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Jeanne Kormina, Detelina Tocheva

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Archives de **sciences sociales** des **religions**

Marking Space The Russian Orthodox Politics of Self-Assertion



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Marking Space: The Russian Orthodox Politics of Self-Assertion

Marquer l'espace : les politiques d'affirmation de l'orthodoxie russe

Marcar el espacio: la política ortodoxa rusa de autoafirmación

Jeanne Kormina and Detelina Tocheva (dir.)



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Veillée nocturne sur le parvis de l'église de Tous-les-Saints à Ekaterinbourg. Les volontaires de l'église portent des tabliers confectionnés pour le centenaire de l'assassinat de la famille royale (16 juillet 2022).

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INTRODUCTION TO THE PUBLICATION

This issue, “Marking Space: The Russian Orthodox Politics of Self-Assertion,” delves into the complex interplay between the Russian Orthodox Church and the socio-political landscape in post-Soviet Russia. Despite Orthodoxy becoming the default religion in many parts of Russia after the USSR's collapse, its public presence is still contested in a predominantly secular society. The articles examine the politics of space, focusing on how religious markers such as crosses, frescoes, pilgrimages, buildings, and collective prayers are employed to claim and transform public spaces into political territories and loci of utopia. This process frequently ignites debates about the common good and the appropriate role of religion in public life. Key themes include issues of heritage and memory, particularly the creation of traditions and the sacralization of places within the vision of a utopian “Holy Russia.” The ambivalent relationship between the State and the Church is also explored, characterized by both cooperation and tension as the Church seeks to expand its influence. Through these discussions, this issue provides a nuanced understanding of the Russian Orthodox Church's efforts to shape spaces and identities in contemporary Russia.

Ce numéro, intitulé « Marquer l'espace : les politiques d'affirmation de l'orthodoxie russe », se penche sur l'interaction complexe entre l'Église orthodoxe russe et le paysage sociopolitique de la Russie post-soviétique. Bien que l'orthodoxie soit devenue la religion par défaut dans de nombreuses régions après l'effondrement de l'URSS, sa présence publique reste contestée dans une société majoritairement laïque. Les articles examinent la politique de l'espace, se concentrant sur la manière dont les marqueurs religieux tels que les croix, les fresques, les pèlerinages, les bâtiments et les prières collectives sont utilisés pour revendiquer et transformer les espaces publics en territoires politiques et en lieux d'utopie. Ce processus déclenche souvent des débats sur le bien commun et le rôle approprié de la religion dans la vie publique. Parmi les thèmes clés figurent les questions de patrimoine et de mémoire, notamment la création de traditions et la sacralisation de lieux dans le cadre de la vision d'une « Sainte Russie » utopique. La relation ambivalente entre l'État et l'Église est également explorée, caractérisée à la fois par la coopération et la tension, l'Église cherchant à étendre son influence. Grâce à ces discussions, ce numéro apporte une compréhension nuancée des efforts de l'Église orthodoxe russe pour façonner les espaces et les identités dans la Russie contemporaine.

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Veillée nocturne sur le parvis de l'église de Tous-les-Saints à Ekaterinbourg.

Les volontaires de l'église portent des tabliers confectionnés pour le centenaire de l'assassinat de la famille royale (16 juillet 2022).

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Dossier coordonné par Jeanne Kormina et Detelina Tocheva

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Introduction

Marking Space: the Russian Orthodox Politics of Self-Assertion

After the demise of the Soviet Union, the Russian Orthodox Church, headed by the patriarchate of Moscow, has undergone spectacular growth.¹ It has left the marginal cultural niche it once occupied and become a mainstream religious organisation. Orthodoxy has become a religion by default for everybody who has not claimed otherwise. The Church's pervasive material presence is one aspect of this development. The legitimacy of this presence, however, is often contested by secular publics and the representatives of other religious groups. As this special issue demonstrates, the christianisation of the landscape in Russia is not without conflict and is not a unidirectional, victorious movement for religious activists and officials, even though it may seem so. Ethnographic research about grass-root initiatives for creating and contesting religious markers in this landscape sheds light on the texture of this process and helps us see how secular Russian society actually is.

Within anthropology, but not only, “the spatial turn” in the study of Christianity has been almost entirely based on examples from Protestantism and Catholicism (e.g., BIELO, 2019; ENGELKE, 2012; HERVIEU-LÉGER, 2002; HOVLAND, 2016; KNOTT, 2005, 2010; O'NEILL, 2013; about religious architecture belonging to different religions, see VERKAAIK, 2013). These, along with other

-
1. This special issue is a result of the research project “Marking space religiously: a comparative study of the presence of the Russian Orthodox Church in Russia and France” (2019–2022) supported by the Fondation Maison des Sciences de l'Homme and the Russian Foundation for Basic Research. We are particularly grateful to the editorial team of the *Archives de sciences sociales des religions*, as well as to the anonymous reviewers for their thoughtful remarks and suggestions.

authors who have joined “the spatial turn” in the study of religion (for an overview see OBADIA, 2015), have largely drawn on Henri Lefebvre’s seminal work *La production de l’espace* (2000) to grasp how religion produces space. Lefebvre analysed the ways in which *dominant forces* produced space throughout history in Western Europe, with the Roman Catholic Church being one such force for centuries. After the fall of the Soviet regime, in highly secular Russia, the Russian Orthodox Church has tried to behave as the most powerful religious actor. But it scarcely determines the production of space in a country where power lies with major political and market actors. Instead, the Church has spread markers that almost never go uncontested, as demonstrated by the articles in this issue. This is simple evidence that invalidates the idea of the Orthodox Church as a major driving force in society and therefore as a *producer* of space in the Russian Federation in the original sense defined by Lefebvre. Yet, simultaneously, the Church’s self-awareness as a historically legitimate and politically supported player, and its aspiration to growth has propelled a specific politics of presence in physical space. Hence our focus on the dissemination of a variety of markers in different kinds of spaces: urban, rural and natural, from the very large to the very tiny. Here lies the specificity of our approach: we take inspiration from Lefebvre’s overarching concept of the production of space by dominant forces in society but depart from it by proposing a different, yet connected concept, *the religious marking of space by a non-dominant social force whose success depends on dominant political and market forces*. Notwithstanding its ubiquitous public presence after the fall of the Soviet regime, the Russian Orthodox Church is, we argue, a non-dominant force in Russian society. The concept of the religious marking of space allows for an exploration of the intersection between a religious organisation’s relative lack of power and its pervasive presence. We postulate that the continuing Orthodox marking of different spaces is neither an epiphenomenon nor a by-product of secondary importance in comparison to what is usually assumed to be the core component of religious growth, namely rising numbers of faithful whose adherence is typically measured through indicators of belief and practice. We argue that the process of marking space deserves greater scholarly attention in its own right. A major finding in the case studies presented here is that if the Orthodox marking of space can be described as hegemonic in a number of cases, it has always been faced with plurality, controversies and struggles. This finding can allow us to shed new light on the transformations of Russian Orthodoxy in specific local, cultural and geopolitical contexts and can, in turn, illuminate changes in these contexts.

Supportive policies from potent market and political actors, notably high-level politicians, have so far proven critical to the growing religious marking of space with Orthodox symbols in a country where citizens’ adherence to this process has remained continuously low since the early 1990s. Looking beyond the issue of the religious marking of space, we see that the apparent paradox of the growth

of the Russian Orthodox Church in the context of a lack of strong popular support has been approached analytically from different angles. A great number of scholars have pointed out that the close relationship between Russia's top political officials and the church hierarchy has facilitated the erection of churches, chapels and monumental crosses, while also encouraging the organisation of Orthodox rituals during public events (e.g., GARRARD and GARRARD, 2008): however, much depends on specific local configurations (KÖLLNER, 2013, 2018, 2021; KORMINA, 2019, 2020; TOCHEVA, 2017, 2022). It has also been demonstrated that Russia's church-state nexus plays a role in the international arena (CURANOVIĆ, 2012, 2019). The Church has become a key partner in global conservative alliances whose main ideas have been integrated into the state's political agenda (STOECKL and UZLANER, 2022; see also ROUSSELET, 2020). A large body of literature explores the ways in which the state has used Orthodoxy to its own ends. Since Vladimir Putin's accession to power in 2000, state policies have made use of Orthodox symbols to craft religion-connected patriotic slogans. In fact, state support for the Church has always been occasional and uneven; when it was put in place, it has been designed to achieve the goals of the state rather than those of the Church (ROUSSELET, 2022; VATÉ, this issue). Another line of analysis underscores the fact that a large number of Russian citizens are attracted to patriotic slogans that hint to religious motifs and to the aspiration to restore what is viewed as Russia's glorious past under the auspices of Orthodoxy (MITROFANOVA, 2005; PANKOVA, 2011), but that believers' and the state's views of patriotism often diverge (ROUSSELET, 2015). Yet other analyses stress the discrepancy between, on one hand, the conspicuous public presence of the Orthodox Church and the high level of declared identification with the Orthodox faith and, on the other, continuously low levels of clerically sanctioned forms of observance and the overall difficulty in bringing the teachings of the Church into social life (DUBIN, 2005; FILATOV and LUNKIN, 2006; MITROKHIN, 2004; RICHTERS, 2013; ROUSSELET, 2013). Statistical surveys conducted since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by the Russian army on February 24, 2022 have pointed to a continuing decline in church attendance in the Russian Federation ("Dannye..." 2024). This process has taken place in the context of an aggressive "weaponization" of Orthodox symbols and top-level clerical participation in state propaganda.

The visibility of the markers of Russian Orthodoxy raises the issue of their "readability" by the different groups that compose Russian society. Indeed, marking spaces implies not just putting in place certain material objects and actions; it is also a semiotic process that involves ascribing meanings to these erected markers and the work of reading these signs. As Lucine Endelstein shows, this work can be unsuccessful if these signs are not recognized as such or if passerbys and observers do not know how to read them. Religious minorities, when they want to be less visible in the space of a city, may use blurred signs that only devotees can read: this is why a Jewish yarmulke replaced by a baseball cap can

be understood as a religious marker only by the group's insiders (ENDELSTEIN, 2005). When a religious community wants to be noticeable, however, it makes its markers super visible and easily identifiable. For example, the most elementary and widespread marker of space for Orthodoxy in Russia is a cross placed by the roadside at the entrance and exit of towns and villages. In Russia, no official permits or approvals are needed to erect such crosses. A cross cannot be confused with anything else; it has indisputable confessional characteristics (unlike the Catholic or Protestant cross, it has two crossbars, the lower of which is oblique). Such crosses are also installed, often at the initiative of local religious activists, in places where the altars of destroyed temples were located. A passerby may not know what exactly the crosses commemorate, but he or she undoubtedly realizes that this is a religious symbol marking the presence of the Russian Orthodox Church. The universal ability to read these signs in the right way is the result of the successful spread of Orthodoxy in post-Soviet Russia. We venture to suggest that the straightforward, frequent and large-scale labeling of space testifies, on the one hand, to the claim that Orthodoxy is a dominant religion in Russia and, on the other, to uncertainty about the signifier—the Orthodoxy of the people inhabiting this territory. Indeed, the presence of Orthodox markers leaves unanswered the question of the religious identity of the people who inhabit the territory and can be seen as *pokazukha*, an emic concept that “refers to putting on a false show to cover up the actual state of affairs” (SÁNTHA and SAFONOVA, 2011: 75).

We study the religious marking of space by the Russian Orthodox Church as a relational process in which a great variety of actors participate, contribute, and contest. As Kathy Rousselet has demonstrated, in the city of Ekaterinburg and in its surroundings, the proliferation of cross processions and public events headed by the Russian Orthodox Church in order to commemorate the death of the last tsar Nicholas II and his family has in fact opened the way for a plethora of differently motivated participations, a great variety of interpretations and moral lessons, some of which are in poignant resonance with Soviet moral teachings (ROUSSELET, 2011). We also pay attention to religious co-participation involving Orthodox and other actors, thus taking into account cases of the competitive occupation of specific spaces, in which different Orthodox believers and other publics partake. In our approach, space is embedded in relations among different actors. It is differentiated and already meaningful from the point of view of those who inhabit it or move through it, be they religious persons or not; it is not an abstract concept, a void to be filled with meaning (TWEED, 2011). The Russian Orthodox Church spreads its markers in spaces that have already been made meaningful by multiple actors and often are saturated with meaning, religious or otherwise. This is this plurality of relations and views that this special issue aims to analyse through a focus on various religious markers.

Let us now turn to the markers and their signification. The growth of the Russian Orthodox Church has taken place through the creation, transformation

and (re-)use of classical Orthodox markers, such as religious paintings, icons (LUEHRMANN, 2010), architecture and monumental crosses that bespeak a connection to the patriarchate of Moscow. The early post-Soviet period was a time of the reconstruction of old churches, some almost in ruins, by local enthusiasts (KORMINA and SHTYRKOV, 2015; TOCHEVA, 2010). In a large number of cases, generous donations from politically motivated businessmen greatly contributed to church (re)construction (KÖLLNER, 2012). From the 2010s, however, a major shift has occurred. The renovation and erection of churches has become a central part of official church policies everywhere in the Russian Federation (see MELNIKOVA, this issue). In 2010, the Russian Orthodox Church launched a controversial “200 churches” programme that aims to build “churches within walking distance” in Moscow’s suburbs. The Church sponsored the creation of the social movement Forty Times Forty in support of this initiative. The idiom “forty times forty” (*sorok sorokov*) means plenty, an uncountable amount of something, and refers to the number of churches to be built in Moscow and everywhere in Russia, as well as to the very idea of the Orthodox people as the majority in the country. Following this logic, to include churches, crosses and other religious symbols in public space is a way to missionize what the Church defines as the Russian land and people. In fact, the country’s geographical, ethnic and religious complexity itself complicates the idea of an Orthodox marking of space. In reviewing major contributions to the so-called spatial turn in the study of religion, Lionel Obadia (2015) argued that it is important to think of the geography of religion beyond the boundaries of geography as a discipline.

We apply this approach to ask what is at stake in different parts of the Russian Federation with the proliferation of Orthodox markers. The variety of case studies allows to analyse different modes of religious marking of the space by the patriarchate of Moscow in different local contexts: in a central square of the capital city (Nadezhda Rychkova), in a national republic within the Russian Federation (Sergei Shtyrkov), in a big industrial city in the Urals (Jeanne Kormina and Kathy Rousselet), in a borderland zone between Russia and Finland (Ekaterina Melnikova) and in the Arctic region facing the United States (Virginie Vaté). Moving the scale of analysis continuously from micro-interactions in specific small places (Rychkova’s contribution) to the macro-level of Russia’s regions (Shtyrkov’s article) and to the international level (Vaté’s article), this special issue approaches the Orthodox marking of space as a process unfolding constantly at the intersection of different scales. The articles bring together analyses of actors’ intimate experience with a broader understanding of a range of historical, educational, environmental, political and geopolitical challenges. We look at Orthodox constructions and material symbols, but also at ephemeral manifestations of faith, such as cross processions, flash mob events and collective prayers. Such markers also indicate how establishing an authoritative memory of real or imagined past events is constitutive to the making of the Orthodox tradition in a specific

territory. Maurice Halbwachs, in *La topographie légendaire des Évangiles en Terre sainte* (2008 [1941]), demonstrated that putting in place religious symbols and performative actions, such as pilgrimage, effectively makes a religious tradition and anchors it in a given space. Danièle Hervieu-Léger argued in her preface to the 2008 edition of Halbwachs' study that such spatialized action partakes in the making of a religious tradition defined as an "authoritative memory." Approaching religion in this way means adopting a heuristic "point of view" (HERVIEU-LÉGER, 2008: 40) whence one can empirically approach religion's complexity. Overall, ethnographically informed analyses of the specific ways in which the Orthodox marking of space has been taking place in recent years in Russia contribute to the spatial turn in the study of religion by offering insights into a highly complex, multi-layered process, involving a variety of actors, religious, political and otherwise, with different views and ways of doing. They also contribute to the new, yet growing literature analysing contemporary transformations of Eastern Orthodoxy from the vantage point of how it transforms space (e.g., SERRANO, 2018; TATEO, 2020; WANNER, 2020).

The articles

Religious marking serves as one of the strategies for transforming space into a political territory. Following social geographers, we understand territories as "political and geographic entities that have emerged out of particular ways of conceiving geographic space" (STOREY, 2020: 20). As the same author argues, territory is "intimately bound up with identity and can be used to instill and reproduce a sense of loyalty and affiliation" (ibid.: 2). In Shtyrkov's and Vaté's case studies, the main meaning of space marking is to label a territory as one's own. It is no coincidence that huge roadside crosses have been erected along the federal highway in southern Russia and neighboring Muslim republics in the North Caucasus, while the largest monument to Saint Nicholas stands in Chukotka: in both cases, the size of the material embodiment of the marker correlates to its political importance. As Vaté shows in her article, such objects are designed to be visible from afar and make it clear to all who owns the area. In other words, they are part of a "key element of territorial practice: border" (STOREY, 2020: 2).

Sergei Shtyrkov's article concentrates on North Ossetia-Alania, a republic located in the North Caucasus. The local diocese of the Russian Orthodox Church was entrusted with the renovation of medieval Christian frescoes in a chapel in Nuzal village. In the process, an unknown burial ground was found, which local nativist movements started defending as a place of the so-called Ossetian ethnic religion. These traditionalists claimed this burial ground so decidedly through both social media and direct action that it came to be considered as theirs by the

broader public. The renovation, instead of supporting the argument of the very old roots of Orthodoxy in North Ossetia, ended up questioning the legitimacy of the Orthodox Church in this region and provoked postcolonial reflections among those involved in this discussion. In the context of the ongoing war in Ukraine, the stakes were high; by drawing public attention to the restoration of the frescoes in Nuzal, the authorities hoped to demonstrate that the origins of Christianity in Russia were older than Kievan Rus, usually identified as the source of Russian Christianity. Shtyrkov demonstrates how the Orthodox marking of the chapel eventually served to promote nativist identities in the republic.

Virginie Vaté analyses processes of marking in the Siberian Arctic region of Chukotka. Here, newly erected Orthodox churches and monumental crosses face the border between Russia and the United States, thus responding to strategic challenges. Despite the effervescent process of erection of Orthodox markers, the indigenous population, coming from a Shamanic background, is more attracted to forms of evangelical Protestantism, whereas the Russian-speaking population consists mostly of temporary labour migrants, leading to high fluidity among parishioners and semi-empty churches. The Orthodox markers, even though particularly prominent, have a geopolitical function and do not seem to elicit expressions of faith and devotion. Some are installed in totally unpopulated land and serve to mark the presence of the Russian state by using the language of Orthodox symbols.

The post-Soviet marking of space as Orthodox can also result in transforming its previous form into a phantom space for its former occupants. In her contribution, Ekaterina Melnikova focuses on northwestern Russia. In this region, the current proliferation of Orthodox buildings and symbols is usually considered as self-evident, since these lands are defined as “pristinely” Russian in official discourse thanks to the protracted workings of Soviet policies of heritage making, including policies of the re-conceptualisation of Orthodox religious buildings and objects as ancient Russian cultural heritage (DONOVAN, 2019; KELLY, 2016; about the Soviet Union more generally, see CANTOU, 1961; KROPOTKINE, 2006). Yet, Melnikova’s case study shows that the dominance of the Russian Orthodox Church does not go unquestioned. The author focuses on one of the most prominent Orthodox monasteries in Russia, situated on Valaam Island in Lake Ladoga, close to the Russo-Finnish border. Often presented as one of the cradles of Russian Orthodox monasticism, at present the island of Valaam is a hybrid space used for recreational tourism amidst a picturesque natural environment and a major pilgrimage destination. Ironically, the most determined restorers of this “ancient Russian heritage” established themselves on Valaam in the late Soviet period while the monastery was closed. They were inspired by heterogeneous versions of New Age spirituality and united by a desire to build a better future. After their eviction by the recreated monastery in the post-Soviet period, Melnikova argues, the Valaam of the restorers has become a phantom space, sealed in their

memory and diametrically opposed to the post-Soviet, monastery-dominated Valaam.

The very expression *marking space* refers to drawing boundaries and securing the constant presence of a collective actor through the establishment of an unmovable material object like a cross or a church. But our ethnographic research shows that marking can be pulsating and more ephemeral, implemented through collective performances. These actions are linked to a vision of a utopian world located in an imagined past or a heavenly present. In her article, Jeanne Kormina addresses the ongoing Orthodox marking of public space in Ekaterinburg, a large and wealthy industrial city in the Urals, focusing on cross processions. The tsar cross processions in Ekaterinburg commemorate a tragic historical event—the killing of Nicholas II and his family in this city in 1918—which has become part of the local identity, especially since the canonization of the royal family in 2000. The procession takes place at a particular time of the year, changing the city’s topography during the commemorations. The ephemeral character of this procession allows the participants to draw a complex, yet evanescent map of sacredness. Nonetheless, the utopian space they claim remains engraved in the memory of past cross processions and in the active planning of processions yet to come. The article develops Certeau’s notion of utopian space and focuses on the “intimate solidarities” (HERZFELD, 2016) of its participants (*krestokhodtsy*).

The articles by Kormina and Rychkova show ways “of conceiving geographical space” (STOREY, 2020: 20) from below, in pious marches and collective prayers. In both cases, the religious imagination of believers adds an additional dimension to geographical space—the world of Holy Russia, inhabited by saints, built up with churches and monasteries, and possessing a special mode of temporality, the temporality of a myth that was, is and will be unchanging and right. As for many other believers (see O’NEILL, 2010), for the Orthodox “citizenship” in their Heavenly City can complement, reinforce and challenge their earthly national loyalty. Imagined Holy Russia is the main referent of their spatial practices; it is the world as it once was and as it ideally should be. Through their spatial practices, Orthodox believers formulate their belonging to the utopian world of Holy Russia, and this loyalty does not necessarily coincide with national identity and may even conflict with it. This double loyalty might make religious activists seem suspicious, dangerous or bizarre to outsiders, ranging from secular publics to state and church authorities.

Nadezhda Rychkova invites the reader to see how one initiative related to the religious marking of space is realized, in which the reference to the mythological time of Holy Russia takes a central place. Rychkova’s article brings the reader to downtown Moscow in her study of Pushkin Square, where an Orthodox community has been trying to revive a religious presence since 2006. By using ephemeral Orthodox markers, such as public prayer and cross processions, and by installing material symbols, the community is hoping to instil Orthodox presence

into this public space and to eventually restore the pre-Soviet Strastnoy monastery. However, even though tolerated by the police and local authorities, their initiative of creating “a religious hotspot” (FIBIGER, 2023) is either unnoticed or often disliked by other users of the square. Rychkova engages with the academic discussion on shared sacred sites and analyses Pushkin Square as a mixed place where different groups of citizens come to implement their “right to the city.” The latter ethnographic account illustrates well the ambivalent position of the Church in contemporary Russia. On one hand, the Church upholds its self-awareness as the most legitimate and powerful religious player in the country, ready to defy secular opponents. On the other, its freedom to act in public space is entirely contingent on the sympathy of representatives of the political authorities. On the ground, it is faced with citizens irritated by pervasive Orthodox symbols with whom the religious activists have to negotiate. The activists have ended up opting for the publicly audible old Soviet argument that Orthodoxy deserves visibility as Russian cultural heritage (KORMINA and SHTYRKOV, 2015).

For our understanding of the spatial presence of the Church, failed attempts at marking space as Orthodox matter as much as those that succeed. Kathy Rousselet’s study of the intricacies around the erection of St Catherine’s cathedral in Ekaterinburg meticulously examines the positions and struggles between pro- and anti-construction actors. The latter have defended citizens’ right to use public space and have not advanced anti-clerical arguments. As Rousselet argues, Orthodox believers could be found on both sides. But over the years, with the rejection of several projects, positions became more radical, ending up completely polarising the public debates, now divided between anti-construction liberals and pro-construction ultra-nationalists. Whether the construction will start one day, in what place and how the cathedral will look like have remained open questions. This failed attempt at marking space as Orthodox perfectly illustrates the ambivalent place of the Church; its behaviour as a hegemonic actor, confident about the support of political and business leaders, attracted disapproval from most locals when they felt that their space, which they see as their common good, was threatened. By choosing to place Rousselet’s article as the closing study in this thematic issue, we wish to deliver a specific message that goes against the bulk of deterministic interpretations that pervade academic discourse at the current moment, namely those that see a symbiotic relation between the Church and the state, defining the Church as a powerful and hegemonic organisation. The role of Russian Orthodoxy in Russian society is deeply connected to the challenges of the spatial presence of the Church. A close examination of these challenges, one that attends to nuance, the diversity of actors and the plurality of ideas they defend, points to a far more complex and undoubtedly open-ended analysis.

Altogether, the authors demonstrate how Russian Orthodox markers impact on spaces and their usages, and how, alternatively, the Russian Orthodox Church and other religious and non-religious organisations and actors change as they

experience the spread of markers in different spaces. They also show that this process, unfolding in a highly secular society, is riddled with tension and can in some cases end up reinforcing contestation and alternative claims. In advancing the concept of the religious marking of space by a non-dominant social force, and by drawing empirically on the largely understudied yet particularly dynamic strand of Russian Orthodoxy, the purpose of this special issue is to open up new comparative perspectives and to contribute to widening theoretical discussion in anthropology and beyond.

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An Ancient Shrine, Archaeological Excavations and the Bones of Forgotten Ancestors in North Ossetia

How Offended Believers Created a Religion

Small Chapel, Big Issues

In the mountain village of Nuzal, in the Republic of North Ossetia-Alania (Russian Federation), there is a small medieval burial vault. Ossetia's mountains are strewn with such vaults. It is easy to pass by without noticing them. However, this particular vault is widely known in Ossetia and beyond for the medieval Christian frescoes painted inside, very rare for this area. It is not easy to see them properly—the space inside is extremely tight. These frescoes, painted in the early fourteenth century and presenting images of Jesus Christ, the Virgin Mary, St George and several saints, define the status of the place, transforming it from an ordinary crypt into an Orthodox chapel. They are considered visual proof that Christianity came to the mountains of the North Caucasus long before Islam and long before the Russian Empire. Thus, the chapel in Nuzal, or Nuzaly arhuan in Ossetian (literally “the Nuzal church”), built in the twelfth or thirteenth century, is a key symbol of the Orthodox religious identity of Ossetians and Ossetia.

North Ossetia-Alania, with about 700,000 inhabitants, is one of the so-called national republics of the North Caucasus region. The first part of the republic's name—North Ossetia—indicates that the majority of the population are Ossetians, an Iranian-speaking people descended from the ancient nomadic Scythians and Sarmatians. North Ossetia was given national autonomy in 1924 as a result of administrative reform in the early Soviet state, which gave some ethnic groups the opportunity to have some kind of nation-state. The word “Alania” was introduced into the official name of the republic in 1995 following a wave of ethno-national activism triggered by the collapse of the Soviet Union. The republic, once part of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic, did not gain independence after the demise of the Soviet Union, although Chechnya,

which is geographically close to North Ossetia, tried hard to do so. But while staying within the Russian Federation, almost all ethno-national regions have emphasized local ethnic identity in their domestic policies and in policies of historical memory. By naming their republic Alania, the leaders of the national revivalism of the early 1990s and their contemporary successors pointed to the continuity of state sovereignty between the modern republic of North Ossetia and the medieval state of their ethnic Alan ancestors, which existed in the North Caucasus from the tenth century, falling under the blows of Mongol and Turkic conquerors in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. From this point of view, the vault in Nuzal is a key element in the historical imagination of Ossetians. According to some historians, Os-Bagatar, the legendary last king of Alania, may be buried there. This hypothesis has now become an objective fact for many.

This small chapel thus combines two important aspects of Ossetians' modern identity as a nation: the memory of their own ancient state and the memory of having become Christian centuries before the missionary activities of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC). The early adoption of Christianity by their ancestors was at the centre of a large commemorative campaign during the 1,100th anniversary of Christianity in Alania. This campaign culminated in an impressive celebration in September 2022. Ironically, this anniversary demonstrated that Alanian Christianity is older than Russian Christianity. However, during the preparations in 2021, this idea suited Moscow's ecclesiastical and secular authorities, because it appeared that Christianity had begun to spread across the territory of modern Russia not from Ukrainian Kiev, now the capital of a foreign country, but from the (Russian) Northern Caucasus. As one Moscow official said in 2021, "the events associated with the 1,100th anniversary of Alania's Christianisation should show the deep historical roots of Orthodoxy in Russia and contribute to strengthening the spiritual unity of the peoples of the country" ("V Severnoj Osetii..." 2021).

Leaving aside the Russian political elites' ways of dealing with the past while denying the legitimacy of Ukraine's independent statehood, let us return to North Ossetia. When it was preparing to celebrate this anniversary, the federal government allocated money to make the contemporary republic look as Orthodox as possible. In large churches, murals depicting scenes of Alania's baptism appeared and heroes of Ossetia's ethnic history were visually represented as Orthodox saints. Special efforts were made to restore and make as visible as possible in public spaces ancient buildings connected in one way or another to Orthodoxy. The purpose was to present the Russian state and the ROC, an active participant in these works, as custodians of Ossetia's heritage. The head of the diocese, Archbishop Leonid of Vladikavkaz and Alania (a reference to medieval Alania was included here in his official title as well), spoke very clearly about these activities: "This is our heritage—churches, chapels, architectural monuments, even those not related to Christianity. I will strive to save them" ("Vladyka Leonid..." 2016). The Nuzal chapel was part of this concern.

Representatives of the local diocese publicly stated that the work to be carried out around the Nuzal chapel would recreate the capital of ancient Alania, with the chapel and a burial site discovered nearby supposedly to become the centre of this monumental complex. The graveyard was presented as “the graves of the Alanian knights”¹ or a “cemetery of the royal family.” In either case, it was depicted as a national sacred place. Therefore, Ossetians started to see it not only as evidence of former Ossetian greatness (an element of epic nationalist discourse [ALONSO, 1994]), but also as a veiled promise of the restoration of their state.²

In other words, the local diocese did a great deal to promote Nuzal as the main Ossetian national shrine. The aim of this information campaign was to strengthen the status of Orthodoxy as the native faith of the Ossetians. However, unintended results unsettled the organisers. A sharp public debate on the Christian past of the Alans, as well as the present and future of contemporary Ossetians, broke out. The clash revealed the specific attitude of an ethnically non-Russian people who are part of the larger political Russian nation to ethno-religious identity. Ironically, the restoration of the chapel in Nuzal, designed to increase the ROC’s authority, drew public attention to its opponents. The latter offered their own critical interpretation of the history of Orthodoxy in Ossetia and of what the real religion of the Ossetians is. As a result of the public debate over the excavation of this ancient cemetery, located next to a chapel that marks the space of Ossetian land as Orthodox, the very Orthodox identity of this space (and thus of Ossetians in general) has been vigorously challenged. This case will be discussed below.

I was not a direct witness or participant in these events, although coincidentally I was present at the start of the excavations, later the subject of heated discussions. In early September 2020, I was collecting field materials on local heritage tourism and traveled to Nuzal with a group of tourists from Vladikavkaz, the capital of North Ossetia. I stood at the ancient chapel, listened to the guide’s story about the area’s heroic past and watched the excavations. The archaeologists, who had just started their research, were quietly doing their work. No one at that moment could have imagined that soon a drama would unfold around these excavations, in which a large number of very different people would take part. I gathered most of the information about these events on social networks. Numerous texts describing and evaluating these events were posted there, as well as videos made both in Nuzal and Vladikavkaz. All these materials were actively commented on and distributed via the WhatsApp and Telegram messengers. I also received information from friends whom I had acquired during fifteen years of fieldwork in North Ossetia. Six months later, I was able to talk to some of the participants in this story. They told me important details of the story, but

1. See KABISOVA, 2018.

2. On the importance of national memory of their state, see SHNIRELMAN, 2000: 21–22. On the importance of archaeological research for the nationalist historical imagination, see KOHL, 1998.

did not change my general understanding of the public debate on the nature of the Ossetian ethnic religion.

I begin by outlining the complexities of defining the Ossetian ethnic religion as linked to the political allegiance assigned to them. I move on to the criticism that emerged with the archaeological excavation of the burial ground, initiated during the restoration of the Nuzal chapel by the local Orthodox diocese. I analyze in more detail the arguments of one of the opponents, as his arguments largely determined the public reaction to the works and to the local Orthodox authorities. I conclude with general remarks about the religious marking of space in the context of a rivalry between groups with diverging views of the past of a land and a people.

Ossetian Religious Identity in the Current Political Agenda

Mainstream Russian media usually present Ossetia as predominantly Orthodox, with an insignificant Muslim minority. According to the official version of the historical narrative, the ancestors of the Ossetians, the Alans, accepted Christianity at the state level in the tenth century from Byzantine missionaries (KOUZNETSOV and LEBEDYNSKY, 2005: 175–182). When the Alanian state was crushed, the existing ecclesiastical structures connected with Byzantium were also destroyed. The descendants of the Alans, the Ossetians, were forced out of the fertile steppes of the North Caucasus foothills into narrow mountain gorges. They retained elements of Christian culture in their lives, but found themselves beyond the disciplinary control of church institutions. Sometimes Orthodox priests from Georgia reached them, but this did not change the overall picture—for several centuries, most Ossetians were not Christians in terms of their legal status. In other words, they were not baptized or given communion by the representatives of any official church.

Christianity came to Ossetians again when the Russian Empire arrived in the Caucasus. The incorporation of the lands inhabited by Ossetians into Russia was a long and complicated process, full of brutal violence. Today it is hardly possible to unambiguously determine the date when Ossetia “joined” the empire. Perhaps one of the most important events was the establishment of the Vladikavkaz fortress in 1784. This act fixed the presence of the Russian state in this part of the North Caucasus, which became a condition for its inclusion into the system of imperial administration, firmly established during the Caucasian War. But one way or another, from the second half of the eighteenth century, imperial administrators did much to make Ossetians, whom they saw as former co-religionists, Christians again in the bosom of the ROC. In 1874, a special Vladikavkaz diocese was established (it was abolished in 1922 and re-established in 2011).

Despite all these historical vicissitudes, the fact that the Alans were baptised in the Middle Ages is very important for the historical imagination of many of the republic's inhabitants. This event is the starting point for the existence of Orthodoxy among Ossetians. The supposed ancient Orthodoxy of this people is also very important for the relations of Ossetian political elites with Moscow, because it makes "Orthodox" Ossetians the natural allies of their Russian coreligionists in the Caucasus, inhabited mostly by Muslims. Even the story of how the Ossetians became subjects of the Russian Empire was, until recently, a fairly straightforward narrative of "voluntary entry into Russia." This version of events implies a special relationship of trust with Russia that supposedly distinguishes Ossetians from neighbouring Caucasian peoples, who were conquered by force of arms. In short, the republic's loyalty to the federal centre is grounded on the Orthodox religious identity of the Ossetians and the place of Orthodoxy in their republic. But for many Ossetians, the role of Orthodoxy does not go unquestioned.

Although, as noted above, North Ossetia is usually considered Orthodox, different surveys give varying figures for those belonging to the republic's religions, with the number of Orthodox believers varying from thirty-five to seventy-five percent. Over the last decade and a half, polls have begun to include another option about religious identity—"the traditional faith (or religion) of the ancestors." The emergence of this option was the result of the energetic activities of a local movement of so-called "traditionalists." These ethno-religious nativists are given various names: *Iron din* (the Ossetian religion), *Ætsæg Din* (true religion) and *Uatsdin* (holy religion), among others.³ The movement is poorly structured (perhaps it would be more accurate to speak of a kind of traditionalist milieu), even though there are several officially registered communities. Most of the people who make up the hard-to-fix field of this milieu speak out and communicate with each other and their opponents mostly, but far from exclusively, on social media. The movement has no clear boundaries, but one can talk about a number of vibrant projects, figures and teams that support or criticize each other depending on the situation. Despite all these differences and internal tensions, the proponents of Ossetian ethnic traditionalism share a united ideological basis. For them, the project's central point is that the Ossetian ethnic religion is much older than Christianity and radically differs from it. And since this is the case, everything truly Ossetian cannot have anything to do with Christianity.

The traditionalists have followers among Ossetian intellectuals. Not only have they convinced some opinion pollsters that their revivalist project is a true religion, along with Orthodox Christianity and Islam: they have also initiated such polls, explaining to respondents what "practicing the faith of their ancestors" means. The results unsurprisingly called into question the predominance of Orthodox Christianity in Ossetia.

3. On this movement, see FOLTZ, 2021: 103–121.

In reality, many Ossetians see no contradiction between being Orthodox and “practicing the faith of their ancestors” simultaneously; these two identities are not mutually exclusive, unlike Islam and Christianity or Orthodoxy and Catholicism. But for traditionalists, these socially overlapping identities seem a terrible violation of their rights and the logic of exclusionary religious identity, thus being in line with the dominant views of the three monotheisms (BROŽ, 2009). They believe that a person who considers himself Orthodox and at the same time practices the faith of the ancestors by performing traditional rituals denies the latter the status of a full-fledged religion, making it a disparate set of local “beliefs and customs.” The aim of the traditionalists is to convince their compatriots that Ossetians have and practice their own religion, to push them to discern it in their lives as a particular phenomenon and to practice it consciously.

Return or conversion to the faith of the ancestors means that Ossetians, many of whom consider themselves Orthodox Christians, must abandon Christianity, which, according to the traditionalists, is the religion of outsiders (some traditionalists claim that Christianity was invented by Jews who wanted to use it to enslave the peoples of the world). To stop being Christians, according to the Ossetian nativists, their Orthodox fellow citizens do not have to do anything special. It is enough for them to admit that their ethnic culture is non-Christian in nature and that, by adhering to their ethnic traditions, they behave as non-Christians. It must be said that most Ossetians perceive “their” Orthodox Christianity as a vicarious religion, practiced by religious professionals in places where ordinary people do not need to go often, as is common in Russia in general among those who consider themselves Orthodox (AGADJANIAN, 2011: 18; KORMINA and LUEHRMANN, 2018: 402; BENOVSKA, 2020: 38–51). From the point of view of the traditionalists, since these people go to church rarely and adhere to Ossetian customs in their ritual life, they are not Christians. That is, the question of the religious identity of Ossetians is essentially a question of what religion underlies their ethnic traditions. In order to find out what that religion is, it is necessary to decide whether their ancestors were “nominal” or “real” Christians, or indeed whether they were Christians at all.

How nativists view this situation is shaped by their ideas about the social nature of religion. They are not prepared to think that a religion that involves “belonging without believing” (MARCHISIO and PISATI, 1999; RIIS, 1996)⁴ could

4. I recall that this concept was proposed by Grace Davie, who found it apt to describe the religiosity of people in contemporary Britain, especially those who associate themselves with the Church of England, which has the status of a state church (see for a discussion of this issue DAVIE, 2015: 71–90). Obviously, when a religious institution has a national and state-supported status in society, as is the case in the UK, Russia, and some other countries, it seems “natural” for many to identify themselves as its followers without giving much thought to issues of religious belief or taking an active part in the life of actual congregations. The default assumption is that the state itself supports the functioning of church structures as its departments of “spirituality” and “national heritage,” and ordinary citizens can be assured

be real. They assume that any real religion presupposes a strong mutual correlation of certain beliefs, practices and identities. This concept of religion assumes that any ritual must be based on the belief of its participants in a certain doctrine, and this belief is what makes a person a follower of a certain religion. From this perspective, mixing ideas and practices supposedly of different religious origins is blasphemous folly. Such an approach to religious life is sincerely presented by many traditionalists as an attempt to combine the incompatible. More than once I have seen the nativists trying to persuade people who perform Ossetian rituals that at this moment they are practicing the Ossetian ethnic religion, although regrettably they themselves do not realize it. Conversely, traditionalists condemn Orthodox Christians who, when performing Ossetian ethnic rituals, express conscious allegiance to the Ossetian tradition for the fact that these Christians are deviating from their religion and appropriating a tradition not belonging to them.

The problem of the appropriation of non-Christian Ossetian heritage by the Orthodox is particularly acute for traditionalists with respect to ancient shrines. When one saw that in a shrine (*dzuar* in Ossetian) he considers Ossetian (and therefore not Christian) someone had installed Orthodox icons, he with annoyance said to me: “Why in the *dzuar* are there objects related to another religious denomination? Complete confusion in their heads, ignorance bordering on promiscuity, disregard for sacral values, and at the same time a lack of understanding of Christian basics...”

Meanwhile, the head of the diocese, as I mentioned, promised to take care of all such objects, even those not associated with Christianity. Legally “historical and cultural monuments” belong to the state: it is state officials who give some of these sites to certain religious organisations for temporary use. The definition of a particular object or building in terms of a certain religion are taken into consideration in this context. In North Ossetia, it usually turns out that such objects and buildings are originally Orthodox. It is thus decided to give them to an Orthodox institution. Yet, many ancient chapels were not used as churches for centuries, as there were no ecclesiastic structures in the region. They became local shrines (pilgrimage and veneration centres, the aforementioned *dzuars*) or were considered “graves of glorious ancestors,” even though in the traditional understanding of the divine among Ossetians, sacred shrines should not be associated geographically and ritually with death. Thus, traditionalists challenge the right of the Orthodox Church to use ancient buildings as Christian sanctuaries. They consider this illegal appropriation. One such case is the chapel in Nuzal.

that they can go there when needed. But most people rarely have such a need, and most people receive their religious identity as part of their citizenship, with no direct connection to issues of creed.

In 2016, the local authorities transferred the right to use the chapel to the ROC as a monument of medieval Christianity. In this situation, the diocese was entrusted with restoration. The traditionalists did not appreciate this decision. They claimed that the chapel was originally not a Christian shrine, but a non- and pre-Christian burial vault, remade by insidious Christian missionaries into a chapel. The controversy around Nuzal's "religious identity" did not end there.

“We Need all the People to Stand Up and Kick Them Out of Here”

In late September 2020, hundreds of residents of North Ossetia received a voice message via WhatsApp.⁵ It was about excavation works around the famous Nuzal chapel:

Those graves that are looted, [there are] no bones in them. They can't find bones. They are being taken somewhere for something. You know how. It's right under our noses. While we sleep, while we sleep, there is just desecration and looting ... of the graves of our ancestors. There is nothing worse for an Ossetian. There is nothing worse than touching the graves of our ancestors. It has been like this since Scythian times. Now it only continues. And other people are digging, and the people in charge of the work are, you know, Jews. Jews, who are in the service of the Russian Orthodox Church. To be frank and honest, the Jews are in charge of the work of the Krasnodar archaeologists. In short, they are conducted by Jews who work for the Russian Orthodox Church. In general, the Russian Orthodox Church, the diocese, is behind all this. ... That's the way things are. I need masses of Ossetians, the more Ossetians know about it the better. We need a wider public response, we need all the people to stand up and kick them out of here, to return the bones to their place and we'll bury them back.

The message was about the excavation of remains from ancient burials, carried out on the initiative of the local ROC diocese. The way in which the situation is described made it clear that the speaker is a convinced traditionalist.

The anxiety of the message's author was understandable. Like his associates, he insisted that the ancient Alans did not become real Christians in the tenth century but had remained committed to the faith of their ancestors. However, the results of the excavations may have cast doubt on this assertion. As I said, from the nativist point of view, a close connection between practices, ideas and identity defines true religion. The traditionalists boldly project this principle into the past. That is why any excavation carried out on any medieval burial ground

5. Hereinafter, all quoted statements were said or written in Russian and translated by me.

is important for them, as it can bring evidence in favour of one or another point of view of who the ancestors of the Ossetians were in terms of their religion. If Christian artefacts are found in ancient graves, this would indicate that the buried people believed in Christ; if these items are not found, this would mean that they did not. The prospect of “Christian” archaeologists finding the remains of “Christian Alans” looked very real.

The sharply alarmist voice message had the desired result for its author. Several dozen angry young men arrived at the excavation site and tried to stop the work, claiming that the archaeologists did not have the necessary permits. The incident came to violence, after which it turned out that the archaeologists did have all the necessary documents; they were allowed and even obliged to conduct excavations on this burial ground. At this time, it also became clear that the archaeologists had not stolen any bones.

But the author of the WhatsApp message was partly right. The restoration work in the Nuzal chapel was carried out on the initiative of the local Orthodox diocese. Ironically, diocesan employees did not initially intend to excavate any ancient graves. The restorers stumbled upon the burial ground almost by chance. In this situation, according to law, it had to be excavated for the restoration work in the chapel to resume. The restorers appealed to the State Committee for the Protection of Historical and Cultural Monuments to authorise the archaeological work. The committee did so and thus it, not the diocese, became the official ordering customer of the excavations. The archaeologists, who came from the neighbouring Krasnodar region (*Krasnodarskii krai*) to carry out these urgent excavations, had not imagined the complexity of the work’s political context. Not knowing that they were “mercenaries of the diocese,” they were extremely surprised by the aggressive reactions of some Ossetians and accusations that they were hired to plant “Christian artefacts” in ancient graves and therefore “Christianise” relatives and/or warriors of the last Alanian king (and thus the epic past of the entire people). Equally bizarre for them were the accusations that they were desecrating the graves of someone’s ancestors, as no one venerated those graves. This was simply because no one knew about them: they were covered by later layers and unnoticeable in the central village square.

It should be noted here that although many archaeologists in Russia are not accustomed to encountering such problems, in other countries their colleagues are familiar with the fact that archaeological excavations often become the cause of postcolonial political conflict when local people resist the invasion of their sacred sites by the representatives of Western science (SMITH, 2004: 26–31). The activities of the latter are seen as attempts not only to take possession of some valuable property, but also to appropriate the past of the people who live on the land, and often the land itself. This confrontation is especially pronounced when it comes to manipulating the burials of those people whom the locals consider to be their ancestors. What for representatives of the Western academy are simply

things, objects, are treated by their opponents as subjects, as persons who can forgive, offend, punish, and to whom the living must be responsible. Archaeologists often do not realize that they are “objectifying” the people (FERGUSON, 1996: 65) with whose remains they deal when excavating burial grounds. But this is well understood and felt by the locals. This acute sense of responsibility for and towards the dead is directly related to the fact that their presence acts “as a literal and metaphorical guarantee of rights to territory and the continuity of ways of life” (SHEPHERD, 2015: 15). This can explain “the peculiar and unexpected centrality of the role that the ancestral dead have come to play in a postcolonial politics of memory and identity, as figures around which to organize local resistances and a set of claims from the subaltern side of the colonial difference” (ibid.: 12).

Many people who spoke and wrote about the Nuzal excavations were really frightened about what might happen to the remains found by archaeologists. I conversed with an acquaintance of mine, a schoolteacher in Vladikavkaz, about this problem on the phone. She tearfully assured me that the bones would definitely be taken away from Ossetia, lost, thrown away or, much worse, replaced. The prospect that the remains of their dead would be replaced by bones of an unknown origin really terrified my interlocutor.

In the story of the excavations in Nuzal, the postcolonial protest against the actions of “foreign” archaeologists (many people lamented that the excavations were not carried out by Ossetians) was complicated by the fact that almost all representatives of the republican elites saw the situation completely differently. The protesters saw the situation from a (post)colonial perspective: some strangers (Russians), who have no moral obligations either to the dead or to living locals, came to indifferently carry out someone else’s orders and as trophies to take to their vaults finds (not things, but rather people) to which they are relatively indifferent, but are very dear to locals.

Local scholars and officials, on the other hand, saw the same archaeologists as people hired by local institutions to study the local past, with the results of their work being stored in local museums. From this point of view, everything was initially under control. These people were simply angered by the fact that the protesters could not understand that it was Ossetians who were interested in these excavations. In turn, their traditionalist opponents suspected that local elites, pursuing their own narrow practical interests, would make any deal with outsiders. One can see these confrontations in terms of two logics: anti-colonial and nationalist (NILSSON STUTZ, 2013: 6–10). They are usually applied to different situations, but here, as in many other applications of non-Western postcolonial critique, they worked simultaneously (sometimes even in one person’s speech).

There is another important aspect of this story that complicates and nuances the interpretation of these events from a postcolonial perspective. The fact is that the Nuzal villagers themselves did not protest the excavations. They took a keen

interest in the work of the archaeologists and even helped them. Obviously, they did not see their relatives in the graves being uncovered: they were resting in peace in the neighbouring cemetery. This is clearly evidenced by the fact that the works at the burial ground were carried out quietly for a month until traditionalists living in Vladikavkaz learnt about them. It was for them that the excavated burial ground turned out to be an ancestral cemetery. Thus, this anti-colonial protest was articulated by the leaders of ethno-religious revivalism, not by local residents. And if the latter had no desire or ability to recognise sacrilege in the actions of archaeologists, the former had quite mastered these interpretative techniques and were able to express their indignation in the public field, as they had long been accustomed to polemics with both Orthodox speakers and representatives of the local intellectual establishment. In this polemic, one of the most pivotal points is the demand of traditionalists for the right to publicly interpret the actions of researchers, in our case archaeologists. Here is how Alan, a member of a traditionalist religious organisation who participated in a public polemic on October 15, 2020 at the North Ossetian Institute for Humanities and Social Studies, formulated this demand:

When archaeology as a science violates some ethical norms (I mean now the mentality of our people, the attitude to cemeteries and to their ancestors), if this line is crossed by an archaeologist, then he ceases to be a scientific worker, but a grave desecrator.... This is the opinion of the participants of our movement.

Although this statement was presented as “just one opinion,” many Ossetian archaeologists and historians present at this discussion, as I was told later, felt that these words seriously threatened their status as experts.

As we can see, the tensions in society were very serious. Many scholars, officials, journalists and activists from a variety of movements and organizations took part. Some local experts said irritably that the traditionalists, being deeply ignorant people, hate archaeology and academic science in general, shaming their people and the republic. The traditionalists, faced on the one hand with the fact that their demands to stop the excavations were not legitimate from the point of view of Russian legislation and, on the other, with the resistance of the political and cultural elite of North Ossetia to their cause, decided not to give up. At this stage, their protest was expressed in terms of a tough demand to return the bones that the archaeologists found in the burial ground to the same place and bury them in accordance with (contemporary) Ossetian burial rituals. They hoped that by insisting that the people buried in the ancient cemetery were not Christians, they would call into question the Christian status of the chapel itself.

To make their claims more legitimate, the traditionalists explained that, for them, the world is arranged differently from the world of the archaeologists and, in general, that of the modernized elite. To put it in the language of current cultural anthropology, they explained that they have their own ontology. Discursively, these ideas were framed in terms of defending the Ossetian ethnic religion and the religious feelings of its followers.

One of the representatives of the traditionalist milieu who decided to continue to resent the excavations described his feelings in a video message on YouTube. A man of about forty-five years of age, he presents himself as a philosopher and bears the typical “Western” name Arthur, which he writes as Art-Khur (“burning sun” in Ossetian), suggesting a peculiar local etymology. Art-Khur also officially changed his surname to Arthuron (“solar fire,” the name of the sun god from the reconstructed ancient Ossetian pantheon). Here is what he said in his video address to the Ossetian people:

Nuzal is the graves of our ancestors. We have a royal cemetery. You could say it's one of the last shards of our history. One of the last fragments that show we had our own state, that we are a great nation. We have it in our genes that we had kings, we had statehood. It seems to me that to touch this cemetery is blasphemy. For any Ossetian it is blasphemy.... I think it was kind of the last stronghold, the last point. I think that no Ossetian can live indifferently, watching what is happening.... This is barbarism. They do not leave us any other chance. For example, for me... I was pinned to the wall, not even to the wall, but to the cliff. If I take a step back now, only shame and death await me from behind. Nothing else awaits me. What's the point of living then? (“Raskopki v #Nuzale i Iron #Ag'dau...,” 2020)

The speaker states that he is very acutely experiencing the feelings that every Ossetian should be experiencing in such situations. He feels insulted, which leads him to such despair that he sees no possibility of continuing his existence. His social and personal identity is virtually equal to his ethnic (and religious) identity.

Two points are important for us here. First, the nation (or ethnic group) is presented as an emotional community. As Barbara Rosenwein writes, “I postulate the existence of ‘emotional communities’: groups in which people adhere to the same norms of emotional expression and value—or devalue—the same or related emotions” (ROSENWEIN, 2006: 2). In our case study, a person who describes his emotions and those of his fellows as normative and, more importantly, natural, generated by his very nature, does not simply belong to an emotional community. He goes further by framing this ethnic group as an emotional community.

Second, Art-Khur publicly displays his scorned feelings. By doing so, he in a sense violates the traditional norms of behaviour that prescribe men not to show their feelings in public. The cultural norm of strong self-restraint is expressed by the Ossetian concept of *Iron Æfsarm*, which is usually translated as “Ossetian

modesty.” So, for example, a shocking violation of this principle is considered to be a public declaration of love and a marriage proposal made in a restaurant.

Characteristically, Art-Khur spoke about his feelings as an Ossetian, not as a believer. His fellow Ossetian video blogger Alan Mamiev, a man in his early 40s, chose a different line of argument, saying that the excavations were a crime against the Ossetian ethnic religion. By doing so, he presented the traditionalists’ arguments through respectable legal language already familiar to Russian legal culture from the article of the criminal code “On Insulting Religious Feelings” introduced in 2013 (ANTONOV and SAMOKHINA, 2015). In doing so, he attempted to present the entire nativist project as a thoroughgoing religion with real followers. What made them real was their ability to feel insulted, a feeling that Orthodox Christians and Muslims were already displaying in Russian courtrooms with the same goal of making their religious communities more visible in public space.

Relics, Energies and Metaphysical Geopolitics

Alan Mamiev is well known in Ossetia, and not only in the traditionalist milieu. He has become known as a political analyst who adheres to a leftist ideology based on nostalgia for the Soviet system and as a volunteer fighter in Donbas in 2014–2016. He has a keen interest in esotericism and now sells self-development courses on social media. Mamiev was among the men who came to the excavation site in Nuzal to stop the works. Soon after he plunged with great enthusiasm into the polemic thriving on social media, Instagram in particular. He had long tried to promote the idea that Ossetians and their ancestors, on the one hand, and the followers of Abrahamic religions and people of modern westernized societies in general, on the other, belong to completely different civilizations. He has tirelessly argued that they have diametrically opposed values and ethics.

This time, Mamiev’s arguments were different. First, he claimed that the people buried near the chapel in Nuzal are, for him and his associates, saints whose remains are relics that should not be touched by outsiders:

Only their ancestors are saints to Ossetians according to *Æhdau* [the traditional way of life of Ossetians]. Do you understand? And there [in the burial ground] are not just ancestors. The ancestors of the most part of Ossetian modern surnames were buried there, in this cemetery. These are their relics. And in this sense, for representatives of the Ossetian traditional religion, the relics buried in Nuzal are the same as Orthodox relics lying in a church. They are respected remains of respected people. Orthodoxy has its own but here we have ours. These are our direct ancestors. Do you see what else the difference is? Not just some people who lived somewhere in Greece, in Rome... [i.e., Christian saints]. [We have] a direct blood [connection] to most modern Ossetians ancestors. Naturally,

there was a great, violent indignation of the people... well, part of the people, so to speak, the public, that these remains began to be extracted. (“Bor’ba za istoriiu #Alanii,” 2020)

From this point of view, uncovering the graves of ancestors is just as blasphemous as desecrating the relics of Christian saints:

They [the archaeologists] have permission, fine. But the essence of what is happening does not change. These are still our ancestors. And they are still digging them up. Under the Soviets, the Bolsheviks also had permission to turn churches into stables. There was such permission, wasn’t there? There was. And there were laws. And relics were collected, bones were bagged and thrown away. There are documentaries about it. This all also happened. And everything was also by the law, by the law of that time, the law of war communism [*voennogo kommunisma*]. And so? And now you’re saying it was bad. So, we’re saying it wasn’t very good either.... Because for us these are our ancestors, these are holy relics. (ibid.)

A little later in this speech, he translates his thought into the language of modern Russian legislation: “For us they are saints, and what is happening there now is an offense to the feelings of believers, i.e., us” (ibid.).

Rather paradoxically, here Mamiev draws parallels with the veneration of relics of saints by Orthodox believers, which Ossetian traditionalists usually ridicule bitterly and present as wild superstition. But in this context, these alien practices become a source of legitimation for the traditionalist’s own claims and an explanation of Mamiev’s emotions.

One more line of reasoning connects the beginning of the excavations in Nuzal with international political events. Mamiev argued that the excavations in Nuzal prompted a series of wars in the Caucasus. This logic borrows its narrative scheme from the historical legend of the opening of Tamerlane’s tomb in 1941; this opening is said to have released the spirit of the great conqueror and caused the war between the USSR and Nazi Germany. In Mamiev’s explanatory construction, the cause-and-effect relationship of the events is likened to the work of laws of nature (or the universe) inaccessible to common people:

My friends who live in Armenia call me and say ... “Is this, they say, really an Alanian lineage?” I say, “Yes.” They say, “This is very strange.” I say, “Why?” [They ask:] “And when did they start opening up the first burials?” I say, “Honestly, I don’t know. I can’t tell by the dates. But here they started excavating at the end of August. Maybe in the middle of September, maybe at the beginning, God knows.” He says, “Very strange. About the same time our Armenians and Azerbaijanis started fighting, the first flare-ups here. The first outbursts had already started then. The dates were roughly the same.” I said, “And why do you think it might be related?” Well, he says, “You know what these kinds of graves are and what

happens when they are opened?” I realize you’re going to accuse me of all sorts of scary things now, but I’ll make a deal first. Hear me out. So, we talked about this whole thing. These people are not stupid, they also have higher education, PhDs and doctorates. These are comrades who understand how it works, who live in Armenia, in Nagorno-Karabakh itself. That was the first sign for me. (“Raskopki tsarskogo alanskogo mogil’nika roda #Tsarazonta,” 2020)

Finally, the third narrative links the excavations to threatening social cataclysms in Ossetia (including epidemics—it was 2020, after all). Alan Mamiev is inspired in this speech by notions of “power places,” from which not only individuals but also entire nations derive their vital energy. Talking about the secret motives of those who organised excavations in Nuzal, he says that these excavations are a “blow to the egregore” of Ossetia and even the whole of Russia, destroying the most important “energy point” on which the strength of the entire nation is based.

After the Nuzal excavation ended, Mamiev explained the essence of these events in a vivid discourse on the current processes taking place throughout the world. In his account, New Age notions of ancient monuments as places of power (TIMOTHY and CONOVER, 2006: 144) joined nationalist eschatology and theories of a global conspiracy of the elites:

Capturing these sacred spots is one of the strategic objectives for people like Herman Gref [head of one of the powerful Russian banking corporations]. Their task, in addition to seizing the land, is to block the action of the sacred places and to start using this energy for their own purposes.... The war is not just on an economic level. It takes place on the sacred, metaphysical level. And these people, no matter what, must ... stop these places from working or make them work for them.... These are not just people. I would like to say: [they are] black magicians.... These places of power, they have to be either blocked, destroyed, or redirected to their advantage. Since they [these invaders] are dark, since they are dark, they cannot draw on this energy; accordingly, they [the sacred places] must be destroyed. (“#Altaj i #Alaniya dva sakral’nykh centra #Evrazii,” 2021)⁶

The origins of the ontologies that the Ossetian traditionalist intellectual uses to claim the burial site can be found in late modern narrative schemes deriving

6. In his other argument, the narrative of sacrilege is directly inspired by the story of the so-called Altai princess, whose mummified remains were discovered by Novosibirsk archaeologists in 1993 in southern Siberia. Details of this story are known to Mamiev from his personal communication with Altai ethnic-ecological activists. For twenty years, Altaians demanded the return of the princess to the Altai. In 2013, the remains were returned to a local Altai museum. Many still demand her burial, linking misfortunes such as the 2003 earthquake to the fact that the spirit of the princess finds no rest. Agnieszka Halemba (2008) and Ludek Brož (2011) explained perfectly how conflicts between different ontologies determined the essence of the conflict between Altaians and archaeologists. In later works, this case was approached through the lens of significant cultural objects in postcolonial contexts (PLETS et al., 2013; TADINA, 2020; PIMENOVA, 2021).

from a combination of Western esotericism (in its New Age version), inverted concepts taken from dominant religious traditions and ontologies of other ethnic groups undergoing postcolonial reflection.

Overt Competition and Covert Rivalry

Why did Alan Mamiev take such an active part in this story? After all, until this moment he had not demonstrated his involvement in traditionalist public actions, limiting himself to theoretical speculations about modern psychology and the parapsychology of religion in connection with actual political processes. An answer can be found in Jeanne Favret-Saada's article dealing with offenses to "religious feelings":

In fact, this struggle for one-upmanship is an ordinary dimension of situations of devotional protest—even if the mass media... are generally unable to realize this. By becoming vocal against impious artists [excavations], groups of devotees attempt to show the religious masses the superiority of their religious zeal: they show they are not afraid to stand against state power... With this in mind, we may say that any conflict on [the excavations] that confronts devotional coteries with non-devotees and nonbelievers presupposes a prior competition among religious groups for the adhesion of religious masses. (FAVRET-SAADA, 2016: 34)

In other words, the primary audience of the person or persons who publicly declare their hurt religious feelings is not the opponents they seem to be addressing, but their potential supporters, for whose attention and loyalty they are vying. These speakers, in proclaiming their struggle against enemy power and their willingness to confront it, are struggling their competitors within the group for attention, respect, and other more material resources.

Following this analysis, to present himself as a particularly committed believer, Mamiev portrayed himself as someone who was ready to come into conflict with the dominant forces in society. Additionally, he shows his particular sensitivity and adherence to principle in issues of loyalty, in our case, to the ethnic tradition (*Æhdau*) and to doctrinal and ritual institutions. By claiming his willingness to sacrifice himself and his acute ability to recognize threats to social values in the actions of others and to respond vigorously to those threats, he enters into competition with other activists from this or similar movements. This position is pretty understandable: Alan Mamiev constantly faces the problem that his version (vision) of the traditional Ossetian faith is not taken seriously by other traditionalists and, above all, by those of them who have real power in the registered communities of this religion. Their skepticism can be explained by Mamiev's particular interpretation of the prospects of Ossetian religious traditionalism. He claims that he does much to bring Ossetian spiritual culture closer to modern

man. This involves translating the realities of local beliefs and practices into New Age language and establishing connections with non-Ossetian nativist groups and projects, such as the contemporary Russian pagan activist Igor Poluichik’s “Magic Army of Rus’” and the New Age Youtube canal “*Etot moment*” (This Moment). In conversations with me, several traditionalist intellectuals ironically called him an esotericist who turns an ancient Indo-European faith into “entertainment for exalted ladies.”

The story of the ancient burial site gave Mamiev an opportunity to change his public image and present himself as a person who can not only speak the sublime language of esotericism, but also openly confront strong public institutions. Mamiev proudly described on his social media pages how, while he was struggling to protect the ancient cemetery, the head of the local diocese of the ROC wrote a police report against him. In addition, according to Mamiev, the archbishop wrote similar reports to the prosecutor’s office and the Federal Security Service. In his video, Mamiev accused the powerful church official of snitching and violating local ethical norms, directly comparing himself to the victims of Stalinist repression. He stated that although the police had not yet been able to bring any charges against him, he still expects that he may be falsely accused of possessing drugs or weapons, which, in Russia, are commonly believed to be planted on people whom the authorities want to imprison for political reasons.⁷

Mamiev’s involvement in solving the main problem associated with the excavations in Nuzal—the return of the remains found by archaeologists to their original location—was particularly vivid and widely publicized by him on social networks. As I said, the initial message calling to stop the excavations was very concerned about where the bones found in the burial ground had gone and what would happen to them next. The mission of the traditionalists was to have these bones reburied, preferably in the same graves. The latter could not be done, because any excavation destroys the archaeological site. However, the prospect of burying these bones in a special common grave not far from the Nuzal chapel seemed very attractive to the initiators of the reburial project. It implied a public ritual and the de facto creation by the traditionalists of a new national shrine, one which the ROC would not be able to control.

According to the rules followed by Russia’s archeologists, the bones had to be reburied one way or another. When the reburial took place at the very end of December 2020, most Ossetian participants in this action learned about it from Mamiev’s post on Instagram. As a result, there is a widespread idea in Ossetia that the reburial was the result of Mamiev’s (media) activities. In urging compatriots to gather in Nuzal, he said, among other things:

7. See “Raskopki v #Nuzale, chem zakonchilis’ i chto dal’she?...” 2020.

We will hold this reburial. The elders will come, pray and do everything necessary—the ceremony [will be] according to our traditional religion. We won't consider any other options, funeral services or anything else. Why? Because we consulted with archaeologists, and the archaeologists said that no symbolism was found in these graves, neither Islamic, nor Jewish or Christian. Accordingly, these were people who lived in our traditional culture, and we will bury them according to the same customs. (“Data perezakhoroneniya v s. Nuzal,” 2020)

Mamiev himself went to Nuzal to participate directly in the restoration of justice after the desecration of the ancestors' graves. About 150 people, mostly young men, arrived in Nuzal. Some young Ossetian politicians and leaders of traditionalist organizations were present. The remains of each of the approximately 200 people found during the excavations were placed in small wooden boxes up to half a meter long, resembling small coffins and specially made for this reburial. These boxes were placed adjacent to each other in concrete boxes, somewhat resembling the stone boxes in which these bones were buried, and were closed from above with concrete slabs before being covered with earth. Although this method of burial somewhat resembled the traditional one, it looked very peculiar and, one might say, non-ritual. Several people who took an active part in this event could not remember anything they associated with Ossetian funeral rites. Ossetia learned of the victory of the traditionalists over the Orthodox in the battle for Nuzal from the lips of Alan Mamiev, who ended his speech, delivered on video, with the (self-)ironic remark: “This is the magic power of Instagram” (“Alan Mamiev rasskazal o tom...” 2020).

Two weeks after the reburial of the remains, Alan Mamiev and his comrades released a special video in which they summarized the “scientific” results of the excavations, claiming one more time that the archaeologists, about whom they spoke with respect this time, had not found any Christian symbols in this burial site. In this video, Mamiev returned to his favorite theme of attempts by dark forces to take possession of “sacred, energetic places.” New details had emerged:

These places are being hunted. During World War II, the Ahnenerbe did this. The SS division “Brandenburg” was rushing here. They were rushing into the mountains. But there is no gold, no diamonds, no oil in Ossetia. But everyone is rushing here for some reason.... Not everybody is eager to get to Grozny's oil. Some, let's say, more advanced fellows in this world, they're after these sacred places. And what we see now is an attempt to squeeze us as a people out from these sacred spots. (“Obrashchenie k molodyozhi...” 2021)

With the Nuzal affair, Mamiev was indeed able to gain public credibility precisely as a leader of traditionalist activism, capable of organizing public action and with merit to the nativist project by his involvement in the conflict over the excavation. His triumph was quite understandable—not only did his actions

draw the attention of many residents of the republic who in one way or another support the religious nativist project. Much more importantly, his interpretations of the sacred nature of local historical monuments, his narrative about the struggle around them and its hidden mechanisms and his ability to demonstrate his heightened sensitivity to the insulted ethno-religious feelings of the Ossetians raised the public profile of both the entire nativist project and his personal reputation as an activist and religious expert. Later, he used this resource when he invited his comrades to conduct the rituals he had created, presented as restored Aryan traditions. But that is another story.

Concluding Remarks

Across the Russian Federation, the ROC is undertaking all possible projects to mark urban and rural localities as Orthodox, that is, as a legitimate space for their activities and institutional dominance. There are such projects in North Ossetia. New churches and chapels continue to be built. Other aspects of this policy are aimed at making the history of Ossetians Orthodox: Orthodox posters on huge street billboards show portraits of the missionary priests who spread Orthodoxy among the Ossetians in the nineteenth century. According to the authors of this campaign, the images of ancient village churches are visual proofs that this land, and therefore the people who lived on it, have always been Orthodox.

As we saw, despite the achievements of the traditionalists, the chapel in the village of Nuzal has remained under the control of the local Orthodox diocese. However, in a context where the Church has no monopoly on the creation of a public narrative about the past of an ethno-political entity, its efforts have pushed supporters of other views of Orthodoxy and religion in general to create alternative interpretations of history and present them in public.

In this case study, the leaders of the diocese, faced with strong opposition to expanding its presence around a national shrine, have withdrawn from the further memorialisation of Nuzal's Christian past, allowing those who do not see their ancestors as Christians to hold commemorative events. In this respect, it is very typical that none of the local priests ever thought of holding a memorial service over the remains of the Ossetian ancestors found by archaeologists, although this practice is widespread in today's Russia. The bones of their seemingly forgotten (in fact, newly found) ancestors were taken care of by traditionalists, who were ready to work with the image of "blood and soil" embodied materially in these nameless bodies. The Orthodox were left with an ancient architectural structure handed over to them by the Russian state, decorated with beautiful frescoes but otherwise empty.

Meanwhile, next to the Nuzal chapel, a new shrine has appeared. It, too, is associated with the memory of the medieval state of Ossetian ancestors, however without any Orthodox Christian symbols. A modest stone with an inscription in Ossetian is supposed to be placed on it. It has no obvious religious meaning, but it allows one to perform the customary gesture of touching a coffin or grave with one's hand as a sign of farewell to the deceased: “*Kæj fænda, uymæn kuyd ua jæ bon bacæuyn æmæ uycy cyrtyl jæ khux aværyn*” (Whoever wants, let him come and touch this tombstone with his hand). Soon after this reburial, projects were started in Ossetia for a large, opulent memorial on this site. According to the sketches I saw, there will be no Christian symbols there.

Whether this monument will be built is not known. It will be a long and complicated process. But the traditionalists expect it to become a place of remembrance where members of the ethnic Ossetian religion can come to honor their glorious non-Christian ancestors and feel again like the emotional community that united in the fall of 2020 to resist a system that can unceremoniously disturb “lovely bones,” turning them from ancestors into the numbered objects of archaeological collections stored in the dark vaults of imperial museums.

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An Ancient Shrine, Archaeological Excavations and the Bones of Forgotten Ancestors in North Ossetia: How Offended Believers Created a Religion

The Russian Orthodox Church is implementing projects to mark the space of the Republic of North Ossetia-Alania as Orthodox, that is, as a legitimate space for its activities and institutional dominance. This policy involves representing the Ossetian past as Orthodox, notably through the restoration of ancient buildings connected with Orthodoxy. However, the Church does not have a monopoly on creating a public narrative about the past of this ethno-political entity. Drawing on an ethnographic case study of archaeological excavations around a medieval chapel in the village of Nuzal, this article demonstrates that the efforts of the Church ended up pushing its competitors, Ossetian traditionalists, to publicly present an alternative interpretation of history. Activists in the revival of the Ossetian pre-Christian religion argue that the Church's attempts are an offence to their religious sentiments, presenting themselves as the legitimate guardians of ethnic traditions.

Keywords: North Ossetia-Alania, Russian Orthodox Church, religious nativism, offence to religious sentiments, archeological excavations

Un ancien sanctuaire, des fouilles archéologiques et des ossements d'ancêtres oubliés en Ossétie du Nord : comment des croyants offensés ont créé une religion

En Ossétie du Nord-Alanie, l'Église orthodoxe russe met en place des projets visant à marquer l'espace en tant qu'orthodoxe pour légitimer ses activités et sa domination institutionnelle. Cette politique implique de représenter le passé ossète comme orthodoxe, surtout en restaurant des constructions anciennes liées à l'orthodoxie. Cependant, l'Église n'a pas le monopole sur la création d'un récit public sur le passé dans cette entité ethno-politique. Basé sur une étude ethnographique de fouilles archéologiques près d'une chapelle médiévale dans le village de Nuzal, cet article montre que les efforts de l'Église ont fini par encourager ses concurrents, des traditionalistes ossètes, à présenter publiquement une interprétation alternative de l'histoire. Des activistes de la renaissance de la religion ossète préchrétienne ont avancé que les fouilles offensaient leur sentiment religieux, en s'affichant comme les gardiens légitimes des traditions ethniques.

Mots-clés : Ossétie du Nord-Alanie, Église orthodoxe russe, nativisme religieux, offense aux sentiments religieux, fouilles archéologiques

El antiguo santuario, excavaciones arqueológicas y huesos de antepasados olvidados en Osetia del Norte: cómo los creyentes ofendidos crearon una religión

En Osetia del Norte-Alania, la Iglesia Ortodoxa Rusa está implementando proyectos para marcar el espacio como ortodoxo para legitimar sus actividades y dominación institucional. Esta política implica representar el pasado osetio como ortodoxo, especialmente mediante la restauración de edificios antiguos vinculados a la ortodoxia. Sin embargo, la Iglesia no tiene el monopolio de crear una narrativa pública sobre el pasado en esta entidad etnopolítica. Basado en un estudio etnográfico de excavaciones arqueológicas cerca de una capilla medieval en el pueblo de Nuzal, este artículo muestra que los esfuerzos de la Iglesia finalmente alentaron a sus competidores, los tradicionalistas osetios, a presentar públicamente una interpretación alternativa de la historia. Los activistas del renacimiento de la religión osetia precristiana argumentaron que las excavaciones ofendían sus sentimientos religiosos, haciéndose pasar por los legítimos guardianes de las tradiciones étnicas.

Palabras clave: Osetia del Norte-Alania, Iglesia Ortodoxa Rusa, nativismo religioso, ofensa a los sentimientos religiosos, excavaciones arqueológicas

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The Construction of Russian Orthodoxy in Chukotka

Ministering to the People and Marking the Territory in an Arctic Border Zone

In 2016, Patriarch Kirill announced that the Russian Orthodox Church had commissioned more than 5,000 building projects and renovations in Russia since 2009 (KÖLLNER, 2018: 1–2). Despite its location at the extreme northeastern tip of Russia, and despite its harsh climate and sparse population, the territory of Chukotka has been no exception to the overt policy of producing Orthodox spaces: over the last fifteen to twenty years, the Orthodox Church has marked the territory with about forty construction projects, including churches, chapels, monumental crosses, and statues (see “Prikhody,” n.d.). While such projects are not unique to Chukotka, their occurrence there may require more explanation than they do in other parts of Russia. As I shall show in the following pages, the Russian Orthodox Church had not been successfully established in the region in the pre-Soviet era, and Chukotka’s Indigenous population had no special historical attachment to the church, in contrast to some Indigenous people in other parts of Siberia (see, for example, KOESTER et al., 2014; PETRASHEVA et al., 2010 on the Itelmens of Kamchatka). Chukotka occupies a specific position within Russia, and, to state and regional authorities, it poses particular challenges linked to its unique set of characteristics. It is remote from the Russian “mainland” (called locally *materik*, the continent) and subject to extreme meteorological conditions. There are few roads, and the sea routes are frozen eight months of the year—which means that one travels to and within the region mostly by airplane. Consequently, the cost of construction materials and of labour is particularly high. Given these difficulties, the investment required to build churches may seem to be disproportionate to the small number of people that the Orthodox Church can reach in Chukotka: while the region is one and a half times the size of France, it is inhabited by about 48,000 people (“Predvaritel’ naia otsenka...,” 2024), 30% of whom are Indigenous.¹

1. Indigenous people of Chukotka include mostly Chukchi, Siberian Yupik, and Even. Because I did most of my fieldwork in villages where the majority of the Indigenous people saw

In this study, I examine the activities of the Russian Orthodox Church in Chukotka paying particular attention to political and socio-historical aspects of its presence and its post-Soviet implantation.² My goal is to document and analyse the challenges that the Orthodox Church has encountered in Chukotka, due not only to its Arctic environment and its extreme remoteness but also to its particular history and its geopolitical location. Generally, I aim to add complexity to our understanding of the contemporary Russian Orthodox Church and its objectives, which are not always self-evident. While ministering to the people is the manifest mission of the Church, in Chukotka, it is not the only one. The leaders of the Russian Orthodox Church, in coordination with the leaders of the Russian state, may have a particularly good reason for attempting to overcome the difficulties involved in establishing its presence. There is, after all, one special feature that must be taken into account: Chukotka's proximity to the United States and, hence, its strategic geopolitical significance.³

I suggest the following: the Russian Orthodox Church has gone to great lengths to make Chukotka Orthodox; but the disparity between the necessary expenditures and the seemingly modest results leads one to reflect on its motives. By marking the land in Chukotka, the Russian Orthodox Church has at least two goals: first, ministering to inhabitants who previously had little contact with Orthodox Christianity and, second, together with the Russian state, staking a cultural and political claim on the furthest Russian territory—a territory that has had, intermittently, a history of close relations with North America and, since 1867, a maritime border with the United States.

Despite important recent contributions (e.g. TOCHEVA, 2017; KORMINA, 2019; KORMINA and SHTYRKOV, 2011; LUEHRMANN, 2019), the anthropology of Russian Orthodoxy is still in its early stages. This is especially true of Siberia, where attention has been directed largely toward other types of religious practices, such as shamanism. There are, however, some studies that are devoted to the encounter between Orthodoxy and Siberian Indigenous practices. For example, Jean-Luc Lambert shows how, in pre-Soviet times, Khanty-Mansi bear rituals took shape in contact with Orthodoxy and Russian colonialism (LAMBERT, 2010). More recently, Anne Dalles Maréchal has provided an illuminating analysis of the ways in which Nanai embroidery, with its characteristic iconography, is used to express ideas consistent with Orthodox Christianity (DALLES MARÉCHAL, 2023).

themselves as Chukchi and because they are the largest indigenous group in the region, I will refer mainly to them in this paper.

2. For a preliminary sketch of some of these issues see VATÉ, 2019.
3. In the Soviet Union and, until recently, in the Russian Federation, the whole territory of Chukotka had the official status of a border zone (*pogranzona*). Thus, anyone not residing in Chukotka and wishing to go there, including Russian citizens, had to obtain authorization to enter the territory (in Russian, *propusk*). The rule applies even more strictly to non-Russian visitors (OPARIN and VATÉ, 2021).

At a more institutionalized level, Marjorie Mandelstam Balzer (2005) looks at the religious and political landscape of Yakutia, where the Orthodox Church and Sakha temples compete. This paper, in contrast, is closer in its approach to Alexandra Antohin's analysis (2011) of the complexities of reinstating the Orthodox Church and parish life in Magadan.

Elsewhere, I have written about religious practices of Indigenous people of Chukotka, with a particular emphasis on rituals of Chukchi reindeer herders (e.g. VATÉ, 2005, 2011a, 2021) and on the post-Soviet conversion of some Chukchi to various forms of Protestantism (VATÉ, 2009). Here, however, I shift my focus to the Orthodox Church in Chukotka. Relations of the Indigenous people of Chukotka to the Orthodox Church are part of this wider focus, but there are many other aspects as well.

In describing and analyzing developments regarding the Russian Orthodox Church in Chukotka, I draw on my own ethnographic data and on information about the Church's activities that I have found online or in other primary or secondary sources. To supplement my own data, I have consulted the website of the Eparchy of Anadyr and Chukotka of the Russian Orthodox Church and articles published in various media. Interactions with a variety of people and exposure to diverse perspectives during fieldwork are necessary for understanding what is happening at the micro level; but information garnered from other primary and secondary sources, many of which are posted online, has enabled me to have a better understanding of what is at stake politically at a macro level.

Ethnographic material for this contribution was gathered during fieldwork in Anadyr, the capital of Chukotka, in March and April 2018 as part of the project "Orthodox Christianity and Indigenous People in Contemporary Alaska and Chukotka" (OCIP).⁴ My knowledge of the Orthodox Church in Chukotka also relies on my long-term experience in this region, including a total of more than three years of fieldwork in both urban and rural areas from 1993 to 2018. In 2018, I investigated the activities of representatives and members of the Church in places of worship, in the eparchy headquarters and in the wider community. I interviewed church officials, including the bishop, and also people whom I knew from my previous trips to Chukotka. In 2018, I recorded about twenty-five formal or semi-formal interviews, but, of course, I spoke casually or conducted informal interviews with many more people—in addition to being able to draw on fieldnotes based on research prior to 2018. Having long-term experience in the region and having an established network of acquaintances was a real asset. One person whom I knew from previous stays was instrumental in enabling me to contact the bishop, to visit the headquarters of the eparchy regularly, and to spend time in the eparchy dining room, where I could engage in conversations with clergy, lay people working for the Church and visitors.

4. OCIP was funded by the French Polar Institute Paul-Émile Victor (IPEV).

In this paper, I present diachronically the situation of the Orthodox Church in Chukotka, emphasizing the tremendous challenges encountered over time. I review briefly the history of relations between the Orthodox Church and the Indigenous people of Chukotka prior to the Soviet period, showing that the early Orthodox missionaries largely failed in their efforts to convert Indigenous people and to leave a significant imprint on the landscape. Second, I trace the initial steps of church representatives in Chukotka in the post-Soviet era, showing how they had to start practically from scratch. Third, I describe the concerted effort of the Russian Orthodox Church, beginning in the early 2000s, to augment its presence in Chukotka by building churches and erecting monuments throughout the region—showing how Diomid, the first bishop of the new Eparchy of Anadyr and Chukotka, helped initiate but then nearly derailed this project. Fourth, I outline the specific challenges that confronted the Orthodox Church in Chukotka at the end of the 2010s—and which, no doubt, continue to confront it—indicating that the Church has made some gains but still struggles to establish its presence in the life of the people. Finally, I argue that, by marking the land in this particular context, the Church not only claims the territory but also aids in asserting Russian supremacy—in the face of the nearby US.

Relations between the Orthodox Church and the Indigenous People of Chukotka before the Soviet Era

The intensive construction of religious monuments and buildings in recent decades cannot be explained by the wish to reinstate a special bond that the Church had established with Indigenous people but that was later destroyed under the Soviets. Chukchi probably present one of the most radical examples of the limited degree to which the Russian Orthodox missions of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries achieved their goals.⁵ In that sense, they present a striking contrast with other Siberian people, such as Altaians (see ZNAMENSKI, 1999b) and the Itelmens, in Kamchatka (KOESTER et al., 2014).

In the course of early encounters with Russians entering their territories in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the Chukchi became famous for their resistance to Russian colonizers (BOGORAS, 1904–1909: 681–682). The first Orthodox missionary arrived in the Chukchi land in 1744 but was reportedly murdered the following year (*ibid.*: 723). Next important missionary campaigns occurred in the 1830s and 1840s (*ibid.*; ZNAMENSKI, 1999b: 162). Even then, the activities of Orthodox missionaries were largely restricted to those areas where Russians lived, that is the south and the northwest of the Chukchi territory

5. For a comparative overview of various encounters with Christianity in Siberia, see BORJON-PRIVÉ et al., 2019.

(VDOVIN, 1979: 61). In the course of the nineteenth century, missionary records show a steady increase in the number of baptisms, but these conversions seem to have had little impact on Chukchi's religious practices (ZNAMENSKI, 1999a: 29; ZNAMENSKI, 1999b: 171–172). Generally, the Chukchi were “indifferent” to Orthodox Christianity (ibid.: 139, 171), as they “saw little social or spiritual sense in adjusting Christianity to their culture” (ibid.: 9).⁶

In sum, the presence of missionaries in Chukotka was minimal (BOGORAS, 1904-1909: 727). The historian Inna Yurganova explains this with reference to challenging geographical and climatic conditions (YURGANOVA, 2015: 62). According to her, a more significant impact of the Orthodox Church would have needed “constant (regular) missionary work requiring both tangible investments (travel missionaries, food, labor, interpreters, creating living conditions for missionaries) and self-sacrifice” (ibid.: 70).

The influence of the Orthodox Church and, more generally, of Russian authorities was further weakened by competition from Americans. Beginning in the 1820s and with increasing intensity after the sale of Alaska to the US in 1867, Chukchi engaged eagerly in relation with American traders, whose products they preferred to Russian counterparts (VDOVIN, 1965: 236, 239). The central position of Chukchi between Russians and Americans provided them with a degree of choice in their dealings with colonial powers.

Consequently, there are today hardly any traces of the pre-Soviet Orthodox past in Chukotka. This is due in part to Soviet atheist policies and propaganda that led to the removal of the few existing Orthodox edifices in the region. But the general absence of the Orthodox Church in the Chukotkan religious landscape in the 1990s was not due to Soviet policies alone but to the fact that the Orthodox Church had not yet managed to establish itself in the region.

The (Re)Birth of the Orthodox Church in the Post-soviet Chukotka

In the 1990s, in the first years of my fieldwork in Chukotka, the Orthodox presence was rather discrete. I associate it with a friend of mine, a Russian woman working in the House of Culture,⁷ then in her fifties, who never missed an

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6. Admittedly, encounters of Indigenous people with Christianity in a colonial context do not result unambiguously in either the acceptance or rejection of the new religion. Anthropologists have approached what happens in such contexts in terms of “interactions,” as “a process of reciprocal influences between the partners involved,” on the basis that “the simple equation of domination and resistance does not allow us to understand the complexity of the colonial situation” (MARY, 2000: 783). All translations from French and Russian sources are by the author.
 7. An institution inherited from Soviet times whose goal is to provide entertainment and cultural enlightenment.

Orthodox service. I would see her rush with enthusiasm to a small church that was built in pre-Soviet times on the outskirts of Anadyr. In the early years of the Soviet era, the building was transformed into a House of Culture, but it was later used for storage, after a new, much larger House of Culture was built in the city centre (VATÉ and DIACHKOVA, 2011: 31). In post-Soviet times, it became the Temple of the Transfiguration of the Lord (*khram Preobrazheniia Gospodnia*), which, according to the website of the Eparchy of Anadyr and Chukotka (“Khram Preobrazheniia...” 2016), was the place where the first Orthodox services in Chukotka took place after 1991. I am not sure how many people attended the services when my friend rushed there, because, at that time, I was documenting Chukchi hunting and herding rituals, rather than the place of Orthodox Christianity in local life. Nevertheless, it was clear that Orthodoxy occupied a rather marginal position in Anadyr in the 1990s, while, in villages, it was barely present at all. To the best of my knowledge, in that first post-Soviet decade, only Protestant missionaries ventured into villages and managed to build communities of believers there.⁸ Representatives of the Orthodox Church did not seem to show interest in converting Indigenous people, or they were not yet in a position to do so.

The Introduction of the Orthodox Church in Chukotka at the Beginning of the 2000s

In the 1990s, the economic crisis that hit all Russia was intensified in Chukotka by the corruption of Aleksandr Nazarov, governor from 1991 to 2000 (see GRAY, 2005; THOMPSON, 2008). The first steps of the Orthodox Church in the region, beginning in the latter years of Nazarov’s term of office, were taken under these difficult conditions.

Father Leonid (Tsapok), a young Orthodox missionary who served in Chukotka at the beginning of the 2000s, has left testimonies about that period that have been posted online. In 2001, Father Leonid was sent to Lavrentiya, the administrative centre of the district of Chukotka (*Chukotskii raion*),⁹ located with its 1,400 inhabitants on the eastern coast of the Chukchi Peninsula. He stayed there for eight years, travelling occasionally to other settlements in the region. In a text that was subsequently published on various websites (TSAPOK, 2010) and in an interview that he gave to the Spiritual Academy BOGOSLOV

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8. Protestant missionaries came from the United States but also Russia and Ukraine. Protestantism managed to spread without pastors from village to village by means of many small, autonomous organizations relying on local and often Indigenous volunteers (for more information about the introduction of Protestantism in Chukotka, refer to VATÉ, 2009).
 9. The Chukotkan Autonomous Region (*Chukotskii Avtonomnyi Okrug*), or simply Chukotka, is divided in six administrative units, the districts of: Anadyr (*Anadyrskii raion*), Iul’tin (*Iul’tinskii raion*), Bilibino (*Bilibinskii raion*), Chukotka (*Chukotskii raion*), Provideniya (*Providenskii raion*), and Chaun (*Chaunskii raion*).

(“Problemy...” 2012), Father Leonid talks frankly about the difficulties that he encountered when trying to organize an Orthodox congregation.

Before going to seminary, Leonid Tsapok had grown up in Anadyr; but like many residents of the regional capital, he was entirely unfamiliar with Chukotkan life beyond the city’s boundaries. When billionaire Roman Abramovich became governor of Chukotka in 2000, the regional economy was in terrible shape. Living conditions in Anadyr were poor, but in the villages the situation was much worse—something I could see for myself during fieldwork. In this context, Father Leonid had to deal with the general poverty of the region, with families suffering from malnutrition and even starvation, and with the decrepit state of infrastructure. About the building he received from the local administration, he writes:

Windows were knocked out, the roof was partially demolished, the heating system—just hopeless. (TSAPOK, 2010: 2)

Father Leonid explains that he struggled to fulfil his duties, not having been prepared at the seminary for the encounter with Indigenous perspectives and ways of life and being surprised to find that his potential parishioners had almost no knowledge of Orthodoxy. In his testimony, which is phrased in paternalistic terms, he distinguishes, on one hand, between Ukrainians and “simple Russians” (*prostye russkie liudi*), who “need a normal liturgy in Slavonic,” and, on the other hand, the “Chukchi/Indigenous people (*mestnoe naselenie*)” for whom “the service should not take more than forty minutes” and should contain as little Church Slavonic as possible (“Problemy...” 2012). However, even members of congregations that had been formed in the absence of clergy by non-Indigenous laypersons in the 1990s or the early 2000s were woefully ignorant of Orthodox Christianity, because they grew up in Chukotka at a time when there was really no church at all:

... One could not go to the church next door to see how they did things. People would follow the magazine *Science and Religion (Nauka i Religiiia)* or their own ideas, and not what a priest (*batiushka*) explained to them. And, as a matter of fact, all kinds of priests came (to Chukotka). It gave rise to an interesting cocktail in people’s head. (*ibid.*)

Introducing changes to suit his purposes, Father Leonid shortened the church service, adding time for discussions and training before the liturgy and for “drinking tea and more discussions” after it. He recognized that some hierarchs might not see his services as completely Orthodox; but, he said, “actually, this is the only possible way; or at least I didn’t manage to think of anything else” (*ibid.*). Father Leonid justified his actions as follows:

It is not realistic to serve an All-night Vigil in such villages. All that can be done is prayer services and short requiems, the rest should be prayed in simple words... There is no use in missionary trips, baptisms and sermons if you just go away afterwards and leave everybody at a loss. (TSAPOK, 2010: 7)

In his missionary efforts, Father Leonid attempted to take advantage of the experience that villagers had already had with the Protestant missions that had been well-settled in the 1990s (VATÉ, 2009). “I think we should adopt the best of their organizational experience,” he wrote, “even more so if life itself is telling us this is the right thing to do” (ibid.: 8).

There was a congregation of Pentecostals in Enmelen, so almost all the people who started coming [to his Orthodox services]... had been to Protestant services at least once. Some had attended those for quite a long time. Our parishioners successfully borrowed some elements of Protestant worship. Women would read akathists and canons from the prayer book, the Bible, and Lives of Saints, and drank tea. They also prayed for different needs when they could find appropriate prayers in Slavonic, and when they could not find them, they used their own words. Every time I came, we would have a Liturgy; everyone would confess and take communion. (ibid.: 7–8)

Father Leonid’s testimony provides insight into the experiences of the first Orthodox missionaries of the post-Soviet era who came to an economically devastated region where Orthodoxy was not deeply rooted and where numerous Protestant denominations had already been established.

Bishop Diomid (Dziuban), Or: How the Small and Distant Eparchy of Anadyr and Chukotka Became the Centre of the Attention of the Russian Orthodox Church

After suffering during the economic crisis of the 1990s, people in Chukotka benefited from the arrival of billionaire Roman Abramovich, who served as governor from 2000 to 2008. During his term of office, Abramovich ushered in a dynamic new era marked by major investments resulting in the reconstruction of housing and the infrastructure, the opening of new shops, and the arrival of people from mainland Russia.¹⁰ In the course of the 2000s, the Orthodox Church established itself progressively in the region, despite all difficulties mentioned previously. In 2000, the new Eparchy of Anadyr and Chukotka became independent from the Magadan Eparchy, to which it had previously belonged. But the main challenge at that time came from within, namely from Diomid, the first bishop of Anadyr and Chukotka, who confronted the Orthodox Church with another layer of problems.

10. Abramovich is said to have spent about 2,5 billion dollars of his own fortune in the region (JENSEN, 2013).

Bishop Diomid was born as Sergei Ivanovich Dziuban in Ukraine in 1961. In 1986, he entered the Russian Orthodox seminary in Moscow and was tonsured as a monk in 1987. Subsequently, he continued to rise in the church hierarchy until he was named Bishop of Anadyr and Chukotka in 2000 (“Episkop Anadyskii...,” n.d.).

Under Bishop Diomid, the Church initiated the extensive construction of Orthodox buildings and monuments in the eparchy. At the beginning of the 2000s, the only Orthodox church in Chukotka was the little one mentioned above, located on the outskirts of the capital city. In other places, members of the first Orthodox communities would gather in private flats, in the local House of Culture, or a museum. Three projects marked the beginning of the construction of Orthodox buildings: a monumental cross on a hill overlooking the city of Anadyr, built in 2003; a statue of St. Nicholas the Miracle-Worker in the centre of Anadyr, built in 2004; and the Cathedral of the Holy Trinity Source of Life, also in Anadyr, built in 2005. The cathedral has the reputation of being the largest wooden Orthodox church built on permafrost that is still in use; while the statue of St. Nicholas, which is twenty-five metres high, is said to be one of the largest monuments of its kind.

After 2005, intensive construction and renovation spread to other parts of the huge territory of Chukotka. When it was not possible to build a new church, existing buildings, such as shops or military barracks that had been abandoned in the 1990s, were transformed into churches, as in the towns of Ugol’ nye Kopi and in Lavrentiya. As previously noted, new Orthodox churches were built all over Russia during this same period. Nevertheless, it is important to remember that building in Chukotka is much more costly than it is in central or southern Russia or even in those parts of the Russian Arctic that are closer to Moscow or Saint-Petersburg and which, consequently, are more accessible logistically. If one considers that building materials can be transported by boat to Chukotka only during summer months and can be relayed inland only by airplane or all-terrain vehicles; and if one considers that salaries are usually three times higher in Chukotka than they are on the Russian mainland; then one may understand why the expense of building a single church there is very high, when compared with expenses in other parts of Russia.

In promoting the reconstruction of Chukotka, Governor Abramovich is known to have dipped into his private fortune, and he seems to have contributed to the Orthodox cause as well. According to reports, the billionaire may have funded the construction of the Cathedral of the Holy Trinity Source of Life in Anadyr in full (“Chukotskii gubernator shchitaet...,” 2006, and FILATOV, 2006). The Church also benefitted from contributions made by the regional administration, private businesses and ordinary citizens.



Figure 1. Statue of St. Nicholas the Miracle-Worker, Anadyr (October 2004).

Credit: Virginie Vaté



Figure 2. Cathedral of the Holy Trinity Source of Life while under construction, Anadyr (October 2004).

Credit: Virginie Vaté

All of this occurred under Bishop Diomid's mandate. However, in 2007, he began, in very harsh terms, to criticize publicly the Russian Orthodox Patriarch, Aleksii II, and the Metropolitan, Kirill (who succeeded Aleksii as patriarch in 2009). Diomid accused them (and others) of nothing less than heresy, in particular of oecumenism. At issue was their signature in 2007 of the act of canonical communion between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia, which had declared its independence in the early 1920s in the wake of the Russian Revolution (RICHTERS, 2013: 3). Diomid also condemned Aleksii II for having prayed with Roman Catholics in Notre Dame Cathedral during his visit to Paris in 2007 and for having venerated the Crown of Thorns there. In response to Diomid's attack on the Patriarch and the Metropolitan, the Holy Synod ordered him to desist, threatening to defrock him for provoking a schism. Diomid chose instead to escalate the conflict, casting an anathema on Patriarch Aleksii II and Metropolitan Kirill—an act that even the Patriarch cannot decide unilaterally, according to Russian Orthodox canonical law. In an ostentatious display of disrespect, Diomid also stopped mentioning the name of the Patriarch during the liturgy in his eparchy. Because of this, the Holy Synod defrocked Diomid in 2008, reducing him to the status of a monk until the end of his life. For his part, Diomid remained defiant and continued to exert his influence on followers all over Russia, some of whom still occupied positions of authority in the Russian Orthodox Church. Then, however, in 2021, Diomid died in a car accident, becoming thereafter the subject of conspiracy theories among some of his followers (BOCHKOV, 2020; SOLDATOV, 2021).

The role that the first Bishop of Anadyr and Chukotka played in establishing Orthodoxy in the region was ambivalent, to say the least. On the one hand, he contributed to the rise of the Orthodox Church in the region, directing an active campaign of construction and also gathering and converting parishioners. On the other hand, he created a divergent and non-canonical branch of the Orthodox Church, which he called the Russian Orthodox Church – Most Holy Governing Synod (*Russkaia Pravoslavnaia Tserkov' – Sviateishii Pravitel'stvuiushchii Sinod*¹¹). In 2018, this non-canonical branch still had followers inside and outside of Chukotka, and it may still have followers today.

While in Chukotka in 2018, I was told that there were still about thirty followers of Diomid who met in a flat in Anadyr. In one village (*posëlok*) with a population of 750, an Orthodox priest, who was recounting the various challenges that he faced in his parish, mentioned the existence of a group of Diomid's followers (*Diomidovtsy*), numbering, in his estimate, fifteen to twenty-five, a group about the size of his parish.

11. This is precisely what Peter the Great called the synod that he created to replace the Patriarchate, which he abolished in 1721. I thank Detelina Tocheva to have drawn my attention on this.

Some people told me that they had become Orthodox because of Diomid and that they felt lost when he left. Their enthusiasm seemed to be based on their experience with him as a person and to have little, if anything, to do with his conflict with the Patriarch. One disciple told me the following:

Diomid was removed because he was against the other schism, that from abroad that came back to us, the Old Believers.¹² That was his position. But he was really a good person. Very smart. He really provided warmth. After him, nobody provided such warmth. Such benevolence, coming from deep inside. Everything was from the heart. A lot of people stopped going [to the Orthodox Church]. Not only us [Chukchi], Russians too. And they go to Pavel's [the flat of a follower of Diomid].¹³

Diomidovtsy in Chukotka seem to remain marginal, in comparison to the new and intense visibility of the Russian Orthodox Church; but insidiously, their very existence still challenged the efforts of the local clergy in 2018.

The Life of the Orthodox Church in Chukotka at the End of the 2010s

From 2008, when Diomid was discharged, to 2018, four bishops held office in Anadyr. This rather quick rate of turnover may reflect the difficulty of establishing the church in the region. Nevertheless, the program of constructing and renovating church buildings continued. When I interviewed Archbishop Matfei (Kopylov), who served in Anadyr from 2016 to 2018, he stated emphatically that he was sent to Chukotka because of his experience in supervising the construction of church building while previously serving in Kamchatka. This continuing effort to construct the church's architectural basis is, however, only one of the current strategies for enhancing the presence of Orthodoxy in Chukotka. Other important strategies include enhancing the attractiveness of church services and organizing cultural events in the public sphere. But despite extreme efforts of members of the clergy onsite results remain ambiguous.

Building a presence beyond construction: The multiple activities of the Orthodox Church in Chukotka in the 2010s

Were it not for his religious vestments, Archbishop Matfei might be taken for a businessman prone to vaunting the performance of the company under his management. This, at least, was my first impression of him during our exchange

12. As explained above, Diomid's objections pertained not to Old Believers but to reunification with the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia, which he opposed.

13. The name has been changed to protect the anonymity of the people involved.

in April 2018. Indeed, as I could see, the Eparchy of Anadyr and Chukotka was abuzz with intense and varied activity.

In 2018, when I was in Anadyr, a city of circa 12,000 inhabitants, the Cathedral of the Holy Trinity Source of Life held religious services daily, and sometimes twice a day. Several new developments bore witness to recent investments serving to promote the activities of the Church. In 2012, on Lenin Street, next to the cathedral, the eparchy had commissioned the construction of an administrative building, which also included a residence for the bishop and for some members of the clergy. Then, in 2017, the eparchy had launched a new website, hiring full-time a professional photographer to supply it regularly with new pictures and information.¹⁴ Under Archbishop Matfei, the cathedral, which had been built ten years earlier, was renovated and fitted out with a high-quality lighting and sound system. The choir was composed of professional singers from mainland Russia, who were regularly shifted after fulfilling the terms of short-term contracts and benefiting from augmented salaries.



Figure 3. The Cathedral of the Holy Trinity Source of Life after its renovation, Anadyr (April 2018).

Credit: Virginie Vaté

14. See the website *Moskovskii Patriarkhat. Anadyrskaia i Chukotskaia Eparkhiia* (Moscow Patriarchate. Eparchy of Anadyr and Chukotka). URL: <https://pravchukotka.ru/> (accessed June 12, 2024).

The design of the church shop (*lavka*) located in the cathedral was also improved, as Archbishop Matfei explained:

We have a relatively modern equipment, and the selection we offer [in the shop] is interesting. We have approached things professionally, and we are constantly renewing the supply in order to offer the latest Orthodox publications, icons, and candles. (Interview with Archbishop Matfei, April 6, 2018)

This intense activity of the church contributed to saturating local cultural life with Orthodox themes and practices. In Anadyr today, the Russian Orthodox Church plays a role similar to that of the Soviet and post-Soviet House of Culture. As Archbishop Matfei told me, the Church worked—and, no doubt, still works—hand in hand with the regional Department of Education, Culture, and Sports. During my fieldwork in 2018, church officials were organizing cultural events, such as exhibitions on Russia’s history¹⁵ that were aimed at “restoring a view of history that [they believed] was distorted during the Soviet period.” These exhibitions travelled with members of the clergy to some of the capitals of the districts. Other events organized by the Church included concerts, film viewings followed by discussions with the filmmaker, and lectures by historians. For projects such as these, the eparchy received funding from the government (*pravitel’stvennyi grant*). In a context where cultural institutions are rather rare, the diverse activities offered by the Church have the potential to attract and influence a great number of people.

In my encounters with the archbishop and with other members of the clergy, my interlocutors emphasized three important goals of the Church: to take action against drug consumption (*anti-narkoticheskaia rabota*), against alcohol abuse (*anti-al’kogol’naia rabota*), and “against sects” (*anti-sektantskaia rabota*)—the last of which means attempting to prevent the spread of Protestantism. This is reminiscent of the historian Anne White’s analysis of the intentions underlying the project of “cultural enlightenment” in the Soviet Union. The house of culture, she writes, had a “preventative and supervisory role... intended to ward off social problems” and to “guide people into officially accepted leisure pursuits, prevent the formation of alternative or counter-cultures and contribute to the elimination of social evils such as crime, drunkenness, and drug addiction” (WHITE, 1990: 1–3). Paraphrasing official Soviet policy, White writes that “the party can and must control the nature of the culture” (*ibid.*: 1). Today, the same might be said of the Russian Orthodox Church, at least in Chukotka. The commitment of church officials to the promotion of “cultural enlightenment” provides a clear illustration of the “ethical continuity” from Soviet to post-Soviet times, described by Tocheva (2014) and documented in a number of other studies (AGADJANIAN,

15. One of the Church’s exhibitions on Russian history, called “The Twentieth Century: The lessons of a hundred years,” was devoted to the revolution of 1917 and its consequences. See “V Bilibino proshla istoricheskaia vystavka ‘XX vek: Uroki stoletii,’” 2018.

2011; KORMINA and SHTYRKOV, 2011; ROUSSELET, 2013). The most recent example is the Centre for Spiritual Enlightenment (*dukhovno-prosvetitel'skii tsentr*), which was built by the Russian Orthodox Church in the heart of Anadyr and opened to the public in October 2023.

During my fieldwork in 2018, the Orthodox Church was also establishing its presence in other sectors of public life. Members of the Orthodox clergy regularly visited hospitals, schools, government offices, and police and fire stations in accordance with both the civil and the liturgical calendar. For instance, they took part in all work-related celebrations, remnants of the Soviet period, such as the Day of the Fire Fighters. In particular, they attended all celebrations linked to military activities, such as the Day of the Protectors of the Fatherland (*den' zashchitnika otechestva*) and the Day of Victory (*Den' Pobedy*) – May 9, commemorating the end of the Second World War in Europe. As in all of Russia, the Orthodox clergy of Chukotka lays special emphasis on everything linked to Russian patriotism. They even bless military equipment. The Orthodox Church also has a highly visible area at the airport with icons, a candelabrum, and pens and paper for those who want to write down prayers.



Figure 4. At Anadyr airport (2018).

Credit: Virginie Vaté

Challenges to Maintaining the Orthodox Church at the Margins of Russia

In the 2010s, the Church was active in implanting itself more concretely in the Chukotkan social and physical landscape. Nonetheless, the Church struggled with two major difficulties: recruiting priests and establishing a stable community of parishioners.

Problems with Staffing the Eparchy

For the churches that have been constructed or renovated in Chukotka in the post-Soviet era, and for the activities reviewed in the preceding section, the bishop of the Eparchy of Anadyr and Chukotka currently relies (according to the eparchy's website) on a staff of eight priests. In April 2018, Archbishop Matfei mentioned eleven priests and a deacon, in addition to which I counted a nun, someone who wanted to become a nun (*poslushnitsa*), a helper at the eparchy (*trudnik*), and about three or four young volunteers—not all of whom were members of the permanent staff. This situation reflects the eparchy's difficulty in recruiting clergymen and women willing to come to Chukotka.

Attracting workers is an issue in all sectors of the regional economy. This is why, as a general principle, people in Chukotka receive the highest level of “hardship pay.”¹⁶ While salaries are higher than those in Western and Southern Russia, prices in Chukotka are also the highest in Russia since most foodstuffs and nearly all manufactured goods are imported. Members of the clergy, however, feel that they are underpaid, and, in my conversations with them, their salaries and the difficulties of life in Chukotka came up several times.¹⁷

Not every priest can serve here. Many leave the region... To live normally... a priest should earn 200,000 roubles a month¹⁸ to support his family.

A priest receives 40,000 roubles¹⁹ as much as a cleaning lady. And a volunteer gets 10,000.²⁰

Indeed, the Eparchy of Anadyr and Chukotka cannot afford to pay members of the clergy sufficiently. The church does help the wife of each priest to find a job, as her salary usually constitutes an important contribution to the household income. And clergymen in Chukotka receive at least some special benefits: under Archbishop Matfei, they and their families became entitled to one trip to mainland Russia per year, paid by the eparchy. Usually, people working in

16. This includes *severnnye nadbavki* (northern allowances) and *raionnyj koeffitsient* (district coefficient) that are added to paychecks.

17. With the exception of the archbishop, clergy members are not mentioned by name or function.

18. At the 2018 exchange rate, the equivalent of about 2,860 euros.

19. At the 2018 exchange rate, the equivalent of about 570 euros.

20. At the 2018 exchange rate, the equivalent of under 150 euros.

other sectors in Chukotka are entitled to funding for such a trip once every two years.

In most Russian localities, the priest is paid by the parish²¹; but, given the continuing difficulties in establishing parishes in Chukotka, which I review presently, this source of funding is largely unavailable. In fact, the Eparchy of Anadyr and Chukotka has the status of a mission (*missionerskaia*), which means that it relies on support (*dotatsionnaia*) from the Russian Orthodox Church. However, such funding seems to be more readily available for building churches and organizing events than for paying adequate salaries for the clergy.

To continue functioning, the Eparchy of Anadyr and Chukotka must rely on volunteers, who come to work there for a fixed period, and on priests with short-term contracts, who come to support the clergy with permanent contracts. Many of the volunteers are young priests or monks who come to the region after completing their studies at the seminary. This is now a rule, introduced by the Patriarch Kirill: a newly trained priest should serve two years in those parts of Russia that the Church has categorized as missions. Not all priests are happy to be sent to Chukotka. During my fieldwork, my interlocutors in the church spoke repeatedly about being exhausted, both physically and morally. Being unaccustomed to the harsh climate, to the winter darkness, to the local food, and to working overtime because of understaffing, several members of the clergy, even relatively young ones, complained of health problems.

In short, the Orthodox Church is able to maintain only a minimal number of clergymen in the region, both in Anadyr and in some district hubs across Chukotka. As a result, not all Orthodox buildings have an officiant, and some of the buildings that were built over the last two decades probably remain largely unused. Like the region as a whole, the eparchy is led continually to manage the shortage of manpower and to operate thanks to a permanent movement of personnel—a feature that is not exclusive to the church.

An Equivocal Engagement of Chukotkans with the Russian Orthodox Church

There is no doubt that the activities of the Orthodox Church in Chukotka have made people more familiar with the institution and its values. However, the eparchy struggles with stabilizing a community of parishioners. While statistics regarding church attendance may be of limited value in evaluating the situation of Orthodoxy in Russia today (TOCHEVA, 2017), they remain an important indicator for local clergymen. Bishop Matfei explained that, in the year preceding our interview, he saw a significant rise in church attendance, which he attributed to the efforts of his team to improve the material conditions of the service. But, outside of Anadyr, church attendance was still low, according to members of the

21. For a discussion on the organization of Orthodox parishes in Russia, see TOCHEVA, 2017.

clergy, especially in parishes where there was no priest or where the turnover rate was high and each new priest had to try to revive his congregation. Even in Anadyr, some members of the clergy raised questions about the actual rise in the number of active parishioners. It remains difficult to ascertain the number of people that the Orthodox Church manages to touch.

To evaluate church attendance in Chukotka one must take two specificities of the population into consideration. First, about 30% of the population is Indigenous; and, in villages, Indigenous people are more numerous than non-Indigenous. Second, non-Indigenous residents—including, especially, Russian citizens from other regions—usually come to Chukotka only temporarily. Different actors develop various relations to Orthodoxy, which, of course, affects church attendance, as I show in the following paragraphs.

Indigenous People and Orthodoxy

In the 1990s, when some Indigenous people of Chukotka started to convert to Christianity, they usually turned to one of the Protestant denominations that had just been introduced to the region. However, in the course of the 2000s, Indigenous people became more familiar with the Orthodox Church. During fieldwork in 2006, I could observe that some of my Chukchi friends had started to buy *kulich*, traditional Easter cake, and coloured Easter eggs—things that were not available during my previous visits to the region. Such practices may express changes in consumption rather than faith; nevertheless, it was evident that Orthodoxy had begun to have an impact on people's lives, even if only in small or subtle ways.

Orthodoxy tends to be more successful in establishing itself among members of the urban Indigenous intelligentsia. In contrast to Protestantism, which has spread in rural communities (VATÉ, 2009), Orthodoxy is perceived to be “Russian,” which means that becoming Orthodox may be interpreted as a way of finding one's place in Russian society. Hence, one of my friends explained to me that her son was not a “good Chukchi” because he did not speak the language and “he had never seen a live reindeer.” Therefore, she wanted him to receive an Orthodox baptism so that, at least, he could be a “good Russian.” Like conversion to Protestantism, conversion to Orthodoxy is often viewed as a way of coping with acute social problems such as alcoholism. Conversion to Christianity sometimes occurs when the person in question makes a trip to Anadyr or to mainland Russia for health reasons. However, being widely criticized in the public sphere, Evangelical Christianity tends to marginalize converts in the wider society, whereas becoming Orthodox today may be a way of achieving at least a degree of social integration in a Russian-dominated environment.

While attendance of Orthodox church services is low among Indigenous people, overreliance on this indicator may be misleading. Indigenous converts often develop their own way of being Orthodox. For instance, they tend to avoid

the crowd in the church, preferring to be undisturbed while praying and revering the icons. Be that as it may, in 2018, after visiting two well-attended Protestant churches where I had done fieldwork in the past, I could not help but conclude that the Orthodox Church in Chukotka lags far behind Protestant denominations in terms of native participation.

An Unstable Community of Non-Indigenous Parishioners

In general, non-Indigenous people settle only temporarily in the region. They come to take advantage of business opportunities, or the augmented hardship pay that allows them to earn well and eventually to buy property in the Russian mainland. How long this temporary residence in Chukotka lasts depends on family histories: it may range from just a few years to twenty years or more. The people in question may also belong to various social strata, from plumbers to successful entrepreneurs. But they all know that, one day, they are going to leave. This has consequences for the life of the Orthodox Church in Chukotka, as explained by a local priest:

People come to Chukotka to earn money. They have two or three jobs... in order to be able to buy a flat in mainland Russia. That's why they won't always come [to church].... There is no population that lives here permanently. People arrive, earn money, and leave, and it goes on like this endlessly. In mainland Russia, one can establish a parish; people live there. But here it is difficult... [Here] you just see someone in the church, you just teach the person to live with God, and, there you go, he or she leaves.

This point was also made clearly by Father Leonid in his statements regarding his time as a priest in Chukotka in the early years of the current millennium:

Every five years the parish renews itself by half. That is, parishioners who are already in the church (*votserkovlennye*), into whom you put effort, part of your soul, those who go to church and are engaged in the church and who are ready to work fruitfully and who actively start to help you—they leave. And then, new people come, and everything starts all over again.

Father Leonid mentioned a related phenomenon:

In Chukotka there are almost no Russian pensioners.... Someone who has worked all his or her life in Chukotka, he or she leaves for the Russian mainland.... That is why people are not ready to put their soul in the [parish] church.... Many of them make donations to a church in the Russian mainland, where they have bought a place for their retirement, but not in Chukotka.

We see, then, that, in Chukotka, the demand for the Orthodox Church is generally low among both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. Nevertheless, the Church has invested a tremendous amount of money and energy in the region. Evidently, choices have been made at a certain level in the Russian Orthodox

hierarchy that favour the construction of buildings and the staging of cultural events over the sufficient remuneration of the clergy. Why is marking the land in Chukotka such an issue?

“Where Russia Begins”: Orthodoxy as a Way to Mark the Territory at its Border

The political scientist Alicja Curanović (2019: 204–205) has shown that both the Russian State and the Russian Orthodox Church turned their attention to the Arctic regions of Russia, starting in the 2010s, with the conviction that the Arctic would play a key role in efforts to strengthen Russia’s position internationally. In this light, the huge investment made by the State and the Church to saturate the physical and cultural landscape of Chukotka with Orthodox buildings and events serves not just to promote a religious mission but also to create and mark a Russian territory in the part of the Russian Arctic that borders the United States most closely.

In the 1990s, military bases in Chukotka were gradually abandoned. Departing soldiers left behind them a ghostly landscape characterized by empty buildings and a decaying infrastructure. Even the formerly secret base of Gudym, containing until 1986 nuclear missiles pointed in the direction of American military bases near Seattle, was progressively demilitarized and finally closed in the beginning of the 2000s. But, in the 2010s, this policy was reversed. Since then, new bases have been established, and the active remilitarization of Chukotka continues until today (BERMUDEZ, CONLEY and MELINO, 2020). In this sense, it is not the Russian Orthodox Church alone that has had a renewed interest in the region over the last fifteen years.

The reestablishment of military bases is not specific to Chukotka but pertains especially to the entire Russian Arctic coastline. Nevertheless, this particular part of the Russian Far North has received special attention. New military bases are being spread along the coast, in Pevek, on Wrangel Island, on Cape Schmidt, in Provideniya, in Anadyr, and in nearby Ugolny (BUSCH, 2017). This attests to Russia’s effort to enforce its supremacy over its coastlines and maritime spaces in the context of global competition.

Curanović (2019: 204) argues convincingly that Russia’s “Arctic policy is a tool of status signalling not only for the Kremlin but also for the ROC,” i.e., the Russian Orthodox Church. By way of illustration, she describes the project called *Russkaia Arktika* (Russian Arctic), developed by the Moscow Patriarchate, beginning in 2010, with the explicit goal “to strengthen Russian civilisational sovereignty in the region” (CURANOVIĆ, 2019: 204). Curanović also clearly links the installation of chapels in northern regions to the delimitation of the Arctic border. Even beyond the border, the Church engages in “spectacular acts of symbolic meaning” such as “baptising the North Pole” (2012) and the Northern Sea Route (2013) (CURANOVIĆ, 2019: 204; JONES and PARFITT, 2012). As Patriarch

Kirill himself declared in 2014, “the development of the Arctic is one of Russia’s highest priorities” (“Patriarkh Kirill shchitaet...,” 2014). This declaration was followed by a cycle of visits to several regions of Siberia and the Far North, including Chukotka.

On September 6, 2016, Kirill, the first Russian Patriarch ever to visit Chukotka, arrived in Pevek, “the northernmost town of Russia” (“Sviateishii Patriarkh Kirill...,” 2016). He travelled to various recently built churches in the region and to sites where churches would be built in the future, giving them his blessing. He also met with “non-baptized Chukchi reindeer herders” (“Patriarkh Kirill posetil...,” 2016) in the Kanchalan tundra and continued his tour by visiting several towns on the coast. Most remarkably, he flew to the island of Ratmanov, which is located in the middle of the Bering Strait separating Asia from North America and which is now uninhabited except for military and security forces. Also known as Big Diomedé, Ratmanov is four kilometres away from the island of Little Diomedé, which belongs to the United States. On Ratmanov, at the foot of a monumental cross facing the US border, Patriarch Kirill pronounced a *moleben*, a prayer of supplication, symbolically marking the limit of the territory (“Sostoialas’ vstrecha...,” 2016). Chukotka is, he declared, the place where “the fatherland begins” (*ibid.*).

Conclusion

In Chukotka, the Russian Orthodox Church has evidently pursued goals that are simultaneously missionary and political. By weighing together the costs that the Church has absorbed in implanting itself in Chukotka, the limited degree of success that it has had in attracting parishioners, and the strategic significance of the region for both the Church and the Russian State, I have tried to show that the political goal is of paramount importance.

Sociologist of religion Danièle Hervieu-Léger (2002) identifies the “geopolitics of the religious” as one of the three “registers” of “religious territoriality.” She understands the “geopolitics of the religious” as the way in which “concrete forms of ‘pastorizing’ are implemented in territories gained (or remaining to be gained)” (HERVIEU-LÉGER, 2002: 99). In the case of Chukotka, this “pastorizing” expresses itself predominantly in marking the land through the construction of Orthodox buildings, but also in organizing cultural events. We have also seen that Patriarch Kirill gave a particularly demonstrative service on Ratmanov Island, facing the US. In what Hervieu-Léger describes as “the model of parish civilization” (referring, in her discussion, to Catholicism), “gain[ing] a hold over territory... anticipates the eschatological achievement of the Kingdom of Heaven” (HERVIEU-LÉGER, 2002: 101). In the Chukotkan case, the “gain” consists less in spreading eschatological conceptions than in expressing national ownership over

the region. Orthodoxy's presence is meant to be a sign of Russianness, not in the sense of being ethnic Russian (*russkii*) but of belonging to the Russian State (*rossiiskoe gosudarstvo*).

Rather than being directly inherited from the Tsarist era, this close association between being Russian (*rossiiskii*) and the Russian Orthodox Church, understood less in the sense of religious engagement than of national belonging, results from the heritagization of architecture, both secular and sacred, that emerged during the Soviet period. According to historian Victoria Donovan (2019: 3), “the Soviet State exploited the architectural heritage of the Russian Northwest, and specifically the towns of Novgorod, Pskov, and Vologda, to craft visions of Russified Sovietness that could stimulate popular patriotic consciousness.” In a similar way, Russian nationhood in Chukotka finds expression in Orthodox buildings, whose architecture reflects the influence of the architectural style of the historical Russian Northwest. In this sense, building Orthodox monuments in Chukotka not only marks the land in the present but also creates an architectural legacy that stems from the nation's past and extends into its future. It fabricates an Orthodox heritage that from now on becomes part of Chukotka's history, a heritage required by the political and religious authorities who affirm that this land, on the border, is indeed *Russian* and *Orthodox*.

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The Construction of Russian Orthodoxy in Chukotka: Ministering to the People and Marking the Territory in an Arctic Border Zone

Over the last two decades, the Russian Orthodox Church has commissioned the construction of churches and other religious monuments throughout Russia, marking the land as Orthodox. Chukotka, a region located at the extreme northeast of the country, is no exception to this general rule. Still, the extent of the construction and of other activities sponsored by the Orthodox Church in Chukotka is remarkable for a number of reasons, including the specificities of the colonial history of the region, its remoteness, sparse population, and fierce climatic conditions, and its proximity to the United States. Based on fieldwork in 2018 and on long-term experience in Chukotka since 1993, this article documents the socio-historical, ethnographic, and geopolitical aspects of the presence of the Russian Orthodox Church in the region, focusing on the specific challenges encountered there by agents of the church. In Chukotka, the Russian Orthodox Church pursues goals that are simultaneously missionary and political. However, given the combination of difficulties that limit the church's impact locally, its commitment to establishing its presence in Chukotka is best understood in terms of the strategic importance of the region.

Keywords: Russian Orthodox Church, geopolitics of religion, Chukotka, Chukchi, Indigenous people, Russia

La construction de l'orthodoxie russe en Chukotka : exercer un ministère auprès de la population et marquer le territoire dans une zone frontalière arctique

Au cours des deux dernières décennies, l'Église orthodoxe russe a promu la construction d'églises et d'autres monuments religieux dans toute la Russie, marquant ainsi le territoire comme orthodoxe. La Tchoukotka, région située à l'extrême nord-est du pays, ne fait pas exception. Cependant, l'effort de construction et d'implantation de l'Église orthodoxe en Tchoukotka est remarquable pour un certain nombre de raisons, qui incluent : l'histoire coloniale de la région, son éloignement de la capitale, sa faible densité de population et ses conditions climatiques extrêmes, ainsi que sa proximité avec les États-Unis. Basé sur des recherches de terrain effectuées en 2018 et sur une expérience de long terme en Tchoukotka depuis 1993, cet article analyse les aspects socio-historiques, ethnographiques et géopolitiques de la présence de l'Église orthodoxe russe dans la région, en se concentrant sur les difficultés spécifiques rencontrées par les autorités ecclésiastiques dans cette région. En Tchoukotka, l'implantation de l'Église orthodoxe s'inscrit dans une démarche à la fois missionnaire et politique. Toutefois, compte tenu de la combinaison des difficultés qui limitent l'impact de l'Église au niveau local, son engagement à établir sa présence en Tchoukotka se comprend mieux en termes d'importance stratégique de la région.

Mots clés : église orthodoxe russe, géopolitique du religieux, Tchoukotka, Tchoukhtches, peuples autochtones, Russie

La construcción de la ortodoxia rusa en Chukotka: servir a la población y marcar el territorio en una zona fronteriza ártica

En las dos últimas décadas, la Iglesia Ortodoxa Rusa ha promovido la construcción de iglesias y otros monumentos religiosos por toda Rusia, marcando el territorio como ortodoxo. Chukotka, en el extremo nororiental del país, no es una excepción. Sin embargo, el esfuerzo por construir y establecer la Iglesia Ortodoxa en Chukotka es notable por varias razones, como la historia colonial de la región, su lejanía de la capital, su baja densidad de población y sus condiciones climáticas extremas, así como su proximidad a Estados Unidos. Basándose en la investigación de campo realizada en 2018 y en la experiencia a largo plazo en Chukotka desde 1993, este artículo analiza los aspectos sociohistóricos, etnográficos y geopolíticos de la presencia de la Iglesia Ortodoxa Rusa en la región, centrándose en las dificultades específicas a las que se enfrentan las autoridades eclesiásticas allí. El establecimiento de la Iglesia Ortodoxa en Chukotka formó parte de un proceso tanto misionero como político. Sin embargo, dada la combinación de dificultades que limitan el impacto de la Iglesia a nivel local, su compromiso de establecer una presencia en Chukotka se entiende mejor en términos de la importancia estratégica de la región.

Palabras clave: iglesia Ortodoxa Rusa, geopolítica de las religiones, Chukotka, Chukchi, pueblos indígenas, Rusia

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Sharing and Conquering

Memory, Religion, and Belonging on the Island of Valaam

Introduction

Valaam, an archipelago in Lake Ladoga near the Finnish-Russian border, is home to one of Russia's most famous Orthodox shrines, the Transfiguration monastery. Having become by the end of the nineteenth century an important geopolitical center of the Russian Empire on the north-western frontier (PARPPEI, 2011), today Valaam is one of the most popular destinations for religious and secular pilgrims and travelers, as well as a conventional stage for informal political negotiations. The patriarch and the president have residences on Valaam, and meetings of high-ranking officials and businessmen take place there quite regularly. In this paper, I discuss Valaam as a historical palimpsest, with a diversity of actors, conflicting powers, and blurred boundaries between the secular and the religious, and turn to an analysis of the space as a site of memory, sustained in the memories of those who lived there in the late Soviet era.

Part of Finland from 1917 to 1940, the archipelago was ceded to the USSR after the Winter War (1939–1940) and remained entirely secular until the early 1990s. The Invalids' Home (*dom invalidov*) (DALE, 2013), which served as the main institution on the island, gave way to the Historical and Nature Reserve in the late 1970s. With the onset of perestroika and the liberalization of church life in the USSR at the turn of the 1980s and 1990s, the Transfiguration monastery was allowed to return to the island, gradually replacing all secular institutions.

My first visit to the island was in 2016, although I have been doing fieldwork not far from Valaam—in the mainland part of the Ladoga region—since 2012, exploring the ways in which today's inhabitants of what was once Finnish Karelia have come to terms with the local past. In my research, Valaam kept slipping away. People didn't talk about it and seemed never to have been there. I had the feeling that the archipelago was not separated from the mainland by 20 km of Ladoga water, but by thick walls that made it an isolated, inaccessible space.

Unlike the locals, the federal and regional media often talked about Valaam, referring to the Russian Orthodox Church's scandalous policy of developing the island by evicting the local population, establishing profitable businesses on the archipelago and destroying cultural heritage. A celebrated Orthodox pilgrimage site and the target of huge federal investment, Valaam has been the subject of much media attention.

It was as if Valaam existed in different realities that never intersected: as an isolated and uninteresting territory for the inhabitants of local Ladoga neighborhoods, as the rich household of the present Orthodox monastery, and as a lost home for those who had to leave it after the monastery's revival. In this article, I ask how these different realities coexist, intersect, and are negotiated. By introducing the notion of "phantom memory space," I address the issue of "sharing," widely discussed in relation to sacred sites, and extend it to the field of memory, which, along with the geographical landscape, is a subject of competition and significant boundary work. This article contributes to the debate on the expansion of religious landscapes into hitherto secular territories, sites, and identities, and offers a more sensitive approach to analyzing the development and consequences of these processes.

I begin by situating my approach within a broader range of studies related to "sharing," "commonality," "co-existence," and "co-action." After setting the scene and discussing my methods, I turn to the biographies of the former residents of Valaam, discussing their social position and role in relation to the locality and social relations enacted within it. In the next section, I discuss the religious-secular boundary as both an interpretive tool and a mechanism of social distinction. In the final section, I address Valaam's phantom space as a powerful site of memory for the former local intelligentsia, who have carefully preserved it until today.

Sharing and Conquering

Sharing, contesting, and co-acting as related to particular spaces and localities have become useful analytical tools in different fields. In the anthropology of religion, a powerful impetus for the study of shared shrines came from Robert M. Hayden's article "Antagonistic Tolerance: Competitive Sharing of Religious Sites in South Asia and the Balkans" (HAYDEN, 2002). The study, which provoked both intense criticism (ALBERA and COUROUCL, 2012; BOWMAN, 2012) and wide support (HAYDEN et al., 2016), resulted in a flurry of research aimed at either challenging or developing the "antagonistic" approach. Hayden claimed that the coexistence of different religious groups in the same sacred place is always associated with a degree of antagonism, either passive or active, with violence being its most extreme form. The rivalry between different groups for the right to be present in a sacred place is always associated, according to Hayden, with

a struggle for domination and the establishment of political hegemony. The anti-religious policy of the Soviet Union in this paradigm is interpreted quite straightforwardly—as a form of “desanctification” and appropriation of the *sacra* by the state. In turn, the history of post-Soviet postsecularism appears as a history of ecclesiastical revanchism—the takeover of sacred space by the Orthodox Church, which acted as a direct agent of the new Russian state (HAYDEN et al., 2016: 146).

The oversimplification and politicization evident in Hayden’s approach has been repeatedly criticized, with his tendency to simplistically define the religious and the secular, to essentialize boundaries, and to reduce the complex picture of interaction in sacred places to a trivial power struggle between groups that are usually too difficult to identify.

The body of research that has emerged in response to Hayden’s statements is wide ranging, but most of the work deals in one way or another with religious co-participation, syncretism, or conflict in relation to different objects incorporated into diverse religious systems, institutions, and practices. Sharing is treated through the problem of sharing *sacra*, which Glenn Bowman defines using the term in its Latin meaning as “all transactions related to worshipping the gods, in particular prayers and sacrifices” and that “relates to a range of sites and activities, including ancestral altars, holy places (shrines, synagogues, churches, and mosques), funerals, religious processions, and festivals (even those which ‘secularize’ the sacred)” (BOWMAN, 2012: 8).

In their anthropological study of cathedrals, Simon Coleman and Marion Bowman approached cathedrals as shared sacred places while extending their theoretical claims to broader forms of co-habitation (COLEMAN and BOWMAN, 2019). Drawing on a discussion in Judith Muskett (MUSKETT, 2016), they used the idiom of “sacred space and common ground” to describe a situation of intersectionality “not only among different religious ideologies, but also between what are conventionally seen as sacred and secular domains in Euro-American contexts, and often beyond” (COLEMAN and BOWMAN, 2019: 3).

Secular/religious co-existence is also interpreted in terms of “secular sacred,” which, according to Markus Balkenhol et al., encompasses:

a person, object, image, representation or place in which secular and sacred ideas, feelings, emotions, motivations, experiences, perceptions, intertwine, conflate and conflict. We take the secular sacred to denote the intertwining processes of secularization and sacralization. This entanglement works both ways: sacred objects can take on new functions in secular imaginations, gazes and practices, thereby potentially losing or at least transforming their sacredness in the process. Inversely, secular practices and values can take on well-nigh sacred dimensions as they become the subject of worship or interdiction. (BALKENHOL et al., 2020: 5)

Jeanne Kormina and Sergey Shtyrkov used this term in relation to the late Soviet cultural heritage, which became a place for the co-habitation of religious and secular publics in the post-Soviet era (KORMINA, 2021; KORMINA and SHTYRKOV, 2015). Although the notion of “secular sacred” denotes some forms of sharing and conquering, it highlights a wide variety of interactions that resist being interpreted in either the “secular” or “sacred” categories constituting this new oxymoronic term.

In parallel, co-participation and interaction have been actively debated in other areas. Laurent Thévenot’s concept of “common places” (THÉVENOT, 2015) and Elinor Ostrom’s category of “urban commons” (OSTROM, 1990) address sharing and competition between various actors for something considered to be common. Both approaches have produced a rich harvest and a thicket of research literature, the branches of which barely overlap. Studies that rely on Thévenot’s sociology center on the idea of common good and collective action, the ways different people find (or don’t find) common language to behave collectively despite all the differences and divergences of opinion (THÉVENOT, 2015). Ostrom’s conception is grounded on the idea of common urban space belonging to no one and therefore belonging to all. Communitarity is also discussed in other cultural theories of collective action, related primarily to the problem of political agency and arenas where people “do politics” (ZHELNINA, 2020: 20–22).

Inspired by these diverse approaches to “sharing” as co-presence, co-existence, and co-participation, my research addresses the issue of “sharing” in relation to memory, focusing on how not only the contemporary landscape of a sacred site is shared, but also its past. I use Valaam as an example of a “phantom memory space,” a landscape that its former inhabitants are unable to share with its new owners in reality, but continue to share in their memories. Once an important site of memory and social imagery for the late Soviet intelligentsia, in the post-Soviet period it has become a powerful symbol of secular-religious conflicts, most well-known for the cases of Solovki and Saint Isaac’s Cathedral in Saint Petersburg (BURGESS, 2007; BOGUMIŁ et al., 2015; SHTORN and BUTEYKO, 2016; VORONINA and BOGUMIŁ, 2018; KORMINA, 2021; KRAIKOVSKI and LAJUS, 2021; DIANINA, 2021). But, as I will show below, the phantom pain of the lost archipelago is not grounded in a sacred-secular divide, but rather in a deep sense of loss and uprooting from a place closely tied to the status, authority, and social identity of its inhabitants. In the memories of its displaced inhabitants, Valaam appears as a shared site of coexistence, which it can no longer be in everyday life today. Drawing on their biographical narratives, I consider the local landscape as an important site of their imaginary, evoking the phantom pain of an unshared home.

Staging the Scene

In 2016, I arrived at Valaam with a group of tourists gathered in Sortavala, from where regular ferries leave for the archipelago during the summer season. The guide met our group at the pier and led us for several hours along the paths of Valaam, ending the tour at the Transfiguration cathedral. During the few hours of walking, I saw well-kept grounds, beautifully restored chapels and hermitages scattered through the forests of Valaam, clean level paths, and almost no people except for other groups of tourists walking around the island with their guides. Three years later, I was on the island again, but came as a “wild tourist,” independent of the sight and schedule of any guide (MELNIKOVA, 2021). This time the landscape of Valaam struck me even more—with its wildness, splendor, and desolation.



Figure 1. General view of Monastery Bay and Transfiguration Cathedral on Valaam.

Credit: Ekaterina Melnikova

The territory of the Valaam archipelago on which the Transfiguration monastery is situated today is 36 km², containing the central manor house with the main cathedral and other buildings, thirteen hermitages and twenty-one chapels located all over the archipelago, and an extensive infrastructure related to the economy of the monastic complex: a bakery, cowshed, and dairy farm, a fishery,

several gardens, stables, workshops, a freight and passenger fleet, hotels, refectories, and cafes. Several secular organizations have also survived on the islands, but their activities are now co-opted into the work of the monastery. The military unit, still stationed on the archipelago, hosts young recruits from the Valaam monastery. Fire and Rescue Unit no. 39 of the Russian Ministry of Emergency Situations is officially responsible for “the protection of the Religious Organization ‘Transfiguration Valaam Stavropegial Monastery of the Russian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate).’” The museum-reserve that once existed on the island has been transformed into the monastery museum in the Vladimirskiy hermitage.

The brotherhood of the monastery is about 200 people, but the number is flexible and heavily depends on a constant rotation of novices and monks. In the summer season, when shipping begins, the population of the island increases—volunteers come to work in the monastery, pilgrimage staff arrive to serve the tourists, and the tourists themselves make up around 200,000 visitors a year. But even in summer the archipelago looks deserted: tourists come for only a few hours mostly without overnight stays and move around the island as part of tourist and pilgrimage groups along strictly defined routes. Most people can be found at the central manor, where the main pilgrim hotels are located, and at the nearby tent camp, where summer youth groups usually stay. Remote parts of the island are difficult to access and hidden from view.

The territory of the archipelago is the territory of the monastery. It is possible to get there only by the ferry of the pilgrimage service.¹ Local hotels belong to the monastery, which also oversees the tent camps. Print-outs with prayers in the pier cafe remind visitors that they should pray before and after eating. The local store sells monastery cheeses, smoked trout from its own fishery, and calvados made by the monks from Valaam apples. To come to the island means to come to the monastery and see a good owner, caring and beautifying his territory: gilded domes shining, smooth paths covered with gravel, and electric cars waiting for tourists at the pier. Nothing in this space suggests that there are other pretenders to the role of master of this land. Nothing suggests that the monastic forms of care and guardianship of Valaam are or can be contested by anyone.

And yet, behind the glossy landscape, there are complicated relationships and conflicts surrounding the archipelago’s past. These contradictions are hidden from the eyes of tourists who come to the island for only a short visit: however, they make up the core of the memory and identity of the people who once lived here but left with the revival of the monastery. After several years of protests for their residential rights in the early 2000s, most of them left for mainland Sortavala or other cities.

1. In 2021, Russian Railways (RZD) launched a multimodal route from Saint Petersburg, Moscow, and Petrozavodsk to Valaam that included railway and water transport. For about a year, one could see on the pier of Sortavala the meteors of both the pilgrimage service and RZD. But in 2022, Russian Railways’ meteors disappeared from the schedule, giving way to monastery transport.

Methods and Contexts of Memory Sharing

At the beginning of the project, I already had research experience and connections in the local community in Ladoga Karelia, so it was not difficult to make initial contacts with former Valaam residents who had moved to Sortavala. However, meeting and communicating with them became a challenge. My primary method is biographical interviews, which requires a high degree of confidence between the interviewer and the interviewee and a considerable willingness on the part of the interviewee to share memories. Most informants in the Russian provinces have no narrative experience in telling their life stories, but are ready to share memories when they see the attention and interest of the researcher. In the case of Valaam migrants, however, the situation was different. Many of them were involved in a tough conflict ten years ago, when they were forced to leave the inhabited area of the island. Some of them gave interviews and made public statements in various media, but failed in their attempts to prove their rights. At the same time, the dramatic events of the eviction exacerbated social conflicts within the Valaam community itself, which had never been monolithic, and provoked new lines of confrontation between its representatives. Today most of them are not enthusiastic about telling their Valaam history, believing it is finished once and for all. “If it’s about the eviction from the island, I’m not sure I want to stir it up, you can’t change anything anyway,” as one of the former islanders commented at my request.

Sometimes I felt as if I had to go through an obstacle course in order to win trust. Once the interview started out on a mountain slope, where we were disoriented, but we ultimately found our way down to the road, much to our mutual happiness. I began each meeting with a far lengthier introduction than typical and realized that I needed to not only introduce myself and my research interests, but also to offer my own views on life and my own recollections. Throughout my work, I had a constant and overwhelming sense of being engaged in a full-fledged debate with my interviewees, sharing not just the interview space but also memories, doubts, and experiences. I wasn’t always aware of the requirements I had to fulfill in order to become a trustworthy interlocutor. Undeniably compelled to have a certain sensibility about Valaam, I could disagree with my interviewees on politics and ideology, but could not allow myself to neglect the value of the island’s unique nature, historical significance, and spiritual power.

At the same time, when I succeeded in overcoming the skepticism of the informants, our interviews turned into long conversations, driven not so much by my guiding questions as by the personal logic of the narrators, for whom memories of Valaam life were both painful and haunting, demanding to be talked through and confessed. I discovered that the memories of Valaam had a pivotal role in shaping their personal narratives. By answering in their life stories, the unspoken question of “what events have made me what I am,” or more precisely, “what you

must know about me to know me” (LINDE, 1993: 20), they repeatedly revisited Valaam, reviving it in their recollections as a forever lost Promised Land.

By the beginning of 2021, I had collected several interviews from people who had once worked on Valaam, and recorded nine more interviews that year. Three more interviews I conducted using various online services, as some former residents had moved to other towns and even other countries. In most cases, these were representatives of the so-called intelligentsia, which will be discussed in more detail below—people with higher education who arrived to the island in the mid-1980s from large cities such as Saint Petersburg (then Leningrad) and Moscow. Some of my interviewees knew each other or were even friends when they lived on the island and have stayed in contact to this day. But there are also people for whom Valaam remained a place of seasonal work, not a permanent residence.

These interviews provided sufficient insight into a specific perspective on the past and the role of Valaam, both spiritual and secular, in the shaping of the personal memories of the late Soviet intelligentsia. This perspective significantly breaks from that of the individuals referred to below as “locals,” whom I had interviewed in previous years as well as in 2021, those who worked in and around Valaam, in the various structures that supplied the island. Valaam held little importance in their lives, serving just as one of the numerous locations where they had to carry out their job. In contrast, the late Soviet intellectuals, who are the focus of this study, consider the island to be the centerpiece of their lives and subjectivities. In the following paper, which is not a quantitative sociological analysis but rather an anthropological reading of individual cases, I will turn to a number of life stories to elaborate this specific view and interpretation.

Local Intelligentsia as Intimate Hosts

I met Nikolay² in June 2021 in a village not far from Sortavala. Born in 1961 into a family of Leningrad architects, he continued the family tradition by entering the Architectural Institute. Inheriting his father’s passion for oriental philosophy, esotericism, and spiritual practices, he gathered a group of like-minded people and developed the idea of building the City of the Sun,³ inspired by the works of oriental and occidental mystics and theologians. The contradictory mix of religious beliefs, along with a desire for spaces free of state control, was typical of the late Soviet educated intelligentsia of the 1970s and 1980s, who sought

2. All personal names are replaced with pseudonyms to anonymize the interviewees.

3. The concept of the “City of the Sun” dates back to the work of Tommaso Campanella in the early seventeenth century, who depicted an egalitarian, theocratic state commune that served as the model for many subsequent social utopias. This image was, and still is, widely used by adherents of various socialist, communitarian, and New Age movements.

refuge in kitchens and outside of big cities. After his failed attempt to establish a commune in a village near Leningrad, Nikolay moved to Valaam, where the museum-reserve was already open.⁴ First as a carpenter and later as a master of the maintenance and construction site (*remontno-stroitel'nyi uchastok*, RSU), during the period of perestroika and economic liberalization he organized his own restoration cooperative. This was conceived as a variant of a commune that would take care of the island's historical heritage while also living according to the principles of the utopian City of the Sun that he had once dreamed of.

We take the hermitage to restoration, we live there, we restore and reconstruct for several years—pooh-pooh-pooh-pooh: we earn money, we live! We have gardens there, we build, we paint, we have frescoes there, everything. We are wearing linen shirts in the dew again [laughs]...

Although not all of their ideas were realized, the group members managed to work on the island for a while. “Yes. We survived, we survived,” says Nikolay: “We survived, and that’s where the mo-na-ste-ry⁵ came in.”

Nikolay talks to me while sitting at a big table in the courtyard of his own house in a small eco-settlement he organized with friends after leaving Valaam. His life story unfolds as a tale of searching and finding himself in Valaam, which he was forced to leave when the monastery was reestablished. Although Valaam appears in Nikolay's life because of fortuitous circumstances, it occupies a central place in his autobiography as a place of hopes and utopias, consciously chosen and deeply anticipated. His story is full of irony and estranging chuckles, and yet noticeably echoes the memoirs-travelogues that praise the unique beauty of the island and its pristine nature, the pervasive grace and spirituality of the place.

The same idioms of destiny and mission I heard in the retrospective story of Rita. A young school graduate from Kazakhstan, she followed her elder brother to Leningrad in 1984. She first visited Valaam during a trip with Leningrad artists, two years later she came there with a seasonal camp of the All-Russian Society for the Protection of Monuments of History and Culture (VOOPIiK), and in 1987 moved to the archipelago as a permanent resident.

At the forestry (*leskhoz*), I got a job. For a long time, they thought where to attach me, because, well, what—19 years old. I didn't know what was going to happen and what was needed here in general. And girls who had higher education, who were older than me and had already graduated, they also all worked as plasterers and housepainters.

In her memoirs, place is crucial in shaping her subjective sense of self.

4. For a picture of the Valaam Monastery in 1988, see MEISTERMAN, 2024.

5. He stretched the word, emphasizing each syllable, as if drawing a line under his biography, marking an important break in his and the island's history.

And plus this formation—you've lived there for thirty years since you were 19, all this subjective formation—it took place on Valaam, more under the influence of nature. This natural connection within you—this crossroads of nature, it's not going anywhere, because it's... I used to say (this has changed now)—that on Valaam you live as if you were living in Christ's bosom.

The idea of the specific grace of the place, through which one finds strength and becomes oneself, is central to her story. Just as with Nikolay, Rita does not consider herself a random person on the island, nor does she regard the island itself a random place to live. Despite her work at the *leskhoz*, she believes that her mission was to take care of the island's main value, which she defines as "Valaam's spirit" (*valaamskii dukh*). And just like Nikolay, she interprets her forced departure from the island as an intimate loss of home.

Rita and Nikolay did not know each other before coming to Valaam and did not become close friends on the island. But although Nikolay came from a family of Leningrad architects and graduated from the Architectural Institute himself, whereas Rita came from Kazakhstan and never received a university diploma, they both represent what is conventionally called the "Soviet intelligentsia." This concept, often used without translation, has been the subject of much debate and numerous definitions, discussed in terms of class and social stratum, status group, subculture, or imagined community.⁶ Sonja Luehrmann used the term "cultural professionals," referring to various types of "mental labour," including education, science, culture, and the arts (LUEHRMANN, 2005: 52). Jeanne Kormina and Sergey Shtyrkov apply the notion of the artistic and cultural elite, on the one hand, and cultural professionals, on the other, subsuming employees of museums and Houses of Culture, restorers, volunteers of the VOOPiK, and other participants in "cultural work" (SHTYRKOV and KORMINA, 2015: 16–17). These heterogeneous and usually urban members of the Soviet intelligentsia, being among the "entrepreneurs" of spirituality (ROUSSELET, 2020: 47), turned out in the 1980s to be the driving force behind various processes, including the retrospective turn (DONOVAN, 2015; SHTYRKOV and KORMINA, 2015), nationalist movements (BRUDNY, 1998), and spiritualist revival (DUBOVKA, 2020; PANCHENKO, 2011, 2018). Not a community in a strict sense and often seeking their own autonomy, the late Soviet intelligentsia was not united by a common level of education, profession, or position, and yet represented a fairly closed group with social prestige and the conviction of their own engagement in the cultural and spiritual development of society. This group exhibited a distinct combination of diverse religious, esoteric, and occult concepts, coupled with a strong preoccupation with preserving historical heritage (PANCHENKO, 2011; ZITZEWITZ, 2016; KOZLOV, 2001).

6. For a detailed discussion of the concept of intelligentsia, see TROMLY, 2014 and ZUBOK, 2009.

Valaam became an assemblage space for this heterogeneous community, providing the setting for a relationship in which the urban intellectuals had both authority and a specific lifestyle. By the mid-1980s, newcomers constituted a large part of the local population and considered themselves the “Valaam elite” as opposed to the “locals”—those who had lived there since the post-war years or who remained after the removal of *dom invalidov*. Although not all of them were close friends or even just acquaintances, these people nevertheless shared a belief in their “groupness” (BRUBAKER, 2004) due to a shared commitment to Valaam. Coming to the island, they not only sought to find deterritorialized spaces of “living *vnye* (outside)”⁷ (YURCHAK, 2006: 128), but also saw their mission in spiritual development in this particular locale. Some of them were mobilized around the museum-reserve created in 1979. Others got jobs at the RSU or local forestry like Nikolay and Rita, but these positions were mostly nominal. Recalling their life on the island, they talk about the unique “Valaam spirit,” the care of which was their main commitment. Their rootedness in the local landscape produced not a local identity but social status and prestige, essentially making them intelligentsia.⁸

In order to emphasize the connection between social position and the sense of place that allows that position to be manifested, I use the term “intimate hosts,” referring to those people whose social status and associated prestige were directly related to an inner, subjectively experienced sense of personal involvement in the fate of the place. Regardless of their positions, these people saw themselves as genuine hosts and guardians of the island, as opposed to the “locals,” for whom the archipelago remained “only” a place to live and work.

“Intimate hosts” dwell on the local landscape as a place of a personal and intimate nature. Remembering her life on the island, Rita emotionally said: “I kept saying, you know, my history of Valaam is connected to a period of childbearing. Because I quickly remember the date, counting down when which child was born.” A temporality anchored in a time of childbearing and maternity creates a phantom space that allows her to reconcile a unique personal biography with supernatural and extra-human values through the landscape of Valaam. “Try to carry a child here on Valaam,” Rita explicates, “because grace—it doesn’t go anywhere, it affects everyone, bad and good—it’s like the sun.” The subjectivation of the island made it an important site of memory. The phantom space of grace and natural beauty, inhabited by local characters and saturated with local flavor, became for these people a hermetic world of the past lost with the arrival of the monastery.

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7. Alexei Yurchak proposed the concepts of “deterritorialization” and “living *vnye*” to refer to those specific relations of the Soviet individual to the authoritative discursive regime that allowed one neither to support nor to oppose it. Yurchak describes a whole range of such deterritorialized worlds that allowed people to remain simultaneously inside and outside of political reality (YURCHAK, 2006: 126–157).
 8. Similar phenomena emerged in so-called cities of science, where locality and citizenry are often converted into social status and vice versa (KASATKINA, 2022: 53).

The Coming of the Monastery and the Fragility of the Religious-Secular Divide

The biographical narratives of the intimate hosts usually break off at a point eloquently marked by Nikolay with the words “and then the monastery came.”⁹ This boundary divides life into two parts: “before” and “after,” creating what Stephan Feuchtwang called the caesura which “mark the moment of creation of a relative past, the before of a given event and the after of a new present” (FEUCHTWANG, 2005: 2). Reflecting on this sharp temporal border, former Valaam dwellers establish not only a boundary between the past and the “new present,” but also distinguish themselves from the monastery, blamed for the dramatic breakdown in their lives. The intensity of this borderline was expressed in the headlines of the regional and federal media of the early 2000s: *Novye Izvestia*’s title “Out of Valaam! Monks of Ancient Monastery Evict Locals from the Island” was quite typical (POZDNYAEV, 2006).

However, the “coming of the monastery” was not a one-time event in either life stories or life histories.¹⁰ The revival of monastic life did not provoke any protest from the other inhabitants of the archipelago. The first group of monks arrived here in 1989 from Moscow’s Danilov monastery, which six years earlier had been returned to the Russian Orthodox Church, signaling the USSR’s new policy towards religion (SMOLKIN, 2018: 230–234). Two years later, the Supreme Soviet of the Karelian Autonomous SSR issued an official decree to return the central manor and some other buildings of the Transfiguration monastery to the Church. This was gradually done with the remaining facilities over the following few years. In 1992, the Valaam Historical, Architectural, and Natural museum-reserve was closed; by the end of the 1990s, a program to resettle local residents from Valaam started. In 2005, the Valaam village administration ceased to exist, and the territory of the archipelago came under the administration of the Sortavala town settlement, thus legitimating the resettlement of people from the island to the mainland city.

Although the revival of the monastery is usually described in media today in terms of militant confrontation and acute conflict between secular locals and the monastery, which resulted in a dramatic breakdown in social structure and life trajectories, this momentous disruption is never associated in memories with the events of the late 1980s. On the contrary, all the accounts of the first monks’ arrival are imbued with warmth, tenderness, and even paternal care, as Nikolay recounted:

9. For picture of the Orthodox procession passing archaeologists who are working on a heritage site on the territory of the monastery, see YAROVY, 2017b.

10. On the distinction between life stories and life histories, see ROSENTHAL, 1993.

And there was such a man, Varsonophii, who came. He was a tall, two-meter tall man—a blond, curly-haired blond. ... He was so big and had such blue eyes. And he's got this spiritual... Great man, but a child—such a huge child! ... But the people really treated him, they loved him.

The emergence of the monastic community and the beginning of services in the Transfiguration cathedral were not viewed as a sign of “taking over” or “invasion.” For Valaam romantics and esoterics, students and university professors, this was a sign of liberalization and legalization of their own spiritual quests, official “permission to openly seek their spirituality,” as Rita put it. The first services were attended by museum workers and restorers, artists and biologists, tour guides and communal services employees, and are remembered with the feelings of awe-inspiring anticipation and communion.

The combination of different religious ideas and the search for spirituality in the historical and cultural heritage that brought the urban intelligentsia to Valaam allowed them to feel like welcoming hosts, ready to share the island's sacred space with other seekers, including Orthodox believers and monks. Meeting and welcoming them as equals, the intimate hosts saw themselves as guides and experts, caring for the newcomers and facilitating their settling into a shrine that still belonged entirely to them.

At the same time, the Orthodox Church was associated with the unquestionable values of the past, to which the late Soviet preservationists and intellectuals turned in search of authority and instruction (SHTYRKOV and KORMINA, 2015: 31). According to Nikolay, “there was a moment when we wanted them to come. We saw them as, well, some kind of... some structure that preserved harmony, morality, yes, some... order.” From the monks, many intimate hosts expected an effective institution to protect the island from the dangers of decay and destruction. In the context of the museum's constantly challenged credibility, the monastery and the Russian Orthodox Church were accepted as both more authoritative and more competent to care for Valaam's landscape and heritage.

Many Valaam residents considered themselves true believers and actively supported the monastery's revival. Even at the height of the conflict between the monastic structures and local residents, activists sought to distance themselves from direct accusations against the monks, distinguishing those who shared their belief in the unique spirit of Valaam from those who only cared about real estate and expensive property. The boundary between religious and secular publics was ambiguous and fragile, failing to serve as a basis for collective action and group solidarity both during and after the crisis. Seen through the eyes of the intimate hosts, the short-lived sharing of the shrine was a period of a joint search for and practice of spirituality in which the Orthodox Church was given an ambivalent and rather subordinate role.¹¹

11. See the discussion of the “keeping religion in ‘its place’” argument in the context of urban struggles in KORMINA, 2021.

The Phantom Space of Valaam

When Nikolay said “and that’s where the monastery came in,” he did not refer to the revival of monastic life on the island but to the later dislocation and brutal property struggles. The most heated phases of the conflict occurred in 2007, when the courts demanded that the families of former museum employees and other secular structures be evicted from the premises that now belonged to the monastery. Some of the residents refused to leave, continuing to live in the so-called Winter Hotel, where the museum provided apartments to its staff back in the Soviet era. Long litigation, public protests, and appeals to various authorities have not changed the situation. The conflict culminated in a fire in 2016 that destroyed the building and left people *de facto* without housing. After a major renovation of the property, none of the previous owners were able to return and the building was transformed into the monastery hotel.

The conflict over residency rights had considerable social and memorial consequences. The dislocated people interpreted these events as the final collapse of their hopes for co-existence and the possibility to share the island with new religious hosts. Denial of their right to live on the island also meant the loss of their authoritative position in the domain of local heritage protection, as well as their status as participants in the history of the archipelago. Their removal, legally recognized and approved, was an important symbolic act of exile—both from the territory and from the past—even though only some of them lived permanently on Valaam at the time.

What is usually discussed in migration studies as the “lost home” effect is one of the most powerful vehicles of social mobilization, consolidating diasporas of people who have left their homes as a result of forced displacement (LONG and OXFELD, 2004; COHEN, 1997; MARSCHALL, 2017; HIRSCH and SPITZER, 2010). In these cases, memory creates phantom worlds of the abandoned past, situated in spatial realms of localized boundaries and new identities shaped by exile. The hybrid form of belonging to multiple spaces makes nostalgic narratives of home an important element in the construction of a new self. At the same time, such communities of memory create and often re-create the space of the lost homeland, endowing it with spatial qualities and material goods (MALKKI, 1995). Shortly after the resettlement of a large number of families from the island in 2007, a group “Valaam—people, events, stories: a community of those for whom the island was home” was created in the social network VKontakte, which today consists of almost 1,500 members. The most active communication in the group was in 2007–2008, when participants shared photos and memories, some of which were later published (VOROBYEV, 2020; GRUZDEV, 2017). Although, according to recollections, people did not gather in person, the online group became an important showcase for the migrants’ community, allowing them to articulate their Valaam identity through nostalgic memories of a vanished past.

In that shared space of memory, they acted as the “genuine locals” and the main heroes, the true guardians and defenders of the archipelago’s unique heritage and spirit.

Meanwhile, the Valaam landscape and the monastery’s versions of its past underwent significant changes. Landscaping, reconstruction, and the building of new hermitages and residences began on the archipelago, changing its image and giving it the glossy look that impresses tourists today.¹² The monastery’s official website has added pages dedicated to its history, which has unfolded as a long path to prosperity and spiritual power. Only a short section of this chronicle was devoted to the Soviet period, entitled “Desolation. Valaam in the 1940s–1980s” (LETOPIS, 2024), which summarizes the entire period of the secular restoration of local heritage in one sentence.

Valaam, a place closely associated with the social status and spiritual pursuits of the intimate hosts, was no longer accessible to them. Signs of their presence were erased from the landscape of the archipelago, and their role in protecting local heritage was downgraded. The loss of home in this context meant the loss of their own authoritative position, prestige, and coherent self, rather than the loss of property and a roof over their heads. When in the mid-2000s Valaam ceased to be a shared shrine, its former inhabitants reimagined it as a phantom space of their own memory that they did not need to share with the monastery. To this day, they maintain its imaginative borders and claim the inauthenticity of the “present” Valaam, considering it to be false, unlike the one they remember. “Valaam—it became different, completely different, just, well—another Valaam. Good or bad—that’s for later,” Anton, who grew up on the island, exclaimed emotionally.

Many former residents are committed to the idea that this is not the Valaam that they once shared with the monastery but were later forced to abandon, but two completely different islands coexisting in two parallel realms. Unlike other migrants, for whom “trip ‘home,’ be it a genuine return to an actual former home or a first time visit to an ancestral or imagined home(land), is instrumental in negotiating one’s sense of belonging, identity and self-construal” (MARSCHALL, 2017), Valaam’s intimate hosts avoid visiting the island and view it as completely unfamiliar. Here is a typical dialogue with Zakhar, the former leader of the volunteer restorers’ team:

ZAKHAR. I miss that Valaam. But not the present one. I went to Valaam about seven years ago. I couldn’t wait to go back home.

ZAKHAR’S WIFE. You can’t get him there now. I asked him many times to go there, but he won’t.

RESEARCHER. You don’t go?

12. For details of the island’s development, construction, and renovation projects, see the materials of the extensive investigation by YAROVY, 2017a.

ZAKHAR. No, no, no... well no... it's sad to look at, let's put it that way. It's been cleaned up... It's not that ruins are better than something renovated. No. There's no spirit there anymore. There's nothing... absolutely nothing. You know, the one that... In our time, when we were there... there was a different... I don't know, something different. Not this monastic one, anyway. Even these first monks, they were different.

By asserting this fundamental difference between his Valaam, the old one, and the present one available to the public, Zakhar places the golden age of the archipelago in a time of which he himself was a part. But he also extends the life of old Valaam as a bounded phantom space that has not disappeared but continues to exist. The phantom space created and maintained by the community of dislocated Valaam intellectuals is the most important site of memory for them, allowing them to still manifest themselves as a cultural elite, bearers of spirit and defenders of heritage, despite being forcibly deprived of both their symbolic role and a literal place under the sun.

Conclusion

The landscape of present-day Valaam is marked by the presence and ownership of the Orthodox monastery, which is advertised as a “Russian Northern Athos,” preserved and restored thanks to “a host of holy ascetics and elders.” Not only on the official website of the pilgrimage service, but also in the advertisements of travel agencies, a trip to Valaam is promoted as an opportunity to join the “spiritual tradition of Valaam” (Valaam Pilgrim, 2022), to “get to know the famous holy place” (Legendary Valaam, 2022), and to “touch spiritual roots” (Tours and Vouchers, 2022). The history of late Soviet Valaam does not fit into the canonical chronicle of the shrine, according to which the modern monastery is essentially rooted in Russia’s imperial past.

In contrast to the glossy surface of the archipelago’s official history, the memory of its former inhabitants is full of contradictions and ruptures. The time of life and the time of history are intertwined in their accounts of Valaam, which was for them a place of personal memory and biography: the place is turned into a lost homeland, a Promised Land to which it is impossible to return.

In this article, I have discussed the personal stories of those whom I call “intimate hosts,” people who have experienced the island as an important site of affective belonging and, at the same time, as a place converted into social status and identity. As I have argued, the beginning of monastic life on the island and the subsequent revival of the monastery was not a critical event for the intimate hosts, who interpreted these processes more as a liberalization of spiritual quests than as a takeover or eviction. However, the subsequent

displacement from the archipelago led to social consolidation and sharpened social distinctions among its inhabitants, turning the heterogeneous community of Valaam intellectuals into a group of memory, united by a sense of a lost homeland. Unable to share the island's landscape with the monastery, they have now created their own phantom memory space of Valaam, enclosed hermetically in their recollections.

Can we call contemporary Valaam a shared shrine? Yes and no. On the one hand, the island is still open to visitors of different religious beliefs, including those interested in nature or architectural heritage. The quite democratic regime established by the pilgrimage service of the monastery makes it a fairly open space. On the other hand, after a brief period in the late 1980s and 1990s, Valaam is no longer an arena for negotiation, discussion, and joint religious and preservation practices. The economic and political resources of the Russian Orthodox Church do not leave room for other actors to assert their right to decide on the development of the island.

Having ceased to be a shared shrine, Valaam has split into two islands, each of which exists in its own mode of memory: the glossy Valaam of the Northern Athos, presented in guidebooks and on the monastery's website, and the phantom space of the former Valaam intelligentsia, existing in their memories. Without overlapping, these two islands exist quite autonomously, although they refer to the same geographical space.

Modern theories view shared shrines as arenas where different actors, both secular and religious, engage in conflicts, negotiations, and interactions over their authority, ownership, presence, and control of the sacred site. These approaches are poorly applied to cases where these tasks are not relevant due to clear inequalities in political and economic resources between potential actors. However, we should not dismiss these situations as failures and outright rejections of the concept of shared space. In such cases, commonality, sharing, the multiplicity of actors, and their interaction are transformed into memorial phenomena that serve as an important component of the collective retrospective imaginary. Sharing without sharing is still a viable option in this scenario, allowing individuals to feel that they are participating in a process that is otherwise unattainable in real life.

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Sharing and Conquering: Memory, Religion, and Belonging on the Island of Valaam

This paper studies the shared shrine of Valaam, an important outpost of official Orthodoxy and a pilgrimage destination in contemporary Russia, but which still retains its significance as a site of memory and utopia for the secular urban intellectuals who engaged in its preservation in the late Soviet years. The personal accounts of former residents forced to leave the archipelago after the revival of the monastery in the late 1990s and early 2000s are the core focus of the paper, allowing it to elaborate on the memory community of “intimate hosts” and the “phantom space” of the shrine as manifested through memories of a lost homeland. Unable to share the island’s landscape with the monastery, the former Valaam preservationists have created their own phantom world of Valaam, enclosed hermetically in their recollections.

Keywords: heritage, memory, landscape, Orthodoxy, shared shrines

Partager et conquérir : mémoire, religion et appartenance sur l’île de Valaam

L’article étudie le sanctuaire partagé de Valaam, un haut lieu de l’orthodoxie officielle et de pèlerinage de la Russie contemporaine qui reste cependant un lieu de mémoire et d’utopie pour les intellectuels urbains laïcs qui ont travaillé à sa conservation à la fin de l’époque soviétique. Les récits d’anciens résidents contraints de quitter l’archipel après la renaissance du monastère à la fin des années 1990 et au début des années 2000 sont au centre de l’article qui analyse la communauté mémorielle de ces « hôtes intimes » et de l’« espace fantôme » du sanctuaire tel qu’il prend forme à travers les souvenirs d’un chez-soi perdu. Se trouvant dans l’incapacité de partager l’île avec le monastère, les anciens conservateurs de Valaam ont créé leur monde fantôme de Valaam, enfermé dans leurs souvenirs.

Mots-clés : patrimoine, mémoire, paysage, orthodoxie, sanctuaires partagés

Compartir y conquistar: memoria, religión y pertenencia en la isla de Valaam

El monasterio de Valaam, Rusia, es ahora un alto lugar de la ortodoxia oficial y de peregrinación. Es un santuario compartido, ya que es un lugar de memoria y utopía para los intelectuales urbanos seculares que trabajaron para preservarlo a finales de la era soviética. Al analizar las historias personales de los antiguos residentes obligados a abandonar el archipiélago después del renacimiento del monasterio a fines de la década de 1990 y principios de la década de 2000, muestro cómo se establece una comunidad de memoria de estos « huéspedes íntimos » y cómo el “espacio fantasma” del santuario toma forma a través de los recuerdos de este hogar perdido. Imposibilitados de compartir el paisaje de la isla con el monasterio, los antiguos preservadores de Valaam han creado su propio mundo fantasma de Valaam, encerrado herméticamente en sus recuerdos.

Palabras clave: patrimonio, memoria, paisaje, ortodoxia, santuarios compartidos

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Connecting Earth and Heaven

Tsar Cross Processions, Spiritual Infrastructure, and Orthodox Christian Citizenship

Introduction

Every year in July, Ekaterinburg, a big industrial city in the Urals and one of fifteen cities in Russia with a population over one million, becomes the centre of Orthodox life in the country. By no means a popular tourist destination, the city in these days hosts thousands of visitors from all over Russia who come to participate in cultural and religious events devoted to the commemoration of the last Russian tsar Nicholas II and his family, killed by the Bolsheviks in this city on the night of July 17, 1918. Believers arrive by car, rented bus, train, and plane in small groups of friends and relatives or in larger groups from a parish or diocese.

Throughout July 16, a large open space in front of the Church on Blood in Honor of All Saints Resplendent in the Russian Land, erected in 2000–2003 on the place of the Ipatiev House where the Romanovs stayed until their shooting in the house's cellar, is occupied by Orthodox pilgrims. Women in their floor-length skirts and headscarves, along with men and children of all ages, sit or sleep on the grass waiting for evensong; some read prayers with their faces and bodies directed at the church, while many confess to one of the twenty-to-thirty priests standing in the area with their anafors, special folding tables used for religious services. Late at night, the liturgy starts on a stage built in front of the church, with several bishops, many priests and deacons, and a large professional choir participating. People can see every detail of the service on two big screens and hear every word due to a powerful audiosystem installed for this event. After several hours of church service, when the city plunges into late summer twilight, believers take part in the eucharist distributed by priests from tens of chalices. At 3 a.m., the cross procession starts. It takes approximately five hours for this huge group of people to cover the 21 km between the place of shooting, where they just had eucharist, and the site of the Romanovs' clandestine grave outside

the city, an old mine called Ganina Yama (literally: Gania’s pit): this is now a monastery with a well-tended recreational area—flower beds, convenient benches, café, and shops.¹ Starting in the city center, the procession weaves along well paved streets, which have kept their Soviet names, before flowing into the wooden suburbs and then down a narrow forest road, arguably following the path along which, in July 1918, the Ural Bolsheviks carried the bodies of eleven murdered people in two trucks.²

The above description based on my field diary shows how infrastructure is assembled for this event from people, things, and buildings. Well-functioning yet ephemeral, it is a true representation of post-secular Orthodoxy—archaic yet the product of high modernity, ubiquitous and very visible yet in many respects superficial, highly individualistic yet obsessed with ideas of collective salvation (HANN and GOLTZ, 2010; TOCHEVA, 2017; LUEHRMANN, 2018; KORMINA, 2019; DUBOVKA, 2020). After the collapse of the socialist regime, Orthodox Christianity step by step started its spread over highly secularized Russia, and eventually the Russian Orthodox Church has become a very visible religious institution, though with a low level of participation. Its outposts—churches and monasteries—often remain poorly, or rather fragmentarily, integrated into the life of the towns and villages where they are located.³ One can say that cross processions, which have become highly popular over the last twenty years, connect these outposts in an inhabited spiritual landscape and make the Russian land more Orthodox, in the eyes of believers and their secular critics at least. This article discusses how *krestokhodtsy* (participants in a cross procession, literary “cross-walkers”) contribute to creating and maintaining this spiritual landscape. It suggests the metaphor of spiritual infrastructure to grasp the emerging network of things, texts, and people that accumulates and spreads grace (*blagodat’*) across the land where the *krestokhodtsy* walk. Following Simone, I “extend the notion of infrastructure directly to people’s activities” (SIMONE, 2004: 407), which, in the case of *krestokhodtsy*, take various forms of collective pious labor (BIELO, 2020), such as walking, praying, fasting, and carrying heavy icons.

Orthodox cross processions, just like the religious processions of Catholics (ORSI, 1985; SEALES, 2008; BRUCHER, 2016; SIEKIERSKI, 2018), the marches for Jesus of evangelicals (FER and MALOGNE-FER, 2017), and the prayer walks of Pentecostals (KIRBY, 2017), give ordinary believers presence in public space: they

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1. On the controversy of the royal remains see SLATER, 2007; ROZANOVA, 2008; AVDONIN, 2013.
 2. Along with Nicholas and his wife, there were their five children and four attendants (a doctor and three servants).
 3. The Church on the Blood religious complex is an excellent example of this disconnection. In 2016, the city government decided to rename the street where it is located as Tsarskaya (Royal) street, but the local residents voted against the renaming. As a result, part of the street changed its name to Tsarskaya while the rest keeps its Soviet name Tolmacheva, after a young local Bolshevik who died during the Civil war.

are their way to struggle peacefully for their right to the city (ORSI, 1999; BIELO, 2013). The difference with Orthodox processions, however, is that the latter do not only take place in cities; often, *krestokhodtsy* go through abandoned villages and down forest roads, which can hardly be considered public spaces and where there is no one to struggle with for the right to be present. Cross processions rather follow the cultural logic of internal colonization discussed by Alexander Etkind, though the new religious “colonizers” do their work symbolically rather than materially (ETKIND, 2011) by creating an ephemeral spiritual map of Holy Russia.

In this essay, I analyze Orthodox religious processions as a collective pious work, a conjunction of bodily effort and prayer aimed at connecting “earth and heaven” and at creating a sense of belonging to the holy collective of the Russian Orthodox nation. All these practices create a utopian space, which is the opposite of “a socio-economic space... [where] the strong always win and the words always deceive” (CERTEAU, 2011: 16). The utopian space has its own topography and uses a specific language of miracles (EADE and SALLNOW, 2000; PEÑA, 2011; BIELO, 2020). I wouldn’t dare say that in this way believers “subvert the fatality of the established order” (CERTEAU, 2011: 18), as did the Brazilian interlocutors of Certeau, but they surely enjoy their utopian space as a space of alternative power relations based on spiritual reputation. A short overview of cross processions in contemporary Russia is followed by ethnographic analysis of the tsar cross procession in Ekaterinburg, with sections focusing on how the atmosphere of holy collectivity is created and how space is claimed in these processions.

Field data for this article have been collected over more than ten years in Ekaterinburg and Sverdlovskaya oblast’ among organizers and participants in the tsar cross processions, as well as among other local people involved (or not) in these activities. I did participant observation during three big tsar cross processions in 2018, 2019, and 2021,⁴ several of the weekly minor processions that cover the last third of the so-called “tsar’s road” organized by a female Orthodox enthusiast, and two processions that went from the Shartash train station (where the Romanovs arrived in 1918 in Ekaterinburg), to the Church on the Blood: these latter processions occur twice a year in March on the day of the Romanovs’ arrival and in July on the day of their deaths. I also followed my interlocutors in their social media activities and participated in their chat groups, one of which, the “Holy Girdle of the Theotokos” (*poias Bogoroditsy*), named after a relic of the Birthgiver, was especially informative. This group is run by lay enthusiasts of cross processions and includes almost eighty members from different parishes and regions. The group acts as an exterritorial religious

4. The number of participants in the night liturgy and the cross procession has grown from 1,500 in 2001 to approximately 40,000 in 2019, with up to 100,000 in 2018, the centenary of the assassination. In 2021 the procession was not officially allowed due to coronavirus restrictions. It nevertheless took place, with approximately 2,000 people gathering.

community and a prayer group that shares information on cross processions, as well as other relevant texts, videos, and calls for in-group collective prayers for the needs of its members, their friends, and relatives. I was invited to the group by one of its active participants, Maxim (pseudonym), whom I met during a minor tsar cross procession in the summer of 2020. In addition, I observed cross processions during my other research projects and simply as a city-dweller with a daily routine that could be interrupted by the *krestokhodtsy*, whose walking, chanting, and appearance seem so exotic in busy city streets.

Pious Work for the Common Good

Contemporary devotional literature and Orthodox media often mention the words “Russia is to be saved by cross processions,” attributed typically to St Ioann of Kronshtadt, when they praise the spread of cross processions throughout Russia from the 2000s. They see the growing popularity of the processions as the next stage in the religious revival that followed the building of Orthodox Christianity’s material infrastructure in the 1990s, often the result of the grass-root initiatives of parishioners and priests (TOCHEVA, 2017; KÖLLNER, 2011). The lack of money and other resources made these efforts truly heroic, and cross processions maintain this ethos of heroism and collectivism, though in their own way.

A cross procession (*krestny khod*: the word is composed of *krest* meaning “cross” and *khodit’* meaning “to walk”) is a normative Orthodox practice of a group of believers holding a collective walk from one point in the sacred landscape (usually a church) to another (a sacred site) or making a circle around a place (a village, town, church, or neighborhood).⁵ It either commemorates an important event in the secular or sacred history of a community annually or takes place occasionally, on the initiative of clergy or pious activists, in order to protect a community from pandemic, foreign invasion, or other dangers. The existing ethnographic research on this form of religious activity is limited, probably because it looks like a normative religious practice under the strict control of the Church, a promising issue for theological rather than anthropological analysis. As Stella Rock noted in her work about the post-Soviet revival of the Velikoretsky cross procession in Viatka region, the clergy is inclined to represent processions as “a form of liturgical prayer” (ROCK, 2014: 281) outside church walls, in line with Orthodox ethnographers who see a group of *krestokhodtsy* as a “wandering church, following the example of the holy apostles” (KVASHNINA, 2019: 73). However, in contemporary Russia a cross procession can be established and managed by lay believers either without the participation of priests

5. The most familiar form of the Orthodox religious procession is going around a church on Easter night.

or with their nominal participation in the form of oral blessing (KORMINA, 2022; see also SHEVZOV, 2004: 151–152). As I could see from online chats, *krestokhodtsy* are happy if clergy joins their procession but if not, they can do their devotional work independently (ANOKHIN, 2018).

Alongside cross processions that rediscover old routes and lead to pre-revolutionary sacred sites, there are plenty of newly established processions. In many cases I know, the new processions relate to a particular project aimed at achieving some public good for the “Russian people,” such as recovering from moral failures that put the nation in danger of disappearance, as in the case of processions against abortions organized by activists in Orthodox pro-life movements (LUEHRMANN, 2017). Processions thus become a form of socially useful pious work, as the following example shows. Andrei Bardizh, a lay enthusiast and organizer of cross processions from Ekaterinburg, arranged his first super-long cross procession in 2000, the year of the canonization of the Romanovs. The procession, named “From the first Romanov to the last Romanov,” started in the village of Nyrob in Perm’ oblast’—where the uncle of the founder of the Romanov dynasty Mikhail Nikitich Romanov was imprisoned on the orders of his political adversary Boris Godunov and died in 1602. It ended in Ekaterinburg on the day of Nicholas II’s regicide. The *krestokhodtsy* walked 900 km along sometimes very difficult, even impassible roads with a myrrh-streaming icon of Nicholas II. In 2014, Bardizh was invited by the famous Orthodox intellectual and administrator Father Vsevolod Chaplin (1968–2020) to his show on the Orthodox TV channel *Spas* (The Savior) to discuss his initiatives. Chaplin, who served as the chairman of the Synodal Department for Relations between Church and Society, questioned Bardizh about the pragmatic usefulness of processions to the Church. Do participants do any missionary work in their way through the remote corners of Russia? How many people participate? Do young people participate? What is the sense of doing the long and difficult walks and what is the reason behind establishing new processions? In his responses to these questions, asked from the point of view of the Church establishment, Bardizh answered from the perspective of lay participants in the processions. He said that for ordinary people this ritual walking is a form of gift, a contribution to the collective effort aimed at religious revival in Russia: “This is a way to sacrifice yourself, your energy (*sily*) to God. For many people who have no money, this is arguably the only possibility to participate (*uchastvovat*).”⁶ Whereas Chaplin⁷ seems to consider these grandiose cross processions a waste of the resources of the Church, Bardizh thinks of them as a way to reinforce the agency of every participating believer in a collective effort for a common good.

6. “Vechnost’ i vremia” (Eternity and time), *Soyuz*, August 26, 2014 (TV program).

7. Remarkably, Chaplin confesses in this TV show that he once joined the tsar cross procession in Ekaterinburg but quickly got tired and left.

Few people can afford to walk with the entire procession for hundreds or even thousands of kilometers. Bardizh explains in this and other interviews that an individual contribution to a collective pious work should be affordable; one can join and leave the procession at any time—“as much as God will.” Thus, the procession is united not by the constancy of participants, starting and finishing the path together and thus creating a temporary religious community, “a monastery on foot” as Andrei himself phrased it; instead, the procession is a project made by a particular person who sets up and manages its infrastructure (food, places for sleep, medical care) and cares about building the spiritual infrastructure of its participants. This allows grace to flow with the procession.

Ekaterinburg’s *Via Dolorosa*

Among many other cross processions in contemporary Russia, the tsar procession in Ekaterinburg stands out. Like those pilgrims who come to Jerusalem to be in the place “where Jesus walked” (KAELL, 2014), especially on *Via Dolorosa*, the street where he went to Calvary, participants in the procession take communion near the very place where the tsar was killed and presumably go by the very road used to take the royal martyrs’ bodies to their burial place. Attesting to the authenticity of the road they follow and to the place where the bodies of the royal martyrs were buried is an important part of the whole event. As Veronika, an organizer of the minor tsar cross processions where I met Maxim, explained to me:

The thing is that we follow the road which was marked (*pobita*) by his [Emperor Nicholas II] blood.... And what does it mean that we follow (*idem vosled*) the royal family? A connection with Christ happens (*soedinenie so Khristom*). The very connection which was lost 100 years ago.

In other words, *krestokhodtsy* are not just “spatializing [the] time” of the Romanov dynasty (LEFEBVRE, 2004: 89) by connecting Romanov-related memorial places on the map as they go from Nyrob to Ekaterinburg; they connect heaven and earth with their own bodies.

For Veronika, “a connection with Christ” was lost by the Russian people when the tsar was killed. As she explained to me in a long interview, confirming what I already knew from other informants and the literature they read, the last Russian tsar was not just a person of royal descent and a legally crowned monarch, nor was he simply a saint canonized by the Russian Orthodox Church as a passion-bearer (a Christian who faced his death in a Christ-like manner). He is more than that: he is a Redeemer who by his death in the “Urals Golgotha” expiated sins of the Russian people, as Jesus did for humanity in Jerusalem (SHNIRELMAN, 2020; SHTYRKOV, 2020). Although the theology of the tsar as redeemer (*tsar’-iskupitel’*)

is considered heretical by the official Church, it is nevertheless widespread among Orthodox believers, especially those who come to the tsar cross processions in Ekaterinburg. These ideas are present in their icons and in the leaflets and brochures they spread. They insist that the tsar was killed in a ritual committed by the enemies of Russia and that, at the same time, his death was a Christ-like self-sacrifice for the sake of the Russian people, who had forgotten authentic ways of life in the throes of modernization on the eve of the revolution.

The aim of the devotional labor of the *krestokhodtsy* is to bind the gaps, spatial as well as temporal, in their utopian space. Spatially, they connect the place of the killing of the “royal martyrs” with their burial place or, in the language of conspiracy theories, the site where the ritual murder started and the place where it was completed by immolating the bodies in fire and acid (SLATER, 2007). Temporally, they build a connection between the past and the future. The tsar cross procession and the week-long festival of Orthodox culture that precedes it are held under the slogan “From repentance to the resurrection of Russia.” Repentance for the collective misdeeds of the past, such as the sin of regicide, should lead to the nation’s future prosperity: the cross procession is a mechanism which helps the future to come and the past to be overcome. The responsibility of the *krestokhodtsy* as representatives of “our people” for the past tragedies and future successes of the nation (*russkogo naroda*) is constantly stressed in the speeches, lectures, and media narratives of the tsar days. Here is what Father Evgeniy, one of most famous and respected priests in the city, preached to a group of his parishioners at about midnight on July 17, 2018 to prepare them for the procession:

We have to be as focused as possible [during the procession], we have to pray to God for our personal salvation and for our families, for our country. Because this is a turning point in a sense, maybe the future history of Russia depends on it, on how we will pray, on what happened within the past hundred years. Have we learned any lessons from that event? Has our people learned to humble itself? Has it repented or does it remain oriented toward sin, toward selfishness, toward egoism?

Dressed in red t-shirts with the logo of the Orthodox service *Miloserdie* (Mercy) headed by Fr. Evgeniy, the thirty or so men and women he addressed did not really need any explanation of history or the meanings of the regicide. Many of them come to the cross procession every year, and not as ordinary participants with icons and church banners; instead, they come to create order in the flow of people. They compose small mobile first aid groups, with a supply of band-aids, small bottles of water, handfuls of candy and chocolates, and a table with an ambulance phone number: they spread out along the procession to assist the *krestokhodtsy* if the need arises. Yet, even if some of them do not really believe in the idea of the collective sin of the Russian people, they do not protest and silently share this popular theology in its moderate version.

In the cross processions in Ekaterinburg, I also met groups of believers who split from the Russian Orthodox Church of Moscow Patriarchate, moved from cities to remote places, and waited desperately for the end of the world to come. Yet, to be extreme in terms of theological claims does not necessarily mean to be marginal socially. Veronika is a happily married mother of four children who lives the comfortable life of a middle-class urbanite. Her devotion to the tsar brought her into a network of people from different places in Russia who share her views and whom she meets in numerous cross processions. Every year she participates in the main tsar cross procession in Ekaterinburg, the next day going to another procession in Alapaevsk, a town 150 km northwest where other Romanovs were martyred, including Elizabeth, the sister of the tsar's wife (also canonized as a saint). In addition, every Sunday she organizes her own minor tsar cross procession, which covers the last third of the tsar's road and tries to follow the historically authentic path as close as possible (KORMINA, 2022).

Religious people, including this mystically oriented woman and more moderate religious practitioners (like Orthodox volunteers), live simultaneously in two “partially connected worlds” (GIRARD, 2019: 14), spiritual and mundane, both of which are real to them. They see the cityscape in a different way to secular people, using their specially trained spiritual gaze (*dukhovnoe videnie*) to see invisible aspects of the world—obscure causality and the meanings of historical events (SHTYRKOV, 2020) or a sacred landscape lost in layers of mundane infrastructure or in the forests and swamps. The spiritual gaze is a prerequisite for successful communication within and about utopian space. Naletova wrote how in Kazan' she “was struck by a group of pilgrims praying ... in a back yard disfigured by the garbage of a factory” (NALETOVA, 2010: 245). This was a site where the icon of the Kazanskaia Mother of God once appeared: then, it was in a deep forest, but a century later was a part of tobacco factory. The tsar's road, too, does not exist in the mundane world: it is invisible to the eye of an ignorant observer outside of special periods of time when the tsar processions make it visible. The road exists in devotional literature, on special maps for pilgrims (including a mobile app prepared for the tsar days by organizers), and in the flow of *krestokhodtsy* who mark and make this road with their own bodies. The cross processions, managed by city services, church professionals, or religious enthusiasts like Bardizh or Veronika, refer not to mundane reality but to the invisible world, the “utopian space” of God, saints, and Holy Russia.

Performing Holy Collectivity

In this section, we will see how the atmosphere of collectivity is felt and maintained in the processions through the pious work of chanting, walking, and sharing the weight of holy icons. Every cross procession is essentially a

collective prayer. Usually, *krestokhodtsy* sing the Jesus prayer (“Lord, Jesus Christ Son of God, have mercy on us”) aloud along the way. In one of his interviews, Bardizh called this prayer “the battle hymn of the host of Christ” (BARDIZH, 2008). Here is a self-description from a participant in one of his long cross processions:

I dare to walk the first 10 km with God’s help. With the first step the Jesus prayer begins. The leader of the procession makes sure that no one is distracted by talking: if the Jesus prayer is interrupted, it is no longer a cross procession. (LARIONOVA, 2013: 23)

Similarly, in the tsar cross processions I observed, the same prayer was sung constantly for several hours, sometimes in turn by male and female voices, which added elements of joyful competition to the procession’s atmosphere. The serious words of the prayer are sung in a major key and in the rhythm of a march. As the phrase is short and the melody simple, everybody, including religiously ignorant people who might join the procession out of curiosity, chant the prayer and thus, through singing in a choir and marching at the same pace, become fully immersed in this collective devotional labor (LUEHRMANN, 2018). As was noted, rhythm is a “central mechanism for contributing to a feeling of unity as it helps coordinate people’s movement in a shared space” (BRUCHER, 2016: 99; DUFFY, 2000), and singing in a choir makes this feeling of unity even stronger. It helps people to become tuned into the collective atmosphere more intensively and contributes to the creation of their utopian space. The collective Jesus prayer chanted by *krestokhodtsy* hence is both a form of discipline and a way to create a strong sense of belonging. Besides, it to some extent “manages the event” (JULES-ROSETTE, 1975: 150) and makes cross processions highly visible in the mundane landscape of the city.⁸

Although the choice of the Jesus prayer as the main prayer for cross processions everywhere can be explained by purely pragmatic reasons, it is rooted in the deeper context of post-secular religiosity in Russia, namely the way “authentic” pre-Soviet religious practices and ideas are interpreted. In popular religious literature for Orthodox believers, the Jesus prayer is widely discussed as an individual mystical practice not recommended to an unprepared person (PAERT, 2010; DUBOVKA, 2018: 200-201). It should be done secretly and privately, under the supervision of a spiritual advisor (ПОР, 2018). In post-Soviet Orthodoxy, however, the Jesus prayer has turned from an elite individualistic religious practice accessible to the most

8. In contrast to logocentric evangelicals who formulate their theological ideas through a huge and constantly expanding song repertoire (GONZALEZ, 2008; FER, 2016), Orthodox Christians in their cross processions chant a short formulaic prayer whose function is communicative (with God and spiritual co-workers) rather than descriptive or performative.

spiritually advanced believers into a sort of a minimal prayer for everybody. As a result, it has become a marching chant and a “battle hymn” that helps the procession keep pace and simultaneously create an atmosphere of full immersion in devotional work, similar to the hesychastic spiritual techniques of uninterrupted prayer. This is how an Orthodox priest from eastern Finland put it before setting out on a skiing procession in his parish: “when skiing, the rhythms of one’s arms and legs is particularly suitable for silently repeating the Jesus prayer” (VUOLA, 2020: 12). For him, the prayer helps to organize everybody’s individual movement; yet for Russian *krestokhodtsy*, the collectivity of their singing is crucial. The collective singing of the Jesus prayer and collective movement help create an experience of being a part of a group, of a people (*narod*) with an unavoidably shared destiny.

None of the participants can take advantage of any social privileges they might enjoy in their usual life as members of a category usually recognized as vulnerable and weaker, such as an older person, a woman, a child, or a person in a particular position in the social hierarchy. Priests, bishops, and even the patriarch (when he joined the procession in 2018) make the whole way on foot; only in extreme cases are wheelchairs used for invalids and strollers for toddlers. Unescapably, one feels, through the efforts of one’s own body over several hours, a belonging to a collective organized on egalitarian principles, where only one’s effort and faith matter. Several buses organized by Fr. Evgenii’s *Miloserdie* group follow the procession, but the volunteers are instructed to allow people into the buses only in the most desperate cases and to remind people that they join the procession *chtoby potrudit’sia* (to do hard work), that is to make the whole way on foot and not by bus. The volunteers are to help those in need but even more so to discipline the flow of people and make the procession a “pious march.”

Many seek to experience hardship in order to become more deeply immersed in their religious performance. This experience is generated largely by dealing with material objects that participate in processions, such as large church icons. Quite often, small groups joining the procession carry their own icons, which are sometimes so large and heavy that they are put on a stretcher on people’s shoulders. This makes walking in the procession extremely difficult but, as I could see, the carriers only reluctantly agreed to have a rest and allow someone else in the procession to take up their burden for a while. Everyone can help these people to carry their icon for some time and, in this way, become immersed deeper in the collective pious work. Indeed, many people (men) want to join the carriers, as one of my students walking with me in the procession in 2018 did. Not a devout Orthodox believer, he wanted to share the weight of the icon with others, therefore accessing a more authentic experience of being part of this collective labor and making his participant observation more immersive.



Figure 1. *Krestokhodtsy* carry an icon from the Church on Blood to Ganina Yama, Ekaterinburg (July 2018).

Credit: Jeanne Kormina

The collective of the procession includes not only *krestokhodtsy* chanting the Jesus prayer, but also invisible agents. Orthodox observers and *krestokhodtsy* themselves compare cross processions to an army with more participants than are visible to the naked eye. As Fr. Evgenii preached to his parishioners before the procession in 2018, “we will go this way (*my proidem etim putem*) side-by-side (*riadom*) with the royal passion bearers. They will also go this way and our prayers will reach them very quickly.” The presence of invisible agents is marked with holy images: some people hold poles with velvet church banners of a deep red “Byzantine” color (sometimes deep blue or green) with images of saints, Jesus Christ, or the Birthgiver embroidered or pictured on them. Some have icons of various sizes and weights, whereas others have just small laminated paper icons hanging around their necks. In any case, an icon on the chest is a distinctive sign of *krestokhodtsy* that helps them to think of the saints as “being synchronous, alive and active in the present” (FORBESS, 2015: 118), marking their real presence in this pious parade alongside the *krestokhodtsy*.



Figure 2. *Krestokhodtsy* with icons of Tsar Nicholas and Prince Alexey, Ekaterinburg (July 2018).

Credit: Jeanne Kormina



Figure 3. Church banner with Tsar as Martyr, Ekaterinburg (July 2018).

Credit: Jeanne Kormina

As Kevin Lewis O'Neill rightly observed in his book on evangelicals in postwar Guatemala, "images of battle and spiritual warfare exist at the heart of the Christian imagination" (O'NEILL, 2010: 230). *Krestokhodtsy*, too, use a distinctive yet specifically Orthodox language of spiritual warfare. This language has a notable number of militaristic metaphors and allusions,⁹ as do the material things and practices: believers march with banners like military units, they may call themselves crusaders (*krestonostsy*) and warriors of Christ (*voiny Khristovy*), and speak jokingly in their chats of the corns (*mozoli*) on their feet as "the medals of the *krestokhodets*." Some Orthodox people, Veronika for example, identify the prototype of the cross procession in the Biblical story of the taking of the city of Jericho by the Israelites (SHEVZOV, 2004: 151).¹⁰ Among evangelicals this story has inspired a well-elaborated theology of spiritual warfare (FER and MALOGNE-FER, 2017: 163), a battle of believers with evil forces. Yet, for contemporary Orthodox people this story just confirms the performative power of their cross processions as apotropaic ritual acts. In 2015, a year after the Russian Federation's annexation of Crimea and the beginning of the war in Donbass, Bardizh organized a super-long procession covering 2,500 km from Sevastopol' in Crimea to Smolensk with the aim of the "spiritual defense of the motherland" (KHUDIAKOVA, 2015). Orthodox Christians see themselves as victims who have to defend their territory rather than attack enemies (demons) as evangelicals do in their territorial exorcisms (GONZALEZ, 2008).

This militaristic discourse, especially prominent in the context of the Russian invasion of Ukraine (wholeheartedly supported by many of my informants, including ethnic Ukrainians such as Fr. Evgenii), is another way of experiencing one's belonging to the collective of the Russian and Orthodox nation. According to the evangelical theology of warfare, "supernatural entities"—God, angels, the Devil, and demons... acted within national and international politics" alongside humans (GIRARD, 2019: 8; see also O'NEILL, 2010; KIRBY, 2017), and believers can have an impact on politics by praying for or against these agents. In Orthodox theology, God is not one of the political agents acting in the world: rather, he is the only political actor, as everything on earth happens only due to his divine permission (*popushchenie*). Hence, collective actions and fighting for the public good in a political sense make no sense to Orthodox people and is not useful for their

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9. One example of many: a documentary about a cross procession from Voronezh to Diveevo in winter 2023–2024 was titled "Prayer squad" (*Molitvennyi spetsotriad*). The procession was organized by a layman, lasted almost three weeks, covered 600 km, and consisted of no more than ten participants. The film, made by a small independent film studio, starts with the poetic lines: "people are going somewhere like a river flowing, like they're soldiers, like there's a war going on" (*Molitvennyi spetsotriad [Prayer squad]*, Podolsk cinema, January 14, 2024. URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jsvufgpq2-w&t=60s> [accessed January 29, 2024]).
 10. Others connect cross processions to the New Testament story of Jesus carrying his cross to Golgotha, prioritizing individual effort and self-transformation over the idea of the performance of a collective ritual.

religious selves. Although in the contemporary Orthodox theology of war, there is an image of the world as a battlefield between the Russian Orthodox people and the dark forces represented by the apostate West and its local representatives (“liberals,” secularists, and other sorts of people who question the holy collectivity of the Russian Orthodox nation [ROUSSELET, 2022]), every (Orthodox) Christian is a warrior of Christ because she has to fight her own passions and sins as the work of the Devil. Thus, the discourse of “militant Orthodoxy” is to a large extent directed at personal salvation through self-cultivation rather than on achieving a public good (KNORRE and ZYGMONT, 2020).

Claiming Space, Challenging Authority

Whatever the differences in the nuances of their understandings how cross processions should function, both Bardizh and Fr. Vsevolod Chaplin would agree that in post-secular Russia cross processions have become “pious demonstrations” that symbolically claim space and demonstrate the presence of Orthodox people to themselves and secular observers (VUOLA, 2020). Indeed, according to Stella Rock:

In travelling through what is now predominantly secular space, halting traffic in city centers, passing through villages without functioning churches, often visiting springs or places that were desecrated or otherwise erased in the Soviet period, they are gradually contributing to the physical re-Christianization of the landscape. (ROCK, 2014: 280)¹¹

It is no wonder that *krestokhodtsy* willingly include abandoned churches and ruined monasteries in their routes. Here in the ruins they perform minimalistic religious rituals: lighting candles and singing prayers. This contribution makes the abandoned church seem less empty and the religious landscape more expansive, more in line with their angelic map of the utopian world.

Cross processions in the Russian legal system are categorized as public events and are thus regulated by the federal law “on gatherings, meetings, demonstrations, processions and pickets,” which is usually applied to political protests. Organizers of a cross procession that goes through a city have to apply to the municipal authorities to get permission for their event: the city administration, in turn, gives orders to the traffic police and emergency services to make the event safe. The law’s technical definition of processions reflects the fact that they are public events involving others as observers and involuntary co-participants (those stuck in traffic, those stopping

11. In the region of north Karelia, divided by the Finnish-Russian border after the Winter War of 1940, it was allowed for the processions to cross the border at the beginning of the 1990s to visit a parish cemetery and other sacred places. These processions symbolically united “the region bisected by the border” and “literally helped people cross borders and visit their ancestral homelands” (VUOLA, 2020: 16; see also KALKUN, KUPARI, and VUOLA, 2018).

for a moment in order to take pictures of the exotic crowd, or those who maybe join it). By walking in city streets, the Orthodox *krestokhodtsy* make a statement about their existence and their right to the city (LEFEBVRE, 1968). In a similar way, the evangelicals of Paris organize annual marches for Jesus to reconquer public space in the city center (FER and MALOGNE-FER, 2017), while Latino Catholic migrants through their impressive Good Friday processions make their presence in their new home, the towns of the American South, visible (SEALES, 2008). In each case, a religious procession has an observer and an opponent, be it another religious or ethno-religious group or a secular urban dweller. To give an example from the post-Soviet world, Georgian Baptists organize an ecumenical procession in Tbilisi on Palm Sunday to claim their presence in a Georgian public space completely occupied by the Orthodox Church when it comes to religion (EASTWOOD, 2009; see also SAINT-BLANCAT and CANCELLIERI, 2014).

In all the cases mentioned above, processions have become “rituals of establishment or protests,” capable of maintaining or challenging institutional authority in many ways (SMITHEY and YOUNG, 2010: 395). Typically, they are organized by religious minorities holding a marginal position in their society. In the Russian case, the Russian Orthodox Church portrays itself as a “socially influential ‘public religion,’” but in fact it occupies quite a tenuous position in a highly secularized society (KORMINA and LUEHRMANN, 2018: 394) that tends to see processions and other public manifestations of religiosity as violent representations of religious and cultural anti-modernism. Hence, the main others for Orthodox believers in Russia are their secularized co-patriots who remind them about the actual cultural marginality of their counterpublic (KORMINA, 2023). At the same time, Orthodox Christianity is taken by many in the country in an essentialist way as an inherited religion, similar to the popular understanding of ethnicity. Everybody born Russian is by default Orthodox, even if she has never practiced this religion. *Krestokhodtsy* and other Orthodox zealots see themselves as an avant-garde for an Orthodox people whose religiosity is sleeping for the time being. By their public actions, they represent “the people” and wake it up.

Cross processions can indeed become rituals of protest, though in their own way. In 2021, due to coronavirus restrictions, all public gatherings were prohibited in Russia, including religious meetings (MITROFANOVA, 2021). These restrictions concerned such a sensitive topic as the purity of the Eucharist and caused heated debates within the Church on the topic of hygiene and holiness: is it safe to give wine and bread from one chalice and with one spoon (*lzhitsa*) to every believer (HOVORUN, 2021)? Or, in other words, can the secular authorities redefine the central ritual of Orthodox believers by mixing scientific logic with religious truth? Some priests and religious communities rejected the rules, which resulted in their split from the Church, and in one case even in the detention of a rebellious priest, Fr. Sergii (who happened to be the first abbot and builder of the monastery in Ganina Yama).



Figure 4. Father Sergii (Romanov) at the Cross procession, Ekaterinburg (July, 2019).

Credit: Jeanne Kormina

In this difficult case (KORMINA, 2020), the Church had no choice but to follow the state-sponsored restrictions, although it resisted secular control in other ways. When in Ekaterinburg that year the governor did not allow the tsar cross procession due to coronavirus restrictions, the head of the diocese Metropolitan Evgenii refused to obey. He wrote a post in his social media that was broadly disseminated by journalists:

The tradition of the people's procession (*narodnoie shestvie*) from the Church on the Blood to Ganina Yama has moved beyond a so-called "event" (*meropriatie*) and has become holy for tens of thousands of people. And now people will follow the holy way, this is obvious. (TRUSKOVA, 2021)

By saying this, the metropolitan openly criticized the regulation of religious processions and, more broadly, the intrusion of secular power into spiritual matters. In his message, the procession appears as a grassroots initiative (*narodnoie shestvie*) rather than a well-organized event (*meropriatie*), and so it cannot be stopped or banished.

In reality, this ban on the procession meant that the state would not provide its usual infrastructural support. In particular, on the night of July 17, 2021 the roads were not blocked by the traffic police; as traffic continued in the streets, the procession had to move onto the pavement and stop while waiting for traffic lights to turn green. These unfavorable conditions obviously broke the dynamic of the “pious march,” as the religious procession crumbled into hundreds of pedestrians. However, quite quickly the *krestokhodtsy* started ignoring the traffic lights and occupied the whole road, as they would do under normal circumstances. The traffic police did not try to stop the flow of thousands of people headed by the bishop and started helping the *krestokhodtsy* to cross the streets (quite empty at night anyway). In other words, the Church asserted its right to hold a holy walk as usual. Nobody was punished.

The notion of collectivity evoked in the metropolitan’s words about a “people’s procession” is very central to Orthodox thinking and living in the world (AGADJANIAN and ROUSSELET, 2010). But what is the collective represented and prayed for by the participants in tsar cross procession and others? In pre-revolutionary Russia, processions were part of village or town festival culture: each parish had several processions a year organized either on a saint’s day, on days commemorating heavenly interventions in the life of the community (such as the miraculous appearance of an icon or the end of an epidemic), or to commemorate other events of local or sometimes national significance, such as the coronation of new emperors (SHEVZOV, 2004: 152). In contemporary Russia, *krestokhodtsy* often join processions that are not in their places of residence, and many national processions attract believers from all parts of the country. During their ritual marching, participants refer to national history rather than locally important events. The procession in Ekaterinburg is a case in point: participants come to this city because, for them, it is “the Russian Golgotha” due to the regicide. Thus, when walking in the streets of the sleeping city, they do not “claim the city”: they rather claim the country, which they re-Christianize with cross processions. Or, to be more precise, they do not really claim it in Lefebvre’s terms, as they use “a language necessarily foreign to the analysis of socioeconomic relationship” (CERTEAU, 2011: 17) in their rituals of spiritual resistance and other practices directed at creating and maintaining a Russian utopian space.

Conclusion: Orthodox Christian Citizenship?

In July 2022, Svetlana and her nine-year-old son from the town of Vikulovo in Tiumen’ region walked in the tsar cross procession for the third time. This time they and fifty other pilgrims from their diocese came to the procession “for only one purpose: to pray for peace in the whole world” (*za mir vo vsem mire*) (ANANINA, 2022). When Svetlana and her son came up to the white and

shiny Church on the Blood, they could not escape seeing the photo exhibition “Children of Donbass.” Two dozen huge black-and-white close-up portraits installed between a sculpture of the royal family in front of the church and its entrance basically told them that the war had started long ago and that Russia’s full-scale invasion of neighboring Ukraine, populated by many people of the same faith and speaking a very close language (WANNER, 2014), makes sense. To pray for peace in the world does not mean to protest the war. This pacifist formula, which has distinct Soviet roots (peace to the world, *miru – mir*), states the existence of an ideal world where there should be no wars. It signifies that Svetlana and the other *krestokhodtsy* want to be citizens of such a utopian world, and perhaps even feel like citizens of such a world during the collective prayer in the procession.

Cross processions, including the tsar procession, are “pious demonstrations” that make the sacred landscape of contemporary Russia visible and densely populated. Through their “ritual walking,” *krestokhodtsy* do not simply mark the space religiously, as immovable religious objects like churches, chapels, and memorial crosses do; they fill the space with the sound of their prayers, the rhythm of their moving bodies united in a specific choreography, and the representations of their invisible saintly co-workers in icons and church banners. They connect permanent religious markers into a sacred landscape and create a spiritual infrastructure that makes the spread of grace throughout their vast land possible. Like a magic needle, they sew together the space of the country, pulling its fragments towards each other and keeping them in place, in their utopian space at least.

The notion of utopian space was introduced by Certeau cursorily in the first part of his famous book *The Practice of Everyday Life* (2011 [1984]). For Certeau, space is created by practices as well as the texts that legitimize them; space also implies the realization of a certain social logic, including the notion of justice, and becomes the source of certain social emotions. Developing these ideas on the basis of Orthodox material, the article shows how utopian space is created and maintained in certain religious performances—cross processions—through bodily practices such as walking and collective singing, as well as through the language of spiritual warfare and the notion of spiritual seeing.

While I fully agree with James Bielo that “there are distinctly Christian modes of urban experience” (BIELO, 2013: 301), there is a significant difference in how Christian cultures conceptualize the city and work with a city space. Evangelicals, themselves the product of modernity, see the city as the natural place for their existence and religious action, and even their buildings are constructed in such a way that they blend in with the urban fabric. In marches inspired by the theology of spiritual warfare, they aim at reconquering the city from secular forces. For Russian Orthodox Christians, the city is basically a place unfit for a proper spiritual life. They fence off the buildings of their churches from the city and localize their centers of spirituality in monasteries and holy places outside city

walls, opposing “tradition,” which they defend and represent, to “modernity”; and they refer through their ecclesiastical architecture and church interiors to the specific reality of their “utopian space.” But more importantly, unlike religion in cities, which are fragmented, split, and divided and where religious groups through their processions and other public performances of piety assert their existence within an urban palette of diversity, Orthodox Christianity in Russia ignores diversity in its efforts at internal colonization. The *krestokhodtsy* see themselves as spiritual delegates of the whole country, of the *narod*, and their religious processions are powerful performances of this imagined unity.

Similarly, the historical drama of the regicide (or ritual murder, depending on the point of view) commemorated on July 17, took place in Ekaterinburg, but it does not really belong to this city, just like the remains of the royal family, which were buried in the royal burial place in Saint Petersburg (or, according to a more conspiratorial version, burned to ashes). For those who hold the latter version, officially recognized by the Church, their sovereign, like Christ, has passed into heaven without leaving earthly remains. And it is to this heavenly kingdom, governed by the Holy Tsar, their “utopian point of reference” (CERTEAU, 2011: 18), that they want to be loyal above all else.

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Connecting Earth and Heaven: Tsar Cross Processions, Spiritual Infrastructure, and Orthodox Christian Citizenship

This article develops Michel de Certeau's concept of utopian space and applies it to the Russian Orthodox realities, considering space as created by practices and legitimized by certain texts. It argues that Russian Orthodox utopian space evokes social emotions of collectivity and belonging. The article analyses how utopian space is created and maintained in popular religious performances through walking, prayer chanting, the language of spiritual warfare, and the notion of spiritual gaze. It focuses on the tsar cross processions in Ekaterinburg which commemorate the violent death of Nicholas II and his family in 1918.

Keywords: Orthodox Christianity, Russia, cross processions, utopian space

Relier la Terre et le Ciel : processions de la croix du tsar, infrastructure spirituelle et citoyenneté chrétienne orthodoxe

Cet article développe le concept d'espace utopique de Michel de Certeau et l'applique aux réalités orthodoxes russes, en considérant l'espace comme créé par des pratiques et légitimé par des textes spécifiques. Il soutient que l'espace utopique orthodoxe russe suscite des émotions sociales liées au sentiment d'appartenance collective. L'article analyse comment cet espace utopique est créé et maintenu dans des performances religieuses populaires à travers la marche, les chants de prière, le langage de la guerre spirituelle et la notion de regard spirituel. L'article se concentre sur les processions de croix du tsar à Ekaterinbourg, qui commémorent la mort violente de Nicolas II et de sa famille en 1918.

Mots-clés : orthodoxie, Russie, procession religieuse, espace utopique

Conectando la Tierra y el Cielo: procesiones de la cruz del zar, infraestructura espiritual y ciudadanía cristiana ortodoxa

Este artículo desarrolla el concepto de espacio utópico de Michel de Certeau y lo aplica a las realidades ortodoxas rusas, considerando el espacio como creado por prácticas y legitimado por textos específicos. Sostiene que el espacio utópico ortodoxo ruso evoca emociones sociales de colectividad y pertenencia. El estudio analiza cómo se crea y mantiene este espacio utópico en las representaciones religiosas populares mediante las marchas, los cánticos de oración, el lenguaje de la guerra espiritual y la noción de mirada espiritual. Se centra en las procesiones de la cruz del zar en Ekaterimburgo, que conmemoran la muerte violenta de Nicolás II y su familia en 1918.

Palabras clave: ortodoxia, Rusia, procesión religiosa, espacio utópico

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“A Right to the Square”

Practices of Urban Space Appropriation by the Religious Community of the Strastnoy Monastery in Moscow

Introduction

Pushkin Square is one of the central squares of Moscow.¹ It is famous not only among local residents, but also outside the capital: firstly, because of the most recognizable monument to Alexander Pushkin in Russia, and, secondly, because of the political rallies that take place there. Many Muscovites with whom my colleagues and I spoke referred to this square as “Moscow’s main one.” Unlike the Manezhnaya or Krasnaya squares, they consider it inhabited with a special energy: if something happens in the country, it will happen there. However, not all citizens share this belief. Some people do not attach much importance to it, simply crossing it as part of their daily routine. This was the case for me until November 16, 2016. On that day as I was crossing the square, as many locals do, I noticed two women kneeling in the center: I approached them and asked them what was happening. They explained that a convent had stood in this place until 1937. Now they pray for its reconstruction. Since then, I have conducted on-site observations and interviews with members of the Orthodox community of the Strastnoy (Passion) monastery.

This article analyzes the continuous effort to religiously mark the square made by these faithful in order to highlight the historical rootedness of the destroyed monastery. For them, the monastery’s seventeenth-century origin means the community possesses greater legitimacy to occupy the space. I thus come to the conclusion that the case of the Strastnoy monastery community demonstrates the situation of religious initiatives in contemporary Russia. Aware of their marginal position in public space, they still pursue their goal of restoring Orthodox order in the country. Unlike many other Orthodox groups, they seek non-conflictual ways of interacting with citizens and government institutions, appealing to historical memory and cultural heritage.

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Pushkin Square as a Mixed Place

The history of Pushkin Square eloquently illustrates the policy of the Russian state towards religion throughout the twentieth century. In 1928, an anti-religious museum was set in the church of the Strastnaya icon, a traditional way of fighting religion in the early Soviet period (KORMINA, 2020; KELLY, 2016). In 1937, the Strastnoy monastery was demolished, and in 1950, the Pushkin monument was moved to its place (thus Strastnoy square becoming Pushkin square). The crowning triumph of culture and secularism over religion was the construction of cinema *Russia* in this place in the 1960s. However, after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the emergence of state support for religion, the opportunity arose to revive lost shrines. Despite the fact that the revival of religion in Russia is taking place in slightly different ways than in Europe or the United States, if only because in these regions there was no violent prohibition of religious practices and militant struggle with religious figures, the processes of interaction between the religious and the secular that took place in Russia and American or European cities are typologically similar. This allows me to place my work within the broader context of the study of religion in contemporary cities (ORSI, 1999; BURCHARDT and BECCI 2013; SAINT-BLANCAT, 2019; KONG, 2008).

In the first part of my article's title, I use a paraphrase of the concept of "the right to the city" coined in 1968 by Henri Lefebvre (LEFEBVRE, 1996), which was subsequently applied by many researchers to study the interaction of various actors in the urban space, including in postsecular cities (BEAUMONT and BAKER, 2011; OOSTERBAAN, 2014; see also TOCHEVA, 2022).² As Lefebvre points out, "the right to the city" has nothing to do with law: in his conception, it is the right of a human to inhabit it. The "right to the city" enables one not just to occupy city space, but also to participate in its production (LEFEBVRE, 2015). This concept can be narrowed down to the right to some place—in my case a square. For other researchers, it is the right to a district (FENSTER, 2011), a shrine (BOWMAN, 2014), or a street (SUAREZ, 2017). Often, the actors operating in such places are either the representatives of different religious groups or secular and religious groups that claim the same space. Each group justifies the right to the space in its own way, and each chooses how to label the space so that others understand to whom it belongs. For describing such places, researchers use different terms ("contested, shared, mixed places"), the choice depending on the situation between the groups

2. The concept of postsecularity was popularized by the philosopher Jürgen Habermas (HABERMAS, 2008). However, empirical research has allowed for the concept to be refined, adding complexity and contextualization. The events of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have shown that religion has not disappeared in the modern world, but neither has it returned. If we use the term "return of religion," we would have to recognize that there was a time when society became completely secular and then became religious again in the same way as before.

in that place, conflictual or peaceful, which can change over time (HAYDEN, 2022). A more relevant term for such spaces is therefore Glen Bowman’s notion of “mixed” places (BOWMAN, 2015). This thesis about the changing nature of interactions in mixed spaces is also confirmed by my case, in which the coexistence of several actors in a square does not seem to be constant.

Another point made by Lefebvre is important for my research: “history and its consequences, ‘diachrony,’ the etymology of these or those loci, that is, everything that happened there, changing the terrain—all this is embedded in space. The past has left its traces on it—inscriptions, the lettering of time” (LEFEBVRE, 2015: 51). In variance with Lefebvre’s assertion, this case study demonstrates that the embeddedness of the historical presence of the Orthodox religion of Pushkin Square was not obvious to the immense majority of city dwellers until recently. The members of the community have provided specific labour in order to signal this Orthodox embeddedness. They use collective practices and material symbols to make it visible and tangible.

The situation in Pushkin Square differs from the usual examples of mixed places. Most studies focus on the coexistence in one sacred place of several religious groups, each of which considers this place its own.³ In Pushkin Square, in addition to the citizens who make their daily routes through the square, walking around it and admiring the fountain, there are groups that occupy the square at certain times for a specific purpose. The largest of these are protesters and participants in the annual Moscow International Film Festival. Apart from them, there are also rallies of political parties, such as the Communist Party of the Russian Federation. All of these are opposed by a religious group that is aware of the existence of other groups, but of which the others are unaware. When I asked participants in rallies whether they were aware that a religious community is organising prayers in the square, none of my respondents answered in the affirmative. Examples from other spaces in Russia suggest that if the walls of a temple or chapel begin to appear, the religious group will definitely be noticed, and then conflict cannot be avoided (KORMINA, 2020). In this respect, the discourse of struggle for space has so far characterised only the members of the community of the Strastnoy monastery, who are also the most tolerated group among all those who organise gatherings in this place, as state security does not prevent them from holding public gatherings, so-called “standings” (*stoiania*), and processions. In the preface to *Sharing the Sacra*, Glenn Bowman writes that when researching mixed places, it is important to pay attention to “the minute details of interaction, avoidance, imitation, affirmation, and disavowal by which members of interacting communities manage the presence of others” (BOWMAN, 2015: 4). In my study, all of these actions are not exhibited by all groups, but only by one: the religious community. For it alone, the place and its rituals create “images of imagined communities—past, present, and future—with which participants feel connected” (BOWMAN, 2016: 6).

3. For example, see BOWMAN, 2015; ALBERA and COUROUCLI, 2012; HAYDEN ROBERT M. et al., 2016.

The study draws on ethnographic fieldwork conducted not only among members of the Strastnoy community, but also among Muscovites and stakeholders who use the square. Since 2016, I have participated in numerous prayer meetings, post-prayer standing tea parties, and other activities, such as gatherings of community activists. Furthermore, I have observed contemporary political events taking place on the square. Interviews were focused on the organization of the Strastnoy community, its goals and internal relationships, and the history of the monastery and that of the movement. Most talks have been recorded over tea, which is a usual socializing practice in Russia. I joined the Strastnoy monastery group in the Russian social network VKontakte (2,322 participants), as well as a group in WhatsApp (thirty-three participants). Finally, I used information from media and social networks. Some topics my interlocutors skirted around, saying that I would find out everything in my own time. Most of the people involved in the prayer standings are aware of my research. The core of community is interested in my presentations about the Strastnoy monastery and is happy that I can tell the world about their initiative.

After a brief presentation of the history of the community, the article turns to analyzing the performative actions of its members, in particular the different forms of public prayer and cross procession. It describes other means of claiming the square, such as narratives, naming, and mental mapping. It analyses interactions with other occasional users of the square and with the police.

The Community of the Strastnoy Monastery

The Strastnoy monastery community has formed in 2006, with the initial goal of opposing a major redevelopment of Pushkin Square. A city project to reconfigure the square was proposed in the 1990s and included the construction of a tunnel, a shopping centre, and an underground parking—this project was abandoned in 2013, thwarting growing protests (ARGENBRIGHT, 2021: 130–131). Members of the community at the origin of the movement recall that the first meeting dedicated to the protection of the historic territory of the Strastnoy monastery took place on May 28, 2006. Organized on the sixth Sunday after Easter, it was meant to commemorate the first miracle of the Strastnaya icon. The first prayer meeting was held on the steps leading up to the cinema *Russia*. It was attended by representatives of several public organisations involved in the preservation of cultural heritage and the revival of Russia's moral values (*dukhovnye tsennosti*), including the regional association “Borodino 2012,” “the Old Moscow Commission,” the All-Russian public movement “People’s Sobor” (*Narodny Sobor*), and the All-Russian Society for the Protection of Monuments of History and Culture. The community of Strastnoy monastery grew out of this social movement. Its plan is, in the medium term, to build a chapel and, in the long term, to revive the monastery.

From that time, members of the community have been collecting signatures for the reconstruction of the monastery, which they hand over to the office of the patriarch. In 2014, Patriarch Kirill gave his blessing to continue collecting signatures. He referred to the Russian president’s decision to restore the Chudov and Voznesenskii monasteries in the Moscow Kremlin as a precedent.⁴ And in a resolution from April 3, 2017, Patriarch Kirill expressed support to begin building a memorial chapel or a small church in the square.⁵

The community is under the pastoral care of the Orthodox priest Alexii, rector of the church of the Assumption of Our Lady in Putinki, located not far from Pushkin Square. A former software engineer, he was ordained in 1996. Some community members belong to his church parish. Others belong to other parishes; they come only for prayer standings and priest Alexii is not their confessor. In the beginning, the prayer meetings were led by the first lay leader, Gennadii Pavlovich,⁶ president of the “Borodino 2012” regional association, the purpose of which is to promote Russian history and culture. He invited Father Alexii to provide pastoral care for the initiative group.

In 2012, they installed a commemorative stone⁷ with a small Strastnaya icon⁸ sealed on it behind the monument to Pushkin. The installation of this stone was made possible thanks to the efforts of the Moscow Patriarchate’s Architectural and Artistic Centre “Arkhkhram,” which in the late 1990s approved a programme with the Moscow city government to create memorial markers at the places of lost religious buildings.

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4. UNESCO experts opposed the idea of building these monasteries on the territory of the Moscow Kremlin. Thus, the authorities created an underground museum of the archaeology of the Chudov monastery, opened in 2020. See “Muzei arkhologii Chudova monastyrya...,” 2020.
 5. A copy of the document provided by Aida Melikhova is kept in the author’s personal archive.
 6. He said he thought of reviving the Strastnoy monastery starting from 1970. He and his acolytes also planned to restore the church of Christ the Saviour, a monumental Russian Orthodox cathedral in Moscow which was eventually rebuilt in the 1990s with the participation of the Strastnoy Orthodox community. See “Vladyka skazal: ‘Podnimaite narod!’” 2014.
 7. Commemorative stones do not necessarily evoke religion. On the erection of stones as signs preserving historical memory, see BOGUMIŁ, 2012.
 8. *Strastnaya* icon literally means “Our Lady of the Passion [of Christ].” This type of Theotokos icon is known in the Catholic Church as “Our Lady of Perpetual Succor” or “Our Lady of Perpetual Help.” See DAVID, 2016.



Figure 1. Commemorative stone with a small Strastnaya icon by Aida Melikhova, Pushkin square (2018).

This granite stele, with an irregular shape about half a meter high, is engraved with the image of the monastery and the following inscription: “The Strastnoy monastery in the name of the Most Holy Theotokos Strastnaya Icon stood here. It was founded in 1654 and destroyed in 1937. In the memory of the Strastnoy monastery and the 200th anniversary of the first divine liturgy in the name of the liberation of Moscow from Napoleon’s army in 1812.”

Credit: Nadezhda Rychkova

In 2015, members of the community registered the Revival of the Strastnoy Monastery Foundation. The latter is aimed at enabling them to attract sponsors. In 2020, the community achieved the return of part of the 930.9 square meter apartment building built in 1912. This is the only surviving building of the Strastnoy monastery. Part of it was transferred to the Moscow patriarchate by the arbitration court in February 2020.⁹ On October 11, 2021, the priest consecrated the rooms. Members of the community have plans to renovate them and create a chapel and a museum dedicated to the Strastnoy monastery there.

9. The rest of the apartment building (2,986.9 square meters) has been privatized and is not subject to transfer to the Church. The return of the buildings of former churches and a number of other objects to the Russian Orthodox Church is carried out on the basis of the federal law “On the Transfer of State or Municipal Property to Religious Organizations” adopted in 2010.

In addition to the priest, the community of the Strastnoy monastery has a lay leader, Andrei. Officially, he is the chairman (*predsedatel'*) of the community. He performs the standing prayer when the priest is not present, manages bureaucratic issues, maintains a group on social networks, and informs members about upcoming holidays and meetings. Andrei joined the community in 2007. The priest proposed him as a candidate for the role of chairman in 2019. The priest does not dictate his own will, but God's: “So God has ordered,” one of my interlocutors told me.

At present, the core of the community consists of fifteen to twenty people. They participate in meetings where the community's tasks are discussed, minutes taken, and decisions made. Most of the members are over fifty years old. Sometimes passersby join the community during a standing, returning regularly thereafter. The largest number of people that I have observed congregate for the Strastnaya icon feast on August 26 was in 2019 when about 100 people were present. Sometimes only two to three people participate in the Saturday group vigil.

Some young people from the Orthodox youth club “Peter and Fevronia,” hosted by the priest's parish church, occasionally come to pray. Younger participants are involved in education, health care, museum work, publishing, small business, crafts, and music. Some run educational and outreach projects in various Moscow churches, while others organize pilgrimage trips, sing in a church choir, publish literature about religious shrines, paint icons, and participate in social movements that support Orthodox traditional values, such as “Many Children is Good.”

Many of those who were at the origins of the community are not physically able to come to the square but continue to support the initiative. Aida Melikhova¹⁰ belongs to this category. She has a doctoral degree in architecture. She contributes to the monastery website, writes reports on the need to restore the historical ensemble at Pushkin Square, and speaks at meetings of the city council and Orthodox conferences remotely. Her son, the architect Roman Tsekhanskii, who has passed away, is considered a key former member. He was the author of pre-project proposals for the partial phased restoration of the historical ensemble, including the monastery. His proposals received support from the authorities (MELIKHOVA and TSEKHANSKII, 2013: 143). Gender distribution, both in the core of the community and in its expanded membership, is about two women for every man. The past and current composition and paths to conversion are consistent with the usual trends documented in urban Orthodox communities (SERGAZINA, 2006; SIBIREVA, 2011).

10. Aida Melikhova died while I was working on this article.

Claiming the Square: Narrating, Naming, Mental Mapping, and Sounding

The community members believe that they possess expert knowledge of the early-twentieth century look of the square, in particular of the prominent place occupied by the monastery. In fact, none of them has ever seen the real monastery. Therefore, these faithful activists have collected sources that they consider authoritative and trustworthy: stories told by eyewitnesses, photographs, videos, and fiction help them picture a predominantly religious space in place of the contemporary secular square. Archival photos of the monastery, photos of the nuns who lived there, photos of past standings—all this is stored in albums in the social network VKontakte. In addition, before each commemorative day, the leader of the community publishes thematic photos and notes on WhatsApp.

The community and the priest claim the square by spreading a standard story about the origin of the monastery that works as a myth of origin. According to it, this place was not accidentally chosen for the construction of a church: a monastery was erected as a result of divine revelation. In the seventeenth century, a miracle-working icon of Our Lady, that is, Our Lady herself, showed the precise location on which a church was to be erected, effectively built in 1646:

On this day, a cart transporting an icon, the original of which is now kept in Sokolniki [district of Moscow] in the church of the Resurrection, passed by this place. The cart was heading to the place prepared and chosen by the Tsar Alexei Mikhailovich [for the erection of a church]. He had heard about this miracle-working icon from Palitsa village in the Nizhny Novgorod region and ordered it to be delivered to Moscow; a place was prepared for it. On this day, the cart stopped right there under the stairs [of the contemporary cinema hall], at the base of the stairs, where the altars were afterwards. And it just stood there like a stone. [Regardless of] how much effort people made to move the cart, they whipped the horses, it just stood there dead. Then they understood, our ancestors were quick to realize the spiritual reasons for the phenomenon. They realized the Mother of God wanted to settle down here, with this icon. They built the church, then the monastery, named it Strastnoy (Passion) after the Passion instruments of the murder and suffering of Christ. This is the church where the Mother of God was presented. (Priest Alexii, speech after a standing, August 26, 2018)

This narrative is not necessarily repeated every time in the above extended form; the priest often refers to it with a few words, as do the leader of the community and its members. The emphasis on the remote historical origin of the monastery is meant to demonstrate that the community has greater legitimacy to claim the square than its main secular occupants, such as the Pushkin monument, which was moved to this place in 1950, and the cinema hall, constructed in 1961. The narrative about the icon's choice of place is a typical folklore text

(REMMEL, 2014; ANTONOVA, 2015). These stories are needed for justifying the sanctity of this place and asserting the legitimacy of the existence of only religious buildings on it. This legend serves to validate the importance of prayer at this site for community members. It does not need any explanation—it is assumed that the participants of the prayer standings are familiar with narratives of this type, and most of them are generally involved in the “secret knowledge” that separates them from the rest, the “secular,” the “uninitiated” (LEVKIEVSKAYA, 2011: 413). Sergei Shtyrkov speaks of a kind of heightened semiotic sensitivity among the representatives of many religious traditions:

In a number of events and phenomena, the believer tries to discern signs of the constant divine presence in his life, which implies the identification of non-obvious meanings of ordinary and seemingly random events. The latter, thus, pass from the category of accidents to the status of signs and wonders (even if small, individual). (SHTYRKOV, 2019: 131)

Using the terms of a miracle, Aida Melikhova describes the events that led to disparate groups coming together to form a community. She uses the words “unexpectedly” and “accidentally” in inverted commas, implying the opposite meaning. Her reflections once again confirm the special view of the world of a religious person as “a constantly unfolding text composed of sign-events” (KORMINA, 2019: 76). The destruction of the monastery, according to the members of the community, also did not happen by chance, but by the will of God. The Russian people were unworthy of having it because they stopped praying in the holy places: in this way, a direct link is established between prayer in the square and the monastery. This is the work that the community does continuously—showing others what to do in this place.

The sacredness of the place is emphasized, besides the legendary component, by historical evidence. These narratives reveal another side of the monastery—not only a holy place for the Orthodox, but also a special monastery in the life of the country. Members of the community mention visits that the Romanov royal family is supposed to have paid to the monastery, from Alexei Mikhailovich to Nicholas II. Ambassadors and foreign royal visitors to the monastery are also mentioned, including King Oscar II of Sweden and Norway. A story based on this plot was told to me by a woman during my first encounter with the community. Her speech was full of different types of stories about the power of the place, its uniqueness, holiness, and prayerfulness. An abundant chain of plots was needed to convince me, an outsider, of the legitimacy and necessity of their goal:

When the Strastnoy monastery was built, any ambassador who came before Mikhail Fedorovich Romanov he would first come here to confess, take communion, and only then went to the tsar. (Woman, about 75 years old, November 16, 2016)

Spreading narratives about the square that reveal the history of the monastery and the acquisition of that place is, according to Michel de Certeau, a way of appropriating it, along with a number of other elements through which community members construct the monastery, invisible to the ordinary person but obvious to them: "... stories tell us what one can do in it and make out of it. They are treatments of space" (CERTEAU, 1984: 122). Besides, stories about the choice of the place by the icon and visits to the monastery by important personalities are complemented by the written texts by Aida Melikhova. Her last presentation, delivered at the twentieth Kadashev Readings conference in 2022,¹¹ was dedicated to the need to revive the Strastnoy monastery during "the special operation" in Ukraine. In her paper, she argues that the restored monastery will help restore order (*poryadok*), as its foundation back in the seventeenth century was closely connected with the reunification of Ukraine and Russia. Aida Melikhova notes that in 1654, Alexei Mikhailovich founded the monastery, and "in the same year the fateful decision of the Zemskii Sobor and the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine on the reunification of Ukraine with Russia was made."¹² In another work, she relates the destruction of the monastery and "the separation of Ukraine from Russia, which was decided in the early years of Soviet power, in the context of hastily invented borders between two twin states with a common culture and economy."¹³ These stories are added to a meta-narrative about the unique role of the Strastnoy monastery in Russia's fate. The Strastnoy monastery thus becomes one of the places on which order and balance in Russia depend. In this regard, efforts to restore religious life in the square take on a momentous significance on the scale of the entire country, thus convincing members of the community, outside observers, and the authorities of the legitimacy of the presence of religion and only religion in this place.

The appropriation of space also takes place through the creation of an imaginary map. Members of the community describe how churches were located on the territory of the monastery and how Strastnoy Square looked like in the pre-revolutionary period:

There were many churches here. There was the church of Anthony Theodosius—the founder of Russian monasticism, then here, in place of Pushkin, there was a chapel or the church of the great Alexii the Man of God, then the church of

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11. Since 2007, the "Kadashev Readings" have been regularly held in the church of the Resurrection of Christ in Kadashi with the blessing of the patriarch. The organizers of the Kadashev Readings are the Society of Zealots of Orthodox Culture and the museum "Kadashevskaya Sloboda."
 12. "The relevance of the Moscow Passion monastery in the new reality of the world order of 2022." Email sent on January 15, 2023 to the author by Aida Melikhova (archived in the author's archive).
 13. "Why is it necessary to rebuild the monastery of Passion?" Email sent on March 5, 2019 to the author by Aida Melikhova (archived in the author's archive).

Anastasia Uzoreshytelnitsa,¹⁴ Nicholas the Wonderworker, Michael the Archangel... It is huge... kings prayed here and people prayed very much. (Man, about 65 years old, April 15, 2017)

The physical existence of preserved objects makes the imaginary monastery more tangible. As Certeau writes, “narrative activity... thus continues to develop where frontiers and relations with space abroad are concerned. Fragmented and disseminated, it is continually concerned with marking out boundaries... stories ‘go in a procession’ ahead of social practices in order to open a field for them” (CERTEAU, 1984: 125). Storytelling thus fulfills a sanctioning function in this case—the community has every right to occupy the square.



Figure 2. A prayer meeting (*stoianie*) in Pushkin square (2022).
Credit: Nadezhda Rychkova

An additional attribute of the creation of an imaginary monastery is the accompaniment of sound—bell ringing, which in a physically existing church is always present. During festive prayer meetings, members of the community set up a portable bell tower; during ordinary standings, one member of the community rings hand bells throughout. At the same time, this sound does not block out all the city noise: it is even quieter than the festive music played during city events, it is drowned out by the sound of the machine that pumps out the public toilets near the commemorative stone. Thus, the sounds in the square are

14. In the Eastern Orthodox Church, St Anastasia is known as St Anastasia the Pharmakolytria, i.e. “Deliverer from Potions.”

“important expressions of the battle for the right to the city” (FENSTER, 2011: 80). They, along with the other elements described in this section, are necessary for the group to make the space their own. At the same time, the presence of other sounds in parallel to the bell ringing emphasizes that the square is first and foremost the space of the city, and community members can only embed themselves within it.

Performance as a Religious Marking of Space

Orthodox ritual in public is a key marker of the square as a religious space. As Chantal Saint-Blancat notes, citing Kim Knott, “through rituals, actors ‘take up space’ by appropriating spaces, and ‘make space’ by endowing them with a different meaning, regardless of the space they occupy” (SAINT-BLANCAT, 2019: 12). Every Saturday at 2 p.m., community members stand in front of the commemorative stone in prayer. In addition, they gather around the stone about twenty-seven times per year: on eight major church feasts and nineteen memorial dates of the monastery. Priest Alexii usually conducts standings on feast days. On Saturdays, the standings are led by the lay leader. The standing unfolds as follows: members of the community gather at the memorial stone and read a prayer—the akathist¹⁵ of the Most Holy Theotokos Strastnaya or another akathist, depending on the date. There are two models of reading the texts: if the meeting is led by Father Alexii, he reads the *kondak*,¹⁶ while all present sing the *ikos*. When Alexii is absent, each participant reads the whole akathist in turn. Each member of the community has a booklet—booklets are brought from the priest’s church and handed out to those present. Giving the text of the akathist to newcomers is a way to integrate them into the collective prayer. Nobody remains without praying: everyone and all together.¹⁷ After reading the akathist, everyone gathers in a cross procession around the territory that once belonged to the monastery, that is, the entire square. The procession begins and ends at the commemorative stone. Walking from the stone, members of the community go through imaginary gates beyond the imaginary walls of Strasnoy monastery. According to a preserved plan, the gate was located on the site where the Pushkin monument now stands.¹⁸

15. An akathist is a type of hymn usually recited by Eastern Orthodox or Eastern Catholic Christians, dedicated to Our Lady, one of the persons of the Holy Trinity, a saint, or a holy event (SHEVZOV, 2006).

16. A *kondak* is a short chant in honour of a saint or feast. The *kondak* is followed by an *ikos*, which elaborates on the thought of the *kondak*.

17. For a similar example, see AGADJANIAN, 2011; LUEHRMANN, 2016.

18. The community actively discussed the location of the Pushkin monument. On the one hand, they call it the “keeper of the place,” which saved the square from the erection of new buildings. On the other hand, its presence in the place of the altar is considered blasphemous.

Above the gate was a bell tower and the gate to the church of St Alexii the Man of God. The procession stops at important memory places for a short prayer: the apartment building, under the stairs of the cinema hall, and before the Necropolis. Here the members of the community commemorate dead people whose life was connected with the Strastnoy monastery. Among them are the new martyrs of the Strastnoy monastery executed and buried at the Butovo site (ROUSSELET, 2007; CHRISTENSEN, 2018) and dead members of community and unknown people whose bones were found during the renovation of the square in 2013.



Figure 3. Necropolis, Pushkin square (2020)

In 2013, the community members placed a monument over the burial with the inscription: “Necropolis of the Strastnoy monastery, seventeenth-twentieth century. Here lie the remains of people collected by the Strastnoy monastery community during the renovation of the square in 2013.”

Credit: Nadezhda Rychkova

The procession is led by men carrying placards stating “For the revival of the Strastnoy monastery” and icons, followed by women, many of whom have icons in their hands or hanging from their necks. Some icons are kept in the church of the Assumption of Our Lady in Putinki and brought out on the occasion of this cross procession. Some participants bring extra icons with them, which they lend to participants who do not have them. During the procession, the participants sing uninterruptedly “Our Lady, rejoice” or, on the days following Easter, “Christ has risen from the dead.”

The final episode of the standing is a priest’s sermon or a speech by the community leader if the priest is not present. Usually, the talk is about the fate of the monastery or the present struggle for its restoration. After religious celebrations,

often, all the participants go to the refectory of the church of the Assumption of Our Lady in Putinki or to the church itself to drink tea and exchange news, with stories about Orthodox miracles being the most popular topic.

Before my arrival, there was a split in the community as to how to act in the square: actively and loudly or quietly. Even though the members dislike discussing the quarrel, Father Alexii sometimes mentions it, calling the loud mode “climbing the barricades” (*lezt’ na barrikady*). He advocates silent prayer. All members of the community can be divided into loud activists and walkers with the cross (*krestokhodtsy*), with the former having been much more numerous at the beginning of the movement. According to community members, in the beginning, the priest also supported the path of “manifestations and public action.” This mode of action caused problems and did not lead to the desired results. Then the priest suggested holding only weekly prayers and processions, which bore fruit—the community was given part of the building of the former apartment house. Now the majority are *krestokhodtsy* who believe in the efficacy of silent prayer.

Some members of the community still think that they need to be more radical in their activity. For example, they believe that signs should be put up to describe the history of the place and red tape should be placed around the place where they think the thrones used to stand so that people do not trample over them. However, the priest and the community leader have a different opinion, as seen in the following dialogue from a chat in a WhatsApp group (February 21, 2022):

WOMAN (in her late forties). Does anyone have a map of the monastery to determine the exact location of the altars and thrones? I will personally bring stakes and white and red tape and will write notices that there is NO WALKING there!

COMMUNITY LEADER. Dear T., to have a public discussion you must have the blessing of the community’s confessor, Father Alexii. You know that.

WOMAN. My heart bleeds. For years on end. About these altars.

COMMUNITY LEADER: Talk to the confessor. Rallies (*mitingi*) won’t bring clarity. The closer to the monastery, the more important the obedience.

WOMAN. How we treat our shrines and restore structure will determine what will happen. How much blood will be shed. Whether there will be a restoration of the monarchy. We are slowing down a lot.

The community leader referred to a rally to describe the loud mode of action. In asking for obedience, he called on his interlocutor to align her actions with the will of God transmitted through the priest. This position is consistent with the community’s belief that the restoration of the monastery evolves the way it does not because people have decided so, but according to God’s will. In their understanding, finding the correct way of acting can affect the destiny of the country.

The priest often reminds of this in his sermons after the prayer meetings:

The akathist of the Passion icon and the Passion icon itself are more appropriate than ever in this place in Moscow, because here [this square is popularly referred to as Pushka—literally cannon], here all kinds of slogans are fired, here all kinds of appeals are fired, forgetting that the fate of Russia, the fate of the state is decided not in rallies or on barricades, but in the silence of monasteries, temples, and cathedrals. There, in silent prayer, in humble appeal to God, in repentance, repentance brings us back to the origins of all upheavals and revolutions. In this penitential prayer in the silence of the monasteries the fate of Russia is decided. (Priest Alexii, speech after a standing, August 26, 2022)

This position of the priest indicates that he understands the consequences of violating the norms accepted in public space. He realizes that belonging to a privileged Orthodox community supported by the state will not ensure the complete acceptance of the authorities for their behavior in the secular central square of the capital. Only legitimate interaction with the authorities through confirmation of all steps with documents can help them move towards their goal. Humility and submission to the will of God in the mouth of the priest, but in reality to the institutions of power is a subtle position developed by the community over quite a long stay in the square. This position helped them gain a foothold in this place and conduct quiet prayer, which both this place and the country as a whole need.

Researchers of religious practices in European cities note that “public religious ritual is not only a process of identity labeling, a demonstration of the collective self or a testimony of faith. It is also a clear desire for public visibility” (SAINT-BLANCAT and CANCELLIERI, 2014: 4). However, in their case, there are migrant minorities who, through religious rituals in public spaces

demand social recognition, which implies becoming full actors capable of demonstrating their identity and specificity in public space. We are dealing with a strong symbolic message: people of low socio-economic status, usually pushed to the periphery, are conquering the “centre,” even if through temporary but ‘legitimate’ appropriation. (SAINT-BLANCAT and CANCELLIERI, 2014: 4)

All these statements are true in my case, with the only difference being that the actors are representatives of the dominant state-supported religion in Russia. At the same time, their atypical presence in public space predetermined the reaction of some citizens who consider the community to be a sect, publishing photos of those standing in social networks with this caption. As it turns out, the community of the Strastnoy monastery looks not like a representative of Russian Orthodoxy, but like a minority (like the migrants in the example of Saint-Blancat) in the eyes of others (KORMINA, 2023). When confronted with a religious ritual, the townspeople, just as in Saint-Blancat’s example, do not understand what is going on, why these people have come to this square, and what they want.

The idea of making a loud statement about oneself and enclosing the area with ribbons can increase misunderstandings over the role of the community. This may cause other urban-dwellers to think about taking over the urban space and turning them against the community. In fact, a conflict has already occurred. Near the necropolis, someone from the community installed a large wooden cross, and the burial area was surrounded by a chain—the whole thing began to resemble a real cemetery. Before the Moscow Film Festival, the city authorities dismantled the cross, explaining to the community that the festival organisers had complained. Here is how Father Alexii recalls it:

One day we woke up and there were crosses put up, chains fenced around everything—a challenge to the city authorities. No one wanted to set up a cemetery here with crosses. This is the centre of Moscow—it’s a cannon—anything goes wrong (off) and they shoot! They shoot at anything. Everything must be balanced and timely (Priest Alexii, speech after a standing, August 26, 2023).

The path that the community has chosen now can be called an intellectual struggle. The following sections will talk about its manifestations when it clashes with other actors in the square.

Claiming Democracy or Walking on Buried Bones?

As I am writing, the square has four dominant features: the monument to Alexander Pushkin, the commemorative stone with the small Strastnaya icon, the fountain, and the cinema hall, located on one line. These four objects correspond to the four groups of actors who identify with the square: respectively, political activists, the religious community of the Strastnoy monastery, ordinary citizens and consumers of citywide activities, and participants in the Moscow International Film Festival.

The community members and political protestors differ in the ways they occupy the square; their respective claims are expressed through postures and movements. The Orthodox group uses the commemorative stone as if it were an altar: the icons brought for the prayer service are leaned against it and the praying people face it, turning their bodies towards the east. Often, people with icons line up opposite to other participants, making an imaginary altar. According to community members, behind the stone was the entrance to the church of the Strastnaya icon of the Mother of God, so that by standing in a certain way people behave as if they were in the former church.¹⁹

¹⁹. For a similar example, see BOWMAN, 2014: 129–130.

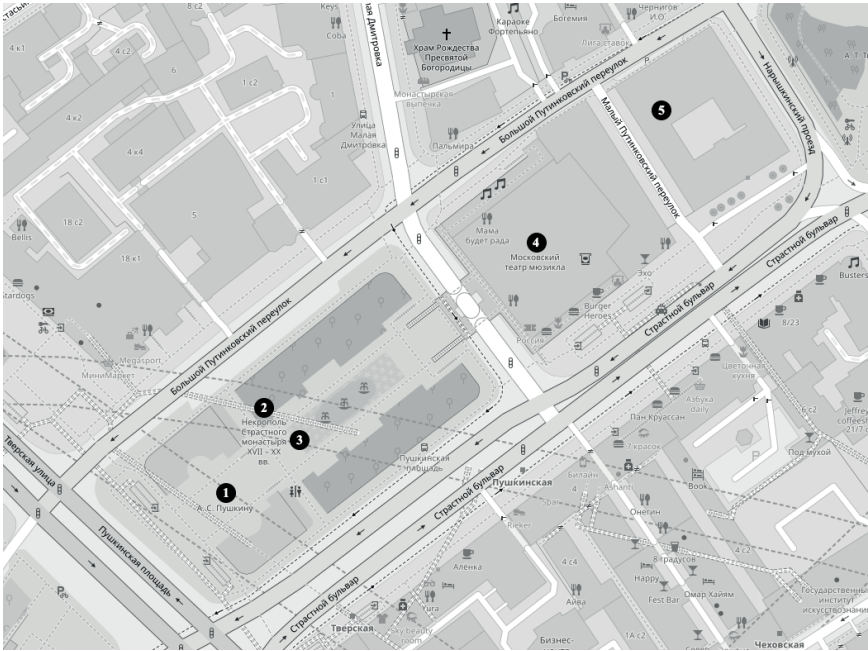


Figure 4. Map of Pushkin square, Moscow.

1. Monument to A.S. Pushkin
2. Necropolis of Strastnoy monastery
3. Commemorative stone
4. The cinema *Russia*
5. Preserved building of the rental house

Credit: OpenStreetMap France (background map by OpenStreetMap France, CC BY-SA), the OpenStreetMap project and its contributors (OpenStreetMap contributors, ODbL)

On days when there are no other actors in the square, their space expands—the procession leaves the imaginary monastery through an imaginary gate near the monument to Pushkin and goes around the entire territory of the monastery. The procession returns to the commemorative stone, where, after religious practices, the members of the community socialize with each other. The lost infrastructure of the monastery is delineated by the trajectory of the procession.²⁰ The religious space is undoubtedly dynamic, a point made by Knott (2005: 165–166) based on her reading of Lefebvre. For these believers, religious space is where the practices takes place.

²⁰. For a similar example of recreating invisible infrastructure, see KORMINA, 2022: 183.

Participants in political rallies always face the Pushkin monument.²¹ They usually occupy the opposite side of the monument, with the stairs leading to the statue separating their side from that of the Orthodox believers in a way so, in the case of small gatherings, the two groups do not notice each other's presence.

In the case of larger political rallies, the participants leave a small space around the praying members of the community that they dare not breach, as if there was a wall between them. Interestingly, once the community leaves its place, the commemorative stone stops being a religious marker—the political activists fill the void by standing with their feet where they did not dare to step during the prayer. The religious space ceases to exist as soon as the religious practice ends. However, this is so for the uninitiated; members of the community think otherwise. For community members, in addition to the visible objects representing the Strastnoy monastery, there are invisible ones. Some are material, in particular the foundations of the monastery preserved under the asphalt covering. But others can be sensed only by the initiated faithful. The community members claim that angels are present in this place even though they are invisible.

Pushkin Square is under the constant supervision of the authorities, represented by the police. The aim of the authorities is to keep the space as it is “conceived” (LEFEBVRE, 2015: 47, 52), which means that in a situation of conflict, they will completely deny access to the square. At such times, neither protestors nor community members are given access to the square. When political protestors and community members are present simultaneously, they find a *modus vivendi*, even though they dislike each other. It is at such moments that clashes and interactions take place. For members of the community, prayer meetings are of utmost importance; during these meetings, they communicate their message to the other group. It is equally important that the message is understood correctly (WOOD, 2015), so members of the community stop and speak to anyone who shows interest.

A clash occurred during a 2019 rally, where people demanded that independent candidates be allowed to run for the State Duma. The square was surrounded by metal fences and several thousand people gathered around it. This event took place on a Saturday, the day when the community holds prayer meetings in the square. Since access to the square was closed, the community gathered under the stairs of the cinema, and then the traditional procession took place. The procession with banners, icons, and singing prayers was met with disapproving shouts, whistles and questions: “Are you sent by Putin?” The president's active participation in Orthodox festivities, the Church's support for state messages, and the joint promotion of the so-called traditional Orthodox values have led those critical of the regime to believe that any Orthodox community supports

21. The westward orientation of the Pushkin monument is criticized by community members. I have examined Pushkin monument narratives in another article (RYCHKOVA, 2021).

the authorities. Some activists wanted to know more about the community, for example by asking whether the religious procession had been authorized. I believe this question was prompted by the popular perception that Orthodox Christians can do whatever they want and do not even need to obtain permission to speak in public, while political activists have to negotiate with the local administration every time they take to the streets of the city. The leader of the community gave the standard answer:

Three years ago we submitted documents to the legal department of the mayor’s office and received an answer that the prayer does not need sanctioning. On the other hand, we have two blessings from the holy patriarch. (Andrei, leader of the community, August 3, 2019)

One of the protestors asked about the purpose of the Orthodox presence here and about the political views of the cross procession’s participants. Members of the congregation skirted the hot topic, because most of them support the authorities, and focused on the history of the place, on the importance of preserving its historical memory by creating a museum and restoring the chapel, which will resemble, they explained, a seventeenth-century bell tower. They spoke purposefully about *restoration* because they are aware of public resentment regarding the construction of new churches. Members of the community have repeatedly voiced fears that when the construction starts, conflicts with citizens cannot be avoided.

The main message that the community members wished to convey to the political activists was the following: your rallies deprive this place of sanctity, your behavior in this place is “dancing on bones.” The approving statements of some participants of the rally about the noble goal of the community and the disdainful attitude of the majority are a good illustration of Wood’s thesis, who noted that society is able to perceive religious messages when it is ready, when there are good conditions for this (WOOD, 2015).

“Today Everyone Was Supposed to Shoot the Artists, but They Filmed Us”

For many years, the opening of the Moscow International Film Festival has taken place right on the square, in the open air: the staircase leading to the cinema turns into a red carpet. On August 26, 2022, for the first time, the most important events of both groups coincided: the opening of the festival and the main feast of the Strastnoy monastery, the celebration in honour of the Strastnaya icon. The square that day was fenced off in a way that an alternative place under the stairs was not available. The community decided to hold a prayer service in front of the Pushkin monument, where the throne of the church of St Alexii the Man of God used to stand.

The community members usually gather at 2 p.m.. On that day, they gathered at 5 p.m., assuming that the opening of the festival should be already over. In fact, both events started at the same time. Around 100 people gathered for the prayer. Police officers suggested that the group disperse. The community leader entered into a dialogue with the policemen and mostly told the story of the place. They ended up shaking hands and parted friends. Neither during COVID restrictions nor during any other events did the police disperse the gathered community. None of the other groups have been granted such privileged treatment. The authorities' leniency reinforced the faith of the community members in their legitimate presence. For them, through the community, Our Lady herself expressed her authority.

On this day, some passersby joined the prayer group. Others were interested in what was going on; they heard what was for them a new history of Moscow. Still others took photos. Members of the community answered questions and handed out the akathist to those who showed interest. They behaved in a hospitable manner, as if they were the rightful masters of the place. The degree of visibility was aptly summed up by one woman from the community: "Today everyone was supposed to shoot the artists, but they filmed us."



Figure 5. The *stoianie* during the Moscow International Film Festival (2023).

Credit: Nadezhda Rychkova

In moments of co-presence, the religious community, virtually invisible on other days, reveals itself, emphasising its existence and informing others about the purpose of its presence. By telling the story of the Strastnoy monastery to other groups, the community asserts its right, stemming from history, to the territory.

Conclusion

The Strastnoy monastery community perfectly illustrates how the largest religious denomination in Russia tries to legitimate claims not only for the return of property that belonged to the Church before the USSR’s formation,²² but also to society’s recognition of some spaces as primordial Orthodox. According to this group, their actions have received sanction from above: the Mother of God stopped the cart at the site of today’s Pushkin Square to create a place for people to pray. The authorities do not challenge the validity of this claim. In addition, the appeal to history, an essentialist understanding of religion, and reference to the successful experience of building churches in place of the destroyed ones²³ allow the community members to feel that they are the only full owners of the place, called to overcome temporary chaos and restore order in the square and the country through prayer. Although other groups come to this place, according to the community they do not have legitimate authority to own it. They are guests, and the religious group is the host, although a hospitable one, which, for now, cedes its home, sharing it with outsiders, even with those who do not behave as required.

Robert Hayden, studying the practices of communities simultaneously present in mixed places, identified several particularly popular ones in different countries that are designed to identify differences between communities: “the dual identity of a deity or saint; separate rites/rituals; temporary separation of rituals into different communities; maintaining invisible boundaries” (HAYDEN, 2022: 77–78). I have applied Hayden’s observations to the groups present on Pushkin Square. Surprisingly, all four practices are followed only by members of the community. Firstly, Pushkin is also a saint for them, as he has been protecting the place from development for many years. For other groups, a memorial stone or necropolis does not represent sanctity, which is confirmed by their actions described in the article. Only the members of the community find out in advance which groups may coincide with them in time and try to reschedule

22. For example, the recent resonant case of amendments to the law on transferring icons kept in museums to the Church. See “RPTS predlozhila...,” 2022.

23. As an example, members of the community refer to the story of the cathedral of Christ the Savior.

either the time or the method of prayer. Other groups do not even try to observe the time interval, “maintain invisible boundaries and ensure that some spaces remain inviolable,” or “observe the unspoken rules of non-interference” (HAYDEN, 2022: 78). Protesters or participants of the Moscow Film Festival do not worry about the presence of a religious group, about the time of its ritual. If they want to occupy the square, they coordinate their actions with the city authorities, and that’s it. The city authorities take into account only the interests of large groups: they block access to the square during the festival, fence it off during rallies, and do not let even a loyal religious community through. This was the case during the rally I described, when members of the community tried to explain to the police that they had the right to be in the square. However, the authorities treated them the same way as the protesters, leaving them behind fences. Thus, despite state support of the Church, in contemporary Russian society, religious groups trying to symbolically take over urban facilities or spaces during tense periods are perceived by the police on an equal basis with other actors: they are also not allowed to enter the square, and in the early years they were even taken to police stations. At the same time, other social groups perceive the community, and more broadly other religious actors, as a marginal minority, tolerated in public space only until religion begins to displace secularism and a mixed place becomes controversial.

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“A Right to the Square”: Practices of Urban Space Appropriation by the Religious Community of the Strastnoy Monastery in Moscow

In post-secular cities, many representatives of different religions claim places that, for one reason or another, they consider theirs. Researchers call such places mixed. Pushkin Square in Moscow, one of them, is used simultaneously by different groups. The first group is the community of the Strastnoy monastery, whose members have been striving for eighteen years to make their religious presence a familiar feature of this square, through collective practices and material symbols. However, they constantly face the presence of other groups that force them to adapt and explain their presence. This article explores the case of the Strastnoy monastery community, which sheds light on the situation of religious initiatives in contemporary Russia. They are aware of their marginal position in public space: however, pursuing their goal of restoring Orthodox order in the country, they are looking, unlike many other Orthodox groups, for non-conflictual ways of interacting with citizens and government institutions, by appealing to historical memory and cultural heritage.

Keywords: Orthodox community, Russia, mixed places, religious practices

« Un droit à la place » : Pratiques d’appropriation de l’espace urbain par la communauté religieuse du monastère de Strastnoï à Moscou

Dans les villes post-séculières, de nombreux représentants religieux revendiquent des lieux qu’ils considèrent, pour une raison ou une autre, comme les leurs. Les chercheurs qualifient ces lieux de mixtes. La place Pouchkine à Moscou est l’un de ces lieux, utilisée simultanément par différents groupes. Le premier est la communauté du monastère Strastnoï, dont les membres s’efforcent depuis dix-huit ans de faire de leur présence religieuse un élément familier de cette place, par le biais de pratiques collectives et de symboles matériels. Ils sont cependant constamment confrontés à la présence d’autres groupes, qui les obligent à s’adapter et à justifier leur présence. Dans cet article, la communauté du monastère de Strastnoï illustre la situation des initiatives religieuses dans la Russie contemporaine. Consciente de sa position marginale dans l’espace public, cette communauté poursuit néanmoins son objectif de restaurer l’ordre orthodoxe dans le pays. Elle cherche, contrairement à de nombreux autres groupes orthodoxes, des moyens non conflictuels d’interagir avec les citoyens et les institutions gouvernementales, en faisant appel notamment à la mémoire et à l’héritage culturel.

Mots-clés : communauté orthodoxe, Russie, lieux mixtes, pratiques religieuses

«Derecho a la plaza»: Prácticas de apropiación del espacio urbano por la comunidad religiosa del monasterio Strastnoy de Moscú

En las ciudades postseculares, muchos representantes de distintas religiones reclaman lugares que, por una u otra razón, consideran suyos. Los investigadores llaman a estos lugares mixtos. La plaza Pushkin de Moscú, una de ellos, es utilizada simultáneamente por distintos grupos. El primer grupo es la comunidad del monasterio de Strastnoy, cuyos miembros llevan dieciocho años esforzándose por hacer de su presencia religiosa un rasgo familiar de esta plaza, mediante prácticas colectivas y símbolos materiales. Sin embargo, se enfrentan constantemente a la presencia de otros grupos que les obligan a adaptarse

y explicar su presencia. Este artículo explora el caso de la comunidad del monasterio de Strastnoy, que aclara la situación de las iniciativas religiosas en la Rusia contemporánea. Son conscientes de su posición marginal en el espacio público: sin embargo, persiguiendo su objetivo de restaurar el orden ortodoxo en el país, buscan, a diferencia de muchos otros grupos ortodoxos, formas no conflictivas de interactuar con los ciudadanos y las instituciones gubernamentales, apelando a la memoria histórica y al patrimonio cultural.

Palabras clave: comunidad ortodoxa, Rusia, espacios mixtos, prácticas religiosas

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Saint Catherine's Cathedral in Ekaterinburg and Disputes over the Common Good

The year 2023, tricentenary of the foundation of the city of Ekaterinburg, was to mark the reconstruction of Saint Catherine's cathedral. The original cathedral was blown up with dynamite on April 6, 1930, after the president of the city's executive committee signed the decision to destroy the building in order to use the stones as construction materials.¹ However, no new cathedral has been built since. Covid-19 delayed construction; the St Catherine Foundation, created to realise the project, instead prioritised the fight against the pandemic. Then Russia declared war on Ukraine. On December 7, 2022, St Catherine's day, celebrating the city's protectress, Metropolitan Evgenii (Kul'berg) of Ekaterinburg and Verkhotur'e affirmed:

It is today the celebration of St Catherine, protectress of the city of Ekaterinburg. According to tradition, we make a procession from the Church of the Trinity to Saint Catherine's Chapel. We pray to God, we pray to our protectress. We pray of course for the soldiers who defend us today, in the cold and in bad times We ask God for victory. Usually, on this day, we ask when St Catherine's Cathedral will be built. I respond very simply: after the victory. This will be the church of the victory of good over evil. (GEORGIEVA, 2022)

Three successive proposals for the project, involving different construction sites, pitted one part of the city's population against local political authorities and the eparchy. The protest movement culminated in 2019, after those in power decided to build the cathedral in a park in October Square, on the banks of the city pond, next to the Sverdlovsk State Academic Drama Theatre and steps away from the building of the Sverdlovsk regional government. In March–April, opponents, including the association Public Parks and Gardens of Ekaterinburg—a principal actor in the protests since its creation in 2017—organised flashmobs (called *pereklichka*).

1. Two other churches in the city were destroyed in 1930: the cathedral of the Epiphany and the St Maximilian church. Reconstruction of the latter was completed in 2013.



Figure 1. The park in October Square, on the banks of the city pond, Ekaterinburg (September 2019).

Credit: Kathy Rousselet

On March 2, they collected signatures against the cutting down of trees. On March 16, a concert with a dozen musical groups from the city took place at the El'tsin Centre (a social, cultural and educational space inaugurated by Vladimir Putin and Dmitri Medvedev in 2015 and considered a zenith of liberalism); signatures were collected there against the construction of the cathedral on the site chosen by the local authorities; the same day, a parody of collective prayer was organised in the public garden. On April 7, the opponents, essentially youth mobilised through social networks, “embraced” the public garden (*obnimashki*). As for those who supported the construction of St Catherine’s cathedral in the public garden, they gathered in numbers for a prayer service (*moleben’*) on March 17, and at Easter. The protest actions were amplified on May 13, 14 and 15, when fencing was installed—according to the media, the number of demonstrators, mostly youth, oscillated between 1,500 and 5,000; violent incidents broke out, incited by members of the mixed martial arts club of the Russian Copper Company (RMK), owned by the local oligarch Igor’ Altushkin, one of the two financiers of the project (the other being Andrei Kozitsyn, former director of the Ural Mining and Metallurgical Company (UGMK), the other big enterprise in the region). This protest movement, which was amply commented on by international media, ended after the intervention of Vladimir Putin himself and his

call for a poll.² Following the poll on October 13, 2019, in which over 100,000 people participated, it was decided to build St Catherine's cathedral on the site of an old hardware factory.³



Figure 2. The El'tsin Centre, Ekaterinburg (September 2019).

Credit: Kathy Rousselet

The commentators all underlined that these protests were not of an anticlerical nature,⁴ even though critiques were issued against religious elites—in the same way as against other elites—and even though the protest took the form of parodies of prayer. Like in many other cities in Russia, the inhabitants of Ekaterinburg descended into the street to defend their urban space. While the Russian regime has considerably hardened since 2012, citizens did not hesitate to protest in 2019 to protect their environment. What is more, they opposed a decision made by

2. His intervention seems to have been due to the fear of a contagion of protest in other cities in Russia.
3. The population was asked “Which of the following options for the location of St Catherine’s cathedral do you support?” They had to choose between the territory of the former Ural old hardware factory (17 Gorky street); and the area behind Makarovskii bridge, within the limits of Energostroitelei street, the Rabochaia Molodezh’ embankment, and Cheliuskintsev street.
4. For an analysis of the religious situation in Ekaterinburg in 1998, see “Issledovanie religioznoi situatsii...” 1998, and more recently GRISHAEVA et al., 2017.

the local authorities without any consultation with the population. These citizens wanted to be able to intervene in local issues. The demonstrations in Ekaterinburg are inscribed in a context of similar protests in other regions of Russia, recalling conflicts that developed in Moscow around Program 200, consisting of constructing churches in the peripheral neighbourhoods of the capital, among them Yasenevo and Torfianka (ARGENBRIGHT, 2016). They are also situated in both a recent and more ancient history of protest in the Ural capital. Finally, the case allows us to examine battles between the religious and secular, in which urban space is often the theatre in the post-socialist world (CAPELLE-POGĂCEAN, 2008; KORMINA, 2021; DARIEVA and KORMINA, 2023). Starting from the case of St Catherine’s cathedral of Ekaterinburg, this study shows the political issues of the religious marking of urban spaces in post-Soviet Russia from the 1990s to the 2020s. The proposed reconstruction of the cathedral in the public garden and the mobilisations it provoked allow us to understand how church–state relations have evolved, at least at the local level. They underline the plural positionings, within the community of believers, as to the place the Church should hold in the public space; one finds Orthodox believers in both camps. Regarding the debates around the construction of the Romanian People’s Salvation cathedral in Bucharest, Antonela Capelle-Pogăcean has underlined the “extreme plasticity of the referent that lends itself to multiple meanings”; she adds that “Orthodoxy is therefore not at the centre, it circulates under diverse forms between different social spaces and expresses multiple aspirations” (CAPELLE-POGĂCEAN, 2008: 211). This is the same plasticity that I observe in Ekaterinburg.

The study unfolds in three sections. It shows the growing importance, since the 1990s, of the St Catherine’s cathedral reconstruction for political and religious elites, against the backdrop of opposition between Ekaterinburg and its region. Concentrating on the very moment of mobilisation around the square, it then explains how the choice of a specific site divided the population of Ekaterinburg, as much believer as non-believer, and analyses the plurality of positionings; it explains that it was above all in the name of the defence of their civic rights, and not against the growing place of the Church in the public space, that a part of the population mobilised. Finally, the study analyses the construction and radicalisation of political imaginaries around this disputed space.

The research relies first on interviews undertaken in September 2019 in Ekaterinburg with priests and laypeople in different parishes, representatives of the eparchy and local activists from the association Public Parks and Gardens of Ekaterinburg. Research among religious authorities and parishioners favourable to the construction of the cathedral in the public garden was facilitated, and also guided, by contacts established with the public relations manager of the eparchy and with believers at the heart of my earlier fieldwork. Therefore, the people I encountered who were favourable to the construction of the cathedral belonged essentially among the venerated—to various degrees—of the imperial

family, an environment with which I had become familiar during my research on the commemoration of the assassination of Tsar Nicholas II, particularly by participating in the processions that take place each year in Ekaterinburg on July 16 and 17 (ROUSSELET, 2011); they belong to very conservative circles. Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine unfortunately prevented me from returning to the Urals. While my French origin facilitated my entry into these circles in the 2000s–2010s, this same status hinders me today. I completed my research via email with an Ekaterinburg activist, articles published in the local and national Russian media, analysis of discussion threads on social networks—particularly the discussion thread of Public Parks and Gardens of Ekaterinburg on Facebook—and films created by activists. While these different sources allow me to show the spaces of controversy and to specify the actions taken by the protagonists, interviews with other religious actors would have without doubt unveiled a plurality of social and political positionings larger than that presented in this study.⁵

The Reconstruction of St Catherine's Cathedral as a Political Issue

In the economically flourishing region of Sverdlovsk, the St Catherine's cathedral reconstruction project evolved in time with the evolution of relations between the Church, local political and economic authorities, in a context of competition or even conflict between the city and the region. The city remained very secularised in the 1990s, but the place of the Church in urban space expanded from the beginning of the 2000s, particularly with the construction of the Church on the Blood in Honour of All Saints Resplendent in the Russian Land (called more simply the Church on Blood) consecrated in 2003.

First a Project “From Below”

The recent story of St Catherine's cathedral began on April 18, 1991, when a dozen citizens planted a wooden cross in the place where the altar of the original cathedral had stood, with the blessing of then Archbishop Melkhisiedek (Lebedev) of Sverdlovsk and Kurgan.⁶ Over 58 metres tall, the original cathedral had been built in the baroque style in 1764 in the place currently known as Labour Square (formerly Church Square, Cathedral Square, St Catherine Square): it contained

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5. This research was completed in the context of the French-Russian project “Marquer l'espace par le religieux : une étude comparée de la présence de l'Église orthodoxe russe en Russie et en France (2019-2022),” financed by the FMSH, and coordinated by Detelina Tocheva and Jeanne Kormina.
 6. According to the story of Father Andrei, a Russian Orthodox priest I interviewed, this happened during the night and illegally since the land belonged to the state. All names were changed.

the relics of a local saint, St Simeon of Verkhotur'e. From 1960, the fountain Stone Flower, named after a fairytale by Pavel Bazhov, has stood at the same location. In 1997, the wooden cross was replaced by a metal cross: a chapel was built for the city's 275th anniversary thanks to a charitable foundation, the Institute of History and Archaeology, created by city economists, historians and business leaders.⁷ The chapel was consecrated on December 7, 1998.



Figure 3. St Catherine's chapel, built for the city's 275th anniversary, Ekaterinburg (September 2019).

Credit: Kathy Rousselet

In fact, they [the city government] wanted to construct a small church.... In a general sense, in the 1990s, there was not a lot of money. And the city government, I will say between us, did everything for the chapel to be as small as possible.... The chapel was 16.5 square metres. Any smaller would be impossible. I don't know, we even make some toilets more spacious now. (Father Andrei, September 10, 2019)

7. The president was a doctor in economics, the executive director a historian. "It was a truly courageous decision, not only because its implementation necessitated significant funds, but also because, during the years of the Soviet regime, the tradition of building churches had completely disappeared" (MAN'KOVA, 2000: 97).

In 2003, a capsule containing earth from the burial place of Vasilii Tatishchev, founder of Ekaterinburg, was placed in the chapel. For a long time, the chapel did not house a parish: “It was simply there, the people passed, lit a candle.”⁸ When the project emerged for the reconstruction of the cathedral, Akathists for the cathedral’s construction were organised at the request of the local archbishop, Vikentii (Morar’). Youth came from diverse parishes and organised meetings, concerts and other activities. The first liturgy took place during Easter 2014. Today, the parish numbers only around fifty people. The young have continued to come to the chapel for the Akathists but without frequenting the parish. It is without doubt a sign of the eparchy’s lesser interest in this place that the chapel was still not finished in 2019. Technical problems, such as ventilation, had still not been resolved, delaying the painting of the frescoes.

Cathedral Projects Against a Backdrop of Political Games

The political landscape of Ekaterinburg has been marked over the course of the past three decades by competition and conflicts between the authorities of the region—skilled in construction—and those of the city. Such conflicts existed between Eduard Rossel’, all-powerful governor of the region between 1995 and 2009,⁹ and Arkadii Chernetskii, mayor of Ekaterinburg from 1995 to 2010.¹⁰ The former supported the Russian Orthodox Church and conservative values; linked to the big businesses of the region, in a context of strong corruption, he built the Church on the Blood.¹¹ The latter was more partial to the separation of church and state, and was supported by the liberal forces of the city.

In 2010, with the change at the head of the region, Archbishop Vikentii, in charge of the eparchy since 1999, suggested to the new governor, Aleksandr Misharin, the reconstruction of St Catherine’s cathedral on Labour Square, facing the magnificent nineteenth-century Sevastyanov’s house. St Catherine’s cathedral would be the project of the new governor, and it would be taller than the Church on the Blood. However, the mayor, Evgenii Porunov (2010–2013), like the urban architects, politicians and the—small—part of the population aware of the project, were not in favour of the plan (“Misharin i Vikentii predlagaiut postavit’ novyi khram...,” 2010). The location, with its fountain, was considered

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8. For all this information concerning the chapel, I rely on the interview with Father Andrei.
 9. He had previously been head of the administration of the region (1991–1994) and president of the regional дума (1994–1995).
 10. The conflicts were partly of a personal nature, but were equally linked to budgetary questions: the cities contribute to the regional budget, which is distributed between the municipalities (MUKHAMEDOV, 2013).
 11. For an explanation by Eduard Rossel’ of the reasons for which he supported the construction of this church, and even contributed personal funds, see “Legendy ural’skoi politiki...,” 2017. This construction appeared to him as an act of repentance. He wished that the remains of the imperial family would be buried there; but these have been transferred to the Ss Peter and Paul cathedral in St Petersburg.

significant for its own history and was well frequented. In terms of urban planning, the construction of a new cathedral here would disfigure Lenin Avenue, one of the city's principal arteries. On April 10, 2010, while Archbishop Vikentii had vituperated particularly aggressively against the opponents of his project some days earlier on an Orthodox television channel,¹² a gathering in Labour Square drew around 3,000 people for Antonov (2010), up to 5,000 according to Lebedev (2017), and a petition against the construction received close to 3,600 signatures (ANTONOV, 2010).

In the national context of the 2010s, marked by significant protests against electoral fraud during the parliamentary elections and the re-election of Vladimir Putin in 2011–2012, and by the hardening of the regime, the city and region were brought into line. In May 2012, Vladimir Putin named a new governor: Evgenii Kuivashev, a lawyer trained at the FSB Border Service Academy. In 2017, gubernatorial elections were held for the first time in fourteen years, with Kuivashev being elected to the post he already occupied. At the municipal level, in September 2013, the charismatic Evgenii Roizman—liberal, poet, entrepreneur and collector of icons, who had fought against drug trafficking in his city—was elected mayor with 33% of the vote. But in 2018, he was replaced by the more conservative Aleksandr Vysokinskii, who was close to the governor, elected by indirect vote after the amendment of the law on elections to local self-government bodies.

Under the leadership of Kuivashev and Metropolitan Kirill (Nakonechnyi), the cathedral reconstruction project was relaunched. The project was also supported by three oligarchs of the region, particularly Igor' Altushkin and Andrei Kozitsyn, cited in the introduction.¹³ To explain their support for reconstructing St Catherine's cathedral, the public relations manager of the eparchy highlighted the oligarchs' faith:

The churches have always been constructed by the people, but as a general rule, there was always a benefactor Ekaterinburg is very lucky with Altushkin and Kozitsyn. These are very religious people, highly practicing Christians, especially Altushkin, who are moreover parents of a large family. They understand that social responsibility is not a vain word. In other words, they have an evangelical spirit, they earn lots and give lots. (Public relations manager of the eparchy, September 10, 2019)

12. "All those who fought the Church were marked by the Lord—no one having resisted God died a beautiful death. We say that to oppose God is very dangerous for man himself, sooner or later the Lord will send him a reprimand, a punishment. This chastisement from God will be handed down for seven generations" ("Sviashchennik prigrozil naseleniu Bozh'ei karoi," 2010). These scandalous affirmations, as well as his mismanagement of the eparchy, riddled with debt, explains his transfer in 2011 to the newly established metropolitanate of Tashkent and Uzbekistan.

13. They had also been financing the reconstruction of St Maximilian's church in the early 2000s.

However, it is perhaps worth also looking at their business situations. Altushkin's entrepreneurial ambitions to construct an extraction-and-processing plant were being hampered for ecological reasons, and he looked for the backing of the patriarch likely to support his project with decision-makers in Moscow. As for Kozitsyn, his enterprise was implicated in the arrest of activists opposing nickel exploitation in the Khoper Basin, the biggest tributary on the left bank of the River Don. Should we see a link here with their wish to finance the cathedral's construction? Would this cathedral be a gift from the governor to two oligarchs in exchange for their support during the gubernatorial election campaign?

The Impossible Construction of the Cathedral

The new place chosen for the cathedral was Ekaterinburg city pond. But this project of the “church-on-the-water” was rejected like the first. On December 7, 2016, a group of around forty people—principally architects, designers, sociologists and philosophers—created the Committee of the City Pond to oppose the project. Besides the place itself—with the pond being considered one of the city's most precious heritage sites¹⁴—the proposed style for the cathedral was also criticised: it was to resemble St Basil's cathedral in Moscow and the Church of the Saviour on Spilled Blood in St Petersburg, thus signifying Ekaterinburg as Russia's third capital. The fact that the project was imposed by the regional authorities was equally upsetting.¹⁵ In February 2017, around two hundred people, mainly members of the intelligentsia (teachers and people working in the cultural sector),¹⁶ lined up along the pond while holding hands in a flash mob that they called “Embrace the Pond.” On April 8, 2017, their numbers reached 1,500. At Easter, the eparchy for its part organised an imposing procession with Governor Kuivashev and Metropolitan Kirill at its head; it counted 7–10,000 participants (TRONINA, 2017). Without doubt the governor feared he would not be re-elected in September by the less religious population of Ekaterinburg. The project was rejected.

The following months were dedicated to the World Cup which took place in Russia from June 14 to July 15, 2018 and to the commemoration of the centenary of the imperial family's assassination. At the beginning of autumn 2018, another new project was debated, this time proposing the cathedral be built in the public garden next to the theatre. This plan resulted in the incidents of May 2019, which took place against a backdrop of conflict between the city and the region.

14. The pond, together with its dam, date to the foundation of the city in 1723.

15. Let us nevertheless note the mayor Evgenii Roizman was in favour of it “as a citizen.” See the interview that he gave to the local media *E1* in 2016 (“Krutoi, derzkii i neodnoznachnyi proekt’...,” 2016).

16. Interview with Pavel, activist with Public Parks and Gardens of Ekaterinburg, trained in social sciences, a connoisseur of his city who offers excursions of Ekaterinburg, September 10, 2019.



Figure 4. The city pond with several churches in the distance, notably the Church on the Blood in Honour of All Saints Resplendent in the Russian Land, Ekaterinburg (September 2019).

Credit: Kathy Rousselet

On May 22, by order of the presidential administration, Evgenii Kuivashev referred to the results of the polling institute VTSIOM, according to which 74% of people questioned considered the choice of location to be ill-advised (“Gorod i khram: opros VTSIOM v Ekaterinburge,” 2019), declaring that the church should be constructed in a more appropriate place (“Glava Sverdlovskoi oblasti zaiavil...,” 2019). Vysokinskii, though unpopular and not having the legitimacy of the ballot boxes, opposed Kuivashev’s decision. The governor knew his position would be threatened if he did not keep the social peace in Ekaterinburg, while the city government, which had until then only applied the decisions of the governor and adopted all the necessary regulations for the construction of the church in the public garden, tried in vain to demonstrate its power in the face of regional authorities. The oligarchs for their part had abandoned the battle.¹⁷

This history of the different projects to rebuild St Catherine’s cathedral shows not only the collusion of the political, religious and economic elites and the importance of relations between the local governor and the metropolitan, but also the fundamental role played by local oligarchs in the construction of this

17. See the analysis of political scientist Fedor Krasheninnikov on May 23, 2019 on the opposition chain *Dozhd'*, in the show of Daria Polygaeva (2019).

place of worship in the 2010s. It also allows us to nuance the political weight attributed to the hierarchy of the Orthodox Church at the local and national level.¹⁸ No governor risked disregarding the opinion of the population to the profit of the Church. Is it possible they feared that the protest would transform into a conflict against the federal authorities? One of the people interviewed had noticed on the internet, on the fourth day of the conflict, a photo of a man sporting the flag of the Ural Republic, a symbol of regional autonomy from July 1 to November 9, 1993 (Ekaterina, September 7, 2019).

Mobilisations around the Square

It is useful to linger on the motivations of the protesting citizens. While some protests certainly had an anticlerical nature, it is difficult to believe that the confrontation was only about the place of the Church in public space. What is more, for the citizens of Ekaterinburg, like in other cities in Russia, the purpose was to protest against the local authorities, who did not leave them enough decision-making power on a subject that concerned their daily life and that, moreover, affected their green spaces. Practicing Christians were themselves divided on the pertinence of the construction of this cathedral in the city centre.

Opposition to the Construction of the Church and “Liminal” Practices of Protest

The conflict around the project in the public garden can be explained first by the recent history of confrontations in Ekaterinburg with the regional authorities, notably around the reconstruction of a shopping gallery, “The Passage” (KIRILLOV, 2022), and then of the demolition of an unfinished television tower, in which Andrei Kozitsyn’s Ural Mining and Metallurgical Company was implicated, and which many people mentioned in interviews. In these two cases, the population was unhappy that they were not consulted.

The national context was equally auspicious to the contestation. In 2018, demonstrations against the law on pensions had taken place. Thus, there was an already formed “class of ‘angry citizens,’ which systematically criticised the governor, whether for wrongly cut trees or poor asphalt” (KOSKELLO, 2022). Among the opponents of the project, the association Public Parks and Gardens of Ekaterinburg was particularly active. Created by two young women and militant ecologists, Anna Baltina and Anastasia Katakova, the association began its activities in 2017 with *subbotniks*—cleaning activities—and cultural actions. Katakova is an architect, while Baltina is the choirmaster at a music school. The objective of the association, which comprises ten to twenty people at its core but

18. See also ROUSSELET, 2022.

has numerous sympathisers, is the defense of green spaces and, particularly, trees. The community created on November 1 of the same year on the social network Vkontakte plays a central role and allows activists in Ekaterinburg, even today, to interact with ecologists in other regions.

In many people's opinion, opponents as much as supporters of the project, the cathedral became a pretext for manifesting their discontent. In the absence of other channels of expression, "because everything was blocked," "everything negative that city inhabitants had accumulated at the end of spring, on all subjects, federal, local, regional, personal," was "spilled" in the square, explained Pavel, an activist with Public Parks and Gardens of Ekaterinburg (Pavel, September 10, 2019). And according to Ivan, a manager at a production company in the field of engineering and an engaged Christian,¹⁹ this was made possible by the weakening of the Church's authority over recent decades, especially among the youth, who were the most numerous group to mobilise in April–May 2019.

The idea is largely widespread that churches are constructed to extract as much money and donations from people as possible.... For some reason I don't know, nobody thinks about the fact that the Church is separated from the state, that it is not financed in any manner. It pays taxes like everyone else It pays for light, for water... for liturgical objects, for the salaries of priests.²⁰ ... We realise that the youth often have very... deformed ideas about the Church. I can also say to you that they don't know what's really going on. They come in the day, it seems to them that all is out of date, and that it is only necessary for certain rich men who try to clean their sins with money. (Ivan, September 7, 2019)

The appearance of members of Igor' Altushkin's RMK martial arts club to defend the construction site barriers provoked an influx of new demonstrators. According to the same Pavel of Public Parks and Gardens of Ekaterinburg cited above, the businessman wrongly believed he would be able to reproduce in Ekaterinburg that which was practised in Chelyabinsk (a Ural city where large factories are found): "Three hundred people demonstrate. He sends fighters. Some demonstrators have their jaws broken. That makes them all leave, and all is good." For this intellectual, whose words reflect a classic arrogance with regard to the less educated classes, such methods could not pass in the Ural capital, where a large part of the population actively works in the educational and scientific domains. The local newspapers, which until then had barely relayed information on account of their links with the elites of the region, could no longer hush up the subject and in turn allowed the strengthening of the mobilisation.

The journalist Anastasia Koskello affirms that the eparchy of Ekaterinburg served as a lightning rod: according to her, "the protest concentrated on 'greedy clergymen,' and the blow to the oligarchs, to United Russia and to the head of

19. He was baptised in April 2019 and is a regular practitioner.

20. See, on these questions, TOCHEVA, 2017.

state was thus considerably reduced” (KOSKELLO, 2022).²¹ The opposition to the construction in the public garden could also be part of the “liminal”²² practices of protest spoken of by Christian Fröhlich and Kerstin Jacobsson— this grey zone “allows creative actors to express or practise resistance while avoiding causing the retaliation of state authorities” (FRÖHLICH and JACOBSSON, 2019: 1147).²³ The protest was moved by the sentiment, as stated by Tania, a young philosophy student supporting Public Parks and Gardens of Ekaterinburg, that the political elites were acting against the people, that the population was not heard, that those in power did “unfair things” (*nespravedlivye shtuki*) (Tania, September 6, 2019). The fight for the public garden became for another young woman, working in the library at the El'tsin Centre, a struggle for political rights²⁴: “Urban citizenship relates strongly to the ‘city as a commons’” (FOSTER and IAIONE, 2016, cited by FRÖHLICH and JACOBSSON, 2019: 1148). As Evgenii Roizman explained to a journalist at the BBC, the demonstrators said, “‘Why would you build here? You remove the earth from the city.’ Everyone suddenly understood that it was our common good [*nashe obshchee*]” (CHURMANOVA and ZOTOVA, 2019).

The Plurality of the Orthodox Ethos

The conflict around the cathedral was far from being a conflict between believers and non-believers. Anna Baltina, particularly opposed to the project, is herself a believer, although now distant from the religious institution. In an interview with Sergei Stukov, she explains:

Who is Orthodox today? I don't understand what Orthodoxy is and what it represents. I don't like the people who represent it today.... Today, when I go to church, I feel nothing. If before I had flowing tears, and a sort of genetic memory was awoken, when we sang the liturgy in a church in Novgorod, now, when I enter, I say to myself: Where did I fall? (STUKOV, 2019)

While the eparchy mobilised Orthodox Christians, regular practitioners, so that they would support the project, others were opposed to it, without however necessarily mobilising. The relationship to the place of the Church in urban space is a controversial subject within the believer community itself, even if this controversy is not visible. We can observe it especially in Moscow, during

21. The same journalist showed how the Pussy Riot affair had had the same channelling effect as the protest in 2012. Rather than criticising the state, the population was opposed to the Church (ROUSSELET, 2022).

22. In the sense of “in-between,” “transitional.”

23. Local collective action around urban space in Russia has already been the subject of several studies (KOVENEVA, 2011; FRÖHLICH and JACOBSSON, 2019; FRÖHLICH, 2020). These studies have insisted on new forms of activism starting from 2011–2012, particularly carried out by the youth, and the place of the “creative class” in the protests in the public space (ZHELNINA, 2014; ERPYLEVA, 2019).

24. See intervention in the film *Gorod besov* (PONOMAREVA, 2019: part 1).

the protests against the construction of the cathedral of Our Lady of Kazan in Torfianka park.

On February 17, 2019, in memory of the destruction of the original St Catherine's cathedral, believers organised a demonstration to recall the history of the largest church in the city. On March 17, the Feast of Orthodoxy and the first Sunday of Great Lent, 8,000 people participated in a procession to the public garden. Many would have been mobilised "Soviet style" and would have come on buses hired for the occasion: not only regular believers and students, but also employees of the companies financing the project (CHIRKOV, 2019). "The bosses called their friends, famous celebrities," explained the public relations manager of the eparchy. At Easter, another grand procession took place, organised by the eparchy and the St Catherine Foundation, in charge of the promotion of the saint in the city and the construction of the cathedral. An immense *kulich* (traditional Easter bread) had been installed in the intended place for the church. The eparchy's public relations service manager, in a fiery recitation, blessed the demonstration:

Imagine 20,000 people marching from the St Trinity church ... to the construction site of the future church. And what is more, in the snow.... As they are Orthodox, these people are optimists. Others would have been upset, would have said that they were cold, or I don't know what else. But the Orthodox, they, they say that it is St Catherine who came to see them. We celebrate on December 7; at this time of the year, it is always snowing. (Public relations manager of the eparchy, September 10, 2019)

All through these months, believers mobilised on social networks, especially on VKontakte, Instagram and Telegram. Prayer times were organised in the parishes.

Other Christians were opposed to the project, "sitting between two chairs," to recall the expression of Petr, a practising Orthodox believer from Kazakhstan and therefore quite free compared to the local community. He explained that there were different understandings and articulations of the Orthodox ethos. In the square, while he had said to a priest that he was Orthodox, the priest had responded that he wasn't a true one (*nepravil'nyi pravoslavnyi*). He had "perhaps a conception of Orthodoxy a tiny bit different" from those who wanted to impose a church in the public garden. For him, "the essential thing is that people feel good"; however, a large part of the population did not want the trees in the square to be cut down, and neither did he. He had listened to Maksim Miniailo, a priest of the Church on the Blood, whose explanations of the project had seemed to him "far-fetched": "The first argument was that it was a symbol of the city And the second, that in the places where there are churches, there are fewer people who drink." Petr tried, in vain, to talk with friends with whom he worked in the charitable association Miloserdie, but not with the priest who

accompanied them (Petr, September 10, 2019). Elena, another student, baptised by her grandmother and practising since she was fourteen years old, also gave her time to Miloserdie. She had preferred to remain silent, fearing discord, “perhaps a passive position,” she added. While being in favour of the construction of new churches in general, many believers were opposed to such a building in the square, because they appreciated walking there, because it would be necessary to cut down trees planted twenty-five years previously for the 275th anniversary of the city or because they felt a new church in the town centre would not be useful. For her part, Elena found the project “old-fashioned” and reckoned that it did not correspond to Byzantine canons.²⁵ She did not favour the project of developing the area around the church either. As for her husband, Ivan cited above, he had initially been favourable to the construction of the cathedral in the public garden, to which he was not particularly attached; although there were a significant number of churches, he considered that, given the crowds during feast days, the construction of a large cathedral was not scandalous. However, when he understood that in this affair “the sponsors were more important than faith” and when he had seen the “sportsmen” appear, he changed his opinion. For him, “a church cannot be built on contradictions, on conflicts, on blood.” The couple was not in the public garden during the events of May, since they were on vacation.

It is difficult to know at what point believers opposed to the position of the eparchy mobilised themselves. Some expressed a sentiment of fearing conflict, like Elena, who, particularly touched by the clashes, had handed over the situation to the hands of God “so that He manages things according to His will.” Ekaterina, a fifty-year-old Orthodox Christian, academic, city guide, and a *matushka* (priest’s wife) before her divorce (who therefore knows behind the scenes of the ecclesiastic institution), explained that this conflictual situation recalled another that went back to the 1990s. The local community of believers was then divided over the subject of Bishop Nikon, accused of homosexuality and abuse of young seminarians. The divergence in viewpoints affected relationships between friends:

This is why, when this story around the public garden started and when people started to get passionate about the conflict and to cry slogans with teary eyes, I was afraid and I really prayed for this conflict not to transform into fights or into stabbings. And I think that we have all had a lot of chance for things to unfold almost peacefully. (Ekaterina, September 7, 2019)

But this fear of conflict also takes part in the official discourse of the ecclesiastic institution, which insists on the principles of humility and obedience of the perfect Christian. Thus, Father Andrei affirmed to me:

25. Pavel said that it was “archaic” (September 10, 2019).

The Orthodox, they would not go to topple a barrier, I speak of true Orthodox, they would never hit someone in the face, topple a barrier or do something similar; they don't like conflictual situations; they prefer to hide their heads in the sand. (Father Andrei, September 10, 2019)

He seemed nevertheless to regret that Orthodox Christians are not active on the political level, that there are not, like in Poland, a country he knows well, Christians engaged in politics at the local level. He argues that this retreat from politics is caused by the sentiment of believers, in the provinces at least, of “belonging to a ghetto,” of “fearing to speak freely of their faith.” The believer who comes to church every Sunday for confession and communion would be considered, in Ekaterinburg, a bit like a “sick person,”²⁶ a fanatic: “People have the idea of a believer who does not eat, does not drink, does not breathe, I don't know what else.” He added also that “what counts for them, it is their situation, their house, their work, their church.”

The engagement of the Orthodox Christian is indeed constructed above all around his parish priest, or even his spiritual director. Sociological research from 2018 shows that regularly practising Orthodox Christians, benefitting from a higher potential of solidarity and self-organisation, would thus also be more active than non-believers (MCHEDLOVA, KOFANOVA and SHEVCHENKO, cited by MEL'NIKOV, 2020). For the Christian as well, local issues and the particular interest take precedence over more general questions. The practising believer is interested less in the affairs of the eparchy than of the parish that makes ends meet with difficulty. The cathedral does not concern them; it is the affair of the bishop. Numerous are those who hope instead for the construction of a church in their peripheral neighbourhood, forgotten by the eparchy, a church that would allow them to go to services on foot (Laypeople, priest in a parish in the periphery of Ekaterinburg, September 8, 2019).

Among the believers favourable to the construction of the cathedral, one equally hears another discourse: they are marginalised in a society that is again today secularised, even anticlerical, recalling the dark days of Sovietism. It is this anticlericalism, finding its origins in the 1920s–1930s, that explains, according to representatives of the eparchy, the motivations of opponents to building the church in the square. And it is the memory of the Bolshevik and Stalinist persecutions that nourishes the activism of engaged Orthodox Christians like Oksana Ivanova (Oksana Ivanova, September 13, 2019).²⁷ This mother of a large family wants to be able to resist where her ancestors could not, getting a sort of revenge: and she wants to work so that her children will not be afraid to testify to their faith. Very active on social networks, Oksana has for several years headed mobilisation

26. Words that resemble those of a believer interviewed by Jeanne Kormina during the conflict around St Isaac's cathedral (KORMINA, 2021: 12).

27. See also KORMINA, 2023.

against all forms of attack against the feelings of believers in Ekaterinburg. In February 2015, she opened a small museum of twentieth-century saints and confessors of the Urals. In May 2019, she was at the barricades on the side of the eparchy. In June 2019, she said she did not want to capitulate in order to return the Church to the place it deserves in public space.

“The church or the public garden?” For us, the question does not pose itself in this way. It is first of all a question of dignity. The third refusal to rebuild the church makes us feel humiliated and offended. It is why we want to make known to all that the Orthodox Christians are not people that one can ignore, humiliate, whose values can be violated with impunity. We are also citizens of Ekaterinburg. And today, these sentiments are felt not only by the faithful who participate in the sacraments, but also by sympathisers, inhabitants of the city who would like to see St Catherine’s cathedral in the city centre, not for religious reasons, but out of respect for national tradition. They also share our sentiments. It is a slap..., a whole campaign to denigrate the Church and believers was launched. It is very offensive.... It would have been more correct to rebuild the cathedral on the historic site, but we have listened to the citizens, we have renounced our legal right, we have accepted the changes for the sake of peace, but we were deceived. My position is that it is necessary to regain our Christian dignity and our primary right to have an opinion on the church. Among the Orthodox, the fact that the fate of the cathedral is decided by atheists is laughable. (SHLYKOV, 2019b)

Like in other conflicts, these believers, who link national and religious identity, say they are in the majority, but oppressed and humiliated by a minority. Dignity, in the name of which liberal Russians protested in Bolotnaia Square in 2011–2012 and Ukrainians in 2014, is reappropriated by Orthodox believers who also feel deceived and denigrated.

Spaces and Imaginaries

Symbolic stories around the cathedral and the conflict engendered by the reconstruction project came to light gradually. They relate to the place social actors wish to accord to religious institutions in society. One discourse on the church as a place of social unification coexists with a conflictualisation of spaces in the city. In both cases, the symbolisation of space is inscribed in the memory of the Soviet period, whether to surmount the errors of the past or to inscribe the logics of today in the extensions of those of yesterday. Through their defence of St Catherine’s cathedral, certain actors stage their opposition to the liberal world, a world where “public space has often been interpreted as an agent of the secular which is crowding out sacred space or driving a wedge in the unity of the sacred and of sacred space” (VAN DER TOL and GORSKI, 2022: 498).

St Catherine's Cathedral as a Place of Social Unification

In the postscript of her work dedicated to St Catherine's cathedral and published in 2000, with the blessing of Archbishop Vikentii, the historian I. L. Man'kova described St Catherine's chapel as a place of liberation and purification after the Soviet period, drawing a parallel between freedom from slavery and from Sovietism:

The building of St Catherine's chapel is not just the memory of the first church of the city. It has a profound historical meaning. If we could make a voyage back in time and pass through the factory villages of the Urals at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, we would see that beside the church, there were chapels consecrated to St Aleksandr Nevskii. The workers and the peasants built these chapels with their own money in memory of their liberation from slavery in 1861 and consecrated them to St Aleksandr Nevskii as a sign of gratitude with regard to Alexander II. May our chapel become a symbol of the liberation and of the purification of all that was negative in the Soviet period and may St Catherine—guardian angel of our city—help us in this. (MAN'KOVA, 2000: 99)

As for St Catherine's cathedral, it is presented by the religious as the symbol of the historic memory of the city. According to the director of the Russia-My History multimedia park of the Sverdlovsk region, Natalia Proshina, it would be a place that reunites “representatives of all generations, of all categories of the population and of all points of view” (“Traditisia davat' gorodam imena dukhovnykh pokrovitelei ochen' znachima dlia Rossii...,” 2018). But even more, the reconstruction of St Catherine's cathedral is seen as a way of moving beyond the Soviet past. For Metropolitan Kirill, while the place of the assassination of the last tsar (the Church on Blood) would be a Golgotha, St Catherine's cathedral would become a place of resurrection that would make it possible to put an end to conflicts as well as the civil war that he sees continuing until today. The story of Russia's salvation, passing from Golgotha to the resurrection, is incarnated in Ekaterinburg, like in other *lieux de mémoire* in Russia. While the region carries the name of the revolutionary Sverdlov, who may have given the order to assassinate the imperial family, the cathedral would contribute to restoring “historical justice.” It would take on a regional dimension, becoming the emblematic church of the metropolitanate, with its five eparchies, created in 2011; it could “show, by its beauty and its position, the spiritual dimension of the life of the city and of the region” (Igumen Veniamin Rainikov, in TIURENKOV, 2019).

The Conflictualisation of Spaces

Parallel to these imaginaries, on social networks and in newspapers, ultra-nationalist Russians did not hesitate to take up the conflict of 2019 and to conflictualise the emblematic spaces of Ekaterinburg. Political metaphors paradoxically

circulated between the two camps, charged with opposite meanings. The conflict around the cathedral was notably reappropriated, in a mystico-political style, by the writer, publicist and politician Aleksandr Prokhanov, president and co-founder in 2014 of the Izborskii Club, a think-tank that called for the invasion of Ukraine (FAURE, 2021, 2022). One finds in one of his articles appearing on May 22, 2019 in the magazine *Zavtra*, of which he is editor-in-chief, all the themes that oppose so-called patriots against liberals. It presents St Catherine's cathedral not only as the symbol of Ekaterinburg, but even more as that of the Urals, incarnating for him technological modernity, which, allied to Orthodoxy and to conservatism of values, will bring salvation to Russia. In a lyrical spirit, which for him is customary, he gives a national dimension to the cathedral which he sees as the church of "the Russian dream," namely "the aspiration for ideal existence."²⁸

This publicist, like others, brandished the spectre of the civil war,²⁹ recalling the putsch of 1991, the conflict around the White House in 1993 and the protest meeting against rigged elections in Bolotnaia Square in December 2011. He situated the events in the memory of the revolution and the assassination of the imperial family:

I do not want St Catherine's cathedral of Ekaterinburg to become another church "on blood." I do not want the liberal leaders and militant groups to have occasion to pour blood on the squares of Ekaterinburg, there where blood was already once shed: that of the assassinated Tsar Nicholas. (PROKHANOV, 2019)

He established a link between the assassination of the tsar in Ipatiev house, the second murder —symbolic—of Nicholas II with Boris El'tsin's destruction of Ipatiev house in the 1970s and the conflict around the cathedral.

This memory of the civil war and of the assassination of the imperial family also structures the imaginary of the managers of the eparchy of Ekaterinburg and Verkhotur'e. In September 2019, the eparchy's public relations manager underlined that it is because the population of the city did not sufficiently repent during the centenary of the imperial family's assassination in 2018 that it was "tempted" by the devil in 2019.

The metaphor of the Maidan Revolution (also known as the Revolution of Dignity) circulated on social networks and in the media, being used to describe the protest in the public garden (Maidan or "ural'skii Maidan" or "skvernyi³⁰ Maidan").³¹ Observers noted that the events involved the same means of protest. This spatial metaphor, Maidan referring to the square in a city or village, charged

28. He would define the "Russian dream" precisely in 2022 (PROKHANOV, 2022).

29. Opponents to the project, like Anna Baltina, also used the metaphor of the civil war (SHLYKOV, 2019a).

30. "Skvernyi" is word play: "skver" (square, the place where the conflict of 2017 took place) is combined with the adjective "skvernyi," meaning "bad."

31. See, for example, STESHIN, 2019.

by Ukrainian protestors with the meaning of revolt against elite leaders of their country and of the aspiration for rapprochement with Europe, was reappropriated by those who condemned the Revolution of Dignity and saw in it, among others, a population under the influence of the United States. This metaphor was also used to condemn the opposition in Torfianka park (KOZENKO, 2015). The eparchy reappropriated it in a memorandum addressed to then mayor Aleksandr Vysokinskiï on May 23, 2019; it presented “Maidan” as a minority that if it were to take power would bring “catastrophes and total chaos” (*Memorandum*, 2019). In 2019, the polemic journalist Vladimir Solov’ev also addressed the opposition of the “atheist population” of Ekaterinburg to the construction of the cathedral and described the Ural capital, “where Nicholas Romanov and his family were murdered” as a “city of demons.” In July 2020, he declared on his blog *Solov’ev Live* that Ekaterinburg would remain a “city of demons” as long as it did not have a cathedral. In May 2022, he called the citizens of Ekaterinburg “Satanists” (KRYLOVA, 2022) and on October 25 the same year, referred to them as “Satanic degenerates” (“Solov’ev nazval zhitelei Ekaterinburga...” 2022).³² This grotesque designation of the “city of demons” was reappropriated and turned around by opponents of the cathedral project, many of whom belong to the art world, thus losing all possible political efficacy.³³ An unknown street artist installed a sign-board at the city gate in May 2019 carrying the inscription “City of Demons.” T-shirts and stickers were printed with the same inscription and a film was made using it as a title.

The El’tsin Centre, where the protest against the cathedral reconstruction project was organised, was equally opposed to St Catherine’s cathedral by the same ultra-nationalists for whom Boris El’tsin is the gravedigger of the Soviet Union and the one who tried to efface the memory of tsarism:

The “El’tsin Centre” is an immense “church” where an altar has been placed to the destructive monster of the Red Empire. A “church” where one venerates an idol, a pagan temple to which El’tsin’s adorers flock, where black masses are recited.... The “El’tsin Centre” is an immense factory where the black machines work in producing darkness. Around the “El’tsin Centre,” the trees dry up, women have miscarriages, one sees two-headed cats being born. From the “El’tsin Centre” crawl beetles unknown to entomologists. (PROKHANOV, 2019)

32. He also called to overthrow the “roizmanshchina,” a neologism to designate the opposition around the former mayor of Ekaterinburg, who has demonstrated against the war in Ukraine since 2022 and was declared a “foreign agent” on November 25, 2022.

33. “In other terms, the ‘city of demons’ seems offensive, ... but when we transpose it in an artistic context, it is not so offensive, quite the contrary, it is as if you were proud that a great propagandist called you ‘city of demons,’ but you are not offended, on the contrary, you use it. In other words, no political argument, however offensive it may be, will work against us” (Interview with Tania, September 6, 2019).

Since 2019, the El'tsin Centre has not ceased to be critiqued by these ultra-nationalist currents and the eparchy. Metropolitan Evgenii of Ekaterinburg and Verkhotur'e took advantage of an act of vandalism on a painting there of a disciple of Kazimir Malevich in 2021 to denounce the lack of professionalism of the centre's personnel ("Mitropolit Evgenii podderzhal okhrannika..." 2022). Several months after the start of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the nationalist film director Nikita Mikhalkov asked that the centre to be considered a "foreign agent." And it is as a continuation of all these ultra-patriotic statements that the commentary of Metropolitan Evgenii, quoted in the introduction, is situated: fiercely opposed to the West and global modernity,³⁴ he affirmed in December 2022 that St Catherine's cathedral would be "the church of the victory of good over evil."

Conclusion

The reconstruction project of St Catherine's cathedral in Ekaterinburg has followed the evolution of the relations between the Russian Orthodox Church, political authorities, the elites and the general population since the beginning of the 1990s. The conflict around the public garden in 2019 yielded a divorce between the governor and the local Church, which felt let down by him. Attesting to the balance of power between the Church and the state under the Putin regime, while the governor remained, Metropolitan Kirill (Nakonechnyi) was replaced by Metropolitan Evgenii (Kul'berg), charged with turning the page on the construction of the cathedral in the public garden. He has tried to give a new image to the religious institution, linked less to the oligarchs and turned more toward the people and their needs.

The demonstrations around the proposed construction sites of the cathedral, in particular those in the public garden in May 2019, illustrate the forms of political resistance that were still possible in authoritarian Russia at the end of the 2010s. One finds in the disputes around St Catherine's cathedral logics close to those observed by Jeanne Kormina in the conflict around another church, St Isaac's cathedral in St Petersburg, which the state was getting ready to transfer to the Russian Orthodox Church in 2016 (2020). One observes the same inscription of the conflict in the memory of the civil war and the same sentiment of marginalisation on the part of engaged Christians. One finds similar instruments of protest: not only the "*obnimashki*," but also the parody of prayer often used to criticise the hypocrisy of the Church (BERNSTEIN, 2014; KORMINA, 2020: 15).

One part of Ekaterinburg's population defended the public garden because it saw the park as its "common good." But the church was not, contrary to what engaged Orthodox Christians, who imagined themselves to be a large majority,

34. See, for example, "Mitropolit Evgenii rasskazal o global'nykh vyzovakh..." 2022.

believed. The public garden thus became a theatre of controversy regarding the place of Orthodoxy in the identity of the city and its citizens. In the foreword of a work that Élise Boillet co-edited on the visibility of the religious in the urban space of modern Europe, she underlines that “the question of its visibility poses the problem, on the one hand, of the management of the religious presence in the public space and, on the other hand, of the articulation between lived religion in the public space and lived religion in private space” (2021: 7). The study of the protests around rebuilding St Catherine’s cathedral also implicitly raises the question of the privatisation of the religious, the development of a religion that is always more detached from an institution, one that is more and more visible in public space while being less and less frequented. Applying to Grace Davie’s concept (DAVIE, 2007), Milena Benovska speaks of Russian Orthodoxy as a “vicarious religion” performed by the most devoted believers, the “little flock” (BENOVSKA, 2020). The situation has hardly evolved over these last years. According to data from the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Russian Federation, on January 6, 2024, 1,3 million people went to the Christmas liturgy, almost two times fewer than in 2020 (2,3 million). The pandemic could have played a role in this decline. According to a survey undertaken by the Levada Centre in August 2022, 51% of the population claimed to have confidence in the Russian Orthodox Church (“Doverie obshchestvennym institutam,” 2022). While climbing to the same level as in 2014, this percentage does not imply any religious practice.³⁵

This study also insists on the plurality of positionings within the community of believers (ELSNER, 2023), and thus on the varied articulations and hybridisations of the religious and politics (ZAMBIRAS and BAYART, 2015). These hybridisations are particularly visible in the imaginaries driven by ultra-nationalist forces and the portion of the religious linked to them. They give a religious dimension to the events of 2019 and use them to construct a story of the city of Ekaterinburg as a place of battle between good and evil: this city where the imperial family was assassinated will be marked by the conflict persisting between the Church and the ultra-nationalists, on one side, and the liberal world, symbolised by the El’tsin Centre, on the other. The spaces of the city are conflictualised today by sacralised imaginaries.

35. Religious practice has fallen with the arrival of Patriarch Kirill in 2009, the Church being perceived little by little as an institution linked to power.

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Saint Catherine's Cathedral in Ekaterinburg and Disputes over the Common Good

Studying the project to rebuild Saint Catherine's cathedral in Ekaterinburg, originally demolished in 1930, allows us to trace the development of relations between the Russian Orthodox Church, political power, elites and the general population of the Ural capital since the early 1990s. Three successive proposals for different building sites pitted part of the city's population against local political authorities and the eparchy. The protest movement culminated in May 2019, after the authorities decided to build the cathedral in a public garden in the city centre. The demonstrations, reminiscent of other "liminal protest practices" in Russia, were not anti-clerical. Instead, both sides defended what they considered to be the "common good," and Orthodox believers could be found on both sides. This study, based mainly on fieldwork conducted in September 2019, shows how a public garden became a theatre of controversy fuelled by the memory of the assassination of the imperial family and religious persecution. It describes the conflictualisation of spaces within the city as a result of political radicalisation.

Keywords: Russian Orthodox Church, mobilisations, environment, public space, Russia

La cathédrale Sainte-Catherine à Ekaterinbourg et les disputes sur le bien commun

L'étude du projet de reconstruction de la cathédrale Sainte-Catherine d'Ekaterinbourg (démolie en 1930) permet de retracer l'évolution des relations depuis le début des années 1990 entre l'Église orthodoxe russe, le pouvoir politique, les élites et la population de la capitale de l'Oural. Trois propositions successives, portant sur des sites de construction différents, opposent une partie de la population de la ville aux autorités politiques locales et à l'éparchie. Le mouvement de protestation culmine en mai 2019, lorsque le pouvoir décide de construire la cathédrale dans un jardin public du centre-ville. Les manifestations, rappelant d'autres « pratiques de protestation liminale » en Russie, ne sont pas anticléricales. Au contraire, les deux camps défendent ce qu'ils considèrent comme le « bien commun », et des croyants orthodoxes se trouvent dans les deux camps. Cet article, basé principalement sur un travail de terrain entrepris en septembre 2019, montre comment un jardin public est devenu le théâtre d'une controverse nourrie par le souvenir de l'assassinat de la famille impériale et de la persécution religieuse. Il décrit la conflictualisation des espaces au sein de la ville sous l'effet de la radicalisation politique.

Mots-clés : église orthodoxe, mobilisation, environnement, espace public, Russie

La catedral de Santa Catalina de Ekaterimburgo y disputas sobre el bien común

El estudio del proyecto de reconstrucción de la catedral de Santa Catalina de Ekaterimburgo, originalmente demolida en 1930, permite seguir la evolución de las relaciones entre la Iglesia ortodoxa rusa, el poder político, las élites y la población en general de la capital

de los Urales desde principios de los años noventa. Tres propuestas sucesivas, relativas a diferentes lugares de construcción, enfrentaron a una parte de la población de la ciudad con las autoridades políticas locales y la eparquía. El movimiento de protesta culminó en mayo de 2019, después de que los gobernantes decidieran construir la catedral en un jardín público del centro de la ciudad. Las manifestaciones, que recuerdan otras «prácticas liminares de protesta» en Rusia, no tuvieron carácter anticlerical. Por el contrario, ambos bandos defendían lo que consideraban el «bien común», y en ambos se encuentran creyentes ortodoxos. Este estudio, basado principalmente en el trabajo de campo realizado en septiembre de 2019, muestra cómo un jardín público se convirtió en un teatro de controversia alimentado por el recuerdo del asesinato de la familia imperial y la persecución religiosa. Describe la conflictualización de espacios dentro de la ciudad como resultado de la radicalización política.

Palabras clave: iglesia Ortodoxa, movilización, medio ambiente, espacio público, Rusia

La revue

La publication de la revue *Archives de sciences sociales des religions* relève des Éditions de l'EHESS et sa mise en ligne électronique sur le site OpenEdition Journals est chose faite. L'entrée dans l'ère de l'édition électronique s'accompagne d'une profonde fidélité à l'esprit des *Archives*, comme en témoigne la numérisation rétrospective des anciens numéros dans le cadre du site Persée.

Lors de la parution, en 1956, du premier numéro de la revue *Archives de sociologie des religions*, sous l'égide du CNRS, ses fondateurs lui assignaient trois objectifs :

- promouvoir une perspective comparative, élargie à toutes les religions et à toutes les aires culturelles ;
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Cette triple ouverture – comparative, pluridisciplinaire et épistémologique – reste cinquante ans après sa création, la règle de la revue, devenue en 1973 *Archives de sciences sociales des religions*. L'effervescence de l'actualité religieuse et la globalisation des formes de religiosité conduisent plus que jamais les sciences sociales à interroger leurs frontières disciplinaires et à mettre à l'épreuve leurs paradigmes du fait religieux.

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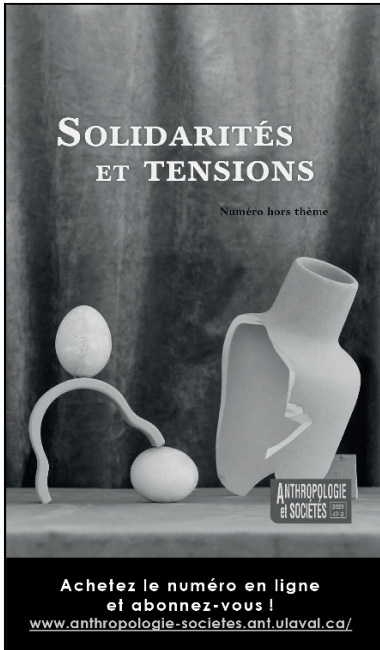


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