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## RUSSIA CONVERTS TO CHRISTIANITY

The conversion of the Slavs to Orthodox Christianity was one of the formative steps in the development of Slavic civilization, as the Orthodox Church assumed a major role in the transmission and assimilation of Byzantine culture into Eastern Europe. Byzantine emperors employed judicious diplomacy, international trade, and the church to transform their hostile and barbaric neighbors into cultural satellites. Kievan Russia, following King Vladimir's conversion to Orthodox Christianity in the late 10th century C.E., proved especially receptive to Byzantine culture and used the empire as a prototype in evolving its own governmental institutions. Provided with a modified Greek alphabet (Glagolitic or Cyrillic), created expressly in about 863 for the translation of biblical and liturgical works into Slavic by Saint Cyril (also known as Constantine), Russian scholars began to record their history and to produce a remarkable native literature. Having no need to master the Greek and Latin languages, which proved essential for full reception of Byzantium's classical heritage, Russian scholars remained somewhat outside the mainstream of traditional classical thought.

The following selections appear in the *Russian Primary Chronicle* ("The Tale of Bygone Years"), our principal historical source for the history of Kievan Russia during the 10th to 12th centuries. Originally compiled in about 1110, the earliest surviving copy is a 1377 version (Laurentian). The account of the conversion of the Slavs by Saints Cyril and Methodius in the 9th century is probably of Moravian origin and may be dependent on old texts and the oral tradition. The account of Vladimir's conversion and baptism in 988 is undoubtedly a Russian legend.

Although the conversion to Christianity was certainly a major step in the Slavic civilization, it also raises questions: Why, according to the *Chronicle* account, did most Slavs pick Orthodox Christianity? Why did they bother to convert to a new religion at all, and what impact would this new religion have on their culture?

### RUSSIAN PRIMARY CHRONICLE

There was at that time but one Slavic race, including the Slavs who settled along the Danube and were subjugated by the Magyars, as well as the Moravians, the Czechs, the Lyakhs [Poles], and the Polianians, the last of whom are now called Russians. It was for these Moravians that Slavic books were first written, and this writing prevails also among the Russians and the Danubian Bulgarians.

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When the Moravian Slavs and their princes were living in baptism, the Princes Rostislav, Sviatopolk, and Kotsel sent messengers to the [Byzantine] emperor Michael, saying, "Our nation is baptized, and yet we have no teacher to direct and instruct us and to interpret the Sacred Scriptures. We understand neither Greek nor Latin. Some teach us one thing and some another. Furthermore, we do not understand written characters nor their meaning. Therefore send us teachers who can make known to us the words of the Scriptures and their sense." The Emperor Michael, upon hearing their request, called together all the scholars and reported to them the message of the Slavic princes. . . . The emperor prevailed upon them [Constantine and Methodius] to undertake the mission and sent them into the Slavic country to Rostislav, Sviatopolk, and Kotsel. When they arrived [in 863], they undertook to compose a Slavic alphabet and translated the Acts and the Gospels. The Slavs rejoiced to hear the greatness of God extolled in their native tongue. The apostles afterward translated the Psalter, the Oktoechos, and other books.

Now some zealots began to condemn the Slavic books, contending that it was not right for any other nation to have its own alphabet, apart from the Hebrews, the Greeks, and the Latins, according to Pilate's superscription, which he composed for the Lord's cross. When the pope at Rome heard of this situation, he rebuked those who murmured against the Slavic books. . . . Constantine then returned again and went to instruct the people of Bulgaria, but Methodius remained in Moravia.

Prince Kotsel appointed Methodius bishop of Pannonia in the see of Saint Andronicus, one of the Seventy, a disciple of the holy apostle Paul. Methodius chose two priests who were very rapid writers and translated the whole Scriptures in full from Greek into Slavic in six months. . . . Now Andronicus is the apostle of the Slavic race. He traveled among the Moravians, and the apostle Paul taught there likewise. . . . Since Paul is the teacher of the Slavic race, from which we Russians too are sprung, even so the apostle Paul is the teacher of us Russians, for he preached to the Slavic nation and appointed Andronicus as bishop and successor to himself among them. But the Slavs and the Russians are one people, for it is because of the Varangians that the latter became known as Russians, though originally they were Slavs. While some Slavs were termed Polianians, their speech was still Slavic, for they were known as Polianians because they lived in the fields [*pole* means "field" in Russian]. But they had the same Slavic language.

. . .

[In the year 980] Vladimir began to reign alone in Kiev, and he set up idols on the hills outside the castle: one of Perun, made of wood with a head of silver and a moustache of gold, and others of Khors, Dazh'bog, Stribog, Simar'gl, and Mokosh'. The people sacrificed to them, calling them gods, and brought their sons and their daughters to sacrifice them to these devils. They desecrated the earth with their offerings, and the Russian land and this hill were defiled with blood.

. . .

In the year 6495 [987] Vladimir summoned together his boyars [nobles] and the city elders and said to them, "Behold, the Bulgars came before me, saying,

'Accept our religion.' Then came the Germans and praised their own faith. After them came the Jews. Finally the Greeks appeared, disparaging all other faiths but praising their own, and they spoke at length, telling the history of the whole world from its beginning. Their words were wise, and it was marvelous to listen and pleasant for anyone to hear them. They preached about another world. 'Anyone,' they said, 'who adopts our religion and then dies shall arise and live forever. But anyone who embraces another faith shall in the next world be consumed by fire.' What is your opinion on this subject, and what do you answer?" The boyars and the elders replied, "You know, Prince, that no man condemns what is his own but praises it instead. If you desire to make certain, you have servants at your disposal. Send them to inquire about the ritual of each and how he worships God."

Their counsel pleased the prince and all people, so that they chose ten good and wise men.

[They visited foreign lands, and] then they returned to their country. The prince called together his boyars and the elders, and he said: "The envoys who were sent out have returned. Let us hear what took place." He said, "Speak in the presence of my retinue." The envoys then reported, "When we journeyed among the Bulgars, we observed how they worship in their temple. . . . Their religion is not good. Then we went among the Germans and saw them performing many ceremonies in their temples, and we saw no beauty there. Then we went to Greece, and the Greeks led us to where they worship their God, and we did not know whether we were in heaven or on earth. For on earth there is no such splendor or such beauty, and we are at a loss to describe it. We know only that God dwells there among men, and their service is better than the ceremonies of other nations. For we cannot forget that beauty. Every man, after tasting something sweet, is afterward unwilling to accept that which is bitter, and therefore we can no longer remain here [in paganism]." Then the boyars said in reply, "If the Greek faith were evil, it would not have been adopted by your grandmother Olga, who was wiser than anyone else." Vladimir then responded, asking, "Where shall we accept baptism?" and they replied, "Wherever you wish." . . .

After a year had passed, in 6496 [988], Vladimir proceeded with an armed force against Kherson, a Greek city [by the Black Sea]. . . . [After a siege] the inhabitants . . . surrendered.

Vladimir and his retinue entered the city, and he sent messages to the emperors Basil and Constantine, saying, "Behold, I have captured your glorious city. I have also heard that you have an unwedded sister. Unless you give her to me in marriage, I shall deal with your own city as I have with Kherson." When the emperors heard this message they were troubled, and they issued this statement: "It is not proper for Christians to give women in marriage to pagans. If you are baptized, you shall have her for your wife, inherit the kingdom of God, and be our co-believer. If you do not do so, however, we cannot give you our sister in marriage." When Vladimir learned of their response, he said to the emperors' envoys, "Tell the emperors I will accept baptism, since I have already given some study to your religion, and the Greek faith and ritual, as described by the emissaries I sent to examine it, has pleased me well." When the emperors heard this report they rejoiced and persuaded their sister Anna [to consent to the match]. They then sent word to Vladimir, "Be baptized, and then we shall send you our sister." But Vladimir said,



"Let your sister herself come [with the priests] to baptize me." The emperors complied with his request and sent their sister, accompanied by some dignitaries and priests. . . . The bishop [episkop] of Kherson, together with the princess's priests . . . baptized Vladimir. . . .

As a bride price in exchange for the princess, he gave Kherson back to the Greeks and then went back to Kiev.

When the prince arrived at his capital, he directed that the idols should be overturned and that some should be cut to pieces and others burned up. . . .

Thereupon Vladimir sent heralds throughout the whole city, proclaiming, "If anyone, whether rich or poor, beggar or slave, does not come tomorrow to the river, he will be an enemy of mine." When the people heard this they went gladly, rejoicing and saying, "If this were not good, the prince and his boyars would not have accepted it." On the morrow the prince went forth to the Dnieper with the priests of the princess and those from Kherson, and a countless multitude assembled. They all went into the water; some stood up to their necks, others to their breasts, and the younger up to their breasts near the bank, some people holding children in their arms, while the adults waded farther out. The priests stood by and offered prayers. There was joy in heaven and upon earth at the sight of so many souls saved. But the Devil groaned, "Woe is me! They are driving me out of here!" . . .

He [Vladimir] ordered that wooden churches should be built and established where [pagan] idols had previously stood. He founded the Church of Saint Basil on the hill where the idol of Perun and the other images had been set, and where the prince and the people had offered their sacrifices. He began to found churches, to assign priests throughout the cities and towns, and to bring people in for baptism from all towns and villages. He began to take the children of the best families and send them for instruction from books.

### STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What kinds of causes for historical change does this account emphasize?
2. How is Vladimir's conversion explained?
3. What relationship is suggested between king and nobles? Between king and ordinary subjects?
4. What church-state relationship is implied by this account?
5. Given obvious distortions and simplifications in this account, what is its value as a historical source? What does it say about Russian politics, religion, and society at this time?
6. How did Russian conversion compare with earlier Christian conversions, and the issues they involved as discussed in Chapter 27?