

Introduction: Rus, Russia, Ukraine

Numerous scholars have now made the case that the Enlightenment period helped to shape our modern perception of the past. Whether this was Anthony Kaldellis talking about the creation of “Byzantium” or Larry Wolff discussing the *Invention of Eastern Europe*, one can turn to good scholarship to understand what happened 300 years ago and its effects on our understanding of history.¹ What is missing though is our integration of that material into our modern understanding of why that matters. The case of medieval Rus and modern Ukraine is an excellent one to use to explore what happened to create a separate medieval East and West and why that matters in the present.

A year before Russian President Vladimir Putin’s 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine, he published a piece entitled “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians.”² In that article Putin repeated the long-standing belief that Russians were Great Russians and Ukrainians were simply Little Russians. To do this, he used history as his guide. He did not just go back to the seventeenth century when Tsar Aleksei Mikhailovich was the first to use the title “Sovereign of Great, Little, and White Russia.” Instead, he went all the way back to the Middle Ages and the medieval kingdom of Rus to demonstrate that the Ukrainians and Russians were the same people. In particular, he quoted the *Povest’ vremennykh let* (often translated as the Tale of Bygone Years), the earliest Russian source, to say, “Let [Kiev] be the mother of all Russian cities.”³ Which is not that different from the only English translation of that source: Oleg “declared that [Kiev] should be the mother of Russian cities.”⁴ This translation, published in 1953 but prepared earlier, is titled *The Russian Primary Chronicle*. And here we can see elements of the problem quite clearly. Both Vladimir Putin and the translator of the chronicle are stating that the history of the ninth-century polity and the early twelfth-century source are all Russian. Such a label makes it much easier to elide the medieval kingdom of Rus into the modern country of Russia and erase anyone else’s claim to the medieval past of that region. A more accurate translation of the same phrase from the chronicle would be, “Let this

¹ Anthony Kaldellis, *Romanland: Ethnicity and Empire in Byzantium* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019); Larry Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994).

² <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181>.

³ The best edition of the PVL, as it is known, is *The Povest’ vremennykh let: An Interlinear Collation and Paradosis*, Compiled and edited by Donald Ostrowski, with David Birnbaum and Horace G. Lunt (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).

⁴ *The Russian Primary Chronicle: Laurentian Text*, transl. and ed. Samuel Hazzard Cross and Olgerd P. Sherbowitz-Wetzor (Cambridge, MA: The Mediaeval Academy of America, 1953), s.a. 882.

[Kyiv] be the mother of the towns of Rus’.”⁵ Taking away the idea that medieval Rus was Russia is one step, but a large one, in attempting to shift our perception of medieval and modern Europe.

However, it is worth examining how medieval Europe became so divided, and why, to help us better understand and move away from those perspectives. As noted earlier, the Enlightenment played a key role, especially in regard to Orthodoxy. Orthodox Christianity was viewed as even more outdated, old, and traditional than Catholicism, which was more common in the lives of the Enlightenment thinkers. Many have traced the anti-religious streak back to Edward Gibbon’s *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, with John Arnold stating, “Gibbon has bequeathed to us a particular way of looking at religious credulity as the opposite of Reason and thus as a threat to civilization, a view which tends to recur in current debate.”⁶ Gibbon’s later eighteenth-century writings did not appear in a vacuum and is contextualized with numerous instances where Orthodoxy was treated as not just the enemy of Reason, but of the Western order, as well. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, broad sheets published in German cities told about the atrocities of the Russians using identical language – in fact the broadsheets were the same, with only the perpetrators replaced – as when they discussed the Ottoman Turks.⁷ Similarly, after Peter the Great’s victory at Poltava in 1709, an official of King George I stated that “Germany and the entire North have never been in such grave peril as now, because the Russians should be feared more than the Turks . . . and are gradually advancing closer and closer to our lives.”⁸ Long gone were the days of any Christian unity, in its place was an identification by Western Europeans that Orthodoxy was as much of a threat, if not more, than the dominant Islamic empire in Western Afro-Eurasia.

Even if we advance to the twentieth century, the division of Europe with Orthodoxy at its heart is not just still present but increasingly codified. J. B. Bury, not coincidentally a scholar of Gibbon, divided his massive *Cambridge Medieval History* project such that eastern Europe was allocated into one volume. He explained his rationale quite clearly in his introduction:

⁵ Here I have followed the draft version of the translation which will be published by the Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute.

⁶ John Arnold, “Believing in Belief: Gibbon, Latour and the Social History of Religion,” *Past & Present* 260 (2023), 241.

⁷ Cornelia Soldat, *Erschreckende Geschichten in der Darstellung von Moskovitern und Osmanen in den deutschen Flugschriften des 16. und 17. Jahrhunderts / Stories of Atrocities in Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century German Pamphlets about the Russians and Turks* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 2014).

⁸ Quoted in Lindsay Hughes, “Russia,” in *A Companion to Eighteenth-Century Europe*, ed. Peter H. Wilson (New York: Blackwell, 2008), 239.

This exception to the general chronological plan of the world seemed both convenient and desirable. The orbit of Byzantium, the history of the peoples and states which moved within that orbit and always looked to it as the central body, giver of light and heat, did indeed at some points touch or traverse the orbits of western European states, but the development of these on the whole was not deeply affected or sensibly perturbed by what happened east of Italy or south of the Danube, and it was only in the time of the Crusades that some of their rulers came into close contact with the Eastern Empire or that it counted to any considerable extent in their policies.⁹

For Bury, Europe may exist as a geographic entity, but medieval Europe largely refers to western Europe and eastern Europe is relegated to a Byzantine sphere of influence. Dimitri Obolensky took this a step further when, in the 1970s, he codified the idea of a *Byzantine Commonwealth*.¹⁰ The organizing principle of Obolensky's commonwealth was the tacit acknowledgment of the Byzantine emperor's authority over the whole of Orthodox Christendom. Thus, he does not include such areas of Byzantine influence as Venice, Sicily, or the Caucasus; because they do not fit into the Orthodox-centered scheme which he has created. Garth Fowden, who took classes with Obolensky at Oxford, makes this quite clear when he notes that Obolensky's commonwealth constituted, "the Chalcedonian Orthodox world of Slavic Eastern Europe."¹¹ A combination of the foregoing ideas has led us to the modern world of medieval studies where there exists a "medieval Europe" which comprises largely western Europe, though Iberia, Scandinavia, and Central Europe are making inroads into this territory; and a Byzantine world which includes the Orthodox Balkans and Rus. Whether one looks in textbooks, job ads, or conference programs, one can see this pattern replicated.

But how then does this relate to Rus, Ukraine, and Russia? The Russian narrative of history was codified by Vasilii Kliuchevsky in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in his famous *History of Russia*. These books inspired a generation of historians and Kliuchevsky himself was, in the words of his biographer, "Russia's most distinguished historian and whose teaching, writing and training of young scholars have markedly affected the way Russians and others view Russia's past."¹² Kliuchevsky's *History of Russia*

⁹ J. B. Bury, "Introduction," *The Cambridge Medieval History* vol. IV *The Eastern Roman Empire (717-1453)* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1923), vii.

¹⁰ Dimitri Obolensky, *The Byzantine Commonwealth, Eastern Europe 500-1453* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1971).

¹¹ Garth Fowden, *Empire to Commonwealth: Consequences of Monotheism in Late Antiquity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 9-10. See also 4n3 where he says that "My indebtedness to Obolensky will be self-evident. His book appeared in 1971, just when, as a first-year undergraduate at Oxford, I was attending his remarkable lectures on Byzantine historical geography."

¹² Robert F. Byrnes, *V. O. Kliuchevskii, Historian of Russia* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), xvii. Further, Byrnes notes that "His five-volume *Course of Russian History* . . .

was translated into eleven languages, including English, and his students taught Russian history across Europe and in North America, thus his ideas spread widely. His view on Rus was that it was simply Russia and in his volume 1, the material is largely related to Russian–Byzantine ties.¹³ There are no mentions of the manifold dynastic marriages which connected Rus throughout Europe in this period, nor the breadth of religious and trade relations. When non-Russian or Byzantine influences are included, they are negative. In fighting against the “barbarians of the steppe” Rus held “the left flank of Europe. Yet this historical service cost her dear, since not only did it dislodge her from her old settlements on the Dnieper, but it caused the whole trend of her life to become altered.”¹⁴ In addition to a lack of Rus, there is also a lack of Russians in his narrative. “He ignored the existence of separate Ukrainian and Belorussian nationalities and cultures and those who proclaimed it: in his judgment, these peoples were Russians.”¹⁵ Moreover, in later volumes, he dealt with the Russian conquest of the lands of Ukrainians and Belorussians as a historical inevitability akin to manifest destiny, often under the label of the “gathering of the Rus lands.” His views codified the belief of a Russian world that comprised eastern Europe and was connected to, if not descended from, the Byzantine Orthodox world; and created the basis for this to be taught and perpetuated until the present day.¹⁶

Kliuchevsky’s narrative has been called the “traditional scheme of Russian history,” and this is accurate, but not inclusive.¹⁷ Due to the popularity of the “traditional scheme,” Russian history writ large – which is to say eastern European history or Orthodox European history – became its own field and thus could be safely excluded from other regions, such as medieval European history. A cursory glance at a popular medieval Europe textbook will show the place of Rus, and other Orthodox polities:

“The ‘border’ that divides Catholic from Orthodox in the Balkans is today roughly the border between Croatia (Catholic) and Serbia (Orthodox). When we think about the wars in the Balkans that occurred in the 1990s, it is important to remember that many of the divisions are at least in part along religious lines – Catholics, Orthodox, and Muslims (remember that Ottoman

which is almost certainly the most widely read and influential study of Russian history ever published.”

¹³ V. O. Kliuchevsky, *A History of Russia*, Vol. 1, transl. C. J. Hogarth (New York: Russell and Russell, 1960), 79–85.

¹⁴ Kliuchevsky, *A History of Russia*, Vol. 1, 192–193. ¹⁵ Byrnes, *V. O. Kliuchevskii*, 145–146.

¹⁶ Not to say that Kliuchevsky did not have opponents. The most famous of whom was his contemporary Mykhailo Hrushevsky who wrote a multivolume *History of Ukraine-Rus’* in which Rus is deeply integrated into medieval history. This series has recently been translated in full into English by the Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies.

¹⁷ Serhii Plokhy, *Unmaking Imperial Russia: Mykhailo Hrushevsky and the Writing of Ukrainian History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), 146.

Turks ruled the southern Balkans for more than four hundred years beginning in the last century of the Byzantine Empire) – that were first established during the Middle Ages.”¹⁸

“Like the Balkan Slavs, the Russians received their religion and much of their culture from Constantinople. Indeed, after the fall of Constantinople to the Ottoman Turks in 1453, the Russians began to think of themselves as heirs to the Roman Empire: just as Rome had given way to Constantinople, so now has the torch passed to the third and final Rome, Moscow”¹⁹

To conclude their narrative, the authors make clear their perspective on the division in Europe and its consequences by suggesting that “When we think of problems and misunderstandings within Europe today, we in large part think of tensions and conflicts that exist along the lines of Western and Byzantine spheres of influence, for example, the line between Poland and Russia or that between Croatia and Serbia.”²⁰ For these authors, as well as for many authors not cited here, the division between Latin and Orthodox in the middle ages are replicated in the problems of the modern world.

A division in Europe based on historical and religious divisions can be seen in current political issues. The United Nations definition of the term “Eastern Europe” exemplifies the issues under discussion: “that part of the European continent that has been ‘under Byzantine and Orthodox influence, which has only randomly been touched by an Ottoman impact, but significantly shaped by Russian influence during the Russian Empire and in the Soviet period’.”²¹ The eastern part of Europe is no longer just a geographical definition, but a categorical one which is based, in large part, around Orthodoxy. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) was created in the wake of World War II, and its mission was to oppose the Soviet Union and its expansion. Yet, the first NATO Secretary General, Lord Ismay, colloquially stated the organization’s purpose as “to keep the Russians out, the Americans in, and the Germans down.”²² Apart from the fascinating comments about Americans and Germans, the focus for Lord Ismay was not the Soviet Union, but Russia and the Russians – perhaps creating a link with the quote from the official of George

¹⁸ William R. Cook and Ronald B. Herzman, *The Medieval World View: An Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press [3rd ed.], 2012), 104–105.

¹⁹ Cook and Herzman, *The Medieval World View*, 105.

²⁰ Cook and Herzman, *The Medieval World View*, 114.

²¹ Florin Curta, *Eastern Europe in the Middle Ages (500–1300)* (Leiden: Brill, 2019), vol. 1, 4. The internal citation is to Peter Jordan, “A Subdivision of Europe into Larger Regions by Cultural Criteria,” United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names, Working Paper no. 48, 23rd session, Vienna, March 28–April 4, 2006, <http://unstats.un.org/unsd/geoinfo/UNGEGN/docs/23-gegn/wp/gegn23wp48.pdf> (visit of September 25, 2018).

²² Quoted in Fyodor Lukyanov, “Transatlantic Transformation: U.S.-German Relations Enter New Era,” *Carnegie Russia Eurasia Center*, published June 29, 2020.

I two hundred years earlier. Lord Ismay's interpretation of the organization's mission was implicitly ratified in the years after 1991 when the fall of the Soviet Union did not mean the disbanding of NATO; instead, it expanded. The expansion of NATO brought it closer and closer to the Russian border, despite multiple warnings from Boris Yeltsin, Putin, and various Russia experts that this was seen as threatening.

We could take our argument one step further and unite the themes of Orthodoxy and European identity. The European Union (EU) comprises twenty-seven member states, of which three are majority Orthodox countries (Bulgaria, Greece, and Romania). The other majority Orthodox countries in Europe are Belarus, Moldova, North Macedonia, Russia, Serbia, and Ukraine.

As can be seen in Figure 1, the Orthodox countries comprise the majority of Europe which is not included in the EU. If one includes the European Economic Area (which adds numerous western and northern European countries), one can see the outliers are all Orthodox countries. Thus, the logical conclusion is that the territory of the European continent which we traditionally label "Europe" is largely non-Orthodox, while the rest, which is typically labeled "Eastern

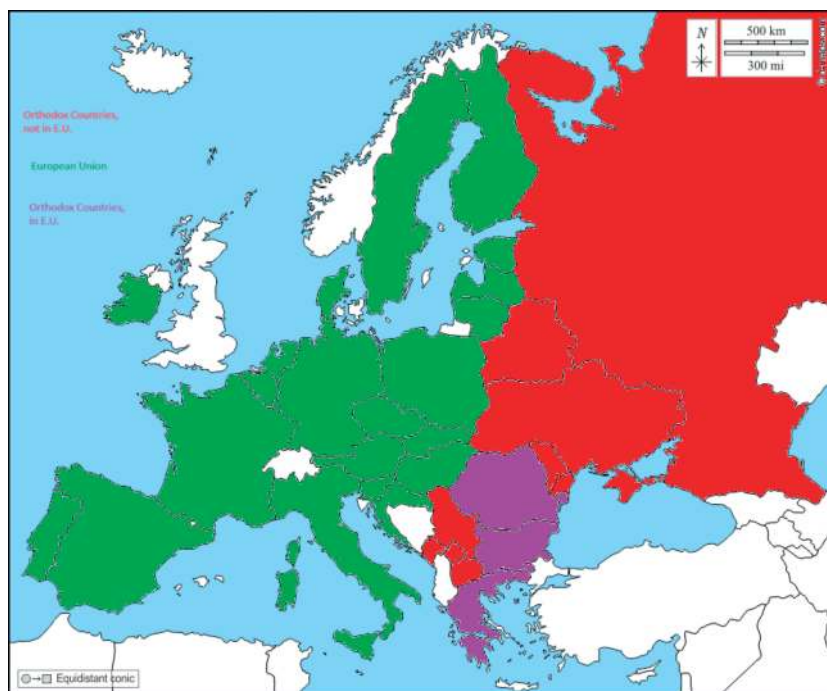


Figure 1 Map of Europe designating Orthodox countries not in the EU (red), the European Union (green), and the Orthodox countries in the EU (purple). (This figure is also available to view online in colour at www.cambridge.org/raffensperger)

Europe” is Orthodox; creating a frame which has caused problems for Ukraine’s ability to join the EU, among many other issues.

Education is a blessing, but an incorrect understanding of history can create problems. Medieval history matters for so many reasons, but one is that it sets expectations for modern perceptions. A medieval Europe that is inclusive of Rus and thus stretches from the Ural Mountains to the Atlantic Ocean will help to shift our perception of Europe not only in that period, but in our own.

The sections in this slim volume will attempt to do a broad task, elucidate the history of the kingdom of Rus and its relationship with the rest of Europe. Section 1: “Situating Rus” is intended as a brief introduction to the foundation of the kingdom, some of its early actors and its relationship to the world around it, both in history and in historiography. Section 2 is on religion and thus tackles the issue highlighted in the Introduction, the conversion of Rus to Christianity. Instead of a traditional picture of Orthodox dominance, this section will highlight the position of Rus within the broader Christian world. Section 3 examines the kingdom of Rus itself with a specific focus on governance, both top down and local. This is an important topic in the historiography because Rus’s decentralized government has often led to perceptions of them as an “other.” Section 4 brings the world back in and discusses the place of Rus in Europe. Far from the traditional “Route from the Varangians to the Greeks,” Rus was tied in to most corners of Europe through dynastic and other relations. The sum total of this short overview of Kyivan Rus in Medieval Europe will demonstrate the importance of accurate representations of history, both for its own sake, as well as for our understanding of the world around us.

1 Situating Rus

Rus seldom appears on modern maps of medieval Europe. Instead, if the map is comprehensive, it may use “Russia” to label that part of the eastern Europe; while if the map is not, it will most likely leave the area blank, or occlude it behind the key explaining what is going on in Western Europe. Regardless of the historiographical issues embedded here, we need to begin with setting the stage for where Rus was, what it was, and how we know anything about it before we can properly contextualize it in regard to medieval Europe as a whole.

The kingdom of Rus was founded by Scandinavians who explored the eastern European river systems. Unlike expansion westward from Norway, which is often described as requiring the dual advances of keel and sail; going east around the Baltic was a much simpler task which could be, and was, accomplished by oared boats.²³

²³ For an excellent, and overarching, discussion of how the Scandinavian exploration west and east were different, see Thomas S. Noonan, “Scandinavians in European Russia,” in *The Oxford Illustrated History of the Vikings*, ed. Peter Sawyer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 134–155.