Everyday Religiosity and the Politics of Belonging in Ukraine
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The Russian parliament signed off on Vladimir Putin’s request to send military forces to Crimea on March 1, 2014, making official what had already begun. Troops wearing unmarked uniforms occupied the peninsula and staged a referendum two weeks later that affirmed the people’s will to transfer the territory from Ukraine to Russia.¹ Not even one month after the Russian annexation of the Crimean Peninsula, separatists in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions, with support from Russia, declared independence from Ukraine after staging referendums of their own. By mid-April 2014, the provisional Ukrainian government launched formal military strikes against two of its own eastern provinces. Since then, Eastern Ukraine has become the site of the bloodiest conflict the European continent has seen since the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s.

Some initially called this a civil war. However, after a Malaysian commercial airliner flying from Amsterdam to Kuala Lumpur was shot down on July 17, 2014, killing all 298 on board using sophisticated weaponry based in territories held by pro-Russian rebels in Eastern Ukraine, it became obvious that the separatists were not acting alone. As the conflict progressed, unclaimed corpses began to pile up in local morgues and were eventually buried in mass cemeteries as “temporarily unidentified soldiers.” This underlined that many of the fighters were not local, and some were even mercenaries. As the fighting escalated, a surge of post-Maidan patriotism produced a plethora of volunteer fighters, who were untrained and fought alongside an unprepared and undersupplied Ukrainian force. Some clergy, who were active on the Maidan, became military chaplains attached to combat units. To date, this conflict has resulted in over 13,000 casualties, nearly
two million people displaced, and airports, schools, hospitals, and roads bombed to rubble throughout a region once known as the “cradle of the proletariat.”

The confrontation between Russian-backed separatists and Ukrainian armed forces continues to simmer and shows no signs of resolution despite international mediation, a series of ceasefires, and sanctions brought against Russia. The concern is that Donbas will join the growing list of “frozen conflicts” in the region that already includes Transnistria in Moldova, on Ukraine’s western border, and Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Georgia, to the south. Such internationally-unrecognized sub-state structures can be used to uphold a limbo-land of organized lawlessness. Transnistria, which shares a border with Ukraine to the west, in particular, became a site of unfettered trafficking in people, drugs, and arms. Donbas could become a similar “black hole” of illegal trade in the east.

Although an international border between Russia and Ukraine has only existed since 1991, after the armed conflict began in 2014, a new iron curtain of a border has been built to separate—depending on one’s perspective—the “aggressor” or the forces of a “fascist junta.” Although it is clear that Putin’s regime enables this combat and even sent Russian special forces from the beginning and regular army units as of July 2014, it is difficult to say who is fighting who exactly. Unquestionably, some Ukrainians from the Donbas are fighting for succession from Ukraine over grievances with what they see as discriminatory and otherwise ill-advised policies of an anti-Russian Ukrainian state. Other Ukrainians fight with the Ukrainian army against these separatist forces, giving this conflict a prominent civil dimension. Postwar reconciliation will have to be among Ukrainians every bit as much as it will have to be between Russians and Ukrainians.

For other ethnic and national groups, this is a proxy war, which is why mercenaries played such a significant role, especially in the beginning. To cite just two examples, Georgians are still smarting from the Russian invasion and annexation of their territory in 2008. They team up with Chechen fighters, who have fought two excruciatingly brutal wars since the collapse of the USSR that produced mass destruction and staggering civilian casualties. Some members of both groups have joined Ukrainian forces in an attempt to strike a blow at Russia, whereas others from exactly the same regions express their pro-Russian allegiance in conflicts at home by fighting on the pro-Russian separatist side in Donbas. Mercenaries from Brazil, Serbia, Canada, the United States, and elsewhere have also been found among the corpses and combatants captured alive.

The task of confronting the horrors of war, the human toll it has taken as well as the challenge of advancing reconciliation increasingly falls to military chaplains, a newly formalized profession.² Military chaplains bring the extraordinariness of war into everyday life with the express purpose of creating change. In addition to providing liturgical and counseling services to soldiers in combat
situations, the stated goal of the military chaplaincy is to “be close by” (buty poruch in Ukrainian), on the front as well as on the home front, according to the head of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church. Chaplains give guidance on understanding the vexed relationship between forgiveness, responsibility, and moral justice (moral’na spravedlivist’ in Ukrainian), given the contentiousness of the conflict and the shrill tone of political debate. Much of the broader ongoing work chaplains do addresses healing the wounds that arise, not just from combat but from a lack of empathy that manifests itself as indifference. Cultural norms and the particulars of a specific historic period shape how empathy is expressed and how forgiveness and the unforgivable are understood. In myriad ways, military chaplains have become arbiters of these important issues. Andriy Zelins’kyi, a military chaplain from the UGCC, who was the first chaplain to serve in a combat situation in Eastern Ukraine, succinctly said, “If the task of the military is to win the war, the task of a military chaplain is to triumph over the war by achieving victory over the consequences of war in the human heart.”

How can this be done?

As we saw in the last chapter, the post-Maidan period saw an expansion of vernacular religious practice in public space that involve mourning loss and commemorating sacrifice. As the number of casualties mounted, so did the number of public sites where they are mourned and remembered. Here I consider how in the face of war everyday religiosity slips into public institutions with great speed and little resistance. These developments are fed by the nature of the work military chaplains perform when they rotate from the front to the home front, which is changing the tenor of public social institutions and, by extension, the cultural values and dispositions they shape. Drawing on military and religious credentials, military chaplains provide counsel and care to the families of wounded or slain soldiers; humanitarian assistance by collecting material goods and money to help Anti-Terrorist Operation (ATO) forces, the displaced, and needy; and work to develop the next generation of patriotic leaders. Above all, these chaplains remind the larger population that the war is not somewhere out there, but it, too, like the chaplains, is always close by. Their perceived success is thanks to the therapeutic religiosity, or healing and empowerment techniques they offer that are grounded in religious worldviews.

From the Maidan to the Battlefield

In recent armed conflicts, it is not the war but winning the peace that is the true challenge, whether we speak of hybrid wars, as in Eastern Ukraine, or more conventional wars, as in Afghanistan and Iraq. In North and South Korea, Israel
and the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, and the disputes over Kashmir, for example, violence was only quelled after the erection of physical barriers that severed connections and contact but delivered no peace. Random violence and palpable tensions keep alive a credible threat of renewed armed combat at any given moment. No one doubts that winning the peace in Eastern Ukraine will be any different. This hybrid war produces neither the single casualty that is a tragedy nor a torrent of deaths that become statistics. By generating a handful of dead and wounded combatants each week and having destroyed the infrastructure of the region, the stinging need to “win over hearts and minds” to achieve peace has not been lost on Ukrainians. Military chaplains are shaping up to be providers of this soft skill in a hard war.

Clergy who offered calming, motivational support to Maidan protesters were called “chaplains of the Maidan.” Once the war began, military chaplains provided the same to protesters, many of whom enlisted as soldiers. The war sparked the remaking of the almost freelance status the military chaplaincy previously had and the ad hoc way in which it functioned. Before the war, commanders were allowed to use “discretion” as to whether to “invite” priests or provide “prayer space” or not (Volk 2020, 35). Clergy simply volunteered to provide spiritual counseling and other forms of service to men in uniform (at that time they were all men). Once the war began, church-state initiatives multiplied to create a more formal and strategic role for clergy and their religious organizations as part of the war effort. The first priority was to prepare chaplains for ATO servicemen in the East.

As of early 2020, about 400 military chaplains worked in an official capacity as employees of the Ministry of Defense. The service of at least double that number is financed, as it was before, by individual denominations or parishes. These chaplains are called volunteers because they do not receive the medical, pension, and legal protections that military chaplains do who are employed by the Department of Moral-Psychological Services of the Armed Forces of Ukraine (Upravlinnia Moral’no-Psykhologichnoho Zabezpechennia Zbroynyk Syl Ukrainy). In short order, the military chaplaincy expanded beyond the Armed Services to include chaplains in the National Guard and the State Border Service in July 2014; in prisons as of the summer of 2015; in government transportation services (railways and airports) in December 2016; and thanks to Covid, legislation was fast tracked to establish medical chaplains in healthcare facilities, such as hospitals and rehabilitation centers, in 2021. The chaplaincy is now divided into military and nonmilitary branches. Beyond, the prison and medical chaplaincies, the other nonmilitary chaplaincies in development are aimed at the next generation and include an “orphan chaplaincy,” as service in state-run boarding schools is called, and student chaplaincies, where clergy serve youth in educational institutions.
Factors Shaping the Chaplaincy

Developing the chaplaincy in Ukraine became an important litmus test for issues of tolerance in an increasingly pluralist society. The process of formalizing military chaplains as employees of the Ukrainian Ministry of Defense triggered tensions, intense legislative debate, and broad popular discussion. Two factors were particularly influential in remaking the chaplaincy after the Maidan. First, legislation governing the military chaplaincy forced an answer to the question of just how independent the Ukrainian Orthodox Church-Moscow Patriarchate is from the Russian Orthodox Church, and by extension the Russian government. Should tolerance include allowing religious representatives of an “aggressor state” to counsel soldiers during times of war? The verdict rendered by the Verkhovna Rada was no. This made the military chaplaincy an instrument to publicly chas-tise the UOC-MP as a Russian institution, limit its presence and influence, and simultaneously expand the activity and visibility of other confessional groups. This generated an international outcry among human rights activists (Volk 2020: 35–36). There are over 12,000 religious communities registered with the UOC-MP, which makes it the largest denomination in Ukraine. Law 2662, which passed in 2018, does not allow priests from the UOC-MP to serve in an official capacity as military chaplains, meaning as employees of the Ukrainian Ministry of Defense. They can, however, serve as volunteers. Nonetheless, this legislation established Orthodox jurisdictions as politically pro-Ukrainian (the OCU) and politically pro-Russian (UOC-MP), which may or may not accurately reflect the political views of each institution’s clergy and parishioners.

For example, on the local level, many I spoke with understand a parish to be “theirs” because of a family history of participation. Perhaps family members helped renovate the church, were baptized there, or that is where they go to light a candle. This is the basis for their attachment, far more so than a statement of political allegiance. The administrative affiliation a particular church building has to a faraway patriarchate in Moscow or Constantinople, while usually known, has not been the driving force in selecting a church, except when it comes to life cycle rituals, such as weddings, funerals, and the like, when a deliberate choice is made. The commitment, especially among the Just Orthodox, is to a particular church building and usually hinges on an appreciation of the aesthetic experience the church offers through its icons, choir, or decor. Sometimes the appeal of a particular church is simply its convenient location. The understanding that Orthodox forms a national community that includes the Just Orthodox, sympathizers and agnostics, who are welcome in any Orthodox church, diminishes the appeal of fixating on a particular face-to-face community that meets regularly. Therefore, choosing a church has not necessarily reflected the political implications of a
parish’s placement in a greater religious institutional structure, although most people are aware of it. Many loyal to a particular UOC-MP parish did not see their church as the arm of the Russian state in their city, town, or village. These are among the factors that explain why legislation to block UOC-MP clergy from serving as military chaplains in an official capacity was so hotly debated and why most individual parishioners did not seek to reaffiliate away from the UOC-MP to the OCU after the tomos of autocephaly was granted.

The Ukrainian Parliament passed additional legislation on December 20, 2018 (Law 5309) regarding the name of religious organizations. According to this law, which was specifically crafted for this historical moment, religious organizations whose centers are located in an “aggressor state” should reflect the name of the aggressor country in their name. The goal was to oblige the Ukrainian Orthodox Church-Moscow Patriarchate to acknowledge in its name that it was really the Russian Orthodox Church. The chaplaincy became an available means to announce the UOC-MP as an inherently anti-Ukrainian force in Ukrainian society. This was controversial, especially beyond Ukraine. It instantly made the chaplaincy a lightning rod to measure issues of religious tolerance. Naturally, the UOC-MP objected vigorously to all restrictive legislation and to being positioned as a Moscow-based organization. To prove its patriotic credentials, it insisted that it too blessed the Ukrainian army in its defense of the Ukrainian state and asserted that military duty is the fulfillment of the Savior’s commandment to love one’s neighbor. However, it was unable or unwilling to rein in the inflammatory rhetoric coming from Moscow, the effects this had on their own clergy and parishioners, their use of their churches to stockpile weapons in the East, and their repression of non-Orthodox faith groups in the Donbas.

In addition to using the chaplaincy, at least bureaucratically and in name, to disempower the UOC-MP, a second factor shaping the chaplaincy is that it is a portal for a variety of foreign-based religious groups with well-established chaplaincies to exert influence on the development of the chaplaincy in Ukraine. Chaplaincy training is primarily guided by Catholic social doctrine that comes to Ukraine via the Roman Catholic Church’s influence on the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church and through Ukrainian Protestant clergy, who have extensive contacts with American Protestant communities. These two minority faith groups, and their ever-expanding programs of military and nonmilitary chaplaincy, outreach, and humanitarian assistance, put pressure on the Orthodox churches to be more socially engaged. There is little in the way of a parallel process underway in Russia. Foreign religious organizations do not exert anywhere near the same influence or degree of support in Russia on the chaplaincy.

By enhancing a multidenominational chaplaincy, and especially by integrating military and nonmilitary chaplains into the workings of secular, public in-
stitutions, ever more differences are being created between the social and cultural landscapes of Ukraine and Russia. The military chaplaincy in Ukraine moves clergy far beyond the front lines and the parish and places them in state-run social institutions, often where people experiencing pain, vulnerability, grief, and rage congregate. The infrastructure that religious institutions offer, not just hierarchical authority structures and meeting places, but also in terms of rituals, traditions, and symbols as a means of nonverbal, performative communication, is a base chaplains use to cultivate empathic dialogue as a first step to addressing social problems in a spiritual, therapeutic, and tangibly material way.

The trust that clergy and ATO volunteers currently enjoy among a large sector of the population is key to unlocking these processes through interfaith, ecumenical work in an increasingly militarized society. A 2019 Gallup poll found only 9 percent of Ukrainians have confidence in their government. For the second year in a row Ukrainians expressed the lowest level of confidence in elected officials in the world, far below the 2018 median average for the governments of former Soviet states (48%) and the global average (56%). The little trust there is goes, as it has in the past, to the armed forces (69%) and to the church (62.5%). This makes military chaplains are the ultimate beneficiaries of public trust. They embody access to military and divine power, hold positions within two institutional hierarchies that demand obedience and accountability, and they do a job that provides little, if any, financial incentives and yet imposes hardships that potentially include loss of life. Against the backdrop of the Donbas war, the loss of territory, and a heightened sense of vulnerability, military chaplains address the fears and concerns of the population at large by providing therapeutic techniques that draw on religiosity to be applied in everyday life.

**Defenders**

Chaplains, unlike the soldiers they counsel, do not carry weapons, but they wear a soldier’s uniform and usually a large, visible insignia to signal their status as chaplains. One of their key contributions is crafting an understanding of how to respond to armed aggression, some of which is Russian-backed but some of which draws on grievances Ukrainians have with other Ukrainians. Military chaplains begin with soldiers themselves. The sin of murder and forgiveness are topics that soldiers raise in conversation with chaplains. Aware of the commandment, “Thou shall not kill,” how should soldiers understand what they have done and how might God understand it? Many chaplains encourage soldiers to forgive themselves by differentiating the aggression that results from defending one’s country from murder. One chaplain from the UOC-KP (which is now part
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of the OCU) explained to his soldiers that there is no murder in war.11 There is only “deactivation of the enemy,” and responding to that obligation is a choice the soldier did not initiate. Another military chaplain from the UGCC explains his position in similar terms by saying, “Yes, this is war and our soldiers need to react with dignity when defending our land. But we didn’t go to a foreign country, the enemy came to us. They brought this war here and we must defend our land with dignity. Every war is an act of aggression. Although we didn’t start it, it’s our duty to stop it.”12 When chaplains encourage soldiers to see themselves as morally empowered defenders, fulfilling their duty to protect their rightful territory, this potentially absolves soldiers from having committed sin. The act of killing becomes a sacrifice the soldier makes on behalf of others, even a form of heroism. This is reaffirmed publicly when commemorative markers given to the Heavenly Hundred as martyrs extend to include ATO fighters as defenders. The implication is that all have made sacrifices for the betterment of Ukraine, some with their lives, some by sacrificing the lives of others. Heroic sacrifice is further highlighted on the local level when dead soldiers return for burial and people line the streets on their knees in homage as the hearse passes by.

Chaplains are also called on by the state to encourage the greater population to see soldiers as moral exemplars of the common good. A new commemorative holiday, Day of the Defender of Ukraine (Den’ Zakhysnyka Ukrainy in Ukrainian) was established on October 14, after the war began. The gendered name of the holiday does not reflect the over 30,000 women serving the armed forces in various capacities as of 2019. Rather, the intention was to replace the February 23 Soviet holiday, Defenders of the Fatherland, which was equally as male gendered, and considered a counterpart to March 8, International Women’s Day.

October 14 has religious and historical symbolism. It is not only an important Orthodox feast day, the Day of Protection of the Blessed Virgin (Sviato Pokrovy Presviatoi Bohorodytsi in Ukrainian), it is also the Day of Ukrainian Cossacks (Den’ Ukrains’koho Kozatstva in Ukrainian). According to Eastern Christian liturgical tradition, Mary the Theotokos appeared to St. Andrew and his disciple Epiphanius in the tenth century on October 1 (Julian calendar) at the Blachernae Church in Constantinople, where relics of her robe, veil, and belt were venerated. At the time the city was in danger of invasion by pagan Rus, but the miracle of appearance saved them; thus the Feast of the Intercession became a feast day in the Byzantine Rite Orthodox churches. Lore has it that the Cossacks considered the Mother of God their patron and prayed to her before military campaigns saying, “We pray: cover us with your Holy Veil and deliver us from evil.” The Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA) also declared the Mother of God to be their patron and chose October 14 as a commemorative anniversary.
In 2005 former President Viktor Yushchenko declared that this feast day would henceforth also be the Day of UPA. Thus, successive generations of defenders, motivated by protecting the Blessed Virgin Mary and Ukraine, are now commemorated with the participation of military chaplains on October 14. These commemorations increasingly occur at monuments, such as the one seen in figure 5.1, erected to honor defenders killed in Eastern Ukraine and the sacrifices they have made.

In 2019 a new monument to Defenders of Ukraine opened in Kharkiv with military chaplains in attendance. On the vertical columns the lines of the poem “Love Ukraine” by the Soviet-era poet Volodymyr Sosyura are engraved. The focal point of the monument reads, “Heroes do not die.” Photo by the author.

In addition to framing soldiers as defenders, other responsibilities that chaplains shoulder further illustrate the interpenetration of religion and national patriotism. According to the training military chaplains receive, they are tasked with developing “high patriotic feelings and the spirit of combat among servicemen” and are encouraged to do so by drawing on the “moral and spiritual potential of the religious and cultural heritage of the Ukrainian people” (Kalenychenko and Kokhanchuk 2017). This integrates a nondenominational religiosity, referred to as a universalism into understandings of the cultural heritage of the Ukrainian
people. What’s more, chaplains are expected to familiarize soldiers with the “history of the national, cultural and religious formation of Ukrainian statehood,” which serves to integrate religion into the foundation of Ukrainian independence and cultural heritage. Finally, using the oft-repeated, Soviet-era brotherly trope to emphasize unbreakable, kin-like bonds, chaplains are expected to foster “brotherly relations among servicemen” that rest on “principles of solidarity, humanity and a sense of the sacredness of military duty.” In other words, military chaplains are tasked with creating commitments to the country based on a shared heritage expressed in the idiom of kin that is worth defending.

Prominent chaplains are at times confronted with military leaders who interpret these instructions to mean that military chaplains serve as politruki (politicheskie rukovoditeli in Russian), or political managers of soldiers. A politruk was responsible for ideological indoctrination in the USSR and for ensuring the political reliability of troops. During World War II, the Soviet Red Army had politruki embedded in battalions to minimize defections. Some commanders see chaplains as a means to make soldiers obey orders. Others are not religious, and do not appreciate the work of chaplains but tolerate it nonetheless.

**Spiritual Gym**

“Sweet” is how the name of one of the first military chaplains I met would be translated. Given his dual credentials as a military man and as a clerical leader in two institutions known for patriarchy and chain-of-command approach to power, I was not prepared for how truly sweet he was. He was ordained in 2006 as a Greek-Catholic priest and right away became a military chaplain at the Lviv National Ground Forces Academy. Later his chaplaincy expanded to include students and orphans. In 2012, he became responsible for a parish in the center of historic Lviv that caters to believers and tourists of all ages, which was the site of the exhibit discussed in chapter 4. Known as the Garrison Church, it was built in the early seventeenth century by Jesuits to serve the Austrian and Polish troops stationed in Lviv. When Western Ukraine was annexed to the USSR, and the Ukrainian Greek-Catholic Church was outlawed in 1946, the church was turned into a book depository. Soviet authorities stored over two million volumes in floor-to-ceiling shelves there. After much dispute, in 2010 the church was finally handed over to the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church. The books have been removed, but scaffolding remains throughout the nave of the church as restoration continues to remove the vestiges of the church’s prior life as a book warehouse. In spite of the construction, the immense Baroque detail of the church’s interior and its majestic icons are still visible. Given its history as a garrison
church, it became the Center of the Military Chaplaincy for the UGCC. This is where Stepan Sus served, along with twenty other priests, from 2012 to 2019.

In January 2020, shortly after running a 10K race with Ukrainian war veterans as part of the Marines Marathon in Washington, DC, Stepan Sus learned that, at age thirty-eight, he would become the single youngest bishop to serve in the Catholic Church, joining seven other Ukrainian bishops ranging in age from thirty-eight to forty-three, who constitute the youngest bishops in the entire Catholic Church worldwide. The strong preference for young hierarchs within the UGCC bespeaks a commitment to catapult over generations whose thinking might be tainted by Soviet-era values and practices. Once the pope confirmed his new status on November 15, 2019, Sus claimed that for him, “a new marathon in the life of the Church” began.

We met for the first time one month before this happened in an outdoor café, not far from the Garrison Church, on an exceptionally warm fall day. He proposed to conduct the interview in English. I soon understood why. Here we were in an open, public place, highly visible to other patrons of the café as well as to numerous pedestrians who passed by. His priestly collar made him instantly identifiable as a member of the clergy. Many people know him, and he must have greeted or chatted with at least ten passersby during the course of our meeting. Yet by speaking in English in this public place, he gained a measure of privacy. Even those who did not know him could see a priest in the mundane act of having a coffee in a café with a woman. This made him approachably human, which, I learned, is a goal he consistently pursues.

Vibrant Parish (Zhyva Parafiia in Ukrainian) is an initiative that the UGCC developed after the Maidan in 2015 to reconsider what parish communities can do for parishioners. This initiative appealed to him because he never intended to be a parish priest. Given his strong commitment and active engagement in the community, I asked why he was initially so reticent to serve in a parish. He explained:

> As a seminarian, I wanted to be a chaplain for deaf children. Sign language. I studied at a special college for deaf children. I wanted to provide some kind of ministry that is totally different from parish ministry. Since Ukrainian independence, we have focused on the parish. You are going to be a parish priest. This was the only model. And it seemed to me to be a very small way to contribute. It is not the only way and not the best for the church. For the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, the chaplaincy was something that they knew about. At the very beginning we had a model of priests relating to the church like priests behind the iconostasis.
He went on to explain what he meant by that, and in the process, explained what a military chaplain’s obligation to “be close by” means. People have been conditioned to “only come to the church, listen to the priest and obey him, and nothing more.” Sus laments that “Church life for too many parishes now consists of liturgy, funerals, baptisms and nothing more. I didn’t want to be in a parish like that. I started to think that we had to change our attitudes to the faithful. How can we provide our ministry? Now we started this project, ‘Vibrant Parish 2020.’ I always thought we had to do something more,” he said.

This determination led him to work with soldiers. He explained how a military chaplain helps to establish comradeship and develop the ability to get along with others. Sometimes it takes a bit of convincing. Soldiers often ask him why they have to repeat such phrases as “Hospodi pomyli” (Lord have mercy in Ukrainian) so many times. It seems senseless. Sus explains the value of prayer in terms they can relate to. “I say to them when you go to the gym you do exercises many times. Five, ten, fifteen repetitions. Why do you do that? They say, “To have results. To have muscles. To be strong.” I explain that we have inner struggles too and we need to be strong.” Religion, in this way, becomes a “spiritual gym,” where one’s conscience grows robust with the repetition of prayer. “In the Church, you are making your soul. You are examining your soul. You teach yourself how to survive, how to deal with challenges, how to look at many things,” he says, which reveals the therapeutic qualities of religious practice as he understands and imparts them to soldiers. One of the most important intended results of repeatedly praying and other ritualized practices, Sus explains, is to hear a developed, strong voice of the soul in the form of a conscience. “We need to hear our soul to be ourselves. We need to hear what we want and what we need,” he says. Fostering self-knowledge by promoting the development of a conscience, understood as the voice of the soul, through prayer and ritual participation is meant to help a soldier develop a more robust moral code and therefore become a better, stronger, and more decisive person.

Eastern Slavs often use the soul as a referent, claiming they do things for their soul. Correspondingly, a well-known proverb, “chuzhaia dusha potiomki” (Another’s soul is darkness), reveals dusha as the force that animates a person’s inner world—emotions, intuitions, values, sensations, and dreams (Pesman 2000). Sharing one’s dusha is a form of intimacy because it makes a person vulnerable. Even in a secular therapeutic context, dusha, or soul, is used to orient a person to their lifeworld and to use the soul to make beneficial decisions.14 The soul was often evoked in the Soviet period to refer to the moral aspects of personality and the righteousness of will. A strong soul allowed a person to remain true and uncompromising (Matza 2018, 267).
To use the soul as a source of commonality and solidarity, hearing the voice of one's conscience through prayer is only the first step. One must also learn to obey that voice. A key aspect of a chaplain’s service, much like a therapist’s, is building an ongoing relationship with soldiers to help them use the voice of their soul to regulate behavior. The difference is that chaplains add religious ritual and prayer to talk therapy to do so. Via analogy to walking down a road, Sus explains to his soldiers how to use their souls to live a moral life.

Between a sidewalk and a road there is a line. This is a sign to show us that one part is no longer the sidewalk. Although the road looks like a sidewalk, it is not any more a sidewalk. It is so wide. You can walk on the road but it’s very dangerous. You can be crushed, destroyed and many things can happen to you. This line between sidewalk and road is the locus of morality. God says that those who are following the narrow ways of life—it can be so narrow—but this line shows the path to success. Some want to walk on the wide road, thinking that it is their sidewalk. Nowadays some people are thinking and saying, “Why can’t I choose to walk on the wide road?” They don’t think about their life. They can lose their life on the road. The purpose of the church is to explain to people where the line of life is, where the line leading to salvation and safety is. That’s morality. In the US so many people use cars so maybe you can’t imagine what I mean.

I think even car-loving Americans can imagine this. The analogy is clear and readily understandable and one of the many ways he prioritizes explaining church teachings in terms of everyday life to make a connection with his soldiers, many of whom might be among the Just Orthodox and only have a tenuous connection to religion. Sus applauds the decision of Christian missionaries in Asia to substitute rice for bread when they taught the phrase, “Give us our daily rice,” as an example of how clergy should meet a person on their own terms. This principle governs the way he approaches his duties as a military chaplain. In sum, his goal, which was also repeated to me by other chaplains, is for chaplains to prevent a broken relationship with God from developing during fighting on the front or while processing its aftermath on the home front. If this pairing between God and soldier can endure, this relationship can be the foundation for building others. One successful pairing can lead to others.

The second part of a military chaplain’s job is to speak of war, to recognize those who fought, and especially those who died, and the suffering their sacrifice has brought to their families and friends. Sus insists, if there is no recognition of their sacrifice, no empathy for their suffering, there will be little support
Religiosity as a Therapeutic Strategy

Julia Lerner (2020) uses the term “therapeutic religiosity” in studying the rise of “therapeutic culture” and how a “psychological logic” affects the discourse of religiously observant migrants from the former Soviet Union to Israel. Even when they are from a variety of faith traditions, in their quest for “happiness,” she argues, a blending of a religious way of life and a neoliberal subjectivity emerges, at once therapeutic and religious. This cultivates a specific emotional palette, which is reflected in narratives that inform “communal, public and collective realms.” (2020, 1–13) Unlike Lerner’s interlocutors, here the focus is not happiness, nor on serving a neoliberal order. Rather, the goal of therapeutic religiosity is enduring and healing from the experiences of war. Religiosity as a therapeutic strategy is marshaled to help people who are wounded in different ways return to some productive capacity as committed citizens capable of contributing to society. Military chaplains offer religiously infused talk therapy to soldiers as they transition to civilian life and a form of empathic care that centers on dialogue and existential engagement, which often begins on the battlefield or in a hospital and extends beyond. The work of military chaplains normativizes a spiritual dimension to care and the therapeutic capacities of religion by injecting religiosity into social institutions to restore and maintain the social fabric.

Techniques grounded in religious worldviews and spiritual practices have long been applied in a variety of contexts to therapeutically bring about a desired transformation of an emotional, bodily, or psychic nature. Religiosity as a therapeutic strategy contrasts with secular therapeutics, meaning credentialed medical expertise, in that it validates religious expertise as a means to empowerment, protection, and transformation thanks to religious practices and religious actors’ ability to access the intervention of otherworldly forces. When military chaplains serve on the home front, they use religious concepts and spiritualized practices, some of which are site specific, to instrumentally solve problems. Secular therapists and counselors, who also use talk therapy, might invoke concepts with religious underpinnings, such as the soul. However, they
cannot pivot to ritual, ritualized behaviors, and an array of other non-verbal vernacular religious practices to evoke the transcendent.

To aid soldiers during the processes of resocialization and re-entry into civilian life, which mandates learning to trust, forgive, and accept the rights of others in a pluralist society, as well as freeing oneself of anger and the urge to violence, chaplains must develop an empathic understanding for the difficulties soldiers, their families and communities might be experiencing. Perhaps even more challenging, they need to help soldiers cultivate empathy for those living among them whose values and visions are different from their own. Othering one’s compatriots, or an enemy aggressor, forecloses on the possibility of imagining a relationship by denying empathy, by denying their very humanity. This perpetuates hostility and is a dynamic frequently found in divided societies. Although empathy can advance reconciliation and peace, it can also be used to intensify recognition of one’s own suffering and thereby heighten hostility toward others, which compounds obstacles to reconciliation and recovery. This is more likely to happen when tropes of victimhood, martyrdom, and sacrifice are mobilized, as they are here, to alter understandings of who is a “brother” and who is a “neighbor.”

We now turn to the work of chaplaincies that address the psychic and emotional pain of grieving family members as well as soldiers and veterans in distress. For many reasons, both cultural and economic, a one-child family became and remains the norm in Ukraine. Therefore, when a child is killed in combat, for parents this means the end of family life. The loss has ramifications not only in the present in terms of grief but in the future in terms of economic well-being. There’s an old saying: Better to have one hundred friends than one hundred rubles. Children are valuable on many levels. Aloneness heightens the vulnerability of an already precarious life. Given the current state of social service provision and economic instability in Ukraine, most people count on their children to provide post-retirement elderly care, which is shattered when a son dies. There are status categories in English to identify loss through death. An orphan is a child who does not have parents. A widow/widower has lost a spouse to death. In Ukrainian, there are words for parents who have lost a child, even at different stages. Mama anhela, angel mother, is a woman who has lost a small child or a child during labor. “Parents who have been orphaned” (bat’ki osirotily) is an expression that indicates parents who, like an orphaned child, have no one to take care of them.

For family members in mourning, military chaplains arrange monthly services at the Lychakivs’kyi Cemetery, Lviv’s most historic cemetery, where soldiers from this region killed in combat are buried in a special section dedicated to them. The first time I went to this part of the cemetery, I was awestruck by
the endless sea of graves. They were undeniable evidence of the staggering number of deaths in the Donbas. The plethora of standardized gravestone memorials communicates the war’s mass dimensions and illustrates the state’s own abilities to effectively render space sacred. The tremendous personalization of those same identical grave sites marks each soldier as a son, husband, father, or all of the above. This form of material commemoration, of clearly marking each person as part of a collective, and yet depicting their individuality, continues the Maidan trend of both knowing the victim and recognizing their sacrifice of life for a cause greater than themselves. We know the dead through photographs and the familiar material objects that personify their lives. This facilitates the bonds of attachment by moving the viewer beyond an imagined realm into a lived reality of solidarity.

Once a month, people meet at the cemetery for a panakhyda, or memorial ceremony for the dead, followed by prayers and the incessant repetition of chants of vichna yomu pam’iat’ (eternal memory to him). Each panakhyda is open to all, and I attended several (see figure 5.2). Nearly everyone present was there because they had a connection to a dead soldier. These ceremonies were comforting for

FIGURE 5.2. After the memorial service led by a UGCC priest at a cemetery in Lviv. Burial in this part of the cemetery is uniquely reserved for war veterans. There were five new graves on the day this photo was taken. Photo by the author.
people who could not articulate the loss they had sustained—and therefore could not engage in dialogue. Nonetheless, they can recite prayers memorized in childhood and perform scripted gestures on cue collectively. This can become a bonding form of communication. For some, they are the only way to articulate the pain of loss. Because these forms of discourse are ritualized and scripted, they are effective in staving off the morphing of grief into rage. These families might gather at the cemetery over prayer and other ritualized acts, but they remain long after. Some women pull up a chair and as grieving mothers wait for others to stop by to chat and mourn together. Others tend graves by placing flowers, photos, and incense, much as they do at shrines and monuments. Tending a grave is a way to feel the presence of someone departed by “doing something” for them. Even though each tends their own relatives’ grave, and often in silence, they do it at the same time, making this a collective endeavor. This coordinated practice serves to stave off a “patriotism of despair,” which Serguei Oushakine (2009) argues descends on families in Russia in the early 2000s when soldiers’ deaths from the first Chechen war were unacknowledged and their sacrifices unrecognized.

This gathering of family and friends is a manifestation of Olga Berggolts’ famous World War II axiom of “No one is forgotten. Nothing is forgotten.” The value of these gatherings, which function as something of a therapeutic support group, is in evidence for the priest responsible for the Center for Military Chaplaincy by the fact that three families that lost a son have decided to adopt a child. Adoption is fairly stigmatized in Ukraine, thanks to unexamined stereotypes that only alcoholics or other dishonorable people would abandon a child. So deciding to recreate a family through adoption is bold. Other parents, who cannot make that step, have volunteered to provide backup care for the new parents. These are the exceptions; the majority mourn in silence. Yet, exceptions serve the purpose of illustrating that rage is not the only available response to grief and that relatedness can be remade too.

**To Live with Dignity**

Another domain where chaplains are active is providing humanitarian aid to the poor and those in need. Serhii is the head of the Synodal Department for the Medical Chaplaincy of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine. He began as a priest with the UOC-MP, switched to the UOC-KP quite publicly, and now is with the OCU. A former medical-turned-military chaplain and now a medical chaplain once again, Serhii served in a parish for many years in southern Ukraine. He is tall, lanky, chain-smoking, and fast-talking. He was a “chaplain of the Maidan,” and after serving in Eastern Ukraine, he has become quite active in peacebuilding
initiatives, among other endeavors, and this is the reason I initially contacted him in July 2018. I called at around 8 p.m. on a Saturday evening. He said I should come over right away. His daughter was out on a date and for sure he would not go to bed before 1 a.m. Plus, he was putting in a proposal for funding, and he was having trouble with the Americans. Perhaps you could help, he asked. I have learned to go with the flow, and so I arrived at St. Michael’s Monastery about an hour later to interview him. He offered me raspberries that an older woman had brought him and honey made by veterans. He had been to the Chernobyl Zone the day before, and pinned to his army green jacket were several Soviet-era pins (znachki in Russian). He instantly handed them over. “Take them,” he said, “they’re probably still radioactive.”

I asked him about a photographic portrait hung at the front of the room. He was seated in clerical robes with soldiers in uniform, six on either side of him, Last Supper-like. The photo was taken in a combat zone in the early phases of the war. This prompted him to launch into a tirade about how the UOC-MP does everything categorically against Ukraine. “It’s just a political-religious organization right out of the Middle Ages,” he said. “In fact, the Moscow Patriarch blesses the killing of its own believers.” He claims to have switched his parish to the Kyiv Patriarchate for one reason: “We didn’t want to participate in the killing of Ukrainian citizens.” Kyiv Patriarch Filaret provided financing for Serhii to create a network of social services, which now has grown to include twelve subsidiaries, that address various social problems, from HIV/AIDS discrimination to refugee resettlement.

Before we could even begin the interview, the Americans called. An Evangelical group in the United States was considering sponsoring one of these projects. But they wanted details. Knowing that his NGO helps the sick and poor, volunteers, displaced persons, the military, and anyone else in need was not enough. They wanted background on stakeholders, transparency, and financial reporting. Exasperated that they failed to see that there was a war going on in Ukraine, Serhii said he was about to send them to hell. A young Ukrainian woman with limited English had been attempting to assist. He cursed his fate that he had to deal with these types and lamented that major foundations prefer to give to NGOs, not churches. “Here churches are like social organizations,” he said.

I offered to translate the requests and responses while Serhii went out for a smoke. Having acted as a peacekeeper myself in this brewing conflict, just as the interaction with the Americans was ending, three Lithuanians and a Pole arrived with a bottle of cognac in hand at about 10:30 p.m. They had just given an interview on Ukrainian television on how the people in their countries were militarily preparing for the Russian threat, and they were eager to talk to a military chaplain who frequently went behind the front lines in Eastern Ukraine. After
much lamenting about the Russians and their accursed geographic fate, they left and it was possible to resume speaking about the organization he had helped found and now leads.

Among his many duties, he is the chairperson of the Eleos-Ukraine Network. The Greek name translates as mercy, compassion, and kindness. This name was chosen because it represents the core values of the organization. Their mission is to “help everyone live with dignity.” Notably, Eleos sponsors programs that address highly stigmatized groups, such as street children, drug addicts, and the mentally ill. One of the reasons why foreign funders might have had difficulty understanding the exact nature of this network is because their activities are wide ranging and involve numerous partners. The chaplains and other supporters of Eleos interface with NGOs, religious communities, governmental organizations, and basically anyone who can help facilitate solving social problems, some of which are unanticipated and episodic, while others are chronic. There is nonetheless an emphasis on assistance to people with disabilities, people suffering from chronic illnesses, such as cancer and hepatitis, as well as designing responses to the global pandemic.

Their programs are also targeted toward mitigating the negative consequences of war. The multitude of social problems that have arisen since the outbreak of the war are reflected in the wide spectrum of programs the Network offers. More specifically, they aim to provide consistent, professional training for medical chaplains, especially those who serve soldiers. A second goal is to improve the consistency and quality of pastoral care for patients, their families, and healthcare workers. They serve displaced people, families of mobilized soldiers, volunteers serving in Eastern Ukraine, demobilized soldiers and volunteers. They are also involved in peacebuilding initiatives and spiritual and patriotic education for young people. All these factors contributed to Eleos becoming active in working to institutionalize the medical chaplaincy in Ukraine. A closer look at the conditions under which medical chaplains currently work illustrates the need for such efforts as they are currently provided by military chaplains.

**Spiritualized Healing of the Injured**

Ivan is an energetic, passionate supporter of the chaplaincy. He became an ardent enough believer during his participation in the Maidan protests to decide to break with his past life and become a priest with the UOC-KP. After the war began in 2014, his clerical life became oriented toward the military chaplaincy almost right away, and this is where he continues to serve. He reaffiliated to the OCU after the tomos was granted. When asked why he chose this particular church, he stated
flatly, “The proper development of correct Christian values is a question of national security.” In other words, it was a political decision and a means to “securitize” religion. He has a wife but no children and she agreed to support him, which is what allowed him to volunteer as a military chaplain for three years.

Like so many other current believers and even clergy, he did not come from a religious family and was for a long time not an active believer. However, a revelation of sorts during the Maidan, which he describes as a “calling from God,” changed everything. “I understood there was a different path,” he said unequivocally. This moment prompted him to make a break with his former life as a “businessman.” Not everyone is willing to share the details of a life they once lived and now disavow. He was not interested in discussing aspects of his past and repeatedly insisted that his conversion “is a long story.” Before becoming a priest, he acknowledged having worked as a “representative” of a Swedish company in Eastern Ukraine. His front teeth had been knocked out and the deep circles under his eyes and leathery tone of his skin betrayed hard living. His persistent avoidance of probing questions about his past was the polar opposite reaction to those I had encountered among converts to evangelical Protestantism. They used a morally compromised past as a foil to illustrate the difference between a life with God and one without. Conversion redeemed a “fallen” past by making it instrumental for inspiring others and measuring spiritual progress, which could be used to enhance one’s moral credentials. In Eastern Christianity, the same sweeping transformation as a result of going from being nominally Orthodox to no longer so is not expected. Therefore, prior lifeworlds that could be construed as unbecoming to a priest were best avoided.

When Ivan began to serve, there were no official military chaplains. He said, There was no sense that becoming a military chaplain was even possible. I just went myself to the soldiers on Tuesdays and Thursdays. That’s why, when an official chaplaincy was developed, they offered me a full-time ongoing post and I accepted. But I never thought about it. An official chaplaincy? We couldn’t even dream that such a thing would become possible. But that’s what happened. Gradually, gradually, since 2017 my status has become official. Why? Because a law, rather than an order (prikaz in Russian), in January 2017 came out. I began my duties as a military chaplain. Where my career started, is where I think it will end.

He insists on the need for chaplains to be better prepared. Although he received a brief theological education, his biggest regret is his lack of training in psychology given the therapeutic qualities of religiosity he tries to harness. Convinced of the tight connection between spiritual and physical healing, he now serves on another front line of sorts, in a large military hospital in Kharkiv. The
hospital is the first stop outside the conflict zone where the wounded are taken. Access to the hospital is strictly controlled. All visitors must show their passports, and foreigners are prohibited from entering. So, I could not see for myself how visits with soldiers in the hospital unfolded. Discharged soldiers also cannot enter the hospital. Therefore, as part of his quest to build an ongoing relationship with soldiers and veterans, Ivan often met with them in the café across the street from the hospital, where I was able to participate in their meetings and conversations.

Ivan has specific ideas as to how the medical chaplaincy should develop. These ideas were sharpened after he was hospitalized. He noticed that volunteer clergy rarely made it to the hospital chapel to provide spiritual care to patients. He confirmed this with a nurse, who in twenty years of working at the hospital never had seen a priest. The Minister of Health from 2016 until 2019 was Dr. Uliana Suprun, an American member of the Ukrainian diaspora. She advocated the placement of dedicated chaplains in hospitals when tasked with reforming the health-care sector under President Poroshenko. After the collapse of the USSR in 1991, some medical establishments began to include a small chapel on their grounds. Most priests served there in addition to their parish duties, as they did in other public institutions including the military, on an ad hoc basis. The result, as Ivan's experience reflects, was that chapels were rarely used. Dr. Suprun initiated legislation that began to change that. Increasingly, even rehab centers, assisted living facilities, and other health-care centers now have prayer spaces that are used by people who work in these facilities every bit as much as by patients.

The practice of including chapels in health-care facilities is receding in parts of Europe. In the UK, for example, even when a chapel is maintained in a hospital, it is often used as a multipurpose room (Beckford 1998). In the United States, the practice of including prayer space in hospitals and health-care facilities continues, but these places strive to be interfaith, capable of serving people of different or no faith simultaneously. Chapels in public facilities, such as the Veterans Administration, go a step further. They aim to strike a tone of religious neutrality, which often renders them bland and nondescript. Many hospitals in the United States have clear religious affiliations; therefore, their chapels openly appeal to an aesthetic of that faith tradition.  

Chapels in Ukraine represent another model. It is becoming more and more common to build or convert space in hospitals and rehabilitation centers into chapels. These worship spaces, by and large, do not reflect a particular patriarch-bound Orthodox jurisdiction nor exclude Byzantine Catholics. They achieve a certain universalism by incorporating a Ukrainian folklore aesthetic, which is characterized by rushnyky, or traditional embroidered cloths, draped around the icons as well as decorative naïve depictions of Ukrainian folk elements, such as
sunflowers and *kalyna*, a native berry. The sacredness of the space is communicated by stylized icons, Byzantine crosses, candles, something of an altar in front, and ample room to sit quietly in prayer or meditation. In this way a generalized atmosphere of religiosity mixed with national folk elements caters to people who see themselves as Just Orthodox. At the same time, it reaffirms the indissoluble links between a national and religious essence and attaches them to healing properties in a public institution.

**Healing the Soul**

Ivan offers therapeutic religiosity in the form of talk therapy during visits to wounded soldiers in the hospital. He clearly delineates the forms of medicalized assistance psychotherapists and psychiatrists can offer from what he and other chaplains provide. A psychotherapist, in his view, handles logistical matters, such as how to get along with others and build relationships, whereas a chaplain engages the fundamental meaning of life questions. In his view, a different kind of expertise is needed to address such questions prior to the work psychotherapists do. He explains,

> A doctor heals the body. A priest heals the soul. Medicine doesn’t address the soul on the level of science. A doctor can help a psychologist solve worldly, day to day problems. But that’s not always what a person needs. You need to understand the person. Where is he coming from and where is he going? He needs understanding. Not just one or two years in the future. But fundamental questions: why am I alive? What will happen later? If I’m at the front and they kill me, what will happen to me then? When the body dies, is anything left or not? Can a psychologist help with that? No. That’s the answer. These are the fundamental questions that trouble people. You can give someone calming meds and he’ll come back as himself. That’s also necessary. But that’s the body. And then there is the soul.

The topics Ivan discusses are often mystical, existential, and even philosophical. Abstract philosophical talk becomes talk therapy when it provides an indirect route to exposing fears and anxieties, which, along with contemplation and introspection, assist in recovery from physical pain and emotional distress. Some of the most common questions that arise are whether there is life after death, if hell exists, and if everyone answers to a higher power. Such existential questions might sound lofty and abstract, but they have a certain urgency for men who might have
killed. Ivan views such dialogue as therapeutic, as a means to heal, because it brings mystical searching into everyday life and promotes a release from despair.

There was not a developed tradition of turning to psychoanalysis or psychotherapy during times of anguish in the former Soviet Union. Psychiatry played a rather punitive role in Soviet society. It was a weapon the state used against dissidents, critics, and other nonconformists who refused to comply with ideologically accepted behavior. Psychiatry to this day is more known for its restrictive capacities than healing or managing chronic mental illnesses. It is against such a backdrop that chaplains step into the healing process. Much like psychoanalysts, chaplains derive their authority and perhaps even the legitimacy of their expertise by having shared (or having imagined they shared) some of the experiences of those they counsel. Ivan’s healing of the soul lacks a specific scientific ontology and methodology. If Sus tries to help soldiers hear their conscience as the voice of their soul, Ivan tries to help their souls heal so that they have a voice. He relies heavily on building a relationship through dialogue to allow the soldier to uncover self-knowledge with the goal of bringing forth the desired transformation to a healthier state, however that might be understood.

**Liminal Atmosphere of the Monastery**

I mentioned to Ivan that in the United States, veterans struggle with problems of suicide and domestic violence, two issues not covered in the existential themes he mentioned. He responded by saying that they have yet to effectively address such issues in Ukraine. He advocates that each exiting soldier should be given a transition period of six months in a monastery, reviving a tradition of monastic medicine when healers of the soul were also healers of the body. Such a proposition trades on the assumption that soldiers have neither confessionally specific nor denominationally specific allegiances and that a Just Orthodox orientation to Eastern Christianity is prevalent enough to make this proposal viable.

The plan is not farfetched. Ivan works primarily in Kharkiv, where in the nineteenth century, a wealthy family bequeathed their estate to the Orthodox Church and built a psychiatric hospital there in honor of their daughter who was mentally ill. During the Soviet period, the religious buildings were repurposed, and the estate became the main regional psychiatric hospital. There has been much discussion as to whether the hospital should be returned to the church or not. There is already a UOC-MP church on the grounds (see figure 5.3). Ivan thinks not only should they be returned but that they should be used for the therapeutic rehabilitation of veterans based on a program of contemplation. This
is vastly different from the medicalized care that relies on drug therapy that is now provided, according to the director of the psychiatric hospital who, predictably, is against all efforts to turn the hospital over to the church (Wanner 2021). There are already two groups of volunteers at the hospital, one connected to the UOC-MP and another small group of highly dedicated women, who provide food and clothing to the patients every week. While he considers the assistance offered by the volunteers from the UOC-MP negligible, he applauds the efforts of the other nonchurch affiliated volunteers for their reliable care and attention to patients as well as the tangible material assistance they provide.

Many people in Orthodox countries believe monasteries are the sites of spiritual energy that heal and rejuvenate. As a result, they visit monasteries to address emotional, psychic, and physical pain, as we saw in chapter two. In that spirit, some Orthodox monasteries offer something of a halfway house for drug addicts who are “working on themselves” (pratsiuvaty nad soboiu in Ukrainian; rabotat’ nad soboi in Russian) with the help of spiritual advisers and medical personnel (Wanner 2007 and Zigon 2010). Ivan explains how a monastery, as sacred ground with healing properties, is particularly well suited to returning...
soldiers. When I ask if he advocates this because he sees a monastery as a space apart, a place to experience some inner peace, he counters with the opposite.

It creates confusion (smushchenie in Russian). That is what is created when we change something. He [a soldier] was at the front. He had specific goals. He knew what to do. He comes back and he sees that now everything is not like that. Why did he do that? It loses meaning. He needs to substitute one thing for another. He needs a new life in the social world. For that he needs most of all calmness and to accept this new life. To want to live. It begins with deep spiritual problems.

Ivan believes that a monastery creates ideal conditions for soldiers to mobilize themselves, as they did in combat, to adapt to civilian life by recreating themselves (perestraivat’sia in Russian). Precisely the liminal atmosphere of the monastery, the not-of-this-world but not-yet-of-the-next in-betweenness, makes it a fundamentally creative place. The confusion a monasterial eye-of-the-storm period could potentially dislodge developed instincts, impulses, and propensities related to combat. This would allow the soldier to reorient to another set of circumstances by engaging in contemplation to gain self-knowledge and develop skills for a new working life in a postcombat world.

Just as monks do physical labor in the monastery, Ivan advocates that the returning soldiers should too. “Not hard labor,” he quickly adds. Rather, he envisions soldiers growing food and then consuming it themselves. The cycle of creative production and consumption is extremely important because, as Ivan says, “war means destruction and murder. One needs to understand that it is not right. It was necessary to fight. He [a soldier] needs to be born again, to do something productive again.” As a microcosm of the greater society, the prescribed environment of the monastery, with its liminal atmosphere and religious supports in place, could offer a healing and reorientation process that would allow each person to develop their potential (realizovat’sia normal’no in Russian).

The kind of therapeutic religiosity Ivan proposes is meant to yield the discovery of a new purpose through dialogue, use labor to begin to fulfill that purpose, and contemplation to give that purpose and new life meaning. Self-knowledge through labor rehabilitation is meant to create a sense of empowerment by allowing the soldier to demonstrate that he is capable of meaningfully contributing to society and finding social meaning in work (sotsial’noe znachenie in Russian). Clerical expertise in a monasterial setting that draws on the military chaplain’s empathic understanding of the trauma the soldier has experienced would be key to ensuring a successful transition. This is all a far cry from what is currently offered to soldiers returning to civilian life. They are now given cash compensation, which most use to buy a home or a car.
In the United States, the Battlemind program is offered to discharged soldiers (Finley 2011, 105–6). It is a twofold program that gears up soldiers for combat in the beginning and psychologically prepares them for reentry at the end of a tour. Military chaplains run the workshop for returning soldiers, which rarely lasts more than one day. The primary focus is on interpersonal relationships and marital counseling. In both Ukraine and the United States, the difficulties of reentry range from the challenges of learning to relax vigilance to reckoning with how much of a stranger a soldier has become to his or her family. It is not difficult to imagine that there are soldiers who could benefit from a more gradual transition, surrounded by people who understand the difficulties of rewiring actions and reactions, emotions, and behavior.

After acknowledging that his proposals for a six-month transition period might elude implementation in Ukraine for quite some time, with the intensity of a warrior on the front, Ivan continues to insist on the necessity of working with men and women who come out of the army and with their families:

We didn’t think about it before, but it has now become necessary for us too. Even our Afghan veterans, to this day they live in Afghanistan. They remember it. They didn’t adapt after that. And now those problems are not disappearing. In fact, they are growing. . . . Military chaplains should not only be close by to active duty soldiers, they should also do postservice adaptation. That is the most important aspect of their service. Chaplains need to continue serving, supporting, and accompanying soldiers. Not just on the front. What comes after is also an important moment. We have to want that. The government needs to take up such questions. They should see the importance of that.

Whether the government does or not, the Greek Catholic Church has declared its commitment to working with veterans. In 2019 the church announced an intention—albeit with no details—to have every diocese have a rehabilitation center for veterans. So slowly, whether it is medical chaplains working in state-run hospitals and rehabilitation centers or collaborating with NGOs to improve the level of treatment or churches establishing their own medical facilities and staffing them with medical chaplains, care of the soul and care of the body conflate.

Building the Country We Want to Live In

“The war doesn’t mean the end of Ukraine. It is the beginning of a Ukraine that we don’t know yet.” This was one of the opening salvos of the first military chaplain to serve in the Donbas as he gave a lecture at Kyiv-Mohyla Academy,
one of Ukraine’s flagship universities and where the chaplain himself studied political science. The perspective one takes determines the vista one has. Zelinski is a priest in the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church. He has made a name for himself by virtue of the novel perspectives he takes and, as a result, the inspiring visions he offers. In the process, he has become a well-known public intellectual and author of two books about his experiences on the front (Zelinski 2015, 2016). Some military chaplains return from the front and counsel those grieving. Others engage in social assistance and healing. Zelinski uses his military experience to inspire leadership in the next generation to rekindle a vision that draws on radical hope for the country’s future.

He expands the military chaplain mandate to “be close by” to include the goal of creating “humans for humanity.” Humanity for him means the ability to appreciate justice, truth, beauty, and the ability to do good. During combat on the front, he saw his job as “provoking a soldier into his/her own humanity” in the face of circumstances that threatened to destroy it. On the home front, he works to ensure that “people have the capacity to do good, to fight for justice, to seek truth, and to contemplate beauty.”

The qualities he tries to foster are necessary to not only win the war but to win the peace too.

Zelinski’s broad pursuit of justice, truth, beauty, and goodness has made him active in many spheres of public life, but especially in policy initiatives concerning cultural politics, nationbuilding, and increasing leadership capacity in Ukraine. He was born in Lviv in 1989, but he left Galicia to study philosophy in the United States for four years, theology in Italy for five, and spent two years in a monastery in Siberia before returning to Kyiv to study political science at Kyiv Mohyla Academy. In between it all, he worked at the National Academy of Land Forces in Lviv and was instrumental in 2007 in setting up the military chaplaincy there. He currently has multiple titles that reflect the wide spectrum of the domains in which he is actively engaged: co-founder of the Ukrainian Leadership Academy; Instructor at the Institute of Leadership and Administration of the Ukrainian Catholic University; a priest in the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church and Deputy Director of the Military Chaplaincy of the UGCC; political scientist, and author of several books.

The mandate to “be close by” motivated him to participate in the Maidan from the very first day. Once the war started, he was the first to serve at ATO headquarters in June 2014 as a military chaplain. As he said to me, and repeated in many interviews and in his writings, he became the first military chaplain to serve in a combat situation because “40 percent of my friends were there.” The war was one of the biggest surprises of his life and a possibility he, like almost everyone else, never considered during the Maidan.

He served two years in Eastern Ukraine during the early stages of the war when fighting was particularly intense, and Ukrainian forces were woefully ill-equipped
and unprepared. He witnessed bloodshed and death, courage and fear, all in heavy doses. During this time, he heard confessions alongside the steady fire of grenade launchers and administered communion in trenches with rubble and shrapnel strewn about. In a combat situation, he maintains that it is the human heart that is the “final fortress” that must be defended from the enemy at all costs. Unlike others who witnessed combat, he managed to chronicle his impressions and experiences in two books, numerous articles, and many interviews. In the process, he has made known the unknown horrors of war, given face to the young men and women who comprise the staggering number of war causalities, and offered radical hope in the form of a way to think about the past such that a path to a future of peace, reconciliation, and well-being seems possible.

This has made Zelins’kyi an inspirational speaker, something of a life coach, especially for the youth of Ukraine. Although based at the main Ukrainian Greek Catholic Cathedral in the capital, he keeps a furious travel schedule that would exhaust the most seasoned traveler. His trips to soldiers, churches, and various chapters of the Ukrainian Leadership Academy are chronicled on social media with daily smiling selfies of Zelins’kyi together with young people making his signature thumbs-up gesture. He is often wearing a navy sweatshirt with the mantra of the Ukrainian Leadership Academy, “I am Ukraine. I love Freedom.”

He communicates unbounded energy and optimism with his slightly crooked smile and athleticism. He jogs every morning at 6:30, regardless of weather, even as he crisscrosses the country. I interviewed him in Lviv under the single worst conditions I have ever interviewed anyone in the thirty years I have conducted ethnographic research. He had been a speaker at a conference on “Populism and Responsibility” at the Ukrainian Catholic University. Unbeknownst to either of us, we chose a place to talk right beside where a children’s dance performance was about to be staged. A small army of parents arrived and surrounded us, cell phones in hand to photograph their twirling children, as the music began blaring out to accompany the tiny dancers. It was bearable until the music shifted from classical to the pop hit “Despacito,” which played at full volume. As one might expect from a man who has been in combat, he was entirely undaunted. He simply raised his voice over the music and forged on, explaining his visions and dreams for the youth of Ukraine as members of that very youth danced all around us.

Increasing Leadership Capacity

One year after the Maidan ended in 2015, he cofounded the Ukrainian Leadership Academy (ULA). The ULA is something of a highly selective, structured
gap year. It offers a ten-month, six-day-a-week residential program of physical, emotional, and intellectual challenge to Ukrainians and members of the Ukranian diaspora from ages sixteen to twenty. Entrance is competitive, and participants receive a stipend. The program has grown steadily since its inception and now includes about 240 participants each year. The ULA is modeled on the Israeli Shnat Sherut program of post-high school community service, which strives to strengthen Jewish-Israeli identity while helping participants develop certain values and skills that will make them assimilated and productive citizens of Israel.20

The ULA has a two-fold goal of developing national awareness and the values and skills conducive to leading initiatives for social improvement in a post-Maidan world. The ULA aims to encourage responsibility, creative thinking, and the confidence among youth to implement their own visions so they can “create the country they would like to live in,” as Zelins’kyi says. It has branches in six Ukrainian cities (Kyiv, Lviv, Mykolaiv, Poltava, Kharkiv, and Chernivtsi) and participants usually go to a city outside the region they are from during their tenure at the Academy, which allows them to get to know other regions of their own country. Few Ukrainians vacation in country other than going to their dacha summer home. Those who can travel usually go abroad. This leaves Ukraine a terra incognita for most Ukrainians, which is why a premium is placed on serving beyond one’s hometown and region. It becomes a means to fortify national awareness and identification.

During the ten-month period, participants attend lectures, volunteer for various community projects, play sports, and organize “Impact Days,” where members of the greater community come to the Ukrainian Leadership Academy’s campus to participate in outreach events and programs. I attended an Impact Day at the ULA in Kharkiv that coincided with the Day of Defenders of Ukraine. Maria, a young woman from Lviv, gave us a tour of the ULA campus. She spoke Ukrainian, as did the other participants. The ULA is located in a renovated, well-furnished two-story building, with large meeting rooms and a kitchen downstairs and dormitory-style rooms upstairs where the participants, along with local leaders, live. The Kharkiv ULA gained some notoriety when one of the local leaders of the program, a young man in his early thirties, committed suicide. Another leader before him had attempted to do the same. For some Kharkivites, the “total institution” aspect of a ULA gap year and the suicide make the ULA suspect, especially when combined with the ever-present suspicion of cults and the steadfast assumption that organized endeavors are inherently coercive.

None of this was apparent or seemed to dampen spirits on Impact Day. On a day when school was not in session because of the Day of Defenders holiday, the ULA participants offered free patriotic activities for neighborhood kids. They
staged a historically themed play, organized craft activities that incorporated national symbolism, offered meals, games, and other outdoor activities. In the evening parents joined in the festivities with their kids. In essence, ULA participants provided free childcare and creative, educational activities, all with a distinctly national flavor, for kids who otherwise would probably have been indoors before a screen. Such activities are part of a greater initiative to promote “self-organization” (sama-organitsiia in Ukrainian), a concept that flourished during the Maidan and aims to create a more vibrant civil society by encouraging civic involvement on the local level. Zelins’kyi visited the ULA in Kharkiv and met with the participants the day before, timing his visit to coincide with the consecration of the new monument to the Defenders of Ukraine in Kharkiv.

**Lessons Learned in War**

There are several insights Zelins’kyi shares, based on his experiences as a member of the clergy and military, publicly in seminars, speeches, and in meetings he holds with ULA participants. I focus on only two here that relate to the therapeutic qualities of religiosity that can be made part of everyday life. The first lesson is the importance of facing, not evading, fears, even in a combat situation when fears are particularly intense. In an article he wrote about serving on the front over Christmas after he received the “People’s Hero of Ukraine” award, he stated, “Fear coaxes us into hatred, forces us into despair and hopelessness, to distrust, and a hardening of our own sense of self-confidence, finally wrecking the entire construct of our individuality. We must never allow ourselves to become prisoners of our fears.”

The essence of faith, he insists, is that it allows a person to endure fear and still maintain humanity. By detailing his own prayerful supplications, devotional practices, and collective participation in the liturgy on the front, he explains how the therapeutic qualities of religiosity work to dispel fear by diminishing feelings of loneliness and vulnerability.

On the home front, religiosity serves to increase, what he calls “psychological resilience” and self-knowledge as a means to empower a positive transformation in one’s life. He speaks of the “mental mattresses” people carry with them, so that if they fall, they will not be injured. He seeks to make the church a place of trust to counter the widespread distrust people have of one another and of institutions as a result of “national traumas” experienced over generations. Both a reduction of fear and an augmentation of psychological resilience are necessary for soldiers, and even for all Ukrainians, to retain a sense of humanity and an ability to recognize and pursue “justice, truth, beauty, and goodness.”
A second lesson that he offers, which was the gist of one of our conversations and the subject of many of his interviews elsewhere, relates to how the past should be reinterpreted to provide a path forward. The various churches offer different interpretations of the Ukrainian historical experience to distinguish each other, given their common roots in Eastern Christianity. Rather than using history to situate Ukraine in relation to Russia, as most do, the vision Zelins’kyi offers is targeted toward bridging regional differences in Ukraine and reconciling the tensions that contributed to the war in the first place. He returns to the Maidan as an example of a way forward. This event was a creative driving force that demonstrated the ability to unite Ukrainian citizens around what I have called “radical hope.” Zelins’kyi notes that an insistence on justice and human dignity and vowing not to back down until they were realized united a broad cross section of the population on the Maidan. People of different faith traditions speaking a variety of languages did not seek to advance a particular aspect of identity politics that hinged on language, religious affiliation, or any other standard identity markers. Rather, he sees the Maidan as evidence of the possibility and power of a civic, value-oriented understanding of what it means to be Ukrainian.

Years later Zelins’kyi’s own optimism prompts him to interpret this moment as one that reveals that Ukrainians are on the cusp of a new beginning. He hardly discounts the chaos and destruction in Eastern Ukraine and the overall instability the war has wrought. Rather than focusing on that, the endless inter-church squabbles, the failures of the Ukrainian government, or other potentially demoralizing topics, he insists that uncertainty and instability open up possibilities. To prove the point, he noted that in the United States, for example, the chaplaincy is an established institution. This makes it far more difficult to introduce change. In Ukraine, in contrast, legislators and clerical leaders are in the process of creating the chaplaincy, which means that the possibilities for innovation and shaping this profession are almost endless. The same is true of how he assesses the prospect of reunifying Ukraine after its territory has been truncated by annexation and war, and its population pummeled and divided by hardship. How these events are interpreted, especially given their freshness and magnitude, will lay the groundwork as to how the country will develop in the future, he insists. His reaction to this precarity and instability is to insist, “We live in a world we don’t understand, in an uncertain world, a world that is unstable. But this is not the end, this is a new beginning. It is our own ability to reinterpret events that we depend on to define how we will live.”

This is radical hope. The future is neither visible nor legible, but the guiding light Zelins’kyi uses to build leadership capacity is his recall of the common, unified pursuit of justice that was achieved on the Maidan.
Naming the Affective Atmosphere

The 2019 election slogan of President Poroshenko was “Army, Language, Faith!” It epitomized his nationalist ideological vision forward. Zelins’kyi criticizes such efforts, claiming that “hovering over the nineteenth century trying to rehabilitate in the twenty-first century ideas that were embraced in Europe two hundred years ago” was never successful in the past. It is unlikely to be effective now. He cautions against scouring history for a viable national story with a universal appeal or struggling to articulate a “national idea” based on the Ukrainian language, a literary canon, or a Ukrainian Church. Durable allegiances are forged on what he calls “social ontologies.” This refers to the values that inform personal decisions, collective priorities, and civilizational aesthetics. A national idea cannot be a text or a cultural trait. It must be a “verbalization of social ontology,” or of a lifeworld that depicts a way of being in the world. He looks to diverse, multicultural countries, such as Israel, that have espoused concepts like a “promised land,” which are laden with hope, to effectively absorb and assimilate a diverse group of Jewish immigrants into Israeli citizens sharing a common social ontology. Just as Israel draws on Judaism in all its varieties, the orienting values Zelins’kyi sees are tied to an Eastern Christian faith tradition. The use of a conceptual national-emotional register is a more promising avenue to generate a commitment to people and place, Zelins’kyi argues, than privileging certain cultural traits, such as language or a particular denomination, which inevitably will create minorities. Indeed, a nationalized emotional register embodied in the arts has defined a certain ontology for other countries. The tango is emblematic of Argentina, samba of Brazil, reggae of Jamaica, fado of the Portuguese, and gospel, blues, and jazz of African Americans. Maria Sonevytsky suggests that “wild music” is a trope that allows Ukrainians to imagine a unifying vision of sovereignty (2019, 177). She sees “discursive wildness” reflected in a variety of music styles, from the Hutsul Wild Dances of the pop performer Ruslana to the sounds of Eastern, Orientalizing Crimean music, as amounting to a form of “acoustic citizenship” because of the common aural sphere it creates.23

Ukraine, as a borderland, has always been caught between multiple state structures, ideological systems, and aesthetic styles. The city of Chernivtsi has used “nostalgic cosmopolitanism” as something of a social ontology to rebrand itself and renovate public space (Wanner 2016). Zelins’kyi believes that, rather than seeing this diversity of experiences as a weakness, it can also bequeath a versatility, openness, and tolerance that could be considered a strength. From Byzantium, Russia took the idea of itself as a third Rome because Russia interpreted its roots in terms of power. In contrast, he offers that Ukrainians could interpret their legacy and distinctiveness in terms of sofia, “wisdom” in Greek,
specifically a “wisdom of being.” Rather than seeing religious pluralism as a source of divided loyalties and interpreting the lack of a single dominant national church as a sign of a weak national identity, these dynamics are a source of freedom and tolerance, opening an ecumenical vista forward.\textsuperscript{24} The “wisdom of being” has yielded the “Kyiv tradition,” an ecumenical union of Orthodoxy and Catholicism. A concept that draws on a broad Eastern Christian faith tradition, such as \textit{sofia} is a potentially unifying rubric. This is a social ontology with world-making capacities, including winning the peace. This is the radical hope he offers his compatriots.

Such hope is radical because the world-breaking capacities of religion and the possibility for prolonged tensions and violence are on the horizon. Religious leaders, and especially military chaplains, are engaged in bringing along the next generation of patriotic leaders, meaning someone who cares about the country, who cares about something greater than him or herself. Such a designation is meaningful in a county where there is a significant degree of cynicism, indifference, and suspicion toward people in power. Even if the affective atmosphere on the Maidan can be revived to reflect an inclusive and universal religious idiom, Ukraine already shares with neighboring Russia the rise of a military-patriotic culture that fosters “militarized masculinity” (Knorre 2015; Knorre and Zygmont 2020). Victoria Fomina writes of a “new culture of war patriotism” that is promoted in Russia as a path forward for the country to reclaim its rightful place on the world stage. (2018). This militarized culture of patriotism involves the Russian Orthodox Church. Initiatives to popularize soldier-heroes in Russia, such as Evgenii Rodionov, a soldier beheaded in Chechnya during the First Chechen War when he refused to renounce his faith, have now morphed into church-state efforts to memorialize and even canonize such figures as saints worthy of veneration. There are now icons depicting Rodionov and pilgrims come to his gravesite to offer devotions (Fomina 2018; Kormina 2014). The massive new Cathedral of the Armed Forces in Moscow, built to mark the 75th anniversary of the Soviet victory in the Great Patriotic War, finds a counterpart in Kyiv where discussions are ongoing to build a special chapel dedicated to defenders who fought and died in Eastern Ukraine.

The emphasis I have placed on military chaplains as drivers of social change and the enhanced affective atmosphere of religiosity after the Maidan and the start of the war could also easily combine to endorse a morally validated militarized masculine defense of the home front. As participants in the war and in the war recovery effort, military chaplains have a dual perspective on hate, indifference, and the violence they fuel as well as on the empathetic processes involving verbal and nonverbal forms of communication that can potentially yield healing and eventual reconciliation. Although violence rages on in Eastern
Ukraine in a contained uncontrolled zone, chaplains are already changing the emotional tenor of public domains. The work of winning the peace and engendering patriotism falls to them in either condemning or legitimating violence. Even as the Just Orthodox refuse an institutional affiliation, the institutions remain robust in as much as they sponsor spiritual ambassadors in the form of chaplains who serve in spaces made sacred in nonreligious settings. Given the populist age of hatred and resentment in which we live, they play a pivotal role in either using religiosity to cultivate empathy and healing or using their moral authority to validate simmering tensions and animosities.