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Introduction

Historians of Russia have frequently described the great variety of cultural, political, religious, economic and geographical factors which allowed the originally insignificant principality of Moscow to become in the fourteenth century the capital of a nation and, eventually, to build an empire. Having been a faithful vassal of the Mongol khans and an executioner for their lordship over Russia, the Muscovite prince, by turning against the hated conquerors at the Battle of Kulikovo (1380), acquired sudden credibility for his position of leadership. His successors in the following two centuries would build on the foundations laid by him and would expand Moscow's power into one of the most powerful and lasting empires of European history.

The purpose of this book is not to describe again the emergence of Muscovite Russia, but to examine the cultural, spiritual and political roots of the events of the fourteenth century which gave Moscow the possibility of rising to the position which it came to occupy for so long. The role played in this process by the then already moribund Byzantine empire has to be considered as one of the most important – if not the most important – aspect of Byzantium's contribution to the history of modern Europe.

The 'gathering of Russian lands' around Moscow, the competition between Moscow and Tver, the role of the Golden Horde (the residence of the Mongol khans on the lower Volga river), the military struggle with Lithuania, all these aspects of the rise of Moscow in the fourteenth century have been described in detail, and sometimes brilliantly, by historians of Russia. All of them, however, have limited themselves, almost exclusively, to consulting Russian sources and visualizing the facts as episodes of Russian national history only.

In the present book an attempt is made at widening the perspective and envisaging the birth of the Russian empire in a broader setting: that of Eastern Europe as a whole, and particularly of Byzantine imperial diplomacy, and including also such factors as

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the commercial activities of the Italian merchant-city-republics – Genoa and Venice – which controlled the commercial routes leading from the Mediterranean to China through the Black Sea.

Our approach to the history of Eastern Europe in the fourteenth century is made possible not only through the availability of Byzantine diplomatic sources (which are very insufficiently used by historians of the period), but also thanks to recent research accomplished by both Western and Russian historians, to whom credit will be given, as we attempt to synthesize the results of their work.

The Byzantine ecclesiastical and imperial diplomacy of the fourteenth century in Eastern Europe is better known to us than that of other periods of Byzantine history. While practically all the archives of the imperial and patriarchal chanceries of Byzantium perished either in 1204, when the city was sacked by the Crusaders, or in 1453, when it fell under the Turks, two volumes of official documents of the patriarchate, containing patriarchal (and some imperial) decisions taken between 1315 and 1402 are preserved in two Vienna manuscripts. What appears when these documents are interpreted in the light of the contemporary political and intellectual history of Byzantium and confronted with the evidence available in other Byzantine South-Slavic and Russian sources, is a continuous administrative activity in areas directly dependent upon the ecclesiastical jurisdiction of the Byzantine patriarchate, and particularly the territories of the former Kievan state, by now politically divided between Poland, the Grand-duchy of Lithuania and the Mongol empire. This activity involves not only ecclesiastical affairs, but also purely political issues, which directly concern the person and the power of the 'Metropolitan of Kiev and all Russia', an appointee of Byzantium, residing permanently in Moscow since 1308.

The documents contained in the Vienna manuscripts and published as early as 1860 have of course been known to historians of Byzantium and Russia ever since. These historians, however, still underestimate the impact of Byzantine diplomacy in Russia, mainly because they tend to ignore the reality of what Dimitri Obolensky, in a remarkable recent book, called the 'Byzantine Commonwealth', i.e., the supra-national idea of an association of Christian peoples, to which the emperor and the 'ecumenical patriarch' of Constantinople provided a symbolic leadership – even if each of these peoples was fully independent politically and economically. In this book, we will try to show that it is not only

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possible, but also historically necessary for historians of Byzantium, of the Southern Slavic nations, and of Russia, to envisage the major events of fourteenth-century East European history as politically and ideologically correlated. Byzantium did in fact exercise, in the framework of its 'Commonwealth', the role of a universal centre, parallel to that of Rome in the Latin West. But while the innumerable papal letters and other documents of the papal curia are still preserved and available to scholars, the violent end which Byzantium suffered in 1453 has suppressed scholarly access to Byzantium's past. Its historic role was thus largely obscured, not only through the well-known anti-Byzantine prejudice of Western historians, but also through lack of objective evidence. It is time that the picture be corrected at least in those areas where evidence is available: the direct administrative power exercised by the Byzantine patriarchate over the Russian Church, which represented the only structure holding together the various Russian principalities, and the continuous spiritual and intellectual impact of Byzantium upon the Slavic countries. In both these areas, in the fourteenth century, Byzantine influence was paradoxically in the ascendant, in spite of the extreme political weakness of the Byzantine empire: the monastic revival in the Byzantine world and its impact upon the activities of the patriarchate contributed to this extraordinary new energy of the Byzantine Church, which was also communicated to the other centres of the 'Byzantine Commonwealth'.

Geography and economy made contacts inevitable between Russians and Byzantines since the very inception of Russia as a state, and of the people called *Rus'* as a nation. The original Russian state, which appeared in the ninth century under the leadership of a dynasty of Varangian, or Scandinavian origin, used as its economic, political and military base the trade route 'from the Varangians to the Greeks' which linked the Baltic and the Black Seas. It was essentially a river-route, following the course of the Neva, the Volkhov, the Lovat' and the Dnieper. The Russian fortress-cities of Novgorod and Kiev controlled the route. The importance of the route – hence the economic prosperity of the Kievan state – was linked to the Arab control of the Mediterranean: the northern passage had become an essential connection between Byzantium and Western Europe.

Having successfully contained the Arab and Bulgarian conquerors and surmounted the internal crisis of iconoclasm, the

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Byzantine empire under its glorious Macedonian dynasty (867–1056) entered a period of consolidation and spectacular expansion. In the Middle East, the Balkans and Italy, this expansion took the form of direct military reoccupation of former Roman territories. In Central Europe and in Russia, Byzantine civilization penetrated as the vehicle of Christian mission. In 867, Patriarch Photius announced to the world that the 'Rus'' (οἱ Ῥῶς), who had recently launched a fierce attack at Constantinople itself, had accepted a Christian bishop from Byzantium; but we know nothing more about the organization of the Church in Russia at that early period.

During the following century, Russia remained, for Byzantium, a basic source of many essential raw materials – furs, wax, honey, slaves – and thus the object of continuous diplomatic concern, well described by Emperor Constantine VII Porphyrogenetos in his *De administrando imperio*. However, peaceful diplomacy was not sufficient to maintain the commercial route open and the materials coming: the Russians were frequently able to impose their conditions by force and, at times, menaced Constantinople. The Russian prince Svyatoslav could be contained only by the long and bloody military campaign of Emperor John Tzimisces (969–76).

But Constantinople was not, for the Russians, an object of military blackmail and economic greed only. In the tenth century, it reached the height of its cultural and political development. The 'New Rome' on the Bosphorus was the unquestionable centre of the civilized Christian world. With a population close to a million, with its imperial palaces and hippodrome and, above all, its 'Great Church' of St Sophia – by far the biggest and most magnificent religious building in the early medieval world – Byzantium exercised on all the Slavic 'barbarians' a fascination with which no Christian centre of the West could compete. Thus, it was able to win their allegiance not only by the force of arms, but by making them acknowledge the superiority of its Christian civilization.

The Kievan princess Olga, the mother of Svyatoslav, personally adopted Christianity. During a visit to Constantinople, she was received with honour by Emperor Constantine VII (957). Her grandson Vladimir, son of Svyatoslav, followed her example: he not only personally received baptism, but also made Christianity Russia's state religion. After successfully intervening in a Byzantine civil war, he even became brother-in-law of the greatest of all emperors of the Macedonian dynasty, Basil II himself, by marrying the emperor's sister (989). Christian scriptures and Byzantine liturgy were already available in the Slavic language. The transla-

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tions were made in Moravia by St Cyril and St Methodius (863) and perfected in Orthodox Bulgaria: the Russians faced no language barrier in adopting the new religion. Neither were they facing the danger of Byzantine political domination, which was so heavily felt by the Southern Slavs in the eleventh and twelfth centuries: distance made Russia virtually inaccessible to Byzantine conquest. The adoption of Byzantine Christianity was in fact a free choice of the Russians and they always remembered it as such. In the Russian 'Primary Chronicle', written in Kiev in the eleventh century, and which served as a preface to all subsequent records of Russia's existence as a nation, generations of Russians read the account of Vladimir's envoys to Constantinople, after their witnessing of the Byzantine liturgy in Haghia Sophia: 'They led us to the edifices where they worship their God, and we knew not whether we were in heaven, or on earth. For on earth there is no such splendour or such beauty, and we are at a loss how to describe it. We only know that there God dwells among men.'[1] This famous episode illustrates the universalism and missionary impact of Byzantine Christianity.

After the Muslim conquest of the entire Middle East with its ancient non-Greek Eastern communities, it would appear that the Byzantine Church, splendidly isolated in the Greek-speaking territories controlled by the Empire, could have simply become the national Church of the Greeks, as did, for example, the Armenian Church, which remained forever bound by the limits of Armenian culture. But the missionary movement of the ninth and tenth centuries, which expanded the reach of Byzantine Christianity not only throughout the Balkans, but also throughout Eastern Europe up to the Arctic Ocean, has preserved the universal, or 'catholic' vocation of the Orthodox Church, as well as the worldwide significance of Byzantine Christian civilization.

For the Byzantines, the 'baptism of the Russians' signified their integration into the empire itself. And, in a sense, the Russians certainly accepted the principle of imperial supremacy over the whole Christian world. However, the Byzantines and their Slavic converts did not always agree on the practical implications of this common belonging to a universal Christian structure. As compared to the other Orthodox Slavs – Bulgarians and Serbs – the Russians were more loyal to Byzantium. Until the dramatic shift following

[1] *Povest' vremennykh let*, ed. D. S. Likhachev and B. A. Romanov, Moscow–Leningrad, 1950, I, p. 75; S. H. Cross, and O. P. Sherbowitz-Wetzor, transl., *The Russian Primary Chronicle*, Cambridge, Mass., 1953, p. 111.

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upon the council of Florence (1438), they generally nourished feelings of respect towards Constantinople and its patriarchate, recognizing in it the source of their religious faith and the centre of a superior civilization. This respect was moderated only by occasional apprehension of Greek 'trickery' which appears in the chronicles and other sources.

Under Vladimir and, especially his son Yaroslav, Kiev, the capital of Russia, rapidly adopted Byzantine civilization as the main criterion of its own cultural development. The cathedral church, built by Yaroslav, was dedicated to 'St Sophia', the Divine Wisdom, and decorated with mosaics by the best Greek masters available (1037–46). The monastery 'of the Caves' (Pechersky) in Kiev adopted the rule of the Studios monastery of Constantinople. Byzantine legal, historical and theological literature, whenever it was not already available in translations made in Bulgaria, was translated anew.

This cultural and religious dependence upon Constantinople, which implied the recognition of the Byzantine emperor as the head of the Christian 'inhabited earth' (*oikouméne*), did not prevent, in the early period, occasional military confrontations with Byzantium. In 1043, at the very time when St Sophia in Kiev was being decorated by Greek mosaicists and painters, a Russian fleet attacked Constantinople, as it had done in the past, when Kievan Rus′ was still headed by pagan Varangian princes. War had apparently started by a conflict of commercial interests. Defeated by the Greeks, the Rus′ retreated, and the confrontation ended with a younger son of Yaroslav marrying a Byzantine princess, probably the daughter of Constantine IX Monomachus (1046). A son, Vladimir, born of this marriage and surnamed *Monomakh*, will play an eminent political role in Kiev and, eventually, become a symbol of Byzantine imperial inheritance in Russia.

After Yaroslav's attempt, no direct Russian offensive on Constantinople was ever repeated, perhaps because Kievan Russia, after Yaroslav's death (1054), lost its political unity. The country became further and further divided into independent principalities (*udely*), each ruled by a descendant of Vladimir and Yaroslav, but paying only nominal allegiance to the 'Grand-prince' of Kiev. Various principalities occasionally joined different foreign alliances and fought against each other. Relations with Constantinople became more difficult when, in the twelfth century, new nomadic invaders, the Cumans, conquered much of the southern Russian steppe and disrupted the Black Sea trade. Three separate political

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centres – anticipating the polarizations of the fourteenth century, which we will discuss later – emerged in what was the unified Russia of Vladimir and Yaroslav: the Grand-principality of Kiev (gradually losing its ancient prestige), the north-eastern principality of Suzdal and the south-western principality of Galicia. It is noteworthy that during the 1140s and 1150s, in the reign of Byzantine Emperor Manuel I Comnenos, both Kiev and Galicia vacillated in their solidarity with Byzantium and, at times, allied themselves with Hungary, then a fierce enemy of the empire of Constantinople. The status of north-eastern Russia as the faithful ally of the Byzantine emperor during these events was noticed by Byzantine historians and may have been an anticipation of the understanding and mutual support which existed also later, in the fourteenth century, between the empire and the leader of the north-eastern principalities – successor of the Suzdalian princes – the Grand-prince of Moscow.

Eventually, the shrewd diplomacy of Manuel I and the sense of belonging to a single Christian Commonwealth prevailed in Kiev, and Galicia as well, but neither the Byzantines nor the Russians could foresee the forthcoming catastrophes which were to befall the entire realm of Byzantine Christendom in the thirteenth century.

We will come back to the consequence of these tragic events: the sack of Constantinople by the Crusaders in 1204 and the conquest of Russia by the Mongols, which started in 1223 and was practically completed with the fall of Kiev in 1240. With independent Bulgaria and Serbia both toying – at least until 1220 – with the possibility of allying themselves with the triumphant Western papacy, it appeared that the Byzantine Orthodox world had finally collapsed. These events of the thirteenth century will be described only to illustrate the remarkable continuity of cultural and political solidarity of the Orthodox world which survived the cataclysms and faced the events of the fourteenth century with a new dynamism.

In 1261, Michael VIII Palaeologus put an end to the parasitical existence of the Latin empire in Constantinople. He did not succeed, however, in restoring fully the former power of the Eastern Roman emperors. His successors on the throne of Constantinople were to be preoccupied with survival, not expansion. And mere survival would be possible only through a combination of diplomatic strategems and pure luck, until finally the end came in 1453.

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A shadow of its glorious past, with its territory gradually reduced to the city of Constantinople itself and its suburbs, the Byzantine empire still retained prestige and influence in the Slavic lands, and particularly in Russia. In the fourteenth century the former Kievan realm was divided as in the past between princes of the 'Rurikide' dynasty, but these were also obliged to pay allegiance to powerful foreign overlords: the Mongol khan of the Golden Horde, the Grand-prince of Lithuania, and, in Galicia (after 1340), the king of Poland. The major topics of our study will concern: the gradual rise of the principality of Moscow from the position of a small vassal of the Tatar khan to that of a potential leader of the Byzantine Orthodox world; the contribution of Byzantium to that development, exercised primarily through the activity of the 'Metropolitan of Kiev and all Russia', a Byzantine appointee, who – by deliberate choice of the patriarchate of Constantinople and the Byzantine government – resided not in Kiev, but in Moscow, and, as head of the Russian Church, controlled the only administrative structure which encompassed *all* of Russia; the problem of the distinct political and cultural development in north-eastern Russia and the southern and western parts of the former Kievan realm, a development which eventually led to the emergence of distinct 'Great Russian', 'Ukrainian' and 'Byelorussian' national groups; the extent of the Byzantine cultural and religious influence, dominated by the monastic (or 'hesychast') revival in Byzantium, and which generally tended to transcend local, national and political divisions; the nature of the religious 'zealotism', coming from Byzantium and the South-Slavic countries, which exercised a decisive influence upon culture, literature and art in all the countries of the 'Byzantine Commonwealth', and its relation to other cultural influences coming from other sources; the question whether the Muscovite empire did eventually fulfil the expectations of the religious and intellectual leaders of the fourteenth century, or whether it adopted ideologies significantly distinct from the Byzantine inheritance.

It is our hope that bringing together all these issues will contribute to a more comprehensive picture of the history of Eastern Europe during the late Middle Ages and thus lead to a better understanding of this area of the world, whose impact upon the history of mankind is a fact of the present, as well as of the past.

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I

Byzantine civilization in Russia

Since the time when, *ca.* 838, an embassy of the people named *Rhōs* (οἱ Ῥῶς) was received in Constantinople,[1] the Byzantine government placed the activities of these northern barbarians and their relations with the Empire on a high-priority list in its foreign policy. The reasons were obvious: the *Rhōs* controlled the commercial route between the Black and the Baltic Seas (an important connection with northern and western Europe since the presence of Arab fleets had made the Mediterranean insecure); they were natural competitors of the Asiatic nomads (Pechenegs, Cumans) who roamed the east European plains and, therefore, could serve as useful allies of Byzantium; and finally, whenever their feelings towards the Empire were not friendly, they were able to attack Constantinople in quick raids across the Black Sea. Whereas the exact origins of the name *Rhōs* are obscure, it is undoubtedly connected with the Varangian (Scandinavian) military clans, which ruled the Slavic populations in eastern Europe, and introduced the well-known strategy of Norman warfare in the area of the Black Sea, menacing the capital itself.[2]

The Greek term *Rhōs* which appears in the early Byzantine texts corresponds to the Slavic *Rus'*. It designates *a people*, and not a country. The original Slavic name for the territory inhabited by the *Rus'* was *Russkaya zemlya* ('the land of the *Rus'*'). However, starting in the tenth century, Byzantine texts (cf. in particular Constantine Porphyrogenetos) speak of Ῥωσία, as the country of the *Rhōs*, which included the vast territories from the Carpathian

[1] Dölger, *Regesten*, I, No. 438.

[2] Aside from many mentions of the *Rhōs* in Byzantine, Latin, and Arab sources of the ninth to twelfth centuries, the most important texts about Byzantino-Russian relations in that period are (a) The writings of Patriarch Photius (two homilies 'On the attack of the *Rhōs*', ed. S. Aristarches, Φωτίου λόγοι καὶ ὁμιλίαι, II, Constantinople, 1900, pp. 5–57; Eng. tr. C. Mango, *The Homilies of Photius*, Cambridge, Mass., 1958, pp. 82–110. *Encyclical* of 866, PG CII, col. 736–7). (b) The Treatise *De Administrando Imperio* by Emperor Constantine VII Porphyrogenetos (ed. R. J. H. Jenkins, Dumbarton Oaks Texts, I–II, with a detailed commentary by D. Obolensky). (c) *The Russian Primary Chronicle*, ed. et tr. cit.

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mountains to Rostov and Suzdal′ in the north-east. The Latin equivalent of Ῥωσία is, of course, *Russia*. The very vastness of the territory of the *Rhōs* is reflected in some texts which speak of it as μεγάλη Ῥωσία, 'great Russia'.[3] The term *Rhōsia* is therefore the standard Byzantine name for 'the land of the *Rus*''. In Russia itself, however, the terms *Rus*′ and *Russkaya zemlya* were the only ones used until the fourteenth century. The Greek form *Rhōsia* and its Latin equivalent, *Russia*, were accepted in the fifteenth century both in Muscovy and in Galicia-Volhynia (later known as 'Ukraine') to designate the entire territory of the ancient country of the *Rus*′.[4] The ancient term *Rus*′ itself regained popularity only with the romantic and Slavophile trends in the nineteenth century, and was then generally applied to the country, rather than to the people inhabiting it.

Since the adoption of Christianity as the state religion of the Kievan principality (988), the influence of Byzantine civilization upon Russia became the determining factor of Russian civilization. The very extent and character of that influence should be understood in the light of the three main elements whose combination determined the life of Byzantine society: the Roman political tradition, the Greek literary heritage, and the Orthodox Christian faith. 'Without all three the Byzantine way of life would have been inconceivable', writes G. Ostrogorsky.[5]

Obviously, these three essential components of Byzantine civilization could not be simply 'exported' to Russia. Their interrelation, on Russian soil, was quite different and they had to compete with other influences, determined either by local conditions, or by contacts with other foreign civilizations. In any case, the political, economic and military connections with Russia, which existed before 988 and are so vividly described by the Emperor Constantine Porphyrogenetos in his *De Administrando Imperio*, acquired a totally new significance when Russia accepted from Byzantium its religious faith, its ecclesiastical hierarchy, its literature in translation, its art, its political ideology.

[3] Neilos Doxopatris, *Notitia patriarchatum*, PG, CXXXII, col. 1105.
[4] See A. V. Soloviev, 'Le nom byzantin de la Russie' in *Musagetes, Contributions to the History of Slavic Literature and Culture*, ed. by D. Čiževskij, s'-Gravenhage, 1957; see also, by the same author '*Reges* et *Regnum Russiae* au Moyen-Age', *Byzantion*, 36, 1966, pp. 144–73.
[5] *History*, p. 27.

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