

# Stories recorded of Ukrainian Christians tortured by Russia

March 8, 2024

KYIV, Ukraine (BP)—Russian soldiers captured Azat, a Ukrainian Baptist pastor, on one of his many trips to deliver humanitarian aid to Mariupol as Russia ravaged the city in the early months of the war.

What Russian soldiers did to him over the next six weeks because of his Christian faith left him temporarily bedridden—one wound baring his leg bone, internal organs damaged, teeth knocked out, eardrums burst, he said in a video recounting the torture.

“I had a bag on my head and my hands were handcuffed to my legs. Electric wires were connected to my genitals. They beat me with batons, an iron pipe, a wooden stick,” Azat said. “They mocked me and asked me how I became a traitor to the faith of my fathers and grandfathers by becoming Baptist. I am a Baptist and for Russians, Baptists are American spies. They call us ‘foreign agents.’”

Electrocuting him, soldiers demanded to know whom he served, perhaps speculating he served a foreign government.

“I told them, ‘I serve God.’ And then they tortured me more, asking which God do I serve. To this, I responded, ‘The Holy Trinity: The Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.’ Well, at this they laughed and beat me so badly that they thought that I was dead.”

## Ukraine Freedom Project records

# persecution

Steven Moore, a U.S. citizen in Kyiv who has launched the Ukraine Freedom Project to tell the stories of persecuted Christians, said Russia's perception of Azat's Christianity is typical.

"The Russians view Protestants and evangelicals as agents of America," Moore told Baptist Press. "As Russia occupies, they (surmise): 'Oh, this is a Baptist church. The pastor must be an agent of America, like our priests are an agent of the Kremlin.'" So, they arrest them, they torture them, and they shut down their church, and sometimes they kill believers for their faith."

Azat tells his story on the website Moore's ministry founded, [RussiatorturesChristians.org](https://RussiatorturesChristians.org). Azat is among four Baptists who share their personal stories of persecution on the site, along with the stories of other Christians tortured and persecuted there.

"What I do, I find the people that have escaped the occupation, because information is difficult to get out of the occupied areas," Moore said. "If you're a Christian who speaks out against the persecution and torture of your co-believers in the occupied areas, the Russians will threaten your family and friends who are still there."

Russia killed at least 26 faith leaders in the first year of the war, now in its third year, Moore said, citing numbers broadly stated as fact. Dmytro Vovk, an expert on religious freedom with the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, cited the number at a March 2023 virtual hearing hosted by the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom.

USCIRF referenced the hearing March 1 in urging the Biden Administration "to utilize all tools available to sanction and hold

accountable Russian authorities, including de facto authorities” for targeting and abusing prisoners of conscience held for their religious faith and practice.

“In Russian-occupied Ukraine, Russian forces have relentlessly suppressed Ukrainian religious communities,” the commission said, “by banning religious groups, shutting down houses of worship, and abducting, detaining, imprisoning, and torturing religious leaders and actors.”

Moore wants Christians in the United States to know the plight of Ukrainian Christians at Russia’s hands.

“If Russia wins in Ukraine, there will be tens or hundreds of thousands of dead Christians,” Moore asserted. “The Baptists are the most represented Protestant denomination in Ukraine, and so, they’re bearing the brunt of a lot of these horrors. The horrors that are happening here to Christians are from the Russians.”

## **Call to prayer and advocacy**

He urged U.S. Christians to continue praying for Ukraine and to advocate for continued U.S. military aid.

“People of faith need to stand up,” he said. “We need their prayers and we need their political support in making sure the Ukrainians can get the weapons they need to save their people in occupied Ukraine and keep more Ukrainians from suffering the same fate.”

Moore, who has worked as a political aide in the United States, said God opened the door for him to launch a ministry to help Ukrainian Christians in the early days of the war. His Ukraine Freedom Project also offers humanitarian aid, providing socks for soldiers, generators for residents, and first-aid kits, among other supplies.

“My friends from Ukraine started calling me and saying, ‘They’re bombing Kyiv, I don’t know what to do.’” Moore, who has spent two years in Iraq as a civilian during wartimes, said he knew how to navigate such offenses. A friend and Ukrainian veteran of Russia’s 2014 invasion of the Donbas region contacted Moore, and the two devised a plan.

“I had the time, I had the resources, I had the skills and so many people were calling me (for) help,” said Moore, who had considered a skiing trip in the days before the war. “I figured if I had gone skiing, it was not a decision that would have aged well. God opened up all these doors. And just, boom, boom, boom, doors started opening.”

Moore intends to continue telling the stories of the persecuted Christians who are able to escape Russia’s grasp, he said.

“We have a passion for highlighting the systematic torture and arrest and murder and persecution of evangelical Christians,” he said. “The Christian population has been totally driven underground.”