Ivan FOLETTI, *Russian Imperialism and the Medieval Past*

Leeds: ARC Humanities Press 2024, 106 pp., ISBN 9781802701760.
https://doi.org/10.58377/byzslav.2025.21

One of the events at the beginning of the 21st century that have rekindled the threat of a world conflagration is the attack of the Russian army on the 24th February 2022 on the Ukraine, including the central Ukrainian territory of Kyiv, preceded by the occupation of Krym and of the eastern part of the Ukraine (Doneck and Luhansk regions) in 2014. This Russian military attack was only mildly criticized by the world community or the UN. Understanding these events and their cultural impact is possible only with knowledge of East European and Russian – including Soviet – history as a process of *longue durée*, to which Ivan Foletti's study contributes.

The author of the book is professor of Art History at Masaryk University in Brno, in the Czech Republic. By re-founding the periodical *Seminarium Kondakovianum*, Foletti tries to follow in the steps of the famous Russian byzantinist N. S. Kondakov and his circle. Foletti and his colleagues from the department of Medieval Art History have published an impressive number of books (on a whole range of topics, from historiography to aesthetics), covering not only Byzantium and the broad territory of medieval Mediterranean, but also Latin Medieval Western – mainly ecclesiastical – culture. One of these academic publications in the English language is Foletti's book which makes the object of this review, providing a fresh look at the Russian imperial cultural ambitions mainly in the period between the 16th to the 21st centuries.

Russian Imperialism and the Medieval Past has an introduction, three chapters and a Conclusion. Each chapter consists of a short introductory section, four sections with titles, and a Conclusion. At the end, Foletti offers lists of titles for "Further Reading," grouped in sections: "Historical Documents" with three subsections and "Texts" related to each of the three chapters in the book. A List of Illustrations is given at the beginning of the book, after the Contents.

"**A Word by Way of Introduction**" (pp. 1–10) covers personalia related to Russia, the author's memories of his visits to Moscow, which Foletti describes as a city of contradictions. Concerning his first visit in the year 2000, he concludes: "If it had not been for this trip, I might never have learned Russian or begun to work on the history of Russian scholarship and imperialism, and, therefore, I would never have written the book you are now holding in your hands" (p. 2). Foletti's other personal memories are only marginal in the text.

Right at the beginning, he touches on topics that he will return to later, these becoming the backbone of the book, primarily the Cathedral of the Russian Armed Forces in Moscow (fig. 2, fig. 3, p. 4) and the Cathedral of the Saviour (fig. 5, fig. 6, p. 6), the

cult of the president of the Russian Federation – Vladimir V. Putin (fig. 1, p. 2 and fig. 4, p. 5). The architecture of Moscow's monumental churches (mainly that of the Church of Christ the Saviour), which Foletti calls neo-Byzantine, represents a leitmotif that recurs in different historical contexts in the three chapters of the book.

The first chapter, "**The Russian Empire and Byzantium. From Napoleon to Nicholas II**" (pp. 11–34), sketches the pre-revolution period in four sections: "Dreaming Byzantium," "Russia, Napoleon, and Byzantium," "Scholarship at the Service of the Empire," and "Building the New Byzantium."

"Dreaming Byzantium" (pp. 12 f.) takes the reader back to the roots of the problem the author deals with, namely the times of the 16th century Tsar Ivan IV, known as the Terrible (1547–1584). "Russia, Napoleon, and Byzantium" (pp. 15 f.) deals with the first Russian victory over the French emperor Napoleon Bonaparte in his campaign against the Tsardom of Moscow, which was to be celebrated by the construction of a monumental architectural structure, the first Cathedral of Christ the Saviour. As an art historian, Foletti focuses on art and architecture, describing the origin of pseudo-Byzantine architecture from the time of Alexander Vitberg's unrealised project of the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour in 1825 (p. 16, fig. 9) – the first documented plan of an imperial building with connection to Byzantine monumental architecture. However, it was only in 1838 that Konstantine Thon's new project of such a cathedral was successfully realised.

"Scholarship at the Service of the Empire" (pp. 21 f.) describes how, similarly to the Austrian Empire and Austria-Hungary of the 19th century, Russians also subordinated their science and arts to state interests. Historians and art historians (such as Nikodim P. Kondakov) returned to the 'roots' of Russian culture and built a-thousand-year-empire architecture, which is the subject of the following section entitled: "Building the New Byzantium" (pp. 25 f.). The restoration of Byzantine imperial culture, though, was based on 19th century ideas, contemporary political interests, and, above all, the level of historical knowledge at the time. One of the key expressions in Foletti's book is 'monumentality.' It manifested itself primarily in architecture, e.g. some churches both in Russia itself and in its satellite territories (in Tbilisi, Sofia, Warsaw, Beograd, Prešov), were dedicated to the national warrior hero, St. Alexander Nevsky, a famous legendary fighter against the 'westerners.'

The period which is covered in this chapter was, indeed, important for Russian history and its identity. The Russian wars which were waged against the Turks were labelled by Russian government as a noble effort to protect the Orthodox Christians in the territories of the Turkish Empire. As protector of Orthodoxy, Russia was active even before signing the treaty in (today's Bulgarian) Kajnardža in 1774. At this time, the main centre of Orthodox Christianity was

in Constantinople, where the seat of the Ecumenical Patriarchs was; these paradoxically promoted peace and loyalty to the Turkish government, only in rare cases being supportive of the creation of new national states and their independence. As a whole, the Balkan multi-ethnic Christian Orthodox population was not prepared to fight for 'their nation,' at the time such an ideal being only in the mind of politicians and intellectuals. The ethnically mixed Balkan population – including Albanians, Turks, Wallachians, Bulgarians, Serbs, Gipsies was not ready to be divided by the idea of 'nationalism': that was to be implemented by the hard efforts of Russian propagandists in the Balkans, with only some success, first in Bulgaria and later in Serbia.

It is to be noticed that, from the 18th century onwards, one of the Russian Tsar's titles – besides that of "Protector of the Orthodox Christians" – was "Protector of the Slavs." When the Bohemian delegation comprising Czech members of the Austrian and Bohemian parliaments met the Russian Tzar Alexander II in 1867, it was František Ladislav Rieger who reminded the Tzar that his father's title was "Protector of the Slavs."[1]

The second chapter "**Lenin, Hitler, Stalin. Anticlericalism, the Blood of Liberators, and Imperialism**" (pp. 35–64) consists of four sections entitled "Utopia in Power and the End of an Empire?" "The 'Great Patriotic War': A Profound Shock," "Marking New Territories," and "The Past of the Present: The Vitreous Mosaic and Images of Power."

In section "Utopia in Power and the End of an Empire?" (pp. 36 f.), Foletti begins with the 1917 October revolution and reveals some of the work of the scientists and art historians of the time who participated in building a new social order (such as Dmitry Ainalov, Nikolay Brunov).

Section "The Great Patriotic War: A Profound Shock" (pp. 42 f.) touches, among others, on the restoration of the Church within the confines of totalitarianism (the election of the patriarch by J. V. Stalin) and the successful ideology against fascism (Sergei Eisenstein's film *Alexander Nevsky*).

"Marking New Territories" (pp. 48 f.) focuses on the period following the celebrated victory over German fascism, the liberation followed by the occupation of Eastern Europe by the Soviet army – with the newly conquered communist republics incorporated into the Soviet system, whose communist parties affiliated with the Soviet one. Monumental secular architecture emerges, such as the 'Seven Sisters,' copies of which were made throughout the Eastern Bloc from Berlin to Bucharest.

In the fourth section in this chapter, "The Past of the Present: The Vitreous Mosaic and Images of Power" (pp. 59 f.), the author points to the rehabilitation of Byzantine visual techniques, such as monumental mosaics from public spaces, where, however, the

1 See Emmanuel Vávra's letter to Karel Sabina about the voyage of the Bohemian members of the parliament to Petersburg and Moscow, in: K. Kazbunda, *Pouť Čechů do Moskvy* [The Bohemians' Pilgrimage to Moscow], Prague 1924, 115.

Byzantinoslavica, Revue internationale des études byzantines, 83/1–2, 2025
© Slovanský ústav AV ČR, v. v. i.

main theme was not the celebration of Christian religious feasts or of Christ Himself, but of workers and peasants. One partial exception is the mosaic of Alexander Nevsky in the Komsomolskaja metro station, whose representation, though, is not that of a saint, but a warrior. The author of the mosaic is Pavel Korin (fig. 29, p. 60), who worked for the new Soviet regime on a regular basis and received the Stalin Prize in 1954.

This second chapter thus covers the Soviet period, describing the unified, centralised power of a totalitarian system, in which symbols of the previous period, churches are destroyed and replaced by the communist party's monuments. Creating 'a new world order' and a new, socialist society was the main programme for intellectuals and artists of this period. As Folleti states: "In the first decades of the Soviet regime, we can say that the imperial past of the Tsarist Empire was systematically criticized in the official discourse. This would probably suffice to explain the radical detachment of neo-Byzantine representation (and Byzantine studies) from Soviet politics" (p. 37). Instead, an uncritical evaluation of national, Russian, and especially Soviet art was promoted by historians, such as Dimitry Ainalov (p. 38) and Nikolai Brunov (p. 39) who often used quotations from Karl Marx in order to support his architectural arguments and studies, as opposed to Viktor Lazarev (p. 46) who, after World War II, published his *History of Byzantine Painting* in two monumental volumes.

There are examples of the Soviet art style – also called 'socialist realism' – dating before World War II, such as the sculpture *Worker and Kolkhoz Women* exhibited by the USSR at the Paris World Exhibition in 1937 (fig. 23 on p. 50), which Foletti compares with the German pavilion from the same exhibition (fig. 24, p. 51). Monumentality and triumphalism in the period of 'socialist realism' became manifest in buildings across the countries of the Soviet bloc such as *Palace of Culture and Science* in Warsaw from 1955 (fig. 28, p. 58) or Prague's *Hotel International* from 1952–1956 (fig. 27, pp. 56–57) in Czechoslovakia.

The titles of the four sections in the third and final chapter, "**Luzhkov, Putin, and the Dream of the Return of Empire**" (on pp. 65–96), are: "The Collapse of an Empire or Shock Therapy?" "The Throne and the Altar Meeting Again?" "The Pussy Riot's Prayer: An Artistic Performance on a Neo-Medieval Backstage," and "Neo Medieval Propaganda: Preparing a War."

Section "The Collapse of an Empire or Shock Therapy?" (pp. 67 f.) points to the partial dismantling of power and of the regime, which, among others, manifested itself in the demolition of statues (such as V. I. Lenin's, fig. 32, p. 68). After the collapse of the USSR in the early 1990s, a rapid process of privatisation transferred the country's wealth into private hands, while the state minimised its economic interventions. This "shock therapy" left space for "unscrupulous speculators" who enriched themselves "at the expense of the population" (pp. 69–70). In the resulting chaos, the Russian society,

burdened by poverty and alcoholism (p. 70), became radicalised, allowing nostalgia for previous regimes (p. 66).

The second section, "The Throne and the Altar Meeting Again?" (pp. 72 f.), deals with the chronic 'illness' of the tsarist Russian, Soviet, and Post-Soviet regimes, the subordination of the Church to political power and its abuse by state ideology. This involves the appearance of soldiers together with bishops at parades and on other ceremonial occasions, such as the celebration of Russia's victory over Napoleon in the 'Patriotic War' (fig. 33, p. 74).

In the third section, "The Pussy Riot's Prayer: An Artistic Performance on a Neo-Medieval Backstage" (pp. 86 f.), the reader becomes acquainted with what was to be a brief disruption of order in Russian society by the 'Pussy Riot' group who, in 2012, performed a "punk-prayer" in front of the iconostasis in Moscow's Christ the Saviour Cathedral, in fact, "an artistic engaged critique of the regime." While "in most Russian media … this artistic and provocative event was presented as blasphemy against the Orthodox Church" (p. 88), politically it was considered "the result of the decadent influence of the West." (p. 90)

The fourth section of this final chapter of the book is entitled "Neo Medieval Propaganda: Preparing a War" (pp. 91 f.). Foletti points out the dangers of such a political system in the Russian society, which ideologically connects conservative state servants and protects semi-criminal elements in the governing bodies of the state.

Foletti's Conclusion to the whole book entitled "**Trauma, Imperialism, and the Russia of Tomorrow**" (pp. 97–102) recapitulates the characteristic ways in which, for centuries, in the Russian society the past has been used "for the needs of the present" (p. 97). The Conclusion is followed by the lists of "Further Reading" (pp. 103–107).

Foletti's short but instructive book reflects the role of art and the humanities such as history, church history, and art history within the power ambitions of given regimes or political parties. It primarily aims at reflecting on the presentation of tsarist imperialism in the nineteenth century and it shows how a similar strategy was employed by the continuator of imperial Russia, the Soviet Union. The Russian 'symphony' between Church and state is a misappropriation of the Byzantine model. The actual reason behind church-state relations in Russia is rather Machiavellian: the atheistic state uses the Church to advance its revisionist and revanchist agenda, while the Church uses the state to fulfil its own hegemonic ambitions. Similar to the pre-war *Deutsche Christen* movement within the Evangelical Church in Nazi-Germany, contemporary Russian Orthodoxy has become what Foletti calls "public religion" (p. 75), a powerful tool of the state, subduing the Christian principle of mercy and instead emphasizing the heroic, military skills of national saints (such as Alexander Nevsky).

There are some aspects of Russian culture that have not found a place in this study but may prove to be beneficial for Foletti's argumenta-

Byzantinoslavica, Revue internationale des études byzantines, 83/1–2, 2025
© Slovanský ústav AV ČR, v. v. i.

tion, possibly in a future publication on a similar topic. To choose only one of them: the Russian and Soviet 'avant-garde' of the 20th century in literature, arts, and architecture (in movements such as Suprematism, Constructivism, Rayonism etc.). How did the avant-garde relate to imperial Russian or to Soviet colonial politics? What was its role in tsarist Russia or during the Soviet period? Did it have any impact on Stalin's realism in the 1930s, which was fully established as *Proletcult* in 1932?

As it is, Ivan Folletti's book is a very useful study, consisting of well-knit topics related to tsarist, Soviet, and contemporary Russian international polity. It will certainly be greatly appreciated by the young generation of scholars who have not had direct experience of the Soviet aggressive military power in the world, especially in Eastern Europe.

Petr Balcárek (Olomouc)
balcarek@ibyz.org