

Chapter 2

Origins of the Russian State: Russia's Historical Cultural Identity and the Holy Rus

Russia's Historical Cultural Identity

During the last five decades, a number of researchers have focused on *cultural* dimensions in the construction of national identity (Anderson, 1983; Appadurai, 1996; Barth, 1969; Bourdieu, 1977; Deutsch, 1966; Geertz, 1973; Gellner, 1983; Habermas, 1995; Hall, 1992; Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983; Smith, 1991; Wodak, de Cillia, Reisigl, & Liebhart, 2009). These authors discussed the construction of national identity in terms of such constructs as 'imagined communities', 'citizenship', 'collective memory', 'cultural identity', 'nation', 'nation state', 'national identity', 'national history', 'habitus', 'identity politics', 'cultural representations'. Most of these have been used by various researchers in discussing the politics of creating the national identity in Russia during Putin's regime (Rapoport, 2015a, 2015b; Zajda, 2016a).

In researching and analysing the nexus between nationalism, national identity and ideology, it is necessary to explain the current usage of these key concepts, which are subject to 'multiple definitions'.

Nationalism, as one of the most dominant ideologies, refers to the belief that the sovereign nation-state represents a 'group of people who consider themselves as belonging to one nation and who share a territory' (see also Smith, 1991, 1995). An example of the nationalist use of history is the desire to return to 'a golden age' (Smith, 1991, p. 66). Historical narratives, constructing national identity, use the notion of 'golden ages', to demonstrate examples of heroes and public virtue, in order to promote the glory of the nation's historical past, its continuity, its idealised heroes, and its noble heritage (Smith, 1991, p. 92).

National identity represents a specific cultural community, whose members are united by 'common historical memories, myths, symbols and traditions'. It denotes

such elements as 'historic territory, legal-political community, legal political equality of members, and common civic culture and ideology' (Smith, 1991, p. 11).

The term *ideology*, refers to a system of dominant ideas, and beliefs affecting every sphere of human social interaction and organisation, be they political, economic, scientific, educational, and cultural, and evolved during the last decade of the eighteenth-century. The concept of ideology is closely connected with power, since ideological symbols, represent, to use Max Weber's 'value-ideas' (general cultural values that constitute social phenomena) construct, which serves to dominate, control, and justify social, economic and political systems (Zajda, 2014a). According to Smith (1991), 'the underlying sentiments and aspirations that nationalist ideology, nationalist language and symbols evoke' relate to the three main concepts: territory, history and community (Smith, 1991, p. 78).

As a result of the nexus between nationalism, national identity, language and ideology, representation of heroes in history textbooks has ideological, cultural and pedagogical significance. Apart from preferred historical narratives and particular language used, illustrations and visual images are also used to reinforce the cult of a hero. National heroes tend to be celebrated for the important roles they played in history. This is associated, at times, with a 'vision of national identity grounded in pride in a culture'.

Searching for Russia's Historical Cultural Identity

In their recent search for Russia's historical cultural identity, Russian policy makers and historians, are compelled to cultivate a new sense of Russian identity and consciousness. In doing so, they invariably use religion, in their attempt to re-discover the origin of the Orthodox faith in Ancient Rus, and its power to unite the people, when Prince Vladimir introduced Christianity in the kingdom of Ancient Rus in 988 AD. Prince Vladimir wanted to unite his people around a single state, and one religion. However, Princess Olga, who ruled Ancient Rus, between 945 and 962 AD (after the death of her husband, Prince Igor in 945 AD) was already attempting to introduce the Orthodox faith. Olga had herself converted to Christianity, in 957 AD, and was baptized in Constantinople. Sakharov and Bugarov (2011) in their sections 'The rule and baptism of the Princess Olga', write that a number of people had already adopted Christianity earlier (Sakharov & Bugarov, 2011, p. 62). She, in fact, was one of the first rulers to bring Christianity to her lands. She also had a big influence on her grandson, Prince Vladimir the Great, who later made Christianity the official religion.

The reference to Princess Olga and her rule, and her baptism, is one of the few examples of prominent women rulers. The next one, almost 800 year later, is Catherine the Great, who ruled Russia between 1762 and 1796.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russian neo-nationalism had 'aligned itself more closely with Orthodox religious resurgence' (Smith, 1991, p. 148). From this religious resurgence, it was drawing on traditional values: a good deal of its

national, moral and cultural aspirations. This trend of placing the Orthodox faith on a pedestal was a defining feature of the 19th conservative Russian monarchy and cultural life.

The current cultural and ideological connections to religion as a symbol of cultural identity in Russia represent a new dimension of a return to traditional values. It could be argued that for Russia, in her search for identity in the twenty first century, the road leads to 'inclusive and integrative' religion, which acts as a 'symbol of cultural identity':

Only a culturally inclusive and integrative type of religion will be religion as a symbol of a cultural identity'. (Kilp, 2011, p. 220)

In *All that is solid melts into air*, Berman (1991, p. 89), drawing on Marx's *Communist Manifesto* (1848), discusses the identity crisis confronting various nations during the later part of the nineteenth century:

All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and men at last are forced to face with sober senses the real conditions of their lives... (Communist Manifesto, 1848)

The crisis of materialism and the destruction of everything holy, resulting in the 'aura of holiness suddenly missing', meant that there existed an existentialist crisis and identity crisis. Berman (1991) explains it: 'We cannot understand ourselves in the present until we confront what is absent' (Berman, 1991, p. 89). It is not surprising, that Russia, in confronting what was absent, turns to religion, the Orthodox faith. Not only are its foot prints traced in the Ancient Russia, but its modernist revival is now celebrated across the nation.

President Vladimir Putin's Attendance at the Celebrations to Mark the 700th Anniversary of the Birth St Sergius of Radonezh

Putin's (2014a) speech at the celebrations to mark the 700th anniversary of the birth of St Sergius of Radonezh, and the event itself, both signal the idea that religion is now used as a symbol to promote a cultural identity of the Russians in the multi-ethnic Russia. Here we have a convenient nexus between ideology, national identity and religion, promoted by the state. It is also an attempt to celebrate a golden age in Russian history, as mentioned earlier. This could refer to such historical narratives as the Ancient Rus, the rule of Peter the Great, and Catherine the Great, or the dominance of the Soviet Union as a superpower.

Foreign media outlets have commented on President Putin's harnessing of the 700th anniversary of the birth of St Sergius of Radonezh for political purposes, with his emphasis on Russian Orthodoxy, as the tie that binds all Russians together. The 10 mile procession of an officially estimated 30,000 pilgrims to the town of Sergiyev Posad, the site of the monastery established by the saint in the fourteenth century culminated in a ceremony addressed by President Putin and the Patriarch of Moscow

and All Russia Kirill. Foreign press reports noted that Mr. Putin attended the ceremony within a day of the tragic MH17 plane crash in the eastern Ukraine. Some commentators suggested that Russia's political leaders wish to create a new religious/political cult to replace their previous emphasis on the introduction of Christianity to Russia by Vladimir the Great, grand prince of Kiev (980–1015) in 988. Now that "Russia and Ukraine are locked in a proxy war, the Russian government and the Church realise that the physical link to an important religious symbol is being severed" according to Geraldine Fagan (2014).

The roots and also the relics of St Vladimir are in the territory of a now estranged neighbour, Ukraine. The celebration of the 700th anniversary commemoration, however, had been planned for years.

Official Russian announcements linked the saint's spiritual leadership and founding of monasteries with the secular history of the nation of Russia. ITAR-TASS referred to St Sergius' blessing of Dimitri Donskoi before the Battle of Kulikovo on 8 September, 1380 against the Mongols of the Golden Horde, to demonstrate his importance as a figure in Russian secular history. What we are not told is that this bloody battle, which resulted in the great victory, gave the Russian princes a 2 year respite. In 1382, the Golden Horde was back, and this time, the Mongols slaughtered the inhabitants, burned the villages and finally looted and burned Moscow. The Russians were forced to submit to the Mongols. This is an example of choosing preferred historical narratives.

The same report also noted the monastery's later secular and political role in withstanding a 16-month Polish siege in 1608–1609 and in helping to organise Russia's first territorial militia, the then Minin and Pozharsky militia.

Mr. Putin's speech was broadcast live nationally. Addressing the 30,000 pilgrims in a 5-minute speech he praised the "patriotic, national and moral resurgence" inspired by St Sergius referring to his building of monasteries as both spiritual centres and fortresses to protect Russia. He referred to St Sergius' role in advocating unity between the rival local factions in the face of the common foe and invader, the Mongols. "His wise and solid words as a mentor and guide were a spiritual pillar and support during a difficult time of foreign invasion and internal discord" Mr. Putin said. He also referred to his prophetic words "Our salvation lies in love and unity". "This appeal, filled with unshakable faith, helped to unite Russia's lands and stamped itself forever on our people's soul and our historical memory".

The commemoration's emphasis on the important concept of *Holy Rus* has been a recurring theme in such celebrations. *Holy Rus* refers to the unity in belief of all Russian Orthodox believers. It was also used as a rallying metaphor during the Great Patriotic War of 1941–1945. Critics point to similarity of the use made by the czars of the concept of *Holy Rus* as a national ideal with Mr. Putin's policy that all ethnic Russians are worthy of protection. The spiritual link between all Russian Orthodox believers found in the concept of *Holy Rus* finds an often made parallel link with the political unity of all Russian speakers.

Earlier, in 2011, the Russian state, under President Medvedev, was the official sponsor of an Exhibition "Holy Rus", at the Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow. The exhibition displayed artwork from the Old Eastern Slavonic state which existed in

medieval times and united the lands of modern Belarus, Ukraine and the European part of Russia, with its capital Kiev. Defending the state's sponsorship of the exhibition, the gallery director said the costly exhibition could not be achieved without state sponsorship. "It does not aim at promoting state-church relations but at providing a window onto their historic relationship" she said (Reuters, May 26, 2011).

Fagan (2014), the author of *Believing in Russia: Religious Policy after Communism*, discusses the ambiguity surrounding the identity politics in the multi-ethnic and multi-religious state. The Russian Orthodox Church asserted itself as the definitive expression of Russian nationhood since 1991 (and during World War II). For Fagan, the nexus between Russian Orthodox Church with national values, as in the past, is a powerful political and cultural strategy to define Russian identity. Connecting the Russian Orthodox Christianity with Russian national culture is an attempt to engage in the nation-building process through the construction of a nation and national identity. The principal assumption here is that the nations, and Russia in particular, is no exception, need to be perceived and understood as mental (cognitive) constructs and emotional attitudes, reminiscent of 'imagined political communities'. Fagan demonstrates that Russia is confronted by a moral dilemma. It is embedded in the unresolved nature of the key question: 'Is Russia to be an Orthodox country with religious minorities or a multi-confessional state?' Will it be possible for Russia to reach a consensus on the role of religion in society? This remains to be seen.

Russia today is a vivid and unique example of ideological repositioning of historical narratives, blending certain Soviet and Russian historiography. According to President Vladimir Putin (2012a), Russian history textbooks should reflect the 'national ideology', and the curriculum should focus on the formation of 'common civic values, to consolidate the Russian nation', and avoiding, in his opinion, 'biased interpretations' of history:

We have to develop common approaches and views...especially in Russian history, and the history of the people of the Russian Federation...there should be no distortion of facts, and biased interpretations of the history of our country. (http://www.edu.ru/index.php?page_id=5&topic_id=3&date=&sid=20188&ntype=nuke).

Furthermore, the notion of teaching patriotism is accentuated in the National history curriculum document, *Primernye programmy po uchebnym predmetam. Istoriia. 5–9 klassy* (2010). In the introduction, the section *The goals and tasks for learning history in schools* it is stated that one of the main goals of learning history is to cultivate in the students 'patriotism, and respect to our Fatherland' (*Primernye programmy po uchebnym predmetam. Istoriya. 5–9 klassy*, p. 5).

Putin's push for 'national ideology', patriotism, and nation-building, where Russia is presented as a unique and great nation, helps to explain why Russian history textbooks are now promoting the notion of Russia as a 'great state'.

The Foundation Narrative of the Ancient *Rus* as a Unified State

The Rus as Unified State

Current Russian history school textbooks increasingly emphasise the foundation narrative of the Ancient *Rus* as a *unified* state. This was already stressed previously in Soviet textbooks and history encyclopaedias. *The Illustrated History of the USSR* (1974), Chapter 1 'The Great State in the Medieval World' describes the greatness of the Ancient *Rus*, in terms of its vast territory, power and conquests (p. 13):

They (the Slavs-Russys) gradually unified towards the 10th century to emerge as a powerful state, led by great princes (p. 13).

In *The Great Soviet Encyclopaedia* (1977), the history chapter, in the section 'The ancient Russian state '(*drevnerusskoe gosudarstvo*) describes 'the unification of various Slavic tribes between the 6th and 9th centuries' (p. 240) and the conquests of Prince Oleg, of Novgorod, who 'invaded and defeated Constantinople in 907 (*Russy*, or Russian tribes, attacked Constantinople on 18 June, 860, JZ)' (p. 241).

In short, history standards, the national curriculum and prescribed Russian history textbooks, designed to promote patriotism and nation-building, are constructing politically accepted and desirable historical narratives of the key events depicting a historical continuity of the Russian empire/state as a historical source of national identity. These historical narratives are also setting historical precedent for the RF to act outside its borders, as other superpowers like USA and China frequently do.

The Sources of National Identity

One of the sources of national identity, as taught in history in *Istoriia Otechestva* (History of the Fatherland, 5th edition) Grade 8 Russian History Textbook, is the aetiology of *Rus*. The earliest written Old Slavonic documents mention the word *Rus* (Russia) in 862 AD, even though the name *Rus* (denoting blond/ginger and white-skinned people—*rusye*) was used by the Greek, Goth, and Arab historians between 5th to 7th centuries. The first sources confirming that 'Rus was a common term among the ancient Slavs can be traced to 6th century' (p. 38). The text informs us that 'The Byzantine historians mention the attack by the Rus in 860 AD on Constantinople' (Sakharov & Bуганов, 1995, p. 34).

Russian history textbooks for Grade 8 and 10 are using two major primary sources for the study of the origins of the Ancient *Rus*. These are *Povest sovremennykh let* (c. 1113) and a Persian ancient manuscript, discovered in 1892, describing Rus during the first half of 9th century (Rybakov & Preobrazhenski, 1993, p. 43).

The notion of the *Rus* as a unified state is first mentioned in the manuscript *Povest sovremennykh let* (The Tale of Bygone Years), describing a history of Kievan Rus from about 850–1110. It was originally compiled in Kiev between 1113 and 1116. Since the original document and copies were lost, it is problematic to verify the reliability of historical narratives in the surviving chronicle.

Rus is now increasingly the preferred name to *Kievan Rus* (as Russian historians used to call it in earlier editions of Russian history textbooks) in current prescribed Russian history textbooks. Already in 1995, Russian history textbooks for Grade 10, stressed that in the ninth century, there existed the two powerful city-states, Novgorod, or the ‘Northern Rus’, ruled by Prince Riurik (who died in 879 AD) and Kiev, or the ‘Southern Rus’ (ruled by Askold and Dir), its chief rival. Prince Oleg marched on Kiev in 882 AD, and having established his rule there, announced ‘Let Kiev be the mother of the cities of Rus. So Novgorod in the North defeated Kiev in the South... *There appeared a united ancient Russia state*, with its centre in Kiev (italics are mine). All this happened in 882 AD’ (Sakharov & Buganov, 1995, p. 42). What is stressed here is the origin of the Russian State, or Rus, with its capital Kiev.

In the 2001 edition of Sakharov & Buganov, this interpretation was revised to read as: ‘Novgorod of the North defeated Kiev of the South. Novgorod became the unifier of all Russian lands into a single state’ (Sakharov & Buganov, 2001, p. 46). Students discover that it was the Russian Novgorod that emerged victorious and powerful, and became the founding member of Ancient Rus.

Furthermore, from 1995, *Rus*, rather than *Kievan Rus*, was used in a number of prescribed Russian history textbooks in their historical narratives detailing the founding of the single state of Rus (*sozdanie yedinovo gosudarstva Rus*). Students learn that during his many battles, Prince Oleg managed to annex huge territories in the South, as far as Kerch, a Greek colony founded in seventh century BC (currently the Russians are considering building a bridge from mainland Russia, Kerch to Crimea, JZ) and Crimea. This demonstrates the historical precedent for a superpower acting outside its borders.

The Founding of the Single State Rus

Unlike the previous editions, the 2011 textbook (17th edition) by Sakharov & Buganov, has a new section entitled ‘The founding of the single state Rus’ (*sozdanie yedinovo gosudarstva Rus*). This is done to stress the notion of the existence of the united kingdom of *Rus* in 882 AD (Sakharov & Buganov, 2011, pp. 54–57). This idea is taught to secondary Russian history students, to emphasise the historical significance of power and greatness of *Rus* as a united East Slav state.

The Grade 10 students learn that ‘There appeared a singular Ancient Russian State,’ (Sakharov, 1995, p. 42; Sakharov & Buganov, 2001, p. 43; Sakharov & Buganov, 2008, p. 55; Sakharov & Buganov, 2011, p. 54). Prince Oleg, known as the brave warrior prince in the medieval literature and chronicles, assumed the title of the ‘Prince of Princes’ (p. 43) or the Grand Prince (*veliki kniaz*). His aim was to

consolidate his power and rule of all the Rus—a multi-ethnic and loose federation of city-states ruled, by feuding princes. As a result: ‘*Rus* made its appearance in the world as a united East Slav state. In terms of its size it was equal to the empire of Charlemagne (ruler of the Frankish Kingdom between 771 and 814 AD) and the Byzantine empire’ (p. 43).

Furthermore, the 2001 edition, by Sakharov & Buganov, has a section ‘The appearance of the state among East Slavs’. It describes the state of *Rus* on the Dnieper, which ‘conquered Crimea, ruled by the Byzantine Empire’ (p. 43).

The 2008 edition in the same section mentions that ‘The thrust against the Crimean provinces of Byzantine was the first mentioning (in Byzantine historical chronicles, JZ) of *Rus* as a state’ (p. 50). In the section ‘The Creation of the unified State Rus’ (*Sozdanie yedinogo gosudarstva Rus*), it is mentioned that Oleg’s role was to ‘unite the two ancient Russian centres’ (Novgorod and Kiev, JZ) in 882:

Having united all East Slav territories, and freeing its citizens from paying taxes to foreigners, Oleg was able to give to the power of the Prince an unbelievable degree of authority and international prestige. He then grants himself the title of the Great Prince, that is the Prince above all princes... (Sakharov & Buganov, 2008, p. 55).

Through these historical narratives of Ancient Rus, students learn about the early attempts by various powerful warrior-princes to unify *Rus* and to create the State. These warrior-princes (but only one princess, Olga, who ruled between 945 and 963) had always included Oleg, Igor, Sviatoslav, Vladimir, and Yaroslav the Wise, and the Grand Prince of Kiev (between 1016 and 1054). In 1054, the title ‘tsar’ was used for first time, when the plaque announced the ‘death of our tsar’ (Sakharov & Buganov, 1995, p. 75). In the section describing the rule of Sviatoslav, who conquered a huge territory between 964 and 972 AD, he was referred to, by the authors of the textbook, as ‘Alexander the Great of Eastern Europe’ (p. 49).

The above examples of historical narratives describing the origins of ancient Russia, as a foundation narrative, demonstrate a desire to cultivate and instil a new historical cultural identity of the greatness of Russia in Europe during the tenth century, and a sense of distinctly Russian consciousness in Russian history classes in grades 6–11. There is an underpinning message that unification brings peace and power and that the politics of fragmentation give way to a ‘new order’.

Globalisation and National Identity in History Textbooks

The Russian Federation

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