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OCCUPIED UKRAINE: "Disappeared" clergy, seized places of worship, library purge

By Felix Corley, Forum 18 (<https://www.forum18.org>)

Russian occupation authorities continue to violate freedom of religion and belief in the Ukrainian territory they currently control. In late 2022 two Greek Catholic priests and a Protestant pastor were the latest known religious leaders seized by occupation authorities. The pastor was freed in January, but it is unknown where the priests are or even if they are still alive. [UPDATE: Russian military seized Orthodox priest Platon Danyshchuk on 26 January.] Raids on and seizures of places of worship continued in January, and a purge of "extremist" books from educational libraries was ordered in Luhansk.

Russian restrictions on freedom of religion and belief and other human rights are being illegally imposed on Russian-occupied Ukrainian territory in a more systematic way since Russia's claimed annexation in October 2022 of further Ukrainian territory. "Since October we are now part of Russia. The situation is different," Oleg Pomnikov of the Religious and Ethnic Affairs Department of the Luhansk People's Republic (LPR) Culture, Sport and Youth Ministry insisted to Forum 18 on 1 February.

The whereabouts, conditions of captivity, and state of health of two religious leaders from occupied Berdyansk remain unknown. Russia's National Guard (Rosgvardiya) seized two Ukrainian Greek Catholic priests, Fr Ivan Levytsky and Fr Bohdan Heleta, on 16 November 2022. Armed Russian soldiers seized Serhiy Karpenko, Pastor of the Vefil (Bethel) Protestant Church, on 12 December 2022. Pastor Karpenko was freed in January, but there has been no news of the two priests. The Russian-controlled Berdyansk District Police did not answer Forum 18's questions. The duty officer at the Russian Military Command in Melitopol refused to discuss anything with Forum 18 or give any number for the Military Command in Berdyansk (see below).

In January, the Russian military broke into a Sunday worship meeting of a Baptist church in the occupied Ukrainian town of Berdyansk in Zaporizhzhia Region. The military checked the identity of all those present, searched the building and sealed it, taking the keys. The following day they seized another Baptist church in the town. The duty officer at the Russian Military Command in Melitopol refused to discuss anything with Forum 18, refused to give any number for the Military Command in Berdyansk and put the phone down (see below).

[UPDATE 6 February 2023: On 26 January, the Russian military seized Fr Platon Danyshchuk, Orthodox Church of Ukraine priest of Holy Trinity Church in the village of Dobropillya in occupied Kherson Region, Fr Ioan Zamarayev of the OCU's Kherson Diocese confirmed on 5 February.]

In Russian-occupied Kherson Region in January, the Russian Regional Police conducted at least two raids on Jehovah's Witness Kingdom Halls, even though they have been empty since the start of the coronavirus pandemic in early 2020. Russian police seized religious literature which they described as "extremist", noting that Jehovah's Witnesses are banned in Russia. The police stressed that anyone continuing the activity of a religious community Russia has banned risks long jail terms under Russia's Criminal Code (see below).

The occupation authorities' Kherson Police described Jehovah's Witnesses as conducting "destructive" activity and "propagandising anti-Orthodox ideas, spreading extremist literature and rejecting the entry of the region into Russia" (see below).

In occupied Luhansk, in January 2023 the Russian military seized a Baptist church that the community has been banned by occupation authorities from using since 2017. Oleg Pomnikov, head of the Religious and Ethnic Affairs Department of the LPR Culture, Sport and Youth Ministry, questioned whether the building is a church. "I looked at the records and there is no registered Baptist organisation in Luhansk," he told Forum 18 (see below).

Pomnikov claimed that the absence of registered Protestant, non-Moscow Patriarchate Orthodox, and Jehovah's Witness communities in the LPR "reflects the local population," he claimed (see below).

Pomnikov of the LPR's of the Religious and Ethnic Affairs Department insisted that anyone who wants to meet for worship legally is able to do so. He said the LPR attitude to religious communities has, since October 2022, been strictly governed by Russian

Federation laws, including the Religion Law (see below).

Pomnikov claimed to sympathise with the Roman Catholic parish in Luhansk, which has been without a priest since its parish priest Fr Grzegorz Rapa, a Polish citizen, left temporarily in March 2020 and was then repeatedly blocked by the LPR from returning. Fr Rapa had served the parish since 1993. "I'm very sad that they can't resolve their problems," Pomnikov claimed to Forum 18. He insisted that if Fr Rapa wants to return, he must apply to the Russian Foreign Ministry (see below).

The LPR is following the neighbouring Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) by purging their libraries of literature they and the Russian occupation authorities regard as "extremist".

On 20 January, the LPR Education and Science Ministry instructed the heads of educational establishments to remove "literature of an extremist nature, expressing the ideology of Ukrainian nationalism" from their libraries by 24 January. Educational establishment heads who failed to do so would bear personal responsibility, they were warned. Yelena Bakhmut, the official who prepared the letter, refused to discuss it with Forum 18 (see below).

The books to be removed include two on Metropolitan Andrey Sheptytsky (who headed the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church until his death in 1944) and one on St Petro Mohyla, a 17th century Orthodox Metropolitan of Kyiv known for his educational and publishing activities (see below).

Russian restrictions on freedom of religion or belief imposed on occupied Ukraine

Freedom of religion or belief violations in the Ukrainian territories Russia has occupied since 2014 have not followed one pattern.

In occupied and illegally annexed Crimea (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2774) the Russian government has forcibly imposed Russian laws and restrictions on exercising human rights, including freedom of religion or belief.

In the occupied parts of the eastern Ukrainian territories of Luhansk (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2721) (under the Russian-created Luhansk People's Republic - LPR) and Donetsk (<https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?country=87>) (under the Russian-created Donetsk People's Republic - LPR) serious violations of freedom of religion and belief and other human rights have also taken place since 2014.

Russia's February 2022 renewed invasion of Ukraine saw more Ukrainian territories brought under Russian occupation. As of early February 2023, Russia controls about 17 per cent of Ukrainian territory:

- 100 per cent of Crimea (including Sevastopol);
- almost all of Luhansk Region;
- about 60 per cent of Donetsk Region;
- about 70 per cent of Zaporizhzhia Region;
- about 70 per cent of Kherson Region;

and small parts of Mykolaiv and Kharkiv Regions.

On 5 October 2022, following referenda that were widely denounced by the international community, Russia illegally annexed the DPR and LPR, retaining these names, along with Ukraine's Zaporizhzhia and Kherson Regions. "The so-called 'referenda' in Ukraine were conducted in areas under Russian occupation," United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres said on Twitter on 29 September 2022. "They can't be called a genuine expression of the popular will."

In 2023, Russia is now following a more coordinated approach to impose the full range of Russian restrictions on the exercise of freedom of religion or belief (<https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?country=10>) across all the Russian-occupied areas of Ukraine (<https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?country=17>).

Unlawful application of Russian law to occupied Ukrainian territory

Russian occupation officials in 2023 now insist that Russian law applies to the occupied territories, and that religious communities must have registration under Russian law.

The Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) has condemned "the unlawful application of Russian Federation legislation by the occupation authorities of the Russian Federation in the occupied territory [Crimea]" in its Report on the human rights situation in Ukraine for 1 August 2020 to 31 January 2021

(<https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Countries/UA/31stReportUkraine-en.pdf>).

Under the Geneva Convention (IV) relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War (<https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/geneva-convention-relative-protection-civilian-persons-time-war>) (2nd part), occupation authorities must respect the laws in force (<https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/en/ihl-treaties/gciv-1949/article-64/commentary/1958>) in the country (Ukraine) "unless absolutely prevented".

Article 58 notes: "The Occupying Power shall permit ministers of religion to give spiritual assistance to the members of their religious communities."

Russia was in December 2022, against international law, passing a law giving its officials and military impunity from prosecution (<https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/12/20/russia-immunity-law-set-crimes-ukraine>) for crimes if acting "in the interests of the Russian Federation", also denying justice to those who have been unlawfully prosecuted by occupation authorities.

Occupation officials also say that any exercise of freedom of religion or belief not permitted is punishable under Russia's Criminal or Administrative Codes (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2681).

Berdyansk: "Disappeared" clergy still "disappeared"

Two Ukrainian Greek Catholic priests seized in Berdyansk in late 2022 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2799) possibly remain in Russian detention, but it is unknown whether they are still alive.

Russian forces have seized many leaders of a variety of religious communities (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2784) in the Ukrainian territory they occupy. In most of these cases, however, it remains unclear if religious leaders were targeted (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2793) to specifically punish the exercise of the freedom of religion or belief.

On 16 November 2022, troops of Russia's National Guard (Rosgvardiya) seized the two Ukrainian Greek Catholic priests, Fr Ivan Levytsky and Fr Bohdan Heleta (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2799), in Berdyansk. The Donetsk Exarchate has had no news of them since, it told Forum 18 on 2 February 2023.

On 12 December 2022, armed Russian soldiers seized Serhiy Karpenko (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2799), Pastor of the Vefil (Bethel) Protestant Church, in Berdyansk. He was freed on 10 January 2023, people familiar with the situation told Forum 18.

Forum 18 has not been able to find out where Fr Levytsky and Fr Heleta have been held, what their state of health is, or whether they have been released at an unknown location.

Officers of Berdyansk District's Russian-imposed police did not answer the phone each time Forum 18 called on 1 February. Forum 18 asked in writing that morning where Fr Levytsky and Fr Heleta are, why they have not been freed and whether they are still alive. Forum 18 had received no reply by the end of the working day in Berdyansk of 3 February.

The duty officer at the Russian Military Command for Zaporizhzhia Region in Melitopol refused to discuss anything with Forum 18 on 1 February, refused to give any number for the Military Command in Berdyansk and put the phone down.

Among other religious leaders detained by Russia in occupied territory, on 21 September 2022 masked Russian soldiers took from their home in Mariupol Leonid Ponomaryov, Pastor of a Baptist Council of Churches congregation in the city, and his wife Tatyana. They were freed in Donetsk on 21 October 2022 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2784).

On 22 November 2022, the Russian military seized businessman and Pentecostal deacon 52-year-old Anatoly Prokopchuk and his 19-year-old son Aleksandr Prokopchuk, who lived in Nova Kakhovka in Kherson Region. On 26 November 2022, their shot and mutilated bodies were found in a nearby wood (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2793).

Berdyansk: Baptist churches closed and sealed

Also in Berdyansk, in January 2023 the Russian military closed two Ukrainian Baptist Union churches which had been able to continue to function up till that point.

On 22 January the Russian military burst into the Sunday worship service of the First Baptist Church in Berdyansk. They inspected the identity documents of each person present and searched the building. They then forced everyone outside and sealed the building, taking the keys, Ukraine's Baptist Union noted the next day. On 23 January, the Russian military summoned the church's pastor to the military headquarters.

The Baptist Church marked its 115th anniversary in September 2022, the Baptist Union said.

On 23 January, Russian occupation forces closed the Second Baptist Church in Berdyansk. "The demands were the same – to renounce Ukrainian registration and to register with the occupation administration," Ukraine's Baptist Union noted the same day.

A Baptist familiar with the situation told Forum 18 that a church member had come to the church that day and found Russian soldiers conducting a search. They seized documents and computers before sealing the building.

The duty officer at the Russian Military Command in Melitopol refused to discuss anything with Forum 18 on 1 February, refused to give any number for the Military Command in Berdyansk and put the phone down.

On 18 October 2022, the Russian military commandant of the town of Chernihivka in Berdyansk District took the keys of the Baptist Church (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2784) and said that from now on the building is the property of the "administration". However, Baptists were allowed to continue meetings for worship.

Luhansk: Russian military seize closed Baptist church

At the end of January 2023, the Russian military seized the building of Emmanuel Baptist Church in Luhansk, the Ukrainian Baptist Union stated on 31 January. The congregation had not been able to use its church building since 2017, after the enforced closure of all Protestant churches (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2721) in the Russian-controlled Luhansk People's Republic (LPR) in the years after the illegal entity's establishment in 2014.

"It's on LPR territory and it does not have registration," Oleg Pomnikov, the head of the Religious and Ethnic Affairs Department of the LPR Culture, Sport and Youth Ministry since autumn 2022, told Forum 18 from Luhansk on 1 February. He indicated that he had not heard of the seizure of Emmanuel Baptist Church, and asked Forum 18 for its address and said he would check.

"The building can't have been seized or confiscated – under Russian law this can't happen without a court order," Pomnikov insisted to Forum 18. He then questioned whether the building is a church. "I looked at the records and there is no registered Baptist organisation in Luhansk."

After the Russian-backed creation of the LPR in 2014, the LPR banned all exercise of freedom of religion or belief without permission (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2721) from the entity's rulers. It also refused to register any Protestant churches – or communities of a range of other faiths, including the Orthodox Church of Ukraine and Jehovah's Witnesses.

Luhansk: "We are now part of Russia. The situation is different"

Oleg Pomnikov of the Religious and Ethnic Affairs Department of the LPR Culture, Sport and Youth Ministry insisted that anyone who wants to meet for worship legally is able to do so. He said the LPR attitude to religious communities has, since October 2022, been strictly governed by Russian Federation laws.

As of 3 February, 202 religious organisations in occupied Luhansk Region that had previously been registered by the Russian-backed LPR were registered with the Russian tax authorities. Almost all of these - 190 - are Russian Orthodox communities under the Moscow Patriarchate. Only 12 are from other communities: 8 Muslim; 1 Jewish; 1 Hare Krishna; 1 Old Believer; and 1 Roman Catholic.

Forum 18 asked Pomnikov why no Baptist, Pentecostal, Seventh-day Adventist, Orthodox Church of Ukraine, Kyiv Patriarchate or Jehovah's Witness communities have been allowed to register (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2721). He replied: "There's one registered Buddhist community also." However, no Buddhist community appears on the Russian tax authorities' list of registered organisations.

Pomnikov of the LPR Religious and Ethnic Affairs Department claimed that the absence of registered Protestant, non-Moscow Patriarchate Orthodox and Jehovah's Witness communities "reflects the local population".

Many religious communities have not been able to, or do not want to seek registration (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2721) under the LPR or – since 2022 – under Russian law. When Forum 18 asked what would happen to communities that meet without registration, Pomnikov replied: "They would consciously break the law if they are not registered. This is the law of the Russian Federation."

Pomnikov of the LPR Religious and Ethnic Affairs Department pointed to Article 9 of Russia's Religion Law, which imposes restrictive conditions for registration. Under Russian law, all unregistered groups must give the authorities full information about those who attend, meeting places, and activities.

Since the LPR was created in 2014 after Russia's invasion, LPR police have raided meetings for worship (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2721) without LPR registration, and courts subsequently fined many religious leaders for leading those meetings. Protestants have been among those particularly targeted by such raids. When Forum 18 asked about this, Pomnikov responded: "I am not aware that the acts of the police were directed at people's religious activity. They were tackling violations of the law."

When Forum 18 listed some of the fines on religious leaders (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2721) in recent years, Pomnikov responded: "Since October we are now part of Russia. The situation is different."

Kherson Region: Raids on empty Jehovah's Witness Kingdom Halls

The Russian Kherson Regional Police launched at least one criminal investigation and conducted at least two raids on Jehovah's Witness Kingdom Halls, even though they have not functioned since 2020. Jehovah's Witnesses across Ukraine stopped meeting in Kingdom Halls in early 2020 because of the coronavirus pandemic. Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Kingdom Halls did not resume their activity in the regions occupied by Russia.

On 29 November 2022, Kherson Regional Police conducted "operational investigation measures" in the village of Krasne on the Black Sea coast which uncovered a group of Jehovah's Witnesses. Officers seized "banned" religious literature. They claim that the community was led by a 65-year-old individual.

Kherson Regional Police reminded readers of its Telegram channel that Russia had banned all Jehovah's Witness activity (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2297) in 2017 – before Russia occupied Kherson. It also noted that under Russian Criminal Code Article 282.2, individuals can be jailed for up to 10 years for organising the activity of an "extremist" religious community (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2681) and for up to 8 years for recruiting others to join such a community. The police said an investigation was underway.

Forum 18 understands that the 65-year-old individual is no longer in Russian-occupied territory.

On 23 January 2023, Kherson Police announced that they had raided the Kingdom Hall in the village of Novosofiivka close to the southern Black Sea coast. Footage of the raid on the Police's Telegram channel showed officers searching the empty premises and finding boxes and cupboards of Jehovah's Witness literature.

The police report described Jehovah's Witnesses as conducting "destructive" activity and "propagandising anti-Orthodox ideas, spreading extremist literature and rejecting the entry of the region into Russia". The report added that officers had "established the identity of the leader and activists of the cell". It reminded readers that Russia had banned all Jehovah's Witness activity under "anti-extremism" legislation.

On 23 January, Kherson Police also announced that they had that day raided the Kingdom Hall in the village of Oleshky, close to the Dnipro River. They claimed the raid was part of "operational investigation measures to halt the underground activity of extremist organisations". The Police report said officers had seized 1,700 "extremist" books and magazine, a collection box and portable display stands.

Luhansk: Will Catholic priest be able to return?

Oleg Pomnikov, the head of the Religious and Ethnic Affairs Department of the LPR Culture, Sport and Youth Ministry, claimed to sympathise with the Roman Catholic parish of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Luhansk and a smaller parish in Stakhanov [official Ukrainian name Kadiyevka]. The Luhansk parish had registration under the LPR and in November 2022 it was among the religious communities in the LPR whose registration the Russian authorities accepted.

The parishes have had no priest since March 2020 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2721), when Fr Grzegorz Rapa left expecting to be able to return. However, LPR officials repeatedly rejected all his and his bishop's attempts to be allowed to return. Fr Rapa, a Polish priest, has served in Luhansk since 1993.

"I'm very sad that they can't resolve their problems," Pomnikov told Forum 18. "Maybe there's a political reason why Fr Grzegorz has not been able to return, I don't know. Maybe he hasn't asked to return. But there is no artificial obstruction."

Forum 18 pointed out that the LPR authorities had repeatedly rejected attempts (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2721) since 2020 to get permission for Fr Rapa's return. Pomnikov of the LPR Religious and Ethnic Affairs Department insisted that the situation is now different since the LPR's annexation by Russia. "If he wants to return he'll have to apply to the Foreign Ministry of the Russian Federation in accordance with Russian law."

Luhansk: Purge of educational establishment libraries

The LPR Education and Science Ministry has ordered a purge of libraries in educational establishments. On 20 January 2023, in a letter seen by Forum 18, acting minister Yevgeny Miroshnichenko instructed the heads of educational establishments to remove "literature of an extremist nature, expressing the ideology of Ukrainian nationalism" from their libraries.

The LPR had earlier banned various texts as "extremist" (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2721), including in 2019 an edition of the Gospel of John in the widely-used Russian Synodal translation originally published in 1820.

Miroshnichenko of the LPR Education and Science Ministry supplied a list of 365 books to be removed. He also ordered libraries to remove a wide range of other literature, including anything about the holodomor (the Ukrainian famine in the 1930s caused by Stalin's policies), literature "propagandising European gender 'values'", literature on events in Ukraine since 2014, and all 90 books from Famous Ukrainians, a biographical series aimed at teenagers.

The Famous Ukrainians series includes a book on St Petro Mohyla, a 17th century Orthodox Metropolitan of Kyiv who was known for his educational and publishing activities, and a book on Metropolitan Andrey Sheptytsky. (Metropolitan Sheptytsky headed the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church until his death in 1944, and protected Jews from the Holocaust (<https://www.adl.org/resources/news/abraham-h-foxman-posthumous-presentation-adl-jan-karski-courage-care-award>) at a time when such acts were punishable by death.)

The list of "extremist" books to be removed also includes a book on Metropolitan Sheptytsky by the former Soviet prisoner of conscience Myroslav Marynovych. "I believe in God and in Ukraine", by the former Soviet prisoner of conscience and Orthodox Christian Levko Lukyanenko, is also on the "extremist" book list.

Miroshnichenko of the LPR Education and Science Ministry ordered libraries to remove all such "extremist" books and put them in sealed boxes, and report on this to the Ministry by 24 January. Educational establishment heads who failed to do so would bear personal responsibility, he warned.

Yelena Bakhmut, the official who prepared the letter for Miroshnichenko, refused to discuss it. "Put your questions in writing," she told Forum 18 from Luhansk on 2 February. When Forum 18 began asking why books on St Petro Mohyla and Metropolitan Sheptytsky were among those ordered removed from educational institutions libraries, she put the phone down.

The Russian-imposed LPR Culture Minister Dmitry Sidorov told a meeting chaired by Russia's Culture Minister Olga Lyubimova on 20 January that public libraries have already removed "extremist" literature.

Oleg Pommikov, the head of the Religious and Ethnic Affairs Department of the LPR Culture, Sport and Youth Ministry, defended the removal from libraries of "extremist" books. "Sheptytsky was an active supporter of Nazism and of Ukrainian nationalism," he claimed to Forum 18. "The Greek Catholic Church supported the Banderists." He made no comment about St Petro Mohyla.

Natalya Rastorguyevka, director of the LPR's Gorky Universal Science Library, refused to discuss the removal of works the LPR and Russian government regards as "extremist" from local libraries. "You can argue about this issue for a long time," she told Forum 18 from Luhansk on 1 February. "But any questions must be submitted through the Culture Ministry."

Rastorguyevka refused to say if her library has, for example, removed any religious works on Russia's Federal List of Extremist Materials (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2215).

The neighbouring Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) has also conducted such a book purge. In May 2022 the DPR Culture Ministry began a programme of removing from public libraries literature that it regards as "extremist" (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2784). These included not only books on Ukrainian culture and history and books about Adolf Hitler, but books on "political and religious figures". (END)

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