News



A church destroyed by a Russian attack on the village of Bohorodychne in Ukraine's Donetsk region is pictured Feb. 13, 2024. Several prominent American Catholics have launched a petition calling for the end of Russia's religious persecution in occupied areas of Ukraine. (OSV News/Reuters/Vladyslav Musiienko)

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Several prominent American Catholics have launched a petition calling for the end of Russia's religious persecution in occupied areas of Ukraine.

The initiative was unveiled as part of a two-day scholarly conference in Washington examining Russia's suppression of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church (UGCC) immediately after World War II.

"History and the present speak with one voice: the freedom of one is the freedom of all," said Metropolitan Archbishop Borys Gudziak of Philadelphia; Fr. Mark Morozowich, director of the Center for Ukrainian Church Studies at The Catholic University of America; and Catholic intellectual George Weigel, distinguished senior fellow at the Ethics and Public Policy Center.

The three had spearheaded a March 27-28 gathering organized by the Center for Ukrainian Church Studies, Ukrainian Catholic University in Lviv, and the St. Gabriel Institute, which provides education and formation for Church diplomats and communications professionals.

The conference, titled "The 1946 Pseudo-Sobor: 80 Years Later — The Persecution Continues," explored the Soviet crackdown that saw the UGCC's visible structures liquidated and its clergy expelled, imprisoned and killed.

Newly declassified documents have enabled scholars and Ukrainian intelligence officials to further map the extent of Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin's plan to destroy the UGCC.

As part of that plan, Soviet authorities arrested five UGCC bishops, including Metropolitan Josyf Slipyj, almost a year ahead of the March 8-10, 1946, Pseudo-Sobor, or "false synod," which sought to absorb the UGCC into the Russian Orthodox Church.

In a video message to participants at the Washington conference, Major Archbishop Sviatoslav Shevchuk, the father and head of the UGCC — who was ordained in an

underground seminary in Soviet Ukraine — said that Russia's current war shows "nothing has changed."

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"Every time Russia occupies a part of Ukraine's territory, our Church is banned and destroyed. Our priests, our nuns, and our monasteries are being closed. Our priests are being imprisoned, tortured, or deported," he said. "Therefore, this project to restore the Soviet Union, which the Russian president is attempting to implement, means a return to the catacombs for us."

The archbishop added, "The very fact that I am speaking to you today from Kyiv is a strong sign and proof that they did not succeed."

The petition advanced by the conference is directed to "American Catholics, Christians, and all people of good will" as Russia's war on Ukraine — which began in 2014, and which accelerated with a 2022 full-scale invasion — has seen close to 740 houses of worship damaged or destroyed.

At least 67 clergy members from various denominations have been killed, with two Ukrainian Greek Catholic priests — Fr. Bohdan Geleta and Fr. Ivan Levitsky — imprisoned and tortured for 18 months prior to their Vatican-mediated release in June 2024.

In December 2022, Russian officials in occupied areas of Ukraine's Zaporizhzhia region formally banned the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, along with the Knights of Columbus and Caritas, the official humanitarian network of the universal Catholic Church.

Multiple human rights reports from the New Lines Institute and the Raoul Wallenberg Center for Human Rights have classified Russia's war on Ukraine as a genocide.

This story appears in the **War in Ukraine** feature series. View the full series.