

Russian Anti-Scientology Technology and the Ukrainian War

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ABSTRACT: From the early 1990s in Russia the study of “cults” with the aim of eradicating them has been presented as a “science” inspiring a specific legal and administrative technology. Using the Church of Scientology as a case study, the paper claims that this combination of (pseudo-) science and technology in Russia went through three different phases: “sectology” and “spiritual security” in the 1990s; “extremism studies” and anti-extremism laws in the 2000s; and “destructology” and statutes against “undesirable organizations” in the 2010s, with harsher measures introduced after the war of aggression against Ukraine started in 2022. Scientology was declared an “undesirable organization” in 2021, which offers to the Russian state new tools of repression after the law on such groups was amended in 2022.

KEYWORDS: Church of Scientology, Scientology in Russia, Spiritual Security, Anti-Extremism Laws in Russia, Destructology, Alexander Dvorkin, Alexander Novopashin, Roman Silantsev.

Introduction

American scholar Michael Ashcraft, in his seminal history of the academic study of new religious movements, distinguishes between the mainline “new religious movements studies” and “cultic studies.” The latter were cultivated by a tiny group of scholars that, unlike the overwhelming majority of their colleagues, maintained that “cults” were different from legitimate religious and used “brainwashing.” “Cultic studies,” Ashcraft wrote, were never accepted as “mainstream scholarship.” They continued as “a project shared by a small cadre of committed scholars” but not endorsed by “the larger academic community, nationally and internationally.” “Cultic studies” scholars live in their own bubble, and only rarely appear in mainline conferences about new religious movements or are published in the corresponding journals. Yet, they remain persuaded that

“cultic studies” are, in their own right, part of “science,” something their mainstream colleagues would deny (Ashcraft 2018, 9).

Ashcraft wrote about Europe and North America. In Russia, the situation was slightly different. While a handful of Russian academics, most of whom have had serious problems in continuing teaching and even living in Russia, have studied new religious movements according to the scholarly criteria prevailing in the West, most of the university courses about секты (“sekty,” the Russian word for “cults”) are offered either in Orthodox seminaries or in courses leading to a degree in National Security or State Administration (Uzzell 2005; Payne 2010). This started in the Soviet Union, including at the KGB’s secret Yuri Andropov Red Banner Institute, now renamed the Academy of Foreign Intelligence, where one of the pupils was a certain Vladimir Putin.

Russian “sectology” claimed to be a science capable of inspiring a technology, i.e., a set of legal and administrative measures aimed at eradicating the “cults” and preventing them from doing harm in Russia.

Through the example of the fight against the Church of Scientology, this paper examines three different historical phases of the Russian scientific or pseudo-scientific study of “cults” and related technologies. The first was “sectology,” as it developed in 1990s, with the corresponding technology of “spiritual security.” The second was “extremism studies” in the first decade of the 21st century, with the technology of the laws and administrative measures against extremism. The third, which started in the previous decade but received a decisive impulse from the war of aggression against Ukraine, is “destructology,” with the corresponding technology of laws and actions against organizations labeled as “undesirable.” This chronology does not imply that the ideology, measures, and campaigns developed in each phase were abandoned in the subsequent one. Rather, the old “sciences” and “technologies” were maintained, while the new ones were added, thus creating a cumulative effect.

Phase 1: Sectology and Spiritual Security

“Sectology” in an anti-cult perspective was taught in Russian Orthodox universities from 1992, immediately after the Patriarchate of Moscow had reorganized its Department of Religious Education. As a 2020 report by the

United States Commission on International Religious Freedom noted, it was not a coincidence that in 1992 Alexander Dvorkin, an Orthodox activist who had left Russia in 1977 to study in the United States, where he was exposed to the ideas of the Western anti-cult movement, returned to his home country. “Sectology” as taught by the Russian Orthodox Church, which in 1999 created for Dvorkin a permanent chair on this subject at its University of Saint Tikhon in Moscow, was a strange mixture of traditional Christian apologetics against heretics and Western anti-cult ideas accusing “cults” of totalitarian control and brainwashing (Human Rights Without Frontiers Correspondent in Russia 2012; USCIRF 2020).

As a recent book by Canadian scholar Douglas Cowan illustrated, in the West there is a clear distinction between a “counter-cult” movement operated by the Christian Churches to denounce “cults” as heretics, and a secular “anti-cult” movement that is based on a non-religious criticism of the “cults” as harmful for their alleged use of “brainwashing” (Cowan 2023). As Cowan notes, the distinction between “anti-cult” and “counter-cult” movements was first proposed by Massimo Introvigne in 1993 and widely adopted by scholars in subsequent years (Cowan 2023, 28). The two movements occasionally cooperate, but just as often disagree, since the secular anti-cult accusations of using “brainwashing” and causing harm are sometimes directed by anti-cultists also against the very Christian groups to which the religious counter-cultists belong.

Not so in Russia, where the Orthodox counter-cult movement and the state-sponsored allegedly secular anti-cult campaigns are hard to distinguish. As American scholar Daniel Payne (himself an Orthodox priest, although not affiliated with the Moscow Patriarchate) wrote in an oft-quoted 2010 article, since the advent of Putin, while the Constitution proclaims the theoretical separation of church and state, in fact “the church is indeed united with the state in promoting a greater Russia through the spread of Russian Orthodox Christianity” (Payne 2010, 713). Payne also noted how in Putin’s Russia the rhetoric against “non-traditional” religions (or “cults”) used by the Orthodox Church and the allegedly secular state security and political institutions was becoming undistinguishable (Payne 2010, 715–16).

In this phase, a key role was played by Alexander Dvorkin who, based on both his affiliation with the Moscow Patriarchate and his fifteen-year training in the West, tried to establish “sectology” as part of mainline social science in Russia. Dvorkin defined what he called “totalitarian cults” as possessing four

characteristics. First, they proposed a false and manipulative interpretation of traditional religious scriptures. Dvorkin's academic background was on Christianity only, but he claimed with dubious arguments that, for example, the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, popularly known as the Hare Krishna movement, falsified and misinterpreted the ancient scriptures of Hinduism. Second, Dvorkin claimed that members of "totalitarian cults" were manipulated by the nefarious influence of a charismatic leader. Third, he used Western theories of "brainwashing" to explain how this influence worked. Fourth, he explained that after having been "brainwashed" members of "cults" often left their families and jobs to start a life separated from the "normal" society (Dvorkin 2002).

One asset of Dvorkin some appreciated in Russia was that having spent fifteen years in the United States, he spoke a decent English, which was not common among Russian Orthodox activists. He was thus used to cultivate foreign anti-cultists eliciting their sympathy for Russia and its treatment of religious minorities. In 2009, Dvorkin became Vice President of FECRIS, the main European umbrella organization of anti-cult movements, a position he maintained for twelve years until 2021. He remained in the board of directors of FECRIS even after the Ukrainian war was started in 2022 (Berzano et al. 2022). In 1999, he organized a FECRIS symposium in Saint Petersburg, which offered the opportunity for a meeting of the participants with the Minister of Justice of the Russian Federation Aleksandr Konovalov (Dvorkin and Semenov 2009).

Dvorkin also invited to Russia Western anti-cultists, including Canadian former Scientologist Gerry Armstrong and German Lutheran pastor Thomas Gandow, both fanatical opponents of the Church of Scientology (Berzano et al. 2022). It became clear to Dvorkin that Scientology was a main target of Western anti-cultists and that, to be taken seriously abroad, he and his anti-cult organizations in Russia should also conduct campaigns against the Church of Scientology.

The technology putting the pseudo-science of "sectology" into action had a specific name, "spiritual security." It consisted in measures aimed at making it difficult for "non-traditional religions" and "cults" to register and operate legally in the Russian Federation, thus ending the short period of religious liberty under Boris Yeltsin (1931–2007). In fact, freedom of religion had already been limited

by the same Yeltsin in 1997 with a more restrictive law on religions enacted under the pressure of the Orthodox Church.

The expression “spiritual security” originated, as Payne reported, from remarks made in 1996 by an influential Russian bishop who presided over the politically important diocese of Kaliningrad, Metropolitan Kirill, who would later become in 2009 the Patriarch of Moscow (Payne 2010, 714). As documents made available to scholars in the short period of the 1990s when previously secret Soviet archives were open to them, Kirill had been an agent of the KGB, which should not be confused with a simple informant, a role thousands of priests were compelled to play. As American scholar David Satter summarized, Kirill

was more than just an informer, of whom there were millions in the Soviet Union. He was an active officer of the organization (Satter 2009).

Parenthetically, Satter noted how his KGB connections helped Kirill in securing after the fall of the Soviet Union a deal that greatly helped his career, under which the state granted to the Russian Orthodox Church the exclusive right to import and sell duty-free alcohol and tobacco. Not all the money was used for religious purposes. Satter reported that in 2006 the personal patrimony of Kirill was already estimated at \$4 billion (Satter 2009).

British scholar John Anderson summarized Kirill’s concept of “spiritual security” as the doctrine that Orthodoxy (together with some ethnic faiths that did not try to convert Orthodox believers, such as Islam for the Chechens or Buddhism for the Kalmyks) was essential for preserving Russia’s identity as a nation. Accordingly, “competitors (especially Catholics and ‘sects’ [‘cults’]) can be depicted as threats to the religion of the nation, and thus to the nation itself” (Anderson 2007, 195).

Putin officially adopted the notion of “spiritual security” in the 2000 “National Security Concept,” which included a provision that

the Russian Federation’s national security also includes protecting the cultural and spiritual-moral legacy and the historical traditions and standards of public life and preserving the cultural heritage of all Russia’s peoples. There must be a state policy to maintain the population’s spiritual and moral welfare, prohibit the use of airtime to promote violence or base instincts, and counter the adverse impact of foreign religious organizations and missionaries (“2020 Russian National Security Concept”).

Concerning Scientology, there was one problem, however. While Dvorkin felt obliged to promote campaigns against Scientology and invite foreign anti-

Scientologists to lecture in Russia to enhance its international role within FECRIS, in fact fighting Scientology was not a priority of the Orthodox Church. The latter was interested in making life more difficult for the groups whose “missionaries” converted a significant number of Orthodox believers, primarily the Pentecostal churches and the Jehovah’s Witnesses. Scientology had smaller numbers in Russia, and the average Scientologist did not correspond to the profile of the naïve Orthodox believer who was “lured” to “heretic” Christian organizations by devious missionaries.

Scientology did not even correspond to Dvorkin’s profile of a “totalitarian cult.” It did not distort the sacred scriptures of Christianity or other traditional faiths as it was a new religion with new scriptures of its own. Its members were hardly under the hypnotic spell of a leader, as they rarely met the head of the Church, David Miscavige. And they did not separate themselves from the larger society, as most Russian Scientologists were well-off professionals with brilliant careers.

Certainly the provisions making registering religions in Russia more difficult also affected the Church of Scientology. However, the original so-called science of “sectology” of the 1990s was clearly insufficient to build a persuasive criticism of Scientology as a “totalitarian cult.” Things, however, changed with the new century.

Phase 2: “Extremism Studies” and Anti-Extremism Laws

In 2000, Russian scholar Nikolay Trofimchuk (1942–2002) published a book called *Экспансия* (Expansion), co-authored with the younger scholar Mikhail Svishchev. The book was praised as a new main theoretical statement of “spiritual security” and was “widely used in training seminars and conferences for federal and provincial bureaucrats” and security agents (Uzzell 2005, 11). Trofimchuk had been appointed in 1994 head of the Religious Studies Department of the Russian Academy of Public Administration but did not come from the Russian Orthodox Church. In fact, in Soviet times he had been the head of one of the departments of Moscow’s Institute of Scientific Atheism.

Yet, in *Экспансия* the former “scientific atheist” Trofimchuk wrote that the harmful activities of the “cults” are “directed primarily against Orthodoxy, the

only Christian religion that has managed to largely preserve the purity of the commandments of Christ and actively opposes the spiritual corruption that the Judeo-Masonic civilization of the Western world brings” (Trofimchuk and Svishchev 2000, 195). While using Dvorkin’s definition of a “totalitarian cult,” Trofimchuk added two other features to identify “cults”. First, they were “extremist” organizations claiming that their worldview offered the only true way of salvation, thus denying that the truth was to be found in the Orthodox Church. Second, they worked on behalf of the American intelligence service to cause unrest and ultimately overcome the Putin government in Russia.

Trofimchuk’s book included a violent diatribe against Mikhail Gorbachev (1931–2022), accused of “embracing Scientologists,” while not being a Scientologist himself, and of favoring the participation of Communist Party members in the activities of Scientology. He noted that both the American headquarters of the Gorbachev Foundation and of the Church of Scientology were located in California. He depicted the American state as the seat of the “Church of the Antichrist,” hosting the headquarters of the Church of Satan (which, by the way, in 2001 had just been moved to New York), and allegedly “one of the world’s largest Masonic ‘temples’... with the symbol of Satan depicted on its facade.” Not coincidentally, the Russian scholar noted, California was also “an international center of sodomy,” with “entire neighborhoods in the cities inhabited only by sodomites” (Trofimchuk and Svishchev 2000, 196–97).

Gradually, the other features of Dvorkin’s original definition of a “totalitarian cult” came to be regarded as secondary, and an “extremist” religious organization was defined as affirming the superiority of its worldview over that of the Russian Orthodox Church and working, sometimes unknowingly but more often knowingly, for the American intelligence to undermine the Russian state. Trofimchuk wrote that

A missionary... preaching the Baptist faith in Siberia is thus as much an American agent as a CIA officer working at the U.S. embassy in Moscow (Trofimchuk and Svishchev 2000, 15).

The new science of “extremism studies” introduced by Trofimchuk was enthusiastically embraced in Orthodox circles by anti-cultists such as Novosibirsk’s Archpriest Alexander Novopashin, who became Dvorkin’s second-in-command in Russia’s main organization combating “cults” called ПАЦИРС (Russian Association of Centres for Religious and Cultic Studies). It also

generated its technology, in the shape of anti-extremism laws and administrative measures.

In 2001, a much more important event than the publication of Trofimchuk's book changed how the world looked at religious extremism, the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Russia passed a law of extremism that was particularly harsh but did not raise much international criticism as it was regarded as one of many international reactions to 9/11. However, in subsequent years, the law was repeatedly amended to include forms of "extremism" that did not include violence. "Religious extremism" was defined, in the footsteps of Trofimchuk and other "extremism studies" authors, as the claim of superiority and exclusivity of one's religion over the others (by which the Russian authorities meant the Russian Orthodox Church and other "traditional" faiths). Books were banned as being "extremist" and seized, including books published and sold by the Church of Scientology (Kravchenko 2018).

The anti-extremism law proved itself a very effective tool for harassing and jailing Jehovah's Witnesses, a main target of the Orthodox Church, starting a process that would lead to their liquidation in 2017. In fact, the Jehovah's Witness actively try to convert members of other religions and tell them that they offer the only way of salvation. Many other religions, of course, do the same, including the Russian Orthodox Church itself, but this did not save the Jehovah's Witnesses from being labeled as "extremist" and banned in Russia (Fautré 2020; Carobene 2021).

In their case, the "science" of "extremist studies" had produced an effective technology: the amendments to the anti-extremism law. However, once again, applying the theory to Scientology proved initially difficult. Scientologists, as all other religionists, are persuaded that what they call their "technology" offers a uniquely effective way of recovering and affirming our identity as spiritual beings, cause rather than effect of our world. However, Scientology is not exclusivist and does not ask those who become Scientologists to abandon their former religion. In this sense, Scientology is not a "religious extremist" organization as defined by the Russian anti-extremism law. In fact, by this definition, it is one of the less "extremist" religious movements operating in Russia.

In the decade that started with the year 2000, several legal actions were initiated against churches of Scientology and individual Scientologists in Russia, but enforcing against them the anti-extremism law as was done in the case of

Jehovah's Witnesses proved difficult. Other legal techniques had to be used, including accusing Scientologists of commercial fraud or providing without a license what allegedly amounted to health care services.

However, another of the new criteria for "religious extremism" might be applied to Scientology. The Church of Scientology was headquartered in the United States, even in California, the "land of the Antichrist" according to Trofimchuk, and thus was by definition suspect of espionage and sabotage on behalf of the American intelligence.

One event that offered to anti-cultists, including Dvorkin and Novopashin, the opportunity of claiming that they had found a smoking gun proving that Scientologists worked as CIA agent was Ukraine's Orange Revolution of 2004. Ukrainians protested that the proclaimed victory of pro-Russian presidential candidate Viktor Yanukovich was due to widespread electoral fraud. The protests eventually led Ukraine's Supreme Court to annul the suspicious elections and call for a re-run election with the presence of international observers, where Yanukovich was defeated.

Russian anti-cultists were particularly vocal in claiming that "cults" had been infiltrated into Ukraine by American intelligence since the 1990s, including the Hubbard Learning Centers of the Church of Scientology, and they had disseminated the anti-Russian feelings that would explode in the Orange Revolution (see *Komsomolskaya Pravda* 2022).

These claims became even stronger after the Maidan Revolution of 2014 in Ukraine that was again directed against the pro-Russian policies of Yanukovich, now president of the country. This time, as I have detailed in a previous article, Dvorkin delivered lectures and granted interviews both in Russia and abroad claiming that Scientology had played a crucial role in organizing and leading the Maidan events (Šorytè 2022). Dvorkin originally claimed that one of the anti-Russian politicians, Arseniy Yatsenyuk, who will become Ukraine's Prime Minister after Yanukovich was ousted in 2014, was a Scientologist and the brother of a prominent female Scientology executive in California (*Srbin.info* 2014).

In other interviews, considering that even American anti-cultists had told him that this theory was not supported by evidence (Ortega 2014), Dvorkin said that

perhaps Yatsenyuk was not a Scientologist but had taken Scientology courses. Dvorkin told *Voice of Russia* that

Yatsenyuk, before his political career, he did take several Scientology courses and paid for it. It is no secret that Scientology as of 1994 has been cooperating very closely with the CIA of the United States of America. The State Department of the USA lobbies the interests of Scientology in all the countries of the world. And Scientology, apparently, shares some of the information it gathers with the Central Intelligence Agency. So, it means that, at least in Yatsenyuk's case, he can be controlled by the CIA (*Voice of Russia* 2014).

Eventually, this escalated to a theory that Scientology, with other “cults,” had “organized” the Maidan, something that has been repeated again when the new war was started in 2022 (Šorytė 2022).

Note, however, that in the absence of exclusivism, the qualifying mark of a “religious extremist” organization, it was still difficult to accuse Scientology of “extremism,” which would allow Russian courts to liquidate it as they would do with the Jehovah's Witnesses. This does not mean that Scientologists are not sentenced for “extremism,” in addition to other charges. On August 24, 2023, the Nevsky District Court of St. Petersburg sentenced five Scientologists for organizing, and participating in, an extremist organization. Four were sentenced to fines and one, Ivan Matsitsky, to six and a half years in prison. He was, however, released as he had already spent this time in pre-trial detention and house arrest (SOVA Center 2023). There is, thus, an inertia under which in old cases the charge of “extremism” is still applied against Scientologists, while there is at the same time some awareness that “extremism” is not the more persuasive category to crack down on the church.

Phase 3: Destructology and Laws against Undesirable Organizations

As the first decade of the 21st century was coming to an end, the role of Dvorkin and Novopashin as the leading Russian anti-cultists was increasingly challenged by a scholar twenty-two years younger than Dvorkin, Roman Silantyev. He also worked for the Orthodox Church, who in 2001 managed to have him appointed as executive secretary of the Interreligious Council of Russia, although he was only 24 years old. In 2005, however, he was dismissed from his position after his publications accusing Islam in general of being a potentially

destructive and harmful religion had caused a strong reaction among Russia's Muslim establishment. The Council of Muftis had even threatened to suspend its participation in the Interreligious Council (*Interfax-Religion* 2005).

While continuing to publish on Islam, Silantsev reinvented himself as an expert of "cults," largely operating independently of the Dvorkin organization. In 2009, Justice Minister Konovalov, the same who in that year received the FECRIS dignitaries, reorganized the Ministry's Expert Council for Conducting State Religious-Studies Expert Analysis, and made it the core body identifying which religions were "extremist." Dvorkin was appointed chair of the Council, and Silantsev deputy chair.

In the subsequent decade, Silantsev started claiming that both "sectology" and "extremism studies" were somewhat outdated, and a new science was needed to elaborate a theory encompassing both extremist and (by the legal definition) non-extremist organizations that threatened Russia's spiritual security. He called this new science "destructology," meaning its field was the study of organizations whose aim was to "destroy" the Russian identity and its traditional Christian values (*Interfax* 2018). Although ridiculed by several Russian scholars, in 2019 "destructology" was officially recognized as an academic discipline, and Silantsev was appointed as head of a "Laboratory of Destructology" at Moscow State Linguistic University, overcoming the objections of the Russian Academy of Sciences, which had described destructology as a "pseudo-science" (see Šorytė 2022).

Silantsev claimed that the advantage of "destructology" was that it allowed to label as "destructive" organizations that were not technically "extremist," yet conspired to destroy Russian and Orthodox values. Chief among these organizations, Silantsev indicated, was the Church of Scientology, but equally "destructive" were non-religious movements and campaigns, including feminism, LGBT activism, and the anti-Putin campaigns of Alexei Navalny (Montay 2023; *The Russian Reader* 2023).

The technology to make "destructology" an effective tool to prevent all these organizations from operating was found in the 2012 Russian Undesirable Organization Law, amended in 2015, which allows prosecutors to declare international organizations "undesirable" without proving they are extremist and without a decision by a court of law. Scientology was declared undesirable in

2021, but more than one hundred organizations have been included in the list, including the World Wildlife Fund (WWF: Ministry of Justice of the Russian Federation 2023, 91) and the Wild Salmon Center, a respected international conservationist organization regarded as “destructive” because it has criticized certain policies in the Russian Far East that endanger salmons (Ministry of Justice of the Russian Federation 2023, 100).

However, before the 2022 Ukrainian war participation in “undesirable” organizations was punished only with a fine. Only those sentenced twice within one year for participating in the same undesirable organization might be sentenced to jail. They could still escape detention by “voluntarily ceasing” any activity in the group.

After the aggression against Ukraine, however, the law on undesirable organizations was amended in 2022, and now any form of participation in an “undesirable” group is punished with a penalty up to ten years in jail or in a labor camp. Pentecostal pastors have already been sent to labor camps under the amended law, which can also be enforced against Scientologists.

Conclusion

On May 4, 2023, theatre director Evgenia Berkovich and playwright Svetlana Petriyчук were arrested in Moscow on charges that their play “Finist, the Brave Falcon,” which had won awards even in Russia, identified them as members of a “destructive” movement (*Novaya Gazeta Europe* 2023). They are well-known in international theatrical circles, and media all over the world protested their arrest (Montay 2023; Tarasova and Tanno 2023; Lloyd 2023).

It came out that the prosecutor had based the arrest order on an expert opinion by Silantyev, who claimed inter alia that the play, which is about women who married Islamic State militants, subtly promoted a destructive movement, feminism. Silantyev wrote that feminism

is far from innocuous. Destructological science has documented instances where the internalization of this ideology has led to the conscious preparation and execution of terrorist acts (*Meduza* 2023).

This was too much even in Putin’s Russia and even during the war in Ukraine. The Scientific Publication Ethics Council, which includes several members of the

Russian Academy of Sciences, published a statement against “destructology.” The scientists wrote that

“Destructology” is not listed as a normative field of science and education officially recognized in Russian Federation. It is also absent from the international scientific field. Publications on this topic amount to the creation of only one author (Roman Silantyev). A new science comes into being not because someone proclaims it (as in the case of destructology), but by making discoveries within it that are recognized by the scientific community. This has not happened... It is unacceptable that persons with pseudoscientific and anti-scientific beliefs participate in the preparation of expert examination reports in humanities for court hearings, they thereby mislead the court. We should especially note that this is happening against the backdrop of an increasing number of centers like the “Destructology Laboratory,” which gather together people with pseudoscientific positions, but receive orders for official state expert examinations, which leads to the legitimization of pseudoscientific fields. In recent years, many erroneous decisions have been made relying on such “expert examinations.” This is detrimental not only to the lives of individuals and their loved ones, but also to the image of the country, its judicial system, and Russian science in general (Scientific Publication Ethics Council 2023).

However, after the declaration it was the Scientific Publication Ethics Council rather than Silantyev that met with some trouble and official harassment. It seems that prosecutors, and the Putin regime itself, are not prepared to renounce pseudo-scientific theories, and the corresponding legal technologies, that allow them to put in jail those who threaten Russia’s “spiritual security.” The Church of Scientology is regarded as one such threat.

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