

Russia Is Persecuting Christian Churches in Occupied Ukraine



Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church priest Serhii Palamarchuk celebrates mass service in Kostiantynivka, Donetsk Region, Ukraine, March 19, 2023. *(Violeta Santos Moura/Reuters)*

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Anyone who believes Russia is 'protecting Christianity' is ignoring the record of Russia's treatment of Ukrainian churches.

THE issue of religious persecution has emerged as an objection to House Speaker Mike Johnson's plans for military funding for Ukraine. Many [congressional Republicans](#) evidently believe that Russia is "protecting Christianity," as Representative [Marjorie Taylor Greene](#) (R., Ga.) said on Monday. These Republican members are being duped by Russian propaganda, including the claim that Russia's war against Ukraine is against Satanism. "The overthrow of faith and traditional values and the suppression of freedom are resembling a 'religion in reverse' — pure Satanism," Putin [said](#) two years ago, in a speech on Russia's intent to annex occupied Ukraine.

Moscow's invasion and devastation of Ukraine have contributed to the assessment, by the U.S. State Department and the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), that Russia ranks among the world's religious persecutors of greatest concern. Russia, they find, "egregiously" and "systematically" persecutes a wide array of Christian churches, except the Ukrainian Orthodox Church—Moscow Patriarchate, which Putin co-opts. A Ukrainian delegation of diverse religious leaders told a Hudson Institute gathering last year that they fear that a victorious Russia would crush their religious institutions. Credible reports on Russia-occupied Ukraine validate this.

Last December, the [Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church](#) posted on its site that in 2022 the Russian authorities in occupied Zaporizhzhia banned all Greek Catholic churches there as well as Caritas and the Knights of Columbus, Catholic aid organizations. According to the post, the bans were based on "groundless" accusations that church buildings were storing explosives and firearms, that its members were participating in anti-Russian protests, and that the charities were spying for the Vatican and Washington. All real property of the Greek Catholic Church in Zaporizhzhia was transferred to the Russian administrative authorities, church leases were terminated, and its leaders were barred from registering to legally carry out their ministries. The office of Archbishop Borys Gudziak of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Archeparchy of Philadelphia confirmed for me that the post represents the official position of the Ukrainian Catholic Church.

[Mission Eurasia](#), an American Christian charity, finds that in spring 2023 "almost all non-Orthodox churches in occupied territories were stripped of their right to hold church services." Forum 18, a Norwegian news service dedicated to religious freedom, reports that, in the occupied Luhansk region, Protestants, Jehovah's Witnesses, and the Orthodox Church of Ukraine have not been allowed to register their places of worship and only two Pentecostal churches were allowed to register, last January. Moreover, in 2022 in Lysychansk, Russian administrators reportedly seized the city's largest

Protestant church and informed another that Baptists, Pentecostals, and Seventh-day Adventists were banned as “extremists.” USCIRF also reported that Russian authorities in Mariupol had banned “all Protestant and non-Orthodox churches.”

Mission Eurasia found that the “scale of the destruction of evangelical prayer houses is vast.” It has mapped more than 600 religious buildings damaged or destroyed by targeted Russian missiles, suicide drones, artillery strikes, and other violence. Affected were the Ukrainian Pentecostal Church, Evangelical and Baptist churches, and the Seventh-day Adventists. The Jehovah’s Witnesses have seen 110 of its Kingdom Halls damaged.

The Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church now has “no clergy left” in Ukraine’s Russian-occupied regions of Donetsk, Luhansk, and Kherson, in addition to Zaporizhzhia, according to Mission Eurasia. It cites Forum 18’s Felix Corley, adding that Ukrainian Greek Catholic churches have been closed and their priests expelled from the occupied regions. The Kyiv-based Institute for Religious Freedom reports that Russian militants calling themselves “Cossacks” have shut down Catholic churches in Donetsk and closed them to worshippers. Storing weapons, promoting “neo-Nazi goals” — such claims are “the kind of classic accusations they’re making against the [Ukrainian] Greek Catholic Church,” said Corley.

In November 2022, Fathers Ivan Levitsky and Bohdan Geleta, Ukrainian Catholic Redemptorist priests, were arrested by Russian authorities at their church in occupied Zaporizhzhia. They were then “tortured without mercy” before being sent to prison, [according](#) to Major Archbishop Sviatoslav Shevchuk, the head of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church. According to Mission Eurasia, Russia’s “widespread” torture of detained Christian leaders in occupied Ukraine, includes “mock executions, threats of rape, electrical torture, and hours-long group beatings.” It finds a “practice of arbitrary arrests and kidnappings of religious figures, holding them in basements in horrific conditions and inflicting violent torture on them.”

USCIRF reports that Russian soldiers in Kherson abducted Orthodox priest Sergey Chudinovich after he refused to allow the military to distribute aid at his church. Russian forces detained him in a cold basement and “beat, strangled, and attempted to rape him with a baton” until he agreed to cooperate.

[USCIRF](#) reports also that Evangelical deacon Anatoliy Prokopchuk and his son Oleksandr were found dead, with signs of severe torture, in a forest two days after Russian forces abducted them in Kherson in 2022. Father Stepan Podolchak, a Ukrainian Orthodox priest, died in Kherson, the Ukrainian military administration (in exile) stated on February 15, 2024, two days after Russian forces abducted him from his home. Bruises were found on the priest’s body. Bishop Nykodym (Kulygin) in the neighboring diocese of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine told Forum 18 “that Russian occupation forces ‘tortured Father Stepan to death.’” Podolchak held religious services in Ukrainian and refused to affiliate with the Moscow Patriarchate.

Many churches are closed on accusations that they have Western ties and are “enemies of the people” and “extremist” for simply praying in Ukrainian. The Orthodox Church of Ukraine and the Greek Catholics both conduct liturgies in Ukrainian, making them prime victims of Russian persecution, but other Christians are also affected. USCIRF reports, for example, that Russians torched a library of Ukrainian spiritual literature in the Tavriski Christian Institute in Kherson.

To thwart underground churches, the Russian-occupation authorities repurpose closed churches, spy on believers’ homes, and deport church leaders. A cross at a church that was seized in Zaporizhzhia was sawed off so that the building could be cynically repurposed as a “Ministry of Culture” office.

I’ve previously [written](#) about the weaponized Moscow Orthodox Patriarchate. But even churches affiliated with it in occupied Ukraine have not been completely spared. They experience “threats, attacks, illegal arrests, and torture for retaining their Ukrainian identity and for refusing to pray for ‘the victory of Russian arms,’” states Mission Eurasia.

In an [interview](#) with *Our Sunday Visitor* in February, Archbishop Gudziak warned about Russian occupation: “We cannot be naive about this. . . . Your fellow Catholics, your fellow Christians, Protestants and others, will not be able to pray freely. Their churches will be closed” and “taken over by the Russian Orthodox Church, as it did with Ukrainian Catholic churches after the liquidation” of its “visible structures.”

Those who care about defending Christians and religious freedom should take heed.