In 2013, Vladimir Putin was still something of a hero to many Christians in the West. That was the year when we released the book *Disinformation*, which I co-authored with Lieutenant General Ion Mihai Pacepa, the highest-ranking defector from the Soviet bloc. One of the first talks I gave on the book was at the Catholic Information Center in Washington, DC.

When I spoke about the very serious threat that Putin presented to Catholicism, Christianity, and religion itself, an audience member challenged me. He argued that Putin was not like the previous, atheistic Communist leaders. He claimed to be religious; he even wore a cross around his neck.

Pacepa, the former head of foreign intelligence in communist Romania, understood that Putin's outward image was a specific type of disinformation: *glasnost*, to use Soviet intelligence terminology. Putin was an old-line, hard-nosed KGB agent. The *glasnost* veneer that made him appear friendly to the churches made him all the more dangerous. Today, while most Americans recognize Putin as a threat to world peace, many still do not understand the enormous threat he poses to religion.

Soviet Plan to Take Over Religion

The modern Soviet plan to take over religion really began under Khrushchev. He presented the Cold War-era "Christian Peace Conference" as a global ecumenical organization concerned with world peace. In reality, it was a KGB front. The Kremlin appointed Metropolitan Nikodim of Leningrad (who had worked for the KGB under the code name "Adamant") as vice president and shadow manager of the CPC. Soviet agents provided him with funding for, among other things, the task of defaming the late Pope Pius XII (d. 1958) as an anti-Semite.

The chief of the KGB disinformation department, General Ivan Agayants, informed Intelligence Directors throughout the Soviet bloc, including Pacepa, that all employees of the Soviet patriarchate's External Affairs Department and all religious servants involved in foreign religious work were working for the KGB. Pacepa was tasked with ensuring a similar situation in Romania.

The KGB also ordered its sister services in Eastern Europe to create special units dedicated to counteracting the Vatican's "poison." Other units were charged with producing intelligence officers capable of working undercover inside the Vatican itself. Pacepa supervised one of those operations. After he defected to the United States in 1978, Pacepa spent three years in debriefing, and he explained these and other Soviet operations to the CIA.

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On December 5, 2008, Patriarch Aleksi II, the primate of the Russian Orthodox Church, passed away. For 50 years, he had worked for the KGB under the codename "Drozdov." In 1988, the KGB had even awarded him a Certificate of Honor. The West only learned about his background in 1994 when the Russians pulled out of Estonia and accidentally left behind a KGB archive.

On January 27, 2009, roughly seven hundred synod delegates assembled to elect Aleksi II's successor. They were presented with a slate of three candidates: Metropolitan Kirill of Smolensk (a secret member of the KGB codenamed "Mikhaylov"); Metropolitan Filaret of Minsk (who had worked for the KGB under the code name "Ostrovsky"); and Metropolitan Kliment of Kaluga (who used the KGB codename "Topaz").

Kirill, who was ultimately elected, had spent four decades promoting "liberation theology," which the Soviet intelligence community had dubbed *Christianized Marxism*. In 1971, the KGB sent Kirill to Geneva as a representative of the Russian Orthodox Church to the World Council of Churches (which was a Kremlin pawn). Four years later, they infiltrated him into the WCC's Central Committee. In 1989, the KGB appointed him chairman of the Russian patriarchate's foreign relations. Kirill still held those positions in 2009 when he was elected patriarch.

In February 2016, Patriarch Kirill traveled to communist Cuba to meet Pope Francis. It was the first time that leaders of the Catholic Church and the Moscow patriarchate had met in person. They issued a lengthy joint statement that was seen as censuring Ukrainian Catholics and favoring Russian aggression against that nation. Major Archbishop Sviatoslav Shevchuk of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church said that he was disappointed, and his Church members felt "betrayed by the Vatican" due to the declaration's position on Ukraine.

Patriarch Kirill: "Putin's Altar Boy"

Given that Putin served for a period of time during the 1980s in the KGB's Fifth Directorate, which was responsible for oversight of religious groups, it is likely that he has known Kirill for over thirty years. Regardless, Putin has certainly taken advantage of Kirill's position. When protests erupted over Putin's 2012 return to power, Kirill likened Putin's presidency to "a miracle from God" and warned of an "apocalypse" if Western-style liberalism were allowed to become dominant in Russia. Kirill has continued to give Putin both his spiritual and his political backing, even belittling the "ear piercing shrieks" of his political opponents. Kirill has such a subservient relationship with Putin that Archbishop Borys Gudziak, the senior Ukrainian Catholic metropolitan in the United States, has called Kirill "Putin's altar boy."

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Many in the West may remember the uproar when, in 2012, Russia convicted members of the all-female punk rock band *Pussy Riot* and sentenced them to as much as two years in prison. The charge of "hooliganism" was based on the band having performed a protest song at the altar of Moscow's largest cathedral without permission. The matter they were protesting was that the Church had become an arm of Putin's government. Kirill and other church leaders did what he asked of them, and the punk-rocking women did not like it.

Current Situation in Ukraine: Role of Religion

That leads to the current situation in Ukraine. While many faiths are openly and freely practiced in Ukraine, the country's population is overwhelmingly Christian and predominantly identified with one of a few branches of Orthodox Christianity, only some of which are in union with Rome. As Putin has used the Russian Orthodox Church to advance his state causes in Russia, he has also used the Orthodox character of Ukraine to further his argument for a closer alignment between the two nations. (Days after the invasion of Ukraine, Kirill echoed Putin's justification as he preached about Kyiv and Moscow "comprising the one space of the Russian Orthodox Church.")

Putin has cited NATO expansion as his principal concern regarding Ukraine, but he clearly has also been concerned about the Ukrainian Orthodox Church's relationship with Moscow. In late 2018, the Orthodox Church of Ukraine-Kyiv Patriarchate (which is not in union with Rome) sought a status known as autocephaly, meaning that its bishops would not report to higher-ranking bishops in Russia. This was an attempt to break free from Moscow and achieve greater religious independence. The Moscow Patriarchate responded by charging the church in Ukraine with persecution and oppression. Such charges, of course, served Putin's purposes quite well.

As historian Diana Butler Bass put it: "The conflict in Ukraine is all about religion and what *kind* of Orthodoxy will shape Eastern Europe and other Orthodox communities around the world (especially in Africa)." For Putin, this is all about "recapturing the Holy Land of Russian Orthodoxy and defeating the westernized (and decadent) heretics who do not bend the knee to Moscow's spiritual authority."

At the beginning of the current war, the Moscow branch of the Orthodox Church in Ukraine came out with strong statements condemning the Russian invasion. Those statements, however, have now been removed from the Church's website, almost certainly under directives from Moscow.

The U.S. Department of State identifies Russia as one of the worst countries in the world for religious freedom, with authorities continuing to "investigate, detain, imprison, torture, and

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and/or physically abuse persons or seize their property because of their religious faith…" (2020 Report on International Religious Freedom: Russia, May 12, 2021). If Russia takes and holds Ukraine, the Orthodox Churches in Ukraine would likely become arms of a puppet government. Russia's abusive treatment of Jehovah's Witnesses, Muslims, and other proselytizing groups would likely spread across Ukraine and come to include Ukrainian Greek Catholics (who are in communion with Rome).

Revisiting the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis

U.S. troops in Europe have been placed on Defcon 2 status. They've only been at that level twice since the system was instituted. The most recent time was at the start of operations for the Gulf War. The other time was in 1962, at the height of the Cuban Missile Crisis.

In 1962, as the world's super powers were locked in a stare-down with all humanity hanging in the balance, Pope John XXIII publicly urged leaders to "do all that is in their power to save peace." Peace talks would reflect "wisdom and prudence which attracts the blessings of heaven and earth." Such "loyal and open behavior [would have] great value… before history." This message appeared in newspapers all around the world, including the Soviet Union's *Pravda*. The headline in that paper said: "We beg all governments not to remain deaf to this cry of humanity."

Economic embargos and shows of force certainly have their place in resolving conflicts, but as Pope John XXIII knew, they come with great risk. His words gave Khrushchev an avenue to step back without losing face. It was, perhaps, the only peaceful way that conflict could have ended.

Somewhat overlooked in the recent news flurry is that Pope Francis called Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy to express "his deepest sorrow for the tragic events that are taking place in our country." In a tweet, Zelenskyy thanked the pope "for praying for peace in Ukraine and a ceasefire. The Ukrainian people feel the spiritual support of His Holiness."

Francis also paid a visit to the Russian embassy, reportedly to speak to Putin on a secure line. Some observers have expressed the hope that the pope will publicly condemn Putin and Russian aggression. Others have referred to his efforts so far as "empty gestures." Those people are wrong.

The pope has made it clear, and no one doubts, that he opposes military aggression. Many other world leaders, however, are already issuing condemnations. According to some accounts, they are only hardening Putin's resolve. A papal condemnation would be unlikely to add anything new.

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As a religious leader, Francis can play an important role by doing what Pope John XXIII did in 1962, giving leaders a way to save face as they step back from an impossible situation. Religious leaders in Russia have limited ability to speak, and those in Ukraine are seriously threatened. Francis can take that role; he may be the only person in the world who can. Creating such openings may, in fact, be the most appropriate thing for any religious leader to do in a time of war.

War is always hell, and this one may have eternal consequences. Francis seems to recognize that. He certainly knows that the world cannot afford to overlook logical avenues to peace. That is why he is working to build them. Pray that he will be successful and that world leaders will be wise enough and brave enough to use the avenues that are open to them.

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