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FROM “FAKE NEWS” TO “FAKE HISTORY”: “THE SUN OF RUTHENIAN LAND” AND INFORMATION WARFARE

Introduction. This article concerns rampant falsification of a quote from the hagiographic text “*Life of Alexander Nevsky*” on Russian popular science and culture websites to promote a specific interpretation of Ruthenian history, along with promoting related current political stances, such as Kremlin authoritarianism and general anti-Western sentiment. Furthermore, it shows how the current historical paradigm in the Russian Federation is centered on appropriating Ukraine’s old Ruthenian history, rather than studying the actual regional history of Muscovy’s own central historical regions.

Review of recent publication. This issue of “modifying” the original quote has been noticed previously by a Finnish researcher Mari Mäki-Petäys, along with American researchers such as Serhii Plokhyy, Chris J. Chulos and Johannes Remy. In her article “*Warrior and Saint: the Changing Image of Alexander Nevsky as an Aspect of Russian Imperial Identity*” Mari Mäki-Petäys details “the cult of Nevsky”, noting the transformation of his image into that of a warrior-lord, and a “son of Rus” in Muscovite literature tradition [2: 68]. Serhii Plokhyy, quoting her, adds that the Nevsky quote situation shows how “the Suzdal Land also served as the immediate forerunner of the notion of the Rus Land in the political discourse of Northeastern Rus” [3: 74]. A peculiar notion, considering it acknowledges that the “Northeastern Rus” did not actually consider itself “Rus” at the time the “*Life of Alexander Nevsky*” was written, before it became a geopolitical statement for Muscovy centuries later.

Objective of the paper. The aim of the paper is to study the issue of rampant falsification of a quote from the hagiographic text “*Life of Alexander Nevsky*”.

Results of the research. The quote from the aforementioned “*Life of Alexander Nevsky*” is the following one (translit): “Mitropolit zhe Kiril glagolashe ‘Chada moia razumeite iako uzhe zaide solntse zemli Suzdalskoi! Uzhe bo ne obriashchetsia takovyi kniaz ni edin v zemli Suzdalstei!’ Ierei i diakoni, chernoriztsi, nishchii i bogatii, i vsi liudie glagolaakhu ‘Uzhe pogybaem!’”, which can be roughly translated to English as: “*So said Metropolitan Bishop Cyril, ‘My children, you should know that already has the sun of the land of Suzdal set! There will never be another duke like him in the Suzdalian land! And the hierarchs and deacons, the monks, the poor and the wealthy, and all the people said: ‘We are already at death’s door!’*” [7: 282].

The text is quoted as such in Boris Mandel’s textbook for students in the Russian Federation on “Fatherland’s literature”, and is provided in its correct form. However, it is also accompanied by a text, detailing a pathos-filled account of Alexander Nevsky’s “freeing the Russians from Mongol-Tatar military conscription” [7: 282]. Let us note that the original hagiographic text never even mentions Rus, Ruthenia, or “the Russians”. It never talks about “the Land of Rus”, although it mentions “the Judean land”, “the German land”, “the Ingrian land”, and even “Alexander’s land”, but never provides the reader with any identification of Alexander’s subjects as those of Ruthenia. Alexander Nevsky’s dukedom is alternatively known by the region’s most important settlement, the fortress of Suzdal. This is a dominating trend in local sources before 14th century, identifying Ruthenia as Kyiv-centered southern lands specifically, often even describing the lords of Novgorod and Suzdal “going to the Rus” from their own lands, contrasting them with the Ruthenian ethnic center [8]. Nevertheless, the spread of the “Ruthenian faith”, which, at the time, was identified as a peculiar sect, different from the usual Greek Orthodoxy [1], eventually led to even the populace of these lands being called “Russian” afterwards, in contrast to pagan neighbors [6: 20]. Even by conservative estimates Suzdal and its surrounding lands would be part of Merjamaa, the historical land of Volga Finns, particularly the Merya, in the 13th century [10].

Although, while some sources of that period like William of Rubruck’s account, described “Ruscia” as strictly the territory of modern day Ukraine, with the river Tanais (Don) being its eastern border, others, like Giovanni da Pian del Carpine, talk of a “*grand-duke in a part of Ruscia called Susdal*”, meaning that a number of contemporaries considered Suzdal already Ruthenian in at least the sense of rulership [4: 25]. Of course, the author of “*Life of Alexander Nevsky*” was not among those.

However, all those facts do not stop outright falsification. The Russian language edition of “*Wikipedia*” on February 26th 2021’s protected version of the article on Alexander Nevsky incorrectly quotes the bishop, now describing Nevsky as “the sun of Russian land” [5]. As Wikipedia is probably the most popular source to search for information amongst students across the world, this is an especially grievous mistake to make, one apparently protected by Russian Wikipedia’s administration. Another educational website, “*Slovo*”, lets the text about “Suzdal land” stay unchanged, but

adds an original interpretation of their own: *“These words were instantly picked up by the whole of Ruthenia, altering: ‘The sun of the Land of Rus has set!’ And so it has become a custom since that time to refer to the heroic Nevsky as such.”*[12]. This educational article further conflates the name and image of Ruthenia with those of Muscovy, the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union, and the Russian Federation. For example, the article treats modern Federation as the same, continuous Ruthenia, which includes pride regarding 18th century Russian Imperial commanders: *“Ruthenia is proud of three names of its military leaders that have never lost a battle in their lives. These are Alexander Nevsky, Alexander Suvorov and Fyodor Ushakov”* [12]. Similar propaganda can be seen in *“Voyennoye Obozreniye”* (“Military Review”), a militaristic Russian news website, which provides a platform for both Soviet-brand Communist and generic Russian militarist propaganda, along with articles on history written in the same style.

Aside from the obvious misquoting, the article on Nevsky compares him to Daniel of Galicia, the actual King of Ruthenia, portraying the latter as an “adventurer” who was fooled by the promises of western leaders, only interested in taking over Ruthenia themselves, while Alexander’s pro-Horde politics are portrayed as a wise choice. The writer, Aleksandr Samsonov, uses the legend of Nevsky to say that the duke of Suzdal *“predetermined the fate of Ruthenia for centuries to come”*, apparently providing his successors with a constant geopolitical strategy. According to the article’s writer, this strategy includes: *“1) uncompromising, irreconcilable struggle with the West and flexible policy in the East; 2) strengthening the centralized grand-ducal power; 3) overcoming feudal division, [establishing] the unity of Ruthenia”*.

Thus, the author uses the story of Nevsky to promote contemporary Kremlin policies of imperialism, authoritarianism and the portrayal of “the West” as “the Other”. Interestingly, the author of the article praises Nevsky for *“opening a new page in the history of Ruthenia”*, saying that *“Vladimir, and then Muscovite Rus would restore their old positions step by step”*, but also notes that *“Moscow became the main centre of the degrading Golden Horde and the heir to northern imperial tradition”* [11]. A peculiar position for the current historiography trends in the Russian Federation, but one rather evident from the author’s general imperial Orientalism and anti-Western sentiment. Falsification continues with Russian Orthodox Church materials, the writers of which should, logically, know better regarding the contents of the hagiographic text.

One of Petrozavodsk and Karelian Bishopric’s websites quotes the Metropolitan’s phrase correctly, but then adds on a sentence in modern Russian: *“There won’t be another duke like this in Russian land”* [9]. This tendency on Russian language websites can be easily observed via a Google search engine operation any user can perform: a quoted search “солнце земли Суздальской” provides approximately 6500 results and more, while “солнце земли Русской” is much more widespread, with searches, depending on network’s location, resulting in 15000 to 16000 results. The misquoted version is almost three times more popular, when comparing only exact quotations.

Conclusion. In conclusion, it is evident that words from “*Life of Alexander Nevsky*” have been popularized in a misquoted version, in a bid to support contemporary political interests of the Kremlin, while portraying Nevsky as some “all-Ruthenian hero”. This position is nonsensical, seeing how the author of the hagiographical work himself did not even consider Suzdal and its people Ruthenian, never using the word “Rus”.

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