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THE RUSSIAN VIEW OF POLISH INFLUENCES IN LITHUANIA AND BELARUS IN THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY

ABSTRACT

This article analyses the attitude of officials in the Russian Empire towards the role of Poles in Lithuania and Belarus at the beginning of the twentieth century, focusing mainly on the period after the 1905 revolution. In this article I argue that the tsarist authorities were unable to compete with the Polish influences in the Northwestern Region, specifically in Belarus, and their actions show that they were aware of this reality. This was why no higher education institution was established in the Northwestern Region, the 'Lithuanian' governorates had no zemstvos, and the Polish-speaking residents of the western districts of the Grodno governorate could not learn Polish in primary schools.

KEYWORDS:

Poles, Tsarist Russia, nationality policy, Northwestern region, Lithuania and Belarus

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From a Russian point of view, nineteenth-century Lithuania and Belarus were a meeting point of two cultures: Russian and Polish.¹ In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the ruling and intellectual elite of the Russian empire regarded the Lithuanian and, to a lesser extent, the Belarusian national movement as a problem of a lower taxonomic order. The 'Jewish question' affected the entire empire, or at least the Jewish Pale of Settlement and Congress Poland, but it also caused the tsarist authorities fewer problems.

This article analyses the attitude of officials in the Russian Empire towards the role of Poles in Lithuania and Belarus at the beginning of the twentieth century, focusing mainly on the period after the 1905 revolution.² In order to analyse this problem, we must not only discuss the tsarist officials' assessment of the Polish influence but above all explain which ideological constructs led to this verdict on the role of Poles in the region. The article focuses not only and not so much on the official interpretation and rhetoric but more on the tsarist officials' actions. Such an analysis has more to say about the tsarist authorities' approach to the problems of the so-called Northwestern Region (*Severo-zapadnyi krai*) than a simple discussion of the official, even confidential rhetoric.

Let us begin by stating that the tsarist officials, especially those who served in the Northwestern Region, were aware that it was not homogeneous. The ethnic and religious makeup of the population of Lithuania contrasted starkly with that of Belarus. The geographical borders of Lithuania and Belarus could be viewed variously: in the 'historical' sense (in which case, the Lithuanian governorates were Vilna, Kovno and Grodno, while the Belarusian ones were Minsk, Vitebsk and Mogilev) or the ethno-linguistic sense (with the whole of the Kovno and part of the Vilna governorates in Lithuanian territory, and the remainder in Belarus). This ethno-linguistic approach is more important in this article. The majority of the population of Belarus were indigenous Belarusians who, according to official thinking, formed an integral part of the tripartite Russian nation, thus the territory was perceived not only as the property of the Romanov Empire, but also as Russian 'national territory'.³ Although the name

¹ Lithuania and Belarus, or the historical lands of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, were known in nineteenth-century Russian discourse as the Northwestern Region/Krai (Russia/Ruthenia). In the early twentieth century, this name applied to the Vilna, Kovno, Grodno, Minsk, Vitebsk and Mogilev governorates.

² Historians have been less interested in the period after the 1905 revolution. Henryk Glebocki, Stanisław Wiech, Daniel Beauvois, Andrzej Nowak, Mikhail Dolbilov, Leonid Gorizontov and others have written about the tsarist authorities' attitude towards Poles in earlier periods, including in other regions of the empire.

³ For more on this notion, see Alexei Miller, 'Shaping Russian and Ukrainian Identities in the Russian Empire During the Nineteenth Century: Some Methodological Remarks', *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas*, 49.2 (2001), 257–63 (p. 258); Aleksej Miller, 'Imperiya i nacija v voobraženii russkogo nacionalizma. Zametki na poljach odnoj stat'i A. N. Pypina', in *Rossijskaja imperija v sravnitel'noj perspektive*, ed. by Marina Batalina and Aleksej Miller (Moskva: Novoe izdatel'stvo, 2004), pp. 265–70; Alexei Miller, 'Between Local and Inter-Imperial. Russian Imperial History in Search of Scope and Paradigm', *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History*, 5.1 (2004), 7–26 (p. 23); *Nationalizing Empires*, ed. by Stefan Berger and Alexei Miller (Budapest and New York: CEU Press, 2015).

Northwestern Region (Krai – Russia/Ruthenia) assumed that everything ‘belonged’ to the Russians, under both the official discourse and the practices of nationality politics the lands where indigenous Lithuanians comprised the majority did not form part of the Russian ‘national territory’.⁴ The Russian *mental map* is the first important ideological construct that can help to explain the (different) verdict on the role of Poles in these areas. We should also remember that the officials were not a uniform mass and, especially after the 1905 revolution, various visions of the empire emerged, with differing types of nationality policy,⁵ one of which I have previously identified as *imperial*. For supporters of the *imperial* national policy, its most important objective was to ensure subjects’ loyalty. The advocates of this approach were characterised by the idea that the reason for the disloyalty of non-dominant national groups, including Poles, was the authorities’ discriminatory and repressive policy. For example, the Russian education minister, Ivan Tolstoy, one of the most consistent proponents of this policy, argued that primitive attempts to “transform one nationality into another”, i.e., assimilation, only gave rise to anger and irredentism.⁶ Avoiding discrimination and repression and satisfying the cultural needs of the non-dominant ethnic groups could secure the loyalty of Poles, Lithuanians or other national groups. Advocates of the *nationalist* vision believed that loyalty towards the Russian Empire was closely linked to subjects’ ethnic and cultural identification, meaning that only Russians could be trusted, while the non-dominant ethnical groups were disloyal, or at least potentially disloyal. According to the governor of Kovno, Nikolai Gryazev (1912–1917), the Lithuanians, “like the Poles, Jews and aliens [*inorodtsy*], are natural enemies of Russian statehood”.⁷ The proponents of this policy therefore backed assimilation and acculturation wherever they thought it was possible (regarding the Belarusians and Lithuanians); whenever they encountered stronger national cultures (Poles, Jews), they favoured a segregationist policy. The ideal for supporters of the *nationalist* policy was a *nationalising empire*.

The term ‘nationalising state’ is often used in analysis of the discourses or nationality policies promoted by nation-states. Rogers Brubaker identified five elements characteristic of this kind of discourse: 1) the idea that a state has a core nation determined by ethnocultural markers that

⁴ Darius Staliūnas, ‘Poland or Russia? Lithuania on the Russian Mental Map’, in *Spatial Concepts of Lithuania in the Long Nineteenth Century*, ed. by Darius Staliūnas (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2016), pp. 23–95.

⁵ Darius Staliūnas, ‘Challenges to Imperial Authorities’ Nationality Policy in the Northwest Region, 1905–1915’, in *The Tsar, the Empire, and the Nation. Dilemmas of Nationalization in Russia’s Western Borderlands, 1905–1915*, ed. by Darius Staliūnas and Yoko Aoshima (Budapest and New York: CEU Press, 2021), pp. 33–66.

⁶ *Memuary grafa I. I. Tolstogo* (Moskva: Indrik, 2002), p. 188.

⁷ Report of the governor of Kovno to the minister of internal affairs from 28 April and 18 May 1913, 28 December 1914, Rossijskij gosudarstvennyj istoričeskij archiv (Russian State Historical Archives; hereafter RGIA), f. 821, op. 128, d. 44, l. 634.

differs from the rest of the population; 2) the state belongs to the core nation, or at least it must have the dominant position; 3) this nation is weak; 4) the state must strengthen it; 5) such efforts by the state are essential as this nation has previously experienced injustice and discrimination.⁸ In recent times, historical literature has referred not only to nationalising nation-states but also empires.⁹

Another important set of coordinates that influenced officials' thinking about specific national groups was the *imagined hierarchy of enemies of the empire*. A particular group's place in this hierarchy depended on three criteria: political loyalty, place in the social hierarchy, and proximity to the Great Russians.¹⁰ The Poles, especially after the uprisings of 1830 and 1863, were public enemy number one not only in the empire's western borderlands, but also on the scale of the entire empire. The fact that in the eyes of officials Poles in the Northwestern Region belonged to the social elite (landed classes, Catholic clergy, bourgeoisie) gave grounds for considering them as potential supporters of the tsarist regime, but the aforementioned political disloyalty meant that members of this group *in corpore* were regarded as unreliable and thus deserving of discrimination.¹¹ Sources from this time frequently recorded situations in which the ethnonym 'Pole' became synonymous with a disloyal person.¹² Polish culture in the eyes of tsarist officials was of course independent, so theoretically it should have merited significantly greater autonomy compared to Belarusian or Ukrainian culture. At the same time, Poles were Slavs (albeit not eastern), meaning that they could have a telling impact on 'Russians' (Belarusians and Ukrainians) and were thus much more dangerous than, for example, Jews.

These ideological constructs (*mental map, differing visions of nationality policy and place of the ethnic group in the imagined hierarchy of enemies*) were interlinked. Some were rather static; others were dynamic. Lithuania's and Belarus's place on the Russian *mental map* at the beginning of the twentieth century was somewhat stable.

⁸ Rogers Brubaker, 'Nationalizing States Revisited: Projects and Processes of Nationalization in Post-Soviet States', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 34.11 (2011), 1785–91 (p. 1786).

⁹ Anton Kotenko, 'An Inconsistently Nationalizing State: The Romanov Empire and the Ukrainian National Movement', in *The Tsar, the Empire, and the Nation*, pp. 17–31.

¹⁰ Andreas Kappeler, 'Mazepincy, malorossy, chochly: ukraincy v etničeskoj ierarchii Rossijskoj imperii', in *Rossija-Ukraina: istorija vzaimootnošenij*, ed. by Alexei Miller, Vladimir Reprincev, and Boris Florja (Moskva: škola «Jazyki russkoj kul'tury», 1997), pp. 125–44.

¹¹ On the identification practices employed by the authorities, as well as the concept of "people of Polish origin" in the Russian discourse, see Michail Dolbilov, 'Poljak v imperskom političeskom leksikone', in *Ponjatija o Rossii. K istoričeskoj semantike imperskogo perioda*, ed. by Aleksej Miller and Ingrid Širle, II (Moskva: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2012), pp. 292–339; Roman Jurkowski, 'Czy każdy katolik to Polak? – kresowe, narodowo-religijne dylematy rosyjskiej biurokracji w dokumencie Ministerstwa Spraw Wewnętrznych z 1910 roku', *Studia z Dziejów Rosji i Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej*, 52.2 (2017), 223–39; Darius Staliūnas, 'The Identification of Subjects According to Nationality in the Western Region of the Russian Empire in 1905–1915', *Ab Imperio*, 3 (2020), 33–68.

¹² Dolbilov, 'Poljak v imperskom političeskom leksikone', p. 292; Charles Steinwedel, 'To Make a Difference: The Category of Ethnicity in Late Imperial Russian Politics, 1861–1917', in *Russian Modernity*, ed. by David L. Hoffmann and Yanni Kotsonis (New York: Macmillan, 2000), pp. 76–94 (p. 76).

While the Lithuanian ethnocultural sphere could still be disregarded in the mid-nineteenth century, towards the end of the empire all tsarist officials understood that the Kovno governorate, part of the Vilna governorate, and also much of the Suwałki governorate, which belonged to Congress Poland, were areas dominated by Lithuanians.

At the same time, in 1905–1915 we observe distinct competition between the *imperial* and *nationalist visions* of policies. During the revolution, the proponents of the *imperial* nationality policy strengthened their influences markedly, but the number of them in leadership positions subsequently dwindled with every passing year, as did their influence. The position of Poles in the hierarchy of enemies of the empire also changed. At the beginning of the twentieth century, especially in 1904–1905, an increasing number of high-ranking tsarist officials asserted that the greatest threat to the stability of the social order in the north-west of the state was posed by new social movements, sometimes noticing that there were numerous Jewish participants, whereas Polish society contained conservative elements with which the tsarist authorities could collaborate.¹³ The same conclusion was reached in 1905 by the Committee of Ministers, which in spring discussed the changes in nationality policy in the Western Krai: “The chairman and 19 members could not fail to notice that circumstances have changed significantly since the 1860s. Now the Russian state has no cause for concern about the integrity of its territory, which the Polish rebellion sought to violate; on the other hand, the existing social system has another enemy here – the spreading of harmful teachings, the aspiration to social equality of people of all classes, and radical democratisation”.¹⁴

At this time, the hierarchy of enemies of the empire also changed on its western frontier. Here it was not ‘the Polish question’ that caused the greatest concern among tsarist officials, but social groups following socialist ideas.¹⁵ Yet the view of Poles as a group with a lesser impact on the stability of the empire did not dominate for long. Just a few years after the revolution, Poles again became the most important problem in the hierarchy of enemies of the empire. In the next part of the article, I shall focus on the assessment of the role of Poles in Lithuania and Belarus among the tsarist administration, in which the *nationalist* vision was dominant.

¹³ Staliūnas, ‘Challenges to Imperial Authorities’, pp. 39–40, 43–44.

¹⁴ Journal of meetings of the Committee of Ministers, 15, 22, and 23 March 1905, in *Rossija. Komitet ministrov. Žurnaly Komiteta ministrov po ispolneniju ukaza 12 dekabrja 1904 g.* (Sankt-Peterburg: Kanceljarija Komiteta ministrov, 1905), p. 323.

¹⁵ Mal'te Rolf, *Pol'skie zemli pod vlast'ju Peterburga. Ot venskogo kongressa do Pervoj Mirovoj* (Moskva: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2020), pp. 436–44.

The proponents of the *nationalist* vision of the empire promoted a discourse characteristic of the vision of a *nationalising state*, which was presented briefly above. This discourse was particularly distinct in the case of Belarus. From the mid-nineteenth century onwards, the tsarist government made intensive use of national statistical data and ethnographic descriptions to prove that most of the residents of the Northwestern Region were indigenous Russians. As noted earlier, Belarusians, like Ukrainians, were regarded as an integral part of the tripartite Russian nation. Among the arguments given for the rights of this numerically dominant national group were historical ones stating that the Grand Duchy of Lithuania was one more Russian state: Western Rus'.¹⁶ Based on this idea, they could claim that the Russians from the Northwestern Region were "the rightful heirs to the former rulers of the region".¹⁷ An increasing tendency in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries viewed the Romanov Empire increasingly as a country 'belonging' to the Russians. This kind of conceptualisation can also be discerned in the story of the unveiling (1898) of a monument to the governor-general of Vilna, Mikhail Muravev (1863–1865). A certain Grigori Kulzhinsky sent a greeting that concluded with the slogan "Russia above all for the Russians, hurrah!"¹⁸ The opinion was expressed in official documents that certain actions in nationality policy should be taken "in the interest of the state and nation".¹⁹

According to various officials, the Russian nation in the Northwestern Region was weak. One of the most radical assessments of this weakness was that of the Vilna governor-general, Konstanty Krzhivitskiy, who claimed that the Belarusians in the Grodno and Vilna governorates "in terms of language and customs are something between native Russians and Poles. [...] The northwestern Belarusian equally easily becomes both a Russian and a Pole, leaning culturally more towards the latter since Lithuania and White Russia were for several centuries in a state union with Poland, which left a profound imprint in many areas of local life".²⁰

Vilna governor Pyotr Veryovkin (1912–1916) stated that in this situation it was the duty of the state and Russian civic activists to "use all possible means to promote the preservation and further development in the Belarusian masses of awareness of the bonds of kinship and

¹⁶ Staliūnas, 'Poland or Russia?', pp. 23–95.

¹⁷ Sermon of the Orthodox Kyiv metropolitan Platon prepared after receiving permission to collect money for a monument to Mikhail Muravev in Vilna, RGIA, f. 797, ap. 61, 2 otd., 2 stol., b. 249, l. 3–12.

¹⁸ Aleksandr Vinogradov, *Kak sozdalsja v g. Vil'ne pamjatnik Grafu M.N. Murav'evu* (Vil'na: Kom. po sooruzheniju pamjatnika, 1898), pp. 37–38.

¹⁹ Top-secret report of the governor of Minsk, Girs, on the measures to strengthen Belarusians' self-awareness and counteract Polishisation of them in the Minsk governorate, RGIA, f. 821, op. 150, d. 167, l. 32.

²⁰ Draft report of the Vilna governor-general of 20 August 1906 to Stolypin, *Lietuvos valstybės istorijos archyvas* (Lithuanian state historical archives; hereafter LVIA), f. 378, BS, 1906 m., b. 412, l. 4.

cultural-historical proximity with Russia".²¹ State intervention was necessary as a counterbalance to the actions of hostile forces.

These hostile forces were Poles. A long-nurtured narrative told of the persecution of Russians in this region. One of the most striking examples was the idea of a new history textbook for the schools of the Northwestern Region outlined by the aforementioned Muravev. Teaching of history was to focus on:

the fate of the Russian nation in the Northwestern Region, its efforts to defend Orthodox Christianity, its language and Russian national customs from the claims of Polish-Catholic propaganda; the incessant struggle with the Polish nobility, which has imposed its alien customs on the local population; this country's marvellous Orthodox Christian historical figures, who in every possible way have resisted the oppression of Polish-Catholic propaganda and methods of coercion and ultimately had to fall victim to the struggle for the Russian Faith and tongue, defeated by the power and influence of the hostile Polish element, which took into its hands all domains of life and the intellectual development of the local population.²²

The problem from the authorities' point of view was that these Polish injustices were not only in the past but also continuing in the present.²³ The tsarist officials thought that the Poles were seeking to "artificially turn Orthodox Christian Belarusians gravitating towards Russia into an independent alien ethnographic unit, while also, in the case of the revival of national awareness among Belarusian Catholics, tearing them away from the rest of the Russian nation".²⁴ The Catholic Church and school were the two centres of public life that, according to the tsarist officials, most continued to 'Polonise' the Northwestern Region's population, mainly Belarusians and, to a lesser extent, Lithuanians.

I will now discuss cases that demonstrate the tsarist authorities' attitude to the potential, aspirations, efforts and results of the actions of Poles in the Northwestern Region, but particularly that part of it regarded as Russian *national territory*, i.e., Belarus. At the same time, the assessment of the role of Poles will also show how the Russian authorities perceived

²¹ Draft report of the minister of internal affairs to the governors of Vilna and Grodno, May (no date) 1912, RGIA, f. 821, ap. 150, b. 167, l. 1-2.

²² See the document "On the textbook for teaching the history of Russian for the educational institutions of the Northwestern Region", LVIA, f. 378, BS, 1864 m., b. 1672, l. 1-2.

²³ Letter of the interim governor of Grodno on the Polonisation of Belarusians in the Grodno governorate, 11 September 1913, RGIA, f. 821, ap. 150, b. 167, l. 8.

²⁴ Document prepared at the Ministry of Internal Affairs, RGIA, f. 821, ap. 150, b. 167, l. 66.

their cultural potential, and not only in this region. I will begin with examples associated with the actual rivalry of Poles and Russians in certain areas of public life, then I will tackle the tsarist authorities' efforts to prevent such rivalry.

TEACHING OF CATHOLIC RELIGION IN SCHOOLS

Among the terms of the Decree of Tolerance of 17 April 1905 was the requirement that the non-Orthodox religion be taught in schools in pupils' "mother tongue".²⁵ The decree, of course, did not envisage procedures defining this language, so this issue was resolved by further legislation. On 22 February 1906, the education ministry issued temporary provisions whereby pupils' "mother tongue" was to be defined in a written statement by their parents or guardians. Six years later (1912), the education minister issued a circular amending the existing procedure and ruling that school headteachers should determine pupils' mother tongue, if necessary after speaking to the parents. These laws were produced and implemented amid a bitter struggle between the local civic administration and the Catholic clergy. The majority of disputes and conflicts surrounded the language in which Belarusian Catholics were to be taught religion.

Local officials, especially those who supported the *nationalist* vision of the empire, insisted that (mainly Belarusian) pupils' mother tongue should be determined by the language used at home, taking ethnographic arguments into account, with the decision made by education ministry officials. The Catholic Church hierarchy argued that religion should be taught in the same language as the one in which pupils prayed, with parents having the final say. The former group wanted Belarusian Catholics to learn religion at school in Russian, while the latter thought it should be in Polish.

Upon publication of the Decree of Tolerance, without waiting for instructions from the civil authorities, the Bishop of Vilna, Eduard von der Ropp (1903–1907), issued a circular instructing priests to teach religion in the pupils' mother tongue. Of course, the Catholic clergy understood the bishop's order as it was intended and switched to Polish. Despite demands from the local administration, the bishop did not withdraw the circular. In his next publication of 22 August 1905, he emphasised that religion should be taught in the language in which children prayed at home.

²⁵ Aleksandr Bendin, *Problemy veroterpimosti v Severo-Zapadnom krae Rossijskoj imperii (1863–1914 gg.)* (Minsk: BGU, 2010), pp. 344–56; Vytautas Merkys, *Tautiniai santykiai Vilniaus vyskupijoje 1708–1918 m.* (Vilnius: Versus Aureus, 2006), pp. 221–32; Darius Staliūnas, 'Challenges to Imperial Authorities' Nationality Policy in the Northwest Region, 1905–1915', in *The Tsar, the Empire, and the Nation*, pp. 33–66 (pp. 60–63).

Following Ropp's dismissal by the tsarist authorities, his replacement, Kazimierz Michalkiewicz, the apostolic administrator of the diocese, continued to oppose the teaching of the Catholic faith in Russian. He responded to a circular from the education minister in 1912 with his own circular, in which he 'reminded' priests that they knew better what pupils' mother tongue was. In this battle for the 'souls' of Belarusian Catholics, the Catholic clergy fared better.

In 1908, the superintendent of the Vilna Education District admitted that Belarusian Catholics were not taught religion in Russian anywhere in the district and that where lessons took place, it was only in Polish.²⁶ Officials at various levels could easily explain that Belarusians were forced to obey priests or landowners.²⁷ In terms of influencing Belarusian Catholics, the power of the tsarist administration proved to be lesser than that of the Catholic clergy, hence the issuing of said circular from 1912, although this soon turned out not to guarantee the tsarist authorities success. Since the education officials' objective stated in the circular was to teach Belarusian Catholics in Russian, in many places, especially in the Vilna governorate, priests simply stopped going to schools, while more than half of all schools were not allocated religion teachers – besides which, most Catholic children did not attend state schools and learned religion at home.²⁸

In this struggle, therefore, the tsarist officials observed the consistent efforts of the Catholic clergy to maintain influence over Belarusian Catholics and became convinced that the Catholic Church hierarchy could openly oppose the orders of the authorities. The fact that study of religion in 1906–1912 took place not in Russian but in Polish – as well as the later sabotage of this subject – should have made it clear to officials that Poles held the upper hand.

²⁶ Report of the superintendent of the Vilna Education District from 18 December 1908 to the education minister, RGIA, f. 733, op. 173, d. 29, l. 72–73.

²⁷ Aleksandr Milovidov, *O jazyke prepodavaniia v narodnykh školakh Severo-Zapadnago Kraja. (Po povodu zaprosa v Gosud. Dumu)* (Vil'na: Tipografija «Russkij Počin», 1912), p. 9.; Letter of the teacher-inspector of class 4 of Bykov municipal school to the director of people's schools of the Mogilev governorate, 17 March 1906, LVIA, f. 567, ap. 12, d. 6385, l. 368; Report of the Department of People's Education of the Ministry of Education to the minister of internal affairs, 9 July 1909, RGIA, f. 821, op. 10, d. 514, l. 216.

²⁸ Letter of the director of people's schools of the Vilna governorate to the superintendent of the Education District, 11 April 1914, LVIA, f. 567, ap. 26, b. 999, l. 10–11. In Lithuanian-majority districts, teaching of Catholic religion in state schools was not halted. See also: Merkys, *Tautiniai santykiai Vilniaus vyskupijoje*, p. 232.

CHANGING DENOMINATION

The Decree of Tolerance announced one more innovation that was even greater than the procedure for teaching religion.²⁹ Henceforth, Orthodox Christian tsarist subjects had the right to change denomination. This drastic step surprised not only local administration officials in the western parts of the empire, but also the central apparatus of power. The circular envisaging a temporary procedure for change in denomination was announced by the central government only on 18 August 1905. Under this procedure, a future convert from Orthodox Christianity to another Christian denomination should apply to the local governor, who would act as a mediator between the two Churches and within a month inform the leadership of the other (non-Orthodox) Church about the new member. This month was supposed to give the Orthodox Church time to persuade the individual to change their mind.

The problem encountered by the civil authorities was the swift reaction of the Catholic Church hierarchy in the Russian Empire, especially Ropp, the Bishop of Vilna. Immediately following the publication of the Decree of Tolerance on 21 April 1905, Ropp issued his own circular stating that those who wanted to convert to the Catholic faith had to make a request to the bishop in writing, and the process would conclude with a decree of the consistory, after which that person would be listed in the congregation of the relevant parish. Soon afterwards, similar circulars were issued by other hierarchs of the Catholic Church.

The Decree of Tolerance enabled thousands of Orthodox Christians to change denomination. In 1905 alone, more than 20,000 converted to Catholicism in the so-called Lithuanian governorates (16,286 in the Vilna administration, 3,625 in Grodno, and 900 in Kovno).³⁰ Perhaps future research will help us to answer the question of how many of those or their family members who converted from Orthodox Christianity in the 1860s were counted in the Orthodox denomination by force, when the tsarist authorities even resorted to coercive measures to increase the numbers of Orthodox subjects. In the Vilna governorate in 1863–1867, some 18,775 people converted to Orthodox Christianity, i.e., practically the same number as those who left in 1905.³¹ The Catholic Church enjoyed less success³² in the Grodno governorate, but in general both representatives of

²⁹ Pol Vert, 'Trudnyj put' k katolicizmu. Veroispovednaja prinadležnost' i graždanskoe sostojanie posle 1905 goda', *Lietuvių katalikų mokslo akademijos metraštis*, 26 (2005), 447–74; Bendin, *Problemy veroterpimosti v Severo-Zapadnom krae Rossijskoj imperii*, pp. 221–320; Vilma Žaltauskaitė, 'Interconfessional Rivalry in Lithuania after the Decree of Tolerance', in *The Tsar, the Empire, and the Nation*, pp. 113–39.

³⁰ Žaltauskaitė, *Interconfessional Rivalry*, p. 121.

³¹ Darius Staliūnas, *Making Russians. Meaning and Practice of Russification in Lithuania and Belarus after 1863* (Amsterdam–New York, NY: Rodopi, 2007), p. 133.

³² In 1863–1867, 16,262 Orthodox Christians became Catholics in this governorate: *ibid.*

the Orthodox Church and local officials saw the mass conversion from Orthodox Christianity to Catholicism as a disaster.

Both officials and local Russian community activists blamed the mass conversion to Catholicism mainly on Catholic priests, who had supposedly tried to 'woo' as many Orthodox Christians as they could using illegal measures. For a long time (until 1908), the Catholic Church hierarchy did not recognise the procedure established by a decree of 18 August 1908, which provided an additional excuse for accusing Poles of actions against the Orthodox Church and the Russian Empire. Whereas in 1905, on the eve of or during the revolution, some tsarist officials might have thought that the socialist movement posed the greatest threat, the Catholic clergy's sudden and consistent use of the opportunities offered by the Decree of Tolerance 'reminded' the civil authorities of the danger represented by this group, which was widely seen as defending the interests of Poles.

The implementation of the Decree of Tolerance (in terms of both catechesis and changing denomination) made it clear to the tsarist authorities that Poles, especially the Catholic clergy, had the same aspirations as previously, which the tsarist officials called Polonisation. Moreover, it became clear that the civil authorities could not compete with the Poles without employing administrative measures, especially when the rivalry concerned influences on Belarusian Catholics. Aware of their own weakness and the Poles' greater potential, the tsarist authorities took measures that simply prevented Poles from competing with the tsarist administration.

HIGHER EDUCATION

In the early twentieth century, there was much discussion about setting up a higher education institution in Vilna or another city in the Northwestern Region.³³ The most initiative was shown by Vilna's local government institution – the *duma* – while other local institutions also got involved, including civil society organisations, often presenting themselves as representing ethnic groups living in the country. The discussions covered the idea of setting up a university or another type of higher education institution.

Laying the groundwork for such an institution was no easy task. Significant funds were needed, with various interests having to be coordinated. In 1906–1908, the committee appointed on the initiative of

³³ Darius Staliūnas, *Visuomenė be universiteto? (Aukštojo mokyklos atkūrimo problema Lietuvoje: XIX a. vidurys – XX a. pradžia)* (Vilnius: LII, 2000).

the Vilna duma ceased to operate “owing to the minimal hope of a satisfactory outcome”.³⁴ The many hurdles that had to be overcome before a higher education institution could be established were cited in the discussions of officials and representatives of society, or in official documents: a lack of funds, the need to set up such institutions in many different cities of the Russian Empire, etc. Such reasoning may have had a certain influence but it could not conceal the real cause, which became apparent in the geography of higher education on the western fringes of the empire. Institutions of this kind operated in the Baltic governorates, Congress Poland, and the Southwestern Region (Ukraine), but not in the Northwestern Region. The first two of these regions were perceived on the Russian mental map as foreign, so a higher education institution there was less dangerous, whereas right-bank Ukraine, like the Northwestern Region, was seen as Russian ‘national territory’, much more integrated with the empire and more Russian.³⁵ Lithuania and particularly Belarus were the weakest links in this part of the Russian ‘national territory’, therefore a university or similar institution of higher education could be dangerous here as Polish students could have a negative influence on others. Based on such arguments, the tsarist authorities did not set up higher education institutions in this region in the second half of the nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries.

INTRODUCTION OF SELF-GOVERNMENT INSTITUTIONS (ZEMSTVOS)

Local self-government institutions known as zemstvos were introduced in the Russian Empire in 1864, but not on its western frontiers as they would have fallen into non-Russian hands (German in the Baltic governorates, Polish in Congress Poland and the Western Krai).³⁶ Debates took place in the corridors of government surrounding the introduction of local governmental institutions in these territories too, until zemstvos were introduced in the Ukrainian and Belarusian governorates of the Western Krai in 1911. Elections to zemstvos were to take place in curias, to which voters were to be allocated depending on their nationality. This is the most obvious

³⁴ Draft letter from the head of the People's Education Committee of Vilna Municipal Council to A. Lagori, 23 May 1911, LVIA, f. 938, ap. 6, b. 312, l. 306.

³⁵ Darius Stalūnas, ‘Ėtniškąja hierarchija gubernij na zapadnyh okrainach Rossijskoj imperii (načalo XX v.)’, in *Rossijskaja imperija meždū reformami i revoliucijami, 1906–1916*, ed. by Aleksej Miller and Kirill Solov'ev (Moskva: Kvadriga, 2021), pp. 302–18.

³⁶ Aron Avrech, ‘Vopros o zapadnom zemstve i bankrotstvo Stolypina’, *Istoričeskie zapiski*, 70 (1961), 61–112; Theodore R. Weeks, *Nation and State in Late Imperial Russia. Nationalism and Russification on the Western Frontier, 1863–1914* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois Press, 1996), pp. 131–51; Michail Dolbilov and Aleksej Miller, *Zapadnye okrainy Rossijskoj imperii* (Moskva: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2006), pp. 271–75, 378–81; Staliūnas, ‘Challenges to Imperial Authorities’, pp. 33–66.

evidence of the fact that the tsarist authorities saw the Polish potential in this region as stronger than the Russian one.

The Russian perception of the Polish potential saw it as even greater in the so-called Lithuanian governorates, where zemstvos were not introduced at all due to the weakness of the Russian landed classes there. The Grodno governorate also had no zemstvos, despite having considerably more Orthodox Christians than Catholics. The official explanation that the same institutions were to operate throughout territory that was subordinate to the governor-general of Vilna seems unconvincing, because in parallel with the introduction of zemstvos there were plans to abolish the Vilna governorate-general, which were implemented in 1912.³⁷ The likelier reason for the failure to introduce zemstvos in the Grodno governorate is the tsarist authorities' fears of excessive Polish influence on the rather numerous Belarusian Catholics living there.

POLISH AS A PRIMARY SCHOOL SUBJECT

The tsarist authorities readily agreed to teaching of Polish in high schools in the Northwestern Region, but the situation in primary schools was entirely different. On 22 April 1906, a decree was issued stating that in the part of the territory of the Grodno governorate neighbouring with Congress Poland, where there was a large population of Poles in state primary schools, including one-class schools, not only could Polish be taught as a subject, but other subjects could also be taught in this language, with the exception of Russian. In 1906, the local administration, which, especially in the education ministry, included many influential advocates of the *imperial* national policy, took steps to implement this decree. It organised consultations and collected information, ultimately recommending that the decree could be implemented in nine districts (six in Bielsk county and three in Białystok county). This recommendation satisfied neither proponents of the *imperial* national policy, headed by Boris Wolf, overseer of the Vilna Education District, nor supporters of the *nationalist* policy, including Grodno governor Viktor Borzenko. The former group believed that the wishes of the population should be followed, increasing the area where Polish could be learnt. Belarusian Catholics also had the right to learn Polish if they wanted. The latter group prioritised 'ethnographic' criteria and sought to restrict this area. As this group grew in strength in the tsarist administration (Wolff left the position of overseer of the Vilna

³⁷ The Vilna governorate-general consisted of the Vilna, Kovno and Grodno governorates.

Education District in 1908), the part of the decree referring to the possibility of learning Polish in the Grodno governorate ultimately remained unfulfilled. Applications from those who wanted to learn Polish were rejected, with the argument that in 1906 it was impossible to precisely define the area dominated by Polish speakers or because the applicants were Belarusians.³⁸ It is evident that at least part of this reasoning was only a pretext (e.g., the unclear Polish-speaking area). One unnamed but very likely reason was the fact that allowing Polish to be taught in primary schools would mean, in the officials' view, that this area would be dominated numerically by Poles, making it their *national territory*. This conclusion (that part of the Northwestern Region was Polish territory) was not accepted by the tsarist officials, especially supporters of the *nationalist* vision. Another reason was officials' reluctance to allow those identifying as native Belarusians to learn Polish.

By failing to implement the decree of 22 April, in effect the tsarist officials admitted that they were unable to persuade Belarusian Catholics that they were Russians and did not need Polish. The authorities thereby accepted that Polish culture and language had a greater potential than its Russian counterpart in the western part of the Grodno governorate, even if the latter could count on the support of the civic administration.

CONCLUSION

In spring 1914, high-ranking tsarist officials met in Saint Petersburg to discuss initiatives "to counter Polish influences in the Northwestern Region". The participants in the meetings familiarised themselves with various documents, including a report from the Vilna governorate in which the governor, Dmitri Lubimov, gave a positive assessment of the struggle against various ethnic groups there and more broadly throughout the Northwestern Region: "Everything comes down to the fact that at first glance the sad picture of the national struggle tearing the Northwestern Region apart has its positive aspects as well as its dark sides. Slowly but inexorably, it is weakening the Polish domination in the region, which is starting to understand the complete historical illegality of this domination. It is therefore unnecessary for the government to interfere in this struggle.

³⁸ Correspondence with the governor-general of the Northwestern Region and landed district marshals on permission to teach Polish and Lithuanian in the Northwestern Region. Directory of the ethnographic makeup of the governorate's population by districts, 1906–1919, *Nacyjanal'ny historyčny archiū Belarusi ū h. Hrodna* (National Historical Archives of Belarus in Grodno), f. 1, op. 18, d. 1097; On determining ethnographic boundaries following the request of the Supreme Command of 22 April 1906 regarding permission for the Polish language in primary schools in the Grodno governorate, LVIA, f. 567, ap. 13, b. 1301; Permission to teach Polish in primary schools in the Grodno governorate, LVIA, f. 567, ap. 13, b. 1369.

Its consequences can be foreseen: the surging storm will undoubtedly pave the way for the Russian cause on the western frontiers".³⁹

In early 1914, the Ministry of Internal Affairs noted that "[...] the Polish National Democratic Party has recently stepped up its efforts to subjugate the local Belarusians by submitting them to Polish-Catholic influences".⁴⁰ The central authorities responded to this assessment by holding a meeting in Saint Petersburg to discuss various nationality policy measures. Some of these can be called repressive, or at least bearing the hallmarks of repression (regulating the national composition of the hierarchs, consistories, and seminary members of the Catholic Church; providing Belarusian Catholics with additional services and teaching religion in schools in Russian; restricting the building of Catholic churches; regulating religious processions; supervision of transactions of purchase and sales of land; stricter control of the operation of civic organisations etc.). More affirmative action included strengthening of the influence of the Orthodox Church; support for purchase of land by Russians; financial subvention for a newspaper that supported government policy in the Northwestern Region, etc.⁴¹ Yet there were far fewer affirmative measures than repressive ones, and in this respect the plan of action prepared by the conference in 1914 was continuation of the policy pursued by the tsarist authorities in the second half of the nineteenth century. Affirmative action measures required skills, implementers and funding. Early in the twentieth century, the tsarist administration lacked all these elements, so priority was given to administrative means, since otherwise the tsarist authorities would not have been able to compete with the Polish influences in the Northwestern Region, and specifically Belarus, and their actions discussed above show that the tsarist officials were aware of this reality. This was why no higher education institution was established in the Northwestern Region, the 'Lithuanian' governorates had no zemstvos, and the Polish-speaking residents of the western districts of the Grodno governorate could not learn Polish in primary schools.

³⁹ Extract from the Vilna governorate report of 1910, RGIA, f. 821, op. 150, d. 172, l. 213.

⁴⁰ Quoted from a letter from the Vilna governor to the superintendent of the Vilna Educational District, 10 January 1914, LVIA, f. 567, ap. 26, b. 999, l. 1.

⁴¹ List of measures for countering Polonisation in the Northwestern Region prepared during the meetings that took place on 17, 18, 20, 22, 24, 25 and 26 April, RGIA, f. 821, op. 150, d. 172, l. 71–72.

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