"INTO CHURCH MATTERS": LAY IDENTITY, RURAL PARISH LIFE, AND POPULAR POLITICS IN LATE IMPERIAL AND EARLY SOVIET RUSSIA, 1864-1928

On 2 August 1864, Tsar Alexander II signed legislation calling for the creation of parish councils (popechitel'stva). In implementing this and other church reforms of the 1860s, political elites sought to improve the material, social, and even psychological condition of an impoverished, disdained, and even self-loathing parish clergy, a parish clergy often the object of parishioners' anti-clerical taunts, jokes, folktales, and much worse. For these reformers, however, clerical welfare was but a necessary way station along the road to a much more glorious final destination: the creation of a "professional" clergy, which, eventually liberated from its estate (soslovie) strait-
jacket, would be able to use newly honed pastoral talents to cultivate a more pious—and hence more politically loyal—flock. By implication, parish revitalization was itself part of this latest wager on the pious. The reformers' goals and parish realities, however, proved to be at odds with each other. Western historiography, in particular Gregory Freeze's The Parish Clergy in Nineteenth-Century Russia, has stressed that even by 1870, parish councils remained an almost tragi-comical failure: relatively few had been created; parishioners rejected their clergy's suggestions to launch them; most of their funds went to the construction or renovation of churches.

But Freeze's aforementioned study, which offers the most in-depth English-language treatment of the popechitel'stva to date, in fact stops at 1870. The history of the church councils after that date—a period during which even rural parishioners began to press ever more vigorously their claims for greater autonomy in parish affairs—is an important subject about which we know relatively little. The story we do have has been compiled by listening to the voices of state bureaucrats, bishops, and other church reformers, who complained loudly and incessantly about the incontestible failure of the church councils to generate enough funds, and to use the resources they did have to support parish schools, welfare efforts, and—most alarmingly in their view—the parish clergy. Their somewhat obsessive complaints about what the church councils were not doing, in fact, all but drowned out their acknowledgement, usually expressed in muted tones, of how parishioners were in fact using the popechitel'stva. Historians have echoed the reformers' expressions of disappointment about the church councils' failure to revitalize parish life in ways scripted by the state. Even when parishioners did express and act on

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2. Prominent reformers such as Minister of Interior P. A. Valuev and Procurator of the Holy Synod D. A. Tolstoi were ultimately interested in cultivating not only the political loyalty of parishioners but of parish clergy themselves, as discussed in Freeze, Parish Clergy, esp. 237-47.

3. As we will see below, the parish revitalization sought by political elites, and the parish autonomy desired by parishioners, were almost invariably two very different things. On the persistent efforts of Tsarist political elites to reshape popular piety and to promote church reform for political purposes well before the 1860s, see ibid., esp. 4-10 and idem, The Russian Levites: Parish Clergy in the Eighteenth Century (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1977), esp. 179-83 and A. V. Kartashev, Ocherki po istorii russkoj tserkvi (Moscow: Nauka, 1991) 2: esp. 514.

4. See Freeze, Parish Clergy, 290-92.