

Russian Orthodox Church considers a ban on blessing of weapons

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In May 2018, days before the annual parade celebrating the Soviet victory in World War II, a convoy of military trucks carrying long-range nuclear weapons trundled to a halt on the Russian capital's ring road. As police officers stood guard, two Russian Orthodox priests wearing cassocks and holding Bibles climbed out of a vehicle and began sprinkling holy water on the missiles.

Since relations between Russia and the West plummeted after the Kremlin's seizure of Crimea in 2014, such scenes have become common in Russia. Priests have sanctified surface-to-air missiles, nuclear submarines, tanks, and fighter jets. Several years ago, a priest in Russia's far east explained that weapons, including nuclear missiles, were "perceived as a means of protection and salvation."

But the practice could soon be a thing of the past. Last month, a Russian Orthodox Church committee on ecclesiastical law recommended that clergy concentrate on blessing soldiers, rather than weapons.

The committee's proposal still has to be approved by Patriarch Kirill, the head of the Russian Orthodox Church.

The ban would constitute a signal change in the church's official policy regarding Russia's nuclear arsenal. Although the global Orthodox Church has condemned weapons of mass destruction, Patriarch Kirill has credited Russia's nuclear capability with "preventing World War III" and ensuring Russia's state sovereignty.

Vsevolod Chaplin, an influential priest and former spokesman for the patriarch, told the *Vzglyad* newspaper that nuclear weapons were the country's "guardian angels" and necessary to preserve "Orthodox civilization."

"Only nuclear weapons protect Russia from enslavement by the West," Chaplin said.

Patriarch Kirill has described the Kremlin's military campaign in Syria as a "holy war," while uniformed clerics embedded with the armed forces are being trained to drive combat vehicles and operate communication equipment.

Some critics have likened the role of priests in the modern Russian military to that played by Soviet-era political officers, whose task was to root out dissenting views. Russia is also constructing a vast Main Cathedral of the Armed Forces near Moscow, whose steps will be made from melted-down tanks seized from the Nazis.

Russia's nuclear arsenal also has its own patron saint—St. Seraphim, whose remains were discovered in 1991 in a disused monastery in Sarov, a small town in central Russia that was home to several key nuclear facilities in the Soviet era.

“The Russian Orthodox Church has systematically and openly supported the Kremlin's foreign policy gambits involving nuclear weapons,” wrote author Dmitry Adamsky in his recently published book, *Russian Nuclear Orthodoxy: Religion, Politics, and Strategy*. “At a time of economic austerity, it supports the Kremlin's national security course and legitimizes budget allocations to the defense sector.”

In exchange for its support, Adamsky wrote, the church had received a boost to its “social and political influence.” —Religion News Service