

3-2021

## Book Review: Russian Nuclear Orthodoxy: Religion, Politics, and Strategy

James R. Payton Jr.  
*Redeemer University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree>



Part of the [Christianity Commons](#), and the [Eastern European Studies Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Payton, James R. Jr. (2021) "Book Review: Russian Nuclear Orthodoxy: Religion, Politics, and Strategy," *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe*: Vol. 41 : Iss. 2 , Article 7.  
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree/vol41/iss2/7>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ George Fox University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ George Fox University. For more information, please contact [arolfe@georgefox.edu](mailto:arolfe@georgefox.edu).

## BOOK REVIEW

Dmitry Adamsky, *Russian Nuclear Orthodoxy: Religion, Politics, and Strategy*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2019. \$30.00 (paper). ISBN: 978-1-5036-0864-1.

Reviewer: James R. Payton, Jr., Professor Emeritus of History, Redeemer University, Ancaster, Ontario, Canada.

In this book Dmitry Adamsky tells a remarkable story which, only thirty-five years ago, would have come across as a wild-eyed dream (or, possibly, nightmare). As he shows, though, this is not a phantasm: it is the reality in Russian today, a reality the rest of the world does well to take note of.

As the Soviet Union was collapsing, resentment toward the enormous amounts of funding and focus devoted during the post-World War II period to the Soviet Union's nuclear warfare capacities, while so many of the needs of its citizens found little more than neglect, fed into a cold disdain within much of the Soviet Union's populace toward those who had valorized and those who still participated in that nuclear competition. Beyond that, resentment found moral suasion as people from around the globe—and within the USSR itself—openly denounced nuclear weaponry and the threat it posed to humanity's existence: opposition to such weapons of mass destruction scored high on morality scales. With all this, the various segments of the Russian military associated with nuclear weaponry became the focus of popular disdain and, in the aftermath of the wide-ranging changes brought in during the final years of the Soviet Union, governmental neglect.

At the same time, the Russian Orthodox Church [ROC], oppressed and persecuted for most of the Communist period, had lost so much of the centuries-long sway it had enjoyed within the Russian nation. Prohibited from engaging in its catechetical and culture-shaping activities for most of the twentieth century, the ROC had lost influence over "Holy Mother Russia." The Byzantine legacy of church/state *symphonia* had been ruthlessly repudiated in the Communist-governed state which had long been exalted as "The Third Rome." The ROC had continued, to be sure; what role it might play in the post-Soviet Russian nation was unclear, though. Any supposition of a return to *symphonia* of some sort would have come across like foolish nostalgia.

Dmitry Adamsky tracks how the leadership of the ROC managed to come alongside the beleaguered nuclear forces within the Russian military to encourage them and stand with them. Championing these forces as the defenders of the fatherland against threats from a secularizing West, the ROC sought both to raise the morale of the Russian nuclear military and also to insert itself within an undeniably strategic component of the Russian military. These forces proved only too willing to receive this support and to welcome the ROC offers of churches on military bases and military priests to serve those churches and catechize recruits. The initiators of this rapprochement were the ROC patriarchs themselves, Alexei and later Kirill: they spawned and promoted this reclaiming of the Russian military as “Christ-loving warriors” defending the cause of the Third Rome against the hordes of threatening secularism emanating from the West.

Adamsky’s treatment is thorough and masterful. He shows how this endeavor has developed over three decades, which he styles “genesis” (1991–2000), “conversion” (2000–2010), and “operationalization” (2010–2020). Each of these three parts of this impressive volume is sub-divided into “State-Church Relations,” “Faith-Nuclear Nexus,” and “Strategic Mythmaking.” The result is a detailed presentation and assessment of how this intimate relationship between Russian nuclear forces and the ROC developed within each decade; the parallelism of structure allows readers to see the overall unfolding of each component from the end of the Soviet Union to the present.

The volume is carefully written: each paragraph is packed with material, all of it well-sourced. (Eighty pages of footnotes support the presentation. Much of this is in English translation, and what is not is in transliterated Russian.) A brief review cannot begin to do justice to the manifold small steps taken, each building on what had gone before, and all this within long-recognized and revered ROC practices, on the one hand, or the increasing welcome afforded by the leadership of the Russian nuclear military. Interesting sidelights about the developing piety of Vladimir Putin through these decades offer intriguing possibilities for assessing him as Russian leader and how to perceive the nature of the reinvigorated church/state *symphonia* as it has unfolded to this point.

It is important to note that the author indicates that the “conversion” of the personnel of the Russian nuclear forces has proceeded only slowly. Adamsky shows the numerous means adopted to facilitate that conversion, but his focus has been more on the relationship of the ROC and the leadership of those forces—which has been, undeniably, impressive in apparent

effectiveness. One must read the footnotes to get a more complete picture of the depth of the changes for the members of the forces themselves.

As the volume comes to its end, the author points out what he sees as an important development that must take place—namely, the articulation of canon law and Orthodox ethical teaching to address directly questions raised by the possible exercise of nuclear power. He does not draw on the ground-breaking position statement, “The Orthodox Church and Society: The Basis of the Social Concept of the Russian Orthodox Church” (an extended document adopted by the Jubilee Bishops’ Council of the ROC in August 2000), to begin to speak into this question. This will surely be a foundational document for the eventual elaboration of such ethical teaching.

Two decades into the twenty-first century, the twentieth-century conceit that religion was fading from the public scene seems remarkably quaint. As we all have seen, religion continues to play a strikingly important role in contemporary life, from the basic elements of personal piety through all the hostilities we have seen break out around the world in the three decades since the Soviet Union breathed its last. To note in the present day that the ROC has such influence within and upon one of the major nuclear arsenals in the world occasions, to say the least, legitimate concern.