CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-54323-1 - A Concise History of Russia
Paul Bushkovitch
Excerpt
More information

I

Russia before Russia

Russian history begins with the polity that scholars have come to call Kiev Rus, the ancestor of modern Russia. Rus was the name that the inhabitants gave to themselves and their land, and Kiev was its capital. In modern terms, it embraced all of Belarus, the northern half of the Ukraine, and the center and northwest of European Russia. The peoples of these three modern states are the Eastern Slavs, who all speak closely related languages derived from the East Slavic language of Kiev Rus. In the west its neighbors were roughly the same as the neighbors of those three states today: Hungary, Poland, the Baltic peoples, and Finland. In the north Kiev Rus stretched toward the Arctic Ocean, with Slavic farmers only beginning to move into the far north.

Beyond the Slavs to the east was Volga Bulgaria, a small Turkic Islamic state that came into being in about AD 950 where modern Tatarstan stands today. Beyond Volga Bulgaria were the Urals and Siberia, vast forests and plains inhabited by small tribes who lived by hunting and gathering food. The core of Kiev Rus was along the route that ran from northern Novgorod south to Kiev along the main rivers. There in the area of richest soil lay the capital, Kiev. Even farther to the south of Kiev began the steppe.

The lands of Kiev Rus lay in the forest zone of the great East European plain. There are no mountains or even large ranges of hills to break this plain between Poland and the Urals. The forest zone is deciduous in the south around Kiev – oak, beech, chestnut, and poplar trees, while farther north the predominant forests were and

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-54323-1 - A Concise History of Russia
Paul Bushkovitch
Excerpt
More information

are composed of the northern coniferous trees: pine, fir, and birch. The best soil, dark and moist, was in the south, where fields opened out among the trees closer to the steppe. In the northern part of the forest zone the soil was sandy and marshes were frequent, thus agriculture was rarer and concentrated around lakes and along the great rivers. The great rivers were the arteries of life. The Dniepr, Western Dvina, Volga, Oka, and the smaller rivers around Novgorod (the Volkhov and others) provided routes to the south and east via Lake Ladoga to the Baltic Sea. Along them princes and warriors, merchants and peasant farmers could move freely, at least in the summer months when the rivers were not frozen.

In the west and east of Kiev Rus the boundaries were those of political control and ethnicity. In the south the ethnic and political boundary was at its basis an ecological boundary. South of the Kievan lands to the Black and Caspian Seas lay the great steppe – flat grasslands with few trees and the "black earth" – dry but not arid. The long grass concealed enormous numbers of animals, including antelopes, wild horses, and even panthers, while the rivers supported myriad ducks and wild geese as well as sturgeon and other fish. Centuries later, the Russian writer Gogol wrote of the steppe: "The farther along in the steppe the more beautiful it became . . . The plow had never touched the infinite waves of wild growth. Only the horses that hid in the grass as in a forest had stamped it down. Nothing in nature could have been better. The whole surface of the earth was like a green and gold ocean, on which millions of various flowers splashed" (*Taras Bulba*). This steppe was actually the western extension of the great Eurasian steppe that extended all the way to Manchuria, which covers today's Mongolia, northern China, Xinjiang, and Kazakstan. From time immemorial it was the land of the nomads and the great nomadic empires – first the Iranian Scythians and Sarmatians of classical antiquity, who were then later replaced by the fearsome Huns and then wave after wave of Turkic peoples. These nomads did not wander aimlessly over the landscape, but instead they followed a regular annual migration over a greater or lesser area. They kept close to the valleys of the great rivers – the Danube, Dniepr, Don, and Volga – where they found winter and summer pastures for their animals. The nomads did not try to settle in the forests, but they used them as a source of booty and slaves,

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-54323-1 - A Concise History of Russia
Paul Bushkovitch
Excerpt
More information

and when they could, they also laid tribute on the settled peoples. For centuries this had been the relationship of nomad and farmer throughout northern Asia and beyond. The steppe and its nomads were to form a crucial element in the history of Kiev Rus, and later Russia, into the eighteenth century.

Archeology tells us a great deal about the settlement and life of the early Eastern Slavs. They were certainly the predominant group along the central axis of Rus from Kiev to Novgorod by at least AD 800, and were still moving north and east, settling new lands. They had built many villages and fortifications of earth with wooden palisades, and they buried their dead with the tools and weapons necessary for life in the next world. From other sources we have some idea of their gods: Perun, the god of thunder and the sky, was apparently the chief god, but there was also Veles, the god of cattle; Stribog, the wind god; and the more shadowy fertility gods, Rod and Rozhanitsa. Around Kiev there were round spaces formed of stones that seem to have been sites of the cult, but Slavic paganism never had any written texts (or none that survived) to give us a glimpse of their actual beliefs.

Reconstructing the political history of the early Slavs is equally complicated. Legend says that the Viking Rurik came from over the sea with two brothers to rule Novgorod in AD 862. This is a classic foundation legend found in many cultures and as such was crucial to the self-consciousness of the subsequent ruling dynasty. The text, the Kievan *Primary Chronicle* of 1116, which recounts the legend, is vague about the establishment of Rurik's descendants in Kiev. Supposedly the Viking Oleg went down the rivers and took the city in 882, but his relationship to Rurik was not specified. Did either of them even exist? Prince Igor, allegedly Rurik's son, was a real person who did rule from Kiev (913–945), until a rebellious tribe killed him. The clan ancestor remained Rurik, who thus gave his name to the ruling dynasty, the Rurikovichi.

The Rurikovich dynasty was originally Scandinavian, as legend and the early names suggest: Oleg from Norse Helge and Igor from Ingvar. Our unique written source, the *Primary Chronicle*, called them Varangians, one of the names for Scandinavians used in Byzantium. In other places it said they were called Rus, not Varangians. Further on, the text localized Rus in the Kiev area, but most it often

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-54323-1 - A Concise History of Russia
Paul Bushkovitch
Excerpt
More information

called the whole state and people Rus. The author was serving his rulers, identifying princes and people, and leaving the historian with a muddle virtually impossible to sort out. In any case the first Rurikovichi were undoubtedly Scandinavian and their appearance in Rus was part of the expansion of the Scandinavian peoples in the Viking age. Unfortunately the archeological evidence does not fit the legends in the *Primary Chronicle* very well. Viking finds are concentrated for these early centuries around the southern rim of Lake Ladoga and in the town of Old Ladoga. The chronicle stories tried to place them in Novgorod, but Novgorod did not even come into existence until about AD 950, after the dynasty of Rurik was already established in Kiev. And in Scandinavia itself there were no sagas of Viking triumphs and wars in Russia to match those recounting the conquest of Iceland and the British Isles. In the lands that were once part of Kiev Rus, there are no runestones memorializing the great warriors and their deaths, such as those that cover Scandinavia and the western islands where the Vikings roamed. All we can say for sure is that a group of warriors whose base was probably Ladoga, with its Scando-Slavic-Finnish community, came to Kiev around AD 900 and began to rule that area, quickly establishing their authority over the whole vast area of Kiev Rus.

The world of AD 950 looked very different from how we might imagine it today. Western Europe was an impoverished collection of weak petty kingdoms and local dynasties. The great Carolingian Empire was now a century in the past and the classic feudal society of medieval Europe was just coming into being. In France the great regional lords and barons owed only the most theoretical obedience to their king. The greatest power in the north for the moment was Denmark, as the Danish kings controlled much of England and the Vikings had small kingdoms in Ireland and Scotland. The Emperor still reigned in Germany, and in Italy the papacy was still under his thumb, while the regional rulers of Germany and Italy grew more and more independent. Most of the Iberian Peninsula was under Arab rule, with a few tiny Christian principalities hanging on in the north.

The great powers and centers of civilization were the Arab Caliphate and the Byzantine Empire. Only a few centuries earlier the Arabs had taken Islam to the far corners of western Eurasia,

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-54323-1 - A Concise History of Russia
Paul Bushkovitch
Excerpt
More information

to Central Asia and Spain, and the Abbasid Caliphate in Baghdad was now the center of that world. These were the great centuries of medieval Arab culture – the time of the translations of Aristotle and other works of Greek learning and of the Islamic commentary and development of Greek ideas and Greek science. The Caliphate was immensely rich, and the many coin hoards found on the Rus lands testify to its trade with northern neighbors. Even more important to Kiev Rus was Byzantium. The Greeks had recovered from the immense shock of the Arab conquests of the seventh and eighth centuries, and by AD 900, a revived Byzantium was master of Anatolia and the southern Balkans. Theirs was a complex civilization, a Christian society with a rich monastic culture and at the same time the heir of classical antiquity. While monks spent their days in liturgy and contemplation, their relatives and patrons were reading Homer and Thucydides, Plato and Demosthenes. Laymen wrote the empire's history not as monkish chronicles in simplified language like those of Western Europe, but in pure Attic Greek following the models of the ancients. The Byzantine Empire was also a bureaucratic state on the late Roman model, dependent on written Roman law and paper documentation. Boys were set to learn all this material from a young age, following the sequence of subjects and texts already laid down in Roman times. For the Byzantines did not call themselves Greeks but Romans, *Rhomaioi,* and their country was to them still Rome.

The Byzantines were not the immediate neighbors of Kiev Rus and communication was difficult. The most intimate contact was with the Turkic nomads of the great steppe. From about AD 750, the steppe was ruled by the Khazars, a nomadic people whose center was on the lower Volga and who laid tribute on the southern Rus tribes. The Khazars were a unique people, for their rulers, their kagans, had converted from Turkic paganism to Judaism and had copies of the Hebrew Bible. Nomadic empires were short-lived, and in the middle of the tenth century the Turkic Pechenegs replaced the Khazars, only to be supplanted about a century later by another Turkic people, the Kipchaks – or Polovtsy, as the Rus called them. In the steppe the Kipchaks lived in a series of large groups, each on one of the main rivers, the most important to Rus being those on the Dniepr, Northern Donets, and Don. Their annual migration

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-54323-1 - A Concise History of Russia
Paul Bushkovitch
Excerpt
More information

between winter and summer pastures involved great herds of horses, cattle, sheep, and even camels, with the Kipchaks following them in felt tents mounted on carts. Their religion was the ancient Turkic paganism centered on the sky and the ancestors. Farther east the Kipchaks spread to the lower Volga and the Caucasus and traded with the Byzantine cities in the Crimea. For long periods the Rus and the Kipchaks raided one another's lands almost annually, each group seizing animals, slaves, and hostages from the other. Relations were not only hostile, for the Rus princes took wives among the daughters of the Kipchak chiefs, who in turn took an active part in the internal feuds of the Rurikovich dynasty. Some of the Kipchaks eventually adopted Christianity, apparently from Rus or the Greeks.

WARRIORS AND CHRISTIANS

In the tenth century, Kiev Rus was hardly a state at all. Rather it was an assembly of tribes – Poliane/Rus around Kiev, Slovene in Novgorod, Krivichi and Viatichi in between, and several others – ruled from Kiev by a prince of the dynasty of Rurik and his warrior band or *druzhina*. The tribes paid tribute to the Kiev princes, who visited them occasionally for that purpose. Otherwise the vast majority of the people were peasant farmers scattered in the clearings of the forests and owning no master but the princes of Kiev. This was still a pagan world, as the legend of the death of Prince Oleg suggests. The story was that a wizard predicted that his horse would cause the prince's death. Oleg put the horse out to pasture and forgot the prophecy, but years later he heard that the horse was dead and remembered it. Oleg went out to see the skeleton of the horse as it lay in a field. As he placed his foot on the skull to lament, a poisonous snake crawled out and bit him. Thus the prophecy was fulfilled.

These Kiev princes spent their time on wars that were essentially raiding expeditions against the Khazars, their successors the Pechenegs, and the richest prize of all, the Byzantines. In log boats they could follow the coast to Constantinople itself, and they raided it several times before they made treaties with the emperor regulating their status as traders. Princess Olga, the widow of Prince Igor, became a Christian about this time, perhaps after a journey to Constantinople. She ruled the land until about AD 962, but her son

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-54323-1 - A Concise History of Russia
Paul Bushkovitch
Excerpt
More information

did not follow her beliefs. Sviatoslav, the son of Igor, was the last pure warrior chieftain in Rus; he spent his time fighting the Greeks and other rivals on the Danube and in the steppe. On his campaigns he slept on the ground with his saddle for a pillow and cut strips of raw horsemeat to roast for his food. He met his death in the steppe coming home from a raid on Byzantium, and the Pechenegs made a drinking cup of his skull.

His son Vladimir (AD 972–1015) at first followed in his father's path. He too was a great warrior, and he maintained control over the Kiev lands by placing his many sons to rule over distant territories. He tried to organize their pagan beliefs and set up a temple in Kiev to Perun, the god of thunder, and other deities. Soon, however, he turned to the religion of his grandmother Olga, the Christianity of Constantinople. The chronicle records several stories of his conversion, probably none of them true, but they remain a part of Russian conceptions of the past to this day. One story was that the decision grew out of a raid on the Byzantine town of Chersonesus in the Crimea. The raid ended in a compromise, according to which the Greeks kept their town but Vladimir married a Byzantine princess and became a Christian. Another story was that his neighbors proposed that he adopt their religion. First a Muslim came from Volga Bulgaria and seemed very persuasive until Vladimir learned of the prohibition on alcoholic drinks. "The joy of Rus is drinking," he told the Bulgarian, and sent him away. Then Vladimir turned to Rome, and the rituals and fasts seemed attractive but the objection was that the ancestors of the Rus had rejected Latin Christianity. Then a Khazar Jew came, but Judaism failed because of the exile of the Jews, clearly a sign of God's wrath. Then a Greek "philosopher" came and explained Christianity, giving a brief account of the Old and New Testaments, emphasizing the fall and redemption of man. He was very convincing, but the prince wanted final proof and sent a delegation to Bulgaria, Rome, and Constantinople. The services of the Muslims and Latins failed to win approval, for they lacked beauty. Then the Rus went to Constantinople and attended the liturgy in Saint Sophia, the great cathedral built by Justinian, and reported that they were so impressed that they did not know if they were on earth or in heaven. The choice was for Christianity as understood in Byzantium, and it determined the place of Kiev Rus, and later of Russia, in European culture for centuries.

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-54323-1 - A Concise History of Russia
Paul Bushkovitch
Excerpt
More information

Vladimir ordered the people of Kiev to be baptized in the river Dniepr, but the new religion caught on slowly outside the major centers. Vladimir himself put away his concubines and married the Byzantine princess, but in many of his values he remained part of the pagan world of the warrior prince. Once, several years after the conversion (AD 996), his warriors began to complain to him that at banquets they had to eat with wooden spoons, not with silver. The prince replied, "it is not for me to get warriors with silver and gold, I shall get silver and gold with my warriors, as my father and his father did" – hardly a sentiment for a Christian ruler. In and around the greater towns, however, Christianity gradually made its way. The Greek clergy in Constantinople supplied the heads of the new church, the metropolitans of Kiev, but other bishops were mostly natives. The founding of the Kiev Monastery of the Caves in the 1050s, dedicated to the Dormition of the Virgin, provided Rus with its first monastery, the key institution for Byzantine Christianity. The monastery produced not only its own saints in its founders Antonii and Feodosii but also the bishops for the eparchies outside of Kiev. The Caves Monastery and the others that soon arose around Kiev and Novgorod also provided the libraries and writing skills that produced the *Primary Chronicle* and other records, but of course their main role was spiritual. It was the monks who provided the charisma to spread a new religion.

The new religion had to be made to fit a society very different from the sophisticated urban world of Byzantium. The introduction of Christianity did not bring with it other aspects of Byzantine civilization, for the tradition of the eastern churches was one of a vernacular liturgy. In Kiev Rus the mass was not in Greek but in a ninth-century Bulgarian dialect scholars call Old or Church Slavic. At that time the Slavic languages were all very similar to one another, so this was a readily comprehensible language in Kiev. The use of Church Slavic implied that the liturgy, the scriptures, and other holy books had to be translated into Slavic, an arduous task but one that removed the need to learn Greek for all but a few learned monks. Much Christian literature and all of the secular literature of Byzantium remained unknown in Kiev Rus and later societies. The Russians would discover Greek antiquity in the eighteenth century from the West.

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-54323-1 - A Concise History of Russia
Paul Bushkovitch
Excerpt
More information

The relations of Rome and Constantinople in these early centuries were complicated. The famous mutual anathema of the Pope and the Patriarch of Constantinople of 1054 was not the decisive break that it seemed to later historians, and the people of Rus were barely aware of it. One of Kiev's Greek metropolitans did write a short tract denouncing the Latins, but native writers did not join him and the *Primary Chronicle* is silent on the events. It was only with the Fourth Crusade, the destruction and conquest of the Byzantine Empire by the crusading armies from Western Europe in 1204, that the people of Rus took notice of the division and where their loyalties lay. The Rus chroniclers covered this event in extensive and bloody detail – the massacre of the people and the desecration of the churches. The Rus people were not just Christians, they were Orthodox Christians.

Orthodox Christianity would determine the character of Russian culture until the eighteenth century and in some ways beyond it. For the Western observer, it has always presented a problem, seeming familiar, but actually not. Most Westerners know more about Buddhism than about Orthodoxy, as the latter forms no part of daily experience nor is it encountered in the course of a normal education. Analogies do not help much. Orthodoxy is not Catholicism with married priests.

The differences between Orthodoxy and the Western Catholic church that emerged during the Middle Ages were of a different order than those that later divided the western church at the time of the Refomation. Theological issues were not central, and were to some extent exaggerated to provide more convincing explanations for the hostilities. The difference over how the doctrine of the Trinity should be expressed in the Nicene Creed, that is, the Catholic addition of the words *filioque* ("and the son") to the mention of the "Holy Ghost, which proceedeth from the father" does not signify any important difference in the actual understanding of the Trinity. The main issue in 1054 was one of church governance. The eleventh century was the time of the gradual emancipation of the papacy from the power of the Holy Roman emperors, and the path chosen was the centralization of ecclesiastical power in the person of the pope. The traditions of the eastern patriarchs were those of a conciliar church. Only the assembled patriarchs and the rest of the

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-54323-1 - A Concise History of Russia
Paul Bushkovitch
Excerpt
More information

higher clergy could determine doctrine or matters of church government. The Patriarch of Constantinople was not a pope. The papacy also managed to assert its independence from the emperors and other rulers in matters of church government and certainly in doctrine, whereas the Eastern Church operated with the more nebulous notions of "symphony" of emperor and patriarch. Lesser matters, like the celibacy of the parish clergy in the west, flowed from these basic decisions. A celibate clergy was free of the entanglements of secular powers; a married priest was part of his local society.

Many differences between the eastern and western churches arose in matters that are hard to pin down and included differences of culture and attitudes rather than dogma and basic belief. The notion of the church building and the liturgy as the meeting points of the divine and human worlds, of spirit and matter, was and is central to Orthodox life and devotion. Preaching and the minute examination of behavior in sermons and in the confessional were not central, even if practiced to some extent. Orthodox monasticism was much less organized, as the monasteries did not form orders with a recognized head and the rules were much less detailed and specific. At the same time, Orthodox monasticism had a prestige and charisma in the east that even the most revered Catholic orders did not approach. For most of the history of Rus until the sixteenth century, we know far more about monasteries than bishops, many of whom are only names to us. By contrast, the western medieval church's annals are filled with saintly and powerful bishops. Finally, the Eastern Church had a rather different attitude toward learning. For the Catholic church of the Middle Ages, the great intellectual enterprise was the interpretation of Aristotle's corpus of writings in the light of revelation and the teachings of the church. The Orthodox, save a few late Byzantine imitators of the West, did not bother with philosophy or Aristotelian science. These were exterior knowledge, not bad in itself but not the final truth. The truth was in Christianity, best studied by monks in isolation from the world, not only from its temptations but also from its secular writings. This attitude fit well into Byzantine society, with its flourishing secular culture, but less so in Rus. In Rus, and later in Russia, there was no secular culture of the Byzantine type, so it was only the Christian monastic culture that flourished.

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org