

CHAPTER 9

Civilization in Eastern Europe: Byzantium and Orthodox Europe

CHAPTER SUMMARY

In addition to the great civilizations of Asia and north Africa forming during the postclassical period, two related major civilizations formed in Europe. The Byzantine Empire, in western Asia and southeastern Europe, expanded into eastern Europe. The other was defined by the influence of Catholicism in western and central Europe. The Byzantine Empire, with territory in the Balkans, the Middle East, and the eastern Mediterranean, maintained very high levels of political, economic, and cultural life between 500 and 1450 C.E. The empire continued many Roman patterns and spread its Orthodox Christian civilization through most of eastern Europe, Belarus, Ukraine, and Russia. Catholic Christianity, without an imperial center, spread in western Europe. Two separate civilizations emerged from the differing Christian influences.

The Byzantine Empire. The Byzantine Empire, once part of the greater Roman Empire, continued flourishing from an eastern Mediterranean base after Roman decline. Although it inherited and continued some of Rome's patterns, the eastern Mediterranean state developed its own form of civilization.

The Origins of the Empire. Emperor Constantine in the 4th century C.E. established a capital at Constantinople. Separate emperors ruled from it even before Rome fell. Although Latin served for a time as the court language, Greek became the official tongue after the 6th century. The empire benefited from the high level of civilization in the former Hellenistic world and from the region's prosperous commerce. It held off barbarian invaders and developed a trained civilian bureaucracy.

Justinian's Achievements. In the 6th century, Justinian, with a secure base in the East, attempted to reconquer western territory but without lasting success. The military efforts weakened the empire as Slavs and Persians attacked frontiers, and they also created serious financial pressures. Justinian rebuilt Constantinople in classical style; among the architectural achievements was the huge church of Hagia Sophia. His codification of Roman law reduced legal confusion in the empire. The code later spread Roman legal concepts throughout Europe.

Arab Pressure and the Empire's Defenses. Justinian's successors concentrated on the defense of their eastern territories. The empire henceforth centered in the Balkans and western and central Turkey, a location blending a rich Hellenistic culture with Christianity. The revived empire withstood the 7th-century advance of Arab Muslims, although important regions were lost along the eastern Mediterranean and the northern Middle Eastern heartland. The wars and the permanent Muslim threat had significant cultural and commercial influences. The free rural population, the provider of military recruits and taxes, was weakened. Aristocratic estates grew larger, and aristocratic generals became stronger. The empire's fortunes fluctuated as it resisted pressures from the Arabs and Slavic kingdoms. Bulgaria was a strong rival, but Basil II defeated and conquered it in the 11th century. At the close of the 10th century, the Byzantine emperor may have been the strongest contemporary ruler.

Byzantine Society and Politics. Byzantine political patterns resembled the earlier Chinese system. An emperor, ordained by God and surrounded by elaborate court ritual, headed both

church and state. Women occasionally held the throne. An elaborate bureaucracy supported the imperial authority. The officials, trained in Hellenistic knowledge in a secular school system, could be recruited from all social classes, although, as in China, aristocrats predominated. Provincial governors were appointed from the center, and a spy system helped to preserve loyalty. A careful military organization defended the empire. Troops were recruited locally and given land in return for service. Outsiders, especially Slavs and Armenians, accepted similar terms. Over time, hereditary military leaders developed regional power and displaced aristocrats who were better educated. The empire socially and economically depended on Constantinople's control of the countryside. The bureaucracy regulated trade and food prices. Peasants supplied the food and provided most tax revenues. The large urban class was kept satisfied by low food prices. A widespread commercial network extended into Asia, Russia, Scandinavia, western Europe, and Africa. Silk production techniques brought from China added a valuable product to the luxury items exported. Despite the busy trade, the large merchant class never developed political power. Cultural life centered on Hellenistic secular traditions and Orthodox Christianity. Little artistic creativity resulted, except in art and architecture. Domed buildings, colored mosaics, and painted icons expressed an art linked to religion.

The Split between Eastern and Western Christianity. Byzantine culture, political organization, and economic orientation help to explain the rift between the eastern and western versions of Christianity. Different rituals grew from Greek and Latin versions of the Bible. Emperors resisted papal attempts to interfere in religious issues. Hostility greeted the effort of the Frankish king, Charlemagne, to be recognized as Roman emperor. The final break between the two churches occurred in 1054 over arguments about the type of bread used in the mass and the celibacy of priests. Even though the two churches remained separate, they continued to share a common classical heritage.

The Empire's Decline. A long period of decline began in the 11th century. Muslim Turkish invaders seized almost all of the empire's Asian provinces, removing the most important sources of taxes and food. The empire never recovered from the loss of its army at Manzikert in 1071. Independent Slavic states appeared in the Balkans. An appeal for western European assistance did not help the Byzantines. Crusaders, led by Venetian merchants, sacked Constantinople in 1204. Italian cities used their navies to secure special trading privileges. A smaller empire struggled to survive for another two centuries against western Europeans, Muslims, and Slavic kingdoms. In 1453, the Ottoman Turks conquered Constantinople.

The Spread of Civilization in Eastern Europe. The Byzantine Empire's influence spread among the people of the Balkans and southern Russia through conquest, commerce, and Christianity. In the 9th century, missionaries Cyril and Methodius devised a written script, Cyrillic, for the Slavic language, providing a base for literacy in eastern Europe. Unlike western Christians, the Byzantines allowed the use of local languages in church services.

The East Central Borderlands. Both eastern and western Christian missionaries competed in eastern Europe. Roman Catholics, and their Latin alphabet, prevailed in Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Poland. The region became a long-standing site of competition between the two influences. A series of regional monarchies—Poland, Bohemia, Lithuania—with powerful land-owning aristocracies developed. Eastern Europe also received an influx of Jews from the Middle East and western Europe. They were often barred from agriculture but participated in local commerce. They maintained their own traditions and emphasized education for males.

The Emergence of Kievan Rus’. Slavic peoples from Asia migrated into Russia and eastern Europe during the period of the Roman Empire. They mixed with and incorporated earlier populations. They possessed iron and extended agriculture in Ukraine and western Russia. Political organization centered in family tribes and villages. The Slavs followed an animist religion and had rich traditions of music and oral legends. Scandinavian traders during the 6th and 7th centuries moved into the region along its great rivers and established a rich trade between their homeland and Constantinople. Some traders won political control. A monarchy emerged at Kiev around 855 under the legendary Danish merchant, Rurik. The loosely organized state flourished until the 12th century. Kiev became a prosperous commercial center. Contacts with the Byzantines resulted in the conversion of Vladimir I (980-1015) to Orthodox Christianity. The ruler, on the Byzantine pattern, controlled church appointments. Kiev’s rulers issued a formal law code. They ruled the largest single European state.

Institutions and Culture in Kievan Rus’. Kiev borrowed much from Byzantium, but it was unable to duplicate its bureaucracy or education system. Cultural, social, and economic patterns developed differently from the western European experience. Rulers favored Byzantine ceremonials and the concept of a strong central ruler. Orthodox Christian practices entered Russian culture—devotion to God’s power and to saints, ornate churches, icons, and monasticism. Polygamy yielded to Christian monogamy. Almsgiving emphasized the obligation of the wealthy toward the poor. Literature focused on religious and royal events, while art was dominated by icon painting and illuminated religious manuscripts. Church architecture adapted Byzantine themes to local conditions. Peasants were free farmers, and aristocratic landlords (boyars) had less political power than similar Westerners.

Kievan Decline. Kievan decline began in the 12th century. Rival princes established competing governments while the royal family quarreled over the succession. Asian invaders seized territory as trade diminished because of Byzantine decay. The Mongol invasions of the 13th century incorporated Russian lands into their territories. Mongol (Tatar) dominance further separated Russia from western European developments. Commercial contacts lapsed. Russian Orthodox Christianity survived because the tolerant Mongols did not interfere with Russian religious beliefs or daily life as long as tribute was paid. Thus, when Mongol control ended in the 15th century, a Russian cultural and political tradition incorporating the Byzantine inheritance reemerged. The Russians claimed to be the successors to the Roman and Byzantine states, the “third Rome.”

The End of an Era in Eastern Europe. With the Mongol invasions, the decline of Russia, and the collapse of Byzantium, eastern Europe entered into a difficult period. Border territories, such as Poland, fell under Western influence, while the Balkans fell to the Islamic world of the Turks. Western and eastern Europe evolved separately, with the former pushing ahead in power and cross-cultural sophistication.

In Depth: Eastern and Western Europe: The Problem of Boundaries. Determining where individual civilizations begin and end is a difficult exercise. The presence of many rival units and internal cultural differences complicates the question. If mainstream culture is used for definition, Orthodox and Roman Catholic religion, each with its own alphabet, offers a logical answer. Political organization is more complicated because of loosely organized regional kingdoms. Commercial patterns and Mongol and Russian expansion also influenced cultural identities.

Global Connections: Eastern Europe and the World. The Byzantine Empire was active in interregional trade; Constantinople was one of the world's great trading cities, and the empire served as a link between northern Europe and the Mediterranean. When Byzantium declined and the Mongols conquered Russia, a period of isolation began. By the 15th century, Russia began to regain independence and faced decisions about how to re-engage with the West.

KEY TERMS

Justinian: 6th-century Byzantine emperor; failed to reconquer the western portions of the empire; rebuilt Constantinople; codified Roman law.

Hagia Sophia: Great domed church constructed during the reign of Justinian.

Body of Civil Law: Justinian's codification of Roman law; reconciled Roman edicts and decisions; made Roman law a coherent basis for political and economic life.

Bulgaria: Slavic kingdom in the Balkans; put constant pressure on the Byzantine Empire; defeated by Basil II in 1014.

Icons: Images of religious figures venerated by Byzantine Christians.

Iconoclasm: The breaking of images; religious controversy of the 8th century; Byzantine emperor attempted, but failed, to suppress icon veneration.

Battle of Manzikert: Seljuk Turk victory in 1071 over Byzantium; resulted in loss of the empire's rich Anatolian territory.

Cyril and Methodius: Byzantine missionaries sent to convert eastern Europe and the Balkans; responsible for creating the Slavic written script called Cyrillic.

Kiev: Commercial city in Ukraine established by Scandinavians in 9th century; became the center for a kingdom that flourished until the 12th century.

Vladimir I: Ruler of Kiev (980-1015); converted kingdom to Orthodox Christianity.

Russian Orthodoxy: Russian form of Christianity brought from the Byzantine Empire.

Boyars: Russian landholding aristocrats; possessed less political power than their western European counterparts.

Tatars: Mongols who conquered Russian cities during the 13th century; left Russian church and aristocracy intact.

Byzantine Empire: (500 C.E. – 1453 C.E.) The eastern portion of the Roman Empire which survived beyond the collapse of the Roman Empire with its capital at Constantinople; retained Mediterranean culture, particularly Greek; later lost Palestine, Syria, and Egypt to Islam.

Constantinople: Capital of the Byzantine Empire; constructed on the site of Byzantium, an old Greek city on the Bosphorus.

Orthodox Christian Church: Eastern church which was created in 1053 after the schism from the western Roman church; its head is the patriarch of Constantinople.

Constantine: (312 – 337) Strong emperor toward the end of the Roman Empire who tried with some success to reverse the tide of its ultimate fall. Constantine moved the capital away from Rome to Constantinople and allowed freedom of worship for Christians with the Edict of Milan.

Huns: Group of nomadic tribes that pushed through central Europe in the 4th and 5th centuries C.E., instigating the migration of the Germanic tribes into the Roman Empire.

Sassanian Empire: (227 – 651) Persian Empire which continued Persian traditions but instituted the Zoroastrian religion as the state religion.

Procopius: Historian of the Byzantine Empire who in his *Secret History* revealed the cruelty of the autocratic system in which the emperor ruled by divine providence.

Hellenistic culture: After Alexander’s death, Greek art, education, and culture merged with those in the Middle East. Trade and important scientific centers were established, such as Alexandria, Egypt.

Greek fire: incendiary material used by the Byzantines described as able to burn in water.

Tsar: Term used for the emperors of the Russia; literally means Caesar.

Cyrillic alphabet: Alphabet named after Saint Cyril who used it to help convert the Slavs to Christianity.

Rurik: Legendary Scandinavian regarded as founder of the first kingdom of Russia based in Kiev in 855 C.E.

LESSON SUGGESTIONS

Leader Analysis	Justinian, Theodora
Peoples Analysis	Byzantines, early Russians
Conflict Analysis	Arab incursions, Catholicism and Orthodoxy
Change Analysis	Byzantine Empire: 565-1200
Societal Comparison	Byzantine Empire and early Russia
Document Analysis	Russia Turns to Christianity
Dialectical Journal	The Problem of Boundaries between Eastern and Western Europe