

# Russian History: From the Early East Slavs to the Grand Duchy of Moscow

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Region: [Russia and FSU](#)

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## Introduction

This series is aimed at shedding light over contemporary Russian affairs, as I firmly believe that in order to analyze properly current international relations, one must get a strong historical background.

Part 1 will be dedicated to the foundation of the Russian state, and the process, as we will see, began way before 862. Indeed, a political embryo emerged with the state of Gardaríki, centered in Novgorod, which included the areas inhabited by Votes, Veps and Ilmen Slavs. It was set up by the Varangian chief Rurik in 862, marking the traditional beginning of Russian history. [1]

But before the creation of Gardaríki, many nomad tribes settled the land, and their influence over the early Russian state will be further discussed. Then, Rurik's successor, Oleg of Novgorod founded Kievan Rus', the first united East Slavic state. [2] Christianity became the official religion of the state in 988, after extended commercial ties with the Bizantine Empire. [3] This crucial event is considered as the beginning of the synthesis between Byzantine and Slavic cultures, which would define Russian culture until the advent of the Empire. [4]

Kievan Rus' was finally torn apart by the Mongol invasion between 1237 and 1240. In the meantime, regional powers such as Novgorod and Pskov fought to inherit the cultural and political legacy of the former state. However, after the 13th century, Moscow asserted itself as the political center of Russia until tsarism. [5]

## The Conquest of the Land by Pre-Slavic inhabitants and Early East Slavs

During Prehistory, the steppes of Southern Russia were home to nomadic tribes, more precisely the Sami people (on the Kola Peninsula), Nenets people (in northern arctic Russia) and Chukchis (on the Chukchi Peninsula and in the Bering Sea region). In classical antiquity, the Pontic Steppe was known as Scythia and the term Scythian, like Cimmerician, was used to refer to a variety of groups from the Black Sea to central Asia and southern Siberia. [6] Archeological evidence of these civilizations were found during the 20th century in places like Arkaim, [7] Sintashta, [8] Ipatovo, [9] and Pazyryk. [10]

The Early East Slavs settled Western Russia by moving from Polotsk towards Novgorod and Rostov, and also by heading to Suzdal from Kiev. [11] From the 6th century heretofore they constituted the majority of Western Russia's population and gradually assimilated the native Finno-Ugric tribes, such as the Meshchera, [12] the Merya [13] and the Muromians. [14]

Traditionally, the changes which took place in eastern Europe during the 6<sup>th</sup> century are explained through the demographic expansion of Slavic peoples, who carried with them their language and customs.

But given the extreme diversity of origins among Slavic tribes, there is no consensus regarding the precise location of the Slavic homeland, although a majority of scholars consider the northern Carpathian Mountains as a probable place. [15] The protection of the forest steppe kept most of their culture safe from assimilation. That is true for their languages (except for phonetic) and agricultural techniques. [16]

Basically, when the Hun Empire collapsed, a distinct Eastern Slavic culture emerged and spread to eastern and central Europe. According to Gimbutas : “Neither Bulgars nor Avars colonized the Balkan Peninsula; after storming Thrace, Illyria and Greece they went back to their territory north of the Danube. It was the Slavs who did the colonizing; . . . entire families or even whole tribes infiltrated lands. As an agricultural people, they constantly sought an outlet for the population surplus. Suppressed for over a millennium by foreign rule of Scythians, Sarmatians and Goths, they had been restricted to a small territory; now the barriers were down and they poured out”. [17] Besides, Goffart argued that Slavic expansion has been furthered eased by the relative depopulation of eastern Europe, with significant emigration of Germans, and also by the lack (or ineffectiveness) of state defences in the related territories. [18]

However, this point of view has been contested by Nichols : “Ethnic spreads can involve either the spread of a language to speakers of other languages or the spread of a population. Massive population spread or demographic replacement has probably been a rarity in human history.... There is no reason to assume that the Slavic expansion was a primarily demographic event. Some migration took place, but the parsimonious assumption is the Slavic expansion was primarily a linguistic spread”. [19]

Furthermore, Dolukhanov asserts that the Slavs were able to gain substantial political and military experience thanks to their ties with nomads. That would be the way they emerged as a « dominant force » and established « a new sociopolitical network in the entire area of central and southeastern Europe ». [20]

Yet another concept has been used to explain Slavic expansion : system collapse. According to its proponents, the fall of the Roman Empire on the one hand and the Hun Empire on the other hand enabled some minority groups to take over the land and impose their customs and language. [21]

Moreover, Barford noted that Slavic tribes might have existed in a large area of central-eastern Europe, comprising territories lying between Zarubintsy-Przeworsk and Chernyakov, even prior to the Slavic migrations of the 6th to 9th centuries mentioned above. [22]. Then, Geary pointed out that the Slavic outstreach was an addition of local processes resulting in the assimilation of scores of people. It was carried out by small groups of “soldier-farmers” who shared common traditions and language. This decentralized movement was probably what protected Slavic people and their emerging unity from foreign aggressors. [23]

This opinion is strongly upheld by Poh, stating : “Avars and Bulgars conformed to the rules of the game established by the Romans. They built up a concentration of military power that was paid, in the last resort, from Roman tax revenues. Therefore they paradoxically depended on the functioning of the Byzantine state. The Slavs managed to keep up their

agriculture (and a rather efficient kind of agriculture, by the standards of the time), even in times when they took their part in plundering Roman provinces. The booty they won apparently did not (at least initially) create a new military class with the greed for more and a contempt for peasant's work, as it did with the Germans. Thus the Slavic model proved an attractive alternative . . . which proved practically indestructible. Slav traditions, language, and culture shaped, or at least influenced, innumerable local and regional communities: a surprising similarity that developed without any central institution to promote it. These regional ethnogeneses inspired by Slavic tradition incorporated considerable remnants of Roman or Germanic population ready enough to give up ethnic identities that had lost their cohesion". [24]

Also important is the fact that in the latter part of the 8th century BC, Greek merchants brought classical civilization to Tanais (a city located in the Don river delta) and Phanagoria (which was the largest Greek colony on the Taman peninsula and was chosen by the kings of Bosphorus as their capital in Asia). [25] Then, between the 3rd and 6th centuries AD, the Bosphoran Kingdom, which succeeded the Greek colonies, [26] was erased after several invasions carried out by nomad. [27]

Therefore, Greek culture had a significant impact on the initial Slavic culture (it will be discussed later in this article).

Although the study of all those peoples' culture and history is a major topic from an anthropological point of view, it won't be further studied here, because their influence on the emerging Russian state has been limited, unlike the one of the Khazars, a Turkic people (not to be confused with the Turkish people, which is just one among many ethnic groups composing the Turkic people). Thereby, this study must begin with an examination of the role held by the Khazars at that time.

#### Khazaria and Rus' Khaganate: Early Political Influences of the Russian State

The lower Volga basin steppes between the Caspian and Black Seas were ruled by the Khazars, until the 8th century. The political power belonged to the Khagan (i.e emperor) while the army was led by the Khagan Bek. [28] Their political power reached its climax during the European Dark Ages and was critical for the creation of capitalism. [29] Indeed, their strategic and commercial importance between China on one side and the Middle East and Europe on the other gave tremendous riches to most of the Eurasian states of that time. [30]

As a result, Khazars established one of the largest polities of medieval Eurasia, their territory comprising much of present-day European Russia, eastern Ukraine, western Kazakhstan, Azerbaidjan, along with large parts of the northern Caucasus and also parts of the Crimea, Georgia, and northeastern Turkey.

Khazaria (or Khazar Khaganate) was known for its tolerance, cosmopolitanism and fairly developed judicial system. To take just one example, its army incorporated soldiers belonging to each great monotheist religion and even pagans. It was also the main commercial link between the Baltic and the Muslim Abbasid empire centered in Baghdad. [31] As stated before, they were major allies of the Byzantine Empire, [32] and won several wars against the Arab Caliphates. [33]

Another important feature of Khazaria is its Jewish faith : it prevented Islam to spread in

Europe. [34] According to David Keys, if Arabs had occupied what is now Russia and Ukraine, the Rus' might never have been able to gain control of southern and eastern territories from the Baltic to establish Russia. [35]

The alliance between Khazaria and the Byzantine empire began to weaken in the early 10th century but the Khazars influenced greatly the Rus' Khaganate, an early Rus' polity located in present-day northwestern Russia and Belarus. [36] However, their relations quickly turned hostile as Joseph, the Khazar ruler in the early 960's, stated : "I have to wage war with them, for if I would give them any chance at all they would lay waste the whole land of the Muslims as far as Baghdad.". Between 965 and 969, Khazar sovereignty was eventually broken by Kievan Rus', with the help of the Bizantine empire. The allies achieved their goal by conquering the Khazar fortress of Sarkel, paving the way to a full-scale annihilation of Khazar Khaganate. [37]

Before the Rurik Dynasty and the Kievan Rus', the Rus' Khaganate was a congregation of city-states set up by a people called Rus', who probably came from what is today northern Russia. [38]

The earliest reference related to the Rus' Khaganate is the Annals of St. Bertin, which mention a group of Norsemen who visited Constantinople in 838. The precise beginning of this polity remains unclear and has been a source of debates as a result. Anymay, Pritsak dates the foundation of the Khaganate to around 830-840, and there are no references mentioning the existence of the Rus' before the 830's. [39]

Moreover, the date of the Khaganate's disintegration has also been contested, partly because the title of Khagan is not mentioned in the Rus'-Byzantine treaties (907, 911, 944), nor in De Ceremoniis, a record of court ceremonials. Therefore, Golden concluded that the Khaganate collapsed at some point between 871 and 922, backed by the fact that ibn Fadlan, in his detailed account of the Rus' (922), designated their ruler as "king" and not Khagan. [40] Rybakov proved that Kiev was the residence of the Khagan, assuming that Dir and Askold were the only Khagans recorded. [41]

However, a worrisome fact is the failure of archeological expeditions to find coins of that period in the region, which would prove that the Dnieper trade route (which would become the backbone of later Kievan Rus') was running in the 9th century. [42] As a result, many historians have suggested that the Khaganate must have been located north from Kiev. The first to propose this theory was Bartov. [43]

Besides, the First Novgorod Chronicle mention an uprising in Novgorod before Rurik came to rule the region in the 860's. This account led Brøndsted to assert that Novgorod was the Khaganate's capital for several decades prior to the arrival of Rurik. [44]

Then, around the year 860, the Rus', a group of Vikings lead by Rurik, came from Sweden and began to rule Gardaríki, an area which was comprised of Novgorod, Smolensk, Saint-Petersburg, Tver and Yaroslavl. [45]

The Khazar connection to early Rus' rulers is supported by the use of a Khazarian seal by Rus' leaders like Sviatoslav I of Kiev. [46] Consequently, Golden asserts that the Rus' Khaganate was a puppet state set up by the Khazars in the area of the Oka River to fight off the recurring attacks of the Magyars. [47]

On the contrary, Novoseltsev argues that the adoption of the title “Khagan” was designed to promote the Rus’ claims to the equality with the Khazars. This theory is shared by Noonan, who points out how politically scattered was the emerging Rus’ Khaganate. Therefore, the adoption of the title “Khagan” was aimed at giving legitimacy to the Rus’ leader in the eyes of his subjects and neighboring states. [48]

Anyway, the power in the Rus’ Khaganate was shared by two officials, just like in Khazaria: the Rus’ Khaganate was assisted by a deputy whose main task was to command the army.

Regarding the economy, trade was the main source of income for the Rus’, who according to ibn Rustah did not engage in agriculture: “They have no cultivated fields but depend for their supplies on what they can obtain from as-Saqaliba’s [Slavs] land. They have no estates, villages, or fields; their only business is to trade in sable, squirrel, and other furs, and the money they take in these transactions they stow in their belts.”. [49]. Rus’ merchants travelled down the Volga, paying duties to the Khazars and travelled as far as Baghdad. [50]

According to Vernadsky, the Greeks and the Khazars erected Sarkel between the Volga and the Don River to defend this strategic point from the Rus’. [51] Other scholars, such as Franklin and Shepard, believe that Sarkel was aimed at repelling (or at least monitoring) the Magyars and other steppe tribes, but not the Rus’. [52]

In 860, the Byzantine army was busy waging war against the Abbasid Caliphate, which enabled the Rus’ to besiege Constantinople. [53]

However, in the early 10<sup>th</sup> century relations between the Khazars and the Rus’ began to sour, while Photius informed other Orthodox bishops about the Christianization of the Rus’, which led to the complete destruction of all the centres of the Khaganate in North-Western Russia. Braichevsky labelled it as a “pagan reaction” against the Christianization of the Rus’. [54]

Soon after, between 880’s and 890’s the Volga trade route ceased functioning, precipitating “the first silver crisis in Europe”. As we might expect, a period of economic depression and political upheaval followed this crisis, but the recovery occurred quite quickly, at the beginning of the 900’s. The arrival of Rurik’s viking crew was probably influential in the process, because he decided to shift the trade route from the Volga to the Dnieper. [55] Consequently, Kiev developed into an important urban centre and Kievan Rus’ replaced the Rus’ Khaganate when Rurik decided to move the capital from Novgorod to Kiev after having thrown out the Khazars. [56]

#### Kievan Rus’ and the Republic of Novgorod: the Particularity of the Russian Middle-Age

In 880, the Kievan Rus’ was officially founded by Prince Oleg, who subordinated the various Eastern Slavic and Finnic tribes. By 884 he managed to subjugate the Polians, Vyatichs, Drevlians, Radimichs and Severians. In 907, Oleg led an attack against Constantinople leaving Igor, son of Rurik in Kiev.

Through a treaty, Oleg managed to impose a bribe upon Greeks, then in 911 he signed a commercial treaty with the Byzantine Empire as an equal partner. In 912, the Drevlians took advantage of the death of Oleg to momentarily break away but were conquered back by Igor.

The new Kievan state prospered because it controlled the three major trade routes of Eastern Europe: the Volga trade route from the Baltic Sea to the Orient, the Dnieper trade route from the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea, and the trade route from the Khazars to the Germans. They grew also through the trade of furs and honey.

Following the death of Igor in 945, his wife Olga ruled as regent in Kiev until their son Sviatoslav reached maturity, in 963. His reign was marked by a fast expansion through the invasion of the Balkans and the conquest of the Khazars of the Pontic steppe. At the end of his life, Sviatoslav was in charge of the largest state in Europe, eventually moving his capital from Kiev to Pereyaslavets in 969, but his conquests, for the most part, were not consolidated into an empire due to fratricidal quarrels among his sons. [57]

In the mid 11<sup>th</sup> century, the state reached its maximal power as its territory extended east to the Volga, west to the Kingdom of Poland and to the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and south to the Black Sea.

Junior members of the dynasty usually began their career as rulers of a minor province, then progressed to more important principalities and finally competed for the throne of Kiev. Officials and soldiers received income and land from the princes in return for their political and military services. Merchants and artisans sometimes exercised political influence through a city assembly, the veche (council), which included all the adult males in the population. A class of tribute-paying peasants, who owed labor duty to the princes existed but there was not a widespread serfdom system, which was a major feature of medieval Western Europe. [58]

The reigns of Vladimir the Great (980–1015) and his son Yaroslav I the Wise (1019–1054) are regarded as the “Golden Age” of Kiev, which saw the introduction of Christianity (988) and the creation of the first East Slavic written legal code, the Russkaya Pravda, which means literally “Justice of Rus’ “.

Capital punishment in Kievan Rus’ was rare compared to feudal Western Europe, as the Pravda favored fines as punishment. [59] Besides, some rights were accorded to women, such as property and inheritance rights. Therefore, the Kievan judicial system was particularly modern compared to the standards of that time. [60]

The christianization was decided because Vladimir’s emissaries in Constantinople were amazed by the beauty of the cathedral of Hagia Sophia and its liturgical service. Vladimir’s choice of Eastern Christianity was made official by his wedding with Princess Anna, the sister of the Byzantine emperor, Basil II. [61]

Besides, this choice was probably heavily influenced by Vladimir’s personal ties with Constantinople, which dominated the Black Sea and more particularly the Dnieper River, which was Kievan Rus’ main commercial route. Therefore, joining the Eastern Church had tremendous political and commercial consequences.

In the meantime, the conversion to Christianity of the Eastern Slavs introduced them to science, Greek philosophy and history, without learning Greek as Hagia Sophia’s liturgy was available in cyrillic. [62]

As a result of their independence from the Roman authority, the East Slavs developed their own literature and arts, which are pretty different from those of other Eastern Orthodox countries. [63] Literacy was high in Kiev, Novgorod and other large cities, compared to European standards of that time. [64]

A son of Vladimir the Great, Yaroslav was vice-regent of Novgorod when his father died in 1015. In 1019, he defeated his brother Svyatopolk with the help of Novgorodians and Viking mercenaries, as Svyatopolk killed three of his other brothers to seize power in Kiev. [65] Yaroslav looked forward to improving relations with the rest of Europe, especially the Byzantine Empire, which was also a concern for his father. He further expanded his power through arranged marriages for his sister and three daughters to the kings of France, Norway, Poland and Hungary. Yaroslav's major achievements is the enactment of the *Russkaya Pravda*, while the construction of Saint Sophia Cathedral in Kiev and Saint Sophia Cathedral in Novgorod used to demonstrate his power to the neighboring states. [66]

The state declined in the late 11<sup>th</sup>, following the death of Yaroslav, and imploded in the 12<sup>th</sup> century to leave the land unruled because of the emergence of several regional powers due to this collapse.

A major cause has been the nature of the political system itself: the power was transferred not from father to son, but to the eldest member of the ruling dynasty. Of course it entailed rivalry and hatred within the royal family. Three of Yaroslav's sons fought each other after their defeat at the Battle of the Alta River against the Cumans (1068) while an unrest took place in Kiev, bringing to power Vseslav of Polotsk.

In 1097, Vladimir II Monomakh organized the first federal council of Kievan Rus in Liubech , in order to reach an agreement among the various fighting sides. The last ruler to maintain a relative unity within the state was Mstislav the Great. After his death in 1132, the Kievan Rus fell into decline and his successor struggled with the growing power of the Novgorod Republic. [67] Then in 1169, Bogolyubsky of Vladimir-Suzdal' destroyed Kiev and by the end of the 12th century the Kievan state became even further fragmented. [68]

After this, the state was further weakened by the collapse of Rus' commercial ties to Constantinople due to the Crusades, which made the Dnieper a marginal as a result of the destruction of Constantinople by the christians. More precisely, the trade route between the Black Sea and the Baltic Sea was the backbone of Kiev's economy as it served as the main trade route between the Varangians and the Greeks, and the Black Sea was controlled by Constantinople at that time. Thereby, once the Byzantine Empire collapsed, trade on this route plummeted and Kiev lost its appeal as a result. [69]

In the north, the Republic of Novgorod prospered as part of the Hanseatic League, the first international trading confederation in history. [70] The city's oligarchy controlled trade routes from the River Volga to the Baltic Sea and as Kievan Rus' declined, it became more independent (but continued to be part of Kievan Rus').

An interesting feature in the development of Novgorod is that although it was ruled by a local oligarchy, a republican government existed there because major political decisions had to be made by a town assembly, which also elected a prince as the city's military leader. It is possible that there was also a kind of "Council of Lords" that was headed by the archbishop but its actual power remains unclear today and he was elected by Novgorodians anyway. Its economy was mainly based on salt and furs, with the lands located north of the

city being critical in that regard. Indeed, they supplied most of the above mentioned items and Novgorod had to defend them against Moscow in the late 14<sup>th</sup> century. The victory of Moscow brought about the decline of Novgorod and boosted Moscow's development until it became the heart of Russia. [71]

In the northeast, Slavs from the Kievan area colonized the territory that would become the Grand Duchy of Moscow. Rostov, which was the oldest centre of this region has been overtaken first by Suzdal and then by the city of Vladimir, which became the capital of Vladimir-Suzdal', a principality which would assert itself as a major power in Kievan Rus' in the late 12th century.

Indeed, Bogolyubskiy, the prince of Vladimir-Suzdal destroyed Kiev in 1169, which resulted in the rise of Vladimir-Suzdal as the main principality succeeding Kievan Rus'. [72]

From the Vladimir-Suzdal Principality to the Grand Duchy of Moscow

The principality progressively grew into a grand duchy which was divided into several smaller principalities. After the Mongol invasion, it became a self-governed state ruled by its own nobility. The principality was bounded by the Volga, Northern Dvina and Oka Rivers.

In 1238, the Mongols set fire to the city of Vladimir, along with other cities in northern Russia. [73]

They conquered gradually most of the Russian principalities, with the notable exception of Novgorod.

The princes of eastern and southern Russia had to pay tribute to the Mongols of the Golden Horde, commonly called Tatars. [74]

As a result, old cultural centers such as Kiev and Vladimir never recovered from the devastation of the attack, while Moscow (an insignificant trade city back then), Novgorod (still prospering thanks to the Hanseatic League) and Tver began to compete in order to take control of the mongol-dominated land. [75] Mongol domination continued until 1480 and entailed the division of the East Slavic people into three separate nations (modern day Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus). [76]

A major cause of the rise of Moscow was that in 1327 the prince of Tver joined a rebellion against the Mongols while prince Ivan I of Moscow allied with the Mongols to crush Tver and to devastate its lands.

By doing so he got rid of his rival, allowed the Russian Orthodox Church to move its headquarters to Moscow, and was granted the title of Grand prince by the Mongols.

As a result, the Muscovite princes became the main intermediaries between the Mongol chiefs and the Rus' principalities. To reward them of their docility, the Mongols didn't raid Moscow-controlled lands, which attracted nobles who sought to settle in these relatively secure lands. [77]

The influence of the Mongols on the Russian nobility was so deep that a survey of Russian noble families of the 17th century established that over 15% of the Russian noble families had Tatar or Oriental origins. [78]. Therefore, historians generally consider that without the Mongol destruction of Kievan Rus', Moscow, and subsequently the Russian Empire, would

not have risen. Meanwhile, the isolation from the West may have caused Russia's later non-involvement in the Renaissance and the Protestant Reformation, both critical in the emergence of capitalism. [79]

The judicial system has also been heavily influenced by the mongol presence, as capital punishment and the use of torture became widespread, while during Kievan Rus' it had "only" been applied to slaves.

However, penal law in western Europe at the same time was even harsher than mongol law. [80]

On the other hand, the Russian fiscal system, transportation, military tactics and census were developed under the Mongol domination. [81]

In a nutshell, Moscow's leadership expanded through war, purchase and marriage.

Indeed, the first ruler of the principality of Moscow, Daniel I, son of Alexander Nevsky of Vladimir-Suzdal, expanded his principality by seizing Kolomna, while his son Yuriy would take over Mozhaisk, ally with Uzbek Khan of the Golden Horde, marry the Khan's sister and gain the title of Duke of Vladimir-Suzdal as a result. It was this special position within occupied Rus' which enabled the Muscovite nobility to interfere into the affairs of the powerful Republic of Novgorod.

Then, Yuriy's successor, Ivan I managed to keep the title of Grand Duke by cooperating closely with the Mongols, more precisely by collecting taxes from other Rus' principalities on their behalf.

Ivan's successors continued to gather the lands of Rus' to increase the population and wealth under their rule. After this, Dmitri of Moscow managed to unite the principalities of Rus' in his struggle against the Horde and became a national hero, although his attempt didn't work in the short term.

Vasily I continued the policies of his father and desisted from paying tribute to the Khan. Married to the only daughter of Vytautas, the Grand Duke of Lithuania, Vasily attempted to avoid open conflicts with him, even when the former annexed Smolensk. His long reign was marked by the expansion to the east (annexation of Suzdal in 1392) and to the north (annexation of Veliky Ustyug, Vologda and Perm of Vychegda in 1398). [82]

Another reason explaining the expansion of the Grand Duchy of Moscow was its favorable dynastic situation, when each sovereign was succeeded by his son, contrary to rival principalities, which experienced many strifes within their own dynasties.

In the 14th and 15th centuries, expansion of the Grand Duchy of Moscow went along with internal consolidation. Indeed, the state was successful in destroying and annexing Novgorod in 1478 and the Grand Duchy of Tver (allied with the Grand Duchy of Lithuania) in 1485, thereby getting rid of direct political competitors.

Indeed, Ivan III, during his 43 year reign over the Grand Duchy of Moscow, further strengthened the state (after defeating the declining Golden Horde) partly by seizing the lands of his brothers, campaigned against his remaining rival power, the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, and, by 1503, he had tripled the territory of his principality. He adopted the title of Tsar and claimed the title of "Ruler of all Rus'", while his marriage to the niece of the last

Byzantine emperor asserted Moscow as the “Third Rome”, the successor state of the Roman Empire.

He competed with the Grand Duchy of Lithuania for control over some of the former principalities of Kievan Rus’ in the upper Dnieper and Donets river basins. It was also under Ivan III that the new Russian Sudebnik, or law code, was compiled by the scribe Vladimir Gusev. [83]

The reign of the Tsars started officially with Ivan the Terrible, but in practice it started with Ivan III, who completed the centralization of the state, traditionally known as the gathering of the Russian lands.

The Moscow princes combined customs and ceremonies inherited from Kievan Rus’ with those imported from the Byzantine Empire and the Golden Horde. During the times of dynastic troubles, like during part of the reign of Ivan IV, boyards (i.e the most senior aristocrats) constituted an internal force which was a permanent threat to the throne. During such conflicts, Muscovite monarchs felt the necessity to counterbalance the power of the boyards by creating a new kind of nobility, based on personal devotion to the Tsar, rather than by heredity. [84]

To conclude, the Grand Duchy of Moscow drew people and wealth to the northeastern part of Kievan Rus’; established trade links to the Baltic Sea, Siberia and the Caspian Sea. It created a highly centralized political system, whose traditions would exert a powerful influence on the future development of the Russian society. [85]

This part had the ambitious aim to sum up more than ten centuries of history. At the end of it, I hope readers can remind of a handful of key ideas:

- From the dawn of humanity, the Russian civilization has been a multicultural one
- Extended political and commercial ties with central asian and middle-eastern states existed as soon as the 9<sup>th</sup> century. This is an interesting fact to be aware of if one is to understand today’s geopolitical relations between Russia and its Arab partners ...
- The history of Kievan Rus’ and the Republic of Novgorod offers striking evidences against the western belief that the Russian people has always been more violent and less educated than their western counterparts, as the exact opposite is true regarding this period of time (not to mention the consequences of the destruction of Constantinople by the Crusaders ...)
- Novgorod and other merchant cities prospered without joining the initial capitalist movement, meaning trade is possible and suitable if it does not imply the impoverishment of weaker commercial partners and workers
- The Grand Duchy of Moscow was an authoritarian political system which paved the way to its successors in that regard. Nevertheless, the context should not be forgotten: the Mongol domination has been critical in the emergence of such a hard line regime. Wars of independence are rarely followed by progressive governments ...

Part 2 of this series will deal with Tsarism and the Russian empire, in order to explain how Russia eventually became a major power.

Notes :

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