

# Presence and Power

## *Reflections on the Politics and Theology of Icons*

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This article is developed from a paper given to the Eighth Graduate Workshop of the international Russian Art and Culture Group in October 2020.<sup>1</sup> In the light of the February 2022 invasion of Ukraine ordered by Russian President Vladimir Putin, I have had to reconsider the argument that I put forward in that paper. Essentially, the elements of the argument remain the same, but the tone and emphasis have needed to change – dramatically. In the earlier version, I treated the use of icons as “battle-flags” to assure a nation or army that God “is on our side” as a largely historical phenomenon. However, the sacralization of the Russian war effort by Patriarch Kirill and the harnessing of the Russian Orthodox Church’s iconographical, liturgical, and pastoral practice as well as its doctrinal and ethical teaching (the Patriarch has declared this a “metaphysical” war), show that this use (or, better, abuse) is only too real in our world today. From a certain perspective this might seem to make my argument completely redundant. On the other hand, the task of developing an account of why and how icons speak to those living out the pain and terror of frontline situations in a way that is *not* reducible to their use as propaganda, could be seen as all the more urgent and important.

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1. “The Problem of Religious Art in Modernity: Uses and Abuses of the Icon in Russia”, *Russian Art and Culture Group*, <https://russian-art.net/workshops/workshop-08/>, accessed 2023-01-22.

Icons are, of course, a phenomenon of Christian life as well as being the object of formal doctrinal definition and it is this lived experience of icons that is my primary reference in this paper, rather than the official teaching of the Church. This is not said so as to imply any dissonance between these: the extent to which practice does or does not cohere with doctrine is a quite different question that I shall not be addressing here. However, I should also add that it is, of course, very difficult to draw a firm line between them. Precisely because icons are a particular means of making present the divine persons or mysteries that they depict, they are always doctrinally loaded. Yet the way in which the icon manifests doctrinal truth is, clearly, different from that associated with dogmatic propositions hammered out in ecclesiastical assemblies and commented on in academic research and debate. Even if we call icons visual theology (as many do), this is still something different from the theology that is written and debated.

My title indicates what I understand to be the main distinctive function of the icon, namely, to make present the person or mystery that it depicts and to do so in such a way that the power of that person or mystery can become effective in the lives of believers. This gives the icon an especially significant role in the life of Christian communities, but, at the same time, it is precisely this function of making the power of the divine present in this-worldly existence that also makes the icon a potential site of abuse. “Power” is both inherently unstable and the object of a near insatiable desire on the part of human beings, exposed as they are to the uncertainties of this transient life.

Memorably filmed in Sergei Bondarchuk’s (1920–1994) 1960s film adaptation, a dramatic scene in Leo Tolstoy’s (1828–1910) *War and Peace* exemplifies the power of icons in pre-revolutionary Russia. The scene is set on the eve of the Battle of Borodino as the Russian army and an accompanying corps of peasant labourers prepare their defences against the impending French attack. Suddenly, a cry goes up: “Here they come! [...] They are bringing her, they are coming [...] Here she is [...] they’ll be here in a minute” and, in response, officers, soldiers, and peasants run down to the road to greet “her”.<sup>2</sup> But who is “she”? She is not a member of the imperial family or even the wife of a general but the icon of Our Lady of Smolensk, led in procession by a regiment of infantry. As Tolstoy describes the scene, the militiamen throw down their tools and, heads bared and bowing to the earth, join the already huge crowd of soldiers accompanying the icon. When the icon arrives at the top of the hill the procession stops and the army gathers round, high-ranking generals, officers, common soldiers, and peasants cross

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2. Leo Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, London 1971, 826.

themselves as the choir continues its chant: “‘O Mother of God, save thy servants from calamity’, and the priest and deacon chimed in, ‘For to Thee we fly as our invincible Bulwark and Protectress’, [and] there was a gleam on every face of that sense of the solemnity of the coming moment.”<sup>3</sup> Then, suddenly, the crowd parts as General Kutuzov, leader of the Russian army, arrives, crosses himself before the icon, and bends down, his hand touching the ground according to Orthodox custom. After the liturgical service is finished,

Kutuzov went up to the holy picture, dropped heavily on his knees, bowing to the earth, and for a long time he attempted to get up, and was unable from his weakness and heavy weight. His grey head twitched with the strain. At last he did get up, and putting out his lips in a naively childlike way kissed the holy picture, and again bowed down, with one hand touching the ground.<sup>4</sup>

We are left in no doubt that Our Lady of Smolensk is venerated by the entire army, binding together men of every class, from the peasant labourers, through the common soldiers, and all the way up through the ranks to Kutuzov himself. The film adds a detail that is not in the novel, showing even the sceptical Pierre Bezukhov removing his hat in a spontaneous response to the atmosphere of the scene. The fact that this scene, no matter how idealized, reflects something genuinely and distinctively Russian can be demonstrated by a simple thought-experiment: try to imagine Lord Nelson (1758–1805) on the eve of Trafalgar or the Duke of Wellington (1769–1852) on the eve of Waterloo behaving like Kutuzov, falling to the ground in essentially the same spirit of humility as an ordinary peasant. I am not suggesting that they did not have and did not express their personal faith, but in their British aristocrat tradition, any such gesture of self-abasement in full view of the lower ranks of army, navy, or society would be out of the question. This is not a moral judgment on their personal lack of humility, simply an observation about cultural expectation. And, of course, there is little doubt that Tolstoy is deliberately contrasting Kutuzov’s self-humbling before the icon with the self-deifying hubris of Napoleon (1769–1821) that has brought such colossal destruction to the Russian lands.

But just what is the meaning of the Russian army’s veneration of the icon?

One answer, tempting to a secular generation brought up on the idea of Christianity as the ideology of empire, is that an icon such as that depicted

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3. Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, 827.

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here is being used in much the same way as a battle-flag, a rallying-point for the army as it prepares itself for battle. Is this a sign in which to conquer, a crusader's flag, a talisman, an extra injection of military valour and power?

The question can, I think, be reasonably extended to the use of icons in the context of national or communal self-affirmation in general, then or now. What does it mean for the icon to be the unifying sign of a "we", a collectivity that is engaged in pursuing its interest in the world in competition with other national entities? Is this not a subversion of its legitimate function as an object of religious veneration, a secular and, implicitly, violent usurpation? And however sincere, does such use not open the door to manipulation by cynical rulers always ready to exploit the credulous masses, as exemplified in twentieth-century totalitarianism?

The use of icons in the context of warfare was not, of course, a modern invention. Visitors to Novgorod can see the twelfth-century icon of Our Lady of the Sign in the Cathedral of St. Sophia. In another of the city's churches is a different icon that depicts the processing of Our Lady of the Sign as Novgorod is being besieged by an attacking army of rival Russian princes in 1170. According to Novgorodian legend, it was the icon of Our Lady of the Sign that brought about the defeat of the besiegers and the liberation of the city. Indeed, such is the power of the original icon that it is, as it were, transferred to its secondary manifestation in the icon of the city's deliverance.<sup>5</sup>

In fact, the use of icons in the context of warfare reaches still further back, as notably in the Byzantine use of the icon of the Theotokos Blachernitissa to defend the city against attacks by Persians and, later, Arabs. In view of the later Russian self-identification as guardian of Orthodoxy, it is ironic that the relic of the Protecting Veil of the Virgin was deployed in the ninth century to repel a naval attack by the forces of Rus'.

This last incident pinpoints what will be a major focus of this paper, namely, that there is a considerable overlap between how icons and relics are used, in this case as a defence in warfare, but also in healing, agriculture, and business affairs. The most significant bridge between the relic and the icon is also to be found in Byzantium, specifically the relic known as the Mandylion that arrived in Byzantium in 944.

The legend of the Mandylion, first found in Eusebius' (c. 260–339) *Church History*, tells the story of the Syrian King Abgar of Edessa (d. c. 50 CE) who suffered from a skin disease. Hearing of the miracles being wrought in Palestine by Jesus of Nazareth, Abgar sent a delegation to summon the Saviour to his court. He, however, merely took a cloth and impressed on it

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5. The icons are illustrated in Viktor Lazarev, *Novgorodskaya ikonopis*, Moscow 1969.

an image of his face which he then returned to Abgar. The image itself was, of course, sufficient to bring about the hoped-for cure. Two points merit especial comment here. Firstly, this image was not a work of art but an image “not made by hands”. If we insist on the distinction between image and relic, it was a relic rather than an image, a physical object directly associated with the body of the Saviour and, in that respect, comparable to Mary’s veil or the crown of thorns. In this respect, it is a significant element in the story of Abgar that although he had sent his court-painter to paint an image of the Saviour, this was impossible to carry out due to the crowds. The only possible image was the one not made with hands.

Secondly, it was, of course, a relic that bore an image and, as such, became the model for the painted icon of the Saviour’s face. This guarantee of the veracity of the image is itself a key point in the classic defence of icons, as in the writings of John of Damascus (c. 675–749). The icon that is to be venerated is not a made-up work of art, a product of the human mind, but a faithful depiction of the Saviour as he was when he made himself visible in the Incarnation and the relic of the image not made with hands becomes the guarantee of the faithfulness of this depiction. This guarantee, this continuity, facilitates the transfer of the properties of the relic to the painted image, so it can do what the relic itself was also able to do as an actual extension of the body of the Saviour. For the Damascene, the image of Christ was Christ, just as the image of the emperor was the emperor (a point I take to refer to the authority conferred by the imperial image on, for example, coinage). The same logic would also be applied in the case of the saints: like the relic (but differently), the icon of the saint *is* the saint, able to do what the saint would also be able to do.

The Mandyllion is the most renowned example of an image not made with hands in the East, but there are comparable phenomena in the West. The idea that the truly holy image is not just a product of human art but involves direct divine intervention was a powerful one and examples continue to the threshold of the Renaissance. Clearly the best-known examples are the legend of Veronica’s cloth and the Shroud of Turin. In some ways, the story of Veronica’s cloth repeats that of Abgar, although in this case the image is captured as the result of a human being coming to the assistance of the divine. As represented in painting, the image itself is often strikingly similar to that of the icon not made with hands, although the Veronica is much later than Abgar’s image, first appearing in the thirteenth century and possibly generated by the reception of an icon of the image not made with hands in Rome. To confuse matters further, the image of the icon not made with hands is sometimes referred to in non-theological art-books as

the Veronica icon. Also in the thirteenth century we find the legend of a friar, Bartolomeo by name, who was charged with painting the eponymous scene of the Annunciation in the Church of the Most Holy Annunciation of Florence; however, Bartolomeo found that he was unable to paint the face of Mary as it should be painted; having prayed about this problem, he came into the church one morning to discover that, overnight, an angelic hand had completed his work. The resulting work is therefore at one and the same time painting and relic.

G.W.F. Hegel (1770–1831) said of our modern relation to medieval art that no matter how skilfully or beautifully the artist has portrayed the holy subject “we no longer bow the knee”.<sup>6</sup> Or, to put it bluntly, what the modern visitor to Florence sees is “a Giotto” or “a Fra Angelico” and not the Mother of God. Legends such as those of the Mary of the Most Holy Annunciation Church remind us that the medieval eye saw very differently. Clearly, patrons who expended considerable sums on new works were very interested in the magnificence of the resulting work, but for many this was secondary to the power of the work as a direct connection to the divine – and it is here that the continuity between icon and relic is important.

In his classic study *The Cult of the Saints*, Peter Brown describes the rise of the cult of relics in the ancient church in the third and fourth centuries and although his focus is on the Western Latin church, his examples come from around the Mediterranean basin, and it is clear that much of what he describes is also relevant to what would become the Eastern Church.

As Brown tells the tale, the cult of relics effected a transformation of late Roman society, enabling the replacement of older pagan Roman networks of kin and friendship with a new set of networks that transcend the narrowness of the older model. An especially important role is played by the grave of the saint, as already in the cults associated with the graves of the biblical patriarchs. To be buried or to have a loved one buried in proximity to the saint, is to get assurance that they will be exceptionally well protected and looked after in their passage to the next life. Thus far, the cult was still likely to be the preserve of the well-to-do who could afford to make elaborate burial arrangements, people like Paulinus of Nola (354–431), a rich landowner who used his wealth to develop the shrine and cult of St. Felix (d. c. 260), his heavenly “friend” and patron.<sup>7</sup>

Later, the bodies of the saints began to be broken up and distributed far and wide, meaning that a bone, a fingernail, a lock of hair, or an item of clothing could make the saint present anywhere throughout the Christian

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6. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, Oxford 1975, 11.

7. Peter Brown, *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity*, Chicago 2015. On Paulinus, see especially pp. 53–60.

world. This was, in effect, a radical democratization of the cult and although, naturally, relics associated with Christ, Mary, and the apostles retained a priority over others, relics of minor saints also made Christ's power present in their own communities. As John of Damascus famously commented, to limit the number of permissible icons to those of Christ himself and to a narrow range of biblical topics and persons would be to rob the king of his army. But the saints are not only Christ's army in an external sense, since through their union with Christ's person their flesh "participates in the divine nature and by this communion becomes unchangeably God". The grace that worked in them in their lives "does not depart from their soul or bodies in the tombs or from their likenesses and holy images".<sup>8</sup> Images therefore enabled a further "democratization" of the presence and power of the saints. Not every local church can have the benefit of an important relic (although the market-forces of medieval Europe ensured a massive supply of these and, as has often been said, a forest could be made of all the relics of the true cross then in circulation). But every church can have an image and, as time went on, every household and every individual could have their own image, a conduit for the presence of divine power in everyday life. This proliferation also allowed for the increasing specialization of these powers, so that particular saints could be looked to for help with toothache, burns, childlessness, and so on. The faithful themselves and enlightened sceptics are equally able to offer a near endless stream of anecdotes to illustrate this wonder-working power.

At a very basic level, the icon is not, then (as the modern secular viewer might think), a mere "representation", an attempt to "picture" an absent object: it is a living entity in its own right, inhabited by the persona of the saint. Here we encounter a certain tension in the defence of images, running all the way through from early iconodules such as John through to contemporary apologetics. On the one hand is what we might call a Platonic argument, namely, that the sensuous qualities of the image can be used as a way of lifting the mind to the realm of higher, invisible things. On the other is the more materialistic argument that the image is the way in which the inhabitants of the higher realm, Christ and his saints, become present to us in the actual world in which we live. It is this second argument that the continuity between relic and icon brings into focus. Here too we may note how, in normal church practice, believers do not spend their time just looking at the icon, they kiss it and pray before it, looking *to* it, indeed, but not necessarily *at* it. To enter a church rich with icons is not to enter

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8. John of Damascus, *On the Divine Images: Three Apologies against Those Who Attack the Divine Images*, Crestwood, NY 1980, 27.

a gallery but is to arrive at a party, surrounded by wise and helpful family elders and friends, to be amongst those who love us and can do good for us. Of course, as with all human relationships, matters could take a very different turn if the looked-for help did not come. Oleg Tarasov tells the story of a devotee praying for his house to be spared in an urban conflagration and, when his prayers produced no result, throwing the icon into the fire, telling it to help itself out. Similarly, when their pleading to an icon to protect them from robbers proved fruitless, a group of Russian peasants hung their icons upside down in the trees and insulted them blasphemously. We may laugh, but these responses are entirely consistent with a whole way of thinking about icons.<sup>9</sup>

None of this is to say that the visual properties of the image are unimportant, merely to emphasize that they are only one aspect of the icon's function in Christian life as it is lived. Nevertheless, although representing the visual likeness of its subject-matter is not the primary aim of the icon, it is a necessary condition, the guarantee of its capacity to function as a bearer of the power of its subject.

I shall return to the question with which I began, namely, what it means to venerate an icon in the context of national or communal self-affirmation. First, however, I want to make a digression via another important sub-topic that relates both to the cult of relics and the cult of icons, namely, death.

As I have already observed, Brown sees graves as being an early focus of the cult of the saints. Already prior to Christianity, there is evidence of the ancient world falling under the spell of an increasingly dark and threatening sense of death. Here we might compare the graves of early Etruscan art with those of the first century BCE. Where the art of the earlier graves shows their inhabitants happily enjoying favourite pursuits such as hunting and partying, the later tombs introduce demonic figures accompanying the departed to judgement, tearing them away from their weeping kin. By the second and third centuries of the Christian era, death was for pagans a dark, fearful, and shameful thing. Christian faith in the resurrection of the body offered a powerful counter-narrative. This was not just theoretical but also involved a changing practice with regard to burials and the care of burial sites. Where the bodies of unbelievers became rotten and foul, those of the saints were observed to be fragrant and even beautiful. Gregory of Tours (538–594) writes of his dead ancestor Gregory of Langres (c. 446–539) that in death “his face was so filled with glory that it looked like a rose. It was deep rose red, and the rest of his body was glowing white like a lily”. Paulinus

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9. Oleg Tarasov, *Icon and Devotion: Sacred Spaces in Imperial Russia*, London 2002, 113.



marvelled at what Brown calls the “awesome stillness” of Felix’s remains.<sup>10</sup> The trees and flowers that flourish at the graves of the saints provide an intimation of the garden of paradise in which the dead (on some accounts) now rest – as we see Christ resting in the time between his death and harrowing of hell as represented in the unusual icon “the eye that never sleeps”.<sup>11</sup>

Again, the cult of relics provides one route by which the promise of resurrection can become present now. The very tininess of the relic itself demonstrated the power of the heavenly over the earthly according to what Brown calls a logic of “inverted magnitudes”.<sup>12</sup> The dismembered body of the saint distributed amongst the faithful approximates to the ubiquity that Protestant theology ascribed to the body of Christ. It is a medium of life nearly entirely separated from the fate of a localized and rotting corpse; it may be just a “little drop of blood” but its power can become present virtually everywhere and is able to prevail over physical forces and, on some occasions, human enemies that are much greater in magnitude than itself. The same is true of the icon.

The face of the saint depicted in the icon is of course a human face. But it is not, for the most part, a face painted in accordance with ideas of individual subjective personality such as are familiar in Western religious art from the Renaissance onwards. Apart from the requirement to paint the icon in accordance with prescribed rules, Tarasov notes that in some cases the features of the saint, particularly in the case fifteenth-, sixteenth-, and seventeenth-century Russian saints, may have been derived from portraits made on the occasion of their deaths. Thus far, the requirement of verisimilitude seems to be entering in. Tarasov observes that in this period, the Baroque, the iconic face too became to some extent individualized and, as he quotes the seventeenth-century iconographer Joseph Vladimirov, saints, like the rest of us, possess “their own likeness”.<sup>13</sup> But, as he also points out, the “illuminated countenance” of the Baroque icon is a kind of borderline phenomenon, revealing both the divine image in which human beings are created and their individual personality. Death, for the saint, is precisely the moment of transition from earthly to heavenly life. Consequently, the face or countenance of the dying or recently dead saint belongs simultaneously to two worlds – not, as in the case of Christ, by virtue of an innate twofold nature, but on account of their faithfulness to Christ in life and his vindication of that faith through the miracles they have been able to perform,

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10. Brown, *The Cult of the Saints*, 76–77.

11. An example of this is kept in the Pskov Museum, Russia.

12. Brown, *The Cult of the Saints*, 78.

13. Tarasov, *Icon and Devotion*, 227–228.

including the miraculous preservation or even transformation of their dead bodies.

In this way, the icon, like the relic, could mediate divine power not only in a general way but also, often, with particular reference to the believer's experience of death. The issues are focused in a striking way in Fyodor Dostoevsky's (1821–1881) *The Brothers Karamazov* when the holy Elder Zosima dies and many believe that his body will be miraculously preserved, as befits the body of a saint. However, against all expectation on the part of his followers, his body begins to rot and those who have condemned him as a fraud seem to be vindicated. Here, it seems, is Dostoevsky's testimony that, in the world of modernity, we cannot expect the kind of immediate revelations of divine presence and power vouchsafed to our ancestors. Though we too may nourish the hope of immortality, we do not have direct access to that heavenly world, but remain (as Dostoevsky reported of himself) suspended in a crucible of doubt. Yet it is striking that the rotting body of Zosima is not quite Dostoevsky's last word in the novel and, in the Epilogue, he leaves us an image of a face that *is* transfigured in death, namely, the face of the child Ilyusha, who, after dreadful suffering, lies in his coffin:

His thin face was hardly changed at all, and strange to say there was no smell of decay from the corpse. The expression of his face was serious and, as it were, thoughtful. His hands, crossed over his breast, looked particularly beautiful, as if chiselled in marble.<sup>14</sup>

Here, perhaps, we see again the “awesome stillness” of the dead of which Paulinus of Nola spoke many centuries before. Although the content of Alyosha Karamazov's farewell discourse to Ilyusha's friends can be glossed almost entirely in secular terms, the transfigured body of Ilyusha hints that this hope is not for this life only.

The relic and the icon, then, may be the media of many particular interventions (in warfare, healing, agriculture, and so on), but perhaps their overarching role is in relation to the last things. In communicating the presence of the living God and of his army, the communion of saints, they provide assurance that we are not to be defined solely as “mortals”, but also as members of a community that transcends death and is not destroyed by the prospect of becoming a rotting corpse. Ultimately, we are all helpless before death, and even the wonders of modern medicine can only postpone and not remove the end of earthly life. The icon marks this ultimate limit, a

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14. Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, London 1912, 813.

point at which finite, mortal existence stands before an immortal heavenly life in which we are united with all we have loved and who love us.

I come back to *War and Peace* and to the image of General Kutuzov, kneeling before the icon of Our Lady of Smolensk. There is, I think, a world of difference between the function of the icon represented in this scene and the raising of a crusader's battle-flag. The crucial difference is this: that, as portrayed by Tolstoy, the great general is shown acknowledging that there is an absolute limit to his power and that of his army, of which, in this moment he is the embodiment. He is not merely acknowledging the uncertainty of the outcome of the impending battle. It is more an acknowledgment that he and his soldiers are all equally exposed to individual and collective death, standing before a power that is greater than that of any human power, a power that no human being and no human society has at its disposal. The power of the icon is in the revelation that there is a power other than that of the all-destroying and indifferent fate of the classical world or the infernal machine that Dostoevsky saw in Hans Holbein's (c. 1497–1543) painting of the dead Christ. We may be helpless before the power of death, but even in our helplessness, precisely in acknowledging our helplessness, another kind of life is revealed, a life of which the defining principle is all-embracing compassion.

This may not seem to amount to much. But we can glimpse something of its significance if we compare the attitude of Kutuzov as it is portrayed here with that of the post-Christian societies of the modern world. In times of crisis when the earth moves and the foundations are shaken, post-Christian societies too look to their leaders for assurance and guidance. But the particular myth of our time is that our leaders have or should have the human and technical competence to secure a good outcome, to “do a good job”, as President Trump said of himself in relation to Covid-19 (though vast numbers of commentators in America and around the world would dispute the accuracy of that self-assessment). For the majority of our contemporaries it seems, there is no power beyond that of society or the leaders in whom society invests its hopes. If society fails or if our leaders fail, we just do not know where to turn and are, indeed, helpless. It is this situation that encourages leaders to instrumentalize traditional symbols of religious life, Christian, Jewish, Islamic, Hindu, or Buddhist, as a means of underwriting the power they wield. But this is very different from seeing in those symbols a reminder of the limits of human national, technological, economic, and military power. Even for those who cannot embrace Christian belief in a communion of saints eschatologically united with God in Christ, the icon serves as reminder, never more timely than in a time of crisis, that the world

is ultimately not at our disposal, a mere resource to fuel whatever kind of life we want to lead. For the iconodule, the icon is much more than this, of course, but even this limited and negative lesson is important. It is particularly important in relation to the abuse of the icon as, in effect, a battle-flag. The veneration of icons amongst Russian forces in Ukraine, contextualized by Patriarch Kirill's fulsome endorsement of the war and its aims, indicate that icons, like other religious and national symbols (and like theology itself), can only too easily be made subservient to goals that can only with difficulty be squared with the values of Christ's peaceable Kingdom. But we should not concede that this is the sole, still less the proper function of icons in such extreme situations. ▲

#### SUMMARY

Contextualized by the use of icons during the current war in Ukraine, the paper finds a point of orientation in the veneration of the icon of Our Lady of Smolensk by the Russian army on the eve of the Battle of Borodino, as portrayed by Tolstoy. Is this turning the icon into a battle-flag? The use of icons in historic conflicts parallels the use of relics as a means of making present the power of the saint. Peter Brown shows that the cult of relics was closely associated with the sacralization of the burial site and dead body of the saint, democratized through the dismemberment of the saints' bodies and the use of physical items associated with them, a process that icons take still further, making the saint present in every church and household. Showing the saint as both heavenly and earthly, the icon recalls human beings to their own finitude and mortality, as we see in Tolstoy's image of Kutuzov kneeling before the icon of Our Lady of Smolensk. As expressive of human beings' individual and collective incapacity in the face of the last things, this understanding of icons provides a defence against the misuse of the icon as a battle-flag or its instrumentalization as a means of political domination and manipulation.