

The role played by religious groups in conducting war crimes in Ukraine



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by Vladislav Maltsev («Nezavisimaya Gazeta» / Independent newspaper)

Since last spring thousands of people, primarily civilians, have become casualties of armed standoff. Ukrainian army artillery and airstrikes destroyed thousands of homes, forcing hundreds of thousands to flee to Russia. It is not entirely the fault of those who conducted these crimes, but those who inspired it, creating a social climate endorsing murder and discrimination against its own citizens. Need I remind you of Rwanda, where editorial staff of “Thousand Hills Free Radio” was condemned for Tutsi genocide, when they escalated fear of Tutsies, calling Tutsies by demeaning word “cockroaches” (just like pro-Maidan supporters call anti-fascists a “colorady” (Colorados); a term coined from Colorado beetle), making heroes out of butchers who slaughtered Tutsies. Ukrainian mass-media’s role in this conflicts requires a separate investigation, while here I intend to study the role of religious institutions and the importance of such due to high religiosity of the Ukrainian society (according to 2014 spring polls, over 76% of Ukrainians consider themselves religious).

The head of Kiev patriarchy Filaret in the his interview released on April 20th on Ukrainian Channel 5 directly called upon the government for a resolute struggle against his opponents, claiming his church is blessing the state to use weapons. A day earlier, he claimed he sent priests and bishops to military units to inspire war spirit there. One cannot help but notice the timing match, when around the same time Ukrainian army begun to use heavy armament in cities of Kramatorsk and Slavyansk, as well as air bombing of Donetsk. By October 2014 in army units of Ukrainian army and law enforcement, as well as in paramilitary groups, there were around 40 Kiev patriarchy clerics, convincing soldiers that killing is not a sin. There are cases where Kiev patriarchy clerics were not just blessing the call to arms, but personally loaded weapons and shot so-called enemies using grenade launchers, as it was done by bishop Kirill (Mikhailyuk) of Uzhgorod in December 2014. By April 2015 Filaret awarded religious medal to the commander of Tornado battalion Ruslan Onishchenko, a well-known kingpin who was arrested two months later along with his fighters on the charge of kidnapping, tortures and killing of peaceful civilians for profit.

Similarly, Ukrainian Greek-Catholic church provided chaplains for the war, half of whom are serving with fascist battalions of the Right Sector. In their sermons, the clerics preach racist rhetoric, a very similar to that of the Third Reich, using phrases like “Asian hordes are invading from the East to kill all Ukrainians”. They do not hide they bless soldiers to kill, neither they conceal the fact they carry firearms and are prepared to use it at will, which is a direct contradiction to both Christian canons and military chaplains code of conduct.

Protestant religious groups showed up an extreme performance by forming two battalions of chaplains, one of which contained around 40 people (that matches exactly the number gathered by Kiev patriarchy or Greek-Catholics church). This battalion was created under heavy support from Protestant churches, notably Skinia church (who raised battalion leaders for “Vineyard” (Vinogradnik), “the Word of Life” (Slovo Zhizni) and “the New Generation”

(Novoe Pokolenie) battalions) in Kiev. In their sermons, Protestant chaplains preach of permissiveness of killing during the wartime, claiming it to be the act of heroism, remembering the violent figure of God in the Old Testament and the Wrath of God against the peoples out of favor, promoting the idea that this war on Donbass is actually a Holy war against Russia, oppressing their faith.

It is outrageous to see that so many Protestant chaplains “de jure” are acting army officers, carrying and using firearms during the battles. A large number of clergyman known to fight alongside and die in paramilitary groups. Sergey Reuta, for example, the preacher of “Live word” (Zhivoe Slovo) church of Lugansk, died on 24th November 2014 in Donetsk suburbs being a part of Donbass battalion on offensive. In fall 2014 another preacher and the creator of “the Church of Good Changes” of Mariupol, Gennady Mohnenko became famous after his statement on Californian television channel Impact TV, where he said he's ready to personally kill Putin and is proud of his clergyman fellowman who received a medal “for killing 500 separatists”. Mohnenko with his rather young congregation postured with rifles, machine gun and grenade launcher on the outskirts of Mariupol.

Finally, we cannot escape the fact of US intervention in this matter, whom are taking part in training of the Protestant chaplains in Ukraine, notably Baptist chaplain Naomi Paget, a crisis intervener for the FBI, exchanging his interrogation skills with Ukrainian side. By spring 2015, the organizers identified Dr. Louis Ross, an officer for US Navy, Ronald Boyd regular army major, Dusty Baxley of USMC, the head for NATO Liaison Office in Ukraine Marcin Koziel and unnamed NATO colonel from Lithuania as the instructors for military chaplains. This engagement looks ambiguous in conjunction with the wave of propaganda for justification of violence, preached by Ukrainian chaplains, as well as their participation in military activities.