

A Peek into the Altar Room

Abridged Version of *Electronic Iconography*:

Religious Propaganda in the Contemporary Russian Federation

Vas Patapovich

Under the supervision of Dr Sean M Maloney

Introduction

Zoya Kosmodemyanskaya was executed on November 29, 1941. Prior to her untimely death, the 18 year old Soviet soldier was extensively tortured for information: beaten, burned, and marched outside naked in freezing temperatures by Nazi soldiers. She told them nothing. Zoya used her final words to address the people of the occupied village, proclaiming: “there's 200 million of us. They can't hang us all”.¹ Her story was used extensively in the Soviet propaganda of the era; she made the perfect Soviet “saint”, with devout communist beliefs and incredible courage; she was posthumously named “hero of the Soviet Union”, the highest military honour of the USSR.

2020 saw her story adapted once again for the silver screen. The movie, simply titled Zoya, was directed by Leonid Plyaskin and Maxim Brius and sponsored by Fond Kino (which in itself is sponsored by the Russian Ministry of Culture). It completely removes Kosmodemyanskaya from her real world motivations, ideology and ideals in order to make her story into an almost biblical narrative, with Zoya playing the role of Jesus dying for our sins. This is seen not only in terms of plot, where the equivalents of Pontius Pilate and Judas also make an appearance, but in visual parallels between the depictions of Zoya and Jesus in The Passion of the Christ.²

The advertising campaign which accompanied the release of this film portrayed the movie as an honest retelling of history with “no propagandistic leanings”, and yet it is impossible to tell the story of Zoya without explaining the ideological climate that made her into the person that she was. Removing her from the communist era teachings to which she devoted her life makes her story at best meaningless, and at worst a malicious lie.

In recent years the RF has had a vested interest in portraying its history in the light of Christianity, since religion is one of the mechanisms of population control employed by the

¹ Lyubov Kosmodemyanskaya, “Повесть о Зое и Шуре// The Tale of Zoya and Shura”, 1950.

² Evgeniy Bagenko, “ЗОЯ (Спасение рядового ИИСУСА)// Zoya (saving private Jesus)”, YouTube, June 8 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S-xjudFgBU&t=2697s&ab_channel=BadComedian .

regime. This proves a difficult task when the past century of a nation's history has been defined by vehement anti-theological beliefs. This juxtaposition of history and political interests results in the rewriting of history in order to suit the current politics of the regime, which is how almost 80 years after Zoya Kosmodemyanskaya's death there was a discussion about canonising a staunch Communist as an Orthodox saint.

The RF has learned to wield religion and mysticism as a weapon, using it against its own citizens in order to radicalise them. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, those in power have been pushing a very specific vision of Russia, both as a nation and as a culture; the state has seen a doubling down on conservatism and reactionary rhetoric. A key part in this vision of the “ideal Russian” is faith. A patriot must be devoted to the Russian Orthodox church, otherwise their entire character and qualifications are in question in the context of society. How exactly was this achieved? Where do we see the effects of this radicalization, and how effective has it been? Answering this question will help Western analysts and political leaders better understand Russian oppositional forces, and, more importantly for the people living in those nations, it would allow citizens to counter insidious Russian ideology.

Timeline

The telecommunication sphere of the USSR began changing in the 1980s; the new glasnost' policy allowed the easing of censorship laws, opening the market to an exchange of ideas with the West. Examples of this were the “telebridges” between the United States and the USSR. Satellite “streaming” technology, as it would be dubbed today, was developed in the Soviet Union in order to be able to broadcast the 1980 Moscow Olympics. The technology remained after the end of the global sporting event, and so a new use was found for it in 1982, where the first telebridge connected Moscow to Los Angeles.³ These telebridges consisted of two studio audiences, one Russian and one American, having a mediated conversation with one another. These shows allowed the audiences to both ask and answer questions; to discuss their daily lives, to highlight their concerns for one another. It is speculated that this raising of the Iron Curtain was one of the many ways in which the glasnost' policy inadvertently accelerated the collapse of the USSR.⁴ This and similar glimpses into the lives of those on the proverbial “other side” will influence the tendency towards Americanised media that will be seen later in Russian telecommunications.⁵

In the late 80s and early 90s there came an alternative to the standard cut-and-dry news brought to the people by “Vremya” (“Time”), the official news program of the Soviet period. Late night news shows featuring energetic young reporters started cropping up, often offering far more depressing news than Vremya’s “labour achievements” segment. These late night alternatives were primarily comprised of topics that were taboo to discuss in the light of

³ “ Передача "Телемост СССР-США"// show “telebridge USSR-USA”. Accessed February 15 2024.
<https://tv-80.ru/informacionnye/telemost-sssr-ssha/>

⁴ V. G. Abramov. “ // Television in the russian mediasphere: history, special features and possible avenues of development. Cyber Leninka. 2014. Accessed on February 8th 2024.
<https://cyberleninka.ru/article/n/televidenie-v-rossiyskom-mediaprostranstve-istoriya-osobennosti-i-perspektivy-razvitiya/viewer>.

⁵ A. M. Smastykov. “ // Transformation of Russian television in the post soviet era”. Bulletin of the Russian federal university named after E. Kant. 2009. Accessed on January 15 2024.
<https://cyberleninka.ru/article/n/transformatsiya-rossiyskogo-televideniya-v-postsovetskuyu-epohu/viewer> 104.

day, such as crime, addiction, and AIDS.⁶ These shows reflected the anxious atmosphere in the country; a climbing social uncertainty which laid the groundwork for a highly cynical culture. As the Soviet Union collapsed, the reintroduction of private ownership into society pushed the telecommunication sphere into a new direction: capitalism.

The main change that the collapse of the Soviet Union brought to the sphere of telecommunications was commercialization. With the appearance of private, non government controlled channels came the wish to make money. Sensationalism quickly became more important than the information being conveyed; shows kept viewers by playing up the emotions of their audience, creating a constant stream of intrigues to be discussed.⁷ After years of only being told good news in the USSR, the pendulum of the information sphere swung to the opposite extreme during the 90s, titillating the audience with drugs, celebrity scandals, and sex.

Commercialization also introduced into the Russian speaking market of never-before-seen formats of media: talk shows and infotainment. Talk shows were cheap and relatively easy to create, leading to the market being flooded with them. Covering a wide variety of topics (from politics to problems in everyday life), they were often filmed 6 episodes at a time, causing production value to decrease dramatically.⁸ Creative drive was no longer necessary when it came to creating media, what mattered most was the bottom line.

Infotainment beautifully and succinctly accomplishes the two main goals of mass media: to entertain and to inform. It subtly shapes the viewer's understanding of the world, tells them what is important and what isn't, all without feeling particularly heavy or overt. With the explosive rise of the internet in the 2010s came the belief that television would soon be replaced by online streaming services. The reasons behind why this is highly unlikely to happen in the post-Soviet bloc are rooted in the accessibility of the television from the

⁶ Ibid. 105.

⁷ Ibid. 104.

⁸ Ibid.

perspective of the average citizen; one must remember that large parts of Russia outside of city centres can easily be considered “underdeveloped”.⁹

Media Dissection

In order to demonstrate how pervasive religious propaganda is, a variety of different pieces of media will be examined. First, a movie whose primary purpose is to alter existing cultural narratives about the Soviet Union: Maria to Save Moscow. Next, a religious television show called War and the Bible will be used to demonstrate how this propaganda tempts to affect perceptions of contemporary conflicts. Finally, a dissection of the popular Russian talk show called Pust’ Govoryat will take place in order to show the effects of a constant religious narrative on public discourse and perception.

Maria to Save Moscow

The 2021 film directed by Vera Storozheva, created with the help of the Ministry of Culture and the Russian Military History Society, starts in Moscow at the end of 1941. A young NKVD agent named Maria Petrova has been tasked with seeking out the council of a blind old woman who can supposedly see the future. Upon pushing past the long line of people waiting to ask about the fates of their fathers and brothers at the front, she enters the old woman’s apartment. Maria asks her what will happen to Moscow, to which the crone replies “whatever you believe in will happen” ; elaborating that she knows Maria doesn’t care about her answer.¹⁰ The young lieutenant replies: “Because you tell everyone the same thing: pray and have faith. Have faith and pray. And I, for example, don’t believe in god, and don’t want to pray. I want to *know*”.¹¹

⁹ V. G. Abramov. “// Television in the russian mediasphere: history, special features and possible avenues of development. Cyber Leninka. 2014. Accessed on February 8th 2024. <https://cyberleninka.ru/article/n/televidenie-v-rossiyskom-mediaprostranstve-istoriya-osobennosti-i-perspektivy-razvitiya/viewer>.

¹⁰ *Maria to Save Moscow*. Directed by Vera Storozheva. Horosho Production. 0:06:24

¹¹ *Ibid.* 0:06:55

The lieutenant storms out, and goes to report her findings to her superior in the NKVD. She tells him the crone's reply to her question about Moscow's survival, calling it "typical religious propaganda".¹² Her superior thanks her, to which she replies the standard "I serve the Soviet Union", and leaves. Outside, Maria runs into the man she's in love with, who tells her that he's being sent to the front. He asks her to deliver the message to his wife, since he must leave immediately. She promises she will. She goes to his home and breaks the news to his wife as she is cradling their infant son. The wife gets understandably upset, which Petrova dismisses, belittling the woman before leaving. This sets up the characterization for the lieutenant: she is cold, ruthless, and heartless.

The scene cuts to Stalin getting briefed on religious activity in the USSR; organised religion is on the rise, with churches seeing a significant increase in attendance. The General Secretary of the Soviet Union is told about the crone, and decides to pay her a visit. She tells him that "the red rooster will beat the black one", but in order to allow for this to happen, Stalin needs to allow religion to revive itself.¹³ The crone tells him that if he flies the Tihinskaya icon over the city, Moscow will not fall.¹⁴

Since Petrova grew up in Torhan, the occupied city in which the icon is located in, she is tasked with retrieving the icon and bringing it back to Moscow. She and a group of seven lackeys set off on the road. The only notable member of the crew assigned to Petrova is an unnamed sergeant who becomes one of the protagonists of the film. He is a caricature of a Soviet soldier, using intimidation and force to overcome any situation. An example of this behaviour takes place when they reach the city: the sergeant immediately kills a random civilian who was chopping wood in his yard. Maria objects to this, saying "he's one of us", to

¹² Ibid. 0:09:23

¹³ Ibid. 0:22:50

¹⁴ Ibid. 0:23:49

which the sergeant retorts that all who live under occupation might as well be collaborationists.¹⁵

Heading to the local church, Maria asks the altar warden about the Tihinskaya icon, posing as a deeply devoted Christian. He tells her that the icon will be brought out for liturgy. This answer doesn't satisfy the protagonist; she pulls out a handgun and demands to be brought to the icon immediately. They enter the altar room where the lieutenant displays some familiarity on the inner workings of this church while talking to the father who was preparing for service inside. A gun fight ensues when a group of Nazi soldiers show up for Sunday service; Petrova's crew of nameless characters is killed, leaving only her and the sergeant.

Petrova leads them towards the middle of the village, since she knows the location of a house which is supposed to have a secret tunnel leading out of town. All they find is ruins; the father reappears and tells them that the house was burned down many years ago by the communists, and as a result the passage was destroyed. He tells them that the house used to belong to the previous father of the church and his wife, both of whom were executed on account of anti-Soviet activity.¹⁶ The father pleads with them to return the icon, in return promising to guide them to a partisan who can get them out safely. Instead the two NKVD members take him hostage.

The group makes it to the house of the partisan located at the edge of the city, only to find out that it was the innocent man the sergeant murdered a few hours prior. They decide to hide out in the dead man's house until night. Once night falls, the sergeant leaves to find a safe passage out of the city. When Maria and the father, who finally introduces himself as Vladimir, are left alone, he confronts her about being the daughter of the previous father of the village. She says that she is a daughter of her homeland, and threatens to kill him if he

¹⁵ Ibid. 0:32:40.

¹⁶ Ibid. 0:43:57.

doesn't stop talking. He counters by saying that she can't kill him since she has the icon on her, asking her to give it to him.¹⁷ She explains that the icon must return to Moscow because it will prevent the enemy from taking the city.

The nameless sergeant comes back from his reconnaissance mission with a brilliant idea: throwing grenades in order to distract the enemy, which will supposedly allow them to escape. They follow through with this, and in an unforeseen turn of events this draws massive amounts of enemy attention to the band. The protagonists begin to flee through the woods with Nazi soldiers and dogs on their heels. The sergeant tells Vladimir "Tell your god to get rid of the dogs", to which the father answers "You tell him. He'll hear you."¹⁸ The sergeant turns back in order to fend off the pursuers, giving the other two time to escape. As the sergeant takes aim at the dogs, he asks God for help. He manages to take out the dogs, and as he's turning back says, addressing God, "maybe you do exist", right before getting shot dead by the enemy. As the Nazi soldiers approach his body, the light from their lanterns creates a halo around his head, implying that he redeemed himself in the eyes of God with his final act.



Still taken from Maria to Save Moscow. Depicts the dead sergeant with halo symbolism. Source: film Мария Спаси Москву, <https://kinogo.biz/53763-marija-spasti-moskvu.html>

¹⁷ Ibid. 1:00:20.

¹⁸ Ibid. 1:08:40.

The father and the lieutenant manage to get away. As they take a rest to catch their breath, Vladimir says a quick prayer for their fallen comrade. Petrova says to cut it out, since the sergeant wasn't religious, to which Vladimir replies "God hears anybody who address themselves to Him, even if they only turn to Him in the last second".¹⁹

As they continue through the woods, Vlad suggests that they stop to rest at the house of one of his acquaintances who lives in a nearby village. The owner of the house, Vasiliy, goes to grab some kindling for them, running into a pair of collaborationists outside. They hand him wanted posters which say that Vladimir is wanted for the murder of the innocent man that the NKVD agents killed in the beginning. Vasiliy uncritically accepts this as the truth, coming back into his house and threatening to kill his guests. Petrova whips out the Tihinskaya icon and dares Vasiliy to kill her, screaming: "Shoot! Cross yourself in Her honour and shoot! Shoot you bastard, make sure she sees it!"²⁰ She starts tearfully reciting a prayer while continuing to hold the image as a shield. Vasiliy lowers his shotgun and tells the two of them to leave.

They set out on the road again. Maria says she doesn't know what came over her, to which the father replies that her mother used to recite the same prayer. Petrova stops in her tracks, asking him if he saw her mother be executed. Vladimir says he didn't, but he was the one who found her body and buried her. This causes a crisis of (communist) faith in the protagonist, as she wonders aloud what her mother did to deserve death; she reasons that her father really was guilty of anti Soviet activity, what with not letting her join the Pioneers and beating her for joining the Komsomol, but why her mother? "If the court decides he is guilty then that is the truth. But my mother was different. Mama wasn't guilty of anything".²¹

The father and the lieutenant are found by Red Army scouts, who take them back to their forward operating base in order to execute them since they also believe the Nazi wanted

¹⁹ Ibid. 01:14:00.

²⁰ Ibid. 1:26:58.

²¹ Ibid. 1:29:50.

poster. Right as they are about to be executed, the unit comes under attack. Only a single bullet is fired, which hits Maria. The execution is cut short as the Soviet soldiers hurry back to defend their base and Maria is still alive; Vlad opens up her coat to reveal that the icon stopped the bullet from piercing her. The two of them lay low as they wait for the fighting to stop.

The unit was completely destroyed and overtaken by enemy forces. Maria sees the corpse of her beloved laying in the snow. She closes his eyes as the father says a quick prayer before telling her they must keep going. As the two of them stand back up, Vladimir is shot dead by one of the grunts that was supposed to execute them earlier. The shooter succumbs to his injuries, and Maria runs away. She makes it out of the city, falls to her knees, and asks God to forgive her.

The film cuts to Petrova making it back to Moscow. She presents the icon to the Commissar who sent her on this quest at the beginning of the movie. He praises her for a job well done, to which she responds “I serve the Soviet Union”, and bursts into tears.²² She goes to see the old woman again in order to tell her that the icon made it to Moscow. The crone replies with: “Praise be to God. Now go my dear, a baby awaits you”.²³ Petrova says that is impossible, but the crone tells her to hurry; Maria pieces together that this means she must go visit her beloved’s widow. She arrives at his home to find out that his wife had died, and there was no one left to take care of the child. Maria takes the baby, who is *also* named Vladimir, and carries him outside in the same manner as she had been carrying the icon for the duration of the film. The final shot is her looking to see the plane carrying the Tihinskaya icon flying over the city.

The movie is bad from a technical standpoint, with a camera operator being visible in one of the shots and cringe worthy background actors, but what is it trying to pass on to the

²² Ibid. 1:41:07.

²³ Ibid. 1:44:13.

viewers? It was funded and supported by two influential organisations, thought was put into its creation. It exists in order to show the importance of faith. The film shows that fate will protect you; on the micro scale of the protagonists this is exemplified in several instances. The Tihinskaya icon prevents Petrova from being shot on two distinct occasions: during her confrontation with Vasilyi and during her would-be execution. Additionally, the sergeant asks God to help him save his comrades, and his wish is granted. Even in death, him turning to God is depicted as redemption. Maria is also redeemed by religion over the course of the film, as depicted by her cruel and uncaring characterisation in the beginning of the story, only to adopt the position of a mother, the very symbol of kindness and compassion, by the end. Faith will not only protect you physically, but will protect your immortal soul through redemption.

On the greater scale of the world as it exists within the movie this message is seen as well. We are told that flying the Tihinskaya icon over the city will ward it from Nazi attack. Over the course of the film there are occasional interruptions to the plot in the form of the focus shifting to the crone. During one of these instances the old woman is having a conversation with a young boy, who asks her “why did God let the war happen”. She answers that God didn’t start the war, people did.²⁴ He asks her what can be done, and the crone tells him to pray, to which he complains that he prays every day but nothing is happening. “I pray too, but it looks like there’s not enough of us yet”.²⁵ This implies that God is powered by prayer and belief, therefore he grows stronger the more people worship him; the stronger he is the more protection he can offer. Even the head of the state relies on God for protection, as is seen when Stalin instructs the NKVD to retrieve the icon.

The problem with this messaging is that the film presents itself as pseudo-historic, with historical organisations backing it. In interviews and press releases about the movie, the

²⁴ Ibid. 00:31:18.

²⁵ Ibid. 00:31:30.

director stated that in order to gain the logo from the Russian Military History Society at the beginning of the film, people working for the society reviewed the film in order to ensure it fits with historic facts.²⁶ Allegedly the only part they took issue with is that Maria's father was a member of the church, and therefore she would not have been able to join the NKVD. Therefore an official federal government organisation deemed that Stalin meeting with an old blind woman who told the future to be historically accurate, as well as giving the icon to fly over Moscow their stamp of approval.

The film is an example of the extent to which history has been corrupted. This story involves both the NKVD and Stalin directly involved in a plot to use an icon as a means of defence against the Nazis attempting to breach Moscow. Not only is the story with the icon fiction that is being presented as fact (since the director deflects criticism of the movie by stating the story is based on real life), but Stalin meeting an old wise woman further shows the contemporary regime's treatment of history.

Stories of hags who can see the future are not uncommon in the post-Soviet space, one popular example being Baba Vanga, a blind Bulgarian woman from the beginning of the twentieth century who many believed to be a healer and a fortune teller. These stories gained mass popularity in the 1990s, when people were desperate for answers and hungry for mysticism. The crone in this story is known as the Holy Matrona. Even though Matrona Nikonava died in 1952, she would remain largely unknown until 1993, when a book titled Сказание о Житие Блаженной Старицы Матроны (The Story of the Life of the Blessed Wisewoman Matrona) telling of her miracles was published.²⁷ From this began the cult-like

²⁶ Evgeniy Vagenko. "В бой идут одни экстрасенсы (Ильин и Мединский против нацистов)// Only people with psychic powers go into battle (Il'yn and Medinskiy versus the nazis)". YouTube. August 11 2023. Accessed February 4 2024.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S-xjudFvgBU&t=5625s&ab_channel=BadComedian. 00:11:40.

²⁷ Mihail Lidin. "Матрона Московская - мифы о чудесах святой; Ванга, предсказания // Matrona of Moscow - myths about the miracles of the saint; Vanga, fortune telling." Youtube. January 30 2019. Accessed on February 6 2024.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hiXYsSd4oMs&ab_channel=%D0%9C%D0%B8%D1%85%D0%B0%D0%B8%D0%BB%D0%9B%D0%B8%D0%B4%D0%B8%D0%BD

following of this woman, with countless re-editions of the book, documentaries, articles and TV shows made about her. Hundreds of people come to pray at her icon in Moscow's Pokrovsky monastery daily; it is said that her image itself is able to grant miracles. She was canonised by the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) in 1999, following a boom of popularity caused by the aforementioned book which the church wanted to capitalise on. The book claims that she was able to see the future, heal people and even exercise demons from a young age, which caused crowds of people to gather outside her house in hopes of receiving her help.²⁸

In October of 2008 a church in Saint Petersburg displayed an unapproved icon of the Holy Matron meeting with Stalin, a story that is told in her book and corroborated by little else.²⁹ The official position of the church at this time was that they do not see this meeting as taking place, therefore the father in question was reprimanded. It is worth keeping in mind that the ROC was responsible for the printing and republishing of the original book popularising this myth. Her canonisation was a divisive issue in the church, primarily due to many parts of her story being clearly fictitious (the episode with Stalin). Many preachers also took issue with some of Matrona's purported methods of healing people, as they were less inline with Christianity than they were with occult methods. Over the years the ROC took out the more divisive elements of Matrona's story from new publications of the book, including her meeting with Stalin, but the damage had been done. In 2019, the federally-sponsored Russian Orthodox channel Spas included a segment on Stalin meeting with Matrona in their documentary "Saving Russia, Moscow".³⁰ On the second of May 2023, the Holy Patriarch Kirill, leader of the ROC, led a sermon in honour of the day of remembrance for the holy Matrona. In his address, he compared her to Christ.³¹

²⁸ Ibid. 3:53.

²⁹ Ibid. 6:52.

³⁰ Ibid. 8:50.

³¹ Russian Church. "Проповедь Святейшего Патриарха Кирилла в день памяти блаженной Матроны Московской // Sermon of the most holy Patriarch Kirill on the day of remembrance of the blessed Matrona of



Icon depicting Matrona with Stalin.

Source: Youtube, “Матрона Московская - мифы о чудесах святой; Ванга, предсказания”

Where does the flyover of an icon over Moscow fit into all of this? The story does not originate from The Story of the Life of the Blessed Wisewoman Matrona, but from a different book that came out the same year: Россия Перед Вторым Пришествием (Russia Before the Second Coming). The text of the book says that the Kazanskaya icon saves Moscow, but the footnote contradicts itself by speaking of the Tihinskaya icon.³² The source at the back of the book for this claim is cited as a newspaper printed in 1991, where the icon flyover appears in the “Myths and Legends” section.³³

Despite the fact that the icon flyover never took place, it is depicted in the Главный храм Вооруженных сил России (main temple of the Russian Armed Forces). Erected in 2020, the structure aims to commemorate the most important moments in Russian military history, and the end of the Great Patriotic War in particular.³⁴ It is presented as an extension of

Moscow” YouTube. May 2 2023. Accessed on February 28 2024.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rjsv_hdvcMg&t=332s&ab_channel=russianchurch

³² Evgeniy Bagenko. “В бой идут одни экстрасенсы (Ильин и Мединский против нацистов)// Only people with psychic powers go into battle (Ilyin and Medinskiy versus the nazis)”. YouTube. August 11 2023. Accessed February 4 2024.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S-xjudFxfBU&t=5625s&ab_channel=BadComedian 1:25:27.

³³ Ibid. 1:25:39.

³⁴ Television Channel Khabarovsk. “Фильм о Главном храме Вооруженных сил России// Film about the main temple of the Russian Armed Forces.” YouTube. June 23 2020. Accessed on March 10 2024.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cf1SMiX1fZA&ab_channel=%D0%A2%D0%B5%D0%BB%D0%B5%D0%BA%D0%B0%D0%BD%D0%B0%D0%BB%D0%A5%D0%B0%D0%B1%D0%B0%D1%80%D0%BE%D0%B2%D1%81%D0%BA 2:31.

a long standing Orthodox tradition to commemorate battles and the soldiers who died in them by building temples in their honour; the official documentary on the structure states that this is especially important now since “there are many who would like to rewrite history”.³⁵



Vladimir Putin, Patriarch Kirill and Sergei Shoigu (Minister of Defence) at the ceremony of the blessing of the temple. Image taken from the official documentary on the temple of the Russian Armed Forces. Source: YouTube, “Фильм о Главном храме Вооруженных сил России”

This instance of making history fit into the narrative of the party using religious structures is far from unique; around the same time as the Temple of the Russian Armed Forces was unveiled, the restoration of the Saint Andrei temple, located in the town where Yuri Gagarin trained and died, completed renovations. There, space and satellites are depicted alongside the iconography of saints.³⁶ What’s more, Gagarin himself is depicted in an icon conceptualised by Aleksei Leonov, who was part of the original cohort of Soviet astronauts, and the first ever person to walk in space.³⁷ The implication made here is that the cosmic achievements accomplished by the USSR and its people were “in reality” supported by the divine; Gagarin is unable to voice his opinions on the matter from beyond the grave.

³⁵ Ibid. 3:32.

³⁶ Свято-Андреевский храм// Saint Andrei temple. Accessed on March 19 2024. <https://ap-hram.ru/>

³⁷ Club of those who like to travel “Red Sails of Hope”. “Киржач - город купеческий//Kirzhach - merchant town”. August 18 2021. Accessed on March 19 2024. <https://parusa-chg.nethouse.ru/articles/kirzhach---gorod-kupecheskii>



Image of the Saint Andrei temple, where satellites and icons co-exist. Source: official website of the St Andrei temple, <https://ap-hram.ru/>.



Image of the icon in the Saint Andrei temple depicting Leonov and Gagarin. Source: official website of the St Andrei temple, <https://ap-hram.ru/>.

All of these factors (which can be summarised as the acceptance of myths as facts) leads to a system in which truth and history are flexible, ever changing to fit the necessary narrative. This is incredibly dangerous, since it erodes reality. Cultures and nations define themselves by their histories; if one begins to carefully alter history, one alters the self-conception of an entire people.

War and the Bible

“War and the Bible” is a 16 episode documentary which debuted on Spas the 21st of November 2022, hosted by Boris Korchevnikov (the CEO of the channel) and Protoiereus Igor Fomin.³⁸ It is based upon a book of the same name written by Nikolai Serbskiy, a bishop in the Serbian Orthodox Church, in 1932 which spoke of an oncoming great conflict.³⁹ The show uses the framework of this book as a vehicle to discuss and explain the war in Ukraine.

The beginning of the first episode states that this project aims to discuss why the Russo-Ukraine war began, who is at fault, why everyone back home must refrain from sin in order to assure victory, why an alliance with evil will always result in failure (explicitly naming NATO as an example of this) and how God himself is involved in this conflict.⁴⁰ The episode fluctuates greatly in tone, shifting from being vague, using formulations like “one side” versus “the other side” to refer to the actors embroiled in this conflict, to explicitly calling NATO forces an alliance between man and the devil. Formulations are typically preceded by Korchevnikov reading out a passage from Serbskiy’s book, and asking the Protoiereus his thoughts on how the paragraph remains applicable in the contemporary context. The main purpose of this show seems to be to frame the conflict that is taking place in Ukraine as a war of good versus evil, with one side playing the part of God’s army, and the other of sin-incarnate. This is done by claiming that Russian forces are less violent than those of the West, outright putting the conflict into metaphysical terms, and bringing up the perceived flaws of Western systems.

Initially the Russian Federation is implied to be more peaceful by way of omission; when discussing the war preparations of different states, a graphic is displayed on screen

³⁸ Pravoslavie.ru. “НА ТЕЛЕКАНАЛЕ «СПАС» СОСТОИТСЯ ПРЕМЬЕРА ДОКУМЕНТАЛЬНОГО ПРОЕКТА «ВОЙНА И БИБЛИЯ» // Channel Spas hosted the premier of the documentary project “war and the bible”.” November 21 2022. Accessed on February 29 2024. <https://pravoslavie.ru/149551.html>

³⁹ Orthodox Christian Information Center. “Life of St. Nikolai Velimirovich”. Accessed on February 29 2024. <http://orthodoxinfo.com/general/stnikolai.aspx>

⁴⁰ Spas. “ПРЕДЧУВСТВИЕ СТРАШНОЙ ВОЙНЫ. ВОЙНА И БИБЛИЯ. 1 СЕРИЯ// Premonition of a terrifying war. War and the bible. Episode 1”. November 21 2022. Accessed on March 2 2024. <https://spastv.ru/predchuvstvie-strashnoj-vojnny-vojna-i-bibliya-1-seriya/> 3:00.

demonstrating the highest defence budgets in the world, except for that of Russia, which is notably absent.⁴¹ Currently, the RF defence budget is second to only the United States, announced to be approximately 35 trillion rubles (\$349 billion USD) in 2024.⁴² In 2022, military spending cost the state approximately 86 billion USD, which would situate Russia at third place in the graphic shown in “War and the Bible”.⁴³ This misrepresentation is purposeful, since it aids to craft the narrative of Russia as peaceful in comparison to the rest of the global community.

Apparently the war in Ukraine contains within it never before seen levels of violence; even the Second World War highlighted the nobility in people, the host claims, as Soviet soldiers and partisans are shown on screen.⁴⁴ He elaborates by saying that this is caused by the fact that one side is involved in order to liberate, the other to destroy.⁴⁵ Apart from being a truly incredible lie, especially when it presents the invasion of Ukraine as liberation, it also misrepresents another major conflict that is central to the identity of all former Soviet people: the Great Patriotic War.

The war on the eastern front was an incredibly brutal one for both combatants and non-combatants alike, taking the lives of at least 40 million people.⁴⁶ From the atrocities committed on occupied Soviet territory by the Nazis, to the horrible vengeful treatment of German citizens by the Red Army, it is impossible to interpret those awful years as “noble” without having some grave misconceptions of historic facts. The tip of this misconception

⁴¹ Ibid. 6:00.

⁴² Pavel Luzin et Alexandra Prokopenko. “Russia’s 2024 Budget Shows It’s Planning for a Long War in Ukraine”. Carnegie Politika. October 11 2023. Accessed on March 2 2024.

<https://carnegieendowment.org/politika/90753>

⁴³ Trading Economics (sourcing SIPRI). “Russian Military Expenditure”. Accessed on March 2 2024.

<https://tradingeconomics.com/russia/military-expenditure>

⁴⁴ Spas. “ПРЕДЧУВСТВИЕ СТРАШНОЙ ВОЙНЫ. ВОЙНА И БИБЛИЯ. 1 СЕРИЯ// Premonition of a terrifying war. War and the bible. Episode 1”. November 21 2022. Accessed on March 2 2024.

<https://spastv.ru/predchuvstvie-strashnoj-vojny-vojna-i-bibliya-1-seriya/> 21:40.

⁴⁵ Ibid. 21:56.

⁴⁶ American Heritage Museum. “Eastern Front”. Accessed on March 4 2024.

<https://www.americanheritagemuseum.org/exhibits/world-war-ii/eastern-front/#:~:text=Of%20the%20estimated%2070%2D85,occurred%20on%20the%20Eastern%20Front.>

iceberg would be that neither side was fighting to destruction, when in fact they both were. The Germans wanted *Lebensraum*, the “living space” located in eastern Europe in order to feed the Third Reich; the people already living there were insignificant cattle to be eradicated. On the side of the Allies, there is a reason the war did not end at the German border; their goal was to completely eradicate the Nazi war machine and occupy Germany so there was no doubt left about the outcome of the war.

The Protoiereus goes on to add that they are fighting for Christ.⁴⁷ This must be proclaimed proudly and openly, since “the motherland without Christ is not the motherland. A Russian person without Christ is not Russian”.⁴⁸ This adds to not only the narrative of this being a borderline spiritual conflict between Russia and the world, but to the image of Russians as the ultimate force of good. They stand not just for some nebulous idea of morals and ethics, but for God himself, for the eternal embodiment of goodness and humanity. They are fighting not because it benefits them, but because the “other side” only understands violence.⁴⁹ Some may frown upon the philosophy of “an eye for an eye”, but this is not revenge, it is a “less bloody and aggressive answer”, since the enemy is “not destroyed or demeaned”.⁵⁰

The perceived metaphysical and spiritual dimension of the war is the focal point of the discussion taking place. Military conflict is framed as the natural response of the universe to excessive sin. These sins include atheism, an excess of self love or self importance, queerness, debauchery, lying, stealing, and pride.⁵¹ The problems fester when people talk about these sins and attempt to make excuses for them, or potentially go so far as to accept this “filth” as part of society. The war in Ukraine is the biblical result of these sins being

⁴⁷ Spas. “ПРЕДЧУВСТВИЕ СТРАШНОЙ ВОЙНЫ. ВОЙНА И БИБЛИЯ. 1 СЕРИЯ// Premonition of a terrifying war. War and the bible. Episode 1”. November 21 2022. Accessed on March 2 2024. <https://spastv.ru/predchuvstvie-strashnoj-vojny-vojna-i-bibliya-1-seriya/> 27:23.

⁴⁸ Ibid. 28:06.

⁴⁹ Ibid. 28:55.

⁵⁰ Ibid. 29:40.

⁵¹ Ibid. 12:53.

allowed to exist unchallenged in the RF, since war is the only way God is able to stop us and set us back on to the right path.⁵²

This gives the invasion of Ukraine a crusade-like quality, framing it as a holy quest to be fulfilled and vanquished in order to find redemption. This message of war originating from the sins of humanity is repeated multiple times. The implicit message here is: “if you stand against us you stand against God”. To further emphasise this point, the war in Ukraine is compared to the biblical story of Cain and Abel, saying that the first war was waged between brothers as will be the last, highlighting that “family bonds of the flesh are not spiritual bonds”.⁵³ In more abstract terms, the audience is told that on “one side” there is the union of two powers: man and the devil.⁵⁴

The final point of interest lies in the episode’s discussion of the failures of the West. The roots of this apparent failure can be traced back to the French Revolution, when “the theory on the absence of God gained popularity”.⁵⁵ Since then, if the relationship between man and God can be conceptualised as parental, the children have been left orphaned, leaving humanity to fight over power and control.⁵⁶ This, in addition to the previously discussed alignment with sin, is why democratic systems are destined to fail. When asked if he is a democrat, Fomin replies:

Democracy is foreign to me. What people usually mean by democracy is them trying to sell their wishes, things that benefit a very small portion of society. The consumers, the elite, the top. We are now seeing lots of different protests in Europe, where citizens are against what the leaders and the government are causing in their country. Is anyone listening to them? Democracy lacks ears; you need to be democratised and obey those who impose democracy. There, you do not have freedom. You don’t have a choice there. There you have the right to live only as you are told to.⁵⁷

⁵² Ibid. 13:45.

⁵³ Ibid. 18:35.

⁵⁴ Ibid. 21:10.

⁵⁵ Ibid. 32:08.

⁵⁶ Ibid.32:20.

⁵⁷ Ibid.33:28.

This show will be viewed by next to nobody outside of the RF. It can be referred to as preaching to the choir, but it is also ensuring the choir stays obedient. It is ensuring that religious people who come across this *documentary* will not question the dominant narrative being created by the propaganda machine, since if they do, they are aligning with the devil. Worse still, they are told repeatedly there exists no better power to align with, as is indicated by Fomin's speech on the nature of democracy. The insistence on calling this glorified podcast a documentary is worth noting as well, since it adds legitimacy, significance and weight to the words being spoken.

All of this is taken from one of 16 episodes that exist of this show. There exist hours more of blatantly false claims, propaganda and fear mongering. While it could be argued that this show is not made for the general Russian audience, since it airs on an explicitly Orthodox channel, it is vital to understand that mysticism and conservatism do not stay secluded to these specific platforms; they are unavoidable. They appear not only in film (as previously discussed), but on popular television channels, inserting themselves into the daily routines of people. Examining this phenomenon will enable a deeper understanding of the pervasiveness of the dominant religious and cultural rhetoric.

Pust' Govoryat

Discussion-based television shows make the viewer feel involved in the process, heightening their emotional involvement in the topic: "The viewer begins to interpret it as personal, not as something happening far removed from them to which they don't have any real relationship".⁵⁸ The structure of these talk shows feeds into this, since the host is interpreted as "one of us", a friend that can be trusted to act as a guide through difficult situations.⁵⁹ "Pust' Govoryat" is one of the shows that exemplifies this.

⁵⁸ V. G. Abramov. " // Television in the russian mediasphere: history, special features and possible avenues of development. Cyber Leninka. 2014. Accessed on February 8th 2024. <https://cyberleninka.ru/article/n/televidenie-v-rossiyskom-mediaprostranstve-istoriya-osobennosti-i-perspektivy-razvitiya/viewer>.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

The show always leaned towards “trashy” television, displaying in front of the nation not only chaotic love lives but the occasional person claiming to have supernatural powers. An example of this would be an episode that aired in 2009 titled “The Devil’s Business”, discussing a firm that had popped up in Latvia claiming to give people monetary loans in exchange for their eternal souls.⁶⁰ The guests included the journalist (Dmitriy Mart) to whom this story was initially brought, a popular Russian writer of the early 2000s (Aleksei Kolyshevskiy), a television host (Maxim Shevchenko), as well as a pastor (Danil Sysoev). After recounting his experience with the eccentric loan shark business, the journalist concludes that this is some sort of PR stunt, seemingly ending the discussion in the first few minutes of the broadcast. That is, until the pastor chimes in and says that it *is* possible to sell your soul, claiming that at the moment of death a person’s soul either joins God or joins Satan, and that the owner of this business is clearly working for the Devil.⁶¹ From there the show quickly devolves into squabbling, with the insertion of Viktor Miroshnichenko, who owns the loan business, into the argument on the ethics and implications of his marketing strategy. Viktor explains that his firm works on honesty, he does not take down anyone’s addresses or ask for proof of identity. He worded this trust placed in the person taking out the loan as: “if you do not return the loaned amount in 90 days, I own your soul”; a figure of speech, on the same level as swearing on someone’s grave. Miroshnichenko gets absolutely berated for this explanation. The guests make fun of him for saying he’s an atheist and accuse him of being a literal servant of the Devil.

⁶⁰ Premierbijon. “Пусть говорят - Контора дьявола? (16.07.2009)// Pust’ Govoryat - firm of the devil? (16.07.2009)” YouTube. November 27 2023. Accessed on March 8 2024.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N6sDjqReZUG&ab_channel=premierbijon

⁶¹ Ibid. 7:32.



Screenshot from the “Pust’ Govoryat” episode “Firm of the Devil”. Depicted is Viktor Miroshnichenko, owner of the business in question. His title reads “buyer of souls”. Source: YouTube, “Пусть говорят - Контора дьявола?”

This fascination with the otherworldly has only increased in the 2020s. In spring of 2022 “Pust’ Govoryat” went on hiatus due the start of the “special operation” in Ukraine and low ratings stemming from the COVID 19 pandemic; starting March 2020 the show focused a majority of its attention on the pandemic which had already completely taken over the lives of people all over the nation.⁶² Broadcasting started again in April of 2022, presenting a stark anti-politicalness when compared with the rest of the channel, which had since the beginning of the invasion of Ukraine pivoted to discussing exclusively political topics.⁶³ Many of these episodes once again featured family conflicts and mysticism, in particular Vanga and her supposed prophecies. On December 6th 2022 aired an episode called: “2023 Will See the Collapse of the European Union and NATO, there won’t be a big war - shocking prophecies by Vanga”.⁶⁴

⁶² ПРИВЕТ, Я РОМА //Hi, I’m Roma. “ КАК ПОГИБЛО ПУСТЬ ГОВОРЯТ?// How did Pust’ Govoryat die?”. YouTube. October 27 2023. Accessed on March 7 2024.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YZLTxgTIKrA&ab_channel=%D0%9F%D0%A0%D0%98%D0%92%D0%95%D0%A2%D0%AF%D0%A0%D0%9E%D0%9C%D0%90 22:44.

⁶³ Ibid. 24:06.

⁶⁴ Pust’ Govoryat. «В 2023 году начнется развал Евросоюза и НАТО, большой войны не будет», — шокирующее предсказание Ванги. Пусть говорят. Фрагмент выпуска от 06.12.2022// “In 2023 the fall of the EU and NATO will begin, there will not be a big war”- shocking prediction by Vanga. Pust’ Govoryat. Fragment from the show on 6.12.2022”. Channel One official website. December 6 2022. Accessed on March 10 2024.

<https://www.1tv.ru/shows/pust-govoryat/dramatichnye-momenty/v-2023-godu-nachnetsya-razval-evrosoyuza-i->

At the beginning of 2023 the talk show once again went on hiatus with little warning or explanation.⁶⁵ The show has recently resumed broadcasting and production; the first episode in over a year aired on February 26, 2024.⁶⁶ The topic? “The Day on Which We Can Open Vanga’s Prophecy”.⁶⁷ The title of the episode that aired the next day stayed on the same theme: “The Secret Notebook of Vanga in the Hands of Astrologists”.⁶⁸

The network on which “Pust’ Govoryat” airs is Perviy Kanal (Channel One). It was created in 1995 under the name ORT (“Public Russian Television”), expanding and changing its name to Channel One in 2004 after the channel became available in the United States, New Zealand and Australia.⁶⁹ Channel One is categorised as a federal channel, meaning it is broadcast throughout the entire territory of the RF.⁷⁰ It has been owned by a man named Konstantin Ernst for the entire duration of Putin’s reign.⁷¹ Since 2001, the board of directors of the channel has been composed exclusively of people who are involved in the political

[nato-bolshoy-voyny-ne-budet-shokiruyushee-predskazanie-vangi-pust-govoryat-fragment-vypuska-ot-06-12-2022](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YZLTxgTlKrA&ab_channel=%D0%9F%D0%A0%D0%98%D0%92%D0%95%D0%A2%2C%D0%AF%D0%A0%D0%9E%D0%9C%D0%90)

⁶⁵ ПРИВЕТ, Я РОМА //Hi, I’m Roma. “КАК ПОГИБЛО ПУСТЬ ГОВОРЯТ?// How did Pust’ Govoryat die?”. YouTube. October 27 2023. Accessed on March 7 2024.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YZLTxgTlKrA&ab_channel=%D0%9F%D0%A0%D0%98%D0%92%D0%95%D0%A2%2C%D0%AF%D0%A0%D0%9E%D0%9C%D0%90. 24:24.

⁶⁶ Victoria Kolodonoova. “«Пусть говорят» возвращается: начали с Ванги и Алибасова, кто дальше// Pust’ Govoryat is coming back: beginning with Vanga and Alibasova, what’s next.”. News.ru. February 26 2024. Accessed on March 7 2023.

<https://news.ru/internet-smi/pust-govoryat-vozvrashaetsya-nachali-s-vangi-i-alibasova-kto-dalshe/>

⁶⁷ Pust’ Govoryat. “День, когда можно раскрыть пророчество Ванги. Пусть говорят. Выпуск от 26.02.2024// The day when we can open Vanga’s prophecy. Pust’ Govoryat. Show from 26.02.24.” Channel One official website. February 26 2024. Accessed on March 8 2024.

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⁶⁸ Pust’ Govoryat. “Секретный блокнот Ванги в руках астрологов. Пусть говорят. Выпуск от 27.02.2024// Vanga’s secret notebook in the hands of astrologists. Pust’ Govoryat. Show from 27.02.2024”. Channel One official website. February 27 2024. Accessed on March 8 2024.

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⁶⁹ Channel One. “История компании // History of the company”. Accessed on March 19 2024.

<https://www.1tv.com/corp/history>

⁷⁰ Obzor Posudi. “Федеральный канал: значение, особенности и функции// Federal channel: meaning, special features, functions”. September 25 2023. Accessed on March 19 2024.

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⁷¹ Продолжение следует// to be continued. “Отдал честь. Константин Эрнст: портрет повелителя телеящика// Gave his word. Konstantin Ernst: portrait of the emperor of the television. YouTube. March 18 2024. Accessed on March 19 2024.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qu-x-q2MN7k&ab_channel=%D0%9F%D1%80%D0%BE%D0%B4%D0%BE%D0%BB%D0%B6%D0%B5%D0%BD%D0%B8%D0%B5%D1%81%D0%BB%D0%B5%D0%B4%D1%83%D0%B5%D1%82

machine of the RF.⁷² Ernst himself has had a hand in crafting Putin's public image from the very beginning; for example he is the one who suggested that the man's inauguration be moved to the Andreevsky Hall, in order to give the occasion more grandeur and to simultaneously make Putin seem more personable.⁷³

Inserting discussions of the supernatural into a show that primarily focuses on interpersonal drama normalises mysticism as a part of day to day life. As discussed in the novel by Monica Black [A Demon Haunted Land](#), when people feel they lack control over their lives they try to regain that control by turning to the supernatural. The supernatural in the RF is deeply tied to religion, as demonstrated by the inclusion of Orthodox pastors in discussions they would not be a part of in most other countries.

The grip that religion has on the national image of Russians is seen not only in pseudo-historical movies like [Maria to Save Moscow](#), or even limited to religious networks like in the case of "War and the Bible". It is injected into discussions of domestic issues as seen with seemingly secular and grounded shows like "Pust' Govoryat". The national image has become so consumed by religious conservatism that it has begun to eat into history, and as a result of that, into contemporary reality; the underlying question of this work is "How do you get people to believe in something that contradicts reality itself"? That is the real question that needs to be targeted in order to understand the hold that religious propaganda has in the RF.

⁷² Ibid. 12:00

⁷³ Ibid. 9:35.

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