

Valentina Izmirlieva:

“The Church has promoted specific ‘martial’ strategies of scriptural exegesis to justify military aggression”

by **Irina Sandomirskaja**

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he projection of imperial power through overtly religious pageantry, symbols and narratives has been a key element of Russia’s identity politics under Putin, informing the Kremlin’s aggressive international policies, but also shaping the domestic perceptions of Russia’s global role.

In a conversation with Irina Sandomirskaja, Valentina Izmirlieva explores the utility of the Russian Orthodox Church in this process, and the significant transformations within the Orthodox sphere that facilitate the radical militarization of Russian society. She also discusses the role and future of multidisciplinary area studies as such, and in particular Slavic Studies.

IRINA SANDOMIRSKAJA: Please say a few words about your scholarly background and context, your interest in Eastern Orthodox religious culture, history, and theology, and the significance of literary theory, especially critical theory, for the study of religion and its role in present-day Eastern European societies.

VALENTINA IZMIRLIEVA: You can call me an accidental historian of religion. I arrived at religious studies through my interest in medieval Slavic manuscript culture. Midway through my college education, I realized that the key to in-depth understanding of the medieval Christian texts that so beguiled me was knowledge of their Orthodox ritual context – knowledge that I lacked, having been raised in the atheist culture of Communist Bulgaria. That is how my intellectual romance with religion began – out of the urge to crack the puzzles of texts that challenged my secular miscomprehension.

That initial insight only expanded during my PhD-training at the University of Chicago, which combined medieval with modern Slavic studies. The deeper I got immersed in East European literature, the deeper my conviction grew that mastering Christian culture is as essential for scholars of European modernity as it is for medievalists. Regrettably, our secular academia has an inbuilt bias against religion, and religious education for literary scholars and cultural historians is sporadic at best. When it comes to Eastern Orthodoxy, the situation is truly dismal because there is no systematic Orthodox training for secular scholars available anywhere in the US. I am still mystified by how, for example, one can be a Dostoevsky scholar without adequate knowledge of Russian Orthodoxy – of its history, theology, and ritual system. And yet we neither provide that kind of knowledge to our PhD students nor encourage them to seek it elsewhere. Those knowledge gaps affect mastering critical theory as well, since literature



Valentina Izmirieva, Professor of Slavic Languages and Literatures and the Director of the Harriman Institute for Russian, Eurasian and East European Studies, Columbia University. She also founded and leads the Black Sea Networks, a global initiative to investigate the Black Sea as a hub of cultural, political, and historical interest.

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students increasingly lack the tools to discern the religious genealogies and underpinnings of the secular discipline they study.

IS: What does your experience and knowledge as a historian of Orthodox Christianity tell you about the present-day “religious turn” in Putin’s Russia? Is there, indeed, a “religious turn” and what are the implications in the ever-increasing involvement of the official Russian Orthodox Church (the Moscow Patriarchate) in Putin’s aggressive militarism?

VI: I’d argue that Eastern Christianity never stopped being relevant for Russian politics and culture. Why did the Bolsheviks focus their revolutionary terror first on the Russian Orthodox Church? Because they recognized the critical political power the Church commanded in Russia as the source of spiritual legitimacy for the state, and rightfully saw Patriarch Tikhon’s anathema of the Bolshevik state as a political liability for their own government. The persecution only increased in scope and brutality as the Soviet state secured its power in the late 1920s, which proves that, despite the systematic dismantling of its official institutional life, Orthodoxy continued to pose a threat to the regime as a competing source of authority and political influence in the Soviet Union. Indeed, Orthodox faith was a crucial mobilizing factor for the Russian émigré communities throughout Soviet history, and much of Russian dissident culture—both within and outside the Soviet Union—had its roots in Russian Orthodoxy. In other words, the incessant persecution of the Church under the Soviets was itself a recognition of Orthodoxy’s continuous political relevance in Russia.

And so were the numerous attempts to coopt the Church into the Soviet political project, arguably the most successful of which was Stalin’s reinstatement of the Moscow Patriarchate during of the Great Patriotic War (as Russians call World War II). In that respect, too, we cannot really talk about the successful coopting of the Moscow Patriarchate into Putin’s new United Russia project as a novel phenomenon, as some unprecedented shift toward religion that we could term a “religious turn.” At best, it is just a radicalization of a tendency that has been there throughout modern Russian history, including its Soviet chapter.

Some people would argue that what is “unique” in the re-Orthodoxification of the Russian political sphere today is the fact that it is led by the same forces that for decades persecuted Orthodoxy in Russia. What seems new in history, however, is usually something old and thoroughly forgotten. After all, wasn’t the official Christian Church cre-

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ated under Constantine the Great (325) by the very same Roman imperial authorities that had viciously persecuted Christianity for decades? I would even go as far as to suggest that Christian history has always oscillated between two opposite visions of the Church: the kenotic Church, an embodiment of Christ on the Cross, and its inverse—the imperial Church of Christ Pantocrator, the Ruler of All. The first is the Persecuted Church that stands for the dispossessed and the disenfranchised. The second is the Coopted Church serving in concert (the technical term is in *symphony*) with the powers of the day. The history of the Russian Orthodox Church during the last hundred plus years closely follows the same bifurcated pattern of institutional identities.

What is really new in the relationship between church and state in post-Soviet Russia – and thus deserves special attention – is the peculiar fusion of the Church with the security structures of the state (the so-called *siloviki*), and especially with the nuclear branch of the military, a phenomenon that my colleague Dima Adam-sky has appropriately called “nuclear Orthodoxy.” This new church/military nexus has given rise not only to the orthodoxification of the military sphere (the restoration of the chaplaincy, the creation of “church commissars” in the armed forces) but also the (re)militarization of the Orthodox sphere in Russia. On that point, the Church has promoted specific “martial” strategies of scriptural exegesis to justify military aggression, and has reintroduced sacramental military rituals, such as blessing of the troops and their weapons, including nuclear weapons for mass destruction. No less importantly, the Patriarchate has reactivated old military saint cults (most notably of St. Alexander Nevsky and St. Dmitry Donskoy), has canonized military heroes as saints (Admiral Ushakov), and has repurposed existing “peaceful” saints for military ends by transforming, for example, the confessor St. Seraphim of Sarov into the patron saint of the Russian nuclear arsenal.

The most visible example of this radical militarization of Russian Orthodoxy is, of course, the new Cathedral of the Armed Forces in Moscow. Conceived by the former Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu and dedicated to the 75th anniversary of the Soviet victory against Nazi Germany, this is a very bizarre Christian church indeed. Its stairs and floor are built of melted-down Nazi weapons, its representative color is military green, and its entire structure follows the logic of some peculiar pseudo-masonic numerical code that invokes the Great Patriotic War: the bell tower is 75 meters tall in honor of the 75th anniversary; the diameter of the main dome is 19,45 m, pointing to the victory year of 1945; the smaller dome is 14,18 m, representing the 1418 days of the war – and the list goes on. More a temple of Mars, the pagan god of war, than of Christ, the messianic Prince of Peace, this cathedral is a perfect embodiment of the new Kremlin religion, which one of the self-proclaimed Russian Orthodox ideologues, Aleksandr Prokhanov, has defined as the “Religion of Victory.”

There is still another way to answer your question about a putative Russian “religious turn,” however. If we zoom out of the Russian specific situation and contextualize the Kremlin’s religious politics within a broader international context, we have to admit that we live in a radically re-enchanted world. Max Weber’s time of secular modernity, which he once termed “the disenchantment of the world,” has given way to a post-secular global society. Religion has come back with a vengeance – from the rise of the trad-right in the West to the intensified activism of fundamentalist faiths everywhere and the aggressive re-entering of religion into the public sphere in a stark reversal of the secularization process. I’d argue that Putin’s Russia is riding this wave of a global religious (re)turn by positioning itself internationally as a serious religion-driven political agent, one that has what it takes to lead the fight for conservative values against the neo-liberal agenda of the “fallen” West. And it is astounding how many individuals and coalitions in the religious right – not only Orthodox, but also conservative Catholics, Evangelicals, and even Muslim fundamentalists – see Russia today as a potential reliable ally.

It would be dangerously naïve for any political actor, however, to assume that the Russians are indeed interested in building lasting global coalitions, or a TradRight International of sorts. Russian exceptionalism has always been a feature of the Russian Orthodox state. As Alexander III once famously said and Putin likes to repeat, Russia has only two allies: the Russian Army and the Russian Navy. So let us be clear: Russia’s ultimate game is *not* to create solidarities but to deepen existing divisions in the West – by intimidating liberal adversaries while courting like-minded conservatives—and using both strategies to undermine and ultimately cripple Western democracies from within.

IS: As Professor [of Slavic Languages] in the Department of Slavic Languages at Columbia University, you have been doing extensive research and teaching embracing a broad spectrum of subjects and historical periods, including old, modern, and post-modern cultural histories of the nations of the Balkans and Russia, in literature as well as in spiritual and textual dialogues between the Abrahamic religions populating the region. Nowadays, however, we live through a period marked by profound and, it appears, irremediable ruptures of all continuities and dialogues that undermine all communications and affinities across time



The Cathedral of the Russian Armed Forces was consecrated as part of the celebration of the 75th anniversary of Soviet victory on the Eastern Front of World War II, known as the Great Patriotic War in Russia.

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and space that in fact allowed us to think these cultures and traditions as one whole entity, that of Slavic languages. Given these facts of material and symbolic devastation in the war of the very idea of cultural and historical relatedness, what do you think is the future of Slavic studies as an academic discipline?

VI: I have been claiming for years that the discipline of Slavic studies is based on an outdated foundation and urgently needs to reimagine itself. As you know very well yourself, the Slavic field was conceived around the nineteenth-century Russian political concept of “Slavdom.” Pan-Slavism, indebted to German Romantic philosophy of language, proclaimed the common identity of the Slavic peoples on the basis of ethnic and linguistic kinship, ultimately calling for their political unification. This idea became an important political tool for the Russian Empire in the late 19th century and was revived by the Soviet Union as a rationale for maintaining political and military control over most Slavic countries between 1945 and 1991.

Slavic studies developed as the academic counterpart of this political project. Built upon the myth of Slavic cultural homogeneity, this field imagines coherence where there is little beyond linguistic fraternity, while downplaying significant distinctions among the political and cultural histories of the three Slavic groups: Eastern (Belarusian, Russian, Ukrainian), Balkan (Bosnian, Bulgarian, Croatian, Macedonian, Serbian, Slovenian) and Central European (Czech, Polish, Slovak). Back in the 1960s, the Italian Slavist Riccardo Picchio argued that excessive reliance on the ethnic factor in Slavic medieval studies had obscured religion’s role as cultural and communal glue. Yet his model of *Slavia Orthodoxa* (together with its counterpart *Slavia Romana*), while helpful, proved to be no less problematic than the notion of Slavdom itself. In reality, the Balkan Slavs share more elements of their religious culture with Orthodox Christians from the Eastern Mediterranean than with Orthodox Slavs from the Eastern group of the Slavic family. More strikingly still, for both the Byzantine and the Ottoman periods, these commonalities extend across confessional divides to reveal Mediterranean networks of cultural exchange that loosely bind Eastern and Western Christians with Jews, Muslims and representatives of various “sectarian” groups. All these observations force the issue of how prolonged contact and coexistence of disparate ethnic, linguistic and confessional groups shape their cultural production, with long-lasting consequences for all forms of their social and political lives.

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President Vladimir Putin and Patriarch Kirill of Moscow, head of the Russian Orthodox Church, in Moscow, 2016.

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COMMONS



Cold War political considerations in the U.S. and Western Europe reinforced the problematic structure of Slavic cultural homogeneity, at a time when developing Slavic studies – re-purposed within the larger framework of studying Communist Russia and its sphere of influence – became a strategic priority for the NATO alliance. Significantly, the Cold War legacy of the field is also a legacy of insularity, as if the physical wall that divided generations of Western Slavists from their object of study became part of their own identity. And the strategic significance of Slavic Studies, coupled with decades of generous financial support, nurtured even a certain sense of exceptionalism in Western Slavists, making their dialogues with non-Slavists feel neither needed nor desired, and further insulating the field from potentially insightful interlocutors.

I should add that the label “Slavic” is generally opaque to colleagues and students from other departments and disciplines: this is one reason why “Russian” has taken over as a sort of translation of the inscrutable Slavic label – a replacement facilitated, of course, by both the strategic emphasis on Russian/Soviet studies during the Cold War and by Russia’s own discursive undercurrent of imperial messaging. I believe that it would be healthy to move away

from “Slavic” as an umbrella term, especially now when the Kremlin’s ambition to reestablish control over the entire “Russian World” has reinforced shared language as a weapon of political aggression. I advocate instead for using more neutral geographic labels that emphasize “shared spaces” (like, for example, the Black Sea) and focus on forms of coexistence and exchange, rather than insisting on putative “shared identities” based on blood ties and much spilled blood.

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IS: A similar question, addressed to you in your other important capacity, as director of the Harriman Institute for Russian, Eurasian, and East European Studies: what future developments can you prognosticate for the REEE region, so heavily affected by Russia’s military aggression against its “brother nation,” Ukraine. How do you see the future of multi-disciplinary area studies whose object is informed by political decisions, strategic necessities, and economic interests rather than cultural genealogies and affinities. As such, Eastern Europe has been in permanent transformation ever since it became a scholarly object, most prominently after WW2. What do you think will be its future and what kind of knowledges will be required?

VI: In the changed political reality after February 2022, all of us who study Russia and Eastern Europe are forced to rethink the conceptual frameworks, assumptions and practices that structure our academic inquiries. The leading

war cry right now is for “decolonization” or “de-centering,” boldly aiming to disrupt the inbuilt academic hierarchies, power networks, and patterns of knowledge production. While I am very sympathetic to the revolutionary spirit of this trend and the need to reorganize the Russo-centric structures of our fields, I nonetheless urge keeping in mind two thoughts that complicate it.

First, scholarship in my opinion should never allow itself to be reactive at the expense of its obligation for reflection, which requires distance: spatial and temporal, as well as emotional distance from the context you study. Scholarly work is distinct from activism, which does not mean, of course, that scholars cannot be activists as well – they can, but that should be a separate role, a separate form of engagement that should not cloud the clarity of their scholarly pursuits. Or to put it another way, changes in academic fields should be driven not by current events but by conceptual inquiry, by Clifford Geertz’s “thick description” of social realities, and by the theoretical frameworks that emerge from those descriptions.

Second, decentering Eurasian and East European studies does not – and should not – mean abandoning Russian studies. Quite the contrary. Russia continues to be strategically crucial and it would be a grave mistake to divest from studies with a Russian focus, abandoning strengths that we have in teaching Russian language, history, culture, and current politics. More than ever before we need to produce knowledge in these areas and specialists who will carry this work into the future. The way I understand de-centering is as redistribution of value and resources in our respective fields of study. To give one example from the literature field which I know best: the disproportionate emphasis on Russian authors has led to paradoxes. We know more about third-rate Russian writers than about the literary classics of some Eastern European countries. That is a bias reflected not only in academic curricula and the production of scholarly work, but in translation and publication policies, which in turn only deepens the problem by ascribing more value and significance to what is known and available. We need to break this vicious cycle.

IS: An academic in your position combines different forms of knowledge. It is deep scholarly competence based on a profound understanding of historical and cultural processes in chosen direction(s) of research that one pursues over longer periods of time – with the capacity of producing strategic knowledge and quick expert responses based on one’s informed interpretation over a variety of contexts, actors, locations, and circumstances here and now. How would you describe this combination of knowledges in your own case and what do you think about the perspectives of educating experts and scholars in the future?

VI: I believe that curiosity and the courage to get outside of one’s comfort zone are essential qualities for a scholar. We need to encourage our students not to be daunted by new things, not to be afraid to say “I don’t know” – that is the only way to learn, expand one’s field of vision, jump over one’s head. We talk a lot about interdisciplinarity, but it is not really practiced widely, because it is not an easy thing to do. Mastering a new discipline is akin to learning a new language: we have to start from scratch, like toddlers, picking things up as we go along. For an accomplished professional, that is a profoundly uncomfortable role to accept, even temporarily. Plus, retooling is generally a slow process that slows down “productivity,” which is a dangerous thing in our accelerated academic culture where success is measured by the speed and quantity of publications. As a result, people prefer to do interdisciplinarity half-way: doing their own thing, the thing they feel secure in, but within different “multidisciplinary” settings. This is not interdisciplinarity. Instead of talking to one another in search of a common language, specialists from different disciplines talk over each other, without real opportunities for transforming their views, approaches, and inbuilt convictions or biases. To break this inertia, we need to raise a braver generation that is not punished for trying new things, making mistakes, and taking time for ideas to mature before publishing them.

IS: Still another hypostasis of your academic persona is activism and advocacy. Could you please say a few words about the Black Sea Networks that you founded and act as head of.

VI: The Black Sea Networks initiative, which I launched in 2016 with a grant from the Presidential Global Innovation Fund at Columbia University, was designed as an intervention into the Slavic field. I guess, in that sense, you could say that it was a platform for academic activism from its inception. I had the quixotic idea to reform the field from within by inspiring young Slavists – both graduate students and a new generation of faculty – to think outside the institutional boxes of current Academia. The model I had in mind was that of water-based studies, refocused onto zones of change and ex-change to escape the fixation on “boundaries” and “identities,” the usual trap of national and regional studies. The Mediterranean studies have been fairly successful in experimenting with this kind of transnationalism and I was keen on testing its potential on the Great Sea’s “little brother” on the other side of the Bosphorus.

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My core group of enthusiasts focused the initiative first on *building* academic networks while *analyzing* the very notion of network-building. We asked how knowledge, information and other values are produced and shared around the Black Sea, how solidarities – including academic ones – are made and unmade, how connections are established and transformed across difference. Of particular interest for our project was the way local engagements produce trans-local effects. More specifically, we explored how the meaning of local interactions changes depending on the territorial scale of our inquiry, how by reframing or recalibrating them we gain new insights about their relevance. One of the exciting results of this experiment – at least for me – was the realization that regionalism is important not because regions are insulated (not because boundaries and identities matter that much), but because the global is always produced locally, and especially in zones of “friction” where, as Anna Tsing so astutely reminds us, heterogeneous elements rub awkwardly against one another to generate entirely new meanings. The Black Sea littoral is one such zone of generative friction with global consequences.

Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine made this insight instantly evident way beyond the academic sphere. All of a sudden, our work that had been fairly niche acquired front-page relevance. For one, the devastation of the Black Sea, which had been a local problem for many decades, was pushed to the forefront of international awareness. The disastrous effects of the military action on the sea itself, together with the looming threat of nuclear catastrophe directly above it, reminded the world of the uncomfortable truth that the Black Sea is an open sea. It is connected, through the Mediterranean, to both the Persian Gulf and the Atlantic, and through riverways, all the way to the North Sea and the heart of Europe. Which means that a Black Sea ecological disaster directly threatens global environmental security. Meanwhile, the strategic significance of the sea as a key transportation hub for both fuel and grain, sharply increased as its throughways became increasingly vulnerable. One of the important projects under the BSN umbrella right now is creating an international consortium of experts on the role of the sea for energy transition and environmental security, with the agenda of raising public awareness and advocating for concrete practical solutions.

The war at the heart of the Black Sea world has also raised the stakes of academic solidarity. As the Director of the Harriman Institute, I have strategically leveraged the Black Sea networks we have built to support both our Ukrainian colleagues and the Russian political activists who work against Putin’s regime. To give but one example, we recently launched a Global Journalism Fellowship for independent Russian-language media in exile as the first step toward creating a larger Black Sea support network for exiled journalists from the Caucasus, the Balkans and the Middle East.

Thus, the Black Sea Networks project, which initially advocated reassessment of priorities, strategies, and distribution of resources in our academic field, has evolved into a platform for more direct engagement with pressing social and political concerns of our interconnected world. 

Irina Sandomirskaja is a Professor of Cultural Studies at CBEES, Södertörn University.

Note: This conversation builds upon Valentina Izmirlieva’s Distinguished Lecture held at CBEES, Södertörn University April 15, 2024. For more information about the Black Sea Network visit: <http://blackseanetworks.org>