

Fall 2024, REES 0100 Portraits of Old Rus: Myth, Icon, Chronicle

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Class meetings: WF, 10:15– 11:44AM (8/27 to 12/9)

Office Hours: by appointment: in person WF and via Zoom on MTR

This course counts for Global Medieval Studies Minor.

Course Description and Objectives

Three modern-day nation-states – Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus – share and dispute the cultural heritage of Old Rus, and their political relationships revolve around interpretations of the past. Has the medieval Rus state been established by the Vikings or by the local Slavs? Is early Rus a mother state of Russia or of Ukraine, and, therefore, should it be spelled ‘Kyivan Rus,’ or ‘Kievan Rus’ in English? Has the culture of Russian political despotism been inherited from the Mongols, or is it an autochthonous ideology? The constructed past has a continuing importance in modern Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus, and it is keenly referenced, often manipulatively, in contemporary social and political discourse. For example, President Putin invaded Ukraine in February 2022 under a pretense that its territory has “always” been an integral part of Russia and its history.

The course covers eight centuries of cultural, political, and social history of the Old Rus lands that are now within the borders of Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus, from early historical records through the 18th century, a period that laid the foundation for the Russian Empire and the formation of modern nations. Students gain knowledge about formative events and prominent figures, as well as social and cultural developments during this period.

The course takes multidisciplinary approach by combining the study of textual sources, objects of art and architecture, music, ritual, and film in their social and historical contexts. Students learn to analyze and interpret primary sources (historical documents and literary texts), identify their intellectual issues, and understand the historical, cultural, and social contexts in which these sources emerged. While working with these primary sources students learn to pose questions about their value and reliability as historical evidence. By exposing students to the critical examination of “the uses of the past,” the course aims to teach them to appreciate the authoritative nature of historical interpretation and its practical application in contemporary social and political rhetoric. The study of pre-modern cultural and political history through the prism of nationalism theories explains many aspects of modern Belarusian, Russian, and Ukrainian societies, as well as political aspirations of their leaders. At the end of the course, students should develop understanding of the continuity and change in the history of Russia, Ukraine and Belarus, their belief systems, and nationalistic ideologies, and will be able to speak and write about these issues with competence and confidence.

History and Tradition Sector

This course satisfies the History and Tradition Sector in the general education curriculum. This sector focuses on studies of continuity and change in human thought, belief and action. Understanding both ancient and modern civilizations provides students with an essential perspective on contemporary life. Courses in this sector examine the histories of diverse civilizations, their cultures and forms of expression, their formal and informal belief systems and ideologies, and the record of their human actors. Students should learn to interpret primary sources, identify and discuss their core intellectual issues, understand the social contexts in which these sources were created, pose questions about their validity and ability to represent broader perspectives and utilize them when writing persuasive essays.

History and Tradition Sector Course Objectives:

- to develop understanding of how historical knowledge is constructed;
- to develop understanding of how interpretive frameworks change;
- to provide students with one or more interpretive frameworks for analyzing historical change;
- to require students to read and interpret primary sources;
- to learn to interpret visual or material objects;
- to require students to write one or more significant interpretive essays about the studied sources.

Course Work at a Glance

- Homework for each class: short video lectures (15-20 min), readings (about 40-50 pages), or films, accompanied by related assignments (close-reading analysis, responding to prompts and questions, preparing for discussion in class)
- Active class participation: engagement in a class conversation, work in groups
- Two written contributions to class discussions identifying main names, events, concepts, overarching themes and implications in home readings and material covered in class discussions (schedule)
- Pop-up 5-minute reading quizzes that test understanding of home assignments
- A 350-400-word close reading of a primary source (around Week 12)
- A mini-research assignment for a presentation (schedule)
- Two multiple-choice tests (midterm and final)
- End-of-the-course written reflection on what you have learned in class (2 pages)

General Course Policies

Mandatory Attendance

At the beginning of the semester, no student can join or remain in the course after missing the first four seminars. Attendance at all class meetings is mandatory, except in cases of conflict with a religious holiday or an illness. While you will be excused from attending in such instances, it is expected that you will make up for the missed coursework and assignments. Throughout the semester, unforeseen circumstances may necessitate missing a class. After the first week of classes, you are allowed **two absences** without affecting your grade. However, beyond this allowance, there are no “excused absences.” Any missed class, for any reason, should be made up to receive credit and contribute to your participation grade. Please use the Course Action Notices tool in [Path@Penn](#) to report all absences. Punctuality is important; three late arrivals exceeding 15 minutes each will be considered equivalent to one class absence. I will start taking attendance from Week 2.

There is no grade for attendance. However, each missed class meeting that is not made-up, beyond the allowed two absences, will lead to the loss of one point at the calculation of the final grade (e.g., if your final grade is 91 and you missed 3 classes without making up any of them, your grade will be lowered to 90.)

How to make-up and get credit for a missed class

In order to make up for a missed class, students can either (1) write a 500-word reflection on assigned readings, responding to suggested discussion questions, class discussion (get notes from classmates), and addressing any specific home and class assignments, or (2) create a 10-minute video podcast accomplishing the same task. Make-up assignments are due by the end of the next day after the missed class or as soon as religious observance or your health make it possible.

Home Preparation and Class Discussion

Your coursework begins at home. The effectiveness and intellectual rigor of our class meetings depend on the depth and extent of your home preparation and your involvement in class discussions. Getting ready for each class includes reading materials from textbooks and research articles, examining maps, as well as watching films and short clips. It's crucial to allocate ample time to thoroughly grasp each reading and come prepared to engage in discussions about what you've learnt. Approach your reading thoughtfully, take notes, and/or use a highlighter. Look up unfamiliar words in a dictionary. Use a reference resource to find background information. Hard copies of your personal notes (paper) can be used during pop-up quizzes. These notes will also prove invaluable during class discussions and preparation for the tests, which include specific questions related to your home readings. For each class, I'll offer tips and pose questions to assist you in navigating through the home readings and getting ready for class discussions.

Learning in a class is a collaborative effort. Engaging in the exchange of ideas and the ability to articulate and defend arguments are integral components of the coursework. Approach class discussions as an extension of your homework, where active engagement is key. Take notes, contribute to discussion, engage with the ideas of your classmates and hone your analytical and public speaking skills. Uphold the academic

community standards of collegial behavior during discussion by treating the opinions of others with respect, staying on topic and within the scope of the discussion, and ensuring your contributions are constructive. Please bring all assigned texts to class. **Refrain from using phones or any electronic devices for texting, emailing, playing games, or web browsing during class. The use of laptops and tablets is permitted solely for note-taking or working with assigned texts.**

Academic Honesty and Integrity

Students are required to adhere to the university's [Code of Student Conduct](#) and the [Code of Academic Integrity](#). Please make sure that you thoroughly understand the [policies of Academic Integrity](#) and their consequences. Any form of cheating and plagiarism, including the use of ChatGPT or any other AI, buying papers, copying ideas without acknowledgement, modifying a source without proper citation, reusing previously submitted assignments, fabricating sources and facts, etc., for any course assignments, will not be tolerated. Such actions will result in severe penalties, and the case will be referred to the [Center for Community Standards and Accountability](#).

Graded Assignments

Pop-Up Reading Quizzes (20%)

Students are expected to complete home reading assignments consistently and thoroughly for every class and will take several unannounced in-class quizzes that consist of false/true, multiple-choice, concept match, and/or short free text answer questions.

Two Contributions to Class Discussions and Class Notes (10%)

To facilitate class discussions and keep them on record students will post two reflections on assigned home material that identify main concepts, issues, and questions for a class of their choice. A detailed explanation of the assignment and a schedule to sign up for specific dates will be posted for Class 3.

Analysis (Close Reading) of a Primary Source from Home Readings (10%)

During the course of the semester, each student will submit an analyses of any of the assigned primary sources. Essays should not exceed one-two pages and should be about 350-400 words. This assignment is designed to help students practice strategies of interpretation of primary sources learned in class.

Mini-Research Assignment and Presentation (20%)

The midterm assignment aims at giving students experience in conducting basic research.

End-of-the-course written reflection on what you have learned in class (10%)

At the end of the course, students will compose a brief reflection (about 2-3 pages), summarizing their key takeaways from the class.

Two in-class tests (30%)

The tests (midterm and final) will consist of multiple-choice and short essay questions.

Schedule of Topics

Course Logistics. History and Historical Methods: Myth, Icon, Chronicle

Why does the course "The Portraits of Old Rus" cover the history of Russia, Ukraine and Belarus? Course objectives, structure and policies, methodology, themes, and key terms. A conversation about the mechanics of learning, reading for understanding, and formulating and expressing ideas. Putting Old Rus on the map.

Ethno-History and National Identity. Historical Geography and Pre-History of Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus

In this unit, we ponder the relationship between national identity, myth-making, and historical interpretation, and we consider how the study of nationalism enhances our understanding of how past is represented in scholarship and politics. We also examine how the position of the lands that would become Russia, Ukraine and Belarus on the geopolitical map of Eurasia has determined their interactions with other peoples and their social and cultural development. Following the Russian historian Nicholas Riasanovsky and the Ukrainian historian Serhii Plokhy, we survey the history of the peoples who inhabited the territories of what we today know as Russia, Ukraine and Belarus.

The Beginnings: Myths of Ethnic Origins, Migration and Ancestry. The Vikings and the Normanist Controversy. Medieval Chronicles of Rus

Three modern states claim genetic relationship with the medieval polity of Eastern Slavs – Russia, Ukraine and Belarus. In this unit, we focus on the myths of origin, migration and ancestry, and one of the most heated debates in Russian historiography – the “Normanist Theory” Controversy: the question about a role of the Norsemen (Vikings) in the culture and political organization of early Slavs, and the political and cultural implications of answers to this question. The oldest historical source that documents the early history of Eastern Slavs (future Russians, Ukrainians and Belarusians) is the *Primary Chronicle* (*Повесть временных лет*). This week we begin the examination of this important source and learn how to read it as a medievalist historian.

Orthodox Christianity: Prince Vladimir Chooses the Faith in the *Primary Chronicle*

Russia’s position between the “Asian East” and “European West” is a common theme and apple of discord of cultural-political disputes. A patriarch of Russian medieval literary scholarship, Dmitri Likhachev, has claimed that Russia’s culture is European because from its early history it was a member of Christian civilization. In this unit, we consider historical evidence for the acceptance of Christianity in Early Rus and its influence on Russian culture. In addition to reading and analyzing the evidence of the *Primary Chronicle*, we consider how the “foundational myth” of Baptism of Rus has been constructed as a divinely inspired event. We also examine the cultural, political and social consequences of the entry of Rus into the political and cultural orbit of Byzantine Commonwealth and adoption of the Eastern Orthodox form of Christianity: cult of saints (hagiography), apocalyptic mentality (eschatology), cult of the Mother of God, popular religion and magic. Our selections of primary sources for this unit include fragments from two texts, both fundamental in Russian and Ukrainian history: the chronicle story about the Christianization of Rus and the “Life of St. Theodosius”. The latter also introduces us to a special genre of hagiography – narrating a saint’s life.

A Myth of the Golden Age: “Kievan/Kyivan” Rus in the history of Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus

“Kievan/Kyivan Rus” is the ancestral state of Russia, Ukraine and Belarus, but who holds the proverbial keys to Kyiv and how should the political trajectories between medieval states and their modern heirs be drawn? In this unit, we discuss both the history and its representation of the “golden age” of Early Rus in Russian, Ukrainian and Belarusian national narratives.

Eastern Orthodoxy: Language and Writing. High and Popular Culture.

The introduction of Cyrillic letters and the Church Slavonic language was one of the most important factors that shaped Russian, Ukrainian and Belarusian religious, spiritual, and educational culture, and provided bases for cultural and national identities vis-a-vis neighboring nations who used different letters and languages. In this unit, we learn about the beginning of Slavic literacy in Great Moravia in the 9th century, its introduction in Rus at the end of the 10th century and its importance for the creation of Eastern Orthodox culture. In this week-long unit, we will also talk about the tradition of venerating saints and examine in more detail how the ideals of holiness have formed Orthodox culture.

Images of Ideal Rulers: Holy Passion-Bearers Princes Boris and Gleb (Hlib) and Holy Warrior Alexander Nevsky – the patron of the Russian Imperial Family

The consolidation of royal power in Christian states went hand in hand with the creation of an image of ‘ideal monarch’. In this unit, we examine two narratives about ideal rulers and the creation of the sacralization of royal power in pre-Mongol and post-Mongol Rus: the cults of “passion-bearers” princes Boris and Gleb and a “holy warrior” Prince Alexander Nevsky. We consider the process of nationalization of these royal dynastical saints and their image throughout history.

Independent Research Week: Work on the mid-term mini-research projects

The Myth of the “Mongol Yoke,” the Fall of the Early Rus State and Shifting Borders

The Mongol conquest of Rus in 1237-1240 and the almost 200-year period of Mongol influence is among most consequential episodes of early Rus history. The official Russian nationalist (imperial and Marxist/Soviet) narrative has been that of the “Mongol-Tatar Yoke”. Yet, has this term been justified by evidence? We examine different arguments of the historical role of the Mongols in Russian history. When Rus finally shook off the Mongol control, the leading role belonged to the Duchy of Moscow that gradually developed into a centralized state, while the Rus state ceased to exist, and its southwestern lands were incorporated into the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and Polish-Lithuania Commonwealth.

History is usually written from the viewpoint of a winner. But this rule is not absolute. So, how is the past represented from the perspective of a loser? To answer this question, we read two stories of a military defeat before and during the Mongol conquest: a powerful chronicle account about the destruction of the city of Riazan by the Mongols and the famous narrative poem *Igor Tale*.

Holy Rus: the Rise of the Muscovite Tsardom. Ivan the Terrible

The concept of the “Holy Rus” emerged in the sixteenth century, as Metropolitan Macarius undertook a grand project of representing the history of Russia as the history of its saintly rulers. In this unit, we examine one of

the most important periods for the formation of the Russian national identity -- the rule of Ivan (III) the Great and his grandson, Ivan (IV) the Terrible. Among the topics for discussion are the expansion of Moscow to Tsardom, the formation of the ideologies of autocracy and the sacralization of royal power, and the foundations of the future institution of serfdom.

Apocalyptic Mindset: Visions of Hell and the Encounter with the Devil

The concept of “time” is a construct of human mind and imagination, an attempt of men to understand the universe and their position in it. In this unit, we talk about Orthodox perception of history, which is characterized by apocalyptic visions and eschatological expectations. As we ponder Russian apocalyptic mentality, we examine how Orthodox believers see their relationship with the devil, who stands on their way to Salvation. From the dualistic beliefs to the iconography of the Last Judgment and the ladder of St. John Climacus, we move on to the visions of the Other World and discover that in the Orthodox world the devil might be closer to people than they expect and hard to recognize.

The Grand Duchy of Lithuania and the Making of Ukraine and Belarus

This week we will look at the history of the lands that fell under the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and Poland, after the disintegration of the early Rus state, following the Mongol conquest. These lands and the Orthodox Rus people who inhabited them would later develop their own regional identities and would lead to the formation of the nations of Ukrainians and Belarusians. This was a long and nuanced process, and we will only look at some of the formative historical events and influences.

Early Modern History Preview: The Time of Troubles and The Myth of Regeneration and Unity, The Schism and Old Belief, Peter the Great and the Russian Empire

The history of Russia before the 1917 revolution is a political history of two dynasties: the Riurikovichs – the descendants of the legendary Viking Riurik – and the Romanovs, the descendants of the Russia’s prominent boyar clan, who ruled the Russian Empire until the 1917 revolution. Their ascent to imperial throne was preceded by one of the most dramatic and captivating periods in Russian history – “The Time of Troubles,” which has received a prominent ideological role in modern, post-Soviet nationalism.

The Time of Troubles led to a relatively prosperous period in Russia's history. However, another time of upheaval – similar in its scale to a civil war – happened during the reign of Peter the Great’s father, Tsar Alexei Mikhailovich in the 1660s. Alexei’s ecclesiastical reforms instigated the great Schism of the Russian Orthodox Church, which caused prosecution and expulsion of the most forceful Russian religious dissenters – the community of Old Believers, whose descendants preserve their old traditions until today, and spread all over the world, including in the US.

Peter's reign marks the transition of the Muscovite Tsardom to the Russian Empire. We'll talk about the difference between these concepts and the importance of Peter I's reforms in Russia's cultural, social and political history. One of Peter's most important innovations was the secularization of power, substantiated by a new, rational and formal foundation of authority. The social contract between the tsar and the people and the general well-fare that the tsar represents become underlying principles of this new formulation of legitimacy of the sovereign.

Final Reflections: National Myths of Russia, Ukraine and Belarus

We end the course with considering the factors and myths that were instrumental in the formation of nations of Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus.