

Lectures on Russian History - Medieval Russia
Dr. Bruce Holl
Trinity University

The term "medieval"

- The first historical period under discussion is "medieval Russia."
- It is also called "Pre-Petrine," "Old Russia," or "*Rus*."
- These terms refer to the period before the Russian ruler Peter I "The Great" (reigned 1689-1725).
- There was no feudal society, no castles, no knights or tournaments that normally come to mind when one hears the term "medieval."
- The "medieval period" simply means the 9-17th centuries CE.

***Rus*' (vs. *Rossia*)**

- The most appropriate term for this time is actually *Rus*', meaning the people and culture of the region
- The later term Russia (in Russian "*Rossia*") is the centralized political entity that existed from the end of the 16th century.

Time Frame

- The *Rus*' era can be subdivided into several periods
- The first is the Kievan period (9th century until ca. 1240), so called because Kiev, capital of present-day Ukraine, was the dominant city.
- "Kievan" is something of a misnomer.
- Other cities, and especially Novgorod in the North, were equally important.
- The next period is the Tatar or Mongol invasion and rule (1240-1480).
- Finally there is the Moscow period (1300-1689).

The People

- The Russians of today descend from two peoples.
- There are the Slavs.
- The Slavs originate in present-day Russia, Ukraine and Eastern Europe in Roman times and probably much earlier
- Their origins are obscure.
- They are mentioned on occasion by Roman historians.
- The group that we are concerned with here can properly be called the "Eastern Slavs" – ancestors of present-day Russians, Ukrainians and Belorussians.
- Then there are the Varangians.
- They are also called the Normans or the Vikings
- Their origin is controversial.
- Some modern historians maintain that, like the Slavs, they are native to present-day Russia.

- The preponderance of archeological and linguistic evidence, however, suggests that they came to Russia from Scandinavia some time around the 9th century CE.
- There is also controversy as to how & why they came.
- The question is, did the Slavs, in the year 862, invite them to rule *Rus*’?
- The supposed reason for this alleged invitation was that the Slavs could not govern themselves.
- A major source, the "Primary Chronicle" of historical events written somewhat after the fact, claims that this was the case.
- According to this account, a Viking named Riurik, who lived in Novgorod in the 9th century, was the first Scandinavian ruler.
- However, the "Chronicle" is known to be inaccurate.
- Evidence (archeology, linguistics and a comparison of law codes) shows that there were Scandinavians, but it's not clear if they were rulers.
- Rather, the rulers may have emerged from amongst the Slavs themselves or some combination of Slavs and Varangians.
- The Varangians may have come to Russia initially not as rulers but to protect the principle trade route from Scandinavia to Byzantium, which passed through Russian territory.
- On the other hand, a relatively recent work, the *Cambridge History of Russia. Volume I* (pp. 189-190), claims archeological evidence does suggest that Riurik was invited in a leadership capacity among three groups in the region that were fighting amongst themselves.

City States

- By the 9th century the people of the region had formed together into what came to be called *Rus*’.
- *Rus*’ consisted in a series of more or less independent city-states.
- The cities included Kiev and Novgorod, which were the most powerful,
- Other early cities included Chernigov,
- Somewhat later Pereiaslavl, and later Smolensk, Volynia, Vladimir and Suzdal came into existence.
- The rulers are referred to in English as Princes
- The Russian term, sometimes used in English, is *Kniaz*’.
- The population of the largest cities was apparently around thirty thousand.
- Although the concept of nation did not exist then as it does now, the princes of the various cities did at least theoretically recognize that they were part of the larger entity of *Rus*’, and at times, especially earlier on in the period under discussion, the cities were united under one ruler, known in English as the Great Prince and in Russian as the *Velikii Kniaz*’.
- Residents of *Rus*’ did not view themselves primarily as members of a single nationality (which, again, is a more modern concept).
- Neither did they view themselves as members of three distinct nationalities corresponding to modern Russia, Ukraine and Belarus.

- This too is controversial: some modern residents of these countries claim they should all be united as Russians, while others claim that they have been separate entities since before the common era.
- What actually happened was that during the Mongol period (ca. 1240-1480, of which more below) a division developed between the West and the East within *Rus'*.
- Western *Rus'* came to be called Ruthenia and eventually developed into present-day Ukraine and Belarus.
- Eastern *Rus'* developed into Muscovite Russia.
- These identities took shape in the late 16th century.

Prince Vladimir and the Christianization of *Rus'*

- There were several Great Princes at the end of the 9th and beginning of the 10th centuries who did manage to unite the Russian cities
- Among the greatest of these was Vladimir (d. 1013), who was Prince of Kiev.
- Vladimir is remembered not only for the fact that he was a *Christian*.
- There had been Christians and even Christian rulers prior to Vladimir.
- Vladimir, however, declared Christianity the state religion of *Rus'*.
- There is a story about this event, described in the "Primary Chronicle" and repeated to this day: Vladimir sent emissaries to the various faiths but rejected them (the Muslims, for example, because they did not allow drinking).
- He chose Orthodoxy because of the beauty of its cathedrals and liturgy.
- The likely reality is that Vladimir wanted a political alliance with the Byzantine emperor, whose sister he married after the conversion.
- In any event, Vladimir in the year 988 declared that his subjects henceforth all would be Orthodox Christians.
- In that year the residents of Kiev took part in a mass baptism by immersion in the Dniepr river.
- Henceforth Orthodoxy became the faith of the vast majority of Russians.
- In 1988 Russians celebrated the 1000 year anniversary.
- This was a sign of the new openness ("Glasnost") then prevailing in the Soviet Union.
- As we will see, however, this was not the typical attitude toward religion in the Soviet period

Social classes of *Rus'*

- Civil categories included:
- The Great Prince, ruler of all the Russian cities and their lands (literally in time of unification, nominally in times of disunity);
- Princes of the various cities;
- The "Boyars," high ranking aristocrats who became the old hereditary nobility of Russia;
- Merchants;
- Craftsmen;

- Peasants, who were free and could retain land in Medieval Russia;
- Indentured servants;
- Slaves (POWs, convicts, captured peoples) with some legal rights;
- The "Veche" or assembly: an elected assembly that decided civic administrative matters and held varying degrees of power in different cities at different times.
- Church categories included:
 - High clergy;
 - Parish priests;
 - Monasteries with a similar hierarchy from monks to the heads of the monasteries.

Novgorod

- It's not surprising the Novgorod would play a leading role in events of the day.
- The city was known as "Lord Novgorod the Great" to its inhabitants
- Novgorod is attested as a city of some significance from the mid 10th century onward, and is attested in legend some time earlier.
- Among the things that made Novgorod unique were the following:
 - Kiev, as noted earlier, was the dominant city of the era (hence the term "Kievan Rus'") but Novgorod gained its autonomy from Kiev in the mid 12th century and retained its independence from other cities until 1478 when it was subsumed by the increasingly strong and centralized Moscow government.
 - It was not dominated by the Mongols as other cities were.
 - Novgorod did pay tribute to the Mongol Khans, but the city was never sacked or garrisoned by Mongol troops and no Mongol was allowed to enter the city without express permission
 - Novgorod was (in the words of the historian Henrik Birnbaum) "one of the chief points of distribution and trans-shipment in an international network of trade routes" from "Scandinavia to Byzantium" (49).
 - All free men, including the tradesmen who made up a large proportion of the city's population, could belong to the Veche (assembly).
 - The Veche had executive powers.
 - The Veche had the right of selecting the Prince.
 - Peasants also could belong to the Veche.
 - Peasants retained their freedom here longer than in other parts of *Rus'*.
 - Peasants worked for the church and on the estates of the Boyars but also owned land.
 - In addition to a strong legislative branch, Novgorod also had a strong judicial system which was noted for its fairness and humanitarianism.

Incursions from Asia and Europe

- *Rus'* was not protected in the east or west by natural barriers.
- *Rus'* was wealthy in furs and other resources and also contained the major north-south trading route to Byzantium
- It was therefore a frequent target of attacks
- Among the invaders were nomadic Asian peoples

- In particular there was a group known as the Kumans, also called the Kipchaks or Polovtsy.
- The Kumans appeared from the eastern steppe toward the end of the 11th century and carried out raids in *Rus'* territory.
- The failure of one Russian Prince, Igor, to fight them off is recorded in an anonymous 12th century text, *The Song of Igor's Campaign*, that is considered one of the early great works of Russian literature.
- *Rus'* was also under frequent attack from the west, in particular by the Germans, the Lithuanians and the Swedes.
- During the period, an ongoing debate among Russian rulers was whether to fight the Mongols (of whom more below), or the Europeans
- A key figure in this debate during the 13th century was a Prince from Novgorod named Aleksandr
- Aleksandr now is a saint of the Russian Orthodox church but in his day he was controversial because he favored cooperating with the Mongols in order to fight the Europeans.
- Aleksandr led the Novgorodians in victories over the Swedes, Lithuanians and Germans in the decade of the 1240s
- One of his victories took place on the banks of the Neva river and thereafter he was known as Aleksandr "Nevsky"
- His most famous victory, over the Germans in 1242, took place on the ice of a frozen lake, through which the German mounted knights fell in their heavy armor.
- One of the most famous movies of the Soviet period, directed by Sergei Eisenstein, is called *Aleksandr Nevsky* and depicts this battle.
- The greatest threat to *Rus'* ultimately came from a group called the Mongols.

The Mongols

- The Mongols (called the Tatars in Russian and sometimes in English) were a nomadic Central Asian people from present-day Mongolia whose various branches were united under the leadership of one man who was granted the title of Chingiz Khan (Universal Ruler).
- Chingiz Khan established a stable government, and a strong military.
- He died in 1227 but his successors eventually established an empire that included China, Iran and the *Rus'* lands and extended well into Europe
- The period of 1240 until 1480 is thus called the Mongol or Tatar period in Russian history and in Russian the "Mongol yoke."
- In general, the Mongols did not occupy the cities of *Rus'* but rather ruled from afar, imposing laws and collecting substantial tribute under threat of military reprisals, which they sometimes carried out
- Russia has both steppe and forest. The Mongols stayed on the steppe, which was most similar to their Central Asian homeland, and did not garrison Russian cities within the forest zone.
- The Mongols did occupy and sack Kiev in the year 1240, which is why that year is generally listed as the beginning to the Mongol period.

- As a rule, the Mongols preferred to bargain with the Princes of the various cities as to the amount of tribute that would be paid.
- To this day there is a controversy as to how much the Mongols impacted Russian culture
- Russian historians before the modern era hewed to the official line that the Mongols ruled inflexibly and had no positive effect on Russian culture or institutions (Vernadsky 17; Wheeler 1).
- To this day there is an expression in Russian that "an uninvited guest is worse than a Tatar."
- There are certainly elements of truth in this view.
- During the Mongol period contact with the West was stunted, economic growth in some regions was curtailed and there were violent reprisals against cities that failed to follow Mongol laws or pay sufficient monetary tribute.
- It is also certain that the language, culture and ethnicity of *Rus* ' were affected by the presence of the Mongols.
- In the modern era, however, historians have taken a more balanced view.
- According to most sources, the Mongols, who adopted Islam at around the time of their foray into *Rus* ', did not interfere much in the local religion. Geoffrey Wheeler notes "the attitude of complete toleration which the Mongols observed towards religion" (1-2).
- As a result the Orthodox church was allowed to develop while civilian authority atrophied, and the church became a powerful institution in subsequent Russian history
- None the less it is fair to say that this was among the many confrontations between Islam and European Christianity that took place during the Middle Ages (Lewis 12).
- Some regions of Russia benefited economically from the presence of the Mongols, who changed trading routes to maintain better contact with their home base.
- Some military and administrative structures were adopted by the Russians.
- Ultimately, and notwithstanding modern-day insistence that the Mongol occupation had its good points, the presence of the Mongols and the corresponding lack of independence became a key factor in uniting the Russian princes.
- This unity, combined with internal problems in the Mongol empire, finally allowed the Russians to drive them out.
- The first decisive victory occurred in the year 1380 on a field known as Kulikovo, near the Don river
- There, on September 8, Russian troops led by a Prince named Dmitrii, thereafter known as Dmitrii Donskoi because of the location of the battle, defeated Mongol troops under a leader named Mamai.
- All of these names, and in particular Kulikovo, became famous in Russian history and are well known to this day.
- Some historians claim there is more myth than reality to the story of Dmitrii Donskoi and Russian resistance to Mongol rule.

- The *Cambridge History* (161) cites political upheavals amongst the Mongols themselves, as well as an outbreak of the Plague in the 14th centuries, as factors in the decline of the Mongol empire.
- Russian historical and popular traditions say that Kulikovo marked the beginning of the end of the domination of *Rus'* by the Mongols, who were finally driven out altogether by the year 1480.
- A battle in that year on the Urga river between Ivan III of Moscow and a Mongol army, although not terribly decisive in itself, is generally considered the final confrontation marking the end of Mongol domination.