September 1, 1939 not only marked the beginning of unprecedented suffering for the inhabitants of Central and Eastern Europe. It also ushered in the beginning of the end for the old world of Eastern Galicia. For centuries, Ukrainians, Poles, Jews, Armenians, Germans, and other peoples had succeeded in living side by side in this multi-ethnic region. About 318,000 people were living in Lviv, Eastern Galicia’s largest city, in 1939.. The population then was composed of 51% Roman Catholics, most of them Poles ( 30% Jews, and 16% Greek Catholics, the majority of whom were Ukrainians%. After 1945, only about 7% of the large pre-war population remained in the city. This number is truly staggering and inevitably prompts consideration of on the cruelty of the two totalitarian regimes that successively controlled this land. Their destruction of everything that had been created and evolved here over centuries – the people, the cultural heritage, and the institutions around which the peoples had gathered – was truly merciless.

One of the ancient institutions that survived the war but did not survive post-war Sovietization was the Greek Catholic Church, one of the successor churches to the Baptism of Volodymyr in 988.[[1]](#footnote-1) In 1939, it was the largest of the Eastern Catholic Churches. With its own law (Ecclesia sui juris), it remained united with and under the authority of the Apostolic See while preserving the Byzantine liturgical tradition.

For centuries, the Greek Catholic Church was the institution through which Galician Ukrainians preserved their culture and national identity. Until 1596, this church, the Kyiv Orthodox Metropolis, was under the jurisdiction of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople. In 1594, the bishops of this metropolis, led by Metropolitan Mykhailo Rahoza (c. 1540–1599), expressed their desire to restore unity with the Catholic Church. The Apostolic See responded favorably to this request, and on December 23, 1595, Pope Clement VIII (1536–1605) officially proclaimed the acceptance of the Kyiv Metropolis into communion with the Catholic Church. The following year, in October 1596, a synod of bishops was held in Brest, where the bishops, led by Metropolitan Mykhailo Rahoza, proclaimed the Union.[[2]](#footnote-2) Thus, from that time on, the church is referred to as the Kyiv Uniate Metropolis.[[3]](#footnote-3)

During the 17th century, the Kyiv Uniate Metropolis experienced difficult times of political instability in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth.[[4]](#footnote-4) In the 18th century, it enjoyed significant growth, reaching approximately 4.5 million faithful at that period.[[5]](#footnote-5) However, with the several partitions of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth late in the century, the Church began declining within its old borders.[[6]](#footnote-6) In the area that became part of the Russian Empire, this Church existed until 1839, when it was dissolved at the insistence of Emperor Nicholas I (1796–1855). The last Uniate diocese within the Russian Empire—that in Chełm—was dissolved by the Russian authorities in 1875.[[7]](#footnote-7)

The fate of the part of the Kyiv Uniate Metropolis that came under Habsburg rule during the First Partition of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in 1772 was quite different.[[8]](#footnote-8) Unlike the Romanovs, the Habsburgs supported the Uniate bishops within their state. Nonetheless, the Church first had to undergo a name change. In 1774, Empress Maria Theresa (1717–1780) issued a decree banning the use of the word “Uniate,” considering it offensive, and introduced the term “Greek Catholic” instead.[[9]](#footnote-9) From that time, the term “Greek Catholic Church” emerged and was used when referring to the church. Another important event for Eastern Galicia during that period was the Edict of Toleration of 1781 issued by Emperor Joseph II (1741–1790), which granted equal rights to people of different confessions, particularly to both Greek and Roman Catholics. The peak of Habsburg support for the Greek Catholic Church came with its restoration of the Galician Metropolis in 1808,[[10]](#footnote-10) which had once been active intermittently between 1302 and 1401. After this, Lviv became the seat of the Galician metropolitans, who had their residence on St. George’s Hill next to the St. George’s Archcathedral.[[11]](#footnote-11)

1. For more on the Baptism of Volodymyr in 988, see: N. Yakovenko, An Outline of the History of Medieval and Early Modern Ukraine. Kyiv: Krytyka Publishing, 2006, 47–52; G. Ostrogorsky, History of Byzantium. Lviv: Litopys Publishing, 2002, 266–67. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For more on the events surrounding the adoption of the Union of Brest in 1596, see B. Gudziak, Crisis and Reform. The Kyivan Metropolitanate, the Patriarchate of Constantinople, and the Genesis of the Union of Brest. Cambridge: Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute, 1998; N. Yakovenko, An Outline,. 213–20; I. Nahayevskyi, History of the Roman Universal Pontiffs, Vol. II. Rome: Ukrainian Catholic University of St. Clement Pope, 1967, 299–318. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. I. Skochylyas, Slavia Unita in the History and Culture of the Kyiv Metropolis from the Late 16th to the 18th Century. Lviv-Kyiv: Ukrainian Catholic University Press, 2024. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. N. Yakovenko, An Outline, 313–69; N. Davies, God’s Playground: A History of Poland. Kyiv: Solomiya Pavlychko “Osnovy” Publishing, 2008, 388–409. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. N. Yakovenko, An Outline, 491–93; see also: The Zamość Provincial Synod of the Ruthenian Uniate Church of 1720, Vol. I: Acts and Decrees / Compiled by R. Paranko, Ih. Skochylas, Ir. Skochylas. Lviv: Ukrainian Catholic University Press, 2021. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. For more on the partitions of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and the Kyiv Uniate Metropolis, see: L. Wolff, Disunion within the Union. The Uniate Church and the Partitions of Poland. Cambridge: Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute, 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. I. Nahayevskyi, History of the Roman Universal Pontiffs, 158–70. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. For more on Eastern Galicia under Habsburg rule, see also L. Wolff, The Idea of Galicia: History and Fantasy in Habsburg Political Culture. Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 2010. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Y. Hrytsak, An Outline of the History of Ukraine: The Formation of a Modern Nation in the 19th–20th Centuries. Kyiv: Yakaboo Publishing, 84; N. Yakovenko, An Outline, 493. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. See The Division of the Kyiv and the Elevation of the Galician Uniate Metropolises: Documents and Materials from the Vatican Archives, 1802–1808 / Compiled, with an introductory article and commentary, translated from French by V. Adadurov. Lviv: Ukrainian Catholic University Press, 2019." [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. It is important to note that St. George's Church in Lviv became a cathedral in 1539, at which time it belonged to the Lviv Diocese of the Kyiv Orthodox Metropolis. In 1700, the Lviv Diocese accepted the Union. For more details on the history of the St. George's Archcathedral, see: Vuytsyk, V. The St. George's Archcathedral in Lviv. LEOPOLITANA. Lviv: VNTL-Klassika, 2013, pp. 136-178. For more on the Lviv Diocese, see: Skochylas, I. The Galician (Lviv) Diocese of the 12th–18th Centuries: Organizational Structure and Legal Status. Lviv: Ukrainian Catholic University Press, 2010 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)