

The Crucified Boy in Russian War Propaganda

How is Theology NOT Ideology?¹

The very first thing I heard when starting my studies in 1993 at the protestant Theological University in Kampen, the Netherlands, was about Theology after Auschwitz (*Theologie nach Auschwitz*): how it helped confront the legacy of violence and change mindsets in post-Nazi Germany. Coming from the Soviet Union, I immediately began to hope that a similar theological reflection on the Soviet past might start soon. As no such reflection emerged during the following twenty years, I gradually came to understand that I myself had to start a project to contribute to a systematical re-orientation in the post-Soviet countries. Thus, such had become my task and my calling. In 2016 I launched a project called 'Theology after Gulag', which name I have changed to 'Theology after Gulag, Bucha, and beyond' since Russia's war in Ukraine.

The main idea of the 'Theology after Gulag, Bucha, and beyond' project is that theology can be of major importance for overcoming legacies of violence and trauma. To this end, the project connects to other theologies that emerged after a legacy of violence and atrocities, as well as other relevant fields such as trauma studies and theories of transitional justice.

As its name suggests, the 'Theology after Gulag, Bucha, and beyond' project engages with, but is not confined to, a theology 'in' or 'about' the Gulag, the Soviet system of forced labour camps. Much like 'Apartheid' for South Africa, or 'Auschwitz' for Nazi Germany, 'the Gulag' has

come to signify a regime of terror, dehumanisation, and unspeakable violence. But the system of unfreedom and violation of ethics penetrated Soviet society as a whole; for this reason Soviet dissidents spoke of the 'mall' and 'large' zone or Gulag. At an expert meeting 'Theology after Gulag' in 2016 Irina Flige, Director of the St. Petersburg Department of 'Memorial', underlined that in the USSR dehumanisation was universal and affected everything, private life, social life, intellectual life: 'The Gulag penetrated into all spheres of daily life, saturating them. The barbed wire did not separate the camp from the 'big zone'' (2016).

This all-encompassing character of Soviet dehumanisation is one of the reasons why Russia has never systematically processed its traumatic past. Russia shares many of the broader theoretical, ethical and religious issues with societies that have experienced mass atrocities. The theories and transitional justice approaches applied in other societies (Gobodo-Madikizela 2018; Hirsch 2012; Philpott 2012; Veraart 2012; Zubrzycki 2006) presuppose conscious reflection on past injustice by political and religious leaders, secured by the rule of law. In these contexts, religious reflection has helped change and facilitate societal debate. For example, the TRC in post-apartheid South-Africa and the 'Theology after Auschwitz'-debate in post-Nazi Germany addressed societal dilemmas such as 'victim/perpetrator/bystander' and the 'grey zone of complicity' as well as theological challenges (God, evil and suffering, Christian complicity in the Holocaust) (Cohn-Sherbock 2002; Kellenbach et al. 2006). The fact that Russia has never made a complete break with the USSR, and the institutional heirs of the 'perpetrators' (KGB/FSB) are still in power (in state and church), complicates the situation.²

> *Russian's war in Ukraine calls for theological reflection and nuanced academic attention.*

During the 1990s there have been individual attempts to encourage open and public debate about Soviet crimes. However, these initiatives have proven to be fragile and they have become subject to 'memory wars' in which the past has been continually revised and rewritten for political purposes. This process of rewriting history involves the successful utilisation of the

obscurest propaganda, including the ideology of the 'Russian world' (see below), now one of Russia's main ideological tools in the war against Ukraine. In addition, the processing of the past in Russia is obstructed, because, unlike other countries of the former USSR, KGB archives remain closed. Much of what is happening today is due to the continuation of power and to the unprocessed past.

Today, Russia's war in Ukraine calls for theological reflection and nuanced academic attention, not only because of the dehumanising impact of the war, but also because religious and theological traditions are employed as ideological tools. The aim of my research is to develop a methodological and theoretical framework for coming to terms with the past, reflecting on present-day developments, and thinking about possibilities for practical academic and societal efforts now and beyond this war. This paper is part of the effort to develop this new multi-disciplinary and interreligious research field.

In the present state of affairs, it is not difficult to make political statements, or to give countless examples of the 'weaponisation' of history, the ways in which history can be made into a means for waging war. Therefore, I will confine this paper to one example. The question that occupies me here is an intricate one: how can religion be distinguished from the current political ideologies without framing 'religion' in non-religious terms? In other words, how is religion not ideology?

War in Ukraine: legacy of conflation of religion and ideology

I must here omit the whole history of the post-Soviet religious revival and its societal context.

I will only summarise the three factors already mentioned:

- 1) In Russia, a deep and systematic reflection about the Soviet past has never emerged as a societal movement. The past is unprocessed and rewritten for new ideological purposes.
- 2) Russia has never distanced itself from its past (the USSR), and the institutional descendants of the 'perpetrators' – the security forces – are still in power.
- 3) Much of what is happening now is a result of the unprocessed traumatic pasts of post-Soviet countries, and Russia in particular.

Gaining insight into the socio-political role of the unprocessed Soviet legacy, including its ideological underpinnings, is challenging work for the future. Since the current war, many scholars and journalists have been discussing the continuity between the Soviet ideology and the ideology of the Kremlin and the Russian Orthodox Church Moscow patriarchate. Yet, the total bankruptcy of the converging state and church ideologies in the current war (think of the sequence of 'denazification', 'demilitarisation', 'desatanisation') is a far cry from the perfected Soviet ideology. The continuing impact of the Soviet legacy requires subtle, complex and comprehensive analysis. At this point, I can only give an incentive for further reflection.

In my view, the resemblance between the two, the perfected Soviet ideology and the Kremlin's current mobilisational and weaponising rhetoric, lies in the adaptation of sophisticated Soviet ideological mechanisms – patriotism, propaganda, myth creation, and substitution – to the Kremlin's new political de-

mands. This adaptation was enhanced since the reinforcement of Putin's regime from the 2000s onwards. These mechanisms continue to permeate society, conditioning popular responses to past and present while ascribing 'sacral' status to human constructs such as Nation, State, and Church. In a society that has not been given nor has taken the opportunity to process its traumatic past, such ideological mechanisms function as triggers of social mobilisation or, evidently, demobilisation (in the sense of suppression). The concept of 'chosen trauma' and 'chosen glory' raised by psychologist and psychiatrist Vamik Volkan (2013) is particularly useful for understanding these processes of identity forming of large societal groups in present-day Russia. According to Volkan, the narratives which become appropriated for 'chosen trauma' or 'chosen glory' can be true or false, or construed both from true historical events and from false narratives about these historical events (or invented stories presented as historically true). New myths and narratives of 'chosen glory', which have been created to be used for political purposes are, for example, those where World War II is being mythologised and propagandised, and the legacy of terror is rewritten in State propaganda and in school textbooks. Ideological tools are the new ideology in today's Russia.

Despite the bankruptcy of anything like a coherent Kremlin ideology, there are several Kremlin war ideologies that are framed in religious narratives, the most prominent of which is the narrative of the 'Russian World'. It has led to condemnations of the Kremlin and patriarch Kirill by international secular and religious authorities and to the perception of the Russian war in Ukraine as a metaphysical war. The shift

in patriarch Kirill's ideology, from 'Russkii Mir' to 'Holy Rus', in turn testifies to the absence of any coherent line of thought also on this side. This ideology is reinforced by the Russian Orthodox Church Moscow Patriarchate's (ROCMP) prominent socio-political role and its symphony with the Kremlin political elites that employ 'Orthodoxy' as an ideological tool. The ROCMP is contributing to the state's sacralisation of patriotic ideology, and has been doing so for the past decade, framing the war in Ukraine as a 'Holy War', in analogy to World War II, and equating Ukrainian 'fascists' with German fascists.³ Narratives of the last type are appropriated as 'chosen trauma's' (the case I discuss below also fits into this category).

Both state and church use religion to fuel the war. Religion functions as an ideological weaponisation tool, given the top-down trend that theologian Cyril Hovorun calls 'putinisation': the political use of Orthodox tradition (Corre 2022). Observers have noticed that in many of Patriarch Kirill's sermons from the start of the war, any reference to Jesus Christ was lacking. Christ is substituted by the sacrality of the State, the army, and the Church.

There is a resemblance between this substitution of Christ by patriotism and the substitution by means of which Soviet ideology became a productive force: by ascribing transcendent features to earthly phenomena, such as the Party, or the communist leaders Lenin and (later) Stalin. In such conflation of theology and ideology, Patriarch Kirill can promise forgiveness of sins to any Russian soldier who perishes in Ukraine (Orthodox Times 2022). Again, the neglect of value of human life while presenting it as something that gives value to life (like 'sacrifice for the Fatherland'), can be

seen as a continuation of Soviet ideology.

To refer to what philosopher Charles Taylor in *A Secular Age* calls the 'immanent frame', the idea that there is no more than the here and now, that everything is determined by this-worldly reality (2007, 539-593), ROCMP and state now 'sell' their immanent frame as a transcendent frame⁴ (for example, by invoking the afterlife). In the end, religion is further instrumentalised and ideologised, generating a vicious circle. This substitution of the transcendent frame by an immanent frame provides embedding for the misrepresentation of historical facts and the distortion of theological concepts when it comes to questions of responsibility and guilt in the current war. This is how the unprocessed past continues to be a cause of war.

Before the war, the mechanisms that mobilise the substituted transcendent frame to work as ideology were different at official (macro-), institutional (meso-) and societal (micro-) levels. After the start of the war, with the full symbiosis between the Kremlin and Moscow Patriarchate narratives and the suppression of any dissident opinion on the institutional levels, the situation seems misleadingly monolithic. The inner dynamics and distribution of power on the macro- and the meso-level and the question whether and how the ideological trend is top-down (hierarchical) or bottom-up, involving the microlevel is now an even more complex and complicated issue than before the war. Analyzing how ideological mechanisms interact at these distinct levels, is therefore an important field for future interdisciplinary research.

Let us now look at one case from the micro-level that exemplifies the difference between religious and ideological reference frames.

How is religion not ideology? The case of the 'crucified boy'

A story which fuelled Russian hatred of what Russian propaganda calls 'Ukrainian neo-Nazis' as early as 2014 was that of a crucified boy in the city of Slavyansk. The story was reported on the 1st channel of the Russian state television (2014) on the 12th and 13th of July 2014 by alleged eye-witness Galina Pyshnyak. She stated to have seen a three-year old boy being crucified and bleeding to death within an hour and a half, while his mother was forced to watch: 'They took a three-year-old child, a small boy in panties, in a T-shirt, and nailed him as Jesus to an advertisement board.' Pyshnyak also claimed that after the death of the boy, the mother had been tied to a tank and dragged around.

In Ukraine and also in Russia, this gruesome story of a crucified boy has come to symbolise Russian war propaganda, disinformation, and fake news. Moreover, the story has caused damage as cases were reported of Russians who volunteered to fight the Ukrainian sadists who crucify little children. The story even made its way to Hollywood. It was mentioned in *Homeland*, the famous series about the CIA. After the start of the war, the story continued to be invoked as an example of war propaganda of the most damaging sort. In April 2023, the original journalistic investigation from 2015 was reprinted by the *Novaya Gazeta* (the newspaper's editor-in-chief is the Nobel prize winner Dmitry Muratov). This reprint was meant as a protest action against 'the conveyor mode (...) without any tangible concern for plausibility' of the Russian war propaganda (Rubtsov 2019).

Some possible historical resemblances of the story of the crucified boy have been named,

alluding to the myths and narratives of crucifixions of young soldiers during both world wars. However, some other cultural motives can be at play here. In fact, the story appeared for the first time on a Facebook page of one of the most successful propagandists of the 'Russian World' ideology, Alexander Dugin (2014). While reading both the typescript of Pyshnyak's story and Dugin's Facebook page, I was reminded (Reading both the typescript of Pyshnyak's story and Dugin's Facebook page, it reminded me?) of Dugin's love for Fyodor Dostoevsky, which – to engage in polemic with Slavoj Žižek – we unfortunately share (Vorotniiov 2022). Such a polemic would be useless if it were not for the fact that a careful reading of Dostoevsky opens deeper insights on the working of propaganda as a mobilisational tool in the current war and can work as a litmus test for answering my main question 'how religion is not ideology'?

Let us therefore have a closer look into possible Dostoevsky-motifs in this story, considering Dugin's love for the Russian writer. After the start of the war, Dugin even suggested to Russians to read Dostoevsky all the time: 'In the morning Dostoevsky, in the afternoon Dostoevsky, in the working afternoon Dostoevsky, at midnight Dostoevsky, and even more Dostoevsky' (Dugin 2022). Considering Dugin's obsession with Dostoevsky, other possible inspirations for the story of the crucified boy present themselves: two stories of tortured children from Dostoevsky's novel *The Brothers Karamazov*.⁵ The first one is told by the fourteen-year-old Liza Khokhlakova to the main character of the novel, Alyosha Karamazov:

'There's a book here in which I read about the trial of a Jew, who took a four year old child and cut off the fingers from the child's both hands, and then hammered nails into him and crucified him on the wall, and afterwards, when he was tried, the Jew said that the child had died soon, within four hours. That was 'soon'! He said the child moaned, kept on moaning and he stood there admiring it. That's nice! 'Nice?' 'Nice; I sometimes imagine that it was I who crucified him. He would hang there moaning and I would sit opposite him eating pineapple compote. I am awfully fond of pineapple compote. Do you like it?' (Dostoevsky 2007 [1878-1880], 658)

Another story from *The Brothers Karamazov* is about a boy hunted by dogs and torn to pieces before his mother's eyes. According to Ivan and Alyosha, the two youngest of the Karamazov brothers, the general who ordered this attack deserves to be shot 'for the satisfaction of our moral feelings'. Ivan, who tells Alyosha the stories, fiercely condemns God who allows for a world order where such things happen. Alyosha agrees with him that there is no power on earth and in eternity which has the right to forgive the perpetrator for torturing a child. Even the child's mother might not (have the right to?) forgive the perpetrator:

'I believe the general was afterwards declared incapable of administering his estates. Well—what did he deserve? To be shot? To be shot for the satisfaction of our moral feelings? Speak, Alyosha!' 'To be shot,' murmured Alyosha, lifting his eyes to Ivan with a pale, twisted smile. (Dostoevsky 2007, 266)

The semantic structure of this condemnation seems to be mirrored in Dugin's Facebook account of the alleged event in Slavyansk:

'The beasts have taken Slavyansk. Escalation of genocide. And such creatures should not need to be 'killed, killed, killed'? For sure, they shouldn't?

However, very different are the contexts in which Dostoevsky and Dugin tell their respective stories. Dugin's aim is straightforward, to fuel and disseminate hatred:

'please disseminate this as widely as possible. A separate request for anyone who speaks foreign languages to translate and distribute this on the resources of the countries in whose languages you will translate this text.'

In Dostoevsky, Ivan's story belongs to the novel's famous chapter 'Rebellion'. Ivan accepts God, but 'respectfully returns' to Him 'his entrance ticket' to the spectacle of reconciliation in eternity, because 'eternal harmony is not worth a single tear from a tortured child' (Dostoevsky 2007 [1878-1880], 268). After another five pages filled with horrendous stories about the sufferings of children, Alyosha, who was just about to agree with Ivan's rebellion against God and his universe, remembers Christ:

'there is a Being and He can forgive everything, all and for all, because He gave His innocent blood for all and everything. You have forgotten Him (...)' (Dostoevsky 2007 [1878-1880], 270).

Striking for our discussion here is that, while a fake story is behind Dugin's account, all the anecdotes Ivan had gathered about the suffering of children as evidence for his rebellion against God, are described on the basis of real events carefully collected by Dostoevsky:

'All the stories about the children occurred, took place, were printed in the newspapers, and I can show (you) where. Nothing has been invented by me' (Dostoevsky 1988-1991, 5:83).

Thus, in Dostoevsky's novel a fictional character considers (and rejects) eternal forgiveness for real victims based on true historic events. At the same time, in the novel elder Zosima provides an implicit answer to Ivan's rebellion in propounding the unity of Creation: 'everything is like an ocean, everything flows and is connected, you touch it in one place – it reverberates at the other end of the world' (Dostoevsky 2007 [1878-1880], 407). This notion underlies the awareness that 'everyone of us has sinned against all men, and I more than any' (Dostoevsky 2007 [1878-1880], 316). This shows how subtle and complex Dostoevsky composed his novels.

This same complexity and subtlety can be seen in the way Dostoevsky lets Liza Khokhla-kova bring the anecdote of the crucified Jew. The episode with pineapple compote has brought Dostoevsky the fame of an anti-Semite, and his character Liza Khokhla-kova the reputation of an underaged hysteric, as Dostoevsky-scholar Tatiana Kasatkina observes (2015, 22). Also, as mentioned above, many readers have become convinced by Ivan's arguments against God who allows innocent children to suffer. Theologically it is important that, and foremost, *how* subtly, almost unnoticed, Dostoevsky brings his message: 'it was I who crucified him'.

Here is the core of the difference between propaganda, substitution and fake news on the one hand, and theology on the other hand (because in Dostoevsky's message of both his stories about tortured boys, we are dealing with theology): the difference between creating

enemies and weaponising history on the one hand, and introspection on the other: taking a deep look into yourself, and taking individual responsibility, Dostoevsky's message 'it was I who crucified him' is addressed to every reader; the reader, in his turn, has to consider how preferring that which does not matter, 'pineapple compote', prevails over that what matters the most ('it was I who crucified him').

Dostoevsky persistently makes the crucifix of Christ present (appear?) behind the child's crucifixion, using the incorrectness and uncertainty of spoken language. By contrast, the allusion to Jesus and crucifixion in Pyshnyak's and Dugin's stories, similar to patriarch Kirill's omission of Christ at a funeral service of a new martyr, is substitution of the transcendent frame by an immanent frame.

How is theology NOT ideology: A lesson from Karl Barth

It would be a mistake, though, to separate today's Russia from similar modes of ideologising religion by conservative groups all over the world and in the identification of nations as carriers of 'traditional values', from the US to Europe to Afghanistan. Kristina Stoeckl convincingly elaborates these resemblances in her work, especially on the rise of a globalised movement of conservative Christians (e.g. Stoeckl 2023; Stoeckl and Uzlaner 2022). My own research on the Swiss theologian Karl Barth, whom many consider to be the 'church father of the 20th century', has enriched my project *Theology after Gulag, Bucha and Beyond* precisely because his theology has a strong ideology-critical dimension. According to Barth, once a Christian theology loses its only dominant – God – it becomes ideology:

Whenever men 'adopt the point of view of God'; whenever He is not everything and they nothing; whenever they desire to be and to do something in co-operation with Him; then, however stimulating their ideas, however noble their actions, God becomes – a notion [*'Gott' ist eben Ideologie*]. (Barth 1968 [1933], 73-74; 2010 [1922], 107)

Religion draws its critical function from God, not from nation or culture, or whatever human notion or occupation. Disentangling religion from ideology is therefore very simple. To paraphrase a Barth scholar, theologians should let theology shape their ideology instead of letting their political ideology shape their theology (cf. Johnson 2020, 96).

Concluding remarks

This might be a straightforward and sufficient answer to the question of this paper: how is theology not ideology? – if it were not for the fact that the real questions actually begin here.

On the one hand, the orientation towards God implies that no direct appeal to God is possible for other than theological reasons – for such an appeal would ultimately risk lapsing into ideology.

On the other hand, we have to do our theology in the real-life context of 2023, confronted with the unprocessed Soviet legacy and the current Russian war in Ukraine – including its ideologisation of religion. If our theology is to face the challenge of Soviet dehumanisation and its continuing legacy, it will have to face its realities, the realities of suffering and trauma, but also the real need to heal and reconcile.

The example of the story of the crucified boy shows how the ideological mechanisms – patriotism, propaganda, myth creation, and substitu-

tion – are important aspects for mobilisation and weaponisation of the transcendent frame. In the distinction between alluding to the transcendent or immanent frame lies, in my view, the key for a theological understanding of the distinction between real and fake or, to end with a reference to a similar theological distinction, between icon and idol (or simulacrum). An idol by definition belongs to the immanent frame. Any allusion to the divine which is made with another purpose than transcending or breaking beyond the immanent frame is an idol. An icon by definition refers to the transcendent frame. This concentration on the divine and not its mediator, for example, an icon, relic etc., is the simple way to understand why the 7th Ecumenical Council (787) insists that 'the icons in the Orthodox Church are only venerated and not worshipped' (Kalaitzidis 2014, 335). In our case, while in Dugin's (and Pyshnyak's) stories the allusion is to a 'phantastic' or 'purely imaginary imitation' (Leitch et al. 2018, 237 & 241) in Dostoevsky's stories the allusion is to a proto-image of Christ. In current Russian war propaganda Christ is made a means of weaponisation. <

Notes

- 1 I draw for some parts of this contribution on my two earlier texts: Tolstaya (2022) and (2023).
- 2 Relations between state and church have a long history in Eastern Orthodoxy – think, for example, of the politico-theological ideal of 'symphonia', which holds that state and church are complementary to each other without fully merging. While these traditional relations would have to be accounted for when discussing the present-day situation, it could well be argued (as has partly been done) that the current church hierarchy in fact distorts or 'ideologises' the traditional concept of symphonia for its own (political) agenda. This form of present-day ideologisation is what this paper intends to discuss. On 'symphonia', see e.g. Antonov 2020.
- 3 One should not forget though that the huge gap between rich and poor and big cities and province make people even more prone to ideological 'triggers'.

- 4 Charles Taylor does not use the notion 'transcendent frame' as such; see Tolstaya & Bestebrurtje (2021, 469-505).
- 5 There is a remarkable trend in Russian war propaganda's susceptibility to the influence of literature. Cf. e.g. the nickname of the recently murdered propagandist Vladlen Tatarsky (real name Maxim Fomin), which he borrowed from Victor Pelevin's novel *Generation P* (1999), where the character's name is Babylen Tatarsky. The question how literature and other art forms (think also of series) work out their performative potential would be a fascinating field for future investigation.

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