

CONCLUSION

THE “RUS’ LAND” is an historical myth, “historical” because it began to be used in a specific century and ceased being used in a specific century, and a “myth,” because clerical and lay authors, writing narratives and documents, manipulated it in order to claim its legitimacy. By its existence it compelled rivals to whoever succeeded in linking the Rus’ Land to its identity to avoid it or create alternatives. The creativity of authors in using or finessing the myth stands out. This was not the kind of articulation and rationalization that a modern myth would generate because medieval and early modern Rus’ lacked any proclivity toward abstract thought. Instead, originality of thought consisted in playing with a fixed deck of cards, but fixing the deck so that a particular player – Rus’ prince or princely line – had the best hand.

[A] good deal of medieval...ideology [in Rus’] was expressed in extremely laconic terms. Phrases, words, and titles served in lieu largely of theoretical treatises. The consistent usage of such forms suggests that the medieval ideologues knew what they were doing, for the references are neither arbitrary nor promiscuous. A medieval...scribe or copyist, author or redactor, could assume that his audience would understand a meaning conveyed so tersely. The creativity and subtlety of the ideologues was manifested not in the composition of vast theoretical and abstract tractates, but rather in the manipulation of key concepts.¹

It is easy in analyzing the Rus’ Land to fall into the trap of reifying an abstraction and forgetting that ideas do not manipulate themselves, they are manipulated by human contrivance. (I do not doubt that my prose sometimes commits precisely these errors.) The history of the Suzdalian Land illustrates that phenomenon particularly well. In the twelfth century, chroniclers from the Suzdal’ian principality in the northeast described it as the “Suzdalian Land” to distinguish it from the Rus’ Land in the Dnieper River valley. In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries scribes from Novgorod in the northwest labeled the region of the northeast from which Grand Princes of Vladimir attempted to extend their influence over Novgorod as the Suzdalian Land to deprive those princes of a legitimizing prop. In Novgorodian eyes the Suzdalian Land lacked authoritativeness. This strategy failed when Muscovy, master of the Rus’ Land, eventually imposed its will and its myth on Novgorod. The Suzdalian Land could serve as a counter-myth or a non-myth.

To describe the Rus’ Land as durable reifies it; rather, it would be more appropriate to say that the myth of the Rus’ Land was so flexible that for give-or-take seven centuries Rus’ authors found it useful. Such longevity deserves to be appreciated in scholarship. The history of the rise and demise of the Rus’ Land as a myth must be understood within the context of the history of the use of other “Land” terms – Novgorodian Land, Pskovian Land, Tverian Land, Suzdalian Land, and Muscovite Land, to name only a few – which never rose above the level of phrase or only very rarely acquired the political status of a concept. Neither the evolution of the Rus’ Land nor of its “cognates” makes sense

¹ Halperin, “Kiev and Moscow: An Aspect of Early Muscovite Thought,” 317.

without the other. Historians have only begun to appreciate the subtlety and creativity underlying the seemingly inarticulate usage of these technical terms in medieval and early modern Rus' texts.