

[Torigian on Adamsky, 'Russian Nuclear Orthodoxy: Religion, Politics, and Strategy'](#)

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Dmitry Adamsky. *Russian Nuclear Orthodoxy: Religion, Politics, and Strategy*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019. 376 pp. \$90.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-5036-0805-4.

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Russian Nuclear Orthodoxy contains a wealth of fascinating new information and raises numerous crucial questions that will help us understand how Russia might change in the future. The argument is innovative and persuasive, and the book is necessary reading for anyone interested in contemporary Russia, military doctrine, and nuclear weapons.

Dmitry Adamsky carefully shows how the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) has helped legitimate and consolidate Russia's nuclear weapons program and rocket forces. Commendably, he is careful not to overstate his case; he affirms that "the ROC's role is not the only, and not even the main, factor behind the Kremlin's nuclear credo" (p. 2). He is also careful not to over-argue about the likelihood of certain possible directions, especially what might happen in a crisis. However, his delineation of those scenarios and of the reasons they might occur is valuable.

Most readers will be persuaded by the evidence that understanding the current state of nuclear weapons in Russia demands an appreciation of the ROC's role. In this review, I will draw out some of the implications of his findings. My conclusion identifies the need for future scholarship to draw in the international environment and civil-military relations to better evaluate just how much the church matters.

Adamsky suggests the possibility that the Orthodox faith and priests may "project on the human reliability of the nuclear chain of command by enhancing obedience and commitment." Operators will "more easily overcome moral and ethical self-restraints." However, operators may also be "driven by faith and encouraged by the clergy" to establish "pockets of disobedience" (pp. 10-11).

Adamsky links his book explicitly to the literature on the role of religion on the battlefield. However, that literature is a subset of a much larger body of scholarship—the nature of military effectiveness and cohesion.[1] Here Adamsky's book brushes up on an essential question: the unique difficulties of maintaining order within strategic rocket forces (SRF), an understudied topic in which Adamsky's book will hopefully inspire further interest.

Adamsky is looking at a special case: nuclear forces in the midst of state collapse and rebirth. Although Peter Feaver has looked at command and control in new nuclear nations, we have to wait for the forthcoming work of Chris Clary and Josh Shifrinson to get a full theoretical treatment of

nuclear forces in a collapsed state.[2] My own recent research in the Russian archives has revealed the surprising extent to which the lack of discipline in the SRF was chronic from the beginning. One document from August 1961 reveals that the other services preferred to give their worst officers to the SRF and that the material situation was so poor that even officers revealed “politically harmful attitudes.” That same summer, of the 923 navy officers who were assigned to the SRF, 556 rejected the opportunity. In 1963, the 9th Independent Rocket Corps in the Far East Military District conducted twelve futile inspections in the 27th Rocket Division that led to no improvement in discipline.[3]

We should be careful to remember, however, that running rocket forces is not hard only for the Soviet Union and the Russian Federation. Disciplinary problems among American intercontinental ballistic missile launch control officers, nuclear-capable bomber crews, and to a lesser extent ballistic missile submarine crews are well-documented: boredom, high expectations, lack of career incentives, and micromanagement have led to cheating on tests, drugs, poor morale, and, in at least one incident, loss of six nuclear warheads for a day. Although recent accounts have often attributed those difficulties to post-Cold War neglect and the view that nuclear war was unlikely, other works have shown that morale has always been a challenge.[4]

With regard to Adamsky’s claim that religion is a potential cohesive force within the rocket forces, two issues within nuclear studies have obvious significance: safety and command and control. Both relate to the broader question of military professionalism.

Does the use of religion and priests contribute to more professionalism? Usefully, Caitlin Talmadge breaks down the mechanisms for how professionalism contributes to military effectiveness, and the application of her theory to the Russian case reveals a mixed message. If religiosity *affects promotion patterns*, then religion hurts professionalism; whether this phenomenon exists now is hard to say. The role of priests in the SRF might suggest problems for *command arrangements*. What happens if someone receives different messages from a priest and a commander? That likelihood, in my opinion, is low. Despite Adamsky’s comparison of priests and commissars, priests are not incorporated into the system of command like the commissars were (and regardless, the commissars were often co-opted into sharing interests with the commanders anyway—the actual situation usually depended on personalities). In terms of *training*, religious activities may take up part of a schedule that would otherwise go to more training, but the extent to which that is happening requires more research.[5] Crucially, if tensions in society between secularism and religion become more pronounced, those divisions may be reflected within the armed forces. An emphasis on the ROC may also create tensions with Buddhists, Jews, and Muslims. Moreover, we have already seen evidence of at least *some* tension within the ROC itself on the matter of nuclear orthodoxy: in February 2020, a document written by a church commission appeared on the Moscow patriarch’s website that said that “the blessing of military weapons is not reflected in the tradition of the Orthodox Church and does not correspond to the content of the Rite,” and that, in particular, weapons that kill an “indefinite number of people” should not be blessed.[6] Ultimately, as Leon Trotsky said, social problems are manifested more strongly in military organizations than elsewhere, and the rocket forces are certainly no exception.

We should remember that although Western scholars tend to measure military effectiveness and professionalism with how well the military is divorced from politics (objective versus subjective control), in Russia, a preoccupation with using politics *for* military power is endemic.[7] Both

countries have regularly emphasized the “human factor” in war at the expense of “technical” virtuosity—a task that requires the armed forces to understand and support the regime’s political agenda. Commissars and political work were never entirely about “coup-proofing” but were also about ensuring a well-disciplined force. Such troops not only fought better but were also capable of overcoming political influence operations.

Political work has also been about the nature of the relationship between officers and the enlisted. The Soviets often claimed that their systems relied on comradely relations and political consciousness, not punishment and material benefits. What kind of discipline does a priest help create, and what does that mean for the SRF in particular? Does it lead to unquestioning obedience when that is necessary? Does it create trust that allows for the unrestricted flow of information and creativity in cases when the rulebook no longer has answers, like in the case of an accident?

Addressing these questions in conventional forces is hard enough, but rocket forces are organized and run differently. The pressures of “safety” versus “reliability” create special challenges, as well as the requirement of convincing the other side of the credibility of the deterrent.[8] Adamsky’s work is an important step that will help scholars better understand the specific demands of keeping rocket forces cohesive and effective.

Usually, when it comes to command and control, analysts focus on the question of whether the button would get pushed when the orders came down. As Adamsky argues, someone invested in Russian nuclear orthodoxy is perhaps more likely to commit to nuclear war if they believe the cause is just. But in the middle of a crisis, the civilian leadership may also worry about missile units acting *too* aggressively. In other words, while civilians may better understand the need to emphasize avoiding escalation, commanders on the ground steeped in the tenets of “nuclear orthodoxy” *may* see matters somewhat differently—although the historic Russian preoccupation with highly centralized decision-making with regard to nuclear weapons makes this only a small possibility.[9] Could ambiguous, potentially threatening signals that appear during a crisis be interpreted in a more threatening way by someone steeped in a “siege mentality” of a holy Russia at war with eternal enemies? In September 1983, Lieutenant Stanislav Petrov, a watch officer, and the general staff dismissed indications of an American attack; would a similar conclusion happen if war with the West was seen as possible?[10] On the other hand, if religious indoctrination creates a situation in which greater cohesion means mistakes do not occur and civilians keep close control over behavior, it will be a net positive for both sides.

What does nuclear orthodoxy mean for nuclear strategy? Adamsky argues: “The theocratization of the Russian strategic community may project on the conflict duration and escalation dynamics. Presumably, the Russian nuclear clergy is less likely to constrain conflict. It might even ensure a relatively easier path to escalation, by legitimizing a belligerent political course and ensuring public support for it” (p. 9). Adamsky even raises the possibility that an “orthodox nuclear ethics” will emerge (p. 247).

Reacting to Adamsky’s points, Brad Roberts, one of the architects of the Barack Obama administration’s Nuclear Posture Review, concluded that “a regime convinced of its moral rectitude and that defines itself as called by history to protect civilization may not be easily deterred by threats to its secular interests. Moreover, a regime whose faith is eschatological in character (that is, that

believes in the second coming of Christ and of an end time for the secular era) may not be particularly fearful of escalation.” And, indeed, Vladimir Putin has made comments like “an aggressor should nevertheless know that retaliation is inevitable, and that he will be destroyed. And as martyrs, and the victims of aggression, we will go to heaven, but they’ll simply be wiped out.” Roberts therefore concludes that “it is difficult to draw the conclusion” that Russian leaders believe “that nuclear wars cannot be won and thus cannot be fought.”[11] Assessing whether Roberts is right leads to serious challenges, as we are now entering the territory of how to interpret political language. But a bit of context can be helpful.

Once again, expanding Adamsky’s book from a case of religion to a broader issue, in this case ideology, can provide some important context. The most obvious comparison here is the intersection of “orthodox” Marxist-Leninist views on the nature of war and the advent of nuclear weapons during the Cold War. Soviet leaders debated this question, and the nature of that debate was complex and revolved around several issues. Most importantly, these discussions were not whether nuclear wars should be fought: everyone thought, even Mao Zedong, that it would be better not to fight a nuclear war. Yet differences did exist about how nuclear war should be *talked about*, and that was rooted in questions that had far from obvious answers.

Before Viacheslav Molotov was removed from power in 1957, contrary to common interpretations, he supported the concept of “peaceful coexistence” at the 20th Party Congress and favored reducing the tense relationship with the West. After he was removed from power, however, he turned the question of nuclear weapons into a wedge issue with which to attack Nikita Khrushchev. Yet even then Molotov did not advocate for an “adventurist” foreign policy or claim that the Soviets should risk nuclear war. Crucially, Molotov said that equating nuclear war with the end of civilization *made war more likely*, which would be catastrophic. In Molotov’s mind, if the West believed Moscow thought nuclear war was a disaster, the West would be more likely to put dangerous pressure on the Soviet Union or take serious risks. Furthermore, Molotov was also deeply concerned that if Soviet society, including the military, believed a nuclear war could not be won, then morale would collapse to dangerous levels. Finally, Molotov was concerned that completely denying the possibility that war could lead to political change would be a dangerous ideological step.

Interestingly, Molotov compared some of Khrushchev’s public statements with those of Mao’s. Although Khrushchev is famously associated with the concept of “peaceful co-existence” and the “nuclear revolution,” he also regularly stated that, if war were to occur, the Soviet Union could still win, a fact that, as Molotov pointed out, indicated that Khrushchev was not as far from Mao as Khrushchev described. Mao did, however, differ from Molotov in one crucial respect: Mao cared even more about ideological proprieties and believed that discounting the power of the bomb could justify a more aggressive communist agenda.

Putin faces many of the same challenges as Khrushchev. While he undoubtedly wants to avoid nuclear war, he may look to nuclear orthodoxy as a useful way of improving the credibility of deterrence, which makes war more unlikely. Given Russia’s weak conventional forces, talking about nuclear war in eschatological terms may also improve Russia’s ability to coerce in ways short of war. Adamsky concludes that the ROC promotes a “pronuclear” worldview within Russian society (p. 2). Yet the dangers of such an approach are obvious. If, because of Russian nuclear orthodoxy, people like Roberts are starting to believe that the “Russian leaders may believe, or come to believe, that

nuclear wars are necessary and just,” then the core of the nuclear revolution, that both sides understand the other side knows war would be catastrophic, is weakening.[12] At the very least, if the Russian population is educated to believe the use of nuclear weapons is moral, then the leadership may not believe using such weapons is politically costly; although, as Scott Sagan and Benjamin Valentino have shown, American public opinion does not seem to find nuclear weapons especially problematic either in some contexts.[13]

Crucially, however, while religion may help motivate soldiers to sacrifice their lives on the conventional battlefield, nuclear war between the US and Russia would most likely signify collective mass murder suicide. That means a redefinition of victory that includes the destruction of life on earth. Little evidence suggests that the Russian Federation has reached that level of religious fanaticism.

Adamsky’s book has received a great deal of attention for what it tells us about the Russian SRF and nuclear doctrine. However, the book’s interesting material on the designers and producers of nuclear weapons should not be overlooked. Adamsky argues that, after the collapse of the USSR, the ROC helped to legitimize funding for nuclear weapons and provide moral inspiration for scientists. Although Adamsky does not say so explicitly, his book is therefore significant because of what it tells us about what can happen to nuclear weapons programs in the event of state collapse—an under-theorized topic, although Americans were deeply concerned about the implications of the fall of the Soviet Union.[14]

Adamsky portrays the role of the ROC as a net benefit for the nuclear weapons program, and his book has implications that deserve exploring. Jacques Hymans identifies two elements necessary for an efficient nuclear weapons project in its early stages. First, scientists need “a strong sense of intrinsic motivation” that comes “in part from nationalism, but even more importantly from an organizational culture of professionalism.” That culture requires respect for “professional autonomy.” Hymans also emphasizes the importance of a “Weberian legal-rational (low political interference)” as opposed to “neo-patrimonial (high political interference)” institutional framework. Hymans explicitly de-emphasizes the importance of funding for programmatic success.[15]

If we proceed from Hymans’s model, the ROC’s role among nuclear scientists should have more ambiguous implications than as described by Adamsky. According to Hymans’s theoretical framework, the “nationalism” part of the ROC could provide more “intrinsic motivation” for scientists. However, what exactly does “nuclear orthodoxy” mean for the more important “culture of professionalism”? The long-term implications of introducing religious motivations into a scientific endeavor are hard to predict. We can think of at least some potential problems, however: tensions between secular and religious scientists, promotion of individuals because of their “religiosity” as opposed to professional qualifications, or time spent on religious activities instead of other work.

With regard to the “Weberian legal-rational” versus “neo-patrimonial” spectrum, it may be the case that better morale allows the political leadership to put more trust in scientists. However, given that the church’s values are arguably more “neo-patrimonial,” it may also create an environment conducive to leadership that is personal, not institutional, but knowing for sure will require much more research.

The relationship between religion and nuclear weapons in the United States is underexplored, but it bears mentioning that Thomas Power, the commander in chief of the Strategic Air Command (SAC), supported the creation of a SAC Memorial Chapel at Offutt Air Force Base in Nebraska in the 1950s. The stained glass windows were inspired by Isaiah 6:8: “Whom shall I send and who will go for us?... Here am I! Send me.” The names of 2,583 SAC crew members who died in the line of duty between 1948 and 1992 are in the memorial register.[16]

Certainly, American politicians have been aware of the potential political benefits of Catholic support in particular. Ronald Reagan lobbied for the pope’s support of his nuclear agenda. Aaron Bateman argues in a very interesting piece that Pope John XXIII opposed the bomb and wanted to “lower the overall tension between east and west,” while Pope John Paul II, on the other hand, had a more forgiving attitude toward nuclear weapons and held anti-communist sentiments. These points suggest some element of instrumentality in the Vatican.[17]

Yet Catholicism has often presented challenges for nuclear weapons in a way quite different from the Russian case. In 1983, the National Conference of Bishops argued in a pastoral letter that nuclear war was “immoral” and Bishop Leroy Mathiessen told Catholics to quit working at a nuclear weapons assembly plant. These events raised serious questions for Catholics serving in the US military.[18] Catholics have protested nuclear weapons in America at great risk to their personal safety.[19] Pope Francis has suggested that not only the use but also the possession of nuclear weapons is immoral—a more aggressive position than the church held in the past. Entangling why Catholicism has been more skeptical is a big research question, and hopefully Adamsky’s book will inspire more interest in this area.

Adamsky provides overwhelming evidence that Russian nuclear orthodoxy deserves our attention, and he is careful not to over-argue about any possible future directions. Possibly in part because of evidentiary restrictions, Adamsky does not test his explanation for the direction of Russia’s nuclear weapons against other competing hypotheses, nor does he attempt to trace key decisions by looking at specific actors within the military and civilian elite and answering why they had particular views and why they emerged victorious. The international system, including potentially causally relevant international events like the Norwegian rocket incident in 1995 or deteriorating relations with the West, does not appear in the analysis.

Significantly, one of the most important works on Russia’s military to come out over the last few years, *Military Reform and Militarism in Russia*, a book that does look at civil-military relations and Russia’s strategic environment more closely, reaches different conclusions about the state of the Russian nuclear forces and the reasons for their evolution. Alexandr Golts credits the leadership of Igor Sergeev, the head of the RVSN (Russian Strategic Rocket Forces), for helping the nuclear forces survive the lean years. In 1996, investigations showed that, of all the services, only the RVSN was recognized as completely ready for war. Visitors to Vlasikha, the headquarters of the RVSN, were impressed by the exercises Sergeev showed them. When Igor Rodionov, the minister of Defense, warned that, due to lack of funds, Moscow could lose control of its nuclear weapons, an inspection ordered by the president showed no such danger. Between 1997 and 2001, Sergeev even went on to serve as minister of Defense—the first “raketshik” to achieve that honor. However, Sergeev ended up feuding with the head of the general staff, Anatoly Kvashnin, and the balance of power shifted away from him when the nuclear arsenal proved incapable of forcing the West to acknowledge

Moscow's interests in Yugoslavia. The war in Chechnya further demonstrated the importance of more funding for conventional forces. In 2001, Kvashnin said: "The Russian army is like a person who has one arm pumped up (the RVSN) and another short, weak, and shrunken. This is not a normal person, but some kind of mutant. I cannot allow this." Golts concludes: "It seems to me that the departure of the raketshiks from primary roles brought considerable damage to the reform of the Armed Forces. If any general could fundamentally change the army, then they would have been from the RVSN. These were the only soldiers in our Armed Forces that could meet the demands faced by a modern army." [20]

These developments are still not fully understood, and Kristin Ven Bruusgaard's forthcoming work, *Russian Nuclear Strategy after the Cold War*, suggests that the *raketshiki* did better in these disputes. In any case, although Adamsky is not trying to write a complete history of the RVSN, it would be interesting to know what role the church played, if any, in these crucial events.

Notes

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