

Ukraine Raids Holy Site Amid Suspicion of Orthodox Church Tied to Moscow

The security services said they searched for spies and weapons at the Monastery of the Caves in Kyiv. Dozens of priests have been arrested since the war began on charges of aiding Russia.



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KYIV, Ukraine — The Ukrainian security services on Tuesday raided one of the holiest sites for Orthodox Christians, saying they were scouring a 1,000-year-old monastery in the heart of Kyiv for Russian saboteurs among the clerics and weapons amid the relics, even as pilgrims prayed in the caves below.

The hunt for Russian spies at the sprawling Kyiv-Pechersk Lavra, or Monastery of the Caves, was a vivid demonstration of the depth of mistrust in Ukraine toward a branch of the Eastern Orthodox Church that until this year followed leaders in Moscow, and has been suspected by many Ukrainians of being a Kremlin-aligned fifth column. Millions of Ukrainians belong to another branch independent of Moscow.

As of last month, officials have said, 33 priests had been arrested for assisting Russia since it invaded in February, most of them charged with gathering intelligence and feeding it to Moscow's forces.

It was unclear if any arrests were made or illegal activity discovered on Tuesday, but the security services warned that churches made a perfect hiding place for those looking to tear Ukraine apart from within.

The Kremlin condemned the raid, calling it evidence that Kyiv is “at war with the Russian Orthodox Church.” Vladimir Legoyda, the spokesman for the Russian Orthodox Church, called the move “an act of intimidation” against the only remaining institution “where people both in Russia and Ukraine sincerely pray for peace.”

The raid came as the Russian military hammered cities and towns in southern and eastern Ukraine with heavy artillery fire, while it attempts to regroup from recent losses of territory and troops. As the Kremlin's forces suffer setbacks on the battlefield, and prepare for a possible slowdown in combat over the winter, they appear to have settled on a strategy of making Ukraine unlivable for those who have not already fled the country.



Russia is striking southern and eastern Ukraine with heavy artillery fire. Arthur Voblikova, 13, was injured by a Russian strike in Kherson and was being moved to the operating room at a hospital there on Tuesday. Bernat Armangue/Associated Press

Ukrainian officials said eight people were killed in Tuesday's strikes. In the town of Orikhiv, a shell struck an aid station at a school on Tuesday, killing a social worker and wounding two women, the governor of the Zaporizhzhia region said. People lining up at the aid station had left spaces between them as a security precaution, which prevented a higher casualty toll, said the governor, Oleksandr Starukh, in a post on the Telegram social messaging app.

Also on Tuesday, officials in Crimea, the peninsula illegally annexed by Russia in 2014, said that Ukraine had mounted a drone attack on the port of Sevastopol, headquarters of Moscow's Black Sea fleet, but it was not clear if any serious damage occurred. Ukraine has carried out several attacks far behind the front lines in Crimea, an important staging and supply area for Russian military operations in the south.

Ukraine has also set its sights on recapturing the Kinburn Spit, a strategically vital peninsula at the mouth of the Dnipro River where it meets the Black Sea. Control of the peninsula allows Russia to project force deeper into the Black Sea, guard routes to the ports there and protect its forces in Crimea. If Ukraine were to take Kinburn, it would put key Russian supply lines running north out of Crimea in easy range of Ukrainian weapon systems.

At the Monastery of the Caves, rifle-carrying soldiers combed through the complex of buildings on Tuesday and questioned priests. In the candlelit labyrinth underground, visitors kissed holy relics and prayed among the mummified, centuries-old remains of revered monks, kept in glass cases. None of the visitors wanted to comment on the intrigue playing out above.

The Security Service of Ukraine, known as the S.B.U., said in a statement that it was investigating allegations that church property was being used "to hide sabotage and intelligence groups, foreign citizens, storing weapons." Agents also raided the Koretsky Holy Trinity Monastery and the Sarny-Polissia Eparchy in the Rivne region in western Ukraine. Officials did not announce any arrests or other results of the operation.

The Monastery of the Caves, considered a cradle of Orthodoxy for both Russians and Ukrainians, has been caught in a growing conflict within the church.



Ukrainian soldiers with a captured Russian military vehicle at the front line in the eastern Donetsk region on Tuesday. Libkos/Associated Press

In Orthodox Christianity, national churches have a high degree of autonomy, with the patriarch in Istanbul — which the church still calls Constantinople — considered the first among equals. But the Moscow Patriarchate has often portrayed itself as the true seat of Orthodoxy, noting that Turkish Muslims have ruled in Istanbul since 1453.

In Ukraine, where most people identify as Orthodox Christians, for centuries the church was not autonomous, operating under the Moscow leadership. But the Ukrainian church has been asserting itself since the country's independence in 1991, a process accelerated by conflicts between the two nations, and by the close alliance between Patriarch Kirill I, the leader of the Russian Orthodox Church, and President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia.

In 2019, the Constantinople Patriarchate recognized a Ukrainian church autonomous from Moscow, a move that infuriated Russian political and church leaders, and led to a schism within Ukraine. While many local churches joined the newly independent church branch, others remained within the one still answering to Moscow — and still in control of the Monastery of the Caves.

Kirill is a prominent supporter of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, casting it as a just defense of Russian nationalism and a crusade against the spread of liberal ideologies. Pope Francis, the head of the Roman Catholic Church, has urged Kirill not to “transform himself into Putin's altar boy,” and instead to work for peace.

After Russia launched its war premised on the notion that Ukrainian identity, language and nationality are myths, hundreds more churches switched allegiance from the Moscow Patriarchate to the one based in Kyiv. Then in May, the Ukrainian branch that had remained loyal to Moscow made a formal break from the Russian Orthodox Church, stating that its leaders disagreed with Patriarch Kirill about the war. But many of its clergy members remain sympathetic to the Kremlin.



A photo released by the Russian Orthodox Church showing Patriarch Kirill leading a funeral for a Russian military priest, Mikhail Vasilyev, who died in Ukraine, at a cathedral in Moscow this month. Patriarch Kirill has been a staunch supporter of Russia's war. Oleg Varov/Press-Service of the Russian Orthodox Patriarch Kirill, via Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

Dmytro Horevoi, a religious scholar and director of the Religious Security Center in Kyiv, recently wrote in an online journal about the difficult situation many priests find themselves in, wanting to remain neutral.

“There are not many open agents among them,” he wrote. The priests take the view that “it doesn't matter what nationality you are, the main thing is to believe in God and be humble,” he added.

“In the ordinary world there is absolutely nothing wrong with this,” he wrote. “But when it comes to a war for national identity, for symbols and historical heritage, those who undermine national identity actually become complicit in the crime.”

Father Hieromonk Ioan, a member of the Kyiv monastery, said that the clergy there were not loyal to Moscow but did not shy away from the close historic ties with Russia. “We have certain relations with Russia and it's painful for us what is going on now,” he said in an interview outside the monastery after the raid.

The raid came several days after a priest, Mykhailo Omelyan, released a video that he said was taken by a graduate student showing people at a chapel at the monastery cheering for Russia. “Motherland is waking up — Russia,” people can be heard singing in the video.

The Ukrainian authorities said they would launch an investigation to determine its authenticity.

“Those who, in the conditions of a full-scale war unleashed by Russia against Ukraine, are waiting for the ‘awakening of Mother Russia’ should understand that this harms the security and interests of Ukraine and our citizens,” said Vasyl Malyuk, head of the Ukrainian security service. “And we will not tolerate such manifestations.”

On Tuesday, according to the service, officers checked whether the monastery's premises, spread along the Dnipro River in central Kyiv, were used to shelter saboteurs or store weapons.

Father Hieromonk Ioan said that the clergy there simply wanted to pray in peace. “The most important is that the war is over — we are praying for that,” he said. “For the guilty to be punished and for us to live in peace and not to be afraid of tomorrow.”



Ioan Hieromonk, a priest, at the entrance to the Monastery of the Caves in Kyiv on Tuesday. Brendan Hoffman for The New York Times

Marc Santora reported from Kyiv and Ivan Nechepurenko from Tbilisi, Georgia. Neil MacFarquhar, Matthew Mpoke Bigg and Carly Olson contributed reporting.