

“Never Quite Roman” - The Rise, Fall, and Revival of Russian Imperial Thought and Roman Inheritance

“Rus! Where are you dashing? Give an answer! No answer comes.”, goes the infamous line in Nikolai Gogol’s *Dead Souls*. Yet, it may be argued, that the Rus did envision a final destination in this lamentation – Rome. Many would be inclined to believe that the Rus, and later Tsarist Empire, were guided by fundamental principles owing to their “barbarian” Slavic origins – never under the sphere of Rome, never being “Roman” enough, and being geographically separated from the traditional European centers of civilization and learning – notably Rome and Constantinople. However, the yearnings of Kievan Grand Princes, and later Russian Tsars, over a roughly 900-year period portray a distinctly contradictory reality – one of religious, political, and social aspirations to first emulate, then take on the mantle of Rome. Through key periods such as Vladimir the Great’s 9th century inception of Roman imitation in the Rus, to the late-medieval Ivan III’s inheritance of symbolism and legacy after the last death-knell of the Eastern Roman Empire rang out across Europe in 1453, and in Peter the Great’s seismic westernization and modernization of Russia as he steered the empire towards a new, enlightened Roman status, the quest to be “Roman” underwent a twisting journey. Ending in revolutionary bloodshed, yet revitalized in the late 20th century, this Imperial obsession embodies more than Greek Crosses and Double-Headed Eagles. It symbolizes Russia’s desire to Romanize herself – believing it will herald the hallowed era of *Pax Romana* and all the glories it entails.

Long having been rid of its pagan origins by Constantine the Great, the Roman Empire, now surviving in its extant Eastern Half under emperor Basil IIⁱ, was not only Europe’s beacon of the still-united Christian faith but was regaining much of its military prowess during a 40-year process of grinding down and establishing supremacy over the recently Christianized Bulgarian state under Tsar Samuel.¹ A Slavic contemporary of both Basil and Samuel, the current pagan prince of the Keiven Rus, Vladimir, sought to bring his principality in line with the Eastern Roman sphere. Made up of several pagan East Slavic tribes including the *Ilman* and *Krivichi* tribes² that inhabited the areas around Novgorod, the Volga and the Dnieper, there was a notable lack of unifying factors that characterized the state unlike the deeply intertwined Romano-Greco-Christian identity of Constantinople and its subsidiaries. It was the notion of Christian religious statehood that Vladimir craved for himself. In his process to find a faith to supplant the various versions of Slavic and Norse paganism that were practiced in the Rus, Vladimir settled on the “Christian” promise of land and victory – after discounting Islam on account of its alcohol prohibitionⁱⁱ, his initial considerations of adopting the Jewish faith after consulting several emissaries had been shattered when he came to believe that the Jewish religion was eternally forsaken as the Jews had been expelled from their Judean homeland³ – he did not want the Rus’ expulsion from their fledgling state either. This Christianization was cemented when in 988 he wed Anna Porphyrogeneta, the niece of Emperor Basil II, and brought the Rus into the political and religious fold of Constantinople. Vladimir, later venerated as an Eastern Orthodox saint for his conversion, began almost immediately in his

¹ Browning, Robert (1992). [*The Byzantine Empire*](#). Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press. [ISBN 978-0-8132-0754-4](#).

² Janet Martin, [*Medieval Russia, 980–1584*](#) (Cambridge, 2003)

³ Janet Martin, *Medieval Russia, 980–1584*, (Cambridge, 1995), p. 6-7

imposition of this new religion, and by extension, “Romanness”. Pagan shrines of both Norse, Slavic, and adopted Iranian deities were smashed, and the people of Kiev were baptized en masse in the Dnieper.⁴ The veneration and royal legitimacy derived from appeasement of the Slavic chief-God *Perun*ⁱⁱⁱ⁵ was rejected in spectacular fashion when his effigy was destroyed and thrown into the Dnieper waters⁶ on the orders of Vladimir himself. Although the title of ‘autocrat’ was embraced in Constantinople, it would not be formally adopted by Keiven Princes, and later Tsars, until the 15th century. ‘Autocracy’ in a Byzantine sense connoted divine, unquestionable power - Byzantine theocratic rule claimed to be the continuation of that of the seminal bastion of Christianity - Rome itself. Unlike pagan gods that required appeasement, offerings, and other forms of veneration, the Christian God of the Romans was absolute – power was derived from his grace alone. As historian Steven Runciman states - “*The constitution of the Byzantine Empire was based on the conviction that it was the earthly copy of the kingdom of heaven... the emperor... should rule on earth and carry out His commandments.*”⁷ The legitimacy of the emperor, and his new Keiven imitator, was founded on the notion that rulers were the intermediate stage between man and God – not unlike the pagan Romans’ designation of the emperor as *Pontifex Maximus* in the religious aspect. Gone were the days of fratricide and external intervention (Most notably by Norse ruler Håkon Sigurdsson in 972 during a succession crisis) to cement the Grand Prince’s authority⁸. The new Byzantine-modeled religious background to political power was the first cry of Imperial thought and absolutism – holy, ruthless, and divinely incorrupt, the new Keivan autocrat now had the means to rule spiritually unchallenged in the fledgling Rus.

Byzantine-influenced legal codes also made their way into the Rus. However, unlike the monarchical divine facsimile, it did not aim to replicate the Roman way in its entirety. Vladimir, along with his son Yaroslav, instituted the first Kievan legal code in the early 11th century. The *Russkaya Pravda* (literally translating to “Russian Truth”) pertained to quintessentially “Keiven” issues – settling blood feuds, feudal laws, and after an 1113 revision, breaking the hold of the primarily Jewish Novgorodian money lenders. The Byzantine Farmer’s Law, or *Lex Rustica*, was influenced by the *Pravda* and visa-versa.⁹ It set out a feudal basis for holding farming communities accountable for the actions of individuals, and set out means to satiate the demands of feudal lords, known as *Boyars* in the Rus. The *Pravda* separated itself from contemporary Byzantine Codexis through its notable lack of advocacy for capital and corporal means of punishment¹⁰. Instead, the *Pravda* focused on feudalism and serfdom – the latter also functioning as a state of punishment which criminals were forced to submit to. This functioned similar to the Byzantine practice of slave-serfdom – indentured servants known as *kholops*^{iv} could be bought and sold regardless of whether they were bound to land or not. A master even had the freedom to kill his

⁴ Longworth, Philip (2006). *Russia: The Once and Future Empire from Pre-History to Putin*. New York: St. Martin's Press.

⁵ Graves, Robert (1987). *New Larousse Encyclopedia of Mythology: With an Introduction by Robert Graves*. Gregory Alexinsky. New York: CRESCENT BOOKS. ISBN 0-517-00404-6.

⁶ Longworth, Philip (2006). *Russia: The Once and Future Empire from Pre-History to Putin*. New York: St. Martin's Press.

⁷ Runciman, Steven (2004). *The Byzantine Theocracy*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press. [ISBN 978-0-521-54591-4](#).

⁸ "[Vladimir I \(grand prince of Kiev\) – Encyclopædia Britannica](#)". Britannica.com. 2014-03-28.

⁹ J. Fine, *The Early Medieval Balkans: A Critical Survey from the Sixth to the Late Twelfth Century*,

¹⁰ Zimin, Alexander. *Pravda Russkaya*. - Moscow: ("Archive"), 1999

kholop without punishment¹¹. The slave-serfdom system was, unlike the Byzantine model, not targeted at minority groups such as Tartars – the majority of *kholops* were ethnic Russians and Ukrainians, with this status quo holding until the de jure abandonment of slave-serfdom in the 17th century.¹² This was due to the diversity of the ruling feudal *boyars* themselves – over the course of the class's existence, over 15% would come to be descended from "Oriental peoples" - i.e., Turkic and Mongolic groups that were assimilated into the expanding Rus as it came into contact with the later Mongol Empire and Khanates. Some of the *boyars*, at least for a generation or so, were allowed to keep their non-Christian faiths – a distinctly tolerant environment as compared to the Greek Orthodox supremacy of the Byzantine elite. The young state's multiculturalism mirrored the diversity of the classical Roman Empire, and its relative openness to minorities in an era of growing religious hatred against Muslims and Jews in the years leading up to the Crusades.

Almost 500 years later, the next stage in embracing Rome and developing imperial thought came under Ivan III. On his ascension to the throne in 1462, history had played witness to two key developments related to "Romanness". The first was the Great Schism of 1054, less than a century after Christianization. This event saw European Christianity cut in two and forever separated Rome from Constantinople¹³. Ostracized from interacting with western religious circles alongside the Byzantines, the Orthodox Rus had been forced to embrace the doctrinal line of a Constantinople that was becoming more insular and Greek as the Byzantine state waned under harassment from zealous crusaders and caliphs alike. The schism had direct political consequences that hastened the Empire's political downfall – the Holy See refused to send aid to the withering state unless the two rites of Christianity were reconciled. After a 1341 succession crisis spurred on by the death of Emperor Andronikos III which the Holy See refused to intervene in, the Empire went into a century-long decline culminating in 1453 the capture of a now-dilapidated Constantinople by a certain Mehmed II¹⁴. The last Byzantine successor state, the Principality of Theodoro, would fall into Ottoman hands 22 years later in 1475. As the largest Eastern Orthodox state left, Ivan moved from a position of emulating Rome to being its sole inheritor. In the process of Romanizing Russia, Ivan made the conscious decision to style himself *Tsar* after the Roman title "Caesar", as well as adopting the role of "emperor and autocrat" of the Rus – an honour previously reserved for Roman and Byzantine emperors alone¹⁵. He adopted the visual symbols associated with 'Romanism' - notably the double-headed Eagle¹⁶, which derived from the insignia of Roman legions, and was later adopted by the Seljuk Turks and Byzantines. He established himself as orthodoxy's greatest vanguard, just as the Byzantine emperor had been, and increased anti-Catholic sentiment through stamping out Dominican missions that had been sent by Pope Alexander IV to

¹¹ Zimin, Alexander. *Pravda Russkaya*. - Moscow: ("Archive"), 1999

¹² Anisimov, Evgenii Viktorovich (1993). *The Reforms of Peter the Great: Progress Through Coercion in Russia*. M.E. Sharpe. [ISBN 978-1-56324-047-8](#).

¹³ Kean, Roger Michael (2006). *Forgotten Power: Byzantium: Bulwark of Christianity*. Shropshire: Thalamus. [ISBN 978-1-902886-07-7](#).

¹⁴ Runciman, Steven (1990). *The Fall of Constantinople, 1453*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press. [ISBN 978-0-521-39832-9](#).

¹⁵ Tolstoi, *Romanism in Russia*,

¹⁶ Babuin, A. (2001). "Standards and insignia of Byzantium".

convert central regions of the Rus. Unlike the Byzantines who yearned for western contact after the Great Schism, Ivan actively avoided any form of religious dialogue – he censored Catholic intellectuals and other western intelligentsia – especially those from the Baltics as they fell further under the harsh Catholic influences of the Poles¹⁷. Finally, and perhaps most symbolically, he married Sofia Paleologue, the niece of the last Byzantine emperor – Constantine XI. Through this blood bond, Ivan claimed an unbroken line of succession to Rome, and therefore saw himself as its unquestionable heir – legitimizing the use of its symbols, spiritual duties, and politics as an absolute successor state. The Byzantine, and therefore Roman theocracy and clout became entangled with Russia through blood and legacy – the Rus saw themselves as having exclusive rights over all this entailed.

Under the newly declared Tsardom, the centralization of both Rus proper and its legalities accelerated, benefitting from a declining Mongolic and Turkic influence through the de facto transformation of the Khanate of Kazan – the last remaining piece of the Golden Horde^v – into a vassal state by 1487¹⁸. This “Tartar Yoke”, as it was deemed by the Rus, had been the bane of Ivan and his predecessors for decades due to its frequent demands of tribute in the form of gold or slaves. However, unlike the harsh assimilations Roman lands were subject to, those from the Khanate were treated with relative openness – much like in the earlier Rus, many Tartars and Mongol-origin peoples assimilated into the *boyar* classes and were allowed to retain their Sunni Muslim practices, although the conversion of their descendants to Orthodoxy was heavily encouraged. Mongol influence on Russian legal practices were perhaps the largest imprint of this population – mirroring the situation where Byzantine and Slavic influence was traded on the *Lex Rustica* (Byzantine Farmers’ Law). The 1497 *Sudebnik* reversed the *Russkaya Pravda*’s pacifist stance on capital punishment and corporal punishment – with Mongol-inspired codes pertaining to punishments such as execution and flagellation being instituted, likely influenced by the new sect of Tartars in the *boyar* class. However, the *Sudebnik* proved unequivocally ‘Russian’ in other respects, especially in its enforcement of feudal code. This Russia-centric bureaucracy hardened the stance on regular serfs, lowering their rights near to that of the *kholops*. Policies were made that introduced *pozhiloye* (fees) for serfs who wished to change feudal masters. Although previous legal codes had allowed for the free transfer of serfs and other peoples in bondage except *kholops*, the *Sudebnik* was harsher in its institution of one day per year (known as Yuri’s Day on November 26th) across the Rus’ lands when serfs could transfer between masters¹⁹. Feudalism, although originally a western import, took on a uniquely “Russian spin”. Its centralization purpose was clear - its policies were superior to that of other *boyar* nobles in a bid to eliminate feudal fragmentation^{vi} and consolidate the rule of one lone Tsar - Ivan himself. This proved further inhibiting for the serfs - who made up 3/4 of the peasantry²⁰ - whose status had been reduced to the extent where it neared overt slavery with no prospect of social mobility that could ever afford entry into the class of *boyars*. The class of *boyars* were also weakened politically – to be “emperor and autocrat” demanded assent from no one other than the God – the *boyars* were no longer consulted on affairs of state or called on for legitimizing or

¹⁷ Fennell, John Lister Illingworth (1961). *Ivan the Great of Moscow*. New York City: [Macmillan](#).

¹⁸ Vernadsky, George (1953), *The Mongols and Russia*, Yale University Press

¹⁹ Monuments of Russian Law. Vol. 3: Monuments of Law in the Period of Formation of Russian Centralised State in 14—15 centuries / ed. by Lev Cherepnin. Moscow, 1955

²⁰ David P. Forsythe, ed. (2009). [Encyclopedia of Human Rights: Vol. 1](#). Oxford University Press.

endorsing the current ruler²¹. The reach of the state and indeed Tsar himself became greater over everyday conduct – to threaten the church as an institution and to trespass on its lands became punishable under the *Sudebnik*²² – the Tsar's font of spiritual legitimacy became further protected.

The following centuries marked a period of relative isolation from western states. After the fall of Constantinople, western eyes had no reason to look east – neither for religious, nor trade reasons after the Ottomans severely restricted, and ultimately terminated trading along the Silk Road for Europeans, a trade route established since classical Roman times²³. This policy of isolation was partly curtailed when Tsar Peter the Great ascended to the Russian Imperial throne in 1682. Peter (ruling from 1682-1725) was aware of the effects of Russia's stark cultural and political isolation. One of the ways he sought ties with other western nations was doing just as the Byzantines had done to the earlier Russian state - by building blood alliances through encouraging his children to marry other European nobility and royalty. Just as the Byzantines saw themselves providing "Roman-blooded legitimacy" to the royal houses they intermarried with, Peter, seeing himself at the head of the Third Rome, believed he was doing the same - reintroducing new Roman blood to Europe. His daughter Anna was married to Prussian Duke Friedrich Wilhelm Kettler in 1710, and his other daughter Elizabeth was touted to marry Karl Friedrich of Holstein-Gottorp, however he died before they wed²⁴. He aimed to use his daughters as pawns in the same way the Eastern Roman Emperors had bestowed Anna Porphyrogeneta and Sofia Paleologue on the Rus' rulers and therefore gifted them "Romanness" in blood. Peter aimed to once again further and preserve the title of "emperor and autocrat" under the pretense of enlightened absolutism^{vii} as it later came to be known in Prussian circles²⁵. The core of Russian life, established since the Kievan Rus, revolved around divine right and serfdom – both of these were de facto preserved. The extent of serfdom widened after the de jure abolition of slave-serfdom in 1723, with the *Sudebnik* policies of restricting the ability to change one's master and allowing serfs to be sold separate from their tended lands having been retained²⁶. Over 20m Russians and Ukrainians were estimated to be private property, with another 18m under various forms of state ownership, with almost 1m more under the direct patronage of the Tsar himself.²⁷ Ironically, slave-serfdom originated as a practice from the Roman Empire under Emperor Diocletian - when he passed laws that legally bound tenant farmers to their land and recorded them under their landowners' names rather than in their own right in censuses²⁸. This was yet another unforeseen hangover of 'Romanism'. Peter's desire to industrialize Russia and build the European-modelled capital of St. Petersburg was demanding on the still-agricultural nation, and the state was

²¹ Gustave, Alef (1967). "Reflections on the Boyar Duma". The Slavonic and East European Review

²² Monuments of Russian Law. Vol. 3: Monuments of Law in the Period of Formation of Russian Centralised State in 14—15 centuries / ed. by Lev Cherepnin. Moscow, 1955

²³ Society, National Geographic (26 July 2019). "[The Silk Road](#)". *National Geographic Society*

²⁴ Coughlan, Robert (1974). Jay Gold (ed.). *Elizabeth and Catherine: Empresses of All the Russias*. London: Millington Ltd. [ISBN 0-86000-002-8](#).

²⁵ Isaac Kramnick (1995). *The Portable Enlightenment Reader*. Penguin Books. [ISBN 978-0-14-024566-0](#).

²⁶ Kolchin, Peter (1987). *Unfree Labor: American Slavery and Russian Serfdom*. Harvard University Press.

²⁷ Marie, Jean-Jacques (1997). "[Le règne réformateur d'Alexandre II](#)". *Cairn*. Retrieved May 1, 2022.

²⁸ Mackay, Christopher (2004). *Ancient Rome: A Military and Political History*. New York: Cambridge University Press. [ISBN 0521809185](#).

financially strained after a series of costly wars with Sweden. Taking on, at least superficially, the ideas of enlightened Europe, he encouraged the proliferation of arts and culture, but kept it centralised to major show-cities like his new capital. The city was built in conjunction with western architects such as Jean-Baptiste Le Blond, a favourite of Louis XIV, being appointed in 1716²⁹, using de facto slave and peasant labour conscription - Peter's reluctance to abolish serfdom was in no small part due to his city-building ambitions and need for cheap labour³⁰. Rome had to become European, but the ancient methods of building it were retained.

Peter's ambitions rose beyond the internal legalities and city-building of a Russia that desired to execute the duties of Rome – he wished for the Russian Empire to wield the diplomatic clout of Byzantium too. Citing a Baltic power vacuum that ensued after the 1669 collapse of the Hanseatic League^{viii31}, and wishing to stunt the growing influence of Sweden and Proto-Prussian states, he waged and won the Great Northern War against Sweden, conquering the lands that he would eventually build St. Petersburg upon in 1703 – the site of a former Swedish fortress. Combined with his newly established military reputation, between 1697 and 1698, Peter led a “Grand Embassy” in soliciting European alliances to both prevent the advance of the Ottomans in southern Europe and encourage western specialists to Russia. He took notable interest in the shipbuilding technology of England and the Netherlands as he sought to expand the Russian Navy in the wake of the Swedish defeat³². The alliance against the Ottomans was of particular interest – having supplanted the remnants of Rome, Peter wished to supplant their empire and re-establish Roman might in its Russian inheritors. Just as Byzantine diplomacy had sought to strengthen alliances in the name of promoting a Greco-Christian culture, the new Russo-Roman custodians coined the term “Holy League” for those who stood against the Muslim Ottomans. This was also a conscious decision to re-assert sole Roman inheritance through Russia - to be ‘Roman’ was to wage war in the name of Christ. The Ottoman Sultan himself, beginning with Mehmed II's capture of Constantinople, had adopted the title *Kaysar-i-Rum* (Caesar of Rome)³³. Russian imperial thought insisted that the true inheritors of Rome could not be “Muslim infidels”, and the Roman Emperor was also the inheritor of the premier position in the Orthodox Church, which a Muslim Sultan could not fill³⁴. Just as absolutism and the concept of divine rule was nearing its apogee in Europe under figures such as Louis XIV, Peter wished to cement his sole, divine authority internally – after centuries of serving as the Rus' kingmakers, the *boyars* had gradually lost their regal influence, beginning with Ivan III. Peter wished to stamp out the Medieval remnants of the class entirely - His administrative reforms swept away the last roots of “familial tribal” power, and he even went as far as forcing physical “westernization” - the traditional dress and facial hairs of the *Boyars* was discouraged, and beards

²⁹ ["Jean-Baptiste Le Blond, architect in St. Petersburg, Russia"](#)

³⁰ Wilson, Derek (2010). *Peter the Great*. Macmillan. ISBN 978-1429964678

³¹ ["Hanseatic League | Definition, History, & Facts"](#). *Encyclopedia Britannica*.

³² [Robert K. Massie, Peter the Great: His Life and World](#), Random House Publishing Group (2012)

³³ Nicolle, David; Haldon, John; Turnbull, Stephen (2007). *The Fall of Constantinople: The Ottoman Conquest of Byzantium*.

³⁴ Ágoston, Gábor (2021). [The Last Muslim Conquest: The Ottoman Empire and Its Wars in Europe](#). Princeton: Princeton University Press. ISBN 978-0691159324.

(owing to the *boyars'* strong Tartar cultural legacy) were even taxed³⁵. Appearances of places and people were to reflect "Roman cosmopolitanism". Power was to come from the monarch alone – an absolute emperor. Legitimacy came from an inherent, sacred right.

The three key developments of Russian Romanism represent the ambitions of a state and its rulers who wished to imitate, inherit, then expand the definition and expansiveness of "Romanism". The superficially altering symbols and projections of power masked a state that internally reached for both the absolute status of a ruler, but also for the Roman state and its 'legitimate' inheritors to be the rightful rulers of the known world. The Russian state relied on two key factors that granted them the right to "Rome" - blood and faith. The political might of the emperor and state was granted alongside this and was shown with Ivan III's Romanization and Peter the Great's quest to make 'Rome' relevant to the western world after nearly a millennium of progressively straining relations. The renewed effort to centralize power and force the proliferation of Russo-Roman 'blood' and ideals into wider European spheres embodied the apex of the new Roman vanguard. The use of symbolism to this Roman right remains in society to this day – the new adoration of the Orthodox Church and renewal of the usage of the Double-Headed Eagle in the modern Russian Federation after the 1991 collapse of communism, combined with Russia's struggle to separate the position of a true leader from that of an autocrat are all directly descended from the actions of those Tsars who wished to change their Russianness for the strength of Romanness. The acts of Russia throughout history are inspired by its imperial emulation, and its long, tortuous dash towards Rome.

(3369 words, excluding title, footnotes, and references)

ⁱ Also known in contemporary sources as "Basil the Bulgar-Slayer" due to his infamous practice of blinding 99 out of every 100 captured Bulgars in battle and instructing the one remaining Bulgar with eyes to guide his brethren back home to tell of the horrors of what they experienced.

ⁱⁱ Vladimir famously declared that drinking was the "great joy of the Rus" during his account of rejecting Islam.

ⁱⁱⁱ Perun was seen as the most important god in the Eastern Slavic pantheon – not only was he the god of a leader's rule, but also commanded thunder and rains, making his appeasement vital to ensure a bountiful harvest. He is related to the Proto-Indo-European thunder deity Perkwunos.

^{iv} "Kholop" translates best as "Boy-servant" in many Slavic languages of the era, although later went on to mean any indentured servant.

^v The Golden Horde fractured off the main Mongol empire in 1242. It existed in various forms until the end of the Khanate of Kazan in 1502.

^{vi} Feudal fragmentation is when many smaller states within a larger political entity exert high levels of autonomy under their respective feudal lords – they threaten the power of the overall ruler and their ability to implement overarching laws.

^{vii} "Enlightened Absolutism" refers to rulers having a paradoxical awareness of enlightenment-era concern for social and secular issues but executing their policies through still-absolutist means.

^{viii} The Hanseatic League was a loose confederation of primarily German, Baltic, and Swedish city-states from the 13-16th centuries that shared mutual systems of governance and aimed to protect their collective trading interests.

³⁵ Kelley, J. (1991). *Makers of the Western Tradition*. New York: St. Martin's