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AN ICON'S JOURNEY FROM KYIV TO THE PACIFIC: RUSSIAN COLONIAL WARS AND ORTHODOX PIETY IN THE EARLY 20TH CENTURY

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ABSTRACT. The article highlights the importance of material objects and practices of mobility for understanding the complex relationships between Christianity and war. It thus explores the potential of material-oriented research for studying the sacralization of military violence, focusing on Russian Orthodox contextual theology of war and using the Russo-Japanese War (1904–5) as a case study. Special attention is given to the icon known as "the Mother of God of Port Arthur", which is analyzed as an embodiment, a material manifestation, of the Russian Orthodox theology of war. The text is divided into four sections, (1) introducing the concept of Orthodox contextual theologies of war, (2) outlining the Russian colonial expansion project to the Pacific, (3) examining key features of Russian Orthodox theology of war in connection to the supposedly "miraculous appearance" and the mobility of the "Icon of the Mother of God of Port Arthur", and (4) summarizing the findings and their relevance for understanding recent developments in Russian Orthodoxy.

Keywords: Russian Empire, Russian Orthodox Church, Kyiv, Pacific, Japan, Orthodox Piety, Icon, Colonialism, material religion, contextual theology

Introduction: Orthodox Contextual Theologies of War and *Material Religion*

"Again war. Again useless, groundless suffering, again lies, again a general stupefaction, obduracy of the people. [...] And everywhere in Russia [...] the priests of the church that calls itself Christian are begging God – the God who commanded us to love our enemies, the God of love

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> – to help in the work of the devil, in the murder of human beings. [...] The Christian priests ceaselessly incite to the greatest crime and ceaselessly blaspheme, asking God for help in the cause of war."[1]

These words sound frighteningly current. They recall Russia's ongoing war of aggression against Ukraine, and the tireless efforts of the Russian Orthodox Church leadership to legitimize this war in religious terms. The quoted passage is not from the daily press, but is some 120 years old. Its author is Leo Tolstoy. He wrote these lines in response to the outbreak of the Russo-Japanese war in 1904, in his programmatic text entitled *Odumajtes'!* (*Change your mind!*).

The critical examination of the relationship between Christianity and military violence is by no means new. There are numerous examples from different periods, geographical areas and denominational contexts. However, in contrast to the Western tradition, Orthodox theology has until recently hardly reflected systematically on war. Orthodox social ethics have emerged only in recent years. These include, first and foremost, *Bases of the Social Concept of the Russian Orthodox Church* from 2000,[2] the document *The Mission of the Orthodox Church in Today's World,* adopted in 2016 by the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church in Crete, [3] and the document issued by the Ecumenical Patriarchate in 2020 entitled *For the Life of the World: Toward a Social Ethos of the Orthodox Church*.[4]

All these recent texts deal with the question of war and peace from a systematic theological perspective, but they ignore the complex history of the Orthodox Church's lived relationship with war. And that history is indeed complex. One of the reasons for this is that Orthodoxy has not developed a binding doctrine on this question, and at the same time has not had at its disposal the instruments that have become established in Western Christianity on this question: for example, the criteria for judging a war as a "just war", as a *bellum iustum*. Rather, Orthodoxy had already established an attitude in the

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1 Leo Tolstoy, "Odumajtes'," accessed April 28, 2023, http://tolstoy-lit.ru/tolstoy/publicistika/odumajtes.htm. Translation – S.P. On Tolstoy's Christian pacifism, see: Iain Atack, "Tolstoy's Pacifism and the Critique of State Violence," in *Pacifism's Appeal. Rethinking Peace and Conflict Studies*, ed. Jorg Kustermans et al. (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 81–102.

2 Russian Orthodox Church, "Bases of the Social Concept of the Russian Orthodox Church," accessed April 28, 2023, http://orthodoxeurope.org/page/3/14.aspx.

3 Holy and Great Council, "The Mission of the Orthodox Church in Today's World," accessed April 28, 2023, https://www.holycouncil.org/mission-orthodox-church-todays-world.

4 Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America, "For the Life of the World: Toward a Social Ethos of the Orthodox Church," accessed April 28, 2023, https://www.goarch.org/social-ethos. For an initial overview, see: Dagmar Heller, "Neuere sozialethische Entwicklungen in der Orthodoxie," *Materialdienst des Konfessionskundlichen Instituts* 72/2 (2021): 60–67.

time of the Byzantine Empire that regarded war as a necessary evil, but did not ascribe any specific theological relevance to it. Nevertheless, the Orthodox churches have had to take positions on war and violence throughout their history. In the absence of a binding doctrine on war, different views on war developed in the different contexts in which the Orthodox Churches existed after the fall of the Byzantine Empire. They were shaped by the political, cultural, and social circumstances in which Orthodox Christians lived. It is therefore possible to speak of a multiplicity of contextual Orthodox theologies of war.

The Russian Orthodox Church occupied a special position within Orthodoxy as a whole.[5] With only a few interruptions, the Russian state has always been led by Orthodox rulers who regarded the church as "*their*" church. This was not the case for Orthodox churches in the Middle East and south-eastern Europe, where for many centuries the Ottoman Empire was the dominant form of government for most Orthodox Christians. It is only in modern times that states of an Orthodox character (such as Greece, Bulgaria, Romania, and Serbia) have emerged in south-eastern Europe, while the Christians of the "old" patriarchates (Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch, and Jerusalem), which have existed since antiquity, still live as minorities in predominantly Muslim countries. The existence of the Russian Orthodox Church in the socio-political context of a state that has been at war almost continuously throughout its history favoured the emergence of a set of ideas and practices that served to sacralize war. These ideas and practices can be understood as a Russian Orthodox contextual theology of war.

While the Christian sacralization of war is usually examined through various textual genres, I would like to emphasize the importance of practices and related material objects. A theology of war is by no means merely an abstract construct of thought or a rhetorical performance. Rather, such a theology, which aims at the sacralization of war, can only be effective if it is embedded in concrete religious acts, rituals and cultures of piety. In recent years, the turn to the material side of religion has triggered a burst of creativity in anthropology, theology, religious studies and history, leading to the establishment of a broad approach that has come to be known as *material religion*.[6] The purpose of this paper is to explore the hitherto largely unrecognized potential

5 Cf. Thomas Bremer, "Das Jahrhundert der Kriege: Die Russische Orthodoxie, der Krieg und der Friede," *Osteuropa* 64 (2014): 279–290.

6 Cf. Peter J. Bräunlein, "Die materielle Seite des Religiösen. Perspektiven der Religionswissenschaft und Ethnologie," in *Architekturen und Artefakte. Zur Materialität des Religiösen*, ed. Uta Karstein and Thomas Schmidt-Lux (Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2017), 25–48. Specifically on Orthodox icons in the context of material religion, see: Martin Bürgin, "Material Religion," in *Ikonen. Abbilder, Kulturobjekte, Kunstwerke*, ed. Marc Seidel (Zürich: Seidel & Schütz, 2023), 74–87.

of material religion studies for the study of the sacralization of war. For this reason, the Russian Orthodox contextual theology of war will be examined from this perspective. The Russo-Japanese War of 1904–5, the last major colonial war of the Russian Empire, serves as a case study.

The article is divided into three parts. First, the Russian colonial expansion project in East Asia and the resulting Russo-Japanese War are outlined. Then the central features of Russian Orthodox war theology are elaborated on the basis of this case study, with particular emphasis on the role of material objects and mobility. Finally, the findings will be summarized and their relevance for understanding recent developments in Russian Orthodoxy will be examined.

Russo-Japanese War in the Context of Russian Colonialism

Russian colonialism, unlike that of most other European colonial powers, was characterized by the fact that it was not aimed at overseas territories, but primarily at continental expansion into neighbouring areas such as the South Caucasus and North, Central, and East Asia. This is why it is called internal colonialism.[7] Another feature of the Russian colonial regime was the role of Orthodox Christianity. In the 19th century, the Russian Empire continued its expansion in Siberia and Central Asia and began to extend its influence into East Asia, especially China and Korea. With the construction of the Trans-Siberian Railway, Russia secured an important link between the European part of the country and the Far East. In particular, Russia was keen to secure an ice-free port on the Yellow Sea to ensure year-round access to the Pacific and to strengthen its military presence in the region. In 1897, Russia occupied the Chinese port cities of Lushun (now Lüshunkou) and Dalian on the southern tip of the Liaodong Peninsula in southern Manchuria, which was also a desirable target for other imperialist powers, especially Japan, because of its strategic location. The pretext was the German seizure of the city of Tsingtau (now usually spelt Qingdao) and the nearby bay in the south of the Shandong peninsula. These areas became a German colony called Jiaozhou Bay and served as a naval base for the Imperial Navy in East Asia. The following year, Russia forced China to lease the occupied ports of Lushun and Dalian for 25 years and allow troops to be stationed in the region. The port city of Dalian was renamed Dalnij (Russian for "far away") and the port city of Lushun was renamed Port

[7] See Alexander Etkind, *Internal Colonization. Russia's Imperial Experience* (Cambridge: Polity, 2011); Dittmar Schorkowitz, "Was Russia a Colonial Empire?" in *Shifting Forms of Continental Colonialism. Unfinished Struggles and Tensions*, ed. Dittmar Schorkowitz et al. (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 117–147.

Arthur (this colonial name was of British origin and dated from the time of the Second Opium War). Port Arthur became the main base of the Russian Pacific Fleet and the center of the Russian military presence in East Asia.

Two years later, in 1900, the Russians occupied the whole of Manchuria during the Boxer Rebellion. In this context, the colonial project of "Yellow Russia" (*Zheltorossiya*) was born. The aim was to wrest from the weakened Qing China some of its north-eastern territories, especially Manchuria, and to Russify them, both by settling Russian Cossacks and peasants, and by converting the Chinese population to Christianity on a massive scale.

The Russian expansionist project in the Far East increasingly became a foreign policy issue of the first order. In particular, it increased tensions with Japan, which also had colonial interests in Korea and Manchuria. Despite repeated attempts at negotiation, the two countries could not agree on their interests in East Asia. Tensions escalated, leading to a surprise attack by the Japanese navy on Russian ships anchored in the port of Port Arthur on 8 February 1904. This attack marked the beginning of the Russo-Japanese War and set in motion a series of naval and land battles over the following months, which ultimately led to Japan's victory. For the first time in modern history, an Asian country had decisively defeated a major European power. This gave further impetus to national and militant forces in Japan and set the tone in world politics for the decades to come.[8] The war had a global resonance, challenging European claims to dominance and becoming an important point of reference in the struggle against imperialism in numerous colonies and semi-colonial territories.

Betsy Perabo has recently pointed to the prominent identity-forming function of religion in the Russo-Japanese War.[9] This accurate observation can be extended to include an important dimension: Not only did religion play a role in the events of the war, but also the events of the war influenced religion. In what follows, I would like to substantiate this thesis using the example of a religious object and the practices of piety associated with it. The object most closely associated with the Russo-Japanese War is the so-called "Icon of the Mother of God of Port Arthur". In the Russian Orthodox Church it is considered to be the first icon to "appear" in the 20th century.

8 For an overview of the current research literature on the topic, see Gerhard Krebs, "World War Zero oder Der Nullte Weltkrieg? Neuere Literatur zum Russisch-Japanischen Krieg 1904/05," *Nachrichten der Gesellschaft für Natur- und Völkerkunde Ostasiens* 183/184 (2008): 187–248.

9 Betsy Perabo, *Russian Orthodoxy and the Russo-Japanese War* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017).

The "Icon of the Mother of God of Port Arthur" as an Embodiment of the Russian Orthodox Theology of War

The "Miraculous Appearance" between Popular Piety and the Poetics of Religious Narrative

Icon worship is often considered one of the most characteristic features of Orthodox piety. Accordingly, great importance is also attached to the stories of their "appearance". The "appearance" (*yavlenie*) of an icon refers to its supposedly miraculous discovery or revelation in a vision. Narratives or stories (*skazanie*) about the "miraculous appearance" of icons constitute a well-documented and exceptionally popular literary genre known in Russian literature since the Middle Ages. Walter Koschmal points out in this regard: "Few literary genres are so characteristic of a culture that they enable a direct access to it and immediately reveal its national specific traits. Russian icon narratives do this."[10] This literary genre deals with icons considered miraculous and usually focuses on two main aspects: First, on the "miraculous appearance" of icons and the signs of grace associated with them, and second, on the miracles emanating from them. In doing so, these narratives usually follow a basic poetic form structured by the compositional principle of the antinomy of vision and materialized appearance.[11] Thus, the material appearance of the icon is often preceded by its appearance in a vision. These basic principles, already found in ancient Russian literature, are essential for understanding the religious practices in the context of the Russo-Japanese War at the beginning of the 20th century.

The "Icon of the Mother of God of Port Arthur" is closely connected with Kyiv and the Kyiv Monastery of the Caves. The history of its appearance is presented below, first of all, on the basis of contemporary reports.[12] The Monastery of the Caves, also known as the Kievo-Pecherskaya Lavra, with its almost 1000-year history, is considered to be the oldest, largest, and most important monastery complex in the Slavic area and is one of the most important pilgrimage sites of the Orthodox Church par excellence. Even at the beginning of the 20th century, the monastery attracted numerous pilgrims. On December 11, 1903, two months before the outbreak of the Russo-Japanese War, among the numerous pilgrims who came to Lavra was an old sailor from Bessarabia. Like his aforementioned

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10 Walter Koschmal, "Die Ikonenerzählung zwischen Dogma, Politik und Aberglaube," *Zeitschrift für Slavische Philologie* 55/1 (1995–1996): 6–26, on p. 6.

11 Cf. Koschmal, "Ikonenerzählung," 12.

12 *Vladivostokskie eparhial'nye vedomosti* 16/17 (1904), 2 (1905), 10 (1905); *Russkij palomnik* 21 (1904), 46 (1904); V. N. Mal'kovskij, *Skazanie ob ikone "Torzhestvo Presvjatoj Bogorodicy", izvestnoj pod imenem Port-Arturskoj ikony Bozhiej Materi* (Tver': Tipo-Litografiya N. M. Rodionova, 1906).

contemporary Leo Tolstoy, this sailor belonged to the last living generation of those who had fought in the Crimean War of 1854–56. But he came to Kyiv not only to pray before the numerous relics of the cave monastery. In fact, the sailor wanted to tell the Kyiv monks about a mystical vision he claimed to have had not so long ago.

In contemporary accounts, this vision is described as follows. One night the old sailor was awakened by a strange noise, which sounded like a strong wind. When he woke up, he saw the Mother of God surrounded by angels, led by the archangels Michael and Gabriel. She was standing on the shore of a bay with her back to the water. In her hands she was holding a white cloth with the face of Christ in the center. Above her head, angels in clouds of light held a crown surmounted by another crown of two intertwined rainbows. Above this was a cross. Above the angels and crowns, on the throne of glory sat the Lord of Hosts in splendor, above whom were the words, "There shall be one flock and one shepherd".[13] The Mother of God was crushing a double-edged sword with her feet. The sailor is said to have been shocked and deeply confused by what he saw. After his account, the Mother of God gave him courage and said

> "Soon Russia will be involved in a serious war on the shores of a distant sea, and many hardships will befall her. Make an icon that accurately represents my appearance and send it to Port Arthur. When my icon is placed within the walls of the city, Orthodoxy will triumph over paganism, and the Russian army will receive victory, help, and protection."[14]

Then – so the story goes – a blinding white light of extraordinary beauty illuminated the man's room. And the vision faded.

Stories of various visions and miracles were not uncommon in the Kyiv Monastery of the Caves, and the monks listened to the story – as recommended by the Orthodox ascetic tradition – with due sobriety and caution. In other words, they did not attach any importance to the story. But after a few weeks, not only in Kyiv, but throughout the Russian Empire, people were talking about the vision of the appearance of the Theotokos. On the night of 8 February 1904, the Japanese attacked the port of Port Arthur, marking the beginning of the Russo-Japanese War.

In view of the outbreak of war, the faithful of Kyiv, who had heard about the apparition of the Mother of God, immediately decided to collect money for the production of the icon revealed in the vision. On the first day, the number of donors for the future icon reached several hundred, so a special committee was

[13] Cf. John 10:16.

[14] Mal'kovskij, *Skazanie*, 6–7. Translation – S.P.

hastily formed and decided to accept only five kopecks (one of the smallest coins in circulation) per person. This was done to ensure equality among the donors and to present the production of the icon as a wide popular action. When the number of donated coins reached 10,000 the collection of money was stopped. The icon was created by the Kyiv icon painter Pavel Shtronda. It is believed that the aforementioned sailor accompanied the entire process and was always on hand to advise and assist the icon painter. The work was completed after six weeks (Fig. 1).[15]

Fig. 1. "Icon of the Mother of God of Port Arthur", copy made in 1904 in Rostov-on-Don, 124x77 cm.

[15] N. A. Merzlyutina, "Port-Arturskaja Ikona Bozhiej Materi," in *Pravoslavnaja Jenciklopedija*, vol. 57 (Moskva: Cerkovno-naucnyj centr pravoslavnaja jenciklopedija, 2020), 480–483, here: 480.

It is noteworthy that the accounts of the apparition of the "Icon of the Mother of God of Port Arthur" from around 1900 follow exactly the compositional scheme and poetics of the classical Russian narratives about "miraculous appearances" of icons known since the Middle Ages. Icons demand a high degree of authenticity. For this reason, the narrative of the "miraculous appearance" of the Mother of God in a vision is directly linked to the icon. The vision is thus the immaterial counterpart, the complement to the concrete-material appearance of the icon in reality. In Orthodox icon devotion, material and performative elements play an important role. The physical proximity and materiality of the icon are usually considered indispensable condition for the deployment of its power. Thus, also in the context of the Russo-Japanese War, it was assumed that the "Icon of the Mother of God of Port Arthur" had to be physically present at the scene of the war (as already indicated in the vision) in order to be able to convey its protective power. Therefore, great importance was attached to bringing the icon to Port Arthur as soon as possible.

Iconic Mobility: A Journey from Kyiv to the Pacific

The icon was solemnly consecrated in the Kyiv Monastery of the Caves during Holy Week 1904, in the presence of a large crowd, and sent on its journey to the Pacific the same evening. Its destination was Port Arthur. The icon was first taken by train from Kyiv to St Petersburg with a special escort, where it was handed over to Admiral Vladimir Verkhovskij. The icon was accompanied by a letter with dozens of signatures in which the Kyiv people expressed their confidence and hope that "His Excellency will take every opportunity to bring the icon safely and as soon as possible to the fortress of Port Arthur."[16] Admiral Verkhovskij, however, was in no hurry to fulfil the Kievites' request. Like much of Russia's aristocracy and educated classes in the early 20th century, the admiral had a distant relationship with the church, let alone popular piety and belief in visions, or the special role of icons in war. The tsar's family, on the other hand, was characterized by intense religiosity and supported the transfer of the icon. The tsar's widow, Maria Fyodorovna (widow of the late Tsar Alexander III), was particularly zealous in this matter. She personally instructed the newly appointed commander of the Pacific Fleet, Admiral Nikolai Skrydlov, to bring the icon to the fortress of Port Arthur. However, when Admiral Skrydlov was on his way with the icon, it turned out that the railway to Port Arthur had already been cut.[17] The icon was taken to Vladivostok and placed in the cathedral there. As

16 Mal'kovskij, *Skazanie*, 17.
17 Ibid., 19.

Port Arthur was already besieged by the Japanese army, all attempts to bring the icon there remained unsuccessful.[18]

The last attempt took place in December 1904 and was initiated by the tsar's family. The retired captain Nikolay Fedorov traveled to Vladivostok especially for this purpose and managed to bring the icon as far as Shanghai and Yantai. However, the attempt to reach Port Arthur from there failed again and the icon was returned to Vladivostok.[19] On January 2, 1905, the Russian garrison surrendered and Port Arthur fell in Japanese hands.

The entire journey of the icon became a media event. Several Orthodox magazines and newspapers reported regularly on the icon's journey and received many letters from concerned readers. Although the icon never reached its destination, Port Arthur, it became increasingly well known in various parts of the Russian Empire. Millions of Orthodox believed that, even after the fall of Port Arthur, it was a "banner of victory", that the Russian army received special grace through it, and that prayers to it had special power. The widespread veneration of the icon is evidenced above all by the numerous copies made in Russia during the Russo-Japanese War and shortly afterwards.[20]

In view of the impending losses in the Russo-Japanese War, the icon was perceived in an extremely ambivalent way. On the one hand, the icon very quickly became an integral part of Orthodox piety. It was held in high esteem not only by many of the faithful, but also by influential clergy and parts of the Russian political elite, especially the tsarist family. On the other hand, the story of the apparition and the attempt to bring the icon to Port Arthur was dismissed as superstition by large sections of Russian society.

Among those who wanted to prevent the spread of the new cult around the icon was, surprisingly, the Russian Church leadership itself. In November 1904, the Metropolitan of St. Petersburg Antony (Vadkovsky) ordered the removal of the copy of the icon from the churches of his city and forbade the making of new copies. He justified his decision by saying that the icon had peculiarities that were unusual in Orthodox icon painting. At the same time, the Holy Synod forbade publishers to print color lithographs of this icon.[21]

Among conservative monarchists, the idea became popular that the war's losses were directly related to the lack of piety among the Russian military elite. So wrote John of Kronstadt, a highly influential (and now canonized) Russian Orthodox cleric of the early 20th century:

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18 Ibid., 22–27.
19 Ibid., 32.
20 Merzlyutina, "Port-Arturskaja Ikona," 481–482.
21 Ibid., 481.

> "The commander of our army, A.[leksej] N.[ikolaevich] Kuropatkin, left all the icons given to him with the Japanese pagans, while he took all the worldly things with him. What an attitude towards the faith and the holy things of the Church! That is why the Lord does not bless our weapons, and our enemies defeat us. For we have become a laughing stock and are trampled underfoot by our enemies."[22]

In this way of thinking, Orthodox piety and success in Russia's colonial wars stood in a relationship of cause and effect. And this relationship was first made tangible through material objects, through icons.

The Icon as a Medium of Colonial Discourse

There is hardly an important event in Russian history that has not been associated with the miraculous work of icons. This is especially true of icons of the Mother of God, which have played a special role in Russia since the Middle Ages. They are considered "the main, regional and national palladium and symbol of power."[23] Icons and the narratives associated with them vividly document the religious interpretation of political events and underpin the reassessment of historical events, including wars.

As the most visible and widely used religious objects in war, icons contributed significantly to its sacralization. They were carried in solemn processions both before and after the war to invoke divine assistance. Icons were also used in propaganda to portray the war as just and necessary and to make the combatants feel that they were under the protection and guidance of God. In this way, icons could help boost the morale of the troops and encourage the population to support the war effort. Icons were also widely used during the Russo-Japanese War.[24] However, the "Icon of the Mother of God of Port Arthur" was significantly different from the other icons and embodied the Russian Orthodox war theology in a very special way.

The "Icon of the Mother of God of Port Arthur" is remarkable for its iconography, which is unusual for the Orthodox tradition. The icon resembles the image motif of the "Veil of Veronica" or *Sudarium*, known in the Western tradition, but instead of a simple woman, here the Virgin Mary herself holds the veil with an image of the face of Jesus. The image motif of the cloth with the face of Christ has been known in the Eastern tradition since late antiquity, where it

[22] Ioann Kronshadskij, Dnevnik "Moja zhizn' vo Hriste," accessed April 28, 2023, https://www.fatheralexander.org/booklets/russian/johnkr.htm. Translation – S.P.
[23] Koschmal, "Ikonenerzählung," 14.
[24] Perabo, *Russian Orthodoxy*, 107.

is called acheiropoieta or "the image of Savior made without hands". This icon was often used in Russia as a military flag or standard. At the same time, the "Icon of the Mother of God of Port Arthur" has elements known from the icons of the feast of the "Intercession of the Theotokos" (*Pokrov*), where the Mother of God spreads her veil protectively over the faithful. Two crossed swords at the feet of the Mother of God recall the broken gates of hell that the Savior tramples on in the Orthodox icons of the Resurrection.[25] The icon thus refers the viewer to other familiar motifs and their respective theological messages, while at the same time linking them to Russian colonial discourse. This link is made on the one hand through the pictorial language, the iconography itself. On the other hand, through the story about the mystical vision in which the Theotokos appeared and revealed the news about the soon outbreak of the Russo-Japanese War. But what elements of this icon and its associated narrative reveal the link between Orthodox piety and Russian colonialism?

Firstly. The reference to war is already made in the caption of the icon. On the edges there is an inscription: "The Triumph of the Holy Mother of God. As a blessing and sign of triumph for the Christ-loving army of the Far Russia from the holy monasteries of Kiev and 10,000 pilgrims and friends." It is noteworthy at this point not only that the territories formally and legally leased by China to Russia are now referred to as Far Russia, and the Russian soldiers stationed there as the Christ-loving army. It is also significant that the city of Kiev is depicted here as the place of origin and spiritual center of the Russian Empire, thus linking it to the newly acquired territories in East Asia.

Secondly. The visionary story associated with the icon also establishes a historical continuity with Russia's earlier colonial wars. It is no coincidence that the mystical vision was received by a sailor and veteran of the Crimean War of 1854–56.

Thirdly. The depiction of the tsar's crown on the icon also expresses the idea of the divine consecration of the Russian monarch. Accordingly, the Russian tsar was considered to be appointed by God, and his political decisions, including the conduct of war, were often seen as an expression of divine will. The reference to the monarchy is also found in the reference to the Gospel of John (10:16), "There shall be one flock and one shepherd", which in this context could be interpreted as a political promise of imperial unity.

Fourthly. The icon and the narrative associated with it emphasize the central motif of the Russian Orthodox contextual theology of war, namely the defense of the faith. The words attributed to the Mother of God in the narrative make the war seem justified, since it was supposedly not about Russia's colonial

[25] Merzlyutina, "Port-Arturskaja Ikona," 482.

interests, but about the defense of Orthodoxy against paganism. Indeed, the Mother of God, crushing a double-edged sword with her feet, appears on the icon itself as a war party. The icon's imagery thus suggested that the Russian soldiers besieged at Port Arthur were fighting for the higher values of the faith, indeed for Orthodoxy itself, and that they could count on divine assistance.

The easy comprehensibility of the narrative embodied by the "Icon of the Mother of God of Port Arthur" became the basic condition for its astonishing dissemination – and this despite the opposition of the church leadership and despite its defeat in the Russo-Japanese War. These characteristics made it a suitable medium for the symbolization, the material manifestation, of war theology and Russian colonial discourse. The contextual theology expressed in the icon offered people, in the face of the oppressive, stressful and frightening experience of war, religious interpretations that made it possible to give meaning to the impositions of the time and thus to cope with them. At the same time, it promoted the civil-religious ideology of the superiority and cultural-political mission of the Russian Empire.

Epilogue: The "Icon of the Mother of God of Port Arthur" and the Revival of the Russian Orthodox Theology of War

Almost all the important places mentioned in the article are no longer situated in Russia: the historical region of Bessarabia is now the Republic of Moldova, Kyiv is the capital city of Ukraine, and Lüshunkou (Port Arthur) is in China. But a colonial gaze, which has again become popular in Putin's Russia, still sees them as part of the "Russian world". Influential political and religious actors in contemporary Russia, most notably Vladimir Putin and Patriarch Kirill, look to the (admittedly idealized) Russian Empire as a model and borrow some of its ideas and practices.

Against this background, it seems no coincidence that the "Icon of the Mother of God of Port Arthur" has experienced a revival in recent years. While at the beginning of the 20th century the official church leadership did not recognize the icon, thus calling into question the alleged miraculous appearance of the Theotokos in a vision, the contemporary Russian Orthodox Church has recently rediscovered the icon. In 2008, Patriarch Alexy II of Moscow gave his blessing for the commemoration of the icon to be included in the calendar of the Russian Orthodox Church.[26] Patriarch Kirill of Moscow, in office since 2009, has

[26] "Prazdnovanie Port-Arturskoj ikone Bozhiej Materi oficial'no vneseno v cerkovnyj kalendar'," Russian Orthodox Church, accessed April 28, 2023, http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/371120.html.

on several occasions expressed his particular devotion to the icon. Today, the "Icon of the Mother of God of Port Arthur" is considered by the Russian Orthodox Church to be the patron of the Russian army, its navy, and Far Eastern territories. As such, it continues to serve as the embodiment of the Russian Orthodox theology of war. Just one example. The official website of the Russian Orthodox Metropolis of Priamursk reports on the "Icon of the Mother of God of Port Arthur":

> "This is a true battle icon! It is the only icon that depicts the Virgin Mary as a warrior and patroness. All her other images are very gentle, feminine, but here she is standing on broken samurai swords, holding in her hand a veil with the icon of the Savior not-made-by-hands, next to her are the Archangel Michael with a flaming sword and the Archangel Gabriel, and above her is the Lord Sabaoth Himself. There is no other icon in the world like the icon of Port Arthur."[27]

The recent comeback of the "Icon of the Mother of God of Port Arthur" and the revival of the theology of war prove that a critical engagement with the entanglements of Russian colonialism and Orthodoxy is not only of historical importance but also of geopolitical relevance in the present.

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