

# Catholic Immigrants in Nineteenth- to Twentieth-Century Urals : Scenarios of Establishing and Maintaining Connectedness

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## **Catholic Immigrants in Nineteenth- to Twentieth-Century Urals: Scenarios of Establishing and Maintaining Connectedness<sup>1)</sup>**

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### **1. Introduction**

While Russia is often perceived as a religiously homogeneous entity with the Russian Orthodox Church dominating the country, in reality, it has a long history of coexistence with different religious traditions. There have always been provinces with majority Catholic, Muslim, Buddhist, or shamanistic populations as well as those characterized by religious diversity. The Ural region has always been multi-religious and is currently home to representatives of more than 50 ethnicities among a population of four million in Sverdlovskaiia *oblast'* (a contemporary administrative unit). It is located in the middle of the Eurasian continent on the border between Europe and Asia with Ekaterinburg (at 56°5′/60°4′) as its capital.

Ekaterinburg was founded in 1723 by Peter the Great as the main metal–copper, iron, and cast iron-producing plant in Russia. It also got its wealth from rich gold deposits discovered in the mid-nineteenth century. As a booming center of metal production in the eighteenth century, Ekaterinburg needed engineers and managers and since there were not enough Russian specialists, foreigners were brought in to fill the jobs. Many Europeans, either exiled prisoners of war or workers contracted by the state, were employed at the Ural metal plants and composed the nucleus of the Lutheran and Catholic communities, which developed into established religious institutions in the city by the late nineteenth century.

This paper focuses on the evolution of Catholic institutions in the Urals, represented primarily by ethno-confessional communities of Poles, who were exiled or had migrated from the European part of the Russian Empire throughout the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The paper is based on documents from local archives, sociological surveys conducted in 2008 and 2012, censuses and census-like materials, field observations, interviews, and materials from the Roman Catholic Church's official websites.

### **2. The Ural Catholic Community's History: A Bird's Eye View**

The influx of Catholics to the Urals started after the autonomy of the Polish–Lithuanian

Commonwealth was terminated and its territories were partitioned among the Russian Empire, the Kingdom of Prussia, and the Austrian Habsburg Monarchy. Its eastern territory, which nowadays includes western Ukraine, Lithuania, and Byelorussia, had Catholic populations and became provinces of the Russian Empire. Participants in the national liberation movements of the former Polish territories, including Catholic priests, were systematically exiled to Siberia and the Urals, mainly to Perm Gubernia (province). For the exiled Poles, their religious identity became a basis for cohesiveness in their new, alien, and often unfriendly surroundings. This led to the formation of ethno-religious communities of Polish Catholics. In Perm City, the administrative center of the Ural region at the time, as well as in most of the other Ural Catholic parishes, Poles comprised up to 90% of the congregations (Kamenskikh 2009, Mosunova 2000).

Although Russian legislation guaranteed the religious rights of its Catholic citizens, conversion to Catholicism by its ethnic Russian subjects was a crime punishable by death until the nineteenth century. Catholic men were allowed to marry Russian Orthodox women, but the weddings had to be conducted by Russian Orthodox priests, and their children were to be baptized and brought up in the Russian Orthodox faith. This practice, common until 1905, contributed to the isolation of the Polish Catholics, who were already quite isolated due to their shared destiny and cultural traditions. Thus, state policies were critical in the maintenance of their religious identity.

Since the number of Catholics in Perm Gubernia had increased by the 1830s, they were able to get permission to establish a permanent chapel in a room rented in a city merchant's house (Charitonowa 1998). They would meet in the chapel and were periodically visited by a priest coming from Kazan, another city with a Catholic congregation that was 600 km away from Ekaterinburg. Every year the priest toured the parts of the Perm Gubernia where Catholics lived in order to perform necessary religious rites. Thanks to a thorough survey conducted throughout the Russian Empire in 1860, we have extensive statistical, ethnographic, and demographic data on Perm Province that was compiled by Lieutenant Colonel Kristian Mozel' (Mozel' 1864) (Table 1).

### **3. Distribution of Catholics in Perm Gubernia in 1860**

The largest Ural Catholic community was located in the Permskii *uezd* (district), and it continued to grow rapidly due to the regular arrivals of exiles, reaching 1800 parishioners in 1869 (Charitonowa 1998). Gradual integration of Poland into the Russian economic system led more Poles to come to the Urals on their own initiative in search of jobs (Kamenskikh 2009). These voluntary newcomers usually settled in the cities where established Polish communities already existed in order to rely on their experience and support while adjusting to their new surroundings. As a result, the existing communities became even larger, stronger, and confident. The thriving Perm Catholic congregation built their own stone church in the center of Perm City. Consecrated in 1875, the church was both a place of worship and the center of social life and cultural events that translated Polish traditions and values. Concerts, charity events, and exhibitions were organized mainly by the Polish Catholics but were attended by the general public as well.

**Table 1** Distribution of Catholics in Perm Gubernia in 1860

<i>Uezd</i> (District)	Men	Women	Total
Permskii	76	57	133
Verkhoturskii	64	23	87
Kungurskii	42	23	65
Ekaterinburgskii	41	23	64
Cherdynskii	42	2	44
Solikamskii	20	5	25
Krasnoufimskii	14	10	24
Okhanskii	16	4	20
Shadrinskii	16	4	20
Osinskii	9	5	14
Irbitskii	6	0	6
Kamyshlovskii	9	5	14
Total	355	161	516

That not only made life more comfortable for the Polish Catholic citizens, but also promoted European customs among the upper classes of non-Polish and non-Catholic Perm citizens.

The Ekaterinburg district's Catholic community was the fourth largest in the Urals during the late nineteenth century. It emerged in the Urals among a group in the Catholic military deployed in the early nineteenth century. They did not have their own priest but were visited by chaplains from Orenburg, Kazan', and later by a chaplain from Perm, who covered about 300 km to serve parishioners. In addition, there were 109 Catholics employed at several Ekaterinburg plants: 106 men and only 3 women (GASO. F.24. Op.10. D.12. L.21). In the city itself, there were 47 Catholics (Mozel' 1864) and their number reached 143 (90 men and 53 women) in 1873, according to the *Day City Census*, which was 0.5% of the entire population of Ekaterinburg. By the end of the 1870s, their number increased again, and they were given permission to have their own priest and chapel in 1876. A few years later, in 1884, they erected a stone church at the center of Ekaterinburg. It was financed by wealthy citizens and not just those of Polish descent. The church was consecrated as St. Anna's Church, and it had an organ as well as a school, chapel, and hotel. According to the local newspaper, the first Roman Catholic Mass at St. Anna's was celebrated on November 4, 1884 and was attended by representatives of all of the city's religions, including Russian Orthodox Christians, Lutheran Protestants, and Jews (Ekaterinburgskaia nedelia [Ekaterinburg Week] 1884). Given the vastness of the territory and the number of believers, the community of Ekaterinburg attained the status of an independent parish, consisting of the Ekaterinburgskii, Verkhoturskii, Kamyshlovskii, Shadrinskii, and Irbitskii districts. According to the Ekaterinburg Day Census conducted in 1887, the number of

Ekaterinburg City Catholics had doubled and reached 310 members: 173 men and 137 women. Ten years later, the congregation had almost the same number of members, 323: 167 men and 156 women (First Russian Census of 1897 1905: 92). Even though the gender disproportion became less evident over time, religiously mixed families with a Catholic father and an Orthodox mother and children were a common phenomenon at least until the 1905 Manifesto of Religious Freedom. In addition, there were many bachelors among the Ekaterinburg district Catholics. Gender disproportion required establishing new connections outside of the religious community to find marriage partners and create families.

According to Church records, most of the Ural Catholics arrived from the western parts of the Russian Empire, present-day Poland, Belorussia, Ukraine, and Lithuania. However, there was also a notable proportion, about 16% of the Ural Catholics, who were of local Ural-Siberian origin—from Ekaterinburg, Perm, Shadrinsk, Kamyshlov, and Tjumen—and apparently were the descendants of those who arrived earlier, as noted in the 1860 survey, and had completely assimilated in the area. In addition, there were Catholics from several foreign countries, including ten Austro-Hungarians, three French, two Swiss, and one Italian, who were either employed as specialists at the Ural plants or were married to such specialists.

In terms of social status, the majority of the Ekaterinburg Catholics were representatives of the gentry. The second and third biggest groups were peasants and burgers. Many of the Catholics were employed as engineers or servants employed by the state in offices. Most of them lived in Ekaterinburg, but there were also small groups in Irbit, Kamyshlov, Kushva, Nizhnii Tagil, Talitca, and Shadrinsk. Due to the distances between these places, communication among the Catholics was limited; however, this pattern of dispersal created a Catholic network with Ekaterinburg as the center of religious life and with the priest as the main actor in this network.

The Ekaterinburg Catholic community rapidly expanded its activities and opened the first parish school. That was a very important sign of the community's further establishment and the beginning of transmitting its values, including language and religion, to the younger generation. They also had their own cemetery; in other settlements, the Catholics were buried in the same graveyards as the Orthodox Russians. Thus, by the end of the nineteenth century, the Catholics had developed their own cultural landscape in the Urals that included both religious and educational institutions.

#### **4. Ekaterinburg Catholics in the Twentieth to Early Twenty-first Centuries**

The revolutionary events of 1905 and the adoption of the Decree on Strengthening Religious Tolerance strengthened the status of the Russian Catholics as a religious community. The Roman Catholic Church received more freedom and was allowed to accept new converts, including spouses and children previously baptized in the Russian Orthodox Church. Ekaterinburg Catholics were able to expand their charitable activities. The number of parishioners continued to grow and reached 1000 in 1913.

After Russia's entry into World War I, the parishioners of St. Anne's Church in

Ekaterinburg doubled in size due to the arrival of refugees and prisoners of war. However, not all of the prisoners of war retained their religion in captivity. For example, 33 former Austro-Hungarian officers of Czech origin decided to convert to Russian Orthodoxy and the ritual was performed by the Archbishop of Ekaterinburg and Irbit in 1916. The decision was perhaps made in the hopes of improving their living conditions. According to Church records, the death rate among Austro-Hungarian prisoners of war dramatically increased over the course of the next two years due to scurvy. It is evident that the Catholic community was unable to provide them with sufficient support. Perhaps the fact that they were ethnic Czechs also contributed to their being left behind by the Ural Catholics, who were ethnic Poles, so they had to seek for more extreme religious variants in order to establish connections with the locals. Similar scenarios were reported earlier when Catholic Poles agreed to convert to Russian Orthodoxy; of course, it does not necessarily follow that this represented sincere religious transformations (Glavatskaya 2015).

The revolutionary events of 1917 followed by the Russian Civil War led to repatriation of the Ural Polish Catholics to a newly independent Poland. From that time on, the Catholic community in the Urals grew smaller due to outmigration. According to the 1920 Census, there were 1082 Poles in Ekaterinburg, and even if not all of them were Catholics, it is likely they made up the bulk of the Catholic community that was officially reregistered in 1920 (GASO, 511-r. Op.1. D.139. L.6.).

Ekaterinburg's Catholic community, like other religious institutions, lost its church property in the early 1920s during the course of the atheist campaign. Officially, St. Anna's Church was closed in 1930 and the community was dissolved. By the beginning of World War II, all of the Ural's Catholic institutions were closed, most of the priests had been arrested, and some had been executed. The church building was refurbished and turned into a children's library and then into apartments. It was used later for storing the Hermitage collections evacuated from Leningrad during World War II. After the war, the building was used as kindergarten and then as a bus station. In the early 1960s, it was converted into an artists' studios before it was finally demolished. The demolition was more than likely ordered in connection with the new atheistic campaign started in the late 1950s in order to erase the memory of Catholic traditions. The area where St. Anna's Catholic Church once stood was turned into a park (Mosunova 1997).

A new wave of Catholics descended upon the Urals after the mass deportation of Poles in 1940–41. More than 27,000 Poles were placed in barracks throughout Sverdlovskaya *oblast'*. In addition, Soviet Germans from the Volga region, where they had lived since the eighteenth century, were conscripted into the so-called "Labor Army" and placed in several labor camps in the Urals. They could rely only on their own means for social support and security in the severe conditions of the labor camps. Religion allowed them to establish additional connections, which were not just ethnic or social. It served to establish among them a shared common hope for salvation under conditions that did not leave much room for hope. Since all religious activity was illegal, the Catholics had to conduct religious practices privately in their homes or form underground barrack religious communities in the labor camp barracks, even though underground

religious activity was persecuted.

Most of the deported Poles left Sverdlovskaiia *oblast'* by 1946 (Motrevich 2008). For them, their connection to Poland was much stronger than what they had established living in the Urals. However, there were many who chose to stay, which is a sign that the existing connections were strong enough to keep them, despite the pressures to drive them away. There were two Catholic communities in Asbest and Karpinsk that, according to the official report of the Committee for State Security (KGB), had up to 20 members each. In fact, there was one other Catholic community, in Nizhnii Tagil, which the KGB officers failed to discover. According to an interview with one of its members conducted in 2012, it was a community of five members who had been meeting since 1956 to pray, sing hymns, and say the Rosary. By the 1970s, the congregation had 30 members. They did not have a priest and therefore could not receive Holy Communion. However, they found an alternative through a specialized network. One of the Catholic women was able to obtain it while visiting relatives in Kazakhstan, where there was a priest who would prepare a box with the Holy Eucharist for the congregation in Nizhnii Tagil, first instructing her on the details of the rite. It is an interesting fact that women may play important roles in establishing connections during times of hardship and periods of religious revitalization.

The process of the institutional revival of Catholicism in the Urals in the late 1980s followed the path taken by the first Catholics in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. First, the church received legal recognition and social status, recovered its hierarchy, and restored its network. In 2002, Sverdlovsk region came under the jurisdiction of Russia's Asian Catholic Apostolic Administration with its center in Novosibirsk, known as the Diocese of the Transfiguration.

The Roman Catholic community of St. Anna in Ekaterinburg was officially registered in 1995. Its revitalization was initiated by Ekaterinburg citizens of Polish origin. For them, the restoration of the Church was associated with the possibility of maintaining their ethnic identity, retaining the use of the Polish language, and establishing ties across state borders with the rest of the Catholic world in general, and Polish Catholics in particular. Indeed, Poland has played a leading role in the restoration of Catholic institutions in the Sverdlovsk region by supporting these efforts financially and politically as well as by sending priests. As a result, the parish gradually expanded and started a Sunday school. Relationships based on shared connections were once again reestablished through the promotion of language and religious education; thus, we may assume that the system of establishing, promoting, and maintaining "connectedness" reveals strong ethnic, linguistic, and educational agendas. Church services were held in rented halls until 1996 when the city administration decided to return what was left of the former Catholic Church's property, including buildings located on Gogol Street. The construction work was conducted by Ekaterinburg parishioners, Catholic missionaries, and volunteers from Poland, Slovakia, France, Germany, and Colombia. In this way, international support was also an important factor in establishing and maintaining connections. The new Church building was consecrated in 2000 and the Catholics also received their own section in the city's cemetery. These activities manifested the



restoration of Catholic institutions in Ekaterinburg City.

Currently, St. Anne's Parish numbers 500 members, of whom 300 regularly attend Church services. The parish institutions also include the local unit of the *Caritas* international charitable organization and a library. The community mainly consists of ethnic Poles; however, there are also representatives from other ethnic groups, including Tartars, Bashkirs, Russians, and a large number of Vietnamese migrant workers. It might be suggested that the international aspect of the support received from abroad has generated a preference for religious similarities over ethnic differences. Although the community originally insisted on a Polish identity, including Polish-language services, the Vatican later ruled that services would be in Russian, since that is the common language of the city. Most of the congregation members were born in Catholic families, but there are also those who converted to Catholicism from secular backgrounds or other religious traditions. According to field research, the Ekaterinburg Catholics have a solid community with a strong identity and great respect for their leaders. They fully rely on the support of their religious community and its leaders during crises. Outside of this community, Catholics reported experiencing discrimination based on their religious affiliation from their bosses at work, officials, and "representatives of other religions." Regarding the latter, they likely meant some insulting statements made by Father Alexander Zaitsev, the former head of the Ekaterinburg Russian Orthodox Church Missionary Department, in 2006 (Zaitsev 2006).

## 5. Conclusions

The history of the Ural Catholic community has had three periods, (1) formation, (2) institutionalization, and (3) establishment, and was marked by development from ethno-religious isolation to integration into the cultural landscape of the region. The dynamic development of the Catholic tradition in the Urals lasted until 1919, when it declined due to reduced numbers and a rigid state policy aimed at the destruction of its religious institutions. It then continued its existence privately, in families, while the state gradually erased all public marks of the existence of Catholicism in the Urals.

The institutions of the Roman Catholic Church contributed to the preservation of the ethnic identity of the population historically associated with Polish and Western European culture, playing important roles in protecting their traditional society.

On the basis of an analysis of Church records, we may conclude that the majority of Catholics in St. Anna's Parish in Ekaterinburg were men, a large number of whom were gentry who migrated from the western parts of the Russian Empire. However, a noteworthy group consisted of local Ural-Siberian Catholics.

In the late 1980s, the revitalization of Catholic institutions started due to the initiative of the ethnic Poles, an effort that was financially and politically supported from abroad. The process of revitalization paralleled the same stages that the Catholic community had gone through in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, including coming together as a group of believers, receiving only sporadic visits by a priest, and renting apartments for their meetings. Gradually, the congregation increased, developed a



legal status, and acquired property. Women were seen to play crucial roles in maintaining religious traditions and connectedness during the community's turbulent times.

The example of the Ekaterinburg Catholic community shows that the development, maintenance, and reestablishment of connectedness has different scenarios that include identity awareness, state policy, social support, ritual practices, institutional evolution, education, leadership, creation of social networks, incorporation into the local cultural landscape, and many forms of support from abroad. Each of these factors played its role at different stages of the process and in different ways.

## Notes

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