

## LIFE &amp; TIMES

## PUTIN WANTS THIS MAN DEAD

Born into Ukraine's 'underground' Catholic Church, its brave leader now condemns Russia's tyrant and Putin's religious leader, Patriarch Kirill



ALAN HOWE

Melbourne is one of the few cities in the world with two Catholic cathedrals. At one, St Patrick's, a noted city landmark, there have been memorials for bushfire victims, famous visitors, including Pope John Paul II, and the funerals of well-known Australians including Archbishop Daniel Mannix, BA Santamaria and Bert Newton. It even bears a stone gargoyles fashioned in the image of former premier Jeff Kennett (based on a John Spooner cartoon).

The other is decidedly lower-key and is nestled in a side street in North Melbourne in muted self-confidence. It is the Ukrainian Catholic Cathedral of Saints Peter and Paul. Most Melburnians are unaware of it.

I walked there the other morning to sit before Sviatoslav Shevchuk, an urbane, smilingly serene, deeply educated and thoughtful man. Russian President Vladimir Putin wants him killed.

Shevchuk comes from a long line of defiant Ukrainians who, despite the best efforts of a series of murderous communist dictators from Joseph Stalin on, have kept the candles of Catholicism burning, for decades underground, and these days on the proud streets of a nation under attack.

Air raid sirens in Shevchuk's home of Kyiv have sounded for more than 900 hours since Putin's forces invaded Ukraine on February 24, 2022. It was the biggest attack on a European nation. More than 110,000 troops and hundreds of tanks entered eastern Ukraine that day, making their way to the capital. They had been given three days' rations. That is how long Russia's military planners – Putin yes-men to their core – said it would take to encircle and capture Kyiv. The convoy from the east was 64km long.

Once they had taken the capital, Putin's instruction were clear:

Volodymyr Zelensky and his ministers were to be killed. So too other national figures, including Shevchuk, the Patriarch of the Ukrainian Catholic Church. Its world leader.

At one stage, Putin had 400 Wagner Group soldiers and as many Chechen commandos on the ground in Kyiv. Some even entered the President's compound and were killed by Ukraine's secret service.

Shevchuk told me he liked being in Australia. It was the first time in almost four years he had been able to sleep at night. No sirens. No drones. And none of the deadly Iran-supplied missiles. Putin almost certainly signed off on the successful assassinations of defector Alexander Litvinenko, opposition leader Alexei Navalny, and investigative reporter Anna Politkovskaya. It pays to recall that Politkovskaya's reporting annoyed Putin and she was killed on Putin's birthday. Litvinenko said Putin had sanctioned her killing, which he planned to investigate. Two weeks later he was fatally poisoned with radioactive polonium.

Asked if he were concerned for his life in Kyiv, Shevchuk responds matter-of-factly: "We are in the hands of God. I am on the hit list, as are other heads of churches in Ukraine."

He said that he was on the hit list to be assassinated when the Russian troops entered his country and "I am still on the hit list of their secret service".

There are six million followers of the Ukrainian Catholic church, 15 million of whom live outside Ukraine, with large populations in Australia and Canada. Locally, they are led by the amiable 45-year-old Mykola Bychok, who was elevated to cardinal by Pope Francis last December, and on Francis's death became the youngest member of the College of Cardinals in Rome to elect his successor, Pope Leo.

Stalin reformed the Russian Orthodox Church in 1943, to make it an organ of the state. In 1946 the Ukrainian Catholic Church was banned and went underground. Stalin was unaware of books, but his rat cunning saw sense in bringing the banned church out of the tunnels in which it operated in fear. It was adopted as the national religion – as long as it worked to his



Clockwise from above: Bishop Sviatoslav Shevchuk; the clergy conducting their meeting under Stalin's portrait in the 1940s; Shevchuk with his mother, Vira, and sister Vsevolod

He detests Kirill's pledge that dead conscripts will have all sins absolved: "He can't do that. Absolutely, that is heresy."

Russia's attacks on Ukraine have unified its religions. "Today we have the outstanding and maybe unique experience to be united in all those churches and religious organisations forming the Ukrainian Council of Churches and Religious Organisations."

Shevchuk scoffs at Putin's claim that he is fighting Nazis in Ukraine. "Our President, Zelensky, is from the Jewish community. The secretary of the National Security and Defence Council, Rustem Umerov, he is Muslim. The commander in chief of the armed forces, Olexsandr Syrskiy – ethnically he is Russian."

And the Patriarch, like almost all Ukrainians, wishes not to cede an inch of Ukrainian land to Putin and his occupiers. It is not just that so many Ukrainian lives have been lost in Putin's illegal war, but the constitution forbids it. And why should Ukraine reward the world's bloodiest tyrant? While Australia's half-educated university students, inspired by their Marxist lecturers, have been marching for Hamas, more people have died every day in the Russian invasion than were killed on any day in Gaza.

Putin, of course, claims to be a Christian. But Shevchuk is dismissive about any commitment. "Maybe he uses Christianity for his political purposes. He is a typical agent of the KGB. He is a fruit of that system of manipulation and oppression and he cannot be freed from that type of mentality ... he is enslaving others to this system of thinking and decision-making."

What would the Patriarch say to Putin were they to meet. "I would probably say the same that Moses said to the Pharaoh: Let my people go."

rules. Church services were then held beneath portraits of their new god – Stalin.

The Ukraine branch stayed underground. Its followers were courageously devout and hated communism. Two of them were Yuriy and Vira Shevchuk – he an engineer, she a music teacher and skilled piano player – whose parents had also worked with the secretive church that lived in fear of exposure, but whose members always placed faith in their god.

Yuriy and Vira gave birth in 1970 to a boy, Sviatoslav. This was a particularly hard time for anyone in the Soviet Union. Leonid Brezhnev had been in power since 1964. He might have been less autocratic than his predecessors, but was also less tolerant of what he saw as potential challenges to his authority.

Those days were hard. Shevchuk recalls them clearly. The crackdown was ruthless, and many priests and other clerics were murdered. His boyhood was one of furtive worship and late-night funerals. "We mourn our dead in their houses – not at fu-

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BISHOP SVIATOSLAV SHEVCHUK, PATRIARCH OF THE UKRAINIAN CATHOLIC CHURCH, COMMENTING ON VLADIMIR PUTIN'S CLAIM TO BE A CHRISTIAN

neral homes," he explained. It was a time when the faithful could ever-so-briefly forget the control of the state, its police, informants and rules.

"That was a moment when the priest was coming in secrecy at night to celebrate the Eucharist and the funeral service. That was a moment when I, as a child, for the first time, met the underground Catholic priest. I grew up in the underground church."

He described it as being "deadly dangerous", but he saw it as the path to freedom and dignity. He was 21 and secretly studying for the priesthood when the Iron Curtain fell and Ukraine was liberated.

Coincidentally, he was last in Australia when Russia started its war against Ukraine, invading and annexing the Crimean Peninsula in 2014.

"We are now facing, I would say, the most challenging period in our history," Shevchuk said.

He has not met his Russian counterpart, the vile, scheming Patriarch Kirill, who is the religious wing of Putin's war machine. Bearing a \$70,000 Breguet

Reveil Du Tsar timepiece, he bills himself as the Patriarch of Moscow and all Rus, a provocative ancient term for the people spread across Russia, Ukraine and even parts of Poland.

So subsumed into Kremlin discipline is the Russian Church that Kirill has described Putin as "a miracle of God". Less than a fortnight into the invasion in 2022, Kirill, completely aware that Russian troops were already raping, torturing and murdering innocents, praised the attack: "We have entered into a struggle that holds not a physical, but a metaphysical significance."

As Pope Francis dismissed Kirill as "Putin's altar boy", Kirill, in an effort to promote Putin's latest round of conscriptions, said that any young Russian who died in the effort to take Ukraine would be absolved of all sin. As of last week, 1,194,080 Russian troops have been killed according to the General Staff of the Armed Forces in Ukraine. On one day last week another 1730 Russian troops joined them.

Of the faithful in Ukraine, Kirill

says: "There will be no trace of (them) because they are fulfilling the evil, devil's will, destroying Orthodoxy in the land of Kyiv."

Shevchuk condemns what he sees as the "weaponisation of religion". He saw it first with Islamic State when "this group of criminals militarised and weaponised Islam for their own political and geopolitical proposals". He sees Kirill's stance as doing the same with the Russian Orthodox Church.

"That ideology, to be explicit and clear, is already condemned by the Orthodox themselves," Shevchuk said.

"This ideology says that the Western culture is the embodiment of (the) anti-Christ (and that the) West is morally totally corrupt. The second statement, it is legitimate to use a weapons and violence to fight that kind of corruption. And third, the most dangerous, everyone who will die in this holy war by the very fact to use a violence against other human beings will have remission of his sins. So that ideology is nothing less than orthodox jihad."

## Bin Laden 'prophecy' among many scoops

## OBITUARY

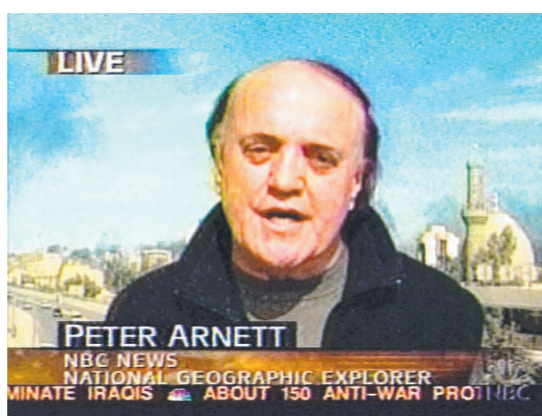
Peter Arnett  
War correspondent. Born Riverport, New Zealand, November 13, 1934; died, Newport Beach, California, December 17, aged 91.

In 1960, Peter Arnett was 26, a high school dropout trying to make his name as a freelance journalist in Laos. On August 11 that year, a military officer named Kong Le staged a coup. Unable to reach the telegraph office in Vientiane, the Laotian capital, Arnett swam across

the Mekong River to Thailand with his typed story, passport and \$US200 gripped between his teeth. On the far side, he hitched a ride on a timber truck to the nearest town, where he paid a telegraph operator \$US100 to dispatch his story. Then he swam back.

Thanks to the drive, enterprise and fearlessness Arnett showed that day, he did go on to make his name. Indeed, he became one of the best-known war correspondents of his generation.

He won a Pulitzer prize for his coverage of the Vietnam War, and so enraged US president Lyndon Johnson with his unvarnished re-



Journalist Peter Arnett reports from Baghdad on NBC television

ports of America's military failures that the White House pressed his employer, the Associated Press, to dismiss him. After the fall of Saigon in 1975, Arnett was one of the few Western journalists to remain in the city.

In 1991, he was one of the handful

of Western reporters who remained in Baghdad as the US-led coalition launched the Gulf War with a ferocious bombardment of the Iraqi capital. He and two colleagues broadcast non-stop for 17 hours for the fledgling CNN. Soon, he was the only Western reporter left in Bag-

dad, and secured an exclusive interview with Saddam Hussein.

In 1997, Arnett secured another notable scoop. He travelled with a producer and cameraman, all of them blindfolded, to a remote hideout in the mountains of Afghanistan, where he conducted a rare interview with Osama bin Laden. "What are your future plans?" he asked the al-Qaeda leader who had just declared jihad against the US. "You'll see them and hear about them in the media, God willing," replied the man who orchestrated the 9/11 attacks four years later.

Short, stocky and balding, Arnett was hardly the epitome of a dashing war correspondent, but he spent four decades covering conflicts in Asia, the Middle East, Latin America and Europe. He survived while many of his colleagues were killed, and deservedly became a household name.

He did much to establish CNN as a major new outlet, but his 18-year career there ended unhappily in 1999 after he was officially reprimanded for narrating a film that claimed, erroneously, that the US Army had used sarin, a nerve agent, against American deserters in Laos in 1970.

Queen Elizabeth appointed Arnett an Officer of the New Zealand Order of Merit for services to journalism in the New Year's honours list of 2007.

He left school at 17 and went to work as a copy boy for The Southland Times. He became hooked on journalism and kept the first of his words ever to appear in print – a paragraph about the weather that had been completely rewritten by a sub-editor.

He passed through The Sun in Sydney before moving to Bangkok. By 1960, he was freelancing in

Laos, primarily for AP, although on occasion he discreetly worked simultaneously for Reuters and UPI, AP's rivals.

He spent most of the next 13 years covering the Vietnam War from Saigon.

In 1967, he witnessed the massacre of US soldiers sent to rescue stranded colleagues during the battle of Dak To. In 1968, he covered the shelling of Ben Tre during the Tet Offensive, famously quoting an unnamed US officer saying: "It became necessary to destroy the town to save it." The Johnson White House allegedly ordered an agent to dig up dirt on him. Instead he was awarded the 1966 Pulitzer prize.

Arnett remained in Saigon as his compatriots clambered on to helicopters from the roof of the US embassy.

Arnett's thirst for adventure

persisted. Following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan four years later, he crossed the border in disguise and linked up with the Mujahideen resistance.

He gave up active reporting in 2007 and settled – by then an American citizen – in a suburb of Los Angeles. He taught journalism at Shantou University in China and wrote two memoirs, Live From the Battlefield: From Vietnam to Baghdad (1994), and Saigon Has Fallen (2015).

By the time of his death from prostate cancer, Arnett was one of the dwindling band of old-school reporters who had covered the Vietnam War, banging out their stories on typewriters and filing them down telegraph wires. His friends from that era were almost all dead. He told an interviewer: "I'm getting lonely now."

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