This article aims to explore one of the turning points in the history of Ukrainian nation-building in nineteenth-century Austrian Eastern Galicia. This process, and the rivalry among supporters of different concepts of the national identity of Galician Ukrainians (customarily called at that time Ruthenians), became the focus of several path-breaking studies over the last two decades. Some authors treated the shaping of a national identity in terms of profound cultural transformation, discursive shift and elaboration of new meaning. In the course of forming national discourse(s), educated Ruthenians reconsidered in different ways the identificatory concepts they inherited from the pre-modern era, such as “Slavdom,” “Rus’,” “Ukraine,” “Greek Catholicism,” and so on. Nation-building among the Ruthenians of Galicia not only influenced how other potential modern nations, Polish and Russian, were built, but also contributed to the process of the disintegration of various pre-modern, proto-national communities (like Polish noble natio, Slavia Orthodoxa, or Rus’). As Yaroslav Hrytsak perceptively stresses in a recently published article, “the making of modern Ukraine was not just unmaking of modern Poland, Rus’, or Russia. It was also the unmaking of pre-modern Rus’. Therefore, modern nation-building among those Habsburg Ruthenians who also belong to Rus’ (Ruthenia) was, in a sense, more complicated than for the Habsburg Poles.”


This article attempts to highlight one of the aspects of the transition from traditional Ruthenian church culture to modern Ukrainian national culture in Galicia by illustrating how the emerging cult of Taras Shevchenko was connected with the ritual-purification (obriadovyi) movement. It shall also shed some light on how religious elements of Ruthenian identity became "nationalized" and politicized, and how in turn a new secular cultural system acquired crypto-religious character.

Since 1848, the entire Ruthenian national movement was organized around the hierarchy of the Greek Catholic Church. It emerged out of ethno-confessional tensions with Polish Roman Catholics, dominant in Eastern Galicia. At that time, loyalty to the Greek Catholic Church was considered an essential part of Galician Ruthenian identity, and the Church was the main symbol of the Ruthenian nation, history and culture. One perhaps may call the Ruthenian national movement prior to the constitutional reforms of the 1860s as "church-based nationalism," paraphrasing how the movement was characterized still in 1862 (tserkovno-narodnyi). Starting from the political modernization of the 1860s, new cultural institutions of Ruthenian (Ukrainian) nationalism emerged. By analyzing this evolution, one may observe the interplay of religious and secular elements in modern nationalism, and trace how Ukrainian cultural nationalism gradually superseded the more traditional Ruthenian church-based nationalism. This process was not unique in the case of Galician Ruthenians and reflected the emergence of modern national cultures out of the spiritual sphere of the Slavia Orthoxa.

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Nineteenth-century Galicia was a Habsburg crownland with an agriculturally-based economy and social structure, numerous small towns and two important cultural and administrative centers, L’viv and Kraków. Its population was ethnically diverse and consisted mainly of three ethno-religious groups: Greek Catholic Ruthenians, Roman Catholic Poles and Jews. These three groups comprised in 1857 respectively 44.83 percent, 44.74 percent and 9.69 percent of the whole population. In the eastern part of