



RUSSIAN ATTACKS **ON RELIGIOUS FREEDOM** **IN UKRAINE**

Research, analytics, recommendations

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R 95

R 95 **Russian attacks on religious freedom in Ukraine.** Research, analytics, recommendations / Edited by Oleksandr Zaiets and Maksym Vasin. – Kyiv, 2022. – 36 pages.

The report highlights documented facts of targeted shelling, vandalism, and looting of religious sites, attacks on religious leaders including torture and deliberate abuse committed by Russian soldiers in Ukraine from February 24 to July 15, 2022. Additionally, it presents an analysis of the state of religious freedom in Crimea, occupied by the Russian Federation since February 2014.

Via QR codes and hyperlinks readers can access the full video recordings of testimonies on war crimes, crimes of genocide, and crimes against humanity, for which Russia have to be prosecuted under international humanitarian law.

This report was prepared by the Institute for Religious Freedom (Ukraine) within the framework of the Locked Faith project, with the support of the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in Ukraine, in cooperation with representatives of the Ukrainian Council of Churches and Religious Organizations, Center for Civil Liberties (Ukraine), and Peace Organization PAX (Netherlands).

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ABBREVIATIONS

ECB – Evangelical Christians-Baptists
 ICC – the International Criminal Court
 IHL – international humanitarian law
 IRF – the Institute for Religious Freedom, Ukraine
 OCU – the Orthodox Church of Ukraine
 UCCRO – the Ukrainian Council of Churches and Religious Organizations
 UOC – the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (in affiliation with the Moscow Patriarchate)

SUMMARY

AUTHORS AND METHODOLOGY

The Institute for Religious Freedom (IRF) is a human rights NGO, founded in 2001 in Kyiv, Ukraine. Our goal is to protect and promote religious freedom and other related human rights, facilitate inter-faith dialogue and church-state cooperation, strengthen democratic foundations and civil society in Ukraine.

From the first days of the full-scale Russian invasion, the Institute for Religious Freedom started its research on the impact of the war on faith-based communities in Ukraine. IRF specialists conducted monitoring and open-source data collection, documented attacks on religious leaders and buildings, and recorded eyewitness testimonies of these events in various regions of Ukraine. This report covers the recent period of Russian aggression against Ukraine from February 24th to July 15th, 2022 and contains an analysis of the state of freedom of religion on the Crimean peninsula, occupied by Russia in 2014.

For the purpose of this research, IRF additionally conducted a written and oral survey of leaders or official representatives of a vast majority of churches, other religious associations, and heads of religious educational institutions of Ukraine. In conclusion, this research expresses the impact of the aggressive war that the Russian Federation started against Ukraine on at least 20 different denominations, which unite around 31 thousand religious communities, constituting 84% of the whole religious network of Ukraine. Among them are Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant churches, Jewish and Muslim religious associations, as well as various religious and ethnic minorities.

BACKGROUND

In 2014 – 2015, the Russian aggression against Ukraine was accompanied by abductions, tortures, and extrajudicial executions of clergymen and believers of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, and a number of Evangelical Protestant churches (Baptists, Pentecostals, Adventists, etc.). The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) and Jehovah's Witnesses were subjected to targeted harassment.

As a result, in the Russian-occupied territories of Donetsk and Luhansk regions most religious communities ceased to exist, believers were forced to pray privately or gather clandestinely, and religious freedom disappeared. The forced implementation of Russian legislation on combating "extremism" and "illegal missionary activity" has significantly worsened the situation of religious communities and associations in these regions as well as in occupied Crimea.

KEY FINDINGS

From February 24, 2022, Russian attacks on religious freedom in Ukraine have become crueler. If previously priests on the occupied territories only received death threats, now religious leaders are tortured and killed – again, but on a scale far worse than in 2014. If previously Russian occupational authorities expelled Ukrainian believers from their churches and prayer houses, now Russia is destroying the spiritual heritage of Ukraine with missile attacks, shelling, and looting of religious buildings without justification by military necessity.

Russia's imperialistic policy, based on the ideology of the "Russkiy mir" (Russian world), is being openly implemented in the Ukrainian territories under occupation. For example, by removing Ukrainian books from libraries and burning them in public, banning the use of Ukrainian language in the public sphere and even on road signs. In addition, the occupational authorities strive to take under control all religious activity, forcing local religious

communities to justify Russian aggression and establish subordination with the Russian religious centers, and compelling pro-Ukrainian religious leaders to cooperation using threats and torture.

Russian media and religious leaders, such as Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia, are justifying the war against Ukraine with propaganda about the supposed protection of Orthodox believers of the Moscow Patriarchate and Russian speakers. Instead, Russian military aircraft and artillery are destroying both houses of worship and believers, regardless of language, denomination, and ethnicity. Examples of massive destructions such as in Bucha, Irpin, Mariupol, and Kharkiv allow to conclude that Russia would rather eliminate whole cities and destroy the Ukrainian historical and spiritual heritage than accept the right of the Ukrainian people to self-determination and sovereignty. Numerous documented crimes committed by Russian soldiers in Ukraine have to be investigated according to international humanitarian law as war crimes, genocide, and crimes against humanity.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings presented in this report and to maximally protect Ukrainian religious communities from further harm, we urge:

1. **The US Senate and President** – to pass, sign, and implement the H.R. 5408 Ukraine Religious Freedom Support Act.
2. **The EU and other democratic states** – to introduce personal sanctions against Russian officials, religious leaders, media workers, and other individuals who are responsible for justifying and (or) implementing repressions against Ukrainian religious leaders and faith-based communities.
3. To create a Special Tribunal for the Punishment of the Crime of Aggression against Ukraine.
4. To facilitate the investigation by the International Criminal Court of any war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide that are perpetrated on the territory of Ukraine.
5. **The EU, US, United Kingdom, Japan, and other UN members** – to support the efforts of Ukraine in investigating and prosecuting war crimes, crimes of genocide, and crimes against humanity committed during the Russian war against Ukraine. In particular through the creation of international mechanisms and instruments in addition to national administration of justice, for example, in the format of an international hybrid tribunal for war crimes and other international crimes.
6. **The UN and OSCE** – to demand Russia to provide unhindered access to the occupied Ukrainian territories, including Crimea, and the people detained there for independent monitoring missions to observe the situation regarding religious freedom and other human rights.
7. **Ukrainian authorities** – with the goal of criminal prosecution of persons guilty of committing war crimes, crimes of genocide, and crimes against humanity, it is appropriate **for the Parliament of Ukraine** to ratify the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court and **for the President of Ukraine** – to sign the Law on the Implementation of the Norms of International Criminal and Humanitarian Law, adopted by the Parliament of Ukraine on May 20, 2021 (draft law # 2689).



1. ATTACKS ON PLACES OF WORSHIP AND OTHER RELIGIOUS INFRASTRUCTURE ¹

Russia's large-scale armed aggression against Ukraine, which began in the night of February 24, 2022, brought destruction to Ukrainian lands that is horrendous in its sheer scope and its level of cynicism. From the first minutes and up to this time, the Russian invasion has been accompanied by massive missile strikes all over Ukraine and heavy artillery fire.

The consequences of the first five months of the war made it clear that for the Russian army, the targeted destruction of civilian infrastructure is typical behavior: shopping malls, food storage facilities, hospitals, schools, kindergartens, maternity hospitals, museums, and religious sites. At the same time, in many cases, Russian missile and artillery strikes on civilian targets on Ukrainian territory had no military purpose, but only serve to intimidate the local population and provoke panic and a humanitarian crisis.

Such an inhumane way of waging war might have lowered the resistance of the local population of Ukraine, which fiercely opposed the Russian invasion, but it is a blatant violation of the laws and customs of war and other norms of international humanitarian law (IHL). As a result, the “scorched earth” policy implemented by the Russian military led to the devastation of a significant part of residential buildings and civilian infrastructure in Irpin and Bucha in Kyiv region, Mariupol and Volnovakha in Donetsk region, Severodonetsk, Popasna and Rubizhne in Luhansk region, certain areas of Kharkiv and Izyum in Kharkiv region, certain areas of Mykolaiv and many other settlements in the areas of the Russian offensive².

¹ This section was prepared by Maksym Vasin, Ph.D. in Law, executive director of the Institute for Religious Freedom

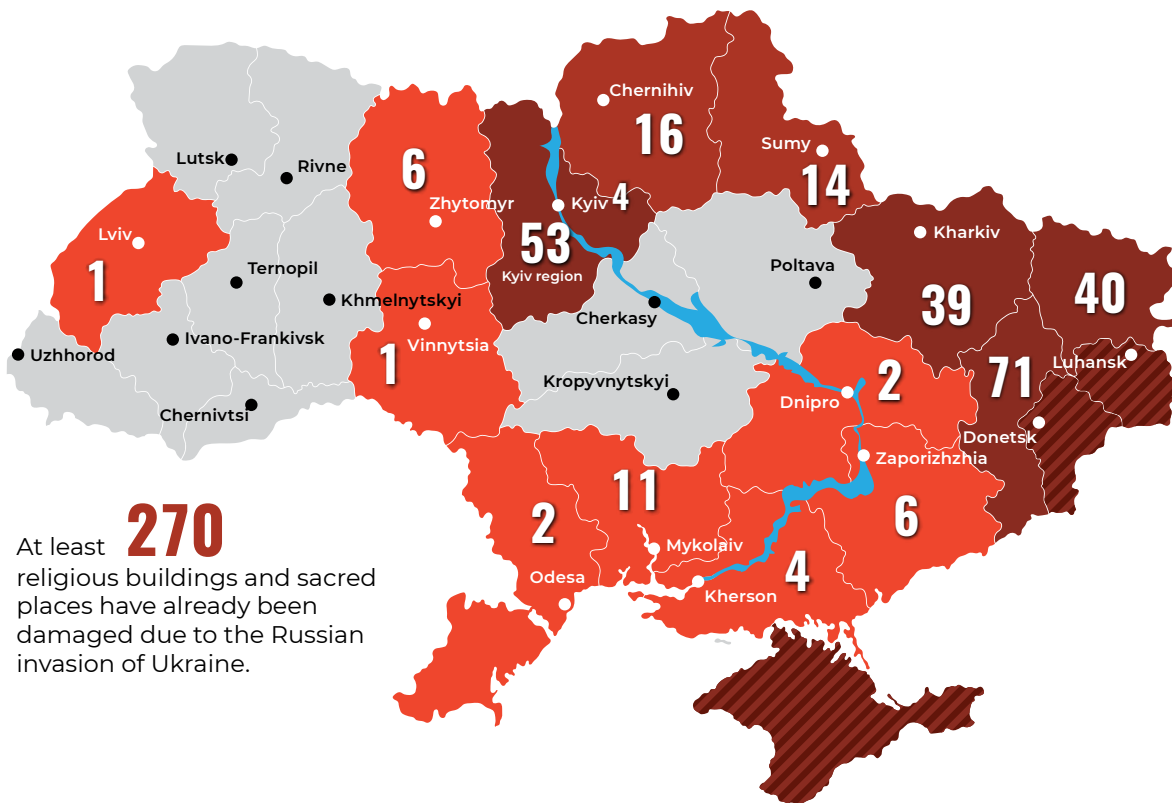
² The Map of Destruction data on completely or partially destroyed objects of social, transport, and housing infrastructure in Ukraine: <https://reukraine.shtab.net>

At least 270 houses of worship, spiritual educational institutions, and sacred sites (cemeteries, memorials, etc.) were ruined as a result of the Russian aggression against Ukraine, being either completely destroyed or damaged.

RELIGIOUS BUILDINGS AND SACRED PLACES

damaged by shelling because of
Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine

** As of July 15, 2022*



The data collected by IRF concerning the scale of destruction of religious buildings in various regions of Ukraine correlates with the map of military action between February 24 and July 15, 2022 (at the time of publication of this research). Destruction mainly took place in border regions where ground offensives of Russian troops took place: Zhytomyr, Kyiv, Chernihiv, Sumy, Kharkiv, Luhansk, Donetsk, Zaporizhzhia, Kherson, Mykolaiv, and Odesa regions. The front line, and in particular the axes of Russian offensives and missile attacks, was expanded due to Russia's active use of the Ukrainian Crimean peninsula, occupied in 2014, and the de facto Kremlin-controlled territory of the Republic of Belarus.

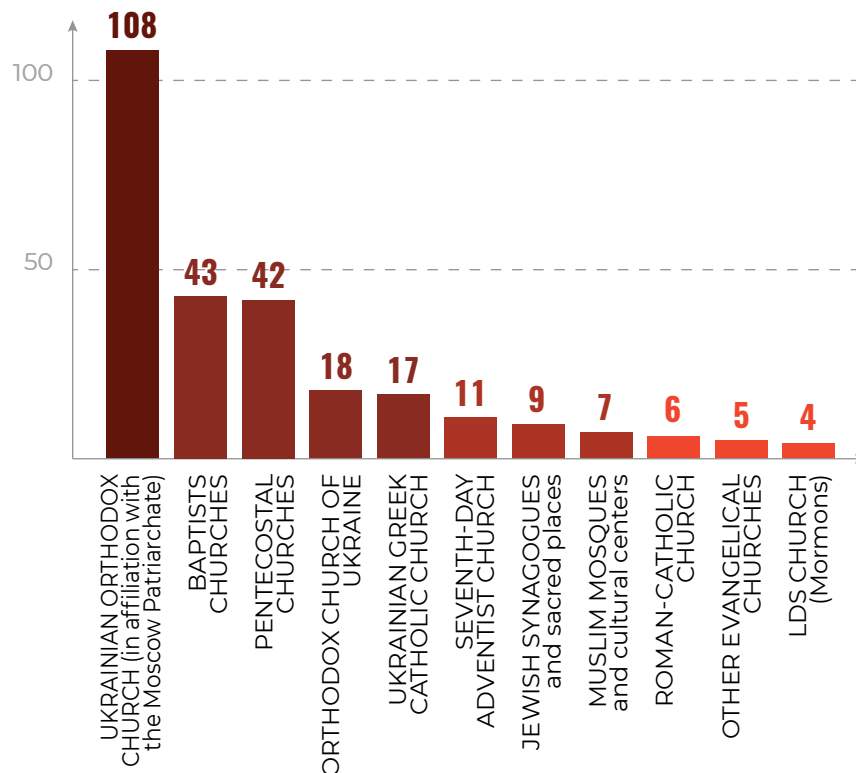
The largest number of churches, mosques, and synagogues was destroyed in Donetsk region (71), especially in the nearly totally destroyed city of Mariupol. Second in terms of the number of ruined religious buildings is Kyiv region (53), where frantic battles for the capital Kyiv took place. The war also caused large-scale destruction and damage to churches and houses of worship in Luhansk (40) and Kharkiv (39) regions.

Analysis of the confessional affiliation of the attacked religious buildings indicates that most of the churches and other church facilities impacted by Russian shelling (108) belong to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (in affiliation with the Moscow Patriarchate). Especially drastic is the state of the Holy Dormition Sviatohirsk Lavra, which during the period of May–July 2022 was subjected to numerous attacks from the positions of Russian troops.

CONFESSIONAL AFFILIATION

of the religious buildings and sacred places
damaged by shelling because of
Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine

* As of July 15, 2022



A priest of an Orthodox parish in Irpin, Kyiv region, in an interview with IRF, testified on the targeted shelling of the church and it being used as a firing position by the Russian military. Given the consequences of the Russian aggression and the Russian Orthodox Church's support for the war against Ukraine, this parish decided to move from subordination to the UOC (in affiliation with the Moscow Patriarchate) to the Orthodox Church of Ukraine.



PRIEST ANDRII KLYUSHEV

Abbot of the Orthodox parish of St. Nicholas the Wonderworker in Irpin (Kyiv region)

"According to eyewitnesses, Russians wanted to get into the church. They tried to force the door. And when they didn't manage, they started looking for a tool but could not find any. Then they broke down the doors to our bell tower and climbed it. A sniper climbed the fire escape to the roof of our church and watched the situation. There were military operations here. The Russian military even shot at the church.

I noticed a tendency – they shot at the windows of any buildings – one-story, two-story, three-story, high-rise buildings. Perhaps they thought that someone was hiding behind the windows. We have an icon of the patron saint of our parish, St. Nicholas, above the entrance to the church, and there



is a gunshot right to his left eye. Probably, one of them just mocked the shrine. It was painful for the parishioners of our church to look at this destruction.”

Watch the full video testimony of priest Andrii Klyushev:
youtu.be/gEp3oZtGGyM

Although Orthodox churches were the most affected by missile and artillery shelling (at least 126), the religious buildings of numerous other denominations, including Muslim mosques, Jewish synagogues, and their holy sites, were also ruined.

On March 1, 2022, several Russian missiles hit the historic Babi Yar ravine near the Kyiv TV Tower, the site of one of the largest mass shootings of Jews in Nazi-occupied Europe during World War II. The United Jewish Community of Ukraine noted that in the Talmud, bone desecration is considered a form of murder. Also, on March 2, a missile fell on a Jewish cemetery in Bila Tserkva, Kyiv region. On April 21, at the Berkovetsk Cemetery in Kyiv, Russian missiles destroyed numerous Jewish tombstones and grave monuments of World War II soldiers decorated with orders and medals.



MOSHE REUVEN ASMAN

Chief Rabbi of Ukraine, chairman of the All-Ukrainian Congress of Jewish Religious Communities (Hasidim Habad Luybavych)

“Think about it – Russian missiles hit a cemetery of former military personnel who protected our homeland during World War II. A Russian missile has also destroyed several graves in the sector of the Berkovetsk Cemetery where great righteous Jews are buried. Many tombstones are broken.

The Russians say that they came to Ukraine to “denazify” it. From whom: from local Russians or from Jews? What are you doing? In April, we buried a parishioner of our community of the Brodsky Synagogue, the central synagogue of Kyiv. His name was Zorik, Zoreslav Zamoysky. He was killed in Bucha while the Russian army ruled there. He was shot – his body has traces of several bullets and marks of violence. He was a quiet, good man, came to the synagogue, prayed, and did no harm to anyone. And died among the hundreds of innocent victims of Bucha, Irpin, Borodyanka, and other cities of Ukraine.

This is one of the crimes committed by the Russian army. He wasn’t killed by the Nazis. He wasn’t shot by the SS. He was shot by the Russian troops who said they came here to “denazify”. No one asked you to come here to “denazify,” and you are shooting peaceful Russian-speaking cities as Kharkiv and Mariupol.”



Watch the full
video testimony of
Moshe Reuven Asman:
youtu.be/F5-Tsr20YkA

Several facilities of the Jewish community in Kharkiv were also damaged. The Jewish youth center “Hillel” was severely ruined. In a Jewish junior school, windows were broken by a shock wave. On March 9, a blast wave shattered the windows of the Kharkiv Choral Synagogue, the second largest in Europe – a Russian missile exploded near a nearby shopping mall. At the time of the explosion, more than 100 Jews were hiding from shelling in the synagogue’s

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basement. Later, on March 15, a yeshiva (Jewish educational institution) on Chobotarska street in Kharkiv suffered from a missile – the roof of the building was punctured by shrapnel³.

*“Over the last days, we have covered the windows on the first floor with sandbags, – said **Moshe Moskowitz**, the Kharkiv rabbi and representative of Chabad in the city. – Food and medicine are running out, and we are trying to deliver supplies despite the danger on the roads.”⁴*

In May, IRF received confirmation that Russian troops completely destroyed the Mariupol synagogue and the premises of the Jewish Community Center. The port city of Mariupol in Donetsk region suffered total destruction as a result of months of attempts by Russian troops to establish control over the city, which ended with the siege of the “Azovstal” plant and the establishment of the occupation administration.



VALENTYN ZAGREBA

Pastor of the Seventh-Day Adventist Church in Mariupol (Donetsk region)

“Just a few days after the beginning of active hostilities, the city was surrounded. It was impossible to move freely in and around the city. It was dangerous because they were already shelling and bombing the inner city. Our last service was held on February 26, 2022. Both of our church buildings in Mariupol were utterly destroyed.

Our house of worship on 28 Mykolaivska Str. is a historical building, a former synagogue, with architectural and historical significance to the city. It was a beautiful and fairly well-preserved building, which was transferred to the ownership of our church. It was impacted in the first days of hostilities in the city: windows and the facade were damaged, and later – the roof was destroyed, and the windows and a part of the wall as well as the first and second floor were severely damaged. Now it is completely destroyed.

Another church building at 254 Shevchenko Boulevard was used not only by our church. Several Protestant churches served in the other part of this building. It was destroyed as a result of a Russian airstrike: a missile hit nearby. As a result, the doors were broken, and the property on the premises was damaged.

In Mariupol, most houses, regardless of their ownership, were damaged and looted as a result of the fighting and the presence of the Russian military in the city.”



Watch the full
video testimony of Pastor
Valentyn Zagreba:
youtu.be/cK_zpo7wBoA

Russian representatives are strengthening their power in the occupied territories by destroying Ukrainian cultural heritage and purposefully combating manifestations of Ukrainian identity. Thus, in Mariupol, the Russian military seized and burned in the courtyard all the books from the library of the Church of Petro Mohyla, which belongs to the Orthodox Church of Ukraine – among the destroyed copies were unique Ukrainian-language editions⁵. Despite the fighting that was ongoing in the city, Russian-controlled local authorities hurried

³ In 20 days, at least 6 Jewish sites in Ukraine were impacted by Russian «denazification»: <https://bit.ly/3A5rXPk>

⁴ In Kharkiv, a Russian missile exploded near a synagogue where Jews were hiding: <https://bit.ly/3pod9Fr>

⁵ In Mariupol, the occupiers burned all the books from the library of the Church of Petro Mohyla: <https://bit.ly/3vL6hVU>

to replace road signs on the outskirts of Mariupol, removing the inscriptions in Ukrainian and English and replaced them with Russian ones⁶. The occupational administration also plans to fully transfer the education system in Mariupol to Russian standards and programs starting from September 2022, which will become a continuation of the process of destruction of the Ukrainian language in this region⁷.

The head of the religious mission in Irpin (Kyiv region) founded by the All-Ukrainian Union of the Churches of Evangelical Christians-Baptists testified to IRF that the Russian military used their religious building as military headquarters and purposefully burned Ukrainian Gospels in the mission's courtyard.



DENIS GORENKOV

Executive director of Mission Eurasia

"After the Russian occupiers entered Kyiv region and Irpin, the Russian headquarters were located in our building. Many witnesses, our neighbors, saw this. After the liberation of Kyiv region, we came here and saw numerous traces of Russian soldiers: track marks from tanks and other armored vehicles and remnants of Russian army rations. In our yard were destroyed Russian equipment and vehicles and the scattered belongings of Russian soldiers.

But it wasn't just the building of our religious mission that was destroyed. We found burnt Gospels and literature produced by our mission on the street near the building. Russian soldiers purposefully burned Gospels printed in Ukrainian, and a lot of our educational literature aimed at families, public life, and educating church leaders. The Russian occupation caused extensive damage to our mission. Personally, I will say that my son cried hard when he found out that this city and our office were destroyed. He really liked to come here."



Watch the full
video testimony of
Denis Gorenkov:
youtu.be/CCgbwdlDqck

In July 2014, the six-building complex of the Donetsk Christian university, founded by Evangelical Christians-Baptists (ECB), was seized by Russian troops, looted, and turned into a military base. Russian troops continued this practice of turning spiritual educational institutions into military facilities during the new wave of armed aggression against Ukraine in 2022.

During the temporary occupation of the village of Berezivka in Kyiv region (from mid-March to early April 2022), Russian soldiers seized the Ukrainian Evangelical Seminary and turned it into an observation post. A representative of the seminary told IRF that the complex of the educational institution, which operated under the All-Ukrainian Union of the Churches of Evangelical Christians-Baptists, was damaged as a result of shelling and deliberate vandalism by Russian soldiers: windows of structures and official cars were shattered, doors were broken, all administrative and residential premises of seminary employees were looted.

Since March 9, 2022 and to this day, the Russian military has been using the Taurida Christian Institute (TCI), located in the village of Antonivka, Kherson region, as a military base. Since 1997, this institute has been operating as a higher spiritual educational institution under the Regional Association of Churches of ECB. According to the testimony of the TCI representative provided to IRF, eight buildings of the institute were damaged, doors were broken in almost all buildings, windows were partially shattered in two buildings, and furniture was

⁶ Russian occupiers destroy Ukrainian road signs near Mariupol: <https://bit.ly/3BHhw5H>

⁷ In Mariupol, occupiers are trying to launch the educational process and introduce Russian standards and training programs: <https://bit.ly/3JBR0wh>

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ruined. Russian soldiers stole property and technical equipment of the TCI valued at nearly 2 million hryvnias (about 68,400 Euros or US dollars).



VENIAMIN BRYNZA

Vice-rector of the Irpin Bible Seminary at the ECB Church (Kyiv region)

"On March 20, from 8 to 10 a.m., about 30 mortar shells hit our seminary building. The first shell hit the kitchen. Other shells hit the rest of the building and the roof. An incendiary mine flew along the entire ceiling. Everything was covered in smoke. I will never forget that day. Tears come to my eyes. I have been driving around Irpin for two days now, looking at the broken houses, looking at what is happening on the streets. The Russian military says they came to "liberate" but did not liberate anyone. They inflicted death and devastation. What they did will only cause hatred because they destroyed everything with targeted fire."



Watch the full video testimony of Veniamin Brynza:
youtu.be/eOrVxSCbbBk

IRF also documented a targeted attack by Russian troops on a Roman Catholic seminary in Kyiv region, which also cannot be justified by motives of military necessity because acts of vandalism and deliberate desecration of religious shrines were committed.



PRIEST RUSLAN MYKHALKIV

Rector of the Higher Theological Seminary of the Most Holy Heart of Jesus of the Roman Catholic Church in Vorzel (Kyiv region)

"Vorzel was under occupation from February 25 of this year until the first days of April. During this time, the territory of the seminary was subjected to two rounds of artillery shelling. More precisely: on February 27, a mine hit, causing damage to buildings and the fence. And in the last days of March, a Russian "Grad" missile hit the territory of the seminary. These explosions caused damage to structures, and some of them require significant repairs. Windows, walls, roof, and fence were damaged and destroyed. The estimated cost of repairing these elements is almost 800 thousand hryvnias (about 27,300 Euros or US dollars).

According to neighbors, on March 24 about 10-15 Russian soldiers invaded the territory of the seminary and remained there for several days. During this time, they damaged many windows, broke down doors, and looted the seminary. They stole household appliances, office equipment, computers, a large number of liturgical accessories, personal clothing, including old clothing, shoes, household tools and machines, stationery, food, and kitchen accessories. In addition, unfortunately, I must testify to an act of vandalism – the Russian soldiers used our chapel as a toilet."



Watch the full
video testimony of priest
Ruslan Mykhalkiv:
youtu.be/RpDJ59MW4Fo

Targeted attacks and deliberate damage to church property by the Russian military were also reported to IRF by employees of the “Vosor” rehabilitation center, founded by the Association of Churches “Salvation” in the village of Motyzhyn, Makarovsky district, Kyiv region.



Watch the full video testimony
of Pastor Vyacheslav Keba:
youtu.be/BhkNtHXoXvM

VYACHESLAV KEBA

Pastor of the “Salvation” Pentecostal Church (Kyiv region)

“First, Russian troops shelled our rehabilitation center with artillery, damaging the roof and the building itself. Then they came to the center and abducted an employee of the center with the goal of further interrogations, suspecting him of cooperation with the Armed Forces of Ukraine. Soon they purposefully fired machine guns and artillery at our center.

Later, Russian soldiers returned to our rehabilitation center and fired a grenade launcher at our car. When entering our premises, the soldiers kicked the doors down with their feet, even though they were open. They deliberately tried to damage everything. Eyewitnesses say that when Russian soldiers entered the center, they just started shooting at the toilets with machine guns and damaged every toilet. In the same way, they shot at mirrors and shattered every mirror in our center. They stole many things: a plasma TV and other valuables.”

Volodymyr Velykyi, pastor of the local “House of God” Pentecostal Church in Bucha, said that at the beginning of the invasion of Kyiv region, on February 26, 2022, Russian aircraft fired several helicopter missiles at the unfinished prayer house in the city of Vorzel on 56 Kurortna Str. Fortunately, the two projectiles failed to explode and caused minor damage to the facilities of the religious community. At the same time, the pastor cannot fathom why the Russian pilots chose their house of worship as their target, as there were no Ukrainian soldiers on the territory and no military facilities were located nearby.

Religious buildings of the Muslim community in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions also suffered a devastating fate. IRF learned about this from mufti Said Ismagilov, who, shortly after the start of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, left his religious leadership position and joined the ranks of the defenders of Ukraine.



SAID ISMAGILOV

Mufti of the Religious Administration of Muslims of Ukraine
“Ummah”

“Muslim religious buildings in Donbas were damaged, such as the mosques in the cities of Mariupol, Kostiantynivka, and Bakhmut in Donetsk region and the city of Severodonetsk in Luhansk region, as well as the Islamic Cultural Center in Severodonetsk. This happened as a result of heavy missile and artillery attacks by the troops of the Russian Federation. I had the opportunity to personally visit three of the four affected mosques: walls, domes, and roofs were damaged. I could not visit the Mariupol mosque to look at the level of destruction that was caused to this new and beautiful mosque, as Mariupol is now under temporary occupation and is controlled by Russian troops.”

Watch the full video testimony of Mufti Said Ismagilov:
youtu.be/txA-UAJH-l8

CONCLUSIONS ON THE TOPIC OF ATTACKS ON PLACES OF WORSHIP AND OTHER RELIGIOUS INFRASTRUCTURE

IRF monitoring data indicates that the Russian armed aggression against Ukraine has negatively affected different religious communities, regardless of their affiliation. If in 2014, when Russia started its war with Ukraine, Orthodox communities of the Moscow Patriarchate enjoyed a certain level of loyalty from the occupational authorities, and the level of destruction of religious buildings was minimal, now it is the churches of the UOC that have suffered the most from Russian missiles and shells⁸.

First of all, this is due to the wide-scale military operations of the Russian army that cover an enormous frontline with a total length of 2,450 km, of which active military operations continue on 1,105 km⁹. Second factor are massive cruise missile attacks on all regions of Ukraine, in particular from the territory of Belarus and occupied Crimea, and the “scorched earth” policy the Russian army resorts to during the ground offensive, cause significant destruction of civilian infrastructure and religious facilities that cannot be justified by motives of military necessity.

Over the past eight years, Russian propaganda has been justifying the armed attack on Ukraine with the motives of “protecting” the faithful of the Moscow Patriarchate and the Russian-speaking residents of the eastern and southern regions. However, the facts mentioned above indicate that the Kremlin’s true intention was not the protection of Moscow-affiliated orthodoxy, which has the largest network of religious communities in Ukraine, or the Russian-speaking population of Donetsk, Luhansk, Kharkiv, and Mykolaiv, which up till now suffered the most from Russian air and artillery strikes.

The true goal of Russia, as stated in the speeches and actions of Russian President Vladimir Putin and which corresponds to the ideology of the “Russkiy mir” (Russian world), is the destruction of Ukraine (1) as a sovereign state; (2) as a nation with its own language, culture and religious diversity; (3) as a democratic society focused on European integration, democracy and the rule of law. It is for this goal and its imperial ambitions that the Russian leadership is ready to continue destroying entire cities with civilian infrastructure (schools, hospitals, food storage facilities, railway stations, etc.), the cultural and spiritual heritage of Ukraine, and fight the manifestations of Ukrainian identity on the occupied territories, imposing its repressive legislation and totalitarian governance regime.

In their totality, these war crimes committed by Russia on the territory of Ukraine may indicate the existence of special genocidal intent aimed at destroying the Ukrainian people, which is a distinct crime from the perspective of international humanitarian law.

Due to the Russian aggression, millions of Ukrainian believers were forced to leave their homes and find themselves in the status of Internally Displaced Persons, settling in the less dangerous western and central regions of Ukraine, or refugees forced to seek shelter abroad. Forced migration caused difficulties in meeting the religious needs of Ukrainian believers, as not all of them were able to find a religious community that corresponds to their religious affiliation in their new place of residence.

We can foresee that in the eastern and southern regions of Ukraine, where hostilities are still ongoing, the scale of destruction of religious buildings will continue to increase. At the same time, this does not exclude the dangers to religious communities in western and central regions of Ukraine: as a result of missile strikes by Russian troops, even an Orthodox Church in Lviv was damaged. So, given the clearly unlawful methods of warfare that Russia is using, we can surely state that every religious community in Ukraine, regardless of its religious affiliation and regional location, is in danger to a certain degree.

⁸ See the 2018 IRF report “Religious Freedom at gunpoint”: <https://irf.in.ua/p/28>

⁹ This was stated by the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of Ukraine Valerii Zaluzhnyi: <https://bit.ly/3QAUb55>



2. ATTACKS ON RELIGIOUS FIGURES ¹⁰

Since the escalation of the Russo-Ukrainian war on February 24, the Institute for Religious Freedom has recorded at least twenty cases of illegal imprisonment of Ukrainian religious figures of various faiths by the Russian military in temporarily controlled or occupied Ukrainian territories. According to the victims' testimonies to IRF, these arbitrary arrests and imprisonment of religious figures were in many cases accompanied by the deliberate infliction of great suffering, torture, attempted rape, real death threats (execution preparations and mock executions), inhumane conditions (deprivation of water, food, access to the toilet), threats of violence against family members, etc.



PRIEST SERGIY CHUDINOVICH

Parson of the Church of the Intercession of the Most Holy Theotokos in Kherson, Protoiereus of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine

"On March 30, 2022, in Kherson, I was captured by representatives of the Russian Federation. I spent the whole day in their room. I was accused of participating in the activities of sabotage and reconnaissance groups of the Armed Forces of Ukraine and of being a member of the territorial defense. This is not the case, of course.

Then they put a hat on my head, tied it very painfully with a neck scarf, and pinched my airways and nose. They took me to the basement. It was in absolute darkness. They didn't let me

¹⁰ The section was prepared by Maksym Vasin, Ph.D. in Law, executive director of the Institute for Religious Freedom

drink, didn't take me to the toilet, took my fingerprints, photos, and a DNA sample, and continued to constantly threaten me. They hinted that something would happen to my family if I did not cooperate with representatives of the Russian Federation. I was given a jacket, but it was very cold there. I was freezing and started coughing.

Then they came in masks and wrung my hands. They told me to go with them, that my life was over, that they would take me apart, that they would kill me, shoot me. They took me to another room. They started beating me in the heart with a baton. I still have a big bruise visible there. My mouth was dry, I was dehydrated, and I could hardly say anything. They demanded that I tell them about the activities of sabotage and reconnaissance groups, named certain people, and demanded information about them. I was very worried and scared. I didn't know what to do or what to say. They were hitting my legs, strangling me, and tied my hands behind my back with tape – they are still numb. I don't feel touch. I asked for water – they gave me vodka. I was able to speak a little. But then my throat dried up again, and my tongue wouldn't move.

Then there came a point when I didn't understand what was going on at all. They gave me a baton to feel with my hands and said that they would rape me with it. Every time I was silent, they were beating and strangling me. Then they took off my pants, and I was standing half naked. They put me on my knees, put my head on a chair, and pressed me down with a knee. They took the baton and said they would force it into my anal opening, tear it, and then use muscle pain medication.

Can you imagine how I felt? I didn't know what to do. I said goodbye to my life. I prayed. The Russian soldiers tried to rape me, and I started shouting, "What can I invent to make you believe me?" It was very uncomfortable, terrifying, and frankly, I was panicking. When they started yelling at me that I would cooperate with them, I said I would. That's how it turned out. I'm actually very ashamed of it.

They asked: "Will you sign a cooperation document?" I said I'd sign it. They then picked me up and put me on my feet. I stood half naked with my hands tied behind my back for a very long time, and a hat was tied with this scarf on my head. Then my left leg started shaking from the tension. I couldn't stop it. They slowly began to soften the rhetoric. They took the hat off me. They told me what they wanted from me, point by point. I said I'd do everything. Eventually, I signed a document stating that I would voluntarily cooperate with the troops of the Russian Federation.

I repeat, I am very ashamed that I showed weakness and could not overcome it somehow. I was scared. I want everyone to hear how Russian soldiers treat prisoners, with whom they then make videos where they say that they treated them well and did not commit any violence against them. That's not true!"



Watch the full video
testimony of priest Sergiy
Chudinovich:
youtu.be/T5vaeQD43hw

The current approach of the occupation administration in Kherson differs from the repressive policy that Russian henchmen implemented in Donetsk and Luhansk at the beginning of Russia's war against Ukraine. In 2014-2015, Russian-controlled militants closed or confiscated churches and houses of worship of Ukrainian churches of various faiths and forced priests to leave the Russian-controlled Ukrainian territories of Donetsk and Luhansk regions¹¹. Now the Russian occupation administration of Kherson is seeking to publicly demonstrate its alleged commitment to religious freedom and is leaving churches, houses of worship, mosques, and synagogues open. However, in reality, this is accompanied by brutal repressions against local religious leaders aimed at forcing them to cooperate with representatives of Russia by using torture, unbearable suffering, death threats, and reprisals against relatives. In these conditions, local priests and religious figures are forced to either submit to the demands of the Russian occupation administration or secretly leave the territories controlled by Russia with their families.

The tactics used by Russian troops to dominate and suppress the resistance of the population of the occupied Ukrainian territories were revealed to IRF by priest Sergiy Chudinovich and a representative of the Muslim community of the Crimean Tatar people from Kherson region.



RUSTEM ASANOV

Imam of the "Birlik" Muslim community of Crimean Tatars (Schastlivtseve, Kherson region)

"Russian soldiers detained me at a checkpoint in Kherson region. They put a bag over my head, handcuffed me, and took me to their premises in the city. There, the occupiers equipped a basement for torture and interrogations. I was held from morning to evening in this basement. They were inflicting damage. They tightened the handcuffs on my hands – my thumbs still don't work. They also tightened the bag on my head, leading to suffocation, and I lost consciousness twice. They kicked me in the ribs and spine and hit me in the lower back with something hard – likely an assault rifle stock. They knocked me down to make me fall, and the handcuffs tightened even more – this caused me unbearable pain.

The Russian military was dissatisfied with my active civic position. They stressed that I, as a religious figure, set the wrong example for my community. It annoyed them. They tortured me and asked me who I knew from different Ukrainian battalions. I replied that I didn't know anyone. They were saying: "There will be no Ukraine, forget about it, soon we will destroy all of Ukraine." They said that we should be glad that we are now under Russian occupation whole and healthy and that nothing has been destroyed here. They stated that this region would be Russia, and anything that would not be captured would be destroyed with missiles. They would dig up the whole of Ukraine, and there will be nothing left.

After they probably ran me through their databases and understood that I was not involved in any battalions, they

¹¹ See the 2015 Human Rights Report «When God Becomes The Weapon»: <https://lockedfaith.org/en/p/12>



Watch the full
video testimony of
Rustem Asanov:
youtu.be/SPBeKYh9dM4

let me go. But they set specific conditions: they forbade me from leaving the district, going anywhere, and strongly recommended that I establish cooperation with representatives of the occupation administration, as well as with the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Crimea (in Simferopol), which in 2014 went over to the Russian side – that is, with traitors. I was trying to escape, so I agreed to anything to get out of there. The day I was released, I began to develop a plan to escape from the occupied territory.

Now worship services are not held in the Kherson region because local residents are intimidated by the atrocities committed by the Russian military: they break people's arms and legs just because they can, for pleasure. Russia has only one goal – to destroy us as a nation, the Ukrainian nation as a whole. They hate us. This hatred is oozing out of them. It overwhelms them. If, for example, they hear the Ukrainian language or see the Ukrainian flag, it tears them apart from the inside."

The representative of the Muslim community of Kherson region, in his testimony to IRF, has also noted a deterioration in religious freedom since the Crimean Peninsula and part of the Kherson region were occupied by Russia:

"When this territory was under Ukrainian control, there were no problems at all. We professed our religion freely, and no one harmed us. Those were golden times, so to speak. Now everything has changed dramatically. Mosques in Kherson region were searched, and books were seized. The occupation administration provided local imams with lists of recommended literature that can be used, as well as lists of prohibited religious literature. Now services are not taking place – during this turmoil, we suspended religious activities because people are intimidated."

The Russian military had also committed many atrocities against civilians in Kyiv region – in Bucha, Irpin, Borodyanka, Motyzhyn, etc. between February 24 and early April, when this region was liberated by the Armed Forces of Ukraine¹². Among the victims were religious figures, who were often baselessly suspected of espionage, cooperation with the territorial defense, or the Armed Forces of Ukraine. Russian commanders could not believe that believers and ministers of Ukrainian churches voluntarily remained in the war zone to help vulnerable local residents (the sick, persons with limited mobility, etc.), organize their evacuation, and establish cooperation with other volunteers to ease the humanitarian crisis in the hotspots of this war.



OLEG BONDARENKO

Minister of the rehabilitation center "Vosor" in Motyzhin, Kyiv region, under the Association of Churches "Salvation"

"A group of Russian scouts discovered our center only on March 23 – a month after the invasion. They couldn't believe that we remained just to save the rehabilitation center because we have four cows and about 50 pigs there. All this time, we were doing charity work: we had a lot of animals, and every two days, we slaughtered a pig and delivered meat to people. These scouts were from the Wagner

¹² Statement of the UCCRO on the genocide of the Ukrainian people, committed by Russian troops in Kyiv region: <https://vrciro.ua/ua/statements/uccro-statement-on-genocide-of-ukrainian-people-committed-by-russian-troops>

Group – they are mercenaries, sadists. They searched everything and found nothing. When they were leaving, their commander, call sign “Kaluga,” threatened: if he would meet me again, it would end badly for me.

After the Russian soldiers searched a nearby farm, they started firing grenade launchers, machine guns, everything, at our rehabilitation center. Our guys jumped out of the windows and managed to flee to the village, but I stayed behind because one of our guys, Zhenya, didn’t have legs. I had to stay with him. Then a Russian machine gunner came in and started shooting everything in our center: at the walls, toilets. Then they started beating me up. They wanted to know everything about the Ukrainian military and territorial defense.

First, they tied me to an ATV and dragged me to the base they shot at. There they tortured me, put a rifle barrel on my spine and pushed it, damaged my spine a little, shot between my legs and near my head, and wanted to run my legs over with an armored vehicle; they were intimidating me. Then, when they brought me to a different place, another officer questioned me, the commander of another reconnaissance battalion, call sign “Vitebsk”. He also didn’t believe that we weren’t mixed up in anything and that it was just a rehabilitation center.

When the Ukrainian army started shelling them, they constantly threw me out into the yard and hid in the dugout, saying, “let your own guys kill you.” Then they put me in the sewer so I could stay alive. I sat in the sewer for two days. They brought someone in every evening and were constantly killing people. On the evening of the 25th, the Russian soldiers brought someone and were killing him for an hour. They shot their legs, broke their arms and fingers; they were killing people in horrible ways.

Later, when they were finishing off another man from the neighborhood, I heard the hatch being opened – they came for me. I thought I was next. The guy who was killed was thrown into the sewer in my place. The Russian military already knew they were going to retreat, so they didn’t even bury the corpses. But the conscripts didn’t shoot me. They took pity, left the door open, and told us to leave in two hours. And added: “Pray for the scouts not to come in and kill you.”

Then, on March 29, Ukrainian troops entered the village and liberated us. It’s difficult for me right now. I can’t sleep. I sleep very little, even with pills, for just 4-5 hours. I have constant screaming in my ears because people were constantly murdered near the sewer I was in, and I was thinking that I was next. My body has not yet recovered from the shock. My back seems to have healed, and my discs were corrected. But I think surgery will be necessary on the arm because it was tied with a rope. The right hand is not working: the fingers move, but the hand itself does not bend, and there is significant swelling on the joint. So I can’t work now. And it’s psychologically hard, I go to therapy.”



Watch the full
video testimony of
Oleg Bondarenko:
youtu.be/lzxRAO6rCuE

2. Attacks on religious figures

Rector of the Odesa Holy Trinity Cathedral of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine and chaplain of the Ukrainian Armed Forces priest **Vasyl Vyrozub** survived 70 days of Russian captivity under inhumane conditions, torture, and beatings. The priest gave an interview about his story to “NV” media outlet. On the morning of February 26, 2022, on the third day of the full-scale Russian invasion, he arrived on Snake island in the Black Sea with a rescue mission to collect the bodies of Ukrainian border guards, who were then believed to be killed by shelling from the “Moskva” Russian cruiser. With him, the priest took two Protestant pastors and a doctor.



However, the mission failed, and the Russian military captured priest Vasyl Vyrozub and his companions. After interrogations and a stay in a filtration camp in Sevastopol, the priest was transferred to a pre-trial detention center in Russia on March 18. *“While the soldiers were beaten, the guards didn’t know what to do with me. No one knew what I was doing there. But when they cut my hair and put me in a uniform, they beat me and didn’t ask me anymore if I was a priest. They were just beating me,”* – Vyrozub said.

On the morning of March 31, guards forced the priest to strip naked and locked him in a small cold isolation cell without windows, toilet, or washbasin, for four days. On the first day of the torture, Vyrozub was visited by four Russians, three of whom were officers. They started asking him questions, and when they weren’t satisfied with the answer, they beat him. For 20 minutes, the Russians were hitting the priest on the back of the head, and then, having not got what they wanted, they returned him to the cold isolation cell, naked.

Russian officers were convinced that the captured priest was working for the Ukrainian intelligence agencies, and therefore should provide them with useful information. They could not believe that a military chaplain would not cooperate with the Security Service of Ukraine, otherwise, in their opinion, what would be the point of such a position. On the second day of interrogations four Russian soldiers, pressing Vyrozub against the wall, began to stretch and unnaturally twist him and strongly beat him again. On the third day, the priest was tortured with electric shock.

As they did not receive the desired information, the Russians continued to hold the Ukrainian priest in a pre-trial detention center for the following month, but without such terrible tortures. In April, they released two Protestant pastors and a doctor who were in the same cell as Vyrozub, but he was not released. The priest was able to return to Ukrainian soil only on May 5, thanks to a prisoner exchange agreement between Ukraine and Russia. After 70 days of captivity, priest Vasyl Vyrozub immediately returned to his native Odesa, where just a few days later, he held a service for his parishioners, with tears in his eyes, and began treatment to recover from Russian torture¹³.

Separate research is needed on the reasons behind the cold-blooded murders and inhumane cruelty of the Russian military against the civilian population of Ukraine which, among other things, led to such tragedies as the Bucha massacre¹⁴. One of the aspects of this phenomenon was highlighted in an interview with IRF by a priest of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, scholar-theologist and priest **Andriy Dudchenko**, who survived the Russian occupation in a village in the Bucha district of Kyiv region. He noted that during

¹³ 70 dark days of chaplain Vyrozub. The story of the OCU priest who was tortured by the Russians with electric shock, light, and cold punishment cells, but did not “break” (author: Natalia Rop): <https://bit.ly/3Qx4sVf>

¹⁴ In Bucha, 73 bodies have already been recovered from a mass grave near a church: <https://bit.ly/3SDYOSu>



his inevitable communication with Russian soldiers, among whom many conscripts, he did not notice rampant aggression toward the civilian population and sometimes was even met with confusion as to why the Russian invasion of Ukraine was necessary. However, their chaplain was more ideologically advanced: a priest of the Russian Orthodox Church, he argued the alleged morality and necessity of the Russian war against Ukraine.

Therefore, the Ukrainian theologian holds for erroneous the idea that the chaplains of the Russian Orthodox Church could have prevented the mass murder of civilians in Ukraine by the Russian military, as the Russian clergy, and in particular Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia, justify the Russian war of conquest against Ukraine. This despite numerous civilian casualties and large-scale destruction of civilian infrastructure, including Orthodox churches¹⁵.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS ON THE TOPIC OF ATTACKS ON RELIGIOUS FIGURES

This report provides only a fraction of the vast array of evidence of war crimes, torture, and deliberate violence committed by Russian soldiers against religious figures that IRF managed to document. Many victims are not ready to publicly talk about the horrors they have experienced, either out of shame, because of security risks for themselves in case they remain in occupied territory, or out of fear of reprisals against their relatives, given the very real threats from the Russian occupation authorities.

With this in mind, Ukraine and its international partners should initiate witness protection programs for especially serious Russian war crimes in order to protect the witnesses and their relatives while at the same time properly documenting crimes of torture and violence inflicted by the Russian military during its invasion of Ukraine.

¹⁵ Patriarch Kirill blessed Russian troops for the war against Ukraine: <https://bbc.in/3CpIDk>

3. INTERNATIONAL LEGAL CHARACTERISTICS OF THE CRIMES OF RUSSIA DURING THE ARMED AGGRESSION AGAINST UKRAINE ¹⁶



¹⁶ This section was prepared by Dmytro KOVAL, Ph.D. in Law, associate professor of the Department of International and European Law of the National University of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy

The new wave of Russian aggression against Ukraine that started on February 24th, 2022 has caused wide-scale destruction of civilian buildings and infrastructure all over Ukraine. For territories that were or still remain under occupation, the invasion has additionally come to mean a real threat of death, imprisonment, sexual violence, etc. The realities of armed conflict are such that not every attack on a civilian building or infrastructure, killing, or infringement of a civilian's rights can be considered a crime from the point of view of international humanitarian law (IHL).

The application of IHL to armed conflicts outlines the obligations of parties during military action or occupation in a highly pragmatic way and leaves considerable room for considerations of military necessity. Nevertheless, this does not mean that the belligerents have carte blanche to neglect those obligations whenever and however they want. In this section, we will consider the relevant norms of IHL that may help qualify the events described in previous sections of this report, and evaluates them from the point of view of potentially committed war crimes. In addition, in order to understand all possible legal dimensions of damage caused to religious sites and attacks on religious freedoms, we will evaluate the actions of the Russian military from the perspective of their qualification as crimes of genocide and crimes against humanity.

IHL AND WAR CRIMES

The Hague Conventions of 1899 and 1907 forbid attacks on temples and buildings dedicated to religion. In addition, the states parties to the convention are required to respect religious beliefs on occupied territory. Those norms were further developed in the IV Geneva Convention relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War of 1949 and in the Additional Protocol I in 1977.

The Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC) directly criminalizes only attacks on buildings dedicated to religion in Article 8(2)(b)(ix). In order to be able to ascertain the commission of a war crime in the form of an attack on religious sites, the simultaneous existence of the following elements of the crime is necessary:

1. The perpetrator executed an attack. A crime according to Article 8(2)(b)(ix) can be committed both during active military action and outside of it. Thus, attacks on religious buildings can have such forms as destruction, damage, pillaging, etc. The Article does not require any real damage to be done to the sites. It is enough for an attack to be directed against a certain religious organization.

2. The target of the attack was one or several buildings of religious nature. The object of the crime, provided for in Article 8(2)(b)(ix) has to be a religious building. The Rome Statute extends legal protection to any buildings of religious nature, not only those that have a particular cultural value. The only fundamental condition is that the objects is not used for military purposes.

3. The perpetrator intended to make such a building the object of the attack. The Rome Statute provides for the application of an approach, according to which, the intent of the perpetrator must cover both the fact of the attack itself and the object of the attack. This means that the assailant must be aware of the factual information about the protected status of the religious site before the attack.

In order to be able to conclude the existence of intent to attack religious sites, these buildings must be clearly identified as objects of religious nature. This can be achieved either by using corresponding marks on the map, on the building itself (cross, Star of David, crescent, or other religious symbols), or be apparent from the appearance of the building (the presence of characteristic domes, bell tower, minaret, etc.).

Intent on the object of an attack can also be ascertained in situations when the perpetrator of the attack or the commander of the unit responsible for it had access to descriptions of the religious site, which are often publicly available, or could see distinctive features of the building, or a mark of a religious building on widely used online maps (for example, Google Maps, etc.).

The facts of attacks of the Russian military on religious buildings in Ukraine that were documented by IRF, in particular those presented in this report, were often selected as targets of attack even when they were not in close proximity to military objects and were not used for military purposes. Perpetrators of the attack were obviously aware of the religious nature of a particular object, especially when such attacks were accompanied by pillaging, burning of religious literature, deliberate vandalism, or the desecration of religious shrines, as for example in the Orthodox Temple of St. Nicholas the Wonderworker and the “Mission Eurasia” building in Irpin, the Roman Catholic seminary in Vorzel, the “Vosor” rehabilitation center in Motyzhyn, Kyiv region, and the Taurida Christian Institute in Kherson region.

The Rome Statute of the ICC does not explicitly call the obstruction of activities of religious organizations on the occupied territory a war crime, although it remains a violation of IHL. At the same time, such obstruction can lead to a number of other war crimes. Such crimes include, for example, **unlawful deprivation of freedom**, a war crime which, according to testimonies provided to IRF, was committed in significant numbers by representatives of the Russian Federation against religious figures in Ukrainian territories that were or remain under occupation.

In addition, war crimes include: **willfully causing great suffering, torture, taking of hostages, destruction and appropriation of property**, etc. Such attacks on religious figures and communities, perpetrated by the Russian military in the territories of Ukraine under their control, were also documented during IRF research and are partially reflected in this report.

For example, priest of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine **Sergiy Chudinovich** from Kherson was detained by representatives of the Russian Federation and subjected to treatment that can be qualified as a war crime in the form of torture, as he was beaten, deprived of water and access to the toilet, forced to be exposed in public, threatened with rape, endured psychological pressure, etc.¹⁷ Similar inhumane treatment, torture, and deliberate suffering were experienced in Russian captivity by priest **Vasyl Vyrozub**, military chaplain of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine from Odesa¹⁸. Torture, mock execution, deliberate endangerment during shelling, forced observation of torture of other people were all experienced by the minister of the rehabilitation center of the Pentecostal Church “Salvation” **Oleg Bondarenko**¹⁹.

THE CRIME OF GENOCIDE OF THE UKRAINIAN PEOPLE

Another perspective that can be used to look at the destruction of religious buildings in Ukraine is the possible qualification of those actions of the Russian military as crimes of genocide against the Ukrainian people. Such attacks themselves are not autonomous manifestations of the crime of genocide, but they may indicate the existence of special genocidal intent. The International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia in the Krstić case has noted that *“where there is physical or biological destruction there are often simultaneous attacks on the cultural and religious property and symbols of the targeted group as well, attacks which may legitimately be considered as evidence of an intent to physically destroy the group”*.²⁰ Later, this conclusion was supported by the UN International Court of Justice in *Bosnia and Herzegovina v. Serbia and Montenegro* and *Croatia v. Serbia*.

17 Watch the full video testimony of priest Sergiy Chudinovich: <https://youtu.be/T5vaeQD43hw>

18 Read the full text of the interview of the priest-chaplain Vasyl Vyrozub to NV: <https://bit.ly/3Qx4sVf>

19 Watch the full video testimony of Oleg Bondarenko: <https://youtu.be/lzxRAO6rCuE>

20 The Prosecutor v. Radislav Krstić. IT-98-33-T, Trial Chamber Judgement / ICTY. (2001, August 2)

The ICC Office of the Prosecutor in its “Policy on Cultural Heritage” has also accounted for the meaning of attacks on cultural heritage, including religious sites, as evidence of intent to commit genocide. In the Policy, it is highlighted that infringement on cultural heritage can occur in the form of *“attacks on buildings that hold cultural significance for the targeted group, which occur simultaneously with biological or physical means directed at the targeted group.”*²¹

During the current armed conflict, the army of the Russian Federation has shelled and continues to destroy Ukrainian cultural buildings that have special meaning for the self-identification of the Ukrainian people. On April 13, 2022, UNESCO stated that as a result of the first months of the full-scale Russian aggression in Ukraine, *44 religious buildings, 6 museums, 25 historical buildings, 3 theatres, 11 monuments, and 1 library were damaged or destroyed*²². The UNESCO list does not portray the whole picture, as some data has yet to be verified, and the scale of the destruction of the spiritual heritage of Ukraine grows with each day of the war.

This IRF report gives a much clearer picture of the scale of the destruction of religious buildings on the territory of Ukraine as a result of the Russian invasion. It truly shows that there are at least reasonable grounds to believe that the destruction of religious sites by the Russian Federation can be considered a confirmation of the existence of genocidal intent, aimed at destroying the Ukrainian people.

CRIMES AGAINST HUMANITY

Another possibility of qualifying the actions of the representatives of the Russian of Ukraine is as crimes against humanity in the form of persecution. The peculiarity of this crime is that it is a kind of addition is followed to other kinds of crimes against humanity. Criminal responsibility of a person can occur only if their actions of prosecution are combined with other types of crimes against humanity, such as murder, deportation, torture, etc.

In addition to the requirement of combining the crime of persecution with another type of crime against humanity, the proper qualification of this type of crime under international law also requires an element of large-scale or systematic nature of the criminal acts. Another important aspect is the orientation of the crime against a specific group, which, among other things, can be identified on religious grounds.

Persecution itself as a crime against humanity can, among other things, manifest itself in attacking religious organizations through the destruction of their buildings with signs of discrimination, prohibition of certain religious practices, restriction of religious freedom, attacks, abuse or torture of clergy, etc.

At the moment, it is not yet possible to speak with full certainty about the presence of all the necessary elements for the qualification of the actions of the Russian military in Ukraine as a crime against humanity in the form of prosecution. However, in case of continuation of the current tendency described in this report – an increasing number of facts of prohibition of religious practices, destruction of religious buildings, abduction and abuse of clergy – then soon there will be reasonable grounds to believe that this international crime was also committed by the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation on the territory of Ukraine.

CONCLUSIONS

The attack on religious freedom and the destruction of religious sites is a violation of the obligations of the Russian Federation under IHL. When the moment comes to consider Russia's

21 ICC Policy on Cultural Heritage (June 2021), § 80 on page 31: <https://bit.ly/3Qgrak5>

22 At least 98 Ukrainian cultural heritage objects have been damaged or destroyed during the war – UNESCO: <https://www.voanews.com/a/unesco-98-ukraine-cultural-sites-damaged-destroyed-during-russia-invasion/6527816.html>

international legal responsibility, the religious element must certainly be included in the broader question of compensation for the inflicted losses, which Ukraine will definitely raise.

In the near future, the Russian attack on religious freedom will result in criminal proceedings both in Ukraine, with ICC, and under the jurisdictions of third states. The most obvious charge of the prosecution will be a war crime in the form of attacks on religious sites. However, the attacks on such sites themselves, as well as crimes against clergy of certain confessions, may also help establish the existence of a crime against humanity in the form of prosecution and the crime of genocide of the Ukrainian people.

RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF INTERNATIONAL HUMANITARIAN LAW

Based on the conclusions of this report, IRF recommends Ukraine and its international partners take at least the following responsive measures:

1. To bring to the attention of the ICC Ukraine's preference not to investigate alone the destruction of individual most significant religious sites, but is waiting for the initiative of the ICC to start an investigation.
2. The imposition by Ukraine and the request to international partners to also impose sanctions against the military commanders that likely ordered attacks on religious sites or did not take appropriate measures to respond to actions of their subordinates after the facts of such attacks were revealed.
3. In cases of transfer of religious sites on occupied territory to new owners (confiscation in favor of the occupation administration, arbitrary transfer of ownership to other confessions, etc.) impose and initiate on the international level sanctions against the new owners (including religious organizations) that have gained control over these religious sites.
4. To proactively support the work of non-governmental organizations on collecting information about illegal actions against religious organizations (or their representatives) associated with foreign jurisdictions (for example, foreign religious centers). This may become the basis for the initiation of criminal proceedings abroad on the facts of Russian war crimes based on the principle of universal jurisdiction. As a result, this will serve to better inform the international community about the crimes that the Russian Federation is committing in Ukraine, and therefore to more effectively prevent them and combat impunity.



4. THE RELIGIOUS SITUATION IN CRIMEA UNDER RUSSIAN OCCUPATION ²³

CONSEQUENCES OF THE RUSSIAN OCCUPATION OF CRIMEA IN 2014

In February-March 2014, the Russian Federation committed an act of armed aggression, as a result of which it occupied the Crimean peninsula, a part of the sovereign territory of Ukraine. By recognizing the establishment of effective control over Crimea and the city of Sevastopol, the Russian Federation assumed legal responsibility for the observance of human rights in these Ukrainian territories.

Since then, Russia has begun to implement its own legislation in the occupied territory, violating the requirements of international humanitarian law in relation to occupied territories. Ukrainian religious organizations in Crimea were forced to re-register in accordance with the requirements of the laws of the Russian Federation in order to maintain their legal status, control over property, and the ability to continue conducting religious and social activities. These actions became a part of the implementation of Russia's repressive policy in Crimea aimed at destroying Ukrainian national identity. In addition to automatic naturalization, which implied the recognition of all residents of Crimea as citizens of the Russian Federation, the Russian authorities began to purposefully persecute religious organizations and believers who did not openly recognize the Russian occupation of Crimea or were perceived as disloyal for other reasons.

According to the norms of international humanitarian law (IHL), a state that has invaded someone else's sovereign territory must respect the religious convictions and practices of the population of the occupied territory²⁴. Despite this, the Russian authorities enacted a repressive religious policy based on intolerance of the Ukrainian identity and a hostile

²³ This section was organized on the basis of materials, prepared for IRF by the Regional Center for Human Rights.

²⁴ Article 46 of the IV Hague Convention on Laws and Customs of War on Land: <https://bit.ly/3D8xhTV>; article 27 of the Geneva Convention relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War: <https://bit.ly/3RtmuYS>

4. The religious situation in Crimea under Russian occupation

stereotypical attitude towards non-orthodox religious denominations as potential Western spies. At times, this led to absurd accusations of extremism, such as those against Jehovah's Witnesses, a completely pacifist religious organization.

Let us evaluate the situation of believers of different denominations on the territory of occupied Crimea.

ORTHODOX CHURCH OF UKRAINE (OCU)

The Russian authorities initiated targeted persecution of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Kyiv Patriarchate (OCU since 2019), approving court decisions on the seizure or demolition of church buildings, imposing administrative fines on clergy, and arbitrarily seizing religious buildings, such as in the city of Sevastopol and the village of Perevalne (Simferopol District). Attempts by the OCU to apply legal mechanisms to protect their violated rights in the judicial and other bodies of the occupation authorities were almost always unsuccessful, even in cases of obvious violation of the legislation of the Russian Federation by representatives of the Russian authorities who exerted pressure on the Church and its believers.

A distinct tool for the persecution of the OCU in occupied Crimea was the launch of a media campaign discrediting the Ukrainian Church and simultaneously justifying the actions of the Russian authorities that seized churches and violated the rights of believers and clergy of the OCU. These state-ordered materials featured false assertions and unfounded accusations, as well as disparaging statements about the OCU, describing it as a "neo-Nazi sect", "groups of provocateurs", "sectarian extremists" and "underground of the Right Sectorc.

Certain violations of the rights of OCU believers in occupied Crimea were also recorded by the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, such as the seizure of churches by paramilitary groups, the closure of churches due to the refusal to extend lease agreements, the arson of a residential building of the OCU in the village of Mramorne (Simferopol District), etc.²⁵

As a result of Russia's policy of eradication of Ukrainian national identity on the occupied territory of the Crimean peninsula, which is the persecution of the OCU is part of, the number of parishes of the Crimean diocese has decreased from 45 to 7, and the number full-time clergy from 14 to 4. At the same time, many priests and parishioners of the OCU were forced to leave the occupied peninsula with their families, mainly for security reasons due to serious threats.

RELIGIOUS ORGANIZATION "JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES"

Before the occupation of Crimea, the number of supporters of the religious organization "Jehovah's Witnesses" on the peninsula was more than 7,000, organized in 22 communities. The Russian armed aggression against Ukraine completely deprived Jehovah's Witnesses in Crimea of the right to freedom of religion, as Russia considers this religious organization "extremist", referring to the decision of the Supreme Court of the Russian Federation of April 20, 2017²⁶.

Although the court's decision itself does not substantiate specific "extremist" activities of Jehovah's Witnesses, it became a formal basis for Russian courts to start prosecuting supporters of this religious teaching. Since then, more and more guilty verdicts against members of the religious organization "Jehovah's Witnesses" were issued in Russia under Article 282.2 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation ("Organization of activities of an extremist organization"), for no more than the sole fact of belonging to an organization classified as "extremist".

25 UN OHCHR report for the period from 22.02.2014 to 12.09.2017, paragraph 140: <https://bit.ly/3R1qHCI>

26 The decision of the Supreme Court of the Russian Federation of 20.04.2017 on the liquidation of the religious organization "administrative center of Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia": <https://bit.ly/3QEVzbt>

One of the most common tactics used for the persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses in the Russian Federation and on the territory of the occupied Crimean peninsula are illegal searches of the homes of believers. In 2020, 451 cases of such arbitrary searches in the homes of Jehovah's Witnesses were recorded in 60 regions of the Russian Federation, and 26 cases in occupied Crimea²⁷.

The Russian-controlled Yalta city court announced the verdict on Artem Gerasimov in a similar criminal case, in which he was punished with a fine of 400,000 rubles (about 4,665 Euros or 5,146 US dollars). Later, on June 4, 2020, the "Supreme Court of the Republic of Crimea" altered this sentence to a harsher one, sentencing the religious actor of the Jehovah's Witnesses to 6 years in prison instead. "After Artyom was sent to a penal colony, the FSB officers began to persecute his friends and acquaintances", the press service of Jehovah's Witnesses reported²⁸. Similar sentences were imposed against Jehovah's Witnesses in two more criminal cases.

12 more criminal cases against members of the religious organization "Jehovah's Witnesses" in Crimea are at the stage of pre-trial investigation or are in trial²⁹. Taking into account the existing Russian judicial practice, in which the court only needs to establish the fact that the accused belongs to Jehovah's Witnesses in order to sentence to imprisonment, we can predict the passing of a dozen more illegal sentences against Crimean believers.

As of July 2022, the activities of the religious organization "Jehovah's Witnesses" on the territory of the Russian-controlled Crimean peninsula are deprived of the right to freedom of peaceful assembly and collective profession of their faith, they are persecuted and intimidated, and are purposefully conscripted for military service despite their conscientious objections. Such difficult circumstances are a serious reason for the forced displacement of Jehovah's Witnesses from the occupied Crimea and other Russian-controlled territories of Ukraine.

HIZB UT-TAHRIR AL-ISLAMI MUSLIM MOVEMENT

At the beginning of the Russian occupation of the Crimean peninsula, the Crimean Tatars demonstrated resistance to actions that violated the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine, and thus showed disloyalty to Russia's annexation policy. Most Crimean Tatars profess Islam. Some of them belong to the Hizb ut-Tahrir al-Islami movement ("Islamic Liberation Party"), which can be considered both a religious organization and a political party. Supporters of this Muslim movement are particularly zealous in the observance of religious dogmas and traditions.

In Ukraine, as in most countries of the world, Hizb ut-Tahrir operates legally. However, in Russia, this organization has been banned and classified as a terrorist organization since 2003. Before the occupation of Crimea, local supporters of Hizb ut-Tahrir numbered 2-5 thousand people, who held various peaceful meetings (forums, lectures) openly and distributed their literature.

Now Crimean Tatars belonging to Hizb ut-Tahrir are increasingly becoming victims of persecution by the Russian occupation authorities, which press them to leave the Crimean peninsula. Repressions manifest themselves in the form of mass searches and detentions³⁰, blackmail and threats³¹, coercion to cooperate with the FSB³², an aggressive media campaign to discredit Hizb ut-Tahrir and Crimean Muslims in general, discriminatory law enforcement practices, fabricated criminal proceedings and unjustifiably severe punishments, violations of the right to legal representation, torture, the use of "secret witnesses" in court cases and so on.

27 Jehovah's Witnesses under the yoke of repression. Results of 2020: <https://jw-russia.org/news/2020/12/11.html>

28 In Crimea, another Jehovah's Witness was convicted for faith: <https://jw-russia.org/prisoners/gerasimov.html>

29 Prisoners of conscience among Jehovah's Witnesses in Crimea: <https://bit.ly/3QXgJ4Y>

30 FSB officers conducted mass searches in Crimea and detained five Crimean Tatars in the Hizb ut-Tahrir case: <https://bit.ly/3P2P94Q>

31 Harassment of Muslims in Crimea: "harassment began with the arrival of the Russian regime": <https://bit.ly/3Cn44UJ>; «Paper terrorists». How more than 100 Crimean Muslims are being tried for extremism: <https://bbc.in/3KVVxug>

32 FSB warns: refusal to "cooperate" will result in at least 12 years in prison: <https://bit.ly/3buGpXK>

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According to the “Memorial” Russian Human Rights Center, as of March 22, 2022, at least 94 Crimean Tatar people are being persecuted in Crimea in connection with their involvement in Hizb ut-Tahrir al-Islami, three of whom have already served sentences in Russian penal colonies³³. This means that almost a third (27.6 %) of the total number of supporters of this movement has been harassed by the Russian authorities both in Russia and in the occupied territories. This fact gives grounds to assert that these persecutions are of a combined ethnic, religious and political nature and based on the disloyalty to the Russian occupation authorities demonstrated by the Crimean Tatars and their governing body, the Mejlis of the Crimean Tatar People. In addition, in 2016, the Russian-controlled “Supreme Court of Crimea” classified the Mejlis itself as an extremist organization and banned its activities, which further complicated the situation of Crimean Tatars on the occupied peninsula³⁴.

LEGAL QUALIFICATION OF THE ACTIONS OF THE RUSSIAN OCCUPATION AUTHORITIES IN CRIMEA

The actions of the occupation authorities in Crimea described above, directed towards the persecution of religious communities and individual believers, can be qualified as crimes under various articles of the Criminal Code of Ukraine: violation of the equal rights of citizens based on their national or regional affiliation, religious beliefs and other grounds (Article 161), obstruction of the implementation of a religious rite (article 180), violation of privacy (Article 182), consciously illegal detention, arrest, house arrest or imprisonment (Article 371), violation of the laws and customs of war (Article 438), etc.

Moreover, the aforementioned unlawful actions of the Russian occupation authorities in Crimea contain elements of a crime against humanity under Article 7(1)(h) of the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court on persecution on religious grounds, and war crime under Article 8(2)(b)(ix) on intentionally directing attacks against buildings dedicated to religion.

CONCLUSIONS ON THE RELIGIOUS SITUATION IN OCCUPIED CRIMEA

1. Systematic persecution of religious communities and individual believers on the territory of the Russian-controlled Ukrainian Crimean peninsula is carried out in order to change the religious environment with the goal of placing it under complete control of the occupation authorities and conforming it to the ideology of the “Russian world”.
2. The main basis for violations of religious rights by Russia is the dissemination of its own legislation, in particular criminal legislation, on the Crimean peninsula, which is the internationally recognized sovereign territory of Ukraine. This has created the formal grounds for the Russian authorities to implement the same repressive tools of restriction of religious freedom and other human rights in the occupied territory that are used on their own territory. At the same time, much tighter government control and the repressive nature of Russian legislation, especially in comparison with Ukrainian legislation, in and of itself leads to a narrower scope of rights and freedoms of religious communities in Crimea (with the exception of the orthodox communities of the Moscow Patriarchate, to which the Russian authorities are particularly loyal).

³³ List of those persecuted for participation in Hizb ut-Tahrir (updated): <https://bit.ly/3A2tYvm>

³⁴ Mejlis banned in Russia: <https://bit.ly/3P76Wb4>

- 3.** Targeted persecution on religious grounds in occupied territory constitutes an obvious violation of international humanitarian law (IHL), which mandates respect for the religious convictions and practices of the population of an occupied territory. Moreover, the extension of Russian legislation in the field of religion to the territory of the occupied Crimea violates the IHL principle of status quo ante bellum according to which the occupying state is obliged to comply with the existing laws on the occupied territory, primarily in the field of criminal law.
- 4.** Russia's ban on certain religious organizations and the extension of such bans to the occupied territories is a manifestation of discrimination, which is a violation of IHL and international human rights law, in particular Articles 18, 20 (2), 26, 27 of the UN International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.
- 5.** Systematic violations of religious freedom, targeted persecution of religious and ethnic groups, and by these means the creation of an atmosphere of fear lead to the cessation of activities of certain religious organizations and the forced displacement from the territory of Crimea of religious figures and believers who are considered disloyal by the occupation authorities. Such behavior by the Russian authorities deepens the humanitarian crisis caused by the aggressive war against Ukraine. The repressive policy of the Russian Federation on the territory of occupied Crimea may lead to the eradication of Ukrainian national identity, which is inextricably linked with religious diversity. This may complicate the de-occupation of Crimea and the restoration of Ukraine's sovereignty on the peninsula.

Read the full analysis of the religious situation in Crimea under Russian occupation on the Locked Faith website:

<https://lockedfaith.org/en/p/182>





5. IDEOLOGICAL ASPECTS OF RUSSIA'S WAR AGAINST UKRAINIAN IDENTITY ³⁵

Today, Ukraine has become the arena for a clash between two worldviews: the European model of development and the “Russkiy mir” (Russian world) project. There is not just a war of arms, but an existential struggle for the values of freedom, dignity, and human rights; the values of the free world, focused on life and the future, against the “values” of slavery and the past, repressions and annihilation of anyone who has the courage to defend their own ideological position or religious beliefs.

The ideas of the “Russian world” were formed on the basis of the Russian statist imperial ideology and provisions borrowed from the intellectual discussions of the 1990s and early 2000s. In the public rhetoric of the leadership of the Russian Federation, the Russian Orthodox Church, and representatives of intellectual circles, “the “Russian world” refers mainly to a community of people (“civilization”), in one way or another connected with Russia and formed on the basis of a common: a) language and culture; b) historical memory and values associated with this common historical memory; c) orthodoxy of the Moscow Patriarchate; d) loyalty to the modern Russian state”, and which seeks to act within the country and on the international arena as a natural legal successor of the Russian statist tradition, the organic components of which are the Russian Empire and the USSR³⁶. The last two components of the concept of the “Russian world” (Russian orthodoxy of the Moscow Patriarchate and loyalty to the Russian state) were less present in the rhetoric of Russian statesmen for some time, they are however just as important for the evolution of this concept as are the Russian language, Russian culture, and the myth of the commonality of historical memory.

³⁵ This section was prepared by Igor KOZLOVSKY, senior researcher at the Department of Religious Studies of the H.S. Skovoroda Institute of Philosophy of the National Academy of Science of Ukraine, Ph.D. in History, religious scholar

³⁶ Zdioruk Serhii, Yablonski Vasyl The project of the «Russian world» as a mechanism of the imperial aggression of Russia against Ukraine // Scientific notes of the Institute of Political and Ethno-national studies of I.F. Kuras of the NAS of Ukraine. – 2014. – Issue 6(74). – C.259-260.

The mythologems of the “Russian world” have long been induced into Ukrainian society in many different ways, mainly through religion, language, education, and culture, under the influence of which individuals and societies form their worldviews and value attitudes. Russia has been attempting to use these to realize its geopolitical interests. From the very beginning, the “Russian world” ideology has been directed at polarizing Ukrainian society, hindering the formation of a common Ukrainian identity, slowing down the processes of Ukraine’s European integration while simultaneously stimulating participation in integrational projects in the post-Soviet space under the auspices of the Russian Federation.

Starting in 2014, that is, since the beginning of the occupation of Crimea and parts of Donetsk and Luhansk regions, the “Russian world” ideology has seen the significant strengthening of two elements: the military component with a vindication of war and of physical destruction of anyone who is not an active supporter of this ideology, as well as revanchist Imperial narratives, the core of which are the denial and annihilation of Ukrainian statehood and Ukrainian national identity. With these, the ideology finally transforms into the misanthropic, revanchist ruscism (or putinism), which becomes the ideological basis for the full-scale Russian Invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022.

The religious factor, which determines the place of religion in the system of values, also occupies an important place in the theory and practice of putinism. At first, it was artificially embedded into this ideology by the Russian intelligence agencies that were preparing the military aggression against Ukraine in order to destroy its sovereignty. Later, during the war against the Ukrainian state and the Ukrainian people, it took the form of mass repressions and the destruction of the multi-confessional religious palette that is a manifestation of religious freedom in a democratic, independent Ukraine.

Beginning in 2014, religious persecution began in Donbas and Crimea: murders of religious leaders and believers, torture, beatings, threats, and imprisonment. There were cases of destruction or seizure of religious sites and other buildings belonging to religious organizations for the stationing of militant groups or use as firing positions³⁷. Since February 24, 2022, the scale of repressive religious policy of the Russian authorities has increased across all territories of Ukraine that were or still are under Russian occupation.

To date, numerous instances of Russian war crimes against religious actors of various confessions, public activists and volunteers, attacks on cultural heritage sites and other religious buildings, cemeteries, and other sacred places have been documented. This indicates that the Russian occupation forces are committing systematic and purposeful repression on religious grounds that against the civilian population of Ukraine in order to impose their power in the territories under their control.

Especially cynical are the crimes of genocide of the Ukrainian people and crimes against humanity, which led to great suffering for thousands of civilians. These include illegal detentions, kidnappings, detention in unfit conditions, torture, intimidation, coercion to cooperate, humiliation, rape, and murder of many innocent civilians. Among them, religious actors once again became distinct targets for Russian soldiers, given their spiritual authority among the local population and the prejudice among Russian soldiers regarding the cooperation of church ministers, especially of non-orthodox confessions, with Western intelligence agencies.

In fact, public trust in the religious communities of Ukraine is based on most of them being an active and effective part of Ukrainian civil society, and capable of demonstrating unity and interacting despite confessional differences. This has been displayed in a very clear and sacrificial way during the national resistance to the ongoing Russian aggression. Ukrainian churches and other religious associations unanimously began to testify

37 Report of human rights organizations «When God becomes a weapon» (April 2015): <https://lockedfaith.org/ua/p/12>

to the entire international community about Russia's aggressive war against Ukraine as a grave sin, *"a great crime before the Almighty"*³⁸.

As an example, the Ukrainian Council of Churches and Religious Organizations assumed a clear and consistent position from the very beginning of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, condemning the Russian Federation as an aggressor and declaring full support for the people of Ukraine and the Ukrainian state. On the very first day of the full-scale war, the UCCRO appealed to all civilized humanity: *"We support the Armed Forces of Ukraine and all our defenders, we bless them in their defense of Ukraine from the aggressor, and offer our prayers for them. We appeal to the religious and political leaders of the world to do everything possible to stop the Russian aggressor's offensive in Ukraine. We ask God to bless our people in this bitter time of trials"*.³⁹ Later, on April 6, 2022, the UCCRO unanimously adopted a statement in which it noted: *"Every state in the world should recognize the genocide of the Ukrainian people during the Russian invasion of 2022 and condemn the ideology of the "Russian world" as one that is justifying the genocide of peoples and the destruction of entire states."*⁴⁰

In contrast, the position of Russian religious actors of different confessions looks pathetic. Most of them proved to be unable to follow their own religious dogmas and condemn this war of aggression. Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia and his clergy not only legitimize the Kremlin's aggressive actions but even give Russian soldiers additional motivation to fight, lifting the armed conflict up to the level of holy war⁴¹. In fact, the Primate of the Russian Orthodox Church incites to the conduct of an aggressive war, justifying the Russian military invasion of Ukraine and calling on the Kremlin to implement its intentions to destroy peaceful Ukrainians.

In response to this, the Primate of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, Metropolitan **Epiphanius**, issued the following condemnation of the Kremlin's use of the religious factor in its aggressive war: *"The ideology of the "Russian world" is the same as the ideology of Nazism. It justifies violence, murder, war and genocide, and therefore must be rejected and condemned in the same way that Nazism, its ideologues and its crimes are condemned. The co-creators and leaders of this criminal ideology are the head of the Moscow Patriarchate, Kirill Gundyayev, and his henchmen. He, together with his subordinates, not only lit this fire in every possible way but also openly, on behalf of God and the Church, blessed executioners and murderers for their dirty work with his deceitful lips."*⁴²

Despite this, Russia has constantly presented and continues to present itself to the world as the leading defender of traditional values, the last bastion of spirituality, and a highly religious society. It is on this propagandistic manipulation that the ideology of the "Russian world" is built. Despite all the declared spirituality, Russia is among the European countries with the highest rates of divorce, domestic violence, orphanhood, drug addiction, alcoholism, and HIV/AIDS.

In truth, modern Russia is a very secularized society, and the real role of the Russian Orthodox Church, or any spirituality at all, in it is highly overestimated. Moreover, the Russian Orthodox Church has long turned into the propaganda unit of a totalitarian state, ensuring ideological support of aggressive Russian policies and the war against Ukraine. During the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, all this demonstrative "spirituality" manifested itself in pathologically brutal cruelty towards the peaceful Ukrainian population.

38 The Appeal of the Ukrainian Council of Churches and Religious Organizations sent to the President of the Russian Federation V.V. Putin on February 23, 2022: <https://bit.ly/3U4kXu0>

39 UCCRO Appeal on Russia's military aggression against Ukraine: <https://bit.ly/3B0ApP2>

40 Statement of the UCCRO on the genocide of the Ukrainian people, committed by Russian troops in the Kyiv region: <https://bit.ly/3QsEp0E>

41 Patriarch Kirill blessed Russian troops for war against Ukraine: <https://www.bbc.com/ukrainian/news-60720034>

42 The sermon of Metropolitan Epiphanius of Kyiv and all Ukraine on the fourth Sunday of the Great Lent: <https://bit.ly/3zPjizf>

Russian attacks on religious freedom in Ukraine

Research, analytics, recommendations



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About IRF

The Institute for Religious Freedom (IRF) is a human rights NGO, founded in 2001 in Kyiv, Ukraine. Our goal is to protect and promote religious freedom and other related human rights, facilitate inter-faith dialogue and church-state cooperation, strengthen democratic foundations and civil society in Ukraine.

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