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## **THE POLISH QUESTION IN THE LATE RUSSIAN EMPIRE (THE SECOND HALF OF THE XIX – BEGINNING OF THE XX CENTURY)**

Modern history of the Polish nation has been dramatic – the Poles have not had statehood for 123 years, were separated, under foreign rule, as well as their territory. In the period of the Napoleonic wars, the issue of restoration of the Polish state became an object of international politics, and the Polish territory, almost swept by a military storm, became a subject of bargaining among European countries. In 1815 the Polish territory was divided between Russia, Prussia and Austria.

After the Kingdom of Poland formation in 1815 of, the Polish question stood out among the most crucial national problems faced by the Russian Empire. Poland was the only one of its suburbs, which had had a long tradition of independent statehood and a rich national culture. The position of Poland was found to be particular due to a large number of Polish magnates (szlachta), the second largest group of the “noble birth” of the Empire after the Russian gentry who were mostly employed in the Civil Service. The Polish question appeared to become vital among other issues during the rebellions of 1863–1864 and 1830–1831, which spread over the Polish, Belarusian, Lithuanian and Ukrainian lands. The Russian government’s politics was aimed at limiting the influence of the Poles on local population in the periods after the uprisings. This politics was realized through a number of activities in the fields of local self-governing, economics, social live, education and religion. These activities can be considered as a specific national politics of the Russian government in the Polish, Belarusian and Lithuanian lands. In addition, the second half of the XIX century witnessed the formation of national and political identities of the Poles. All the above-mentioned identified problems make up a part of the concept “The Polish question”.

The purpose of this article is to study the Polish question within the Russian Empire based on the analysis of the latest English-language periodicals by scholars of the 1990s – 2000s.

**Short review of the historiography.** The Polish question has been more than once a special subject for studies throughout Russian history. Considerable attention was paid to it by historians from Russia and Poland. Schools of Polish and Russian Studies also emerged in Germany, France and Austria. The study of G. Eversley “The partitions of Poland” was among the

first papers on the Polish history in the XIX century, which was published in 1915 in Great Britain and the United States [4, p. 303–324]. However, the landmark of the English-language historiography has changed since 1917. The problems of the history of the Russian imperial period remained poorly developed in the English literature up to the end of the XX century. More attention was paid to the political analysis of the Bolsheviks in power, and the history of the Soviet Union. As a result, very large schools on Kremlinology were developed in the United States and Canada.

At the end of the XX century, the study of world empires gave new impetus to the development of the world historiography. The amount of basic research centers grew in number. Thus, during 1998–1999 a “revisionist” five-volume “The Oxford history of the British Empire” was released. It was followed by “The Cambridge Illustrated History of the British Empire”, edited by one of the greatest experts on the subject, P.J. Marshall, in 2001. In the same year there appeared a thick volume “Empires”, edited by S.J. Olkok. After the disintegration of the Soviet Union in the 1990s, the English-language historians also turned to the study of the phenomenon of the empire, considering the problem of the Soviet Union in this context. Special attention was given to the national politics. Historians were interested in the comparative analysis of peoples in multinational and multicultural imperial formations. Scientists paid special attention to the history of the Poles in the Russian Empire. At the end of the last century there appeared several major monographs on the subject, including books by C.A. Blackburn “Napoleon and the szlachta” (New York 1998), R.E. Blobaum “Rewolucja: Russian Poland, 1904–1907” (Ithaca 1995), S.D. Corrsin “Warsaw before the First World War: Poles and Jews in the Third City of the Russian Empire, 1880–1914” (New York 1989), B. Porter “When Nationalism Began to Hate. Imagining Modern Politics in Nineteenth-century Poland” (New York 2000) and T.R. Weeks “Nation and State in Late Imperial Russia. Nationalism and Russification on the Western Frontier, 1863–1914” (Illinois 1996). However, many of the conclusions made by American colleagues remain largely unknown to the Belarusian historiography.

For realizing of the project a substantial number of recent scientific articles have been studied in journals such as “The Russian Review”, “European review of History” and “Ab Imperio”. Though the journal “Ab Imperio” is a Russian edition and comes out in Kazan, many English-language authors publish their research results on its pages. The total output of the given works is up to the requirements of the candidate minimum for a foreign language learner. Among the names of the authors, who are specially engaged in the study of the Polish question as a national one of the Russian Empire,

may be called Th. Weeks, A. Nowak, S. Berger, A. Miller, A. Rieber and C. Woolhiser. M. Deflem shows the importance of the use of the comparative method in the study of national entities in history [2; 3].

All the articles under consideration possess a number of distinctive features that differ them from similar Russian works. First of all, the authors of these articles not only give the illustration to the problems in a number of examples, but make overall conclusions and implications. In other words, the induction of thinking is the main logical procedure of the researchers. Secondly, most works have the character of reasoning on a given topic; the author's position is clearly expressed in them. Thirdly, the majority of authors transfer assessment of the Russian imperial period on the Soviet period, they look for similarities and often they find them. This can be explained by the orientation of political science, which is characteristic of all of the English-language historiography. Finally, any problem, especially the national one, is looked upon in a wide context of the accompanying circumstances. As a result, sometimes originally different events can be connected to each other.

A. Nowak, who is a Polish historian and Jagiellonian University Professor, analyzes the imperial trail in the Polish tradition of self-identification, identifies its specific manifestations in various ideologies at different times in the XIX century [6, p. 266–273]. The researcher concludes that the Polish imperial claims were determined by the Polish self-perception as a perennial border between East and West.

Th. Weeks, a professor of the University in California, makes an attempt to analyze the reign of Alexander II and his politics on the national question including the Polish one [9, p. 225–232]. First according to the author the Russian national identity was quite weakly developed in the XIX century. Then the author notes that the Poles presented “a headache” for the Russians and occupied a special place in the national world of the Empire. Finally, according to Th. Weeks the Polish question operated at least on three levels: as a direct political threat, as a religious-spiritual threat, and as a threat within Slavdom. The historian concludes that the politics of the imperial government was based on conflicting considerations and motives: on the one hand, it characterized the traditional mechanisms of control over the periphery, and on the other hand, it used the modern mechanisms of Russification [10, p. 366–367]. Th. Weeks also analyses the Government's politics of the Romanov Empire on protecting the Orthodox Russian people and oppressing non-Russians in the bordering areas between the Russian and Polish provinces [8, p. 539–551].

S. Berger (Professor of the University of Manchester) and A. Miller (a Russian historian and Central European University Professor) do not believe

that nation-states challenged empires in the XIX century and ultimately brought about their downfall. Instead they argue that nation-states were created by empires [1, p. 317–326].

C. Woolhiser's attention (Professor from Harvard University) is drawn to the role of boundaries in the formation of the Polish and Belarusian national identities. He concludes that the influence of political, social and religious identities in the formation of national consciousness of the Poles and Belarusians contributed to the complex linguistic picture, which did not coincide with the ethnographic picture [11, p. 345].

Professor of the University of Pennsylvania A. Rieber analyzes the Russian national politics in the context of the reform of the political, economic and social systems of the Russian Empire [7, p 331–335]. The researcher focuses on the periodical press and literature in the process of promoting the ideas of imperialism. He also points to the clash of the Polish and Russian imperialism in the Belarusian-Lithuanian provinces.

Thus, the short review of the literature used for writing the article shows that the Polish question is closely connected with the problems of national politics in the Empire and the formation of national identities in historiography. Historians also devote considerable attention to the position of the borders of the Empire. The Belarusians are also considered in the context of the borders between East and West. We think that historians are absolutely right in defining the role of Russia in the formation of the Polish political and national identities. However, many of their assessments are subjective and they need to be specified.

**The Poles: the place and role in the Russian Empire.** The position of the Kingdom of Poland in the Russian Empire was complex and polysemantic. On the one hand, the Russian government has sought to include the Polish territory into a single imperial system. The government implemented mechanisms to unify it. On the other hand, the Russians could not ignore the Polish experience of self-state of the existence and features of the national character. Therefore, the government pursued a cautious politics, which was aimed at curbing the influence of the Poles to other nations that were part of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth.

The Poles occupied a special place in the national world of imperial Russia for several reasons, foremost among these, simple numbers, geography, history, culture, and religion. Using imperial Russia's method of calculating nationality, the Poles made up the largest non-Russians ethnicity in the Empire. This inherently hostile national group, furthermore, lived in the geopolitically vital borderlands between Russia and Central Europe. Unlike most other minority nationalities, the Poles could look back on a long and

distinguished history, a fact of no little import in the historically obsessed XIX century. Besides political strength, the historical existence of a Polish court and Polish nobility meant that, again unlike the Lithuanians or Kazakhs, the Poles could boast of a sophisticated European high culture which, for all their criticisms, Russians respected. Moreover, from at latest the early XVII century, the history of Polish-Russian relations were consistently hostile [5, p. 225]. All of these factors – religion, culture, history, geography, and numbers – continued to make the Polish question sui generis among the nationality “headaches” of the Russian Empire to its very demise.

The Russian public, for the most part, treated the Poles with hostility there was a reason for this. Emperor Alexander I tried to keep the Congress Kingdom of Poland not only as a valuable strategic outpost of Russia’s influences in central Europe, but also as a kind of testing ground, where he tried new techniques and possibilities to reform his state in order to bring it closer to western standards. The fact that the tsar granted Poland a liberal constitution, while Russia still had none (actually she would have to wait for her own liberal constitution for almost 180 years) illustrates this situation. The Russian westernized elite took it as an offence, an affront to the victorious generation of 1812 war heroes, the future “Decembrists”. As a result, Russian always treated with suspicion and charity to the Poles throughout the XIX – beginning XX centuries.

N. Karamzin expressed for the first time a vision of the mortal combat between the Russian and Polish cultural-political cores over the lands of the former Kievan Rus’ and domination in the whole Eastern Europe. His harsh verdict meant that it was a zero sum game [4, p. 267].

M. Murav’ev was also no liberal in any sense of the word, and certainly he regarded the Poles (in particular the “szlachta” and the Roman Catholic clergy) as inveterate enemies of all things Russian [5, p. 226]. From his own point of view, however, Murav’ev was no simple brute but a defender of Russian state interests and of the Russian “simple folk” whose economic and national interests were held in thrall by haughty and repressive of the Poles. Consequently, during the 1863 rebellion (for Murav’ev and his supporters always “mutiny”),

M. Katkov accused the Poles of attempting to resurrect the borders of 1772 and reestablish Polish domination over western Russia. In so doing, the Poles betrayed their responsibilities as subjects of the Tsar and as members of the Russian nobility. M. Katkov called for a nationalization or, to put it another way, russification of the noble estate throughout the Russian Empire [5, p. 228].



Thus, the imperial elites were trying not only to limit the impact of separatist nationalism and political modernization, but also to use these new trends to strengthen empires [10, p. 331–333]. They thought of themselves, primarily, as defenders of “Russianness” in that highly contested area. Nevertheless, after 1863, when great effort was expended to bring the Kingdom of Poland more in line with general administrative practices in the empire, it retained its own legal system, mortgage laws, and censorship regulations [6, p. 366].

In the Kingdom of Poland that was not claimed as national territory, the Russian government was usually satisfied with a certain level of acculturation, which was necessary for the functioning of the modernizing state machine? Key institutions of the Russian Empires (army, law courts, bureaucracies, and universities) were staffed by peripheral elites keen to take material advantage of the promised integration of this area. For examples, in the Romanov Empire the officer corps proved to be the most efficient tool not only for the acculturation and consolidation of the imperial elite but later also for the Russification of Polish nobility [8, p. 322]. At the same time, the Russian had to fight hard to prevent local nationalism activists from using these tools for their rival purposes.

One of the latter was the evolution of confessional politics toward the Roman Catholic Church. In the context of the Polish-Russian confrontation, catholic clerics came to be viewed as leaders of the Polish national movement. The equation of Catholicism with “Polonism” became by the mid-1860s quite commonplace in official documents, periodicals, private correspondence. Instead of disciplining and therefore delegitimizing the Catholic religiosity, the officials launched what was in fact a campaign of denigration of Catholic faith. It included, among other measures, political persecution of Catholic clergy and mass conversions of the rural Catholic population to Orthodoxy (driven by offers of material incentives and benefits) [7, p. 543–545]. Actually, a considerable majority of clergy stood loyal to the imperial authorities and preached obedience; those who shared in thinking about national independence, had their own (apolitical and inspired by Catholic theology) vision of how to attain this goal. However, the imperial mythology presented Catholic clergymen as one of the most perilous enemies and oppressed them out of proportion to their actual involvement in the national movement.

Thus, the Poles were perceived internal enemies (or rivals) in the Russian Empire. This point of view was typical of both the Russian government and the public opinion. The activities of the Poles threatened the position of the Orthodox Church (especially in the Belarusian-Lithuanian provinces), and

Russian imperial interests in East-Central Europe. In addition, the unresolved conflict with the Poles undermined the position of the Russian as defenders in the Slavic world.

**The Polish national ideology: the main directions in the XIX – beginning of the XX century.** One of the most pressing issues is the question: how did the Polish elites of the Commonwealth transform themselves into pioneers of modern nation building and the “awakening” of other East European nations? It is necessary to stress here the importance of the specific ideology coined during the Romantic era, following the first great uprising of 1830. However, all of Polish history and culture was infused with the equating of szlachta with nation, and a complete neglect of and contempt for the peasant masses [5, p. 229]. Actually, it was not a modern ethnic nation-state ideology, but, on the contrary, a new faith in the binding capacities of the Commonwealth. Beaten in the field, the old Republic should have its spiritual revenge over Russian and all other despotisms.

New ideology was presented in the post-insurrection emigration by the most-talented Polish poets, such as A. Mickiewicz, J. Slowacki, and their teacher-historian from Wilno University, J. Lelewel [4, p. 268]. All of them represented the Grand Duchy of Lithuania’s historical traditions. All of them stressed the importance of a voluntary union as a principle of the Commonwealth’s political system. All of them extolled the unique character of the Commonwealth’s republican virtues and the rights and liberties of its citizens as opposed not only to the Russian political traditions, but to Western European bureaucratic formalism and state absolutism in different guises. In A. Mickiewicz’s and J. Slowacki’s messianic-religious interpretation, Poland became the nation-martyr and even the Christ of nations. All the struggles for Polish independence, consecutive insurrections from the Bar confederation through the Kosciuszko uprising to the 1830–1831 war with Russia were interpreted as models of a courageous consistency in striving for freedom. J. Lelewel coined the tenet used during the uprising of 1830–1831 and repeated subsequently by the émigrés as the new motto of the Polish mission, “For your freedom and ours”. Indeed, the Polish émigrés were active and very much visible in all of Europe’s political turmoil between 1831 and 1863. The Revolutions of 1848–1849, known as the Spring of Nations, was the climax of this revolutionary Polish activity.

For J. Lelewel and A. Mickiewicz, any geopolitical considerations were alien. They sternly believed in the attractive force of an ethic appeal connected to the example of the Polish fight against the Tsarist arch-Empire and extended this belief to the Russian nation as well, which they treated as one of the victims rather than the perpetrator of imperial and despotic designs.

In other versions of Polish émigré political thought, however, the Polish “liberation doctrine” was more geopolitically oriented, distinctly opposing Poland and Russia as two opposing the Poles of political attraction in Eastern Europe and in Slavdom in general, not only in terms of idealistic principles, but also in the harsh reality of state-interests [4, p. 270]. Poland, reconstituted in its old, pre-partitioned borders, would form a kind of anti-Russian strategic magnet. In order to secure the future place of Poland, its aim should not be so much to create a Polish Empire as to destroy the existing Russian Empire and diversify its geopolitical territory into as many component-states as possible.

More illustrative in this respect may be the last stage of Prince Adam Czartoryski’s political career. The former Tsarist foreign minister became the prime minister of the Polish insurgent government in 1831 and ended up the most implacable enemy of the Russian Empire’s territorial integrity. For thirty years, he led the propaganda and diplomatic fight against the Tsarist state from his émigré headquarters in Paris. The failure of the idea of a just empire, an idea he had cherished during his service at Alexander I’s court, developed into a highly original concept of nations and their rights to independence, which was to take priority over imperial states in organizing a new political order in Europe [4, p. 271]. He expressed this new idea in his extensive “Essay on Diplomacy”, written in 1823 and printed in 1830, and then tried to realize it against the Russian Empire. Leading the post-insurrection diplomacy and propaganda of Polish exiles for thirty years, Prince A. Czartoryski became the main patron of all non-ethnically Russian elements of the Empire with the aim of tearing the empire apart. His battle cry against Tsar Nicholas I’s state was independence for the Don Cossacks, the Tatars, the Circassians (that is Chechens), Finns, Estonians and other ethnic or religious minorities.

Actually A. Czartoryski himself was the main financial and political patron of the group of émigrés that tried to defend the old unity of the Commonwealth as a multiethnic, multi-religious, and even multilingual entity founded on common republican virtues and on the belief in the revival of the old Polish-Lithuanian-Ukrainian power in its pre-partition frontiers. They even established a particular organization in Paris at the end of 1831, The Society of the Lithuanian and Ruthenian Territories. It had one of A. Czartoryski’s associates as its president, A. Mickiewicz as vice-president, J. Slowacki as treasurer, and J. Lelewel as head of the historical section. The Society’s aim was to propagate the unity of the Lithuanian and Ruthenian lands with Poland and the specific historical and political traditions that differed them from Russia.



After the defeat of the national uprisings 1830–1831 and 1863–1864 the early modern conception of a republican nation began to be replaced by the modern concept of the nation as the sum of vernacular speakers, a necessary precondition for modern democracy as it seemed. So they (especially T. Krepowiecki and A. Gurowski) criticized the concept of the old supra-ethnic Commonwealth as a destructive and anarchic one. Any “regionalism”, such as the cultivation of a separate Ruthenian (Ukrainian) or Lithuanian cultures and languages, should be strictly forbidden. The eastern half of the former Commonwealth should simply adopt Polishness [4, p. 272].

Another attack on traditional ideas of the Commonwealth originated from the political thinker M. Mochnecki, who criticized the “international” character of the obligations taken by A. Mickiewicz or J. Lelewel in their concept of Romantic nationalism. The Poles should spare their blood for the Polish cause only. Any solidarity of nations is just dangerous chimera. M. Mochnecki and T. Krepowiecki, in their concurrent critique of Romantic sense of mission, foreshadowed a crisis in the concept of the Commonwealth’s regeneration and of its “liberation mission” in Eastern and Central Europe. They intellectually paved the way for modern nationalists not only in Poland, but in Lithuania and Ukraine as well.

The very fundamental characteristics of the Romantic-republican ideology of a future Polish state as the cultural and political center for a large part of Eastern and Central Europe were undermined from within. It provoked another wave of criticism of the Romantic idea of Poland, this time formulated on the right wing of the Polish intellectual life by conservative historians in Krakow (J. Szujski and M. Bobrzynski) [4, p. 273]. They were closer rather to A. Mickiewicz than to modern nationalists in their concept of a tolerant, multiethnic polity. However, they were radically vehement in their assault on the Romantic Sarmatian belief in any specific virtues of the old Polish Commonwealth’s political culture and civilization. Just like the Enlightenment philosophers a century before, Krakow’s historical school renewed a perception of Poland as a retrograde country that should be civilized by Western European standards and should change radically its political “anarchic” tradition to those represented by such centralized states as Prussia or France.

Thus, the Polish national ideology was aimed at reviving the Polish state. It has gone a few stages from the Republican conception to the modern- or post-nationalist conservative type. They dealt another blow to the “imperial” belief of the old Sarmatianists and the XIX century Romantics that Poland could be an independent political leader in the whole of Eastern Europe and

that it could be a leader in the strategically vital region, independent both from Russia and united Germany.

**Belarusian-Lithuanian provinces: the particular situation between the Russian and Polish national identities.** Following the Partitions of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in 1771–1795, most of its East regions were ceded to the Russian Empire, including Belarusian-Lithuanian provinces. While the Tsarist authorities initially did little to counter Polish linguistic and cultural influence in the Belarusian lands, the anti-Russian uprisings in Poland and Lithuania of 1830–1831 and 1863–1864 led to increasingly draconian measures on the part of the authorities to russify the annexed territories. In 1839 the Uniate Church (to which up to 80% of the Belarusian peasantry had belonged since the XVII century) was forcibly merged with the Russian Orthodox Church, and in 1840 Polish was replaced by Russian as the official language of the region.

For a long while, western borderlands of the Russian Empire were associated in imperial officials' minds with Polish culture and language. During the first half of the XIX century, despite Nicholas I's attempts at establishing (especially after the Polish uprising of 1830–1831) a unified Russian-language administration, court and education in the western provinces, the latter remained predominantly Polish on the mental maps of the ruling elite itself. In essence, a kind of alliance between the imperial state and Polish nobility was preserved. It was until the early 1860s that such a state of things radically changed. Analysis of geopolitical perceptions of the imperial elite in the era of the partitions of Poland shows the complexity of the task bureaucrats-Russifiers were facing in the Western provinces in the 1860s.

While previously official St. Petersburg had generally ignored the existence of the Belarusians as a distinct ethnic group, maintaining that the population of the so-called “Northwestern Territory” was predominantly Polish as a concession to the Polish-oriented elites of the region, it now maintained that the majority of the population were in fact Russian, albeit corrupted by insidious Polish Catholic influences [9, p. 303]. To strengthen the Russian cultural and linguistic presence in the region, Roman Catholic Belarusians were forcibly converted to Russian Orthodoxy and the use of both Polish and Belarusian in education and the cultural sphere was prohibited. The Polish question represented Russia's “sore spot” because it forced Russians to act in contradiction with their fundamental national values. Russians were by nature tolerant, and yet they were forced by circumstances (and by faults in the Polish national character) to retain a tight grip not only on the Russian Western provinces, but even on the Kingdom of Poland [5, p. 232].

An important part of the elites of the Commonwealth had not been satisfied with the situation where the Kingdom of Poland was separated from the western provinces, the eastern half of the former Commonwealth. They had already been on the path that led – through modernization – to a new, national reconstruction of their identity with the idea of state independence as a natural consequence and guarantor of it. Notwithstanding the fact that another and still quite substantial part of the former Commonwealth's gentry (the ethnic Poles included) saw nothing bad or compromising in serving the Empire and pursuing their personal careers in the Tsarist administration and army, they were actually trapped between the independence-minded Polish groups and the Russian national reaction. The spiral of recriminations and aggression on both sides of the conflict confounded the imperial logic of the Tsarist state. The Poles (equated in the traditional, still officially pre-national system, with Catholics) began to be excluded from the Empire's elite just because they were the Poles. This meant the beginning of the "nationalization" of the Empire that finally led to its destruction [4, p. 267–268]. Two Polish uprisings of 1830–1831 and 1863–1864, and corresponding Russian national reactions to them were milestones in this process of destruction.

The Russian politics in the region after 1863 was torn by contradictions; on the one hand, it was maintained that the local peasantry, both Catholic and Orthodox, was on the whole loyal to the Tsar, and thereby constituted a bulwark of the state; at the same time, the identification of "Catholic" with "Polish" meant that many Belarusian-speaking Catholic peasants were subjected to the same restrictions as Polish gentry (limitations on the purchase of land, etc.). The question of the use of Russian or even Belarusian in Catholic churches divided Russian officialdom: some supported the idea as the most effective means to bring about linguistic and cultural Russification among the Belarusian-speaking Catholics, with the ultimate goal of converting them to Orthodoxy. Others expressed the concern that replacing Polish with Russian would permit the formation of a sizeable Russian Catholic community, which would inevitably demand equal rights, thereby strengthening the position of Catholicism in Russia.

The negative side of the program of national politics is easily guessed: land settlements very unfavorable to the landowning class, followed by a complete prohibition on the Poles from purchasing land in the region, repressions and restrictions on the Catholic Church and clergy, and proscriptions on many aspects of Polish culture. This politics against the Polish landowners and Catholic clergymen was explained by the belief that only a hard line would succeed in dispelling the Poles' illusions and pretensions toward this "eternally-Russian land". Accordingly the Russian

aspired to increase the numbers of schools there, improve the financial situation of the local Orthodox churches and clergy, keep the Poles out of government posts, and watch carefully over the activities of the Catholic clergy.

Moreover, imperial elite often supported what they thought to be weaker local nationalisms in order to neutralize claims to contested territories from alternative powerful expansionist projects. In the western borderlands of the Romanov empire the authorities for a certain period supported Lithuanian, Latvian and Estonian nationalisms in the hope of undermining challenges from Polish and, since 1866/1870, German nationalisms, which claimed respectively the territory of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and the Baltic provinces [8, p. 321]. Nevertheless, through forced conversions in Orthodox, the Tsarist authorities unwittingly furthered the identification of Catholicism with Polish national identity in the Belarusian-Lithuanian region, since at the time only the Polish national cause offered a clearly articulated defensive ideology in the face of the regime's anti-Catholic politics [9, p. 304].

The growth of divergent national identities among the rural population of this region, in particular the gradual transformation of Belarusian-speaking peasants of the "Polish faith" into "Poles", was thus indirectly a product of Tsarist Russian nationalities politics. While the Orthodox (including the formerly Uniate majority) were identified as Russians, at the local level this term continued to be associated primarily with confessional, rather than national identity [7, p. 539–540].

Despite intensified Russification politics after 1863, the linguistic character of the region, particularly outside of the cities, remained largely the same [9, p. 305]. Native speakers of Russian, increasingly numerous by the beginning of the XX century, were to be found primarily among military personnel, government officials, white-collar workers and professionals, Orthodox clergy, and some of the landowners who had been granted lands confiscated from Polish participants in the Uprising of 1863. Native Polish speakers were found primarily in the towns (mainly among the intelligentsia) and on the estates, among the Catholic clergy, and in some rural szlachta settlements. Officially Belarusian language was regarded as a dialect of a single Russian language, along with Great Russian and Little Russian, in other way Ukrainian.

Thus, after 1863 religion was increasingly intertwined with nationality and even subsumed into it. And yet, despite efforts by some Russian officials to encourage conversion in an effort to strengthen the Russian position (either imperial or national) here in the end this activism was of short duration and had fairly limited consequences [6, p. 368]. The most acute religious issue, as

synonymous with national, came to the fore in the late of the XIX – early of the XX century, when the Uniate Church was eliminated in the Kingdom of Poland and the Uniates converted to Orthodoxy.

**Conclusion.** It is by now a truism that the Russian Empire was a multi-national state that should not be studied or researched as if it was simply “Russia.” Recent English-language historiography has challenged a broadly accepted perspective on the relations between empires and nationalism. We used to think that the nation-state formation in Europe (particularly East-Central Europe) was invariably undermining empires and that imperial elites were doing their best to block nation-building processes. This abstract is based on the assumption that empires played much more complex roles in the process of shaping nation-states, that it is more productive to think that imperial elites actively participated in nation-building in the core areas of empire and sometimes also in their peripheries, and that nation-building was not only a challenge for empires but also part of their survival strategy in the new modern setting. That is not to say, of course, that in contiguous empires all the peripheral regions were targets of a concerted strategy to include them in the nationalising core.

Nationalist historical narratives were constructed in order to “prove” conclusively the belonging of diverse imperial spaces to the “national territory”. In the western borderlands of the Romanov Empire the Russian national historical narrative was used to claim the eastern borderlands of the partitioned Polish Commonwealth as Russian national territory on the grounds that both the medieval Kievan Rus’ and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania were Russian states. Nationalist historical narratives had a trickle-down effect on school curricula, which were rewritten in order to facilitate the nationalisation of imperial space. In Russia the author of an important national narrative, N. Ustrialov, was awarded the prize for the best textbook in history as early as the 1830s.

During the 1860s and later, the Northwestern region was the area of the most intense Polish-Russian rivalry, the bitterest clash of the Russian and Polish nation-building projects. Contention with the Polish presence was not simply military struggles, oppression, reprisals, and persecutions of those whom the government considered irreconcilable rebels or incorrigible separatists. Such contention also included a good deal of sophisticated cultural and semiotic legitimization of imperial power, resourceful myth-making and representational strategizing.

The whole campaign of Russification was intended to reassert the “Russianness” of the Western provinces (as distinct from the Kingdom of Poland). However, this type of discourse threatened to undermine the



traditional foundations and mechanics of the Romanov Empire. To justify their anti-elitism and harsh measures against the Kingdom of Poland and Western provinces, the imperial authorities had to perpetuate the extralegal order of administration there.

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