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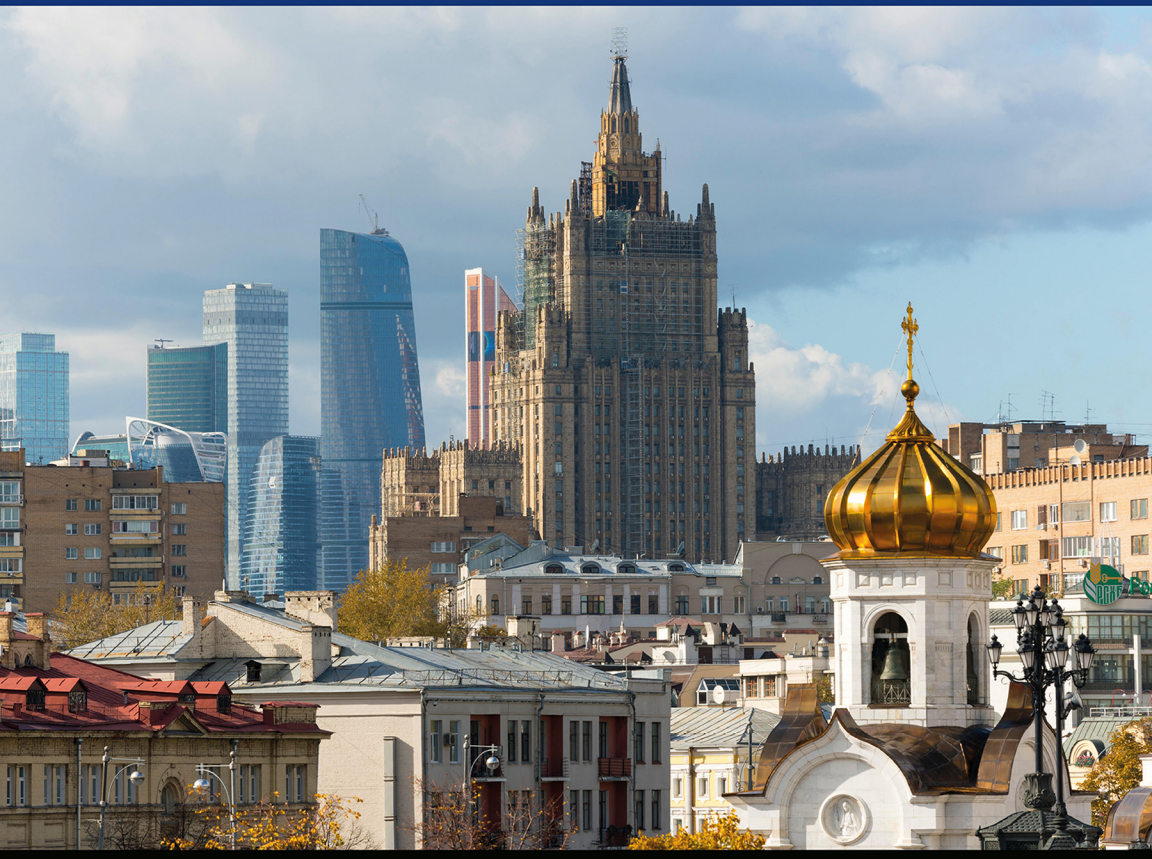
RUSSIA

A Historical Introduction from Kievan Rus' to the Present

NINTH EDITION



CHRISTOPHER J. WARD AND JOHN M. THOMPSON

Russia

This lucid account of Russian and Soviet history presents major trends and events from Kievan Rus' to Vladimir Putin's presidency in the twenty-first century.

Directly addressing controversial topics, this book looks at issues such as the impact of the Mongol conquest, the paradoxes of Peter the Great, the "inevitability" of the 1917 Revolution, the Stalinist terror, and the Gorbachev reform effort. This new ninth edition has been updated to include a discussion of Russian participation in the War in Donbas, eastern Ukraine, Russia's role in the Syrian civil war, the rise of opposition figure Alexei Navalny, Vladimir Putin's confirmation as "president for life," recent Russian relations with the United States, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and the European Union as well as contemporary social and cultural trends. Distinguished by its brevity and supplemented with substantially updated suggested readings that feature new scholarship on Russia and a thoroughly updated index, this essential text provides balanced coverage of all periods of Russian history and incorporates economic, social, and cultural developments as well as politics and foreign policy.

Suitable for undergraduates as well as the general reader with an interest in Russia, this text is a concise, single volume on one of the world's most significant lands.

Christopher J. Ward received his Ph.D. from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He teaches Russian and world history at Clayton State University in metropolitan Atlanta, USA, and is the author of *Brezhnev's Folly: The Building of BAM and Late Soviet Socialism*.

The late **John M. Thompson** was a graduate of Columbia University's Russian Institute and taught history at Indiana University, USA, for seventeen years. He was a distinguished visiting professor at the United States Air Force Academy and the Air War College.

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My first thanks go to Professor Emeritus of History Martha Cooley of Guilford College, who was my undergraduate Russian history instructor and who encouraged me to pursue my studies at the graduate level.

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I am also grateful to Clayton State University, Koninklijke Brill, and Kristina Wischenkamper in addition to Rebecca Brennan, Ed Gibbons, Robert Langham, Eve Setch, and Zoe Thomson at Routledge-Taylor & Francis for their assistance.

In addition, I am profoundly honored that in 2016 Professor John (Jack) Thompson agreed to allow me to serve as co-author of the Eighth Edition of this textbook. It is my firm belief that Jack, who passed away in March 2017 just as the Eighth Edition was published, would be pleased to see his textbook continue into this edition.

Finally, I am most thankful for the support and encouragement provided by my wife, Heidi, my son, Neil, and my parents, Jim and Carol, throughout my career.

My deepest thanks to you all.

Christopher J. Ward
Atlanta
April 2021

Preface to the Ninth Edition

Much has occurred in Russia and the field of Russian History since the last edition of this work was published in 2017. As such, Routledge has graciously given me the opportunity to update this textbook and expand its scope.

This edition of *Russia* contains a number of new features, including:

- An updated narrative to reflect current scholarly trends and areas of emphasis in the study of Russian history.
- An additional focus on notable events in Russia since 2010.
- Significant updates to Further Reading sections at the end of each chapter to include recent and more broadly based scholarship on Russia and the surrounding region.
- Updated demographic information on the contemporary Russian Federation.
- An updated discussion of recent political and foreign affairs in Russia.
- A stronger emphasis on cultural affairs, particularly during recent decades.

It is my hope that you find this latest edition of *Russia* to be engaging and thought-provoking.

Christopher J. Ward
Atlanta
January 2021

Preface to the First Edition

This book grew out of dissatisfaction my students and I experienced with longer, more detailed histories of Russia at the University of Hawai'i in spring 1983, when I taught a survey course treating the entire history of Russia in one semester. Such a course, difficult under the best of circumstances, becomes almost impossible for both instructor and students when the latter must try to master in fourteen weeks the complex material of a six-hundred-page textbook designed for a two-semester course. In my view, there is no up-to-date, clear, short history of Russia that gives approximately equal attention to earlier Russian history and to the modern period since 1801. I hope this book will fill a need for teachers and students at the upper secondary and college levels.

At the same time, I have become aware of the interest in Russia and its past on the part of many individuals not enrolled in courses in Russian history, those in other fields or with a general curiosity about foreign cultures or international affairs. Friends of my children, acquaintances, audience members at public lectures I give, and others frequently ask me, "I would like to learn something about Russia and its history. Is there a good short book I can start with?" Unfortunately, I cannot recommend any single book as an introduction to the subject. Consequently, although I have written this volume primarily for students, I have also had in mind general readers, with the goal that this brief account might both provide them basic information and whet their appetites for further reading and study of Russian history.

To some extent, this book is also the outgrowth of my career as a student and teacher of Russian history for almost forty years. The story of the Russian people—their tribulations and courage, their tragedies and triumphs, and their remarkable contribution to world culture—remains just as fascinating to me today as when I first encountered it in 1946 in the undergraduate classroom of Professor E. Dwight Salmon of Amherst College. I hope that readers can glimpse the personalities, excitement, and drama of Russian history even in this introductory account.

A work of this circumscribed compass has obvious limitations. In this preface and throughout the book, I occasionally use the terms "Russia" or "Russian" to refer to the whole territory and collection of peoples in the tsarist empire or the Soviet Union. The reader needs to keep in mind that this

terminology is for brevity and convenience, that, in fact, Russia is only part of a much larger state and Russians comprise barely half the population of the Soviet Union. Although the book tries to make clear that the tsarist empire was multinational from at least the 1600s and that non-Russians made important contributions to Russian and Soviet history, a longer volume would be needed to give adequate treatment to the non-Russian aspects of this story.

Similarly, I could deal only cursorily with a number of significant topics, such as religious history, and no subject could receive full and definitive treatment. Moreover, many questions in Russian history are still matters of lively historiographic debate. Although I have tried to note the most significant of these disputes, lack of space made it infeasible to present contending positions in detail or to take account of the Marxist views of Soviet historians as fully as is probably warranted.

The book is designed for the introductory survey course that treats Russian history from Kiev to the present in one semester. Since the chapters are short, averaging about twenty-five pages, the instructor can require supplemental reading as well. The book can also be used in two-semester survey courses in which the instructor wants students to acquire a basic chronological structure and framework of information from a textbook but also seeks to expand their acquaintance with Russian history and culture by asking them to read primary sources, selected articles, contemporary documents, or fiction (poetry, short stories, novels, plays). To assist both students and general readers who wish to delve more deeply into a topic that interests them, a brief list of recommended readings in English follows each chapter. Maps and illustrations have been chosen to relate directly to the text.

This history is predominantly a straightforward narrative. It aims to give the reader a logically organized, lucid, unembellished account of the main events and developments in the history of Russia from its origins to today. No particular theory about the evolution of Russia is espoused; no special or novel interpretations are advanced. Within the limits of space, the chapters analyze why important events happened, and readers are challenged to think through their own answers to certain questions. Whenever a conclusion is put forward that is not widely accepted among Western scholars or that represents a new point of view, I have noted it as my own.

Dates and Names

Beginning in 1700 and continuing until February 1918, dates in Russia were calculated according to the Julian calendar, or in the Old Style. In the eighteenth century, that calendar was eleven days behind the Gregorian calendar (New Style) used in the West; in the nineteenth century, it was twelve days behind; and in the twentieth century, thirteen days. Because students are familiar with Western dates, we have given all dates in the New Style, or according to the Gregorian calendar.

Since some Russian names are familiar to Western readers (e.g., Nicholas for the last tsar, Leo Tolstoy for the novelist), transliterating all names according to strictly followed rules would create confusion. We have tried to use common sense, seeking clarity while at the same time avoiding excessive anglicization.

Acknowledgements

I am indebted to my first graduate-level teachers of Russian history, Professors Philip E. Mosely and Geroid T. Robinson, for providing the enthusiasm and insights on which I began to build my own understanding of Russia and the Soviet Union. My students at the University of Hawai'i and my colleagues there, Professors Don Raleigh and Rex Wade, empathized with my complaints about the difficulty of the course I was teaching and the lack of suitable text material for it, and all of them strongly encouraged me when I was seized by a determination to try to write the book I needed. My employer, the Universities Field Staff International, generously released me half-time between May and September 1984 so that I could begin this book. My first editor, Alex Holzman, reacted enthusiastically when I first suggested this volume and assisted me with heartening support in the initial stages of planning and writing it.

Invaluable help was furnished by Professor John T. Alexander of the University of Kansas, a distinguished scholar of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Russia, who acted as my consultant and meticulous first reader. He not only caught many errors and awkward expressions but was willing to discuss with me points of befuddlement and interpretation. I am most grateful for his cheerful assistance. Needless to say, he is in no way responsible for whatever mistakes and infelicities remain.

This book was written at home, and I thank my wife warmly for her constant support and understanding.

J. M. T.
September 1985

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1 Introduction

Ancient Russia and Kievan Rus'

The Geography of Russia

It is difficult to comprehend the vast expanse of territory of Russia during its long history.[1] In order to understand the enormity of this space, we should be aware that this gigantic region once covered one-sixth of the land surface of the entire Earth, across Eurasia from the Pacific Ocean in the east to the Baltic Sea (an arm of the Atlantic Ocean) in the west (see Map 1.1).

Six thousand miles and eleven time zones from east to west, three thousand miles from north to south, with the world's longest coastline (much of it along the Arctic Ocean), Russia both past and present contains every type of terrain: deserts, semitropical beaches, inland seas, sweeping semiarid plains, rugged mountains, treeless grasslands known as steppe, thick forests, long rivers, and the icebound tundra of the far north.

The size of Russia creates special challenges for the people living there. How can such a huge territory be managed and its riches extracted and used efficiently? How can its inhabitants stay in touch with one another and develop a sense of common identity and purpose? How can power be exercised and the state administered over such vast distances? What should be the balance between control from the center and local decision making? Should new industry be developed where a majority of the people live but where there are few resources, or where there exist large quantities of raw materials but few inhabitants?

In addition, the great extent of Russia's landmass produced important strategic consequences over the centuries. Paradoxically, the area was both hard to conquer and hard to defend. The peoples living in the region at various times have coped with enemies on three, four, and occasionally even five fronts. Thus, the governments of the area have had to allocate much of their effort and resources to defending large territories. However, the opponents of Russia often had trouble invading and occupying the region. Although the Mongols succeeded in conquering and ruling much of what is now Russia from the 1200s to the 1400s, the Poles, the Swedes, the Turks, the French under Napoleon, and the Germans twice in the twentieth century had less luck, turned back in part by the enormous distances to be traversed.

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Map 1.1 Russia and other post-Soviet states

In assessing the influence of Russia's natural environment on its history, we find that its location is as important as its size. For example, if you lived in Washington, DC, and were suddenly transported by magic to a Russian city with a comparable latitude, where do you think you would end up? In Moscow? You would miss Russia entirely because it lies within latitudes parallel to those of Canada and Alaska. St. Petersburg, for example, is slightly farther north than Juneau, Alaska.

This northerly position on the Earth's surface causes recurring hardships for the citizens of Russia. In many areas, winters are long and cold, and the growing season for food is short. Also, much of the land is so far north that it cannot be farmed, and living there is difficult. Consequently, Russia was never rich agriculturally, despite its huge size.

Although situated in the northern part of the great Eurasian landmass, Russia has during its long history stretched south, east, and west so that it touched most of continental Asia, the Middle East, and Europe (see Map 1.1). As a result, the region has always been a crossroads of cultures and ideas. Russia was affected by European, Asian, and Islamic civilizations and absorbed aspects of all of them. In turn, and increasingly in the past two centuries, Russia has influenced (and on occasion dominated) its neighbors.

In particular, Russia's central location in Eurasia has contributed strongly to its mix of cultures and values today and to its important role in contemporary world affairs. Although linked to both Asia and the West, Russian society has evolved in distinct and complex ways. It need not be characterized as exotic, Asian, or merely an offshoot of Western civilization. Russia's unique history has produced a modern society unlike any other. As such, the region must be understood on its own terms.

Partly because of its northerly location and partly because it is situated far from the major oceans, Russia has a forbidding climate in most regions: very hot and dry in the summer, bitterly cold in the winter, with a spring marked by deep mud that makes travel on unpaved roads almost impossible. Since most of the rain comes across Europe from the Atlantic Ocean, it peters out as it moves over the Russian agricultural plain from west to east. Some of the best soil receives insufficient rainfall, and almost all the farming in Central Asia requires irrigation. As a result, less than 15 percent of Russia's land is used for growing food, another feature that limits the country's agricultural potential and strength.

In some ways, Russia was well protected, especially by the frozen expanse of the Arctic Ocean to the north and by some of the highest mountains in the world to the southeast (see Map 1.1). Yet along its borders in the east, the southwest, and the west, Russia had virtually no natural defenses and at different times suffered invasions from all these points of the compass.

Moreover, the heart of Russia was one vast plain, broken only by the Ural Mountains, which are not very high and, in any case, do not reach all the way to the Caspian Sea. The impact of this plain on the area's development was double-edged. Russia and adjacent lands often lay open to attack across this terrain, but the extent of the plain made it easy for the Russian state to expand and bring

surrounding nationalities under its rule. One can easily visualize horsemen, traders, and modern armies moving back and forth across these flat expanses.

But Russians and other peoples who lived in the region traveled as much by water as by land. Although the Russian Empire was largely landlocked and had limited access to the sea—the Arctic shore opens primarily on ice, and the Baltic and Black Seas and the Sea of Japan in East Asia lead to the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans only through narrow straits—much of Russia and neighboring lands possess a widespread system of interconnecting rivers, "the roads that run," as folk wisdom puts it. Until about one hundred and fifty years ago, when railroads and later motor vehicles and airplanes appeared, Russians and other peoples moved extensively by boat, up and down the rivers, which generally flow in a north–south or south–north direction, or on the tributaries that touch each other along an east–west axis. Thus, the earliest inhabitants, using river routes, traveled to and traded with Europeans and Vikings to the northwest, Byzantine Greek Christians to the southwest, and Asian merchants and artisans to the south. Later, the Russian Empire's expansion across Siberia, led by fur trappers and traders, was carried out primarily by water. Even in modern times, river transport plays an important role in moving goods and people throughout the region (see Figure 1.1).

Russia possesses rich natural resources, but much of this wealth, such as oil, natural gas, and other abundant minerals, was exploited only recently. For most of its history, the peoples of Russia were quite poor, and they struggled to survive and improve their way of life while supporting, with limited resources, a government-organized defense against recurrent enemies. Unfortunately, carrying the burden of the state and the army often meant that people lived in harsh poverty. In the second half of the twentieth century, there was significant progress in raising the quality of life.

The Peoples of Russia and the Former Soviet Union

The most striking fact about the population of the states of Russia and the lands Russia once controlled is the existence of some 125 national groups, of which over 20 included more than one million people. A wide variety of religions and cultures coexist within the borders of Russia and neighboring states. Jewish peoples generally spoke Russian and intermixed with the rest of the population throughout European Russia (the modern states of Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus). In the twentieth century, non-ethnically Russian groups developed a sense of ethnic identity and growing nationalist aspirations, which helped to create the pressures that contributed to the collapse of the Soviet Union (also known as the USSR[2]) and the birth of fifteen post-Soviet states,[3] including today's Russia.

Of the approximately 146 million people living in the Russian Federation today, the largest national groups are ethnic Russians[4] who represent around 81 percent of Russia's population, Tatars (an ethnically Turkic

Figure 1.1 Barge traffic in the 1890s on the Volga River, an important commercial artery in the region from the earliest times
(Courtesy of the Library of Congress, LC-DIG-prok-02445)

people who speak the Tatar language and mostly live in Tatarstan, a republic located within European Russia), Ukrainians, and Bashkirs, who are also Turkic and reside mostly in European Russia. Geographic and demographic factors influenced the development of Russian society. A word of caution is in order, however. History is made by individuals in a society interacting with each other and their neighbors. Thus, it would be an oversimplification to conclude that primarily Russian institutions, such as a centralized authoritarian government, or traditional Russian values, such as a concern for the group rather than the individual, resulted primarily from the harsh conditions of the region's natural environment.

The Formation of Kievan Rus'

Kievan Rus' emerged in the late 800s or early 900s. Briefly centered in the city of Novgorod in what is now northern Russia and then for several hundred years in the city of Kiev on the Dnieper River in what is now Ukraine, Kievan Rus' was a loose confederation whose origin remains unclear.

Figure 1.2 Scythian gold stag
(Courtesy of Dr. Daniel Wood)

During the late 700s and 800s, traders and warriors known as *Rus'* (the term from which the word "Russia" derives) participated in commercial activity in northern Russia and along the upper Volga River. Most likely, the Rus' were Swedish Vikings, but they intermingled and interacted with local groups of Finns, Balts, Bulgars, and Slavs. They sought silver and luxury goods from the east, for which they traded furs and even slaves. In 860, an expedition of Rus' reached Constantinople, but regular contact with the Byzantine Greek civilization based in that city developed only later.

The most detailed historical source, *The Primary Chronicle*, compiled by monks in the eleventh century, recounts that since there was no order among the Slavic tribes in the 800s, they invited a Varangian (a term for Swedish Viking) named Riurik and his two brothers to come and rule over them. But this chronicle was written several hundred years later, partly for the purpose of legitimizing Riurik's alleged descendants' claims to power, making the story suspect in itself. In addition, a growing body of archeological and other evidence suggests that the role of the Varangians in Russia was a good deal more complex than the picture *The Primary Chronicle* paints.

As long-distance traders, the Varangians were well acquainted with the trading routes from Scandinavia to the east and to the Byzantine capital at Constantinople that passed through today's Russia and Ukraine, primarily down the Dnieper River and across the Black Sea. Thus, the Varangians, though occasionally plundering and conquering as they did in Western

Europe a short time later, entered the region primarily as traders and mercenaries. It is logical to assume that in these roles they worked closely with local Slavic leaders to increase order and security, to protect trade routes, and to encourage regular payment of tribute by rural peoples to the commercial and military leaders of the towns in the area. Thus, although in certain times and places the Slavs and Varangians clashed, and on occasion the Varangians may even have attempted to assert political control over Slavic groups, the Varangians and local leaders probably cooperated much more often in pursuit of common objectives. The most sensible conclusion is that the Varangians worked with Slavic chieftains to create a loose confederation of local states known as Kievan Rus'.

This first civilization is important to an understanding of Russian civilization for several reasons. In Kievan Rus', the fundamental characteristics of Russian culture and religion took root. Kievan Rus' also introduced basic and lasting political ideas and social institutions. Finally, it created the tradition of the region as a force in international affairs and as a nexus between Europe and Asia.

How Did the Peoples of Kievan Rus' Make a Living?

Kievan Rus' lasted from the late 800s to the early 1200s. At its greatest extent, the Kievan confederation was long and narrow. In the eleventh century, it stretched for thousands of miles from the Baltic Sea in the north to the Black Sea in the south, including a band of territory of varying width both east and west of its main axis on the Dnieper River (see Map 1.2). A general estimate puts its maximum population at about seven or eight million, of whom fewer than a million lived in towns and cities. The largest cities, such as Kiev, probably contained tens of thousands of people, but in most of the more than two hundred fortified centers that have been identified, the population was undoubtedly fewer than five thousand.

More than 85 percent of the people lived on the land as farmers, hunters and trappers, beekeepers, and herdsmen. Most of the farming was small in scale and used primitive implements, such as wooden plows, though some iron plows also existed. Most of what people produced, they ate. But some of the output was delivered or seized as tribute or taxes to political and military leaders, first representing clans or tribes and later based in towns within Kievan Rus'. Besides crops used to feed soldiers and townspeople, the goods included furs, honey, hides, and wax, all of which could then be traded to outsiders, primarily the Byzantine Empire. Since there were frequent military campaigns to collect tribute and recurring wars with outsiders, captives were taken and often sold or traded as slaves, a convenient commodity since they could walk to market.

Because individual farmers, or even farming families, of the sort that existed later could not muster sufficient labor to grow crops in the difficult conditions and with the poor methods of that era, most rural people in Kievan Rus' banded together in communes. A farming commune, known in Russian as *obshchina*, usually consisted of several extended families,

Map 1.2 Kievan Rus', circa 1100

although some apparently included individuals who were not near relatives. Members of both the collective farm and the obshchina pooled labor and tools to accomplish heavy agricultural tasks. They shared not only the work but the products of their labor. Throughout much of the area's history,

these institutions, dominated by patriarchal elders, embodied joint responsibility for taxes and military recruits. They also fostered attitudes of egalitarianism and collectivism that influenced society.

Feudalism has sparked historiographic controversy about Kievan Rus', so it is useful to note several aspects of Kievan Rus' society related to feudalism that had an impact on later history. In the first place, the system of tribute (and later taxes) led to continuing obligations on the part of peasant farmers to various sorts of social, religious, and political overlords. Although in the Kievan Rus' period these obligations were neither usually in the form of labor nor tied to land ownership (obshchinas generally possessed their own land), they later took the form of service to a particular lord in return for certain use rights to land. Thus, in Kievan Rus' a pattern of obligation developed that in later centuries and under different economic and political conditions would help turn essentially free peasants into serfs.

Second, Kievan Rus' incorporated concepts of service that resembled some aspects of the relationship between lord and vassal in Western Europe. In particular, fighting men in Kiev, who came to be known as boyars, served particular princes, although the terms and duties of such service are rather unclear. This service concept later reappeared as a major principle at the time of the development of the Muscovite state, commonly known as Muscovy.

Finally, a key ingredient of European feudalism was largely lacking in Kievan society: the idea of mutuality. In the European relationship between lord and vassal, the lord had definite responsibilities to his subordinate vassals; in return, the vassals had obligations to the lord. Some writers have argued that this sense of a contract, of a mutual responsibility, is a crucial element in the development of representative government and civil rights in Western civilization. Whether they are right or not, the principle of mutual obligation hardly existed in Kievan Rus', and this may have contributed later to the ease with which the tsars of the Russian Empire asserted unlimited authority over all the people, lords and peasants alike.

Historians have also argued whether agriculture or trade predominated in the Kievan Rus' economy. The most likely answer is that, although most of the people farmed, producing agricultural and forest goods, trade and commercial activity also played an important role, especially in the life of the towns. Their location favored the peoples of Kievan Rus' in this regard. Situated between Northern Europe and Constantinople and midway between Central Europe and Asia, they could carry on a lively commerce in several directions.

There were, of course, risks. Small nomadic groups, such as the Cumans and Pechenegs, often attacked trading parties, particularly at rapids, where boats and goods had to be portaged. Terms of trade with the Byzantine Empire were not always favorable, and Kievan Rus' sent several military expeditions against Constantinople to compel the opening of better trading opportunities and contracts. Thus, military activity, including the collection of tribute, and trade went hand in hand. As a result, warriors and merchants (often the same persons) ranked high on the Kievan Rus' social scale.

The importance of trade to Kievan Rus' society was not only due to its economic benefits. Because the Kievan Rus' traded with neighbors on all sides, in Constantinople and in Asia, they were exposed to a wide range of ideas, technologies, and cultural influences. Kievan Rus' was not a "closed" society in any way but interacted effectively with Christian Europe, with the Hellenic empire of Byzantium, and with the Islamic civilization of the Arabs.

The Societies of Kievan Rus'

No evidence exists to tell us when class differentiation began in Kievan Rus', but by the time of the first law codes, compiled in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, the lines were sharply drawn. Depending on how one defines a distinct class, there were as many as eleven classes stipulated by Kievan Rus' law. But these can be allocated among seven main categories: princes, boyars (nobles), merchants, artisans, *smerdy* (peasants), semi-free persons, and slaves. At the top of the ladder were the princely families. Allegedly descendants of Riurik and his brothers, they exercised military, judicial, and administrative power over most Kievan Rus' towns and territories. Relations among the princes were complicated, and their struggles for political pre-eminence led to civil war and greatly weakened the Kievan Rus' confederation.

At first, each prince had his own band of military servitors, of whom many in the beginning were probably Vikings. But soon they merged with already existing groups of Slavic warriors, and by the 1000s, a Slavicized upper class of lords, the boyars, had formed. Their numbers were always small, but their role was crucial since they carried out military service on behalf of prince, town, and state and also assumed administrative and governing responsibilities. Some of them certainly engaged in commerce as well.

In this role, they blended with a separate merchant class, the origins of which undoubtedly predate the formation of Kievan Rus'. The merchants, though of lower rank than that of the princely families and boyars, had considerable influence because of their importance to the economy of Kievan Rus' and because, in some towns, they also exercised political power. The merchants were among the chief consumers of the goods they imported from Asia and Byzantium: silks, spices, wines, fruits, metals, and jewelry.

Most people in towns fell into a broad group of artisans and workers. Their equivalent in the countryside, the peasants, bore the colorful designation *smerdy* ("stinkers"). Some were dependent on princes or boyars, but apparently most were free. Through debt or other circumstances, both artisans and peasants could fall into the semi-free class comprising people who were bound to another through some sort of obligation.

At the bottom of the social ladder were slaves. How important they were to the Kievan Rus' economy is not clear. Some may have been semi-free individuals who fell into complete bondage, but a majority were apparently captured in war, and many were therefore not Slavic. In the earlier years of Kievan Rus' rule, slaves formed an important trade commodity.

Religion and Culture in Kievan Rus'

The single most important event in the history of Kievan Rus' was its official adoption of Christianity in 988. Although pagan beliefs and practices as well as earlier cultural attributes of Kievan Rus' society persisted long afterward, the acceptance of Christian religion fundamentally altered Russian civilization. Adopting Christianity affected not just religious beliefs and practices but also law, education, literature, the arts, attitudes and feelings, and even the political system.

An extremely significant aspect of Kievan Rus' conversion was that Christianity came to the area from the Byzantine Empire, which practiced what is today called Eastern, or Orthodox, Christianity. When the Kievan Rus' were converted, the Christian church was still united, although there were already considerable differences between its western wing based in Rome and its eastern wing centered in Constantinople. In 1054, these divisions became irreconcilable, and the church split in two, forming the Latin (Roman Catholic) Church, which dominated in Western Europe, and the Greek (Eastern Orthodox) Church, which was prevalent in the Balkans, the Middle East, and the Eastern Slavic lands, including much of contemporary Belarus, Russia, and Ukraine.

This separation had three important consequences. First, the development of Christianity took quite a different form in the Eastern Slavic lands from that in Western Europe. Second, as the hostility between the two main branches of Christianity heightened, Kievan Rus' was put at odds with its nearest neighbors to the west: Poles, Lithuanians, and later German settlers along the shores of the Baltic Sea, all of whom were Roman Catholic. Finally, the region's intellectual and cultural contacts with Western European societies were curtailed for five or six hundred years, almost into modern times, when religious differences became much less important. It is true that the Mongol conquest of the area in the 1200s also acted to sever its ties with central and Western Europe, but religious difference was a formidable barrier and a source of suspicion and hostility.

In the year 955, the first woman ruler of Kievan Rus', Olga (one of the few women who appears in the sources from this period), chose Christianity for herself, but another three decades elapsed before Vladimir, one of Kievan Rus' ablest princes, decided to adopt Christianity as the official religion for the whole state and all its subjects. To make sure everyone got the message, he had the pagan idols smashed and arranged a mass baptism in the Dnieper River for all the inhabitants of the city of Kiev, at least according to *The Primary Chronicle*.

We do not know Vladimir's reasons for choosing Eastern Christianity, but we can surmise that the close commercial and political ties that Kievan Rus' had developed with Constantinople over the preceding hundred years were an important factor. Vladimir, who was later made a saint in recognition of his decision, was likely influenced by the fact that two Christian monks, Saints Cyril and Methodius, had developed a written language that, though based on Greek, transcribed the spoken Slavic language quite well. This new literary language meant that people did not need to learn Greek or Latin to become Christians, and the average person could understand the Mass and other church services. Today,

Belarusian, Russian, Ukrainian, and other languages are written in the Cyrillic alphabet, named in honor of Saint Cyril.

Finally, geographic and political factors undoubtedly weighed heavily in Vladimir's choice. If he selected Judaism, its nearest adherents, the Khazars, were some distance away to the southeast, and their power was already in decline. If he chose Islam, the Arabs were even farther away, and he would be drawn into wars against their continuing enemy, the Byzantine Empire. Latin Christianity had spread only recently to Northern Europe and must have seemed quite insignificant to Vladimir in comparison to the nearby might and magnificence of Orthodox Christianity, with its seat at Constantinople.

The Orthodox Christianity that Vladimir adopted had several important characteristics that were reinforced by local conditions and later differentiated it sharply from Western Christianity, particularly after the Latin Church split in the 1500s into Protestant and Catholic branches. One was the almost mystical concern in Orthodox Christianity with the collective spirit of the whole congregation. In the religious service itself and in the spiritual outlook of the faithful, the focus is on the group of believers rather than on individual souls and their salvation. This attitude, called *sobornost'*, meaning "spirit of the congregation," fit well with the collective sense of the community that had already been developed among the Eastern Slavs through the peasant institution of the obshchina.

Orthodox Christianity also strongly emphasized outward forms of religion: the church buildings and decorations, the icons (paintings on wood of holy figures and saints), and the structure and ritual of the Mass itself. To stress these visible signs of devotion made it easier to wean the Eastern Slavs away from pagan idols and customs and to convert an illiterate population; together with the concept of sobornost', however, it encouraged a rather routine and passive practice of the new religion rather than engaging individuals directly in the process and stimulating personal commitments of faith and belief. Later, in Western Christianity, particularly after the Protestant Reformation, individualism in religion (and later in other matters) gained ground, while collectivism continued to predominate in Russian Orthodox Christianity.

Finally, Byzantine Christianity was quite otherworldly, stressing asceticism, the importance of a communal monastic life, and the rewards of the hereafter. Again, this tendency was strengthened in its transplantation to Kievan Rus', and later it worked against the Orthodox Church's taking an active role in everyday life as a force for social betterment.

For a long time, Christianity was only thinly superimposed on the basic animistic beliefs and customs of the Slavic population of Kievan Rus'. Many old pagan rites and practices were continued or even adapted to the new religion. As a result, some historians say, many peoples of Kievan Rus' never fully understood the new faith and accepted it only superficially. Only the educated few in the upper classes of society were fully committed to Christianity.

At the same time, there is no doubt that the introduction of Christianity raised the general level of culture, learning, and artistic expression in Kievan Rus'. Well-educated monks and priests entered the area, monasteries were established,

churches were built, and artisans were trained. By the middle of the eleventh century, Kievan Rus' civilization, though modeled on Byzantine achievements in most fields, had reached a height of cultural and artistic splendor that was not to be equaled in the area again until some five hundred years later.

The introduction of a written language, Old Church Slavonic, meant that books were produced and circulated. To be sure, only a tiny fraction of the population was literate, but this upper crust was quite sophisticated, aware of intellectual currents and developments in both Byzantium and Europe. In addition, Constantinople masters taught Kievan Rus' the art of painting icons and introduced them to church music. A magnificent cathedral in Byzantine style, Saint Sophia, named after the main church in Constantinople (also known as Hagia Sophia), was built in Kiev and decorated by local craftsmen. Kievan Rus' artisans, who had developed great skill in working with indigenous materials, particularly wood, modified Byzantine forms into a distinctive and charming style. Unfortunately, because almost all the buildings they erected were made of wood and were subsequently destroyed in the frequent fires that plagued Kievan Rus' towns, we have only a few descriptions or examples of these striking architectural achievements.

Education, scholarship, art, architecture, and music were all predominantly religious in motivation and theme. Naturally, all these aspects of cultural life followed Byzantine precepts and models. But Kievan Rus' artists soon introduced local subjects and techniques, and before long, they had surpassed their Byzantine masters in icon painting, creating some of the most moving and beautiful religious paintings in the world.

Nonreligious, primarily folk art also developed, particularly in songs and stories. The first secular piece of literature, *The Tale of the Host of Igor*, is a stirring pagan saga of the adventures of a Kievan Rus' prince and his followers in fighting an array of enemies to defend their homeland. In the words of the tale:

> Igor leads his warriors to the Don.
> The birds in oak trees portend his misfortunes
> The wolves howl of the menace in the ravines
> The eagles with their clatter summon beasts to a bony feast
> The foxes yelp at the crimson shield.
> O Russian land! You are so far behind the mountains. …
> With their shields the Russians have divided the great field
> Seeking honor for themselves and glory for their prince.[5]

Considered as a whole, Kievan Rus' culture and civilization in the 1000s and 1100s was probably at a higher level than Western European civilization at the same time. Moreover, the upper classes in Kievan Rus' society interacted with the elite of central and Western Europe. In addition to the contacts between and travels of Kievan Rus' and European merchants, the princely families in Kievan Rus' intermarried with noble and royal families in the German states and Scandinavia.

Power and Politics in Kievan Rus'

The impact of Byzantine civilization was felt not only in religion and culture, but also in thought, values, and attitudes. These influences were made tangible in the Kievan Rus' law codes of the eleventh and twelfth centuries and the political order. Yet in politics, Byzantine ideas could never quite overcome more traditional concepts and institutions; they had their greatest impact later during the Muscovite period.

For example, the Byzantine state was a clearly defined geographic area over which the emperor and his administration exercised control. But the concept of state and sovereignty in the Kievan Rus' system was much less clear. Authority derived originally from the person of the prince, and his jurisdiction ran along trade routes, over scattered areas that paid him tribute, and in certain fortified centers rather than over a specific contiguous territory.

Moreover, although eventually it was recognized that the prince at Kiev was the senior prince and therefore head of the confederation, princes in other towns had rights of their own. They also felt free to contest for leadership with the Kievan prince. Certain towns, particularly the important northern trading and administrative center of Novgorod, also had autonomous rights. The princes at Kiev possessed little centralized authority or direct administrative and political control, but rather led a fluid confederation of towns and tribes.

In the middle of the Kievan Rus' period, Iaroslav the Wise, one of the ablest princes, tried to set up a system of rotating rulers under which younger brothers to the prince of Kiev held power in towns designated according to their seniority. When the ruler at Kiev died, everyone moved up one notch. This system was designed to avert the bitter and bloody struggles for succession that had plagued the politics of Kievan Rus' over the preceding hundred years. But such a complicated system, requiring great self-restraint by all the players, soon broke down in practice, and the succession to the princedom at Kiev continued to be settled on most occasions by force and strife.

This meant that Kievan Rus' princes had to spend a good part of their reigns fighting off rival claimants to the throne. In addition, princes had to defend the confederation from external enemies on all sides and, particularly, to protect the trade routes to Byzantium from nomadic attacks originating in the southeast. A further major military obligation was to keep sufficient pressure on the Byzantine emperors so that they would grant political concessions and favorable commercial privileges to the prince, his warriors, and his merchants. As if all this were not enough, the prince was frequently called upon to wage military campaigns against recalcitrant subjects or neighboring tribes who refused to pay taxes or deliver tribute.

It is little wonder that a good part of a prince's life was spent in warfare. One of the most successful military leaders of Kievan Rus', Sviatoslav I, who ruled from 962 to 972, is described in *The Primary Chronicle* as follows:

> Stepping light as a leopard, he undertook many campaigns. Upon his expeditions he carried with him neither wagons nor kettles, and boiled no meat, but cut off small strips of horseflesh, game, or beef, and ate it after roasting it on the coals. Nor did he have a tent, but he spread out a horse blanket under him, and set his saddle under his head; and all his retinue did likewise.[6]

When the princes were at home, they faced other obstacles to their rule. Two political-administrative institutions existed in Kievan Rus' to represent the interests of the upper classes: the boyar *duma* and the *veche*. The duma was a body of the highest-ranking nobles who in theory advised the prince, though it remains unclear how much power it had or how regularly princes consulted it. Before major military campaigns and during succession struggles over title to the head principality at Kiev, it benefited the prince to garner as much support from the boyars as possible, and he probably used the duma for that purpose.

The veche, a town council dominated by merchants, had considerable influence, particularly in towns in the north, where it had a stronger and longer tradition. In a few places, such as Novgorod, the veche on occasion exercised full political authority and administered the town and surrounding territory. But in other towns, it had only a minor advisory role.

As with any series of rulers, the princes of Kievan Rus' varied greatly in ability, persistence, and success. The first few were Vikings, though they were quite Slavicized; all the rest for more than two hundred years were ethnic Slavs. Although the legendary credit goes to Riurik, Prince Oleg was the actual founder of Kievan Rus'. A Varangian from Novgorod, he saw the advantages of linking as many towns as possible along the main trade route from the Baltic to the Black Seas, and he united Novgorod and Kiev by force. Moving his base to Kiev in about 880, he established the primacy of that city, "the mother of Rus' towns," which lasted until 1132. In 907, Oleg attacked Constantinople. As a result of his victories, he was able to negotiate an effective commercial treaty with Byzantium in 911. Oleg also merged his Viking and Slavic warriors into a single upper class and established greater control over the Slavic tribes along both sides of the Dnieper River.

Almost a hundred years after Oleg had established and begun to consolidate the state, Vladimir, who ruled from 980 to 1015, made remarkable strides in extending its authority east, south, and west and in raising the Kievan Rus' level of culture and sophistication, in part by adopting Christianity as the official religion.

Yet Vladimir's sons fought over the succession, and civil war weakened the confederation for two decades. Strong leadership was restored under Iaroslav the Wise, who reigned from 1019 to 1054. He extended Kievan authority over new areas and was able to put an end for some time to the constant, harassing attacks of the Pechenegs in the east. He also supervised the compilation of the first law code and encouraged the building of Saint Sophia and other important churches. Within a few decades of his death,

however, inter-princely fighting had again become widespread, and except for a brief resurgence in the first quarter of the twelfth century, Kievan Rus' power and cohesion declined steadily over the next hundred and fifty years.

Conclusion

Various reasons are plausible for the decline of Kievan Rus'. As is so often true in explaining major events in history, not one cause but many produced the collapse of the Kievan confederation. Perhaps the most important was its political weakness. Neither effectively centralized nor cohesive, by the late 1100s, under weaker princes, Kievan Rus' increasingly disintegrated into rival princedoms and towns that spent more time fighting one another than their common external enemies. No institutionalized central government existed, and the struggle to become grand prince became increasingly divisive. For example, between 1139 and 1169, the throne changed hands seventeen times. The loose confederation gradually fractured into its component parts.

A second major factor in the Kievan Rus' decline was its loss of economic strength. The goods it traded became less valuable, and at about the same time, Europeans established new trade routes to the Middle East and Asia, while the position of the Byzantine Empire weakened. As a result, the trade routes across the region became less important, and the Kievan Rus' economy declined.

However important political, economic, and commercial causes were to the Kievan Rus' demise, in the end, external factors played the decisive role. Throughout its history, Kievan Rus' had struggled, with limited resources, against foreign foes, particularly various nomads from Asia who constantly attacked the state from the southeast. In the 1100s, this effort increasingly became a losing fight, and Kievan Rus' was weakened by recurring battles against the Cumans. These latest nomadic invaders succeeded on various occasions in cutting the trade route to the Black Sea and caused much damage as well as loss of life. In 1169, Andrei Bogoliubskii, prince of Vladimir-Suzdal, an area in the northeast, led an attack on Kiev and then chose to reign as grand prince at Vladimir instead of Kiev. In the thirteenth century, the Mongols arrived to administer the final blow to the remnants of Kievan Rus'.

Although Kievan Rus' was overrun and conquered, the civilization it created was not. Kievan Rus' left a powerful legacy on which much of the subsequent Russian and Ukrainian civilizations were built. Kievan Rus' had succeeded in drawing together and blending four elements: the ancient indigenous population, the imprint of successive steppe empires, the influence of the Varangians and Vikings, and the powerful impact of Byzantium.

The most significant gift Kievan Rus' bestowed on subsequent generations was Orthodox Christianity. The Orthodox Church and faith played quite a different role in the region than Christianity did in Western history, but its importance in the development of society cannot be denied. After the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, the Soviet government attempted to eliminate religion, but it failed. More than fifty million Christians were practicing

their faith in 1991 when the Soviet Union collapsed. Today, the Orthodox Church plays a major political, social, and religious role in Belarus, Russia, and much of Ukraine.

With Orthodox Christianity came Byzantine culture, learning, and law. Consequently, Kievan Rus' produced from the very beginning a compound of indigenous Slavic values and forms and Byzantine borrowings. The result was quite distinct from Western European civilization. A foundation had been laid, but it was only a beginning. Much more, and much of it traumatic, was to happen to the successors of Kievan Rus' as they struggled to build a unique civilization and future.

Notes

1 At various times during its history, Russia has included the territory of a number of other modern nations, including Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Estonia, Finland, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova, Poland, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan. Even part of the United States, namely Alaska, was once a part of Russia.
2 The acronym USSR stands for the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, which disintegrated in 1991.
3 In addition to Russia, the post-Soviet states are Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Estonia, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan.
4 Russians and Ukrainians are Eastern Slavic peoples, along with Belarusians. The term "Slavic" is linguistic and refers to an even larger group of people, the Slavs, who speak a number of related languages. The word "Slav" probably comes from the term *slovo*, meaning "word," suggesting that the Slavs at one time spoke a common language. Today, more than twenty Slavic languages are spoken in the Balkans, Central and Eastern Europe, including Belarus, Russia, and Ukraine. By about the year 600, references by Gothic, Byzantine, and Arab authors make it clear that Slavic tribes formed a considerable part of the population north of the Black Sea. Putting the written and archeological evidence together, we know that the early Slavs had well-developed agriculture, raised cattle and bees, fished and hunted, and knew how to weave and make pottery.
5 Basil Dmytryshyn, *Medieval Russia: A Source Book, 850–1700*, 3rd ed. (Fort Worth: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1991), 74.
6 Samuel H. Cross, and Olgerd P. Sherbowitz-Wetzer, *The Russian Primary Chronicle* (Cambridge, MA: Medieval Academy of America, 2012), 84.

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2 Kievan Rus' in Crisis and the Mongol Contact, 1054–1462

In the twelfth century, internal dissension gravely weakened Kievan Rus' civilization. In the thirteenth century, the Mongol arrival transformed it even further. While some features of Kievan Rus' society persisted and were incorporated into the Muscovite (i.e., centered in Moscow) state that arose in the fourteenth century, a new civilization emerged beginning in the eleventh century that differed in a number of ways, many of which resulted from the psychological, economic, and political effects of the Mongol contact.

For Russians, other Slavic peoples, and many non-Slavs living in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the overriding need was for security. This was at the same time when Europeans, as they emerged from the Middle Ages, were enjoying increased protection from feudal infighting and external attack as well as benefiting from rising economic well-being provided by improved agriculture and reviving trade. Meanwhile, Russians, Ukrainians, and many others who lived under Mongol control were forced to deliver tribute and sometimes conscripts to the Mongols. Trade and handicraft production languished, and agriculture remained primitive. Consequently, limited resources hampered the regional populations' efforts to protect themselves and to create a stable society. Moreover, the enemies of the Russians and other neighboring peoples maintained continuing pressure on them. The post-Kievan Rus' civilization struggled to overcome the Mongol impact in conditions that were far from ideal.

Kievan Rus' and Its Rivals

Despite brief periods of strong rule by able princes, Kievan Rus' from 1054 to the Mongol invasion in 1237 was characterized primarily by internal dissension and political weakness. This was partly due to the fact that Kievan Rus' was inherently unstable, as it was based on rotating authority among princely families and lacking the concept and practice of a homogeneous, centralized territorial government. It was also due to the relentless pressure of foreign enemies, particularly nomadic tribes to the southeast.

As the Kievan Rus' confederation disintegrated, the average citizen reacted in two ways. First, many fled from the open, exposed plains of southern Russia to the thick, protecting forests of the north. A substantial population

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shift took place in the eleventh through thirteenth centuries, from southern Russia to the northeast in particular.

Second, peoples throughout Russia and neighboring lands sought security from the depredations of outside foes and neighboring princes by placing themselves under the protection of a local boyar, monastery, or prince. This marked a significant step toward the development of a social system characterized by privileges for the upper classes and obligations for the lower classes. But a considerable period of transition occurred before serfdom and the service state emerged.

In political terms, when the senior prince in Kiev could no longer command tribute and allegiance from all the towns and tribes over whom Iaroslav the Wise had ruled, the Kievan Rus' system began to break up, and separate principalities and city-states emerged. At the height of this process of disintegration, the region was divided into dozens of such small units, many of which fought one another. Different forms of government tended to predominate in three main areas:

- the southwest (Volhynia and Galicia): aristocratic (rule by the boyar duma)
- the northwest (Pskov and Novgorod): democratic/oligarchic (rule by the veche)
- the northeast (Suzdal and Moscow): monarchic (rule by a prince).

However, there were exceptions to this pattern, and in many principalities, all three institutions—boyar duma, veche, and prince—coexisted, although one was dominant.

The southwest encompassed the territory stretching west and northwest of Kiev to the northern slopes of the Carpathian Mountains and including present-day Belarus. It contained two important principalities, Volhynia and Galicia, and was the richest area agriculturally. It had excellent prospects for emerging as the center of a revived state, the logical successor to Kievan Rus', with close ties to Europe. Strategically, the principalities of Volhynia and Galicia had certain advantages. They were located far enough west to be spared the incursions of the Cumans. They were next door to Poland and Hungary, two strong European states of the time, with which Volhynia and Galicia had lively commercial and cultural interactions.

On the other hand, their location created certain disadvantages. Their trading partners, Hungary and Poland (and later Lithuania), were larger and more powerful and soon began to covet the resources of neighboring Volhynia and Galicia. Moreover, Hungarians, Poles, and Lithuanians were all Roman Catholics and looked upon the Orthodox Christians to their east as ripe for reconversion into the fold of true Christianity. Finally, these small states were not far enough west to escape the Mongols, who overran and briefly occupied the region in the 1240s.

Another liability to the southwest's potential as the nucleus of a new state was that political power in Volhynia and Galicia was quite unstable. Wealthy boyar

landholders contended with aspiring princes for political control, and until the 1500s it was the only region in which a boyar had the audacity to claim a princely throne. During the period of Mongol control, boyar power and prestige continued to grow, and Volhynia and Galicia might ultimately have had a full-fledged system of aristocratic rule had the two territories not been absorbed in the 1300s by Lithuania and Poland, respectively.

A second area that could have shaped and led a resurrected state was the northwest. The first towns and organized governments were established here, even before the founding of the city of Kiev. Its largest town, Novgorod, had a population of more than thirty thousand and ranked in splendor and culture with the major towns of Europe. Organized as a city-state, Novgorod controlled a considerable hinterland from which it drew forest and agricultural products. It traded extensively with Scandinavia and the northern German towns along the Baltic Sea, exchanging furs, wax, honey, and timber for grains, woolens, wine, metal, and sweets. It also served as a major storage and transhipment point for trade to the south down both the Volga and Dnieper Rivers. At the same time, small manufacturing and craft works were almost as important to Novgorod as commerce. The town was well known for its talented artisans, who created not only practical items like tools and corduroy (log-paved) streets but intricate wooden decorations and tall, elegant churches in a distinctive northern style.

The people of Novgorod were cultured, energetic, and decidedly independent-minded. Despite a number of threats, the Novgorodians preserved their independence for six hundred years, a remarkable record in those times. However, they finally succumbed to the rising state of Moscow after 1470.

It is, of course, an oversimplification to call Novgorod democratic. Like many other societies, Novgorod did not permit women, slaves, and certain other social classes to vote. But most freemen could, so it was a republic in form and provided a considerable degree of representative government. Voters elected both an all-city government and district administrations in five boroughs. For the first few hundred years, there was a prince, though one with strictly limited powers. In 1136, the veche began to elect the prince, who reigned but did not govern. After the 1290s, the post of prince was abolished altogether.

Novgorod possessed a complex and quite enlightened judicial system as well as an autonomous church, whose archbishop was elected by the townspeople, although the archbishop was confirmed by the highest official of the Orthodox Church in the area, the metropolitan of Kiev.

The veche, a town meeting of all freemen, was summoned by the ringing of a special bell. In the 1470s, when Moscow conquered Novgorod, the bell was carried back to Moscow as a symbol of Novgorod's defeat. In the beginning, the veche, besides electing officials, decided major issues of policy. Later, an elected council acted in its stead on most matters. Also, the wealth, education, and influence of the leading merchants and landowners meant that they increasingly controlled Novgorod's government and affairs. It became more an oligarchy (i.e., rule of the few) than a democracy.

As in most medieval towns, disease, famine, and fire regularly ravaged Novgorod. Moreover, the veche was supposed to act unanimously, and when there were strongly opposing viewpoints, quarreling in the veche could lead to violence. Finally, as the gap between the boyars (upper-class merchants and landowners) and the rest of the population widened, social strife would occasionally erupt, as *The Chronicle of Novgorod* for the year 1418 makes clear:

> And again they [the common people] became enraged like drunkards, against another boyar, Ivan Yevlich … and on his account pillaged a great many boyars' houses, as well as the monastery of St. Nikola in the Field, crying out: "Here is the treasure house of the Boyars." And again the same morning they plundered many houses in the Lyudgoshcha Street, calling out: "They are our enemies." … And they began to ring throughout the whole town, and armed men began to pour out from both sides as for war, fully armed, to the great bridge. And there was loss of life, too. Some fell by arrows, others by arms … and a dread fell on the people on both sides.[1]

At its height, Novgorod controlled a good part of what is today northern Russia, including the town of Pskov as well as colonized territories to the northeast along the shores of the Arctic Ocean. By acknowledging Mongol suzerainty and paying tribute to the Mongol khan, it averted direct Mongol attack or occupation. This strategy permitted Novgorod to fend off enemies to the west, including Sweden, the Teutonic Knights who occupied the area along the eastern shore of the Baltic Sea, and later the Lithuanians. But Novgorod was not a warrior state, and its decentralized system of government made it an unlikely candidate to lead the restoration and unification of the region.

The honor fell instead to the area of the northeast and to a city that was not even founded until the middle of the twelfth century: Moscow. Although the northeast contained old and important cities, such as Suzdal and Rostov, it had fewer resources than either the southwest or Novgorod. The balance of power began to shift there, even before the Mongol invasions, for two reasons. First, it was a relatively secure area, entirely in the forest zone and fairly far removed from the area's western and southeastern foes. Second, it developed a tradition of princely rule that permitted the beginnings of centralized authority and effective government.

Thus, when the tradition that the most powerful prince should be based at Kiev broke down, his seat was moved to Suzdal, then to a newer town in the northeast, Vladimir. Later, the metropolitan, the chief official of the Orthodox Church, also migrated from Kiev to the northeast. In this way, the tradition of unity was preserved in the states of that region, including Moscow.

Moreover, as trade declined and land became a more important resource, the princes of the northeast, dependent primarily on agriculture, were better able to mobilize the limited wealth of the country and to establish viable state power. But before they could do so, they had to endure the arrival of the Mongols.

The Arrival of the Mongols

To those living in the villages and towns of northeastern Russia, the year 1237 must have seemed like any other year. The seemingly endless winter had at last erupted suddenly into a green and luxuriant spring. The crops had been sown, tended, and harvested; winter pelts and hides were prepared for market; traders had come and gone; and quarrels among the region's princes had been no worse or more harmful than customary. To be sure, people still passed along rumors of a new and ruthless band of nomads who had routed the local army fourteen years earlier southeast of Kiev, but no sign of the intruders had been seen since.

The autumn had been spent accumulating food and fuel for winter, repairing houses and town walls, and hunting and trapping. No one was prepared for what suddenly occurred in mid-December, as reported in sources from the era:

> With irresistible vigor and astonishing speed, the Mongols made their way through the forests of Penza and Tambov, and appeared before the beautiful city of Riazan. For five days they discharged a ceaseless storm of shot from their ballistae [military catapults] and, having made a breach in the defenses, carried the city by assault on the 21st of December, 1237. The prince, with his mother, wife [and] sons, the boyars and the inhabitants, without regard to age or sex, were slaughtered. … Some were impaled, some shot at with arrows for sport, others were flayed or had nails or splinters of wood driven under their fingernails. Priests were roasted alive, and nuns and maidens ravished in the churches before their relatives. No eye remained open to weep for the dead.[2]

Who were these invaders? Today, we know much more about the Mongols than the bewildered and hapless citizens of Riazan in the thirteenth century, although the origins of the Mongols remain obscure. In Russia and other East Slavic lands, the Mongols were known as Tartars or Tatars, but the term "Tatar" is more accurately used to designate Turkic groups allied with the Mongols who subsequently settled in southeastern Russia and the Crimea. In any case, the Mongols emerged in the 1100s, as had earlier nomadic peoples such as the Scythians and later the Huns, who attacked the main centers of civilization and invaded Europe, trampling over the Slavs north of the Black Sea as they passed westward from Inner Asia.

The Mongols, however, differed from their predecessors in two important respects. First, their impact was even more significant both materially—in terms of loss of life as well as the physical destruction of towns, churches, and dwellings—and psychologically in terms of how they terrorized and subjugated their opponents. Second, the Mongols were extremely well organized and disciplined, characteristics that permitted them to establish the largest empire in history. At its height, the Mongol realm stretched five thousand miles from China in the east to the Adriatic Sea in the west and from Siberia in the north to the Persian

Gulf in the south. The Mongols soon withdrew from Europe, and this huge empire did not last very long. Nevertheless, the Mongols conquered and ruled China and Russia, influenced India and Islam, and threatened Western Europe (see Map 2.1). Moreover, they did all this with a relative handful of warriors and administrators. Several hundred thousand Mongols held sway over more than one hundred million people in Eurasia.

This astounding achievement was due largely to the impact of one man, Genghis (Chingiz) Khan. He was born as Temuchin, in about 1165, the son of a minor chieftain among some nomadic tribes living in present-day Mongolia. Reputedly a skilled horseman and archer by age eleven, Temuchin worked unceasingly as a young man to unite the quarreling Mongol tribes. Finally, in 1206, at a solemn conclave of tribal leaders, he was proclaimed "mighty ruler," or Genghis Khan. He apparently believed it his divine mission to rule the world. After subduing neighboring regions, he conquered northern China, almost all of Central Asia, and part of Persia (contemporary Iran). After his death in 1227, his three sons and grandson, Batu Khan, extended the empire by overrunning most of the Kievan Rus' principalities, the Caucasus, southwestern Asia, and the rest of China.

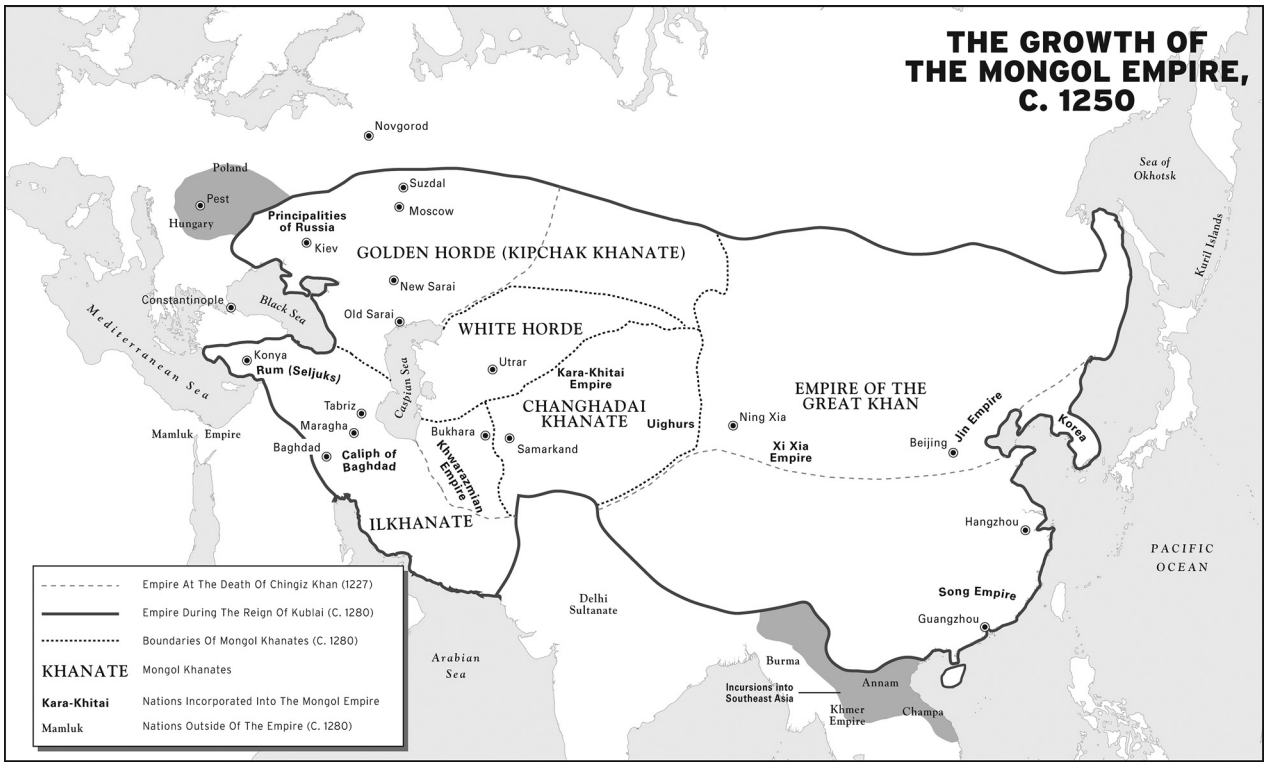
The Mongols' dazzling military success depended on four qualities that characterized almost all of their campaigns: surprise, mobility, organization, and discipline. Applied together, these traits permitted the Mongols to overrun armies that were often twice as large as their forces. Mongol generals were carefully selected and trained, usually by the great khan himself. They relied on stealth as well as tactical and strategic surprise to catch the enemy unaware and confuse him in battle. The army was organized on a decimal basis into units of ten, one hundred, one thousand, and ten thousand, and strict discipline was enforced from the lowliest soldier to the highest general reporting to the great khan.

Mongol warriors were outstanding horsemen and highly skilled with the bow and arrow. They wore cloth, leather, or metal armor and could travel incredible distances, as this account by Marco Polo, who worked at the court of Kublai Khan, shows:

> [The Mongol soldiers] are also more capable of hardships than other nations; for many a time, if need be, they will go for a month without any supply of food, living only on the milk of their mares and on such game as their bows may win them. Their horses also will subsist entirely on the grass of the plains, so that there is no need to carry store of barley or straw or oats.[3]

Finally, the Mongols were skilled adapters. By the time they invaded Russia and neighboring lands, they had learned from the Chinese how to use catapults and other siege weapons.

Between the attack on Riazan in 1237 and their armies' push through Central Europe to the Balkans in 1241–1242, the Mongols overran and destroyed most of the cities in the former Kievan Rus' lands. Those in the northwest were



Map 2.1 The growth of the Mongol Empire, circa 1250