



TEXAS NATIONAL SECURITY REVIEW

BOOK REVIEW ROUNDTABLE:

Russian Nuclear Orthodoxy

Sept. 18, 2019

Table of Contents

1. "Introduction: The Russian Orthodox Church and the Russian Nuclear Complex," by Jon Askonas
2. "Rhinestone-Covered Icons at 'Russia's Los Alamos,'" by Anya Loukianova Fink
3. "The Bishops and the Bomb, Take Two," by Brad Roberts
4. "Getting Comfortable with Russian Nuclear Orthodoxy," by Irina du Quenoy
5. "Moving Beyond Russian Nuclear Orthodoxy," by Olga Oliker

1. Introduction: The Russian Orthodox Church and the Russian Nuclear Complex

By Jon Askonas

In *Russian Nuclear Orthodoxy*,¹ Dmitry Adamsky provides overwhelming evidence that the Russian Orthodox Church and the Russian nuclear forces are influencing each other to an astonishing degree. Each leg of the Russian nuclear triad, along with the Russian nuclear development complex and civilian energy sector, has embraced and been embraced by the highest levels of the Church's hierarchy, a relationship that was encouraged by the Putin regime. The Church and the nuclear complex cooperate on matters small and great, and Orthodox worship, pastoral care, and theology is increasingly integrated throughout the chain of command. Having proved the existence of this unusual nexus, Adamsky tries to figure out what it means, especially for our understanding of nuclear strategy and Russian foreign policy.

In Adamsky's book, the literature on strategic culture comes full circle. While the concept has since acquired a life of its own, it emerged from an interpretive puzzle that faced those studying none other than the then-Soviet nuclear forces. In his 1977 RAND report, "The Soviet Strategic Culture: Implications for Limited Nuclear Operations,"² Jack Snyder poked at the soft underbelly of American nuclear strategy: the assumption that the Soviet military shared America's understanding of nuclear weapons. Snyder made it clear that, as they had been shaped by a different political, historical, and organizational context, Soviet strategists might behave differently than American game theory predicted. While communist ideology did not play a large role in Snyder's analysis, the Soviet military's approach to nuclear weapons still provided the "origins and continuing vitality of attitudes and behavior that might otherwise seem to American observers inscrutable, wrong-headed,

¹ Dmitry Adamsky, *Russian Nuclear Orthodoxy: Religion, Politics, and Strategy* (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2019).

² Jack L. Snyder, "The Soviet Strategic Culture: Implications for Limited Nuclear Operations," RAND Corp., September 1977, <https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/reports/2005/R2154.pdf>.

or peculiar.”³ In *Russian Nuclear Orthodoxy*, we once again return to the seemingly puzzling behavior and beliefs of Russia’s nuclear decision-makers.

Adamsky has long been one of the more careful scholars of strategic culture. Not prone to culturally essentialist flights of fancy, Adamsky has shown a particular skill for interpreting the peculiar mixture of circumstances, organizations, and socio-cultural dispositions that shapes how militaries conceptualize and operationalize new ways of fighting. In *The Culture of Military Innovation*,⁴ he traces how military innovation emerges in the Russian, American, and Israeli militaries through the reception of the “Revolution in Military Affairs.” Using a wide range of historical, anthropological, and social science resources, he explores why Russia excels at conceptualization, America at technological and organizational development, and Israel at adaptation and tactical implementation. Rather than fixating on single factors, Adamsky’s attention to detail and comparative approach allow him to weave a richer and more compelling tapestry of factors, contexts, and constraints that add up to a distinctive culture surrounding military innovation. He brings a similar approach to *Russian Nuclear Orthodoxy*, painting a complex picture of the assumptions, beliefs, incentives, and interactions that are leading to ever-tighter connections between the Orthodox Church and Russia’s nuclear complex.

“Inscrutable, wrong-headed, or peculiar” is how the uninitiated might describe the tight embrace between the Church and the Russian nuclear community. Among those who study Russian defense policy, discovering the strange role of the Church in the military is something of a rite of passage. An airborne church with parachuting priests, bishops blessing missiles, and an olive-drab military cathedral (complete with stairs made of melted Nazi weapons) all reflect a highly distinctive approach to church-military relations.⁵

³ Snyder, “The Soviet Strategic Culture,” 38.

⁴ Dmitry Adamsky, *The Culture of Military Innovation: The Impact of Cultural Factors on the Revolution in Military Affairs in Russia, the U.S., and Israel* (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010).

⁵ Oliver Wainwright, “Russian Army Introduces the Flying Orthodox Church-in-a-Box,” *The Guardian*, April 2, 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/architecture-design-blog/2013/apr/02/russian-army-flying-church>; Orthodox Priests Blessing Things, “48. A Missile,” Twitter, Oct. 11, 2018, <https://twitter.com/blagoslovie/status/1050406166638067712?s=20>; “Russia’s New Military Cathedral Will Train War Priests — Reports,” *Moscow Times*, Nov. 30, 2018,

Adamsky's contention is that these oddities amount to more than a Russian quirk and actually reflect a way of thinking about nuclear weapons that is at odds with American beliefs in ways that could, in principle, affect nuclear escalation dynamics and Russian actions in a crisis. Adamsky's claims are careful and nuanced, but the subject matter alone demands closer attention.

What Adamsky chronicles is the long rise of "Nuclear Orthodoxy," in theory and practice, which began in the dire days of the 1990s, expanded alongside Putinism, and reached its fullest flower in post-Reset Russia, as the Putin regime moved away from rapprochement with the West. Nuclear Orthodoxy is not a regime-driven nor a top-down phenomenon, although it certainly maintains the regime's support. Adamsky argues that at least some of the demand for spiritual guidance and affirmation within the nuclear community is bottom-up, emerging as a result of the dangers and loneliness of the job and the spiritual void felt by many in the wake of the Soviet collapse. But alongside the practical elements of Nuclear Orthodoxy — special churches in closed cities and top-secret faculties, ikons above the emergency controls in nuclear reactors, chaplains aboard patrolling submarines — a theoretical and theological framework has arisen: "To stay Orthodox, Russia should be a strong nuclear power; to stay a strong nuclear power, Russia should be Orthodox".⁶

Each of the contributors in this roundtable wrestles with what the broader implications of Russian Nuclear Orthodoxy are.

Anya Fink contextualizes the Russian nuclear community's embrace of the "spiritual-moral" benefits of Orthodoxy within the broader spiritual crisis that gripped Russia from the late Soviet period onwards. The "strategic mythmaking" at the heart of the nexus between the Church and the nuclear complex is meant to outlast the current regime, not least because of deep resonances (some historical, some strategic) between modern Orthodox spirituality and the nuclear community, as embodied in Saint Seraphim of Sarov, one of the most revered modern saints who happened to have lived in what would become the Russian Los Alamos. The Russian faithful, of course, don't believe that to be a

<https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2018/11/30/russias-new-military-cathedral-will-train-war-priests-reports-a63671>.

⁶ Adamsky, *Russian Nuclear Orthodoxy*, 161.

coincidence. At the same time, Fink raises questions about how the nexus is shaping Russian public perceptions of the Orthodox Church, and wishes Adamsky had gone further to address the deeper questions about how the link will affect Russian nuclear policy. Will it amount to more than a superstition or good luck charm before nuclear operators go into battle?

Brad Roberts reminds us that, though we often forget it, the Roman Catholic Church had a dramatic effect on Western security policy, not least through the doctrines of Just War Theory. Thus, we ought not dismiss the idea that theology might modify even the highest-stakes questions of international security. In fact, in stark contrast to the Western church, the Russian Orthodox Church has embraced nuclear weapons as guarantors of peace and a defensive shield in the hands of the Russian state, opposing nuclear abolition as firmly as the Pope supports it. As Saint Seraphim Sarovsky protects Russia with the shield of his holiness, the nuclear technicians of Sarov protect Russia with a nuclear shield. Roberts highlights the deep connection between the Russian state's strategic narrative and traditional Russian Orthodox beliefs about Russia as a "Third Rome," the seat of Christianity and civilization with a distinct salvific mission. If these beliefs are widespread across the nuclear community, it is hard to see how they would *not* change behavior in an apocalyptic confrontation.

Irina du Quenoy provides some deeper cultural context about Russian Orthodoxy in the post-Soviet period, rightly noting that Adamsky (though he does not describe it so) is in fact illustrating how the Church's and the Russian nuclear community's *cultures* evolved after the Soviet collapse and are possibly even merging in important ways. She helpfully sheds light on a few editing or writing quirks that might be imperceptible to non-specialist readers, and she also highlights the unique position Adamsky is taking in the religion and international relations literature — a deep, sociological analysis of religion and security in a world religion *other* than Islam. If Adamsky has turned up such gold, perhaps more researchers ought to strike out in search of more similar cases.

Olga Oliker lauds Adamsky for a rare accomplishment: revealing an important phenomenon to the security studies community that few (even among Russianists) were even cognizant of, much less incorporating into analysis and forecasting. But she wishes that Adamsky had connected his findings to other scholarship on the Church's influence in other parts of Russian life and had ventured to say more about what the battlefield consequences might

TNSR Roundtable: Russian Nuclear Orthodoxy

<https://tnsr.org/roundtable/book-review-roundtable-russian-nuclear-orthodoxy/>

be. She concludes that Adamsky's empirical claims at least demand attention and that these questions ought to be sorted out.

In an even more detailed and convincing way than Snyder in 1977, Adamsky challenges Western assumptions about how nuclear weapons work and how other states will interpret their deployment and use. The book adds another complex layer to ongoing U.S.-Russian arms control discussions: Just as nuclear weapons politics in the United States is changing, so many of the assumptions underlying Russian support for the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty and New START have shifted under Nuclear Orthodoxy. Given the sacred mission of Russia's nuclear shield, some Russian thinkers have even calling into question the desirability of arms control between great powers. Adamsky is hesitant to push his claims too far and argue that the Russian nuclear chain of command, from a newly baptized bomber pilot to Vladimir Putin himself, is increasingly shaped by a theological view of nuclear weapons and their use in defense of the Fatherland. But what would it mean if they were?

Jon Askonas is assistant professor of politics and a fellow at the Center for the Study of Statesmanship at the Catholic University of America.



2. Rhinestone-Covered Icons at “Russia’s Los Alamos”

By Anya Loukianova Fink

For several years beginning in 1989, it was not uncommon to turn on the television in the Soviet Union, and later in Russia, and witness a seriously-coiffed man in large glasses waving his hands in front of the camera and mumbling. Pensioners and families flocked to watch, while placing 10-liter receptacles of water in front of their TV screens. They did this because they believed that psychic Allan Chumak, who conducted these so-called TV séances, was charging the water with positive and healing energy.⁷ No one knew how or if it worked, but many drank the water.

Chumak’s séances came during a time when the Russian public had lost its ideological-political orientation — a tumultuous period in Soviet/Russian history. But according to some surveys, more Russians today believe in the supernatural, superstitions, and life after death than did so at the end of the Cold War.⁸ It’s not uncommon, for example, for Russians to drink holy water sourced from local Russian Orthodox churches or special water from underground springs. There is a special water source in a monastery near the town of Sarov that, some say, has healing properties from St. Seraphim himself.⁹

St. Seraphim, as we learn from Dmitry Adamsky’s insightful and meticulously sourced book, *Russian Nuclear Orthodoxy*, is the patron saint of Russia’s nuclear weapons program. In the book, Adamsky makes a powerful case for the convergence between the Russian Orthodox Church and Russia’s nuclear enterprise. He argues that the Church has “wormed” its way into the hearts and minds of the Russian leadership, Russia’s elite

⁷ See “Allan Chumak, Famous Perestroika TV Healer, Dies at Age 82,” *Moscow Times*, Oct. 10, 2017, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2017/10/10/perestroika-era-television-healer-dies-at-age-82-a59221>.

⁸ “Vera i sueveriy [Faith and superstitions],” Levada Center, Nov. 16, 2017, <https://www.levada.ru/2017/11/16/17049/>.

⁹ “Istochnik Serafima Sarovskogo v Diveevo: itseleniya i chudesa” [The spring of Seraphim Sarovsky in Diveevo: healing and miracles], *MyDiveevo.Ru*, undated, <https://mydiveevo.ru/istochnik-serafima-sarovskogo-v-diveevo-istseleniya-i-chudesa/>.

nuclear science institutions, its nuclear forces and space cadre, and the Russian military.¹⁰ Adamsky's work is important because, if his analysis is correct, the trends that he documents have the potential to reshape the Russian nuclear science establishment, the Russian military, and Russia's policy toward nuclear weapons.

Discussions of priests blessing nuclear submarines, baptizing intercontinental ballistic missiles, and sprinkling holy water inside control rooms at nuclear power plants do not surprise Western Russia watchers. (As one Twitter account details, Russian Orthodox priests bless a lot of things.¹¹) But the phenomenon as it relates to the Russian nuclear enterprise and the military has been puzzling nevertheless. Adamsky makes an important contribution toward solving that puzzle by documenting the emergence, spread, and entrenchment of the Church's influence, as well as its adoption of a staunchly pro-nuclear position. He also makes the case that this phenomenon is likely to outlive Russia's President Vladimir Putin.

The Blossoming of the Church-Nuclear Elite Nexus

Russian Nuclear Orthodoxy describes how the Church's role steadily grew across three time periods: The first, from 1991 to 2000, is dubbed the "Genesis Decade"; the second, from 2000 to 2010, is called the "Conversion Decade"; and the final period, from 2010 to 2020, is labeled the "Operationalization Decade." In discussing each period, Adamsky documents what he refers to as state-church relations, the faith-nuclear nexus, and strategic mythmaking. He details how attitudes toward Orthodox faith and the Church changed across the political-military-scientific elites as well as the forces responsible for parts of the nuclear mission: the Strategic Rocket Forces, the Nuclear Navy, Long-Range Aviation, the Space Forces, the Early Warning Forces, as well as the 12th GUMO, a special department of the Ministry of Defense responsible for the security and handling of Russia's nuclear weapons.

¹⁰ Dmitry Adamsky, *Russian Nuclear Orthodoxy: Religion, Politics, and Strategy* (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2019), 3.

¹¹ See, Orthodox Priests Blessing Things (@blagoslovie), Twitter, <https://twitter.com/blagoslovie>.

During the Genesis Decade, Adamsky writes that “the quest for religiosity emerged as a grassroots phenomenon within the nuclear complex, and the latter entered into a covenant with the [Russian Orthodox Church].”¹² He describes how the Church began its focused effort to develop church-military relations in an era of post-Soviet “spiritual hunger,” when the Russian military was also reeling from the war in Afghanistan.¹³ He argues that efforts by then-Patriarch Alexey and then-Metropolitan Kirill to engage the hearts and minds of the military and nuclear elites were instrumental to the conception of the relationship. During this decade, all three legs of the Russian nuclear triad gained their respective patron saints.

During the Conversion Decade, Adamsky describes how “nuclear churching became state policy” at a time when Putin was seeking to revive Russia’s greatness.¹⁴ He discusses the link between Putin’s personal faith and the Church’s efforts at the catechization of the military. This decade saw the creation of numerous chapels across the services as well as the beginning of official outward expressions of faith, like Long-Range Aviation aerial cross processions.

During the Operationalization Decade, Adamsky argues that “the nuclear arsenal [had] become one of the major instruments of national security, while religion [had] gained extraordinary prominence in national ideology.”¹⁵ Putin’s 2012 comment on the importance of the “spiritual staples” for the unity of the Russian state and society provides the backdrop for this decade. Adamsky documents the emergence of the growing self-identification of Russians as Orthodox and the Church’s efforts to turn “declared ‘believers’ into practicing ‘belongers.’”¹⁶ During this decade, the Russian Orthodox Church emerged as a foreign policy player, especially in the context of Ukraine and Syria. Military chaplaincy became widespread along with cross processions on military bases and underwater temples in submarines.

¹² Adamsky, *Russian Nuclear Orthodoxy*, 233.

¹³ Adamsky, *Russian Nuclear Orthodoxy*, 29.

¹⁴ Adamsky, *Russian Nuclear Orthodoxy*, 234.

¹⁵ Adamsky, *Russian Nuclear Orthodoxy*, 235.

¹⁶ Adamsky, *Russian Nuclear Orthodoxy*, 173.

A Lasting Mythology or a Flash in the Pan?

Woven through the book is a masterful narrative of the Church's use of Seraphim Sarovsky in creating the mythology of "the divine predestination of the Soviet nuclear project, epitomized by the role of St. Seraphim and the geographical location of the first Soviet nuclear weapons design bureau."¹⁷ Seraphim, born in 1754, was a hermit and a spiritual elder associated with a monastery in the town of Sarov. He was canonized in 1903 for his ascetic lifestyle and teachings as well as reported healing powers at the behest of Czar Nicholas II. Soviet authorities sought to discredit Seraphim's legacy, and, eventually, the Sarov Monastery became the site of a design bureau for Soviet nuclear weapons, while the area around it became Arzamas-16, a closed nuclear city that was sometimes referred to as "Russia's Los Alamos." The weapons design bureau, known by its abbreviation VNIIEF, was instrumental to the development of many Soviet nuclear weapons, including the RDS-220 Tsar Bomba hydrogen bomb.¹⁸

In Adamsky's telling, during the 1990s, then-Patriarch Alexey "'miraculously' discovered" Sarovsky's relics and began promoting him as a Russian prophet.¹⁹ Church leadership then cultivated a mutually reinforcing relationship with VNIIEF, one that the weapons design bureau saw as instrumental during a decade in which the Russian nuclear enterprise's state of affairs had become dire due to a lack of funding and state support. Later, in part due to the elevation of Sergey Kirienko to the head of the state nuclear corporation Rosatom in 2005, the relationship between the Church and the nuclear industry became stronger. As the Sarov Monastery was revived, VNIIEF and the Russian Orthodox Church began to support the construction of churches and organize conferences on areas of mutual convergence. At this point, there was an emergence of the narrative that the prophetic St. Seraphim had foretold and even enabled the creation of Russia's "nuclear shield."²⁰

¹⁷ Adamsky, *Russian Nuclear Orthodoxy*, 73-74.

¹⁸ "Russian Federation Nuclear Center—All-Russian Scientific Research Institute for Experimental Physics (VNIIEF)," Nuclear Threat Initiative, April 22, 2014, <https://www.nti.org/learn/facilities/925/>.

¹⁹ Adamsky, *Russian Nuclear Orthodoxy*, 31.

²⁰ Adamsky, *Russian Nuclear Orthodoxy*, 157.

This story about the deliberate creation of the narrative of the “divine predestination” of Russia’s nuclear weapons is perhaps the most important and memorable in Adamsky’s book. But it is also an example of how the author brings to bear powerful evidence that largely conforms with his central argument that the Church was generally unopposed in its actions. To be sure, he cites one critic of this unique relationship, Russian diplomat Alexey Obukhov, who argued that Russia’s nuclear weapons do not need the Church’s blessing and insisted that the Soviet authorities’ choice to develop nuclear weapons in Sarov was not a mystical coincidence, and instead pointed to “deliberate anti-religious policies of the state.”²¹ However, Adamsky’s discussion of such criticism seems largely pro-forma. Was Obukhov really the only one with a dissenting opinion at the time? It certainly seems that Church proponents were expecting much more criticism than they appear to have received.

Other stories are likewise insightful, but seem oversimplified for the sake of emphasizing Adamsky’s central argument. For example, the author discusses the 2012 creation of a department of theology at the prestigious Moscow Engineering Physics Institute as an expansion of the Church’s role in scientific higher-education institutions. But he doesn’t explore the fact that over 90 leading Russian academics criticized this development, including members of the Russian Academy of Sciences. They argued that the creation of the theology department was counter to the Russian Constitution and “to common sense,” as well as potentially counterproductive to ensuring nuclear safety.²² Moreover, in looking at the department’s website, it appears that its faculty consists primarily of Russian and Western historians and not just clerics from the Russian Orthodox Church.²³ Does the faculty makeup have to do with the criticism of the department at its inception? Some

²¹ Adamsky, *Russian Nuclear Orthodoxy*, 167.

²² “Что было вначале [What was in the beginning],” *RG*, June 11, 2013, <https://rg.ru/2013/06/10/kafedra-site.html>; and “Ученые-ядерщики выступили против ‘религиозных подразделений’ в МИФИ [Nuclear scientists campaigning against religious department in MIFI],” *Vesti*, June 10, 2013, <https://nauka.vesti.ru/article/1038132>.

²³ See list at “Kafedra teologii,” Natsional’nyy issledovatel’skiy yadernyy universitet MIFI, undated, theology.mephi.ru/cathedra/sotrudniki.

additional details on what exactly it teaches and how would have been helpful to better understand the significance of the department's creation.

A skeptical reader will also be left unsure if the book is describing an enduring phenomenon or simply how one generation of Russian elites responded to the zeitgeist. Is there substantial evidence that young nuclear scientists or military draftees and contractors are internalizing and practicing Orthodoxy? Are there pressures to participate in Church activities? Is participating in such activities something these individuals do because they want to or because not doing so will have negative effects? One doesn't get a satisfying answer to those questions from the book.

The reader is also left wanting to know more about how the close relationship between the Russian Orthodox Church and the nuclear establishment might have a negative impact on the public's perception of the latter across segments of Russian society. Recent protests in Yekaterinburg surrounding the proposed construction of a Russian Orthodox church in a public park are but one example that suggests that the public has concerns about corruption resulting from the nexus between church, state, and business.²⁴ Moreover, trust in Patriarch Kirill does not appear to be very high and, according to some surveys, even though public trust in the Church has generally held steady, there are now more people who mistrust the Church than in the past.²⁵

Will the nuclear establishment's link with the Church have no impact on how the Russian public perceives the former? It's worth considering the recently publicized efforts by VNIIEF to procure 76 rhinestone-covered icons, 66 images, 90 triptychs, and 165 books about St. Seraphim — with a price tag of 2.3 million rubles (about \$34,500). Rosatom told *Tass*, Russia's largest news agency, that it is better to have these items on hand as

²⁴ Alexander Baunov, "Russians Are Getting Sick of Church," *Foreign Policy*, June 12, 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/06/12/russians-are-getting-sick-of-church-orthodox-putin/>.

²⁵ "Символ веры православного атеиста" [Symbol of faith of an Orthodox atheist]," Levada Center, Nov. 16, 2017, <https://www.levada.ru/2017/11/16/simvol-very-pravoslavnogo-ateista/>; and "Институциональное доверие" [Institutional trust]," Levada Center, Oct. 4, 2018, <https://www.levada.ru/2018/10/04/institutsionalnoe-doverie-4/>.

souvenirs “instead of vodka.”²⁶ It wouldn’t be out of place for the Russian public to wonder if VNIIEF’s focus should be on nuclear physics instead of the promotion of religious nuclear mythology. In this regard, however, *Russian Nuclear Orthodoxy* performs a valuable service by explaining the “faith-atoms nexus.”²⁷

Long-Term Implications

Adamsky’s ultimate interest is in the long-term impact of this unique relationship on the nuclear enterprise and the military. In the concluding chapters, he explores potential implications that deserve careful attention from Russia scholars, including the role of the Church in bureaucratic rivalries, its role in draft and mobilization, as well as the ability of Orthodoxy to be a “promotion multiplier” by essentially facilitating the preferential treatment of Orthodox servicemen across the military. He also discusses some potential implications that are more difficult to measure, like the influence of theocratization on “conflict duration and escalation dynamics” as well as the “impact of religious beliefs on the effectiveness of deterrence.”²⁸

Russian Nuclear Orthodoxy leaves readers with a couple of big questions: Will there be a body of Orthodox jurisprudence, including on nuclear weapons? And, what impact will Orthodoxy have on nuclear operators? Adamsky asks fascinating questions that are difficult to begin to ponder, let alone answer. On the latter question, one can surmise that, during an escalating conflict, nuclear operators will be exposed to one of the greatest stresses in their lifetimes. Alongside training, faith, regardless of denomination, will play some role in their decisions and actions. But another important factor will be the nuclear operators’ beliefs in superstitions and the supernatural — beliefs the Russian Orthodox Church is strongly critical of. Maybe the “special sauce” will be the blend of faith and superstition. If so, it will

²⁶ “Ядерный центр в Сарове закупит для сувениров иконы, картины и книги на 2,3 млн рублей [Sarov nuclear center to purchase icons, pictures, and books for 2.3 million rubles],” *Tass*, May 24, 2019, <https://tass.ru/v-strane/6469657>.

²⁷ Adamsky, *Russian Nuclear Orthodoxy*, 167.

²⁸ Adamsky, *Russian Nuclear Orthodoxy*, 239–41.

probably all depend on whether the nuclear operators drink the water from St. Seraphim's spring before they head into battle.

***Anya Loukianova Fink** is a research analyst at CNA and a research associate at the University of Maryland's Center for International and Security Studies at Maryland. Previously, Dr. Fink was a Nuclear Security Working Group fellow in the U.S. Senate and a Stanton Nuclear Security fellow at the RAND Corporation. She was also a program officer in nuclear materials security at the Stanley Foundation and a research associate at the James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies. She holds a PhD in international security and economic policy from the University of Maryland, College Park, and has native fluency in Russian. The views expressed here are her own.*



3. The Bishops and the Bomb, Take Two

By Brad Roberts

In the Western moral debate about nuclear weapons, the thinking of the Roman Catholic Church has played a major role. The Church has been profoundly ambivalent about nuclear deterrence and is now engaged in renewed internal debate.²⁹ In an important, timely, and deeply troubling new book, Dmitry Adamsky reminds us that there are other churches with other views. His focus is the Russian Orthodox Church — a church that is evidently neither ambivalent about nuclear weapons nor engaged in any such debate. Adamsky is an associate professor in the Lauder School of Government, Diplomacy, and Strategy at the

²⁹ The Cold War debate was famously summarized in a 1983 book review by McGeorge Bundy, entitled “The Bishops and the Bomb,” published in the *New York Review of Books*, June 16, 1983.

IDC Herzliya College in Israel, where he leads a program on strategy and decision-making. In recent years, he has done some of the best new work on Russian military doctrine and nuclear strategy.

Adamsky's new book tells the story of the interplay between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Russian nuclear establishment since the end of the Cold War, which he believes represents "a major discontinuity from the past."³⁰ It is a story of mutual exploitation and eventual cooptation by the state. It should be read by everyone trying to understand the thinking of the current Russian leadership about nuclear weapons. This book adds an entirely new perspective to this debate, one that is far from reassuring.

The New "Unifying Narrative"

For the most part, this is a work of straightforward historical analysis, drawn from interviews and research in Russia. Adamsky breaks Russia's post-Cold War history into three decades: The story begins in the 1990s with the collapse of political order in post-Soviet society, deep social disorientation, and the grassroots efforts of two misplaced institutions — the Church and the military — to support each other. In this decade, the nuclear establishment showed itself to be more eager than the rest of the Russian military to embrace the Church as a means to weather the storm and begin its recovery. Adamsky demonstrates the central role of the Church in creating the conditions that led to President Boris Yeltsin's commitment late in the decade to maintain the Russian triad and reinvigorate the overall deterrent. In the 2000s, President Vladimir Putin embraced the connection, institutionalizing the role of the Church in the nuclear establishment and taking a personal leadership position in setting out the ideological foundations of that role. In Adamsky's analysis, Putin "needed a national idea that provides the ideological-spiritual staples to hold the country and the society together. A mix of orthodoxy, nationalism, and autocracy became such a unifying narrative."³¹ The 2010s are then the decade of consolidation and operationalization of this top-down approach. The Church has become an instrument of Russian diplomatic and military strategy and has played a central and

³⁰ Dmitry Adamsky, *Russian Nuclear Orthodoxy: Religion, Politics, and Strategy* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2019), 11.

³¹ Adamsky, *Russian Nuclear Orthodoxy*, 87.

highly visible role in the renewal of the nuclear deterrent. Adamsky records the many ways in which representatives of the church have essentially replaced representatives of the Communist party as ideological guides throughout the Russian nuclear establishment.

Adamsky enlivens a sometimes dry story line with an additional line of inquiry into the “strategic myth-making” of the church-nuclear duo. These myths, he explains, have often been “contradictory, incoherent, and saturated with logical fallacies.”³² But they have also been potent, not least in shaping the perceptions of national security professionals. They have, he argues, “enabled the military and nuclear communities to reinvent themselves in terms of their ideological orientation, world of values, reality perception, and professional credo.”³³ They have also proven useful to Putin’s efforts to enable social mobilization against an external enemy.

In the 1990s, Adamsky argues, the primary strategic myth began with a divine interpretation of Soviet nuclear history and a crude moral distinction between the Russian “defender bomb” and the American “killer bomb.” He characterizes the myth of nuclear orthodoxy as follows: “In order to preserve its orthodox character, Russia needs to ensure its being a strong nuclear power, and in order to guarantee its nuclear status, Russia has to be genuinely orthodox.”³⁴

In the 2000s, this nuclear narrative was woven into the older narrative about “the eternal struggle of Russian civilization with the anti-Christ.”³⁵ It emphasized the role of the Russian nuclear deterrent in preventing the world from a premature apocalypse caused by a zealous, secular, and corrupt United States. Adamsky describes the ways in which Putin “began presenting contradictions between the United States and Russia as emanating not only from different geopolitical views but also from cultural and value dissimilarities.”³⁶ Putin crafted a narrative linking orthodoxy with the state’s internal security and nuclear

³² Adamsky, *Russian Nuclear Orthodoxy*, 70.

³³ Adamsky, *Russian Nuclear Orthodoxy*, 69.

³⁴ Adamsky, *Russian Nuclear Orthodoxy*, 77.

³⁵ Adamsky, *Russian Nuclear Orthodoxy*, 173.

³⁶ Adamsky, *Russian Nuclear Orthodoxy*, 199.

weapons with its external security. Church leaders then warned that “the forces of evil are approaching our Southern and Western borders.”³⁷

The dominant strategic myth of the current decade, argues Adamsky, has been that of “the Russian world.”³⁸ This is a reference to the historical Rus, the originating place and lands of Russian speaking people and Russian culture, which is not fully contiguous with the current Russian state. The myth emphasizes preservation of “the spiritual-cultural-civilization code of the Rus” and Moscow’s destiny as the “Third Rome,” the spiritual center of a virtuous world and responsible for the salvation of the Christian world and, indeed, all of humanity.

Orthodoxy and the Nuclear Calculus

How and why should all of this matter to those interested in security and the risks of nuclear war in the 21st century? The short answer, one might reasonably think, is that it doesn’t. If the Russians want to assign a patron saint to each leg of the triad, send priests to sea to bless nuclear torpedoes, re-name their bombers for holy figures, or simply ensure ministry for the faithful, outsiders should have no complaints.

But the implications of the story told in this book are potentially far more consequential. This is partly because the new configuration of the Church and the nuclear establishment seems likely to far outlive the current Russian leadership. Adamsky makes a compelling case that what he terms “Russian nuclear orthodoxy” — the institutionalization of the role of the Russian Orthodox Church in the nuclear establishment — is now deeply embedded and that the myth-making has taken on a life of its own. One day Putin will depart, but the Church will remain. Adamsky lays down a few important markers but largely leaves it to the reader to draw his or her own conclusions. From my perspective, his work raises three fundamental questions.

The first has to do with the impact of Russian nuclear orthodoxy on Russia’s approach to nuclear deterrence. So far, the close engagement of the Russian Orthodox Church in the Russian nuclear establishment has helped to renew the professionalism and dedication of

³⁷ Adamsky, *Russian Nuclear Orthodoxy*, 170.

³⁸ Adamsky, *Russian Nuclear Orthodoxy*, 105.

the Russian nuclear establishment, which might well be seen by outsiders as having a stabilizing benefit. Adamsky's analysis, however, points to some additional, more troubling possibilities. One is the increased Russian confidence in Russian nuclear threats: Leaders in Moscow may assess that "the image of the observant [that is, faithful,] strategic actor, ready to go against all odds, adds credibility to their threats." Another possibility is an expansion of extended deterrence in Russian nuclear strategy: The "Third Rome" narrative, after all, raises the question of whether Russian leaders might conclude that their duties to the Rus oblige them to extend nuclear protection to Russian-speaking peoples outside the Russian state. Yet another possibility is a more coercive form of deterrence. Here Adamsky cites a high-level church statement that "under conditions of mutual nuclear deterrence, the war of perceptions, subversion of the opponent's combat spirit, his political integrity, his self-identity, acquires a bigger role [than before]. It is about imposing on the adversary alien meanings and forcing him to make the wrong choices."

A second fundamental question raised by Adamsky's work is the obvious converse question: What impact should Russian nuclear orthodoxy have on the nuclear deterrence strategies of the West? These strategies focus on an adversary's decision calculus in times of political-military crisis and seek to influence that calculus by putting at risk what adversary decision-makers most value. Adamsky's analysis calls into question whether outside observers adequately understand either that calculus or those values. Adamsky asks: "Are the strategic choices of the observant different from those of the secular?" He offers plenty of reasons to think that they might be. Western nuclear deterrence strategies focus on both preventing war and preventing or limiting escalation in war. Russian leaders seem much more focused on the former than the latter. In addition, a regime convinced of its moral rectitude and that defines itself as called by history to protect civilization may not be easily deterred by threats to its secular interests. Moreover, a regime whose faith is eschatological in character (that is, that believes in the second coming of Christ and of an end time for the secular era) may not be particularly fearful of escalation. Today, in Russia, the Church advises that "force is the source of good blessing" and that Russian leaders should be "unafraid of any tribunals" when considering the use of force.

Adamsky notes the peculiar fact that there has been “no systematic theological discussion of the strategic-operational issues pertaining to nuclear weapons”³⁹ despite the pervasive engagement of the Church with the nuclear establishment. In the absence of such “theological jurisprudence,” the Church simply lends its weight to the arguments of Russian political and military leaders that nuclear weapons, nuclear deterrence, and even nuclear war are moral.

From this last observation flows a third major implication of Russian nuclear orthodoxy: its impact on the disarmament project. Unlike its Roman counterpart, the Russian Orthodox Church has no moral qualms about nuclear weapons. Accordingly, it opposes nuclear abolition and does so with the overwhelming support of the Russian people. This is yet another reason to doubt the prospects of the nuclear ban treaty or the claims of the International Campaign Against Nuclear Weapons to speak on behalf of people everywhere.

Conclusion

In trying to understand today’s thinking in Moscow about nuclear deterrence, the central question is whether or not Russian leaders believe, as their predecessors came to believe, that nuclear wars cannot be won and thus must not be fought. From Adamsky’s analysis, it is difficult to draw the conclusion that they do. Their beliefs are of a different nature. But, on the basis of the evidence produced in this volume, nor should they be cast as nuclear warmongers, since there is nothing in Adamsky’s analysis to suggest an eagerness for nuclear war. But the normative restraints that operate powerfully in Western societies to limit the role of nuclear weapons in military strategy simply are not matched in Russia today, where the moral and religious contexts pull policy in a different direction. The risk is that Russian leaders may believe, or come to believe, that nuclear wars are necessary and just.

³⁹ Adamsky, *Russian Nuclear Orthodoxy*, 263.

Brad Roberts is the director of the Center for Global Security Research at Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory. He is the author of *The Case for U.S. Nuclear Weapons in the 21st Century* (Stanford University Press, 2015) and served as deputy assistant secretary of defense for nuclear and missile defense policy from 2009 to 2013.



4. Getting Comfortable with Russian Nuclear Orthodoxy

By Irina du Quenoy

The visible role of the Russian Orthodox Church in seemingly all realms of post-Soviet Russian life has garnered a fair amount of attention over the years, both from scholars within a burgeoning subfield of “Russian Orthodox Studies” and from journalists fascinated by the sight of exotically dressed, bearded clergy standing shoulder to shoulder with the current Kremlin elite. More recently, the security community has also started to pay attention to the possible implications of the clericalization of Russian society, with both the RAND Corp. and the Center for Strategic and International Studies publishing edited volumes last year aimed at educating Washington policymakers on this otherwise arcane topic.⁴⁰ In this growing literature, the publication of Dmitry Adamsky’s book, *Russian Nuclear Orthodoxy: Religion, Politics, and Strategy*, stands out as a seminal event, as it

⁴⁰ Katya Migacheva and Bryan Frederick, eds., *Religion, Conflict, and Stability in the Former Soviet Union* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2018); Olga Oliker, ed., *Religion and Violence in Russia: Context, Manifestations, and Policy* (Washington, DC: CSIS, 2018).

brings together impeccable scholarship with policy relevance far beyond the specific area of American-Russian relations.

Adamsky's work is not the first to at least hint at the importance of religion for Russian military strategy writ large. For example, the cover of Ron E. Hassner's *Religion on the Battlefield* (2016) is graced with an image not of Islamic State fighters but of Russian troops receiving a priestly blessing on their way to the front.⁴¹ But Adamsky goes deep into entirely uncharted territory, examining the role of the Russian Orthodox Church within the country's nuclear military-industrial complex. In so doing, he tells the compelling story of a formerly persecuted religious organization capitalizing on a chaotic period of transition between communism and Putin-era stabilization to make itself indispensable to Russia's revived nuclear forces.

Adamsky's book "focuses on the bond that has emerged between the Kremlin, the [Russian Orthodox Church], and the nuclear weapons community."⁴² It traces the evolution of this bond — what he calls "Russian Nuclear Orthodoxy" — through three stages, each lasting approximately a decade. Identifying the three stages as "genesis" (1991–2000), "conversion" (2001–2010), and "operationalization" (2011–2020),⁴³ Adamsky divides the book into three eponymous parts, each of which, in turn, is divided into three subsections. Within these subsections, he provides a context for understanding the specific case at hand by 1) discussing how it fits into the trajectory of "state-church relations" in Russia, including state-military relations broadly speaking; 2) giving a detailed analysis of the "coming together of strategy and religion" within each subdivision of the nuclear complex; and 3) discussing the "evolution of strategic mythmaking during the discussed decade and its impact on the national security discourse."⁴⁴

⁴¹ Ron E. Hassner, *Religion on the Battlefield* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2016).

⁴² Dmitry Adamsky, *Russian Nuclear Orthodoxy: Religion, Politics, and Strategy* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2019), 3.

⁴³ Adamsky, *Russian Nuclear Orthodoxy*, 6–7.

⁴⁴ Adamsky, *Russian Nuclear Orthodoxy*, 6.

This telescopic structure allows Adamsky to drill deep into the heart of his subject matter, and although he never references Clifford Geertz, the latter’s method of “thick description” is masterfully employed throughout the book.⁴⁵ Recalling Geertz here is more than appropriate, as *Russian Nuclear Orthodoxy* is, implicitly, a work about the intersection of military and religious *cultures* that have, in the Russian case, merged into a unique new culture with profound implications for the survival of the human species. Just how this new culture came to be formed is a fascinating story, one that Adamsky tells in painstaking detail.

The Evolution of Russian Nuclear Orthodoxy

Rightly noting that the Russian Orthodox Church plays a visible role within all branches of the Russian armed forces, Adamsky makes the case that the relationship between the Church and the military is particularly strong in the case of the nuclear community, an outcome that was far from obvious as the Soviet era drew to a close. In the early 1980s, the two sides could not have stood further apart, as the nuclear triad represented the crown jewel of Soviet scientific and military achievement, while the Church barely survived in the face of a government devoted to eradicating religion in its entirety. The work of church historians of the period demonstrates convincingly that, in the years immediately preceding *perestroika*, the Soviet Union was very near to fulfilling Nikita Khrushchev’s promise to demonstrate the last believer on television by 1980 — years of suppression and official state atheism had led to minimal religious observance, at least in public.⁴⁶ And, as Adamsky shows, the nuclear forces were overwhelmingly staffed by convinced atheists for whom religion was an obstacle on the way to the glorious communist future.⁴⁷ Symbolically (in more ways than one, as his analysis later demonstrates), the first Soviet atomic bomb was built on the desecrated site of the Sarov monastery, a religious community built atop the hermit cell of one of Russia’s most revered saints, Serafim of Sarov. Transformed in

⁴⁵ Clifford Geertz, “Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture,” in Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books), 3–30.

⁴⁶ Nathaniel A. Davis, *Long Walk to Church: A Contemporary History of Russian Orthodoxy* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2003), xvii.

⁴⁷ Adamsky, *Russian Nuclear Orthodoxy*, 30.

1946 into the closed city of Arzamas-16, this location of religious pilgrimage now functioned as the (mystically inaccessible) holy of holies of the Soviet Union's nuclear weapons industry.

The collapse of the Soviet Union was accompanied by a radical reversal of this dynamic. Suddenly, the formerly persecuted Russian Orthodox Church experienced an unprecedented revival, with the reopening of churches and monasteries accompanied by a massive influx of citizens seeking to be baptized, married, or otherwise participate in ecclesiastical life. Throughout the 1990s, the Church polled consistently as the most trusted institution in the Russian Federation. There were many reasons for this, but chief among them was the general disorder that characterized the Russian landscape during that decade: The Church, with its claims to historic continuity with the pre-Soviet era and timeless spiritual wisdom, represented a force for stability that contrasted sharply with the disorienting political and economic landscape.

Meanwhile, the fortunes of the nuclear military-industrial complex were on the opposite trajectory. No longer the elite of the elite, scientists and military personnel in the nuclear field found themselves without funding and without respect, either from society or from the government. Suddenly, the industry was seen as a proximate cause of the general collapse, as the Soviet regime had poured inordinate resources into the arms race at the cost of all other sectors of the economy. Worse, because President Boris Yeltsin's early foreign policy was oriented toward peaceful coexistence and even integration with the West, the justification for maintaining a nuclear arsenal was no longer there — as a part of democratic Europe, the Russian Federation ostensibly had no enemies to defend itself from. (Russia as a “Eurasian” country was, in those years, a fantasy maintained on the disaffected margins.)⁴⁸

And it is here that events took what might almost be called a mystical turn (Adamsky never reaches this conclusion, but one can imagine a reader with a religious mindset doing so). In December 1990, the Russian Orthodox Church rediscovered the relics of St. Serafim, which had been taken from the Church during the Soviet era, in the storage area of the Kazan

⁴⁸ On the demoralized state of the industry, see Adamsky, *Russian Nuclear Orthodoxy*, chapt. 2, esp. pages 33-38.

Cathedral in St. Petersburg. Under the leadership of Patriarch Aleksii II, the Church sought to hold a mass pilgrimage with the relics to the convent of Diveevo, in order to return them to the original burial site of the saint in the vicinity of Arzamas-16. On Aug. 1, 1991, a delegation from the Russian Orthodox Church headed by Aleksii arrived in the city and, at a meeting with initially nervous high-level nuclear personnel, both sides discovered that their interlocutors “were people too.” “In the official summary,” Adamsky writes, “the hosts concluded [that] ‘The hierarchs of the church and the creators of nuclear weapons are people of the same circle who perceive state interests in the same way.’”⁴⁹

From this initial encounter developed the partnership that Adamsky describes in the rest of the book. Over the next few years, the two sides “began sending delegates to different social, political, and entrepreneurial forums to explain the importance of the closed cities and the nuclear industry.”⁵⁰ These efforts culminated in a conference at the patriarch’s residence in Moscow in 1996, titled, “Nuclear Weapons and Russian National Security.” In retrospect, senior representatives of the nuclear weapons complex credited this event with “[enabling] the industry to survive the time of troubles.”⁵¹ Whether as a direct result of this intervention or in combination with other factors, the fortunes of the nuclear community turned around, as the regime recognized its centrality to strategic defense and began to allocate resources accordingly. While one wishes that Adamsky had said more about possible outside factors, such as the end of the honeymoon with the West, his depiction of the Church’s centrality to the turn-around in the Russian nuclear triad’s fortunes is convincingly detailed.

Such is the background leading up to the present day, in which the nuclear branch of the Russian military is by far the most “clericalized.” Adamsky provides copious examples, of which only a few need to be mentioned here to convey the general atmosphere:

[I]cons appear on nuclear platforms. ...[T]he military clergy provide regular pastoral care to the nuclear corps’ servicemen and function as official assistants of the

⁴⁹ Adamsky, *Russian Nuclear Orthodoxy*, 37.

⁵⁰ Adamsky, *Russian Nuclear Orthodoxy*, 38–39.

⁵¹ Adamsky, *Russian Nuclear Orthodoxy*, 39.

commanders for work with personnel. ...Within each big base there is a garrison church, chapel, or prayer room ... [and] nuclear priests are integrated in professional activities through the whole chain of command and join their flock during operational missions on the ground and underwater.⁵²

The Uncomfortable Church-State Relationship

And yet a word of caution here is warranted: This is *not* the story of a religious institution plotting to gain influence over a branch of the Russian military as recompense for raising the latter's social respectability and providing ideological legitimation for its continued existence. Rather, as the bulk of Adamsky's book makes clear, the initial encounter in Sarov and the Church's subsequent actions on behalf of the nuclear triad in the 1990s were accompanied by a grassroots process in which the lower ranks of officers and servicemen came to recognize priests as a source of pastoral/psychological support, an element sorely needed in the high-stress environment in which they worked. It was only during the second decade of the relationship that the regime began to take notice and attempt to direct the phenomenon from the top down. Indeed, the one unfortunate flaw in *Russian Nuclear Orthodoxy* lies not so much in the author himself as in the failure of his editors to catch a linguistic quirk that stems from his origins as a non-native English speaker. The repeated use of the word "penetrate" to refer to the increased presence of the clergy within the nuclear ranks was meant seemingly as a direct translation of the Russian "*vnedritsa*," which has a rather less negative, purposeful connotation, meaning something like "to become an indispensable part of." This could happen as the result of an organic process without there necessarily being some nefarious plan. Whereas in English, the word "penetrate" is suggestive of covert activities aimed at subverting an institution.

At the same time, perhaps it is fortuitous that the editors at Stanford University Press did not pick up on these nuances of the Russian language. This is, after all, a book about a religious organization that has engaged in activities outside of what would be, in the West, seen as its customary sphere, and the fact that it has done so will no doubt leave many

⁵² Adamsky, *Russian Nuclear Orthodoxy*, 1. In this introductory paragraph, Adamsky gives an overview of signs of clericalization of the nuclear corps. All of these examples and more he discusses at great length throughout the book.

readers, particularly in the United States and Europe, feeling very uncomfortable. The partnership between the Orthodox Church and the state in Russia in general is consistently represented as a symptom of the Putin regime's undemocratic essence. It would not be surprising if Western readers discovering the interactions between the Church and the nuclear military-industrial complex perceived such a relationship in an instinctively negative light. Nothing like it, to be sure, exists in the United States.

But as recent history has shown, even in the United States the question of what church-state separation really means has not been definitively settled, even as the Islamic State haunts us with the image of what the ultimate fusion of religion and state might mean. Indeed, one of the many strengths of *Russian Nuclear Orthodoxy* is that it forces the reader to think not just about this specific case but about the questions it raises across several interrelated fields. For instance, does the contemporary democratic consensus allow for any role for religion in the security sphere? If defense of "values" has a place in strategic thinking, then it could be argued that religion, as one of, if not *the*, source of said values, has a legitimate place at the table. The image of the United States as a God-fearing nation certainly played an important role in legitimizing American opposition to Soviet expansionism during the Cold War — it is often forgotten, for example, that the line "one nation, under God" was added to the Pledge of Allegiance in 1954 as an explicit reaction to the Soviet threat. That the Russians, no longer "Godless," have introduced religiously infused ideas into the military-strategic discourse is curious. That they have done so most especially in the nuclear field is unnerving. That observers in the West find it unsettling reveals perhaps the extent to which their own priorities have moved in a more secular direction.

International Relations Through a Religious Lens

In terms of the field of international relations specifically, prior to 9/11, no one, pace Samuel Huntington, really thought of religion as playing any role in this arena. Matters of faith were thought to be important in the domestic sphere, both in the sense of private belief and in the sense that church-state relations fell under the domain of national politics. Since Sept. 11, 2001, of course, scholarship on the role of religion in international relations has proliferated, with current events driving much of the effort, resulting in us knowing rather more now than we did before about international Islamist movements. Adamsky's book is

rare in the sense that its focus is on a world religion other than Islam, and that it showcases the fact that a country's *domestic* church-state configuration can have a serious impact on the country's behavior on the international stage. Moreover, the evolution of ideology within the military sphere is not separate from processes outside of it. At least in the case of Russia, Adamsky demonstrates convincingly that religiously infused ideas can migrate effectively between the military and civilian spheres, sometimes with nation-wide ramifications that then seep into both domestic and foreign policy.

True, one might argue that the Russian case is unique, as Russia is the world's only nuclear Orthodox power, and that the specific dynamics Adamsky describes here may not be applicable elsewhere. However, if we look at this more broadly as a story about the permeability of the boundary between religion and the military, the Orthodox church may be understood as a particular *kind* of religious actor with a presence in the armed forces not just in majority-Orthodox countries in Europe, but also in Africa. The case of Ethiopia is obvious and of particular interest given Ethiopia's military involvement in neighboring Somalia. Less obvious, but still of interest, is the fact that the mission of the Alexandrian Orthodox Patriarchate in Africa has exploded over the past several decades, resulting in sizeable Orthodox minorities in places like Kenya, Uganda, and even Angola.⁵³ In Kenya especially, Orthodoxy holds a place of notable respect, as adherents of the faith played an important role in the Mau Mau rebellion against the British. No one, as yet, has thought to ask what role being Orthodox plays in decisions made by Ethiopian (or Kenyan, etc.) soldiers. Perhaps, having read Adamsky's book, some entrepreneurial researcher will make this leap.

Finally, a word should be said about another aspect of *Russian Nuclear Orthodoxy* that deserves attention. Eschewing perennial arguments about the relative importance of systemic factors and the role of personalities, Adamsky manages to bring forth the importance of both in the evolution of the religious component in Russia's current nuclear strategic vision. Epochal structural changes — *perestroika*, the collapse of the Soviet Union, the chaotic 1990s, and the post 2000-stabilization — have all had their place in this story, as

⁵³For a list of African Orthodox dioceses that suggests the extent of this phenomenon, see: "Holy Archdioceses," Archdioceses & Bishopsrics, Patriarchate of Alexandria and All Africa, accessed Aug. 5, 2019, <http://www.patriarchateofalexandria.com/index.php?module=content&cid=004001>.

the shifting framework within which individual military nuclear personnel and Orthodox clergy forged relationships that themselves would have system-wide effects. Both lower-level contacts and the presence of strongly defined leadership personalities form part of Adamsky's narrative tapestry, reminding us that it is not ideas themselves but rather the people who embody them and act upon them that ultimately determine issues of war and peace. Rightly highlighting the roles of Patriarchs Aleksii II and Kirill I on the Orthodox side of this story, Adamsky's one oversight lies in treating Vladimir Putin as the central actor on the side of the regime. Dmitry Medvedev's role in strengthening the church-state partnership, with direct ramifications for the nuclear-religious nexus traced in this book, was far greater than Adamsky acknowledges. This criticism aside, *Russian Nuclear Orthodoxy* has deservedly gained attention far beyond the academic walls within which it was written, with its insights and rich empirical material sure to inspire much discussion, reflection, and (one hopes) imitation for some time to come.

Irina du Quenoy holds a Ph.D. in comparative government from Georgetown University. Her research focuses on religion and politics, with a particular emphasis on the Orthodox Church. She taught at the international relations and European studies department of Central European University from 2008 to 2012, subsequently moving to Beirut, Lebanon. She returned to the United States in 2018, and is the managing editor of the Journal of Intelligence and Cyber Security as well as a research fellow at the Georgetown University Berkley Center for Religion, Peace and World Affairs.



5. Moving Beyond Russian Nuclear Orthodoxy

By Olga Oliker

Russian Nuclear Orthodoxy is a rare book. It is not often that one picks up a volume and learns something from each chapter, if not every page. Who knew how much the Russian Orthodox Church had permeated Russia's nuclear defense industry, its nuclear forces, the Ministry of Defense custodians of nuclear weapons, and elements of both its military and civilian space programs? Naturally the Church knew, and perhaps the personnel of the organizations in question as well. Yet, somehow the vast majority of the community that studies Russia's military and its nuclear strategy, whether in Russia or abroad, remained blithely ignorant of this relationship. Indeed, in the concluding chapter of his new book, *Russian Nuclear Orthodoxy*, author Dima Adamsky writes, "some Russian defense intellectuals and security experts, when presented with the book's findings, were surprised to learn about this phenomenon of which they were unaware."⁵⁴

Adamsky does a remarkable job of tracing the development of the role of the Church in the aforementioned institutions and their subsidiary organizations. He has dug and sorted through a wide array of military and religious sources to piece together a detailed and coherent story. He tells readers of Church efforts to build its following among Russia's nuclear community, and about how members of that community saw opportunities in partnering with the Church. Indeed, it is difficult to dismiss Adamsky's argument. If you think of the Russian nuclear world as a bastion of atheism, you will realize that you were wrong after reading this book.

Adamsky concludes that "the most basic takeaway from this book" is that security scholars should not ignore religion in the course of their research and analysis.⁵⁵ He is very convincing on this point. Both in general and when it comes to Russia in particular,

⁵⁴ Dmitry Adamsky, *Russian Nuclear Orthodoxy: Religion, Politics, and Strategy* (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2019), 236.

⁵⁵ Adamsky, *Russian Nuclear Orthodoxy*, 255

Adamsky has ably demonstrated that there is, in fact, a “there” there. But I, for one, walked away from *Russian Nuclear Orthodoxy* wanting more. Adamsky has pulled together a great deal of evidence that the Russian Orthodox Church has gotten in tight with various components of Russia’s nuclear community and he has told us a compelling story of how it happened. But he leaves unanswered the question of how significant this is, and, relatedly, what the implications may be.

I feel somewhat petty writing that. This book makes a tremendous contribution and Adamsky is not obligated both to reveal things that were previously largely unknown and also to explain conclusively their meaning and impact. It’s perfectly fair to leave next steps to other books and articles, whether by Adamsky or by others. However, Adamsky promised to do at least a little bit more, introducing his effort by saying that “exploring the impact of religion on strategy in Russia is the main theme of this book.” Therefore, it seems fair to ask just how such a task could be better done in the future.

Unanswered Questions

First, a comparative perspective would be tremendously valuable in order to tease out just how important the relationships described in this book truly are. Several comparative perspectives, in fact, would be needed. Dmitry Gorenburg has suggested comparing the role of the Church in Russian nuclear affairs both with the role of other faiths in the same sphere and with how what Adamsky terms the “faith-atoms nexus” plays out in other countries.⁵⁶ These would both be worthwhile enterprises. But, being greedy, I also want to better understand how nuclear-specific the phenomenon Adamsky has identified is.

Scholars could begin this process by drawing on the material in *Russian Nuclear Orthodoxy*, supplementing it with other research, for instance about the Church’s role in other parts of the military, and using these multiple data sets to assess just how different the nuclear sector (and its components) is from other institutions which, based on a variety of asides throughout Adamsky’s book, may also exhibit some of the same phenomena. This

⁵⁶ Dmitry Gorenburg, “How Much Did Orthodox Church Help Revive Russia’s Military and Nuclear Complex?” *Russia Matters*, April 23, 2019, <https://www.russiamatters.org/analysis/how-much-did-orthodox-church-help-revive-russias-military-and-nuclear-complex>.

would help us begin to understand not only how unique Church outreach to the nuclear world is, but also where it has been more and less successful and why.

Moving away from the military, one could also do similar analyses focused on other sectors. We know the Church's role in Russian education is evolving — is the Church using the same tools here that it used in the nuclear community? Do educational institutions respond in similar ways? If Adamsky's book were to spur a broader inquiry into these topics in Russia and elsewhere, the combined body of knowledge would surely be greater than the sum of its parts. It would help us understand whether and how religion is changing Russia. Importantly, more cases would make it possible to better judge whether the coherence that Adamsky describes is really there — does the Church have a plan that it is implementing, following similar paths through a variety of sectors of society, or is its approach haphazard? How has this changed over time?

This sort of comparative framework may be especially useful if we want to understand whether and how penetration translates into influence. Adamsky assumes the influence is there in part because the penetration is. But evidence from a different case, where there has been some scholarly inquiry, is decidedly mixed. Unlike the role of the Church in Russia's nuclear sector (or in the military more broadly), the role of the Russian Orthodox Church in Russian politics has been explored by academics, journalists, and others over the course of some two decades. Importantly, they disagree on the Church's level of penetration, the character of its penetration, and the extent of its influence. Adamsky also takes on these topics, and cites some of this literature to paint a picture of substantial Church influence throughout Russia as a whole, and on Russian President Vladimir Putin specifically. Others, however, suspect that the Church is cynically used by political authorities for legitimacy and that its real influence, if any, is indirect.⁵⁷ Some hold that religiosity fuels reactionary

⁵⁷ John Anderson, "Putin and the Russian Orthodox Church: Asymmetric Symphonia?" *Journal of International Affairs* 61, no. 1 (Fall/Winter 2007): 185–201, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24358086>; Daniel P. Payne, "Spiritual Security, the Russian Orthodox Church, and the Russian Foreign Ministry: Collaboration or Cooptation?" *Journal of Church and State* 52, no. 4 (Autumn 2010): 712–27, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jcs/csq102>; Fiona Hill and Clifford G. Gaddy, *Mr. Putin: Operative in the Kremlin* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2015), chaps. 4, 10, 11, 15; On alignment between the Church's message and that of the Russian government, see Alexander Agadjanian, "Tradition, Morality, and Community: Elaborating Orthodox Identity

attitudes, including racism, whether or not the Church itself does so.⁵⁸ On the question of Putin's personal religiosity, Fiona Hill and Clifford Gaddy, whose *Mr. Putin: Operative in the Kremlin* Adamsky cites to argue that Putin is indeed religious, do not themselves appear fully convinced of it.⁵⁹

Most likely, for Putin, just as for many Russians, the reality of religious belief and its influence is complicated. Russians are more likely to profess spirituality than they once were, yet they don't go to church.⁶⁰ The 2017 furor over the film "Matilda," described by Adamsky as evidence of Russian conservatism, blew over. Though the film lost money, the scandal may have had little to do with the lack of audience interest.

If it is difficult to judge how the Church and Orthodox belief systems affect society, how can we know what impact the Church's penetration of Russia's nuclear sector has and will have in the future? Adamsky asks a lot of the right questions on this point. His analysis is clearly informed by the broader literature on religion's role in society, and particularly the work of Ron Hassner.⁶¹ But he doesn't, in the end, have answers. The data one wants to see simply does not exist. There is not a large body of Church writing on nuclear strategy. Examples from the rest of the world do not provide clear evidence that religious influence on military institutions would push in any specific direction. So how can scholars move forward? In theory, one could interview Orthodox leaders on these topics. One could also study the

in Putin's Russia," *Religion, State and Society* 45, no. 1 (2017): 39-60, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09637494.2016.1272893>.

⁵⁸ See Aleksandr Verkhovskiy, "The Role of the Russian Orthodox Church in Nationalist, Xenophobic and Antiwestern Tendencies in Russia Today: Not Nationalism, but Fundamentalism," *Religion, State and Society* 30, no. 4 (2002): 333-345, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0963749022000022879>. See also Marlene Laruelle, "The Three Colors of Novorossiia, or the Russian Nationalist Mythmaking of the Ukrainian Crisis," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 32, no. 1 (2016): 55-74, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1060586X.2015.1023004>.

⁵⁹ Hill and Gaddy, *Mr. Putin*, 68.

⁶⁰ Pew Research Center, "Russians Return to Religion, but not to Church," Feb. 10, 2014, <https://www.pewforum.org/2014/02/10/russians-return-to-religion-but-not-to-church/>.

⁶¹ Ron Hassner, *Religion in the Military Worldwide* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Hassner, *Religion on the Battlefield* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2017); and various other works cited by Adamsky.

religious language used by officials and military personnel and assess how it has shifted over time. Perhaps there are other approaches that should be explored.

Nuclear Martyrs

Difficult as it may be to gain purchase on these questions, Adamsky's case that it is imperative to do so is bolstered in an environment of increasing emphasis on nuclear weapons. Last fall, at the annual Valdai meeting, Putin provided his take on possible Russian nuclear use. He insisted that Russia would only use nuclear weapons in retaliation against an aggressor who struck first. So far, so good: This is exactly how deterrence is supposed to work. But Putin described the Russian response in not only colorful language, which he has favored in the past, but in religious tones as well: "An aggressor should nevertheless know that retaliation is inevitable, and that he will be destroyed. And as martyrs, and the victims of aggression, we will go to heaven, but they'll simply be wiped out."⁶²

This formulation is important. The overall strategy is nothing new, nor is the Russian president's desire to ensure that aggressors know that attacks on Russia will lead to the destruction of the aggressor. Again, that's how deterrence works. But, as a Russian colleague pointed out to me shortly afterwards, Putin made a choice to use the language of faith, speaking of martyrdom and the promise of heaven. After reading Adamsky's book, this makes me somewhat more nervous than I was before. If Russia's president believes that the end result of a nuclear war that destroys much of the world's population is that Russians go to heaven, and if this belief is shared by others in the military and civilian leadership, then Russia may itself be less deterred by such an eventuality.

Speaking for myself, I remain doubtful that Putin, or the people of Russia's armed forces, are fully confident of their path to the afterlife or eager to test their prospective martyrdom. Historically, Soviet and Russian views on deterrence evolved to incorporate tremendous fear of nuclear war and skepticism that escalation could be controlled in any way. I was recently relieved to learn that the Church is rethinking its policy of blessing weapons of

⁶² "Putin Shares His Thoughts About 'Aggressors' and 'Martyrs' in any Nuclear Strike Against Russia," *Meduza*, Oct. 18, 2018, <https://meduza.io/en/short/2018/10/18/putin-shares-his-thoughts-about-aggressors-and-martyrs-in-any-nuclear-strike-against-russia>.

mass destruction.⁶³ But I think Adamsky is absolutely right that neither scholars nor policymakers today fully understand the impact of religious faith on society, politics, military strategy, and nuclear strategy in Russia and elsewhere. If Russian approaches truly are changing, and faith is at the heart of it, failure to rectify this ignorance may prove very costly.

Olga Oliker is program director for Europe and Central Asia at International Crisis Group.



⁶³ “В РПЦ предложили больше не освящать оружие массового поражения” (A Recommendation to No Longer Bless Weapons of Mass Destruction in the Russian Orthodox Church), *BBC Russian Service*, June 21, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/russian/news-48702605>.