

# The Polonization of the Ukrainian Nobility

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The attractive Polish model of the privileged nobleman exerted a powerful assimilatory influence on the Ukrainian nobility. And the obvious superiority of its culture intensified the appeal of all things Polish. The Jesuits, sure of their victory over Protestantism, now focused their attention on the "schismatics," as they called the Orthodox. Soon after 1569, they moved into Ukraine, establishing collegiums in Iaroslav, Lviv, Kamianets, Bar, Lutsk, Vinnytsia, and Kiev. Their best polemicist, most notably the brilliant Piotr Skarga, castigated the alleged doctrinal fallacies and the cultural backwardness of the Orthodox in sermons and open debates. In his famous work "The Unity of God's Church," Skarga argued that the state of Orthodoxy was so helpless that its adherents' only alternative was union with Rome. "The Greeks fooled you, O Ruthenian people," Skarga wrote, "for in giving you the Holy Faith, they did not give you the Greek language, forcing you to use the Slavonic tongue so that you could never attain true understanding and learning... for one can never attain learning by means of the Slavonic language"

For status conscious Ukrainian noblemen - and nobles are by definition status conscious - their association with a religion and culture that was considered to be inferior was extremely galling. As a result, they abandoned the faith of their forefathers in droves and embraced Catholicism along with the Polish language and culture. In 1612, in a mournful work entitled "Trenos or the Lament of the Holy Eastern Church." A leading Orthodox churchman, Meletii Smortrytsky, bemoaned the loss to Rus' and Orthodoxy of its leading families: "Where are the priceless jewels of [Orthodoxy's] crown, such famous families of Ruthenian princes as the Slutsky, Zaslavsky, Zbarazky, Vyshnevetsky, Sangushsky, Chartorysky, Pronsky, Ruzhynsky, Solomyretsky, Holovchynsky, Koropynsky, Masalsky, Horsky, Sokolynsky, Lukomsky, Ruzyna, and others without number? Where are those who surrounded them... the wellborn, glorious, brave, strong, and ancient houses of the Ruthenian nation who were renowned throughout the world for their high repute, power, and bravery?" The question was obviously rhetorical, for it was common knowledge that all of these illustrious magnate families had joined the Catholic Polish camp.

An insight into one of the ways in which the process of assimilation worked was provided by the Polish archbishop of Lviv, Prucznicki, himself a descendant of a Ukrainian family: "When it happened that a wealthy young lady or a rich widow became available then the Polish kings would dispatch their Polish noblemen to Rus'

and help them [to arrange a good marriage] by means of their influence; as these nobles married, they inundated Rus' and introduced the proper, Roman Catholic faith. Conscientious priests saw to the rest, for soon even the magnates in Rus' abandoned the Greek schism and joined the Roman church." Of the remaining Ukrainian Orthodox magnates, only few, notably those who began their careers before 1569, when the Ukrainians were still a potent political and cultural force in the Grand Principality, remained true to the old faith. Traditional ways still survived among pockets of poor gentry, which lived in isolated areas, far from the centers of Polish culture. However, they were politically, socially, and economically too weak to stem the process of Polonization.

One cannot exaggerate the profound implications that the loss of their elite had for the Ukrainians. In the Hierarchically structured societies of early modern Europe, for a people to be without a nobility was tantamount to being a body without a head. It meant that Ukrainians were left without the class that normally provided political leadership and purpose, patronized culture and education, supported the church, and endowed a society with a sense of ethnopolitical identity. With the spread of Polonization among much of the Ukrainian nobility, Orthodoxy, as well as the Ukrainian language and customs, became associated primarily with the lower classes. As such they became the objects of scorn in the eyes of the Polish establishment in the commonwealth. Henceforth, ambitious, talented Ukrainian youths would constantly be forced to choose between loyalty to their own people and traditions and assimilation into the dominant culture and society. Usually they opted for the latter. Consequently, the problem of a Ukrainian elite, or rather, the lack of one, now emerged as yet another of the central and recurrent themes in Ukrainian history.