

Ukraine, Canada and the Church: Historical and religious context of the war in Ukraine

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“Ukraine, Canada, and the Church,” the first online gathering of Canadian Christian leaders representing the Canadian Council of Churches, The Evangelical Fellowship of Canada, and Slavic churches in Canada, took place June 21. The primary focus was on historical and religious context of the war in Ukraine and how the Body of Christ can help as a bridge for reconciliation. It became clear that before we can talk about potential solutions, it is important to have a thorough understanding about Ukraine’s historical past and spiritual connection with the Russian Orthodox church.

The historical and spiritual motivation of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict

No other war has drawn the attention of the world community in the past year than the conflict in Ukraine, which has dominated world media and been discussed thoroughly in homes, educational institutions and political forums. Though Western world forums side with Ukraine, the war needs to be examined through the lenses of both actors, Russia and Ukraine, to determine diverse and complex motives behind the conflict.

Dr. Vitaly Petrenko and Fr. Bohdan Hladio helped the session participants understand that until the end of the Cold War, Ukraine was a republic of the Soviet Union, dominated by Russian colonial rule, which did not recognize Ukrainian language and culture. Through determination and commitment to their own identity, Ukrainians worked to keep their culture and language

alive through (underground) extracurricular activities in schools and communities. The diaspora community in Canada saw its mission to maintain the Ukrainian language and culture. However, since the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1990, Ukraine has been enjoying political, economic and social freedom from Russia and developing close bonds to the West, adopting its democratic values and seeking total detachment from the Soviet era. In pursuit of its own national identity, Ukraine began talks with NATO about possible membership in the last few years, which was interpreted as a threat and breach of trust by Vladimir Putin. This was a catalyst for the invasion of Ukraine in 2022 by Putin, who had a vision for expanding the Russian Empire, restoring its former territory and greatness.

Though this invasion was perceived by many as being the beginning of Russian expansionism policy, people tend to overlook the spiritual dimension of this conflict and the role the Russian Orthodox Church played in justifying it. Vladimir Putin's close ally, Russian Patriarch Kirill, considers the conflict to be a spiritual war. In the Russkiy Mir (Russian World) view, the spiritual and historical past of both countries cannot be separated as it goes back to the 10th century when Prince Volodymyr I of Kyiv converted to Christianity. Prince Volodymyr's conversion is seen as the origin of Russian Orthodox Christianity.

This historical event was addressed in a letter from Patriarch Kirill to the World Council of Churches reminding them that Ukrainians and Russians “come from one Kievan baptismal font [...] and share common historical fate” ([usip.org](https://www.usip.org)). With its seat in Moscow, the Russian Orthodox church has played a significant role in Ukraine, especially since the fall of Constantinople in 1453, when it claimed to be the third Rome, heir of the Christian orthodox faith and civilization ([encyclopedia.com](https://www.encyclopedia.com)). For centuries the Patriarch of Moscow has been the dominant voice of the life and faith of Orthodoxy, including in Ukraine. And, it should be noted,

both Russian and Ukrainian Christians of Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant traditions suffered under the atheist rule of the Soviet Union, though the persecution of Catholic and Protestant Christians was more intense.

Being the biggest church in Ukraine prior to the invasion, the Russian Orthodox Church has had a tremendous impact not only on Ukraine but also on its diaspora community by keeping close bonds between both nations. Patriarch Kirill even considers the Russian Orthodox church as the defender and the spiritual leader of the Eastern Orthodox Church. Patriarch Kirill believes the church's duty is to protect the faith and future of the Orthodox Church until the coming of the Messiah.

On March 6, 2022, during a sermon in Moscow, he openly accused the West of trying to “impose gay parades on the Russian World” and justified the invasion as being a spiritual mission to “restore human civilization” in Ukraine (blogs.lse.ac.uk). This accusation and justification for the war has brought a rift within the Eastern Orthodox Church between the Ukrainian and Russian population and their faith communities, a chasm that is widening as the war continues.

To summarize, the Russian rationale for its invasion of Ukraine is rooted in a reunification of what it considers to be Russian people and territory, and this rationale has deep Christian spiritual and religious underpinnings. Meanwhile, Ukrainians' position is to seek total political freedom and independence from Russia at any costs. It isn't any wonder, then, that these different approaches have made mediation and negotiations impossible to this point. Is there still hope for peace? Is there any hope for reconciliation? Is it not precisely here where the Christian Church should intervene and have something unique to offer?

When people go back to the roots of the Christian Church and focus on love, peace, justice, compassion and prayers, something bigger can emerge out of the commitment to address the conflict and allow healing among the Ukrainian community to take place. A key theme that emerged from this first session was that the Body of Christ in Canada and abroad can't remain silent on the issue but must openly take a stand about the ongoing violence. To be silent is to approve of the violence and contrary to the gospel we uphold.

How to mend the wounded Ukrainian soul?

Volodymyr Romanyuk of Samaritan's Purse highlighted that today the harm, pain and destruction caused by the war have led to hatred by Ukrainians towards Russians. This leads us to the main question: How can we heal the wounded soul? The church must play a central role in the solution.

The Canadian Church can step in to provide counsel, humanitarian assistance and prayers.

Canada has already received more than 170,000 Ukrainian newcomers, and this is the opportunity for the Church to mobilize and begin dialogue across our society and with government. Christians can seek to reach the depths of the wounded soul and identify the cause of emotional hurt to allow healing to take place. Healing will require forgiveness.

Rooted in the forgiveness found in Jesus Christ, the Ukrainian people will eventually need to begin the process of forgiving the government, people and Christians of Russia to be able to find healing and restoration. This path to reconciliation will be a long one once the fighting finally comes to an end. The Canadian Church, which works with many Ukrainian diaspora communities, can help by listening to, loving and serving Ukrainian and Russian believers.

The diaspora Slavic groups – Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant – represent a great hope in the current tragedy. Their years in Canada have allowed them to go through personal and spiritual transformation processes and healing from wounds of the Soviet era. Their experiences and different perspectives on the conflict can help other newcomers to be transformed as well, and go through a similar process of mental, emotional and spiritual healing. Together with the rest of the Christian Church in Canada, the Ukrainian diaspora church communities can intervene by providing encouragement and any kind of spiritual assistance by showing unconditional love and giving a listening ear to the victims. Yielding to the Spirit and imitating the love of Jesus can be a first step toward restoring trust not only in God but also in humanity and toward reconciliation.

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