

# 14 “The Lord is my Banner”: Making War Sacred in Russian Orthodox Media<sup>1</sup>

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Modern technologies provide authoritarian regimes with multiple opportunities to maintain power, strengthen control and suppress individual freedoms. Russia's ideological machine has undergone significant technological advancements in recent decades, turning into a powerful mechanism of surveillance, repression and impunity. As the war in Ukraine illustrates, authoritarian regimes require new territories, populations and ideas for their expansion. The ideological underpinnings of Russia's war in Ukraine have been examined across various research fields, all acknowledging the significant role of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) as the primary co-producer of state ideology and promoter of the war. Having justified Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the ROC also had to craft its own “spiritual armour” – to rationalize and legitimize the aggression towards Ukrainians (a predominantly Orthodox Christian population) through theological arguments. In this context, the church's ongoing discourse of sacralization offers a “normalized” view of war – a reality in which terror and violence are justified by religion. Such an “aesthetic” perception of war relies critically on technological infrastructure and digital space where the discourse of sacralization is constructed, discussed and performed.

The ROC's pro-war rhetoric has been conceptualized in diverse research fields, broadly categorized by their views on the ROC's agency in the war: is the church merely an instrument of the state regime, or is it pursuing its own geopolitical agenda? Thematically, two main perspectives on the ROC's justification of war emerge – theological and political. The first perspective primarily explains the church's position via the lens of metaphysical and eschatological understandings of war. The ROC narrates the war as a cosmic battle between good and evil, in which Russia is missioned by God to save Orthodox civilization and fight against liberal values of the West (Denysenko 2023; Hovorun 2023; Pynnöniemi/Parppeli 2024). The political perspective offers a broader scope of approaches, interpreting the ROC's

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<sup>1</sup> This phrase from Old Testament (Exodus 17:15) alludes to a miraculous victory of Israelites over Amalekites when Moses built an altar as the recognition of God's support and leadership in the war. The Russian Orthodox media actors use this phrase in pro-war discourse.

role in the war as evidence of contemporary Orthodox imperialism (Kolstø/Kolov 2024; Kuzio 2023), a component of Russia's military strategy (Saar 2023), a manifestation of "Russkii Mir" (Casanova 2024; Coman 2023) and "Holy Rus" ideology (Babynskyi 2024), or as the ROC's struggle for dominance in the Orthodox Christian world (Krawchuk 2022; Suslov 2024).

Additionally, as a driving force in state memory politics, the church seeks to mobilize society by invoking nationalist sentiments about Russia's past (Griffin 2024; Klimenko 2024). Through strategic mythmaking of history, the church reinforces the state regime and supports Russia's fight for global dominance as a "restoration of justice" (Curanović 2024; Horsfjord 2024). All these interpretations converge on one significant point – religious warfare is fundamental to Russia's ongoing aggression against Ukraine.

This chapter contributes to the studies of digital religion by focusing on the Orthodox discourse of war sacralization through the conceptual framework of "third spaces of digital religion" (Echchaibi/Hoover 2023). This approach allows us to conceptualize Orthodox digital spaces as venues where religious imagery interacts with the war agenda, producing new practices that extend into broader offline performances across public, religious, military and political domains. Furthermore, digital space functions as a "symphonizing" mechanism that unites ideologically diverse Orthodox actors in the production, distribution and marketing of religious warfare. In the context of war, digital Orthodox space facilitates the transformation of religious symbols into instruments of *religious warfare*.

According to Juergensmeyer (2019: 106), religious warfare emerges from images and religious language that displace violence with symbolic forms of sacrifice, martyrdom and divine order. Images, in particular, serve as the primary forms of religious warfare (Ibid.) that can be further weaponized within digital spaces. For instance, medieval imagery has often been used to construct national narratives about enemies, military might and Russia's statehood (Griffin 2024; Parppai 2021). Similarly, during the war, Orthodox actors are revising medieval myths in their quest for unifying symbols of glory, victories and Orthodox piety. This study focuses on one of the most prominent religious images of Russia's war – *Holy Image of the Savior Not-Made-by-Hands* (hereafter – HIS) – as an instrument of religious warfare and one of the constitutive elements in the ROC's pro-war discourse of sacralization.

Through comparative corpora-based discourse and content analyses of Russian Orthodox media (*atlas.ti*), this chapter explores how religious actors from different ideological backgrounds, such as *Spas TV* and the *Movement of Sorok Sorokov* (MSS), generate nationalist and religious war imagery in shared digital spaces and further it offline. By analyzing the pro-war discourse surrounding the military flag HIS, this study aims to deconstruct the discursive mechanism underlying the sacralization of war. The research is guided by the following questions: 1) What specific perceptions of a religious object enable it to function as an instrument of religious warfare in po-

litical-military contexts? 2) What digital spaces are significant for the construction and mediation of the ROC's pro-war discourse?

The chapter begins with theoretical considerations on the role of militant theology within the ROC and its increasing digitalization over the past decade. Following this, I examine the performative capacity of "third spaces of digital religion" (Echchaibi/Hoover 2023), focusing on how media actors exploit religious imagery to perform the pro-war discourse that simultaneously sacralizes Russia's aggression and mobilizes Russia's society. Next, the chapter presents a comparative analysis of two media platforms – *Spas TV* and the MSS Telegram channel – to deconstruct their discourses of sacralization surrounding the *HIS* flag. Finally, I discuss digital space as a venue where the ROC seeks to recreate its hierarchically organized system of authority with its own rules, objectives and loyal actors.

## **Digitalization of Military Theology: Connecting Imaginary Past with Imaginary Future**

The strong military trend in the ROC is mainly explained by two major factors: the socio-political context of the post-Soviet period and specific war ethics within the theological tradition of the ROC. The social chaos and religious freedom of the post-Soviet period brought the church new opportunities to regain its influence in the theological domain and play new roles in society (Knorre/Zygmont 2020). Military service became a highly productive sphere of self-expression and influence for the church. In the 90s, church-army relations developed in a bottom-up trajectory and grew from personal contacts between clergy and commanders of military bases located near the parishes (Adamsky 2020). During this period, one of the ROC's roles was to restore the prestige of military service in Russian society, which had declined after the break-up of the Soviet Union (Knorre/Zygmont 2020; Laruelle 2015). Consequently, the church became "a provider of ideological meanings, as a pastor, and as a shield from public criticism" (Adamsky 2020: 434). At the same time, activism in the military sphere presupposed building close relations with the state, which, unsurprisingly, offered mutual benefits for both actors – the state favored patriotic education with an Orthodox component, whereas the church received new possibilities to cooperate with the armed forces. The institutionalized recognition of military clergy in 2009 was the starting point for "a systematic weaponization of the ROC's theology" (Gustafsson Kurki 2024: 33), which also signaled a further integration and stable engagement of the clergy into all levels of the armed forces (Adamsky 2020; Knorre 2016).

In contrast to this 'contextually conditioned' approach, framing the ROC's militarism as a logical response to post-Soviet uncertainty and a search for a new collective identity, the 'war ethics' approach discerns the roots of the religious militarism

within the Orthodox tradition itself. Accordingly, a 'militant piety' (Knorre/Zygmont 2020) goes back to the cults of saint warriors, *milites Christi*, venerated as the defenders of faith or martyrs of faith in medieval Europe (Berezhnaya 2022). The ROC modernized the symbolism of sacrifice to meet new political expectations. It aligned the death for God with death for the fatherland, so the glory of salvation was replaced by the triumph of victory (Klimenko 2024: 13). The shift towards the Orthodox militarism was also strengthened by numerous official documents that rehabilitated the post-Soviet army: theologians framed participation in military acts as a 'justified war', thus elevating it to the status of the highest Christian virtue, an expression of love for God and readiness to sacrifice one's life for the fatherland (Knorre/Zygmont 2020). Over the past two decades, the 'justice narrative' remained a significant concept in the ROC's legitimization of Russia's aggression, and it has become even more deeply integrated into public and religious discourses after 2022 (Curanović 2024).

In the last two decades, militant piety has reached unimaginable heights within the ROC: one can observe it, for example, in the secularization of saint warrior cults, production of religious-military material culture (e.g. the Main Cathedral of Russian Armed Forces), or sacralization of civil rituals (e.g. cult of Victory Day). However, militant piety is not exclusive to the ROC's theological tradition. On the conceptual level, various religions assert their primacy in bringing meaning and order to a social world of chaos and uncertainty. There is always a conflict between notions of order, so actors of real wars, who attempt to restore or impose 'their' order, symbolically frame the war as a struggle with a higher, divine purpose – "cosmic war". This, according to Juergensmeyer, represents "the spiritual struggle between order and disorder, light and darkness, faith and doubt" (2019: 111). The attempts of one side to bring order to the other side inevitably lead to destruction and violence. However, for this purpose, religious imagination offers rich symbolism through concepts like 'sacrifice', 'martyrdom' and 'salvation', which blur the chaos of war, reframing violence as a justified struggle for order (Ibid.: 104–6). In this way, religious actors become the conquerors of disorder, while violence serves as religious warfare in pursuit of harmony, order and divinity. In a similar way, militant piety, grounded on the dualistic vision of the world as the eternal fight between good and evil, is activated in a particular political context when religious actors justify real acts of violence with theological arguments within their religious traditions (Gorski et al. 2022; Parppai 2021; Knorre/Zygmont 2020). Thus, the imaginary war against cosmic evil might be easily replaced by a real war, such as 'a battle to defend Christian truth' (Denysenko 2023).

### Revision of Victory Cult

In the Russian context, militant theology emerges from the discursive spaces of religious and national imagery. They both contribute to the repertoire of militant dis-

course using the concept of *victory* as a formative core to generate new meanings, recycle the myths of the past and shape national memory. Revising the nation's memory through the lens of victories, either mythical or historical, religious and political actors enhance the image of Russia's military might, religious exceptionalism and special mission in the present. At the same time, the focus on victory in militant theology strengthens public perceptions of the ROC's unique role in the formation of the nation, Orthodox identity and culture. The concept of victory emerges as a 'primal sacred meaning', or activator of a 'sacred map of the past' (Agadjanian 2022: 30), a sacralized perception of history that allows church and state to offer deeper meanings for present events. As Agadjanian illustrates (*Ibid.*), religious institutions are well-equipped to activate the memory of the past as a sacred map because of their rich reliance on rituals, visual symbolism and systems of norms. Similarly, religious symbols may function as 'trans-temporal nodes' – objects that embody collective memories, myths and narratives – and, if the object re-emerges in the present, the audience receives a known frame of how to interpret the new reality (Zubrzycki 2022). In other words, the concept of victory turns out to be a well-known collective frame for linking to and perception of the current war as part of a larger, previously constituted sacred map of Russia's past.

Undoubtedly, the ROC mobilizes its symbolic resources when political actors especially need support and legitimization – during Russia's war against Ukraine. However, the growing attention to religious heritage and sacralization of the past links to the general conservative turn in Russia's domestic and foreign politics after 2012 (Stoeckl/Uzlaner 2022), when the sacralization of history became one of the central ideas in education, youth work and culture policies. Together with the state, the ROC became an active co-producer of national memory and sacral heritage (Klimenko 2020; Kormina 2013). The role of the ROC, as an institution, in this process was undoubtedly crucial: the church claimed to represent the spiritual foundation of Russia's history and strengthen the 'Orthodox core' in understanding Russia's past as well as take on new roles in Russia's present and future. The agenda of 'traditional values' was beneficial for both actors: the state incorporated the morality component into the political initiatives while the ROC, in its turn, strengthened the rhetoric of Russian statehood, might and exceptional mission in the world. At the same time, these ideas contributed to the growing military component in the ROC's sacralization of the past (Adamsky 2019; Berezhnaya 2022; Laruelle/Karnysheva 2020).

Religious imagery highly elaborates the picture of the ROC's militarism through the commemorations of saint warriors in public spheres. Linking the myths of saints with the present events, the church traditionally balances among three significant aspects of their images: religious, secular and military (Berezhnaya 2022). This multi-layered perception allows religious actors to offer flexible veneration of a saint in response to rapidly changing political and social expectations – each aspect of the image may be activated individually to portray the saint as a warrior, a monk,

or the heavenly patron (Ibid.). For example, a well-developed myth of St Alexander Nevsky was widely elaborated in religious, academic and political discourses of the last decade in Russia (Adamsky 2019; Berezhnaya 2022; Zygmont/Knorre 2019). As Berezhnaya notes (2022: 12), after 2008, the historical narrative of St Alexander Nevsky centered on his military image as “one of the prominent symbols of the Russian civilizational path and the ‘Russian world’, as well as the embodiment of an *antemurale christianitatis*”. The latter aspect might be especially useful during the war when the church legitimizes aggression as a defense of ‘true’ Orthodox faith, Holy Rus, traditional values and anti-Western mindset in general.

The cults of saint warriors, however, are also expected to bring new meaning and purpose to the occupied territories of Ukraine. Predictably, one of the first things Russian authorities did after the occupation of Mariupol was the construction of a monument to St Alexander Nevsky.<sup>2</sup> Depicted as a warrior on a horse, St Alexander Nevsky is carrying a sword, resembling a cross with its blade down, in his right hand and the fluttering flag with Christ’s image (HIS) in his left – all implying Russia’s military might and ‘holy war’ amid a surreal setting of destruction and emptiness. Here, Carleton’s words (2017: 38) explain Russian triumphalism: “This is mythic history at its best, doing just what one expects it to do by leavening a majestic spirit with sufficient historical grounding to make it feel right.”

Historical memory is a particularly productive material for militant theology in times of war. Situated in a religious context, it generates new myths, produces new narratives and redesigns national memory (Pynnöniemi 2021). As Klimenko’s study (2020) on history parks in Russia shows, the ROC is an influential narrator of Russia’s history who amplifies the role of Orthodoxy in shaping Russian identity, legitimizes the current regime and induces ideas of heroism and sacrifice for the fatherland in public discourse. The latter is well exemplified by Russia’s cult of victory in WWII (the Great Patriotic War), which has special functions in the formation of national memory. First of all, according to Agadjanian (2022: 37), the cult formalizes the feeling of heroism and national pride to maintain the ideas of a strong nation, strong state and strong leader. Secondly, the national triumph over victory in WWII changes the public perceptions of the evils during the Soviet period, so the strong emphasis on the purpose of sacrifice justifies war losses (Ibid.). One can also recognize these functions of the victory cult in the representation of the Main Cathedral of the Russian Armed Forces, constructed on the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of victory in the Great Patriotic War (WWII). The Cathedral, as “a spiritual symbol of Russia, glorifying the greatest victory of life over death,”<sup>3</sup> manifests the concept of victory in various dimensions:

2 Religious procession with Nevsky’s relics along the frontline, <https://spastv.ru/s-krestom-vperek-k-pobede-aleksandr-nevskij-na-peredovoj/>

3 The main Cathedral of Russian armed forces, <https://hram.mil.ru/>

from images of holy warriors of the ROC, national myths and narratives of historical personalities to the numerical symbolism in the architecture. The Cathedral is an attempt to materialize a feeling of triumph over all Russia's victories in the past as much as to 'cement' a contract of mutual legitimization between the ROC and the state (Kolov 2021). During the war in Ukraine, the ROC's actors reinterpret the victory cult again, fitting it within the collective continuum of national and religious myths.

### Ortho-Blogging on the Guard of the ROC

Along with the post-Soviet transformations in Russia, the ROC's military trend greatly benefited from the general processes of digitalization: the church received new tools to better function in society and upgrade its potential for influence, interaction and presence in public spheres. The rapid growth of the church's digital activism is linked to the enthronement of Patriarch Kirill in 2009, who, seeking new areas of the church's mission and social activism, approached the new technologies in a well-thought-out strategic manner (Staehle 2018). However, the ROC's need for digitalization was also propelled by socio-political events in the context of the 2012 presidential elections in Russia. The church, trapped at the center of public scandals, had to revise its media strategies to respond to growing public criticism, which was particularly visible on social media (Zygmont/Knorre 2019: 15). For example, the ROC had to demonstrate its agency in response to 'the act of blasphemy' associated with the *Pussy Riot* performance, followed by fervent discussions on state and social media. Framed as an offence against religious feelings on state television, the performance of anti-Putin activists was extrapolated into the wider context of offence against Orthodox values, a core of Russian nationhood and, consequently, was presented as a threat to statehood. In the construction of the protest coverage, state media drew on a picture of society's unity around traditional Orthodox values (Hutchings/Tolz 2015: 207), which contributed to the official discourse of Putin's presidential campaign, elaborated around the rhetoric of society's moral decay, threats to Russia and the church (Ibid.). As a result, the media event allowed the ROC to strengthen its image of a vulnerable institution that needs special protection in society, which led to broader changes in legislation and passing of the anti-blasphemy bill in 2013 (Staehle 2018: 393). Under the pretext of defense of the faith, the ROC could silence critics, block anti-church rhetoric and shape the church's public image to its own vision.

Similarly, on the wave of the 'information campaign' against the church (Staehle 2021: 135), the ROC entered into an active stage of digitalization with at least the following goals: to defend its moral authority in society, upgrade religiosity in Russia, strengthen relations within Orthodox community, shape ideas of 'Orthodox nation' and legitimize state's policies among others. This period was characterized by the

growth of Ortho-blogging: increased visibility of religious actors on social media and their active production of video content on YouTube, VK and Instagram (Zasan-ska 2019). At the same time, Orthodox bloggers attempted to conceptualize the role of Internet in understanding and practicing the faith, which brightened up the general trend of Orthodox digitalization with a sense of 'digital anxiety', the church's fear of losing its control over the digital spheres of influence (Suslov 2015). Ortho-blogging was seen as an especially promising sphere of the ROC's digital activism that would strengthen the official voices of the church in unpredictable, chaotic and hostile to the church media spaces. However, building a network of Orthodox bloggers loyal to the ROC meant their control, supervision and digital literacy. In 2018-2020, the church developed a list of official recommendations on Ortho-blogging, work in social media and promotion of religious content.<sup>4</sup> Also, the ROC's Synodal Information Department started to organize an international festival of Orthodox media "Faith and Word"<sup>5</sup> – an event where Orthodox media celebrities share their 'success stories', give masterclasses on work in social media and get awards from the ROC. Although blogging is an open space for diverse Orthodox voices with differing ideological views, who may stay quite distanced from the official ROC's agenda (Staehle 2021: 88), the network of digitally proficient Ortho-bloggers, loyal to Patriarch Kirill's stance on the war, had already emerged by 2022, active on Instagram, VK, YouTube and Telegram.<sup>6</sup>

During the war, Ortho-bloggers intensified the pro-war rhetoric of the church. However, their subordination to the ROC's hierarchy of knowledge and power is apparent: bloggers tend to recycle the narratives from 'reliable' ideological centers and media 'factories' supplying religious warfare, such as for instance, *Spas TV*. As one of the leading producers of Russian patriotism earlier in the 2000s (Laruelle/Rollberg 2018), the channel enhanced the military content after the annexation of Crimea in 2014, and, in particular, after Russia's full-scale attack on Ukraine.<sup>7</sup> Now, *Spas TV* functions as a generator of the 'holy war' discourse, seeking new meanings in religious and national imagery to legitimize Russia's aggression. At the same time,

4 The ROC's recommendations on 1) videoblogging <https://sinfo-mp.ru/videoblogi-svyashhe-nnikov-russkoy-pravoslavnoy-tserkvi-rekomendatsii-i-sovetyi.html> 2) work with social media <https://sinfo-mp.ru/rekomendatsii-po-rabote-v-sotsialnyih-setyah-dlya-eparhialnyih-i-prihodskih-informatsionnyih-sluzhb.html> 3) promotion of the ROC's Internet resources <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5732929.html> 4) online courses for Orthodox bloggers <https://cerkovmedia.ru/courses/>

5 Festival for Orthodox bloggers, <https://sinfo-mp.ru/festival-vera-i-slovo>

6 School for bloggers in the ROC, <https://www.vedomosti.ru/society/articles/2024/03/11/1024508-v-rpts-zapustili-shkolu-bloggerov-dlya-svyaschennikov>

7 See, for example, Andrey Afanasiev's or Boris Korchevnikov's projects on *Spas* <https://spastv.ru/litsa-kanala/>

*Spas TV* attempts to provide a space in which ideological and theological oppositions within the ROC blur. As a result, the producers of *Spas TV* provide a continuous flow of pro-war narratives online to be further mediated across various social media platforms, promoting cooperation and mobilization of Orthodox groups, society and state authorities – all those willing to unite for Russia's victory over Ukraine.

## Creating Sacral Space: Concepts, Methodology and Data

Religious marking of space emerged as one of the Russian Orthodox Church's (ROC) fundamental tasks following Patriarch Kirill's enthronement. As Kormina and Tocheva (2024:15) observe, Orthodox marking of public space – through the construction of crosses, churches, or other religious symbols – serves not merely as an expression of religious piety and devotion to God but fulfills a broader geopolitical function. These religious markers delineate "what the Church defines as the Russian land and people", while simultaneously signifying "the presence of the Russian state", particularly in sparsely populated borderlands or regions with indigenous populations (Ibid.: 13–15). Beyond material manifestations, Orthodox marking of space emerges through performance – collective prayers, religious processions and commemorative events. These religious practices enable the church to manifest faith, mediate an established version of memory and plant a new religious tradition in previously unmarked space (Ibid.: 13–14). This profound reliance on believers' imagination in marking physical space appears particularly adaptable to the digital environment, which offers multifunctional venues for religious expression, symbolic performance and creation of new religious markers.

The potential of a religious performance to construct and inhabit new spaces finds thorough conceptualization in the theory of "third spaces of digital religion" (Echchaibi/Hoover 2023:8). This framework approaches the digital realm as "a site of negotiated religious praxis" which "produces its own spiritual repertoire, its own discursive logic and its own aesthetics of persuasion" (Ibid.: 14). Within this paradigm, the "third space" emerges as a hybrid, fluidly bounded, interactive and co-generative domain existing between various contexts (e.g. private and public, authority and individual autonomy, static and generative). This "in-between-ness" constitutes the foundational principle of the concept (Ibid.: 10). Consequently, the traditional polarity between digital or physical space dissolves, replaced with the idea of "as-if-ness": believers perceive their belonging to community and engagement in practices as totally authentic. These "as-if" practices, through their fluid, aesthetic and engaging nature, intensify the significance of religious self-exploration for those immersed in the shared experience of sacrality (Ibid.: 10).

This study particularly focuses on another significant feature of the "third space": its potential to generate meanings and catalyze actions, emerging as "the sources of

ideas, of claims, of identities, and of solidarities around their articulations" (Ibid.: 14). Through this performative capacity, the "third space" catalyzes revisions, negotiations and transformation of religious knowledge and practice. The digital space of shared values and discourses facilitates transitions to offline activities and further formation of social actions (Ibid.: 16). This translation of religious meanings into the social sphere – where they call for actions and may serve political expectations – proves especially valuable for understanding the ROC's pro-war discourse, particularly, its evident trend towards sacralization of Russia's aggression. Accordingly, this study approaches the ROC's digital media through the lens of "third spaces of digital religion" to examine how media actors exploit religious imagery to produce pro-war discourse that sacralizes Russia's aggression and mobilizes Russian society's support of war.

In this study, the digital space of the ROC emerges as a multi-layered space of complex and hierarchically structured networks. While digital environments may challenge traditional authorities by undermining established hierarchies of knowledge and power, this study reveals distinct hierarchical patterns in the cooperation among the ROC's media actors on the 'holy fronts' of the war. The sacralization of war necessitates consonance and unity among Orthodox actors in generating, advancing and disseminating pro-war discourses. The ideological 'core' of the ROC's digital space comprises the church's official media outlets (e.g. *Spas TV*), which produce qualitative pro-war content while offering unequivocal support to the ROC and state authorities. However, these 'core' religious actors necessarily depend on the periphery's support – Orthodox activists (e.g. *Movement of Sorok Sorokov*), clergy, or public figures who further mediate the ROC's official narratives through social media networks. The Orthodox activists maintain church loyalty while pursuing their own ideological agendas. The comparative analysis of *Spas TV* and *Sorok Sorokov*'s media spaces reveals how religious actors from different ideological backgrounds jointly construct national and religious imagery of war.

Religious thinking makes a symbolic displacement of violence with the themes of sacrifice, virtue and martyrdom: human destruction is justified "on behalf of a divine purpose" (Juergensmeyer 2019: 104). At the same time, religious images are primary forms of symbolical displacing, imposing specific perceptions of order – a fundamental characteristic of religious thinking (Ibid.: 106). By selecting the *Holy Image of the Savior Not-Made-by-Hands* (hereafter – HIS) as the gonfalon of Russia's invasion, Orthodox actors aim to recycle religious imagery, establish new military rituals, revise national myths and shape collective memory in Russia. Drawing from previous studies on the role of religious symbols in shaping national mythology, political agenda and religious practices (Kormina/Tocheva 2024; Niedźwiedź 2010; Zubrzycki 2022), several perceptions of religious images prove particularly valuable for understanding the discursive mechanism of sacralization of the Russo-Ukrainian war.

First of all, the image of *HIS* has a story of *divine origin*: it is “not made by human hand”. The power of such images comes from “direct contact with the sacrum at the moment of their creation” (Niedźwiedź 2010: 6), offering the faithful a genuine presence of a holy authority. Then, the *HIS* functions as a *spiritual weapon*, carrying its own “military history” of glorious and miraculous victories over “others” – enemies, pagans, or non-Orthodox. Furthermore, the image possesses the quality of *holy protection* for those under threat or attack. Finally, the image ‘communicates’ with the faithful through its *miraculous capacity*, introducing a possibility of personal experience and interaction with divinity. The study employs these four perceptions of the *HIS* to deconstruct the discursive space of sacralization in the ROC’s digital media. Moreover, this focus enables examination of how the ROC integrates this image (Figure 1) into a broader historical narrative – what Niedźwiedź terms “a great story” (2010: 45) – “the mythologized vision of the history of the nation and ascribes to it a causative role in many historical moments”.

Figure 1: *Holy Image of the Savior Not-Made-by-Hands. “For Faith, Tsar and United Holy Rus.”* Public domain.



The study examines how Russian Orthodox actors from varying digital and ideological settings jointly generate the discourse of sacralization using the *HIS*. The data comprises two sets: 1) eleven films from *Spas TV* (transcripts and videos) demonstrating the role of the flag in the war, and 2) Telegram posts (n=527) from the flash mob #*CnasBkajdyiDom* ('Flag of Savior for Every Home') organized by the Orthodox nationalist militant organization *Movement of Sorok Sorokov* in 2023–2024. The flash mob, devoted to Russia’s Victory Day (9<sup>th</sup> May), sought to mobilize Russian society in support of the war against Ukraine. In the same time frame, in

2023–2024, *Spas TV* produced numerous documentaries with references to the *HIS* to legitimize Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The *Spas TV* journalists shared the documentaries among their followers, primarily via Telegram and VK.

The first stage employed discourse and content analyses (software *atlas.ti*) of film transcripts and Telegram posts to identify how specific attributes of the *HIS* (*divine origin, spiritual weapon, holy protection and miraculous capacity*) manifest in pro-war narratives by *Spas TV* and *Sorok Sorokov*. Then, the study examined center-periphery relations in digital space, analyzing how the mechanism of sacralization differs between producers on *Spas TV* and activists of *Sorok Sorokov*.

## Spas TV on the Mission of Sacralization

In 2023, *Spas TV* produced a number of films about the war in Ukraine, framing Russia's invasion as a sacred mission to defend traditional values and rescue the world from moral decay. A *Spas TV* war correspondent, Andrey Afanasyev, acknowledges the "spiritual and symbolic vacuum of meanings" in Russian society at the beginning of the war in 2022, explaining how the idea of the flag emerged:

It happened by itself. We, of course, understand precisely how the idea with the flag emerged (*Afanasyev points at the Main Cathedral of the Armed Forces to show it as a provision of God* – author). It was necessary to find a specific unifying symbol that would not divide us by political worldviews and historical perspectives but would unite and bind us. And this is undoubtedly our ancient gonfalon, which accompanied the Russian army throughout history.<sup>8</sup>

Similarly, state and religious authorities also attempted to fill the vacuum of meanings with symbolic rituals. In the spring 2023, Putin visited the frontline in Luhansk and Kherson regions, presenting the icon of *HIS* to the Armed Forces.<sup>9</sup> This symbolic performance evoked national myths of Russian tsars and commanders blessing battlefields with the icon. This gesture also continued the narrative about glorified heroes and miraculous victories in the past, implying an unshakeable faith in future victory over Ukraine. In his turn, Patriarch Kirill complemented this performance by blessing the icon for a frontline tour, enabling Russia's soldiers to imagine themselves as Christ's warriors acting through divine will.

As a symbol of the war, the flag of *HIS* seamlessly integrates into the cult of St Alexander Nevsky – a widely elaborated religious, academic and political dis-

<sup>8</sup> Spas TV, film "Spas Nerukotvornyi. Voinstvo so znamenem Hrista" (Holy Image of the Savior Not-Made-by-Hands. Warriors with the Jesus' gonfalon), Afanasyev's talk about unifying mission of HIS, <https://spastv.ru/spas-nerukotvorniy-voinstvo-so-znamenem-hrista/>

<sup>9</sup> Putin presents an icon to the armed forces, <https://ria.ru/20230418/ikony-1866058542.html>

course in contemporary Russia (Adamsky 2019; Berezhnaya 2022; Klimenko 2020; Zygmont/Knorre 2019). The ROC venerates the saint as a warrior, a monk and the heavenly patron of Russia. As Berezhnaya observes (2022), the 'style' of veneration of the saint in Russia depends significantly on the changing political and social contexts, with the ROC carefully balancing religious, secular and military perceptions of the image. During the war, these aspects converge: the flag of *HIS* alludes to St Alexander Nevsky (believed to gain victories under the *HIS*),<sup>10</sup> and consequently, it reactivates the discourse of Russian military might, Orthodox piety and national pride.

Such attention to the figure of St Alexander Nevsky – whose image embodies national and religious myths of miraculous victories in the past – also reflects the intensification of the victory cult in Russia after 2022. This cult has been a crucial element of state memory politics and the Kremlin's ideology over the past decade (Klimenko 2019), with massive military parades, concerts and art exhibitions positioning the Russian Army as the pivotal force in defeating fascism in WWII (in Russian phrasing – the Great Patriotic War). Consequently, the *HIS*, which itself symbolizes God's victory over death (as indicated by the Slavonic letters: "Jesus Christ Conquers"), transforms into a collective symbol of Russia's victories, glory and pride. It also appeals to Russian society as the great people of winners (*narod pobediteley*), refers to the fight against fascism (the official Russia's statements on 'denazification' of Ukraine) and manifests the vision of Russia's ideal future through the image of a utopian Orthodox unity – Holy Rus.

The *Spas TV* films that integrate the flag of *HIS* into the discourse of sacralization can be categorized into three primary groups: 1) films justifying the war with theological arguments from sacred texts and religious authorities;<sup>11</sup> 2) films sacralizing the past through references to historical figures, saints and events, demonstrating Russia's continuity with the 'glorious' past;<sup>12</sup> 3) films promoting mobilization within Russian society by constructing an image of Russian soldiers as pious Orthodox Christians (and God's warriors).<sup>13</sup> The latter group specifically aims to boost soldiers' morale, with *Spas TV* journalists and chaplains bringing these films directly

<sup>10</sup> Spas TV, film "St Alexander Nevsky. Holy warriors" <https://spastv.ru/aleksandr-nevskij-svyat-ye-voiny/>

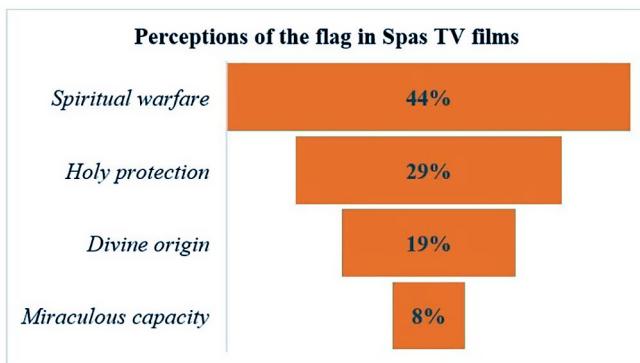
<sup>11</sup> Spas TV, project "War and Bible" (Voina i Bibliia), film "Gospod – znamia moe" (The Lord is my Banner), <https://spastv.ru/gospod-znamya-moe-vojna-i-bibliya-3-seriya/>

<sup>12</sup> Spas TV, film "Sviatye voiny" (Sacred warriors), <https://spastv.ru/aleksandr-nevskij-svyatye-voiny/>

<sup>13</sup> Spas TV, film "Serdtsce voina" (Heart of a warrior), <https://spastv.ru/serdtse-voina-film-andre-ya-afanaseva-premiera-na-spase/>

to the frontline.<sup>14</sup> The quantitative textual analysis of film transcripts and content analysis of the video representations of the *HIS* reveal the following tendencies (Figure 2).

Figure 2: The flag of *HIS* in the sacralization scheme on *Spas* TV.



Accordingly, *Spas* TV producers shape the perception of the *HIS* primarily as a tool of *spiritual warfare*. Through this lens, the war against Ukraine is justified as the battle against global evil, with Russia having a mission to bring Orthodox order into a world of chaos, moral decay and destruction. Within this frame, the films integrate national and religious myths while offering vivid allusions to the present events and political figures. For example, the documentary on Alexander Nevsky<sup>15</sup> emphasizes his “diplomatic alliance with the Horde”, his rejection of “Western support” and his suppression of internal rebellions. This narrative underscores that Nevsky’s decisions were invariably correct – a manifestation of “foresight, unappreciated in his time”. In a similar vein, the *Spas* TV films accentuate the linkage to the past, glorifying deaths in war as sacrifices for God and fatherland:

The flag of the Holy Image of the Savior became a symbol of our struggle for our culture and faith. Even now, when flags are flying throughout the whole great Rus-

<sup>14</sup> Spas TV, film “Spas Nerukotvornyi. Voinstvo so znamenem Hrista” (Holy Image of the Savior Not-Made-by-Hands. Warriors with the Jesus’ gonfalon), <https://spastv.ru/spas-nerukotvornyi-voinstvo-so-znamenem-hrista/>

<sup>15</sup> Spas TV, film “Sviatye voiny” (Sacred warriors) <https://spastv.ru/aleksandr-nevskij-svyatye-voiny/>

sia, few people understand that it is a battle for faith, for language, for culture, for land.<sup>16</sup>

Another perception of the *HIS* highlights its status of 'not made by human hand', which stands for the veneration of objects considered holy by their divine origin – those created or sent by divine powers. This icon, known as the Mandylion of Edessa, is associated with several stories of its miraculous origin: Jesus' gift to the king of Edessa, Jesus' burial shroud, or Veronika's shawl. *Spas TV* producers attempt to accentuate the "divinity status" of the *HIS* by referencing historical and religious imagery surrounding the object and emphasizing its divine power in the ongoing war. For instance, soldiers and chaplains in the documentaries describe the *HIS* as a source of divine grace, inexplicable power and courage: "Under the flag of the Holy Image, you get a feeling that God's grace comes over you. You become stronger, and you cannot help but win."<sup>17</sup> In the films, the *HIS* functions both as an icon in prayer spaces and as a gonfalon in military contexts – displaced in bases, bunkers, or vehicles. The films demonstrate how this flag transforms mundane locations into sacred spaces, whether amid ruined buildings, tents, or underground trenches. Moreover, the *HIS* is employed to romanticize the war and create new military rituals, including kissing the flag, making the signs of the cross, kneeling before it and wearing chevrons with miniature representations of the *HIS*.

Likewise, *Spas TV* refers to the *HIS* to manifest God's presence, justify the invasion and symbolize *holy protection*. Military divisions in the Russian armed forces traditionally have their holy patrons. The *HIS* is one of the main icon patrons<sup>18</sup> – most prominently displayed in the massive mosaic in the Main Cathedral of the Russian Armed Forces. The *Spas TV* films articulate the idea of holy protection through the popular slogan: "We are Russians. God is with us!" This rhetoric occasionally produces comic moments, such as when Muslim soldiers wear chevrons with the *HIS* to secure holy protection: "We are Tatars, we are together with Russians, and God is with them."<sup>19</sup>

Sometimes, the trajectory of holy protection takes unexpected turns. For instance, a film titled "Alexander Nevsky. Sacred warriors." depicts the life of a Russian

16 Spas TV, project "War and Bible" (Voina i bibliia), film "Gospod – znamia moe" (The Lord is my Banner) <https://spastv.ru/gospod-znamya-moe-vojna-i-bibliya-3-seriya/>

17 See soldiers to speak on the flag with HIS here <https://spastv.ru/spas-nerukotvornyj-voins-tvo-so-znamenem-hrista/> or here <https://spastv.ru/kak-maloe-vojsko-pobezhdaet-bolee-sil-nogo-protivnika-vojna-i-bibliya-seriya-11/>

18 The icon of HIS as the patron of the Russian Armed Forces <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5914221.html>

19 Spas TV, programme "Sacred warriors arrived at the frontline" <https://spastv.ru/spetsvypusk-svyatye-voiny-prishli-na-peredovuyu-boris-korchevnikov-o-molitve-v-zemlyanke-i-russkoj-pobede/>

military battalion named after this saint.<sup>20</sup> At the background of numerous religious objects like flags, chevrons and icons, noticeable in the military setting, the film recounts the story of a soldier with the call sign 'Nevsky'. In this film, the soldier Nevsky is a hero who sacrificed his life to save others. After his death, his comrades feel honoured to have their 'own Nevsky' (*implying his holy sacrifice – author*) alongside their saint patron Alexander Nevsky. This deliberately created parallel between an ordinary soldier and a saint conveys a crucial narrative of the *Spas TV*: each soldier's 'small' sacrifice is significant for the fatherland, church and society. This film subtly reveals the potential mechanisms through which the ROC might construct a new pantheon of martyrs after the war.

Finally, the *Spas TV* producers address the *miraculous capacity* of sacral materiality – particularly the *HIS* – at war. In the films, Russian soldiers narrate stories of their miraculous survival after bombardment, attributing it to the supernatural power coming from various religious objects carried into the frontline – chevrons, pocket icons, or rosaries. One testimony suggests: "In those units where soldiers pray, where commanders pray, where priests are regularly present, where soldiers have shrines, icons and banners, casualties are fewer."<sup>21</sup> However, the appeal to miracles serves a broader narrative: participation in the 'holy war' is portrayed as a catalyst for spiritual transformation. This newfound piety, the producers suggest, not only justifies previous wrongdoings but even grants a total spiritual 'upgrade': "We brought the relics of holy warriors into this temple, and when we began to pray, standing around the throne, it felt as if holy warriors were talking to the other holy warriors (*Russian soldiers – author*)."<sup>22</sup> The incorporation of sacral materiality into the war's routine aims to elevate religious consciousness and maximize the army's fighting capabilities. One commander confirms this perspective: "A faithful man will not retreat, will not abandon his comrade in trouble, will never leave a wounded soldier on the battlefield. He will stand resolute to death, to the end, carrying out the commander's orders."<sup>23</sup>

In constructing a unifying sacral symbol of war from the *HIS*, the *Spas TV* producers present this object as *spiritual warfare of divine origin*, bestowing *holy protection* on Russia's armed forces and unveiling *miraculous capacities* for the faithful. However, *Spas TV*'s reach is constrained by limited audience interaction, particularly af-

<sup>20</sup> Film on Spas TV "Alexander Nevskyi. Sacred warriors", <https://spastv.ru/aleksandr-nevskij-svyatyey-voiny/>

<sup>21</sup> Spas TV, programme "Sacred warriors arrived at the frontline" <https://spastv.ru/spetsvypusk-svyatyey-voiny-prishli-na-peredovuyu-boris-korchevnikov-o-molitve-v-zemlyanke-i-russkoj-pobede/>

<sup>22</sup> Film on Spas TV "Boevye otsy. Hronika sluzhenii voennogo duhovenstva", <https://spastv.ru/boevye-otsy-hronika-sluzeniya-voennogo-duhovenstva/>

<sup>23</sup> Film on Spas TV "Boevye otsy. Hronika sluzhenii voennogo duhovenstva", <https://spastv.ru/boevye-otsy-hronika-sluzeniya-voennogo-duhovenstva/>

ter YouTube blocked *Spas YouTube* channel in 2022.<sup>24</sup> These obstacles have prompted *Spas TV* producers and creators to diversify their content distribution through social media platforms such as Telegram, Instagram and VK.<sup>25</sup> As representatives of the ROC, politics and civil faith activism, these *Spas TV* actors engage broader audiences within Russian society, aiming to mobilize them around a shared national ideology. At the same time, specific ideological constructs of *Spas TV*, as exemplified by the *HIS* case, activate marginal religious groups, providing them with additional opportunities to promote their specific group agendas.

## Sorok Sorokov: War Mobilization Online and Offline

The movement *Sorok Sorokov* (MSS) is an Orthodox ultranationalist organization in Russia, founded by Andrey Kormuhin and Vladimir Nosov in 2013. The movement functions as a paramilitary group of the ROC, whose members patrol religious ceremonies and organize protests against any perceived 'threats' to traditional values – whether manifesting as a film, concert, art exhibition, LGBTQ+ parade, or citizens' opposition to constructing a new church in their local park (Laruelle 2020). One of the well-known protests against the premiere of the film "Matilda" in 2017,<sup>26</sup> organized by the MSS, made them not only visible actors in the religious landscape of the ROC but also demonstrated their capacity to act as a well-organized, radical Orthodox force within Russian society.

The movement fervently champions the idea of a Russian Orthodox Empire whose unique mission is to preserve traditional values and save the world from a "moral decay". Consequently, their Telegram discourse gravitates toward conspiracy theories, fakes, demonization of the West, anti-migrant, anti-LGBTQ+ and pro-family rhetoric. After Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the MSS became even more vocal about their visions of Russia as Holy Rus. Under the pretext of spiritual mobilization<sup>27</sup> and collaboration with *Spas TV*, the group received

24 The Spas claims to have about 1 million of followers on YouTube in 2022, <https://spastv.ru/category/spas-strim/>

25 For example, the most active Spas actors on Telegram (as of November 2024) include Andrey Tkachev (253K subscribers at [https://t.me/videotca\\_Andrea](https://t.me/videotca_Andrea)), Boris Korchevnikov (120K at <https://t.me/boriskorchevnikov>), Roman Golovanov (86K at <https://t.me/s/romagolovanov>), Vladislav Beregovoy (73K at <https://t.me/pravoslavieVtelege>), Anna Shafran (57K at <https://t.me/annashafran>), Vladimir Legoida (34K at <https://t.me/s/vladimirlegoida>) and Andrey Afanasiyev (22K at <https://t.me/Andrafanaslive>).

26 Historical romantic drama about the relationship between Nicholas II and ballerina Matilda Kshesinska

27 Patriarch Kirill's call for 'spiritual mobilization', 27<sup>th</sup> September, 2022 <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5963304.html>

new opportunities to disseminate their radical pro-life, ultranationalist and anti-migrant rhetoric. At the same time, the MSS's visibility on social media increased: before 2022, the group had a limited audience on their Telegram channel (*Movement Sorok Sorokov*) with the number of followers doubled during the flash mob of HIS.<sup>28</sup> In addition, the group positions itself as an Orthodox minority that defends 'true' Christian values of Russia against local liberal bureaucrats. The narrative of an eternal fight with an 'immoral' majority is used to emphasize their ideological constructs and demonstrate absolute loyalty to both the ROC and the Kremlin.

The group's ideology manifests beyond digital platforms: MSS members organize monthly prayer meetings across regions, conduct regular religious processions and organize annual pro-family parades. Although the *Sorok Sorokov*'s actions became more visible, aggressive and violent over the past decade, the ROC appreciates their mobilization potential as a form of "Orthodox activism" (Elsner 2023), perceiving it as beneficial to the position and prestige of the church in society. The war has intensified the groups' activism in both digital and offline spaces. While previously the MSS Telegram channel served primarily informative and ideological purposes, during wartime, it turned into a dynamic space for online discussions of war, interaction with other religious actors and promotion of militant Orthodox activities. The channel also serves as a space where the ROC's pro-war stance is articulated, accentuated and mediated into public manifestations of support and solidarity. As demonstrated by this study, it is often the peripheral actors of the ROC who render the meanings of religious imagination active, functional and comprehensible to a wider audience.

The MSS started to popularize the flag HIS following Russia's occupation of the Luhansk and Donetsk regions in 2014. Group members would present the flag as a gift to military units in these regions, symbolically portraying the occupation of Ukraine as the emergence of Holy Rus. After Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the flag's ideological mission was revised, emerging as a unifying symbol of 'holy war.' On May 2, 2023, the MSS announced a national flash mob '*Spas (Holy Image of the Savior) for Every Home*' to celebrate the national holiday in Russia, Victory Day (9 May) and attract more public support for Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The media campaign also aimed to promote society's support of the armed forces, raising the feeling of national dignity, solidarity and pride. Similarly, the flash mob served to upgrade the image of the Russian army, emphasizing its military might and invincibility. In their first Telegram post on the launch of the action (814697 views and 4868 reposts), the organization invited military bloggers, clergy, Orthodox celebrities and popular influencers to support and join their flash mob:

<sup>28</sup> According to the data analytics from *TGStat.ru*, the MSS channel <https://t.me/sorok4orussi> had 41 000 subscribers at the beginning of the full-scale escalation in February 2022. The number increased up to 82 580 subscribers by December 2023.

With the tricolor of our State and the flag of Victory, let's display the flag of our millennial Russia with the image of our Lord Jesus Christ. Russians, it is time to prove that we are Russians and God stands with us!! It is time to unite beneath the gonfalon of our God! And, indeed, Victory Day in 1945 coincided with Easter.<sup>29</sup>

Initially, the flash mob envisioned a public display of three flags – the national flag, the Soviet Victory flag and the *HIS* – with participants sharing their photographs with the flags on social media. Although the flash mob might seem like an intricate potpourri of different ideologies, the three flags aimed to manifest the harmonious unity among state authorities, the Russian people (positioned as the winners of WWII) and the ROC. According to the MSS, this representation of ideal unity among state, people and church was crucial for building a new Russia – Holy Rus. However, the initial idea to display all three flags failed soon, with the flash mob centered only on the promotion and marketing of the *HIS*.

What is remarkable is that *Spas TV* contributed to the early promotion of the flash mob with a deliberate media stunt. At the very beginning of the action, Boris Korchevnikov, *Spas TV*'s general director, shared a story on Telegram depicting police officers forcibly removing the *HIS* flag from a participant's balcony in Moscow. The incident was deliberately framed as an unjust assault on Christian values, rapidly circulating across Telegram channels alongside the flash mob hashtags. MSS members visited the alleged victim, distributed flags in her neighbourhood and officially announced the launch of the flash mob. Amid public criticism of the police, the action gained significant visibility on Telegram and facilitated the distribution of the flags in Russian regions.

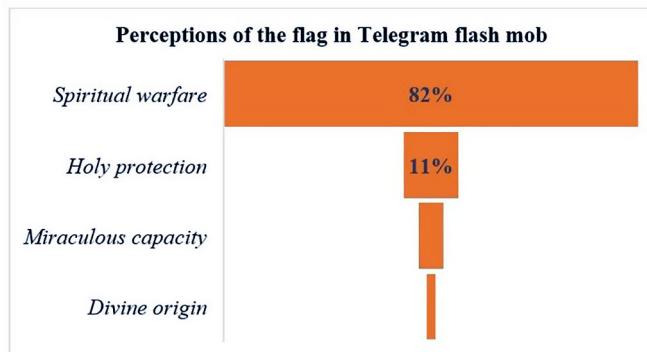
Simultaneously, the *Spas TV* team developed a promotional strategy for the flag, which included the production of numerous documentaries about the *HIS*, interviews with museum curators and historians and night programs hosting the leaders of the MSS movement. While *Spas TV* primarily concentrated on the construction of the ideological imagery surrounding the *HIS*, the MSS focused on furthering society's mobilization and garnering support for Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Following the scheme of sacralization presented earlier in the chapter, the flash mob posts were analyzed through four main perceptions of the flag: *spiritual warfare*, *holy protection*, *divine origin* and *miraculous capacity*. As the analysis reveals, the MSS appeal to two main perceptions of the flag – *spiritual warfare* and *holy protection* – to sacralize the war and support the armed forces (Figure 3).

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29 MSS leader on the importance of the flag for unity and victory, <https://t.me/sorok4orussia/41869>

Figure 3: The flag of HIS in the sacralization scheme of Sorok Sorokov's Telegram channel.



In both online and offline activities, the group positioned the *HIS* as a sign of God's presence, God's warriors and God's territory (Holy Rus). While the MSS defined the flash mob as a project aimed at the resurrection of Holy Rus, the *HIS* flag symbolically demarcated the entire territory of Ukraine as a part of Holy Rus, framing the war as the fight for Orthodox piety, moral values and Russia's idealized future: "Our flags step advance to the positions of civilizational war of thousand-year Holy Rus against Satanists." (Telegram channel) On the one hand, with the online and offline flash mob activities, the organization attempted to evoke a sense of collective mission, positioning society as a reliable support for the armed forces. On the other hand, by emphasizing the flag as *spiritual warfare*, the MSS portrayed a Russian soldier as a warrior of God's will and holy mission. The Telegram channel extensively featured photos and videos of soldiers displaying the flag *HIS* in various locations: vehicles, storehouses, prayer rooms and occupied towns. Posts depicting flags in the occupied territories of Ukraine received particular attention and engagement online, serving as markers of military might and a symbolic manifestation of Russia's permissiveness and impunity.

The display of the flag in public and private settings was also meant to signify the Orthodox piety of the Russian people. Andrey Kormuhin, the MSS leader, presented the flag as a symbol of *holy protection* over Russia: "We should all be behind this icon, we should all be behind the Savior, because we are governed by the Savior. We follow Him as a civilization. Without the Savior, we will all perish – both spiritually and physically."<sup>30</sup> The flash mob's organizers drew an image of Russians as a God-chosen people who should trust in God's will and see the war as a part of God's holy plan. Similarly, in military contexts, the flag signified God's protection

<sup>30</sup> Kormuhin about the protection of the flag Holy Face <https://t.me/sorok4orussia/46550>

for the Russian armed forces as "Christ's warriors". In addition, Telegram channel posts accentuated this perception of the *HIS* to underscore Russia's frontline dominance and present the occupation of Ukrainian territories as the "resurrection of Holy Rus" project.

The *miraculous capacity* of the *HIS* gained minimal emphasis during the flash mob, which has clear grounds: the MSS' primary aim was to mobilize Russian society in their ideological and financial support of the army. Nevertheless, the flag was presumed to mediate a power of spiritual transformation of the armed forces who may become pious, fearless and strong warriors: "The more of our kits and flags reach our fighters at the front, the more victories, spiritual growth and heroic feats will emerge. And there will be less swearing, alcohol consumption, passions and sins" (MSS Telegram, 13 October 2024). As purported evidence of God's support, the Telegram channel reposted a video from *Spas* TV journalist Golovanov,<sup>31</sup> who narrated a miraculous story about the myrrh-streaming of the *HIS* flag following an intense frontline combat.

Finally, the perception of the *HIS* as an object of *divine origin*, requiring special religious behavior, was not widely presented in the flash mob's performance. The MSS omitted traditional rituals associated with treating the flag as holy or 'turning' it into holy. For example, the flags were not blessed before entering the offline spaces of flash mob participants. Similarly, the group leaders did not give any instructions on religious practices associated with the *HIS* (e.g. reading a prayer to Jesus Christ, or crossing oneself before the image). Instead, the MSS prioritized the visibility of the flags in secular settings, asking participants to display the *HIS* in crowded and public locations.

## Conclusions

The ROC's aim to construct a unifying symbol around the icon of *HIS* that would serve as a material signifier of the 'holy war' relies significantly on the digital space. Social media provide the church with numerous opportunities to engage closely with society, monitor subtle shifts in public opinions and address undesirable reactions or tendencies. Through the technical affordances and flexibility of digital media, the ROC appears capable of dynamic revision and shaping its military discourse: by involving new religious actors, using popular social media platforms and investing in clergy education. However, the possibilities of alleged improvisation by Orthodox actors in the digital space align with the structure and ideology of the ROC. The ROC attempts to construct a digital space with its own rules, actors and objectives: one that strengthens the church's authority in society, legitimizes the

<sup>31</sup> Flag of HIS myrolybting on the frontline, 17 April, 2024, <https://t.me/s/romagolovanov>

state regime, circumscribes individuals within specific value boundaries and demarcates the images of 'inner' and 'outer' enemies. Undoubtedly, Russia's invasion of Ukraine has advanced the church's monopoly on the developments within online Orthodox activism.

First of all, the ROC's digital space significantly relies on Telegram channels, uniting diverse Orthodox activists and clergy around a shared war agenda. The analysis of the pro-war discourse points out the symphonic convergence of ideologically diverse groups within the ROC who perform varied roles, network with each other and construct multi-layered war narratives. As the study demonstrates, the church seeks to recreate its hierarchically organized system of authority within the digital realm. Consequently, digital pro-war discourse centers around several major ideological producers (approved by the church), interacting with minor ideological groups, media clusters, or individual actors. While these peripheral actors may hold divergent ideological backgrounds, the church remains tolerant to their engagement as their online contributions benefit the mainstream war narrative. Moreover, this study illustrates that ultranationalist Orthodox organizations gain increased power and visibility during the war. Their assertions of exclusive truth, Russia's superiority and restoration of the past (Pollack et al. 2023) serve as an additional powerful mechanism to mobilize Russian society and advance the pro-war agenda.

The discourse of sacralization emerges through at least three primary stages: (1) *construction of a sacral narrative* by major religious actors; (2) *mediation* and subsequent *negotiation of the narrative* by clusters of minor religious actors; and (3) *performance of the narrative*, or 'spiritual mobilization' of society across offline and online, religious and public spaces. In this study, the ROC relies heavily on *Spas TV* as the principal generator and producer of meanings and narratives of the 'holy war'. At this stage, the narrative of *HIS* as a sacral object is being constructed, discussed and revised. *Spas TV* producers attempt to contextualize it within a broader framework of collective memory and religious imagery, drawing on the audience's prior knowledge, evoking emotional response and underscoring the relevance of the *HIS* to the present. This stage also seeks to integrate the narrative of *HIS* into a vision of a better future for Russia.

Building upon this foundation, the next stage – mediation – prompts *Spas TV* journalists to distribute television content across social media platforms. This stage engages diverse media participants: clergy, celebrities, political actors, military bloggers, Orthodox activists and believers. In this setting, Orthodox influencers function as 'network marketers' who popularize and distribute the ROC's products while simultaneously deriving their personal benefits online. However, this distribution does not imply creative input from participants. As the study reveals, the narrative of *HIS* is integrated into previously well-established religious and national imagery, specifically, the cult of St Alexander Nevsky and the cult of Victory

Day. In other words, the *HIS* flag is a constructive element of a 'great story' or a 'mythologized vision of the history of the nation' (Niedźwiedź 2010: 45), actively promoted by the ROC and the state over the past decades. Digital space facilitates the reconstruction of these myths during wartime, their adaptation for various audiences and the continuous addition of new meanings and perceptions.

Finally, the online narrative of *HIS* extends beyond digital spaces, culminating in collective performances – a defining feature of the "third space of digital religion". As a signifier of the 'holy war', the flag evokes a collective response aimed at the legitimization of Russia's aggression. Religious actors employ digital technologies to exploit the object as a tool of 'spiritual mobilization' across various offline contexts, including public, private, military, political and religious domains. Despite these varied contexts, the *HIS* signifies a collective space for expressing national unity, a pro-war stance and belonging to the ROC.

## Acknowledgements

This research was supported by the Philipp Schwartz Fellowship (Alexander von Humboldt Foundation). I want to express my deep gratitude to the Interdisciplinary Center for European Studies (ICES) at the Europe-Universität Flensburg for their invaluable support during my research stay.

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