

medieval russia's epics, chronicles, and tales

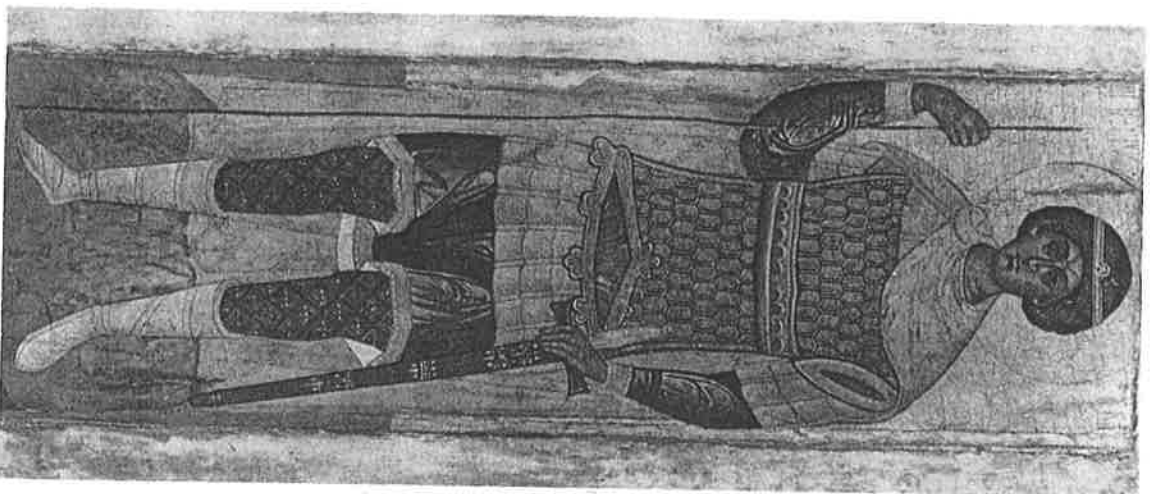
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St. George in the garb of a medieval Russian knight. A sixteenth-century icon.

PREFACE

IN PREPARING this volume for publication, I felt that at the present level of American and British scholarship in the field of Russian studies the time has come to offer readers and students a comprehensive anthology of Russia's medieval literature in translation. The works of modern Russian writers of the nineteenth century, especially those of the age of the great Russian novel as represented by Dostoevsky and Tolstoy, have long since become an inalienable part of American and British curricula of literary studies and of collections in public and school libraries. Also rather well known are the contemporary writings of Russia's Soviet period. Very different is the situation regarding the literature of previous centuries, especially that of the Russian Middle Ages, which lasted until the beginning of the eighteenth century. Indeed, there are available in English translation such masterpieces of medieval Russian letters as the *Primary Chronicle*, the *Lay of Igor's Campaign*, some adaptations and translations of the *Life*, or autobiography, of Avvakum, and of some other works written from the eleventh through the seventeenth centuries. Most of these translations, however, are either out of print or not readily available, having appeared in rare or expensive editions. Moreover, the tremendous remaining part of Russian medieval writings has never been translated either into English or into any other Western language.

The present anthology is therefore a pioneering effort to present to Western readers the finest works, a few in excerpt, of Russian literature from its very beginning, in the early eleventh century, through the seventeenth century, when Peter the Great forced Russia to rejoin the European family of nations and discard its medieval culture.

Russian medieval literature is very extensive. According to incomplete statistics, for example, there are over seven thousand versions of lives of saints written during Russia's Middle Ages, and many thousands of chronicles and tales. Therefore, the task of selecting for translation the most outstanding of these was not easy. I attempted to solve this problem by offering here as many recognized masterpieces of that period as possible, together with some lesser-known works that also contribute to an understanding of the mentality, culture, and literary manners of Old Russia. My guiding principle was to offer entire works whenever possible, or at least complete narrative passages from such longer

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SECOND EDITION

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A. MILITARY TALES

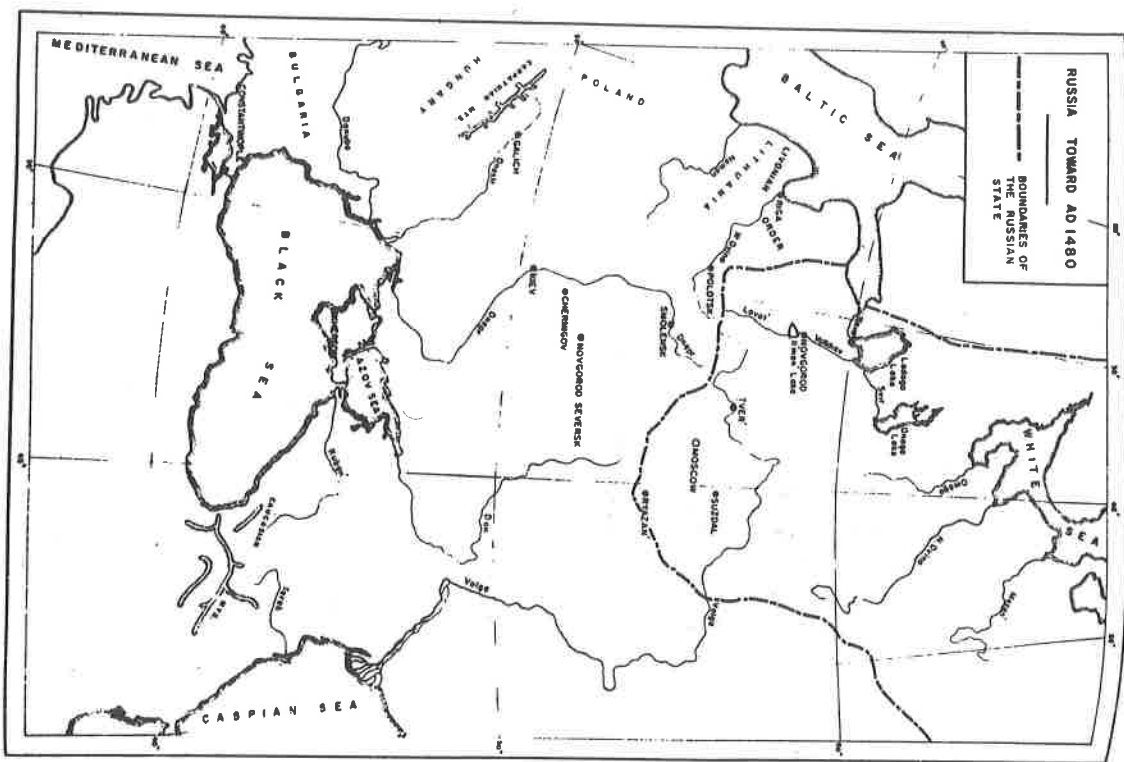
34. THE BATTLE ON THE RIVER KAIKA

In 1223 the Mongols, united under Genghis Khan, invaded southern Russia for the first time. They came there more or less accidentally, returning to Central Asia after conquests in Persia and the Caucasus. (The Mongols became known to Russians by the name Tatar. The Tatars were actually a Mongolian tribe from which were taken the shock troops for the advancing Mongolian army.) After having defeated the Russian princes and their allies, the Kumans—who joined with the Russians the better to resist the invasion—the Mongols disappeared into the Central Asian steppes and deserts. They returned twelve years later, and this time they held the Russian land for more than two centuries. The report of this first decisive battle on the river Kalka is apparently of southern origin, and was incorporated into the *Novgorodian Chronicle* under the year 1224.

6732 (1224) In the same year, for our sins, there came unknown tribes. No one knew who they were or what was their origin, faith, or tongue, and some people called them Tatars, while others called them Taumens, and still others called them Pechenegs. Some say that these are the same people of whom Methodius of Patar spoke and that they came from the Yertian Desert, which is between North and East. Methodius said that at the end of time there will appear those whom Gideon drove away, and they will conquer the whole land from the Tigris and Euphrates rivers to the Pontic Sea, with the exception of Ethiopia. Only God knows who these people are or from whence they came. The wise men, who understand the Books, know who they are, but we do not. Here we record them in memory of the misfortunes of the Russian princes that came about at their (the Tatars') hands. We have heard that they have conquered many lands and have killed many Yassians, Abkhassians, Kassogians,¹ and godless Kumans. And many Kumans were driven away and many others were killed, owing to the wrath of God and his Immaculate Mother. Much evil has befallen the Russian land at the hands of these Kumans, and therefore most merciful God desired that these godless Kumans, sons of Ishmael,

¹ Yassians, Kassogians, and Abkhassians were Caucasian tribes.

Russia ca. A.D. 1480



should die in order to revenge the Christian blood that was upon them, these lawless ones.

These Taumens (Mongols) came across the whole Kuman land and came close to the Russian border. And the remnants of these godless Kumans under the leadership of Khoitian and other princes came to the so-called Kuman Wall, where many were killed together with princes Danil Kobiakovich and George. This Khoitian was the father-in-law of Mstislav Mstislavich, the Russian Prince of Galich. And he (Khoitian) arrived in Galich with greetings for his son-in-law, Mstislav Mstislavich, and all the other Russian princes. He brought them numerous presents: horses, camels, buffaloes, and girls. And he presented these gifts to them, and said the following: "Today the Tatars took away our land and tomorrow they will come and take way yours." And Khoitian begged his son-in-law (for help). And Mstislav Mstislavich began to beg his brothers, the Russian princes, saying: "Brethren, if we do not help them, they will turn to the Tatars, and so later they (the Kumans) will be more powerful."

And hence, having deliberated for some time, they decided to start a campaign, responding to the appeals of the Kuman princes. And the warriors began to gather in their respective regions, and began a march against the Tatars after the whole Russian land was united. Soon the Russian army came to a place called Zarub on the Dnieper.

The Tatars, learning that the Russian princes had begun to march against them, sent their envoys to them, saying: "We hear that you, having followed the advice of the Kumans, do march against us. But we have neither occupied your lands nor your cities and villages, and we are not campaigning against you. We came because God let us conquer the godless Kumans who are our slaves and cattle herders. You should make peace with us. If the Kumans came to you, fight them and take all their belongings. We tell you this because we understand that they have done much harm to you and that is why we fight them."

The Russian princes paid no heed to these speeches, but killed the envoys and marched against the Tatars. They set up camp on the Dnieper in the vicinity of Oleshie. And the Tatars once again sent envoys, and they said the following: "You have listened to the Kumans and have killed our envoys. Come, then, though we have not occupied your lands, and it will be an injustice against God and everyone." And the Russians permitted the envoys to go away.

And Prince Mstislav Mstislavich forded the Dnieper and charged the Tatar outpost and took it with a thousand warriors.

The rest of the Tatars of this outpost escaped to the Kuman Hills under the command of Gwemia Beg. Since the Tatars found no assistance, they hid their leader, Gwemia Beg, underground so that he would not be killed. But they were attacked at that place by the Kumans, and Gwemia Beg was killed with the approval of Mstislav Mstislavich.

As soon as the other Russian princes learned of this action, they all crossed the Dnieper, and after nine days they came to the river Kalka. They sent the Kuman vanguard, under the command of Yarun, ahead, while the Russian princes and their armies set up camp. Yarun began fighting with the Tatars, but his Kuman warriors failed, and retreated in such haste that they galloped over the Russian camp and trampled it underfoot. And there was not time for the Russian forces to form ranks. And so it came to complete confusion, and a terrible slaughter resulted.

Mstislav, Prince of Kiev, having witnessed this misfortune, decided not to retreat, but took his position over the river Kalka. It was a rocky, rugged place on which he built a stockade and fought off the Tatars for three days. In this fortification with Prince Mstislav there remained his brothers-in-law, Andrew and Alexander of Dubrovich. The Tatar troops that besieged the fortification were led by Chigyz Khan and Teshu Khan. With the Tatars there were also a number of Brodniki² who were under the command of Ploskyn. This accursed commander pledged by the holy cross that Prince Mstislav and his two brothers-in-law would not be killed, but released for ransom. But this accursed Ploskyn lied, and he bound the princes hand and feet and turned them over to the Tatars. The princes were taken by the Tatars and crushed beneath platforms placed over their bodies on the top of which the Tatars celebrated their victory banquet. And the fortified camp of Mstislav was taken, and all his warriors were slain.

The other princes were pursued to the Dnieper, and six of them were killed there: Sviatoslav of Yaney, Iziaslav, son of Ingvar, Sviatoslav of Shumsk, Mstislav of Chernigov and his son, and George of Nesvizh. But Prince Mstislav Mstislavich, Prince of Galich, escaped by crossing the Dnieper, and he cut loose the boats from the shore to ensure his escape. Only one Russian warrior in ten lived through this battle; in returning to their homelands, many of these were killed by the Kumans for their horses and clothes.

² Russian outlaws and adventurers who lived on the prairie among the Kumans.

In such a way did God bring confusion upon us, and an endless number of people perished. This evil event came to pass on the day of Jeremiah the prophet, the 31st day of May. As for the Tatars, they turned back from the Dnieper, and we know neither from whence they came nor whither they have now gone. Only God knows that, because he brought them upon us for our sins.

35. ORISON ON THE DOWNFALL OF RUSSIA

The *Orison on the Downfall of Russia* is a well-known, poetic, but still obscure, Russian thirteenth-century literary fragment. It can be found in miscellanies that contain the *Tale of the Life and Courage of the Pious and Great Prince Alexander* [Nevsky], and precedes it in manuscripts. However, its style differs strikingly from the tale of Alexander Nevsky. It is very probable that it is the beginning of a longer orison or lamentation bewailing the conquest of Russia by the Mongols. It ends abruptly with the indication that a catastrophe befell Russia. Its style is both rhetorical and pathetic, and reflects a strong nationalistic spirit embittered by the catastrophe. One can presume that a longer description of the Mongol invasion originally followed this introductory part.

Although this orison was not written in verse, it can easily be divided into short rhythmic units, many of which rhyme, as for instance, lines three to eleven. The rhythm and diction of this work have many features in common with those of the *Lay of Igor's Campaign*. Since the author mentions the ruler at the time of the orison's writing as being Yaroslav (Great Prince of Vladimir, 1238-1246), it can be concluded that this work was composed no earlier than 1237, the year the Tatars invaded Russia, and no later than 1246, the year of Yaroslav's death.

This translation is based on the Russian text to be found in Yu. K. Begunov, *Paniatnik russkoi literatury XII veka*, "Slovo o pogibel'i russkoi zemli," Moscow-Leningrad, 1965.

O Russian land, brightest of the bright,
most beautifully adorned,
thou art marvelous to us, with thy many beauties.
Marvelous are thy numerous lakes,
thy rivers and venerated springs,
steep mountains, high hills,
oak forests, beautiful fields,
many beasts and countless birds,

35. ORISON ON THE DOWNFALL OF RUSSIA

great cities, wonderful villages, and monastery gardens,
honorable boyars and countless lords,
Christian churches and stern princes.
Thou, Russian land, art rich in wealth
and in the Orthodox Christian Faith.
Thou spreadest from Hungary to Poland and Bohemia,
from Bohemia to the land of the Yatvags,
from the land of the Yatvags to the Lithuanians and Germans,
from the land of the Germans to Karelia,
from Karelia to Usting,
where live the pagan Töymians,
and beyond the breathing sea,¹
and from the sea to the Bulgars,
from the Bulgars to the Burtasians,
from the Burtasians to the Cheremiss, and
from the Cheremiss to the Mordvians.

All these vast areas and the people that live on them
were subjugated by God to the Christian people (of Russia)
and to Great Prince Vsevolod
and to his father, Yury, Prince of Kiev,
and to his grandfather, Vladimir Monomakh,
with whose name the Kumans frightened
their children in their cradles,
and in whose reign the Lithuanians
did not dare show themselves from their swamps,
and in whose reign the Hungarians fortified
the stone walls of their cities with their iron gates
so that great Vladimir might not pass through.
And at that time the Germans did rejoice
in being so far (from the Russians) beyond the sea.
And the Burtasians, Cheremiss, Votiaks, and Mordvians
worked hard to pay tribute to Vladimir the Great.
And even the Emperor of Byzantium, Manuel,
fearing lest Vladimir the Great take Constantinople,
was sending rich presents to him.

And so it used to be.
But now a great misfortune has befallen the Russian land,
the land that was once ruled by the great Yaroslav and
Vladimir,
and is now ruled by Prince Yaroslav
and his brother, Yury, Prince of Vladimir. . . .

¹ The White Sea and Arctic Ocean, so-called because of the frequent fogs.