



Patriotism as Worldly Asceticism: The Role of Sports and Martial Arts in the Activities of Orthodoxy-Based Groups

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The authors focus on how faith-based groups, either affiliated with the Church, or those whose connection to Orthodoxy may be uncertain, provide patriotic education primarily through paramilitary activities and instruction in martial arts (sports). The article seeks to answer the question: why faith-based groups are increasingly interested in military-patriotic education and why this education is predominantly implemented through activities like sports and martial arts. The authors posit that patriotic activity serves not only as a means of obtaining financial support, but

also as a way to legitimize the existence of groups that may be in conflict with the ecclesiastical hierarchy. Patriotic education also reflects faith-based groups' intention to return to the ritualistic origins of sport and other physical practices, presenting them as a form of worldly asceticism. The article is based on a close-up study of the former Pokrov Fraternity (Perm), the Center "Spas" (Obninsk), and the all-Russian movement "Sorok Sorokov", not being limited to them.

Keywords: grassroots patriotism, military-patriotic education, Orthodoxy and martial arts, Orthodoxy and sports, faith-based NCO, Sorok Sorokov

Патриотизм как мирская аскеза: роль спорта и боевых искусств в деятельности православно ориентированных организаций

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Статья посвящена тому, каким образом религиозно ориентированные некоммерческие организации, как аффилированные с Русской православной церковью, так и те, связь которых с православием неочевидна, осуществляют патриотическое воспитание посредством военизированной активности и обучения боевым искусствам (или спорта). Авторы предлагают свой вариант ответа на вопрос, почему религиозно ориентированные группы проявляют усиливающийся интерес к военно-патриотическому воспитанию и по какой причине это воспитание осуществляется в основном посредством спорта и боевых искусств. Предполагается, что патриотическая деятельность служит не только средством доступа к финансовой поддержке, но и способом легитимации существования групп, которые могут находиться в конфликте с церковной иерархией. Патриотическое воспитание также отражает стремление религиозно ориентированных организаций вернуться к ритуальным корням спорта и других телесных практик, представляя их как форму мирской аскезы. Статья основана на методе крупно-

планового исследования бывшей Покровской обители (Пермь), центра «Спас» (Обнинск), всероссийского движения «Сорок Сороков» и других организаций.

Ключевые слова: низовой патриотизм, военно-патриотическое воспитание, православие и боевые искусства, православие и спорт, религиозно ориентированные НКО, Сорок Сороков

Introduction

THERE is already a significant amount of publications that mention that, at least from the official viewpoint, patriotism in Russia is commonly viewed from a specific militarized angle¹. This has given birth to the recognizable Russian concept of military-patriotic education (or upbringing). This understanding of patriotism was partially inherited from the Soviet period, and the reasons behind it are beyond the scope of this article. Simultaneously, several authors focus on patriotic initiatives at the grassroots, revealing how specific actors at the local level manage to find niches for themselves within state-supported programs of military-patriotic education while pur-

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1. Sperling, V. (2009) "Making the Public Patriotic: Militarism and Anti-militarism in Russia", in M. Laruelle (ed.) *Russian Nationalism and the National Reassertion of Russia*, pp. 218–271. New York: Routledge; Sieca-Kozłowski, E. (2010) "Russian military patriotic education: a control tool against the arbitrariness of veterans", *The Journal of Nationalism and Ethnicity* 38(1): 73–85; Bækken, H. (2019) "The Return to Patriotic Education in Post-Soviet Russia: How, When, and Why the Russian Military Engaged in Civilian Nation Building", *Journal of Soviet and Post-Soviet Politics and Society* 5(1): 123–158; Pynnöniemi, K. (ed.) (2021) *Nexus of Patriotism and Militarism in Russia: A Quest for Internal Cohesion*. Helsinki: Helsinki University Press; Shakhanova, G. et Kratochvil P. (2022) "The Patriotic Turn in Russia: Political Convergence of the Russian Orthodox Church and the State?", *Politics and Religion* 15(1): 114–141.

suing their own goals, sometimes substantially different from official declarations².

Being the state's lesser partner, the Church had no option but to reproduce this militarized vision of patriotism. Nevertheless, grass-roots faith-based actors involved in the implementation of Orthodox patriotic projects, and those whose connection to Orthodoxy may be uncertain, according to Kathy Rousselet, "appropriate the Church's calls to patriotism, but also ...develop their own patriotism according to their position within the Church, their social status and their ideological orientation"³. The article seeks to answer two questions: why are these faith-based groups increasingly interested in patriotic education, and why is this education predominantly implemented through sportive activities, more precisely, through teaching martial arts? Our research is focused on Orthodox groups or those who, at some point in their history, declared their belonging to Orthodoxy. In the beginning, we discuss not formal ecclesiastical bodies, such as parishes, but paraecclesiastical organizations represented by socially oriented faith-based non-commercial organizations (NCOs).

The inner life of such organizations is typically concealed from external observers. We gathered data about patriotic projects from open-access printed and electronic sources, enabling us to analyze audiovisual and other web-based narratives. This was supplemented with participant and non-participant observation at the premises of the mentioned groups in Moscow, Obninsk and Perm and during public events they sponsored. Additionally, we conducted interviews with leaders and representatives of the groups in question. While the non-

2. Omelchenko, E., Pilkington H. (eds.) (2012) *S chego nachinaetsia Rodina: Molodezh v labirintakh patriotizma* [Where the Motherland begins: young people in the labyrinths of patriotism]. Uliyanovsk: Izdatelstvo Uliyanovskogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta; Daucé, F., Laruelle M., Le Huérou A., Rousselet K. (2015) "Introduction: What Does it Mean to be a Patriot?", *Europe-Asia Studies* 67(1): 1–7; Laruelle, M. (2015) "Patriotic Youth Clubs in Russia. Professional Niches, Cultural Capital and Narratives of Social Engagement", *Europe-Asia Studies* 67(1): 8–27; Le Huérou, A. (2015) "Where Does the Motherland Begin? Private and Public Dimensions of Contemporary Russian Patriotism in Schools and Youth Organisations: A View from the Field", *Europe-Asia Studies* 67(1): 28–48; Goode, J. P. (2017) "Official and Everyday Patriotism in Putin's Russia", in M. Skey, M. Antonsich (eds.) *Everyday Nationhood: Theorising Culture, Identity and Belonging after Banal Nationalism*, pp. 121–146. Basingstoke, U. K.: Palgrave Macmillan; Sanina, A. (2017) *Patriotic Education in Contemporary Russia. Sociological Studies in the Making of the Post-Soviet Citizen*. Stuttgart: Ibidem Verlag; Köllner, T. (2021) *Religion and Politics in Contemporary Russia: Beyond the Binary of Power and Authority*. New York: Routledge.
3. Rousselet, K. (2015) "The Church in the Service of the Fatherland", *Europe-Asia Studies* 67(1): 51–52.

commercial organizations at the heart of this research are widespread throughout Russia, determining their exact number would require significant additional financial and administrative resources. The research, as a result, was qualitative in nature and did not involve the collection or analysis of quantitative data.

Patriotism from below: the Orthodox perspective

Various Orthodoxy-oriented non-commercial organizations, as well as Church parishes, exhibit a high level of activity in the practical implementation of patriotic projects. This thesis can be illustrated using the website of the ecclesiastical Foundation of Humanitarian and Enlightening Projects “Sorabotnichestvo” (Collaboration)⁴ that has held an NCO grant competition called “Orthodox Initiative” since 2005. The website archives information about grant applications submitted from 2015 onward, including those that have not received support. We have examined the number of recent projects that were, in some way, related to the theme of patriotic education.

Nineteen different applications were found to be related either to patriotic education or to the promotion of patriotism in society. Most of the authors proposed educating schoolchildren with a strong military emphasis. The titles of these applications included: “Military-patriotic camp: The Righteous Warrior”; “Patriotic club: Archistrateg”; “Patriotic club: The Young Defender of the Fatherland”; “Military-patriotic shift on the basis of the children’s health camp ‘Khop’ — ‘We can serve Russia’”; “The Museum of the Cossack history as an instrument for military-patriotic education of children and youth, and others”. In cases where schoolchildren were not directly involved in military education, the applications continued to present militarized communities as models for fostering genuine patriotic values.

In some cases, the submitted applications were not explicitly related to military education, but their explanatory notes revealed a similar emphasis on militarized patriotism. For instance, the nationwide patriotic project “For Their Friends” [*Za drugi svoia*] aimed to build a community of people based on a continuous cultural and sporting practice. In a detailed description, it indicated that this involved ac-

4. Fond podderzhki gumanitarnykh i prosvetitel'skikh iniciativ «Sorabotnichestvo» [Fund for Support of Humanitarian and Educational Initiatives ‘Co-operation’] [<https://pravkonkurs.ru/>, accessed on 14.11.2024].

quiring knowledge about martial arts and developing programs in the areas of teaching hand-to-hand combat and the fundamentals of personal safety.

We suggest that the same military tendency in patriotic education can be observed in applications focused on honoring the memory of great figures from Russian history. There was only one case where we found an abstract, non-militarized reference to such historical figures, which was a project titled “Patriotic Campaign: Be Worthy of the Memory of Great Ancestors”. In most cases, the applications mentioned Alexander Nevsky, a warrior and a saint. Examples of such projects include: “Youth Patriotic Tour: Alexander Nevsky — Glory, Spirit, and the Name of Russia” and “Constructing a Contemporary Patriotic Educational Environment on the Example of the Personality of Alexander Nevsky and the Best People of Our Fatherland”. These examples illustrate the prevailing militarized focus even in projects that aim to honor historical figures.

Noticeable, in terms of the frequency of references to the topic, are also memorial events related to honoring those who fell during the Great Patriotic War. For example, a social patriotic project in honor of the defenders of the Fatherland is titled “The Legends of the Obelisks of Stalingrad”. Even this project includes some elements of military education for schoolchildren, with the aim of enhancing the psychological and physical preparedness of adolescents and young people for learning, self-education, self-realization in their future endeavors, and in defense of the Fatherland.

A significantly smaller portion of applications propose projects that imply non-military patriotic education. These projects are more cultural in nature and draw upon the legacy of Russian culture. For instance, they involve areas like cinematography (e.g., the “Orthodox Spiritual and Patriotic Family Cinema Club: Fatherland” with a focus on providing access for population groups with low mobility), music (the “Festival of Spiritual and Patriotic Songs: My Soul Sings”), or history (a “Patriotic Historical and Educational Project: The Light of the Fatherland”). Similar to the military patriotic events, the authors of these applications suggest using topics and images in their Orthodox projects that are only indirectly related to religion and the Church.

We were able to identify only two projects whose authors suggested that patriotic education could be rooted in faith-based norms and principles of behavior as reflected in the lives of believers. Neither of these projects received support. The first project, titled “Life to Moth-

erland, Heart to God”, was submitted by the editorial office of the newspaper ‘*Neue Zeit*’ from the village of Galbstadt in the German national district of Altai Krai. The application proposed the spiritual, moral, and patriotic education of the newspaper’s readers by enlightening them on the topic of Orthodox patriotism and Christian family values, using examples from the life stories of saints and contemporary individuals. The location of the submitters raises questions about the reasons for Orthodox education in what is presumably a Lutheran or Catholic environment. However, beyond speculating on their motivation, this project stands out for its use of religious values, rather than military ones, for patriotic education.

The second project was submitted by the Spiritual and Educational Center at the Rybinsk bishopric of the Russian Orthodox Church. It proposed organizing a spiritual and patriotic rally called “Transfiguration” (*Preobraschenie*), which involved detailed planning of religious activities for participants. This included obedience works, prayer rules, and attendance of divine services. The program of the rally aimed to directly involve children in Orthodox tradition by fostering an environment that promoted the development of feelings of friendship, unity, mutual respect, and the observance of traditional moral values. In this case, it appears that patriotism was not the central focus of the educational effort but rather an inseparable part of Orthodox spiritual upbringing.

The involvement of Orthodox non-commercial organizations (NCOs) in the sphere of military-patriotic education cannot be solely attributed to pressure from higher authorities. In most cases, these patriotic projects are organized by enthusiasts who are not under strict control from their superiors and may even be at odds with formal structures, including ecclesiastical bodies. Similar to secular patriotic initiatives from below, faith-based NCOs do not consciously oppose the official discourse but rather integrate themselves into it while also pursuing their own objectives. The formula of “military-patriotic education” may be imposed on them, but the specific activities undertaken are often initiated by these organizations themselves.

Many authors note that military-patriotic education in Russia is generally loosely, or sometimes not at all connected to preparing the youth for military service⁵, even though such a connection might seem

5. Sieca-Kozłowski, E. “Russian military patriotic education: a control tool against the arbitrariness of veterans”; Bækken, H. “The Return to Patriotic Education in Post-Soviet Russia: How, When, and Why the Russian Military Engaged in Civilian Nation Building” et al.

self-evident. Marlene Laruelle's work discusses militias⁶, but the majority of organizations involved in military-patriotic education are not militias. Representatives of military-patriotic initiatives frequently emphasize that their primary goal is not necessarily to educate future conscripts, but rather to foster the development of young boys into responsible and mature individuals⁷. That's a valid point, but many military-patriotic initiatives do involve a significant number of girls as well. According to Laruelle, "patriotic clubs uphold strikingly traditional narratives (men go to fight, women stay at home), but this does not correspond with reality"⁸. That is why to gain a deeper insight into the motivations of faith-based actors engaged in military-patriotic education, we aim to closely examine two Orthodox-oriented non-commercial organizations.

From patriotic education to social recognition

Neither of the organizations in question is affiliated with any specific church or parish, and they can be characterized as paraecclesiastical. As such, they enjoy a relatively high degree of autonomy in determining their agenda and activities, without feeling the necessity to align it with the declarations of ecclesiastical leaders.

The first NCO, known as "Spas" (Savior), was founded in 1996 in the city of Obninsk, located in Kaluga oblast. It was established as an "urban Cossack community" under the leadership of Igor Lizunov (born in 1958). In 1998, "Spas" was granted a portion of the dilapidated Belkino manor. The organization undertook the restoration of the decaying structures and constructed new ones, including a domestic church dedicated to the Savior Not-Made-by-Hands. The manor remains under state ownership, but since 2002, it has been managed by a private foundation, of which the "Spas" community is a part.

6. Laruelle, M. (2019) "Russia's Militia Groups and their Use at Home and Abroad", *Russie. Nei.Visions* 113 [https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/laruelle_russia_militia_groups_2019.pdf6969, accessed on 14.11.2024].
7. For example: Lizunov, I. (2015) *Ratoborstvo: opyt obshhinnoj pedagogiki* [Ratoborstvo: experience of community pedagogy]. M.: VRNS, 2013; Youtube (2015) "Pravoslaviie i edinoborstva" [Orthodoxy and martial arts], *bloodandsweatmma*, 28 April [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rG4tzZDJfJU&t=4s>, accessed on 02.11.2024]; Interview with Andrei Kormoukhin, Moscow, June 29, 2019.
8. Laruelle, M. "Patriotic Youth Clubs in Russia. Professional Niches, Cultural Capital and Narratives of Social Engagement", p. 20.

From its inception, “Spas” adopted a militarized approach; its members wore uniforms and referred to Igor Lizunov as “ataman,” a term with dual connotations, signifying a traditional Cossack leader and, at times, the leader of a criminal gang. One of their stated objectives was the military-patriotic education of children and youth, grounded in the Orthodox faith and a group combat system called “Kettle” (*Kotöl, Komëñ*), which was devised by Lizunov. “Spas” emphasized that this combat was not one-on-one but rather group-oriented. Over time, the concept of education through combat expanded to include other demographic groups. According to Lizunov, “Now we need to nurture not only children but, unfortunately, adults as well. I am referring to pedagogy in a broader sense”⁹. The community increasingly became involved in the rehabilitation of individuals struggling with alcoholism and drug addiction.

As a result, the community officially ceased to be identified as Cossacks, and in 2006, it obtained the status of a non-commercial organization known as the “Community Pedagogical Center Spas”. The range of its activities broadened significantly, encompassing not only military-patriotic education and the rehabilitation of addicts but also, for instance, providing support and guidance to criminal offenders on probation. Presently, the community is officially positioned as a non-religious organization on its official website and across social networks. Additionally, “Spas” changed its logo; it previously featured an icon of Christ Not-Made-by-Hands, but it was replaced with a neutral image of a tree with fruit. However, the community’s domestic rules remained unchanged. For example, individuals undergoing rehabilitation actively participate in communal prayers, assist in the altar, and partake in communion twice a week.

“Spas” initially raised suspicions from both the state and the Church. To put it bluntly, in the eyes of the state, all Orthodox organizations that are not officially registered as parishes under the Moscow Patriarchate are viewed with suspicion and are often categorized as “sects”. At its inception, “Spas” was a group of individuals in uniforms heavily involved in paramilitary training, residing in a gated manor. For a period, their status as “Cossacks” offered some protection against being suspected of engaging in potentially unconstitutional activities, but the community is no longer officially associated with the Cossacks. From the perspective of the Church, “Spas” was also viewed with suspicion because the manor’s inhabitants did not attend any parish and

9. Lizunov, I. *Ratoborstvo*, p. 115.

were not under the supervision of the local bishop. They constructed a church for their own use and observed their unique religious rituals connected with the “Kotöl” system.

“Spas” successfully established its relationship with the state by emphasizing its social utility. This approach was reinforced by framing military-patriotic education as a universal solution to various social issues. Igor Lizunov articulated this strategy as follows:

What is needed is to build correct relations with the state power, with the church structures, to present ourselves in the right way... [Our] utility lies in the fact that we willingly assume certain responsibilities, and in doing so, we aid the administration... They often lack the financial resources, but we do not request funding... What we are proposing is that we are prepared to educate [children], even without financial support, in exchange for a specific status in the city¹⁰.

Pursuing this strategy, “Spas” began to receive support from state grants starting in 2009, which allowed them to expand their collaboration with various government bodies. This, in turn, contributed to the further expansion of their activities and agenda. Rehabilitation of addicts provides an opportunity to collaborate with the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the Federal Drug Control Service, while working with criminal offenders — with the Federal Penitentiary Service (we mean representative offices of these bodies in Kaluga oblast). In 2023, “Spas” initiated a new branch of its activities, offering psychological assistance to the families of mobilized citizens¹¹. While most of these branches extend beyond the scope of patriotic education, it was the emphasis on the latter that enabled “Spas” to shed its previously uncertain status as a suspicious paramilitary religious group and transform into a respected and socially-oriented non-commercial organization that is viewed as useful by the state.

The key point here goes beyond the mere opportunity to secure additional funding from the city of Obninsk, from Kaluga oblast, or even from presidential grants. Offering patriotic education in a broader

10. STV (2006) “Interv’iu s Predsedatelem pravleniia Obninskoi gorodskoi kazachiei obshchiny «Spas» Igorem Konstantinovichem Lizunovym” [“Interview with the Chairman of the Obninsk urban Cossack community Igor Lizunov”], a DVD.

11. Obninskoe gorodskoe sobranie (2023) “V obshchinnom tsentre pedagogiki Spas sostoyalsya kruglyi stol” [“A roundtable held at the Community Pedagogic Center Spas”] *Obninskoe gorodskoe sobranie*. May 4 [https://gs-obninsk.ru/pages/news/news_5548.html], accessed on 02.11.2024].

context has granted “Spas” a pathway to legitimization. Even though Igor Lizunov continues to wear a uniform and is addressed as “ataman” by his subordinates, these distinctions appear to be of diminishing significance. The favorable disposition of the state also serves to automatically forestall potential counteractions from the ecclesiastical hierarchy in relation to the community.

The second organization we are examining is markedly different from “Spas,” particularly in its external appearance. The social movement “Sorok Sorokov” (Forty Forties) was founded in Moscow in 2013 and bore no resemblance to a paramilitary group. Its members do not wear uniforms and do not employ Cossack symbols. This is in line with the shift away from the militarized style that was prevalent among Orthodox organizations in the 1990s. The leader of the movement, Andrei Kormoukhin (born in 1970), has never referred to himself as an “ataman” and maintains a distinctly civilian demeanor. For “Sorok Sorokov”, the core of patriotic education is not centered on war per se but rather on sport. In an interview with the authors, Kormoukhin emphasized that

our ancestors were preparing for war from their childhood... and sport has essentially taken the place of this historical tradition in our society... it has become a kind of cognitive warfare that instills certain values¹².

A considerable portion of the movement’s patriotic projects revolves around sports. One such example is the annual “spiritually-sportive event” called the “Murom Path” named after a reference to a folk song but also to Iliya Muromets, a saint and warrior. During this event, which takes place on the morning of January 1st, participants go for a run. The purpose of this event is to demonstrate that these individuals refrain from celebrating the secular New Year throughout the night because it coincides with the Christmas fast.

Despite the fact that participants wore similar red T-shirts instead of uniforms, “Sorok Sorokov” encountered suspicion from the state, society, and the ecclesiastical hierarchy right from the beginning. As mentioned earlier, any Orthodox movement not based in a parish tends to provoke suspicion. Additionally, the movement’s rhetoric and assertive style of action significantly diverged from the official discourse. “Sorok Sorokov” underwent several checks for alleged extremism, particularly after their campaigns against vaccination and

12. Interview with Andrei Kormoukhin. 29 June 2019.

the law combating domestic violence. The movement's substantial involvement of former and current football fans, as well as some genetic connections with Russian nationalists, further contributed to these suspicions¹³. Notably, the "Murom Path" is an Orthodox adaptation of a well-known nationalist sporting event called "the Russian run", and, in general, many nationalist organizations place a strong emphasis on sports.

While "Spas" primarily collaborates with state bodies and maintains neutrality in its relations with the Church, "Sorok Sorokov" managed to gain support from ecclesiastical structures for their patriotic educational projects. In 2015, the Patriarchal commission on physical culture and sports was established, with Vladimir Nosov, a boxer and coordinator of "Sorok Sorokov", becoming one of its members. Consequently, in 2018, the movement announced that, under the auspices of this commission, they had commenced opening spiritual-sporting clubs (or centers) affiliated with Orthodox parishes. These centers provide children not only with opportunities to engage in sports but also to be "nurtured based on the examples of their great compatriots and in accordance with traditional and patriotic values"¹⁴. The first of these centers, named "Andrey Oslyabya" after an Orthodox saint, warrior, and national hero, was inaugurated in December 2018 at the Church of St. Sergius of Radonezh on Khodynskoe Field in Moscow.

In contrast, the movement's relations with the state showed no significant positive developments. For instance, based on the information accessible on the website of presidential grants¹⁵, none of the applications officially submitted by "Sorok Sorokov" received support. Additionally, applications for their annual festivals "Orthodoxy and Sports," which were submitted through a proxy non-commercial organization, did not receive financial backing.

The rapid development of collaboration with the Patriarchy led some scholars to label "Sorok Sorokov" as "the illiberal services pro-

13. Reznikova, O. (2021) "Guardians of Torfjanka Park: The Fight for "Our Moscow" and the Understanding of "Ordinary People" in the Current Conjuncture", in Ege, M., Moser, J. (eds.) *Urban Ethics: Conflicts Over the Good and Proper Life in Cities*, pp. 261-276. London and New York: Routledge.

14. Sorok Sorokov (2018) "Otkryvaetsya tsentr 'Andrei Oslyabya'" ["Opening of Andrei Oslyabya center"] *Sorok Sorokov*, December 18 [<https://soroksorokov.ru/event/4219-otkryvaetsya-duhovno-sportivnyj-tsentr-andrej-oslyabya/>], accessed on 02.11.2024]

15. Fond presidentskikh grantov [Fund of presidential grants] [<https://президентские-гранты.рф>], accessed on 14.11.2024].

vider” for Patriarch Kirill¹⁶. However, events during the pandemic period have demonstrated that this theory was far from accurate. “Sorok Sorokov” openly voiced opposition to the patriarchal position and the state-imposed anti-epidemic measures¹⁷. They went so far as to collect signatures in December 2021 for the dismissal of the government. This ultimately resulted in a cooling of their relations with the Church.

“Sorok Sorokov” has significantly reduced its visibility and shifted its focus toward activities that do not require substantial financial and organizational resources, such as picketing. The program to open spiritually-sporting centers was discontinued, and the once-solemnly inaugurated “Andrey Oslyabya” is not currently operational. In general, the movement’s agenda has become less appealing to a broader public and has concentrated on issues more traditionally associated with radical Orthodox organizations, such as opposing abortion, vaccination, and digitalization. However, it is important to distinguish between what is transpiring in Moscow and the situation in the regional offices of the movement. The latter are establishing their own relationships with local administrations and ecclesiastical authorities and can still enjoy their support. For instance, the “Orthodoxy and Sports” festival is consistently held in the city of Dzerzhinsky near Moscow with the assistance of its municipal administration.

Patriotism in the agenda of a group with shattered identity

The popularity of patriotic initiatives within the Orthodox community is not limited to officially registered parishes or paraecclesiastical organizations associated with the Moscow Patriarchate. It extends to communities whose Orthodox identity is disputed, both by the church leadership and other believers.

An example of such a community is the Pokrov Fraternity in Perm, which was initially associated with the Annunciation of Theotokos parish. Until August 2019, this group was formally a part of the Perm bishopric (and later, the metropolitanate) and remained under the supervision of priests appointed by the local bishop. During this initial

16. Hanzel, A., Avramov K. (2023) “Patriarch Kirill’s Praetorian Guard: Sorok Sorokov as Radical Outreach for ‘Holy Tradition’”, *Journal of Illiberalism Studies* 3 (1): 47-83.

17. Mitrofanova, A. (2021) “The impact of Covid-19 on Orthodox groups and believers in Russia”, in N. Käsehage (ed.) *Religious Fundamentalism in the Age of Pandemic*, pp. 48-81. Bielefeld: Transcript.

period, the community operated within the Orthodox tradition, as evidenced by its name and the way of life of its members, aimed at preserving the traditions of Christian fraternities¹⁸. Currently, the group comprises approximately fifty individuals, with thirty-six of them being adults. Olga Novikova (previously known as Budilova, born, most likely, in 1970) has been leading the group since 1995–1996. She initially worked as a coach for “Training for Solving Research Tasks”¹⁹ and later, with a group of like-minded people, became involved into restoring Orthodox environment in Perm krai.

Starting from mid-2019, the status of the Pokrov Fraternity as a faith community became uncertain. The leadership of the Perm Metropolitanate, facing legal actions from former members of the community, had to address the fact that the teachings promoted by Olga Novikova (Budilova) and the associated practices could not be classified as Orthodox. For example, the leader of the group suggested renouncing common Orthodox practices and envisioned God as someone needing to communicate with her. Simultaneously, she proclaimed herself as the new mother of God. Some media reports and statements from those who initiated legal proceedings compelled Church representatives in Perm Krai to launch an internal investigation. As a result, the Pokrov Fraternity lost its status as an Orthodox organization. However, due to the high level of trust in its leader and the community’s nearly self-sufficient economy, it managed to retain its members and continue to exist as an independent group.

The lawsuits, which included accusations of fraud and causing harm to the health of minors, made it necessary for the community to defend itself against external criticism. Consequently, they altered their approach to self-representation. Initially, a series of media reports were orchestrated to present the community and its leader

18. Ryazanova, S. (2020) “Zakrytoe religioznoe soobshchestvo: strategii skladyvaniia i printsipy funktsionirovaniia” [A closed religious community: a folding strategy and principles of functioning], *Sotsiologicheskaiia nauka i sotsial’naia praktika* 8(2): 86–100.; Ryazanova, S. (2021) “Zakrytye soobshchestva kak fenomen sovremennoi religioznoi zhizni” [Closed communities as a phenomenon of modern religious life], *Vestnik PSTGU. Seriya I: Bogosloviye. Filosofiia. Religiovedeniye* 96:119–135; Ryazanova, S. (2022) “Talking to God: Religion, Para-Science and Disciplinary Practices as Consolidation Tools”, *Changing Societies & Personalities* 6(1): 182–196; Ryazanova, S. (2022) “Transformatsiia pravoslavnogo prikhoda: ot katekhizisa do patriotizma” [Transformation of an Orthodox parish: from catechism to patriotism], *Kontsept: filosofiia, religiia, kul’tura* 6(4): 41–54.

19. Ryazanova, S. “Talking to God: Religion, Para-Science and Disciplinary Practices as Consolidation Tools”.

in a more favorable light. During the pandemic period, the community also invested significant efforts in crafting a positive online image. They chose to promote patriotic education through horse riding training as their distinguishing feature. This choice can be attributed in part to Olga Novikova's longstanding interest in horses and partly to the community's preexisting hippotherapy program for children with disabilities.

Presently, the primary focus is on promoting a proxy non-commercial organization affiliated with the fraternity known as the "Education and Practice Center for Russian Martial Art in the Name of General-Major Yurii Drozdov" (Drozdov was a former Soviet security official). The center's mission is defined as the

revival and preservation of the military and combat traditions of the Russian people, defense of the state, service to the Fatherland, patriotic education, and instilling in people's consciousness the values of serving the Fatherland and love for the Motherland²⁰.

The center's programs are highly diverse and encompass horse riding stunts, Russian martial arts, restoration of historical weapons, military archaeology, or activities related to search and recovery²¹. This also includes organizing museum exhibits and thematic excursions, hosting sporting and cultural events, as well as offering blacksmithing, woodworking, weaving, and saddlery workshops. Furthermore, they offer recreational horseback riding, Russian dances and games, and singing. However, there is a noticeable emphasis on military-patriotic education and sports.

During public events organized by the community, students of the center, including both girls and boys under ten years of age, demonstrate horseback riding with stunts, knife-throwing, and their proficiency in handling weapons from the eras of the Civil War and the Great Patriotic War. The military aspect is further reinforced as adult participants immerse themselves in historical re-

20. Vkontakte (2021) "Doklad Shapovalova D.S. 'Sintez razlichnykh napravlenii patrioticheskogo vospitaniya dlya formirovaniya tselostnoi lichnosti cheloveka'" [The presentation by D.S. Shapovalov on 'Synthesis of various branches of patriotic education in the formation of integral human personality'], *Vkontakte page by UPT's RBI*, December 2 [https://vk.com/wall-189259729_154, accessed on 02.11.2024]

21. Le Huérou, A. "Where Does the Motherland Begin? Private and Public Dimensions of Contemporary Russian Patriotism in Schools and Youth Organisations: A View from the Field", p. 39-49.

enactments, replicating the appearance, weaponry, and lifestyles of Russian military personnel from the 1940s. The only deviation from these militarized instructional practices was a series of seminars on “The Principles of Biometric Processes for Restoring Bodily and Personal Integrity in Humans.” Unlike the patriotic events, these seminars, being formally open to the public, required staying with the fraternity for two weeks and exclusively involved members of the community.

The community enhances its image and secures financial support by participating in public events and competitions related to patriotism, many of which are organized at higher levels of authority. Community members engage in gatherings with organizations of war veterans and take part in various paramilitary contests. Their Vkontakte social media page consistently updates information regarding the birthdays of great military commanders and significant foreign policy events. An example of how the fraternity capitalizes on all-Russian patriotic events to bolster its local image is the Immortal Regiment initiative. In 2021, they organized their own Immortal Regiment procession in close proximity to their premises. It is obligatory to post photographs and reports about such events in their Vkontakte group to reinforce the fraternity’s loyal position.

These activities stand in stark contrast to what the group’s leader advocates during their private seminars held behind closed doors, and where she emphasizes the exclusive status of group members, the evil nature of the outside world, and the existence of enemies to be mentally battled against²². Nonetheless, the Center of Russian Martial Art has successfully secured two grants from the governor of Perm Krai for its patriotic educational projects²³. In 2021, they received funding for the construction of an outdoor diorama called “The Northern Frontier”, which essentially consists of a full-size trench from the 1940s situated on the community’s premises. In 2022, they were awarded a grant for organizing a museum related to the military archaeology group “Memory”, and in 2023 — a grant for archival research in order to identify names of people who died in military hospitals of Perm during the Great Patriotic War.

22. Ryazanova, S. “Zakrytye soobshchestva kak fenomen sovremennoi religioznoi zhizni”.

23. *Fond grantov gubernatora Permskogo kraia* [Perm Krai Governor’s Grant Fund] [<https://грантыгубернатора59.рф>, accessed on 02.11.2024].

Sport as inner-wordly asceticism

Finally, we would like to explore why military-patriotic education, provided by Orthodoxy-based NCOs, is predominantly conducted through sporting activities, specifically martial arts. The influence of sports on socio-political life in Russia is not significant enough to discuss it as an exclusively effective method of influence. Charity and education provided by faith-based organizations play an equally important role in advancing their agenda. However, sports appear to be of special interest. Even Patriarch Kirill, in his address during the first meeting of the Patriarchal commission on physical culture and sports in the summer of 2018, emphasized that “enchurching sport is a pastoral task, and that is why the Church, by Christ Himself, has been called to address it”²⁴.

Gradually, throughout the country, numerous Orthodoxy-based sports clubs with distinctive names emerged: the Orthodox club of hand-to-hand combat “Spiritual Force” named after St. Alexander Nevsky²⁵, the Orthodox sporting club “Seraphim”²⁶, or the Orthodox club of hand-to-hand combat “Archangel”²⁷. Often, these clubs adopt names that are not only related to Orthodox Christianity but also simultaneously honor Russian ancient warriors who have been canonized as saints: the club of hand-to-hand combat “Peresvet”²⁸, or the Orthodox fighting club “Iliya Muromets” (clubs named after this saint warrior can be found in many cities). Some names refer both to ancient warriors and to the Soviet past, for example, the Russian Orthodox club of hand-to-hand combat “Nard”²⁹, meaning Nar(odnaya) Druzhina (People’s Squad). It is quite rare to come across softened or humorous names, such as the club of combat Sambo in the Orthodox

24. Patriarch Kirill (2018) “Vystuplenie Sviateishogo Patriarkha Kirilla na pervom zasedanii Patriarshei komissii po voprosam fizicheskoi kultury i sporta” [His Holiness Patriarch Kirill’s address to the first meeting of the Patriarchal commission on physical culture and sports], *Russkaia pravoslavnaia tserkov*, June 6 [http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5215803.html?ysclid=lnnjztmpiy846332038, accessed on 02.11.2024]

25. Pravoslavnyi klub edinoborstv “Sila dukha” Sviatogo Aleksandra Nevskogo [https://sila-duxa.ru, accessed on 14.11.2024].

26. Pravoslavnyi sportivnyi klub “Serafim” [https://szvik.ru/2017/01/15465, accessed on 14.11.2024].

27. Pravoslavnyi klub edinoborstv “Arkhangel” [https://vk.com/club52969895, accessed on 14.11.2024].

28. Klub edinoborstv “Peresvet” [http://peresvetft.ru/, accessed on 14.11.2024].

29. Russkii Pravoslavnyi klub edinoborstv “Nard” [https://sc-nard.ru, accessed on 14.11.2024].

tradition “Oboronyashka” (can be translated as “Cute little defender”) at the parish of St. Innokenty in Moscow. An example of a noteworthy name is “The Ascetic”, representing an Orthodox center for spiritual and physical development located in the village of Ivanovka, Belgorod oblast. This name explicitly signifies the importance of sports in the lives of Orthodox laypersons.

During the inauguration of “Andrey Oslyabya” club, His Eminence Mark, the Metropolitan of Ryazan and Mikhailov, emphasized that

Sport nurtures patience, fosters character, and instills perseverance in the pursuit of a defined objective. It is precisely this perseverance and patience in the pursuit of goals that a person requires in their lifelong, most significant battle — the spiritual struggle³⁰.

Martial arts have frequently been acknowledged as a sporting activity that facilitates the cultivation of spiritual attributes. This perspective is evident on the website of the Orthodox hand-to-hand combat club in Northern Butovo (Moscow):

To meet life’s challenges and combat all forms of evil, one must be spiritually and physically strong. We derive spiritual strength from our Orthodox faith (all exercises commence and conclude with a collective prayer), while we enhance and fortify our physical strength through our club’s training sessions³¹.

The concept of Orthodox sporting combat gained significant popularity, leading to the initiation of Orthodox martial arts festivals under the auspices of the Patriarchate³².

It was of paramount importance for Orthodox clubs to distinguish themselves from Oriental martial arts, which were presumed to be grounded in the spiritual principles of “Oriental” faiths. Unlike Igor

30. Moskovskaia eparkhiia (2018) “V Moskve otkrylsia pervyi dukhovno-sportivnyi klub pri khrame” [In Moscow the first spiritual and sportive club at a parish was inaugurated], December 24 [<http://moseparh.ru/v-moskve-otkrylsya-pervyj-duxovno-sportivnyj-klub-pri-xrame.html?ysclid=lnm75v3uay198034569>, accessed on 02.11.2024].

31. Kham Dmitriia Donskogo (2024) “Seksiiia rukopashnogo boia” [“Hand-to-hand combat club”] *Kham Dmitriya Donskogo*, no date [<https://www.dmdonskoy.ru/node/67>, accessed on 02.11.2024].

32. TASS (2023) “Festival edinoborstv ‘Kubok ravnoapostolnogo Nikolaia Yaponskogo’ otkrylsia v Podmoskovie” [Hand-to-hand combat festival “The bowl of Nikolai of Japan, Equal to Apostles”], February 24 [<https://tass.ru/sport/17136885>, accessed on 02.11.2024].

Lizunov, not all clubs were willing to develop their own combat systems. A practical solution came in the form of Sambo, an acronym for “self-defense without arms”, which was invented in the Soviet Union. In Russia, it gradually evolved into a “national” martial art with a distinct patriotic undertone³³. It held significance for Orthodox practitioners that the official creator of Sambo, Vasily Oshchepkov, began his education at an Orthodox seminary in Kyoto, Japan, established by St. Nikolay of Japan. Later, he transitioned to a Judo school³⁴.

During a roundtable discussion on “Orthodox Consciousness and Martial Arts” at the Moscow Theological Academy, the then-president of the International and Russian Sambo Federations, Mikhail Tikhomirov, fused national discourse with Orthodoxy. He stated,

In our era, when foreign Oriental combat sports are being imposed in Russia, which are disconnected from our national spirit, it becomes particularly vital to revive the national tradition of martial arts... Sambo was conceived as a synthesis of the spirit and the body, blessed by St. Nikolay... The saint bestowed his blessing upon his disciple to assimilate the finest elements of Oriental combat techniques to create a new martial art in service to the Fatherland and God³⁵.

During the same forum, it was proclaimed that an Orthodox believer may participate in Oriental combat sports only if they refrain from engaging in meditative practices and “working with energies” that are typically associated with Oriental martial arts³⁶.

Judo, in particular, was acknowledged by the Church not only as the foundation for Sambo but also as a sport where the President of Russia has achieved the highest level of success. However, within this informal hierarchy of martial arts, Sambo holds the top position. Some ecclesiastical educational institutions have even become

33. Laruelle, M. “Russia’s Militia Groups and their Use at Home and Abroad”, p. 18.

34. Pravmir (2012) “Vasilij Oshchepkov, sviatitel Nikolai Yaponskii i sambo” [“Vasily Oshchepkov, St Nikolai of Japan and Sambo”] *Pravmir*, September 18 [https://www.pravmir.ru/vasilij-oshchepkov-svyatitel-nikolaj-yaponskij-i-sambo/?ysclid=lo2lybfec0544991996, accessed on 02.11.2024].

35. Pravoslavnyaya gazeta (2022) “Kruglyi stol: Pravoslavnoe soznanie i boevye iskusstva” [“Roundtable: Orthodox consciousness and martial arts”], 12 (189), March 22 [https://orthodox-newspaper.ru/numbers/at27619?ysclid=lnm7kzf2uw508178068, accessed on 02.11.2024].

36. Ivashko, S. (2022) “Pravoslavnye pomirilis s karatistami” [The Orthodox made peace with Karate fighters], *Tsentr Peresvet*, March 25 [https://peresvet-lavra.ru/press/pravoslavnye-pomirilis-s-karatistami, accessed on 02.11.2024].

part of the national “For Sambo” project. As an example, in the summer of 2023, the first-ever Sambo club for students of the Theological Seminary of Ekaterinburg was established in the city of Verkhnyaya Pyshma³⁷.

Orthodox sporting clubs are not necessarily restricted to martial arts alone; for instance, members of “The Ascetic” engage in activities like super marathons. However, according to those who teach and promote martial arts, these sports appear to better align with the spiritual and moral expectations of a Christian. They emphasize qualities such as self-restraint, discipline, self-organization, and exhibit a high degree of ritualism. Additionally, they are built upon principles that Orthodoxy extols as “obedience” from a disciple to their teacher, which forms the foundation of monastic life. According to Archpriest Viktor Ivanov, a Sambo enthusiast who leads the “Alexander Nevsky” club in the city of Ufa, other sports do not possess these qualities in the same concentration. He stated,

When it comes to hand-to-hand combat sports... I’m not talking about football or basketball... it’s in these disciplines that individuals most fully reveal their true selves. They learn how to surmount obstacles, how to conquer their limitations and laziness, and how to endure pain. One could argue that these sports offer a comprehensive preparation for individuals, not only on a physical level but also on a spiritual level³⁸.

The founder of Spas even describes his community as a “warrior’s monastery without walls”, emphasizing that

it is not a mere utopian project but an actual place located in Kaluga province, near Obninsk, which happens to be the first science city, situated on the grounds of a picturesque ancient estate³⁹.

37. Ekaterinburgskaia eparkhia (2023) “Mitropolit Evgenii priniial uchastie v otkrytii pervoi v Rossii sektiis sambo dlia budushchikh sviashchennikov” [“Metropolitan Evgenii took part in inaugurating the first in Russia Sambo club for future priests”], June 1 [https://ekaterinburg-eparhia.ru/news/2023/06/01/106607/?ysclid=lnm7w9b1se467319862, accessed on 02.11.2024].

38. Youtube (2015) “Pravoslavie i edinoborstva” [Orthodoxy and hand-to-hand combat], Youtube-channel by bloodandsweatmma, April 28 [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rG4tzZDJfJU&t=4s, accessed on 02.11.2024].

39. Lizunov, I. *Ratoborstvo*, p. 59.

Conclusion

We propose that the sustained focus of faith-based NCOs on initiatives in military-patriotic education illustrates the effectiveness of patriotism in solidifying the positions of religious communities. Even groups that may initially be viewed with suspicion by the state and society, based on their secluded lifestyle, distinctive attire, strong rhetoric, and sometimes being in conflict with official ecclesiastical structures, can, through military-patriotic projects, create opportunities to attain the status of socially beneficial NCOs. For some, such as “Spas”, patriotism has served as a foundation for building mutually beneficial relationships with governmental bodies. It is evident that these relationships can only be maintained by keeping certain aspects of these NCOs’ activities in the shadows to avoid negative reactions from the state, society, or the Church. This is an area where “Sorok Sorokov” encountered challenges, whereas the Pokrov fraternity found considerable success. Consequently, military-patriotic initiatives simultaneously grant access to the economic resources of the Church and the state while safeguarding faith-based groups from external scrutiny by legitimizing their existence.

Regarding the prominent role of sports, specifically martial arts, in the patriotic activities of faith-based NCOs, it can be viewed as an endeavor to fill the void of religious engagement for the laity. Currently, the Russian Church offers the ordinary believer a limited range of activities beyond attending religious services and adhering to religious customs in their daily lives, which can sometimes be challenging for individuals residing in urban environments. We believe that sports can serve as an appealing form of religious engagement for the laity, offering an alternative to monasticism and providing an avenue for practicing self-discipline outside of monasteries. Martial arts, with their numerous ritual practices and the requirement for a secular form of “obedience” analogous to monastic obedience, can be considered a fitting embodiment of worldly asceticism in the Weberian sense. Through these activities, sports can reacquire the long-forgotten ritual functions.

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