

The War in Ukraine and Russian Conspiracy Theories About the Jehovah's Witnesses

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ABSTRACT: After the war in Ukraine, sensational revelations were spread by Russian anti-cultists presenting the Jehovah's Witnesses as American or Ukrainian agents preparing riots and even a coup against the Putin regime in Russia. These theories may look like the ramblings of lunatics. However, the lunatics are not isolated. They are supported by mainline Russian media and by an international anti-cult network abroad. While obviously false and inherently ridiculous, such conspiracy theories should be understood within the larger framework of Russian campaigns to justify the war in Ukraine and international anti-cult efforts targeting the Jehovah's Witnesses.

KEYWORDS: Jehovah's Witnesses, Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia, Conspiracy Theories About the War in Ukraine, Alexander Korelov, FECRIS, Anti-Cult Movements in Russia.

The Sensational Revelations of Alexander Korelov

In 2022, Alexander Korelov, the official lawyer for the Russian national anti-cult organization RATsIRS, which at that time was affiliated with the European anti-cult federation FECRIS (“Информационно-консультационный центр по вопросам сектантства” 2023), launched a sensational revelation on Russian media. He claimed that, after it was “liquidated” and banned in Russia in 2017,

the extremist cult of the Jehovah's Witnesses did not cease to operate. As we expected, they went underground, holding their meetings in safe houses, receiving instructions from the American center through instant messengers, blogs, and so on. But lately the picture has changed. From the leading centers located in the United States, instructions are sent to the illegal divisions of the cult in our country through “closed” channels, which indicate an attempt by the cult to organize a coup d'état in Russia like the Maidan

in the now former Ukraine (“Свидетели Иеговы готовят государственный переворот” 2022).

A coup against Putin, Korelov said,

is precisely what is being intensively prepared in the milieu of cults. Now we have absolutely certain data that Jehovah's Witnesses are turning from an extremist organization into a terrorist one. We warned about this already several years ago (“Свидетели Иеговы готовят государственный переворот” 2022).

Perhaps overlooking the fact that the Jehovah's Witnesses moved their headquarters from Brooklyn to Warwick in 2016–2017, Korelov insists that

the leaders from the Brooklyn center are turning Russian adherents into cannon fodder to achieve their goals. Just like in Ukraine, the United States is fighting with the hands of Ukrainians and mercenaries, so in Russia they are ready to waste biomaterial they do not need in the form of adherents of this cult. The American leadership of Jehovah's Witnesses is made of people unencumbered by moral standards. They are ready for anything. At the same time, ideological support is being launched among American-sponsored religious scholars, who have already started talking about the need for a “rehabilitation” of the Jehovah's Witnesses (“Свидетели Иеговы готовят государственный переворот” 2022).

The Jehovah's Witnesses were accused of operating in Russia

“sleeping” extremist cells under the leadership of their center in the United States. And the fact that the Brooklyn [again] center of this cult is under the complete control of the American secret services is no longer a secret (“Свидетели Иеговы готовят государственный переворот” 2022).

After he was ridiculed internationally and received some criticism even domestically, Korelov granted an interview to the national magazine *Izvestia* claiming that he had now found the smoking gun. He stated that in the remote Yamalo-Nenets Autonomous Okrug on the Arctic Circle (the same place where FECRIS dignitaries gathered for a conference with Russian anti-cultists in 2017: European Federation for Freedom of Belief 2017), mysterious men were knocking at the doors of the residents and asking, “Where can I find the answer to the question about happiness?” (Petrov 2022a).

According to Korelov the mysterious “philosophers” were Jehovah's Witnesses, who had “received instructions from the center through closed communication channels” (Petrov 2022a).

The men did not identify themselves as Jehovah's Witnesses. However, Korelov said,

Simply put, Jehovah's Witnesses are required to resume walking around the entrances without directly naming their organization. Why is this being done? First, in order to resume their activities. And secondly, they are given operative instructions on organizing protests, including against the conduct of the Special Military Operation. That is, our fears about the danger of this organization are confirmed. The structure was essentially in a dormant mode, and today it is starting to show activity. According to my information, members of Jehovah's Witnesses are asked whether they are ready for active protests, including physical resistance to representatives of law enforcement agencies (Petrov 2022a).

Even the *Izvestia* journalist objected that there are not enough Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia to organize mass protests and overthrow the government. They are more than many believe, answered Korelov, and they will not act alone:

If we add to this [the number of the Jehovah's Witnesses] that other cults, including the neo-Pentecostals and the Scientologists, will be involved in the protests, then we get a fairly significant number of people (Petrov 2022a).

enough to create serious trouble.

Korelov's theory may identify him as a madman, but he is not an isolated madman. Several media and the main anti-cult websites in Russia reprinted his interviews (see e.g. Petrov 2022b). Korelov had even been invited in 2017 to speak at a main FECRIS event in the Belgian Parliament, although recently he became such an embarrassment that FECRIS manipulated the program of the conference as it appears in its website by retroactively eliminating Korelov's name from the list of speakers (Introvigne 2023).

An International Anti-Cult Network

The theory that the Jehovah's Witnesses are preparing an anti-Putin coup is somewhat extreme. However, other items of Russian propaganda about the Jehovah's Witnesses are taken seriously internationally and spread through the anti-cult network. This emphasizes the growing and dangerous influence of an international anti-cult movement. Their subtle collusion with media and politics allows not only an unstoppable spread of lies, hatred, and intolerance against those they label as members of "cults" but also incites mentally unstable people to act.

On March 9, 2023, a man entered a Kingdom Hall of the Jehovah's Witnesses in Hamburg, Germany, and opened fire with a semi-automatic gun, killing seven members of the congregation and an unborn child. When the police arrived and were about to arrest him, he shot himself. While the real political problem was why a man who had exhibited obvious symptoms of mental disease had been legally allowed to buy and carry a deadly weapon, anti-cultists focused on the fact that the assassin was an ex-member of the Jehovah's Witnesses. They speculated that his mind has probably been destabilized either by his permanence in a "cult" or by the fact that those who leave the Jehovah's Witnesses are ostracized or "shunned" by their former co-religionists, who are counseled not to associate with ex-members. Several German and international media took the anti-cultists seriously, and started suggesting that the Jehovah's Witnesses of Hamburg were somewhat responsible for what had happened to them (see e.g. Dahlinger 2023; Schaaf 2023; Zanni 2023).

What was, in fact, missing in the media coverage of the Hamburg shooting was the possibility that the criminal had been excited by the anti-cult propaganda. The Hamburg shooter, just by being German, was obviously exposed to the media slander against "cults" and the Jehovah's Witnesses prevailing in his country, and he lived in a city, Hamburg, where some of these campaigns have been officially sponsored by the local government (Respinti 2020). Yet, the negative role of media is so strong that they were able to turn the blame from perpetrator to victims.

Anti-cult movements in various countries, which widely differ politically, ideologically, and economically, are collaborating so closely and crafting together their poisonous messages against non-majority religions. What do you think today may unite Russia, China, France, Germany and Japan? The right answer is, their joint fight against the so-called "cults." They combat them for very different reasons, but at the end of the day they craft the messages against the so-called "cults" in a similar manner. Consequently, through compliant media, these messages are effortlessly crossing all borders (Berzano et al. 2022a, 2022b). It is amazing to see, for instance, how once a negative message against the Jehovah's Witnesses started being spread in Russia, it was exported to democratic countries such as Germany, Japan, and even the United Kingdom.

When Russia in 2017 named the Jehovah's Witnesses an extremist group, liquidated their organization, and confiscated their properties, it seemed

something so illogical that I believed it will stop at the borders of Russia and perhaps some satellite states. On the contrary, more and more governments and media around the world are accepting unfounded accusations against the Jehovah's Witnesses. This propaganda may even excite feeble minds and result in deadly attacks.

I could easily understand why a state-sponsored campaign was created and struck the Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia. Why the same arguments used in Russia against the Jehovah's Witnesses are gaining momentum in Europe and beyond, was totally eluding me. What does this connection mean?

As I have argued elsewhere, Russia is and was so much against religious organizations such as the Jehovah's Witnesses because it wants to protect the monopoly of the Russian Orthodox Church in a country where there is a very close connection between the state and the church. Since the time of Czar Peter the Great (1672–1725), the Russian Orthodox Church was part and parcel of the state apparatus. Its role was twofold. It was supposed to spread a message favorable to the state's policies to the Russian masses, and at the same time to collect information about the people's mood and report it to the powers that be. This role never changed (Šorytė 2020, 2023).

When President Putin introduced the notion of “spiritual security,” he confirmed once again that only the Russian Orthodox Church is and can be the religious guardian of the Russian soul. In addition to the Russian Orthodox Church, ethnic religions are tolerated if they cater to ethnic minorities such as Muslims in Chechnya or Buddhists in the East, teach them to support the regime and obediently fight and die in its wars, and do not try to convert Orthodox believers. Any other religion or spiritual movement is a deviation from the Russian identity and should be contained and fought. The first in the row targeted by this fight, much before the war in Ukraine started, have been the Jehovah's Witnesses, because their headquarters are in the United States, which is perceived as the largest enemy of Russia. Many others followed suit.

Changes After the War in Ukraine

In other lectures and articles, I repeatedly discussed these aspects, trying to explain the Russian mentality and fears (Šorytė 2020, 2023). But after the

aggression against Ukraine started, many things inside Russia changed. This took Western and international anti-cultists by surprise, as evidenced by the crisis in the FECRIS, the European umbrella organization of anti-cult movements. Russian organizations and activists had a prominent role in the FECRIS, but they became an embarrassment after they started supporting Putin's war in Ukraine. FECRIS took some cosmetic measures to hide its Russian connections but waited until March 2023 to exclude the Russian branches from its affiliated organizations ("Информационно-консультационный центр по вопросам сектантства" 2023). However FECRIS did not change its ideological attitude, which remains like Russia's and sometimes relies on propaganda created in Russia.

The real reason of the Russian aggression against Ukraine is cynically simple. Russia wants to bring back Ukraine under the Russian control, thus putting in place one piece of its big puzzle of the reconstruction of the former Soviet Union. It is as simple as that. This truth, however, is hidden by propaganda under arguments that are continuously changing and try to supply an ethical and moral justification for what is in fact just brutal aggression.

Different arguments target different audiences. The world is full of anti-Americans, and they are told that Ukrainians are just fighting a proxy war on behalf of the United States, whose aim is to contain and destroy Russia. When addressing right-wing audiences, the Russian propaganda would insist that it is fighting the corrupt West and defending family values against a LGBT "invasion" that has reached Ukraine and may enter Russia itself. But when talking to left-wing interlocutors, the same propaganda would downplay the LGBT argument and argue that a good number of Ukrainians, including their leading politicians, are "Nazis," and Russia is really fighting a resurgence of Nazism in Europe. When reaching pious Christian churchgoers, Russia would say that it is fighting "Satanism" and that there are many "Satanists" in Ukraine, although the word "Satanism" should be decoded and sometimes is just a metaphor for LGBT rights. And when talking to anti-cultists, they would say that the U.S. and Ukraine use "cults" as a weapon against Russia.

The Russian anti-cult movement, which in the last thirty years has been alternatively dismissed as marginal or unleashed by the authorities, depending on what was more convenient in a particular political situation, contributes the argument that "cults," since the Maidan revolution of 2014 and perhaps even

earlier, dominate the Ukrainian political life, are the American tool of choice to excite anti-Russian feelings in Ukraine (Berzano et al. 2022b), and are infiltrated into the Russian territory to create riots and commit acts of sabotage. As usual, the Jehovah's Witnesses are presented as the main culprits.

The question remains, though, whether these stories are created for domestic Russian consumption or for international propaganda. My answer is that they serve both purposes. Domestically, they reinforce an old Russian narrative that has constantly been mobilized in times of war, that Russian is under siege by enemies who use as tools the Western idea of democracy, immorality, and “bad” religion, meaning religions perceived as being in competition with the Russian Orthodox Church.

At the same time, Russia desperately needs friends in the West that would put pressure on their governments and ask them to stop supporting Ukraine. For this purpose, anti-cultists and opponents of the Jehovah's Witnesses are as good as anybody else.

Russian anti-cultists are less important in Russia than they believe themselves to be. However, they are supported and financed by the Kremlin and the Russian Orthodox Church because they create sympathy for Russia, and antipathy for the allegedly “cult-friendly” Ukraine. They spread these theories in the international anti-cult network, which has close ties with the government in France, with important politicians in Germany, Japan, and other countries, and with media everywhere.

The Russian Orthodox Church itself is part of this propaganda machine both domestically and internationally. For instance, it tries to sell the Russian version of what is happening in Ukraine, through its ecumenical connections, to the World Council of Churches and even to the Vatican and the Pope, with some success.

Originally, the Jehovah's Witnesses were targeted and finally “liquidated” in Russia because the Russian Orthodox Church perceived them as successful competitors and perhaps because somebody had an interest in acquiring their valuable real estate properties. After the war started, they became part of a propaganda narrative that claims that Russia is not the aggressor but is defending itself against the aggression of forces that threaten its “spiritual security” and

want to overthrow its government, including LGBT activists, Nazis, Satanists—and the Jehovah's Witnesses.

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