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[Religious terror in modern Russia](#)



Following the controversy over *Matilda*, a film directed by Alexei Uchitel, a radical pseudo-Orthodox movement close to the Church has emerged on the general public's radar. It is a movement with many [nicknames](#) in the news media, most memorably the "Orthodox Taliban" and the "Orthodox ISIS".

State Duma deputy Natalia Poklonskaya, [an icon of the Russian Spring](#), has become the face of this unexpectedly strong movement, which is new to many. Her symbolic Crimean political capital, which has diminished considerably since 2014, nevertheless allowed her to take the lead of a monarchist strand of opposition "on the right" and mobilise Orthodox voters wanting the state to go ahead with its plans to cleanse the country of enemies, *i.e.* those who are against restoring the theocratic ideals of the Russian Empire.

However, religio-political opposition speaking on behalf of Orthodoxy with a plan to establish religious control over political and cultural spheres arose long before Natalia Poklonskaya and the mass protests against *Matilda*. This opposition has existed since the early 1990s as a religious underground, largely critical of the policies of the Russian Orthodox Church and the authorities. The institutional core of this movement is a small number of "*Oprichnik* brotherhoods" that are very active in the media, the most famous of which is the Union of Orthodox Banner-Bearers (SPKh).

SPKh was created in 1992 and has been headed by Leonid Simonovich-Nikshich ever since. A court case against the flag-bearers for distributing “artistic production” with a three-skull symbol and the slogan “[Orthodoxy or Death](#)” captured Russian society’s attention in 2010.

Throughout the last decade, the brotherhood’s members have been “trying on” the image of warrior monks, specialising in creative political protest actions against contemporary art and gay parades. This community became well known for their symbolic inquisition performances, such as organising the funeral of a toy monkey as a symbol of Darwinism and atheism in 2007; the public burning of Vladimir Sorokin’s “Day of the *Oprichnik*” and “The Sugar Kremlin” in 2008; burning books by Edvard Radzinski about the Tsar’s family and “The Gospel according to Solovyov” by the famous TV presenter Vladimir Solovyov; and they recently organised a [ritual burning](#) of a poster for *Matilda* and a photograph of its director, Alexei Uchitel. The neo-*Oprichniks* have declared all these works blasphemous and destructive to Russian history, Orthodoxy, God-fearing Russian folk and the Russian katechonic state.

Represented by Natalia Poklonskaya, this monarchist counterculture has now found support in the highest legislative body of the Russian Federation. Despite Poklonskaya distancing herself from religious extremism, her honouring of Nikolai II as a victim of [ritual sacrifice for Russia](#) brings her close to neo-*Oprichnik* ideology.

Neo-*Oprichnik* doctrine

The current neo-*Oprichnik* doctrine is rooted in Russian theocracy, and the tradition of treating monarchs as divine (see Uspenskiy B.A. *Tsar and patriarch: charisma of power in Russia. Byzantine model and its Russian interpretation*, 1998). The resurrection of the *Oprichniks*’ monarchist ideals is directly linked to active work by a range of revived ecclesiastical and secular organisations at the beginning of the 1990s to canonise Ivan the Terrible as the founder of Russian monarchy. Demands to canonise Ivan the Terrible in neo-*Oprichnik* texts have always been accompanied by demands to canonise Grigori Rasputin, as well as Nikolai II and the Tsar’s family in the 1990s (they were canonised in 2000).

Apologists of Ivan the Terrible in ultra-conservative Orthodox circles begin from the works of the Metropolitan of St. Petersburg and Ladoga, Ioann (Snychev) (1927–1995), particularly his book “The Autocracy of the Spirit”, published in 1994. For this reason, the neo-*Oprichnik* theology also names it the Doctrine of Metropolitan Ioann. According to neo-*Oprichnik* theology, the status of the Orthodox monarch is higher than any church hierarchical status. There is no principle of harmony between secular and church authority in this doctrine, which is why the Russian Orthodox Church classifies it as a “Tsar-God” blasphemy.

Oprichniks are described by Metropolitan Ioann and some other Tsar-God ideologists as a kind of heavenly soldier, an Orthodox ascetic ideal, and a holy weapon in an eschatological war with the Antichrist, where no holds are barred. Religious terror in fighting the enemies of Orthodoxy and the Russian state is the main focus of neo-*Oprichnik* unions and brotherhoods.

The neo-*Oprichnik* ideology is broadcast by several media, including the almanac *Svyashchennaya Khorugv, Rus’ Pravoslavnaya* newspaper, websites *OdigitriA* and *Russkaya narodnaya liniya*. One of the leading authors of the neo-*Oprichnik* media is Konstantin Dushenov, a historian and Metropolitan Ioann’s former press-secretary. Despite the fact that Dushenov was sentenced for extremism (he received a three-year prison term in 2010 for anti-Semitism under article 282, and was released early, in November 2012), his books are still available in church kiosks, and he is a popular video-blogger, [with his own programme](#) *Heart-to-Heart Chats* on the online video channel Den-TV.

Like the majority of national-patriots, Dushenov had high hopes for Putin’s third term and the ongoing process of “nationalising elites”. On May 7, 2013, he [wrote](#) in *Zavtra* newspaper about the need for a neo-*Oprichnik* movement and a new “Black Hundred”:

“The Kremlin is currently in desperate need of its own *Oprichniks*, its own Black Hundred, its own “order of knight-swordsmen” – some sort of “Orthodox NKVD” of the 21st century. We need wide support from the masses, on whom we can rely with confidence in case of any cataclysms, turbulence, or attempts to destroy Russian statehood, no matter whether these attempts come from outside or within. It looks like the Kremlin understands this”.

Prayer vigils, religious processions, marches, and performances are the areas in which neo-*Oprichniks* are most active and visible. The most popular religious practices among “Tsar-God” ideologists include writing texts dedicated to Ivan the Terrible for church masses, and creating icons bearing his image. The Russia of the future is seen as a monastery state ruled by a Tsar-hegumen. In neo-*Oprichnik* pseudo-icon-painting, Ivan the Terrible is depicted as a humble monk, God’s fool, a fearsome warlord, and leader of the Third Rome simultaneously.

It is worth noting the important social aspect of the neo-*Oprichnik* movement – a dogma about everyone’s absolute equality before the Tsar-hegumen. In the context of the currently severe social and economic inequality in Russia, this neo-*Oprichnik* dogma has significant mobilising power.

The Russian Orthodox Church vs neo-*Oprichnik* movement

The militant neo-*Oprichnik* movement is a serious threat to the official Orthodoxy. Despite a small number of active organisations, the neo-*Oprichnik* worldview in itself is quite widespread. As political scientist Alexander Shmelev [writes](#):

“We shouldn’t think that all of this is something “marginal”. Quite the opposite: what turns out to be somewhat marginal is the “Bases of the Social Concept” of the Russian Orthodox Church – although adopted by the Council of Bishops in 2000, it is fruitless, as it has failed to stimulate any real theological or literary activity. Meanwhile, the Doctrine of Metropolitan Ioann is actively bearing fruit, it’s enough to visit any church bookstore to see it”.

The Russian Orthodox Church is trying to fight the theocratic counterculture and the Doctrine of Metropolitan Ioann. Deacon Andrey Kuraev, missionary priest Daniel Sysoev (1974–2009), the famous researcher of sectarianism, Professor Alexander Dvorkin, and theologian Aleksey Osipov have dedicated articles and lectures to denouncing the popular fascination with Rasputin and Ivan the Terrible. In 2004, the Synodal Committee on canonisation rejected the nominations of Ivan the Terrible and Grigori Rasputin, and spoke out strongly against the non-canonical forms of veneration and attempts to review the commonly accepted historical understanding of their actions.

Nevertheless, the official church does not completely disassociate itself from the actions of neo-*Oprichnik* brotherhoods. For example, this is how archpriest Vsevolod Chaplin [describes](#) the activities of the Union of Orthodox Banner-Bearers:

“I cannot approve each of their actions and each public talk. This is a creative organisation which likes to respond to different events in social and cultural life. It mainly consists of classical intelligentsia, despite its “folksy” image”.

In the controversy surrounding the erection of monuments to Ivan the Terrible, we can see how the Russian Orthodox Church and officials have an ambiguous attitude towards the neo-*Oprichnik* movement and the increased pressure to clear the name of Ivan the Terrible (which was started by radical monarchists back in the 1990s). It is symptomatic that the “Tsar-God” supporters’ campaign against *Matilda* coincided with the unveiling of a monument to Ivan IV, the Terrible.

The neo-*Oprichnik* phenomenon seems exceptionally relevant and worth closer examination in the context of researching the politicisation of history and the transformation of historical remembrance processes in modern Russia. As we can see, Russian history is now much-coveted as a symbolic resource, not only by the current authorities, but also by the new “civil society” – radical political, religious and public movements and associations.

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