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OCCUPIED UKRAINE: Masked, armed men in third raid on church's worship meetings

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

Armed, masked men broke up worship meetings of a Council of Churches Baptist church in Russian-occupied Melitopol three times between October 2023 and November 2024. They checked members' passports and church literature. Police questioned the church's Pastor Dmitry Malakhov, insisting he led a religious service without informing the authorities and conducted illegal missionary activity. On 18 December, a court closed one case because of the statute of limitations, issued a warning in another and set the third for 21 January. Russian-controlled courts continue to hear "illegal missionary activity" cases. A Military Brotherhood official vandalised a seized Jehovah's Witness place of worship.

In October 2023, September 2024 and November 2024, armed, masked men in camouflage uniform raided and broke up meetings for worship of a Council of Churches Baptist church in Melitopol in the Russian-occupied part of Zaporizhzhia Region. "They checked the passports of those present, questioned the deacon, Sergey Potemkin, and ordered everyone to disperse," Baptists said after the November raid.

Officers later summoned Deacon Potemkin for questioning at the Russian Police's Department for the Struggle with Extremism and Terrorism. "They questioned him at length about the life of the church, its leaders and other things," Baptists noted (see below).

Council of Churches Baptists choose not to seek state permission to exercise freedom of religion or belief wherever they have congregations (see below).

After the September raid, the local Russian police officer summoned the church's Pastor Dmitry Malakhov. He demanded that Malakhov sign a record that he had led a religious service without informing the authorities and that he had conducted illegal missionary activity. Pastor Malakhov refused to sign anything, the Baptists noted. He explained that this was a regular service and that church members had the right to hold such a service under the Russian Constitution (see below).

First Deputy Prosecutor Dmitry Zagoruyko at the Russian-controlled Zaporizhzhia Prosecutor's Office drew up three records of an offence against the church's Pastor Dmitry Malakhov and handed them to court (presumably Melitopol Inter-District Court). On 18 December, the Judge at the court in Melitopol closed one case (on charges of "illegal missionary activity") because of the statute of limitations, issued a warning in another (on failing to notify the authorities) and set the third for 21 January, local Baptists told Forum 18. They noted that the prosecutor disagrees and intends to appeal (see below).

The woman who answered the phone at the Russian-controlled Zaporizhzhia Prosecutor's Office refused to put Forum 18 through to Prosecutor Zagoruyko. "He doesn't talk by phone to anyone about anything," she told Forum 18 (see below).

Forum 18 was unable to reach the Russian Melitopol Police to find out why its officers raided a meeting for worship. It did not answer the phone whenever Forum 18 called (see below).

Russian-controlled courts in occupied Ukraine continue to hear further cases to punish "illegal missionary activity" (Russian Administrative Code Article 5.26, Part 4). This carries a fine for individuals of 5,000 to 50,000 Russian Roubles (see below).

On 9 December, Judge Nikita Mazurak of the Russian-controlled Artyomovsk District Court in Luhansk heard a case against 40-year-old Aliaskhab Suleimanov. The Court did not respond by the end of the working day of 19 December as to the outcome of the hearing (see below).

In mid-October, a court in Russian-occupied Luhansk Region fined a local religious leader one week's average local wage for "illegal missionary activity" (see below).

On 18 November, the branch of Military Brotherhood from the Russian town of Solnechnogorsk in Moscow Region (part of a Russian nationwide veterans' association) said one of its members deployed to the zone of the "special military operation" (SMO,

Russia's term for its war against Ukraine) prised the lettering "Kingdom Hall of Jehovah's Witnesses" from the outside wall of their seized place of worship (see below).

"These letters will form part of a new exhibition dedicated to the SMO [Russia's war against Ukraine] at the museum of military glory in Solnechnogorsk," its leader Andrei Vorobyov declared on its VKontakte social media account. He described the removal of the lettering as an "important step as part of patriotic education" (see below).

The woman who answered the phone at the Solnechnogorsk branch of Military Brotherhood told Forum 18 that Vorobyov was in Crimea, but would not give a number for him. Asked why a member of the organisation had vandalised the Jehovah's Witness place of worship in occupied Ukraine, she laughed and then put the phone down (see below).

The Russian Orthodox Church appears to have taken over the Church of St Petro Mohyla in Mariupol in Russian-occupied Donetsk Region. The Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU), which was granted autocephaly (independence) by the Ecumenical Patriarch in 2019, built the church in Primorsky District in the south of the city (see below).

The OCU decorated the exterior in the distinctive Petrykivka folk art tradition in 2020. "Now the occupiers have decided to 'bring the church to comply with the canons of the Russian Orthodox Church'," the exiled Mariupol city council noted on its Facebook page. "For this they sent 'Orthodox volunteers' to the city. They're going to change the look of the building."

Fr Vasili of the Moscow Patriarchate's Donetsk and Mariupol Diocese insists that the church belongs to the Moscow Patriarchate. "It's now in the jurisdiction of the Moscow Patriarchate," he told Forum 18 from Donetsk. Reminded that a different religious community – the Orthodox Church of Ukraine – had built the church, not the Moscow Patriarchate, he responded: "It's on the territory of the Moscow Patriarchate." He then put the phone down (see below).

Occupation forces repeatedly forcibly close Ukrainian religious communities

Russian occupation forces have repeatedly forcibly closed religious communities (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2902) in Russian-occupied Ukrainian territory.

Russian-imposed Governor Yevgeny Balitsky banned four religious communities (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2882) in Russian-occupied parts of Zaporizhzhia Region in December 2022: the Greek Catholic Church, Grace Protestant Church, Melitopol Christian Church, and Word of Life Protestant Church. (The buildings of Grace, Melitopol Christian, and Word of Life churches had been seized in September 2022 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2784)). Occupation Governor Balitsky accused these Churches of links with foreign "special services" and ordered all their property seized.

A February 2024 meeting of the Russian-controlled Zaporizhzhia Regional Administration, chaired by Russian-imposed Governor Balitsky, praised the "halting of the work of religious sects which had taken part in organising mass disorder and anti-Russian activity", the governor's website noted on 26 February (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2902).

Russian occupation officials treat all Ukrainian religious communities which have not received Russian state registration as illegal (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2890).

It is illegal under international law for Russia to enforce its own laws on occupied Ukrainian territory, as Russia is required to leave Ukrainian law in force (<https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/en/ihl-treaties/gciv-1949/article-64/commentary/1958?activeTab=undefined>).

Melitopol: 2023 raid on meeting for worship

In October 2023, armed and masked men in military uniform raided the Sunday meeting for worship (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2869) of the Council of Churches Baptist congregation in the Russian-occupied city of Melitopol. Several men in civilian clothes accompanied the armed men, bringing the total number of raiders to about 20.

Council of Churches Baptists choose not to seek state permission to exercise freedom of religion or belief wherever they have congregations.

"Soldiers in masks entered the hall and, without identifying themselves, ordered everyone to leave the building, and then began inspecting the house," church leaders noted in October 2023 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2869). They inspected all the rooms, including in cupboards. They seized several CDs, two video surveillance recordings, and one copy of each piece of literature.

The Russian soldiers seized two computers for inspection from the home of the Pastor, Dmitry Malakhov. They warned him the police would summon him and he would then face a court (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2869) and a fine of 10,000 Russian Roubles. They added that until it gets Russian registration, the church cannot meet. It appears Pastor Malakhov was

not fined after the raid and questioning.

Melitopol: Two 2024 raids on meetings for worship

On 18 September 2024, nearly a year after the previous raid, men in masks "unexpectedly" arrived again at the Council of Churches Baptist congregation in Melitopol and broke up its meeting for worship. "They began checking literature from the church library and studying who had published it," local Baptists noted. "They checked everyone's phones and passports."

The men interrogated Pastor Dmitry Malakhov, and prepared a record of an offence against him. As during interrogation in 2023, they again asked him why the church is not registered with the Russian authorities, what organisation it belongs to and who its leader is.

The local police officer summoned Pastor Malakhov on 12 October. He demanded that Malakhov sign a record that he had led a religious service without informing the authorities and that he had conducted illegal missionary activity. Pastor Malakhov refused to sign anything, the Baptists noted. He explained that this was a regular service and that church members had the right to hold such a service under the Russian Constitution.

Armed, masked men in camouflage uniform again invaded the church's Sunday meeting for worship on 10 November as children were singing. "They checked the passports of those present, questioned the deacon, Sergey Potemkin, and ordered everyone to disperse," Baptists said.

Officers later summoned Deacon Potemkin for questioning at the Russian Police's Department for the Struggle with Extremism and Terrorism. "They questioned him at length about the life of the church, its leaders and other things," Baptists noted.

The Russian Melitopol Police did not answer the phone whenever Forum 18 called between 16 and 19 December.

Melitopol: Court rejects one case against Pastor, warning in another, Prosecutor to appeal

On 9 December, First Deputy Prosecutor Dmitry Zagoruyko at the Russian-controlled Zaporizhzhia Prosecutor's Office drew up three records of an offence against Baptist Pastor Malakhov and handed them to court (presumably Melitopol Inter-District Court). The court set a date for hearing the cases of 18 December.

One case was under Russian Administrative Code Article 5.26, Part 4 ("Russians conducting missionary activity"). The second case was under Russian Administrative Code Article 19.7 ("Failure to provide or late provision of information to a state body") for failing to notify the authorities of the existence of his Council of Churches Baptist congregation.

The third case was under Russian Administrative Code Article 5.26, Part 3 ("Implementation of activities by a religious organisation without indicating its official full name, including the issuing or distribution, within the framework of missionary activity, of literature and printed, audio, and video material without a label bearing this name, or with an incomplete or deliberately false label").

The woman who answered the phone at the Russian-controlled Zaporizhzhia Prosecutor's Office refused to put Forum 18 through to Prosecutor Zagoruyko. "He doesn't talk by phone to anyone about anything," she told Forum 18 from Melitopol on 16 December. Asked why he had drawn up records of an offence against Baptist Pastor Malakhov and handed them to court, she repeated her earlier remarks. "No one else here is competent to answer your questions. Arrange an appointment here in person."

On 18 December, the Judge at the court in Melitopol closed the "illegal missionary activity" administrative case because of the statute of limitations and issued a warning in the case of Pastor Malakhov failing to notify the Russian authorities of the community's existence, local Baptists told Forum 18. They noted that the prosecutor disagrees with these decisions and intends to appeal.

The Judge set the hearing on the third case - of failing to give the organisation's full legal name - on 21 January 2025.

The man who answered the phone at Melitopol Inter-District Court told Forum 18 that it was not the court. The Court did not reply to a written question about the cases sent the same day.

More "illegal missionary activity" court cases

Russian-controlled courts in occupied Ukraine continue to hear cases to punish "illegal missionary activity" (Russian Administrative Code Article 5.26, Part 4). This carries a fine for individuals of 5,000 to 50,000 Russian Roubles.

On 9 December, Judge Nikita Mazurak of the Russian-controlled Artyomovsk District Court in Luhansk heard a case against 40-year-old Aliaskhab Suleimanov under Russian Administrative Code Article 5.26, Part 4 ("Russians conducting missionary activity"), according to the court website. Forum 18 has been unable to reach the court to find out the result of the hearing. Calls to

the court did not connect and the court did not respond to a written enquiry by the end of the working day of 19 December.

In mid-October, a court in Russian-occupied Luhansk Region fined a local religious leader 5,000 Russian Roubles for "illegal missionary activity". This represents about one week's average local wage.

On 22 July, Telmanovo District Court in Russian-occupied Donetsk Region fined a local religious leader (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2924) for "illegal missionary activity".

Following repeated raids on his unregistered Council of Churches Baptist congregation, on 27 April, the Russian-controlled Krasnodon Town Court in occupied Luhansk Region fined Pastor Vladimir Rytikov 5,000 Russian Roubles (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2908) on charges of "illegal missionary activity" (Russian Administrative Code Article 5.26, Part 4) for a meeting for worship of his unregistered Baptist congregation in January at which he was not present. "This is half my [monthly] pension," he noted. On 11 June, Luhansk Supreme Court upheld the fine (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2915).

The head of the Russian Krasnodon police, Colonel Sergey Krupa – who had signed the order to hand the case to court - refused to explain to Forum 18 in April (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2903) why police had brought the prosecution against Pastor Rytikov for a meeting of his church in a home.

On 22 August, Krasnodon Court Bailiff Lieutenant Natalya Gavran drew up a further record of an offence against Pastor Rytikov. Gavran issued him a summary fine (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2936) of 10,000 Russian Roubles, representing about one month's pension. He had failed to pay within the stipulated 60 days the fine handed down in April. "Each time they double the amount," local Baptists told Forum 18. Pastor Rytikov has not paid the latest fine either.

In September 2023, officials of a Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) department responsible for limiting the exercise of freedom of religion or belief in occupied Donetsk Region seized two priests of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU), Fr Khristofor Khrimli, and Fr Andri Chui. On 22 September, Telmanovo District Court fined both priests (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2869) (who are Ukrainian citizens) under Russian Administrative Code Article 5.26, Part 5 ("Foreigners conducting missionary activity"). The court also ordered them to be deported "beyond the bounds of the Russian Federation".

Russian occupation officials in October 2023 illegally transferred Fr Khristofor and Fr Andri to Russia's Rostov Region, where they were held in a Deportation Centre. In early 2024, Russia deported Fr Khristofor and Fr Andri to Georgia (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2903).

The Russian occupation authorities also use Russian Administrative Code Article 5.26 to punish the exercise of freedom of religion or belief in Crimea, which Russia illegally occupied in 2014. Many of those targeted are Muslims who lead prayers in mosques (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2878).

Damage to seized Jehovah's Witness Kingdom Hall

On 18 November, the branch of Military Brotherhood from the Russian town of Solnechnogorsk in Moscow Region (part of a Russian nationwide veterans' association) said one of its members deployed to the zone of the "special military operation" (SMO, Russia's term for its war against Ukraine) prised the lettering "Kingdom Hall of Jehovah's Witnesses" from the outside wall of their seized place of worship.

The Solnechnogorsk branch of Military Brotherhood described Jehovah's Witnesses as an "extremist" organisation in line with the Russian Supreme Court decision of 2017 banning the organisation (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2897).

Since 2017, courts in Russia (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2922) and in Russian-occupied Crimea (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2818) have jailed or fined hundreds of Jehovah's Witnesses for exercising freedom of religion or belief. Since Russia's full scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, it has not allowed Jehovah's Witnesses to meet for worship in the newly-occupied parts of Ukraine. The Russian military have seized many of their Kingdom Halls.

"These letters will form part of a new exhibition dedicated to the SMO [Russia's war against Ukraine] at the museum of military glory in Solnechnogorsk," its leader Andrei Vorobyov declared on its VKontakte social media account. He described the removal of the lettering as an "important step as part of patriotic education".

The Solnechnogorsk branch of Military Brotherhood posted a video on VKontakte the same day showing a man in camouflage uniform prising the letters off. It did not identify the location in Russian-occupied Ukraine.

Forum 18 was unable to reach Vorobyov to find out why a member of his organisation had vandalised the property of a religious organisation and why it intends to take the letters from occupied Ukraine to Russia.

The woman who answered the phone at the Solnechnogorsk branch of Military Brotherhood on 19 December told Forum 18 that Vorobyov was in Crimea but would not give a number for him. Asked why a member of the organisation had vandalised the Jehovah's Witness place of worship in occupied Ukraine, she laughed and then put the phone down.

Mariupol: Moscow Patriarchate remodels church seized from Orthodox Church of Ukraine

The Russian Orthodox Church appears to have taken over the Church of St Petro Mohyla in Mariupol in Russian-occupied Donetsk Region. The Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU), which was granted autocephaly (independence) by the Ecumenical Patriarch in 2019, built the church in Primorsky District in the south of the city.

Since Russia occupied Crimea in 2014 and launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, it has tried to prevent the OCU continuing to meet for worship. It has forcibly closed its churches and its priests have fled, both from Crimea (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2878) and from other parts of Russian-occupied Ukraine. The mutilated body of one OCU priest from the occupied part of Kherson Region was found on the street (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2936) after Russian officials took him from his home.

The OCU bought the building in Mariupol in 1997. After rebuilding it over the next 20 years as the Church of St Petro Mohyla, it decorated the exterior in the distinctive Petrykivka folk art tradition, named after a village in Ukraine's Dnipropetrovsk Region. The work was carried out in 2020 by a team of artists led by the Lviv painter Olga Cheromushkina.

On 23 June 2022, the Russian military brought a delegation of Moscow Patriarchate priests to Mariupol. There they toured churches, including the Church of St Petro Mohyla. "After the visit of the Moscow FSB agents in cassocks, it became known that the whole large library, collected by volunteers and benefactors, was seized and burned in the yard," Petro Andriushchenko, advisor to the (Ukrainian) Mayor of Mariupol who had to flee the city, announced two days later (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2784).

Andriushchenko added that the Church of St Petro Mohyla, "built with the support of the townspeople", was threatened. "Now the occupiers are deciding the issue of its demolition or remodelling in accordance with the canons of the Russian Orthodox Church."

By late 2024, it seems the Moscow Patriarchate is remodelling the church in Russian style. "Now the occupiers have decided to 'bring the church to comply with the canons of the Russian Orthodox Church'," the exiled Mariupol city council noted on its Facebook page on 6 November 2024. "For this they sent 'Orthodox volunteers' to the city. They're going to change the look of the building."

Ukraine's Culture and Strategic Communications Minister of Mykola Tochytskyi condemned the Russian treatment of the church as "cultural genocide". "The desire to change the unique decoration of the church in accordance with the canons of the Russian Orthodox Church is a direct attempt to displace Ukrainian culture and impose alien values on us," he declared on 6 November. "This church, which was a spiritual support for the people of Mariupol in the most difficult times, is now turning into an instrument of hostile propaganda."

Fr Vasili of the Moscow Patriarchate's Donetsk and Mariupol Diocese insists that the church belongs to the Moscow Patriarchate. "It's now in the jurisdiction of the Moscow Patriarchate," he told Forum 18 from Donetsk on 19 December. Reminded that a different religious community – the Orthodox Church of Ukraine – had built the church, not the Moscow Patriarchate, he responded: "It's on the territory of the Moscow Patriarchate." He then put the phone down.

The OCU priest of St Petro Mohyla Church, Fr Roman Peretyatko, had to flee in haste when Russian forces occupied Mariupol. He insists that any changes the Russians make to their place of worship will be reversed.

"Whatever happens to the church, when we return this territory we will rebuild it," Fr Roman told Suspilne Donbas news website for an 11 November article. "This is a building, it can be restored, redone, the ceiling can be replaced, the walls can be painted again. Unfortunately, we cannot bring back the people who died there in Mariupol." (END)

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If you need to contact F18News, please email us at:
f18news @ editor.forum18.org

Forum 18
Postboks 6603
Rodeløkka
N-0502 Oslo
NORWAY