

ПРОДОЛЖЕНИЕ ДИСКУССИИ

RELIGIOUS PROSELYTISM IN STATECRAFT

A PAST AND PRESENT COMPARISON OF RUSSIA AND THE UNITED STATES

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Abstract

This article seeks to understand the use of religious proselytizing in the Statecraft of the United States and Russia. The different perspectives on this activity is first assessed historically. The experiences that both countries had (or did not have, in the case of the US), provide insights into the disparity of opinion and practice between the two countries today. This historical view reveals how politically important and influential such activity was for Russia. Good relations with religious leaders and their religious movements helped to ensure stability in far flung regions of its territory, and active attempts to convert other people, i.e. proselytizing, was seen as politically aggressive and socially disruptive. The second part of this article looks at the contemporary implications of statecraft and proselytization. One sees a continuity between the imperial, Soviet and contemporary periods regarding proselytism, despite the political diversity of the periods. Domestically, Russia has clamped down on religious organizations with ties to the US and whose practices included active proselytizing. In this way, one can see how it believes religion, and proselytizing in particular, can be politicized or weaponized and used in foreign policy. Beyond its borders, Russia has employed the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) in proselytizing or quasi-proselytizing activities to help carry out its political agendas. For the US, religious conversions were traditionally never part of the national or political discourse, and so there is still a tendency to view such activity as innocuous, individual experiences. Meanwhile, Russia continues its crackdown on religions which promote an aggressive proselytizing agenda, and especially US-based ones, such as the Jehovah's Witnesses, whose members are often treated as enemies of the state.

Keywords:

statecraft; USA; Russia; religion; proselytism; Jehovah's Witnesses; Russian Orthodox Church.

In June 2020 Gennady Shpakovsky, 61, a member of the Jehovah's Witnesses, a religious organization from the United States originating at the end of 19th century, was sentenced to six years in prison in Pskov, Russia.

This was the longest sentence handed out to the dozen or so members¹. In total some 495 raids were carried out in 2017 resulting in more than 300 charges. Wiretaps and other forms of monitoring were used to net the sus-

¹ Russia 'Escalating' Jehovah's Witnesses Crackdown – HRW, The Moscow Times, 01.10.202. URL: <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2020/01/10/russia-escalating-jehovahs-witnesses-crackdown-hrw-a68860> (accessed: 04.11.2020).

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pects. This crackdown followed the decision of the Duma in April 2017 to ban certain designated “extremist” organizations. The Jehovah’s Witnesses was numbered among these². Its 170,000 members were barred from assembling and forced to disband.

The United States (US) reacted critically to what it perceived as acts of persecution and deprivation of religious liberties. Its embassy in Moscow described the Kremlin’s actions as “harassment”. The US government complained formally to the United Nations on 5 July 2018,

the behavior of Russian officials has continued, with increasing numbers of police raids, arbitrary arrests and detentions, deportations, and intimidation targeting Jehovah’s Witnesses, and other religious minorities, including Scientologists and Muslims. Targeting individuals for mistreatment because of their beliefs is directly at odds with Russia’s international obligations and OSCE [Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe] commitments regarding freedom of religion or belief. Such actions also contravene Article 19 of the Russian Federation’s constitution. ... Russia’s attempts to justify its repressive actions under the pretense of combating “extremism” in effect exposes over 175,000 Jehovah’s Witnesses and thousands of other “non-traditional” religious minorities to unjustified criminal prosecution simply for peacefully practicing their religion. Despite Russia’s assurances that its law on combating “extremism” would not affect individual worshippers, this is exactly what is happening³.

Neither the US – nor the EU – could understand how groups like the Jehovah’s

Witnesses were a threat to Russia, a nuclear superpower. While the US and EU viewed the issue as centrally about religious freedom, Russia adopted an approach, emphasizing the group’s ties to the United States.

At his sentencing, Shpakovsky remarked, “Unfortunately, history repeats itself. Today, the same thing is being done to me and my fellow believers.” In contesting the charges, Shpakovsky, a former leader in his local precinct in Pskov, “drew parallels with Soviet repressions of people”⁴. Shpakovsky was on to something with his reference to history, but as this article will suggest, he did not go back far enough, to underscore the full social and political implications that religious minorities within Russia and the Russian empire have historically held.

Structure & Argument

It is from the long perspective of religion operating within Russia and its empire of old that this article will assess statecraft, which is the pattern of behavior of states pursuing their goals in external affairs, and the activity of religious proselytizing, which is the attempt to convert people to another faith or denomination⁵. Statecraft’s inclusion (or exclusion) of religion and the relevance of proselytism to the US and Russia have historical roots that partially explain the sharp divergence of opinion and practice today between the two countries, as illustrated in the opening anecdote. Russia’s political, diplomatic, and military involvement in the various religious movements that it encountered as it expanded its empire, especially from the 18th century and the time of Catherine II (r. 1763–1796), provided it with precautionary tales of the power, potential, and

² ‘Russia Detains Jehovah’s Witness ‘Elders’, The Moscow Times, 10.07.2020. URL: <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2020/07/10/russia-detains-jehovahs-witness-elders-a70840> (accessed: 04.11.2020).

³ Ongoing Harassment of Jehovah’s Witnesses and Other Religious Minorities in Russia. U.S. Embassy & Consulates in Russia. 2018. URL: <https://ru.usembassy.gov/ongoing-harassment-of-jehovahs-witnesses-and-other-religious-minorities-in-russia/>. (accessed: 04.11.2020).

⁴ ‘Russia Hands ‘Harshest, Longest’ Jail Sentence to Jehovah’s Witness’, The Moscow Times, 09.06.2020. URL: <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2020/06/09/russia-hands-harshest-longest-jail-sentence-to-jehovahs-witness-a70521> (accessed: 04.11.2020).

⁵ The notion of statecraft became the subject of examination in 2021 special issue of the journal, see [Jordan, Stulberg and Troitskiy 2021].

impact of religion on politics. Thus, Russia's domestic policy provides insights into its foreign policy and its statecraft more generally, especially where the US is concerned. The US is home to numerous Protestant denominations and sects, many of which have a decidedly proselytizing edge to them and a deep interest in employing it in Russia. By contrast, the US determined early on, during the formation of its Constitution, to distance itself as much as possible from religious affairs, and especially from proselytism or conversion, which it considered a personal decision devoid of meaningful political implications.

In other words, Russia and the United States conceive of the relationship between religious groups and foreign policy differently because they hold fundamentally different assumptions about how religion relates to politics. Americans subscribe to a peculiar Protestant and liberal concept according to which religion and politics represent autonomous and distinct spheres. That viewpoint stems from America's origins in the Puritan religious movement and its arrival in America to escape regulation and persecution in Britain. However, that has not precluded flashpoints of religious prejudice, as the Presidential race of 1960 and the Roman Catholic democrat, John F. Kennedy, reveals. But this is an exception to the religious liberty experienced most of the time; in fact, liberty of faith was upheld to such a degree, that it was actually a guiding foreign policy objective under the George W. Bush administration (r. 2001–2009) [Dulk and Rozell 2011].

Russia's concern about the potentially insidious effects that religious groups can have on its population is borne out in the numerous instances, historical and contemporary, some of which will be discussed below. Obviously, the effects and consequences are different now than they were then, but the threat of loosening political cohesion and legitimacy remains. The threat of religious undermining posed by groups such as the Jehovah's Witnesses or even Scientologists, both discussed in this article, might have potentially larger domestic ramifications. Russia's expansion as an empire, in earlier centuries, account for this sensitivity towards religious movements.

This article is divided into two parts. The first will look at the historical considerations which account for the great disparity between the two super powers in their views on religion and proselytizing and their political capabilities. In brief, the numerous experiences taught Russia a crucial lesson that its American counterparts never experienced or learned, and thus have never fully appreciated or understood: good relations with religious movements and their leaders often assured political stability.

Building on the evidence collected in part one, part two looks at the contemporary implications of statecraft and proselytization. Noteworthy is the continuity between the imperial, Soviet and contemporary periods regarding proselytism, despite the political diversity of the periods. Religion in Russia moved beyond individual particularities and figured into issues of national identity and domestic and foreign policy. Thus, both policies are considered in this article in assessing statecraft and proselytism. Domestically, Russia's clamping down on religious organizations with ties to the US and whose practices include aggressive proselytizing within Russia, reveals ways in which Russia believes religion, and proselytizing in particular, can be weaponized and used in foreign policy. Beyond its borders, Russia has employed the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) in proselytizing or quasi-proselytizing activities to help carry out its political agendas.

The dangers that religious leaders who opposed the Romanovs represented are generally well understood, especially by historians of the Russian empire. And many writing on the topic of statecraft have correctly remarked upon the misuse of history: how politicians, partially informed, banded historical events about to suit their policy initiatives [Gavin 2012: 2]. This is undoubtedly true and happens in every legislative chamber. But there are certain historical "truths" that are more difficult to misinterpret and consequently require less justification (though they can still be scrutinized) and are understood as "public history" at the societal level, where disagreement occurs only on the fringes. That which will be discussed throughout this first section of the article falls into this category, though these lessons

are less known to outsiders and need to be addressed in this bi-lateral context of statecraft, of which very little has been written.

THE HISTORICAL DIMENSION OF RELIGIOUS STATECRAFT

In 1794 both Russia and the United States were experiencing political turmoil. Already in its third year, the Whiskey Rebellion in Pennsylvania had begun when disgruntled farmers took the law (and pitchforks) into their own hands to protest the tax on whiskey, which they contended robbed them of their modest profits. Meanwhile, in Polish lands, Tadeusz Kosciuszki led a rebellion to throw off the Russian government and free Poland, following the second of three partitions of that land. Interestingly, he had also played a (minor) role in the successful American Revolution against the British nearly two decades earlier. Both rebellions were ultimately put down; however, the repercussions were starkly different; Catherine inaugurated forced conversions to the Orthodox faith of 750,000 Uniate believers, while President George Washington forced the farmers to pay the tax, intent on maintaining a credible tax system, though eventually the excise tax on distilled spirits was repealed.

Yet these two events are instructive for the historical divergences the two countries took. The sensitivities in the US evolved, not around religion, but around taxation and the economy, as seen in its meteoric rise to global leader by the end of the 19th century; meanwhile, Russian political fomentations invariably had a religious edge to them. Kosciuszki and his compatriots were urged on as much by their religious identity, as Roman Catholics, as by their political identity, as Poles.

The Politics of Proselytizing

Proselytizing traditionally carried with it overt political connotations beyond whatever benign intentions missionaries may have possessed. Poland's first king, Mieszko I, felt it prudent to convert his kingdom en masse from Paganism to Christianity in the 10th century, in part, to avert future attacks by German marauders to the west. This type of forced conver-

sion, from within, was instanced later in England under Henry VIII and lands affected by the Peace of Augsburg in 1555; it was also featured at times in Russian policy, especially under Catherine II, Nicholas I, and Alexander III.

In the age of discovery, empires facilitated the presence of missionaries in newly-occupied, foreign lands. It is for this reason that the Chinese and Japanese at most times, and the Vietnamese and Koreans at various times, looked askance at the arrival of Christian missionaries in a manner not dissimilar to an encroaching army. Their experiences bore this out. The Western aggression that incited the Opium War was concluded piecemeal in various treaties. In article six of the Treaty of Tientsin (1858) between China and France, which followed the second Opium War, the latter (France) protected its missionaries on foreign land: "the religious and charitable establishments which were confiscated from Christians during the persecutions of which they were victims shall be returned to their owners through the French Minister in China" [French Gov't, 1860]. In this version, the aggressor – and outsider – suddenly became the victim; the situation today within Russia and touched upon in the opening bears a certain resemblance, at least from the Kremlin's perspective. Indeed, statecraft amongst empires included (and protected) missionary outreaches in an attempt to convert the hearts and minds of the locals.

Even with no European army in the shadows, missionaries and their ideas were disruptive. In the case of Catholic missionaries to China, the rules of the faith were at times unbending, if not hostile. Chinese converts were expected to throw off their ancient practices of ancestral veneration to be considered a proper Roman Catholic. Reconfirmation of this decision in 1721 left Chinese Catholics between a rock and a hard place, forced to choose between a most cherished tradition and a religion that promised them eternal salvation. Indeed, the basis of proselytism is the missionary's belief that locals have a wrong outlook and belief system. And with Russian identity, then and today, so closely associated with the ROC, such activity by US-based religious groups easily offends in such a tense political climate.

Orthodoxy has existed as long as Russia itself, from the end of the tenth century and the baptism of Rus to the fall of the Romanovs in 1917, only to be revived after 1989. It developed rather autonomously within the Byzantine empire, before developing its own patriarchate in 1589. By the nineteenth century most of Russia's population were Orthodox Christians. In an attempt to avoid competition inside Russia, the tsars, beginning with Peter the Great, decided not to name a Russian patriarch. Instead, a Holy Synod, part of the government apparatus with the emperor presiding, administered church affairs between 1721 and 1917. And even earlier, in *sobornoe ulozhenie* of 1649, many administrative functions were consolidated by the state. This was replaced by a new code of laws in 1832 under the directions of Mikhail Speransky, in which the Church, its clergy and their seminary education were even more tightly regulated⁶.

As empires, neither Russia nor the United States, is understood in the traditional European sense of this term. In the US, religion subsumed public and personal life but was not a disruptive or political force; to be sure, it influenced politics, but often indirectly and without a menacing aspect [Farr 2008]. To the extent religious leaders got entangled in the political sphere, it was generally within the democratic process. For its part, the US determined not to make religion its business, as set out in the Constitution and the first amendment of the Bill of Rights.

In the case of its empire, matters were trickier, but in the end, the United States refused to coopt with Protestantism in any hegemonic, proselytizing partnership. During the takeover of the Philippines from Spain, the US encountered a deeply entrenched Spanish Catholic Church and a people clinging closely to a religion they shared with the now undesired Spanish authorities. In ousting Spain, the US had to deal with a Catholic population, largely illiterate and immersed in a thoroughly Catholic education, which was controlled by Spanish friars [Raftery 1998]. The US government's

desire to break-up the friars' monopoly on education, which included the removal of religious paraphernalia from classrooms and limiting Catholic education to three afternoon classes a week, was viewed by the American Catholic Church as an infringement of the separation of Church and State. Under Theodore Roosevelt, the government accommodated many of the US Catholic church's demands for the island, especially concerning schoolbooks and education curriculum. Although these issues were politicized initially, in the end, there was no attempt to convert the locals to Protestantism, and Catholic authorities were allowed to determine local educational matters.

Russia's empire grew unevenly, in fits and spurts, not by carracks on the high seas, but through and along the rivers in the Volga region, out to Siberia, in the Caucasus, Poland and the Baltic Sea, and to Central Asia. Its growth occurred mainly on land through the conquest or assimilation of those on its borders to the West, and especially to the South and East. In doing so, they encountered people groups of different faiths, including many Muslims [Werth 2014: 2] described the policy at the time this way: "guided by *Polizeistaat* models of statecraft and moderate Enlightenment conceptions of religious toleration, Catherine II's government came to recognize the utility of non-Orthodox religions as sources of order and stability." This was especially true in the Russian hinterlands.

When co-opted by the State, religion was seen as a calming and unifying influence. And in Catherine's case, promoting proselytism – or rather, the deepening of one's faith – aided this process.

Werth [2014: 85] continues,

the Police state combined with missionaryism! Catherine II was famous—and later criticized—for promoting Islam among Kazakhs, who were perceived to be weakly Islamicized and thus more unruly than settled Muslims further west. For similar reasons the government facilitated the spread of Buddhism among shamanistic Buriats in the eighteenth century.

⁶ Code of Laws of the Russian Empire 1832 Characteristics. URL: <https://buhconsul.ru/en/svod-zakonov-rossiiskoi-imperii-1832-g-harakteristika-obshchaya/> (accessed: 08.11.2020).

For, on the periphery, the Russian empire relied on collaboration with local (religious) leaders, whether Muslim, Christian or Buddhist, because the borders were much more porous than most understood.

From Catherine II to Nicholas I (1825–1855) foreign or minority religions began to be officially regulated by the state, in the form of Ukases, or legislation. Under Catherine a rather coherent (domestic) religious policy began to take shape. The empire was expanding and with that meant the presence of diverse religions, most notably Catholics in the West and Muslims in the East and South. These religious organizations were led by their spiritual leaders, bishops and imams, who held *de facto* power within these societal groups. And since the fringes of empire were traditionally the most vulnerable, as the motives behind Russia's sale of Alaska in 1867 make clear, it was imperative to form an understanding, if not political cooperation with them. Crews [2006: 349, 358] and Werth [2014: 10], argued broadly that religions became the “building blocks of the empire,” and religious leaders in each community were seen as “instrument[s] of imperial rule.” As such, Catherine extended religious toleration over her sovereign lands and diverse peoples, for “to forbid or not to allow their various faiths would be a very harmful mistake for the peace and security of its citizens.” [Werth 2014: 38]. And earlier when Russia desired to expand its empire in the 18th century, its proselytism abated in order to “minimize encroachments on the religions of its subjects” and create peace in the hinterland, proof yet again of the disruption proselytizing represented.

And when acts of forced conversion through persecution occurred on its borders, Russia defended such groups if they were allies or potentially future allies. In the case of the Armenian national church, they occupied land near the Russian border in the Ottoman Empire, Russia's traditional enemy. As such, they represented an important ally in the region. Supplications for protection were made in the late 1820s by Christians of all ilks who told of persecutions and coerced conversions, a result of Ottoman retribution for what it perceived as a Christian alliance in support of the Greek revo-

lution. Russia offered support to the Armenian Apostolic Church, which paid modest dividends later in its war with Persia (1826–1828). A leading Armenian cleric, Nersēs, assembled thousands of Armenian faithful and helped capture Erevan and eastern – or Persian – Armenia [Bournoutian 1998: 264]. This tale of religiously-backed military support forms part of a larger thesis by Riegg [2020: 2], who argues in his book that Russia “tried to harness the stateless and dispersed Armenian diaspora to build its empire in the Caucasus and beyond.”

The deeper into the nineteenth century one went, the greater tendency religion had to take on a political character. According to Werth [2014: 5],

state officials [increasingly] regarded the activities and outlooks of non-Orthodox clergies as disturbing “political” manifestations that challenged the autocratic order or the integrity of the empire. Still committed to promoting religiosity for all of the empire's subjects, the autocracy now became more inclined to perceive “politics” rather than spirituality in some expressions of non-Orthodox piety.

After the Polish rebellion of 1863, Tsar Alexander II sent remonstrance to Pope Pius IX over the actions of the Polish Catholic church: “This Union of the servitors of religion with the instigators of disorders, a threat to society, is among the most scandalous facts of our time.” [Riegg 2020: 240]. Indeed, Catholics to the West were treated more cautiously because of the long, antagonistic history between Poles and Russians, who were nearly subjugated fully to Polish dominion in the early seventeenth century. Werth [2014:16] sees the attempts at conversion as part of the reason for the negative Russian attitude towards Catholics:

From its medieval predecessor, imperial Russia inherited a set of strongly anti-Catholic outlooks that were rooted in hostility to papal pretensions and fears of aggressive Latin proselytism. Those antagonisms were nourished by Muscovite-Polish struggles over the lands of the Lithuanian Grand Duchy and, in the Time of Troubles, even over the religious future of Muscovy itself.

Yet, Russian attitudes and policies towards religion were complicated and an understanding of these contrasting views provides insight into why the US and the EU today struggle to understand them. Werth [2014: 10–12] goes furthest in explaining the complicated and conflicting policy of the Russian empire regarding religion. He depicts Russian policy as “continuities and discontinuities”. On the one hand, it promoted spirituality and upheld “religious forms of authority”; on the other hand, “the imperial state proved hostile to manifestations of religiosity that it regarded as being ‘political’”, among which often included proselytizing. In such cases, foreign confessions were “basic protections of religious toleration”. Pertinent for our discussion, Werth wrote of “discrediting” actions which “involved a process whereby statesmen denied full legitimacy—and thus some of the basic protections of religious toleration—to the foreign confessions.” [Werth 2014: 10].

Until the twentieth century, one of the most significant Russian domestic policies in the sphere of religion was conversion of the Uniates. In 1596, three million or so Orthodox believers recognized the primacy of Rome. This became known as the Union of Brest. These converts were referred to by several names, including Eastern-Rite Catholics, Ruthenians, Greek Catholics, and Uniates, the preferred nomenclature of this article. Under the agreement with Rome, the Uniates were allowed keep some of their Orthodox practices but were to submit to the spiritual authority of the pope and his church’s doctrine. In 1794, Catherine II compelled three quarters of a million Uniates to return to the Orthodox fold. This legislative proselytization was a way “to secure their loyalty to their new sovereign” and loosen the influence of Poles over them. [Wolff 2002: 188]. This policy of reducing the foreign influence of Russia’s enemies by targeting religious groups within its territory has modern applications with the US, as will be shown in the second section of this article.

Sensitivity towards religious movements and how they affected political affairs heightened under Nicholas I, following the revolts of December 1825 and November 1830. He understood that religion was a veritable tinder box if not strictly controlled, especially where Catholics were concerned. Open support of the November Uprising by Catholic bishops resulted in his desire to monitor and control all aspects of the church’s temporal operations within his empire. Like his grandmother, Nicholas forcibly converted the remaining Uniates in his territory in 1839, and for similar reasons: to reduce political tension building on his western frontiers.

Other heavy-handed measures were adopted under Nicholas I. In 1827 he tried to stop the flow of fugitive priests from the state church to the Old Believers, who adhered to religious practices as they were prior to the reforms of Patriarch Nikon (1652–1666) and resisted reforms in line with Greek Orthodoxy. It became a criminal offense for Orthodox priests to join the “schismatics” [Clay 2008: 116–117]. In Perm Old Believers gradually succumbed to tsarist wishes, owing their conversions “more to the legal and administrative pressure that secular and ecclesiastical officials applied”. Clay [2008: 116–117] summed up the general plan as “a broader Nikolaevan program to eliminate or attenuate all forms of religious dissent”. The closest parallel in the case of the US was its policy towards the Mormons in Utah; it forced the group to discontinue its practice of polygamy and conform to the laws of the land before Utah would be admitted as a state to the union.

When not forced, conversions inevitably came about through a form of education. The Society of Jesus, a Roman Catholic religious order known more colloquially as the Jesuits, was very effective during the Counter-Reformation in converting those under their tutelage. Its great educational influence in German lands under Peter Canisius is but one example⁷. Educational reform and the Enlightenment were slow in coming to Russia, lag-

⁷ Peter Canisius: Countering the Reformation in Germany. Jesuits in Britain. 09.11.2020. URL: <https://www.jesuit.org.uk/articles/peter-canisius-countering-reformation-germany> (accessed: 10.10.2021).

ging far behind its European counterparts. Educational reforms under Alexander I, beginning in 1802, helped but Russia still relied upon the outside for assistance. Polish, French or German governors were often selected to educate scions of the elite; Germans in Tartu shaped university life, while the Polish and Ukrainian Jesuits were given cover by Catherine II, ignoring a papal bull of suppression of 1773, so that they could educate the communities in which their educational institutions were found.

This outside educational assistance was also a vulnerability, liable to be exploited politically. Admired by Catherine, the Jesuits fell into disfavor under her beloved grandson, Alexander I (r. 1801–1825), and were banned. The reasons for this are revealing: conversion of “several members of leading noble families” and a foreign headquarters, after 1814 and the Jesuit restoration [Flynn 1970: 249]. Another Romanov strategy was to control or at least monitor the curriculum and the institutions where it, the curriculum, was taught. Between 1783 and 1794, Catherine II established a governing body over religious affairs in Crimea and the Volga-Ural region, her two most populous Muslim regions [Werth 2014: 49]. Later, in 1801, a Roman Catholic seminary was erected in St Petersburg.

Consolidation: Autocracy & Orthodoxy

Spreading religion was often done domestically within a broader, political program of education. In 1833 the education minister, Sergei Uvarov, unveiled a plan known as Official Nationality. In a circular he stated that “all education in Russia must be conducted in the joint spirit of Orthodoxy, autocracy, and nationality.” This was as much an effort to encourage those to remain loyal to the Orthodox faith as it was to draw in those who had drifted away. According to Riasanovsky [2005: 132–133], Uvarov “presented these principles invariably as the true treasure of the Russian people”. Thus, Orthodoxy held several meanings for Russians: its official Church and a department of the state and “its source of ethics and ideals that gave meaning to Russian life and society”, ideas that Vladimir Putin

would champion after 2012 both at home and abroad, on which more below.

This movement towards religious (Orthodox) homogeneity amongst its Slavic populations mainly was a domestic policy that indicated its mindset towards statecraft and religion more generally and towards statecraft and proselytization more specifically. Nicholas I basically held that people groups were born with a certain religious DNA, which, if altered, violated the natural order of things. In the run up to the Crimean war, Nicholas attempted to protect Orthodox believers in Wallachia, Transylvania, and Moldavia from the repression of the Ottoman Empire. Elsewhere, he attempted to dissuade German Lutherans in the Baltic from converting to Orthodox, believing that they should remain faithful to their own natural identity. In fact, in 1841, Russia discouraged such conversions to Orthodoxy and “subsequently imposed cumbersome procedures that restricted such transfers” [Werth 2014: 82. This mindset bears an uncanny resemblance with the thinking of the Kremlin today.

CONTEMPORARY CONSIDERATIONS OF STATECRAFT

The promotion of Orthodoxy as a defining agent within the Russian empire was not exclusive to the 19th century. Under Vladimir Putin, Orthodoxy has become “one of the main organizing motifs of national ideology” [Adamsky 2019: 179]. Adamsky [2019: 1] wrote in the opening lines of his book, *Nuclear Orthodoxy*,

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, religion and nuclear weapons have grown immensely in significance, reaching a peak in Russian ideology and strategy. Faith has a high profile in the president’s public and private conduct and in domestic and foreign policy, and it is a measure of national identity.

Curanović [2021: 1] defines this collaboration even further suggesting that the Russian state has adopted a “messianic” mission in the international arena, deriving this from the ROC itself.

In perhaps the clearest link with the Romanovs and the program inaugurated under Nicholas

I, and given emphasis under Alexander III, the Kremlin, in conjunction with the Russian Orthodox Patriarch, Kirill, articulated similar notions. The Orthodox Church was the “main spiritual staple”; its destruction was tantamount to the “destruction of the state” [Adamsky 2019: 176–177]. In this light, it is clearer to understand why the government acted as it did towards Jehovah’s Witnesses, who desired to win converts from the ROC, ultimately suggesting in the process that it was not a true Christian faith. One need to look no further back than 1992 to understand how great an influence religion could have on modern national and international politics in the region. Reflecting back on the fall of Communism, ex-Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev observed, “Everything that happened in Eastern Europe in these last years would have been impossible without the presence of this pope [John Paul II] and without the important role – including the political role – that he played on the world stage” [Rocca 2014].

The historical continuity of Russian attitudes is poignantly seen in juxtaposed quotes between the Kremlin today and Uvarov in the 1830s. President Putin spoke out against “secular Americans and Europeans for rejecting their roots, including the Christian values that constitute the basis of Western civilization” [Adamsky 2019: 180–81]. While Uvarov in 1833 drew attention to “the rapid collapse in Europe of religious and civil institutions, at the time of a general spread of destructive [anti-religious] idea[s]” [Adamsky 2019: 133], Uvarov went on to add,

it was necessary to find the principles which form the distinctive character of Russia, and which belong only to Russia; it was necessary to gather into one whole the sacred remnants of Russian nationality and to fasten to them the anchor of our salvation. Fortunately, Russia had retained a warm faith in the sacred principles without which she cannot prosper, gain in strength, live. Sincerely and deeply attached to the church of his fathers, the Russian has of old considered it the guarantee of social and family happiness. Without a love for the faith of its ancestors a people, as well as

an individual, must perish. A Russian, devoted to his fatherland, will agree as little to the loss of a single dogma of our *Orthodoxy* as to the theft of a single pearl from the tsar’s crown.

Similarly, the Kremlin today emphasizes “Russian uniqueness, ethno-religious values, the revival of patriotic feeling, tsarist-Soviet imperial nostalgia, and Russia’s great power status” [Adamsky 2019: 176–177]. It was with this mindset that Russian clergy and others involved in religious organizations had to be educated in Russia or undergo recertification after studying abroad.

In fact, the Russian Orthodox Church has become the “Kremlin’s geostrategic gambit” in areas of the world which feature sizeable Orthodox adherents and in areas which are open to Russian culture more generally. Blitt [2011: 365] argues that the patriarch and the ROC play “a key role in both formulating and advancing Russian interests abroad.” Prime Minister Medvedev reiterated this point in 2009:

I cannot help mentioning the role of the Russian Orthodox Church and our other traditional confessions in reviving the spiritual unity of compatriots and strengthening their humanitarian and cultural ties with the historical homeland. We will certainly continue contacts between the state and appropriate confessions [Blitt 2011: 378].

Just as in earlier times, its goal was not generally to convert, as such, but rather to keep the faithful from converting, by preaching “sympathy toward the Kremlin’s course, [and] orienting the flock away from the West” [Adamsky 2019: 182]. As Prime Minister Putin stated in 2009, “[i]n the dialogue with other Sister-Churches, the Russian Orthodox Church has always defended and hopefully will continue to defend the national and spiritual identity of Russians” [Blitt 2011: 378].

This desire to shore up the Orthodox values of the faithful is reminiscent of Nicholas I and his attitude toward the Orthodox diaspora in the run up to the Crimean War. President Putin has given assurances that he would protect Christianity around the globe and that this would be “a major part of his foreign policy” [Adamsky 2019: 187].

But Russian statecraft has in recent years gone beyond herding the flock and advocated growing it or at least garnering greater sympathy in what can be described as cultural-religious proselytizing. This image building features centrally the ROC. In the case of Christian communities in the Middle East, the Kremlin used “the humanitarian pretext for further diplomatic initiatives and enabl[ed] it to promote itself as the only patron of persecuted regional Christians”.

Further afield, in Latin America, the Russian government has lent the ROC a helping hand in proselytizing in the region. A Chilean priest recounted the effect that “the concerts of Sretensky Monastery’s choir, the exhibition ‘Holy Russia, Orthodox Russia’, and the cinematic festival of Russian films” had on the Chileans who participated. According to Blitt [2011: 392], it “awakened in them an interest in spirituality and in true Russian culture.” In Buenos Aires, the ‘Russia House’ “strengthens Russia’s public diplomacy” in the region [Blitt 2011: 393]. Whether this is proselytizing in the manner exhibited by the Jehovah’s Witnesses, it seems not, but the temporal effects are similar.

Closer to home, the ROC was employed as a diplomatic pawn in the recent row with Ukraine, in the ultimately unsuccessful attempt to keep the two churches (ROC and UOC) united. Patriarch Kirill adopted a strong-arm approach that fell flat with his Ukrainian counterparts⁸. President Putin accused the United States of stoking the independence of Ukraine and its Church, in an interview from January 2019. He stated, “[The US’s] main goal is to divide the peoples of Russia and Ukraine, to sow not only national, but religious strife. ... I repeat: we are not talking about any kind of spiritual life – we are dealing with dangerous and irresponsible politicking”⁹.

Similar initiatives in Montenegro provoked more aggressive action on the part of

the ROC and the Russian government. According to one think tank and overtly pro-American article, the Kremlin used the ROC to attempt to “influence Montenegro’s foreign policy” in 2006 when Montenegro desired independence and a decade later when it acceded to NATO. One of the most contentious issues was Montenegro’s attempt to wrest control of the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC), a sister church of the ROC, into the autonomous and local Montenegrin Orthodox Church (MOC). At issue was land in possession by the SOC, which would be turned over to the MOC if proof of ownership prior to 1918 could not be established by the SOC. This provoked public and political demonstrations, enlisting the support of the Metropolitanate of Montenegro and the Littoral, who was part of the SOC.

Once again, Russian officials criticized the actions of the US, as having an insidious effect on the region. Spokeswoman Maria Zakharova accused the US of having “an obvious intention to bring a schism into the Orthodox world, to destroy the integrity of the spiritual space in the Balkans,” and of dividing the Montenegrin population.

In assessing the situation with US-based faiths in Russia, the Kremlin has drawn similar conclusions. If the US can disrupt using religion in Montenegro or Ukraine, they can do it within Russia as well. Of the Christian faiths, the Jehovah’s Witnesses had the most run-ins. According to Professor of Religious Studies, Olga Griva, who later testified against the group, Jehovah’s Witnesses had been “covertly” carrying out missionary activities in Crimea. She advocated the need to “counter the ideology of religious extremism”. Indeed, the JW touched a nerve. As Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov spoke of strengthening the ROC, its hierarchy claimed that the Law of Freedom of Religion was “an act of supporting the schism by weakening the canonical

⁸ Defender of the faith? How Ukraine’s Orthodox split threatens Russia, ECFR, 2020. https://ecfr.eu/publication/defender_of_the_faith_how_ukraines_orthodox_split_threatens_russia/ (accessed: 08.11.2021).

⁹ Ukraine Orthodox Church granted independence from Russian Church. BBC News. 05.01.2019. URL: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-46768270> (accessed: 08.11.2020).

Church”¹⁰. According to Blitt [2011: 379], it is the ROC which dictates to the government which religious groups are “threats to its spiritual and cultural well-being” and that require repression. The ROC complained that foreign religions proselytize on “the canonical territory of the Church”) [Blitt 2011: 425n]. In further justification of the Government crack-down against groups like the JW’s, Russia’s Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, speaking to the OSCE, invoked spiritual values as a component of Russia’s security interests [Blitt 2011: 373].

Whether the same sort of concerns was on the minds of Russian authorities in their raid on the offices of Scientology in March 2019 is unclear, but that it is a US-based religious sect seems not to be a coincidence. And whether fraud occurred, to the tune of 800 million rubles (\$12 million), the timing of this raid, along with the efforts against US missionaries and the Jehovah’s Witnesses as a whole, appear to be a coordinated effort to lessen US influence domestically and disrupt whatever statecraft was in play in the region¹¹.

This understanding of foreign religions as a potential social disruptor falls in line with the broader policy of neutralizing or eradicating US influence within Russia’s geo-political sphere. US organizations tend to offer an alternative mindset and worldview to that of the Kremlin. And in a political system that shuns openness or transparency, these religious or societal angles are seen as potentially nefarious and in need of close monitoring.

The Jehovah’s Witnesses reveal a connection to the US government far weaker than those of their Islamic counterparts and neighboring Saudi Arabia or Turkey. The reasons for persecuting the JW might be more subtle – and personal. Pundits have speculated that the

JW’s refusal to serve in the army, along with their American ties, are the two likely irritants. But, as well, the ROC could have played an influencing role.

The Russian policies on religion and missions in Crimea are a curious and revealing mix of domestic and foreign. Their primary concerns in adopting these were Muslim extremists. However, the policy implemented reveals, how very real the Kremlin takes the threat of political upheaval by religious leaders and their followers. The restrictions introduced in Crimea, targeted all faiths except the ROC. Tatar and Ukrainian Muslims received the most scrutiny. One report attempted to read between the lines and observed, “in the case of Crimea, Russian culture and Orthodox religion were used to popularize a policy that had already been deemed in the strategic interests of the nation” [Petro 2018: 224]. The pressure brought to bear on religious minorities focused on those groups thought to be disloyal.

Interestingly, the closest the US came to targeting certain religions was the so-called “Muslim ban”, executive Order 13769 by President Trump in March 2017, entitled “Protecting the Nation from Foreign Terrorist Entry” into the United States. The affected countries were all Muslim ones: Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen. And the objective was not too dissimilar to Russia’s: to contain those actors considered hostile to the US. In total, 700 travelers were detained, and up to 60,000 visas were “provisionally revoked”¹².

Yet, despite a perceived similarity, the US reactions to Russian religious policies reveals just how far apart the two sides are on the capabilities and inclusion of religion into Statecraft. Its reaction to Russia over treatment of the JW’s was not unique. The US reacted similarly towards Germany, an ally, over its censorship of

¹⁰ The Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church has a message for the local churches. URL: https://www.b92.net/eng/news/world.php?yyyy=2019&mm=12&dd=30&nav_id=107721 (accessed: 28.12.2021).

¹¹ *Luxmoore M.* (2019). Scientology Properties Raided In Russia Amid Broader Clampdown On Foreign-Based Faiths. Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty, 29 March. URL: <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-scientology-raided-clampdown-foreign-faiths/29850267.html>. (accessed: 03.09.2020).

¹² Federal Judge Stays Trump Travel Order, But Many Visas Already Revoked. NPR. 04.02.2017. URL: <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2017/02/03/513306413/state-department-says-fewer-than-60-000-visas-revoked-under-travel-order> (accessed: 28.12.2021).

the JW's, accusing it of violating human rights. The US appears to discount the possibility of such political disruption. Instead, it appears to adopt a more humanitarian angle, arguing for the need for religious freedom, though this policy has been a disruptive one where Russia is concerned. Since the break-up of the Soviet Union, the US has publicly criticized crack-downs by the Kremlin on religious organizations. Back in 2002, the US Commission on International Religious Freedom observed the consequences of proselytizing by noting

“discriminatory laws, policies, and practices at the local and provincial level. Local officials have harassed and interfered with the activities of religious communities, preventing them from constructing, renovating, or renting suitable places for worship; distributing religious publications; and conducting religious education. Protestant, Catholic, and Muslim indigent believers and foreign missionaries have been harassed by security officials, denied re-entry visas, and even expelled, for propagating their faith”¹³.

While America has seemingly underutilized its “own” religions for political aims, it has had few qualms in collaborating with “foreign” faiths abroad (mainly minority religions) in carrying out its foreign policy. This is especially so when states proved uncooperative towards its geopolitical aims in the region. Thus, US statecraft has sought to identify and cooperate with disenfranchised religious groups in the Middle and Far East in helping to carry out its foreign policy aims in a given region, as the examples in Yemen, Indonesia, Morocco, and Jordan make clear [Hamid et al. 2017]. Former Secretary of State, John Kerry, said as much: “religious communities can play a role in achieving foreign policy goals around the world”¹⁴. These examples, while interesting, remain on the edge of our discussion dealing with proselytism.

When assessing US and Russian views of religion, proselytizing, and foreign policy, there are clear patterns that form between the past and the present. For the US, religious conversions were never part of the national or political discourse. For Russia, at certain times and in certain places, they most definitely were. Foreign religious missions within Russia were often viewed as a political threat and dealt with accordingly, unless state sponsored. The treatment of Jehovah's Witnesses as an enemy within has historical roots. It mattered not whether the member was Russian or a foreigner, though locals were often treated more harshly, akin to a traitor.

Similar severity was applied to domestic missions when backed by the government. Forced conversions were common and designed to return those into the fold of the ROC. Attracting new converts was normally not the aim. The same was true of foreign policy, where consolidating and affirming Orthodox values among the faithful was of primary importance, with less attention paid to attracting new followers, though recent activities in Latin America suggest that this might be changing.

And while statecraft is associated with foreign affairs, it acts as a guide for us presently in domestic policy towards foreign religions. Given Russia's intent to diminish US interference in its geo-political sphere, domestic religious policy will continue to disadvantage US-based religions, especially those with an active proselytizing agenda.

Given that the two sides, Russia and the United States, are seemingly so far apart on this religious issue, political opportunities arise for actors to exploit this great disparity. In perhaps no other area in discussions on statecraft are the two sides so far apart. Future Russian tactics abroad might go unnoticed or overlooked by the US, which has traditionally not

¹³ Remarks by USCIRF Commissioner Richard Land on Religion, Politics and Human Rights in Moscow, Russia. USCIRF. URL: <https://www.uscifr.gov/publications/remarks-uscifr-commissioner-richard-land-religion-politics-and-human-rights-moscow> (accessed: 05.11.2020).

¹⁴ *Morello C.* Kerry explains why religion is relevant to U.S. foreign policy. The Washington Post. 27 April 2016. URL: https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/kerry-explains-why-religion-can-play-a-role-in-us-foreign-policy/2016/04/26/b86eac2f-f6dd-4f6d-b1f4-5c16005c7261_story.html. (accessed: 11.05.2021).

viewed religious conversions in a political sense. The discounting of religious proselytizing presents a potential strategic opportunity that Russia could exploit in the future, though most of its foreign activity appears thus far to be of a defensive manner, to maintain the status quo among its Orthodox diaspora.

This notion of reading backwards, from domestic policy, to deduce statecraft, as this article has done, is rarely attempted. But it seems that, in this case at least, this unorthodox approach is a profitable way in which to gain insight into attitudes, mindset and objectives of one's own statecraft. Russia's sensitive attitude towards US-based religious organizations in its territory provides clues as to how Russia views religion abroad as a potential disruptor. This can

be used as a predictive indicator, given what we also know about the activity of the ROC abroad.

Finally, it is ironic that Russia, a country whose leadership and academics are overwhelming realists in their understanding of international relations, would yield great political potential to soft-power institutions such as religious organizations. The aggressive manner in which religious leaders and some of their followers have been treated by the Russian government suggests, in fact, little difference between men in uniform and men of the cloth. This is because in Russia's history, religious groups and especially their religious leaders held power large enough to cause disruption, requiring action that at times resembled war.

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РЕЛИГИОЗНЫЙ ПРОЗЕЛИТИЗМ КАК РЕСУРС ГОСУДАРСТВЕННОЙ ПОЛИТИКИ

ПРОШЛЫЙ И АКТУАЛЬНЫЙ ОПЫТ РОССИИ И США

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Резюме

Статья призвана оценить роль религиозного прозелитизма в государственной политике в американском и российском восприятии. В первую очередь различия в подходах к этому вопросу рассматриваются с точки зрения исторического опыта двух стран. Вызовы, с которыми они сталкивались (или не сталкивались в случае с США), помогает объяснить различие в их представлениях и практиках сегодня. Исторический взгляд показывает, насколько политически важной и влиятельной была прозелитистская деятельность для России. Хорошие отношения с религиозными лидерами и их движениями помогали государству поддерживать стабильность в отдалённых владениях, а активные попытки обращения других людей, то есть прозелитизм, рассматривались как политически агрессивные и социально разрушительные. Во второй части статьи рассматриваются современные последствия сформировавшихся взглядов на роль прозелитизма в государственной политике. В России в отношении прозелитизма видна преемственность между имперским, советским и современным периодами, несмотря на политические изменения. На территории России религиозные организации, связанные с США и практикующие активный прозелитизм, сталкиваются с ограничениями и запретами. Они объясняются сложившимся восприятием религии и, в частности, прозелитизма как объекта политизации, превращающего их в оружие, используемое во внешней политике. За пределами своих границ Россия использовала Русскую православную церковь (РПЦ) для прозелитизма или квазипрозелитизма, чтобы помочь в реализации политических планов. Для США обращение в религию традиционно никогда не было частью национального или политического дискурса, поэтому с американской стороны сохраняется тенденция рассматривать такую деятельность как индивидуальный опыт. Тем временем Россия продолжает преследование религиозных групп, которые продвигают агрессивную прозелитическую повестку дня, особенно базирующихся в США, таких как Свидетели Иеговы, к представителям которых часто относятся как к противникам государства.

Ключевые слова:

государственная политика; США; Россия; религия; прозелитизм; Свидетели Иеговы; Русская православная церковь.