Surveillance and the Sacred: Constructing Soviet Religious Life in Postwar Ukraine

In July 1949, officer Steblovskii of the Soviet secret police in the west Ukrainian city of Ternopil compiled a list of local priests who were registered with the official Russian Orthodox Church, but were observed practicing Catholic rituals during the liturgy. Next to each name on the list, he indicated the compromising material the police had on each priest, including ties to the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA), a group of anti-Soviet nationalist partisans that fought the Soviet occupation of western Ukraine during WWII and in the years after. Steblovskii’s report is an example of a particular kind of surveillance of religious activity that raises questions about religious life in the world’s first officially atheist state. The report reveals that in some cases, the Soviet secret police’s interest in its population’s religious activities was not simply about whether they were religiously observant, but the ways in which they performed the rites of their faith in officially recognized religious spaces.

This was especially true in Ternopil and its surrounding territory of Galicia, a western region of Ukraine which had only become part of the Soviet Union during WWII. In this newly Soviet region, the state had taken a particularly interventionist approach to the religious affiliation of their new subjects. In a process that began in 1946, the Soviet state Committee for the Affairs of the Russian Orthodox Church (CAROC) and their partners in the clergy presided over a forced transfer of much of the local population from the Greek Catholic (Uniate) Church, the majority Church of the Galicia’s Ukrainian population with nearly 3 million parishioners, to the state-recognized Russian Orthodox Church. This forced religious transfer from one confession to another was referred to as a “reunification” [rus. vossoedinenie/ ukr. vozz’iednannia] by the authorities, connecting what they viewed as a “reunification” of historic

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1 DA SBU f. 2, op. 4, spr. 16, ark. 100-101.
Ukrainian territory when Galicia was annexed from Poland with a “return” to what was viewed as the ancestral faith of Galicia’s Ukrainians, Russian Orthodoxy.

The history of the Greek Catholic Church is a history deeply connected to questions of belonging in the borderlands between the Orthodox and Catholic worlds. The Greek Catholic Church was created as a hybrid church in the 16th century as a way to transfer Orthodox peasants in territories conquered by the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth to the Vatican’s jurisdiction by creating a church that preserved Eastern-Rite Christian customs within a Catholic church structure that recognized the authority of the Pope. Because the Greek Catholic Church was a product of a church union, theological debates about which Eastern-rite rituals were permissible and which went against core tenets of Catholicism defined Church life ever since its inception. State authorities and later nationalist movements also came to weigh in on these debates, connecting ideas about Catholic and Orthodox rituals to loyalty, citizenship, and national belonging in ways that often ignored the theological foundations of these practices.²

The Greek Catholic Church was borne out of the creation of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, and thus when Poland was partitioned in the 18th century, the fate of the church became uncertain. In the 18th century, when imperial Russia gained Polish territory, the Greek Catholic parishes there were forcibly transferred to the Russian Orthodox Church. At that time, empress Catherine II deemed Greek Catholics Russian Orthodox who lost their way and connected their “return” to Russian Orthodoxy with a “return” of their lands to the Russian Empire, calling it a “reunification.” In the regions of Poland that were partitioned to the Habsburg Empire, specifically Galicia, the Greek Catholics did not meet the same fate. Under

² For the origins of state interventions into these debates, see Barbara Skinner, *The Western Front of Eastern Church: Uniate and Orthodox Conflict in 18th Century Poland, Ukraine, Belarus, and Russia* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2009).
Habsburg rule, Galician Greek Catholic Church parishes were allowed to remain. Eventually, the Greek Catholic Church came to be the primary confessional affiliation of those who identified as Ukrainian in Galicia, in contrast to Ukrainians in the Russian Empire who were mostly Orthodox. Confronting these Galician Greek Catholics during the annexation of eastern Poland to Soviet Ukraine during WWII, Soviet authorities drew on the imperial precedent of reunification to transfer these populations to the Russian Orthodox Church, which by that time had become an official partner of the Soviet state.

In this context of a state intervention into confessional affiliation on such a massive scale, surveillance of religious life took on a particular significance as part of the Sovietization of this population and territory. In this region, I argue, the surveillance of priests and religious practices in newly Orthodox churches demonstrates how the presence of official religious spaces were seen as key measures of successful Soviet power. In the reports on ritual drawn up by members of the secret police and other state officials, deviations from what the state considered official Russian Orthodoxy were not just seen as remnants of a Greek Catholic tradition or a failure of the church reunification project, but as evidence of disloyalty to the Soviet state and of ties to anti-Soviet organizations.

These surveillance reports also reveal that in moments when Soviet authorities doubted the loyalty of its newest subjects in western Ukraine, the space of the official Russian Orthodox Church came under increased scrutiny. Like the kolkhoz, the factory floor, or village school the newly Orthodox Churches of western Ukraine were imagined by Soviet authorities as a place where loyalty could be demonstrated and disloyalty uncovered, not just in the form of overheard conversations, but in the form of religious practices.
In order to survey religious rituals, the secret police first had to identify and categorize them. As anthropologists of religion have pointed out, the very act of the documentation of “ritual” often tells us more about the observers of the religious ritual than about the practitioners.\(^3\) In this case, the categorization of rituals demonstrates that for the secret police, these outward markers of participation in official religion—speaking (or not speaking) certain words, displaying (or not displaying) certain objects—seem to indicate a view that adherence to the new Orthodox religion was evidenced by performance of it. There is certainly a practical element to this. Other aspects of religion, specifically belief and faith, perhaps were determined to be impossible to observe. The surveillance and categorization of ritual raises the same fundamental questions other types of surveillance of Soviet life have: did the state expect people to believe or simply participate as if they believed? Was there a way for surveillance to get at belief or could it only operate in the realm of performance?\(^4\) In this case, the imagined connection between improper ritual and anti-Soviet activity demonstrates that those who were unwilling to perform Russian Orthodoxy in the way the authorities deemed proper were demonstrating a dangerous unwillingness to participate in the Soviet project as a whole. The space of the sanctioned Russian Orthodox Church in the officially atheist Soviet Union was only useful as a disciplined space—one that needed to be surveyed and controlled to ensure that its role as a marker of Soviet power remained.

While the conditions for religious life in western Ukraine were distinct because of the context of a mass religious transfer, the notion of official religion and the role of recognized

\(^3\) This argument has been made in numerous studies on religious rituals, especially in the context of state-sponsored ethnography. See, for example, Catherine Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

\(^4\) These are the questions explored by the historians who explore the construction of the Soviet subject, a process that I argue was also imagined to be occurring in official religious spaces.
official religious institutions as part of the Soviet state existed in other Soviet regions, especially those on the borderlands. The WWII and postwar era of the Soviet Union was characterized by an approach to religion that recognized the potential usefulness of religious institutions that could be managed and used by the state. Understanding surveillance of official religion as evidence of the importance of these spaces to Soviet governance can shed light on how Soviet authorities envisioned the role of sanctioned religion more broadly as part of Soviet life. What the surveillance and categorization of religious ritual reveals is that in order for religion to be mobilized, it had to be controlled. Soviet authorities understood the power of these religious institutions—it is the reason they sought partnerships with them. At the same time, they saw their power over these spaces as something precarious, a power that could just as easily be turned against them.

The 1946 Sobor and Its Aftermath

The forced transfer of Greek Catholics to Russian Orthodoxy in western Ukraine began officially in March 1946 when a sobor (church meeting) was convened by Soviet state authorities in the Galician city of L’viv to determine the fate of the Greek Catholic Church. While the sobor was held in 1946, plans for this forced transfer had been drawn up years earlier, during the USSR’s first occupation of Galicia from 1939-1941. The recruitment of Greek Catholic priests to serve as delegates for the sobor, who were threatened with arrest, exile, and other forms of state terror if they refused to participate, began in earnest in the summer of 1945. Even with the presence of these delegates, the sobor was technically not canonical because of the lack of participation of the Greek Catholic Church hierarchy. Still, in March 1946 in a resolution decided in advance by the Soviet state, over 200 Greek Catholic priests voted unanimously to
declare invalid the 16th century Union that had created their church and agreed to join their parishes and parishioners to the Russian Orthodox Church.

The 1946 sobor was envisioned by those in the Soviet state responsible for orchestrating it as just the start of a process of promoting Russian Orthodoxy in historically Catholic Galicia. In a quarterly report to Georgii Karpov, the head of CAROC, P. Khodchenko, CAROC’s top official for Ukraine, noted that now that the sobor was over, “The work has just begun,” a phrase underlined by the reader of the report.5 Later that year, Karpov addressed his CAROC plenipotentiaries to remind them that they must continue to enforce the sobor’s proclamation of reunification, otherwise it would mean they “failed to take into account the political meaning of the liquidation of the Uniate Church and the L’viv sobor.”6

In the months immediately following the sobor, the work of enforcing reunification focused on registering Greek Catholic priests and their parishes as Russian Orthodox. But by the late 1940s, the standards for success had shifted. Beginning in 1948, reports from CAROC and the secret police stopped focusing on recruiting priests for reunification, and emphasized instead concerns about the sincerity and loyalty of the formerly Greek Catholic priests who had already joined the Russian Orthodox Church. In this period, reports on newly Orthodox priests began to feature the phrase “formal reunification,” implying that while some priests may have reunified “formally,” that is filled out the necessary paperwork and met with authorities in both the Soviet state and in the Russian Orthodox Church, these initial measures were not enough. These priests were accused of maintaining close ties to the Ukrainian nationalist underground and using their position in the clergy of the official Russian Orthodox Church to influence their congregations to support anti-Soviet Ukrainian nationalist forces, instead of promoting Orthodoxy and integration

5 GARF f. R-6991, op. 1, d. 99, l. 65.
6 GARF f. R-6991, op. 1, d. 103, l. 18.
into Soviet life.\textsuperscript{7} This suspicion led to the beginning of a systematic surveillance and documentation of the religious rituals practiced by these priests, rituals that authorities in the secret police, CAROC, and members of the clergy deemed evidence of loyalty or disloyalty.

How to explain this shift? I argue that there are two key contexts for understanding this impetus to monitor and discipline official religious life in this way: the late 1940s purges of local elites in Galicia and the Russian Orthodox Church’s precarious position as wartime concessions to religious life were slowly being reversed.

\textbf{The Late Stalinist Context: Changes in Church and State}

In the spring of 1945, nearly a year before the March 1946 sobor, two men were recruited by the Soviet state to mobilize the clergy and the local population for the eventual transfer of Greek Catholics to Russian Orthodoxy. One was priest Havryïl Kostel’nyk who was selected to be head of a committee of Greek Catholic clergy charged with recruiting fellow priests to become Orthodox. This committee, “The Initiative Committee for Reunification with Orthodoxy,” led the proceedings of the March 1946 sobor. The second man was Yaroslav Halan, a Galician writer who was recruited to write agitational materials discrediting the Greek Catholic Church, including with accusations of Nazi collaboration. By 1949, both of these figures would be dead—assassinated, allegedly, by members of the Ukrainian nationalist underground.

Kostel’nyk was shot to death on the steps of the Preobrazhens’ka church in L’viv, a newly Russian Orthodox church, immediately after leading the liturgy on September 20, 1948 by a man Soviet authorities identified as a member of UPA.\textsuperscript{8} Yarsoslav Halan was shot in his L’viv

\textsuperscript{7} Examples of priests who were accused of only “formally” reunifying with Orthodoxy can be found in secret police records from the late 1940s and early 1950s, including in the collections DA SBU f. 2, op. 4, spr. 2 and DA SBU f. 2, op. 4, spr. 19.

\textsuperscript{8} DA SBU f. 3, op. 1, spr. 206, ark. 4-13.
apartment on October 24, 1949 by two local students, who Soviet authorities claimed also had
connections to UPA.9

The forensic and investigative details of both of these cases have fascinated scholars, journalists, and contemporary observers. Several aspects of these murder cases do not add up and point to potential secret police involvement.10 But the consequences of these murders have not been analyzed nearly to the same extent as who committed them. As Tarik Amar argues in his history of Soviet L’viv, one of the most important aspects of the murder of Yaroslav Halan is that it “provided the occasion for the most comprehensive single postwar wave of repression of students, youth, and local intelligentsia in L’viv.”11

As Amar argues, in the years following the murders of Kostel’nyk and Halan mass purges took place that targeted students and the Galician intelligentsia. These purges were directed by Nikita Khrushchev (then head of the Ukrainian Communist Party). Khrushchev at various moments made explicit comparisons between the murder of Sergei Kirov (which launched the “Great Terror” of the 1930s) and the murder of Halan. As the local intelligentsia came under suspicion, central authorities in Kyiv and Moscow began investigating the course of

9 DA SBU f. 16, op. 1, spr. 695 ark. 1-4.
10 To support this argument, scholars and activists have pointed to a few inconsistencies in these cases. First, around the time that Kostel’nyk was killed members of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) in exile in West Germany had made contact with him, offering to smuggle him out of Ukraine. These contacts were known to Soviet authorities, who in their own surveillance of Kostel’nyk in this period began referring to him as a “Ukrainian nationalist” and doubting his reliability as a Soviet partner. See, for example, the documents in Kostel’nyk’s two-volume SBU file: DA SBU f. 3, op. 1, spr. 204 (Volume 1) and DA SBU f. 3, op. 1, spr. 205 (Volume 2). In addition, some scholars have noted that UPA never took responsibility for the killing of Kostel’nyk and denied having any connections to Pan’kiv, Kostel’nyk’s alleged killer, even though UPA had taken responsibility for killing other Ukrainian priests in the years prior. See Mykola Marunchak. “Materialy do spravy pro vbyvstvo H. Kostel’nyka,” in Ed. Yaroslav Harasym. Havryil Kostel’nyk na tli doby. 8th Edition (L’viv: Grazhda, 2007), 198; Bociurkiw, Katakombakh (1993): 114. In reports on the population’s reaction to the killing created at the time, one secret police report notes (and underlines) that some believe that the Soviets were in fact behind Kostel’nyk’s killing. See DA SBU f. 3, op. 1, spr. 206. Volume 1. Similar issues have been raised regarding Halan’s murder.
other Soviet projects in the region, especially collectivization, and pursuing harsher methods to achieve their goals.\textsuperscript{12}

The surveillance of ritual, and the resulting arrests of reunified Greek Catholic priests, that began in this period should be understood as a product of the same atmosphere of distrust in local cadres in the intelligentsia that characterized the purges in these same years.\textsuperscript{13} This renewed attention on reunified priests was not the result of doubting reunification as a project, just as purges in this and other eras was not the result of giving up on including the local intelligentsia in the Soviet project. Instead, these arrests targeted priests who were not fulfilling the role prescribed to them by secular authorities, precisely in order to send a message to these priests about the continued importance of their participation in the Orthodox Church in western Ukraine. By arresting priests who were seen as not fully embodying the goals of the reunification project, Soviet authorities were emphasizing that reunification should be seen by the clergy as a project that they must actively participate in. While this atmosphere brought increased scrutiny on the clergy, it also demonstrates that these priests remained important authority figures in the eyes of the Soviet state.

At the same time as fears were spreading about the weakness of Soviet control over Galicia, the official Russian Orthodox Church was facing a crisis of its own. Important voices in the Soviet state were questioning the usefulness of the church’s role in public life now that the wartime conditions that had led to the return of the Church were no longer in place. While the Khrushchev era is typically associated with an end to Stalin’s wartime concessions to religious

\textsuperscript{12} Amar, 221-261.

\textsuperscript{13} This distrust in local cadres and the local intelligentsia was not unique to west Ukraine and speaks to doubts from Moscow about sovietization in various peripheries. Claus Hansen argues that this same distrust of locals characterized the late Stalinist purges in Uzbekistan. Claus Hansen, “Power and Purification: late-Stalinist repression in the Uzbek SSR,” \textit{Central Asian Survey} 36, no.1 (2017): 148-169.
institutions, cracks in the strategic church-state partnership began to emerge already during Stalin’s rule. As Tatiana Chumachenko and Mikhail Odintsov argue, beginning in 1948 influential Party ideologues like Mikhail Suslov began advocating for a decreased role for the Russian Orthodox Church and the agency that represented it, CAROC, in Soviet life. Some of the churches that had been opened during Nazi occupation and that Soviet authorities had kept open after the war were closed again. Party reports routinely called into question the loyalty of the clergy and their usefulness to the Soviet state. CAROC’s head, Georgii Karpov, found that many of his requests for additional resources and plenipotentiaries were denied.

In 1949, Karpov wrote to Communist Party Officials about the necessity of CAROC, noting that if the agency was to be reduced, he should be the one to determine the terms of this change. In this proposal, Karpov puts forward his view of the most important activities of CAROC in light of which aspects of CAROC’s work would be of the most use to the Soviet state. Karpov recommends keeping CAROC offices in Ukraine and Belarus, places where the Russian Orthodox Church had been invited to help integrate annexed territory and assimilate new Soviet peoples beginning in 1939. Karpov also insists on two regions where plenipotentiaries must serve—the places undergoing reunification of the Greek Catholic Church with the Russian Orthodox Church: “In [these] oblasts… the plenipotentiary posts must be retained, in light of the process of the liquidation of the Greek Catholic (Uniate) church through the process of the reunification of it with the Russian Orthodox Church.”

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15 Chumachenko, Church and State (2016), 88-9, 98.
16 RGASPI f. 17, op. 132, d. 111, ll. 17-18.
The Russian Orthodox hierarchy that worked closely with Karpov and CAROC seemed to take up this line as well. On December 12, 1949 Patriarch Alexei of the official Russian Orthodox Church convened a synod in Moscow. At the synod, the church hierarchs for the former Greek Catholic regions presented on religious life in their parishes and openly admitted that few of the reunified churches had adopted proper Russian Orthodox practices as they envisioned them. The hierarchs then presented a resolution entitled “Measures for the good of Orthodoxy” [Zakhody dla korysti pravoslav’ia], which laid out sixteen measures necessary for the “purification” of ritual. These measures were to be implemented to end the presence of Catholic influence and included recommendations for which aspects of the liturgy must remain and which should not be tolerated. A few weeks later, this resolution was printed and distributed to members of the clergy in western Ukraine.17

The timing of this sobor, months after surveillance and arrests of the clergy had begun in earnest, demonstrates that the impetus for disciplining ritual did not come from the church hierarchy.18 Yet, in an atmosphere when the position of the Russian Orthodox Church in Soviet life seemed to most precarious, the church became more willing to play this role. Even though the Russian Orthodox Church did not initiate the surveillance campaigns of the late 1940s, the sixteen points of Orthodoxy presented at the sobor soon became a point of reference for church inspection in the decades that followed.19 It is the confluence of these two trends, a fear of disloyalty in Galicia and an official Russian Orthodox Church adapting to postwar life, that brought this specific type of surveillance to the newly Orthodox churches of Galicia.

18 As Natalia Shlikhta argues, the hierarchs of the official Russian Orthodox Church based in Moscow were initially reluctant to partner with the Soviet state for the enforcement of the reunification project in the months following the sobor. Natalia Shlikhta, Tserkva tykh, kto vyzhyv: Radians’ka Ukraiïna seredyna 1940-x—pochatok 1970-x (Kharkiv: Akta, 2011), 276.
19 Hovera, 154.
Surveying The Newly Orthodox

Interest in religious rituals by Soviet policymakers had previously reflected state and party activists’ efforts to make sense of spiritual practice in order to eradicate it. In the first years of the Soviet state, Robert Greene argues that Bolsheviks paid particular attention to the Russian Orthodox tradition of the cult of the saints and the worship of their bodies and relics, understanding this tradition’s importance to the spiritual life of the Russian peasantry. However, these early Bolshevik specialists used their “expert” understanding of these rituals in order to mount a campaign to expose the “truth” about these saints and their bodies.20 As Greene describes, in a series of orchestrated demonstrations staged from 1918 through 1924, appointed “exhumation committees” uncovered the relics of Orthodox saints in order to reveal that the bodies of the saints were not “preserved in a state of divinely ordained incorruptibility but were, in fact, mere matter subject to the ravages of time and nature.”21 In this case, the religious rituals surrounding the bodies of the saints were examined in order to develop a secular ritual that would expose the “backwardness” and falseness of this religious practice.

In her work on Soviet atheism, Victoria Smolkin argues that Soviet policymakers understood the ambiguous category of “religion” to consist of three components: the political, the ideological, and the spiritual, “encompassed in the values, practices and customs that made up the ineffable dimension of everyday life, or byt.”22 In crafting early anti-religion policy, Smolkin explains, Party experts believed that the “everyday life” aspects of religion, specifically its rituals, would disappear when “cultural revolution” would “transform the traditional ways of

20 Robert H. Greene, Bodies Like Bright Stars: Saints and Relics in Orthodox Russia (Dekalb, Ill.: Northern Illinois University Press, 2010): 16
21 Ibid.
life into the new Communist ways of byt.”23 As Smolkin argues, when these Party experts studied religious ritual, they studied it in order to understand its persistence, with the goal that “developed socialism” would eliminate the need for these religious practices.24 Richard Stites and others have made note of state efforts to understand religious ritual in order to assimilate them into official Soviet life, from isolated and short-lived phenomena like “octoberings” (a secular baptism) to initiate a child into Soviet society to more permanent measures such as ensuring that state holidays would fall around traditional Orthodox festivals to preserve traditional times of celebration and leisure.25 The study and surveillance of Orthodox ritual practice in these instances did not always achieve its desired effect. As is the case when any state decides to make ritual an object of analysis, the act of monitoring ritual gave new meanings to traditional practices. In many cases, this fundamentally altered religious practice itself, allowing spirituality to imbue spaces where Soviet authorities were not looking for ritual practice and desacralizing traditionally sacred places.26

Yet, the studies mentioned above focus on the study of religious ritual by the Soviet state in the service of promoting atheism. The surveillance of the religious rituals of reunified clergy and believers is a different story. For those in the secret police and CAROC conducting surveillance on newly Orthodox churches, religious ritual itself was understood as a part of Soviet byt. Unlike other surveillance of religious practice that saw religious rituals as fundamentally contrary to Soviet life, the ways in which Soviet authorities monitored the reunified clergy demonstrates that performance of Russian Orthodox ritual in a “purified” way,

23 Ibid.
24 Smolkin, 194-228.
that is without Greek Catholic inflections or traditions, indicated a successful reshaping of
everyday life. While in other times and places, the end of a religious practice or the start of a new
“communist” secular practice was evidence of successful Sovietization, within the reunification
project in Galicia religious rituals themselves were evidence of Soviet transformation.

Officer Steblovskii of Ternopil’s 1949 report offers one version of how this framing
played out. His July 1949 list featured seven local reunified Orthodox priests who practiced
Catholic rituals during services and the compromising material the secret police had on each
priest.\footnote{DA SBU f. 2, op. 4, spr. 16, ark. 100-101.} The list was entitled “Former Uniate priests, who have reunified with Orthodoxy, but
continue to conduct the liturgy in the Uniate fashion \textit{[po uniatskim obriadam]} with the
commemoration of the Pope.” While the sixteen points for strengthening Orthodoxy list had not
yet been created, the improper ritual that the list focuses on is one of the most obvious
distinctions between Orthodoxy and Catholicism: the recognition of the authority of the Pope.
The list draws an explicit connection between those priests who are willing to proclaim aloud
their continued allegiance to the Pope and behaviors that demonstrate their rejection of Soviet
power, conflating an acceptance of Russian Orthodoxy with an acceptance of Soviet rule.

For example, the first entry on the list is Vladimir Teofilovich Koval’skii, born in 1906, a Greek Catholic priest who had agreed to reunify with Russian Orthodoxy and registered as a
Russian Orthodox priest, yet still spoke the Pope’s name during the liturgy. \textit{“Compromising
materials” (kompromat)} on Koval’skii identify him as a “Ukrainian nationalist” who had given
“sermons of a nationalist character” in church during WWII.

It is unclear from this list whether the compromising materials listed were known to the
secret police because they were collected during these priests’ recruitment for reunification in
1945 or whether this material was collected more recently, after the priests reunified but were found to persist in practicing Greek Catholic ritual. Whichever the case, Steblovskii’s list connects religious ritual and whether it is being properly followed to anti-Soviet political activities. Whether it was the ritual infraction that led to a re-examination of these reunified priests’ backgrounds or the other way around, the investigations into reunified priests viewed these two categories of activities as connected.

This demonstrates that the space of these newly consecrated Russian Orthodox Churches continued to be imagined as a space where loyalty to the new Soviet authorities could be performed, through proper Orthodox ritual led by reunified priests. When priests were perceived to be straying from that role, flouting religious ritual, Soviet authorities connected this improper ritual practice with a rejection of the role in the Soviet state church reunification had offered these former Greek Catholic priests, and thus necessarily connected their actions to suspicious political activity.

This had not been the case in the first years after the sobor, before Kostel’nyk and Halan’s assassinations. While questions about changing rituals were often the topic of conversation among Greek Catholic priests and between Greek Catholic priests and their secret police handlers as the 1946 sobor approached, these questions were not a priority for Soviet state authorities initially. A long report drawn up for the secret police in November 1945 about ritual differences between Greek Catholics and Russian Orthodox, for example, concludes by noting: “People are accustomed to these rituals, but many of these differences will easily be smoothed out with time.”

 Hovera, 142.
As late as April of 1949, the head of CAROC for Ukraine, Khodchenko chided his plenipotentiary for the L’viv oblast, Vyshnevs’kyi, for reporting instances of improper ritual, remarking:

On the question of the preservation of purity [chistoty] in the observance of Orthodox rituals in former Uniate churches, it seems that you are more concerned about this than even arch-episcope Makarii [the Orthodox hierarch for the L’viv region] …we should not be more concerned about this than the clergy is.29

Yet, just a few months later it was the secret police reporting on the very infractions that had concerned plenipotentiary Vyshnevs’kyi. Shortly after the December 1949 synod, Captain Brikker, one of the secret police officials instrumental in the 1945-6 reunification campaign summarized the resolutions made at the Moscow synod and sent out a memo to his division of the secret police. The memo contained the sixteen points for strengthening Orthodoxy included in the church’s resolution and noted that these measures needed to be applied in surveillance of newly Orthodox churches.30

Shortly after, in March of 1950, the L’viv secret police reported on the ongoing investigations into reunified Greek Catholic priests whose improper religious rituals had raised suspicion.31 One priest, Evgenii Nikolaievich Yurik was accused of only “formally” reunifying with Russian Orthodoxy in 1946 because of his continued practice of Catholic ritual, specifically the presence of a sacred heart icon in his church.32

Alongside this infraction, the investigators noted that Yurik had made anti-Soviet speeches from his pulpit during Nazi occupation and during the war had helped officiate a funeral for a Ukrainian nationalist. As in the previous cases, it is unclear whether the observation

30 DA SBU f. 2, op. 4, spr. 13, ark. 2-3.
31 DA SBU f. 2, op. 4, spr. 19, ark. 44-62.
32 Christ’s heart as an object of devotion is not part of Orthodox practice, but is recognized in Catholicism.
of a sacred heart icon in the church prompted an investigation into Yurik’s wartime activities or
whether his decision to flout Orthodox tradition convinced investigators to revisit the charges
Yurik avoided when he reunified with Orthodoxy in 1946. In either case, Yurik’s current
infractions as a religious authority were connected to his wartime anti-Soviet activity.

In April of 1950, six formerly Greek Catholic priests were arrested in Ternopil oblast—all identified as having practiced unsanctioned religious rituals, as they were understood by secular Soviet authorities, after their reunification. These ritual infractions ran the gamut from actions that were simply looked down upon by Soviet authorities in the realm of official Orthodoxy (reunited priest Vailevich told his congregants he witnessed a Marian apparition) to blatantly illegal (reunited priest Kobliak performed an unregistered Greek Catholic baptism for a baby born to an alleged UPA member). These ritual infractions were connected in the secret police reports to political activities outside the church. Vailevich’s vision, for example, was connected to the fact that he collaborated with Nazis during World War II, while Kobliak’s unregistered baptism was discussed alongside the fact that he had recruited young men for the SS Halychyna, a Nazi military formation that conscripted Ukrainians in Galicia, during the war.

Significantly, Vailevich and Kobliak’s wartime disloyalty seemed to be known to investigators years prior to their 1950 arrest and were not what prompted the investigation. In fact, Kobliak’s previous association with the SS Halychyna had been known to authorities since 1945 and had used to recruit him as an informant. In these cases, reunification with Orthodoxy had served as a path to Soviet redemption, specifically a way to escape arrest for their alleged wartime infractions and participate in building Soviet life in West Ukraine. However, when these

33 DA SBU f.2, op. 4, spr. 17, ark. 83-98.
34 DA SBU f. 2, op. 4, spr. 17, ark. 91-92.
priests strayed from that role, one that required them to use their churches to lead by example, these charges were brought forward again to arrest them.

Vailevich and Kobliak’s suspicious conduct was not directly connected to the “sixteen points” list that came out of the church’s 1949 sobor, but in reports where surveillance was said to be conducted by a fellow reunified priest, these points were referenced often. For example, in November of 1951, a former Greek Catholic priest who had reunified with Russian Orthodoxy, Ivan Mironiuk, conducted an inspection of a church in the city of Horodok (L’viv oblast) where he referenced the 1949 synodal resolution to report a number of infractions, including the failure to commemorate the ecclesiastical authorities of the Russian Orthodox Church and the pronouncement of the filioque in the liturgy.35

While as a priest Mironiuk likely understood the theological foundations behind why the rituals he observed should not be occurring in an Orthodox liturgy, some state officials emphasized the importance of Orthodox rituals for their relation to secular politics. In a 1949 CAROC meeting, I. Ivanov, a CAROC official who had helped orchestrate the March 1946 sobor noted that the commemoration of the ecclesiastical authority of the Patriarch in Moscow in the liturgy should not only be emphasized because of its canonical importance in Orthodoxy, but because of Moscow’s symbolism for Soviet power as well:

What does it mean when the reunited priests do not commemorate the Orthodox patriarch, I see this as bad, there needs to be at least one commemoration. Moscow, it’s the capital of our motherland [rodina] the cradle of everything progressive in the human world…36

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35 Hovera, 156. The inclusion of the filioque (Latin “and from the son”) is a significant marker of Catholic affiliation. The theological debates around the inclusion of this phrase center on different understandings of the Holy Trinity, but over time the phrase itself has come to stand as a symbol of the schism between the Orthodox and Catholic worlds.
36 GARF f. R-6991 op.1, d. 519, l. 150
For Ivanov and the CAROC leadership, this Orthodox religious ritual of commemorating the church authorities of the Moscow Patriarchate ought to be mandated for reunited priests because of its relevance to the Soviet project, not just to Orthodox practice.

From these reports and others, it is clear that the surveillance and reporting of what went on inside these reunified churches was a collaborative effort—between the secret police, CAROC, as well as within the clergy themselves. In many cases, the lines between these three organizations were unclear—with various CAROC plenipotentiaries having previously served as secret police agents and members of the clergy listed as secret police informers.

This surveillance led to significant arrests among the clergy, arrests numbers that rivaled the state terror that accompanied the initial recruitment for the forced transfer to Orthodoxy in 1945. For example, in arrest numbers broken down by year in Svitlana Hurkina and Andriy Mykhalenko’s study of arrests of the clergy in L’viv oblast, 89 priests were arrested in 1945, compared to just 18 in 1946. But in 1950, 53 priests were arrested, compared to just 9 in 1951, revealing ebbs and flows in arrests during Stalinism. See Ed. Svitlaka Hurkina, Andriy Mykhalenko, *To the Light of Resurrection through the Thorns of the Catacombs: The Underground Activity and Reemergence of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church* (L’viv: Ukrainian Catholic University Press, 2014): 21.

37 It is important to note that the surveillance reports on ritual and the resulting arrests focused on the clergy and rarely on parishioners. While the sixteen points of Orthodoxy made mention of not only rituals conducted by the clergy and the presence of ritual objects, but also of rituals conducted by the laity, Soviet authorities put their focus on the space of the church and the liturgy as led by the priests, and rarely commented on what parishioners were doing or saying. In some ways this reflects how the initial reunification campaign was conducted. It was the priesthood who was asked to attend agitational meetings to agree to become Orthodox. They were also required, as individuals, to go through a registration process that included both the Soviet state and Russian Orthodox ecclesiastical authorities. The same went for church property. A church building became Orthodox when it was registered as one. The parishioners, though,
simply became Orthodox along with their priest or by virtue of continuing to attend a building that was now registered as an Orthodox Church.

This is not because in the minds of Soviet authorities the religious affiliation of these believers was un-important, but instead a recognition of the spiritual and moral authority of the priest in the Galician Greek Catholic context. The clergy had been considered important local authority figures and partners since the arrival of the Red Army in 1939—it was this consideration that led to the reunification plan in the first place. The partnership with the clergy continued during the so-called “pacification” of the borderlands after the war’s end, as Soviet authorities recruited clergy members to aid in the counter-insurgency. Long into the postwar era, the process of building Soviet life and the inclusion of the clergy in this project was imagined as continuing, just as the incorporation of western Ukraine into the USSR was thought of as an ongoing project.

This purge of priests eventually ended around 1951, around the time that the parallel purges of the intelligentsia came to an end. Still, the decision by Soviet authorities to judge the effectiveness of reunification and the “sincerity” of the reunified priests by monitoring religious ritual set a precedent for considering reunification an ongoing process that would require constant surveillance. At moments of crisis when anti-Soviet activity was perceived to be on the rise, reports on surveillance of ritual would begin to appear once again.38

By connecting religious ritual conducted by reunified priests to loyalty and participation in the Soviet project, Orthodoxy and its practice, not just its institutional presence, came to be tied to Sovietization in West Ukraine. Reunification, like other Soviet projects, could not simply be declared but had to be continually enforced. By the early 1950s the connections between ritual

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38 Hovera, 161.
and loyalty that had been established by reunification created a paradigm that would inform Soviet policy toward Russian Orthodoxy in western Ukraine for the decades to come.

In a 1952 report to his CAROC superiors, plenipotentiary Vyshnevs’kyi emphasized why continuing to monitor religious ritual was so important—just three years after his own supervisor had chided him for his attention to these matters:

> What does it mean that there continues to be opposition to the Orthodox rite (obriad), it means that this opposition will continue in individual churches as long as Vatican agentura and bourgeois-Ukrainian nationalists do not accept Orthodoxy in formerly Greek Catholic churches. With this in mind, I believe that that the more churches take on Orthodoxy (pravoslavnyi vid), the less there will be a base for anti-Orthodox activity and more importantly it will expose the enemy activity and without a doubt will narrow the possibility for enemy elements to continue their subversive work.⁴⁹

This view of the stakes of official Russian Orthodoxy, and the necessity for it to be continually monitored and enforced ensured that fighting the anti-Soviet, Ukrainian nationalist specter of Greek Catholicism allowed CAROC and the Russian Orthodox Church to advocate for its continued role in Soviet life in western Ukraine. In the renewed push for atheism under Nikita Khrushchev (in power 1954-1964), the Orthodox Church was nevertheless able to maintain a robust presence in western Ukraine more so than anywhere else in the Soviet Union through emphasizing its role in Sovietization.⁴⁰

Conclusions: The meaning of “official” religion

In recent years, scholars have moved beyond analyzing religious life as something that necessarily existed outside of Soviet life to studying how the Soviet state institutionalized and accommodated religion. The return of a recognized and legal Russian Orthodox Church during WWII provided a blueprint for other religious institutions to be mobilized by the Soviet state. In

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Central Asia, as Eren Tasar argues, this meant creating new Islamic religious institutions as well as a state structure for administering and controlling Islamic religious life during WWII and after.  

41 Similar arrangements for institutionalizing religion in the wartime and postwar era were made for Buddhists in Buryatia and Evangelical Christians in Russia and Ukraine.  

42 In each of these cases the institutionalization of these religions had two related purposes. First, creating a religious structure within the Soviet state created a domestic spiritual authority inside the borders of the Soviet Union for believers, an effort by the Soviet authorities to minimize international influence and transnational religious connections. Second, creating a legal structure for religious practice allowed for spiritual activities to be both organized and surveyed by the state, drawing these activities out from the dark underground and under the spotlight of the state administrators. 

The forced transfer of the Greek Catholic Church to the Russian Orthodox Church and the subsequent establishment of Russian Orthodox structures in western Ukraine fits into this pattern in some ways, and diverges in others. While for Islam, Buddhism, and Evangelical Christianity, creating administrative institutions was intended to organize and control a religious community that already existed, the reunification project was an attempt to not simply administer a confession but also to construct a new religious affiliation. In addition, this new confessional belonging for west Ukrainian Greek Catholics came simultaneously with their Soviet belonging. 

For religious communities whose home territories had been part of the USSR since 1917, by the end of the second world war many had experienced the full spectrum of Soviet religious policy, from cautious flexibility in the 1920s to the violent repressions of the 1930s to the institutional

41 Eren Tasar, Soviet and Muslim: The Institutionalization of Islam in Central Asia (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018.)
partnerships of the 1940s, adapting their religious practices to these changing conditions. In contrast, west Ukrainian Greek Catholics faced the radical reconstruction of their confessional life alongside the tumult of WWII, reeling from the precarity of the Greek Catholic Church in the nationalizing interwar Polish state to the chaotic years of the first Soviet occupation (1939-1941), to the promises of religious and national liberation under Nazi occupation (1941-1944), to the imposition of Soviet power and simultaneous promotion of Russian Orthodoxy (1945 onwards).

I argue that the particularity of the conditions for official religion in western Ukraine does not prevent meaningful comparisons with other projects of state-sanctioned religion in the USSR, but instead can shed light on what it meant for the Soviet state to administer religious life in a variety of contexts. Scholars have argued that Stalin’s initial interest in allowing for religious institutions in Soviet life was the result of the state’s initial success in repressing religion in the 1930s—the counter-revolutionary potential of religion had been curtailed to such a degree that the Soviet state had the capacity to fully control religious life and make it useful for broader goals. At the same time, in the case of the official Russian Orthodox Church in western Ukraine, the campaigns to survey and control ritual reveal that the oppositional potential of religious life still existed as a specter haunting Sovietization in historically Catholic western Ukraine.

In the case of former Greek Catholics, these fears led to a focus on ritual, and an imagined connection between the persistence of Catholic ritual with the persistence of anti-Soviet activity in a contested borderland region. But what about these fears when it came to other

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43 As Adriano Roccucci argues, these 1943 discussions of a new role for the Russian Orthodox Church represented a profound shift in Soviet policy: instead of using the Soviet state apparatus to weaken the Russian Orthodox Church, Stalin, Beria, and Molotov sought to strengthen the church in order to make it an instrument of the Soviet state. Roccucci, Stalin i patriarkh (2016), 10. Once the church was successfully instrumentalized, William Fletcher argues it became a key element of Soviet foreign policy, especially in border settings. William C. Fletcher, Religion and Soviet Foreign Policy, 1945-1970 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), 16-29.
sanctioned religious communities? This case raises questions about how the borders between “official” and “unofficial” religious life were enforced by the Soviet state in a variety of confessional, national, and geographic contexts, inviting further research on what it meant in the eyes of state officials to be both Soviet and a believer. What the monitoring of ritual tells us is that administering religion went far beyond creating state institutions and deploying roving plenipotentiaries, it meant actively shaping religious practices to ensure the connection between these religious communities and the Soviet project that accommodated them.

Even though surveillance of ritual may have had little basis in theology, it still deeply influenced religious life for believers and clergy. When the Soviet Union collapsed and the Greek Catholic Church was permitted to practice legally in Ukraine again, conversations about which religious rituals were authentic and which had been “corrupted” by life under Soviet rule led to fierce debates among the clergy of now independent Ukraine. Within this context, the notion of a need to “purify” ritual has re-emerged, but this time it is about restoring religious traditions to how they were imagined to have been practiced before the arrival of Soviet power.44

Even as the nature of the conversation changed, the stakes have remained remarkably similar: long after the end of the Soviet Union, the space of the Ukrainian church remains a place where changing loyalties are performed and observed.45 As newly independent Ukraine contends with the continued presence of the Russian Orthodox Church and the newly legalized Greek Catholic Church, as well as the recognition of an autocephalous Ukrainian Orthodox Church, the rituals tied to various confessional affiliations remain connected to ideas about loyalty, sovereignty, and the Soviet legacy.

List of Archival Abbreviations

DA SBU  Haluzevyi derzhavnyi arkhiv Sluzhba bezpeky Ukrainy (Kyiv, Ukraine)
DALO  Derzhavnyi arkhiv L’vivs’koi oblasti (L’viv, Ukraine)
GARF  Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii (Moscow, Russia)
RGASPI  Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv sotsial’no politicheskoi istorii (Moscow, Russia)