Past and Present Ukrainian and Russian Identity

By Murray Rundus

Despite often being overshadowed by the ongoing conflict in Israel-Palestine, the Ukraine-Russia war wages on, with thousands being killed and displaced because of it. Much of international politics still surrounds this issue, and for Catholics to have a truly well-formed worldview, understanding the conflict is vital. The dispute over who should rightfully control the lands of modern-day Ukraine and Russia has been a point of contention between the Slavic nations for many centuries and is a question largely centered on religious, ethnic, and political identity. Having a grasp on what those identities are and how they came about is the key to understanding the current crisis.

Too often, the debate and overview of the current crisis begins with Soviet history, a useful polemic that manages to take Christianity completely out of the picture. In reality, the conflict is centered around how Russians and Ukrainians view themselves in respect to the ancient Christian "Kyivan Rus" and its institutions. It is only through viewing Ukrainian and Russian history through the lens of the Christian faith and how Jesus Christ transforms nations through Christian institutions that we might understand how Providence has been deeply involved in the region, which we know will eventually culminate in the conversion of Russia, and the bringing about of peace.[1]

The Origins of the Contention: The Kyivan Rus'

The root of the contention between the two cultures can be found in the contest for who is the rightful inheritor of the legacy of the Kyivan Rus' which is "the state established in the tenth century by princes of the Rurikid dynasty that disintegrated into a number of polities after the Mongol invasion of the mid-thirteenth century."[2] The Kyivan Rus' controlled much of what is now Ukraine and Russia in Eastern Europe. Since the beginning of the Kievan Rus', there was a struggle among the Rus' peoples to establish a common identity. The early empire was composed of several Slavic-speaking tribes who acquired the name of Rus' after they invited Viking warriors called Varangians, led by the Rurikid dynasty, to rule over them.[3] Among the pagan Rus', there was not an established common pantheon of gods to provide religious unity[4] and on the political level centralized authority was not visible.[5]

Two Views of History

For many Russians, the Kyivan Rus' was a unified Russian nation, defined by a unified and strong Russian culture. There were subgroups within this Russian nation, like Belarussian

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and Ukrainian elements, but all were really variants of that Russian culture. For the Russians, the term "Ukrainian" is simply a fabrication and therefore a Ukrainian state is illegitimate. Much of their perspective was developed by Vasily Klyuchevsky. He saw the East Slavic peoples as containing the "Great Russian" and the "Little Russian" peoples, which are the Russian and Ukrainians, respectively, both of which he claimed to come from an "All-Russian" Rus' nationality.[6]

Those promoting Ukrainian claims tend to follow a new strain of thought from Mykhailo Hrushevsky in the early 20th century. Hrushevsky radically challenged the traditional Russian view and said that the Kyivan Rus' was actually proto-Ukrainian. Proponents of the Ukrainian perspective will make the claim that the Kyivan Rus' was essentially Ukrainian and that there were differences even during the time of the Kyivan Rus' between the people living in modern-day Ukraine and the people living in modern-day Russia.[7]

The Conversion of St. Vladimir

The de-centralized pagan Kyivan Rus' began to become more centralized with the conversion of Prince Vladimir to Eastern Christianity in A.D. 980. His conversion story is quite unusual and is based on seeking out the best way to unify his people. Vladimir commanded that reports of the world's religions be given to him. He examined the exiled Jews and couldn't see how a group of exiled shepherds from Palestine and Khazaria could benefit anyone. He then looked to Islam, and though he saw great conquerors, he saw the Islamic prohibition of alcohol as absurd for the Rus', a people who certainly loved to drink. The prince then turned to Christianity and was not impressed with the austere missionary churches of the Latin Church. If only the prince could have seen the grand cathedral of Aachen, he may yet have become a Latin Catholic! But Vladimir was extremely impressed by Byzantine culture and architecture and was somewhat familiar with the Eastern Church as his grandmother, St. Olga, had also converted to Eastern Christianity years prior.[8]

Vladimir's conversion unified the Kievan Rus' on a religious level with a common creed and church. He also unified his people politically with the idea of princely sovereignty introduced from the Old Testament.[9] As previously mentioned, on the cultural front, it is highly debated as to how much homogeneity there was from the conversion of Vladimir until the demise of the Kievan Rus', and whether or not this culture was more Ukrainian or Russian in nature. What both the traditional Ukrainian and Russian views have in common is to claim that there was ethnic homogeneity and cultural coherence in the Kievan Rus'.[10] In reality, there was a very loose cultural unity that was dependent on the religious and political authorities.[11] What was evident was that Vladimir's baptism of the realm and claim to princely sovereignty had given the Kievan Rus' as a polity the power to bind the people of Rus' together. After the death of St. Vladimir, the Rus' was divided into two main

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parts. In the North were the princes of Vladimir-Suzdal,[12] commonly seen as the predecessor to the Russians. In the South were the princes of Galicia-Volhynia, who were seen as the predecessors to the Ukrainians. This division became very apparent when the princes of Vladimir-Suzdal sacked Kyiv in 1169.[13] But despite their differences, the princes were still under the institutions established by St. Vladimir and were even united for a brief time under the Galicia-Volhynian prince Roman the Great. But soon the trampling of hooves could be heard on the steppes, and with the onset of the Mongol Horde, everything changed.

The "Tatar Yoke"

The brief period of stability and unity that St. Vladimir established would not last and was ultimately shattered after the unexpected Mongol Invasions of 1237-1240. This era of Ukrainian and Russian history is often referred to as the Tatar Yoke. "The destructive power of the Mongol war machine eclipsed anything the Russians had seen before. Other steppe nomads had contented themselves with raids and forays. This time Kievan Rus' found itself rapidly subjugated and annexed into the huge Mongol Empire. For the first time in their history the Kievan principalities felt the weight of foreign domination."[14] It is during this time "at which Russian history begins to follow one path, while the histories of Ukraine and Belarus take another."[15]

The Mongols did not desire to mix with Rus' people and desired stability among their subjects, so they kept the ecclesiastical and secular institutions of the Church and the title of Grand Prince. This began a competition among the princes for the title of Grand Prince, as whoever could connect themselves to the Kyivan Rus' was seen as the legitimate leader of the Rus'. The rulers of Vladimir-Suzdal claimed inheritance to the Kievan Rus through dynastic connections to the Kyivan dynasty while the rulers of Galicia-Volhynia claimed it by the control of Kiev itself.[16] The Mongol Invasion created a clear divergence between the two as "Galicia-Volhynia was nominally dependent on the Mongols only until the turn of the fourteenth century, Northeastern Rus' experienced their rule until the mid-fifteenth century."[17]

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Galicia-Volhynia as a Kyivan Candidate

At first, the princes of the Galicia-Volhynians were seen by the Mongols as the *de facto* leaders of the Rus'.[18] The Galician-Volhynians themselves considered only Prince Roman the Great and his successors as the rightful heirs of the Kyivan Rus'.[19] Galicia-Volhynia faced a disadvantage by immediately bordering the great powers of Poland, Hungary, and Lithuania compared to the princes of Vladimir-Suzdal, who faced nothing but the Siberian wastes on their borders.[20] Prince Roman's own Galician predecessor had been defeated and poisoned by the Hungarians, and upon Prince Roman's death, the realm would once again be attacked by them.[21] The man seated on the throne during Mongol rule was named Prince Daniel. Daniel had the strongest claim to the Rus' lands, with his lands centered around Kyiv. On the surface, Daniel showed loyalty to the Mongols, but Daniel wanted autonomy, and he needed to be liberated from the Mongols. With Eastern Europe in

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shambles, the prince's only hope was in the West. The prince sought the support of the Pope in Rome.

The Catholic-Orthodox Divide in Early Rus' Lands

The common conception of the schism between the Catholics and Orthodox beginning in 1054 is largely false. An apparent division between the Byzantine and Latin practices was seen even during the time of Photius of Constantinople in the ninth century, who condemned the Latins as heretics. At the same time, the division was complex, and even after 1054, Orthodox and Catholics did not always see each other as schismatics. This was especially the case in medieval Russia, as seen by their chronicles which were quite friendly towards Catholics, using the same terms for "church" and "priests" for both Catholic and Orthodox and saying other Catholic princes acted in a Christian manner. This is despite them being notorious for being particularly vicious towards schismatics and heretics.[22]

Turning towards Rome

A surprising turn in history came when the Pope managed to contact Prince Daniel. However, rather than sending a crusade of Teutonic Knights, the Pope merely sent his envoys. Pope Innocent IV agreed to give Daniel the title of King of all of Rus' and established him as a legitimate Catholic ruler.[23] Due to a lack of military support, the now-King Daniel did not succeed, and his realm was ultimately forced back into Mongol submission. Had Christendom perhaps been more united and Western Europe helped the Galicia-Volhynians unite the Rus' lands under the Catholic faith, perhaps Russia would still be Catholic to this day, and perhaps the cultural divisions of the North and South Rus' lands would have homogenized under a new Rus' culture around the Rus' Catholic Church. But no crusade was sent, and Galicia-Volhynia would soon meet its demise.

The Fall of Galicia-Volhynia

After Prince Daniel's death, Galicia-Volhynia would begin to lose its ties with the original Kievan Rus' after the last Galician-Volhynian member of the Rurikid house, which had ruled the Kievan Rus', died in 1323.[24] Ultimately, the loss of the connection to the Kievan Rus' would prove to be its demise as the Poles, Lithuanians, and Hungarians would take over the principality after the assassination of Yurii II, a non-Rurikid Galician-Volhynian prince, for being partial to foreigners.[25] From this point on, the principality of Galicia-Volhynia would turn into a region of Ruthenia within the lands of Hungary, Poland, and Lithuania. With no way of connecting themselves to the institutions of the Kyivan Rus', they were forced to create a new *Ukrainian* identity.

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Developing an Identity

The forces that dominated Ruthenia were prominently the Poles and the Lithuanians. These two states would unite to become the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in what is called the Union of Lublin in the 1560s. While this was a significant international event, it impacted Ruthenia greatly. The Commonwealth would send the Jesuits into the region and move the jurisdiction of the Church to Rome instead of Constantinople. However, the Rus' lands remained firmly Orthodox, largely due to the nobility. The most prominent example was Prince Ostrozky, commonly referred to as the uncrowned king of Ruthenia.

Ostroh: An Orthodox Rome?

In an era when printing cities like Geneva and Wittenberg were shaking the world, Ostrozky began work to create his own influence. His home city was Ostroh, a city in modern-day Ukraine, and Ostrozky did everything he could to revolutionize the city. He managed to get a printing press set up, a major university built, and even played with the idea of trying to move the See of Constantinople there.[26] His influence was shown when, in 1596, two church councils were held in Brest: one was pro-union with the Pope and created what we now know as the Ukrainian Greek-Catholic Church, the other anti-union and lobbied to re-establish the Orthodox hierarchy. At the end of the day, the latter succeeded, and the Eastern Catholic Church, while still somewhat prevalent to this day, would never dominate Ukraine. This was largely due to Ostrozky's infrastructure and ability to innovate. In 1620, the Orthodox hierarchy was re-established by the Patriarchate of Jerusalem, and soon, the King of the Commonwealth would grant them legal protection.

As a part of their efforts and the building of infrastructure, the Ruthenians began to see themselves as a unique people, and the differences that existed between them and the North-Eastern Rus' peoples were now magnified after isolation, new institutions being established, and close proximity to the West.[27] This period of isolation from the rest of the Rus' lands and the history of seeking to enter into the orbit of the West while retaining Eastern traditions is core to the Ukrainian identity and meant that homogenization with the other parts of Rus' lands really wasn't possible, especially after the princes of Vladimir-Suzdal developed an identity of their own.

Vladimir-Suzdal's "Tatar Yoke"

The princes of Vladimir-Suzdal were much more impacted by the Mongol rule, experiencing it much longer and more immediately. The Mongol invaders did not want to change daily life in the northern Rus' lands and showed complete tolerance to the Rus'.[28] Indeed, "the Rurikid dynasty and the Orthodox Church that had given identity to Kievan Rus' continued

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to dominate north-eastern Russia politically and ecclesiastically. But over the next century dynastic, political relations within north-eastern Russia altered under the impact of Golden Horde suzerainty."[29] What the Mongols gained out of their suzerainty was not centralized dominance but the right to confirm princes on their thrones and the collection of tribute and conscripts.[30] The political situation became a bid of princes from numerous dynastically inherited principalities in North-Eastern Russia that sought to win from their Mongol patrons the title of grand prince.[31] That the Mongols were now deeming the rulers of the North-Eastern region of Vladimir as grand prince, a title formerly only given to Kyivan princes, shows that the supremacy Kyiv over Rus' lands had effectively been usurped and transferred from Kyiv to Vladimir.[32]

While at first one might think that Mongol domination over the Russian lands would diminish Russian identity, the opposite was the case, much like how foreign dominance forced the Ruthenians to develop their own institutions. "Mongol dominance gave the elites of those territories a sense of unity by defining their political homeland as an autonomous realm of the Golden Horde ruled by the grand prince of Rus'."[33]

The Rise of Muscovy

In a strange turn of events, history would be shaped by what, at the start of the Mongol invasion, was a tiny backwater town. The insignificant river town of Moscow, barely known or even considered Rus' lands until the 14th century, would birth one of the strongest princely houses, the House of Muscovy. "One of the major elements in the formation of a Muscovite state was the success of the Muscovite grand prince in creating a 'national Muscovite' identity and then imposing this new identity on the conquered peoples of other Rus' lands."[34] Muscovy developed this identity by establishing a strong and characteristic religious order by managing to gain influence from the Khan and Patriarch of Vladimir, managing to gain the title of grand prince due to a marriage between the Khan's sister and the prince of Muscovy, and by convincing Patriarch Peter to move his "See of All Rus'" from Vladimir to Moscow. This was coupled with the establishment of a unique Muscovite pantheon of Saints, and the assertion that a Rus' must venerate them or be viewed as suspect of heresy.[35]

Ivan the Terrible's Creation of a Russian State

The strong religious order was coupled with a robust political order under the new Russian tsardom created by Ivan IV the Terrible. In 1480, the Muscovites met with the army of the Golden Horde at the River Ugra with both sides withdrawing without a fight; this would be the last time that the Muscovites would face the armies of the Golden Horde, and the "Tatar yoke" was lifted. The title of tsar, created by Ivan, "symbolized their independence of the

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khans, making them equal in status with their sovereigns, and established a claim to power comparable to that of the west European emperors."[36] Ivan founded this tsardom on the Kyivan roots and by introducing unlimited rule and obtaining much of Muscovy for himself by the policy called "oprichnina".[37] While some view this policy as an economic and geopolitical failure, it did leave Muscovy much more centralized, independent, and provided an official narrative from the tsar that Muscovy and the tsar was the descendent of the Kievan Rus' and the grand prince.[38] A new Russian identity was born, one that was firmly rooted in the Kyivan Rus' but developed by the cunning and skill of the Muscovites.

The Time of Troubles that would come after the death of Ivan the Terrible and death of the final Rurikid candidate for the throne mirrored in some ways the collapse of the Galicia-Volhynians after the death of Yurii II, with the invading Poles seeking to replace the tsar with a candidate of their own.[39] But the newly established Empire of Ivan did not collapse, as there was the well-founded Muscovite identity based on the authoritative institutions of the tsar and the Patriarch of All Rus'.

Observations and Conclusion

The history covered in this article deals not with the conflicts between Russians and Ukrainians in the USSR and post-USSR periods, from which stem much of the territorial disputes involved in the present conflict. However, simple observation of the situation and the parties at hand leads one to believe that this is not a simple territorial dispute, but a conflict of culture and of identity. The scope of this article is to merely point out that two separate identities exist and to examine their claims to the early Kyivan Rus', the center of those identities.

With the history of how these two cultures established themselves, I believe we can make a few observations. Firstly, it is evident that the claim that there exists a singular "All-Russian" nationality, continuous from the Kyivan Rus' to modern-day Russia, is simply a myth, as the Kyivan Rus' itself was not originally ethnically, religiously, or even culturally homogenous but only became relatively united after the establishment of Christian institutions under St. Vladimir. Secondly, these institutions, such as the grand princely state and the Patriarchate of the Rus', did transfer to Russia albeit in an imperfect way (consider the patriarchate going into schism with Rome and the grand princely state often becoming tyrannical and bloody). Finally, it is clear that while the Ukrainian culture does not have a connection to the Kyivan Rus' through its institutions, they did develop a true, distinct identity of their own and one that originates in reaching out to the Pope for help against pagan foes.If Ukraine wants to truly find solemnity and stability in its identity, it should reform its identity towards its true original purpose: reaching out to the West yet retaining Eastern tradition. This is not done in the way of seeking to join godless Western groups but

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in seeking to retain their religious patrimony under Eternal Rome to fight the modern paganism that is liberalism.

As for Russia, her destiny has been foretold by Our Lady of Fatima. Russia's fulfillment will not be found in a geopolitical move to reclaim a Communist empire accompanied by a state-serving church hierarchy, but rather in a spiritual metamorphosis of her people.[40] This conversion will not be a simplistic adoption of the Roman Rite, especially in its current abysmal form; it is one where the very fabric of the Russian people's own deep-seated yearning for tradition is woven into communion with the Roman Catholic Church. This Church, although momentarily cloaked in the darkness of modernity, awaits her own awakening to tradition and perhaps is to be stirred by the very spirit of Russia. It is through this coming union of East and West that lies the promise of a world reborn in peace — a tranquility not based on a mere ceasefire between nations but a true renaissance, a turning of East and West away from the darkness of modernity to the light of Holy Tradition.

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[1] https://fatima.org/the-consecration-of-russia.

[2] Serhii Plokhy, *The Origins of the Slavic Nations: Premodern Identities in Russia, Ukraine and Belarus* (Cambridge University Press, 2010), 12-13.

[3] Ibid., 23-24.

[4] Ibid., 43.

[5] Walter K. Hanak, *The Nature and the Image of Princely Power in Kievan Rus', 980-1054: A Study of Sources* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 167.

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[6] Vasily Osipovich Klyuchevsky, *A History of Russia* (London & New York, 1911).

[7] Mykhailo Hrushevsky, *History of Ukraine-Rus'* (Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies Press, 2010) and *From Kievan Rus' to Modern Ukraine: Formation of the Ukrainian Nation* (Ukrainian Studies Fund, Harvard University, 1984).

[8] For more on this topic, see Nestor's "Primary Chronicle," essential reading for Russian-Ukrainian history.

[9] Hanak, *The Origins of the Slavic Nations*, 167-170.

[10] Jaroslaw Pelenski, *The Contest for the Legacy of Kievan Rus'* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1998), 7.

[11] Plokhy, *The Origins of the Slavic Nations,* 46-48.

[12] A region named not after St. Vladimir but his great-grandson, Vladimir II.

[13] Pelenski, *The Contest for the Legacy of Kievan Rus'*, 6.

[14] Charles J. Halperin, *Russia and the Golden Horde: The Mongol Impact on Medieval Russian History* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1985), 20.

[15] Plokhy, *The Origins of the Slavic Nations,* 50.

[16] Ibid., 6-8.

[17] Ibid., 51.

[18] Ibid., 67.

[19] Ibid., 65.

[20] Ibid., xv.

[21] Fr. Nicholas L. Chirovsky, *An Introduction to Ukrainian History* Vol. 1 (New York, NY: Philosophical Library, 1981), 163.

[22] Plokhy, *The Origins of the Slavic Nations,* 63.

[23] Alexander Maiorov, *Rex Coronatus of Rus'* in *Studia Mediaevalia Europaea et Orientalia*.

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[24] Fr. Chirovsky, *An Introduction to Ukrainian History*, 174.

[25] Ibid., 178-179.

[26] Plokhy, *The Origins of the Slavic Nations,* 182.

[27] Some Russians today argue that the Ruthenians saw themselves as the "Little Russians" due to continuous pleas for the Moscow princes to save the Ruthenians from their occupiers. But this is disproven by the fact that the Muscovites saw the Ruthenians as a corrupted people and did not see a unity between the two (see Plokhy, *The Origins of the Slavic Nations*, 231-235).

[28] H. Paszkiewicz, *The Origin of Russia* (New York, NY: Philosophical Library, 1954), 305.

[29] Maureen Perrie, Dominic Lieven, and Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Cambridge History of Russia* (Cambridge University Press, 2006), 128.

[30] Janet Martin, *Medieval Russia: 980-1584* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 153.

[31] Perrie, *et al*, *The Cambridge History of Russia*, 143

[32] Martin Dimnik, "The Title 'Grand Prince' in Kievan Rus'." *Mediaeval Studies* 66 (2004): 253–312.

[33] Plokhy, *The Origins of the Slavic Nations*, 157.

[34] Ibid., 77.

[35] Ibid., 78.

[36] Ibid., 138.

[37] Martin, *Medieval Russia,* 347-351.

[38] Plokhy, *The Origins of the Slavic Nations,* 125-126.

[39] Perrie, *The Cambridge History of Russia*, 359.

[40] https://fatima.org/news-views/did-the-recent-consecration-fulfill-our-ladys-request.

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