

# Putin's Medieval Weapons in the War against Ukraine

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On November 4, 2016, Vladimir Putin unveiled a massive new monument just outside the walls of the Kremlin. Beside him at the ceremony stood Patriarch Kirill, the head of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC), and several members of Moscow's political elite. "I greet and congratulate all of you with the opening of the monument to Saint Equal-of-the-Apostles Prince Vladimir," Putin said in the televised address. "Vladimir's era knew many achievements and the most important of these, the definitive, key achievement, was the baptism of Rus. This choice became the shared spiritual origin of the nations of Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus." The patriarch was next to address the crowd. "The monument to Prince Vladimir is a symbol of the unity of all nations, for whom he is a father," the patriarch proclaimed. "And these are the nations of historical Rus, who now live within the borders of other governments."<sup>1</sup>

The patriarch and president looked into the television cameras that late autumn day and retold an ancient tale. The speeches, the honorifics, the monument: all of these repeated a story about Prince Vladimir recorded in the *Rus Primary Chronicle* (*Повесть временных лет*) in the early twelfth century.<sup>2</sup> Yet as the crane-mounted cameras swept over the crowd on Borovitskaia Square, revealing the glow of smartphone screens recording the event for social media, it was clear that the medieval myth of origins had been deployed for more modern purposes. But what, exactly, was the backstory behind the staging of this neo-medieval media spectacle? Why had a sixty-foot statue

<sup>1</sup> A full transcription of the speeches, as well as television footage of the event, is available at: "V Den' narodnogo edinstva v Moskve otkryt pamiatnik kniazii Vladimiru," <<http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/53211>>(accessed July 2019).

<sup>2</sup> *The Povest' vremennykh let: An Interlinear Collation and Paradosis*, ed. Donald Ostrowski, David Birnbaum, and Horace Lunt (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute Publications, 2003).

of Saint Vladimir the Great appeared in the center of Moscow in the final months of 2016?<sup>3</sup>

Such questions may strike the secular-minded as trivial. Yet they are no less relevant in Russia today than the price of a barrel of oil or the latest round of economic sanctions from the West. In fact, I shall argue in this essay that the monument for Prince Vladimir represents nothing less than the culmination of a 25-year-long search for a new post-Soviet political identity. It symbolizes the triumph of a nascent Russian political mythology – the mythology of Holy Rus – that has been crafted by ideologues in the Moscow Patriarchate (MP) and adapted by political technologists in the Kremlin.<sup>4</sup> The statue is therefore more than a symptom of Putin's spiritual vanity or a grandiose tribute to his namesake and patron saint. It is perhaps better understood as an ideological weapon, designed for the digital age, and aimed directly at the hearts and minds of contemporary Russian, Ukrainian, and Belorussian citizens.

The figure of Saint Vladimir has become a key element in the Kremlin's information warfare campaign against the post-Maidan Ukrainian government. The authorities in Kyiv are well aware of this development, moreover, and in response to the Russian operation they have devised an alternative political mythology associated with Prince Vladimir – a mythology that liberates Ukraine from imperial oppression and promotes its entrance into the European Union.

The renaissance of the political cult of Prince Vladimir did not originate in Moscow, but rather in Kyiv. In 2008, the western-leaning president of Ukraine, Viktor Yushchenko, signed an executive order officially establishing a new national holiday: "The Day of the Baptism of Kyivan Rus-Ukraine." The date chosen for this new Ukrainian *svyato* was highly symbolic. The celebration was to be held annually on July 28, the liturgical feast day of Saint Vladimir, according to the contemporary civil calendar.

Yushchenko and his advisors did not invent the new festival out of thin air. A similar commemoration was first celebrated in 1888, in major cities throughout the Russian Empire, in connection with the 900th anniversary of the baptism of Rus.<sup>5</sup> A hundred years passed before the next major

<sup>3</sup> On medievalism in post-Soviet Russian culture, see Richard Utz, "Medievalism is a Global Phenomenon: Including Russia" and Dina Khapaeva, "Neomedievalism as a Future Society: The Case of Russia," *The Year's Work in Medievalism* 32 (2017), <<https://sites.google.com/site/theyearsworkinmedievalism/all-issues/32-2017>>, last accessed August 2019. The groundbreaking Russian-language work on the topic is: Dina Khapaeva, *Goticheskoe obshchestvo: morfologiya koshmara* (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2007).

<sup>4</sup> On the intellectual history of the term "Holy Rus", see Mikhail Suslov, "Holy Rus: The Geopolitical Imagination in the Contemporary Russian Orthodox Church," *Russian Politics and Law* 52.3 (2014): 67–86.

<sup>5</sup> On the nationalist politics of this commemoration, see Heather Coleman, "From Kiev

memorialization, when in 1988 Mikhail Gorbachev shocked Communist Party stalwarts by permitting the church to publicly celebrate its millennial anniversary.<sup>6</sup>

The Ukrainian president was motivated by more than pious feelings. Yushchenko desired a fully independent Ukraine, liberated from Russian political interference, and economically oriented towards the European Union. To help achieve this ambition, he had allied himself with those who sought the creation of an independent (or “autocephalous”) Ukrainian Orthodox Church, free from the ecclesiastical jurisdiction of the MP. Political medievalism in contemporary eastern Europe turns out to be deeply intertwined with ecclesiastical politics, and thus a brief review of East Slavic church history is required.

In the year 988, or thereabouts, Prince Vladimir accepted baptism from the Byzantine church, and for the next 450 years the leaders of the Kyiv metropolitanate were typically ethnic Greeks, appointed by the patriarch in Constantinople. In 1448, the hierarchs of the Rus church, which was now headquartered in Moscow, broke with the church in Constantinople and elected their own leader. Over a century later, in 1589, the metropolitan of Moscow was elevated to the rank of patriarch, with the approval of the Constantinopolitan hierarchy, which now resided in Ottoman Istanbul. Another century passed, and in 1686 the clerics in Istanbul transferred full control of the Kyiv metropolitanate to the MP. Thus, since the late seventeenth century, the Russian church has regarded Ukraine as its exclusive canonical territory, while fiercely opposing any claims to the contrary.<sup>7</sup>

However, shortly after the disintegration of the USSR in 1991, the cleric in charge of this territory, Metropolitan Filaret (Denysenko) of Kyiv, requested complete autocephaly for the Ukrainian church. His appeal was rejected several months later at a church council in Moscow, where Patriarch Aleskii II (Ridiger) of Moscow accused Filaret of leading the church into schism and demanded his resignation as patriarchal exarch. In response, Filaret helped to form an alternative church body called the Ukrainian Orthodox Church-Kyiv Patriarchate (UOC-KP), a development that ultimately led to his anathematization by the ROC in 1997.<sup>8</sup>

Across All Russia: The 900th Anniversary of the Christianization of Rus' and the Making of a National Saint in the Imperial Borderlands”, *Ab Imperio* 4 (2018): 95–129.

<sup>6</sup> On the millennial celebrations, see N. I. Solntsev, “Kreshchenie Rusi: istoriia iubileev i memorial'naia politika,” *Vestnik Nizhegorodskogo universiteta im. N. I. Lobachevskogo* 6.3 (2012), 36–41.

<sup>7</sup> For an introduction to Russian church history, see Thomas Bremer, *Cross and Kremlin: A Brief History of the Orthodox Church in Russia* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2013).

<sup>8</sup> On the history of the Ukrainian autocephaly movement in the last hundred years, see Nicholas Denysenko, *The Orthodox Church in Ukraine: A Century of Separation* (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 2017).

With this historical background in mind, it begins to become clear why Yushchenko's actions in 2008 caused such a stir. The Ukrainian president did not simply create a new national holiday; at the same time, he invited the current patriarch of Constantinople, Bartholomew I, to celebrate the festival alongside him in Kyiv. It was the first time that a Greek ecumenical patriarch had stepped foot in the city for over 350 years. Then, in an elaborate public ceremony held in front of Saint Sophia's Cathedral – the magnificent stone church built by Prince Vladimir's son in the mid-eleventh century – Yushchenko turned to Bartholomew and asked him to bless the creation of an autocephalous Ukrainian church. "I ask your blessing for this dream, for truth, for hope, for our state, for Ukraine," the politician told the Greek prelate. "This is a feast of Christianity, a feast of European civilization, a feast of our 1000-year-old nation."<sup>9</sup>

Yushchenko's rhetoric was significant. On a holiday honoring Saint Vladimir and the baptism of Rus, he linked the prince's desire to be baptized with a desire to become a part of Europe. He explicitly invoked the medieval East Slavic myth of origins and suggested that it belonged to Ukraine, not Russia, and that it reflected the country's desire to become a part of the European political community.

Not surprisingly, the leaders of the ROC had a rather different interpretation of these early medieval events. Patriarch Aleksii was not invited to hear the president's speech, but that did not prevent him from flying to Kyiv and leading his own rival celebrations in honor of Saint Vladimir. Preaching beneath the monument to the tenth-century prince on *Volodymyrs'ka hirka*, the Russian hierarch suggested that the baptism marked the moment when an enduring East Slavic identity was born – and *not* the moment when a European Ukraine came into existence. "Saint Equal-of-the-Apostles Prince Vladimir stood at the cradle of our national church, which over its 1020-year history has shown to the world a countless number of saints," Aleksii told the crowd. "And no matter who these saints were, whether they were Russian or Ukrainian or Belorussian, the origin of their spiritual life, as well as the origin of their ecclesiastical and national identity, came from ancient Kyiv."<sup>10</sup>

Later that same night, at a public rock concert in the city center organized by the MP, Aleksii's right-hand man, Metropolitan Kirill, the man who is now patriarch, charged onto the stage and made a similar appeal. "Russia, Ukraine, Belarus: this is Holy Rus!" Kirill energetically proclaimed to the crowd. "And Holy Rus is not an empire, not a union of what once was,

<sup>9</sup> "Zvernennya Prezydenta Ukrayiny Viktora Yushhenka do Ukrayins'koho narodu z nahody 1020-littya xreshhennya Rusi 26 lypnya 2008 r.," in *1020 rokiv xreshhennya Kyiv* "koyi Rusi : navch.-metod. posib.," ed. A. I. Smyrnov (Kyiv, 2008), 28–30.

<sup>10</sup> "Slovo Sviatishhego Patriarkha Moskovskogo i vseia Rusi Aleksiia II posle Bozhestvennoi liturgii na Vladimirovskoi gorke v Kieve 27 iulia 2008 goda," <<https://mospat.ru/archive/2008/07/42011/>>, last accessed May 2019.

or what might be in the future [...] Holy Rus is invincibility. Holy Rus is beauty. Holy Rus is power. And we all together: this is the united holy Rus!"<sup>11</sup>

The nostalgia rock being performed on-stage paled in comparison to the nostalgia politics being preached by the hierarchs of the ROC. What the masses thronging the concert venue could not possibly have known, however, was that these slogans about a primordial Slavic past were not the culmination of a neo-medieval propaganda campaign, but rather its beginning. Indeed, over the next decade, the Day of the Baptism of Rus would evolve into an annual showdown for possession of the medieval past, pitting pro-EU Ukrainians against their pro-Russian, neo-imperial adversaries.

The following July, for example, shortly after being enthroned as the new patriarch of Moscow, Kirill returned to Ukraine and preached his doctrine of Holy Rus in cities throughout the country – a propaganda tour that met with fierce resistance from Ukrainian protesters. Next, in 2010, Russian President Dmitrii Medvedev further intensified the memory wars by making the “Day of the Baptism of Rus” an official Russian federal holiday. That same year, pro-Russian politician Viktor Yanukovich came to power in Kyiv, replacing Yushchenko as president. The stage was therefore set for the extensive media medievalism that took place in Kyiv three years later, in July 2013, on the occasion of the 1025th anniversary of the Baptism of Rus.

At these celebrations, Russian leaders were eager to show that the pro-Russian faction was back in power in Ukraine and that it was payback time for the events of 2008. At service after service, and in speech after speech, Kirill's rhetoric of Holy Rus was on full display. In fact, to emphasize the authority of his church, Patriarch Kirill traveled from Moscow to Kyiv in a specially outfitted train, replete with its own church-on-rails, carrying the “Cross of the Holy Apostle Andrew.”

Why did the patriarch go to such lengths to accompany the relic to Kyiv? Because in the eastern Christian tradition, Andrew is the “apostle to the Slavs”: the visionary who stood on the banks of the Dnieper and prophesied that a great Christian kingdom would one day arise on the surrounding hills. Kirill's point was therefore crystal clear to his Russian and Ukrainian audience. He had the cross. He had the traditions of the apostle Andrew. He was the guardian of genuine Orthodoxy, and not the *raskol'niki*, the schismatics, associated with Filaret and the UOC-KP.

Patriarch Kirill was not the only prominent figure attending the festivities. Vladimir Putin also flew in for several high-level meetings, during which he emphasized the “civilizational choice” facing contemporary Ukrainians. “We have gathered here today in this place, at the Dnieper baptismal font, and at this Kyivan font a choice was made for all of Holy Rus,” Putin told a crowd of

<sup>11</sup> “Pravoslavnykh ne udalos' razdelit,” <[www.vesti.ru/doc.html?id=197376&tid=60113](http://www.vesti.ru/doc.html?id=197376&tid=60113)>, last accessed May 2019.

like-minded supporters. “Our ancestors, who lived in these territories, made this choice for all of our people. We have no right to forget this brotherhood. We are obliged to keep the traditions of our ancestors.”<sup>12</sup> Meanwhile, in his sermon at *Volodymyrs’ka hirka*, in front of the bronze monument to Saint Vladimir, Patriarch Kirill made it plain which church preserved the medieval prince’s true values: “It is the Russian Orthodox Church that, like unto a mother, has protected the spiritual values chosen by Prince Vladimir, and which has protected the spiritual unity of all those who called themselves, and who continue to call themselves, followers of Saint Prince Vladimir.”<sup>13</sup>

The next day, at a rival service performed in front of the same monument by members of the UOC-KP, Patriarch Filaret strongly condemned this Russian perception of the medieval past. In his final blessing, the churchman prayed: “Therefore, may our Lord Jesus Christ, through the prayers of the Holy Equal-of-the-Apostles Prince Volodymyr [...] unite our Orthodox Church and strengthen our Ukrainian state, so that our Ukrainian state may enter the European Union, just as the Holy-Equal-of-the-Apostles Prince Volodymyr once entered Europe.”<sup>14</sup>

Some might argue that the Lord heard Filaret’s prayer. Little more than five months later, in the winter of 2013–14, protests against Yanukovich’s regime at Maidan Square turned into a full-blown revolution. The Ukrainian president eventually fled to Russia in a private jet under the cover of night, and a new, pro-European Union, and anti-Russian government took control in Kyiv. Putin’s forces responded with the lightning annexation of Crimea, an event that shocked western observers and helped to precipitate the ongoing war in the Donbas region of eastern Ukraine.

Neither Kirill nor Putin have been back to Ukraine since the revolution. So, what did these two leaders decide to do when simmering geopolitical tensions no longer allowed them to visit Kyiv and commemorate the Baptism of Rus in the shadows of the monument of Saint Vladimir? They decided to bring the saintly man to Moscow for themselves. This is the reason that a sixty-foot monument honoring the prince now towers over Borovitskaia Square in the center of the Russian capital, because it is the new Kremlin-financed site for the ritualized performance of post-Soviet Russian political identity. It is the site where Putin’s neo-imperial ambitions in Ukraine are ritually enacted and sanctified by the Russian church, in one televisual public spectacle after another. For as Patriarch Kirill said in his speech at the consecration

<sup>12</sup> “Konferentsiia Pravoslavno-slavianskie tsennosti—osnova tsivilizatsionnogo vybora Ukrainy,” <<http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/18961>>, last accessed August 2019.

<sup>13</sup> “Slovo Sviatishogo Patriarkha Kirilla posle molebna na Vladimirovskoi gorke v Kieve,” <<http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/3119097.html>>, last accessed August 2019.

<sup>14</sup> “Slovo Svyatishoho Patriarkha Filareta bilya pam’yatnyka cv. Rivnoap. knyazya Volodymyra Velykoho,” <<http://cerkva.dp.ua/slovo-sviatishoho-patriarkha-filareta-bilia-pam-iatnyka-cv-rivnoap-kniazia-volodymyra-velykoho>>, last accessed August 2019.

ceremony for the monument: "Without Vladimir, there would be no Rus, no Russia, no Russian Orthodox state, no great Russian Empire, and no contemporary Russia."<sup>15</sup>

By now it should be clear that the new symbol of Putin's government – the "new Lenin" of post-Soviet Russia – is in fact Saint Prince Vladimir the Great. Since 2008, he has become the icon of Holy Rus: the emblem of an alternative, non-western, East Slavic political identity. This is why statues of Prince Vladimir now stand in over fifteen Russian cities, from Sevastopol and Khar'kov, to Smolensk and Novosibirsk. It is also why, in 2015, the Russian church created a new holiday devoted to the "1000th anniversary of the Falling Asleep of Prince Vladimir" and staged over 4,500 public events focusing on the Kyivan origins of Russian statehood. And what was the highest grossing Russian film of 2016, the same year when the monument in Moscow was erected? It was none other than *Viking* (*Викинг*), an ultra-violent Game-of-Thrones style blockbuster recounting the life of ... Saint Vladimir the Great.

Ukrainians are well aware of the political significance of Prince Vladimir and the spectacles that take place around his monument in Moscow. In fact, a joke has been making the rounds in Kyiv about the monument. The city's residents, upon seeing the towering figure for the first time, ask in befuddlement, "Who the hell is that?" Looking down from his lofty perch, the saint responds, "Where the hell am I?" The crux of the joke is that the historical Prince Vladimir would be utterly unable to recognize modern-day Moscow, because he died centuries before the city was founded.

For many Ukrainians, the statue is therefore a symbol of Russian aggression. It represents a political strategy designed to deny Ukraine its own history, identity, and national sovereignty. This point was driven home in July 2017 by the FEMEN activist Anna Alliaín, when she assumed the pose of the crucified Christ upon the monument of Saint Vladimir in Kyiv. Alliaín wore a traditional Ukrainian crown upon her head, in the colors of the national flag, and the words "Putin kills" were written across her breasts. At an interview on the following day, the self-described "sex-tremist" explained the meaning of her protest art. "I believe that [the Day of the Baptism of Rus] was specially created to destroy the Ukrainian nation and to assimilate it," Alliaín explained:

Today Ukraine is independent [...] and yet the Moscow Patriarchate continues to exist in Ukraine and still has the audacity to conduct a witches' sabbath using our national symbol: the monument to Vladimir. In this way, the monument is transformed into a symbol of

<sup>15</sup> "V Den' narodnogo edinstva v Moskve otkryt pamiatnik kniazia Vladimiru."

another Vladimir: Vladimir the Warrior, which is to say Putin, who is committed to slaughtering Ukraine.<sup>16</sup>

The result of these memory wars has been the creation of two absolutely contradictory versions of post-Soviet political medievalism. In Ukraine, the media repeatedly broadcast stories about a “European” Saint Vladimir: the prince who baptized Ukraine-Rus so that it could enter into Europe. This is a post-colonial version of the medieval prince: a Vladimir that divorces the Ukrainian church from Russian autocracy, and that unites traditional Ukrainian identity to the prevailing political values of the European Union.

Meanwhile, in the Russian media, Prince Vladimir is the symbol of Holy Rus. He and his statues are the icons of a new, trans-national, post-Soviet political identity – one designed to prevent any further disintegration of Russia’s former imperial dimensions. This is a version of Vladimir rooted in authoritarianism and political conservatism. It is a Vladimir who stands with a cross in one hand and a sword in the other, beckoning to twenty-first-century Russians to embrace an alternative civilizational model, separate and distinct from that of the democratic, pluralistic, and liberal West. Only time will tell, of course, whether these new statues of Vladimir, standing throughout Russia today, will be toppled to the ground, just like the statues of Lenin before them.

<sup>16</sup> Mark Krutov, “Grud’iu protiv Putina,” <<https://www.svoboda.org/a/28645412.html>>, last accessed August 2019.