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The Parochial School Sector in the Russian Empire (1866–1886): The Shift from the Purview of the Zemstvos to That of the Holy Synod

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Abstract

This study explores the movement of the parochial school sector in the Russian Empire from the purview of the zemstvos to that of the Holy Synod. Its chronological scope is from 1866 to 1886.

The study's findings revealed that 1884 was a watershed year for the country's parochial school sector, as that is when the Russian Emperor signed into law the so-called *Rules on Parochial Schools*. This event brought to an end the 18-year period of parochial schools being under the purview of the zemstvos in the Russian Empire, during which this sector had descended into a state of crisis – a 4-times drop in the number of parochial schools in the country relative to 18 years earlier. However, different dioceses in the Russian Empire fared differently during that period. Specifically, the Kiev Diocese lost 25 % of its schools in a 16-year period (from 1,349 schools in 1866 to 1,064 schools in 1882), but the figure was almost restored in the subsequent 5 years (1,275 schools). There was a similar situation in some other Ukrainian dioceses (e.g., the Podolia Diocese). The experience of the Kiev Diocese indicates that the local clergy and zemstvos were able to reach a compromise in the area of public education. A completely opposite example is the case of the Lithuanian Diocese, where the number of parochial schools dropped more than 50 times in the same 16-year period (from 430 to 8) – but then increased nearly 100 times in the subsequent 5 years (from 8 to 792). Thus, the period 1866–1886 was peculiar geographically – the greatest success in preserving the school potential in 1866–1882 was achieved by Ukrainian dioceses, whilst the most dynamic rehabilitation of the parochial school sector in 1882–1886 was exhibited by Baltic and Belarusian dioceses.

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1. Introduction

On June 13, 1884, Emperor Alexander III signed into law the so-called *Rules on Parochial Schools*, developed by the Holy Synod. The introduction of this regulation would radically change the situation with parochial schools in the Russian Empire, dividing time into two major periods – one before the adoption of the Rules and one after. This study seeks to explore the operation of the parochial school sector in the Russian Empire from 1866 to 1886, i.e. in the 18-year period before the adoption of *Rules on Parochial Schools* and in the 2-year period after that.

2. Materials and methods

The best source for statistics on the operation of parochial schools under the purview of the Holy Synod in the Russian Empire has been the yearly *Most Faithful Report of the Chief Procurator of the Holy Synod*. Use in this study was made of this publication for 1866 and the period 1882–1886. The particular focus on these timeframes is also associated with that a sample of just 1 year may not be considered a representative one, as certain dioceses did not provide data on the numbers of schools within them and students in those schools each year. For instance, no data were provided in 1882 by the Yeniseysk, Kamchatka, and Yakut Dioceses and the Georgian Exarchate ([Iz vlechenie iz vsepoddanneishego otcheta..., 1884: 93](#)). In 1883, no data were provided by the Vladimir, Don, Yeniseysk, and Turkestan Dioceses ([Iz vlechenie iz vsepoddanneishego otcheta..., 1885: 93](#)), in 1884 – by the Vologda, Yekaterinoslav, Yeniseysk, Kiev, Lithuanian, Minsk, Mogilev, Oryol, and Kherson Dioceses and the Georgian Exarchate ([Vse poddanneishii otchet..., 1886: 93](#)), in 1885 – by the Yekaterinburg, Kiev, and Lithuanian Dioceses ([Vse poddanneishii otchet..., 1887: 93](#)), and, lastly, in 1886 – by the Vologda and Irkutsk Dioceses ([Vse poddanneishii otchet..., 1888: 94](#)).

The study's methodology is grounded in a set of major historical principles – systematicity, historicism, and objectivity. The use of these principles made it possible to conduct an analysis of social processes within Russia's parochial school sector through the lens of relevant official documents and identify relevant contributing factors both on a national Russian scale (e.g., in order to establish the reasons behind the sharp increase in the number of parochial schools in 1883) and on a regional one (e.g., in order to establish the distinctive characteristics of the operation of parochial schools in Ukrainian, Baltic, and Belarusian dioceses).

3. Discussion

To date, the topic under consideration has not been the subject of dedicated research, although attempts to explore the making and development of Russia's parochial school sector have been undertaken more than once. For the most part, researchers have focused either on various landmarks in the history of parochial education on a national Russian scale or on the experience of creating parochial schools in particular regions across the Russian Empire.

The first group of works includes the one by M.A. Goncharov and M.G. Plokhova, which explores the place of parochial schools in the area of training primary school teachers during the imperial period ([Goncharov, Plokhova, 2012](#)), the one by V.A. Simora, which examines Russian parochial schools as a phenomenon of religious education that occurred in the period between late 19th and early 20th centuries ([Simora, 2009](#)), the one by D.V. Rykhlova, which analyzes the development of the system of public schools in the late 19th century and devotes some attention to parochial and zemstvo schools ([Rykhlova, 2018](#)), the one by A.A. Cherkasov, which investigates the system of primary education in Russia in the period of the reign of Emperor Nicholas II and draws conclusions about the effectiveness of that system ([Cherkasov, 2011](#)), and the one by the same scholar, A.A. Cherkasov, and his colleagues, which represents a historical-statistical study aimed at establishing the scale of the development of the country's parochial school sector in the period 1860–1917 ([Cherkasov et al., 2020](#)). In addition, there have lately been published several historiographical works on the history of parochial schools in Russia. For example, an attempt was undertaken in 2020 by A.S. Bykanov to analyze the Soviet and contemporary historiography on the operation of the parochial school sector in the Russian Empire in the period between the last quarter of the 19th and early 20th centuries ([Bykanov, 2020](#)).

The second group of works, concerned with parochial schools in particular regions across the 19th-century Russian Empire, includes the one by V.N. Yakunin, which explores ecclesiastical education and the parochial school sector in the Samara Diocese (Yakunin, 2019), the one by Y.B. Lavitskaya, which explores primary education in the Belarusian lands through the example of church schools (Lavitskaya, 2013), the one by S.Yu. Ierusalimskaya, which examines the development of the parochial school sector in the Upper Volga region (Ierusalimskaya, 2014), the one by T.A. Magsumov and his colleagues, which devotes some attention to parochial schools as part of a study focused on the system of public education in Astrakhan Governorate (Magsumov et al., 2022), the one by G. Rajović and his colleagues, which examines similar processes in Tambov Governorate (Rajović et al., 2023), the one by O.V. Natolochnaya and her colleagues, which examines similar processes in Vilna Governorate (Natolochnaya et al., 2019), and the one by V.S. Molchanova and her colleagues, which examines similar processes in the Kuban region (Molchanova et al., 2019). In addition, of note are the work by A.M. Mamadaliev and his colleagues, which investigates the system of public education in Erivan Governorate, a Transcaucasian region (Mamadaliev et al., 2021), and the one by K.V. Taran and his colleagues, which explores the system of private education in the Caucasus (Taran et al., 2021).

4. Results

Parochial schools were present in Russia from the times of ancient Rus'. While the growth of this sector varied from era to era, parochial schools were indissolubly linked to school education in Russia. In the 19th century, one of the spikes in the development of the country's parochial school sector was witnessed following the abolition of serfdom. Specifically, in 1865 the Russian Empire had over 21,000 parochial schools with a combined enrollment of more than 400,000 students (Pribavlenie..., 1909: 1042). Subsequent to 1865, there was a continual drop in their number. This was associated with the adoption by the Russian government of *Regulation on Primary Public Schools*, of June 14, 1864, as a result of which parochial and Sunday schools were placed under the purview of gubernia and uyezd school councils. Thus, the clergy was no longer in a position to exercise independence of action in the area of school education, which could not but be reflected in the way the country's parochial school sector fared.

It is important to note that during that time the relationship between the country's Orthodox Christian clergy and zemstvos was quite a complicated one. Amongst the zemstvo intelligentsia were many liberals who subjected the clergy to criticism. What was not helping improve this relationship was that at zemstvo primary schools the typical curriculum devoted only 2 hours a week to Religious Education and, on top of that, liberal zemstvo teachers promoted Darwin's theory of human evolution, thus undermining the religious education of students.

By 1882, the Russian Empire had 4,521 parochial schools with a combined enrollment of 115,000 students (Izvolechenie iz vsepoddanneishego otcheta..., 1884: 93) – a 4-times drop relative to 1865. However, the figure varied from region to region across the country. In 1882, Russia had 56 dioceses. The largest number of schools was found in the Kiev Diocese (1,064), followed by the Podolia Diocese (746), the Volyn Diocese (501), and the Riga Diocese (397). The dioceses with the smallest number of schools in 1882 were the Tobolsk Diocese (1), the Caucasus Diocese (1), the Penza Diocese (3), and the Don Diocese (4). In 1866, Russia had fewer dioceses – 54. However, relative to 1865, the number of schools reduced by as many as 2,000 – to 19,400.

Table 1 displays the top four of dioceses in the Russian Empire for the highest number of schools in 1866 and in 1882.

Table 1. Top Four of Dioceses in the Russian Empire for the Highest Number of Schools in 1866 and in 1882 (Izvolechenie iz vsepoddanneishego otcheta..., 1884: 92-93; Izvolechenie iz vsepoddanneishego otcheta..., 1867: 94-95)

Diocese	1866		1882	
	Number of schools	Number of students	Number of schools	Number of students
Kiev	1,349	39,820	1,064	30,097
Podolia	1,164	25,641	746	15,620
Volyn	2,151	20,714	501	11,440
Riga	322	21,255	397	12,254

As evidenced in [Table 1](#), during the period 1866–1882 the numbers of schools and students in the Kiev Diocese each reduced just 25 %. The figures for the Podolia Diocese dropped approximately 40 %. In the Volyn Diocese, the number of schools dropped 4 times and the number of students reduced just 2 times, i.e. there was a sharp increase in the number of students in the sector. Things were the opposite in the Riga Diocese, where the number of schools was up but the number of students reduced almost 2 times, Of note is the fact that in this diocese most of such schools were in lowly populated villages. Of interest is also the fact that the first three dioceses were in modern Ukraine and the fourth was in the modern Baltics. This may be testimony to that in certain Western regions of the Russian Empire there was no pronounced confrontation between the zemstvos and the clergy and the opposing sides were able to find common ground in respect of public education.

[Table 2](#) displays the top four of dioceses in the Russian Empire for the lowest number of schools in 1866 and in 1882.

Table 2. Top Four of Dioceses in the Russian Empire for the Lowest Number of Schools in 1866 and in 1882 ([Iz vlechenie iz vsepoddanneishego otcheta...](#), 1884: 92-93; [Iz vlechenie iz vsepoddanneishego otcheta...](#), 1867: 94-95)

Diocese	1866		1882	
	Number of schools	Number of students	Number of schools	Number of students
Don	121	2,614	4	120
Penza	167	2,917	3	235
Tobolsk	173	948	1	22
Caucasus	142	2,705	1	36

As evidenced in [Table 2](#), the number of schools in the dioceses with the lowest number of schools in 1882 ranged in 1866 from 121 to 173. That is, in the subsequent 16 years the number of such educational institutions reduced dozens of times, virtually dropping to the initial levels – those the region had when parochial schools first emerged there. Geographically speaking, this group was represented by two dioceses located in central Russia (Penza and Tobolsk Dioceses) and two in southern Russia (Don and Caucasus Dioceses).

Thus, by 1882, the country's 56 dioceses contained a combined 4,521 parochial schools.

[Table 3](#) illustrates the change in the number of parochial schools in the Russia Empire over the subsequent 5 years.

Table 3. Parochial Schools in the Russia Empire in 1882–1886 ([Iz vlechenie iz vsepoddanneishego otcheta...](#), 1884: 93; [Iz vlechenie iz vsepoddanneishego otcheta...](#), 1885: 93; [Vsepoddanneishii otchet...](#), 1886: 93; [Vsepoddanneishii otchet...](#), 1887: 93; [Vsepoddanneishii otchet...](#), 1888: 94)

Year	Number of schools	Number of students
1882	4,521	115,804
1883	5,942	118,599
1884	4,640	112,114
1885	8,351	202,350
1886	11,693	318,652

When looking at [Table 3](#), we need to take into account the availability of information for different years within the period under consideration. Specifically, in 1884 no data were submitted to the Holy Synod for as many as 10 dioceses – hence the lower number of schools in the table. Nevertheless, it can be seen from [Table 3](#) that in 1883, back before the adoption of *Rules on Parochial Schools*, there was a sharp increase in the number of such schools. This may have been associated with the following two factors: 1) increased demand for primary education (the fewer schools there were in a diocese, the greater was the demand for education); 2) the dioceses must have been aware of the development and discussion of a draft of *Rules on Parochial Schools* and convinced that the regulation would be signed into law. Consequently, the diocesan clergy acted proactively and the number of parochial schools in the Russian Empire immediately increased 25 % (from 4,500 to nearly 6,000), although the number of students remained virtually unchanged.

In 1886, i.e. 2 years after parochial schools were placed again under the purview of the Holy Synod, the situation began to change. Specifically, as evidenced in Table 3, the number of schools increased nearly 2.5 times relative to 1882. However, this growth was uneven.

Table 4 displays the country's top four dioceses with the largest number of schools as at 1882 and includes the dioceses that had over 700 parochial schools in 1886.

Table 4. Dioceses in the Russian Empire With the Largest Number of Schools in 1882 and in 1886 (*Izvlachenie iz vsepoddanneishego otcheta...*, 1884: 92-93; *Vsepoddanneishii otchet...*, 1888: 93-94)

Diocese	1882		1886	
	Number of schools	Number of students	Number of schools	Number of students
Kiev	1,064	30,097	1,275	45,240
Podolia	746	15,620	963	27,329
Volyn	501	11,440	472	10,796
Riga	397	12,254	462	17,795
Lithuanian	8	144	792	15,566
Minsk	158	2,336	986	16,770
Mogilev	78	2,907	848	17,923

As evidenced in Table 4, three dioceses in the top four for 1882 posted an increase in the number of schools: the Kiev Diocese – nearly 20 %, the Podolia Diocese – a little over 29 %, and the Riga Diocese – over 16 %. On the other hand, the number of schools in the Volyn Diocese decreased by 29 – and that was despite the legislation being favorable to the clergy. At the same time, three dioceses with more than 700 schools – the Lithuanian, Minsk, and Mogilev Dioceses – established themselves among the leaders. Over the 5-year period, the numbers of schools in the Minsk and Mogilev Dioceses increased 6 and 10 times, respectively. A really unique phenomenon was the increase in the number of schools in the Lithuanian Diocese (from 8 to 792) – an increase of virtually 100 times! It is fair to note that in 1866 the Lithuanian Diocese contained 430 parochial schools – one of the best examples illustrating the collision between the zemstvos and the clergy.

Geographically speaking, the Russian Empire's Western regions – the modern areas of Ukraine, the Baltics, and Belarus – were once again the best performers.

5. Conclusion

The year 1884 was a watershed year for the country's parochial school sector, as that is when the Russian Emperor signed into law the so-called *Rules on Parochial Schools*. This event brought to an end the 18-year period of parochial schools being under the purview of the zemstvos in the Russian Empire, during which this sector had descended into a state of crisis – a 4-times drop in the number of parochial schools in the country relative to 18 years earlier. However, different dioceses in the Russian Empire fared differently during that period. Specifically, the Kiev Diocese lost 25 % of its schools in a 16-year period (from 1,349 schools in 1866 to 1,064 schools in 1882), but the figure was almost restored in the subsequent 5 years (1,275 schools). There was a similar situation in some other Ukrainian dioceses (e.g., the Podolia Diocese). The experience of the Kiev Diocese indicates that the local clergy and zemstvos were able to reach a compromise in the area of public education. A completely opposite example is the case of the Lithuanian Diocese, where the number of parochial schools dropped more than 50 times in the same 16-year period (from 430 to 8) – but then increased nearly 100 times in the subsequent 5 years (from 8 to 792). Thus, the period 1866–1886 was peculiar geographically – the greatest success in preserving the school potential in 1866–1882 was achieved by Ukrainian dioceses, whilst the most dynamic rehabilitation of the parochial school sector in 1882–1886 was exhibited by Baltic and Belarusian dioceses.

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