

Final Report

Visegrad Scholarship at the Open Society Archive

Research Project: **Use, Abuse, and Refuse: Building and Challenging Political Narratives of Medieval Rus' in the Late USSR and Post-Soviet Russia**

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My research project examines the ideological implications associated with the term “Kievan/Kyivan Rus’” in the Late Soviet and Post-Soviet political and historical discourse. Looking closely at the transformations of this historiographic term, from the Soviet period to the contemporary master narratives in public history and education in Russia and Ukraine, I trace the corollaries of its interpretation for the ideology-building and state propaganda in Putin’s Russia. For this purpose, I look closely at school and university history handbooks, radio broadcasting, and public debates in scholarly and political journalism, and analyse how the manipulation with the term (de)legitimized Ukrainian nationhood and, later, statehood. Thus, my objective is to demonstrate how the emphasis on different facets of the term and its presence/exclusion in/from the public discourse and teaching materials contributed to the new emerging tendencies in the social and political life of Russia.

During my two-month research at the OSA archives, I studied the public discourses on the Medieval history in Russia and Ukraine during the Late Soviet and early Post-Soviet periods in order to find where the present-day militant historical narratives stem. For this reason, I worked on the four groups of materials: 1) Files of the RFE/RL related to Ukraine and its public historical narratives; 2) Files of the RFE/RL related to the Orthodox Christianity and its history; 3) Public writings and interviews on history-related subjects given by professional historians of the Medieval period from different republics of the USSR (biographic files); 4) the broadcast recordings of the RFE/RL devoted to Orthodox Christianity and History.

Among the Red Archives’ biographical files, I searched for the names related to the public discussion of medieval history. The extensive collections of Kraus Biographical Files and USSR Biographical Files include several folders with the interviews and newspaper articles by the Soviet public intellectuals. Among them, the most important were the files with the materials on Dmitry Likhachev and Sergei Averintsev, the former being a historian of Rus’ literature and the later a Soviet byzantinist. Additionally, I looked for the files on such scholars as Gennady Litavrin, Aron

Gurevich, and Alexander Kazhdan, - three late-Soviet medievalists who were popular among intelligentsia. These biographical files primarily dedicated to the careers and public appearances of these scholars, however they also provide information on the activities and organizations in which these historians were involved, including late-Soviet and early Post-Soviet cultural and heritage associations, academic institutions, and even political organizations.

The biographical and subject files gave an insight into the political and intellectual climate of late Soviet Union as well as post-Soviet Russia and Ukraine. During this period, under the disguise of Marxist narratives, the new intellectual trends started to appear in the Soviet republics. The Russian historians promoted a patriotic discourse on medieval history where Moscovite Rus' and, later, the Russian Empire was represented as a true heir of Kievan Rus' in political and territorial terms, whereas Ukraine and Belarus' were mentioned only occasionally. This type of discussion echoed the pre-1917 and émigré historians of medieval period who adhered to the imperialist project of the Orthodox Russian state uniting the Eastern Slavic nations and deriving its legitimacy from the Kievan/Kyivan Rus'.¹

On the other hand, the subject files and media digests on Ukrainian history contain examples of semi-official publications, samizdat manuscripts, and other forms of cultural expression that were produced and disseminated, despite the repressive climate of the time. These files demonstrate an interest of local Ukrainian intellectuals in the master narrative, mainly developed by the anti-Soviet Ukrainian émigré and diaspora in the United States, Canada, and Western Europe, namely the version of the past originating in Mykhailo Hrushevsky's *History of Ukraine-Rus'*. Hrushevsky, and later other Ukrainian historians such as Serhii Plokyh, considered the Kingdom of Galicia (centered around the Western-Ukrainian region of Halych) as a true heir of the Kyivan/Kievan Rus' and, despite the direct dynastic connections between the Moscovite rulers and the Rurikids, saw only Prince Danylo of Halych as a political successor of the Kievan/Kyivan rulers.

Thus, with the help of media digests on Russia and Ukraine in the 1980s-1990s, I could trace the re-emergence of conflicting interpretations of history (including the medieval period) in two countries' public discourses. As both of them stemmed in the étatist historical ideas, i.e. understood a state as the only historical actor and statehood as the ultimate national good, the narratives provided fruitful soil for later ideological confrontations. Initially, the Russian vision of

¹ See, Miller, Aleksei. *The Ukrainian Question: The Russian Empire and Nationalism in the Nineteenth Century*. Budapest: Central European University Press, 2003.

the past, imperialist in its core and influenced by the White émigré ideas, ignored the developing Ukrainian historical narrative, essentially nationalist and shaped by the concepts promoted by the Ukrainian intellectuals in Canada and the US. As the media digests prove, these discourses co-existed in the early Post-Soviet period, but later, as Georgiy Kasianov spotted on, entered into a “Memory Crash”² that Putin used as one of the pretexts for invading Ukraine in 2022.

The influence of the pre-1917 imperial ideas on the late-Soviet Russian cultural and historical narratives came through the re-discovery of the Tsarist historiographic concepts by the scholars who were interested into such topics as Medieval Slavic literature, art, and philosophy or Orthodox Christianity, as they were gravely mistreated in the Soviet Marxist historiography. Consequently, looking into the Samizdat and other Red Archive files, I have discovered a growing interest of personally religious intellectuals and scholars working on the Christian literature in the textual and audio materials developed by the Russian-speaking intellectuals in Europe, the ones who represented the Russia in exile. Such historians as Dimitri Obolensky or John Meyendorff preserved and developed the historical thought of the Russian Empire that regarded the Orthodoxy an ideological glue uniting the Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarussians, alongside with the loyalty to the God-established royal authority and a common Eastern-Slavic national identity.

Judging on the interviews and public speeches of the early 1990s, the late-Soviet intelligentsia largely borrowed from the historiography of the Tsarist and White émigré scholarship. They seem to rediscover the pre-1917 discourse through the religious and cultural programs of Radio Liberty (especially, *The Millennium of Christianization of Kievan Rus'* and *Not Bread Alone*) and unofficial deliveries of émigré books (samizdat) published by YMCA-Press, Possev, Krug (TelAviv) to USSR. Thus, already in the articles of such public intellectuals as Dmitry Likhachev and Sergei Averintsev the term “Kievan/Kyivan Rus'” underlining the Ukrainian origin of the Rus' state, started to be replaced by the expression “Russian land” (*Russkaya zemlya*) and “Ancient Rus'” redirecting attention to the connection between Rus' and Russia. Developed as an opposition to the Marxism-burdened old concepts, this new discourse also reflected the penetration of cultural and religious history into the once Soviet methodology, as these post-Soviet historians started to discuss such topics as medieval monasticism, royal piety, and the Russian patriarchy as their role in the history of Russian state.

² Kasianov, Georgiy. *Memory Crash. Politics of History In and Around Ukraine, 1980s-2010s*. Budapest: CEU University Press, 2023.

The dangers of this neo-imperialist approach to Russian history and culture were noted in the reports composed for the RFE/RL by Vera Tolz in the 1980s. In the *Report on the Anniversary of the The Tale of Igor's Campaign* (1985) and the *Report on the Celebrations of the 1000th Anniversary of the Christianization of Rus'* (1988), the research analyst noted the growing interest of the Russian politicians into history as an element of ideology and national propaganda. She observed a simplistic binary contrasts between the Soviet (Russian) nation and the Others and signalized the perception of the pre-1917 Russian historical discourse as "more democratic than Western scholars think". Later, looking at the attempts to rewrite the Soviet history into the History of Russia, she noted that Russia's colonial past became transferred into the new, post-Soviet, ideology, without its critical examination.

To sum up my research activities at in the OSA, I would like to underline that the information I have discovered among the archival holdings elucidated the actual connections between the late-Soviet intellectuals and émigré historians and public figures. It also proved that the ideological division between Russian and Ukrainian visions of the countries' common medieval past started to emerge already in the 1980s, before the fall of the Soviet Union. This way, I was able to trace the origins of the Russian present-day misuse of history in the service of ideology and mis-representation of Rus' as the *Russian* medieval state to the public intellectual discourses of the 1980s.

Finally, I would like to express my gratitude to all employees of the OSA Archive, and particularly to Katalin Gádoros, István Rév, Nóra Ungár, Robert Parnica, and Oksana Sarkisova for supporting me during my stay at the OSA. I also would like to thank the Visegrad foundation for the financial assistance that allowed me to undertake the archival research.

Appendix. List of Consulted Archival Materials

HU OSA 300 Records of Radio Free Europe/ Radio Liberty Research Institute

HU OSA Soviet Red Archives 300-80

HU OSA 300-80-1 Old Code Subject Files

OSA 300-80-1: boxes 322-323, 703-704

HU OSA 300-80-7 USSR Biographical Files

OSA 300-80-7: boxes 4, 145, 197-198

HU OSA 300-80-9 Kraus Biographical Files

OSA 300-80-9: boxes 152, 361

HU OSA Monitoring Unit 300-81

HU OSA 300-81-2 Subject Files Related to Ukraine

OSA 300-81-2: boxes 15-18 (History)

HU OSA 300-81-4 Soviet Media Digest Files

OSA 300-81-4: boxes 9-15 (Ukraine Today)

HU OSA Samizdat Archives 300-85

HU OSA 300-85-9 Published Samizdat

OSA 300-85-9: boxes 9, 11, 17, 49, 53, 153

HU OSA 300-85-12 Subject Files

OSA 300-85-12: boxes 53-56 (Geography: Ukraine)

HU OSA 300-85-13 Biographical Files

OSA 300-85-13: boxes 97, 129

HU OSA RFE/RL Russian Broadcast Recordings 297-0-1

"Millenium of Christianization of Kievan Rus", (1984-1986), 17 of 50 broadcast recordings

"Not Bread Alone", (1978-1988), 72 of 335 broadcast recordings

"Essays on the History of the Russian Church", 05 February 1977. HU OSA 297-0-1-84633