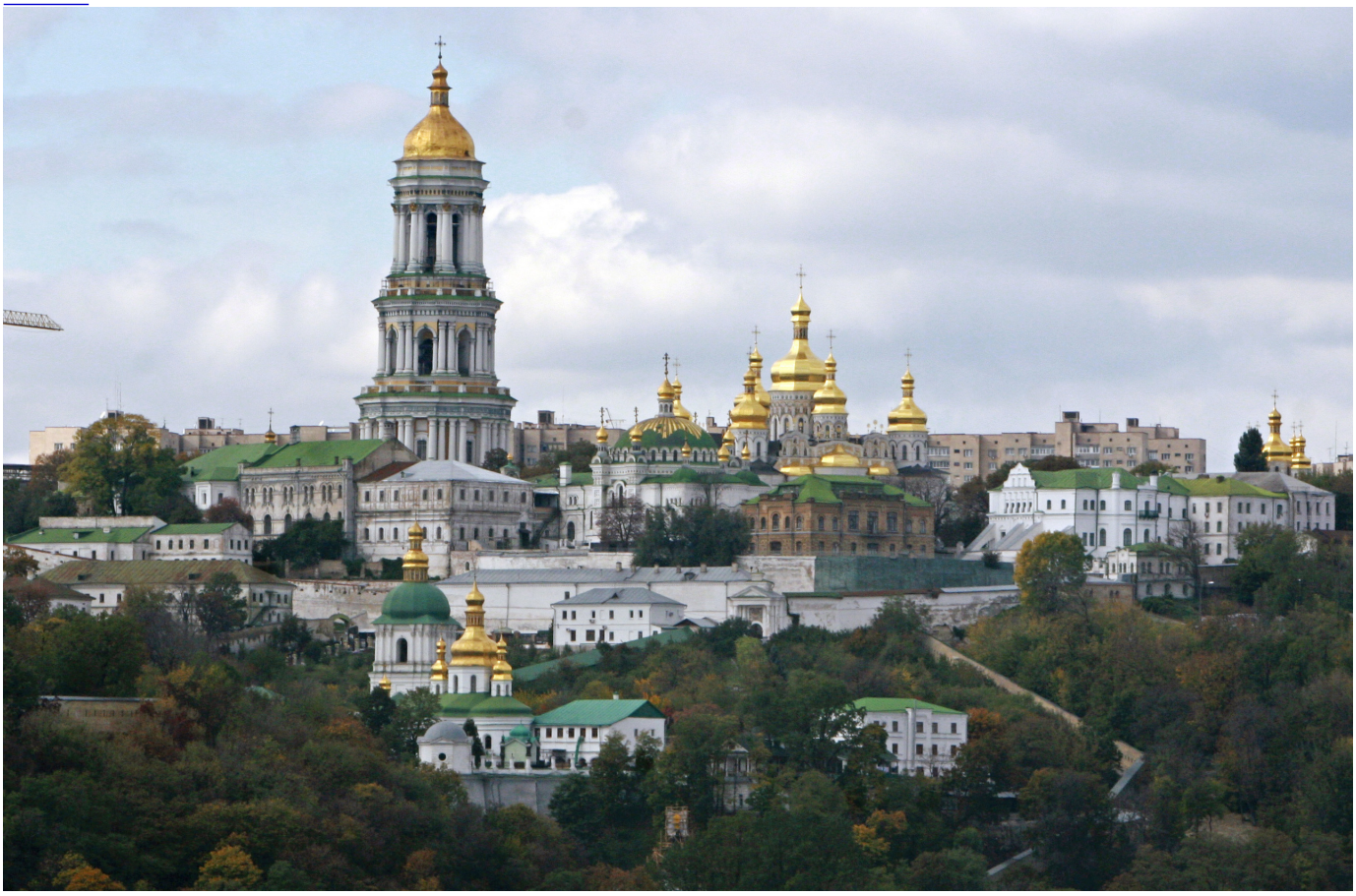
News



The Monastery of the Caves, also known as Kyiv-Pechersk Lavra, one of the holiest sites of Eastern Orthodox Christians, is seen in Kyiv, Ukraine, Wednesday, Oct. 10, 2007. (AP Photo/Efrem Lukatsky, File)

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Kyiv, bracing for a potentially catastrophic Russian attack, is the spiritual heart of Ukraine.

Among the sites at risk in the Ukrainian capital are the nation's most sacred Orthodox shrines, dating back nearly 1,000 years to the dawn of Christianity in the region.

The sites, along with other landmark shrines in Kyiv, are religiously significant to both Ukrainian Orthodox and Russian Orthodox. They also stand as powerful symbols in the quarrel over whether the two groups are parts of a single people — as Russian President Vladimir Putin has claimed — or are distinct but related Slavic nations.

The landmarks include the golden domed St. Sophia's Cathedral and the Kyiv-Pechersk Lavra, a sprawling underground and above-ground complex also known as the Monastery of the Caves. Others include the multi-towered St. Michael's Golden-Domed Monastery and St. Andrew's Church.

On Tuesday, Ukrainian officials said Russian forces damaged another monument — Ukraine's main Holocaust memorial, Babi Yar — prompting international condemnation.

"What will be next if even Babi Yar (is hit)" asked Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy on Wednesday. "What other 'military' objects, 'NATO bases' are threatening Russia? St. Sophia's Cathedral, Lavra, Andrew's Church?"

There is no indication the Russians intentionally targeted Babi Yar. Nor is there any confirmation that the Russians plan to target any of the sacred sites in Kyiv. But civilian buildings have already been hit in other cities, and Kyiv's major shrines sit in elevated locations that could leave them especially vulnerable.

Case in point: The Assumption Cathedral in Kharkiv, Ukraine's second-largest city, was damaged in the recent attacks, reportedly with stained-glass windows broken and other decorations damaged. The cathedral, which is under the Moscow-affiliated Orthodox church, was Kharkiv's tallest building until sometime in the 21st century.

The risk is even greater in Kyiv.

"We're talking about a very old city," said Jacob Lassin, a postdoctoral research scholar at the Arizona State University's Melikian Center for Russian, Eurasian, and East European Studies. "The center part is densely packed. Even if you're trying to hit one thing, you could easily hit something else."

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The symbolic value of the shrines is powerful even to people who don't share the religious faith they commemorate.

"The idea that the main symbol that stood in your city for 1,000 years could be at risk or could be destroyed is very frightening," Lassin said.

The symbols matter not only to the Ukrainian people but to Putin, too. He justified the invasion with baseless claims he was countering "neo-Nazism" in Ukraine — this in a country with a Jewish president.

Babi Yar, a ravine in Kyiv, is where more than 33,000 Jews were killed within 48 hours in 1941 when the city was under Nazi occupation. The killing was carried out by SS troops along with local collaborators. It was one of the largest mass killings at a single location during World War II, according to the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum.

It is "at once an accursed and a sacred place," American Jewish Committee CEO David Harris said. Just last year, Zelenskyy took part in the inaugural ceremony of a memorial there.

Whether Kyiv's Orthodox shrines come under direct attack or receive collateral damage, such an action would be a "total refutation" of another of Putin's claims — to be defending Orthodox Ukrainians loyal to Moscow's patriarch, Lassin said.

"It would literally be destroying the main seat of Russian Orthodoxy according to his own rhetoric," Lassin said.

The shrines' oldest parts date back to the medieval Kievan Rus kingdom, soon after its adoption of Christianity under Prince Vladimir in the 10th century. Putin has claimed the kingdom is the common ancestor of today's Russia and Ukraine. Ukrainians counter that theirs is a distinct nation now under fratricidal attack from

its Slavic neighbor.

The cathedral and nearby monastic complex represent "a masterpiece of human creative genius in both its architectural conception and its remarkable decoration," says a summary by UNESCO, which lists them as World Heritage Sites.

The cathedral, built under Prince Yaroslav the Wise in the 11th century, was modeled after the Church of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople, the spiritual and architectural heart of medieval Orthodoxy. The Kyiv cathedral includes mosaics and frescoes as old as 1,000 years, and it was a model for later churches in the region, according to UNESCO.

"The huge pantheon of Christian saints depicted in the cathedral has an unrivaled multiplicity among Byzantine monuments of that time," UNESCO says.

The Monastery of the Caves, including underground monastic cells, tombs of saints and above-ground churches built across nearly nine centuries, was hugely influential in spreading Orthodox Christianity, according to UNESCO.

Both complexes were endangered and at times damaged by centuries of warfare.

St. Sophia's, sacred both to Ukraine's two main rival Orthodox churches and to Catholics, is currently a museum and isn't normally used for religious services.

Two of the landmarks are associated with opposing sides in the schism within Ukrainian Orthodoxy.

The monastic complex is overseen by the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, which is affiliated with the Orthodox patriarch of Moscow, though it has broad autonomy. St. Michael's is the base for the more nationalist Orthodox Church of Ukraine. But the Ukrainian leaders of both Orthodox groups have harshly criticized the Russian invasion.

If Kyiv's landmarks are damaged or destroyed, "could it potentially damage morale? Yes," Lassin said. "Could it potentially galvanize people to be more united? Absolutely. ... What I can say is the Ukrainian people are extremely resilient and are fighting back through all of this."