

## Opposition to Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia: The Cultural Roots

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**ABSTRACT:** To understand why the Jehovah's Witnesses are persecuted in Russia, the broader background of Russia's history should be considered. From the time of Peter the Great, the country has been deeply divided between an elite looking at the West, and the peasant masses, supported by some intellectuals, that resisted the Westernizing reforms and believed in an eternal Russia alternative to the Western values. The latter incarnation of the Russian ethos prevailed in the Communist Revolution. After the fall of Communism, many in Russia and the West hoped that the pro-Western forces might once again prevail. In fact, Putin came, and built a hybrid system with some (but less and less) elements coming from pre-Soviet Russia, and others (more and more) derived from Soviet Russia. In this context, any religious organization other than the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) came under severe scrutiny. The ROC itself, however, is losing momentum, and increasingly appears as a giant with feet of clay.

**KEYWORDS:** Anti-Western Feelings in Russia, Russian Anti-Western Propaganda, Religious Freedom in Russia, Russian Orthodox Church, Putin's Religious Policy, Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia.

### *Why Russia?*

Russia is very much in the news today, from the Alexei Navalny case to the support offered to President Alexander Lukashenko of Belarus. We all have opinions on Russia and its main figure—Vladimir Putin. To some, Russia represents a major challenge. They would mention the occupation of Crimea, the heavy involvement in the conflict in Ukraine, the support offered to President Bashar al-Assad in Syria—and the list is longer.

Some believe that Russia is meddling in most of the Western countries' internal affairs, seeking to destabilize and sowing discontent, with the NATO and the EU as its major targets.

The most recent of several documents produced in the West, the report on Russia by the Intelligence and Security Committee of the British Parliament, dated July 21, 2020, denounced widespread Russian “promotion of disinformation and its attempts at broader political influence overseas.” Before focusing on how Russian propaganda influenced the UK 2016 Brexit referendum, the report mentioned several other examples:

- use of state-owned traditional media: open source studies have shown serious distortions in the coverage provided by Russian state-owned international broadcasters such as RT and Sputnik;
- “bots” and “trolls”: open source studies have identified significant activity on social media;
- “hack and leak”: the US has publicly avowed that Russia conducted “hack and leak” operations in relation to its presidential election in 2016, and it has been widely alleged that Russia was responsible for a similar attack on the French presidential election in 2017; and
- “real life” political interference: it has been widely reported that Kremlin-linked entities have made “soft loans” to the (then) *Front National* in France, seemingly at least in part as a reward for the party having supported Russia’s annexation of Crimea, and the GRU sponsored a failed coup in Montenegro in October 2016—an astonishingly bold move in a country just a few months from its accession to NATO (Intelligence and Security Committee of the [UK] Parliament 2020, 9).

The purposes of these massive Russian propaganda and interference campaigns were explained as follows:

- direct support of a pro-Russian narrative in relation to particular events (whilst some of the outright falsehoods which are put forward may not be widely believed, they may still succeed in casting doubt on the true account of events: when people start to say “You don’t know what to believe” or “They’re all as bad as each other,” the disinformers are winning);
- direct support of Russia’s preferred outcome in relation to an overseas election or political issue; and
- general poisoning of the political narrative in the West by fomenting political extremism and “wedge issues,” and by the “astroturfing” of Western public opinion; and general discrediting of the West (Intelligence and Security Committee of the [UK] Parliament 2020, 9–10).

Of course, the report also noted,

Russia's disinformation efforts against the West are dwarfed by those which the Russian state conducts against its own population (Intelligence and Security Committee of the [UK] Parliament 2020, 9).

There are others, however, and it appears they are more and more in the West, who regard Russia as a model country, where a traditional understanding of the family is preserved, and there is no same-sex marriage. Many would argue that Putin is an exceptional leader, a sincere believer in God, and a fierce fighter for traditional values (Verpoest 2017). This image is actively promoted by Putin himself. He proclaimed in 2013 that,

We know that there are more and more people in the world who support our position on defending traditional values that have made up the spiritual and moral foundation of civilization in every nation for thousands of years: the values of traditional families, real human life, including religious life, not just material existence but also spirituality (Putin 2013).

But what exactly this country—Russia—is, and why we all have such diverse opinions about it? What is this country, which bans, criminalizes, and tortures devotees of the Jehovah's Witnesses, accusing them of being an “extremist group”?

Other groups that are persecuted in Russia include Scientology (Falikov 2018; Introvigne 2018; Zoccatelli 2018) and the Muslim followers of the Turkish mystic Said Nursi (1877–1960) (Kravchenko 2018). But there are more who are about to fall out of the good graces of the government, without having committed any other crime than just not being part of the Russian Orthodox Church, or being perceived as not supportive of the Putin regime. The Roman Catholic Church continues a precarious existence (Rozanskij 2020). And certainly, we do not expect members of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine to be allowed to freely practice their faith in Russia—or in Crimea (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, Crimean Field Mission 2015)—, particularly after it severed its ties with the Russian Orthodox Church in 2018.

To understand what this country is, we cannot apply our non-Russian way of thinking. Russians like to say that one would never be able to understand Russia with the mind, Russia can be understood through the heart only.

### *The Third Rome*

In many ways, Russia is a deeply spiritual country. Nonetheless, this declarative statement should be compared with a reality that is much harsher and less spiritual. The reason why the Russian reality may be difficult to understand is not because Russia is somehow “more spiritual,” in comparison with the Western world. It is because, since ancient times, Russia was closed into itself. This situation persisted through the centuries, and in particular in the Soviet era. Different regimes developed and perpetuated an entire system of belief that Russia is divine, and the West is evil, the West being more recently identified with the United States and their allies.



**Figure 1.** Ivan the Terrible (played by Nikolay Konstantinovich Cherkasov, 1903–1966) proclaims his faith in the Third Rome in Eisenstein’s movie.

After Constantinople (now Istanbul), called by the Eastern Orthodox “the second Rome,” fell to the Ottoman Turks in 1453, the Russians proclaimed that Moscow had become “the third Rome,” the only remaining center of true Christianity (Poe 2001). At the end of the first part of the film *Ivan the Terrible* by Sergei Eisenstein (1898–1948), which was released in Soviet theaters in 1944,

i.e. during World War II, which Russians call the Great Patriotic War, Czar Ivan the Terrible (1530–1584) pronounces these words, which may be apocryphal but capture a continuing claim in Russian history: “Two Romes fell, but Moscow, the third Rome, will go on, and there will not be a fourth Rome!” (Eisenstein 1944).

More than five centuries later, we still hear that Russia is the only remaining holder of real values, while the Western world is possessed by exclusively materialistic ideas, and worships only one god—money.

### *The Cat and the Mice: Peter the Great*

Russia is an entire world in its own, with a specific worldview and mentality. This is rooted in Russian history. Russian nationalists are painfully aware that, for centuries, Russia was still underdeveloped and primitive, while the Western world had developed a higher culture and civilization. To open Russia to the world, the first and greatest efforts were undertaken by the most famous Tsar of the Russian Empire, Peter the Great (1682–1725), who ruled at the end of 17<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup>. He had the ambition to transform medieval Russia into a major European power, at the image of France and other flourishing European countries. He deployed all possible efforts for a rapprochement between Russia and the West. He moved the capital from Moscow to Saint Petersburg (closer to the West), built the city with the help of Western architects, and led what some have called a “cultural revolution,” aimed at modernizing Russia based on the Western models of the early Enlightenment (Miliukov 1963; Cracraft 2006). The effect of Peter’s reforms is still felt in Russia today (Riasanovsky 1985).

Unfortunately, Peter imposed most of his reforms with violence and brutality. Consequently, his reformist effort was met with resistance (Anisimov 1993). This crucial passage in Russian history resulted in a deeply divided country. The elite—the aristocracy, the upper level classes of society, and the intelligentsia—quite eagerly accepted and adopted Western values and ways of living. The working class, and the peasants and the serfs—sometimes collectively called mujiks by Western observers—, kept their older values and lifestyles (Kahan 1966). With time, these deep-rooted divisions between the cities and the

countryside, and between the rich and the educated and the poor, became even deeper.

An immensely popular, although repeatedly banned, *lubok* (popular print) of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, *The Mice Are Burying the Cat*, depicts the peasants of the different Russian regions as mice, and Peter the Great as the cat. The meaning was that during his lifetime, Peter terrorized the peasants with his Westernizing reforms but in the end the old, eternal Russia will prevail. and the peasants will have the last laugh (Alaniz 2010, 23).

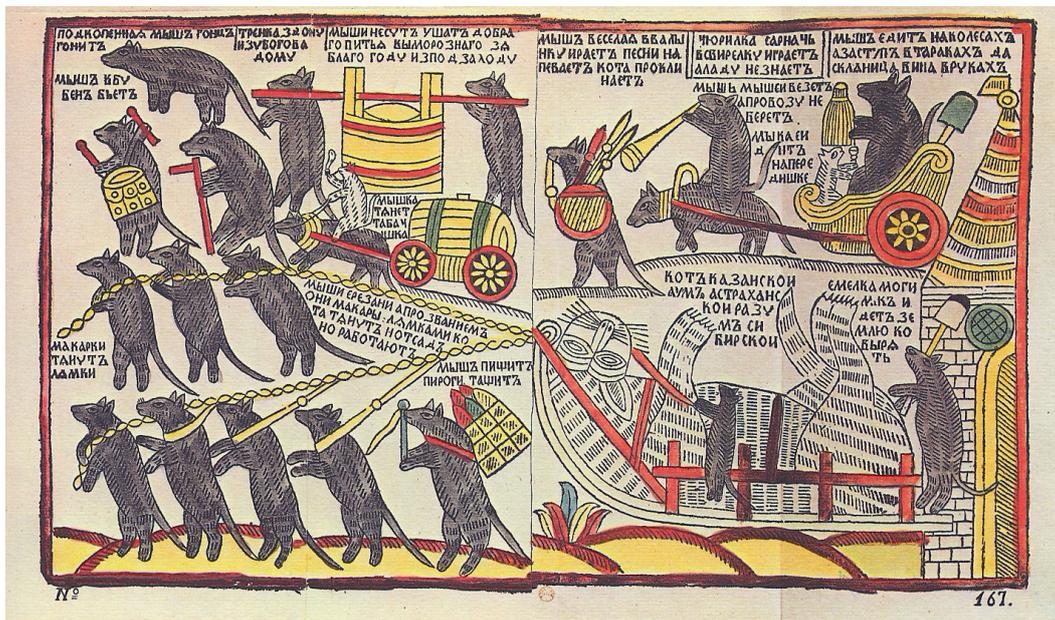


Figure 2. *The Mice Are Burying the Cat*, print, circa 1760.

### *The Revolution and Soviet Russia*

Eventually, these divisions and complete cut-off between two parts of society created the conditions for the Russian Revolution of 1917. Extreme poverty, rampant injustice, total neglect and ignorance of the living conditions of the lower levels of society by the elite, played a consolidating role, and helped to mobilize the peasants and the working class to revolt and to take power, although the top-down role of a small but determined Communist intellectual elite was also crucial (McMeekin 2017).

During the so-called Proletarian Revolution, and the bloody Civil War that followed, the country was destroyed. The Russian Civil War was fought between

the “Whites” (i.e. the richer, more Westernized population) and the “Reds” (i.e. the “proletarians” and mujiks). An important aspect to remember is that this war was not only about power and control, but also about values (Lazarski 1992). And here lies an essential point, which is important even today, and might help to understand certain trends in Russia.

After the victory of the Reds, everything—and I underline, *everything*—that had been accepted by the rich, educated and powerful, which at the same time meant the Westernized part of the Russian society, was declared obsolete and harmful to a new Russian (or, rather, Soviet) society. The aristocrats, the rich, the intelligentsia, and the clergy became “enemies of the people.” It is especially important to remember that the Russian Orthodox Church was an integral part of the “old” power, closely connected with the Emperor, and part of the repressive apparatus of Imperial Russia. By building a “new” society, the Soviets banned the Russian Orthodox Church from the social life of the new Soviet state. Most of the churches were destroyed, and the priests were killed or sent to Gulags (Pospelovsky 1987–88).

Atheism became the new religion; the Church and God had been replaced by a new God—the Communist Party and its leaders (Powell 1975). The personality cult of the Soviet leaders reached grotesque excesses under Iosif Stalin (1878–1953), but was always part of the regime.

The hatred of the rich and the educated, which represented in the minds of the new Soviets the Western values, thus the enemy, was further amplified because of the support offered by the USA, Great Britain, France, and Japan to the White Army fighting against the Reds in the Russian Civil War (Carley 1989). It clearly put “us” against “them.”

Another decisive historical factor was World War II. This war was fought with unspeakable sacrifices by Russian and Soviet peoples. The war was won by the Soviet State, but in order to justify the unjustifiable human cost, Stalin and its regime built an entire narrative on the Great Patriotic War about how good the Soviets and Russians were, and how they had to fight not only against the Nazis but at the same time against the evil plans of the Western world, led by the Americans (Tumarkin 2003). This was followed by the last passage in our history—the Cold War, which required, again, from the Russians substantial economic and social sacrifices, demanded in the name of “resisting the dangers coming from the Evil West.”

These and other episodes of history perpetuated a fear and hatred of the Western world, which had a longstanding impact on Soviet mentality, and persists even today. Putin's Russia is a kind of hybrid, with some, but less and less, elements coming from pre-Soviet Russia, and more and more elements derived from Soviet Russia.

### *The Early 1990s: A Time of Hopes*

In the 1990s, after the fall of the Soviet Union, Russia underwent another major transformation. What had been a part of the Soviet Union became, once again, a Russian state. This raised the hopes of those, including the leaders of the Russian Orthodox Church, who during the Soviet time had suffered severe persecutions, deportations, executions, and property confiscations. These people were eager to be rehabilitated, and wanted their true stories to be told and acknowledged. They were seeking their right place in the society, and called for justice to be restored. For most of them, even more important was that the unity of all Russians be restored.

Some expected a rebirth of the old Russia shaped by the reforms of Peter the Great, which would become again part of the Western world. This position was often found among the highly educated and liberal elites. They were seeking democracy, freedom of speech and assembly, religious liberty. They perceived Westerners as their friends and allies. Immediately after the fall of the Soviet Union, the relationship between the new Russia and the West substantially improved. The world was expecting a new Russia to emerge, embracing democracy, respecting human rights and the rule of law (Ellison 2006). Most treaties and agreements between Russia and the West were signed in these years. To encourage Russia to pursue this path of rapprochement, it was accepted into the exclusive club of G8.

At the same time, there were many in Russia who had sincerely believed in the “proletarian values” and the Soviet system. Those who were strongly attached to the Soviet past, and who were so proud of their victory in the Great Patriotic War, were deeply traumatized by losing the “grandeur” of the Soviet Union, the comfort of thinking that everything was perfect, and that Russia was always right. For these people, it was extremely traumatic to realize that the “glory” of the Soviet Union was based on lies, torture, and repression. For them, the dissolution

of the Soviet Union was perceived as a deeply humiliating defeat. They were reluctant to accept the emerging new Russia, and its opening to the West, which for so many years was perceived as a fierce enemy. They perceived the universal values of freedom, democracy, respect for human rights, as foreign and unnecessary. A considerable part of the Russian society kept a strong resentment towards the new political system, the opening of Russia to the world, and the efforts to adopt Western values (Langdon and Tismaneanu 2020, 35–53).

### *Enter Putin*

When it seemed highly likely that these two irreconcilable parts of the Russian society would clash against one another, Putin came. Putin himself, being part and parcel of the Soviet system, understood these deeply divisive contradictions of the country, and the threats they represented for the unity of Russia (Belton 2020). As a first step, he sought reconciliation between the two factions of society. An answer to the historical fact that Soviets committed crimes against their own people was found in the theory that Russians might have been on both sides of the trench, but those who really were instigating killings were—foreigners of all kinds. The simple logic was: all Russians—White or Red—were (and are) “good,” all problems came from the “foreigners.”



**Figure 3.** From *Admiral* (2008).

There is a significant scene in the 2008 Russian movie *Admiral*, directed by Andrei Kravchuk. The film is a biography of Alexander Kolchak (1874–1920), the main leader of the White Army in the Civil War. After one of Kolchak’s last battles, Orthodox priests come to bury the dead. One priest asks another whether they should also bury the atheist Reds, rather than the Christian Whites only. The answer is that they should all be buried together. White or Red, they are all sons of Mother Russia. Later in the movie, Kolchak is executed by the Reds, who are almost reluctant to perform something they believe is needed for the sake of the Revolution. And they make sure that Kolchak understands that he dies because he has been betrayed by his Western allies (Kravchuk 2008).

Besides a Russian national reconciliation, and a reconciliation with the past, Putin had other major ambitions—to make Russia a superpower again. Unfortunately, being himself a product of the Soviet system, Putin maintains the Soviet mentality and understanding of the world, which basically means seeing West as an enemy to be fought. Furthermore, his clear ambition is to regain control of the Soviet Union’s space. Slowly but steadily, the new version of the Soviet system in the shape of new Russia is developing—Stalin is being rehabilitated, the Soviet anthem has been reintroduced, Putin’s United Russia is becoming the only ruling party, freedom of speech is being suppressed, opponents are eliminated or marginalized. Slowly but steadily, the grand dream of the 1990s about a new Russia is dying, and some kind of reincarnated Soviet Russia is emerging (Langdon and Tismaneanu 2020). The packaging might look new, but inside is the same old Soviet content, although transformed: the economy is controlled by those who are friendly to Putin and his United Russia party (Belton 2020), and only those religious or spiritual groups that are praising Putin, Russia, and the system are tolerated. Any non-Russian presence is feared, and remains under severe scrutiny. Religious groups with links to the US and other Western countries either are subject to severe limitations or have been banned and their properties confiscated, as is the case for the Jehovah’s Witnesses, which were accused of being “extremist” and “liquidated” (Kravchenko 2018; USCIRF 2020).

In Russia, there are three major powers ruling the country and tightening its grip: first, the political elite in the form of the party United Russia, which is unquestionably submissive to its leader Putin; second, the oligarchs, who hold the economic power and control almost everything in the country; and third, the

Russian Orthodox Church (ROC). All these three forces are very tightly interconnected, and need each other. The ROC leaders became so absorbed by all this power and influence that they neglected to reform themselves. They preside on the same old-fashioned, didactic institution cherishing its close ties with rulers, as it always was in Russian history, and often neglecting the contact with their people. The ROC hierarchy became an essential player in the State's system, meaning Putin and its oligarchs, defending its interests internally and internationally.

### *The Church: A Giant with Feet of Clay?*

Russia, though, is not as strong and monolithic as some think. Deep down, Russia is full of internal contradictions and deep-rooted tensions, and only a full control at all levels of life guarantees the unity of the state. To maintain stability, the authorities should keep a tight control on everything and everybody.

The ROC is an essential tool in trying to keep the country together and implement the state's agenda. Any competition from any other religious group is simply not tolerable. The reason given is that to be Russian, one should have close ties with the land, speak Russian, and be part of the Russian Orthodox Church. At the same time, Putin needs the ROC to spread a good message about him and his party. The ROC is expected to keep control over people's minds. It was supposed to be a win-win situation on both sides, a holy alliance indeed (Human Rights Without Frontiers Correspondent in Russia 2012).

In the 1990s, the Russian Orthodox Church was part and parcel of the revival of Russia. At that time, the ROC attracted a massive influx of people. To be religious at that time was the same as seeking freedom and respect of human rights after the Soviet repression. Churches were full of people, young and old, educated and simple people from the villages. To be religious and to be politically liberal at the same time was entirely normal. But slowly, the ROC was submerged by its own ambitions to be rich and powerful, and lost contact with many devotees. The relationship became a monologue instead of dialogue. Now, churches are largely empty, and the religion is perceived as a business of old ladies. The new generation of Russians once again is becoming more and more secular. Even though 79 percent of Russians declare themselves Orthodox Christians in the polls, most of the churches, which were renovated, rebuilt, or

built anew, remain empty (Baunov 2019). Nevertheless, the ROC continues building more and more churches.

This disconnect was perfectly illustrated by the massive demonstrations in May 2019 in Yekaterinburg, which is one of the most important cities of Russia, and where during Revolution the Romanov family was executed. The discontent and protests were provoked by the ROC's plans to build yet another church in one of the last remaining public squares (Rainsford 2019). As peaceful protests were going unabated and growing, finally the authorities decided to freeze the project. According to the polls, 74 percent of city's population was against building a church in that square (*BBC News* 2020).

This episode shows that, notwithstanding all the official propaganda, still there is a spirit of liberty that nobody is able to control. However, as long as the system will maintain its tight control on society, there is no chance that this spirit will prevail. On the contrary, in my personal opinion, the persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses and other religious groups, perceived as agents of the United States or as enemies of the ROC and the government, will continue. There is little to be done from outside to change it—unless the change will come from inside.

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