
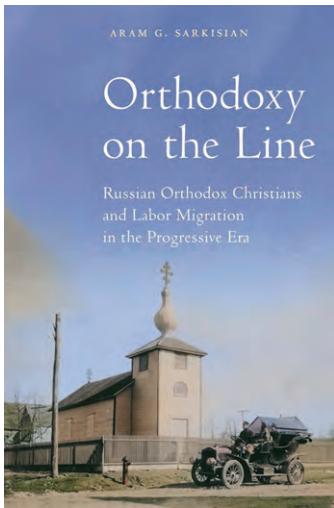


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**Sarkisian, Aram G. 2025. *Orthodoxy on the Line: Russian Orthodox Christians and Labor Migration in the Progressive Era*. New York: New York University Press, 336 pp.**



In the 1890s, a wave of mass conversions to Russian Orthodoxy swept through the Eastern European migrant communities of America's industrial heartland. While Russian Orthodoxy had earlier gained its North American foothold in the Russian colony (and later United States territory) of Alaska, most adherents were not ethnically Russian, but rather Rusyn converts in the industrial region stretching from Minnesota to Massachusetts. Led by Fr. Alexis Toth, a former Greek Catholic priest in Minneapolis, tens of thousands of Rusyns joined the transnational Russophile community of believers that Sarkisian calls "American Orthodox Rus."

The church reached its greatest density among working-class migrants in the industrial Midwest and Northeast. Sarkisian highlights the strong working-class character of the church and its core geography overlooked in broader, synthetic histories of American Orthodoxy. A linguistically and

culturally diverse group of migrants cooperated to build American Orthodox Rus'. Rusyns formed the largest contingent, but Ukrainians, Belarusians, and other Slavs including Poles and Slovaks joined as well. Russian congregants were few, as the imperial authorities restricted their migration to the United States, but through Russian priests, funding, and language classes, a Muscovite character prevailed. Without a stateside seminary for many years, priests were sent to Russia for education, where they adopted Russian culture and customs.

American Orthodox Rus' is a Russian-centric framework of the plurinational group of believers who built the chain of onion-domed churches stretching from the metropolises of the Midwest to the region's most remote industrial settlements. Sarkisian balances analysis of these large cities such as Chicago, Detroit, and New York City—where the Tsar funded enormous, ostentatious cathedrals—with far-flung and lesser-known Orthodox outposts including Clayton, Wisconsin; Boswell, Pennsylvania; and Berlin, New Hampshire. From strongholds in major cities and the anthracite coal region, the church evangelized migrants in adjacent localities. Churches in the small towns where many miners, paper pulpers, and farmers lived comprised an essential part of the Orthodox church. Linked through a network of religious newspapers and fraternal organizations, spiritual and financial ties wove these disparate urban and rural communities tightly together.

The book is divided into chronological and thematic halves. "The Vineyard" recounts the beginnings, missionary efforts, and character of the church while "The Toil" addresses the challenges that nearly destroyed the church in the late 1910s: the 1917 Russian Revolution, the 1919 Influenza Pandemic, and political radicalization of parishioners. Sarkisian's account is based on Orthodox church papers, primarily in the Russian language, but also on the Rusyn newspaper *Svit*. Few American religious historians can read these languages, and Sarkisian's reconstruction of the Orthodox world is highly original and closely informed by these new sources. Legal documents from the court system and the Bureau of Investigation (later the FBI) further enrich Sarkisian's novel approach.

Across such vast geographic expanses, Russophilia and Russian administrative structures united believers as they prayed for the health of the Tsar during liturgies, learned Russian chants, and studied Russian in Sunday school courses. By outlining unique functions and categories of Russian Orthodox religious culture—such as *podvig* (heroic deed) and its structure: *blagochinie* (regional deanery) and *sobornost* (conciliar governance)—Sarkisian argues

that the church functioned in a wholly different manner from Roman Catholic and Protestant congregations in the same region, which have received more scholarly attention. The social culture of Russian Orthodoxy, with families of married priests that passed down sacred functions over generations, uniquely shaped gendered relations in religious space in opposition to Greek Catholicism in the United States, which restricted married clergy at the behest of the Vatican and Roman Catholic hierarchy.

We might also consider the limits of American Orthodox Rus' as a framework for understanding this fragmented community of believers. The official name of the Rusyn church was the Russian Orthodox Greek Catholic Church—a title congregations proudly defended in court against Catholic challenges and boldly inscribed on church cornerstones. Many new Orthodox congregations struggled to immediately adopt Russian cultural, ethnic, and religious traditions. For example, when the Cathedral of St. Mary in Minneapolis built a new church after a fire in 1904, the congregation looked to the Dormition Cathedral in Omsk, Russia, for inspiration. However, the style of the church did not replicate the Russian revival original. The Polish-American architect Victor Cordella blended Latin and Russian architectural traditions, borrowing the footprint of the Omsk Cathedral while using arches, columns, and materials typical of Western architecture. Similarly, in McKees Rocks and Frackville, Pennsylvania, Orthodox congregations maintained interior decoration with Western-style art typical of Greek Catholic churches. Located in Slavic neighborhoods with other migrants from Galicia and Carpathian Rus', identity as Orthodox Rus' often overlapped with other racialized and ethnic identities. Many contested the definition and character of American Orthodox Rus': priests and congregations vacillated between Orthodoxy and Greek Catholicism, Ukrainians formed the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, and, as the book explores, priests and congregations frequently clashed over the politics, administration, and finances of American Orthodox Rus'.

Among the work's most important contributions is revealing the extent of political radicalism in Orthodox congregations. Inspired by Russian radicalism, many Orthodox sought to reform church administration in the United States. In the 1910s, an independent movement arose in Orthodox churches across the region, in many cases led by pro-union priests who responded to churchgoers' demands for a more radical religion. This movement—hitherto unrecognized by scholars—created some of the largest and most successful churches: St. George's Cathedral in Chicago and Holy Trinity in Baltimore.

Although both churches rejoined Orthodox denominations, congregants' drive for autonomy and demand for a church that balanced Bolshevism with Orthodoxy attracted government attention. This powerful blend of religion and radicalism terrified American authorities. The nascent Federal Bureau of Investigation dispatched undercover agents to spy on independent Orthodox congregations and the Department of Justice fought to deport Orthodox radicals during the infamous Palmer raids in 1919 and 1920.

For Carpatho-Rusyn scholars, Sarkisian begins to reveal how Russophilia became such an ingrained and influential force among diaspora communities in the United States and the ways in which conversion altered cultural practices. As today's Orthodox communities search for roots, renovate parishes, and make decisions on how to frame ethnic and religious histories, these debates remain fresh. While some congregations maintain Western-style art and celebrate Rusyn identities, others have replaced art influenced by Greek Catholicism with Russian icons, adding a new layer to the complex cultural history of American Orthodox Rus'.

Sarkisian's book is a welcome contribution to religious, migration, and ethnic history. It is the most comprehensive work on Orthodoxy in the industrial United States and helps to reorient narratives of Orthodox Christianity towards themes of labor, radicalism, and conflict absent in more hagiographic accounts of the church. It is also a personal narrative, as Sarkisian possesses family roots in the Orthodox communities of Detroit and aspired to write a regional and distinctly Slavic history. As religious communities in the Rust Belt increasingly investigate their own histories, *Orthodoxy on the Line* is a critical text for scholars, community members, and history enthusiasts. Its accessible and engaging writing makes the text equally attractive for classroom teaching and book club discussion.