceive their antagonism with the West. This antagonism, in their imagination, has the scale of a cosmic battle. Patriarch Kirill is particularly eloquent in painting such a picture with thick brush strokes. According to him, God himself endorsed Russia with a special mission — to save the world from itself:

The Lord has chosen our country and our Church — not because of our personal holiness or our good deeds, which we do not have, but because of the prayers of our saints, martyrs and confessors, because of the great civilisational work that Russia had done by establishing Orthodoxy across the spaces of the Eurasian continent [...] So we must firmly follow what the Lord intends us to do, by holding our country, our people, and through this, perhaps, the entire world from the domination of the devil, from decay and destruction.¹⁰

In this passage, the patriarch refers to the Pauline concept of “katechon.” The second epistle to the Thessalonians implies something that Paul had more explicitly explained to the community in Salonica and what the epistle’s modern readers can only guess:

Don’t you remember that when I was with you I used to tell you these things? And now you know what is holding him back, so that he may be revealed at the proper time. For the secret power of lawlessness is already at work; but the one who now holds it back will continue to do so till he is taken out of the way. And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will overthrow with the breath of his mouth and destroy by the splendor of his coming. The coming of the lawless one will be in accordance with how Satan works. He will use all sorts of displays of power through signs and wonders that serve the lie, and all the ways that wickedness deceives those who are perishing. They perish because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. For this reason God sends them a powerful delusion so that they will believe the lie and so that all will be condemned who have not believed the truth but have delighted in wickedness (NIV 2:5-12).

Paul is writing here about what has already happened (hence the verb οἶδατε — “you *have* seen”), what is happening (ἐνεργεῖται — “*is* acted”), and what will happen (ἀποκαλυφθήσεται — *will* be revealed). He also refers to the “katechon” as both a thing (τὸ κατέχον) and a person (ὁ κατέχων). Both are supposed to withhold (old King James’ translation) or restrain (new King James version) the lawlessness, which is also implied to be both a thing and a person. This passage is obscure

⁵ <https://pravoslavie.ru/155245.html>

⁶ <https://provereno.media/blog/2022/04/26/govoril-li-brzezinski-chto-s-raskolom-pravoslavia-i-raspodom-rossii-amerike-pomozhet-ukraina/>

⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T1409sXBleg>

⁸ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/mar/25/barack-obama-russia-regional-power-ukraine-weakness#:~:text=President%20Barack%20Obama%20has%20described,beyond%20annexation%20of%20Crimea%20and>

⁹ See Adrian Karatnycky’s “The Long, Destructive Shadow of Obama’s Russia Doctrine” in *Foreign Policy*: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/07/11/obama-russia-ukraine-war-putin-2014-crimea-georgia-biden/>

¹⁰ <https://ria.ru/20230719/patriarkh-1884968418.html>

enough to allow a wide array of interpretations, usually addressing and serving various political agendas. In what we know as Byzantium, it endorsed the basileuses with an extra layer of legitimacy. They were believed to be an “ensouled” or alive law (ἔμψυχος νόμος, *lex animata*),¹¹ as it was stated, for example, in Emperor Justinian’s *Novellae Constitutiones*:

However, the Emperor is fortunately removed from all those things we have just mentioned as God Himself elevated him above the laws, sending him down to be a living law (νόμον αὐτὴν ἔμψυχον) amongst men; for this reason, the consulate belongs in perpetuity to the Emperor over all cities, peoples, and nations, to govern them in his person and according to his pleasure, or through another, conferring the consular robe on him, for the consular office always goes along with the imperial sceptre.¹²

The source for this novella is not Christian but pagan. It builds on the ideas that go back to the Hellenistic times, when, for example, pseudo-Archytas of Tarentum, some time between the first century BC and third century AD, differentiated between two kinds of law: the soulless one codified in letters (ἄψυχος γράμμα), and the ensouled one embodied in the person of a king (νόμων δὲ ὁ μὲν ἔμψυχος βασιλεύς).¹³ This idea was imported to the Christian political theology by a prominent pagan statesman who served several Christian emperors, Themistius (317 - c. 388). He explained:

Do you want to know what is philosophy’s contribution? It declares that the king is living law (νόμον ἔμψυχον εἶναι φησι τὸν βασιλέα), a divine law which, in the course of time, has come down from above (νόμον θεῖον ἄνωθεν ἦκοντα ἐν χρόνῳ) as outpouring of the eternal Good, a providence of that nature closer to the earth, who looks in every way towards Him, and strives in every way for imitation, who is absolutely divinely born and divinely nourished, as Homer says, sharing with God these other epithets too: guardian of guests, guardian of suppliants, the kindly one, the bringer of fruits, the giver of good things, orchestrator of justice, steward of ease, overseer of good fortune.¹⁴

This pagan idea of king as an ensouled law framed the Byzantine hermeneutics of Paul’s idea of *katechon*. Paul, as we have seen, presented the *katechon* as both a thing and a person. The Byzantine political theologians applied both notions to their emperor. Both the institution and the personality of an emperor became the embodiments of the Scriptural *katechon*, in the eyes of many Byzantines. Putin’s political theologians applied this idea to the contemporary political desiderata. For them, *katechon* is still both a person and an institution. Putin is the person. However, unlike in Byzantium, the institution is not the presidential office as a continuation of the imperial office, but Russia itself. One of the faithful Putin’s lieutenants, Vyacheslav Volodin, presently the Chairman of the State Duma of the Russian Federation, famously stated in 2014: “If there is Putin, there is Russia. If there is no Putin, there is no Russia.”¹⁵

No wonder, therefore, that any critique of Putin is interpreted by his adherents as symptoms of Russophobia. As we have seen, Prof Fr Tsy-pin mentioned Byzantinophobia as related to Russophobia. I believe there are reasons to be afraid of Byzantium. However, not Byzantium per se, as Fr Tsy-pin implies, but the political instrumentalisation of the idea of Byzantium, i.e., Byzantinism. As a matter of fact, all right-wing dictatorships that existed in the countries with the Orthodox tradition during the twentieth century, made references to Byzantium and pretended to

¹¹ Ákos Tussay defended in 2022 in Pázmány Péter Catholic University in Hungary a doctoral dissertation “A History of the *nomos empsychos* idea,” which I highly recommend on this subject.

¹² *Novellae Constitutiones* 105.2.4, in 168.

¹³ Pseudo-Archytas, *Fragmenta*, in H. Thesleff, *The Pythagorean Texts of the Hellenistic Period*, Åbo: Åbo Akademi, 1965, 33.

¹⁴ Themistius, *Ἑπτακτὸς εἰς τὸν αὐτοκράτορα Ἰοβιανόν* 64, in G. Downey and H. Schenkl, *Themistii orationes quae supersunt*, vol. 1, Leipzig: Teubner, 1965.

¹⁵ <https://www.mk.ru/politics/2014/10/23/volodin-est-putin-est-rossiya-net-putina-net-rossii.html>

reincarnate the latter. Putin's Russia does the same. The idea of *katechon* is one of many similar ideas from the nomenclature of the Byzantine political theology. As a rule, the original ideas are quite modified and adjusted to the current political circumstances.

One of Putin's most prominent political theologians, Metropolitan Tikhon Shevkunov, appointed as a bishop to Crimea, has made a particular contribution to boosting the legitimacy of Putin's regime by referring to Byzantium. Shevkunov's Byzantium is a fantasy very different from the original Eastern Roman empire really was. He has constructed a Byzantium that fits Putin's fantasy about Russia in a seminal movie that he produced in 2007.¹⁶ This is a Byzantium hated by the West, and this hatred is extrapolated upon Russia.

Alexandr Dugin concurs with Tikhon Shevkunov in assuming that Putin's Russia embodies Byzantium's "religious, soteriological, and eschatological mission."¹⁷ At the centre of this mission, Dugin believes, there is "the Supreme Ruler" as "a paternal, almost mystical figure." He argues that "with the advent of Putin and by virtue of his truly decisive patriotic reforms [...] the autocratic principle unfolded in full force. The [Russian] people want only Putin and no one else, and for this, they are ready to change the Constitution and everything else. Putin is the Supreme Ruler, the saviour of Russia."¹⁸

One of the most important references to Byzantium that implied Putin's role as a new basileus, was his visit to Mount Athos in Greece in 2016. This monastic commonwealth reached its prominence in the Middle Ages owing to the endorsements from the Byzantine basileuses, who in exchange sought from the monks blessings and endorsements for their rule. In our days, the Athonite monks were happy to endorse Vladimir Putin as a non-crowned king of the Orthodox.

There are no theologians in modern Russia who would be of the calibre of Gerhard Kittel, Paul Althaus or Emanuel Hirsch in Nazi Germany.¹⁹ Yet, there are similarities between Hitler's and Putin's theologians. For example, both groups began as liberal theologians and ended as radical conservatives. Nazi theologians evolved from the liberal Protestant thought as it developed in the late-nineteenth - early-twentieth century. Z-theologians, as I call the supporters of Putin, grew from reading such open-minded Russian thinkers, mostly among the emigrées, as Vladimir Lossky or Georges Florovsky. Everything that the West liked about Orthodoxy in the twentieth century, became distorted by the post-Soviet Russian theologians. At the same time, I believe, the emigrant Orthodox theology was pregnant with some features of what would evolve to Z-Orthodoxy. One is the intrinsic anti-Westernism that, for example, derived the entire Western civilisation from Filioque.

Let me illustrate how theological anti-Westernism became a path towards Z-theology, by the example of Professor Alexey Osipov. He is known internationally more than most other modern Russian theologians. For example, he represented the Moscow Patriarchate in the Orthodox-Lutheran ecumenical dialogue. He is also very popular among the faithful of the Russian Orthodox Church as a preacher and promoter of Orthodox spirituality. He counterposes it to the Catholic spirituality. In particular, he considers as spiritually dangerous and delusional such figures of the Catholic spirituality as Francis of Assisi and Theresa of Avila.²⁰ Generally speaking, he has been quite anti-Catholic and proudly anti-Western since the Soviet era. After February 2022, Professor Osipov became a fervent proponent of "Z-Orthodoxy." He explained, for example, that "those steps

¹⁶ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FdZz7pmWdF0&ab_channel=RussianFaith%26HeritageChannel

¹⁷ Александр Дугин, *Ноомахия. Войны ума. Византийский Логос. Эллинизм и Империя*, (Москва: Академический проект, 2016), 176.

¹⁸ <https://t.me/russica2/47732>

¹⁹ See, for example, Robert P. Ericksen. 2010. *Theologians under Hitler: Gerhard Kittel, Paul Althaus and Emanuel Hirsch*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

²⁰ «Скажите мне, кто ваши святые, и я скажу вам, какова ваша Церковь...»:

https://ruskline.ru/analitika/2010/11/13/skazhite_mne_kto_vashi_svyaty_e_i_ya_skazhu_vam_kakova_vasha_cerkov/

that Russia has taken now (i.e., the war - CH) are necessary. Thank God that it managed [to launch the war] at the last moment, when everything was already hanging over the abyss.”²¹ He thus repeated the point of the Russian propaganda that Russia started its aggression pre-emptively, just before Ukraine would launch its attack on Russia being driven by the West.

Osipov is a senior professor at the Moscow Theological Academy. This institution has become a centre of Z-theology, similarly, for example, to what the Faculty of Theology at Jena University had become in Nazi Germany. A critical proportion of the Moscow Academy’s faculty converted to Z-Orthodoxy. The former rector of the Academy (from 2019 through 2020), Bishop Pitirim Tvorogov (now of Skopinsk and Shatsk in Ryazan oblast of Russia) turned to one of the most outspoken preachers of the war against Ukraine. Here is only one piece of his pro-war preaching.²² After having visited the frontline in Donbass, he shared with his congregation that he experienced there “a special grace of God.” In his words, he has not felt such a grace anywhere else, including Mount Athos or Jerusalem. He counterposed the criminals from the “Wagner” group, which recently attempted a coup d’état, to those who criticise the war. For the ex-rector of the theological academy, the latter are true criminals, while the former are saints. Pitirim believes that the Ukrainians are true Cains, while the Russians are Abels — not the other way around.

The mentioned Fr Vladislav Tsy-pin also presents the Ukrainians as Cains. He, thus, brings up Biblical arguments to corroborate his Z-Orthodoxy. Tsy-pin compares the Russian people with the Jews whom Jahweh ordered to eliminate their enemies:

Hear, Israel: Today you are going into battle against your enemies. Do not be fainthearted or afraid; do not panic or be terrified by them. For the LORD your God is the one who goes with you to fight for you against your enemies to give you victory (NIV Deut 20: 3-4).²³

References to the wars of Israel against its enemies have become an important part of the Russian Z-theology and propaganda. The Russian Orthodox Church-owned TV channel “Spas” broadcasted a piece of such propaganda through a documentary series “War and the Bible.” It is based on the book by the Serbian bishop and Saint Nikolaj Velimirović with the same title.²⁴ Episode five from the series, titled “For which reason did God condemn the biblical cities to death?” focuses on the biblical story told in the book of Joshua:

Then you crossed the Jordan and came to Jericho. The citizens of Jericho fought against you, as did also the Amorites, Perizzites, Canaanites, Hittites, Girgashites, Hivites and Jebusites, but I gave them into your hands (NIV Jos 24:11).

The episode was recorded in Volnovakha – a Ukrainian city in the east of the country occupied and almost completely demolished by the Russians. While standing against the backdrop of the destroyed city, one of the film’s authors, Fr Igor Fomin, asserts that “God gives a direct command to the Jewish people to cleanse the land from the peoples” that were impious and therefore destined by God to “go into oblivion,” so that other peoples could be “erected in their place.” When asked the question: How can God, who loves mankind, want his people to perish, even if they are impious? — Fr Fomin answers: God does not think in the categories of human life. This is a liberal way of thinking. In contrast to it, God does not have limitations, even when it takes to take the life of a whole people. He does not hesitate to eliminate the peoples when they apostasise from him. Although Fr Fomin does not explicitly say that the same applies to the Ukrainian people, he implies it. While he is deliberating on this, the editors are showing footage from Ukraine, including the Revolution of dignity in 2013-14. Their message is clear: the Ukrainians revolted against God when

²¹ regnum.ru/news/polit/3544084.html

²² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x9dAIYSuBBY>

²³ <https://pravoslavie.ru/155245.html>

²⁴ Velimirovic, Nikolaj. War and the Bible. United States: Diocese of New Gracanica and Midwestern America, 2018.

they turned against their president, Viktor Yanukovich, for which reason God sent the Russian army to punish them.

Fr Fomin asserts that the chosen people of Israel stopped to be chosen when they abandoned Christ. In a similar way, according to the film's narrative, the Ukrainians lost God's mercy after they chose to abandon the Russian world. They therefore deserve only destruction and ruins, which are demonstrated in the film in abundance. This message is really dangerous, because it implies, for example, that God was behind the Shoah. It means that the Nazi army was an instrument of God's justice, as the Russian army is such an instrument in Ukraine.

These are only a few strikes of brush on the huge and quite horrifying canvas of Z-theology. The question is, what is to be done to tackle it? I think nothing new should be invented as a remedy to what is nothing more but a variation of what Fr Luigi Sturzo described as *il clerico-fascismo*²⁵ and Dorothee Sölle – as *der Christofaschismus*.²⁶ More classical forms of European fascism were deconstructed through an intellectual effort of philosophers and theologians, mostly in the West. Now we need to reapply, creatively, their approaches to the most recent form of fascism, which calls itself the “Russian world.” I would like to use my presentation here as an invitation to all of you to accomplish this task together. Then we could contemplate together the sun prevailing over darkness, as in this picture, which I took in Fr Struzo's native Sicilian town of Caltagirone.

²⁵ See, for example, his article “Perplessità e confusioni” in *Popolo Nuovo* #27 from July 8, 1923.

²⁶ Dorothee Sölle. *Gesammelte Werke*, Band 5. Herausgegeben von Ursula Baltz-Otto & Fulbert Steffensky. Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 305.

