



Written by [Tatiana Christy](#) on August 6, 2018

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## The Russian Church as Putin's Weapon of Influence

From the Middle Ages to the Bolshevik Revolution, the Russian Orthodox Church served the country's monarchs, playing an active role in state governance. Today the situation is little different, although Russia is a secular state, according to its constitution. The church in Russia got resurrected after it was all but destroyed by the communist revolution of 1917 and the subsequent years of totalitarian rule. Now religion has become relevant once again, and after the fall of the communist regimes all across Europe in 1989, it has been rehabilitated. Religious faith has begun to matter, and the religious institutions have been given an important status in the post-totalitarian societies.



However, the newly reborn religious freedoms in Russia came with the legacy of the KGB. After 1917, the whole church was brutally repressed and purged. It was portrayed as evil — a symbol of capitalism, imperialism, and the “opium of the people,” according to the Marxist ideology. The church as an institution was nearly annihilated by the Bolsheviks. They, however, had too many battles to fight at the time, and could not focus their full attention on the church and its followers. Also they realized they could not expect people to become devout atheists overnight. Generations were needed to eliminate faith and religious beliefs, which were deeply rooted in the Russian psyche prior to the revolution.

Instead, the Bolsheviks offered the Russian Orthodox Church a choice to collaborate with the regime, which in return would ensure its survival, despite the fact that the Bolsheviks did not recognize it. “You had to reach certain compromises, especially, if you wanted to move up in the Russian church hierarchy,” says Yuri Felshtinsky, a U.S.-based Russian author who specializes in intelligence issues. The communists used the church as a KGB tool for spying and reporting on people. “After seeing three-quarters of its monks and priests purged after the Revolution, the church needed little prompting from the KGB to serve it. For the church, there was indeed no alternative. They had to be friendly with the KGB,” says former KGB officer Oleg Gordievsky.

Former *Reader's Digest* senior editor John Barron, in his 1974 book *KGB: The Secret Work of Soviet Secret Agents*, noted that by 1939 the Russian Orthodox Church had virtually disappeared in the Soviet Union. “However,” Barron wrote, “in the extremity of war Stalin recognized that the church could help rally the people to the defense of Mother Russia. On September 4, 1943, he received the three ranking Russian Orthodox leaders in a private audience and consummated with them a deal that has governed church-state relations ever since.” The deal? The communist state would allow the church to survive in return for the church's unwavering political support.

Barron, who was a former U.S. Navy intelligence officer and Russia specialist, wrote: “To control the churches and guarantee they kept their bargain, the Party established the Council for the Affairs of the



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Russian Orthodox Church and the Council for the Affairs of Religious Sects, responsible for all other denominations.” These councils were reorganized in 1966 and placed under the direction of G.G. Karpov, who had been a general in the NKVD (forerunner of the KGB). “Ever since, the regulatory councils have been dominated by the KGB,” Barron noted. “Whenever it wants the council to order the church to do something, it can count on an obliging response.”

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For more than 70 years, the Russian Orthodox Church was in the grip of the communists. In fact, it became a massive tool for spying, and high clergy were awarded high ranks in the KGB hierarchy. Such priests were often sent abroad under the cover of their cassocks to attend religious events. In reality, they were used mainly for spying. What did they do? What one would expect Soviet spies to do: They gathered information, recruited, and projected the Kremlin’s propaganda line. One of the tricks of the KGB was to invite potential recruits selected by the clergy to come to Russia for a briefing. The clergy were an important part of the KGB’s oppressive apparatus.

In 1992, with the opening of some of the KGB archives by the Russian Parliamentary Commission on the Work of the KGB, it became clear that practically all Russian dioceses were connected to the KGB. Thanks to these archives, the public was informed that today’s Russian patriarch — Kirill Gundyaev — was a KGB agent with the rank of general, who operated under the spy name “Mihaylov.” According to the same sources, the patriarch before him — Alexei, now deceased — was also a KGB operative. Although there are no official KGB dossiers on the work of the Orthodox clergy, the commission easily determined which agent code names represent which priests, connecting biographic details and foreign travels of the agents with KGB aliases to the professional resumés and bios of acting priests.

Russian investigative journalist and radio host Yevgenia Albats is one of the few who has had access to the KGB archives. In her book *State Within a State: The KGB and Its Hold on Russia — Past, Present, and Future*, Albats quoted Konstanin Kharchev, the former chairman of the Soviet Council on Religious Affairs, as stating: “Not a single candidate for the office of bishop or any other high-ranking office, much less a member of Holy Synod, went through without confirmation by the Central Committee of the CPSU [Communist Party of the Soviet Union] and the KGB.” The post-Soviet KGB was renamed and split into the FSB, which is the domestic secret police, and the SVR, which is in charge of foreign espionage and active measures.

Thus, the problem with today’s Russian clergy (and that of the other post-communist states) is that most of today’s leaders have been literally made and trained by the KGB, and continue to be directed by its successors. The church, as an institution, has never had the opportunity to reform itself so that it serves society rather than the people in power. All of that comes in very handy to authoritarian leaders such as Putin, who sees in the church yet another tool to serve his regime. In fact, during Putin’s stay in power, the church has been integrated into the government far more profoundly than during the Soviet era. In order to create an image of himself as a “true democrat” who allows spiritual freedoms and religious expressions, Putin turned the church into a huge propaganda machine that uses religion to exploit patriotism, to promote Russian “greatness and exclusivity,” to justify Russian territorial expansions, to batter government critics, and to propagandize against the “horrible influence of the West.”

The church is also used to spread Russian foreign policy through priests as emissaries to foreign



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countries — where they are used as diplomats, negotiators, or extortionists, twisting arms on issues that concern Russia. Putin often uses Patriarch Kirill Gundyaev to project influence outside Russia. For example, in a recent visit to Bulgaria, Gundyaev was openly insolent to the Bulgarian president, Rumen Radev, blaming Bulgaria for not being “thankful enough” to Russia for liberating it from the rule of the Ottoman empire in late 19th century. The patriarch’s outburst came after a traditional ceremony where Bulgarians acknowledge the fallen heroes from all nationalities that fought in the Russian-Turkish war 1877-1878. Not surprisingly, in view of the current Russian-Ukrainian tensions, Russia was unappreciative of praise for Ukrainian soldiers who fought alongside Russian soldiers against the Turks. This illustrates how Putin’s government is ready to go back centuries to try to find reasons to impose its dominance, regardless of the relevancy to present realities.

To be religious in Russia has become an inseparable part of supporting government policies. Although it was clear that Russians couldn’t become atheists overnight after 1917, a reverse miracle happened after 1989: Politicians and the newly rich business elite (all connected to the previous communist *nomenclatura*) miraculously became religious with the snap of a finger. Those were the same people who propagated atheism, who repressed churchgoers, and who forbade young people to attend church services. It was the same people who wrote schoolbooks defaming religion. It was impossible, before 1989, to be officially religious in Russia and have a career — you could not become a party member, study at a university, or be a part of the Komsomol (the Communist Youth Organization). Openly devout Christians were fired from their jobs and ridiculed. Incredibly, after the wall came down, the same people who were saying that religion is a retrograde anachronism literally became the most devoted believers overnight! They understood that religion was needed to legitimize their power in the context of “new democratic values.”

“It is absolutely ridiculous to even suggest that these people have anything to do with religion,” says Irina Ivanova, a Russian historian and theology scholar who lives in the United States. “These people haven’t read the Bible, they never attended church services, they do not know Christian holidays and customs, apart from Christmas and Easter. They can’t have Christ in their heart! They even don’t know how to cross themselves in a church — many confuse the Orthodox way of crossing: Instead of touching the right shoulder first, they touch the left, like the Catholics do,” says Ivanova.

Even Putin himself recently crossed himself like a Catholic in an improvised baptism in freezing water — at one of his regular shirtless photo ops. And many people showed their outrage at the staged spectacle. “What kind of an Orthodox Christian are you, when you don’t even know how to cross yourself?” critics were saying. But for Russian politicians and business elite, it has become very fashionable to parade their religiosity and churchgoing by diligently documenting it with photo selfies and posting them on social media. Showing “religiousness” gives these people bragging rights to be seen as “righteous.”

However, such behavior has turned many people away from the church. To a great number of Russians, the church never became a true spiritual refuge. It is considered more as a business corporation, glued to the government, which serves people in power. “The church is viewed as part of the government and to many it lacks its appeal and spiritual guidance,” says Aleksei Makarin, a Russian political analyst.

According to journalist Ksenya Kirilova, the Russian Orthodox Church is part of the political process and a government instrument. It plays a supporting role to the regime.



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Numbers show that since Putin took power in 1999, the percentage of people who consider themselves religious and Christian Orthodox rose dramatically. The Pew Research Center reported that in 1991 only 38 percent of Russians claimed to believe in God. The most recent surveys by Pew show that in 2015, 71 percent of the population of Russia declared itself Eastern Orthodox. Some speculate that people in the surveys say they are religious only because the government wants them to be, and that the actual number of atheists has not changed much since the fall of communism. This is supported by the Russian Center for Public Opinion Research (an independent research center with which the official church disagrees), which says that no more than five percent of Russians regularly go to church and attend services. According to the center, most Russians, if they go to church at all, do it no more than two times per year — for Christmas and Easter services. This would seem to indicate that the attachment to religion in Russia is not strong. Also, the Russian Orthodox Church is not particularly known for conducting humanitarian activities, such as helping the poor, running hospitals and shelters, giving money to education, or supporting charitable causes that are not directly connected to the government.

The church in Russia is a megaphone for Putin's domestic and foreign policy, backing him openly in all elections. Thanks to the church, Putin is being portrayed almost as a deity with superhuman powers, a savior of Russia and the world.

Russian priests across the country take part in the political discourse and enjoy enormous media attention. There are many videos on social media with Russian priests threatening the West, and the United States in particular, with war and annihilation. Recently, a very disturbing video surfaced on YouTube in which Russian military personnel train priests, dressed in religious attire, how to use different military weapons in modern combat. They are shown firing not only handguns and rifles, but also large anti-tank weapons. This is not simply "a day at the gun range" that one can readily experience at private ranges here in the United States. This is an official training session by military instructors of Putin's KGB-FSB state. It is clear also that this is not a single session of training because the military instructor says (in Russian) at the beginning, "Today we are going to learn how to use...", which implies that such trainings are regular and routine.

The Christian Orthodox nations in Europe — Ukraine, Romania, Serbia, Macedonia, Bulgaria, Belarus — are especially important to Russia since they are all part of Russia's former sphere of influence. Ukraine and especially the Balkans are the Russian church's targets to proliferate Russian policies under the pretext of "brotherly love" and "common Slavic and religious heritage." In Serbia, the Russian church focuses on the sacralization of Serbian nationalism, constantly referring to NATO as a destroyer of its "Orthodox shrines." The church also plays the role of an antagonist among surrounding nations. It follows the Russian doctrine of divide and conquer — putting a wedge between nations, stirring up ethnic, nationalist, and religious rivalries — between ethnic Albanians in Macedonia, Serbia, and Montenegro and Christians there, opposing vehemently any closer relationship of these countries' governments with the EU and NATO. Russia wants to keep these regions under its influence and uses the Orthodox Christianity card as a bargaining chip. It also antagonizes Serbs and Croats (who are Catholic and therefore hostile to the Orthodox religious doctrine). It antagonizes Macedonians and Bulgarians because Russia does not want Macedonia to become a part of the EU. In his recent visit to Macedonia, Putin said on purpose that the Cyrillic alphabet comes from Macedonia, whereas historically it originated from Bulgaria. This may seem like a small matter to outsiders, but it was



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clearly calculated by Putin to stir up longstanding ethnic, linguistic, nationalistic, and territorial divisions between the Macedonian and Bulgarian populations within the region, a tactic the communists have used effectively not only in the Balkans but throughout the world.

The case of the Balkan country of Bulgaria is especially interesting because it is the country in the European Union that has the strongest pro-Russian lobby, controlled directly by Russia through business corporations, blackmail, and Russia-sponsored politicians and media. When the Russian patriarch visited this country in March of this year, he ordered the Bulgarian government (through Russian security services) to monitor and harass citizens who wrote posts on Facebook disapproving of his visit and Russian policy in general. Scores of people were visited by the police and issued warnings for expressing their disdain for the patriarch. Especially harassed were Bulgarian priests who disagree with the Russian church and its propaganda.

Other emissaries of the Orthodox Church and Putin are the government-sponsored bikers calling themselves “Putin’s Wolves.” They crusade every year across Europe, on the pretext of celebrating “Slavic cultures, history, religion, and victory over Nazi Germany.” In reality, this group is nothing more than a tacky, noisy nuisance, dressed in black leather jackets, decorated with crosses and religious symbols, and waving Russian flags. This is why some European countries refuse these “wolves” an entry and turn them back. Others that are more vulnerable to Russia put up with them every year.

An interesting fact about the Russian patriarch is that despite his appeals to the nation to live a life of piety and humility, he himself is not an example of religious righteousness. Patriarch Kirill leads the lavish lifestyle of a billionaire, possessing mansions, palaces, expensive yachts, and cars; and he has a longtime lover, a woman he never married. This former KGB agent emulates the lifestyle of the richest aristocracy and makes no effort to hide it. Not long ago there was a huge scandal involving the patriarch wearing a Breguet watch that cost more than \$30,000. These high-end Swiss luxury watches are symbols of European aristocracy — worn by Marie Antoinette, Czar Alexander I, and others. Although at first the patriarch denied that he knew that this was an expensive watch and claimed that it was a “present,” this story made international news and was a huge embarrassment to the Russian church and government.

In reality, Patriarch Kirill Gundyaev is mostly a businessman, known by the nickname “The Tobacco King,” who earned his first several hundred millions in the ‘90s importing tobacco from Switzerland under the cover of “humanitarian help” and not paying import taxes as a member of the church. Then he was just a metropolitan bishop. But he reached the status of a billionaire when he started exporting petrol in 1997. Among his business enterprises are stakes in the automobile industry, in the production and export of expensive seafood such as caviar, in the banking industry, and in other areas. He seems to be an omnipresent businessman in Russia, but his multiple business dealings would never have been possible without the protection of government throughout the years.

However, officially Patriarch Kirill Gundyaev does not own much. His real-estate portfolio boils down to one apartment in Moscow. The church in Russia is under information curfew, and everything about it is classified. Because of this lack of transparency, it is very hard to find out what exactly Gundyaev owns, but thanks to independent investigative journalists and bloggers in Russia, his wealth (or some of it) is being exposed by the media.

The Russian church, as an extension of Putin’s government, impacts Americans in many ways, but one



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that is rarely mentioned is the importance of Moscow's dominion over the Russian Orthodox Church here in America. KGB defector Konstantin Preobrazhensky has been warning about this for more than a decade. "On May 17, 2007, Russia has gained a historical victory over America," he wrote in his blog in September 2007. "It has opened its province here, which is called the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Of Russia (ROCOR). On this day it has recognized Moscow's superiority over itself by signing an Act of Canonical Community with the Moscow Patriarchate (MP). But in Russia, the Church and state are separated only on paper. In fact, the Moscow Patriarchate (MP) is controlled by the Russian neo-KGB state and has always been the pawn of the Russian intelligence."

Preobrazhensky, a former lieutenant colonel in the KGB, operating mostly in Japan, China, and Korea, was granted political asylum in the United States in 2006. He writes: "Though a part of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Of Russia (ROCOR) has refused to come under Moscow's rule and retained independence, many thousands of Russian Americans and their children are now nourished in the spirit of loyalty to authoritarian Russia, which is becoming hostile to America day-by-day. Government-backed priests with Russian passports are replacing local clergy. Their churches have become insidious fronts for Russian state interests no matter how our relations evolve in the future."

Today's Russian church hierarchy is more of a business enterprise and propaganda organ tied to the government than a spiritual center. Putin needs the church to sanctify his power, and so far he is succeeding.

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