Mikhail Dolbilov, Darius Staliunas, *Obratnaia uniia: iz istorii otnoshenii mezhdru katolitsizmom i pravoslaviem v Rossiiskoi imperii 1840–1873*, Vilnius: LII leidykla, 2010. 274 p. ISBN 978-9955-847-32-8

At the end of the 18th century when the Russian Empire expanded to the West, a very varied region, from a national and confessional point of view, emerged on its territory. Catholics of the Western and Eastern rites dominated, but there were also many Jews, and villages of Russian Old Believers who had escaped to the West from the persecution of the tsars. Despite the fact that Eastern Slavs lived in the seized region, there were hardly any Orthodox believers among them. Their church in the territory of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania (GDL) and the Kingdom of Poland had essentially been liquidated by the Union of Brest that came into effect in 1596, the Orthodox believers became Uniates (Eastern rite Catholics), and in more than 200 years totally moved away from the culture related with Orthodoxy.

Connected to the Russian Empire, the lands of the former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth preserved their character for a long time. After the uprising of 1831, the first large-scale repressions inspired by the tsarist government prompted major changes. The real upheaval in religious life occurred in 1839, when suddenly there appeared in the Western provinces millions of Orthodox believers: after liquidating the structure of the Uniate Church, the Uniates were declared to be Orthodox believers. The quite simple joining of the Uniates encouraged some strategically thinking adepts of the empire to go further: to design scenarios for joining the Catholics to the Orthodox Church. This book is devoted to an analysis of these projects. The papers and documents published in it unfurl the proposals that reached the highest echelons of the tsarist government in 1840–1866.

The authors have succeeded in finding important documents related to projects for joining the Catholics to the Orthodox Church. All of them are anonymous, except for the secret document presented in 1840 by the first Bishop of Minsk Antonii (Zubko). It reached the emperor, and was rejected in a resolution by Nicolas I: ‘It is interesting and very important; however, too early, to be kept secret until the time comes’ (p. 26). Later proposals to the Ministry of Internal Affairs in 1865–1866 also remained classified, although it would seem that in seeking effective measures to integrate the rebellious Western provinces after the 1863 revolt they could have attracted interest.

The authors of the book discuss all the projects in detail. In the appendices, the texts are published along with professionally and carefully prepared comments. Much attention is devoted to the determination of the authors of the projects; there is an attempt to discern their motives. These actually raise many doubts, because Dobilov and Staliūnas assign the authorship of the 1865–1866 projects not only to the Orthodox bishop mentioned, but also to two Catholics, the head of the nobility in the Minsk province Eustaf Prószyński, and the well-known publicist Adam Honory Kirkor (pp. 8, 49–73).

After reading the book, the question first of all arises whether it was worth devoting so much attention to unimplemented anonymous projects, and to publish them as a separate publication. After all, the authors published their first work on this topic a long time ago, and in the new publication they formulated theses about the emergence of the mentioned projects and their creators essentially remain (for links to their works published in various languages from 2002, see p. 17). One can understand the desire to publish the projects of the union: four documents from 1865–1866 and a version of one of them published in Paris in 1873 with a comment by its publisher. Nevertheless, all these projects remained only on paper. They were not proposed by officials responsible for the confessional policies of the empire, but by unknown local ‘enthusiasts’. Neither the spiritual nor the secular government was interested in the proposals, thus the promptly classified reasoning about the unification of the Catholics with the Orthodox Church through a union more likely falls into the context of political thought rather than the confessional policies of the empire (as the authors suggest, pp. 8, 259).

In this review, we would like to draw attention to some of the questions raised and discussed in the publication. First of all, about the authorship of the projects, or more precisely of A. Kirkor. The authors of the book decide on his participation in creating projects for joining the Catholics to the Orthodox Church only from secondary sources, and they present the thesis as a hypothesis. Although the data from some sources sound convincing, nevertheless, the impression is that the authors have searched too intensely for evidence of their statement in writings by Kirkor, and make too far-reaching conclusions. For instance, finding his remark in a letter of 1853 that from now on he will write only in Russian, the authors theorise: ‘If one were able to forsake the Polish language, then why can one not do the same for the “Polish” religion?’ (p. 79). The authors do not specify in what context Kirkor wrote to Josef A. Kraszewski to ‘forsake’ his Polish language, but they should have noticed that he never implemented this intention, and until the very end of his life wrote publicistic writings and personal letters in Polish. He also never disavowed his religion.

The authors link the authorship of the union projects to the name of Kirkor also due to sentences in them about Lithuania, and argue the exis-

ting reasoning link with the views of this person (pp. 58–64). It is hard to believe that a person who has not lost his national consciousness would propose destroying the cultural foundations of his country. After all, the proposals provided in the published documents are broader than the idea of a Church union. In it there is also a programme for the colonisation of the country, of Russification through the schools. A person offering similar things could hardly have been able to conceal his true views (or their radical change, turning point), so that historians researching over 150 years and publishing his writings could not have found clearly compromising information. On the other hand, Kirkor is considered up to now a distinguished Polish, Belarusian and Lithuanian player of the middle of the 19th century, and the analysis of his historical writings about Lithuanian relations with the Poles even allow Dolbilov and Staliūnas to identify him ‘nearly as a current-day [Lithuanian] nationalist’ (p. 60).

The content of the documents indicates that it is quite viable to search for the authors of the projects among representatives of the Russian administration, who had access to the first project in 1840, and attempted to reanimate a topical idea for them after the 1863 revolt. For instance, in the 28 May 1866 letter we read: ‘What have **we** done to Russify the country in recent years?’ (p. 215), ‘**We** have recovered indemnities, imposed fines...’ (p. 216; my emphasis).

The second topical question for this review is linked to the assessment of the projects mentioned. In the last sentence of the conclusions, the authors summarise that the project of the ‘reverse union’ was a ‘paradoxical means to indirectly exert pressure on the authorities, insofar as the members of an oppressed confession, by calling for solidifying secular surveillance of their religion, could virtually be defending it from worse, even more arbitrary persecution’ (p. 267). It would be very difficult to agree with such a statement, because the projects did not propose strengthening the control of the Church, but in quite a short time (in one project in a few years, in another in 12) to join it totally to the Russian Orthodox Church, applying in parallel other means in the rapid Russification of the country. It is difficult to imagine greater arbitrariness than that proposed by the proponents of the ‘reverse union’. The real policies carried out by the tsarist government of discrimination against the Catholic Church and Catholics did not reach that far, the Church was dominant in most western provinces of the empire, and to stabilise its situation, measures, especially such desperate ones, were really not necessary.

It seems that, having become interested in the ‘reverse union’ projects, and looking for reflections in other sources of 19th-century history, the authors have overestimated the importance of documents discovered. As has been mentioned, this was an undertaking, born in the heads of several people, that the highest spiritual and secular government of the empire (the tsar himself) without hesitation rejected. Probably the main ‘engineer’ of

the confessional policies in the Northwest, Bishop, later Metropolitan, Josif Semashko, did not support this idea (p. 20). It may be that he, a former member of the Uniate Church who had contributed most to its liquidation in the Russian Empire, did not believe in the prospects for any church union. For instance, while he was alive, in the Orthodox Diocese of Lithuania (covering the Kovno, Vilnia and Grodno *gubernias*) not a single United-in-Faith* parish was founded, although in the depths of the empire the project of the union of Old Believers and Orthodox was well advanced.

The authors of the book do not consider the question how real the new union of Orthodox and Catholics could have been, in other words, was the Orthodox Church able to cope with the task of converting the Catholics in the region, not shaking loose the foundations before they were strengthened. The most important reason for the rejection of the proposed union was most likely the weakness of the structure of the Orthodox Church: several decades after 1839 it still remained 'Polish', it preserved a multitude of elements of the officially liquidated Uniate Church. Even Orthodox bishops visiting parishes in the 1870s and 1880s admitted that the majority of former Uniates did not understand the dogmas of Orthodoxy and the meaning of religious celebrations. Moreover, many of these converts secretly visited Catholic churches and worshipped in them.¹ The Orthodox historian M. Kojalavičius noted in 1886 that on feast days in the Orthodox churches of Vilnius one could hardly see any ordinary people, only officials attended services. Meanwhile, the populace, according to him, was inundating Catholic churches, where Polish hymns were sung.² With the joining of the Uniates being stuck, the proposals to apply a similar policy to Catholics could have sounded like a provocation.

The reviewed collection is interesting due to the published documents, reflecting the social and political situation in the Northwest Region, and the results of its 'absorption'. Informative comments highlight some episodes of the policies of the tsarist government. Recalling the conflict between the Orthodox and Catholic churches in the Russian Empire in the 19th century, the published documents should not be one more illustration of the dramatic situation of the Catholics: the tsarist government did not try

* United-in-Faith or Edinoverie is a form of union of the Orthodox and Old Believers churches: after joining Orthodoxy, the Old Believers could follow their ancient rights and traditions, but had to be at the disposal of the hierarchy of the Orthodox Church. Churches were built with state funds, the priests that they themselves chose, who would receive salaries from the state just like Orthodox clergy, were appointed. Furthermore, the United-in-Faith could enjoy civil and legal rights that Old Believers, discriminated in the empire, did not have.

¹ V. Merkys, *Tautiniai santykiai Vilniaus vyskupijoje 1798–1918 m.* (Vilnius, 2006), p. 248; N. Izvekov, *Istoričeskij očerk sostojanija Pravoslavnoi Cerkvi v Litovskoi eparchii za vremia 1839–1889* (Moscow, 1899), pp. 270–274.

² N. Izvekov, *Istoričeskij očerk*, p. 274.

in vain to classify them, because the initiatives for the union of too loyal citizens could serve only one purpose, to discredit the very empire (in the book the publication of two 1873 documents shows this).

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