

Russia's Religio-Political Factor in Arctic Re-Establishment

Overview

When considering how the Kremlin views the current state of Russian Arctic security, it is necessary to understand the tri-union of the country's history, theology, and security as a factor applicable to any risk analysis. Russia's religio-political relationship with the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) is rooted in a historical interpretation of the Orthodox Christian presence from the tenth century, through the period of the Russian Empire, to the current situation in Russia. Furthermore, the Kremlin's relationship with the ROC can be likened to the time of Theodosius I, when the Roman emperor declared Christianity the official state religion.

Russian Christianity arose from Olga of Kyiv's conversion to Christianity in the tenth century.¹ Missionaries spread Christianity throughout the Kyivan Rus, including the northern frontier, during the reign of tsars. When the Bolsheviks transformed Russia into the Soviet Union, they secularized this mission into one of industrialization and militarization. Contemporary Russia has regarded the Arctic simultaneously as a sacred Christian inheritance and an economic lifeline. Russia has taken a strategic religio-political view, with the ROC utilized by the Russian government for religio-political purposes.²

Although the early ROC's position was that of sincere conversion to Christianity in order to save souls, it also had an inadvertent political effect which unified the Kyivan Rus under one empire. The Bolsheviks later secularized and militarized the message, which united the post-Soviet

¹ Christian Raffensperger and Donald Ostrowski, *The Ruling Families of Rus: Clan, Family and Kingdom* (London: Reaktion Books, 2023), 309.

² Minna Ålander, "Death by a Thousand Paper Cuts: Lessons from the Nordic-Baltic Region on Countering Russian Gray Zone Aggression," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, last modified November 14, 2024, accessed 1 December 2025, <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/11/russia-gray-zone-aggression-baltic-nordic?lang=en>.

ROC and the Kremlin. This is how Christian nationalism in the Russian historical context was achieved, with the Arctic included in its objectives.

Understanding the ROC's outlook on salvation and its need to missionize the Russian Arctic is necessary in any religio-political analysis, as the current theological considerations are intertwined with the Kremlin's goals of keeping a historical Russia united.³ It is well known that the ROC, under Patriarch Kiril, does not want Western Christianity expressed in or near Russia. President Putin supports this position, as we have seen with the Ukraine War. There are theological considerations that Putin inadvertently supports with respect to social issues. Both men fear Russia will become liberalized and distant from Russian Christianity's birthplace,⁴ which is considered to be Kyiv (current day Ukraine).

This article is intended to provide a cursory look at the link between the ROC and the Kremlin, and their joint effort to securitize Russia's Arctic as a part of keeping Russia unified, with especial consideration of Patriarch Kirill and President Putin's shared KGB history.⁵

Early Evangelization: Tenth Century to Soviet Period

Christianity officially arrived in the region after it was made the state religion for the Kyivan Rus, as declared by Princess Olga in the tenth century.⁶ Thereafter, Christianity spread to the Novgorodians and then onward to places such as the city of Arkhangelsk, through the missionary

³ Anders Strindberg, "An Overview of the Russian-Orthodox Church's Moscow Patriarchate as an Agent of Influence," Swedish Defence Research Agency, last modified May 12, 2022, accessed December 1, 2025, <https://www.foi.se/en/foi/reports/report-summary.html?reportNo=FOI+Memo+7865>.

⁴ Robert F. Worth, "Clash of the Patriarchs," *The Atlantic*, May 2024, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2024/05/russia-ukraine-orthodox-christian-church-bartholomew-kirill/677837/>.

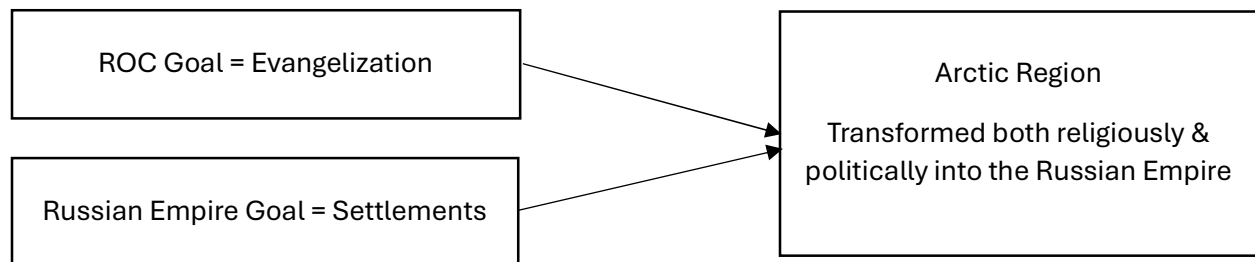
⁵ Elisabeth Braw, "The Strange Habits of Russia's High North Clergymen," Center for European Policy Analysis, last modified March 26, 2024, accessed December 1, 2025, <https://cepa.org/article/the-strange-habits-of-russias-high-north-clergymen/>.

⁶ *Encyclopedia Britannica Online*, s.v. "St. Olga," accessed December 1, 2025, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Saint-Olga>.

activity of the Novgorodians. Subsequently, a monastery was built there in the sixteenth century, and a diocese was eventually established in the seventeenth century.⁷ As Christianity continued to develop within the Russian Empire, the faith continued to spread across the empire's influence locally and abroad. This regional history provides the groundwork for Russia's religio-political union in the Arctic.

Christianity further spread through ROC missionaries, who were central to the Russian Empire's early expansion into the Arctic, and eventually reached places such as Siberia and modern-day Alaska in the eighteenth century; this latter point also ties in the Yukon Tlingit people's contact with Russian traders and ROC missionaries in Skagway, Juneau and Sitka⁸.

The ROC combined evangelism with state consolidation, exemplified by St. Innocent Veniaminov's translation of church liturgy into indigenous languages, which fostered both conversion and cultural assimilation.⁹ These missions coincidentally complemented the empire's advancements for state authority northward and eastward. The ROC's position was that this opportunity gave the Church a sincere way to bring the eschatological message of salvation to people groups that did not hear the Christian message.



⁷ "Antonievo-Siysky Monastery," Spotting History, accessed December 1, 2025, <https://www.spottinghistory.com/view/1676/antonievo-siysky-monastery/>.

⁸ "Orthodox History Project" *Orthodox Church in North America*, last modified July 20, 2024, accessed December 1, 2025, https://orthodoxcanada.ca/Pearl_Keenan.

⁹ Jesse D. Murray, "Together and Apart: The Russian Orthodox Church, the Russian Empire, and Orthodox Missionaries in Alaska, 1794–1917," *Russian History* 40, no. 1 (2019): 91–110, doi:10.1163/18763316-04001006.

Figure 1. How the historical goals of the ROC and Russian Empire coincided in the Arctic Region.

Missionizing the Arctic was fraught with difficulties, as the ROC discovered. The Obdorskaya Mission of 1832–1833 attempted to convert the communities that lived in the Arctic tundra, such as the Nenets, Khanty, and Komi. This mission failed due to resistance from local elites and logistical difficulties. Regardless, this evangelism demonstrated the empire's desire to extend religious re-expansion into the Arctic. It also gave an avenue for the religio-political side of the empire's ambitions to secure the Arctic for Russia's benefit.¹⁰

The united religio-political considerations of trade, industrialization, and security through settlements provided a dualistic approach to expansion into the Russian Arctic region, which was captive to the goals of exploration and colonialism in a Russian context. This historic dualism is ironically parallel with the modern-day Kremlin's goal of becoming a major player in Arctic issues to ensure both the survival of Russian society as well as the expansion of the ROC across Russia's Arctic jurisdiction.

Soviet Secularization

Once the Soviets took over from the previous Russian Empire, religious expansion ceased due to the secularization of the nation. Therefore, the ROC mission work in the Arctic came to an abrupt end, with only fragments continuing in secret. Many of the local indigenous communities regarded the secular Soviet invasion of Bolshevik ideology as oppression against their people.¹¹ The

¹⁰ Sergei Viktorovich Turov, "Obdorskaya Orthodox Mission of 1832-1833: Unsuccessful Experience of Preaching Christianity Among the Inhabitants of the Tundra," *Russian History* 6 (2023): 26-36, doi:10.31857/S2949124X23060032.

¹¹ Nikolai Vakhtin, "The Russian Arctic Between Missionaries and Soviets: The Return of Religion, Double Belief, or Double Identity?" in *Rebuilding Identities. Pathways to Reform in Post-Soviet Siberia*, ed. Erich Kastan (Berlin: Dietrich Reimer Verlag, 2005), 27-38.

Bolsheviks removed all indigenous ways of life and went as far as killing the indigenous shamans along with the ROC priests and elders.

The Bolshevik Revolution replaced evangelization with ideological indoctrination. Soviet authorities collectivized indigenous communities, expanded Gulag labor camps into the Arctic, and turned northern ports into centers of industrialization.¹² Though stripped of religious framing, the Soviet Arctic maintained the pattern of central authority, which imposed itself on the periphery. All religious and cultural rituals, regardless if they were sanctioned by the ROC or not, were ruthlessly removed from public practice. This forced secularization transformed Russian culture and politics, with residual effects in the current religio-political context. Secularization has been replaced again with the ROC, and communism has been replaced with current Kremlin political ideology.

Post-Soviet Russia: Collapse of the Soviet Union to Present

In the post-Soviet period, evangelical groups revived missions to the Arctic.¹³ For example, unregistered Baptists equated the Arctic with the ends of the earth, which linked evangelization to Western Anabaptist theological beliefs. This evangelistic continuity is why the ROC sees the Arctic as central to ensuring the safety and salvation of the Russian people. The ROC wants to ensure Russian influence in the region, especially against Western Christianity and culture, which usually comes with protestant evangelization.

The ROC reasserted itself in the region in the early 2000's and consecrated a thirty-meter wooden church in Pevek, Chukotka, on permafrost terrain. It symbolized their ongoing Arctic

¹² Fiona Hill and Clifford G. Gaddy, *The Siberian Curse: How Communist Planners Left Russia Out in the Cold* (Brookings Institution Press, 2003), 454.

¹³ Laur Vallikivi, "On the Edge of Space and Time: Evangelical Missionaries in the Post-Soviet Arctic," *Journal of Ethnology and Folkloristics* 8, no. 2 (2014): 95-120, <https://ojs.utlib.ee/index.php/JEF/article/view/22650/17189> .

mission and sacralization of Russia's northern frontier.¹⁴ Furthermore, the Patriarch of the ROC has supported Russia's president from a moral perspective, who has aligned with the ROC's theological position of social issues. This religio-political posture has worked as a mutually beneficial strategy for both leaders.

Russian Securitization: Soviet Era to Present

This religious and political union was further demonstrated at the Kola Peninsula, which became one of the locations of Soviet strategic deterrence. Nuclear submarines, bomber squadrons, and radar installations made the Arctic a front line in the US–Soviet nuclear standoff¹⁵, while ROC's churches are being re-established in places such as Murmansk. The Russian Arctic has returned to being both a religious and political frontier from its secularized period under the Bolsheviks. Figure 1 illustrates this same goal as religious and political transformation into the ideal concept of Russia, formerly under the Russian Empire, currently the Kremlin.

Russia expresses that it's current Arctic militarization emphasises defence. The Kremlin says that it seeks to safeguard the Northern Sea Route and provide a nuclear deterrent rather than pursue outright territorial aggression¹⁶, to which this perspective is reluctantly seen in the West. Reforms have modernized Arctic command structures for the Russians, with their Northern Fleet elevated to a joint strategic command, which is similar to being under military oversight. Russia's reliance on the Kola Peninsula as the anchor of its nuclear triad is clear.¹⁷ Submarines, missile

¹⁴ Atle Staalesen, "Church on Arctic Mission" *The Barents Observer*, last modified September 29, 2016, accessed December 1, 2025, <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/life-and-public/2016/09/church-arctic-mission>.

¹⁵ Rolf Tamnes and Kristine Offerdal, eds., *Geopolitics and Security in the Arctic: Regional dynamics in a global world* (Routledge, 2014), 32.

¹⁶ Mathieu Boulègue, "Russia's Military Posture in the Arctic Managing Hard Power in a 'Low Tension' Environment," Chatham House, last modified October 15, 2024, accessed December 1, 2025, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2019/06/russias-military-posture-arctic>.

¹⁷ Pavel K. Baev, "Russian Strategic Guidelines and Threat Assessments for the Arctic," *Security Insights*, no. 26 (April 2019): accessed December 1, 2025.

systems, and advanced S-400 and S-500 defenses project an anti-access/area-denial envelope across the High North, complicating security operations for the US, Canada, and NATO allies. Furthermore, the Ukraine War accelerated Russia's securitization of the Arctic, to ensure that Western influence would not permeate Russian boundaries. This belief system is visible in the consecration of ROC churches in the Russian Arctic, as well as the logistical support provided to these communities.¹⁸

Another religio-political consideration is noted by the Arctic Institute, which observed a shift towards gray-zone tactics, cyber-enabled disruptions, and deeper military infrastructure in the Russian Arctic.¹⁹ Russia's Foreign Minister, Sergey Lavrov, publicly pledged that Moscow would defend its Arctic interests through diplomatic, technical, and military means, the former as demonstrated by the recent tenuous situation in Sweden where ROC churches, willingly or not, have been implicated in intelligence operations:

The ROC lost state-funded support in Sweden in 2024 after the Swedish Security Service issued a warning about the church in Västerås on the grounds of its connections to Russian intelligence and security services and the funding it received from Russian state-owned energy company Rosatom. The ROC also operates a church close to Norway's most important naval base in Haakonsværn. A recent attempt to build a church next to the Vardø military radar complex in northern Norway was averted. Churches enjoy special protection in Sweden and Norway, which makes it particularly hard to address the issue once the ROC has established presence.²⁰

<https://www.marshallcenter.org/en/publications/security-insights/russian-strategic-guidelines-and-threat-assessments-arctic-0>.

¹⁸ Braw, "The Strange Habits of Russia's High North Clergymen."

¹⁹ Mathieu Boulègue, "Russia's Arctic Military Posture in the Context of the War Against Ukraine," The Arctic Institute: Center for Circumpolar Studies, last modified October 31, 2024, accessed December 1, 2025, <https://www.thearcticinstitute.org/russias-arctic-military-posture-context-war-against-ukraine>.

²⁰ Ibid.

Furthermore, Lavrov continues to publicly underscore the securitization of the Arctic from a Russian perspective, and in an interview, appeared to ensure EU and NATO members' interests as well.²¹ Russia's Arctic strategy is not merely economic or scientific expansion and reclamation of its historical territory; it is also eschatological assimilation into Russia's religious and political union.

Summary

Russia's Arctic vision has been intertwined with the ROC. The early evangelization missions of the ROC established the cultural template for future frontier expansion, which continues to be used today. The Bolshevik transformation of Russia secularized this expansion. Post-Soviet Russia integrated the ROC into its Arctic expansion narrative, and sacralised new bases, churches, and infrastructure through a salvific perspective.

Russia's Arctic ambitions have not been mere material competition, but blended history, theology, and political influence. The theological and historical component is valuable to integrate into a religio-political assessment, as it considers more than a secularized Western perspective. There have been salvific factors intertwined in the historical spread of Christianity in Russia since the tenth century,²² unlike the spread of Western Christianity where reformation, enlightenment, and autonomy grew. It is important to consider the Kremlin's use of the ROC. Religion, regarded an ideology in many disciplines, can bind and unify a nation, which is an important objective of the ROC and Kremlin's relationship.

From Orthodox evangelism in the tenth century to the militarization of the twenty-first century, the Russian Arctic has been integral to Russian identity. It fused religious symbolism, strategic deterrence, and economic ambition into a comprehensive Arctic policy based on a strong

²¹ Reuters, "Lavrov Vows Russia to Defend Its Arctic Interests," *Reuters*, September 19, 2024, accessed December 1, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/lavrov-vows-russia-defend-its-arctic-interests-2024-09-19/>.

²² Worth, "Clash of the Patriarchs."

historical past. Comprehending this synthesis is critical for understanding Russian behavior in the Arctic and formulating effective Western responses. Russia should be known for its three-pronged policy of theology, history, and security. As illustrated in figure 1, the pre-Soviet and post-Soviet outcome is the same.

Author Bio: Cyril Sweetville

Cyril Sweetville has a combined twenty years of law enforcement and regulatory experience, and has worked for the Abbotsford Police Department, CBSA, RCMP and DFO. He has participated in frontline policing, federal policing (national security and border integrity programs), close protection, departmental security and instruction. He holds Bachelor of Religious Studies and Bachelor of Political Studies; a Postgraduate Certificate in Policing, Intelligence, and Counterterrorism; and a Master's in Homeland Security. He is currently an instructor for the National Security Analysis course at BCIT and has an interest in where religion and national security intersect. He has written a number of articles in this subject matter. *NOTE: This article has been peer-reviewed by Bob Young, former Regional Director General for CSIS Pacific Region with 33 years of experience in National Security. Bob is the lead instructor for the National Security Analysis course at BCIT where Cyril instructs.*