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Janet Martin

Excerpt

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I

THE ERA OF VLADIMIR I

In the year 980, an obscure prince landed on the northern shores of a land that became known as Rus' and, later, Russia. Almost a decade earlier his father, the ruler of this land, had placed him in charge of the area surrounding one of its towns, the recently founded Novgorod. But after his father died (972) and one of his elder brothers killed the other (977), this prince, Vladimir (Volodimer) Sviatoslavich, fled abroad. After several years of exile he now led a band of Varangians (Norsemen) across the Baltic from Scandinavia. His intention was to depose his half-brother Iaropolk and assume the throne of Kiev.

VLADIMIR'S SEIZURE OF THE KIEVAN THRONE

Upon landing in Rus', Prince Vladimir immediately sought allies to join him against Iaropolk. He turned to the prince of Polotsk (Polatsk), Rogvolod, a fellow Varangian but unrelated to Vladimir and his family, and requested the hand of his daughter Rogneda in marriage. But she haughtily refused him, calling him the "son of a slave" and indicating a preference for Iaropolk. Vladimir responded by leading his Varangian force, along with Slovenes, Chud', and Krivichi from his former domain of Novgorod, against Polotsk. He defeated and killed Rogvolod and his sons, captured Rogneda, and forced her to become his bride. Polotsk was attached to the realm of Vladimir's family, the Riurikid dynasty.

Vladimir then marched toward his brother's capital, the city of Kiev. Growing out of settlements established in the sixth and seventh

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centuries, Kiev was located far to the south of Novgorod on hills overlooking the west or right bank of the Dnieper River. By 980 it had become the political center of a domain, known as Kievan Rus', that extended from Novgorod on the Volkhov River southward across the divide where the Volga, the West Dvina, and the Dnieper Rivers all had their origins, and down the Dnieper just past Kiev. It also included the lower reaches of the main tributaries of the Dnieper. Arriving at the city, Vladimir entered into negotiations with his brother. But in the midst of their talks two of Vladimir's Varangians murdered Iaropolk. Vladimir Sviatoslavich became the sole prince of Kievan Rus'.

Prince Vladimir's claim to the Kievan throne rested only in part on the military force he used to secure it. It was also based on heritage. Vladimir was one of the sons of Sviatoslav, prince of Kiev from 962 to 972. The Russian Primary Chronicle traces Sviatoslav's lineage back through his father Igor' and mother Olga to a Norseman named Riurik. The legend of Riurik claims that in the ninth century a group of quarreling eastern Slav and Finnic tribes that had dwelled in what is now northwestern Russia invited Riurik and his brothers to come to their lands, rule over them, and bring peace and order to their peoples.

While the chronicle account incorporates myth and cannot be taken literally, it does reflect the fact that Scandinavian Vikings, called Rus',¹ were present in the territories of the eastern Slav and Finnic tribes by the ninth century and that they eventually became rulers or princes over the native population. Vladimir's ancestors, founders of the dynasty that was later named after Riurik, led one of those Viking bands. Vladimir's victory over Rogvolod signaled the completion of the process pursued by Igor' and Sviatoslav to eliminate rival bands and establish exclusive ascendancy over enough of the native tribes to fashion a cohesive principality out of their territories. Although the Slav tribes shared a common language and there is some evidence of

¹ The origin of the term "Rus'" and the populations and territories to which it refers have been the subjects of lengthy and intense debate. For the sake of simplicity the term will be used in this chapter to refer to the Scandinavians, including the members of the Riurikid dynasty, who imposed their rule over the eastern Slavs. In subsequent chapters the distinction between the Scandinavian Rus' and the Slavs will be dropped and the term will be applied to the rulers and population of Kievan Rus'. That term will be used broadly to mean those lands subject to the Riurikid princes.

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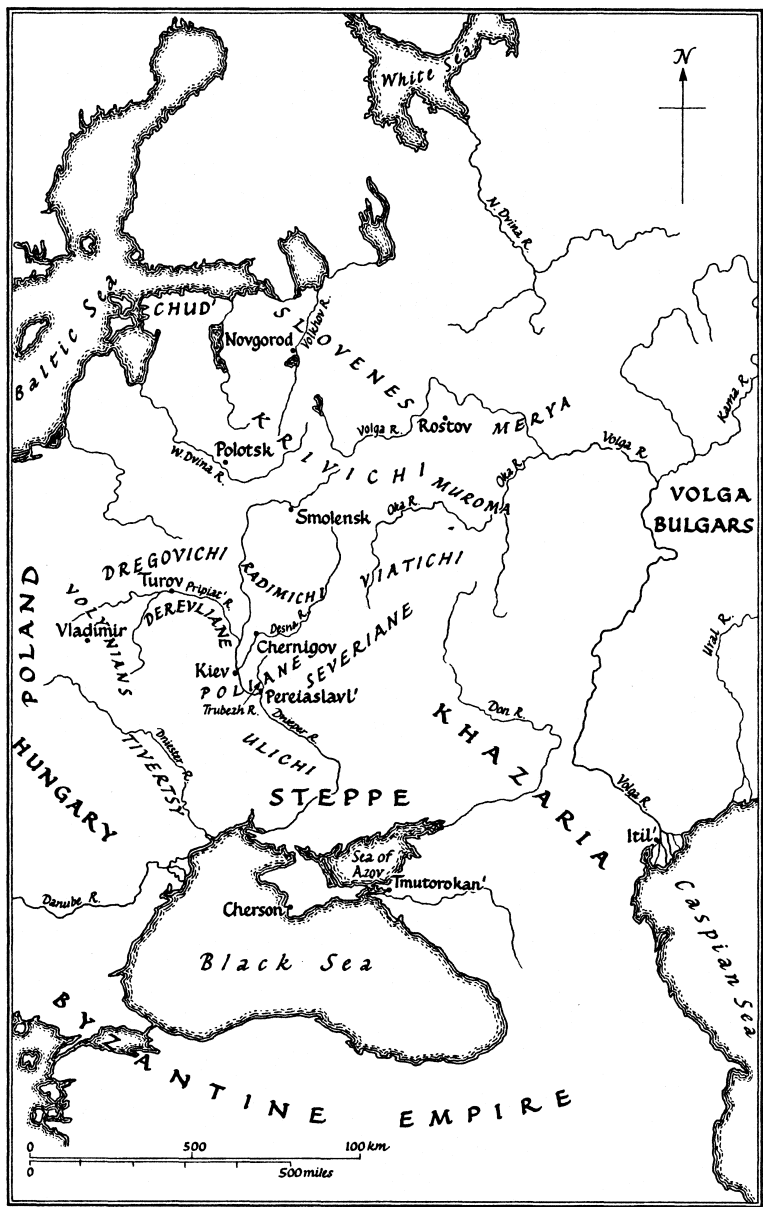
a federation among them prior to the establishment of Scandinavian rule, it was their common recognition of the Riurikid dynasty that bound them into the state that became known as Kievan Rus'.

CONSOLIDATION OF POWER

The lands of Vladimir's realm were populated primarily by eastern Slav tribes. To the north were the Slovenes of the Novgorod region and the neighboring Krivichi, who occupied the territories surrounding the headwaters of the West Dvina, Dnieper, and Volga Rivers. To the south in the area around Kiev were the Poliane, a group of Slavicized tribes with Iranian origins. To their north the Derevlane inhabited the lands west of the Dnieper extending to its right tributary, the Pripiat' River (Pripet). On the other side of the Pripiat' were the Dregovich. West of the Derevlane dwelled the Volynians; south of them, i.e., southwest of Kiev, were the Ulich and Tivertsy tribes. East of the Dnieper along its left tributary, the Desna River, were Severiane tribes; the Viaticchi lived to their north and east along the upper Oka River. Kievan Rus' was fringed in the north by the Finnic Chud', and in the northeast by the Muroma and Merya tribes that occupied the lands on the Oka and Volga Rivers. To the south its forested lands settled by Slav agriculturalists gave way to steppelands populated by nomadic herdsmen.

Within Kievan Rus' there were several noteworthy towns by the late tenth century. Kiev and Novgorod, its southern and northern focal points, were the most important. In addition, Kievan Rus' contained Smolensk, a center of the Krivichi, located on the upper Dnieper. West of Smolensk was the town of Polotsk, which Vladimir had seized from Rogvolod; it was located on the Polota River which flows into the West Dvina. South of Polotsk, on the Pripiat' River, was the Dregovich center of Turov (Turau). On the east side of the Dnieper Chernigov (Chernihiv), the major center of the Severiane tribes, commanded the Desna River. Pereiaslav', situated southeast of Kiev on the Trubezh River, another tributary of the Dnieper, was the town nearest the steppe frontier. Rostov, located on Lake Nero in Merya country, had also been founded by the era of Prince Vladimir.

Kievan Rus' was coalescing amidst other organized states. To the east was Bulgar, located on the mid-Volga River near its juncture with the Kama. South of Bulgar and southeast of Kievan Rus' were the



Map 1.1 The tribes of early Rus'

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remnants of a once powerful empire, Khazaria. Before the formation of Kievan Rus' Khazaria had claimed some of the eastern Slav tribes as its tributaries. And until the reign of Vladimir's father, Sviatoslav, who delivered the final blow that destroyed it, Khazaria had dominated the region of the lower Volga and the Northern Caucasus and had maintained stability on the steppe. West of Kiev were Poland and Hungary, which were also organizing into kingdoms and expanding in the late tenth and early eleventh centuries. And to the south, beyond the steppe, was the greatest empire of the age, Byzantium, whose control extended over the northern coast of the Black Sea and influence into the Balkans.

Once established in Kiev, Vladimir faced the task of consolidating his personal position and the monopoly on power he had attained for his family or dynasty over all the lands of Kievan Rus'. After displacing Iaropolk, no relatives were available to challenge him. But he nevertheless had to ensure that all the tribes within his realm would continue to recognize him as their prince and neither withdraw their allegiance nor transfer it to a neighboring power. Their loyalty was symbolized by their payment of tribute or taxes.

Vladimir's most pressing problem in this respect was posed by the Viaticchi, who had rebelled when Sviatoslav died in 972. One of Vladimir's first acts (981–82), therefore, was to suppress their rebellion and reestablish Kievan authority over them. In 984, he also expanded Kievan Rus' by subordinating the Radimichi, another Slav tribe that inhabited the lands north of the Severiane and east of the upper Dnieper.

In 985, Vladimir and his uncle Dobrynia also conducted a military campaign against the Volga Bulgars, who dominated the mid-Volga region and exercised some influence over the tribes dwelling to the north and west of their own territories. After the demise of Khazaria, Bulgar was the chief potential rival to Kievan Rus' authority over the peoples, like the Muroma and the Merya, who occupied the lands along the upper Volga and Oka Rivers well to the east of Kiev and the Dnieper. Vladimir's campaign was militarily successful. Yet significantly, Vladimir, heeding his uncle's advice, did not attempt to reduce the Volga Bulgars to tributary status. Rather, he concluded a treaty with Bulgar that served as the basis for the peaceful relations that lasted between the two states until the late eleventh century. The Rus' victory also removed Bulgar as a potential rival for suzerainty over the tribes on the eastern and northeastern frontiers of Kievan

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Rus'; in this way it also helped to secure their allegiance to Kiev and the Riurikid dynasty.

CONVERSION TO CHRISTIANITY

In addition to using force to consolidate his ruling position over the tribes of his realm, Vladimir adopted another policy that served twin goals of integrating the diverse tribes into a single society and of introducing an ideology that would legitimize his rule. That policy was the introduction of a uniform common religion for his heterogeneous population. In so doing Vladimir began a process of associating secular political authority with religious institutions and clergy, whose authority and advice were eventually popularly respected. Conversely, pagan priests and tribal leaders, who clung to their local gods, lost their positions, prestige, and power.

Vladimir's first attempt at providing a single faith was undertaken shortly after he assumed the throne in Kiev; it was based on the pagan religions of his subjects. Having witnessed the recent collapse of Khazaria, which had lacked religious unity, and evidently appreciating the political advantages of identifying himself with the broad spectrum of gods worshipped by his diverse subjects, Vladimir sponsored the erection of a pagan temple on a hill at the very heights of the city. The temple was dedicated to six gods; the idols represented several groups within the Kievan population. Perun, the god of thunder and war, was a Norse god favored by members of the prince's *druzhina* (military retinue). Others in the pantheon were the Slav gods of the sky (Stribog) and of light and fertility (Dazhd' bog or Dazhboh); Mokosh', a goddess representing Mother Nature, was worshipped also by Finnish tribes. In addition, Khors, a sun god, and Simargl, another fertility god, both of which had Iranian origins, were included, probably to appeal to the Poliane. For reasons not explained in the chronicles, Vladimir became dissatisfied with this religious arrangement. The alternative he found provided the same unifying advantages and ideological support for his political position. He adopted Christianity.

Christianity had been known in Kievan Rus' for at least a century. Vladimir's grandmother, Olga, had been a Christian, and a Christian church, the Cathedral of St. Elias (Il'ya) had been functioning since at least 944, when Christian retainers of Vladimir's grandfather, Igor', were said to have sworn oaths there. Nevertheless, the selection of

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Christianity was not a foregone conclusion. Kievan Rus' was familiar not only with Christianity as practiced both in Byzantium and Europe, but with the other monotheistic religions, Judaism and Islam. A chronicle tale relates that Vladimir sent representatives to investigate all the options available to the Rus'. The tale reflects not only the wide range of cultural influences to which Kievan Rus' was exposed, but also the culturally receptive, yet selective character of this emerging state. It explains that Vladimir and his advisers rejected Islam because, among other factors, Muslims were prohibited from drinking alcoholic beverages. They considered Judaism unacceptable because they found it inexplicable that the God of the Jews, if He were truly powerful and favored His people, would have allowed them to be deprived of a country of their own. When comparing the two versions of Christianity, Vladimir's emissaries reported they found no glory in the ceremonies in the "German" or European churches. But when they went to Constantinople and were led by the emperor into "the edifices where they worship their God," they were overcome with awe: "we knew not whether we were in heaven or on earth," they informed their prince and his court. "For on earth there is no such splendor or such beauty, and we are at a loss how to describe it. We know only that God dwells there among men, and their service is fairer than the ceremonies of other nations."²

A continuation of the chronicle tale, however, indicates that the process of adopting Christianity was more mundane and immersed in politics and war. It describes how Vladimir led a campaign against Cherson, a Byzantine commercial outpost on the Crimean peninsula. He laid siege to the town, which surrendered after its water supply had been cut off. Vladimir then held it as ransom while he demanded Emperor Basil's sister Anna in marriage. Despite her declaration that she would prefer to die than wed Vladimir, the emperor agreed to the prince's conditions. Anna reluctantly arrived in Cherson, whereupon Vladimir was baptized, married the Byzantine princess, and returned Cherson to Basil as his bridegroom's gift. Then, accompanied by his wife and Byzantine Christian clergy, he returned to Kiev. Prince Vladimir destroyed the pagan idols that overlooked the city, conducted a mass baptism of the Kievan population in the

² *The Russian Primary Chronicle, Laurentian Text*, trans. and ed. by Samuel Hazzard Cross and Olgerd P. Sherbowitz-Wetzor (Cambridge, Mass.: Medieval Academy of America, 1953), pp. 110–111.

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Dnieper River, and began the process of baptizing the rest of his subjects.

The chronicle tale, an amalgam of legend and fact compiled approximately a century after the events, contains numerous lapses and inconsistencies that have compelled historians, drawing upon supplementary sources, to compose coherent narratives around the events associated with the conversion. Standard descriptions have clung to the chronicle's outline. They add, however, that at the time of these events the Byzantine emperor Basil II (976–1025) had recently suffered a defeat in Bulgaria and was losing control over Anatolia to rebels. Desperate for military support, he sent a delegation to Vladimir with a request for assistance. His need for a Varangian detachment to confront the dangers facing him was so great that the emperor agreed to arrange a marriage between his sister Anna and the Kievan prince. The only conditions were that Vladimir send the troops, convert to Christianity, and forsake his other wives.

As a result of these negotiations, Vladimir did send reinforcements with whose aid Emperor Basil successfully defended Constantinople from the rebels. By spring of 989, the Varangians had finally crushed Basil's opponents. But the emperor seemed to renege on his agreement. Marriage into the ruling house of the Byzantine Empire was a singular honor, rarely granted, and therefore strikingly significant in that it would bestow such high stature on a new addition to the Christian world. The bride herself apparently balked at the idea of marrying a northern barbarian. It was at this point that Vladimir, impatient at the delays, attacked Cherson.³

Some scholars have offered variant scenarios. Andrzej Poppe, for example, proposed that Emperor Basil and his sister Anna, motivated by political and military necessity, honored their commitment to Vladimir in a timely manner. Anna and Vladimir, according to this reconstruction of the events, had already married when the Rus' prince undertook his campaign against Cherson. The objective of the campaign was then not to force the Byzantine emperor to fulfill his pledge, but to assist him, once again, by suppressing rebels in the town who supported his enemies. Poppe justified his revision of

³ For examples of this version of the events, see George Vernadsky, *Kievan Russia. A History of Russia*, vol. II (New Haven, Conn., and London: Yale University Press, 1948), pp. 62–65, and Dimitri Obolensky, *The Byzantine Commonwealth: Eastern Europe, 500–1453* (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1982), pp. 254–258.

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the chronicle account by describing it as “a legend ‘vested in historical garments’” that had been compiled “over one hundred years after the conversion” not with the intention of accurately recording a chronology of facts, but of “present[ing] . . . a significant religious occurrence” that required no “logical sequence of events” and therefore lacked one.⁴

Although the sources do not provide a consistent set of dates for all the events, the year 988 has been accepted as the traditional date of the formal conversion of Kievan Rus' to Christianity. It marked a triumph for Byzantium and its Church, which acquired potential access to the peoples dwelling as far north as the Gulf of Finland. The achievement was even more dramatic against the background of the recent expansion of the Roman Christian Church into northern, central, and eastern Europe and Islam to the mid-Volga region, where it had been adopted by the Bulgars in 922.

Although written later by Christian monks, the chronicles contain curiously scant information on the history of the Church from 988, the time of the conversion, to 1036, when Vladimir's son Iaroslav gained full authority over the Rus' lands and renewed efforts to spread and fortify the faith in his realm. The lack of information has led to some speculation about the status of the Church during its early years. It is generally accepted, however, that from the time of its inception the Orthodox Church in Kievan Rus' had the status of a metropolitanate, whose chief prelate was appointed by the patriarch of Constantinople. It is also widely acknowledged that the seat of the metropolitan was Kiev itself, although other possibilities have been suggested.

The adoption of Christianity had a major impact on Kievan Rus'. The Church became a second institution, along with the Riurikid dynasty, that gave shape and definition to the emerging state. It turned the face of Kievan Rus' from the Muslim East, whose wealth had originally drawn the Rus' to the lands of the eastern Slavs, toward

⁴ Andrzej Poppe, *The Political Background to the Baptism of Rus': Byzantine–Russian Relations between 986–989*, *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, no. 30 (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Center for Byzantine Studies, 1976), pp. 211–212, 221, 224–228, 241; reprinted in Poppe, *The Rise of Christian Russia* (London: Variorum Reprints, 1982). The quoted phrases are taken from Poppe's article, “How the Conversion of Rus' Was Understood in the Eleventh Century,” *HUS*, vol. 11 (1987), pp. 299–300.

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Byzantium and served as a vehicle for the influx of a range of cultural influences associated with Christianity into Kievan Rus'.

The most immediately dramatic and obvious impact of the adoption of Christianity was the transformation of Kiev's architectural landscape. Vladimir smashed the pagan idols and hilltop temple he had built just a few years before; in their place arose a church dedicated to St. Basil. Even more spectacular, however, was his construction of an ensemble of buildings set on the central hill of Kiev, outside the old fortifications. Vladimir ordered the grounds of a cemetery that had occupied the place of honor leveled. In a location visible to all inhabitants of the city and with unmistakable symbolism, he built the stone Church of the Holy Virgin, more commonly known as the Church of the Tithe, on the desecrated remains of the pagan dead. The foundations of the church were laid in 989 or 991; it was completed and dedicated in the year 996. The Church of the Tithe has been considered by scholars to have been either the prince's royal cathedral or the first residence of the metropolitan.⁵ In either case the grand stone edifice with its elegant interior, including its tile and mosaic floors, its slate and marble detailing, and its vestries, icons, and other religious symbols, was unique among the city's growing number of wooden churches. Vladimir, as an additional confirmation of his commitment to Orthodoxy, pledged a tithe or one-tenth of his revenue to support his new church.

Flanking the Church of the Tithe and completing the ensemble were two palatial structures, which served as Vladimir's court buildings. To surround this area that became known as "Vladimir's city," the prince also built new fortifications, consisting of high ramparts

⁵ Among the scholars who have debated this issue, Andrzej Poppe concluded that the Church of the Tithe was a royal chapel. He proposed that the metropolitan's residence was a wooden church, dedicated to St. Sophia (Holy Wisdom). His argument was presented in "The Building of the Church of St. Sophia in Kiev," published in the *Journal of Medieval History*, vol. 7 (1981), and reprinted in his *Rise of Christian Russia*, pp. 18, 24; Ia. N. Shchapov also concluded that the Church of the Tithe was a royal church. His argument is outlined in *State and Church in Early Russia, 10th–13th Centuries*, trans. by Vic Schneerson (New Rochelle, N.Y., Athens, Moscow: Aristide D. Caratzas, 1993), pp. 25–34. The position that the Church of the Tithe was the original seat of the metropolitan is represented by Petro P. Tolochko in his article, "Religious Sites in Kiev during the Reign of Volodimer Sviatoslavich," *HUS*, vol. 11 (1987), p. 322, and in his book, *Drevniaia Rus'*. *Ocherki sotsial'no-politicheskoi istorii* [Ancient Rus': essays on socio-political history] (Kiev: Naukova dumka, 1987), p. 73.