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Putin finds an ally in resurgent Orthodox Church

by Marc Bennetts

MOSCOW — How times have changed in [Russia](#).

Earlier this year, on the 145th anniversary of the birth of Vladimir Lenin, the head of the present-day Communist Party compared the founder of the officially atheist [Soviet Union](#) to Jesus Christ.

Speaking at a ceremony on Red Square, where Lenin's embalmed body remains on public display, Gennady Zyuganov said both Lenin and Jesus Christ had preached a message of "love, friendship and brotherhood." Mr. Zyuganov also declared that the [Soviet Union](#) had been an attempt to create "God's kingdom on Earth."

Mr. Zyuganov's controversial statement was the culmination of a dramatic upturn in fortunes for the [Russian Orthodox Church](#), which has seen its religious revival in the post-Soviet era matched by a growing, behind-the-scenes political clout, most recently by — literally — giving its blessing to Russian President [Vladimir Putin](#)'s decision to escalate the country's military mission in Syria.

Under the Soviet authorities, at least 200,000 members of the clergy were murdered, according to a 1995 Kremlin committee report, while millions of other Christians were persecuted.

"The more representatives of the reactionary clergy we shoot, the better," Lenin once said. Although Soviet dictator [Joseph Stalin](#) permitted a carefully controlled revival of the [Orthodox Church](#) to boost morale during World War II, anti-religion propaganda was common until the mid-1980s.

Today, with some 70 percent of Russians identifying themselves as Orthodox Christians, no serious politician can afford to be seen as lacking in belief. Russian President [Vladimir Putin](#), a former KGB agent, frequently attends religious services at the reconstructed Christ the Savior Cathedral in central Moscow — the original was destroyed by [Stalin](#) in 1931. [Mr. Putin](#) also seeks to depict himself as a defender of "traditional values," and accuses the West of abandoning its Christian roots on issues such as gay marriage.

The [Russian Orthodox Church](#) has been happy to enter into an alliance with the Kremlin.

In 2012 the powerful head of the [Orthodox Church](#), Patriarch Kirill, publicly endorsed [Mr. Putin](#) for a controversial third term, and described the ex-KGB officer's rule as a "miracle of God." His

statement came shortly after [Mr. Putin](#) had granted the patriarch residence at the Kremlin and in the wake of a number of lucrative real estate rulings in favor of the [church](#).

Although the Russian Constitution stipulates the separation of church and state, senior church officials openly speak of their desire for an even closer relationship with the Kremlin. Archpriest Vsevolod Chaplin, a prominent church spokesman, has frequently called for a “harmonious” cooperation between the [church](#) and the Russian authorities.

Signs of the mutually beneficial relationship between the Russian authorities and the [Orthodox Church](#) are everywhere. Priests regularly sprinkle Russian space rockets with holy water ahead of liftoff, while the [Orthodox Church](#) has even held a religious service in honor of the nation’s stockpile of nuclear weapons. In a development that would have made the heads of Soviet space pioneers spin, Russian cosmonauts on board the International Space Station are frequently photographed wearing religious icons.

Support for Syria

So when the Kremlin ordered airstrikes in Syria in late September, the [church](#) was quick to lend its support. Patriarch Kirill blessed the use of the Russian armed forces to “protect the Syrian people,” while Rev. Chaplin, the church spokesman, called the military operation part of a “holy battle” against terrorism.

“The fight against terrorism is a moral struggle, if you like, a holy struggle, and our country today is probably the most active in the world that resists terror,” Rev. Chaplin said recently.

“This statement demonstrates the complete and final merger of the [Russian Orthodox Church](#) and the state,” said Valery Ostavnykh, a theologian and Kremlin critic.

Last month it was the Russian authorities’ turn to return the favor, when the Investigative Committee, an FBI-style law enforcement agency that answers only to [Mr. Putin](#), ordered the exhumation of the remains of Czar Alexander III. The [Russian Orthodox Church](#) said the move was necessary to confirm the identity of two of his royal grandchildren, who were murdered alongside their father, Czar Nicholas II, in 1918. Czar Nicholas II was canonized by the [resurgent church](#) in 2000.

The decision to exhume the remains of Czar Alexander III went against the advice of respected historians, who said there were no grounds to doubt the identities of the grandchildren, Maria and Alexei. But investigators made no secret about the reason for the controversial move.

“At the initiative of his holiness the Patriarch, a decision has been made to open the tomb of Emperor Alexander III,” said senior investigator Vladimir Solovyov. “The Investigative Committee is always ready to help the [church](#).”

Russian investigators say new DNA tests conducted at the request of the [Orthodox Church](#) confirm that the exhumed remains of [Russia](#)’s last czar, Nicholas II, and his wife, are genuine.

The Nov. 11 statement by forensic experts from [Russia](#)'s Investigative Committee creates a greater possibility that all seven members of the Romanov czar's family — who were executed by the Bolsheviks in Yekaterinburg in 1918 — can be buried together.

The [Russian Orthodox Church](#) has also pitched in to support [Mr. Putin](#)'s gradual rehabilitation of [Stalin](#)'s reputation. In hotly debated comments earlier this month, Patriarch Kirill praised what he called the “undoubted successes” in industry and the military sphere during [Stalin](#)'s rule. He made no direct mention of the gulags or the millions murdered by the Soviet authorities.

“Yes, Pontius Pilate also had undoubted successes,” responded Andrei Kurayev, a controversial deacon who is often at odds with church leadership. “Plumbing was installed in Jerusalem [under his rule].”

Others warn, however, against an overexaggeration of [Russia](#)'s religious revival since the collapse of the [Soviet Union](#). Although vast numbers of Russians claim to be Orthodox believers, only a tiny proportion actually attend church services. One public opinion survey by the independent Moscow-based Levada Center suggested that around 30 percent of “Orthodox Christians” do not believe in God.

“As far as faith is concerned, there are precious few in [Russia](#) who attend services, fast during Lent or draw on priests for moral authority,” said Maria Lipman, a Moscow-based analyst at the European Council on Foreign Relations.

“The [Russian Orthodox Church](#) itself is much more a pillar of the Russian statehood and a loyal partner of the state than a source of moral authority [and] spiritual comfort. For many, being an Orthodox Christian simply means being Russian.”