

Leviathan by Andrey Zvyagintsev: A Reflection of Orthodoxy in Russian Politics and the
Joint Use of Nostalgia

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Leviathan, by Andrey Zvyagintsev, with its sweeping coastal views and poignant hue, poses a tale of moral deterioration in proposed rehabilitation. The 2014 Russian film follows the story of a corrupt mayor claiming, and ultimately gaining, the land of a family's seaside house. The struggle leads to many troubles, and the final scene reveals the land's new use as for an Orthodox church. *Leviathan* epitomizes the three-way tie between the Orthodox Church, the Russian government, and restorative nostalgia. I will begin with an overview of the scholarly conversation surrounding *Leviathan's* release, then I will turn to the separate, pertinent discourse of Orthodoxy in Putin's Russia. With this background, we can extend Svetlana Boym's classification of nostalgia as the terminology in discussing *Leviathan's* depiction of Orthodoxy and Russian politics.

Leviathan garnered much success in the film world, particularly with the Western audience. Along with cinematic praise, both the Washington Post and The New York Times highlighted the role of politics in the film. As Ann Hornaday noted upon its release, power weaves throughout: "It's also a canny study in how power operates, whether on behalf of an indifferent and greedy God, a malevolent state or brutish, patriarchal force."¹ Manhola Dargis similarly pointed to the film's reflection of contemporary Russian events: "absolute power can be announced again and again: in the picture of Mr. Putin; in a nod to the dissident group Pussy Riot."² What the Western reviews seemed to focus on less—Orthodoxy—seems particularly relevant to Russian critics. As for the Orthodox Church response, Vsevolod Chaplin, an official spokesman for the Church, disdainfully asserted, "It is obviously made for a Western audience,

¹ Ann Hornaday, "'Leviathan' Movie Review: From Russia with Buzz," The Washington Post, last modified January 22, 2015, accessed December 11, 2022, https://www.washingtonpost.com/goingoutguide/movies/leviathan-movie-review-from-russia-with-buzz/2015/01/21/258f8706-a190-11e4-9f89-561284a573f8_story.html.

² Manhola Dargis, "Life: Poor, Nasty, Brutish and (Probably) Short," The New York Times, last modified December 24, 2014, accessed December 11, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/25/movies/leviathan-turns-on-a-modern-day-job.html>.

to be more precise, for the Western élites.”³ The government response was not much warmer with, Vladimir Medinsky, the minister of culture, rejecting the film for “profanity” while preparing “a resolution (which did not mention ‘Leviathan’) that would ban from public distribution films believed to be ‘defiling the national culture, creating a threat to national unity and undermining the foundations of the constitutional order.’”⁴ This “national unity,” we will later see, is distinctly tied up with religion. An understanding of both critical viewpoints underscores the interconnectedness of politics and the Russian Orthodox Church.

Many scholars are currently tracking and synthesizing the bond of the Kremlin and the Orthodox Church. George Soroka focuses on how this connection extends to international relations with the promotion of a “socially conservative policy agenda, both domestically and beyond the Russian Federation’s borders.”⁵ Gaziza Shakhanova and Petr Kratochvíl then attend to “traditional values” and patriotism shared between the Church and government.⁶ They observe how “the specific political role of the Church is perhaps best visible in its attempts to impose a traditionalist normative agenda.”⁷ Finally, Joshua Yaffa, in his book section titled “The Last Free Priest,” offers an account of the Church’s strict hierarchy and the rising influence of Patriarch Kirill in Putin’s Russia. Yaffa pays a focus to Putin and Kirill’s relationship, developing from Kirill’s election to Patriarch in 2009. These expert studies illuminate the tangled nature of

³ Masha Lipman, “The Campaign Against ‘Leviathan’ in Russia,” *The New Yorker*, last modified January 26, 2015, accessed December 15, 2022, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/campaign-leviathan-russia>.

⁴ Lipman, “The Campaign,” *The New Yorker*.

⁵ George Soroka, “International Relations by Proxy? The Kremlin and the Russian Orthodox Church” *Religions* 13, no. 3 (2022): 208, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13030208>.

⁶ Gaziza Shakhanova and Petr Kratochvíl, “The Patriotic Turn in Russia: Political Convergence of the Russian Orthodox Church and the State?” *Politics & Religion* 15, no. 1 (03, 2022): 114-141. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1017/S1755048320000620>.

⁷ Shakhanova and Kratochvíl, “The Patriotic,” 118.

religion in Russia, but the key term of nostalgia can help to further connect these histories and trends.

As widely known, the collapse of the Soviet Union left a gap in the Russian national identity formerly filled by the stabilizing idea of Communism; in place of Communism, Orthodoxy became a source of hope for the Russian people. Putin and his government uphold Orthodoxy as the antidote to societal ills, but just as the idea of Communism benefited political leaders, so too does the Orthodox religion in its alignment to nostalgia. Svetlana Boym distinguishes between the different types of nostalgia: though “reflective nostalgia does not pretend to rebuild the mythical place called home; it is ‘enamored of distance,’”⁸ “restorative nostalgia” focuses on nationalism and “is based on a single-transhistorical plot...and the inevitable scapegoating of the mythical enemy.”⁹ Ilan Manor then argues on the role of nostalgia in public diplomacy: “nostalgia can...make sense of complex crises using historical precedent [and] reduce feelings of uncertainty brought about by globalization and the contestation of local traditions.”¹⁰ While *Leviathan* initially does not seem to be about Orthodoxy, the culminating scene reframes the viewer’s takeaway. After a story of familial turmoil and government corruption, the camera pans out in the final scene to surprisingly reveal a church as the unspoken center of conflict. The undercurrent of the Orthodox Church in the film reflects that of the rise and hold it has in Russia. In viewing the cinematic trajectory of *Leviathan* through this lens of nostalgia, scholarly conversations find themselves at a crossroads within the film: the

⁸ Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York, NY: Basic Books, a member of the Perseus Books Group, 2016), 50.

⁹ Boym, *The Future*, 43.

¹⁰ Ilan Manor and James Pamment, "From Gagarin to Sputnik: The Role of Nostalgia in Russian Public Diplomacy," *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy* 18, no. 1 (March 2022): 44, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41254-021-00233-3>.

culminating pain and language of restoration parallels—and proves warning of—the contemporary convergence of Church and State.

Leviathan introduces the mayor, Vadim, as a central antagonist to Kolya, a father who is fighting to keep his family's land. With Kolya's lawyer friend finding blackmail against Vadim, corruption presents itself principal to the mayor's politics. But then the viewer watches as Vadim dines with Orthodox priest, Father Vasily. Though the exact topic of conversation remains vague, Vadim is nervous and Vasily responds, "You do well to tend to worldly matters, but remember the divine," commending him as a "charitable patron...bearing gifts."¹¹ Vasily then assures that "all power comes from God. As long as God wishes for it, you need not worry."¹² But when Vadim questions if God actually wishes for the elusive "it," Vasily becomes audibly more assertive with a firm "He does."¹³ The camera lingers on the scene of the two dining over a luxurious table, with a large-scale painting of "The Last Supper" set behind them. The Church and religious iconography have a place in a business meeting—obviously not a confessional in this restaurant setting— and the scene leaves the viewer questioning. Almost an hour later in the film, Vadim and Father Vassily meet again, with Vassily seeming even more powerful an influence over Vadim. To questions of his faith and church attendance, Vadim responds: "Every Sunday, without fail. I try to."¹⁴ At this point in the film, Vadim has already inflicted harm upon Kolya and his family. Though Vadim's churchgoing clearly appears hypocritical in contrast with his faltering morals, it also reflects the church as an environment in alignment with Vadim's corruption. Then, Vasily, getting more frustrated with Vadim's nerves, placates: "you are doing God's work. It is said that good deeds are done happily and with ease"¹⁵ and continues to explain,

¹¹ Zvyagintsev, *Leviathan*, 22:50.

¹² Zvyagintsev, *Leviathan*, 23:35.

¹³ Zvyagintsev, *Leviathan*, 23:55.

¹⁴ Zvyagintsev, *Leviathan*, 1:11:35.

¹⁵ Zvyagintsev, *Leviathan*, 1:12:30.

“you've got your territory, and I've got mine.”¹⁶ Upon inspection, the viewer realizes that whatever process Vadim is engulfed in is not “done happily and with ease.” Both Vadim and Kolya’s family are struggling in whatever plot is underway; thus this plot is not a “good deed.” Father Vasily’s notion of “territory” then furthers the idea that both the Church and government have different aspects that can be joined together in power. Mayor Vadim and Father Vasily become increasingly dependent on each other as the film and their secretive plot progresses.

Leviathan presents itself to perfectly trace another progression: the turn from reflective to restorative nostalgia. Almost an hour into the film, Kolya’s son sits around a bonfire with his friends, surrounded by the ruins of a church.¹⁷ The kids laugh, pass around swigs from a bottle, ultimately brought together by this vacant space; the golden hue of the fire radiates around the adolescent figures, an image of beauty among the crumbling, imperfect structure. Boym’s understanding of reflective nostalgia consists of a picture just as this one: lingering “on ruins, the patina of time and history, in the dreams of another place and another time.”¹⁸ This younger generation fills the space of the past with chatter of the present, the kids serving as a vision of the future. The parents continue this reflection when Kolya’s family gathers with others for a birthday celebration on the crags. Friends play a shooting game and, when the bottles run out, political portraits become the target. As Kolya's friend Stepanych pulls out framed pictures of past leaders, Kolya asks, “Got anyone more current?”¹⁹ But Stepanych responds: “I've got all kinds of stuff. But it's too early for the current ones. Not enough of a historical perspective. Let them ripen up on the wall.”²⁰ Kolya and his friends partake in reflective nostalgia with an understanding of “perspective.” Though a violent act to shoot down framed portraits of leaders,

¹⁶ Zvyagintsev, *Leviathan*, 1:13:00.

¹⁷ Zvyagintsev, *Leviathan*, 56:45.

¹⁸ Boym, *The Future*, 41.

¹⁹ Zvyagintsev, *Leviathan*, 1:07:15.

²⁰ Zvyagintsev, *Leviathan*, 1:07:20.

their ability to do so is a hallmark of Boym's reflection. The friends don't lean into a false pretense of the past, a "single-transhistorical plot,"²¹ nor hide their emotions towards it. They instead find humor and reflect on the importance of "historical perspective." But in the concluding scene, *Leviathan* takes a turn to the restorative. In a surprise to the audience on the subject of the mayor and priest's discussions, the scene reveals a newly constructed Orthodox Church on Koyla's land. Father Vasily, in his sermon, attests "We are reawakening the soul of the Russian people."²² The term "reawakening" strikes; It invokes a sense of something that had always been there—just dormant. The *Leviathan* Orthodox church rises up as if it had always been there, erasing the family home from which it took the land, but posing to the people as historical by association with the Orthodox religion's longevity. Orthodoxy emerges with government encouragement to comfort with nostalgia—as if it has been a constant all along. Shakhanova and Kratochvíl explain the uprising of churches: "the Church has become nigh omnipresent in the Russian society in recent decades. Tens of thousands of churches were built in Russia"²³ In contrast to the kids enjoying the ruins, people—but particularly those with government standing (i.e. the mayor)—of this seaside town prefer the meticulously crafted structure: a reconstruction of the past.

The ending sermon of *Leviathan* serves as a culmination of the film as a whole and thus the interconnected themes of politics, religion, and nostalgia. Father Vasily continues his call to the audience: the defender of truth "can regard events and see their true meaning and tell good from evil."²⁴ "True meaning" denotes a single view of the world: a singular nostalgia. Svetlana Boym warns against this one-sided narrative, though, explaining, "Only false memories can be

²¹ Boym, *The Future*, 43.

²² Zvyagintsev, *Leviathan*, 2:09:25.

²³ Shakhanova and Kratochvíl, "The Patriotic," 5.

²⁴ Zvyagintsev, *Leviathan*, 2:09:25.

totally recalled.”²⁵ If the Orthodox Church pushes a narrative of the past with the acceptance of only one “truth,” it participates in national memory—the making of “a single teleological plot out of shared everyday recollections”²⁶—a facet of restorative nostalgia. The Church becomes a tool in this “plot[ing].” Patriarch Kirill praised Putin in a 2012 speech with similar language of Father Vasily: “I should say openly as a patriarch, who is obligated to tell the truth, without paying attention to politics or propaganda, that you, Vladimir Vladimirovich, personally played a massive role in righting this crooked twist in our history.”²⁷ Kirill portrays Putin as a hero, touching on the “crooked... history” that becomes a key notion for national memory and restorative nostalgia. Kirill upholds Putin as the solution to all historic struggles—crafted from nostalgia—with the prestige of his endorsement being above “politics or propaganda.” The relationship is infallible. Ilan Manor furthers the caution of nostalgia in contemporary Russia: “Notably, Russia’s historic revisionism, and reliance of nostalgic tropes, may be but a tool to rally domestic support in Putin, while diverting attention from Russia’s domestic woes.”²⁸ This “nostalgic trope” of “crooked... history” works to elevate Putin and serves as a connection, needing to be repaired by the two in alliance, just as how Mayor Vadim and Father Vasily partook in restoration in alliance.

By the end of *Leviathan*, the viewer does not feel any divine inspiration. The film provides a bleak warning of the contemporary streamlining of Church and State. The mother ends up dead, the father—Koyla—in jail, and the child without parental care: only the Church and government survive unscathed. Both parties share in the nostalgic fight towards “traditional values,” but these alleged values only lead to destruction. Gaziza Shakhanova and Petr

²⁵ Boym, *The Future*, 54.

²⁶ Boym, *The Future*, 53.

²⁷ Joshua Yaffa, “The Last Free Priest,” in *Between Two Fires* (New York: Tim Duggan Books, 2020).

²⁸ Manor and Pamment, “From Gagarin,” 44.

Kratochvíl examine the joint aim of patriotism: “The Church’s moral discourse targets an ‘imagined, typified western liberal ethos.’”²⁹ These “traditional values” then find themselves at odds with the ideas of the West. Boym notes of tradition, “the stronger the rhetoric of continuity with the historical past and emphasis on traditional values, the more selectively the past is presented.”³⁰ The Orthodox Church, the ultimate Russian tradition, becomes a foil to “Western values” and thus the Western world. As restorative nostalgia thrives with a “scapegoat,”³¹ the Church promotes the idea that the West, with its progressivism, is an evil force acting against the best interest of Russia. The relationship is mutually beneficial: both parties, the Church and government, gain support and bolstered credibility. The trajectory of *Leviathan* as a whole exemplifies the disastrous trajectory of the Orthodox Church and the Russian government’s conflation and joint manipulation of nostalgia: lies and misunderstanding abound, from false property claims, secret affairs, and misguided murder accusations. These troubles grow out of a return to the supposed “values” of the Church and to a falsified memory.

The lesson of coalescence through nostalgia, derived from *Leviathan*, illuminates Russia’s current war on Ukraine. An initial reasoning for the attack stemmed from the (imagined) warm feelings of brotherhood and the religious nostalgia of unified Rus under Orthodoxy. In a study specific to the role of the Orthodox Church in the war, Alar Kilp explains, “The soft power [of] the Russian Church...is manifest in the strong emphasis on the spiritual unity of Russian and Ukrainian people within the religious narrative of the Russian World.”³² Russian media utilizes the restorative nostalgia of a memory of “one brotherhood” and religion

²⁹ Shakhanova and Kratochvíl, “The Patriotic,” 118.

³⁰ Boym, *The Future*, 42.

³¹ Boym, *The Future*, 43.

³² Alar Kilp and Jerry G. Pankhurst, “Soft, Sharp, and Evil Power: The Russian Orthodox Church in the Russian Invasion of Ukraine,” *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe* 42, no. 5 (2022): 1, accessed December 11, 2022, <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree/vol42/iss5/2/>.

to justify government brutality. In Putin's portrayed logic, "Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus all grew from the root stock of the Christian conversion of Rus' by the Grand Prince Vladimir in A.D. 988 and were properly included in the Russian Empire and the successor Soviet Union; they should be joined together again, and if need be, that can be done by force."³³ It is a war of a "false memory" of peace and cooperation. To an encapsulating effect, Ilan Manor reflects, "By summoning a nation's past to the present, the past becomes a template that illuminates the present and elucidates the future."³⁴ Here the Russian government utilizes the Orthodox religion as a function of restorative nostalgia with detrimental consequences. Russia's "template" for the future is based on twisted truths presented as righteous and historic. But the question for the world is if we will let it transform from a false narrative to a historic precedent.

³³ Kilp and Pankhurst, "Soft, Sharp," 4-5.

³⁴ Manor and Pamment, "From Gagarin," 44.

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