Alexander Kalinin, a 33-year-old Siberian with piercing pale eyes and a bushy brown beard that wouldn’t look out of place on an Old Testament prophet, is a man on a mission. Head of Christian State–Holy Rus, a radical Russian Orthodox Christian movement, Kalinin and his followers seek to establish by any means necessary ‘the rule of Christ’s law’ in Vladimir Putin’s Russia.

‘All this is coming to an end,’ Kalinin tells me, when I meet him in a central Moscow café, gesturing contemptuously in the vague direction of the New Arbat, the neon-lit road that leads directly to the Kremlin. ‘God willing.’

Christian State–Holy Rus is just one of a number of similar religious groups in Russia, where the fortunes of Orthodox Christianity, once brutally suppressed by the Soviet authorities, have undergone a dramatic state-sponsored revival over the past two and a half decades. But Kalinin’s movement, which only rose to national prominence this year, is one of the most, if not the most extreme.

In January, Christian State–Holy Rus sent letters to hundreds of cinemas across Russia warning of violent retribution if a ‘blasphemous’ film about Nicholas II, the last tsar, made it to the big screen. ‘Cinemas will start to burn,’ the letters read. ‘Those who love God and the people so much that they are ready to go to prison, or even face death, will begin to act.’

The film in question is Mathilda, a big budget production about a romance between the young Nicholas and Mathilda Kschessinska, a teenage prima ballerina at the Mariinsky Theatre in St Petersburg. Nicholas II was executed alongside his entire family by Bolshevik revolutionaries in 1918, and canonised by the Russian Orthodox Church in 2000. Although the romance depicted in Mathilda was over by the time of Nicholas II’s engagement to the future tsarina, Alix of Hesse, and before he ascended the throne in 1894, Christian State–Holy Rus and other Russian Orthodox Christians say the film is sacrilegious because it portrays the last tsar in erotic scenes.

‘If they spit at my church, humiliate my faith, and everything that is holy, then by the law...
of God, I am forbidden to tolerate this,’ Kalinin tells me.

‘People will call you ‘Christian terrorists,’ I counter. Kalinin shrugs. ‘That’s fine. Let them.’

One of Kalinin’s followers, a 30-something man named Yury Lomov, has accompanied the Christian State–Holy Rus leader to the interview, and he nods in silent agreement. Kalinin says the core of his movement is made up of around 50 diehard activists, plus thousands of supporters across the country, including ‘very rich’ anonymous patrons. Christian State–Holy Rus also runs ‘military-patriotic’ camps in the countryside near Moscow.

Kalinin insists, however, that the letters, which were reported on widely by Russian media, were in fact a desperate attempt to save lives. ‘I’m not intending to burn anyone myself,’ he says. ‘But I know hundreds of people, our people, who are ready to incinerate everyone. People are angry. They will not tolerate this film.’

*Mathilda*, directed by Alexei Uchitel, an internationally renowned Russian filmmaker, was initially slated for release in March, but its premiere has been postponed until October, ostensibly to avoid clashing with Hollywood blockbusters. To date, only two brief trailers for the film, one of which shows Nicholas II excited by a flash of naked breast, as well as cavorting on a bed with his ballerina lover, have been released. Uchitel insists he has no intention of offending religious believers.

In any case, Kalinin is confident the film will never be shown in its entirety in Russia. ‘Uchitel will be in prison by the end of the year, you’ll see,’ he says with a smile. He also ‘lets it slip’ that a grenade with the pin still in place was recently thrown into Uchitel’s film studio by Orthodox Christian activists, and an empty coffin sent to his home address. Kalinin says the note attached to the grenade read: ‘Next time, no pin.’ (I was unable to verify the claims.)

Kalinin’s prophecy took a step towards being fulfilled in May, when tax police launched an inspection of Uchitel’s film studio on the orders of Natalia Poklonskaya, an ultra-conservative MP with Putin’s ruling United Russia party. Tax evasion charges are frequently used in Russia to pressure those who anger the authorities. No charges have yet been brought, but the inspection is continuing.

The official reaction to Christian State–Holy Rus’s statements has been ambiguous. While Putin has condemned the movement’s threats of violence, he has also said that artists should not provoke society by producing work that could upset believers. Dmitry Medvedev, Russia’s toothless prime minister, has defended Uchitel, pointing out that no one has seen the film in its entirety yet. Medvedev also condemned what he said was a growing atmosphere of ‘intolerance’ towards the arts in Russia. But there has been a distinct lack of action by law enforcement authorities. Although dozens of Russians have been jailed for ‘extremism’ in recent years, many for the ‘crime’ of reposting social media comments critical of Putin, the police have so far neither charged nor indeed formally questioned anyone from Christian State–Holy Rus. However, in July, after a complaint
from Uchitel, Russia’s state prosecutor ruled the ‘cinemas will burn’ letter was in violation of laws against threatening behaviour, clearing the way for possible charges against the movement.

The powerful Russian Orthodox Church has condemned the group’s statements, but it has also urged the ‘creative community’ to show ‘tact and respect’ towards the feelings of religious believers.

‘These [Orthodox Christian] groups should have freedom to express themselves, but what they do cannot be fully associated with the Church’s positions,’ Vakhtang Kipshidze, a spokesman for the Russian Orthodox Church, tells me. ‘We always stress that their activities should be within the law. That said, we give them the freedom to advocate for Christian values.’

Mathilda is far from the first artistic work to feel the wrath of Russia’s increasingly confident Orthodox Christian movements. Orthodox activists have attacked a number of ‘offensive’ exhibitions in recent years, as well as forcing the closure of ‘blasphemous’ theatre productions, including a performance of Jesus Christ Superstar.

‘Christian State–Holy Rus is a new phenomenon,’ Alexei Zygmont, a journalist who has researched Russia’s religious right, tells me. ‘Although I doubt they are really willing to kill people for their ideas, the group came into existence thanks to the government and the Russian Orthodox Church, who failed to protect people from the actions of radical religious activists.’

Aside from Christian State–Holy Rus, other leading movements include the Union of Orthodox Banner Bearers, whose members wear black paramilitary clothes decorated with skulls, and God’s Will, whose controversial leader, Dmitry Enteo, once lectured an audience on the theme of ‘Will Putin Become God by Divine Grace?’ Another prominent movement is Sorok Sorokov, a direct action group described by its critics as the Russian Orthodox Church’s ‘combat unit’.

Although Russia’s constitution stipulates a strict divide between church and state, critics say Putin has deliberately sought to blur the lines between the Kremlin and the Russian Orthodox Church in a bid to forge something resembling a national ideology. Around 77 per cent of Russians call themselves Orthodox Christians. In recent years, Patriarch Kirill, who took over leadership of the Russian Orthodox Church after the death of Patriarch Alexei in 2009, has made public statements on a range of issues, from Russia’s ‘holy war’ in Syria to the ‘abomination’ of gay marriage. The patriarch has also described Putin’s long rule as a ‘miracle of God’, a statement that led to Pussy Riot’s now infamous protest in Moscow’s biggest cathedral in 2012.

‘Under Patriarch Alexei no one said that the Russian Orthodox Church should comment on political and social issues,’ says Zygmont. ‘But under Patriarch Kirill, the idea that the Church should have an official position has been established and this official position has become closely linked to a right-wing and nationalist ideology.’
The social and religious conservatism driving these religious radicals was granted the status of Russia’s unofficial ideology in 2012, after mass anti-Putin protests in Moscow.

In a keynote speech to parliament after the protests had been quelled, Putin declared that a strict adherence to ‘traditional values’ was the only way to prevent Russia and the world from slipping into what he called ‘chaotic darkness’. In a separate speech, he also accused Western countries of betraying their Christian roots and pursuing polices that ‘place on the same level a multi-child family and a same-sex partnership, a faith in God and a belief in Satan.’

Some Russian analysts, such as Maria Lipman, editor of Counterpoint journal, believe Putin’s conservative shift was a deliberate attempt to ‘neutralise’ liberal Russians who had dared challenge his long rule by associating them with ‘Western immorality and decadence’. After Russia was again rocked by massive opposition protests this March, Putin turned once more to the Orthodox Church in a bid to shore up his support. In late May, during a highly publicised visit to a Moscow cathedral, he kissed a golden ark said to contain the rib of St Nicholas. Just days later he took part in the consecration of a new church.

Perhaps the biggest boost to Russia’s Orthodox Christian movements came in June 2013, when Putin approved a law that made it a crime to ‘offend the feelings of religious believers’. The law stipulates up to a year in jail for ‘insulting’ acts that occur outside a place of worship.

Those that happen inside are punishable by up to three years behind bars. So far, the law has been used almost exclusively to prosecute those who ‘insult’ Orthodox Christianity. Around 80 per cent of Russia’s population say they back the law on religious belief, according to the VTsIom state pollster. For a country where a public belief in God was once punishable by death or imprisonment, the law represents a startling development.

‘If Russia continues down this road, by 2030 Russia will be like mediaeval Spain, where the Inquisition persecuted non-believers and heretics,’ Alexei Bushmakov, a defence lawyer involved in one of the first trials on insulting religious believers, tells me. ‘It’s terrifying to think what will happen if people are deprived of the right to choose what to believe and what not to believe in.’

While no one has yet been sentenced to jail under the law, the Russian authorities have used it to justify police raids and hold people in custody for extended periods. The first person to be charged was Viktor Krasnov, a 38-year-old man from Stavropol in southern Russia. In October 2014, during a heated online dispute with two Orthodox Christians, Krasnov wrote, ‘There is no God.’ His apartment was subsequently raided by police and a judge ordered him to spend a month in a psychiatric ward to determine if he was mentally fit to stand trial. ‘No one in their right mind would write anything against Orthodox Christianity and the Russian Orthodox Church,’ the judge explained. Psychiatrists ruled him sane, but the case against Krasnov was closed in February when the statute of limitations expired.
In another highly publicised case, state prosecutors requested over three years behind bars for Ruslan Sokolovsky, a 22-year-old video blogger from Yekaterinburg, Russia’s fourth biggest city. Sokolovsky’s crime? He had posted online footage of himself playing Pokemon Go in a cathedral. ‘I didn’t catch the rarest Pokemon of all – Jesus,’ Sokolovsky said at the end of the YouTube clip. ‘But, hey, what can I do? They say he doesn’t even exist!’ Sokolovsky posted the provocative video after state television warned Russians that anyone caught hunting for the augmented reality creatures in church could face jail time. ‘This is nonsense. Who can be offended by someone walking around a church with a smartphone?’ Sokolovsky asked in his video. He was held in a pre-trial detention facility for almost six months, where he says he was threatened with rape by Orthodox Christian inmates. A court handed him a three-year suspended prison sentence in May.

‘Forgiveness is a very tricky thing,’ Kipshidze, the Orthodox Church spokesman told me, when I asked him to comment on Sokolovsky’s case. ‘Of course, we should follow Christ’s examples. However, in all societies, laws are applicable.’

A further sign of the rising influence of Orthodox Christianity came last year, when Putin appointed Olga Vasilyeva, a religious scholar with deep ties to the Russian Orthodox Church, as education minister. Another worrying development for Russia’s liberals was the appointment, also last year, of Anna Kuznetsova, another devout Orthodox believer, as Russia’s top official for child rights. Kuznetsova had previously said that wombs have memories, and that if a woman has more than one sexual partner, she will give birth to children with loose morals.

Kalinin, the Christian State-Holy Rus leader, hasn’t always been a fire-and-brimstone religious activist.

‘I used to be a pawnbroker, and I was interested in stupid things – a good car, a nice flat, all that stuff,’ he tells me. All that changed during a holiday at the Black Sea in 2005. After getting into a dispute with a local artist, Kalinin says he was ‘cursed,’ and the very next day he fell seriously ill.

‘I experienced clinical death,’ he says. According to Kalinin, he then travelled to hell and back via a ‘gigantic black space,’ before regaining consciousness. In a 52-minute-long YouTube video that has so far been watched over three million times, a weeping Kalinin spoke of how his journey to hell’s eternal fires convinced him of the need to devote his life utterly to God. ‘My life changed after this experience. I began to preach. I was invited to churches and monasteries to talk about what I’d witnessed, and slowly, with God’s blessing, a lot of people who were thirsting for real change began to unite around me.’

Unlike other Orthodox Christian movements, Kalinin is openly critical of Russia’s political elite, railing against the massive high-level corruption that has plunged millions into poverty and left infrastructure in Russia’s forgotten provinces decades behind more developed countries.

‘We are people of faith. We believe that change will come to Russia this year – the 100th anniversary of the [Bolshevik] revolution – through some mystical process,’ Kalinin says.
‘If this means picking up weapons, we are ready to do this. When 100,000 Orthodox warriors take to the streets, no one – not the army, not the police – will stand against them. This year will see the start of regime change in Russia, and next year it will be over. If not, lots of people will die, or be sent to prison.’

What about Putin? I ask. Despite his many years of service as a KGB officer in the Soviet Union, Russia’s strongman leader has frequently spoken of his deep Christian faith. That’s not necessarily a contradiction – many Russians were secret believers throughout the Soviet era, baptising their children at home and keeping Bibles alongside copies of works on Marxism-Leninism.

‘I think Putin is a believer now, even though he has a bad past,’ Kalinin says. ‘To be honest, I used to think perhaps that Putin is a bastard, just like all the other bastards in power. But our holy fathers tell us he is a worthy person. And so we are loyal to Putin, but not to those filthy officials and oligarchs around him,’ Kalinin says. ‘But Putin has done all he could for Russia, and it is time for a change.’

Despite his condemnation of Putin’s KGB background, Kalinin professes a paradoxical fondness for the Soviet Union, where at least 200,000 Christians were murdered for their faith, according to official statistics. ‘We lived for 70 years with the ideology that everyone would be equal, and it was a success, in many ways. People really loved each other,’ he says. It’s a viewpoint shared by Russia’s current Communist Party. In 2015, the party’s veteran leader, Gennady Zyuganov, compared Vladimir Lenin to Jesus Christ and said that the Soviet Union was an attempt to establish ‘God’s Kingdom on earth’. Kalinin may speak in positive terms about Russia’s Old Believers, who withdrew from Russian society after controversial Orthodox Church reforms in the 17th century. More recently, in 2008-9, a group of modern-day Old Believers, including young children, spent months living in a series of tunnels in the Russian countryside in expectation of the apocalypse. The sect had likewise destroyed all their state-issued documents, and refused to pay taxes or purchase products stamped with barcodes, which they believed to be the Mark of the Beast. Two of the group died before they finally emerged from their tunnels.

‘I’m not about to bury myself underground,’ says Kalinin, smiling, when I remind him of the incident. ‘I’ve got too much work to do here.’

Despite Christian State–Holy Rus’s revolutionary rhetoric, many analysts believe that even the most radical of Orthodox groups are unlikely to offer a serious challenge to Russia’s political elite. ‘They are permitted to exist by the authorities. This is the marginal, extreme side of the state’s official dialogue. They are anti-West, and for a Holy Russia, and they can always be used against someone or something – against film directors, theatres, human rights organisations,’ says Alexei Malashenko, chief researcher at the Moscow-based dialogue of Civilisations Research Institute, and an expert on Russian Orthodox Christianity.

When I ask Kalinin, he tells me that Christian State–Holy Rus maintains contacts with high-level figures from the Russian Orthodox Church. ‘But they are not ready to go public with their support yet,’ he says. ‘They say, “Wait until the right time comes.”’
Although Patriarch Kirill is a loyal Kremlin ally, not all Russian Orthodox priests are as compliant. Archpriest Vsevolod Chaplin, widely seen as the spiritual father to Russia’s religious right, has frequently spoken out against widespread high-level corruption. When I interviewed him in 2015, while he was a spokesman for the Russian Orthodox Church, he even refused to endorse Putin for a possible fourth term of office.

‘A lot depends on whether we can get out of this situation of economic stagnation, and if the country’s leaders, together with the people, can awaken the slumbering strength of the nation,’ Chaplin told me, during an interview in his Moscow office. ‘The Russian Orthodox Church today is not only people in cassocks. It is a large amount of active Orthodox laymen. These people cannot be ordered around, and will organise and speak out. They will determine Orthodox Christian opinion when the time comes for a change of power. And power will change in Russia, sooner or later.’ Chaplin was dismissed from his post shortly after the interview.

A fervent supporter of Russia’s war in Ukraine, Chaplin is deeply convinced that Russia is morally superior to the West. In 2012, as Putin prepared to approve a law banning American families from adopting Russian children, the archpriest said he supported the legislation because children brought up in the United States would be unable to receive a ‘true Christian upbringing’ and would be barred entry to ‘the Kingdom of God’.

The view that Russia is a beacon of Christian morality is widely shared by Orthodox radicals, who believe that Western countries are the modern-day equivalent of Sodom and Gomorrah. ‘It’s terrible. there aren’t enough women in Germany, so men rape dogs,’ a middle-aged Kremlin supporter told journalists recently in a clip that went viral. ‘You walk along the streets, and the dogs are howling everywhere because they are being raped.’

It’s a nightmarish vision of Europe that has been inspired by sensational and frequently dishonest state television reports that paint a lurid picture of the West as a place where incest, the sexual abuse of children, and all manner of sexual perversions are the norm. Russian state television also depicts European countries as swamped by sexually violent Muslim migrants who are condoned by politically correct politicians.

‘Russia is the last stronghold of humankind on this planet,’ Andrei Kormukhin, the 44-year-old leader of Sorok Sorokov, tells me when we meet in central Moscow. ‘What is happening right now in Europe is a nightmare. Europe has rejected Christian values. Any sin is acceptable now in Europe - zoophilia, incest and paedophilia. As a result Europe will stagnate and die out.’ His expression as he says this suggests that he relishes the prospect.

Kormukhin formed Sorok Sorokov in 2013, and the movement, whose name is a reference to the 1,600 Orthodox Christian places of worship that existed in Moscow before the Bolshevik revolution, claims around 10,000 members nationwide.
Sorok Sorokov first came to public attention in 2014, when 4,000 of the movement’s members marched around Moscow’s Christ the Saviour Cathedral in a show of support for Patriarch Kirill. The movement repeated that rally this year, when its activists surrounded St Petersburg’s landmark St Isaac’s Cathedral. Civic activists had previously protested plans by the city governor to hand the 19th-century cathedral, a UNESCO world heritage site, over to the Russian Orthodox Church. St Isaac’s was seized by the Soviets in the 1930s and transformed into a museum of atheism. Since the collapse of the Soviet system, it has been used to stage classical concerts and art exhibitions.

Last year, Sorok Sorokov members were involved in violent clashes with Muscovites who rallied against plans to build a new Orthodox church on parkland in the north of the Russian capital. Sorok Sorokov activists, including Kormukhin and his sons, have also carried out attacks on members of Russia’s beleaguered LGBT community.

‘Sorok Sorokov is a typical neo-fascist organisation that covers up its swastikas with icons and banners,’ wrote Andrei Rudoi, a journalist for Russia’s Vestnik Burya website. ‘Former and current football hooligans, ultra-right skinheads, and similar types join up.’

Kormukhin, who was recently honoured by Patriarch Kirill, flatly rejects the allegations, saying that his movement attracts ‘sporty people’. He also denies the movement has any fascist tendencies, arguing that this is impossible because his relatives fought against Nazi Germany. ‘The European elite, which has dictated transhumanism to Europe for many years, is frightened of the Russian Orthodox Church – the keeper of those conservative values according to which “father” is called “father” and “mother” is called “mother”. Not “Parent Number One” and “Parent Number Two”,’ he sneers. ‘The Russian Orthodox Church is an enemy to the European elite. That’s why the conservative part of Europe that wants to live according to Christian values is turning towards Russia.’ He cites the rise of the far-right AfD party in Germany as proof.

But Kormukhin’s insistence that Russia is a stronghold of Christian values is contradicted by the facts. According to UN statistics, Russia has the second highest abortion and divorce rates in the world. It also has the highest levels of wealth inequality outside of Caribbean islands with resident billionaires. And while the vast majority of Russians identify as Orthodox Christians, only a small minority regularly attend church or observe Orthodox fasts. Indeed, for most Russians, Orthodox Christianity is more about identifying as Russians, rather than a deep-seated belief in God. In an opinion poll published by the Moscow-based Levada Centre in 2012, 30 per cent of respondents who self-identified as Orthodox Christians said they did not actually believe that God existed.

Kormukhin sees no contradiction, however. ‘Right now in Russia, we are going through a critical stage in our development. We still haven’t decided what kind of society we want to live in – an unjust one where oligarchs control all the wealth, or a just one based on Christian values, and where a sin is called a sin. Russia was formed on a belief in God, and this is what we have to return to.’

Kalinin, the Christian State–Holy Rus leader, puts it more simply. ‘We have to force people to love Christ’s ideology,’ he tells me, as we prepare to go our separate ways. ‘To
love one another, not to kill, not to steal, and so on. Only then can people know and love God.’

These are admirable principles, I admit, but aren’t they incompatible with Kalinin’s threat that ‘cinemas will start to burn’ if *Mathilda*, the film about Russia’s last tsar, is released? Kalinin cuts me off before I’ve even finished my sentence. ‘When a true Orthodox warrior kills, his soul weeps, because he has to deprive another of life,’ he says. ‘But he does this only when he sees no other way out. Killing in defence of the faith is not murder.’

And with that, he vanishes into the Moscow night.

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