

The Life and Times of Peter Mohyla, Metropolitan of Kiev

Ronald P. Popivchak

Abstract

(Українське резюме на ст. 359)

The author, one of only a handful of active Mohyla scholars of the last quarter-century, provides an overview of this enormously influential reformer of ecclesiastical life in Ukraine, including his biographical and historical milieu in Reformation and Counter-Reformation Europe. Mohyla, recently glorified as a saint by the Orthodox Church, possessed a brilliant mind able to manoeuvre between many conflicting ecclesial and political currents before emerging at an astonishingly young age as metropolitan of Kiev, a position from which he reformed and restored to great heights the Church of his day. His accomplishments analyzed here include his reformation of the clergy of his day; formation of the famed Mohyla Academy, the first institute of higher learning in Ukraine and a model for Slavic Europe; and publication of so many works that his erudition and ambition continue to amaze. Several works are examined here, including the *Lithos Albo Kamen* of 1644; his *Trebnyk* of 1646; his various lives of the saints; and then his famous *Orthodox Confession of Faith*, which influenced all of Orthodoxy and is analyzed here in detail as one of the greatest lasting achievements of the Church of Kiev.



Although the literature on Peter Mohyla is rather extensive, only six major and comprehensive works have been written about this Kievan metropolitan during the last one hundred or so years.¹ His recent canonization by the Orthodox Church of Ukraine invites us to renewed interest in his life and a critical review of works about him. The following is an attempt at such a review.

1. Historical Background

At the beginning of the seventeenth century, Eastern Europe was groaning under the weight of both political and religious upheaval. The north-south geo-political plane, stretching from Moscow to Constantinople, was being re-aligned. The east-west axis, which led from Kiev through Krakow and Geneva all the way to Rome, was being redrawn. New religious forces challenged the old, while kings and tsars tried mightily to stave off upstart sultans and hetmans. Into this new world aborning came Peter Mohyla, both prince and prelate, who chose to stand at the epicenter of the gathering storm.

The northerly movement of power, both political and ecclesiastical, after 1453 from Constantinople to Moscow, could not completely bypass Kiev, the “Mother of all Rus’ Cities.” Politically the Ukrainian lands were ruled by both the Grand Principality of Lithuania and the Kingdom of Poland at the time of the fall of Constantinople as a result of the Union of Krevo in 1385 and the dynastic marriage of Polish Queen

¹ They are chronologically: Стефан Голубев, *Киевский митрополит Петр Могила и его сподвижники*, 2 vols. (Kiev, 1883 and 1898); A. Malvy and M. Viller, “La Confession Orthodoxe de Pierre Moghila,” *Orientalia Christiana* X (1927); T. Ionesco, “La Vie et L’Oeuvre de Pierre Moghila, Metropolitte de Kiev,” (Paris: Faculté Libre de Théologie Protestante de Paris, 1944); O. Barlea, *De Confessione Orthodoxa Petri Mohilae* (Frankfurt am Main, 1947); А. Жуковський, *Петро Могила і питання єдності церков* [=Peter Mohyla and the Question of the Unity of the Churches] (Paris: Ukrainian Free University, 1969); R. Popivchak, “Peter Mohyla, Metropolitan of Kiev (1633–47), Translation and Evaluation of his ‘Orthodox Confession of Faith,’” (unpublished Thesis 259, Washington, DC: Catholic University of America, 1975). The last named is the only doctoral dissertation written at an English-speaking university during the last 60 years.

Jadwiga and Lithuania Prince Jagiello. As Poland gradually gained the upper hand over its partner in union, it became clear that Kiev and other Ukrainian provinces would now lose all semblance of self-rule. In the words of Orest Subtelny: “in 1452 Volynia, occupied by a Lithuanian army, was transformed in accordance with Polish models, into a common province which was governed by an official of the Grand Prince. In 1471, Kiev and its surrounding territories experienced a similar fate.... It was now evident that the last institutional remainders of Kievan Rus’ and of Ukrainian self-rule were quickly disappearing.”² And indeed, by the time of the Union of Lublin in 1569 and its formation of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, the fate of Ukrainian lands was sealed. For once the Ukrainian “lands and populace were transferred from Lithuania to Poland, their continued existence as distinctive societies would be put in question.”³ And so, while the two-headed imperial eagle might have transferred its nest from the Bosphoros to Moscow in the north, it would not lack serious political rivalry. The White Eagle of the vast Polish Kingdom had now taken wing.

Ukraine as a nation would not inherit the political power of the dying Eastern Empire of Byzantium. The immediate heirs were Moscow and Poland-Lithuania. But the Ukrainian Church would manage to survive the swirling storm with help from an unexpected quarter, Rome itself. Some eleven Kievan metropolitans⁴ (from Theognost in 1350 to Jonas in 1461) had taken up residence in Moscow, making that city the ecclesiastical center of all Rus’. But in 1458 the patriarch of Constantinople, Gregory, then living in and united with Rome, consecrated Gregory II to be the metropolitan of Kiev with his residence in that same city. The pope himself, Pius II, confirmed this consecration with a papal bull to Polish King

² Orest Subtelny, *Ukraine, A History* (Toronto, 1988), 77.

³ Ibid.

⁴ For a complete listing of all the Kievan Metropolitans, both Orthodox and Catholic, see Іриней Назарко, *Київські і Галицькі митрополити* (Rome, 1962).