

War and *Russkiy Mir*: The Russian Crusades of the 21st Century

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“Russia has only two allies: our army and our navy”
- Tsar Alexander III¹

Introductory Remarks

This paper focuses on the recent Russo-Ukrainian war as viewed through the lens of Eastern Orthodox church history, geopolitics, and military strategy. My attempt is to synthesize a range of interdisciplinary sources while arguing that the war in Ukraine is a religious war, akin to the Fourth Crusade which sacked Constantinople in 1204 AD, due to poor management and deficient strategic implementation by the 13th century aggressor. Similar poor management and lack of successful strategic implementation by the 21st century aggressor (in this case, the Kremlin, in lockstep with the patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church) in its failure to conquer Kyiv in 2022 is reminiscent of Rome’s failure during the Fourth Crusade to conquer Jerusalem – the original target of the Crusade – and subsequent capture and sack of Constantinople. Just as Jerusalem was viewed by Rome as the prized birthplace of Christianity in 33 AD, Kyiv was the legitimate child of adoption, viewed by the Russian Orthodox Church, since the famous conversion of Prince Vladimir in 988 AD. Both imperial powers through religious justification and military means have tried over the centuries to recapture what was seen as their *imperial property*, with tragic and harrowing outcomes, at the expense of fellow brothers and sisters in Christ.

While peer-reviewed scholarship of the Russo-Ukrainian war itself is rather scant given the recent nature of events unfolding, the bulk of literature in the study for this paper was conducted prior to the start of the 2022 invasion. I argue the war being conducted by Russia against Ukraine is a religious crusade, with deep ecclesiastical implications for Orthodox Church unity. While I do not assert that this religious war will necessarily lead to outright schism within the Eastern Orthodox Church at large, historical context supports a view that schism *could* be an outcome should the war drag on. This was the case following the Fourth crusade, which put a definite end to Latin-Byzantine hopes for reunion between the Roman Catholic West and Byzantine Orthodox East two centuries following the Great Schism of 1054 AD. With endless calls for peace and unity, it is my humble prayer that this terrible war ends soon and peacefully – for the sake of the Church and for the countless innocent lives that have been lost, displaced, and traumatized by the brutal and unholy call to arms. Make no mistake, this war is a religious crusade, contrived by Moscow², and by the looks of it now, will probably be more inhumane and crueler in terms of death toll and suffering, whenever it ends, however it ends, than the Fourth crusade was to Constantinople and Rome - especially if nuclear weapons are used to achieve Russian ends - a theme I explore in the last sections of this paper.

¹ Quoted in Juri Saar, *The Russian Holy War and Military Statehood*, page 11.

² By “Moscow”, I mean the Church-State apparatus acting in unison, in this case the state agency of the Kremlin with Vladimir Putin acting as president, and the Russian Orthodox Church, with Kirill acting the patriarch of Moscow in seat of the historical Patriarchate of Moscow.

From Metropolitan of Kyiv to Patriarchate of Moscow: 988 – 1309 AD

As stated in my Introductory Remarks, Kyiv was seen as the adopted spiritual child by the Russian Orthodox Church in 988 AD from its parent, the Byzantine Empire, when Grand Prince Vladimir of Kyiv choose to baptize himself as an Orthodox Christian in present-day Crimea and adopted the Kyivian principality to Orthodox Christianity in alignment with the faith of the Byzantine Empire. The baptism of Vladimir and Kyiv had political as well as religious ramifications: alongside his baptism, he took for himself a wife, Anna, the sister of Byzantine Emperor Basil II; it was a marriage of religious and political conversion at once.³ Political alliances to Byzantium at the time were important for the establishment and legitimacy of the newly established Kyivian Rus – the precursor to what would eventually become the Patriarchate of Moscow. Kyiv was the spiritual birthplace of Slavic Orthodox Christianity, with the establishment of the first Metropolitan of Kyiv, a Russian named Hilarion, who was appointed by Vladimir's son Yaroslav the Wise.⁴ Periods of great instability ensued in the first few centuries after the establishment of Kyivian Rus. Brutal fighting with the invading Mongols of the East would cumulate in the burning of Kyiv in 1240 AD and subsequent movement of the spiritual capital of Kyivian Rus from Kyiv, to Novgorod, and eventually to Moscow by 1309 AD, under the direction of Metropolitan Peter “of Kyiv and all Russia.”⁵ Eventually by 1589, Moscow would become its own Patriarchate with the consecration of Patriarch Job of Moscow.⁶

The move from Kyiv to Moscow held significant historical and geopolitical value. In 1309 AD, the geopolitical location of Moscow – at the time a backwater village in the Russian hinterland – helped to insulate the new metropolitan from the various wars that were occurring to the southwest. Most pertinent to this essay was the sack of Constantinople of the Fourth Crusade, in century prior in 1204 AD, which Kyiv took note in observation of, watching from afar and noting Byzantium's decline in power and eventual capitulation to the Turks in 1453 AD; a humiliating defeat that Moscow would forever be on the defense of – always anxious/paranoid over foreign threats – a trend that resonates strongly throughout Russian history and especially today. The decline and fall of Constantinople – the second Rome – would eventually be seen as an event which the Muscovites would have to remake in their own image and power. Moscow became the imperial torchbearer as the new “third Rome”.⁷ Before I progress further, let us return to the Sack of Constantinople for a moment.

³ “The Chronicles, obviously exaggerating, claim before his conversion he had 800 wives and concubines; but upon conversion he released them all and kept only one wife, Anna, sister of the Byzantine Emperor, whom he received along with baptism as a price for returning Crimea to Byzantium” in Dimitry Pospelovsky, *The Orthodox Church in the History of Russia*, page 21.

⁴ John Meyendorff, *Byzantium and the Rise of Russia*, page 15.

⁵ John Meyendorff, *Byzantium and the Rise of Russia*, page 94.

⁶ Dimitry Pospelovsky, *The Orthodox Church in the History of Russia*, page 67.

⁷ “But a more consistent exposition of the Third Rome doctrine fell to a monk from Pskov, Philotheus (Filofei in Russian), who argued that, after the fall of all other Orthodox states to Muslim Turks, the resurgence of Russia puts special moral responsibilities on her rulers. Two Romes have fallen, Moscow has become the third Rome, and there will never be a fourth, he writes. This makes Russia a protector of all Orthodox Christians and requires of her a purity of faith. Should she fail to preserve the purity of Orthodoxy, that would bring about the end of time.” In Dimitry Pospelovsky, *The Orthodox Church in the History of Russia*, page 45-46.

The Fourth Crusade and Sack of Constantinople: 1202-1204 AD

Despite his name, Pope Innocent III was anything but innocent. Upon his installation as Pope of Rome in 1198 AD, he firmly declared in his consecration sermon, apropos Jude Law as the fictional Pope Pius XIII in HBO's *The Young Pope*: "I am placed between God and man, below God but above man; I am less than God but more than man; I am he who will judge all and be judged by none."⁸ History would go down to judge Innocent III as guilty of one of the greatest catastrophes in Latin-Greek church history: the man who instigated the Fourth crusade. Instead of retaking Jerusalem from Muslim control, his crew sacked Constantinople, forever handicapping the great Byzantine city by burning it and desecrating its inhabitants.

The Fourth crusade is a case study in military mismanagement. His primary error was to cede operational control to a crew of greedy Venetian mercenaries. The chronicles read "the Republic of Venice agreed to provide ships to transport 4,500 knights and their horses, 9,000 squires and 20,000 foot soldiers – an army of 33,500 men – for the sum of 85,000 marks to be paid in four installments by April 1202, when the crusaders would be at Venice, ready to ship out in late June...the Republic further agreed provision the crusading army for one year."⁹

By the time the mercenaries had set sail from Venice for Jerusalem, originally by way of the northern African coast on the Mediterranean, they turned their attention instead to Zara after a mere 48 hours en route – a rich merchant city on the Adriatic coast in modern day Croatia. They sacked the city, plundered its goods, before setting off once again, this time headed for Constantinople. Jerusalem was no longer the goal; the greediness of the Venetians turned their compasses toward more material ends, satisfied after a successful plunder of Zara but wanting for more in wealthy Byzantium.

By 1204, having arrived onto the shores of the Bosphorus, they beheld Constantinople with great passion. French knight Robert de Clari noted, with great theological justification and hatred toward the Greeks on the eve of the sack:

For formerly the inhabitants of the city had been obedient to the law of Rome and now they were disobedient, since they said that the law of Rome was of no account, and called all who believed in it 'dogs' and the bishop said that for this reason one ought to attack them, and that it was not a sin, but an act of great charity...the bishops said that, by the authority of God and in the name of the Pope, they would absolve all who attacked the Greeks.¹⁰

Hell had broken loose on the cobblestone streets of Byzantium. Eyewitness accounts from Greek historian Niketas Choniates speak of the horrors he beheld:

No one was without a share in the grief. In the alleys, in the streets, in the temples, complaints, weeping, lamentations, grief, the groaning of men, the

⁸ F. Donald Logan, *A History of the Church in the Middle Ages*, page 185.

⁹ F. Donald Logan, *A History of the Church in the Middle Ages*, page 189.

¹⁰ Dana C. Munro, *The Fourth Crusade*, page 2.

shrieks of women, wounds, rape, captivity, the separation of those most closely united. Nobles wandered about ignominiously, those of venerable age in tears, the rich in poverty. Thus it was in the streets, on the corners, in the temple, in the dens, for no place remained unassailed or defended the suppliants. All places everywhere were filled full of all kinds of crime. Oh, immortal God, how great the afflictions of the men, bow great the distress!¹¹

Reading Niketas' account reminds me of the modern-day reports, outlining the horrors taking place in the Ukrainian cities of Kherson, Mariupol, Irpin, or Bucha. Rape, murder, pillage, loud shrieks of distress followed by harrowing silence – all for the greed of mercenaries and mismanagement from the top rank-and-file. However, to his credit, upon learning that instead of Jerusalem, the Venetian mercenaries had attacked Constantinople, Innocent III was outraged. He lamented the loss of Constantinople and the distress it caused the two Churches:

Those men were dedicated to seek only the things of Christ and nothing for themselves. Their swords, which were meant to be used against pagans, they have bathed in the blood of Christians. Paying heed neither to religion nor age nor sex, they have publicly committed adultery and fornication and have exposed to the filthy defilement of soldiers the holy women and virgins dedicated to God.¹²

The world still awaits such a response from Patriarch Kirill, who instead of offering even a pithy condolence in the wake of great atrocities and crimes against humanity at the hands of Russian soldiers and mercenaries, only further justifies the use of state-sponsored religious violence by stating “remember that if you lay down your life for your country, you will be with God.”¹³ Former Russian President and Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev is no better, in an almost cut-and-paste fashion from Robert de Clari's address, on Telegram, scribbled “who is fighting against us?...we are fighting against those who hate us, who ban our language, our values, even our faith, who spread hatred toward the history of our Fatherland...the enemy is a bunch of crazy Nazi junkies...and a large pack of barking dogs from the Western kennel.”¹⁴ Dogs seems to be the key noun in describing the religious enemy, Greek or Ukrainian, 13th century or today.

Third Rome & Russkiy Mir: 21st century

To fully comprehend the current religious war in Ukraine, one must understand the theological, historical, and hierarchical components involved, to recognize this war – and the structures that support it - as unique in the sense that it's more than just a land grab, or potential economic gain, but religious and historical in nature. This crusade, much like the crusades of the medieval time period, is an attempt to establish the Church's power in the near-abroad when its integrity has been threatened within. Nothing has done more to undermine the integrity of the Russian Orthodox Church than the Soviet Union subjecting it under their rule for 70 years, only for the Church to re-emerge with zeal as an established

¹¹ Dana C. Munro, *The Fourth Crusade*, page 16.

¹² F. Donald Logan, *A History of the Church in the Middle Ages*, page 193.

¹³ The Wall Street Journal, *The Patriarch Behind Vladimir Putin*, Dec 29th, 2022.

¹⁴ The Wall Street Journal, *The Patriarch Behind Vladimir Putin*, Dec 29th, 2022.

world power, a Russian World, in *symphonia* with the State and military apparatuses. Andrew Louth, a British-Russian Orthodox priest, noted in his recent paper on the concepts of Moscow as the Third Rome and *Russkiy Mir*:

Seventy years later, after the collapse of communism, the patriarch had to redefine his role in rapidly changing conditions, and was sorely tempted to restore the patriarchate to its former (through generally challenged) glory – by re-establishing the close relationship, the *symphonia*¹⁵, inherited from Byzantium, between emperor and patriarch, and together with that idea of ‘Holy Russia’, even the claim to be ‘third Rome’. Related to this has been Kirill’s promotion (even before he became patriarch) of *Russkiy mir* (‘Russian World’), a forum for promoting a conservative image of Russian culture in contrast to the allegedly degenerate West.¹⁶

The West has misunderstood the power of the Kremlin/ROC nexus and especially how closely aligned the Church and the military have become since the fall of the Soviet Union and rise of Putinism. Even noted international relations scholar Samuel P. Huntington, in his famous 1996 book *The Clash of Civilizations* concluded erroneously that “violence between Ukrainians and Russians is unlikely. These are two Slavic, primarily Orthodox peoples who have had close relationships for centuries and between whom intermarriage is common.”¹⁷ Just like on the dawn of the Fourth crusade, the West didn’t believe that Rome would attack another Christian capital, as Innocent III had believed, but oftentimes the alliance of state-military-church relations can take a road of its own, especially when private mercenaries are involved. This is the case today in Ukraine by the Russian paramilitary Wagner Group and the Venetian mercenaries sent during the Fourth crusade.¹⁸

This understanding is of prime importance especially for Orthodox Church history scholarship; *Russkiy Mir* is not a term well understood even among some Orthodox Church scholars of today, much less political scholars. A recent paper from George Fox University defines *Russkiy Mir* as the following:

In 2014, when Russia annexed Crimea and initiated a proxy war in the Donbas areas of Ukraine, right up until the beginning of the full-fledged war against Ukraine and afterwards, Putin and Patriarch Kirill have used Russian world ideology as a principal justification for the invasion. The teaching states that there is a transnational Russian sphere or civilization, called Holy Russia or Holy Rus’, which includes Russia, Ukraine, and

¹⁵ “This Christian empire envisaged *symphonia*, harmony, between ‘the great gifts’ of God to human kind: *sacerdotium* and *imperium*, priesthood and sovereign power – convinced that if the priesthood were to keep itself ‘above reproach in every respect, and enjoy access to God,’ while sovereignty ‘keeps in correct and proper order the realm that has been entrusted to it, ‘there will be satisfactory harmony.’” in Andrew Louth, *Ukraine: A Thorny Past and a Tragic Present*, page 187.

¹⁶ Andrew Louth, *Ukraine: A Thorny Past and a Tragic Present*, page 189.

¹⁷ Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, page 167.

¹⁸ The Economist, *What is the Wagner Group, Russia’s mercenary organization?*, March 7th, 2022. At present time, it is evident that the Wagner Group has been at the forefront of the most egregious atrocities committed against the Ukrainians. This has caused friction not only with the world, but even within the Kremlin as the Wagner Group and the Russian military have become at odds with strategy and tactics. I read an article this weekend about the issues between the Wagner Group and the Kremlin – see: The Wall Street Journal, *Wagner Threatens to Pull Out of Ukraine in Latest Internal Russia Spat*, May 5th, 2023.

Belarus (and sometimes Moldova and Kazakhstan), as well as ethnic Russians and Russian-speaking people throughout the world. It holds that this 'Russian world' has a common political centre (Moscow), a common spiritual centre (Kyiv as the 'mother of all Rus'), a common language (Russian), a common church (the Russian Orthodox Church, Moscow Patriarchate), and a common patriarch (The Patriarch of Moscow), who works in 'symphony', with a common president/national leader (Putin) to govern this Russian world, as well as upholding distinctive spirituality, morality, and culture.¹⁹

Russkiy Mir is a geopolitically destabilizing and dangerous idea, which violently places Russian priorities above and against its neighbors. This reality is not new – Chechnya, Georgia, Ukraine, and Azerbaijan are all 21st century examples alone – but the reality *of its consequences* for the rest of the world are new.²⁰ The West either turns a blind eye, or does not understand, this well. It has – up until last year – has been treating Russia with kid gloves. Just glance back to the infamous Obama-Medvedev reset of relations in March 2009, which occurred mere months following Russia's invasion of neighboring Georgia in August of 2008. The West, it seems, has a short memory or an expedient concession for Russian aggression since the end of the Cold War. George Kennan, the eminent American Cold War diplomat and Russian expert, noted well in 1947, with excellent foresight, that:

When there is something the Russians want from us, one or the other of these features of their policy may be thrust temporarily into the background; and when that happens there will always be Americans who will leap forward with gleeful announcements that 'the Russians have changed,' and some who will even try to take credit for having brought about such 'changes'. But we should not be misled by tactical maneuvers...this means that we are going to continue for a long time to find the Russians difficult to deal with...these precepts are fortified by the lessons of Russian history: of centuries of obscure battles between nomadic forces over the stretches of vast unfortified plain.²¹

Russian Nuclear Orthodoxy

The lessons that the Eastern Orthodox Church needs to understand is that under the last two decades of Putinism, the alignment between the top echelons of the Russian military (those with direct command-and-control of Russia's nuclear arsenal) and the Russian Orthodox Church have become codependent, culminating into a perverted, theocratically based relationship aimed at the justification for violence and nuclear war. This term - coined by Dmitry Adamsky in his fascinating 2019 book – is called "Nuclear Orthodoxy":

¹⁹ George Fox University, *A Declaration on the 'Russian World' Teaching*, pages 121-122.

²⁰ Juri Saar notes that "the Russian Empire's centuries long expansion into new areas lacked an understanding of the natural boundaries because this country had had territorial disputes and conflicts with essentially all its neighbors throughout history" in *The Russian Holy War and Military State*, page 14.

²¹ George Kennan, *The Sources of Soviet Conduct*, pages 572 & 574.

Nuclear Orthodoxy is an unofficial doctrine, or public belief, that has circulated in the Russian strategic community and broader public since the 2000's. In a nutshell, it argues that in order to preserve its Orthodox character, Russia needs to ensure its being a strong nuclear power, and in order to guarantee its nuclear status, Russia has to be genuinely Orthodox.²²

This is not just a theory or neat sounding term. We're seeing it play out live today in Belarus (a country which borders Ukraine to the north), where Russia has, just within the last month, staged tactical nuclear weapons along the Ukrainian-Belarusian border – further escalating an already violent situation where Ukraine now borders not one, but two, countries with nuclear-tipped missiles aimed at them.²³

Under Putin since 2000, the unholy alliance between Russia's nuclear armed forces and the Russian Orthodox Church has grown very close, to a disgusting degree. In 2009, Russia's state-owned nuclear corporation ROSATOM, made a public address comparing the ascetic efforts of St. Seraphim of Sarov²⁴ to that of Russia's nuclear achievements since the start of the Cold War:

Remarkable scientists, engineers, and technicians have been creating the most formidable weapon in the famous monastery, where a hundred years before the hermit Saint Seraphim labored. There, where this God's pleasurer taught about the Holy Spirit and forecasted the destinies of Russia, the nuclear shield, which stopped the aggressive aspirations of the Fatherland's adversaries, was created. Sarov, which once used to be the center of Russian monkhood, became the capital of Russian science and weaponry²⁵

Russian military nuclear capability, fused with the Kremlin's imperial ambitions and spiritual legacy of the Russian Orthodox Church, is a dangerous tripartite combination. Imagine, if for example in the USA, certain far right-wing Protestant preachers were given the power by our government to wax poetic about the US's nuclear capabilities and justify US foreign military operations in recent wars such as in Libya against Qaddafi or in Iraq against ISIS, in official Pentagon military press briefings? How unnerving would that be to the world at whole, not to mention most of the American population? While I admit I have an inherent American bias of separation of Church and State relations, and I can, to an extent, accept the *symphonia* architecture of the Orthodox Church in certain States (modern day Greece, for example). I cannot accept a *symphonia* between a Church and a State's nuclear or its military apparatus. That's disgraceful and dangerous – and history has repeatedly shown the vulnerability to innocent lives that it creates.

Concluding Remarks

²² Dmitry Adamsky, *Russian Nuclear Orthodoxy*, page 77.

²³ Al Jazeera, *Russia to put nukes in Belarus near NATO borders*, April 3rd, 2023.

²⁴ St. Seraphim of Sarov is a beloved 19th century Russian Orthodox saint and mystic. His most famous quote was “acquire a peaceful spirit, and thousands around you will be saved”. He is to Russia what St. Francis of Assisi is to Italy: a saint of peace, who conversed with animals and lived in the wilderness. A true vessel of the Holy Spirit. Hence my disgust to read this comparison by ROSATOM with his peaceful and holy legacy.

²⁵ Dmitry Adamsky, *Russian Nuclear Orthodoxy*, page 111.

My hope in this essay is to show that history has a way of repeating itself. The Fourth crusade of the 13th century is not that much different from the Russian crusade of the 21st century. That the war of aggression against Ukraine constitutes a religious war. That the spiritual birthplace of Slavic Orthodox Christianity, Kyiv, was the intended target initially of the war, and harkens back to the retaking of the spiritual center of Slavic Orthodox Christianity, but that Kremlin, much like Rome with Jerusalem, failed to capture its primary target, and that an immediate retreat and cessation of hostilities would be seen as humiliation for Russia, hence the sustained and repeated attempts to justify the war efforts in other parts of Ukraine by the patriarch of Moscow, despite the horrific cost to innocent humans lives and crimes against humanity that inevitably follows any religious war.

My prayer and hope, alongside many, is for a cessation to all hostilities and a recognition by the Patriarch of Moscow that a gross error of spiritual judgement has been made. Just as Pope Innocent III declared once he learned that his crusade to retake Jerusalem led to the eventual downfall of Constantinople, at the cost of countless fellow Christians – Greeks, who were a separate Church but nonetheless united as brethren in Christ. A recognition by Moscow that Ukraine is a fellow sovereign Orthodox country independent of any *Russkiy Mir* connotations is not out of the realm of possibility. Indeed, the world awaits such a humble recognition, but I fear we may not see this in our lifetime. Perhaps a future Patriarch of Moscow or President of Russia will come to this self-effacing conclusion, for the sake of Pan Orthodox Church unity and healing among the Slavic brothers and sisters united in Christ.

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