

# **RUSSIAN ORTHODOXY TRIUMPHANT?**

## **MASS CONVERSION AND CULTURAL IDENTITY IN BELARUS, 1825-1855**

*An NCEEER Working Paper by*

**Barbara Skinner**



**National Council for Eurasian  
and East European Research**

1828 L Street NW

Suite 1200

Washington, DC 20036

[info@nceeer.org](mailto:info@nceeer.org)

<http://www.nceeer.org/>



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## **Executive Summary**

The recent rebirth of the Uniates in Grodno and throughout Belarus was largely promoted among the well-educated strata of the population who understood the role and fate of this church within Belarus' past. Within efforts to unwrap their national history and identity from pro-Russian perspectives imposed by Russian imperial and Soviet regimes, Belarusians have turned toward Belarus' religious past as well, with particular attention paid to the suppression of the Uniate Church within the Russian Empire.



## **Introduction**

A scant dozen parishioners sat in coats, hats, and scarves on plain wooden benches in an unheated chapel in Grodno, Belarus, on a frigid Sunday in early March 2012. Their breath condensed in the cold air as they recited and sang the Uniate (Greek Catholic) responses, but they knew the words and their voices were strong. The Uniate Church has experienced a growing presence here despite a lack of government support or clerical training within the borders of Belarus. The young priest of this parish, Father Andrei Krot, and other Belarusian Uniate priests – spread thinly throughout major cities in this former Soviet republic – receive training, ordination, and salaries from the Ivano-Frankiv diocese of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church in southwestern Ukraine. The Roman Catholic diocese in Grodno granted the small Uniate parish the right to use this suburban chapel as a temporary home until a church for them could be built; a site for the Uniate church has been arranged in downtown Grodno and donations from parishioners help to fund the construction.<sup>1</sup>

The rebirth of the Uniates in Grodno and throughout Belarus was largely promoted among the well-educated strata of the population who understood the role and fate of this church within Belarus' past. Within efforts to unwrap their national history and identity from pro-Russian perspectives imposed by Russian imperial and Soviet regimes, Belarusians have turned toward Belarus' religious past as well, with particular attention paid to the suppression of the Uniate Church within the Russian Empire. Created in 1596 inside the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, the Uniate Church accepted Roman Catholic doctrine while maintaining the Eastern (Byzantine/Slavonic) rite and became the dominant faith of the Belarusians by the

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<sup>1</sup>Information from my conversation with Father Andrei Krot in Hrodna, March 4, 2012.

eighteenth century. After the partitions of Poland, this church came under attack by the Russian church and state, its adherents forced to convert to Russian Orthodoxy by 1839. Many who have embraced Belarusian nationalist sentiment in the post-Soviet era have turned to the Uniate Church as a marker of distinctive identity in the spiritual realm. “For Belarusians who take pride in their nation, who know its history, who speak Belarusian, who love the Belarusian culture, the Uniate Church is the only church that is truly ours, Belarusian,” said Belarusian historian and Grodno resident Alexander Kraütsevich, “When I attended a Uniate service for the first time, I finally felt that this is my faith, that this should be my faith, and I felt at home in this church.”<sup>2</sup>

This nationalist sentiment was not yet present at the time of the mass conversion of Uniates within the Russian Empire to Orthodoxy in 1839, but the archival documents from this time bear witness to a strong consciousness on the part of the Uniate population inside Russia of the foreign-ness of Russian Orthodoxy compared to their distinctive and familiar Uniate culture. The Uniate Church combined Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic elements in a dynamic blend of Eastern liturgical tradition with Catholic theology and religious intellectual foundations based on Western teachings, of Slavonic services with Polish-language non-liturgical texts and prayers, of the celebration of saints and holidays from both the Eastern Orthodox and the Polish Catholic tradition. Inside the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, this hybrid religious culture had been slowly shaped over the centuries since the church’s foundation, with its strongest manifestations in the Belarusian and western Ukrainian provinces. During the partitions of Poland (1772, 1793, and 1795), when the majority of Uniates came under Russian rule, Catherine II strived to convert Uniate believers in her empire to Russian Orthodoxy in short order. A massive campaign led by Russian Orthodox priests from neighboring eastern Ukraine

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<sup>2</sup>Author's interview with Alexander Kraütsevich in Hrodna, Feb. 29, 2012.

succeeded in wresting some 1.5 million Uniate souls into Orthodox control in 1794-96, primarily in central (Right Bank) Ukraine; while conformity to standard Orthodox practices in these newly converted parishes would take decades, central Ukraine became firmly Orthodox. The Uniate Church continued to dominate the Belarusian lands and western Ukraine until Tsar Nicholas I presided over the next large-scale effort to convert the remaining 1.3 million Belarusian and 200,000 Ukrainian Uniates inside the Russian Empire and to establish Russian Orthodox liturgical practices as the norm for all Eastern Slavs inside its borders – Russians, Belarusians, and Ukrainians alike. This involved a far more intensive effort than in the previous century and led to the formal eradication in 1839 of all Uniate institutions – including dioceses, parishes, monasteries, and schools – in the eight provinces acquired by Russia during the Polish partitions.

Official Russian rhetoric condemned the Uniate Church as a product of forced Polonization and Latinization of the “Russian” peoples (Eastern Slavs) that stole them from their “true” Orthodox and Russian cultural heritage. The Russian conversion policy – especially following the 1830 Polish uprising – constituted an open attack against the Polish influences within these lands of the former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and reflected imperial anxieties about the ultimate loyalties of the Belarusian and Ukrainian peoples. More than just religious conversion, this policy aimed to erase or at least diminish the cultural distinctions between Russians and the Belarusians and Ukrainians in the western borderlands of the Empire and to create an Orthodox population that by virtue of their religious culture would be more loyal subjects of the tsar. This was a calculated and powerful mode of Russification.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>The significance of the loss of the Uniate Church to this region can be seen within the importance of this church to the development of Ukrainian nationalist sentiment in the region where it survived, in the western Ukrainian region of Galicia, which went to Austria during the Polish partitions. There the Uniate Church, called the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, continued to develop over the 19<sup>th</sup> century and to nurture a distinctive Ukrainian religious identity during the rise of nationalistic sentiment. Despite Stalin's brutal repression of the church after the Soviet Union

But it was a highly fraught effort and one that yielded questionable results. Former Uniates did not immediately accept and adopt the Russian Orthodox practices foisted upon them. Instead, both short-term acts of resistance and long-term residual Uniate practices continued to plague the post-1839 Orthodox dioceses in these regions. Both the policies and the mixed results reflect key aspects of Belarusian, Ukrainian, and Russian imperial identity development that merit more careful consideration by scholars of this region. Documents from the local church and state archives of these western provinces underscore the complexity of the process and the inherent difficulties of imposing wholesale changes in confession and religious culture. They point to clashing perceptions of the process between those instituting the policy and those subjected to it. For the case of Belarus in particular, this evidence raises questions about the historical legitimacy of current Russian Orthodox claims to the vast majority of churches and parishes there.

### **1) A Multiconfessional Environment**

The western provinces of the Russian Empire alone of all borderlands of Russia's vast imperial space had a multiconfessional population with a long history of competing strains of Christianity. This region consisted of the gubernii (provinces) of Vitebsk, Mogilev, Minsk, Grodno, Vilna, Kiev, Volhynia, and Podolia acquired by the Russian Empire from the partitions of Poland-Lithuania.<sup>4</sup> Of the dominant Christian population here, only pockets of Protestant

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claimed Galicia during World War II, Ukrainian Greek Catholics re-emerged several million strong with the new religious freedoms in the Soviet Union of the late 1980s. This church today continues to support a Ukrainian identity that embraces Western concepts and rejects closer ties to Russia.

<sup>4</sup>Aside from its majority Christian population, the western provinces also contained the vast majority of Russia's Jewish population (though comprising a minority in the region), who were dealt with separately in terms of legislation and rights.



(mostly Calvinist) and Orthodox communities remained by the time of the second partition in 1793, while the majority of the inhabitants were either Roman Catholic or Uniate. With the loss in the late 17<sup>th</sup> century of the Orthodox strongholds of Eastern Ukraine and Kiev to Muscovy, the Orthodox Church in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth had suffered a blow from which it did not recover. As Polish-Lithuanian legislation restricted political and social rights of Orthodox citizens in order to limit avenues of Russian influence, and as Roman Catholic landowners more and more often insisted on Uniate rather than Orthodox churches for their peasants, increasing numbers of formerly Orthodox Belarusians and Ukrainians became Uniate.

Russian policies and attitudes toward the Uniate Church were shaped prior to the acquisition of these lands from the partitions of Poland. From the late 17<sup>th</sup> century, the Russian tsar began taking notice of the diminished Orthodox Church inside the Commonwealth and advocating for its rights vis-a-vis the Uniates.<sup>5</sup> Russian officials adopted the rhetoric devised by educated Orthodox clerics in Kiev that condemned the Polish promotion of the Uniate Church as “persecution” of the Orthodox Eastern Slavs; this same rhetoric celebrated the shared ethnic (“tribal”) roots of Belarusians (White Russians), Ukrainians (Little Russians), and Great Russians and promoted the concept of an “all-Russian” identity that incorporated all three Eastern Slavic groups within a single Orthodox culture.<sup>6</sup> This perspective evolved into the Russian imperial ideology behind territorial and cultural claims to the region. Catherine II thus justified the partitions of Poland as “returning” to Russia the lands of ancient Rus’ and as saving

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<sup>5</sup>See documents compiled in Nikolai Bantysh-Kamenskii, *Istoricheskoe izvestie o voznikshei v Pol'she unii s pokazaniem nachala i vazhneishikh, v prodolzhenie onoi chrez dva veka, prikliuchenii, pache zhe o byvshem ot Rimlian i Uniatov na blagochestivykh tamoshnikh zhitelei gononii* (Moscow, 1805).

<sup>6</sup>This argument was most notably presented in a Kievan text from 1681 called *Sinopsis*. See Hans Rothe, *Sinopsis, Kiev 1681. Facsimile mit einer Einleitung* (Cologne and Vienna, 1983).

Russia's Eastern Slavic brethren there from Polish "persecution." In 1794, she launched the first major attack on the Uniate Church inside Russia in a massive conversion campaign to "return" Belarusian and Ukrainian Uniates to their "true faith" of Russian Orthodoxy, thus saving them from Polish and Catholic spiritual "oppression."<sup>7</sup> This effort secured for Orthodoxy the central Ukrainian provinces of Kiev and Podolia where the Uniate Church had the shallowest roots, but immediately encountered resistance in Volhynia (western Ukraine) and in all the provinces of Belarus, where the Uniate faith had its firmest foundations and fullest development.<sup>8</sup>

Aiding the Russian argument of Polish "persecution" and "oppression" in this region was the particular ethnic/class construction of the western provinces, where the landowners were predominately Latin-rite Roman Catholics – mostly Poles, but also Polonized Lithuanians, Belarusians, and Ukrainians – and the enserfed Belarusian and Ukrainian peasantry were Eastern-rite Uniate or Orthodox. It is true that landowners had encouraged their Eastern-rite labor force to adopt the Uniate faith, and, in some cases forcefully imposed this faith on their Orthodox peasants over the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Nevertheless, by the second quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century, when Nicholas I supported renewed efforts to convert the Uniates, the peasants in Belarus and western Ukraine had been Uniate for multiple generations and had become used to its hybrid culture, blurring any previous lines of persecution.

Moreover, the divisive Russian rhetoric on Polish and Catholic "persecution" did not reflect the fluid confessional situation in the western provinces in which conversions in all directions occurred on a regular basis. Documents from the Orthodox consistories and Russian

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<sup>7</sup>This language is used to great effect in the ukaz initiating the mass conversion, *Polnoe sobranie zakonov Rossiiskoi imperii* (PSZ), series 1, no. 17,199 (April 22, 1794).

<sup>8</sup>On the 18<sup>th</sup>-century history, see Barbara Skinner, *The Western Front of the Eastern Church: Uniate and Orthodox Conflict in Eighteenth-Century Poland, Ukraine, Belarus, and Russia* (DeKalb, Ill.: Northern Illinois University Press, 2009)

governor-generals over the decades prior to 1839 offered frequent complaints about Uniate conversions to Roman Catholicism and investigations of cases of apostasy when those on Orthodox rosters (usually former Uniates pressured to convert in 1794-96) converted to either the Uniate or Roman Catholic confession. Intermarriages between all three faiths were common and required the conversion of one of the parties.<sup>9</sup> Additionally, prior to the mass conversion of 1839, Uniate individuals voluntarily converted to Orthodoxy for a variety of personal reasons, as well as from the influence of Orthodox missions into the western provinces.<sup>10</sup> Uniate peasants who worked in the households of Polish landowners or attended Catholic schools sometimes converted to Roman Catholicism.<sup>11</sup> The Russians had set their sights on a moving target, and this became a constant element of frustration for them.

The documents from the early 19<sup>th</sup> century also reveal a clear sense of familiarity between Uniates and Roman Catholics and concomitant estrangement between Uniates and Orthodox. By that time, Uniate churches more closely resembled Roman Catholic churches in architectural design (with no iconostasis and an altar against the sanctuary wall) and in sacramental utensils (such as altar bells and the cyborium or monstrance to store the consecrated Host); aside from Uniate Slavonic liturgical books, Uniate priests also often used Polish-language Gospels and sermons, and the people knew some prayers in Polish. Uniate clergymen often attended Catholic public (secular) secondary schools and were required to write their parish

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<sup>9</sup>Representative documents are in NIAB Minsk (see fn. 28), f. 136, op. 1, dd. 7853, 8215, 10709, 10777, 10844, 10847, 10895, 10896, 10914, 10973, 10982, 11067, 11120, 11171, 12809, 12848, 12853, 12891, 12892, 12903, 13012; f. 1297, op. 1, d. 7795; f. 3245, op. 1, d. 439.

<sup>10</sup>Orthodox bishop of Polotsk, Smaragd, championed the process of individual conversions in the region, whereas the Uniates working toward mass conversion saw these individual conversions as detrimental to the larger mass effort. Shavelskii, 94-154, 178-192, 236-242.

<sup>11</sup>For example, NIAB Minsk, f. 136, op. 1, d. 7942 (1828).

records in Polish.<sup>12</sup> Uniates and Roman Catholics regularly joined together on holidays dedicated to miraculous icons or saints. Moreover, a majority of the members of the Uniate monastic order, the Basilian Order, came from Latin-rite families, often becoming instructors of Uniate schools and members of the Uniate hierarchy, which was traditionally drawn from the celibate Basilians.<sup>13</sup> Local Uniate and Roman Catholic elites both saw this movement of educated Roman Catholics into the Basilian Order as essential to the well-being of the Uniate Church.<sup>14</sup> Additionally, Roman Catholic clergymen could provide rites to Uniates in times of need (until the Russian state restricted Roman Catholics in this regard in 1830), while Russian legislation firmly prohibited Roman Catholics to perform rites for Orthodox parishioners.<sup>15</sup> Uniate clergymen who had refused to convert to Orthodoxy in 1794-96 and had consequently lost their parishes received shelter from Roman Catholic monasteries and landowners and positions in Roman Catholic chapels.

To the Uniates in the western provinces, the Eastern-rite Orthodox church seemed far more foreign by the 1830s, with its iconostases separating the congregation from the altar, its more elaborate liturgical ritual, and its use of Russian – not well understood by Belarusians and Ukrainians – rather than Polish in any instructional communication. During and after the partitions, a new political loyalty toward the Russian state emerged among the Orthodox believers in these provinces, and this created another layer of distinction between Uniate and

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<sup>12</sup>Visitations to parishes in the Novogrodek region in western Belarus reveal the predominance of these characteristics already in 1798. *Arkheograficheski sbornik dokumentov otnosiashchikhsia k istorii severo-zapadnoi Rusi*, Vol. 13 (Vilna, 1902): 154-235 and Vol. 14 (Vilna 1903): 56-125.

<sup>13</sup>See S.M. Klimov, *Basiliane* (Mogilev, 2011), 54-55, 76, 115, 133, and statistics in RGIA, f. 824, op. 2, d. 213.

<sup>14</sup>Attested to in comments from Uniate Metropolitan Kochanowicz and the marshal of the Minsk nobility in RGIA (see fn. 28), f. 797, op. 6, d. 22319, ll. 24-24ob and 38.

<sup>15</sup>*Svod Zakonov Rossiiskoi Imperii poveleniem gosudaria imperatora Nikolaia Pavlovicha*, 1833, chast' IV, section I, articles 79 and 81; Klimov, 101.

Orthodox communities. Whereas Orthodox communities had been ill-treated under Polish rule, now it was the Uniates who felt “persecuted” under the new Russian regime. In fact, this vulnerable position gave them one more shared characteristic with Roman Catholics, who remained under suspicion of disloyalty, particularly following the 1830-31 Polish uprising, and who suffered an enormous loss of monasteries and churches under the Russian regime over the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Thus, given this 19<sup>th</sup>-century situation in Russia’s western provinces, converting the Uniates here to Orthodoxy involved undermining the dominant characteristics of Belarusian and Ukrainian religious life. First, the broad grey zone between Roman Catholicism and Orthodoxy occupied by the Uniate Church and by the constant interconfessional interactions in this region had to be suppressed and replaced by a firm line of separation between the Polish/Latin/Western Roman Catholic Church and the Russian/Byzantine/Eastern Orthodox Church. Secondly, the culture and practices of the Uniate Church had to be detached from its shared sphere with Roman Catholicism and remade into a church that shared liturgical characteristics with the Orthodox Church and that could then easily be absorbed into the greater Russian Orthodox Church.

Of great interest, the heavy-handed policies used to carry out these goals derived not from the imperial Russian administration, but instead from within the Uniate hierarchy itself. Specifically, a Uniate clerical administrator from Ukraine, Iosif Semashko, forged the path toward erasing the unique hybrid culture of the Uniate Church and destroying the bridges between Eastern-rite and Latin-rite churches in the western provinces. Although historians depict him as a mere tool for the Russian regime, he alone – motivated by his own affinity for Russian culture – created the program of steps to eradicate Catholic influence and practices in the Uniate Church that were necessary for the *vozsoedinenie*, or reunion, of Uniates to Orthodoxy. He

enlisted other Uniate administrators and bishops to help him impose this program of *vozsoedinenie*, and he won Nicholas I's support for its implementation. Documents from the 1830s demonstrate Semashko's careful micromanagement of the process.<sup>16</sup> Given his orchestration of the mass conversion from within the Uniate hierarchy, those studying the region must concede that the loss of the interconfessional zone and hybrid faith associated with a separate Belarusian and Ukrainian religious culture was to some degree a self-inflicted wound. Semashko's views, however, should not be dismissed as a mere anomaly, as many historians have done, but must be seriously accepted as one of many the strains of identity present among the Belarusian and Ukrainian subjects of the Russian Empire.

## 2) *Vozsoedinenie*: the steps toward the “Reunion” of Uniates to Orthodoxy

The documentation on the Uniate conversion process demonstrates impressively persistent and methodical efforts toward the eradication of all Uniate liturgical practices that diverged from the Eastern rite of the Russian Orthodox Church in the years leading up to the 1839 *vozsoedinenie*. As Iosif Semashko clearly argued, the Uniate Church first had to be rid of all manifestations of Polish influence – of all institutions, material culture, and practices drawn from the Roman Catholic Church – before it could merge into the Russian Orthodox Church; thus, he advocated “first to prepare the Uniates through external transformations, and only then to approach religious *vozsoedinenie*.”<sup>17</sup> Semashko wrote that at least part of his motivation for this process was his own patriotism toward Russia and his concern about the anti-Russian sentiment stoked by the Poles and Roman Catholics and spread to the Uniate communities in the

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<sup>16</sup>Aside from archival documents, the published sources in *Zapiski Iosifa Mitropolita Litovskago*, Vols. 1-3 (St. Petersburg, 1883) amply illustrate Semashko's degree of control over the process.

<sup>17</sup>*Zapiski*, Vol. 1, 90.

western provinces: “These two ‘firing pins,’ Polish patriotism and deceitful Catholicism ... continually act toward distancing the hearts of the residents of the Polish *gubernii* [western provinces] from their current fatherland [Russia].”<sup>18</sup> He presented the eradication of Polish influences in the Uniate Church – and the eventual merging of this church (*vozsoedinenie*) with the Russian Orthodox Church – as beneficial to the fatherland by eliminating “dangerous” elements, thus from the start gracing his policy with a greater political goal.

As a 29-year-old assessor and prelate in the Roman Catholic College, Iosif Semashko outlined his vision for *vozsoedinenie* in November 1827 in a memorandum entitled “On the Situation of the Uniate Church in Russia and the Means to Return it to the Bosom of the Orthodox Church.”<sup>19</sup> This memorandum followed in the wake of a decree by Nicholas I to reinforce a prior law prohibiting Basilians (Uniate monastics) from accepting Roman Catholics into their order; the new decree expressed imperial concern about the Uniate rite’s increased deviation from the Eastern-rite principles laid out by the pope upon the creation of the Uniate Church in 1596.<sup>20</sup> The implication that the tsar understood the Uniate rite better than the Uniates themselves and the tone of a stern but concerned father figure guiding his children back to the right path colored this decree and indeed all of the policy implemented toward the Uniate Church.<sup>21</sup> Semashko used the tsar’s decree as a prologue to his memorandum on steps to eradicate the Catholic influences in the Uniate Church, and thereby to transform it into a church

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<sup>18</sup>*Zapiski*, Vol. 1, 36-37.

<sup>19</sup>The entire memorandum (dated 5 November 1827) is published in *Zapiski*, vol. 1, 387-398.

<sup>20</sup>PSZ, 2<sup>nd</sup> series, no. 1449 (October 9, 1827).

<sup>21</sup>In reality, Basilian services with their organ music and intelligent sermons attracted a number of Orthodox believers (former Uniates), frequently ending in apostasy, and the Russian authorities feared a weakening of Orthodoxy in the region. Should the Uniate services more resemble the Orthodox services, perhaps fewer cases of apostasy would occur.

that could easily be “returned” to Orthodoxy. The perspective was consistent with all previous Russian church and state stipulations on the Uniate Church: that this was not a valid church and that Uniates were Orthodox believers brought into Catholic errors by the persecuting hand of the Poles. Thus, the righteous Russian regime would lead them away from these errors and back to “the faith of their forefathers.”

Tsar Nicholas I personally approved of Semashko’s plan, and a steady stream of decrees immediately followed that reorganized the Uniate administration, further weakened the Basilian order, and reshaped Uniate clerical education in the Orthodox mode. First, in 1828, the Uniate administration broke from the Roman Catholic Spiritual College, which had managed the Uniate Church from 1798, to form a separate, self-governing Greek-Uniate Spiritual College.<sup>22</sup> (This body still remained under the supervision of the Ministry of the Interior’s Department of Ecclesiastical Affairs of Foreign Confessions, as did all non-Orthodox confessions.) Without votes of protest from Roman Catholic representatives, the program of *vozsoedinenie* could proceed uncontested. At the same time, the number of Uniate dioceses was reduced from four to two – both headquartered in Belarusian provinces: the Belorussian (Belorusskaia) diocese, based in Polotsk, and the Lithuanian (Litovskaia) diocese, based in Zhirovitse, each with its own secondary schools and seminary, and each absorbing parishes from the dissolved Brest and Lutsk dioceses. Semashko argued that this streamlining would make it easier to ensure that “reliable people” ran the dioceses and clerical education. Additionally, Basilian monasteries were subordinated to diocesan administration, effectively ending their self-government, and in 1830

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<sup>22</sup>From this moment, official church and state documents consistently refer to the Uniate Church as the “Greek-Uniate (Greko-Uniatskaia) Church,” bringing its title closer to the “Greek-Russian (Greko-Rossiiskaia) Orthodox Church”, as the Russian Orthodox had taken to calling themselves.



the Uniate College required them to observe the Eastern rite in all their services.<sup>23</sup> By 1829, further legislation introduced new charters for Uniate ecclesiastical secondary schools and seminaries, with curriculums changed to match those of Orthodox schools, including instruction in the Russian language. Enforcing the new curriculum was difficult for some time, but the Russifying impact was enormous: Church historian Marian Radwan argues that with the new curricular restrictions, the seminaries performed a “dysfunctional role” for the Uniate Church, an ideological role, serving as “transmission belts” for Russifying the western provinces.<sup>24</sup> For his successful work on these policies, in 1829, Semashko was promoted and ordained as bishop in the Uniate Church.

The Polish uprising of 1830-31 interrupted this spate of reforms, much to Semashko’s frustration. Given the disruptions of the uprising and its subsequent adjudication across the western provinces, including investigations into any participation on the part of the Uniate clergy (especially the Basilians), as well as a widespread outbreak of cholera, little more was accomplished on “the Uniate issue”, as Semashko termed it, until 1834. The one exception was a harsh policy to suppress the Basilian order. Semashko’s 1827 plan had identified the Basilians as the most problematic institution of the Uniate church (given their historical promotion of Catholic practices and resistance against earlier efforts to reinstate the original Eastern rite, as well as the respect and influence they had from the local population) and had called for closing three-quarters of the eighty Basilian monasteries and all thirteen of their public schools

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<sup>23</sup>PSZ, 2<sup>nd</sup> series, no. 1977 (April 22, 1828); *Zapiski*, vol 1, 60 and 580-82.

<sup>24</sup>Marian Radwan, *Carat wobec Kościoła greckokatolickiego w zaborze rosyjskim, 1796-1839* (Lublin, 2004, 156. Sons of Uniate clergy could no longer study in the Roman Catholic Vilna university.

A number of other restrictions were also legislated at this time, all enumerated in *Zapiski*, Vol. 1, 59-62, including prohibiting Uniate priests from holding positions in Roman Catholic chapels (common for the Uniate priests who refused to convert with their parishes in 1794-6).

remaining within Russian borders. By 1830, two Basilian schools and seven monasteries had been dissolved. When suspicions against some Basilians for supporting the Polish uprising proved true, Russian administrators moved quickly: between 1831 and 1836, Russian authorities, with approval of the Greek-Uniate College, closed 44 Basilian monasteries and all but two Basilian secular schools.<sup>25</sup> In the midst of all this, in 1833, Semashko received another promotion to eparchial bishop and became head of the Lithuanian diocese (and still the guiding member of the Greek-Uniate College).

From 1834 to 1837, efforts focused on transforming all Uniate parish churches to comply with the Eastern-rite norms of the Orthodox Church. This involved an extraordinary series of episcopal and Uniate College mandates to strip the physical churches of all the structures, utensils, vestments, and service books that distinguished Uniate churches from Orthodox churches and then to outfit the churches with the appropriate Orthodox items. In advocating to the Greek-Uniate College and to the Minister of the Interior (Dmitrii Nikolaevich Bludov) for these policies, Semashko – now Bishop Iosif – provided the same explanation for these changes as had the imperial decree of 1827 on the Basilians: to purify the Eastern rite of the Uniate Church. Nowhere did any of the correspondence dealing with the parishes on these issues mention a future conversion to Orthodoxy – all at this point was carried out ostensibly in the name of cleansing the Uniate Church of Polish/Catholic influences to return it to its original form in 1596.

Given that most Uniate Churches – particularly those in the Belarusian provinces – no

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<sup>25</sup>*Zapiski*, vol. 1, 395-396; Radwan, 130-31, 138-140. To try to thin the monastic ranks, the Russian state allowed those Basilians who wished to return to the Roman Catholic faith to do so (only about 50 did so by the deadline of 1834). See *Zapiski*, vol. 1, 61.

longer resembled Eastern-rite churches in their fundamental structure, the task was monumental. In the Lithuanian diocese, only 80 of 800 parishes had iconostases<sup>26</sup>, and almost all churches in both dioceses had altars built against the back wall, making it impossible to proceed around the altar, as required in traditional Eastern-rite liturgies.<sup>27</sup> Building an iconostasis and placing the altar correctly constituted the most fundamental transformation in order to create a church that could accommodate Orthodox services. Additionally, in the churches that had them, organs were to be dismantled (as the “pure” Eastern rite did not allow instrumental music), side altars destroyed (as the Eastern rite did not permit the use of multiple altars), benches removed (the Eastern-rite did not permit sitting during the liturgy), and any pulpits and confessionals removed. Of utensils, most importantly the cyborium or monstrance (an elevated tabernacle holding the Host and placed upon the altar) had to be discarded, and an Orthodox-style tabernacle supplied instead. Altar bells could no longer be used during the liturgy, and Uniate vestments that tended toward Latin-rite standards also needed replacing. Uniate liturgical books had to be discarded and replaced with those published by the Holy Synod press in Moscow.

Once the Greek-Uniate College approved these measures in 1834, instructions proceeded from the bishops (Metropolitan Bulhak and his vicar Vasilii Luzhinskii in the Belorussian diocese and Bishop Iosif Semashko in the Lithuanian diocese) to all of the Uniate district deans, and from the deans to the parish priests, as well as to the monastic clergy. None of these measures was easily or quickly carried out (many instructions did not get to the deans until 1835 or 1836, especially in the Belorusskaia diocese), and a number of parish priests resisted or in

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<sup>26</sup>*Zapiski*, vol. 1, 88.

<sup>27</sup>G.I. Shavel'skii, *Poslednee vossoedinenie s pravoslanoi tserkovii uniatov Belorusskoi eparkhii (1833-1839gg.)* (St. Petersburg, 1910), 222.

some cases refused to comply. Resistance from Roman Catholic landowners also created additional tensions in some districts. Given these difficulties, Minister of Internal Affairs Bludov ordered governors-general and governors to help impose the measures and created a Secret Committee on Greek-Uniate Affairs, comprised of Uniate and Orthodox hierarchs, as well as civil officials, to oversee and coordinate the efforts to transform the Uniate churches. Of all the necessary measures involved, destruction and removals of the organs and Latin-rite altars, pulpits, and utensils presented fewer problems (although many churches responded very slowly to these demands). Building iconostases and re-equipping the churches with Orthodox utensils and liturgical books proved to be the biggest challenges.<sup>28</sup>

For iconostases and liturgical utensils, the issue was economic: most Uniate parishes were impoverished, with barely enough resources to provide for their clergy and basic maintenance of the church, let alone to build a new physical structure inside the church and to buy new liturgical vessels. Aware of this, Semashko obtained annual allocations of 5000 rubles per diocese from the government to assist the parishes in this process; however, these funds were not regularly or effectively distributed and remained insignificant to the task. Eventually, the Minister of Finance authorized 300 rubles per parish for equipping those churches on state domains; again, documentation points to chronic delays in distributing these funds. On private

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<sup>28</sup>The bulk of my archival research dealt with these transformations, including educational changes, and the clerical resistance and problems encountered during and following the *vozsoedinenie*; this highly detailed material cannot be described in depth in an article of this length, but will be presented in my forthcoming monograph on the topic. The most useful archival collections on these issues were the files of: the Litovskaia diocese (Uniate and then Orthodox) in the Lithuanian State Historical Archive (LVIA), f. 605; the governor-general of the western Belarusian provinces in LVIA, f. 378; the governor-general of the eastern Belarusian provinces in the National Historical Archive of Belarus in Minsk (NIAB Minsk), f. 1297; the Orthodox consistory in Minsk in NIAB Minsk, f. 136; the governor of the Grodno province in the National Historical Archive of Belarus in Grodno (NIAB Grodno), f. 1; the Uniate College, the Ministry of Interior's Department of Foreign Confessions, and the Holy Synod in the Russian State Historical Archive (RGIA), f. 812, f. 824, op. 2, f. 834, f. 796, op. 205, and f. 797, op. 87. Overviews of the process are in *Zapiski*, vol. 1, 79-101 and Shavelskii, 193-23.

estates, the landowners were supposed to supply material assistance, but volumes of documents testify to their adamant resistance to help. Perceiving Uniate churches as fellow Catholic communities under papal rule, the Roman Catholic landowners saw the transformation of Uniate churches as the unwelcome incursion of Orthodoxy into their Catholic space, and only pressure from civil officials or local police motivated them to assist. Often, the priests and parishioners themselves, regardless of their dire material situation, had to rely on their own meager resources to build the iconostasis. Threats from civil officials that the priests would lose their parish, and therefore their livelihood, motivated them to complete the task. Upon doing so, landowners often harassed the priests and disturbed the services in the refashioned churches.<sup>29</sup>

The example of Grodno province is enlightening. Here, Semashko claims, the local governor (M.N. Murav'ev) provided more assistance than other governors to ensure that iconostases were built.<sup>30</sup> The 1838 governor's report on the progress of the 32 Uniate churches in the Grodno and Lida districts claimed that almost all of these churches had an iconostasis, although four were not complete or inadequately finished (only one had a previously built iconostasis). Generally, the priest himself funded the construction, although several landowners provided funding for seven of the churches. Two churches were on state domains and received treasury funding. The simultaneous description in the report of the other structural deficiencies of the churches, however, pointed to the dire material condition of the churches and, given this, the rather absurd investment of resources in an iconostasis. For example, the Masalianskaia parish

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<sup>29</sup>Decrees on these matters (from Greek-Uniate College and Minister of Internal Affairs D.N. Bludov) are in RGIA 796, op. 205, d. 180; on Ministry of Finance contributions: RGIA, f. 384, op. 1, d. 199; on specific cases in the Litovskaia diocese: LVIA, f. 605, op. 1, d. 2482, 2486, 2487, 2488, and 2491. Parishes in the Belorusskaia diocese encountered the most difficulties with landowners, and the process dragged on to 1839 and beyond; see Shavel'skii, 210-222 and NIAB Minsk f. 3245, op. 2, d. 445 and f. 136, op. 1, d. 10517 and 10799.

<sup>30</sup>*Zapiski*, vol. 1, 97.

church in the Grodno district needed “repairs and whitewashing of the stone walls, whitewashing of the entire church, a new roof, windows, and repairs to the bell tower and fence,” although the iconostasis was “decently built.” The Tsetserovskaia parish of the same district needed either a new church or capital repairs to the old one, but the existing church now had a “well built” iconostasis. Only two churches had no iconostasis because of the need to build a new church altogether, but most often the churches seemed to be literally falling apart around a newly built iconostasis. Constructing this structure was prioritized at the expense of everything else.<sup>31</sup>

While iconostases could be built of local materials (although quite often, decent icons were hard to come by), the Orthodox tabernacles and other liturgical utensils needed to come from Russia; the cost of these items could rarely be covered by selling the Uniate tabernacles, which were often made of tin and without great value. Therefore, even where iconostases were built, the churches still lacked the necessary utensils. Clergy from the Lida district (Grodno province) reported in 1838 that 14 of 17 parishes still had no tabernacle and lacked other necessary utensils as well.<sup>32</sup>

The problems surrounding the replacement of Uniate liturgical books with those from the Moscow Holy Synod press were multifaceted. First, supply and distribution of the necessary books was uneven. Even though the press donated 1500 copies of the main service book, the *Sluzhebnik*, the churches also needed copies of the *Evangelia* and the *Apostol* (the Gospels and Epistles) in order to conduct the liturgy. Uniate service books contained the necessary New Testament excerpts for the liturgy, obviating the need to have copies of the texts themselves and

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<sup>31</sup>NIAB Grodno, f. 1, op. 19, d. 1752, ll. 1-8ob.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid; Shavelskii, 224.

resulting in very few churches owning copies of the Gospels and Epistles. While the churches for the most part received the new *Sluzhebnik*, provision of the New Testament texts was wrought with problems. Reports from Belorusskaia diocese in 1837 revealed that in at least three districts, only 25 percent of the churches had these additional texts.<sup>33</sup> Other essential texts, as well, such as *Trebniki*, *Triody*, and prayer books remained in deficit. Documents attest to continued insufficiencies in service books after 1839.<sup>34</sup>

Secondly, the Uniate churches fundamentally lacked the trained staff to conduct the sung Eastern-rite liturgy according to the Orthodox service books. The seminaries began teaching only the Moscow press *Sluzhebnik* by the 1830s, and seminarians had to demonstrate solid knowledge of it to be ordained. However, the Uniate College required all priests, new and old, to learn the new liturgy; priests identified by their deans as having insufficient knowledge of the Moscow *Sluzhebnik* (which also provided detailed instructions on the rites) were summoned to the diocesan cathedral for training and had to pass an exam, or they would lose their position. The cathedral in the Litovskaia diocesan capital, Zhirovitse, trained more than 200 priests from 1834 to 1836 – some escorted there by police – for periods from several days to six weeks, depending on their abilities. Official reports show that most priests did learn the rite, but a few recalcitrants indeed lost their parishes.<sup>35</sup> Even more detrimental, however, was the lack of trained cantors (*diachki*) to sing the responses during the liturgy. Since the Uniate church allowed spoken masses, the need for cantors had decreased, and over the centuries their numbers and their role in

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<sup>33</sup>RGIA, f. 796, op. 205, d. 170, ll. 18-19; *Zapiski*, vol. 1, 112; Shavel'skii, 195-97.

<sup>34</sup>Notably, the Mogilev diocese in 1853 still complained of a severe shortage of service books and consequential problems with conducting the Orthodox service. RGIA, f. 796, op. 135, d. 324, ll. 7, 16.

<sup>35</sup>LVIA f. 605, op. 1, d. 2008, ll. 1-97.

the services had dwindled. One historian called the extreme shortage of trained cantors “the greatest hindrance in restoring the Greek-Eastern rite to the Uniate churches.”<sup>36</sup> It would take decades to train cantors properly in schools created for that purpose in the 1830s and to staff the former Uniate churches with suitable cantors. In the meantime, a few former organists with singing abilities – after the organs in Uniate churches were destroyed – were pressed into service as cantors<sup>37</sup>, but most churches had no trained cantors and therefore could not properly perform the Eastern rite in its Orthodox form.

Thirdly, and most profoundly, while all the other transformations were external, this one involved dogma. Two fundamental doctrines of the Uniate church, the supremacy of the pope and the Trinitarian theology that the Holy Spirit proceeded from the Father and the Son, had been intertwined in the words and the prayers of the Uniate liturgical books. The Orthodox books from Moscow, of course, did not mention the pope (instead incorporating prayers for the Holy Synod and the Russian imperial family), and, in accordance with Orthodox theology, presented the Holy Spirit as proceeding from the Father alone (contradicting Uniate – and Roman Catholic – theology). Thus, adopting the new liturgical books involved abandoning core beliefs of the Uniate faith, and this reform, then, became a focal point for clerical resistance to the imperial pressures to adopt the Orthodox books and to abandon the Uniate faith in general.

In the end, threats and pressures on Uniate priests by both religious and civil officials, as well as more training sessions in the cathedrals and the expulsion of particularly troublesome clergy, yielded results that could be construed by officials as successful. By this point, no

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<sup>36</sup>Shavelskii, 227.

<sup>37</sup>On organists, NIAB Grodno, f. 1, op. 19, d. 1005, ll. 11ob. - 12; LVIA 605, op. 1, d. 2485, ll. 37-37ob, 64. On the creation of a school for cantors in Polotsk in 1837, RGIA, f. 797, op. 7, d. 22381.



Uniates were deluded that the official goal of all the transformations was not overall conversion to Orthodoxy, and those most firmly opposed risked much to resist the final outcome. Indeed, once church structures and rites were for the most part compatible with Orthodoxy, the actual act of reunion of the Uniates with Orthodoxy, *vozsoedinenie*, could take place. At its essence, this final step was mere formality: the bishops secured from the majority of the parish and monastic priests signed statements that they were ready to join the Orthodox Church. Given the choice of doing so or losing their livelihood, the priests usually offered stiff pro-forma statements that lacked convincing signs of religious conviction.<sup>38</sup> With these in hand, twenty-four Uniate episcopal and administrative clergy gathered in Polotsk to sign on Feb. 12, 1839 a document of reunion that placed all Uniate churches under Holy Synod control and in communion with the Russian Orthodox Church. Governor-generals took precautions to ensure the presence of police and military against any possible unrest in the most troublesome districts<sup>39</sup>, but no violence occurred as the union was announced. From May and throughout the summer of 1839 Orthodox and former Uniate bishops and clergymen celebrated together in liturgies and processions throughout the region to commemorate the completion of the *vozsoedinenie*.

### **3) *Vozsoedinenie*: Opposition and Long-Term Issues**

Despite the official celebrations and the rhetoric of triumph, instituting Orthodoxy within the former Uniate dioceses was problematic for generations. Opposition to the policy of

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<sup>38</sup>RGIA, f. 823, op. 2, dd. 348-372 and 834, op. 4, dd. 654, 658, 674. As with the church transformations, these statements were collected much more quickly and with less complaint in Semashko's Litovskaia diocese than in the Belorusskaia diocese.

<sup>39</sup>Most notably, Governor-general D'iakov of Vitebsk, Mogilev, and Smolensk summoned a regiment of Cossacks to be on hand in the most problematic districts under his control. NIAB, op. 1297, op. 1, d. 1116, ll. 27, 43-44, 59, 71.

*vozsoedinenie* during its implementation indicated how painful this process was for many who went through it, as well as how difficult it was to change the religious culture, and ultimately the general culture and identity, of the inhabitants of this region. In some regards, the former Uniates simply did not change, and Orthodox churches in the western provinces continued to differ from those in neighboring Russian provinces.

The most obvious form of resistance to the policy came from the Uniate clergymen themselves. Numerous documents point to chronic delays or refusals to carry out the transformations of their churches and to perform the liturgy according to the new rite, particularly in the Belorusskaia diocese. For example, a certain Father Samovich had not constructed the iconostasis in his church in Disnenskii *uezd* by December 1836, refused to accept funding from the landowner to do so, and continued to leave the benches and the altar bells for use during services. The Minsk governor deemed this priest “a dangerous influence on the parishioners” and asked that the diocese remove him and replace him with someone more “reliable”<sup>40</sup> While individual cases like this proliferated, the doctrinal implications of introducing the new liturgical books from Moscow prompted collective action among the parish priests in the Belarusskaia diocese. One hundred and eleven parish priests signed a petition to the tsar to let them secede from the current Uniate hierarchy, to have their own printing press for Uniate liturgical books and their own schools, and to allow them to convert to Roman Catholicism should these conditions not be possible. This act of defiance was intolerable to the Uniate hierarchy and to Russian officials. The governor general and the Ministry of the Interior weighed in on the punishment of those 20 priests deemed the most culpable, who were punished by loss

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<sup>40</sup>NIAB Minsk, f. 3245, op. 2, d. 445, ll. 14ob, 18-19ob.

of parish positions and either demotion to sacristan, exile to a Uniate monastery to repent, or exile to an Orthodox monastery in the Russian province of Kursk.<sup>41</sup> Such punishments became standard for resisters, with some 65 of the most problematic Uniate clergymen (both parish and monastic) deported to Orthodox monasteries in Russian provinces, most commonly Kursk, but also Orel, Smolensk, Tambov, and Riazan.<sup>42</sup> At least twenty of those were Basilians, who ranked among the most stubbornly opposed to the adoption of the Russian-style Eastern rite; other Basilian monks remained virtually imprisoned in one of the several Uniate monasteries left open to serve the purpose of isolation and surveillance of intransigent monks who refused to accept Orthodoxy.<sup>43</sup>

By 1839, “unreliable” priests had been identified and pressured to give signatures that they would accept Orthodoxy, but the tally still fell short. When the act of *vozsoedinenie* was signed, 938 of the total 1149 Uniate clergymen (both parish and monastic priests) in Litovskaia diocese had signed statements agreeing to become Orthodox, but 116 parish clergy and 95 monastics had refused. In the more problematic Belarusskaia diocese, not quite half of the Uniate clergymen there, 367, had offered signatures; 305 parish priests and 77 monastic clergy had refused.<sup>44</sup> The majority of those who refused eventually did sign statements by 1841, but not without great effort on the part of the authorities.<sup>45</sup>

Aside from the clergy, Uniate parishioners and Roman Catholic landowners resisted

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<sup>41</sup>RGIA, f. 797, op. 7, d. 23446, ll. 27-30, 53-54ob., 190-191; Radwan, 166-167.

<sup>42</sup>Radwan, 170-171; NIAB Minsk, f. 1297, op. 1, d. 11287, ll. 8, 14, 117-119; RGIA, f. 797, op. 7, d. 23496 documents the creation of a temporary monastery in Kursk for this purpose.

<sup>43</sup>Radwan, 141-142; RGIA, f. 797, op. 6, d. 23441, ll. 36-37; Klimov, 69.

<sup>44</sup>*Zapiski*, vol. 1, 117-119.

<sup>45</sup>RGIA, f. 834, op. 4, d. 555, ll. 17-22ob and d. 654 (general register of conversions).

actively and passively when the churches began to follow the new mandates on the rite. As noted above, the landowners effectively delayed the implementation of the mandates by refusing to provide material support for building iconostases and acquiring the necessary liturgical utensils and vestments; parishioners passively resisted by not showing up for confession and communion. Active resistance most often involved disrupting the services that were performed according to the new rite with shouting and offensive comments to the priest, sometimes damaging the iconostasis, removing necessary utensils, or even keeping the keys to the church from the priest. The Russian government officials predominantly blamed the Roman Catholic landowners for stirring up the parishioners against the Eastern rite and pressured the landowners with threats of confiscating their land or exiling them to the Russian interior should they not cooperate with material support for the churches. Even when cooperation was achieved, however, Russian officials still retained a lingering suspicion and heavy police surveillance of landowners in problematic districts.<sup>46</sup>

Thus the continuous resistance of so many Uniates and their landowners belied the unsettled reality behind the official reports of the happy reunion of Uniates “into the bosom of Russian Orthodoxy.” The dozen-year effort to break the centuries-old bonds between Roman Catholicism and the Uniate faith did not yield strong ties between the former Uniate population and the Russian Orthodox church. Cultural differences between the former Uniates and established Orthodox communities continued to be manifest for decades following the *vozsoedinenie*.

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<sup>46</sup>On active resistance: RGIA, f. 834, op. 4, d. 555, ll. 6-6ob., 8ob. and f. 797, op. 87, d. 16, ll. 1-4; NIAB Minsk, f. 1297, op. 1, d. 111264, ll. 4ob - 7, d. 111265, ll. 2-2ob, 12-13 and f. 136, op. 1, d. 10799, ll. 3ob, 6. On passive peasant resistance: Radwan, 171. On surveillance of landowners: RGIA, d. 834, op. 4, d. 555, l. 9 and f. 797, op., 87, d. 22, l. 2ob.

From the start, a majority of Uniate clergy in the Belarusian provinces signed statements that they would convert to Russian Orthodoxy only on the condition that they could continue to maintain their usual appearance, without wearing beards and cassocks as was customary in the Orthodox Church. A common statement from the Lithuanian diocese reads: "I give my signature that I am ready to join the Greek Russian Church, but only on the condition that I am allowed, as has been my custom, to shave my beard, wear my same outfit, and live in the same parish that I have managed up to now."<sup>47</sup> Given the widespread sentiment of the priests on these matters and fearing that the priests would lose the parishioners' respect if their external features immediately become more Russian with a beard and cassock, Semashko requested and received the tsar's permission to allow Uniate priests to continue to shave and wear short jackets after the *vozsoedinenie* since these practices did not contradict any doctrine of the Orthodox Church. This imperial permission was secretly communicated to the Uniate bishops and corroborated by a decree from the Holy Synod.<sup>48</sup> For at least ten years, the priests continued their Uniate customs, although Bishop Vasilii of Polotsk declared that by 1855, most of the priests in his diocese had already grown beards and wore the cassock.<sup>49</sup> The real crux of these statements, however, is that the priests kept their parish position; in other words, they retained their livelihood. That likely explains much of the willingness to sign the statements, as well as the cold and stilted quality of the statements that did not reflect sincere religious conviction.

Russian church and state officials continued to make distinctions between the former Uniate and Orthodox priests even after the former began to adopt beards and cassocks. Orthodox

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<sup>47</sup>RGIA, f. 824, op. 2, d. 348, l. 3 (May 1838); also identical f. 834, op. 4, d. 658, l. 2 (Feb. 10, 1839).

<sup>48</sup>Shavel'skii, 300.

<sup>49</sup>RGIA, f. 797, op. 25, d. 38b (otdel 3, stol 1), l. 12ob.

bishops in the western provinces at least into the 1860s distinguished between the “reunited Orthodox” (*vozsoedinnenye*) and the “old Orthodox” (*drevlepravoslavnye*) priests and noted the continual struggles to get the former to become as fully Orthodox and as fully capable as the “old Orthodox.”<sup>50</sup> Some *drevlepravoslavnye* priests did not treat the former Uniate priests as their equals or show them respect; one allegedly announced in 1848 that the prayers of the “reunited Orthodox” clergymen “were not pleasing to God since they were all ordained by Uniate Bishop-heretics.”<sup>51</sup> In 1862, police officer Colonel Reichart from Minsk province blamed the “reunited clergymen” for the local peasants’ lack of knowledge of the Orthodox doctrine and reported that the peasants still crossed themselves from left to right in the Uniate (Catholic) manner and used Polish in their prayers. In order to transform the population into loyal Orthodox subjects, he concluded, “[I]t is necessary to cleanse this region of the former Uniate clergy, who preserve even in the new generation a Polish national sentiment, Catholic rites, and a secret sympathy for the Western church, while doing nothing over 23 years for the people in relation to Orthodoxy and Russian [language and loyalty] and retaining a certain discomfort with clergymen who have descended for generations from pure Orthodoxy.”<sup>52</sup> Bishop Vasilii of Polotsk had vigorously refuted similar statements in 1855 and defended the progress that the former Uniate clergy had made in this region<sup>53</sup>, but Reichart’s observation reflects a continued bias on the part of Russian officials against the former Uniate clergy.

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<sup>50</sup>Orthodox bishops after 1839 used these terms to discuss the continued problems of the former Uniates. See, for example, Polotsk Bishop Vasilii’s report from November 1840, RGIA f. 797, op. 10, d. 27496, l. 9; from March 1855, RGIA, f. 797, op. 25, d. 38b (otdel 3, stol 1), l. 11ob.

<sup>51</sup>RGIA, f. 797, op. 87, d. 27, ll. 56-57 (1848).

<sup>52</sup>RGIA, f. 797, op. 32, d. 218, l. 2ob. (28 March 1862).

<sup>53</sup>RGIA, f. 797, op. 25, d. 38b (otdel 3, stol 1), ll. 9-14.

Although the blame primarily fell on former Uniate priests for the continued deviations from the Orthodox rite, circumstances beyond their control also contributed to the difficulties in conforming to Orthodox practices after 1839. As noted above, shortages of liturgical books and utensils continued well into the subsequent decades; without the necessary texts, the priests could not conduct proper Orthodox services. Iconostasis construction in a number of parishes continued into the 1840s; churches without one could not conduct the rite according to Orthodox canons. Into the 1850s, bishops continued to note inadequate liturgical vestments and utensils, which again created deviations in the rite.

The dire poverty of the parishes in general inhibited the outfitting of the churches, and the Roman Catholic landowners, supported by local government officials who were often Roman Catholic, continued to provide inadequate material support despite negative pressure in the form of threats by the Russian government. Those landowners who contributed materially to the transformation of the Uniate churches on their estates risked the anger and cold shoulder of fellow landowners, or even harassment from local police who were Roman Catholic.<sup>54</sup> Others contributed only in the most minimal terms. Bishops' reports continued to bemoan the material condition of the churches, and the government at times resorted to positive pressure by rewarding those landowners who carried out their obligations.<sup>55</sup> Nevertheless, the Roman Catholic landowners, who had previously had amicable, albeit materially ungenerous, relations with the Uniate parishes on their estates, now had barely any interest in providing material assistance to Orthodox parishes. As Father Shavel'skii noted in his magisterial history of the

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<sup>54</sup>Shavel'skii, 221.

<sup>55</sup>Ibid., ll. 13-15, 22ob (1853); RGIA, f. 797, op. 10, d. 27496, ll. 61-64, 75 (1848); f. 796, op. 205, d. 305, ll. 39 ob., 41 ob., 45ob., 46 (1851); f. 796, op. 135, d. 324, ll. 7, 8ob., 16ob. (1853); NIAB Minsk, f. 1297, op. 1, d. 23213 (1852).

Uniate *vozsoedinenie* in eastern Belarus, the landowners “washed their hands” of caring for the parishes even prior to 1839, not concerned about churches of the Orthodox confession, and heaping scorn upon them.<sup>56</sup> As this situation continued, the material condition of the Orthodox (predominantly former Uniate) parishes in the western provinces became the subject of special ordinances from the Holy Synod and the imperial government, most emphatically in a law of 1842 that mandated labor obligations from the parishioners for the parishes and material support from the landowners to provide for parsonages and housing for clerical staff. However, the expected assistance from the landowners in that regard had still not appeared well into the 1850s in many districts, and the mandated work demands on the peasants actually harmed the relations between the clergy and the parishioners.<sup>57</sup>

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In the end, the conversion of the Uniates to Russian Orthodoxy not only did not create the happy situation in the western provinces promoted within official rhetoric, but provoked even more tensions and resentments. This multiconfessional region that had been used to regular peaceful interactions between confessions, as well as conversions to and from the Uniate, Roman Catholic, and Orthodox faiths for personal reasons, now had to abide by laws that imposed a firm line of separation between Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism in the absence of the Uniate Church. The former Uniates, as Orthodox subjects, now could have nothing to do with the Roman Catholic Church without breaking the law of the land and being accused of apostasy. And yet they did not feel comfortably Orthodox, as they were not used to the new church

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<sup>56</sup>Shavelskii, 215.

<sup>57</sup>N.D. Izvekov, *Istoricheskii ocherk: sostoiianiia Pravoslavnoi Tserkvi v Litovskoi eparkhii za vremia s 1839-1889* (Moscow 1899), 174-232; RGIA, f. 796, op. 135, d. 324, l. 18ob; NIAB Grodno f. 135, op. 1, d. 230, ll. 1-9.



interiors and religious practices, and as church and state officials continually differentiated them from those who had been Orthodox for generations. Perhaps inevitably, those who felt estranged by the Orthodox services attended Roman Catholic services, and a significant number converted outright to Catholicism, despite the risk of penalty for apostasy.<sup>58</sup>

Additionally, reshaping the multiconfessional environment previously inhabited by Roman Catholics, Uniates, and Orthodox into a simple dichotomy between Orthodox and Roman Catholics had adverse social and governmental effects, with particular losses for the Roman Catholics. The relations between the Belarusian and Ukranian peasants and their Roman Catholic landowners – never very good to begin with – had now worsened. Not only did landowners refuse to provide material support to the Orthodox churches on their estates, but they often forced the peasants to work during Orthodox holidays so that they would not be able to attend the services. These acts of passive resistance by the Roman Catholic landowners worsened relations between them and the Russian government, which only increased the government intervention and surveillance on them, continuing the cycle of resentments on both sides. Relations between the Roman Catholic Church with the Russian regime also became more tense. After the 1830-31 Polish uprising, the Roman Catholic Church had suffered punishing losses of monasteries and church property, as well as constant surveillance from government officials. Add to that the persistent accusations of active promotion of apostasy in the case of former Uniates who attended Roman Catholic services, and even more legislated restrictions on Roman Catholic priests, and resentments built upon resentments. Russian church and state officials expressed constant wariness and concern about the long-term well-being of Orthodoxy in the

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<sup>58</sup>For example, NIAB Minsk, f. 1297, op. 1, d. 12659; RGIA, f. 797, op. 87, d. 27, ll. 22-27ob. and d. 23, ll. 7ob. - 9ob.

western provinces, given their fears and suspicions about the alleged anti-Orthodox and anti-Russian program of the “Polish party” in the western provinces.<sup>59</sup> The 1839 Uniate conversions further isolated the Roman Catholics in the western provinces, as they now had no natural allies to soften the blow of Russian suspicions against them. Certainly, more consideration should be given to the impact of the 1839 *vozsoedinenie* on the Roman Catholic population and its long-term contribution to the pressures that exploded in the 1863 Polish uprising.

Existing scholarship has generally painted Russia’s eradication of the Uniate Church in black or white terms, as a persecution or a triumph, depending on either the pro-Catholic/Uniate or pro-Orthodox perspective of the scholar. Modern Belarusian and Ukrainian scholarship has been more nuanced, although often infused with nationalist sentiments that perceive this history as a clear mark of Russian chauvenism against Ukrainians and Belarusians. Certainly, the existing sources highlight the resistance and the difficulties of the conversion (as does this paper), but one must also consider the silent majority of those who conformed without protest, or the reasons by which a Uniate cleric such as Iosif Semashko engendered such a passion against his own faith.

While Ukraine’s history is more complicated, given the survival of the Uniate Church in the provinces that came under Austrian rule during the partitions, the case of Belarus is more straightforward. There, the Russian Empire incorporated from Poland all of the territory inside the current Belarusian state, leaving no provinces untouched by the policy of mass conversion to Orthodoxy in the 1830s. It took generations for the religious changes to take hold, but virtually nothing was left of the Uniate religious culture when the recreated state of Poland regained control over western Belarusian provinces in the inter-war period. After the Soviet regime’s

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<sup>59</sup>Ibid.

suppressive policies toward religion, the current manifestation of the Uniate Church in Belarus is a product of the new growth of religious interest that came with the softening of Communist policies in the 1980s combined with nationalist nostalgia for a religious tradition that was forcibly removed from Belarus under the tsars (and made possible due to the strong Greek Catholic Church in western Ukraine that has provided the episcopal support and oversight for Belarus).

Today, nationalistic sentiment colors the view of the Uniate Church in Belarus, at least among the generation that remembers life before 1991. Yet, I would argue, the first step toward understanding the role of this church in Belarusian culture and history would be to jettison arguments of nationalism, anachronistic to the conversion period. Indeed, the Uniate Church was the defining element of identity for the Belarusian people in the era before nationalism - but it was a larger identity that also included the Uniate Ukrainians and alliances with the Roman Catholics and Poles. Stepping back to view this issue within a larger framework, the history of this region from the 18<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> century – highlighted by the Polish partitions, Catherine II's first efforts to convert the Uniates, and the 1839 *vozsoedinenie* – is the story of the shift in the dominant cultural influences from Polish to Russian. Since this shift toward Russian dominance involved pressure on the Uniate population to carry out profound changes in religious culture within a limited time period, the process yielded resistance and resentment on a large scale that has lived on within modern nationalistic sentiment.

And yet, the younger generation in Belarus seems to be developing a view of the Uniate Church less influenced by nationalist sentiment. A young student at the National University of Grodno who was my guide to the Uniate church service on that cold Sunday in March 2012 explained that what attracted her to the church was the sense of community, the care and concern

of the parishioners toward each other, as well as the priest's ability to teach the faith in ways that made sense. Her eyes sparkled as she told me about teaching the children in Sunday school and the weekly social meetings with the small parish.<sup>60</sup> Here, indeed, is a perspective devoid of nationalist motivation, but expressing instead a deep spiritual and communal commitment. That this small Uniate parish has succeeded in building such a foundation among its parishioners bodes well for its future.

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<sup>60</sup>Interview in Grodno on March 4, 2012; according to her wishes, this student will remain unnamed.