



The Crisis of Medieval Russia 1200–1304

John Fennell



THE CRISIS OF MEDIEVAL RUSSIA
1200–1304

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JOHN FENNELL

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Glossary

- baskak** (pl. **baskaki**) Tatar overseer, official
chern' common people
Chernye klobuki Black Caps (Turkic tribe. **Karakalpak**)
chislenniki Tatar census officials
Chud' Estonians
Desyatinnaya tserkov' Church of the Tithes (Kiev)
detinets Novgorod kremlin
druzhina bodyguard, detachment of troops, private army.
dvoryanin (pl. **dvoryane**) servitor, service-man
Em' Finns
grivna coin
izvod chronicle redaction
konets (pl. **kontsy**) city district of Novgorod
kramola sedition
kuriltai Mongol national assembly
myatezh rebellion, upheaval
namestnik (pl. **namestniki**) governor, lieutenant-governor
otchina (pl. **otchiny**) patrimony
posadnichestvo office of **posadnik**
posadnik (pl. **posadniki**) mayor, chief executive (Novgorod, Pskov)
posol (pl. **posly**) Tatar agent, plenipotentiary
povest' tale, narrative
rat' army, war
samoderzhets autocrat
sluga (pl. **slugi**) service-man
snem council
Sovet gospod Council of Lords (Novgorod)
Sum' Finns
Svei Swedes
Svod Chronicle compilation, codex
tanga customs tax
tiun, tivun (pl. **tiuny, tivuny**) administrator

GLOSSARY

tuska ? tax

tysyatskiy local commander and police chief

veche (pl. vecha) town assembly

voevoda (pl. voevody) general, commander

volost' (pl. volosti) district, Novgorod administrative unit

yarlyk patent for throne, Tatar document of privilege

zhit'i lyudi well-to-do people

Abbreviations

A. N. SSSR Akademiya nauk SSSR	
DDG	<i>Dukhovnye i dogovornye gramoty</i>
E	<i>Ermolinskaya letopis'</i>
GVNiP	<i>Gramoty Velikogo Novgoroda i Pskova</i>
Ipat	<i>Ipat'evskaya letopis'</i>
L	<i>Laurent'evskaya letopis'</i>
LPS	<i>Letopisets Pereyaslavlya-Suzdal'skogo</i>
L' v	<i>L'vovskaya letopis'</i>
M	<i>Moskovskiy letopisnyy svod kontsa XV veka</i>
MAK	<i>Suzdal'skaya letopis' po Akademicheskomu spisku</i>
MGH	<i>Monumenta Germaniae Historica.</i>
N1	<i>Novgorod First Chronicle</i>
N4	<i>Novgorodskaya chetvertaya letopis'</i>
Nik	<i>Patriarshaya ili Nikonovskaya letopis'</i>
NPL	<i>Novgorodskaya pervaya letopis'</i>
P1L	<i>Pskovskaya pervaya letopis'</i>
P2L	<i>Pskovskaya vtoraya letopis'</i>
PSRL	<i>Polnoe sobranie russkikh letopisey</i>
RFA	<i>Russkie feodal'nye arkhivy (L. V. Cherepnin)</i>
RM	<i>Russia Mediaevalis</i>
S1	<i>Sofiyskaya pervaya letopis'</i>
Sim	<i>Simeonovskaya letopis'</i>
T	<i>The Trinity Chronicle</i>
TL	<i>Troitskaya letopis'</i>
TODRL	<i>Trudy Otdela drevnerusskoy literatury</i>
Tv. sb.	<i>Tverskoy sbornik (=Tverskaya letopis')</i>
UL	<i>Ustyuzhskiy letopisnyy svod</i>
VFR	<i>Vneshnepoliticheskie faktory razvitiya feodal'noy Rusi (V. V. Kargalov)</i>

Preface

This book covers a period in which two momentous events, the one dependent on the other, altered the whole course of Russian history: the Tatar invasion and the eclipse of Kiev and most of what had once been the great Kievan empire of the south. The first of these events was to dominate Russian history for nearly two and a half centuries; the second had a lasting effect on Russia's destiny: while a drastically weakened South Russia became an easy prey for the vast expanding state of Lithuania and Poland, the virtual disappearance of Kiev from the Russian political scene freed the Mesopotamian area of Suzdalia from the constant need to preoccupy itself with territories outside its natural area of development. Rid of the necessity to watch over and to guard itself against the South, the district of Suzdal'—Vladimir—Rostov was able eventually to develop its own resources, to acquire inner strength and, in the fifteenth century, to free itself at last from its Tatar overlords.

The available Russian sources provide remarkably little information on the social and economic conditions of the age: in them we find practically no details of agrarian conditions, of trade, of landownership, of legal administration, of the tax and tribute system in Russia. But from the chronicles, our main source of information for the period, we do learn a considerable amount about the relationships of the numerous rulers of the separate principalities with one another: their conflicts, their alliances, their family connections, their military ventures. Consequently much of this book is taken up with the political activities of the descendants of Vladimir I and with the complex interaction of the various autonomous or near-autonomous districts that went to make up the Russia of the thirteenth century.

The main aim of the book is to chronicle, and seek an explanation for, the gradual decline of princely power from the heyday of Vsevolod III's rule at the beginning of the century to the nadir of the authority of the grand prince of Vladimir at the end of it. To do this it is necessary to investigate the minutiae of inter-princely relations and to attempt to disentangle the complicated web of available information. All the conclusions reached are based exclusively on a study of the primary sources — for the most part, the chronicles — and on an investigation of the interrelationship of these sources.

The chronicles themselves present considerable difficulties. Not one was contemporary to the events described, that is to say not one received its *final* redaction in the thirteenth century. It is therefore at times necessary to reduce the earliest accounts to their original versions by stripping them of later accretions. It is also essential to establish the bias not only of the contemporary chronicler but, often more important still, of later editors of the text as well. The trouble is that so often the skilled compilers of the great codices of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, while collating a number of conflicting – and often inadequate – versions and trying to make sense out of what was often contradictory nonsense, tended to rewrite history in the spirit of *their* age. In Appendix A I have described the relevant chronicles and have shown their origins, their history and their relation with one another.

In books in English on early Russian history problems are often posed by place names, proper names and titles. Throughout I have used the terms 'Russia' and 'Russian' rather than 'Rus' (which in the sources relating to the twelfth and thirteenth centuries tends to denote the *south* of the country rather than the north-east and north-west) and the ill-sounding 'Rus'ian' favoured by some historians. I have adopted the chroniclers' habit of using 'collective patronymics' to denote members of this or that clan: thus, the 'Ol'govichi' are the descendants of Oleg Svyatoslavich of Chernigov, the 'Rostislavichi' – those of Rostislav Mstislavich of Smolensk. As for Lithuanian names, I have given the Russian version first, then the Lithuanian in brackets, e.g. Voysheik (Vaišvilkas), Zhemaytiya (Žemaitija). Estonian and Livonian place names present more of a difficulty: in most cases I have given the Russian name followed by the local (Estonian or Lettish) and German names in brackets, e.g. Rakovor (Rakvere, Wesenburg). However, Kukenois (German: Kokenhusen) and Gersicke, both on the Western Dvina, have been left in the local form, there being no accepted Russian forms; Kolyvan' (Tallinn, Reval) I have called by the commonly accepted Russian version 'Revel'; Lake Chudskoe (Peipsi Järv, Lake Peipus) is 'Lake Peypus' *passim*. In the spelling of Tatar names I have omitted diaeresis throughout: thus Hulagu *vice* Hülägü, Ogedey *vice* Ögedey; I have also used the commonly accepted Russian version of 'Baty' rather than 'Batu' throughout.

For the transliteration of Russian words I have used the 'British' system of latinization advocated in the *Slavonic and East European Review* (see W. K. Matthews, 'The Latinisation of Cyrillic Characters', vol. xxx, no. 75 (June 1952), pp. 531–49). I have made one or two minor exceptions to this system: (i) e and ë are always transliterated e (thus *Ermolinskaya*, not *Yermolinskaya*); (ii) the endings -ый and -ий are rendered by -y in modern surnames (*Gorsky, Ilovaysky*) and first names (*Vasily, Dmitry, Yury*). In adjectival endings, however, -yy and -iy are used (*Novyy, Nevskiy, Nizhniy, Dolgorukiy*); (iii) in the spelling of feminine names ending in -iya, the spelling -ia has been used throughout (*Maria*).

The second section of Chapter 4 has appeared in a slightly modified form in *Oxford Slavonic Papers* (New Series), vol. xiv, 1981.

Finally I would like to express my gratitude to the Rockefeller Foundation

PREFACE

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Oxford

December 1981

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Russia in 1200

At the beginning of the thirteenth century few of the territories that had once made up the state of Kiev showed signs of such healthy political stability as did the north-eastern district of Suzdalia — that is, the territory of Suzdal', Rostov and Vladimir, bounded roughly by the upper Volga in the north and the Oka in the south. The authority of its ruler, Vsevolod III, one of the shrewdest and most farsighted of all the descendants of Vladimir I, was widely acknowledged among his fellow-rulers. 'All lands trembled at his name and his fame spread throughout the whole country', wrote his chronicler, who, though using the conventional fulsome clichés of the adulatory obituary, probably represented the views of most of his contemporaries. All Suzdalia owed him allegiance of some kind or other; the great city-state of Novgorod with its vast subject lands to the west, north and north-east had, for the first eight years of the thirteenth century, only his sons as its rulers; Kiev's eastern neighbour, Southern Pereyaslavl', was firmly under his control; and the princes of Murom and Ryazan' to the south were little more than his vassals.

If at the turn of the century the northern half of the country of Russia enjoyed a certain degree of stability, the southern half did not. By the year 1200 a three-cornered struggle for power had begun between the princely family of Smolensk (the descendants of Rostislav Mstislavich: the Rostislavichi), the descendants of Oleg Svyatoslavich of Chernigov (the Ol'govichi) and the formidable Roman Mstislavich of Volynia. It was a fight for supremacy over the whole of the south of Russia, from Volynia and Galicia in the west to Chernigov and Pereyaslavl' in the east, and for control over the 'mother of the Russian cities', Kiev, and it was to continue off and on until Kiev fell to the Tatars in 1240.

This did not mean, of course, that at the turn of the century Kiev was in a state of complete political and economic decline or that the hegemony of the new centre of Vladimir-on-the-Klyaz'ma was finally established and recognized by all: indeed, the bitter feuding was soon to give way to relative stability in the south (from 1212 to 1235), while in the north Vsevolod III's death in 1212 was followed by a period of violent internecine war, and it is doubtful if at that time the prince of Kiev considered himself in any way the inferior of his cousin

in Vladimir. But by 1200 Suzdalia was showing distinct signs of political strength, and the southern princes tended to look up to the grand prince of Vladimir as *primus inter pares*, if not as the senior of all the descendants of Rurik.

Why was this so? In order to find an answer we must consider briefly the political organization of the various territories which made up the whole of Russia at the turn of the century and glance at their previous history.

* * * *

The agriculturally rich 'land beyond the forests' (*Zalesskaya zemlya*) or Suzdalia, as it is convenient to call the federation of principalities in north-east Russia ruled by Vsevolod III and his numerous sons, was situated in the basins of four major rivers, two running west-east, two running north-south. Through the centre of the district flowed the Volga from Zubtsov in the west – the extreme upper reaches of the river from Rzheva to Lake Seliger ran through Smolensk territory – to its confluence with the Oka in the east. In the south of Suzdalia was the river Klyaz'ma, running from its source north-west of Moscow to where it flows into the Oka and on the central reaches of which stands the capital Vladimir. In the north-west and the north-east of the district were the two northernmost tributaries of the Volga, the Sheksna, which links the Volga with the White Lake, and the Unzha, which formed the easternmost boundary of Suzdalia. Apart from Beloozero near the influx of the Sheksna into the White Lake and Ustyug at the confluence of the Sukhona and Yug rivers in the far north-east, most of the major cities were situated either on the Volga (Tver', Uglich, Yaroslavl', Kostroma) and the Klyaz'ma (Vladimir, Starodub), or between the two (Suzdal', Pereyasavl' Zalesskiy or Northern Pereyasavl', Rostov, Dmitrov, Yur'evPol'skiy).

A glance at the map will show just how favourably Suzdalia was situated with regard to these river routes. Most of the main rivers flowed from west to east, and three of them, the Klyaz'ma, Moskva and Oka, were linked with the Volga near the beginning of its great sweep southwards to the Caspian Sea, thus providing trade routes with the markets of the East. At the same time the Moskva and Ugra rivers, both tributaries of the Oka, provided waterways to Smolensk in the south-west and thence to the Baltic and the Black Sea, while the great western commercial centre of Novgorod was linked to Tver' by the Msta and Tvertsa rivers. Furthermore, a number of tributaries bisecting at regular intervals the area between the Upper Volga and the Klyaz'ma provided routes between most of the major towns in the mesopotamian area and also gave them outlets along the main rivers.

The first mention of the 'Trans-forest Land' as a political entity occurs in the Novgorod First Chronicle where Suzdalia is described as an appendage to the *otchina*, or patrimony, of Southern Pereyasavl' left by Yaroslav I to his third eldest surviving son Vsevolod in 1054: 'Vsevolod [received Southern] Pereyasavl', Rostov, Suzdal', Beloozero and Povolzh'e [the Volga district]'.¹ Virtually uncontested, it remained the possession of Vsevolod and his son Vladimir Monomakh and the latter's descendants. Curiously enough, in the elev-

enth century little attention seems to have been paid to this vast and rich area, which was later to become the centre of the great Muscovite state from the fourteenth to the seventeenth centuries – indeed, before 1093 or 1094 neither Vsevolod nor his son Vladimir even appointed princes to rule there. But from the beginning of the twelfth century Vladimir Monomakh began to show a keener interest in this the jewel of his family possessions. Perhaps it was because of the need to defend the southern borders of Suzdalia against the princes of Chernigov or perhaps it was because he had to counteract the growing menace of the Volga Bulgars on his eastern borders, who in the early twelfth century were penetrating further and further west along the Volga?² Whatever the cause, we find Vladimir Monomakh founding the city of Vladimir-on-the-Klyaz'ma (1108), the future capital, and appointing his son Yury Dolgorukiy prince of Suzdal'. By the time of his death in 1125 Suzdalia was virtually independent of Kiev under its sovereign ruler Yury.

For the rest of the century the district grew and strengthened under its three rough and remarkable rulers, Yury Dolgorukiy (1120–57) and his two sons Andrey Bogolyubskiy (1157–74) (so called from the palace built at the village of Bogolyubovo near Vladimir) and Vsevolod III (1176–1212). Yury, that veritable 'Christopher Columbus of the Povolzh'e', as one historian has called him,³ can truly be called the founder of the Rostov-Suzdalian state. During his 37-year rule Suzdalia took shape. Its frontiers with Chernigov in the south and Novgorod in the west became fixed; towns sprang up: Ksnyatin at the mouth of the Western Nerl', Yur'ev-Pol'skiy, Pereyaslavl' Zalesskiy (Northern Pereyaslavl'), Dmitrov, Moscow; throughout the country churches and monasteries were built and decorated; colonization was vigorously fostered; links between Suzdalia and the south were strengthened; and Yury's sons were established in the major cities, often while at the same time holding districts in the south. When he died in 1157 he was succeeded by an even more single-minded and autocratic ruler, his son Andrey Bogolyubskiy, whom the local boyars of Rostov, Suzdal' and Vladimir proclaimed as their prince.

Suzdalia was immensely strengthened by Andrey. Not only did he have far less *southern* aspirations than his father, who had twice been prince in Kiev, or his sons and brothers – it was a son of his (Mstislav) who seized Kiev in 1169, not Andrey, and it was the same son who put Andrey's brother Gleb on the throne of Kiev in the same year – but also he was aware of the danger of having too many relations to share power with and too many of his father's boyars to advise him on how to use that power. In his desire to be 'autocrat (*samoderzhets*) of all the land of Suzdal'', he chased out four of his brothers, two of his nephews and the 'senior boyars of his father' (1161).⁴ He even attempted to assert ecclesiastical independence from the see of Kiev by proposing (in vain) to set up a metropolitanate of the north. Again, the frontiers of Suzdalia were widened. Andrey's reach extended eastwards, mainly along the Klyaz'ma, in an effort still further to stem Bulgar aggression: he founded the easternmost outpost of Gorokhovets on the Klyaz'ma as a jumping-off place for the great campaign against the Volga Bulgars in 1164.⁵ In the north his influence was beginning to be felt in the vast territories under the nominal control of Nov-

gorod – in the district of Zavoloch'e, the lands 'beyond the portage' between the White Lake and Lake Kubenskoe, watered by the Northern Dvina river.⁶

He was murdered in 1174, and for two years there was confusion and unrest in Suzdalia while two of his nephews and his brother Mikhalko briefly ruled Rostov and Vladimir. But on Mikhalko's death in 1176 the youngest son of Yuri Dolgorukiy, the great Vsevolod III, took over, the first prince ever officially to adopt the title of grand prince.⁷ His long reign (1176-1212) was marked not only by a great increase of his authority as ruler of Vladimir, both internationally and amongst his southern relatives, but also by a significant increase of territory. In the west Vsevolod reached an agreement with Novgorod whereby the Novgorodian territories of Torzhok and Volok Lamskiy were held in joint control by both Novgorod and Suzdalia,⁸ while at the same time he moved further westward along the Volga, building the town of Zubtsov on the southernmost bend of the upper Volga and thus creating a wedge of Suzdalian land between Novgorod territory proper and the shared district of Volok Lamskiy. In the east his defences against the Volga Bulgars were strengthened: Kostroma, Nerekhta and Sol' Velikaya, all on or near the middle Volga, were founded to provide further bulwarks against attacks from the east or to serve as collecting points for campaigns against the Bulgars, as was Unzha, built on the middle reaches of the Unzha river. In the far north further incursions into Novgorod territory were made in the Pechora and Northern Dvina river districts, and the town of Ustyug, at the juncture of the Sukhona and Yug rivers, was founded in 1178.⁹

By the end of the century Vsevolod III's power was firmly established. Furthermore it was recognized by the third and fourth generations of descendants of Monomakh, who saw in him the senior 'amongst all cousins in the tribe of Vladimir [Monomakh]' (see p. 22). Whoever wrote the *Tale of Igor's Campaign* – whether at the beginning of the thirteenth century or later – singled him out amongst all the princes of Russia: 'Grand Prince Vsevolod! Should you not fly here [i.e. to Kiev] in thought to watch over your father's golden throne? For you can splash dry the Volga with your oars and empty the Don with your helmets! Had you been here, a slave-girl would be worth a farthing and a male captive a mite' – an exaggeration, perhaps, of Vsevolod's military capacities, but at any rate an indication of his formidable reputation and of the power of Suzdalia at the turn of the century.

* * * *

The principality of Kiev in the south presented an altogether different picture. At the end of the twelfth century it consisted merely of the lands watered by the middle reaches of the Dnepr, by the western tributaries of the Dnepr from the Uzh in the north to the Ros' in the south and by the southern tributary of the Pripyat', the Sluch'. In total area it was smaller than Suzdalia, Chernigov, Smolensk, Polotsk or Volynia. In the south there were virtually no boundaries at all and it is hard to tell where Kiev ended and the territory of the steppe nomads, the Polovtsians, began, but an approximate, though fluid, line between the two could be drawn south of the Ros' river and the upper

reaches of the Southern Bug. The eastern frontier between Kiev on the one hand and Chernigov and Pereyasavl' on the other ran along the Dnepr, although a 15-kilometre-wide slice of land east of the Dnepr from the Desna to the Trubezh belonged to Kiev. In the north the frontier with the principality of Turov-Pinsk ran south of the Pripyat' river, while in the west that with Volynia ran in a line east of the upper reaches of the Goryn' river.

The town of Kiev itself was ideally situated. Militarily it enjoyed excellent defences thanks to its hilly position; economically the Dnepr provided not only a direct route to the Black Sea, but also links with the Baltic via the Berezina and the Western Dvina, with the Oka and Don via the Desna and Seym and with the basins of the Dnestr and Neman via the Pripyat' and Western Bug. Close by were the strongly fortified cities of Vruchiy (or Ovruch, as it was sometimes called), Vyshgorod and Belgorod commanding the approaches to the capital from the north-west, the north and the south-west respectively. From the south Kiev was shielded by a system of forts along the Dnepr and a series of strongly defended towns on the Ros' river.¹⁰

At the beginning of the twelfth century the frontier situation was much more fluid. Indeed it is hard to say whether under the great rulers of the early twelfth century, Vladimir Monomakh (1113–25) and his son Mstislav the Great (1125–32) boundaries even existed between what later became known as the 'principality of Kiev' and Volynia, Turov-Pinsk, Smolensk and Southern Pereyasavl', all of which were held by close relatives (and subjects) of the prince of Kiev. Kiev was 'Rus'', and 'Rus'' consisted of all the southern lands excepting Galicia and Chernigov-Ryazan'. Even parts of Polotsk in the north-west were subject to Monomakh and Mstislav. But the unity of the Kievan land, resuscitated by Vladimir Monomakh after the civil wars of the eleventh century, was shortlived. Already the reign of Yaropolk (1132–39), who succeeded his brother Mstislav, was clouded by fragmentation and soured by the struggle within the clan of the Monomashichi themselves: the younger sons of Vladimir Monomakh, who could expect to follow Yaropolk on the throne of Kiev according to the rules of lateral seniority (brother succeeding brother), were incensed by the fact that Yaropolk placed his *nephews* (Mstislav's sons) in Pereyasavl', by now the accepted seat of the prince next in line for Kiev (see p. 10). The intestine strife was intensified by the intervention of Vsevolod, the son of Monomakh's old rival, Oleg of Chernigov. It became a three-cornered struggle for power between the princes of Chernigov, the powerful sons of Mstislav the Great and the latter's uncles, Yaropolk and his brothers. Civil war was now the order of the day in southern Russia, just as it had been in the last three decades of the eleventh century. Power swung from family to family: from one clan of the Monomashichi to another, from one branch of the princes of Chernigov to another, until eventually a sort of compromise was reached in the curious duumvirate of Svyatoslav Vsevolodovich of Chernigov and Rurik Rostislavich of Smolensk, who virtually ruled the principality of Kiev jointly until the former's death in 1194. Families themselves became more and more fragmented the greater their expansion. Separate branches began to concentrate on areas which each gradually came to recognize as its inalienable heritage: thus

the grandchildren of Izyaslav Mstislavich (prince of Kiev 1146-54) built up their patrimonies in the west - Vladimir in Volynia, Lutsk, Dorogobuzh, Shumsk, Peresopnitsa; the descendants of Rostislav Mstislavich (prince of Kiev 1159-67) kept to Smolensk, which the family had held since 1125¹¹; Yury Dolgorukiy's family, as has been mentioned above, concentrated its energies in Suzdalia; the Ol'govichi of Chernigov split into the senior clan (the descendants of Vsevolod Ol'govich, prince of Kiev 1139-46) with its claims to Chernigov itself and the cadet branch (the descendants of Svyatoslav Ol'govich) which settled for the lesser portion of Novgorod Severskiy.

All this meant, of course, considerable variations in the actual power wielded by whoever was prince of Kiev. Yaropolk, for example, indecisive and only too willing to accept a compromise and a disadvantageous peace, undermined the authority won by his elder brother Mstislav and his father Monomakh; Mstislav Izyaslavich (1167-69), for all his energetic and successful defence of the southern frontiers against the steppe nomads, the Polovtsians, was opposed by the majority of the princes and saw his capital taken by the troops of Andrey Bogolyubskiy's son (1169); under Rostislav Mstislavich (1159-67) and Svyatoslav Vsevolodovich (1177-94), on the other hand, a certain stability was achieved, there were few feudal clashes and successful anti-Polovtsian campaigns were undertaken. But in spite of the constant waxing and waning of the authority of the numerous princes who occupied the throne of Kiev from the death of Mstislav the Great in 1132 to the death of Svyatoslav Vsevolodovich in 1194, Kiev never lost its importance as the centre of the south and as the magnetic attraction for the Monomashichi and the princes of Chernigov, nor was it to lose it for the first four decades of the thirteenth century. Much has been written concerning the political and economic 'decline' of Kiev in the twelfth century, and much attention has been paid to Andrey Bogolyubskiy's unwillingness to rule in Kiev after his son's armies had taken the city in 1169. But there is little to show that the authority of Kiev, both as a centre and as a principality, diminished noticeably in the twelfth century, and the fact that neither Andrey Bogolyubskiy nor his brother Vsevolod III chose to rule there is evidence of their determination to concentrate their attention on Suzdalia rather than of their 'contempt' for Kiev. The 'mother of the Russian cities' remained the great prize of the princes until shortly before its capture by the Tatars.

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Of all the southern districts independent of Kiev the strongest and the least fragmented by the beginning of the thirteenth century was undoubtedly Smolensk. The principality enjoyed an enviable geographical position, situated as it was on the upper reaches of most of the major rivers of Russia. From north to south flowed the head waters of the Dnepr, on which the town of Smolensk was located, as well as the Dnepr's two large tributaries, the Sozh and the Desna. Westward flowed the Western Dvina and its various tributaries, and to the east the upper Vazuza, a major tributary of the Volga, and the upper Ugra, which joined the Oka in Chernigov territory. Thus Smolensk was linked

by its waterways with Kiev in the south (along the Dnepr, Sozh and Desna), with the Baltic (via the Western Dvina), with the Gulf of Finland (via various portages between the Dnepr and the Lovat') and with the main routes east (Volga and Oka). Shaped like a tilted triangle, Smolensk shared a boundary with Chernigov in the south, with Polotsk in the west, with Novgorod in the north and with Suzdalia in the east.¹²

In the last forty years of the eleventh century and the first quarter of the twelfth Smolensk appears to have been a dependency of Kiev: in other words, the ruler of Smolensk was the appointee of whoever was prince of Kiev.¹³ It passed from prince to prince among the descendants of Yaroslav I, but for most of the last quarter of the eleventh century and the first quarter of the twelfth it was the possession of, or in the gift of, Vladimir Monomakh. Only after Monomakh's death in 1125, when his grandson Rostislav Mstislavich was given Smolensk, did the principality become an independent political unit with its own prince, who could, and did, confine Smolensk to his own descendants. From then on, until the early fifteenth century, Smolensk was ruled exclusively by the family of Rostislav – the Rostislavichi.

Throughout the remainder of the twelfth century the Rostislavichi controlled Smolensk with tact and discipline. From time to time their power was such that they were able to place their nominees – usually close relatives – on the throne of Novgorod and sometimes on that of Pskov as well. Smolensk became a bishopric in 1136. In 1165 the town and district of Vitebsk was temporarily acquired at the expense of Polotsk. Rostislav and two of his most powerful sons, Roman and Ryurik, frequently occupied the throne of Kiev. Most important of all, the Rostislavichi managed to build up strong family connections in the fortress towns near Kiev itself – in Vrchuiy, Belgorod and Vyshgorod – thus facilitating the eventual takeover of the city and district in the thirteenth century.

The reasons for the strength of Smolensk at the end of the twelfth century are not hard to find. The principality enjoyed a flourishing economy thanks largely to its links with Eastern Europe along the Dvina river: there is evidence of strong commercial connections with Riga and with the main trading centres of Germany – Lübeck, Dortmund and Bremen. There were no squabbles among the members of the ruling dynasty, nor are there any signs of separate *otchiny* being formed: a member of the clan might temporarily hold a provincial centre, but there was no question of the establishment of *separate* branches of the family outside the capital of Smolensk itself. The princes, it seems, were always at the disposal of whoever was senior member of the family. Above all, Smolensk was virtually free from attacks by external enemies: Polotsk and the south-west corner of Novgorod territory shielded it from Lithuanian and German inroads, while the Polovtsians had to penetrate Kiev, Pereyaslavl' and Chernigov before reaching the frontiers of Smolensk.¹⁴

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Smolensk's southern neighbour Chernigov, surrounded by Kiev and Turov in the west, Smolensk and Suzdalia in the north, Murom and Ryazan' in the

north-east and Pereyaslavl' in the south, enjoyed a less favourable geographical position in that its southern and eastern frontiers were more vulnerable to attack: the southern half of the eastern border, for instance, was open to the Don steppes. The principality, however, was provided with a system of waterways which linked it with Smolensk (via the Dnepr and Sozh), the south (via the Dnepr) and the east (via the upper Oka). Throughout the southern and central regions flowed the Desna, on which the major cities – Chernigov, Novgorod Severskiy, Trubetsk, Bryansk and Vshchizh – were situated. In the south of the district ran the Desna's tributary the Seym, which constituted a natural barrier against inroads of steppe invaders, while in the west, from Lyubech to Rogachev, Chernigov held the middle reaches of the Dnepr, thus controlling the main water route from Smolensk to Kiev.

Unlike Smolensk, Chernigov, ever since the mid-eleventh century, was recognized as the family possession of one branch of the descendants of Yaroslav I, and one branch only. In 1054 Yaroslav bequeathed it to his second eldest surviving son, together with Ryazan' and Murom: 'Svyatoslav received Chernigov and all the eastern land even as far as Murom.'¹⁵ For the first twenty-two years it was the undisputed possession of Svyatoslav, but during the age of bitter civil war from 1077 to 1097 it changed hands no less than seven times, alternating for the most part between Svyatoslav's sons and Vladimir Monomakh. In 1097, at the great congress of Lyubech, at which the territorial problems of the Kievan state were temporarily solved, Chernigov was confirmed as the *otchina* of the Svyatoslavichi: 'Let each one hold his own patrimony (*otchina*). . . . Let David, Oleg and Yaroslav [the three surviving sons of Svyatoslav] hold Svyatoslav's [patrimony]',¹⁶ and in the hands of the Svyatoslavichi it stayed as long as Chernigov remained an independent principality.

Throughout the twelfth century the family grew and splintered. David, as the eldest son of Svyatoslav, held Chernigov; Oleg made Novgorod Severskiy his capital, while the third son, Yaroslav, eventually (1127) settled in the district that was probably allocated to him at Lyubech and in which his descendants were to remain – the separate joint principality of Ryazan' and Murom. Chernigov and Novgorod Severskiy passed from one branch of the family to the other, from David and his children to Oleg and his. But the branch of the Davidovichi died out in the second generation, and only the Ol'govichi remained. By the seventh decade of the twelfth century the Ol'govichi themselves divided into two lines: the descendants of Vsevolod Ol'govich, the senior branch, and the descendants of Svyatoslav Ol'govich, the cadet. It meant that the territory of Chernigov itself was virtually split into two: only members of the senior branch acceded to the throne of Chernigov, while Novgorod Severskiy was the centre of the lands held by the cadet branch. How exactly the whole territory was divided into the districts of Chernigov and Novgorod Severskiy is hard to say: most of the western and northern lands were seemingly under the control of Chernigov, while the *otchina* of the princes of Novgorod Severskiy consisted of the southern half of the country. Unfortunately there is not enough clear evidence to show how the various minor members of the two families were assigned to the smaller towns. Nor do the