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A Child of the Father of Lies

A sermon given by Professor Cyril Hovorun at the University Church of St Mary the Virgin (Oxford, England) on 26 March 2023

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Since the war in Ukraine escalated in February 2022, it has become obvious that what Vladimir Putin and his mouthpieces, including those among the church hierarchs, propagate as the reasons for waging it, are, in fact, pretexts for an unspoken agenda. The true reasons are usually not admitted or articulated publicly. It is our task, as theologians and scholars in other disciplines, to expose them. These reasons include an unbridled, post-Soviet revanchism, the megalomaniac idea of superiority, and the urgent necessity to preserve autocracy and kleptocracy in Russia, which serve the privileged few. What follows is an analysis of the war's pretexts.

1. The first one is fighting "Nazism." Russian propaganda accuses Ukraine of being a "neo-Nazi" state. This state, however, has the only Jewish president outside Israel. Ukrainian Jews suffer with the rest of the country from the Russian bombardments and fight together with other Ukrainians on the frontlines against the Russian aggressors. All leaders of Jewish communities unanimously condemn these aggressors—for example, in the framework of the All-Ukrainian Council of Churches and Religious Organisations. At the same time, the chief rabbi of Moscow, Pinchas Goldschmidt, had to flee Russia in March of last year, after he denounced the war. He explained his decisions on Twitter: "I could not remain silent, viewing so much human suffering, I went to assist the refugees in Eastern Europe and spoke out against the war." Now he is the President of the Conference of European Rabbis and continues to condemn the Russian aggression. The Russian state, which claims to fight fascism and Nazism, has itself become the Mussolinian *lo stato totale*, whose *modus operandi* is the Goebbelsian *der totale Krieg*.



2. The second pretext: Fighting “Russophobia.” According to Russian propaganda, “Russophobia” is the fear of everything Russian. It has allegedly engulfed “the West” and reached its historic



Figure 1. The cross that commemorates the victims of Baturyn massacre. Photo by the author.

maximum in Ukraine. Indeed, the Ukrainians had many historical reasons to fear Russians, at least from the times of Peter I (1672–1725). In 1708, he burned down the capital of the Ukrainian state of that time, Baturyn, in the same way as Putin burned down Mariupol. The Russians then destroyed even the Ukrainian churches, although one of their alleged motivations was to defend Orthodoxy against the West—a pattern being repeated in our day. Not only the defenders of the city, but also thousands of civilians were killed in cold blood by the Russian troops.

According to the sources, the dead bodies of the defenders were crucified and sent down the river of Dnieper—to make other Ukrainians fear the Russians. Many of those Ukrainians who survived were brought against their will to build Peter’s new capital in the north. When you walk in the streets of St. Petersburg and enjoy the grandeur of its imperial architecture, remember that it is built literally on the bones of the enslaved Ukrainians who died there under harsh conditions. Katherine II (1729–1796) continued the

work of her grandfather-in-law in sowing fear among the Ukrainians. She destroyed the remains of the Ukrainian Cossack republic—the *Sich*—and enslaved those who had managed to remain free since the time of Peter.

In the nineteenth century, Russia became more civilised, and at the same time turned more imperial. Slavery was abolished there only in 1861. A Ukrainian Shakespeare, who articulated the quintessence of what it means to be Ukrainian in the language which continues to be the literary standard, Taras Shevchenko (1814–1861), was born a slave and bought out from slavery by his friends who admired his talent. This was the “springtime of nations” in Europe. Spring came to the Ukrainian nation as well. There was a revival of the Ukrainian language, literature, theatre, and identity. However, the Ukrainian people were soon severely oppressed by the imperial authorities. Proponents of the Ukrainian culture and identity, including Shevchenko, were arrested and exiled. Tsar Nicholas I Romanov (1796–1855) in his own handwriting prohibited Shevchenko to write and paint, even for his private use. The Romanov empire became a prison

for the Ukrainian nation, together with the other nations it had colonised across Europe and Asia.

The “prison of the nations” was an expression that Vladimir Lenin (1870–1924) applied to the Russian empire. He promised to liberate these nations. Indeed, in the first years after the Bolshevik revolution, which toppled the Romanov dynasty in 1917, the Ukrainian people received a chance to have their own independent state. However, the Ukrainian republic lasted only until 1921, when it was destroyed by the Red Army. Many Ukrainians died at that time, while defending their country. There are again many parallels between then and now. Hopefully, this time we will survive as a nation, unlike what happened in 1921 and in the ensuing Soviet period. Although the Ukrainian culture and identity were tolerated in the early years of the Soviet Union, the situation changed under Joseph Stalin (1878–1953). After he became the sole ruler of the Soviet “empire,” he enforced Lenin’s policies of internationalism by destroying national cultures and identities. They were declared anti-proletarian and serving the interests of the global capital—similarly to how Putin declares the Ukrainian culture as anti-Russian and serving the “evil forces of the West.” As a result, the most prominent and promising Ukrainian writers, poets, playwrights, theatre directors, actors etc., ended up in Stalin’s prisons and concentration camps, where many of them perished. We in Ukraine call them the representatives of “the renaissance executed.”

Hundreds of thousands of faithful members of various Ukrainian churches were liquidated in different ways as well. Soviet Russia imposed atheism as its “established religion.” The Ukrainian religious landscape has been diverse since early modernity. Its diversity was conditioned and enhanced by the Ukrainian lands being positioned at the crossroads between East and West. Although Orthodoxy is its dominant tradition, other traditions found a home and flourished on Ukrainian lands, including Catholic, Reformed, Jewish, and Muslim. Under Stalin, all of these were persecuted.

After having eradicated the Ukrainian intelligentsia and the church, Stalin decided to break the backbone of the Ukrainian peasantry through an artificial famine, which we in Ukraine call Holodomor—literally “death by starvation.” From 3.5 to 7 million Ukrainians, primarily the vulnerable ones, such as children, women, and elderly, died of starvation. This happened in the years 1932–1933. Six years later, Communist Russia became an ally of Nazi Germany. Their alliance was sealed by the signing in 1939 of an agreement known as the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. The two predatory regimes agreed to invade and divide Poland. Many Ukrainians then lived in its eastern part and found themselves under the Russian occupation after 1939. They soon experienced all the Soviet policies regarding culture, language, and religion. This happened in the same period when the people in the UK suffered from Stalin’s ally, Hitler, and his bombardments of their cities.

Stalin's alliance with Hitler did not last long, and one predator eventually attacked the other one. The Ukrainian people found themselves between the hammer and the anvil. Some sided with one of the invaders, and others resisted both. For example, the Ukrainian Insurgent Army fought both the Soviets and the Nazis, and continued fighting the Russian occupants even after Hitler was defeated. While the Soviet troops kept fighting pockets of resistance in the Ukrainian west, a new wave of famine came to the rest of Ukraine. The post-war Holodomor is a part of my own family's story. My great-grandmother, who had lost her husband to the Nazi occupants, survived after the war only because her son, my grandfather, was a student in the military academy in Moscow.

Every Ukrainian family has similar stories about its members who did or did not survive one or another wave of the Russian policies of extermination. Surprisingly, in most cases, such stories did not translate to Russophobia. According to the data of the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, which has studied the attitude of the Ukrainians to the Russians since 2008, less than 10% had a negative attitude in the beginning of the studies. The situation dramatically changed in 2014, following the annexation of Crimea and the proxy war in Donbas. Then the negative attitude spiked to about 50%, and after that began gradually going down, to less than 30% in

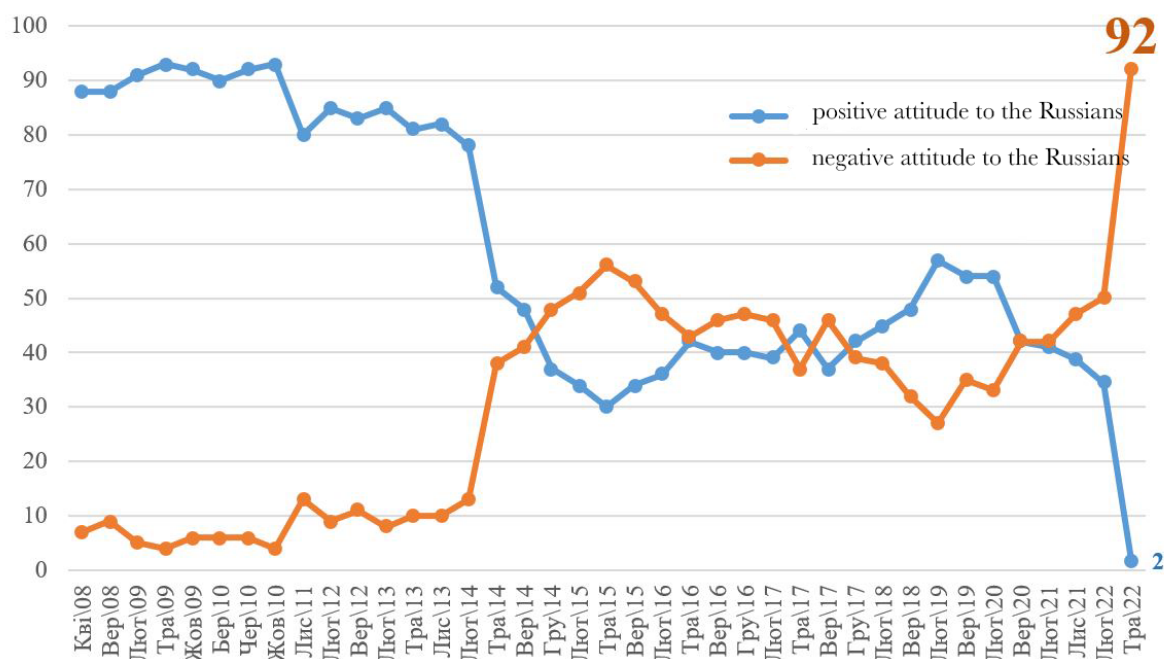


Figure 2. Positive and negative attitudes of the Ukrainians to the Russians from 2008 to 2022.

February 2019. Now the degree of “Russophobia” is the highest in the entire Ukrainian history, having reached above 90%. This is clearly the ironic result of Putin’s fighting “Russophobia.” No one else has contributed more to its rise than the Kremlin.

3. No one else has damaged the Russian-speaking population in Ukraine more, the protection of which Putin has alleged as his third pretext for the invasion. He claims that the Russian-speaking Ukrainians became oppressed as a result of the social transformations in the country, especially geared up by its two revolutions: The Orange one in 2004–2005 and the Euromaidan in 2013–2014. Many if not most Ukrainians are bilingual. In everyday life, many prefer to speak Russian, even though almost everyone can also speak Ukrainian. Many if not most participants in both Ukrainian revolutions were those bilinguals who preferred to speak Russian. What they were fighting for was not so much language or ethnic identity as transparency, social justice, and the rule of law. Putin perceives the latter values, and not the Ukrainian identity or language, as an existential threat to his regime. To put it simply, what he wants is to protect the corruption-based system he created, but he started a war on the pretext of protecting the Russian language in Ukraine. This war began in 2014 with the annexation of Crimea and the occupation of two eastern Ukrainian regions, Donetsk and Luhansk, by the Russian troops camouflaged as local guerrillas. As a result of this war, a mass exodus of the Russian-speaking population began from the occupied areas. I remember well how in the Spring of 2014, the streets of Kyiv, where one often overheard Russian language, became even more Russian-speaking. The streets of Kyiv and other Ukrainian cities were literally flooded by those who tried to escape their so-called “liberators.” According to the report of the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, one year of the Russian occupation of the Ukrainian east produced over one million one hundred thousand internally displaced persons and over seven hundred thousand refugees.

Most of these people were supposed to be protected by Putin, but in fact had to flee, trying to escape this so-called “protection.” Some of them had to leave their new homes again, when Russia started bombarding the entire country in February 2022. There are many stories similar to the one told by Andriy Shpygunov. He was born and lived all of his life in Crimea. He organised some Christian charities there, but then, in May 2014, had to escape the Russian occupation of the peninsula. His family settled in Irpen near Kyiv. In March 2022, their new home was destroyed by a Russian shell. Fortunately, they had left it by then, but they do not have a home to return to anymore. This is an example of the kind of people Putin wants to

protect as “Russian-speaking.” Many such people were less fortunate than Andriy’s family. In fact, most civilians killed in the war are those who used Russian language in their everyday life.

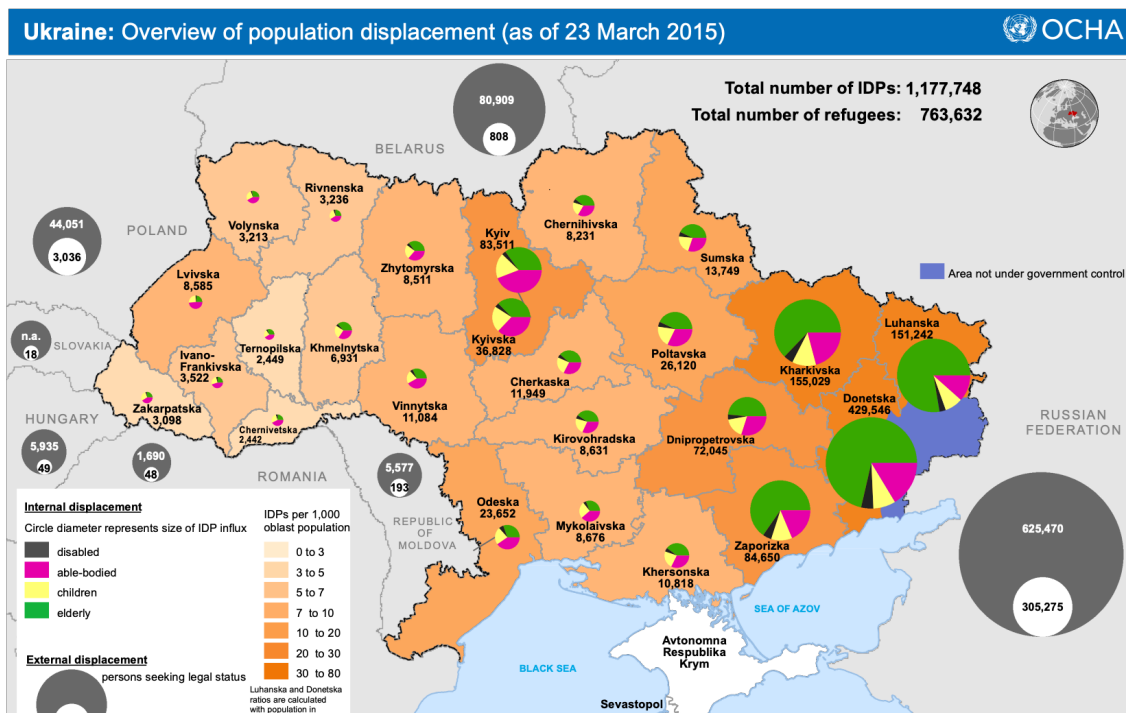


Figure 3. The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations. Internal Displacement: Data provided by the Ministry of Social Policy, as of 23 March. External Displacement: Figures reported to UNHCR by Government Asylum Authorities as of 22 March for Hungary, 24 March for Poland, 26 March for Moldova, 26 March for Belarus, 22 March for Romania, 31 December 2014 for Slovakia, and as reported by the Russian Federal Migration Service as of 16 March for the Russian Federation.

4. The fourth war-pretext that Putin cherishes particularly, and probably more sincerely than others, is Russian sovereignty and dignity. For him, Ukraine is not sovereign and, therefore, does not deserve dignity. He hoped to enhance Russia’s own sovereignty and dignity by diminishing even further those of Ukraine. What is happening in reality is quite the opposite. Ukraine is successfully defending its sovereignty, along with demonstrating its dignity to the astonished world, while Russia is losing both. Russia’s sovereignty was seriously compromised, for example, after Putin had declared the annexation of the occupied territories, which he could not control, and which were retaken by the Ukrainian counteroffensive. As for dignity, he made so many Russians inside and especially outside the country to feel ashamed of being Russians. He left a stigma upon at least one generation of his compatriots, whether they support him or not. Even those things that Russia was always proud of, such as its culture, are now being questioned and sometimes even cancelled. This war has become a catastrophe for Russian identity and self-esteem.

5. Protecting Christianity became the fifth pretext for Putin's war. His propagandists already used this narrative, of protecting a Christian minority in the Middle East, when Russian airplanes bombarded Aleppo and other cities in Syria. Many Christians died then, along with many Muslims. The two religious groups, as a result, became alienated even further. Something similar is happening in Ukraine, where Putin claims to be protecting the Russian Orthodox Church. In January of this year, he even called a special session of the Security Council of the United Nations to raise his concerns. No one bought into his alleged concerns, but they further alienated the two Orthodox churches in Ukraine. The church that Putin calls "the Russian Orthodox Church" in Ukraine, denies being such, and claims to be independent from Moscow. Even those of its members who used to value their connection with Moscow, now try to hide it. Moreover, most churches and religious sites destroyed in the war belonged to the Moscow Patriarchate.

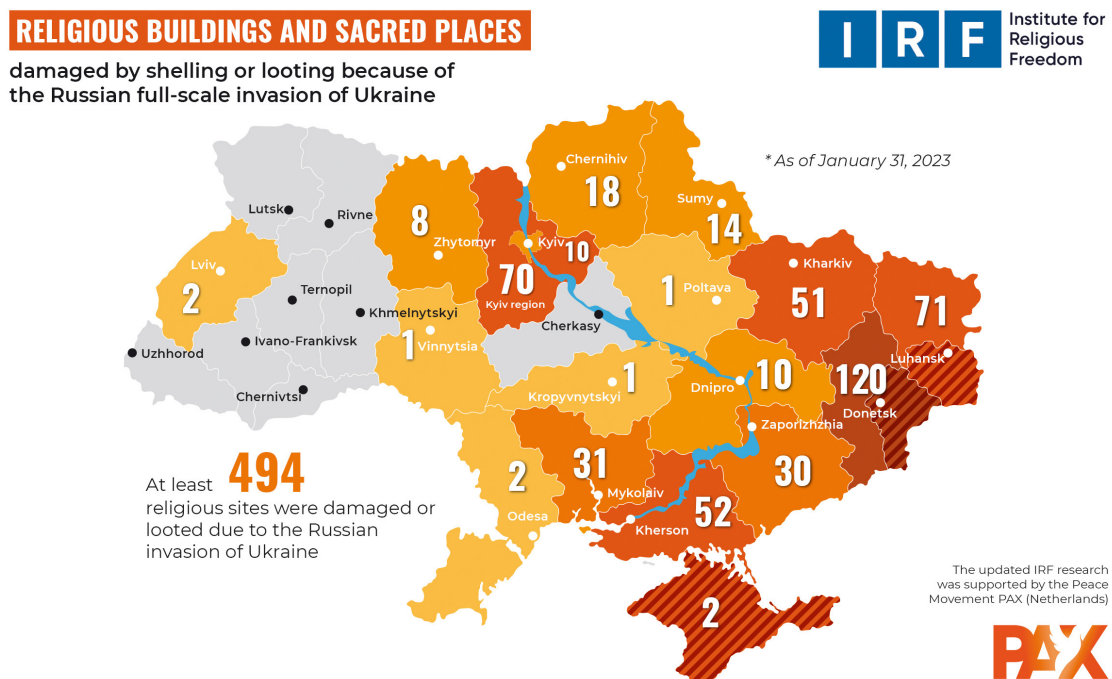


Figure 4. Religious buildings and sacred sites damaged as a result of shelling or military-related looting because of the Russian invasion of Ukraine (Institute of Religious Freedom).

Even those members of the Moscow Patriarchate who were Putin's supporters fall prey to the aggression he has unleashed. I personally knew a priest, Fr. Vladimir Bormashev, who was a zealous Russian patriot. He was a professor at the Kyiv Theological Academy and a priest of a community in Irpen. In the first days of the invasion, he tried to escape the bombardments. Like many others, he could not and was hit by a Russian shell. He died from his wounds in March 2022. Or another example. In the east of Ukraine there is a monastery of St. Nicholas and St. Basil, which was founded by a priest-monk, Zosima Sokur (1944–2002). He was reputed to be

the spiritual father of the ousted Ukrainian president Viktor Yanukovich, whose authoritarianism triggered the Euromaidan in 2013. Fr. Zosima was also a fervent supporter of the unity between Ukraine and Russia and developed an ideology coherent with Putin's propaganda. The latter sometimes uses the former. That is to say, propaganda sometimes exploits ideology to its own ends. This monastery was shelled and partially destroyed, as the Russian troops advanced into this area. Some monks were killed. Zosima's grave has been damaged. I do not mention these cases to point out that proponents of the "Russian world" have unwittingly reaped what they sowed. I want to say that Putin tends repeatedly to destroy everything and everyone he claims to care about.

6. This also applies to the sixth pretext of Putin's war—the so-called "traditional values." This idiom was coined in the period when religion was persecuted behind the Iron Curtain and shunned in Western societies. Sociologists of religion, such as Talcott Parsons (1902–1979), used this phrase to distil from religion a secular moralistic substrate, as it were, to make religion somehow relevant to contemporary society. Thus, this phrase in its original meaning was a symbol of compromise between religion and secularism in the West. In post-secular Russia, this phrase was paradoxically turned into a symbol of the struggle against the ostensibly "secular" West. Moreover, Putin weaponised the notion of "traditional values." As with his other weapons in his corrupt and dysfunctional armies, this intended weapon of Russia's supposed "traditional values" has been discredited. Indeed, which of these values have not been violated by Putin and his troops? Let us assess this violation against the ten commandments (Exodus 20:3–17):

(i) *"Thou shalt have no other gods before me."*

(ii) *"Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth: Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them."*

(iii) *"Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain."*

The "Russian world" is about worshipping—worshipping *this* world. It places "Fatherland" before the Father. Putin himself suggested this when he addressed a crowd in Moscow on 22 February 2023. With reference to "the Fatherland," he claimed that this word "features something powerful, huge, I would say mystical and holy. It's not a coincidence that one of the most known prayers begins with 'Our Father.'" The "Russian world" worships "the Fatherland" and is based on what is called "political religion." This is a sort of religion that substitutes religion proper with ideologies and acts coercively. All political religions are coercive and idolatrous. The deities worshipped in the political religion of the "Russian world" are particularly bloodthirsty, demanding ever more human sacrifices, both of Russia's neighbours and of Russians themselves.

(iv) *"Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy."*

Before Christmas of this year, the Patriarch of Moscow Kirill and Vladimir Putin came up with an initiative to cease fire to celebrate the Nativity of the Lord. This initiative was hypocritical *per se*, as if it is alright to kill when it is not Christmas or some other holiday. However, the Russian troops did not stop killing even on those days. They shelled mines on 7 January, when the Orthodox in Russia and Ukraine celebrated the Nativity, and killed a civilian in the Kharkiv region.

(v) *“Honour thy father and thy mother.”*

A part of the mythology that Putin propagates refers to Kyiv as the “mother” of the Russian cities. He dishonours Kyiv and many other cities and villages in Ukraine by besieging, bombarding, and destroying them.

(vi) *“Thou shalt not kill.”*

According to the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, the war that Putin started has claimed over three thousand civilian casualties in 2014–2015 and over eight thousand after the war escalated in February 2022. These casualties include about 500 children.

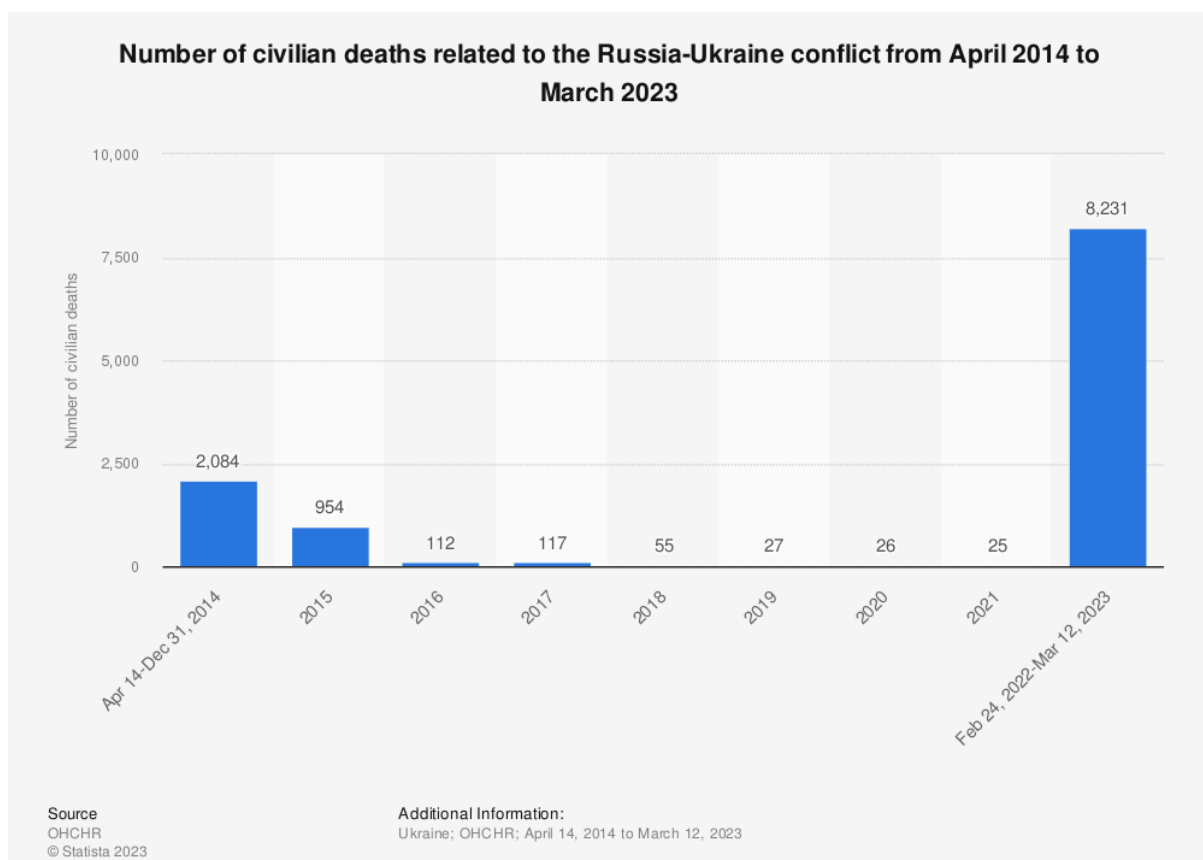


Figure 5. Number of civilian deaths related to the Russian-Ukraine conflict from April 2014 to March 2023 (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights).

(vii) *“Thou shalt not commit adultery.”*

Adultery became an intrinsic part of Putin’s war. In the words of the UN special representative on sexual violence Pramila Patten, “When women are held for days and raped, when you start to rape little boys and men, when you see a series of genital mutilations, when you hear women testify about Russian soldiers equipped with Viagra, it’s clearly a military strategy.” She added: “And when the victims report what was said during the rapes, it is clearly a deliberate tactic to dehumanise the victims.” According to Patten’s office, “more than a hundred cases” of rape or sexual assault have been registered since February 2022. And this is just “the tip of the iceberg,” in her words. The age of the victims varies from four to 82 years old; they are mostly women and girls, but also men and boys.

(viii) *“Thou shalt not steal.”*

In this war, both the Russian state and its soldiers steal on a gigantic scale. The state steals everything from children to grain. Over sixteen thousand children have been deported or, in other words, stolen from Ukraine by Russia. Many of them were separated from their parents without their consent. For this reason, the International Criminal Court issued on 17 March an arrest warrant for Vladimir Putin and the commissioner for Children’s Rights in the Office of the Russian President, Maria Lvova-Belova. While the Russian state steals on a national scale, its soldiers do the same at the level of households. They loot them and steal from them everything they can carry: From washing machines to toilets. One hopes there will be justice served for such cases as well.

(ix) *“Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbour.”*

The war is driven by false witnesses presented by Russian propaganda. In 2014, the central, state-sponsored Russian TV channels broadcasted a story about a three-year old boy who was allegedly crucified by the Ukrainian troops who regained the eastern city of Sloviansk after its short Russian occupation. This story caused outrage in Russian society but was later proven as completely fabricated. In 2022, the Russian aggression escalated on the basis of another false witness—about the Ukrainian troops allegedly preparing to invade Russia. Every aspect of this war is driven by false witnesses, which bluntly violate God’s commandment. This reminds me of another scriptural dictum: “Ye are of your father the devil, and the lusts of your father ye will do. He was a murderer from the beginning, and abode not in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaketh a lie, he speaketh of his own: for he is a liar, and the father of it” (John 8:44). In this dictum, murder and lies are intrinsically connected—as they are in Russia’s war against Ukraine.

(x) *“Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour’s house, thou shalt not covet thy neighbour’s wife, nor his manservant, nor his maidservant, nor his ox, nor his ass, nor any thing that is thy neighbour’s.”*

As of March 2023, the office of the prosecutor general of Ukraine has registered about 75 thousand crimes that violate this commandment. This is only a part of all violations committed. As the war continues, tragically there will be more crimes against humanity and individual human beings in Ukraine. One hopes, justice will be eventually served for all of them.

7. I would conclude with a final, seventh, charge against Putin—of distorting the tradition that he pretends to protect and associates himself with. The more he struggles to explain the war to himself and to the Russian people rationally, the more he develops irrational arguments. These arguments may sound theological, but they have little to do with theology proper. Here is an example. In his speech delivered on the occasion of the war's anniversary on 21 February, he addressed the debates within the Anglican Communion regarding what kind of language should be used for God. He gave his own "theological" answer to the questions raised in these debates. He said, and I quote: "The Anglican Church is considering a gender-neutral God. May God forgive them for they know not what they do." Maybe his intention was different, but what he actually did was to affirm that God has gender. This statement is as clumsy as the one Putin made on another occasion, on which he stated that Orthodox Christianity is closer to Islam than to the Western Christian traditions.

Even Joseph Stalin, who studied theology in a seminary and had opinions about many fields of knowledge, did not utter a single one on theology. Putin, as distinct from Stalin, did not study theology but follows Stalin as his role-model, and yet does not hesitate to opine on theological matters. His sort of "service" to theology and the Orthodox tradition is as destructive as his rapacious "service" to Russia and its long-suffering neighbours.