

Criminotheology

Persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses in Putin's Russia

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Abstract

Following their ban in 2017, the state targeted Jehovah's Witnesses as harmful sectarians in the context of a 'conservative twist' in Russian politics grounded in late-Soviet anti-sectarian models and narratives. The active use of religious instruments in the political setup has led to a growing securitization of religion in Russia, where 'non-traditional' religiosity and religious non-conformism have been criminalised and blended with terrorism and extremism. The article focuses on forensic expertise in religion used in trials against believers and discusses how the forensic analysis of religious teachings for criminal evidence (criminotheology) have construed Jehovah's Witnesses as dangerous extremists.

Keywords

Jehovah's Witnesses, Russia, religious persecution, forensic expertise, religious extremism.

1. Introduction

The Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society (the official name of the Jehovah's Witnesses organization) has perhaps the most ambiguous and complicated historical experience of any religious movement. Many countries across the globe consider them unwelcome or illegal, and yet Jehovah's Witnesses are among the fastest growing Christian denominations in the world. Few other religious groups have experienced a similar scale of state-sponsored repressions, whole-scale terror,

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and discrimination as have the Witnesses. This historical background, however, has reinforced their readiness to defend their faith.

In Soviet Russia, the Witnesses were targeted by the state as harmful and deceitful sectarians; as outlaws, they were forced to function underground. A short-lived period of relative religious freedom followed the dissolution of the USSR in 1991, but within the same decade, the new regime adopted a series of anti-cult regulations in the context of a conservative, anti-liberal turn and the rise of the Russian Orthodox Church as a new political power wedded to Putin's regime. State-sponsored advocacy for and protection of 'traditional values' from the 'decadent West' drew a firm line between traditional religions (conventionally understood as Orthodox Christianity, but formally including also Islam and Buddhism) and non-traditional religions (i.e., all religious minorities, particularly those of Western origin). This trend was not new; it followed the pattern of the Soviet Union's religious politics regarding control and intimidation of religious minorities, particularly Khrushchev's anti-sectarian discourse and conspiracy rhetoric, which culminated with the banning of the Watchtower society in 2017.

This article tells the story of state-sponsored persecution of Witnesses in Russia after their ban in 2017: how forensic experts in religion (*religiovedcheskaia ekspertiza*) and 'criminotheology' – the analysis of religious teachings for criminal evidence and extremism – have construed believers as dangerous extremists. We argue that Putin's trials against Jehovah's Witnesses and the creation of an institution of forensic religious experts are grounded in late-Soviet anti-sectarian models and narratives. As Emily Baran (2019:105) points out, "the early post-Soviet period was an anomaly in its relative religious toleration, and the shifting climate since the early 2000s a return to the norm."

First, we summarize the Soviet (the post-war period and particularly during Khrushchev's anti-religious campaign) and post-Soviet policies towards the Witnesses, including the adoption of anti-cult and anti-extremist laws and the ban of the Watchtower Society in Putin's era. Next, we proceed to the analysis of discourses in official documents, interviews, and workshops of leading forensic experts on Jehovah's Witnesses. As we argue, the understanding of state-sponsored expertise on religious extremism is linked to a 'conservative twist' in Russian politics and state-sponsored nationalism in late-Putinist Russia (Kolstø & Blakkisrud 2017) in which the Russian Orthodox Church has cemented national identity.

2. The Soviet period: Fanatical sectarians and secret emissaries

Jehovah's Witnesses were persecuted by both the right-wing and left-wing regimes in twentieth-century Europe. The countries of the socialist bloc – the Soviet Union, Romania, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Romania – considered

the Witnesses a hostile organization with American roots that maintained close ties to its Brooklyn headquarters, rejected civic duties (including military service, based on their teachings of non-violence), espoused apocalyptic beliefs, and engaged in door-to-door proselytizing (Knox 2018; Chryssides 2016). Denied legal recognition, they became one of the largest categories of political prisoners.

In the Soviet Union, the Witnesses had no legal rights to practice and preach their faith. As outlaws, they were kept under close surveillance and subjected to harassment: home raids, confiscations, mass arrests, and long-term imprisonment in labour camps. Two major deportations in 1949 and 1951 exiled over 10,000 Witnesses and their families (including children and the elderly) to 'special settlements' in Siberia and Transbaikal (Odintsov 2002; Tsarevskaja-Diakina 2004; Golko 2007). It was the largest mass exile of a religious community in the Soviet Union (Baran 2014:59-69). Despite state persecution, Witnesses ran one of the most complex secret underground operations in the Soviet Union. Their network of close-knit communities, their system of bunkers, hideouts, and underground printing presses, their smuggling operations, their couriers with coded communication, and other secretive practices distinguished them from other religious organizations functioning in the Soviet Union.

Only the unregistered Baptist movement can be compared with the Witnesses' underground network in the Soviet Union. The so-called Council of Churches of the Evangelical Christian Baptists (or simply the Baptist Brethren) had a similar network of underground and dissident activities (the second largest underground printing press in the Soviet Union belonged to them) from the 1960s to the 1980s. What distinguished the Jehovah's Witnesses from the Baptist Brethren was that the Witnesses never intended to move their dissident activities into a public space or engage human rights activism; on the contrary, they invested all their efforts in cultivating their clandestine practices. Unlike the Jehovah's Witnesses, unregistered Baptists established clandestine communications with human rights activists and organizations abroad, founded the Council of Prisoners' Relatives known as *Female intercession*, organized protest actions during court sessions and petition campaigns to support their imprisoned fellow believers, and sent masses of letters to higher state authorities (the so-called 'letters to power') with open complaints about the growing cases of religious persecution (Vagramenko 2018).²

Unlike other religious organizations, Witnesses had no church structure. They represented themselves as a lay society or corporation and were able to devel-

2 More visual and archival materials on the Baptist Brethren movement can be found at the Digital Exhibition *The Underground*. Available at: hiddengalleries.eu/underground/.

op a highly organized hierarchical network of local congregations, regional districts, and country branches. Their structure was transnational; Soviet Witnesses were subordinated to the Polish branch, and the headquarters of the Watch Tower Society was located in the United States. Throughout the Cold War, Soviet Witnesses maintained their contacts with their superior branch offices abroad, sending monthly missionary reports and receiving the Watch Tower literature (Vagramenko 2021a, 2021b; Berezhko & Slupina 2011). Soviet authorities, obsessed with conspiracy theories, represented Witnesses as stooges of American imperialism, even though they were largely criticized as un-American and unpatriotic in the United States (Knox 2013). Hence, Jehovah's Witnesses became the primary target of the Soviet secret police. Apart from mass arrests and two deportations, the secret police attempted to infiltrate the Witnesses' organization. In the last years of Stalin's reign, straightforward coercive measures were slowly giving way to more sophisticated and veiled ways of control and surveillance. "Jailing is not allowed, education is needed" (*sazhat' nel'zia, nuzhno vospityvat'*) was a frequent motto that echoed a turn in the Soviet police state away from the brute force of mass political repression, but there was no change in its underlying coercive principles toward religious minorities branded as sects.³ This meant putting the underground organization under totalizing control. But not only that – it also meant heading it. From the mid-1950s until at least the late 1970s, the KGB infiltrated the Witnesses' country committee (the main governing body of the Soviet Witnesses) and brought it under its control (Vagramenko 2021a).

The period of destalinization, which started in the mid-1950s, brought some relief to Soviet society. Many people who had been repressed for political reasons received amnesty and returned home from the Gulag; among them were many pastors, priests, and other religious activists. These changes gave rise to renewal amongst Protestant movements in Ukraine and across the Soviet Union. However, along with the first attempts to criticize the repressions and the Great Terror of the 1930s, Khrushchev soon initiated a massive anti-religious campaign, which was to be based on a strong commitment to scientific atheist principles. Hence, the new wave of religious persecutions and arrests of religious activists that began in the late 1950s was accompanied by numerous anti-religious propaganda films, public lectures, articles, books, exhibitions, and public events specifically targeting the so-called 'sectarians' (all Protestants in Ukraine fell under this definition), depicting them as fanatical, deceitful, and socially harmful people. This propaganda contrasted the backwardness of the sectarian worldview with the scientific progress and development achieved by the Soviet people. Jehovah's

3 SBU Archive f. 2, op. 1, spr. 2431, ark. 253.

Witnesses became one of the main targets of this new policy, and multiple publications, films, newsreels, and public trials attacked them as harmful fanatics and imperialist spies. As we argue, Putin's regime in many aspects inherited the logic and patterns of Khrushchevian and late-Soviet anti-sectarian discourse, with the exception that this time it was grounded not on atheist principles but on conservative and traditionalist premises and close state-church relations, with the Russian Orthodox Church emerging as a powerful force for cultural, social, and political conservatism (Stoeckl 2016).

3. The post-Soviet period: From non-traditional religions to totalitarian sects

Despite attempts by the Soviet state to eliminate the unwelcome religion or to put it under control, Jehovah's Witness congregations mushroomed all over the USSR, becoming one of the fastest growing religious organizations in the Soviet Union. Their membership increased twenty-fold between 1939 and 1991. By the end of the Soviet Union, when religion re-emerged in the public sphere and became very important in the everyday life of many Russians, Witnesses already had branched networks of congregations across the former Soviet republics.

The dissolution of the Soviet Union marked a significant, although in many ways chaotic, relaxation in the politics of religion. In 1991, a short-lived period of religious freedom and pluralism began in Russia. That same year, Jehovah's Witnesses were officially registered for the first time in Russia as a religious organization. It was a time of intensive evangelical missionary activities and new opportunities for cross-cultural interaction that revealed a global religious marketplace (Wanner 2007; Elliott & Corrado 1997; Vagramenko 2018). In the first post-Soviet summer of 1992, six conventions gathered nearly 100,000 participants, and thousands were baptized. By 2004, there were over 138,000 Witnesses in Russia with 407 registered local organizations (in comparison with 105 organizations registered in 1995). Jehovah's Witnesses gathered thousands in stadiums, built new Kingdom Halls (houses of worship) and Bethels (branch offices), and became visible in the public space as a significant part of the post-Soviet religious landscape. In 2000, the Jehovah's Witnesses Memorial of Christ's death (their main religious event) gathered over 270,000 participants.

By the mid-1990s, Russian politics on religious pluralism started to shift. As early as 1996, courts and some government bodies began to question the need for religious freedom (Urazmetov & Benin 2018). The 1997 Federal Law "On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations" introduced the notions of traditional and non-traditional faiths. The distinction rested upon the Soviet legacy, as the law privileged religious organizations that were registered in the Soviet period.

Minority religious groups not legalized in the Soviet Union (Jehovah's Witnesses among them) fell under the category of 'non-traditional', thus making them vulnerable to discrimination. A chain reaction brought about more regulations restricting religious diversity and religious freedom in Russia, reinstating the post-Stalinist Soviet model of state-religion relations, in which coexistence between the state and religious institutions was based on totalizing state control and interference.

In the context of the social construction of and discrimination against 'non-traditional' religiosity, the notions of 'totalitarian sects' and 'destructive cults' appeared with long-term effects. Destructive sects were defined as a counterculture and a 'protest against the existing system of values, the world order, religious traditions, and official churches' (Abdulganeev 2012). To put it simply, Russian law labelled non-traditional religions as dangerous and destructive, with the Jehovah's Witnesses at the top of the list in public media accounts.

The Russian public narrative on destructive cults, like its European counterpart, was that they "posed an increasing threat to social and individual safety, as well as a menace to human rights" (Urazmetov & Benin 2018). However, while European anti-cult narratives were part of social and political secularization trends, the anti-cult discourse in Russia took a different trajectory, as it was lobbied for and reinforced by an emerging powerful force: namely, the Russian Orthodox Church. As early as 1993, the St. Irenaeus Centre for Religious Studies was established with the blessing of Patriarch Alexei II of Moscow and All Russia "to deal with the problems of new religious movements, sects and cults."⁴ A new discipline called *sectology* (*sektovedenie*), introduced by the Orthodox anti-cult activist Aleksandr Dvorkin and the Orthodox protopriest Alexander Novopashin, ferociously attacked minority religions, particularly those without Russian origins. Dvorkin and Novopashin, particularly during the late 1990s and early 2000s provided all sorts of consultations for policy makers as they published and lectured extensively. Jehovah's Witnesses soon became the target of their attacks. They called the Watch Tower Society a "pseudo-Christian Arian apocalyptic millenarist totalitarian sect" and a "quasi-communist ideology with pagan elements concealed by some Christian images and concepts" (Dvorkin 1999).

The Bishops' Council of the Russian Orthodox Church in 1994 defined sects as those who "purposefully undermine centuries-old traditions and foundations of the peoples and come into conflict with social institutions."⁵ As ambiguous as it was, the definition nevertheless set the foundation for legal mechanisms to

4 St. Irenaeus Centre for Religious Studies website: <https://iriney.ru/>.

5 Russian Orthodox Church, Moscow Patriarchate, "Definition "On pseudo-Christian sects, neo-paganism and occultism". Available at: <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/530422.html>.

delegalize and criminalize minority religious movements, that is, the ecclesiastic-based notions of traditional vs. destructive religiosity initially formulated by Russian Orthodox Church hierarchs and activists became further developed in the legislative sphere. Subsequently, many publications on religious extremism authored by legal scholars oftentimes uncritically replicated the official Russian Orthodox standpoint. For instance, two legal scholars with PhDs in legal studies wrote in an academic journal:

Contemporary Russian society has a single cultural (civilizational) code... And it was thanks to the Orthodox priesthood that this cultural (civilizational) code has been preserved throughout the history of our state... The Orthodox clergy pointed out that false religions destroy the traditional foundations of life formed under the influence of the Orthodox church, a single spiritual and moral ideal for us. (Bobrova & Merkuriev 2022:109)

They continued by arguing that the ‘unfriendly countries’ (a list of countries that “commit unfriendly actions against Russia” has been published by the Russian government and includes 49 states, including the entire European Union) also admit this and therefore have invaded Russia with “harmful beliefs” and “various religious organizations of foreign origins and non-traditional for Russia confessions” in order to destabilize the country (Bobrova & Merkuriev 2022:109). The article stated the need to define the notion of “destructive religious sects” (as elaborated by the Orthodox clergy) as a legal term. In this study, the Jehovah’s Witnesses – along with nearly all other neo-Protestant denominations – appeared as an example of a totalitarian pseudo-Christian Arian apocalyptic sect (Bobrova & Merkuriev 2022:110).

Thus, by the early 2000s, the Orthodox-inspired discourse on non-traditional religiosity entered the legal field and became a basis for further legal restrictions of religious freedom in Russia. A further step was to allow open persecution. In a changing political atmosphere with an increasing phobia of terrorism, Russian politics towards religious minorities was moving in that direction.

4. Securitization of religion: From totalitarian sects to religious extremists

The active use of religious instruments in the post-Soviet political setup has led to a growing securitization of religion in Russia. Religion started to be seen either as pledge of or a threat to national security, an idea inflated by the global fear of terrorism that affected not only the life of Muslim communities, but many other

non-Orthodox denominations in Russia. The previously formulated notion of destructive religiosity soon became associated with extremism and terrorism. “The wish to gain power and control over society is implemented through destructive religiosity with its aggressiveness, violence, and superiority. In contrast to traditional beliefs, non-traditional religions are prone to extremism and terrorism,” a criminology major writes in his PhD thesis on religious extremism (Abdulganeev 2013). The new terminology on religious extremism has been legally settled by several federal laws and decrees, such as the 2002 Federal Law “On Combatting Extremist Activity” (amended in July 2022); the 2006 Federal Law “On Counteraction against Terrorism”; and the 2009 order of the Federal Ministry of Justice “On State Religious Expertise.” Combatting religious extremism as one of the main threats to the national and military security of Russia has been elevated to the rank of a priority area in the Presidential Decree “On the National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation,” published in 2015, and in the “Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation” as of 2010.

Under the guise of the protection of the state and society from extremism and terrorism, the government rationalized and securitized limitations of religious freedoms and re-established the post-Stalinist and late-Soviet model of total control over religious life. In addition, criminal legislation stipulated measures for “protection of religious feelings” of the Russian people, which allowed the possibility for creative use of the law against undesirable religious organizations and movements. It is noteworthy that the article regarding “protection of religious feelings” was introduced into the criminal code after the Pussy Riot case, in which the Russian Orthodox Church promoted persecution of the three women on trial. This unfolded against the background of the nationalist and fundamentalist currents inside the mainstream Russian Orthodox Church that have become increasingly important over the past two decades (Kostiuk 2000; Mitrofanova 2002). The new religious strain was linked with the revised and militarised ‘Russian world’ ideology. Although the ‘Russian world’ is a theological concept that has long historical roots linked with the explicitly religious concept of ‘Holy Rus’, it re-entered political discourse and obtained its new practical meaning during the years of the Putin presidency, engendering new forms of geo-political imagination. In Putin’s Russia, the ‘Russian world’ presents a careful blend of religious and nationalistic narratives with neo-colonial and anti-liberal aspirations that are used to justify domestic authoritarian power and messianic policies abroad (Surzhko Harned 2022; Suslov 2014). In this context, the strengthened state-church connection has allowed for the further securitization of religion in Russia.

The ‘conservative twist’ (Shnirelman 2019) in Russian politics since the late 2000s prioritised the Russian Orthodox Church as the main defender of ‘tradi-

tional values' and the sacred border of the 'Russian world' at the national and international levels (Suslov & Uzlaner 2019). It is noteworthy that, in spite of the diversity of Russia's religious landscape (with a significant Muslim community) and fact that the law "On Freedom of Conscience" states that Christianity, Islam, and Judaism are historically established religions on the territory of Russia, neither Islam nor Judaism nor other minority religions enjoy the state support and prioritization on the federal level that the Russian Orthodox Church does.

The 2002 Federal Law "On Combatting Extremist Activity" provided the first serious legal ground for religious discrimination, including the subsequent ban of the Jehovah's Witnesses in 2017. As Shterein and Dubrovsky argue (2019:223-224), although the law provided a general list of loosely defined acts of extremism, including those committed on religious grounds, it did not, however, deploy "religious extremism" as a legal term. While vaguely defining extremist activity, the law replicated the ideas of "traditional religions" and "Russian spirituality" as guarantors of national security and well-being, thus, in this context, implying that 'foreign' and 'non-traditional' religions were acting as potential threats (Shterin & Dubrovsky 2019:224).

Since the adoption of the 2002 law, Jehovah's Witnesses became one of the primary targets, with more and more trials labelling the Watch Tower literature as extremist. The trial against Jehovah's Witnesses in Taganrog in 2009 became the largest criminal case against believers since the Soviet period and before the official ban in 2017 (Corley 2012). The Taganrog court forcibly liquidated a local Witnesses organization in the Rostov region, accusing 15 members (the youngest was 17 years old) of extremist activity. A list of 34 publications, including the magazines *The Watchtower* (intrinsic to the practice of faith, what Witnesses called 'spiritual food', second only to Bible) and *Awake!* along with many book titles published by the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society, were confiscated and labelled as extremist for the first time.

In 2008, President Putin created the Department for Combating Extremism of the Ministry of Internal Affairs – later renamed as Centre E – which soon became the main state actor in collecting criminal evidence and enforcing compliance by religious groups with the new anti-terrorist law. Centre E in fact acted as the secret police and, similar to the KGB Fifth Department, it soon became responsible for controlling and combatting ideological dissent in the Russian Federation. As in the Soviet Union, control over religious non-conformism and religious and ethnic minority movements fell under the jurisdiction of the secret police in post-Soviet Russia.

The 2010s were reminiscent of Khrushchev's anti-religious campaigns with the exception that, this time, the state favoured the mainstream Russian Orthodox

Church, which regained its political weight in the country. House searches, confiscations, and show trials, followed by a wave of ‘anti-sectarian’ and sensationalist TV programmes, publications, and films mushroomed in Putin’s Russia. Reminiscent of the Soviet anti-sectarian discourse, the Witnesses were represented in mass media as a dangerous and conspirative sect, foes hidden behind a religious mask who were secretly collecting strategic information for foreign intelligence, or who were treacherous spongers and manipulators. It is noteworthy that it was both criminal investigators and Orthodox priests who frequently appeared in contemporary anti-sectarian shows and publications as the main authorities in religious questions. For instance, in the documentary “Sects: Hunters of Human Souls,” released in 2022 on the Rossiia 24 federal channel, eight officials from the Investigative Committee of Russia, regional Criminology Departments, and regional Departments of Investigation of Particularly Important Cases appeared along with two Orthodox archpriests as major experts in what was called the ‘sects’, including the Jehovah’s Witnesses.

A seven-minute newsreel, *Jehovah’s Witnesses Headquarters found in Zaporozhie oblast*, released on Rossiia-24 in 2022, showed a raided local Jehovah’s Witnesses Kingdom Hall turned into a Centre for Patriotic Education on the newly occupied territory in the Zaporizhia region of Ukraine. An official representative of the Department of Religious Organizations of the occupation authorities, Andrei Zinchenko, stated the following in his interview for the state-owned news channel Rossiia-24:

Adherents of the Jehovah’s Witnesses religious organization are in fact agents of influence of Western intelligence services... [who] pass necessary information to the United States... [Their] preachers are professional agents of [Western] intelligence services who conducted their recruitment on the territory of the former Ukraine.⁶

What is striking is the similarity of the visual aesthetic and narratives of these films and publications to the Soviet anti-sectarian imagery. Similar to Soviet propaganda films, like *Clouds Over Borsk*, or the documentaries *It Worries Everyone* and *The Spider*, a dark, ignorant, and dangerous religious underground is contrasted to a happy and safe life of patriotic (in Soviet times) or Orthodox traditional (in Putin’s Russia) society (Vagramenko 2021b:51).

The new anti-sectarian imagery was part of the so-called prophylactic of extremism and terrorism and echoed the Soviet prophylactic (*profilaktika*) of

⁶ Shtab “Svidetelei legovy” obnaruzhili v Zaporozhskoi oblasti – Rossiia-24, 27 October 2022. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3PVrdDo>.

dissent. Since the late-1950s, this prophylactic became a form of surveillance, control, and intimidation of the domestic population, a “tactic that combined traditional secret police coercion and surveillance with ideologically inspired efforts at re-education and moral reform” (Cohn 2017). Back then, the prophylactic included a complex of measures with the help of Party and Soviet organizations, and the KGB; it also brought in mass media, the film industry, and engaged public attention. All events and publications were organized and orchestrated by the KGB. While revoking the ghosts of the Soviet past, Putin’s regime has rested heavily upon Khrushchev’s post-Stalinist legacy of domestic control and repression of dissent. The reproduction of Soviet-style anti-sectarian measures allow us to assume that Putin’s secret police were behind these actions in a like manner.

5. The 2017 ban

On 20 April 2017, the Russian Supreme Court declared the Jehovah’s Witnesses an “extremist” organization and banned all its activities. By the time of the liquidation, there were 395 local Jehovah’s Witnesses organizations in Russia with over 175,000 active members and 120,000 non-member attendants. All local organizations and the Russian headquarters were closed, and all property seized. Under the ruling, distributing the Watchtower literature, discussing Jehovah’s Witness beliefs in public, and communal prayer gatherings became a crime.

Accusations of extremism were certainly more dangerous than a label of “totalitarian sect” or “destructive cult” and had more legal weight, as it closely coupled the religious movement with the fear of terrorism, which had been growing since early 2000s, and conflated believers with radical politics, terror, and anti-state violence. As Baran (2019:126) observes, the notion ‘extremist’ as applied to Jehovah’s Witnesses has no western precedent, unlike ‘cult’ and ‘sectarian’, which are quite popular in the West. In the following years, trials and media propaganda publications targeted Jehovah’s Witnesses and attempted to demonstrate how a pacifist religious group bore commonalities with international terrorist groups.

The state’s counter actions were immediate and swift. Starting from 2017, arrests, house searches, police raids by fully armed *operativniki* (FSB officers), confiscations and destruction of literature, deportations, and prison terms again became a reality for Russian Witnesses. As of December 2022, 665 Jehovah’s Witnesses believers were subject to criminal prosecution; 362 were detained, with 88 receiving prison terms (up to eight years); and 454 believers appeared on the list of extremists.⁷ The Federal Security Service keeps believers under surveillance

7 Official data of the Watchtower Society. Available at: jw-russia.org/.

using hidden cameras, sending infiltrating agents, tracing money transfers, interrogating former believers, etc. Multiple anti-religious publications, news reports, and films were released in recent years with sensational discoveries of yet another “extremist organization cell.” All these further marginalized Witnesses.

As some believers shared with us in personal conversations, they had to adapt to a new reality, increasing secrecy practices and developing new survival strategies. Their Soviet historical legacy has been revived. Watchtower publications and reports were encrypted and went online, while believers met online or secretly in private homes. For safety reasons, the Watch Tower Society stopped publishing statistics about their members in Russia, as all of them began to function underground. The Russian law enforcement agencies, however, created their own statistics on the new religious underground based on their surveillance. Larger prayer or Bible study meetings were easier to expose. For instance, as the judicial expert Igor Ivanishko reported, the police managed to trace large gatherings of Witnesses when they rented large spaces or rural cottages under the pretence of organizing training seminars (Ivanishko 2022). The state authorities, Ivanishko continues, acknowledge the high level of secrecy of believers and can only roughly estimate the number of believers and the extent of their religious activity in Russia. Many believers migrated to Ukraine, the Baltic countries, and Finland (authors’ research data; there are no official statistics on how many believers emigrated from Russia after the ban), while keeping strong ties with their co-religionists back in Russia. Another form of survival was internal migration. As observed by Sergei Ivanishko, different federal regions applied the extremism law differently. In some areas, local authorities actively searched and hunted for believers, while in other regions the authorities were less proactive; hence, Witnesses tended to move to those regions where they felt safer (Ivanishko 2022).

6. Criminology

During the trial against Jehovah’s Witness Anatoly Vilitkevich (Ufa 2021), the court received many hours of video-recordings made by a hidden camera installed at Vilitkevich’s home by the security service. The video showed home gatherings of believers, where they were preaching, praying, and reading the Bible. In order to find out whether this material contained elements of extremism, the prosecution invited a well-known expert, the religious studies scholar Marina Bignova, who is Lead Analyst at the People’s Friendship University and a member of the Prophylactic Centre (discussed below). Bignova came to the conclusion that the material demonstrated the extremist attitudes of the believers (Kucherenko 2021:8).

Both late-Soviet and post-Soviet judicial practices relied heavily on so-called scientific expertise in their persecution of religious groups and organizations.

In many KGB penal files against certain religious groups, one can find expert evaluations from linguists and scholars of religion (who were normally staff at Scientific Atheism departments by that time). Likewise, in contemporary criminal investigations against Jehovah's Witnesses, the trials rely heavily on sociological expertise and on experts who claim to be specialists in religion (*religiovedy*). They have become a vocal force in the Putinist repressions of minority believers. This is a limited group of scholars that appear as judicial experts on trials against Jehovah's Witnesses across Russia. Only a handful of them have a specialised education in the study of religion; many have a non-profile background (pedagogy, psychology, political science, legal science, and even fields as far as removed mathematics). Their examinations and reports are directly used by the prosecution in courts, thereby determining the fate of believers on trial.

A growing sector of experts on religious extremism come from legal studies, including a new section in criminology called *Criminotheology* (*kriminoteologiya*) or *judicial sectology*. As the textbook in Criminotheology posits, the post-Soviet law on religious freedom and the lack of state control over religious life allowed for the avalanche-like growth of various religious organizations, which is seen as detrimental for Russian society. Acknowledging a lack of legal terminology for religious crime in the Russian penal code, the creators of Criminotheology have introduced this novel section of criminology to "study religious criminality or crimes committed based on any kind of religious beliefs" (Starkov & Bashkatov 2013).

Forensic expertise became a commercialised service due to a high demand from numerous trials across the country. Forensic religious expertise also was widely applied during divorce and child custody proceedings when one of the parents was a Witnesses believer (such cases particularly increased after the 2017 ban). These formally and mechanically produced evaluation reports that unambiguously sided with a non-believing parent who normally got full child custody (Ivanishko 2022). A number of centres and companies were established with the aim to provide 'expert service' in the 'sociocultural sphere' (art, linguistic, psychological, religious expertise, etc.) at the request of the law-enforcement and judicial authorities. The Centre for Sociocultural Expertise (CSE), for instance, issued a series of expertise reports that were used in courts, like the process against Pussy Riot's performance in Moscow's Cathedral of Christ the Saviour and the political processes against the dissident historian Yuri Dmitriev and the politician Alexei Navalny, and the liquidation of Russia's International Memorial Society (Dubrovskiy 2019; 2022). In their work, the CSE closely collaborated with the FSB Centre E. In 2017, the CSE issued an expert report on the New World Bible translation used by the Watch Tower Society (Kotel'nikov et al. 2017). The document was authored by three CSE experts, none of whom had a degree in Bible

studies, nor in the study of religion: V. Kotelnikov, who has a higher degree in political science; N. Kriukova, a mathematics schoolteacher; and A. Tarasov, a language schoolteacher. As we discuss below, the expert evaluation claimed that the New World Bible translation was an extremist publication and recommended its prohibition. The Moscow Centre for Prophylactic measures against Religious and Ethnic Extremism in Educational Institutions (Prophylactic Centre) also provided expert reports that were crucial in the courts and in legislation against Jehovah's Witnesses. Based on official documents, academic publications, workshops, trainings, and media outputs by some of the experts from the above-mentioned centres, we discuss below the main speculative trends and techniques elaborated by forensic experts to communicate the idea of the danger and extremism that Jehovah's Witnesses pose to Russian society. The section does not aim at providing a comprehensive analysis of the Centre's activities, but rather delves into the role of Putinist scientific-religious expertise in the creation of knowledge on religious extremism.

7. Experts for the prosecution

"Faith can be different. People believe in different and very strange things, and we have to understand that Jehovah's Witnesses have a faith that makes them distinct from all other religions," reported Larisa Astakhova, sociologist, forensic expert, Head of the Study of Religions Department at Kazan University, and a member of the Prophylactic Centre, at the seminar "Humanities forensic expertise: Challenges and solutions."⁸ Astakhova is widely known for her expertise in court cases against Scientology and the Church of the Last Testament, which led to the liquidation of the both groups in Russia (Dubrovskiy forthcoming; Elbakian 2015), and she has organized a seminar series for forensic experts in religion. Among other participants in the seminar was Marina Bignova, historian, forensic expert, Lead Analyst at the People's Friendship University, and member of the Prophylactic Centre, who also shared her experience in court expertise. "When Jehovah's Witnesses say that they are Christian, they do not mean the Christianity we are accustomed to... They are not Christians, because they do not recognize the Nicene-Constantinople creed," she noted.⁹

Legal definitions of non-traditional (i.e., minority) faiths in Putin's Russia are constructed as a dichotomy of *religious normality* vs. *religious otherness*. Normality (a model of the 'good religion') in turn is firmly linked to the Russian

8 The seminar series were held as part of the "Faith & Fiction" project organized by the Centre for Ethno-religious research Faith & Fiction Project, 10 July 2020. Available at: youtube.com/watch?v=ZkNoitA7rWA&t=23s.

9 The ecclesiastic statement by the First Council of Constantinople in 381 A.D., recognized by both the Orthodox and Catholic Churches, but not by all Protestants.

Orthodox Church, which serves as an ideological blueprint, a background of normality against which other religious communities are defined and judged. This dichotomy reflects the conservative turn in Russian politics since the late 2000s that has prioritised the Russian Orthodox Church as the main defender of ‘traditional values.’ The model of the ‘good religion’ dwells upon a primordialist understanding of religiosity, according to which Russians (or those who reside on the ‘canonical territory’ of the ‘Russian world’) are born into Orthodoxy, a phenomenon described as ‘ethnodoxy’ (Karpov et al. 2013). In this context, Jehovah’s Witnesses are seen as bringing destruction “to patriotic education and to questions of national identity. The teaching of the Jehovah’s Witnesses breaks away from history, culture, and the Russian traditions,” argues Igor Ivanishko, forensic religious expert at Russian State University of Justice and a member of the Prophylactic Centre, in his interview for the criminal news section of the REN TV, a Russian federal television network.¹⁰ This stance has had important societal implications. For instance, the study of how police officers in Russia (who deal with local religious organizations) understand what destructive religion means has shown that 23 percent of policemen believe that any non-traditional religion should be defined as destructive, with 12 percent considering that any non-Orthodox religion should be defined as destructive (Latov 2010).

The New World Bible translation forensic expertise took a similar approach, providing an analysis of the Jehovah’s Witnesses Bible translation against the background of ‘normal’ religion, meaning Orthodoxy, and the ‘normal’ Bible translation, meaning the Synodal Bible translation (considered the only authentic Bible translation) used by the Russian Orthodox Church:

The nonreligious (from a Christian point of view) discourse of Jehovah’s Witnesses contains commandments similar to those of the *traditional church (Orthodox)* that have basic religious notions of sin, salvations, God’s plan, etc... This discourse, however, has a fundamental divergence from *traditional Christian church theology* (emphasis added). (Center for Sociocultural Expertise 2017)

The expertise goes as far as accusing Witnesses of denying the basic Orthodox principle of the sacrament of the Eucharist (not recognized by most Protestant confessions). The experts argue that the New World Bible translation provides a “flawed [*ushcherbnaia*] interpretation” of the sacrament that is central “for

¹⁰ V SK raskryli podrobnosti o zaderzhanii chlenov ‘Svidetelei Iegovy’, 10 February 2021. Available at: bit.ly/3Rv17Zy.

the traditional Christian (Orthodox) church.” Other differences between the New World Bible translation and the Synodal Bible are interpreted as a sign of extremism. The experts conclude with the observation: “The main attention is given to symbolic and prophetic interpretation of the text that is not typical for Christianity in general (not to mention for Orthodoxy).” (Center for Sociocultural Expertise 2017)

Likewise, the active evangelism and door-to-door ministry of Jehovah’s Witnesses are interpreted as a “propaganda of superiority” that presents a potential social threat to traditional Russian society (the logic can be potentially extended to all proselytizing faiths). In an article with the eloquent title “They create a type of person ready for a terrorist attack: Why Jehovah’s Witnesses have been banned,” forensic expert Larisa Astakhova (2017) argues:

Extremism is not only the justification of violence and terrorism, but it can be also the instigation of religious hatred or the propaganda of superiority of one religion over another. All these ideas can trigger action – for example, the desire to destroy sacred objects of other religions, for example Christian [i.e., Orthodox] icons...The Russian Orthodox Church does not support aggressive proselytizing or the conversion of adherents of other traditional religions to its own faith...

8. Religion as extremism

Both civil and criminal law systems in Russia rely upon forensic expertise in trials. With the increasing dependency of the justice system on the authoritarian political regime, experts find themselves involved in politically motivated cases where they are expected to be attuned to certain political demands. This is particularly the case of court processes against the so-called ‘non-traditional religions’ or religious minority groups (such as Jehovah’s Witnesses, Scientologists, Church of the Last Testament, etc.), where accusations follow common patterns and biases with the simple aim of extending the notion of extremism towards the faith groups on trial (Dubrovskiy forthcoming). Astakhova, for instance, argues that although Jehovah’s Witnesses are not terrorists per se, they do, however, attract a type of person “who can become a terrorist, who can be very attractive for radical groups... This person can be ready for anything, including a terrorist attack” (Astakhova 2017). The reason, she goes on, is that Witnesses teach the superiority of religious values over individual and social values and believe in the righteousness of their faith – an idea, in fact, paramount to all religious movements. In this context, however, proclaiming the superiority of one faith over another becomes a criminal offense solely on qualitative grounds. Jehovah’s Witnesses talk about it

more often than other religious believers, according to Bignova, who shared her statistical analysis at the methodological seminar for forensic religious experts.¹¹ Within this framework, the use of texts of the Old Testament that speak of violence and vengeance can be easily interpreted as a sign of extremism. From an interview with Larisa Astakhova published in *Life.ru*:

Astakhova: [Jehovah's Witnesses] approve of the Old Testament wars in which the Israelites destroyed entire nations of pagans.

Interviewer: What a dangerous tendency! (Astakhova 2017).

Another accusation of extremism derives from the Jehovah's Witnesses doctrine of political neutrality, the principle of non-involvement in social and political life, and their refusal to endorse any government. "This neutrality implies the idea that the current state is the kingdom of Satan, while they are waiting for the arrival of the Kingdom of God. This means that all secular states are from Satan and not from God," Bignova observed while discussing the neutrality of Jehovah's Witnesses at the seminar for forensic experts. Astakhova agreed with her:

They respect the state and comply with the law, but this is an enforced respect (*vynuzhdennoe uvazhenie*) and an enforced obedience. If the state is not from God, they develop a negative image of the state... They pay taxes but they do not sacralise them... They obey the laws because they are forced to do it in order not to be banned by the state.¹²

Astakhova concludes, "Our initiatives should end up where the categorical, imperative requirement of the state begins ... Jehovah's Witnesses are against all states. They do not worship [*pokloniatsia*] any state."¹³ Thus, political neutrality becomes a form of extremism in Putin's Russia with its growing state-sponsored political nationalism, the reification and sacralisation of statehood. On the one side, the idea reflects the strong connection between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Russian state, rooted in the Orthodox doctrine of symphony between the two powers, secular and ecclesiastic, according to which both powers are sacralised. On the other side, the rejection of political neutrality comes from the Soviet model of state control over religion. In post-war repressions against Witnesses and later during Khrushchev's anti-religious campaign, Witnesses'

11 Oral presentation at the methodological seminar "Humanities forensic expertise: Challenges and solutions," "Faith & Fiction" project, 10 July 2020. Available at: [youtube.com/watch?v=ZkNoitA7rWA&t=23s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZkNoitA7rWA&t=23s).

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid.

political non-involvement had direct political implications. Their theocratic doctrine established that worldly governments could not bring about justice and peace because they were corrupted by Satan, soon to be destroyed by God in the imminent Apocalypse. Witnesses refused to serve in the Red Army; participate in elections; join the Communist Party, state collective farms, or state organizations like the Komsomol; salute the national flag; or obtain a passport – let alone collaborate with the police. They openly challenged the Soviet order and, in their house-to-house ministry, preached the establishment of a theocratic government during the millennial rule of Christ (Vagramenko 2021a). As Emily Baran argues, it “became increasingly clear to Witnesses in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union [that] neutrality was inherently political” (Baran 2014:21).

9. Conclusion

The history of Jehovah’s Witnesses in Soviet and post-Soviet Russia offers insight into the complicated relationship between non-conformist, non-traditional religious groups and the non-democratic state. The increasing state control over religious diversity in Putin’s Russia has triggered new and old responses from political and religious actors. Putin’s politics of religion rest upon the late-Soviet legacy of surveillance and control over religious life, constraining religious diversity, and using the mainstream churches for its political ends. Outlawed believers, in turn, are again forced to go underground, going back to old Soviet-era survival strategies.

This study shows how state-sponsored anti-sectarian discourses and the securitization of religion are an outcome of the growing political power of the Russian Orthodox Church, and how they serve as an ideological blueprint of religious ‘normality’ against ‘deviant’ non-traditional religion. In Putin’s Russia, religious and nationalist narratives have merged in a convoluted way with the goal of showing the messianic roles of Russia and the Russian Orthodox Church as saviours. This highly eclectic narrative constitutes the foundation of the anti-liberal and conservative turn led by Putin’s regime in the last decade. The politicization and securitization of religion in Russia are features of the ideology of the ‘Russian world’, according to which Russia is destined to lead, politically and spiritually, the eastern Slavic world. This ideology is also deeply rooted in the Soviet past, a time when the Russian Orthodox Church was under the close control of the Soviet secret police and was instrumentally used in Soviet foreign policy.

Securitization in the religious sphere – when religion is regarded as an issue of national security, or as a threat to it – has hit minority faiths in particular. ‘Non-traditional’ religiosity and religious non-conformism have been criminalised and blended with terrorism and extremism, a contemporary world-wide fear. Even though ‘religious extremism’ is not a conventional, internationally

recognized term, it has been legally introduced in several laws and regulations that facilitate the open persecution of minority religious groups. As legal experts argue nowadays, “non-traditional religious groups are the first step towards crime.”¹⁴ Putinist trials against minority believers play a decisive role in the criminalization of religious opposition, which can be seen as a step towards the criminalization of all opposition to the state.

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¹⁴ Ibid.

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