

# Early Russian History

## SETTING THE STAGE:

At the beginning of the 9<sup>th</sup> century, the Byzantines regarded the forests north of the Black Sea as a wilderness. In their minds, those forests were inhabited only by “barbarians,” who sometimes made trouble along their borders. They would soon consider these Slavic peoples as fellow Byzantine Christians.

## BOTH SLAVIC AND GREEK:

Midway through the 9th century, the Slavs—the people from the forests north of the Black Sea—began trading with Constantinople. As they traded, they began absorbing Greek Byzantine ideas. Russian culture grew out of this blending of Slavic and Greek traditions.

## THE LAND OF RUSSIA’S BIRTH:

Russia's first unified territory originated west of the Ural Mountains in the region that runs from the Black Sea to the Baltic. Hilly grasslands are found in the extreme south of that area. The north, however, is densely forested, flat, and swampy. Slow-moving, interconnecting rivers allow boat travel across these plains in almost any direction. Three great rivers, the Dnieper (NEE-puhr), the Don, and the Volga, run from the heart of the forests to the Black Sea or the Caspian Sea.

In the early days of the Byzantine Empire, these forests were inhabited by tribes of Slavic farmers and traders. They spoke similar languages but had no political unity. Sometime in the 800s, small bands of adventurers came down among them from the north. These Varangians, or **Rus** as they were also called, were most likely Vikings. Eventually, the Vikings built forts along the rivers and settled among the Slavs.

## SLAVS AND VIKINGS:



Russian legends say the Slavs invited the Viking chief Rurik to be their king. So in 862, he founded Novgorod (NAHV-guh-rahd), Russia's first important city. That account is given in *The Primary Chronicle*, a history of Russia written by monks in the early 1100s. Around 880, a nobleman from Novgorod named Oleg moved south to Kiev (KEE-ehf), a city on the Dnieper River. From Kiev, the Vikings could sail by river and sea to Constantinople. There they could trade for the products from distant lands.

The merchandise they brought to Constantinople included timber, fur, wax, honey, and their Slavic subjects whom they sold as slaves. In fact, the word slave originates from Slav. Kiev grew into a principality, a small state ruled by a prince. As it did, the Viking nobles intermarried with their Slavic subjects. They also adopted Slavic culture. The society remained strictly

divided between peasant masses and the nobles, or boyars. Gradually, however, the line between Slavs and Vikings vanished.

**Kiev Becomes Orthodox** In 957, a member of the Kievan nobility paid a visit to Constantinople and publicly converted to Christianity. Her name was Princess Olga. From 945 to 955, she governed Kiev until her son was old enough to rule. Her son resisted Christianity. However, soon after Olga's grandson **Vladimir** (VLAD-uh-meer) came to the throne about 980, he considered conversion to Christianity. The *Primary Chronicle* reports that Vladimir sent out teams to observe the major religions of the times. Three of the teams returned with lukewarm accounts of Islam, Judaism, and Western Christianity. But the team from Byzantium told quite a different story:

*...the Greeks led us to the buildings where they worship their God, and we knew not whether we were in heaven or on earth. For on earth there is no such splendor or such beauty, and we are at a loss how to describe it. We only know that God dwells there among men and...we cannot forget that beauty.*

This report convinced Vladimir to convert to Byzantine Christianity and to make all his subjects convert, too. In 989, a baptism of all the citizens of Kiev was held in the Dnieper River. Kiev, already linked to Byzantium by trade, now looked to Constantinople for religious guidance. Vladimir imported teachers to instruct the people in the new faith. All the beliefs and traditions of Orthodox Christianity flourished in Kiev. Vladimir appreciated the Byzantine idea of the emperor as supreme ruler of the church. So the close link between Church and state took root in Russia as well.

## **KIEVAN RUSSIA:**

Thanks to its Byzantine ties, Kiev grew from a cluster of crude wooden forts to the glittering capital of prosperous and educated people. The rise of Kiev marks the appearance of Russia's first important unified territory.

Vladimir led the way in establishing Kiev's power. He expanded his state west into Poland and north almost to the Baltic Sea. He also fought off troublesome nomads from the steppes to the south.

In 1019, Vladimir's son **Yaroslav the Wise** came to the throne and led Kiev to even greater glory. Like the rulers of Byzantium, Yaroslav skillfully married off his daughters and sisters to the kings and princes of Western Europe. Those marriages helped him to forge important trading alliances. At the same time, he created a legal code tailored to Kiev's commercial culture. Many of its rules dealt with crimes against property. For example, Yaroslav's code called for a fine of three gruznas for cutting off a person's finger, but 12 gruznas for plowing over a property line. Yaroslav also built the first library in Kiev. Under his rule, Christianity prospered. By the 12th century, Kiev could even boast of having 400 churches. However, the wooden churches proved to be as temporary as Kiev's glory.

## **POWER STRUGGLES BRING ON KIEV'S DECLINE:**

The decline of the Kievan state started with the death of Yaroslav in 1054. Yaroslav had made a crucial error. Yaroslav divided his realm among his sons—instead of following the custom of passing on the throne to the eldest son. His sons tore the state apart fighting for the choicest territories. And because this system of dividing among sons continued, each generation saw new struggles. The Crusades added to Kiev's troubles by disrupting trade. Then, just when it seemed that things could not get worse, they got far worse.

Europe. Their savage killing and burning won them a reputation for ruthless brutality. When Genghis Khan died in 1227, his successors continued the conquering that he had begun. At its fullest extent, the Mongol Empire stretched from the Yellow Sea to the Baltic Sea and from the Himalayas to northern Russia.

In 1240, the Mongols attacked and demolished Kiev. They rode under the leadership of Batu Khan, Genghis' grandson. So many inhabitants were slaughtered, a Russian historian reported, that "no eye remained to weep." A Roman Catholic bishop traveling through Kiev five years later wrote, "When we passed through that land, we found lying in the field countless heads and bones of dead people." After the fall of Kiev, Mongols ruled all of southern Russia. For over 200 years, the Mongol Empire in Russia held power. The empire's official name was the "Khanate of the **Golden Horde**": Khanate, from the Mongol word for "kingdom"; Golden, because gold was the royal color of the Mongols; Horde, from the Mongol word for "camp."



## MONGOL RULE IN RUSSIA:

Under Mongol rule, the Russians could follow all their usual customs, as long as they made no sign of rebellion. As fierce as they were, the Mongols tolerated all the religions in their realms. The Church acted as a mediator between the people and the Mongols. It also pacified the oppressors by praying for them. Church leaders found a religious meaning in the Mongol occupation of the country. They explained it as a punishment for the peoples' sins. Icons gained importance at this time, and Russians used the images to help escape their painful political realities.

The Mongols demanded just two things from Russians: slavish obedience and massive amounts of tribute. The Mongols themselves made sure Russians remained obedient. However, they made local nobles collect the tribute. As long as the money was delivered, the nobles could keep their titles. Novgorod's prince and military hero **Alexander Nevsky**, for example, advised his fellow princes to cooperate with the Mongols. The Russian nobles crushed revolts against the Mongols and collected oppressive taxes for the foreign rulers. At his death, Nevsky willed the principality of Moscow to his son Daniel. Daniel founded a line of princes there that in 200 years would rise to great prominence.

Mongol rule isolated the Russians more than ever from their neighbors in Western Europe, cutting them off from many new ideas and inventions. However, during this period, forces were at work that would eventually lead to Russia's liberation and to the rise of a new center of power: Moscow.



## MONGOL RULE SERVES MOSCOW'S INTERESTS:

In some ways, the Mongols actually helped to unite Russia. Kievan Russia had been a collection of small independent principalities. Mongol rulers looked upon Russia as their unified empire, and all Russian principalities had to pay tribute to the Mongol Khan.

The rise of Moscow also began under the Mongols. The city was first founded in the 1100s. By 1156, it was a crude village protected by a log wall. Nonetheless, Moscow was located near three rivers: the Volga, Dnieper, and Don. From that strategic position, a prince of Moscow who could gain control of the three rivers could eventually control nearly all of European Russia.

That opportunity for expansion would not arise until the 14th century. In the late 1320s, Moscow's Prince Ivan I had earned the gratitude of the Mongols by helping to crush a Russian revolt against Mongol rule. For his services, the Mongols appointed Ivan I as tax collector of all the Slavic lands they had conquered. They also gave him the title of "Great Prince." Ivan had now become without any doubt the most powerful of all Russian princes. He also became the wealthiest and was known as "Ivan Moneybags."

Ivan was also able to convince the Patriarch of Kiev, the leading bishop of Eastern Europe, to move to Moscow. The move enhanced the city's prestige and gave Moscow's princes a powerful ally: the Church. Ivan I and his successors used numerous strategies to enlarge their territory: land purchases, wars, trickery, shrewd marriages. From generation to generation, they schemed to gain control over the small states around Moscow.

## AN EMPIRE EMERGES:



The Russian state would become a genuine empire during the long, 43-year reign of Ivan III (1462-1505). This prince was only a boy of 13 when Constantinople fell to the Turkish Empire in 1453. In 1472, Ivan III managed to marry the niece of the last Byzantine emperor. He then began calling himself **tsar** (czar), the Russian version of Caesar. (The title became official only during the reign of Ivan IV.) By calling himself tsar, however, **Ivan III** openly claimed to make Russia the 'Third Rome.'

In 1480, Ivan made the final break with the Mongols. He refused to pay their tribute. Following his refusal, Russian and Mongol armies faced each other on either side of the Ugra River, about 150 miles southwest of Moscow. However, neither side wanted to fight. So, after a time, both armies turned around and marched home.

Russians have traditionally considered this bloodless standoff as marking Russia's liberation from Mongol rule. After that liberation, the czars could openly pursue an empire. The Mongols were not the only conquering people to emerge from central Asia. Eventually, however, the Turks would begin establishing an empire in Southwest Asia. In one form or another, their empire would last from the 11th century to the 20th century.



**SOURCE:** *World History: Patterns of Interaction*. McDougal-Littell: 1999, pp. 274-278.