Aleksandr Iurievich Bendin, *Problemy veroterpimosti v Severo-Zapadnom krae Rossiiskoi imperii (1863–1916)*, Minsk: BGU, 2010. ISBN 978-9855-184-40-0

In the past few years, several history books in the Russian language have appeared devoted to the confessional history of the western fringes of the Russian Empire ‘in the long 19th century’. This should not testify to some kind of ‘boom’ in interest in this problem in today’s Russia. If the history of the Church’s inter-denominational relations continues to interest a significant number of researchers, the interest in the western periphery of the empire, the former lands of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, is considerably subdued. There is much less of it than there was a decade ago, when the mentioned books began to be prepared.

The fact that these books were published in the Russian language should not create the illusion that all of these studies more or less belong to the same or a similar paradigm of scholarly research.¹ In addition to the solid monographs² supported by numerous archival and published sources and well integrated into the international scholarly discourse, there are those of which the reading in the 21st century raises more than surprise. For example, St Petersburg University Press in 2007 published a book by A. Tikhonov devoted to the confessional policies of the empire with respect to Muslims, Jews and Catholics.³ Writing about the third element of these policies, the author states that the imperial government did not interfere in the ‘internal’ life of Catholics and people of other faiths, but only ‘strictly observed’ that the members of these religions did not expand their influence ‘on new segments of the population’, while in 1905 the

¹ There has also just appeared a collection of articles in the Russian language by the American historian Paul Werth, which also analyses the confessional problems on the western fringes of the empire: P. Werth, *Pravoslavie, inoslavie, inoverie: Ocherki po istorii religioznovo raznoobrazii Rossiiskoi imperii* (Moscow, 2012). We should also mention the thesis by Irina Vibe *Veroispovednaia politika samoderzhavii v Zapadnom krae (1830–1855)*, defended at the Russian Academy of Sciences, St Petersburg Institute of History, in 2009. This work has not yet been published as a separate book.

² M.D. Dolbilov, *Russkii krai, chuzhaia vera: Etnokonfessional’naia politika imperii v Litve i Belorussii pri Aleksandre II* (Moscow, 2010). My review, in which critical comments are also expressed, is in: *Rossiiskaia istoriia*, 2012, no. 4, pp. 61–64.

³ A.K. Tikhonov, *Katoliki, musul'mane i iudei Rossiiskoi imperii v poslednei chetverti XVIII–XX v.* (St Petersburg, 2007).

rights of the Catholic and Orthodox churches were made completely equal. The author gives us to understand that the former policy was a mistake: 'It [the 17 April 1905 Tolerance Decree] did not lead to reconciliation, but to a greater escalation of relations between the Catholic Church in Russia and the state, revealing an apparent problem: the Roman Catholic clergy of the Western region always held a position of complete independence from the Russian government.'⁴ Such a portrayal of the empire as just and legitimate, and the Catholic Church or the Catholic clergy as an aggressive force, not taking into account various measures, is also typical of A. Bendin's monograph considered here. Although the author is from Minsk, there is nothing Belarusian, with the exception of archival sources from the archives of Belarus, and outright hostility to most modern Belarusian scholars, in this book.

At first glance, the book creates the impression of a solid scholarly monograph: it consists of ten chapters of considerable volume, in which, in more or less chronological order, the confessional problems the imperial government encountered and how it tried to solve them, are shown. Most attention is devoted to how the government tried to increase the number of Orthodox believers, how religious instruction was regulated, how the confessional policy changed at the beginning of the 20th century, and what problems the government faced after the publication of the mentioned Tolerance Decree in 1905. The book used a lot of primary sources (from archives in Belarus, Russia and Lithuania), and the various debates by officials on specific methods of confessional policy are presented; quite a few episodes in the specific implementation of confessional policy, or interdenominational relations, are described. We should also note that we can agree with some of the author's claims. For example, Bendin's statement that restrictions on the Catholic Church imposed after the 1863 Uprising were the result of a direct response by the government to the actions of, from its point of view, a disloyal group of society, the Catholic clergy, but also did not change the status of the Church as 'tolerated' in the empire (p. 7); with the finding that the mass conversion of Belarusian Catholics to Orthodoxy in the 1860s was determined to a great extent by the actions of government officials, often also by using coercion, and in such cases very often content with the formal change of confession, paying no attention to the beliefs of those changing confession (pp. 32–3); and with the observation that the 'integration' of Belarusian Catholics into the 'Russian nationality' should reduce the possible social base of a Polish uprising (p. 84). Neverthe-

⁴ Ibid., p. 232.

less, these generalisations by the author of the book, and the abundant empirical material collected, can in no way reduce the woeful impression left by this book.

In a summary of the book, the author promises a methodological novelty, and criticises previous historical scholarship: allegedly, it is too ideological (when speaking about contemporary Belarusian scholarship, pp. 18–19); or that they do not purport to an overall discussion of the problem (in this way, the works of T.R. Weeks, P. Werth and D. Staliunas are evaluated, pp. 21–22); but in this reviewer's opinion, the deficiencies about which Bendin talks are, in fact, characteristic of his book.

Let us begin with the fact that the author of the book accuses contemporary Belarusian historiography of primordialism. However, it is easy to notice that Bendin himself is a typical example of primordialistic thinking. In his understanding, there were actually two options for the Belarusians: either Polonisation, or integration into the Russian nation. The first option, in Bendin's opinion, is unnatural, because that way the Belarusians 'would experience the process of not only religious but also ethnic alienation from their ethnically related neighbours' (p. 156). Meanwhile, becoming Russian is a reasonable and legitimate process. The book repeatedly emphasises the ethnic and linguistic, and often the confessional kinship of Belarusians and Russians: 'In reality there was a process of integration of Belarusians, related in ethnic terms, into the Russian ethnic religious community. This process took place either on the basis of common confessional or cultural values, as with the Belarusian Orthodox, or only on the basis of cultural values, as happened with Belarusian Catholics' (p. 10). Therefore, the policy of Russification, according to the author of the book, is nothing more than 'the social and national mobilisation of Belarusians' (p. 129), 'ethnic mobilisation' or the 'defence of the Russian identity of Belarusian Catholics' (p. 432), and in no way can it be said that the imperial government sought to Russify the Belarusians by force (p. 9).

After reading this book, the reproach by Bendin of earlier historiography also seems strange: allegedly, it did not provide a composite view of the confessional problems. The book only once or twice glimpses the ethnic Lithuanian lands; the Žemaitijan (Telšiai) Bishop Motiejus Valančius is not even mentioned once; we will not find anything here about the introduction of Cyrillic script into Lithuanian writing, which was perceived as a preparatory stage for the conversion of the Lithuanian peasantry to Orthodoxy; we will also find nothing in the book about the secret Lithuanian schools (all the illegal Catholic schools, according to the author, were Polish).

In general, we have to note that in the book we will not find many important publications on this topic. The research works of Mikhail Dol-

bilov are ignored,⁵ there are no works of Polish historiography,⁶ not to mention works by Lithuanian historians.⁷ True, among the more often cited historians, we can count the author of this review, but the citation or link is very selective, i.e. Bendin takes only what suits his preconceptions.⁸ Writing about the discussions in the corridors of power in the 1860s on the introduction of the Russian language into additional Masses in Catholic churches (pp. 74–84), the author does not even mention the fact that the supporters of the measure thought that the introduction of the Russian language would facilitate the conversion of Belarusian Catholics to Orthodoxy, although at the beginning of the book works are cited in which these statements are justified.⁹ Not a single word is mentioned about the

⁵ In the footnotes, we can find only one publication by M. Dolbilov, prepared together with the author of this review (p. 22), and one book concluded along with Alexei Miller, which is presented in the list of literature at the end of the book (p. 434), but not used at all in the monograph. These articles by M. Dolbilov, which are important on this topic, that appeared before the publication of the reviewed book, were mentioned: M. Dolbilov, 'Konstruirovaniie obrazov miatezha: Politika M.H. Murav'eva v Litovskovo-Beloruskom krae v 1863–1865 gg. kak ob'ekt istoriko-antropologicheskovo analiza', *Actio nova* 2000 (Moscow, 2000), pp. 338–408; *ibid.*, 'Kul'turnaia idioma vrozozhdeniia Rossii kak faktor imperskoi politiki v Severo-Zapadnom krae v 1863–1865 gg.', *Ab Imperio*, (2001), no. 1–2, pp. 227–268; *ibid.*, 'Prevratnosti kirillizatsii: zapret latinitsy i biurokraticheskaiia rusifikatsiia litovtsev v vilenskom general-gubernatorstve 1864–1882 gg.', *Ab Imperio* (2005), No 2, pp. 255–296.

⁶ Several works are mentioned in the introduction, but serious doubts arise as to whether the author has read these works. The book deals quite a lot with the activities of the Bishop of Vilnius Eduard von der Ropp (1903–1907), and his relations with the government, but not only are the works by Lithuanian authors on this subject unknown to Bendin, but also those by Poles: R. Jurkowski, 'Edward Ropp jako Biskup Wileński 1903–1907', *Studia Teologiczne*, 8 (1990); A. Kozyrski, *Arcybiskup Edward Ropp. Życie i Działalność, I: (1851–1939)* (Lublin, 2004).

⁷ It seems that Bendin does not know the Lithuanian language, so there is no need to mention the work of V. Merkys, E. Vidmantas, V. Žaltauskaitė, and others.

⁸ In addition, a book, published in English: *Making Russians. Meaning and Practice of Russification in Lithuania and Belarus after 1863* (Amsterdam, New York, 2007) is not mentioned at all. In general, there is a feeling that the author of the reviewed book knows only the Russian language. In the introduction, several studies in English are mentioned, but there are no signs that Bendin had read them. The situation with the Polish language may be similar: at the beginning, several works by Polish historians are mentioned, but it is unclear whether they were read. It is true that the author writes in the introduction that he used the Polish *Kurjer Litewski*, which was published in Vilnius, as a source, but we find references to it only two times.

⁹ D. Staliunas, 'Mozhet li katolik byt' russkim? O vvedenii russkovo iazyka v katolicheskoe bogoslužhenie v 60-kh godakh XIX veka', *Rossiiskaia imperiia v*

influence on these debates of the influential journalist Mikhail Katkov, who is described many times in historiography.

Nevertheless, the greatest problem of the book is the absence of elementary criticism of sources. Bendin often presents the evaluations of events formulated by Russian officials as if they reflected the objective reality (for example, pp. 29, 77), so it is not surprising that the book emphasises the allegedly illegal and morally indefensible activities of the Catholic Church (pp. 11, 58, 431). Opponents of the government are described with the same rhetorical means which we find in the official correspondence of officials: 'Polish insurgents' (p. 129); representatives of 'religious extremism' (p. 156); Catholic priests acted 'destructively' (p. 349); the 'blasphemous treatment of Orthodox temples and the Orthodox faith' is characteristic of them (p. 413); the 'Catholic side' used 'psychological terror and physical violence' (p. 413); 'religious-ethnic intolerance' of Orthodoxy is characteristic of them (p. 431); and, in general, the Catholic Church was unable to take advantage of the religious freedom granted in 1905, because intolerance was characteristic of its 'ecclesiastical tradition' (p. 432). Meanwhile, the confessional policy measures used by the government were merely a response to these allegedly illegal and immoral acts by Catholics (pp. 413, 432).

These observations should be sufficient for the reader to form an impression about the scholarly value of the book.

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zarubezhnoi istoriografii. Raboty poslednikh let: antologiya; ed. P. Werth, P.S. Kabytov, A.I. Miller (Moscow, 2005), p. 578.