Changing Societies & Personalities, 2022
Vol. 6, No. 4, pp. 733–749
https://doi.org/10.15826/csp.2022.6.4.200

ESSAY

Moral Choice and the Concept of Evil in Military Narratives of Orthodox Christians

Andrey S. Menshikov
Ural Federal University, Yekaterinburg, Russia

ABSTRACT

The article contributes critically to the current discussion of militant piety in Russian Orthodox Christianity. It argues for a more historically informed use of the notion of militant piety, which can benefit from critical discourse analysis of personal narratives and the focus on lived experience and lived religion of Orthodox Christians who were involved in wars. The article analyses ego-documents collected in two recent volumes: the first showcases the stories of Orthodox clergy and believers in WWII; the second volume gives voice to army officers of late Soviet wars. Both volumes mold personal accounts into a larger narrative with the view to provide Orthodox believers with discursive means for reflection upon wars and to offer an exemplary Orthodox Christian attitude to war. In these narratives, beliefs and principles were understood by religious people not abstractly but in the context of their individual and collective experience. The first narrative reveals how the course of the Great Patriotic War changed the Orthodox Christians' attitudes from initial self-sacrificial service in defense of the Motherland to waging the sacred war against the Antichrist forces of evil and later to ensuring the retribution for Nazi criminals who were interpretatively exempt from Christian commandment of love. The second narrative does not present a normative ideal of an Orthodox warrior but rather it sheds light on real "militant piety", on practical religiosity of soldiers and officers, who built their relationship with God and religion in the context of their professional activity, regularly described as "work". Christian doctrine of love and forgiveness in its abstract form would be inapplicable in this "work". In personal accounts, however, Orthodox Christian ethics is adapted to the circumstances of the military service and is transformed into the lived religion based on the principles of self-sacrifice, loyalty, and duty.

Received 9 December 2022
Accepted 19 December 2022
Published online 30 December 2022

andreimenchikov@gmail.com

KEYWORDS
Orthodox Christianity, Russian Orthodox Church, personal narratives, lived religion, militant piety, notion of evil, evil and violence, Orthodox Christian ethics, Orthodox Christian attitude to war, sacred war, cosmic war, Christian ethical principles of love and forgiveness

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS
The research is supported by the grant of the Russian Science Foundation (project No. 20-18-00240). The author would like to thank Ekaterina Purgina for her generous help with preparing this text in English.

Introduction

Among a vast body of literature on Orthodoxy in the wars that Russia was involved in, in my further discussion, I will focus on the following two volumes: *Bog i Pobeda: Veruiushchie v velikikh voinakh za Rossiiu* [God and Victory: Believers in the Great Wars for Russia] (2014) edited by V. Zobern and *Iz smerti v zhizn'. Svidetel'stva voinov o pomoshchi Bozh'ei* [From Death to Life. Soldiers' Accounts of God's Help] (2011) edited by S. Galitskii. Unlike the publications of archival documents[1] aiming to give an objective picture of the activities of the Russian Orthodox Church, or the publications of oral histories conveying a broad spectrum of subjective emotions and memories[2], these two books mold personal accounts and documents into an exemplary model of the Orthodox Christian attitude to war and weave them into a narrative of appropriate Orthodox Christian behaviour in the wartime. These volumes provide Orthodox believers with discursive means for reflection upon the war's tragic events as well as practical examples to emulate in time of war.

The first book, *Bog i Pobeda* [God and Victory], mainly contains the war accounts of Orthodox believers, especially those of the higher clergy and parish priests, while the second book, *Iz smerti v zhizn'* [From Death to Life], gives voice to Soviet army officers—participants of the military conflicts in Afghanistan and in the Caucasus. In the latter case, the narrators' social or professional background would suggest that they shunned any religiosity, but the narratives show how army officers discovered religious faith and what it meant to them.

Currently, scholars approach the Orthodox perspective on violence and war by analyzing "the theoretical premises of the militarist discourse in contemporary Russian Orthodoxy" (Knorre, 2015, p. 559; trans. by Ekaterina Purgina [E. P.]) or "legitimation of real wars, social conflicts" (Zygmont & Knorre, 2019, p. 11; trans. by E. P.). These studies aim to describe "socio-cultural attitudes inherent in Orthodox tradition, forming a type of militant religiosity called 'militant piety'" (Knorre & Zygmont, 2020, p. 1). The theoretical framework for Knorre and Zygmont's studies draws on the

[1] For example, Vasil'eva et al., 2009.

[2] Numerous publications on this topic include, for example, Ot Soldata do Generala: Vospominaniia o Voine [From Soldier to General: Memories of the War] (Vols. 1–18) (2003–2016).

idea of "cosmic war" introduced by Mark Juergensmeyer. To illustrate this point, they select examples from canonical, theological texts and opinion pieces supporting the "socio-cultural orientation" of Orthodoxy towards the legitimation of violence. The bewildering denunciatory tone prevalent in these studies seem to imply that the Church should always oppose violence and condemn all military action. I would try to add some historical nuance to their main conclusion that

> in the church environment, a consistent tradition of war justification is being actively formed, that is, what can be called *theology of war* with a certain system of axioms, priorities, inferences, and aesthetically-tinged formulae. There is an obvious trend to use stylistic and sociomorphic metaphorization of the army implying that the Church is a military institution or a part of it. (Knorre, 2015, p. 577; trans. by E. P.)

As I will try to show further, the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC), following its tradition and pursuing its mission in the world, did not deem it necessary in the past to condemn violence *per se*, nor did the Church see it appropriate to oppose itself to the Russian army as an institution. On the contrary, the Church never refused to provide spiritual guidance to the military servicemen, to recognize warrior saints and honor those who laid down their lives for faith and country. Moreover, if we look at the messages, addresses, and sermons of the ROC leaders or the numerous letters, accounts, and memoirs written by Orthodox believers, we will see that patriotism was considered an important element of Orthodox identity long before this idea was aired by present-day "militant pietists".

If religion is considered not as a set of theoretical premises, socio-cultural practices and abstract norms expressed in the public discourse but is approached through the analysis of materials that show *la religion vécue* [lived religion] (Ammerman, 2007, 2021), then we observe a different picture of the Orthodox attitude to violence and war. What seems especially valuable to me in this approach is that it aims to reveal the connection people build between their faith and their everyday life, including their experience of violence and war. The believers connect their tradition and the new circumstances; they connect their fluid emotional attitudes and their solid ethical principles in the actual behavior. These connections can be examined by looking at narratives of personal experience rather than public discourse. Personal accounts reveal how people reconcile their ethical principles with their actual experiences of war, suffering, hatred, and loss; how they justify their moral choices.

This analysis does not deal with normative documents[3], which has become a widespread practice in the studies of the ethics of war. Nor does it use quantitative methods such as the search for Orthodox categories and biblical allusions, calculating their relative frequencies. The main research focus in this paper is the construction of narratives about the religious experiences of the witnesses and participants of war in all their complexity and controversiality. Methodologically, this study relies on the

[3] See, for example, the official document on military chaplaincy (Polozhenie, 2013).

revised version of critical discourse analysis (CDA) which was adapted for the study of religion. CDA places a special emphasis on the construction of social identities, social relations, systems of beliefs, and systems of knowledge in narratives (Hjelm, 2016, p. 20), thus enabling us to connect the analysis of narratives with the "lived religion" approach, that is, to examine personal accounts as a form of individual reflection within the system of the narrator's views, beliefs, and values, which are, in their turn, determined by the Orthodox faith.

Sacred War: From Self-Sacrifice to Retribution

In *Bog i Pobeda* [God and Victory], V. Zobern starts with the Bolshevik repression of the ROC after the Revolution. He provides accounts of the fierce persecutions of priests and believers, of churches being damaged and destroyed, and religious sites vandalized. Thus, he leads us to the idea that

> these years were a cruel and harsh school of suffering and cultivating within oneself courage and resilience in the shadow of the oncoming Great Patriotic War. It is not for nothing that during the war many priests, upon their return from the exile, took up weapons and went off to the front to defend their Motherland. (Zobern, 2014, p. 46; trans. by E. P.)

Examples of such moral fortitude include the stories of saint elders (*startsy*) and believers: their influence is said to be "outwardly indiscernible but strong and vast" (Zobern, 2014, p. 46; trans. by E. P.). Quite illustrative in this respect is the case of Seraphim Vyritsky: people strove to protect him from arrest and execution and ensuring his survival was a source of comfort for them: "In this mayhem and in the whirlwind of violent events there was a refuge of strong faith, calm hope, and unhypocritical Christ's love" (Zobern, 2014, pp. 46–47; trans. by E. P.). Whence Zobern comes to more general philosophical and historical conclusion:

> For centuries, Christian faith fostered in Russian people resilience and ability to sacrifice themselves for the higher good and for the sacred. Faith, which in recent years has demanded a lot of courage from believers, did not allow true Christians to betray their Motherland. Forgetting the grave insults, humiliations, and abuse they suffered, forgetting about the danger of being executed by the authorities, believers, together with all the people, joined the struggle against the horrendous destructive force of fascism [...] Persecutions had failed to make Christians bitter. Examples set by martyrs and confessors inspired those who survived and taught them that there are sacred things worth giving their life for. (Zobern, 2014, p. 52; trans. by E. P.)

Even though Orthodox believers shared patriotic feelings with the majority of the citizens, it should be noted that for many believers the crucial factor in their decision-making was the call of the higher clergy to defend Motherland.

Among people's recollections of how they found out about the beginning of the war, the central role is played by the Address to the Pastors and their Flock of Christ's Orthodox Church of 22 June 1941 issued by Sergius (Stragorodsky), the Patriarchal Locum Tenens, Metropolitan Bishop of Moscow and Kolomna. In his address, Sergius calls the believers to stand for their motherland[4]. He compares Hitler's invasion to other foreign invasions and expresses hope that

> with God's help, this time, they [Russian people] will turn to dust the invasive fascist force. Our ancestors [...] disregarded risks to their persons and set aside their interests, they heeded their sacred duty to their motherland and faith and this is why they emerged victorious. (Vasil'eva et al., 2009, p. 38; trans. by E. P.)

The "sacred duty" of defending Motherland, however, is associated not so much with Soviet citizenship and USSR's civic identity but with such figures as Alexander Nevsky and Dmitry Donskoy, "saint Russian monks, interceding before God on behalf of the Russian Motherland, great Russian warriors" (Zobern, 2014, p. 55; trans. by E. P.). This duty is exemplified by the following Biblical quote: "Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends" (English Standard Version Bible, 2001, John 15:13). The Metropolitan Bishop goes on to explain that "the person who lays his soul is not only the one who will die on the battlefield for his people and for the good of his people, but also each and every one who sacrifices himself, his health and interests for the sake of the Motherland" (Zobern, 2014, p. 39; trans. by E. P.). By invoking the values of self-sacrifice and examples of self-sacrifice for the sake of the Motherland and Orthodox tradition, the Metropolitan Bishop connects Christianity with the concept of patriotic duty:

> Through self-dedication countless thousands of our Orthodox warriors, laying their lives for the Motherland and faith, in all times went to fight against the enemy invasion. When they were dying, their last thoughts were not about glory, they thought that their Motherland needed their sacrifice and so they humbly sacrificed everything they had and their life itself. (Zobern, 2014, p. 40; trans. by E. P.)

Zobern reminds his reader of the fact that the war started on the Day of All Russian Saints (22 June 1941), many of whom were martyrs for the faith. He also mentions the Orthodox service of A. Alexandrov, author of the song *Sviashchennaia Voina* [Sacred War]. Zobern's narrative comprises not only stories of believers' self-sacrifice during the war but also talks about their participation in various initiatives, for example, fundraising for the tank column named after Dimitry Donskoy[5], civil defense, medical service, and volunteer corps. Zobern emphasizes that "the Church's patriotic

[4] In Zobern's collection this document is referred to as the Address (Zobern, 2014, p. 55).

[5] Apart from the accounts presented by Zobern, there is documentary evidence about the donations made by dioceses, cathedrals, and parishioners. For more details, see Vasil'eva et al., 2009, pp. 46, 62, 81, 82. There were also fund-raising events for the Defense Fund (p. 57) and the Red Cross (p. 59).

activities won the recognition and respect not only among the believers but also atheists" (Zobern, 2014, p. 103; trans. by E. P.). Thus, self-sacrifice was not limited to service in its civilian forms but also included donations to weapons manufacturing.

Among the private and public prayers relevant to the war efforts, not only prayers for peace or prayers commemorating those who laid down their lives were sung but also prayers for victory in the war became widespread. For this purpose, as the author explains, the prayer *Podazhd' voinstvu nashemu o imeni tvoem pobediti* [Give Our Army Victory in Your Name] was written by archbishop Avgustin (Vinogradovsky) in 1812 (Zobern, 2014, p. 74; trans. by E. P.). Another example is *Moleben o nashestvii supostatov, pevaemyi v Russkoi Pravoslavnoi Tserkvi v dni Otechestvennoi voiny* [Prayer About the Invasion of Foes Sung in the Russian Orthodox Church in the Days of the Patriotic War]. Both prayers evoked strong emotions in the believers. In his Easter Address of 1942, Metropolitan Bishop Sergius puts forward the analogy between Christ's victory over death/Satan and the victory over fascism, as Sergius puts it, "by celebrating Christ's victory over hell and death forever and in temporary earthly life—the victory of Christ's Cross over the swastika" (Zobern, 2014, p. 77; trans. by E. P.). At the first stage of the war, church leaders clearly formulated their attitude to the enemy as an anti-Christian, anti-Orthodox force: Metropolitan Bishop Sergius condemned and excommunicated those Orthodox priests who collaborated with the occupying forces either because they were seduced by Nazis' calls for struggle against Bolshevist atheism or out of fear. Either way, Orthodox hierarchs made it crystal clear which side all Orthodox believers should be on.

The Church leaders were perfectly aware of the fact that the army's effectiveness depends significantly on the public support, which is why they placed particular emphasis on the importance of self-sacrifice of the people behind the front lines. In my view, quite significant in this respect is the speech of Metropolitan Bishop Alexius, describing people's desire to be active participants in the struggle against the enemy:

> Yet, to acknowledge only these reasons and conditions would mean to present all the people, except for those in the army, as doomed to inaction during the war, reduce them to the state of passive spectators of the unfolding events. No, there are moral conditions for victory, much broader and much superior, it seems fair to say, much more powerful than the number and effectiveness of modern weapons. These moral conditions invigorate a victorious army that needs inspiration, strength to withstand all kinds of tribulations, suffering, wounds and death itself; these moral conditions are no less necessary for the people behind the front lines, the people who fostered the army before the war and who provisions the army and nurtures the souls of soldiers during the war. Such moral factors that contribute to the army's success include the strong faith in God, who gives His blessing to the just war; spiritual uplift; combatants' certainty that they are defending the just cause; awareness of their duty to God and Motherland. (Doklad Mitropolita Aleksiia, 1943; trans. by E. P.)

Even though civilians did not participate directly in military action, they didn't remain mere spectators. In other words, they did not stay passive in their anticipation of the battle's outcome but invested all their spiritual powers into supporting their army. A vivid example illustrating the recognition of the fact that what seems to be passivity—the act of waiting—may in fact be active participation in the national struggle is the poem *Zhdi menia* [Wait for Me] by Konstantin Simonov (1941)[6].

At first, the war was declared just, the enemy was named an Antichrist and the Cross was pitted against swastika, hence the Church called to self-sacrificial action as well as to armed struggle against the enemy. But as the enemy troops were advancing and civilians were forced to flee their homes, as they were captured, tortured and killed, the official discourse of the Church changed. After the meeting of the Church hierarchs with Stalin and Molotov in 1943, when the latter offered state support to the Orthodox Church, brochures such as *Russkaia Pravoslavnaia tserkov' i Velikaia Otechestvennaia voina* [Russian Orthodox Church and the Great Patriotic War], and renewed periodical *Zhurnal Moskovskoi Patriarkhii* [Journal of the Moscow Patriarchate] were published. They contained accounts of priests and believers, telling the stories of the heinous crimes committed by the Nazis, of their false promises to support Orthodoxy. In one of such accounts, the author quotes the letter of Alexius, the Archbishop of Ufa, dated 27 March 1942, relating the retreat from Orel,

> [the believers] were able to find inner strength, [...] resist panic and bring hope to those who were left behind and convey their confidence that the time would come when they all could re-unite and the hateful enemy would be ousted with shame and disgrace from Orel land; they told those who stayed that God would not let the strangers' dirty boots tread on the sacred Russian soil. We believe deeply that God will hear their prayers. The Russian land will belong only to Russians. Our confidence rests upon the incorruptible loyalty of Russian people to the Russian Orthodox Church, its saints, the strong, unbending love to the Russian soil which nurtured and fostered them. Russian people sacrifice whatever they can to defend their Motherland! Everything in Russian people is imbued and blessed with the prayer and faith in Christ, and this faith will incinerate those who dare to step on our sacred land. (Zobern, 2014, pp. 112–113; trans. by E. P.)

In this letter, readiness to self-sacrifice is intertwined with the pain of loss and hatred for the enemy. Similarly, Orthodoxy is identified with the national (Russian) identity through the traditional trope of "sacred Russian land" and its derivatives, which means not so much the land itself but the country abundant in saints. Thus, all Russian people come to be perceived as "blessed with the prayer and faith" and the Russian land itself, as "sacred". Such broad interpretation of sacredness leads the author to assert the sacred nature of the war. Thus, faith becomes militant because it can "incinerate" those who dare to desecrate holy places. Self-sacrifice, summed up by the maxim "lay down his life for his friends", becomes the core of the sacred

[6] Two translations of this poem are available at: https://simonov.co.uk/waitforme https://www.inyourpocket.com/st-petersburg-en/russian-poetry-konstantin-simonov-wait-for-me_75228f

war with the anti-Christian force, which is fought not by the holy lamb of redemption but by the angel of retribution seeking to exterminate evil.

Instead of constructing the narrative in accordance with the chronological order of events, Zobern follows his own logic. For example, after describing the beatings and abuse of believers by the Nazis, he quotes metropolitan Sergius's address dated 24 November 1941:

> Orthodox believers who had managed to escape from the fascists told us about the desecrations of churches [...] Not only does vicious enemy Hitler organize persecutions of Christians but he also wants to exterminate the Slavic peoples [...] This is why the progressive mankind has declared a sacred war on Hitler, a war for the Christian civilization, for the freedom of conscience and faith. (Zobern, 2014, p. 151; trans. by E. P.)

The war is not only just but also sacred, prayers for victory are accompanied by the belief that "the wrath of God will exterminate the fascist pack, for the blood of innocent wives and children cries out to the heavens for vengeance" (Zobern, 2014, p. 162; trans. by E. P.). The sacred war is driven by sacred hatred, to which Zobern devotes a separate passage of the same name. To prove his point, he quotes the texts by metropolitan Nicolas (Iarushevich), metropolitan Alexius (Simanskii), priest Nicolas (Khar'iuzov), arranging them in a non-chronological order.

Zobern starts by claiming that "God blesses the just war in the name of the triumph of good over evil" (Zobern, 2014, p. 169; trans. by E. P.); then he goes on to point out the heavenly protection that the Russian army obviously enjoyed after 1943. This, in turn, leads him to the question of retribution. In his discussion of the article *Mozhno li prostit' fashistov*? [Can the Fascists be Forgiven?] written by Nicolas Khar'iuzov (1945), Zobern first quotes directly from the article:

> from the perspective of the correctly understood Christian doctrine, the fascists undoubtedly have to be justly punished for all their atrocities, retribution for them is inescapable. The Saviour's teaching to love our enemies, to forgive past wrongs cannot be applied to fascism, its ideologists and followers. (Zobern, 2014, pp. 170–171; trans. by E. P.)

Zobern then argues that victory alone is not enough, that what is necessary is the "ultimate victory", "complete and perfect", which means that "even the memory of the inhumane fascist doctrine will be wiped out" (Zobern, 2014, p. 171; trans. by E. P.). In his own reflections, the author states that in relation to the fascists

> one cannot talk about revenge. Revenge is not always just; it is not immune to blinding passion. What awaits the fascists is retribution, that is, impartial justice for what they have done [...] Fascists will face the trial, they will stand before all the humanity, and this trial will be the true "voice of God", "trumpet of Doom", the punishment will be severe and just. (Zobern, 2014, pp. 171–172; trans. by E. P.)

Punishment in this case exceeds the scope of mercy, as "it is not appropriate to invoke Christian mercy for judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy'" (Zobern, 2014, p. 173; trans. by E. P.). The community of believers is thus extended to all Russian people while Russian people are identified with Orthodox believers, with Orthodox Christianity itself. In this case Orthodox values—the saints, holy sites, Orthodox faith—become the shared Russian heritage and a common source of the "will to win", which has been frequently mentioned in the narratives in relation to priests' efforts to boost the morale of the military and civilians or in the context of the Church's information policy. In regard to the latter, the ROC appealed to the international community and to the Christian churches all over the world, urging them to take a more active part in the war (open the second front, provide economic and other aid to the USSR, etc.)[7]. In contrast to this community building both on national and international level, the Church, in Zobern's account, due to the evidence of the hideous crimes committed by the fascists, instructs its believers that Christian morality and in particular the responsibility to love and forgive should not take them so far as to forgive the enemy.

In this context, of special interest are Zobern's theological and political arguments in the part of the book where he discusses and quotes the article *Pravednyi sud naroda* [Just Tribunal of the People] written by Archbishop Luke (Voyno-Iasenetsky) (1944). Archbishop Luke starts with the condemnation of the Nazis' crimes from the point of view of universal human values, emphasizing that it is the collective will all nations rather than solely Russian people that punishment be done because the moral feeling of all the humankind had been trampled upon. The trial over the Nazi leaders was greeted by stormy approval and their execution was considered an event worthy of celebration by all the mankind:

> And Christ's Church, the pillar of the law of truth, will not stand aside from this holiday as this will be the victory over the forces of hell that shocked all the mankind, the punishment of the Antichrists who have defied the law of brotherhood and love. (Zobern, 2014, p. 174; trans. by E. P.)

This praise of death and capital punishment, this celebratory tone are particularly noteworthy. Zobern further justifies it by the following Biblical examples: in "the divinely inspired law of Moses", capital punishment was meted out to those whose "deeds threatened the spiritual and religious integrity of Israeli people, their moral purity, obligatory for God's chosen people" (Zobern, 2014, p. 175; trans. by E. P.). The reign of the judges as an important period in Israel's history shows that God did not just tolerate the punishment but ordained the judges to uphold His law and actively eliminate evil. This interpretation is confirmed by the statement "Vengeance is Mine, saith the Lord, I will repay" (Berean Standard Bible, 2021, Deuteronomy 32:35). Moreover, in the New Testament, "Paul the Apostle associates the punitive function of the judge with serving God, 'For the one in authority is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for rulers do not bear the sword

[7] For example, Obrashchenie Sobora episkopov Russkoi Pravoslavnoi Tserkvi ko vsem khristianam mira [Address of the Council of the Russian Orthodox Church to all Christians of the world]. (1943).

for no reason. They are God's servants, agents of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer' (Romans 13:4)"[8] (Zobern, 2014, p. 177; trans. by E. P.).

The most interesting is the interpretation given by archbishop Luke to the words and representation of Christ himself. I think it is best to quote Luke's words as they are related by Zobern:

> Lord Jesus Christ rejected the sanction of capital punishment in the famous story of a woman taken in adultery (John 8). The light of the new law of God's grace, which rose above judgement, took precedence over the severity of the Old Testament Law. How could Christ, the reader of the human heart, accept the truth of the execution of a weak woman for a sin of which her judges—the legalists—were also guilty? Compare the guilt of this poor woman, which is so common, with the satanic crimes of the Germans who buried babies alive or threw them into fire and it will become evident that the holy answer of God's Son about the punishment to the woman taken in adultery cannot be used as an argument against the execution of these butchers, exterminating thousands of innocent people in their diabolical gas chambers. Can we, speaking of the Nazi monsters, invoke Christ's command to love your enemies? No, absolutely not! We cannot do this because it is totally impossible to love them and it is impossible to love them neither the people nor the angels nor even God of Love Himself could love them. Because God hates evil and extinguishes the evildoers. Not only are the Nazi monsters our enemies but they are also God's enemies and who can or who dares to speak of love in relation to God's enemies! (Zobern, 2014, pp. 177–178; trans. by E. P.)

Thus, for their crimes it is not only obligatory that the German Nazis should face human and divine justice, but they should also be excluded from the commandments to love thy neighbour and to love thy enemy.

The final chapter encompasses the narratives about the celebration of the Victory Day, reflections about the significance of the victory in the Great Patriotic War and the price paid for it. One of the key analogies that are drawn in this regard between the war and the Calvary:

> The road taken by the Orthodox Church and by every Christian who saves himself or herself is the same road as the one taken by Christ. It is known that the Church grew and became stronger on the blood of martyrs and men of faith and Christ said to his followers, "You will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will turn into joy" (John 16:20)[9]. (Zobern, 2014, p. 527; trans. by E. P.)

The motives of Russian patriotism and of Russian people's heroism are inseparably linked with the Orthodox faith. While Isaiah's triumphal exclamation

[8] New International Version Bible, 2011.

[9] English Standard Version Bible, 2001.

"Speak a word, but it will not stand, for God is with us" (English Standard Version Bible, 2001, Isaiah 8:10) the Orthodox tradition is interpreted, for example, by Basil the Great as a prefiguration of God's incarnation in Jesus Christ, Zobern's narrative opts for a more militant interpretation and alludes to Constantine's vision of the cross and cry, "In this sign thou shalt conquer" (Zobern, 2014, p. 532; trans. by E. P.).

The search for Divine Providence, for providential signs in the development of the war (retreat, losses, then victories, recapturing of occupied territories, advance into Europe, and ultimately victory) are major drivers in Zobern's narrative. The logic of his narration, sometimes defying chronology, moves from glorifying self-sacrifice and patriotism of the Orthodox believers to the revelation that this war is sacred, and it is the war of good and evil, in which the Cross is triumphant. The Russian people were called to execute the universal mission to eradicate the evil of Nazism. The victory will bring peace not only for Russia but the "peace for the peoples of the world". The historical future of the mankind depends on whether the evildoers will be brought to divine justice rather than to human justice alone. Thus, Zobern, while relying on personal accounts and stories, constructs a narrative of the cosmic struggle against evil which was won by the Russian people motivated by their Orthodox faith. The official atheism, Bolshevik ideology, multiethnic Soviet army, contributions of the allies to the war—all these factors are practically eliminated from this account of the WWII. Moreover, the conventional teachings of the Orthodox Christian ethics are adapted to the official Soviet history of the WWII: initial self-sacrifice in the defensive war is replaced by all sorts of mobilization—from voluntary conscription to spiritual support—in the sacred war and subsequent retribution is justified by rejection of the Christian supreme command of love and charity.

"There are No Atheists in the War"

A somewhat different logic can be traced in the narrative or, to be more precise, in a series of narratives compiled into the book *Iz smerti v zhizn'. Svidetel'stva voinov o pomoshchi Bozh'ei* [From Death to Life. Soldiers' Accounts of God's Help]. S. Galitskii undertakes this mission:

> In the army, stories of immediate participants of the warfare are spreading by word of mouth, they talk about the miraculous salvation in the situations which, from the perspective of the warfare science, were absolutely hopeless. The time has come to gather these priceless stories of God's protection so that they could reach those who need them most of all. (Galitskii, 2011, p. 5; trans. by E. P.)

Out of the ten accounts of the Soviet and Russian officers who took part in the armed conflicts in Afghanistan, Chechnya, and Ossetia, only two convey the narrators' interest in the Russian Orthodox Church, its teachings, canons, and sacraments. For the rest, their faith in God fits into the category of "ad hoc religiosity".

Apart from the casual expressions such as “Thank God” or “With God’s help”, the divine is represented in these accounts not in the dogmatic form of a personal deity but rather in the form of a miracle personally experienced by the narrator, e.g., a radio set miraculously coming back to life (Galitskii, 2011, p. 34). This might the miracle of surviving a life-or-death situation[10] or the miracle of performing a seemingly impossible military task, of completing a military operation[11] successfully despite insurmountable obstacles or utter despair and hopelessness of the troops[12]. In the *Foreword,* S. Galitskii observes that

> there is no war without casualties. But we must always remember, first and foremost, those paratrooper officers for whom in the most violent battles the life of every soldier was as valuable as their own. These commanders were the first to get into the thick of the battle, they were the last to board the helicopters to be evacuated, with a sinking heart, they counted their soldiers before the takeoff: is everyone here? [...] And they refused to leave if they found somebody missing. They searched for the missing soldiers and found them—dead or alive [...] For these officers, the success of their military operation always fitted into the same formula: “I have performed the task and my soldiers have come back alive”. (Galitskii, 2011, p. 7; trans. by E. P.)

This ideal does not so much correspond to the idea of Christian ethics but it does reflect the ethics of solidarity—of military brotherhood and the commander’s responsibility.

Although all the narratives in Galitskii’s book foreground the examples of heroism and courage on the part of soldiers and officers, they also make clear that the motives behind these people’s appeals to God were largely grounded in self-interest and in practical considerations: to survive, to save your comrades-in-arms,

[10] “And I hear the munching sound of the bullets biting into the mudbrick wall 10–20 centimeters from me! And I am still alive after that! Sometimes a thought flashed through my brain: “At least one bullet has been bound to hit my ‘dome’ to put an end to all of this for me”. And then a calmness came over me. God exists. He will save me because in these circumstances He is the only one who can do it!” (Galitskii, 2011, p. 136; trans. by E. P.).

[11] “Now imagine: all my subordinates boarded [the helicopter], and I, the newly appointed squad commander, was the only one who didn’t. I was going back to Kunduz with the landing force commander on board. At this point I realized that if I can’t leave now, I simply won’t be able to survive this. I would have to shoot myself in the head out of shame right here, in front of the helicopter on the airfield. I also realized that I cannot board [the helicopter] and at this moment I remembered my grandmother. I grabbed the collar in which a small icon was sewn and said: “Saint Nicholas, God’s helper, save me and help me!” It was my fourth or fifth mission (I actually wondered how come they had not shot down my helicopter yet!). Suddenly it seemed like the helicopter had acquired some extra aerodynamic force—the Divine force. I landed the helicopter, the assault troops exited and the mission was accomplished. It was then that I came to believe in God. I suddenly realized one simple truth: among those who have been to war, there are no atheists” (Galitskii, 2011, p. 63; trans. by E. P.).

[12] “Then they got quiet but it was even worse—the flies swarmed all over me. I tried to cover my face with my hands but it didn’t help much. At that moment I thought that this is what hell possibly looks like. It was in this abominable pit that I came to believe in God. I prayed fervently to Him!” (Galitskii 2011, p. 126; trans. by E. P.).

to fulfill the mission. In this context, God is equivalent to fortune or good luck or any other mystical force:

> For twelve years I was in command of a helicopter regiment. For all of these twelve years, when I was teaching aerodynamics to young pilots, I told them: "There are laws of aerodynamics. But there are also the supreme, divine laws, believe it or not. Only the existence of God's law explains the situations that were completely hopeless from the perspective of physical laws, but one still managed to get out". (Galitskii, 2011, p. 66; trans. by E. P.)

Only one officer-narrator demonstrates a truly Orthodox attitude, describing his decision to become a practicing Christian:

> Looking back on how baptism had changed my life, I strongly wanted him to get baptized as well. I myself got baptized rather late. When I came back from that nightmarish trip. The country had collapsed. And so had my family. I had no idea what to do next. I found myself in some sort of a deadlock [...] I have a clear memory of how after the baptism a sense of calmness came over my soul, everything fell into place, I finally understood how I was going to live my life. Afterwards, when I served in Kronstadt, on several occasions I sent sailors to help the dean of the Kronstadt Cathedral. (Galitskii, 2011, p. 226; trans. by E. P.)

The situations of a person turning towards religion because he or she sees it as a safe haven amid life's tragedy and horror were a recurring motive in the first book *Bog i Podeda* as well. In these accounts, the losses, horrors, and moral suffering the narrator endured became the main motive behind his decision to come to Church. This decision helped the troubled soul find peace and ultimate meaning in life. In such cases one specific person—the priest—becomes particularly important: the priest is the first to meet the seeker's soul. If the priest had some warfare experience, then he could find the right words:

> At that time the priest there was Father Sviatoslav, an Afghan War veteran. I said, "I want to have my baby baptized. I am not a believer, though, I don't know any prayers [...]" I remember what he said to me word for word, "Sergey, have you ever been under water? Have you been to war? Then you believe in God. You can go now!" This was the decisive moment for me and I turned towards the Church once and for all. (Galitskii, 2011, p. 227; trans. by E. P.)

Even in this case, however, neither the teachings of the Orthodox Church nor the Christian way of life play a significant role in the narrative. Orthodox Christianity becomes a part of the narrator's identity, it provides psychological and moral resources to the person who suffered and whose ethical views were based on other foundations—the army ethic.

The reflections about the moral aspects of Orthodox Christianity and the clash of different ethical principles, in particular the military duty and the medical duty of care, are in more detail described in the account written by "Doc", a colonel of the medical service. In his reflections about what he was taught and what he had to go through, "Doc" writes the following:

> When I was a student in the Military Medical Academy, I noticed a direct contradiction between what I had to do during the war and what we were taught. Respectable professors told us that one cannot become a good surgeon without being a good person. But during the war, I had to do many appalling things which I am still scared to think about [...] And I realized that the solution to this problem should come naturally. If after all the events in Afghanistan I would have rejected any morality and ethics, or if I had developed some pathological inclinations, then it would mean that I had become a moral monster. If thinking about the past disturbs me, it means that I still have my conscience. Even though I am well aware of the fact that I will answer for my deeds before the Supreme Judgement. (Galitskii, 2011, pp. 143–144; trans. by E. P.)

The Orthodox moral ideal, which supposedly conflicts with the military duty of the soldier, can still become the foundation for evaluating soldiers' behavior, especially the behavior of those soldiers who perform heroic deeds or acts of bravery in saving their comrades:

> We were really lucky to have such a man as Misha Rumiantsev. Otherwise, we would all have been dead by noon. He and his soldiers brought us some ammo. At the cost of his own life, he kept the commandment in the New Testament, "Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends". (Galitskii, 2011, p. 142; trans. by E. P.)

The very possibility of self-sacrifice and active love shown by soldiers provides their comrades with evidence for Divine Providence and Divine Protection:

> By all laws of war, we were bound to get killed in this battle, every last one of us. We were far outnumbered by the enemy! The enemy also had a tactical advantage, the enemy knew the terrain better. We were encircled by the enemy forces and we were fighting for twelve hours, on top of that, we were fighting on two fronts. I still don't understand how I managed to survive there. (Galitskii, 2011, p. 144; trans. by E. P.)

Thus, the accounts collected in Galitskii's volume *Iz smerti v zhizn'* does not present a normative ideal of an Orthodox warrior but rather it sheds light on real "militant piety", that is, practical religiosity of soldiers and officers, who built their relationship with God and religion in the context of their professional activity (commonly described as "work").

Conclusion

In Zobern's narrative, a mosaic of personal accounts and observations creates a tapestry of the collective experience of Orthodox believers during the greatest war Russia knew. At the first stage of the war, the Orthodox Christians shared the patriotic feelings with the majority of Soviet people and, despite the preceding persecutions, considered what was happening a defensive and, therefore, just war, which required true self-sacrifice in order to prevail over the German Nazi invaders. The Orthodox Christians felt compelled to go beyond civilian—non-combatant—activities in defending the Motherland such as fund raising, civil defense, medical and nursing service, when they labored at the factories manufacturing weapons or enlisted in military service and took part in military action. They felt no contradictions with their faith in doing so. The Orthodox Christians prayed for peace, they prayed for the fallen, but they also prayed for the victory and for the utter destruction of the enemy. After the believers learned more and more about the atrocities of the German troops, however, their patriotism and desire to protect the Motherland gave way to visceral hatred towards the enemy. Thus, Hitlerism came to be seen not just a national enemy and invasion force but rather as an absolute evil. This hatred culminated in the notion of the sacred war: this cosmic war was fought by the Russian people, "blessed with prayer and faith", with the Antichrist. The aim of this sacred war, therefore, came to be associated not only with defense but also with the eradication of this evil from the history of the mankind. Finally, in ensuring the just retribution for the crimes committed by the Nazis, the Orthodox Christians excluded the Nazi criminals from the jurisdiction of Christ's commandments about love and forgiveness.

Beliefs and principles were understood by religious people not abstractly but in the context of their individual and collective experience, as part of their daily life on the front lines or at home. Moreover, even though most of the personal accounts belong to ordinary believers and priests, Zobern leaves no place for doubt that the higher clergy (especially metropolitans Sergius, Alexius, and Nicolas) determined the moral choices and the course of action for the Orthodox community. These three hierarchs were the ones to meet Stalin in 1943 and to obtain the permission from the Soviet government to conduct propaganda both inside and outside the country. Condemnation of collaborates in the first months of the war, dissemination of the information about the Nazis' crimes in church periodicals as well as the information on decisions taken in the aftermath of the hierarchs' meeting with Stalin had a great influence on the moral evaluation of events and morale of believers in the USSR and abroad. The questions of identity of the Orthodox Christian community were inseparable from the questions of power and of the choice made by the leaders, thus setting the limits for the moral choices of their flock.

Nevertheless, it should be noted that the call for self-sacrifice, for the proof of true faith (that is, martyrdom), justified by the maxim "Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends" (English Standard Version Bible, 2001, John 15:13), by no means solves the problem of "laying down' others" lives, that is, of killing enemies and/or giving orders to do so. On the practical level, however, we see

that the narratives we looked at avoid the direct question about the permissibility of killing an enemy soldier. While discussing the categories of the sacred war—of the cosmic war with the forces of the Antichrist—and attempting to justify the limits to the supreme Christian commandment of love, the text of *Bog i Pobeda* purporting to offer an exemplary model for being an Orthodox Christian at war leaves this moral problem of killing others unanswered on the theological level.

For officers' accounts in *Iz smerti v zhizn'*, their everyday "work" implies participation in military action involving the risks of being killed or suffering casualties among the soldiers in their charge but it also entails the inescapable destruction of other lives—killing the enemy and commanding others to do so. The Christian doctrine of love and forgiveness in its abstract form would be inapplicable here. It, however, is adapted to the circumstances of the military service and is transformed into the lived religion based on the principles self-sacrifice for the salvation of the lives of comrades and civilians; into the principles of military loyalty and *esprit de corps*; into the recognition of officers' responsibility for the lives of their subordinates; into the hope for God's help in the struggle for the just cause. Even though self-sacrifice, loyalty, hope, and mercy acquire a specific context, they remain dominant value orientations in Orthodox "militant piety".

References

Ammerman, N. T. (Ed.). (2007). *Everyday religion: Observing modern religious lives*. Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195305418.001.0001

Ammerman, N. T. (2021). *Studying lived religion: Contexts and practices*. New York University Press.

Berean Standard Bible. (2021). https://berean.bible/index.html

Doklad Mitropolita Aleksiia [Report of Metropolitan Alexius]. (1943, January). *Zhurnal Moskovskoi Patriarkhii*, 9–13. http://www.jmp.ru/ya43.php?ys=43&my=01&rm=&sr=430105

English Standard Version Bible. (2001). ESV Online. https://esv.literalword.com/

Galitskii, S. G. (Ed.). (2011). *Iz smerti v zhizn'... Svidetel'stva voinov o pomoshchi Bozh'ei* [From death to life... Soldiers' accounts of God's help]. Grad Dukhovnyi.

Hjelm, T. (2016). Theory and method in critical discursive study of religion: An outline. In F. Wijsen & K. von Stuckrad (Eds.), *Making religion: Theory and practice in the discursive study of religion* (pp. 15–34). Brill. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004309180_003

Khar'iuzov, N. (1945, May). Mozhno li prostit' fashistov? [Can the Fascists be forgiven?]. *Zhurnal Moskovskoi Patriarkhii,* 44–47. http://www.jmp.ru/ya43.php?ys=45&my=05&rm=STAT&sr=450516

Knorre, B. (2015). “Bogoslovie voiny” v postsovetskom rossiiskom pravoslavii [“Theology of war” in Post-Soviet Russian Orthodoxy]. *Stranitsy: Bogoslovie. Kul’tura. Obrazovanie*, *19*(4), 559–578.

Knorre, B., & Zygmont, A. (2020). “Militant piety” in 21st-century Orthodox Christianity: Return to classical traditions or formation of a new theology of war? *Religions*, *11*(2), Article 2. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel11010002

New International Version Bible. (2011). Biblica. https://www.biblica.com/online-bible/

Obrashchenie Sobora episkopov Russkoi Pravoslavnoi Tserkvi ko vsem khristianam mira [Address of the Council of the Russian Orthodox Church to all Christians of the world]. (1943). *Zhurnal Moskovskoi Patriarkhii*, 1, 14–16. http://www.jmp.ru/ya43.php?ys=43&my=01&rm=&sr=430107

Ot soldata do generala: Vospominaniia o voine [From soldier to general: Memories of the war] (Vols. 1–18). (2003–2016). Akademiia istoricheskikh nauk. http://www.ainros.ru/toma.htm?ser_id=1

Polozhenie o voennom dukhovenstve Russkoi Pravoslavnoi Tserkvi v Rossiiskoi Federatsii [Regulations on the military clergy of the Russian Orthodox Church in the Russian Federation]. (2013, December 26). Official website of the Moscow Patriarchate. http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/3481010.html

Vasil’eva, O. Iu., Kudriavtsev, I. I., & Lykova, L. A. (Eds.). (2009). *Russkaia pravoslavnaia tserkov’ v gody Velikoi Otechestvennoi voiny 1941–1945 gg. Sbornik dokumentov* [Russian Orthodox Church in the years of the Great Patriotic War of 1941–1945. Collection of documents]. Izdatel’stvo Krutitskogo podvor’ia.

Voyno-Iasenetsky, L. (1944, February). Pravednyi sud naroda [Just tribunal of the people]. *Zhurnal Moskovskoi Patriarkhii*, 26–28.

Zobern, V. (Ed.). (2014). *Bog i Pobeda: Veruiushchie v velikikh voinakh za Rossiiu* [God and victory: Believers in the Great Wars for Russia]. Eksmo.

Zygmont, A. I., & Knorre, B. K. (2019). Voiny, mstiteli, mucheniki: Agiologiia militantnogo diskursa v sovremennom rossiiskom pravoslavii [Warriors, avengers, martyrs: Hagiology of the militant discourse in contemporary Russian Orthodoxy]. *Studia Religiosa Rossica: Russian Journal of Religion*, *2*, 11–35. https://doi.org/10.28995/2658-4158-2019-2-11-35