44. The Orthodox record: coercion, captivity, war and scandal

This chapter sets out nine cases from the record of the Orthodox churches, from the persecution of the Old Believers in seventeenth-century Russia to the Russian Church's support for the war in Ukraine and recent cases of financial misconduct and sexual abuse. Each case gives what happened, using dates and figures accepted by historians and courts; the criticism, from historians, victims and other Orthodox Christians; the Orthodox response, from the churches' own statements and defenders; and whether and how it was corrected. The Orthodox Church is a communion of self-governing churches, so each case names the church concerned: what one patriarchate did is not the act of all.

The criticism

- **Church bent to the state's purposes.** Critics, among them the Orthodox theologians who signed the 2022 Declaration on the "Russian World" Teaching, say the close bond of church, state and nation has repeatedly put the Church at the service of state power: the tsars enforced the councils against the Old Believers, the Moscow Patriarchate defended Soviet policy, and its leadership now calls the invasion of Ukraine a holy war.
- **Collaboration left unexamined.** The parliamentary investigators who read the KGB files in 1991–92 reported agents among the Russian bishops and said the church had made "not one single move" to remove them; the hierarchy has rejected the specific charges.
- **Late or missing apologies.** Old Believer leaders still ask the Moscow Patriarchate to repent of three centuries of persecution, Romani scholars note that no formal apology has been made for the monasteries' slaveholding, and the suppression of the Greek Catholic churches in 1946 and 1948 is still described by the Orthodox churches concerned as a "return."
- **Texts and silences.** Anti-Jewish stanzas remain in the Holy Week services, and the Serbian Church was criticized for its silence about wartime crimes committed by Serbs.

How the Orthodox answer

- **A church of martyrs.** The Orthodox churches of Russia and Eastern Europe were themselves persecuted: by 1939 only three or four Orthodox bishops and about a hundred churches could function in the Soviet Union, and in Romania more than a thousand Orthodox priests were imprisoned, sent to forced labor or deported after 1944. The compromises of those years were made, in the words of Patriarch Kirill, because "the church remaining here had to exist."
- **The state, not the Church's teaching.** The burnings of Old Believers, the Soviet terror and the dissolution of the Greek Catholic churches were carried out by state power. The Russian

Church's *Bases of the Social Concept* (2000) teach that if the authorities force believers to apostatize or to sin gravely, "the Church should refuse to obey the state."

- **Correction by councils.** Orthodox councils and synods have reversed past errors: the Russian Local Council of 1971 lifted the anathemas on the old rites, the Russian Church Outside Russia asked the Old Believers' forgiveness (2000), the Orthodox Church in America admitted "we were wrong" and reformed its finances (2007), and the Romanian Holy Synod defrocked a bishop convicted of rape (2025).
- **Criticism from within.** The sharpest criticism of the Moscow Patriarchate's war stance has come from Orthodox Christians themselves, the Ecumenical Patriarch, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church and hundreds of Orthodox theologians among them, which the Orthodox take as evidence that no single patriarch speaks for Orthodoxy.

Summary

1. The persecution of the Old Believers

Period: 1660s–1905

Status: PARTLY ACKNOWLEDGED

Key correction: Anathemas lifted (1971); Church Outside Russia asks forgiveness (2000)

2. Roma slaves held by monasteries in Wallachia and Moldavia

Period: 14th c.–1856

Status: PARTLY ACKNOWLEDGED

Key correction: Monastic slaves freed (1844, 1847); no formal apology

3. Anti-Jewish passages in the Holy Week services

Period: Byzantine era–present

Status: PARTLY CORRECTED

Key correction: Harshest stanzas dropped in some editions (Romania, 1970)

4. The Moscow Patriarchate under Soviet control

Period: 1927–1991

Status: DISPUTED

Key correction: Alexy II asks forgiveness for compromises (1991)

5. The forced absorption of the Ukrainian and Romanian Greek Catholic Churches

Period: 1946–1989

Status: DISPUTED

Key correction: Greek Catholic churches legal again (1989–90)

6. A priest's blessing of the Scorpions and the Srebrenica killings

Period: 1995–2005

Status: DISPUTED

Key correction: Church condemns the crime (2005); killers convicted (2007)

7. The Moscow Patriarchate and the war in Ukraine

Period: 2022–present

Status: ONGOING

Key correction: None; Ukrainian Orthodox Church breaks with Moscow (2022)

8. Financial misconduct at the head of the Orthodox Church in America

Period: 1990s–2008

Status: CORRECTED

Key correction: Financial accountability rules (2007); chancellor deposed

9. Sexual abuse of seminarians in the Romanian diocese of Huși

Period: 2017–2025

Status: PROSECUTED

Key correction: Final conviction; bishop defrocked (2025)

Close all

A. Coercion and prejudice in the old order 3

1. The persecution of the Old Believers 1660s–1905 PARTLY ACKNOWLEDGED

2. Roma slaves held by monasteries in Wallachia and Moldavia 14th c.–1856 PARTLY ACKNOWLEDGED

3. Anti-Jewish passages in the Holy Week services Byzantine era–present PARTLY CORRECTED

B. Under Communist rule 2

4. The Moscow Patriarchate under Soviet control 1927–1991 DISPUTED

5. The forced absorption of the Ukrainian and Romanian Greek Catholic Churches 1946–1989 DISPUTED

C. War and nation 2

6. A priest's blessing of the Scorpions and the Srebrenica killings 1995–2005 DISPUTED

7. The Moscow Patriarchate and the war in Ukraine 2022–present ONGOING

D. Money and abuse 2

8. Financial misconduct at the head of the Orthodox Church in America 1990s–2008 CORRECTED

9. Sexual abuse of seminarians in the Romanian diocese of Huși 2017–2025 PROSECUTED

The other records: Catholic, Lutheran, Reformed, Anglican, Methodist, Baptist.

1. The persecution of the Old Believers 1660s–1905

PARTLY ACKNOWLEDGED

WHAT HAPPENED

Patriarch Nikon of Moscow (1652–58) ordered the Russian service books and rites corrected to match Greek practice of his day, including the sign of the cross with three fingers instead of two, and made the reform obligatory. Many priests and laity refused. Even after Nikon's deposition, a series of church councils culminating in that of 1666–67 endorsed the reforms and anathematized the dissenters, who became known as Old Believers. Archpriest Avvakum, their leading voice, was exiled and then imprisoned at Pustozersk in the Arctic; a council of 1682 condemned him, and he was burned at the stake there on April 14, 1682. A council completed under Patriarch Ioakim in 1682 forbade Old Believers to worship even at home and required priests to report them to the government. Many fled to the edges of the empire; others, facing arrest, burned themselves in their churches, and a commonly cited estimate holds that some twenty thousand had died this way by 1690. Old Believers remained subject to persecution under later tsars, including Nicholas I and Alexander III, until the edict of toleration of April 17, 1905.

The criticism

Old Believers count almost three hundred years of persecution, which they trace to the reforming hierarchy that called on the state to enforce its councils. Metropolitan Korniliy of the Russian Orthodox Old-Rite Church said in 2021 that the curses on the old rites were canonically "illegitimate and invalid," and that reunion could rest on the repentance of the reforming church "for the cruel persecutions and executions of the Old Believers," shown in deeds and not only in words. He judged that the 1971 decision had brought nothing concrete for Old Believer clergy.

Orthodox response

The Moscow Patriarchate calls the schism a "national tragedy" whose pernicious consequences it recognizes, and Metropolitan Hilarion, then head of its external relations department, described the 1971 decisions as historic signs of the Church's serious intention to hold dialogue with the Old Rite. He described the persecutions, which took thousands of lives, as the work of "the authorities." The Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia went further: its Council of Bishops (October 2000) deeply regretted the "atrocities" visited on the adherents of the old ritual by civil authorities "inspired by certain of our predecessors," and asked Old Believers' forgiveness.

Was it corrected? Partly acknowledged. State persecution ended with the 1905 edict of toleration. The Local Council of the Russian Orthodox Church (May 30–June 2, 1971) rescinded the seventeenth-century anathemas and recognized the old rites as fully valid; the Russian Church Outside Russia

> declared them invalid "as if they had never been" in 1974 and asked forgiveness in 2000. The Moscow Patriarchate has not issued an apology for the persecutions themselves, and communion with the main Old Believer churches has not been restored.

Sources: Encyclopaedia Britannica, "Old Believer"; Encyclopaedia Britannica, "Avvakum Petrovich"; Library of Congress, Meeting of Frontiers, "Religious Flight and Migration: Old Believers" (2000); EBSCO Research Starters, "Self-immolation of Old Believers"; Russian Orthodox Old-Rite Church, interview with Metropolitan Korniliy (Kommersant, July 26, 2021); Moscow Patriarchate, "Metropolitan Hilarion: Unification is impossible if one side considers the other 'heretical'" (2021); Council of Bishops of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia, epistle to the Old Ritualists (October 13/26, 2000).

2. Roma slaves held by monasteries in Wallachia and Moldavia

14th c.–1856 **PARTLY ACKNOWLEDGED**

WHAT HAPPENED

In the Romanian principalities of Wallachia and Moldavia the Roma were held as slaves for more than five centuries, as Patriarch Daniel of Romania himself put it in 2016. The prince (later the state), the boyars and the Church were the three classes of owners. A donation of 1385 gave forty Romani families to the monastery of St. Anthony at Vodița, and monasteries went on holding Roma slaves until the emancipation laws of the 1840s. Slaves had no legal personality and could be sold, given away and punished. Slaves of the monasteries were freed without compensation in Moldavia in 1844 and in Wallachia in 1847; privately owned slaves were freed on December 10/22, 1855, in Moldavia and February 8/20, 1856, in Wallachia, with the state compensating their owners. Freed Roma received nothing, and many stayed beside the monasteries that had owned them, forming villages that still exist.

The criticism

Romani scholars and advocates, among them the Romanian scholar and activist Margareta Matache, point out that monasteries and churches were built by enslaved Roma (she writes that some 800 Romani slaves built the Cașin monastery in the 1650s), and say the Church has "embraced an approach of hiding, ignoring, and neglecting" five hundred years of enslavement. They note that some church representatives deny that Roma bondage was slavery at all, and that neither the Romanian state nor the Orthodox Church had formally apologized as of the 170th anniversary in February 2026. They ask for apology, truth-telling and reparation.

Orthodox response

Patriarch Daniel's message for the 160th anniversary of emancipation (February 19, 2016) argues that honest research must take the international context into account: slavery existed in the neighboring Byzantine, Ottoman, Habsburg and Russian lands and in the Atlantic world, and Roma slaves in the principalities, he says, had more rights than slaves in the colonies. He points out that Metropolitan

Gavriil Calimachi and the bishops of Moldavia forbade the separation of Roma families in 1766, saying they too "are made by God like other people"; that Archimandrite Ioasafat Snagoveanul sat on the commission for the liberation of the Gypsies in 1848 and died in exile; and that the Church now trains and ordains Roma priests, builds churches for Roma communities and publishes services in Romani. He calls Church, state and society to look critically at what was negative in the past.

Was it corrected? Partly acknowledged. Slavery was abolished in 1844–1856, monastic slaves first. In 2011 Romania established by law a Day of the Abolition of Roma Slavery. The Romanian Patriarchate has acknowledged that the Roma were slaves near its monasteries and has expanded its pastoral work among Roma, but it has issued no formal apology for the Church's slaveholding.

Sources: Basilica.ro (Romanian Patriarchate), Patriarch Daniel, "Roma minority from slavery to freedom and hope" (February 19, 2016); Venera Achim, "Bonds Issued in 1856–1858 in Moldavia and Wallachia in Compensation to Former Slave Owners," Transylvanian Review 19/1 (2010); European Roma Rights Centre, "170 Years After Slavery, Roma did not gain freedom from racism" (February 20, 2026); Margareta Matache, "It is time reparations are paid for Roma slavery," Al Jazeera (October 5, 2020).

3. Anti-Jewish passages in the Holy Week services

Byzantine era–present PARTLY CORRECTED

WHAT HAPPENED

The Triodion, the book of services for Lent and Holy Week, contains a small number of hymns that speak harshly of "the Jews" as a people. Among the stanzas most often cited are canons of Compline in Holy Week, attributed to St. Andrew of Crete, that call them "God-slayers" (*theoktonoi*); stanzas of the Good Friday Lamentations addressing a "bloodthirsty people, jealous and vengeful"; and a Holy Thursday antiphon saying that when Christ was raised on the Cross "the people of the Hebrews was destroyed." Such stanzas are few within the whole Triodion, but they are sung in the most solemn services of the Church's year. Outside the liturgy, the Jewish Telegraphic Agency writes that the Russian Church's history includes pogroms and forced baptisms of Jews in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The criticism

These hymns have been called a "stumbling stone" in dialogue between Jews and Orthodox Christians. The Greek theologian Hamilcar Alivizatos called for correcting the liturgical texts as early as 1960, prompted, as his title put it, by a renewal of Nazi persecution of Jews in Germany and elsewhere; later voices for removing the anti-Jewish elements include Metropolitan Kallistos Ware, Andrew Louth and Sandrine Caneri. Critics argue that such hymns, sung at the heart of the Church's year, lay the guilt for the Crucifixion on the Jewish people as a whole; George Demacopoulos of Fordham University traces that charge to the oldest hymns written for Holy Week, the idiomela, which he says were the first to blame the Jews rather than all humanity for Christ's death, a claim he calls historically misleading.

Orthodox response

Defenders of the received texts, such as the Romanian theologian Alexandru Mihăilă (2019), read them within Byzantine discourse about identity: addressed to Christians in church, not to Jews, and meant to strengthen the worshippers' sense of who they are. A quantitative study of the Triodion by the Orthodox theologian Alexandru Ioniță (2024) finds that only very few of its hymns contain anti-Jewish elements, and proposes that those be omitted or transformed in translation. Orthodox leaders have also condemned antisemitism directly: in 1991 Patriarch Alexy II of Moscow told an audience of rabbis in New York that the Russian Church must oppose it and called them brothers, a speech for which some Russian clergy denounced him.

Was it corrected? Partly corrected. Ioniță describes the anti-Jewish elements as kept in modern liturgical texts largely without revision, but some editions have dropped the harshest stanzas: the 1970 Romanian Triodion omits or softens several stanzas of the Lamentations, and Greek-American service books such as Papadeas's shorten the service and leave out the anti-Jewish stanzas. Many parishes use such shortened texts. In 2023 the Orthodox Theological Society in America formed a working group, Orthodox Christians in Dialogue with Jews, beginning with Holy Week hymnography and preparing guidance for parishes considering liturgical renewal.

Sources: Alexandru Ioniță, "Mapping the Jews in the Byzantine Hymnography: The Triodion," Religions 15/2 (2024) 237; Geoffrey Ready, "Renewing Tradition: The Orthodox Christians in Dialogue with Jews Working Group and the Challenge of Anti-Judaism," Review of Ecumenical Studies 17/2 (2025), on JCRelations; George Demacopoulos, "The Origins of Anti-Jewish Rhetoric in the Hymns of Good Friday," Public Orthodoxy (April 2022), reposted by the Polish Council of Christians and Jews; Jewish Telegraphic Agency, "Russian Orthodox voice against anti-Semitism dies" (December 5, 2008), on JCRelations.

4. The Moscow Patriarchate under Soviet control 1927–1991

DISPUTED

WHAT HAPPENED

On July 29, 1927, Metropolitan Sergius (Stragorodsky), deputy locum tenens of the patriarchate, signed a declaration pledging the Church's loyalty to the Soviet government. Persecution continued: under Stalin in the late 1920s and 1930s a bloody persecution claimed thousands of victims, and by 1939 only three or four Orthodox bishops and about a hundred churches could function officially. In 1943 Stalin allowed Sergius to be elected patriarch, and under Patriarch Alexy I some 25,000 churches reopened, before Khrushchev's campaign of 1959–64 cut them to under 10,000. Throughout, the bishops had to deal with the state's Council for Religious Affairs, which supervised the churches. When a parliamentary commission on the 1991 coup attempt, which included the priest and deputy Gleb Yakunin, was given

access to KGB files, it reported agents and informers in the hierarchies of nearly every recognized religion, the Russian Orthodox among them. Lawrence Uzzell, writing in 1992, matched the KGB code names "Abbat," "Adamant" and "Antonov" to three senior metropolitans; in 2000 Keston News Service concluded from Estonian and Moscow archive documents that an agent "Drozdov," recruited in 1958, was the future Patriarch Alexy II. In February 2023 two Swiss newspapers, *SonntagsZeitung* and *Le Matin Dimanche*, reported, citing declassified Swiss federal archives, that Patriarch Kirill had worked for the KGB under the name "Mikhailov" while representing the Moscow Patriarchate at the World Council of Churches in Geneva in the 1970s.

The criticism

Critics within Orthodoxy, the Russian Church Outside Russia foremost among them, held that the 1927 declaration made the Church's leadership a servant of an atheist state, and in 1991 they were still asking Moscow to repent of it publicly before any dialogue. Uzzell cited KGB reports that agents in the church's delegation to the 1983 World Council of Churches assembly in Vancouver blocked resolutions on Soviet religious persecution and the invasion of Afghanistan. Yakunin and the commission chairman Lev Ponomarev said in 1992 that the Russian Orthodox Church had made "not one single move" to remove KGB infiltrators, and Uzzell wrote that Patriarch Alexy II urged the parliament's leader to suspend the commission's work.

Orthodox response

The Moscow Patriarchate holds that the declaration "had as its aim to seek the legalization of the church in the secular state," as Patriarch Kirill said on its ninetieth anniversary in 2017, and that Sergius violated neither dogma nor canons. Church leaders do not deny the compromises; they say they were the price of the Church's survival. "The church remaining here had to exist," Kirill, then a metropolitan, said in 1991, and Alexy II told an interviewer that year, "Our choices were cooperation or annihilation." In an interview with *Izvestia* (June 10, 1991) Alexy II said that as a churchman he must take responsibility for everything in his Church's life, and asked forgiveness, before God and before them, of those hurt by the concessions, silence and declarations of loyalty that the church leadership had allowed. His spokesman called the 2000 Keston report "absolutely unsubstantiated," saying no secret document bears the patriarch's signature, and the Church declined to comment on the 2023 Swiss reports; Kirill's nephew, who heads a church in Geneva, told one of the newspapers that his uncle was likely not an agent but had been under the KGB's strict supervision.

Was it corrected? Disputed. State control ended with the Soviet Union in 1991. The church's *Bases of the Social Concept* (2000) teach that if the authorities force believers to apostatize from Christ or to

commit grave sin, "the Church should refuse to obey the state." The church rejects the specific charges drawn from the KGB files and continues to defend Sergius's declaration as a step needed for its survival.

Sources: Encyclopaedia Britannica, "Eastern Orthodoxy: The Russian Revolution and the Soviet period"; Moscow Patriarchate, "Patriarch Kirill chairs a regular session of the Holy Synod in St. Petersburg" (July 29, 2017); Christianity Today, "The KGB Files: Inside the Church" (April 27, 1992); Lawrence A. Uzzell, "The KGB's Agents in Cassocks," Christian Science Monitor (April 28, 1992); Patriarch Alexy II, "I accept responsibility for everything that was," interview with Izvestia (June 10, 1991), reposted on VK; Christian Science Monitor, "Russian Orthodox Leader Seeks Unity" (November 12, 1991); Felix Corley, Keston News Service, on the Patriarch and the KGB (September 21, 2000); Vladimir Berezansky Jr., "A Transitional Patriarch," Moscow Times (December 11, 2008); Swissinfo, report on Patriarch Kirill and the KGB (February 5, 2023); Novaya Gazeta Europe, report on the Swiss newspapers' findings (February 5, 2023); Moscow Patriarchate, *Bases of the Social Concept of the Russian Orthodox Church* (2000) III.5.

5. The forced absorption of the Ukrainian and Romanian Greek Catholic Churches 1946–1989 DISPUTED

WHAT HAPPENED

Ukraine. On April 11, 1945, Soviet authorities arrested Metropolitan Josyf Slipyj and the other Ukrainian Greek Catholic bishops of Galicia, who in June 1946 received long forced-labor sentences on charges of treason and collaboration with the German occupiers. A "Sponsoring Group for the Re-Union" of three priests, led by Havryil Kostelnyk, was given exclusive authority over the church by the Soviet Ukrainian government in June 1945. Because no Greek Catholic bishop would take part, the Moscow Patriarchate ordained two of the group's priests as Orthodox bishops in February 1946, and a Moscow bishop was instructed to assist the group. On March 8–10, 1946, an assembly at St. George's Cathedral in Lviv, with 216 invited clerical and 19 lay delegates, revoked the Union of Brest (1596) and joined the church to the Russian Orthodox Church. By then 986 priests had been brought to accept "reunion"; others were imprisoned, deported or in hiding. **Romania.** On October 1, 1948, about three dozen Romanian Greek Catholic priests meeting under government pressure in Cluj voted to end the union with Rome and asked for reunion with the Romanian Orthodox Church; the union was declared abolished at Alba Iulia on October 21. The Greek Catholic bishops were arrested that autumn, and Decree 358 of December 1, 1948, dissolved the church; most of its property went to the state and to the Romanian Orthodox Church. Four of the bishops, and another consecrated in secret, died in prison.

The criticism

Greek Catholics call the Lviv assembly a "pseudo-council": convened by none of the church's own bishops, who were in prison, it was in their view a Soviet operation carried out with Orthodox participation. Some Orthodox agree. On March 7, 2016, a group of Orthodox theologians and writers, among them Antoine Arjakovsky, Olga Sedakova, Constantin Sigov and Jim Forest, declared that all serious historians regard the 1946 synod as "only a sham," asked Orthodox authorities in Russia, Ukraine and elsewhere to recognize the invalidity of its decisions, and asked the Greek Catholics'

pardon "for all the injustices they have suffered under the cover of the Orthodox Church." In Romania, the historian George Cipăianu, writing for the Greek Catholic Eparchy of Oradea, says that Orthodox clergy took part in the security police's surveillance of Greek Catholics and that very few confiscated churches have been returned, many only after costly lawsuits.

Orthodox response

The Ukrainian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate), marking the seventieth anniversary in March 2016, described the Lviv council as the return of the Greek Catholics to the Church their ancestors had been drawn from by the Unions of Brest (1596) and Uzhhorod (1646), which it regards as forced. It says part of the Uniate clergy and faithful "sincerely returned to the Orthodox faith," citing some 900 Galician parishes that stayed Orthodox after the Greek Catholic church was legalized; it objects that critics ignore the Soviet persecution of the Orthodox themselves, and calls for historical grievances on both sides to be studied openly. The Romanian Orthodox Church holds that the 1948 conversions were voluntary, and in the property disputes it argues that any transfer must take account of the present pastoral needs of both communities, and that the parish communities now worshipping in the churches oppose handing them back.

Was it corrected? Disputed. The Soviet Ukrainian authorities legalized the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church on December 1, 1989, and the Romanian decree dissolving the Greek Catholic Church was abrogated on January 2, 1990. In the Balamand statement (1993) the Catholic–Orthodox theological commission rejected "uniatism" as a method of union while affirming that the Eastern Catholic churches "have the right to exist," and asked both sides to honor all who suffered persecution. The Orthodox churches concerned still describe 1946 and 1948 as a return, not a suppression. In Romania, by CNEWA's count, a joint commission returned only 16 churches before its work largely stopped, leaving more than 200 Greek Catholic communities without a church of their own.

Sources: Internet Encyclopedia of Ukraine, "Lviv Sobor of 1946"; RISU, "The Orthodox Appeal for recognition of the 1946 Lviv 'synod' as a sham" (March 7, 2016); RISU, commentary of the Department for External Church Relations of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate) on the Lviv Council (March 11, 2016); CNEWA, Ronald Roberson, "The Romanian Catholic Church," *The Eastern Christian Churches*; George Cipăianu, "The Present Day Situation of Greek-Catholic Church in Romania," Greek Catholic Eparchy of Oradea (September 20, 2023); Ronald G. Roberson, "Balamand and Beyond: The State of Catholic-Orthodox Relations," ONE Magazine (July–August 1995).

6. A priest's blessing of the Scorpions and the Srebrenica killings 1995–2005 DISPUTED

WHAT HAPPENED

In July 1995, after the fall of Srebrenica, members of the Scorpions, a Serbian paramilitary unit, shot six young Bosniak captives from Srebrenica near Trnovo; four of them were under 18. The unit filmed the killings. The video, which became evidence at the Hague war crimes tribunal, was broadcast on Serbian television on June 1, 2005. It opens with a Serbian Orthodox priest blessing the unit's members before they set out. Serbian police arrested several members of the unit within days, and the priest was identified as Father Gavrilo, abbot of the monastery of Privina Glava in Vojvodina. In the wider Srebrenica operation of July 11–19, 1995, some 8,000 Muslims from the town were executed, crimes that the International Court of Justice found in 2007 to constitute genocide.

The criticism

Critics in Bosnia and Croatia, quoted by Radio Free Europe in June 2005, noted that the Serbian Orthodox Church was almost the only Serbian institution that had not commented on the tape, and that it had also been silent about Serbian wartime crimes in general; they said the time had come for Patriarch Pavle and the church to discuss the church's role in the wars. In Serbia some found the priest's blessing disgusting, while others answered that blessing soldiers before combat is a priest's work. The German Society for Threatened Peoples went further in June 2005, accusing the church of having supported the murder and expulsion of Bosnian Muslims, citing a Holy Synod statement that it was "unchristian" to call the Serbian army the aggressor and the church's backing for joining Serb-held regions to Serbia.

Orthodox response

Father Gavrilo told the Novi Sad daily *Dnevnik* that he had blessed Serb soldiers going to war but "did not bless the crime," which only extremists out of control could have committed and which nothing excused. On June 10, 2005, the Croatian news agency HINA reported that the Serbian Orthodox Church had condemned the conduct of those most responsible for the massacre at Srebrenica, while recalling the crimes committed earlier against Serbs in eastern Bosnia, which it said did not justify the killings. When the UN General Assembly established a day of remembrance for the Srebrenica genocide in May 2024, Patriarch Porfirije called the faithful to prayer against what he called "completely false and unjust accusations" against the Serbian people, and a diocesan statement warned that the resolution could label the whole nation genocidal.

Was it corrected? Disputed. The killers were prosecuted: on April 10, 2007, the War Crimes Chamber of the Belgrade District Court convicted four members of the unit, including its commander Slobodan Medić, who received the maximum twenty years. The church condemned the crime in 2005; reports at the time recorded no church action concerning the priest, and the church rejects the charge that the Serbian people as a whole bear guilt for Srebrenica.

Sources: Al Jazeera, "Serb execution video leads to arrests" (June 3, 2005); Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Balkan Report (June 10, 2005); Zlatko Jelisavac, "Zastava, sopstvenost i drugi," Vreme (June 23, 2005); HINA, "Serb Orthodox Church condemns Srebrenica massacre" (June 10, 2005); Society for Threatened Peoples, "The Serbian Orthodox Church supported the genocide of Bosnians" (June 8, 2005); OrthoChristian.com, "Serbian Church offers fervent prayer as UN declares Srebrenica massacre memorial day" (May 2024); Humanitarian Law Center, "Scorpions Verdict Politically Motivated," Transitional Justice Bulletin (April 13, 2007); Associated Press via NBC News, "Serbian court convicts 4 for war crimes" (April 10, 2007).

7. The Moscow Patriarchate and the war in Ukraine 2022–present

ONGOING

WHAT HAPPENED

Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Patriarch Kirill of Moscow has supported the war, describing it as part of a metaphysical struggle against a liberal West. In a sermon on September 25, 2022, days after Russia announced a partial mobilization, he said that a soldier who dies fulfilling his military duty makes a sacrifice, "and therefore we believe that this sacrifice washes away all the sins that a person has committed." Priests of the Russian Church were required to read a prayer for "Holy Rus" asking God to "grant us victory"; on January 13, 2024, the Moscow diocesan court defrocked Archpriest Alexei Uminsky, a well-known Moscow pastor, for refusing to recite it. On March 27, 2024, the World Russian People's Council, which the patriarch heads under its statutes, adopted a decree, "The Present and Future of the Russian World," declaring that "the special military operation is a Holy War."

The criticism

On March 13, 2022, a group of Orthodox theologians coordinated by the Volos Academy in Greece and Fordham University's Orthodox Christian Studies Center issued a "Declaration on the 'Russian World' (*Russkii Mir*) Teaching," signed by over a thousand people within ten days, which rejected the religious ideology behind the invasion and the Church's subordination to the state's geopolitical aims. Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, speaking in Abu Dhabi in December 2022, called the war the worst geopolitical and humanitarian crisis in Europe since the Second World War, noted the strong criticism drawn by Kirill's "ambiguous stance" and support for Putin's policies, and said the "Russian world" ideology makes faith "the backbone" of the regime's ideology, recalling the condemnation of ethnophyletism, "a form of ecclesial racism," by the Council of Constantinople in 1872. On May 27, 2022, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, until then part of the Moscow Patriarchate, condemned the war, voiced disagreement with Kirill's position and declared its full independence. The World Council of Churches said in April 2024 that it "cannot reconcile" the decree with Kirill's own earlier words, and the Orthodox theologian Cyril Hovorun said Kirill had replaced Christian martyrdom "with the idea of religious terrorism."

Orthodox response

Kirill's defenders say his words have been misread. Archpriest John Whiteford argues that the September 2022 sermon, which also called the conflict "fratricidal" and prayed for its end, applied to any soldier who dies out of duty and love for others (John 15:13; 1 Pet 4:8), and did not teach that soldiers win heaven by killing Ukrainians or by dying in this war. At a meeting in Moscow in May 2023, Kirill told the World Council of Churches that his earlier references to "holy war" concerned the metaphysical realm, not armed conflict, and agreed that no armed war can be holy. Writing on the Russian Church's Pravoslavie.ru site, Irina Borshch replied to the Volos declaration that it charges the Church with heresy without citing any Church document, misreads *mir* (which also means "peace"), and makes the Church "a political tribunal."

Was it corrected? Ongoing. The war and the patriarch's support for it continue. The Russian Church has not publicly withdrawn the 2024 decree or the prayer for victory. No pan-Orthodox body has ruled on the "Russian world" teaching, and the Ukrainian Orthodox Church's break of 2022 remains in force.

Sources: Associated Press (Peter Smith), "Moscow patriarch: Russian war dead have their sins forgiven" (September 27, 2022); Meduza, "Moscow priest who was removed from post defrocked for refusing to recite prayer for 'Holy Rus' victory" (January 13, 2024); Vatican News, report on the WCC statement on the decree of the World Russian People's Council (April 15, 2024); University of Exeter, news release on the Declaration on the "Russian World" Teaching (March 22, 2022); Aleteia, "Ideology fueling Ukraine war is hurting Orthodox unity, says patriarch" (December 16, 2022); Novaya Gazeta Europe, "Ukrainian Orthodox Church to become independent from the Moscow Patriarchate" (May 27, 2022); John Whiteford, "Did Patriarch Kirill Espouse 'Jihadist Theology'?" OrthoChristian.com (2023); Irina Borshch, "Declaration on the Teaching of 'Russian World' as a Document of a new 'Time of Troubles,'" OrthoChristian.com (March 31, 2022).

8. Financial misconduct at the head of the Orthodox Church in America 1990s–2008 CORRECTED

WHAT HAPPENED

The Orthodox Church in America's former treasurer, Protodeacon Eric Wheeler, publicly accused the church's central administration in Syosset, New York, of "financial corruption." An audit by the law firm Proskauer Rose and the accountants Lambrides, Lamos, Moulthrop, announced in December 2006, found that financial controls had been circumvented at least since 1998, a "pattern of personal use of church money," falsified financial reports and attempts to divert money given for charity, with the misconduct "centered on and around one individual." The chancellor, Protopresbyter Robert S. Kondratick, had been dismissed in March 2006; a church court presided over by Archbishop Nathaniel recommended that he be deposed from the priesthood, the Holy Synod deposed him permanently effective July 31, 2007, and it upheld the deposition on appeal on December 13, 2007. On September 3, 2008, a Special Investigative Committee reported that church leaders had either "squandered" millions of dollars or helped cover up the diversion of funds to personal expenses and shortfalls, and recommended discipline for Metropolitan Herman, the church's primate since 2002, as well as for his predecessor Metropolitan Theodosius,

Kondratick, two former treasurers and a former comptroller. Herman, who had been refused a medical leave, retired the next day.

The criticism

The charges were pressed by the former treasurer and by laity such as Mark Stokoe, whose website ocanews.org reported the case, before the bishops acted. They held that the problem was not one man: the investigators' recommendations reached two successive primates as well as the church's financial officers, and the Holy Synod itself had at first treated the accusations as exaggerated. The audit had found attempts to divert even money given for charity.

Orthodox response

The Holy Synod admitted its error. In an archpastoral statement of March 22, 2007, the bishops wrote that they had first thought the accusations exaggerated or easily explained, and "we were wrong in these beliefs"; they found the former chancellor's explanations "neither credible nor persuasive" and called the faithful to beg God's forgiveness "for our sins, known and unknown." The church's own councils commissioned the audit and the investigation, and its Metropolitan Council adopted reforms before the final report was issued.

Was it corrected? Corrected. On June 14, 2007, the Metropolitan Council unanimously adopted "Best Practices, Principles and Policies for Financial Accountability," covering ethics, conflicts of interest, whistleblowing, internal audit and donor rights, and created an ethics committee. The chancellor was deposed (2007), the metropolitan retired (2008), and a new primate was elected at the All-American Council in November 2008.

Sources: Associated Press via Deseret News, "Orthodox church finds financial impropriety" (December 30, 2006); Orthodox Church in America, "Holy Synod of Bishops issues archpastoral statement" (March 22, 2007); Orthodox Church in America, "Verdict of Spiritual Court announced" (August 7, 2007); Orthodox Church in America, "Special Session of the Holy Synod, December 12–13, 2007"; Orthodox Church in America, "Metropolitan Council supports investigation committee, approves best practices, establishes ethics committee" (June 14, 2007); Religion News Service via The Christian Century, "Orthodox body seeks new leader in wake of financial scandal" (October 21, 2008).

9. Sexual abuse of seminarians in the Romanian diocese of Huși 2017–2025 PROSECUTED

WHAT HAPPENED

In June 2017 Bishop Corneliu Bârlădeanul of Huși (Cornel Onilă) reported that three priests of his diocese were blackmailing him with a compromising recording. The Holy Synod of the Romanian Orthodox Church withdrew all his duties and his episcopal function in July 2017, and he withdrew from office in

August. A first criminal investigation was closed; prosecutors reopened it after the investigative journalists of *Să fie lumină* published the accounts of former seminarians. On May 21, 2020, prosecutors detained Onilă on suspicion of raping and sexually abusing a minor student of the Ioan Gură de Aur theological seminary in Huși, where he had taught, together with former archimandrite Sebastian Jitaru of the Huși cathedral, already defrocked and imprisoned for the blackmail, who was accused of repeated rape and sexual abuse of minor seminarians. On April 30, 2025, the High Court of Cassation and Justice made final a sentence of eight years in prison for Onilă for rape and sexual assault, and of 14 years and 2 months for Jitaru.

The criticism

Romanian reporters pointed out that the criminal case moved only after journalists gathered the students' testimony, and Radio Free Europe reported in 2020 that the retired bishop was living in the guesthouse of Văratec monastery while still receiving a retired bishop's salary, with an aide and a driver. When the Holy Synod finally defrocked him in 2025 it returned him to the status of a monk rather than expelling him from monastic life, and the daily *Adevărul* asked why, given the gravity of the crimes, he had not been removed from the Church altogether.

Orthodox response

The Romanian Patriarchate's spokesman, Vasile Bănescu, said in 2020 that the Church had settled the case in July 2017 on the information then available and that, under church law, the Holy Synod could take "the irrevocable decision of defrocking" only after the criminal conviction became final. After the final verdict the Diocese of Huși said it "deeply regrets the suffering caused to the victims," asked forgiveness "for all the evil" done by the two men, "first of all to the victims," and noted that it had had no connection with them since August 2017. It added that the court's order making it jointly liable for the victims' material damages reflected no moral or institutional fault, and that it would seek to recover the money from the two men.

Was it corrected? Prosecuted. Both men were convicted with final effect in April 2025. At its session of July 1–2, 2025, the Holy Synod defrocked Onilă, stripping him of the priesthood and the title of bishop and returning him to the rank of a monk; he serves his sentence in Bacău penitentiary.

Sources: Europa Liberă România (RFE/RL), "BOR: Episcopul retras al Hușilor nu poate fi caterisit definitiv decât după condamnarea sa" (May 2020); Europa Liberă România (RFE/RL), "Fostul episcop al Hușilor, Corneliu Bârlădeanu, condamnat definitiv la 8 ani de închisoare pentru viol" (April 30, 2025); Agerpres, statement of the Diocese of Huși after the conviction (April 30, 2025); Adevărul, on the Holy Synod's decision of July 1–2, 2025 (July 2, 2025).