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THE FALL OF KIEV

6 December 1240 AD



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The Fall of Kiev

On the 6th of December 1240 AD: the sounds of Kiev's destruction was heard across all of Rus even into Poland. A claim made only three years ago by the Kipchaks still rang true, "Our land they have taken, your land they will come and take tomorrow."¹ In Geoffrey Hosking's book, *Russia and the Russians a History*, he summarizes the destruction:

The experience of Riazan was repeated in many other cities. Over the next three years they were stormed, their inhabitants ruthlessly put to death, and their buildings destroyed. In Vladimir many of the inhabitants took refuge in the Cathedral of the Assumption, where they were burned alive or hacked to death by the assailants if they tried to escape. Suzdal suffered a similar fate: "They plundered the Church of the Holy Virgin and burned down the prince's court and burned down the Monastery of St Dmitrii, and others they plundered. The old monks and nuns and priests and the blind, lame, hunchbacked, and sick they killed, and the young monks and nuns and priests and priests' wives and deacons and their wives, and their daughters and sons—all were led away into captivity."²

These experiences were seen across the entirety of the principalities including all the important Rus governments. These events similarly echo today as Kiev is again attacked from the east. Eight hundred years ago the Mongols attacked Kiev and destroyed the city; today it is the modern state of Russia invading and attacking Ukraine, threatening its capital Kiev. Since certain current events echo those that precipitated the fall of Kiev in 1240, the analysis of Kiev's rise to power, its challenges following that rise and the events of its destruction reveal that the key to today's power struggles between Russia and the Ukraine originate from this event which shifted power to the north.

Many years before the fall of Kiev, Rus was a conglomerate of principalities with no centralization. The reason: two cities Kiev and Novgorod, competed for supremacy.

Novgorod was positioned to the north of Kiev near current day St. Petersburg. Therefore the

¹ Geoffrey Hoskings, *Russia and the Russians A History*,(Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2003), 51.

² Ibid. 52-53.

Novgorodians were heavily influenced by the Viking traders and had a republic according to the *Primary Chronicle*.

Then there was Kiev, which laid to the South. The city of Kiev was much closer to Byzantium than any other Rus city. Early on in Kiev's history, Kiev made a trade agreement under its early ruler, Rurik, with Byzantium to establish a slave trade. This permitted Kiev to become 'civilized' and would be favored by other nations over Novgorod, since Kiev was looked upon highly by the Byzantines.

When one Kievan Prince, Sviatoslav, went to war with Bulgaria, Byzantium entered the war on the side of the Bulgarians. Kiev would come out of this war with very little injury in the area of diplomacy and land.³

In late July, after ferocious fighting, a deal was struck. The Rus' received grain, safe-conduct and confirmation of the right to trade at Constantinople in return for Sviatoslav's written oath never again to attack imperial territory or Bulgaria.⁴

Unfortunately Sviatoslav would continue warring against the Bulgarians not long after the deal was struck. Thusly, Constantinople must have had a great friendship with Kiev to grant such splendid peace terms, so their friendship would continue. During the next several decades, Kiev would begin to rise and become an intellectual, political, and cosmopolitan center. Finally, going into the 1230s Kiev's history can be summarized in one word: warfare.⁵

Kiev from the beginning was surrounded by enemies: internally and externally. Leading into the 1200s, Kiev was frequently in a state of war. If Kiev was not at war with the Princes of Rus, Poland, or Byzantium, then Kiev was at war with the 'infidels', such as, the

³ The Grand-Prince of Kiev c. 960s

⁴ Johnathan Shepard, "The Origins of Rus' (c.900-1015)," in *The Cambridge History of Russia*, vol. 1, *From Early Rus' to 1689*, ed. Maureen Perrie (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006) 62.

⁵ Christendom entered Rus under Grand-Prince Vladimir, and was after his death scholars' note, Rus had entered a golden age, because of great contributions to Rus.

eastern tribe. To the East of Kiev sat the Steppes into Asia. On these plains, lived many nomadic tribes, of which, were the Mongols, Kipchaks, and Tartars.

Many expeditions would be led by the princes to the Steppes. The most famous was performed by a Kievan Prince: Mstioslav, who gathered two princes with him to march on the Kipchaks. The reason was: the Kipchaks were plundering trade routes and terrorizing the populace, even to the extent of rebellion. During the princes' march to battle, a disagreement would occur and the two princes who came with Mstioslav would march and join the Kipchaks out of spite.⁶ Although, Mstioslav was outnumbered, he commanded the superior equipped and trained force of Kievans. He would break the armies of the Kipchaks and the two princes.

Prior to this event in Rus, Mstislav's cousin Iurii, was poisoned by his own people in Kiev.⁷ After the news of Iurii's capture of Kiev, a war of succession would occur. Following, Iurii's death, Iziaslav Davidovich marched on Kiev and capitulated the great city. Mstislav planned a coup against his cousin, and aligned himself with his uncle Rostislav Mstislav. Both aligned with other princes and waged war with Iziaslav. Iziaslav would capitulate and lose Kiev, however, he would attempt to retake the city and die in action.⁸

These two events paint a picture of Rus prior to the fall of Kiev in that fateful December. We must remember this picture to understand later why Kiev would fall. For the pictures describe the tragedy of power in those days, when brothers killed brothers and cousins waged war with each other. When the families were not quarreling, the princes would

⁶ Disagreements among the Princes of Rus were quite common, most of the time they would end in war and bloodshed.

⁷ Martin Dimnik, "The Rus' principalities (1125-1246)," *The Cambridge History of Russia*, vol. 1, *From Early Rus' to 1689*, ed. Maureen Perrie, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

rage war with those ‘infidels’ from the Steppes of Asia. This is the summary of Rus leading up to the fateful decade of the 1230s.

Now to the South and East, a force greater than any other the world at that time had known besides that of the Romans was beginning to brew: the Crusades, Christendom was at stake and the Turks were on the move. During the 11th and 12th centuries the Crusades would be waged. The Crusades would force the trade routes to turn and change. No longer would trade from Northern Europe have to go to Novgorod down to Kiev then to Constantinople. With the Holy Land under the Crusaders and Rome’s control, trade could go from Northern Europe straight to Constantinople by ship, principally after the fourth crusade.⁹

A change in trade routes would cause a shift in the economy for Kiev and all of Rus. No longer could Rus depend upon the trade of the East. Rus, like Kiev, and all of Kiev’s princes would be forced to look inwards for a source of goods and revenue. It must be said: when money talks the door closes. This idea can be seen in the modern world every day with common examples: from sibling quarrels over the death of parents with their estate to married couples over money. What would make Rus different from the examples just mentioned? Nothing! The mark of the end of Rus’ Golden Age was seen by a decline and break down of alliances among the principalities, thereby an inauguration of wars would occur.

During the 1230s all of the past history of the princes and the principalities, both good and bad, came to a head and exploded. The 1230s marked a time of internal dissent and a time of destruction and decay. For ten long years the princes would be at a continual state of war with each other, no land would be safe and no land would be left unravished by the time the Mongol invaders would come. According to Martin Dimnik, the period of this intercessional war is seen by strife. Martin Dimnik summarizes this idea as follows:

⁹ Modern day Israel and the Middle East

During this period Rus' witnessed fierce rivalries as dynasties fought to increase the size of their territories. The principalities of Galicia, Polotsk, Turov, Murom and Riazan' became the main victims of such appropriation. Novgorod was especially desirable for its commercial wealth and because, like Kiev, it had no resident dynasty. But winning Kiev, which enjoyed political and moral supremacy in Rus', was the main object of internecine wars. The princes descended from the powerful dynasties of the inner circle conceived by Iaroslav the Wise were the chief contenders. In their intra-dynastic and inter-dynastic rivalries they acknowledged and, for the most part, faithfully adhered to the system of genealogical seniority that dictated later succession.¹⁰

Thus, our attention must be turned to the East, where a great and mighty people laid, the Mongols. They had a new leader, known to the West as Chingiz Kahn, but known to the East as Ghangis Kahn. The Mongols were known for their successful military campaigning. How they were successful must be known. The Mongols were successful for many reasons, but the three primary reasons are: numbers, intelligence, and psychological warfare. The Mongols were known to charge into battle yelling and screaming, just like the Native Americans during the Indian Wars in America and the Confederates during the American Civil War (although not the same yell, the same ferocity and effect was evident).

Chingiz Kahn placed his sights on a new target, not China or Japan, but the West. In the 1210s, Chingiz sent spies into the Kingdom of Khoreziman.¹¹ In 1219-1220, Chingiz Kahn invaded the lands of Khoreziman and destroyed the Kingdom. With the lands under his control, he marched north around the Caspian Sea and into the Caucus States, where the Kipchaks resided.

The Kipchacks saw the Mongols advancing towards their civilization, thus they dispatched many letters and requests to the princes of Rus to send aid, but princes refused. One of the last messages that was sent by the Kipchacks stated:

¹⁰ Martin Dimnik, "The Rus' Principalities (1125-1246)," in *The Cambridge History of Russia*, vol. 1, *From Early Rus' to 1689*, ed. Maureen Perrie, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 125.

¹¹ Present day Persia and Central Asia.

“Our land they have taken, your land they will come and take tomorrow.”¹²

This ominous message would ring true. In the midst of the Kipchacks destruction Mstislav gathered his forces with two princes and advanced against the remnants of the Kipchaks to push back the ‘infidels’ in 1223. The princes who came to Mstislav’s aid would betray him. This betrayal would lead to Mstislav being defeated in battle. Although Mstislav was devastated in the field, he would still achieve a great and mighty victory. The victory would not be the traditional victory of taking the field or winning the day, but Chingiz falling in the battle. The Mongols had no leader now, therefore, Rus was temporarily saved.

In 1228, the Mongols would elect a new leader: Oegoedei Kahn. Two years later, with no Grand-Prince of Kiev had not been established, therefore, Rus entered a bloody civil war. From 1230-1240, Rus entered a bloody civil war between the princes for control of Kiev. Oegoedei Kahn would send his spies during these years to infiltrate the Rusan ranks, and would find the princes were at war with each other. The game was set for the extermination of Kiev, all Oegoedei needed was time.

In December 1237 Batu, the grandson of Oegoedei Kahn, and Batu’s men were seen on the border of Riazan. The *Hypatian Codex* declares the event as such:

(Dec. 1237) 6745 (1237). The godless descendants of Ishmael appeared; they had engaged the princes of Rus’ previously on the Kalka river. At first they attacked the Rjazan’ land and took the city of Rjazan’ by storm. They captured Prince Jurij by means of a ruse and took him to Pronsk for at that time his wife was in Pronsk. [Then] they tricked the princess into leaving [the city] and killed both her and Prince Jurij. They slaughtered all the inhabitants of the land and would not even spare infants till nursing at their mothers’ breasts.¹³

The Mongols under Batu would advance down the frozen rivers and streams and take out three more cities, one of which would be important, Suzdal. The reason why Suzdal was of

¹² Geoffrey Hoskings, *Russia and the Russians A History*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2003), 51.

¹³ *The Hypatian Codex*, vol. 2, *The Galician-Volynian Chronicle*, trans. George A. Perfecky, (Muechen: Universtaet-Druckerei, 1973), 45-46.

great importance, was the city's number of able bodied men to do battle and the number of religious centers. After the fall of Riazan and Suzdal, Vladimir, the Prince of Vladimir, would march his army to stop the Mongols. He would be defeated. For the next three years, the princes would advance one by one and would be annihilated.

6 December 1240: Kiev was besieged by the Mongol Hordes. A dispatch was sent to Poland requesting aid and men. However, by the time the Poles would receive the request, Kiev had fallen to the Mongols. According to the *Hypatian Codex*, the fall of Kiev went something like this:

Batyj approached Kiev in great force; [he came] with a mighty host of soldiers and surrounded the city. It was encircled by the Tatars and a close siege began...Batyj set up his catapults [for firing] against the city in a line parallel with the Ljadskije Vorota [in Kiev]...The catapults hurled their missiles day and night without cessation and breached [the city's] walls. Its inhabitants climbed up on the breached walls and here one could see lance break against lance, shield scrape against shield [as the besiegers met the besieged in mortal combat. Then a barrage of] arrows eclipsed the light of the defeated [Kievans]...The inhabitants threw up new fortifications around the Church of the Blessed Virgin. The next day [the Tatars] attacked them and a great battle ensued.¹⁴

All that was left was carnage and destruction, Kiev the once great city was destroyed.

Southern Rus had been defeated and shaken. Thus the Golden Horde's reign would begin over Southern Rus. Batu would set his sights on more of the West and Northern Rus, but this time he would be stopped. For he did not know, the Poles were marching with an allied of army of the German states. However, the Poles did not know Kiev had fallen.

The two armies would clash on 9 April 1241 at the Battle of Liegnitz. This battle would prove to be fatal to the allies, for the armies were in mortal hand to hand combat against the Mongols. In the midst of the battle a lone Polish horseman showed up on scene

¹⁴ The reason for the Hypatian Codex use is: the Hypatian Codex is the only surviving manuscript (chronicle) of the time. Therefore, the Hypatian Codex is the only surviving document that permits us in the modern day to know what actions took place back in 1240 and several other decades.

yelling: “Run! Run!”¹⁵ The army broke in the field. The Mongols that day would slaughter 40,000 of the allied number (including both women and children).¹⁶

With the fall of Kiev, Rus would enter their Medieval Era, or it might even be called a Dark Era, just as that seen by the Sea Peoples. The events which occurred in Kiev from 1230-1240, is a similar event that stretches all the way back to 1177 B.C. with the Egyptians and the Sea Peoples. When the Sea Peoples came though Egypt in 1177 B.C., they destroyed much of the writings, buildings, intellectual centers, and technologies of the time period. It was said in Erich H. Cline’s book regarding the seas, *1177 B.C. The Year Civilization Collapsed*,

But then, the world as they had known it for more than three centuries had collapsed and essentially vanished...For it was in that year, according to the Egyptian records, that the Sea Peoples came sweeping through the region, wreaking havoc for a second time. It was a year when Egypt struggled for its very survival; a year by which time some of the high-flying civilizations of the Bronze Age had already come to a crashing halt. In fact, one might argue that 1177 BC is to the end of the Late Bronze Age as AD 476 is to the end of Rome and the western Roman Empire...¹⁷

Upon scouring the *Hypatian Codex*, there seems to be no writing about technological, social, or economical advances during the time period of the fall of Kiev in 1240 to even 1250.¹⁸

Therefore, we can presume Rus, just like that of Egypt in 1177 B.C., entered a Dark Era, not like that of Europe in the Medieval Age, but worse. One that resurrects the extent of the destruction of that of the Mediterranean Civilizations by the Sea People. All that can be found in the writings, which became much shorter during this period, is thusly this: war torn land, blood of many generations, even a whole generation loss, cities leveled, and blood stained soil. With all of these facts stated it can be declared Rus did have a time of upheaval or a

¹⁵ Thomas J. Craughwell, *How the Barbarian Invasions Shaped the Modern World*, (Beverly: Fair Winds Press, 2008), 290.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* 290.

¹⁷ Erich H. Cline, *1177 B.C. The Year Civilization Collapsed*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014) 72.

¹⁸ *The Hypatian Codex*, vol. 2, *The Galician-Volynian Chronicle*, trans. George A. Perfecky, (Muechen, Germany: Universtaet-Druckerei, 1973), 48-59.

transformation similar to the extent of the Mediterranean Civilizations following the cataclysmic destruction caused by the Sea Peoples, because during this time there is no mention of intellectual, social, or economical advance in the *Primary Chronicle*, comparatively to that of the earlier years.

The carnage of this period can be compared to that of France during the period of: 1789-1815, where France had lost a generation's worth of young men, and the countryside destroyed; or that of the Germanic lands during the 15th, 16th, and 17th, centuries, when Germany was called the "Sandbox of Europe." The reason for the Germany being labeled "The Sandbox of Europe," is because, during that period—15th, 16th, and 17th centuries—foreign armies marched through the country to fight. The comparison between Germany during the 15th to 17th centuries, and, Rus during the decades following the fall of Kiev, was this: the Christian armies of the west marched to fight the armies of the east, the Mongol Hordes.

Although Kiev would fall, one day the grand city would be rebuilt, but not to the city's former glory, not to the peak of the great city's existence, but unlike so many capitals in history that have been destroyed, the city did resurrect. In Kiev's absence, the balance of power would shift in Rus. The power shifted temporarily to Novgorod, but inevitably to the Principality of Muscovy in the 1300s under the famous Russian Czar, Ivan IV. Moscow, a back-water town in the middle of the woods would rise, while Kiev would be rebuilt. Moscow, as history would play out, became the new capital of Rus, now called Russia. Over the next several centuries, Moscow and Kiev would rage war over who rules who, or should we say, who truly rules Russia.¹⁹

¹⁹ Gale (*General OneFile*), "Kiev Receives Reassurance," *Europe-East* (September 2008): 233538, April 20, 2015. http://rx9vh3hy4r.search.serialssolutions.com/?ctx_ver=Z39.88-2004&ctx_enc=info%3Aofi%2Fenc%3AUTF-8&rft_id=info:sid/summon.serialssolutions.com&rft_val_fmt=info:ofi/fmt:kev:mtx:journal&rft.genre=article&r

As there are similarities in history, Rus is no exception. Moscow would become like Germany and Kiev like Austria. Who rules who? During the 15th Century, the Reformation in Europe was beginning to take shape, and the old Dukes (Princes) of the Germanic States took a stand against the Holy Roman Emperor. The Dukes declared themselves independent of the Empire, and would form Prussia. Over the next couple centuries, Prussia would expand and wage war with Austria. Austria would begin a downward fall and in the end following World War I, Austria would become annexed from Anschluss by Germany. A similar storyline played out between Kiev and Moscow at an earlier date.

Today, as with these other storylines, Vladimir Putin embodies these earlier Russian ambitions. Just like the Mongols he has his eye set on expansion into the Ukraine. In May of 2014, Putin declared: “Crimea has always been and remains an inseparable part of Russia. Both time and circumstances could not erase it. Dramatic changes that our country went through in the 20th century could not erase it either.”²⁰ One may wonder what plans Vladimir Putin has for this region.

In conclusion, the story of Kiev is sad and long. The story is filled with bloodshed and tears. More bloodshed and tears than this paper can give credit towards. To give due credit towards the story volumes upon volumes would need to be written. However, the story with all of the sadness and blood, there are light sides as well. Rus would become Christianized thereby coming to know the Lord our Savior. Rus would enter a golden age and show its military might and tradition which continues to this day. Finally, Rus would inevitably become westernized. In the end, the history of Rus and the fall of Kiev must be understood to

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²⁰ “In signing treaty, Putin declares Crimea has always been ‘inseparable’ part of Russia,” PBS, May 18, 2014, accessed April 15, 2015, <http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/putin-declares-crimea-has-always-been-inseparable-part-of-russia/>.

know why, the events in the Ukraine, such as the civil war and possible Russian intervention, is happening today—why Kiev and Moscow bicker. Finally the story, would shaped the next 800 years of Europe and the world.

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