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MYTHOLOGIZATION OF ALEXANDER NEVSKY IN HISTORICAL MEMORY

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Abstract

In the history of Russia, there are many outstanding and at the same time contradictory personalities, among whom Prince Alexander Yaroslavich Nevsky (1221-1263) occupies a very special place. His image, due to its strength and uniqueness, is present on the pages of scientific and popular publications in a variety of contexts, which ensured Alexander Nevsky the position of one of the most famous characters in all of Russian history. However, the real figure of the Prince has been losing its historical form over time, more and more acquiring the features of a cultural archetype. In this regard, it is appropriate to pose the question about circumstances which contributed to the separation of the perceived image from the real historical figure and consider how, under their influence, the image of the Novgorod prince was transformed. This article briefly analyzes the sum total of political and ideological factors that were changing the attitude towards Prince Alexander Nevsky and modifying the position of this historical figure depending on the political context. Through the metamorphoses of the image of Nevsky in public memory, one could learn a lot about the eras that produced this image and could clearly perceive the mechanism of its mythologization.

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1. Introduction

The importance of the idea of common past for the development of identity in society is recognized and problematized by researchers dealing with the formation of nations and nationalism in general. In the development of identity as a product of social construction and communication, the determining factor is the perception of common past. In their turn, historical characters serve as the nodal points of group memory, which not only determine the attitude to a particular historical period, but also allow one to relate to the events of the past and analyze the present. In this regard, it is necessary to interpret and explain not only the very fact of remembering Alexander Yaroslavich Nevsky (1221-1263), but also how and in what capacity people remember him, and to consider the dynamics of changes in the types and forms of social historical memory and those factors that determined the image of the famous Novgorod prince at each separate stage of the historical path of Russia.

2. Problem Statement

At present, the scientific community displays interest in the problems of mythologizing historical memory; however, despite a certain number of studies, there is a lack of systematization and analysis of discourses that form the image of individual historical characters having special significance in history during their life time and in public memory. The personality of Alexander Yaroslavich Nevsky (1221-1263), as one of the brightest figures in Russian history, needs special consideration in regards to certain aspects of the development of Russian cultural memory and the indication of changes in the concepts of collective identity in Russian history.

3. Research Questions

In the course of research on the stated problems, a brief analysis of the features of the memorialization of the Novgorod prince Alexander Yaroslavich Nevsky (1221-1263) in various historical epochs will be given; the specifics of the cultural space and those factors that determined its content at various stages of the historical path of Russia will be considered; the research analysis will embrace the period from the development of St. Alexey cult (Alexey is the name of Alexander in monasticism) till the current flourishing of various forms of memory; the greatest attention will be given to specialized historical literature.

4. Purpose of the Study

The research has been carried out in the context of the achievements of current research methods of historical and political cultures which allow taking a fresh look at the phenomenon of group memory and group identity, as well as systematizing the existing knowledge about Alexander Yaroslavich Nevsky (1221-1263), a cult figure for Russian history.

5. Research Methods

The research has been carried out on the basis of a comprehensive analysis of historiography and generalization of various cultural clichés associated with the figure of the famous Novgorod prince. The sources used in the study are united into problem blocks according to the eras of their creation for a more vivid illustration of the factors that gave rise to them. The article is based on the inductive method, which involves the analysis of individual indicative plots and their subsequent generalization that has formed a visual model of the functioning of public historical memory on the example of a definite historical image.

6. Findings

The initial period in the development of the image of the famous prince is connected with the tradition of venerating Alexander Nevsky as a saint shortly after his death, which absolutely excluded the presence of negative features in his image. In the hagiography, the Prince appears as a well-behaved ruler, protector of the church and the Russian land (Hellie, 2006; Ostrowski, 2013). However, in the 15th century, the image “bifurcates” - on the one hand, there is the defender of Novgorod’s liberties, who inspired opponents of Novgorod’s subordination to Moscow (Nasonov, 1950, pp. 290-292, 294-296, 306), and on the other hand, there is his “pro-Moscow” twin, emphasizing the importance and legitimacy of the Moscow dynasty (Begunov, 1959). After the fall of Novgorod, the latter image was established in chronicles, hagiography, and icon painting, and the veneration of the Holy Prince spread throughout Russia.

The next period in the development of the image of the Novgorod prince is associated with the desire of Ivan IV to establish himself in the Baltics. In the 16th century, the name of Alexander, the winner of the Order, was used to justify the tsar’s foreign policy in connection with the beginning of the struggle for Livonia. In the Illuminated Compiled Chronicle, more than half of the illustrations connected with Alexander are devoted to the struggle against the Teutons and Sweden, whereas Ivan IV backed up the claims in the Baltic by referring to “the great sovereign Alexander Nevsky” (Rogov, 1967, p. 54). In the same vein, the personality of the Prince was also interpreted by Peter I, who defended the rights of Russia in the Baltic States during the Northern War. By the will of Peter, the figure of Nevsky acquired an unprecedentedly wide meaning: the saint ancestor, the conqueror of the Swedes, the defender of the borders, the patron saint of St. Petersburg, the inspirer and personal example of Peter himself, i.e. the forerunner of the Empire. A historical milestone in the development of the patriotic image of Alexander Nevsky was the reburial of his remains in St. Petersburg on August 30, 1724 and subsequent regular celebrations in his honor, which deeply anchored the image created by Peter in the mass consciousness (Kostyrya & Sokolov, 2021; Pavlova, 2018; Zherdev, 2017).

In the second half of the 18th and in 19th centuries, the image of Nevsky was widely developed in the context of creating an all-Russian national consciousness. In the “History of the Russian State” by Karamzin (1992), the Prince appears as a national hero and a strong, almost autocratic ruler. Kostomarov (1880) also emphasized the national significance of the figure of Alexander, but rather saw him as the reason for the decline of the democratic traditions of Novgorod. These two views are the embodiment of the contradictions of the 19th century, the search for national identity between the official imperial

ideology and the desire for federalism. The final place of Nevsky in the ideology of the Empire was determined by the theory of “official national ethos”, which put all history textbooks at the service of “cordial respect for the national”, at the same time excluding all alternatives from the official press. The overly contradictory image of the Novgorod prince in the system of imperial nationalism guidelines could not withstand competition with such statesmen as Rurik, the Saint Vladimir and Dmitry Donskoy and took a very modest place in historical discourse (Shenk, 2007).

The First World War, which began in 1914, briefly “revived” the heroic image of the Prince, making his name the property of anti-German propaganda. However, the arrival of a new revolution in 1917 and the accompanying revision of all socio-political institutions had the most radical impact on the image of Alexander Yaroslavich. The “dictatorship of the proletariat” needed Nevsky neither as a hero, nor as a sovereign or as a saint. His merits were disputed, and he appeared in literature as a usurper of the rights of the people and a destroyer of veche traditions (Pokrovsky, 1923-1926). In 1922, in accordance with the concept of militant atheism, his burial was rudely opened, and his remains were ridiculed in print. Alexander Nevsky retained his heroic image only in the works of the Russian expatriates, who glorified his “feat of battle” supported by the “feat of humility” before the Mongol domination (Sokolov, 2019); there is an evident analogy with the situation after the defeat of the White movement in the Civil War.

With the abolition of the old Empire and the formation of a new Empire on its fragments, the Soviet Union needed the characters of the historical past. The party’s course demanded the creation of a patriotic history, which was supposed to increase the love of the people for their homeland, and especially for the country’s leadership. Nevsky was again raised on a pedestal as a national hero endowed with great talent, a supporter of centralization and a favorite of the people. In this capacity, the Prince, who had recently been disgraced by the ruling regime, contributed to the formation of the personality cult of I. V. Stalin. Thanks to numerous publications and the film by Eisenstein (1938), this image has become the most widespread in the mass consciousness (Cohen, 2014). After the signing of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact in 1939 and the subsequent improvement of Soviet-German relations, this process was temporarily suspended, but with the beginning of the Great Patriotic War it began to develop with renewed vigor. No other era was as rich in works about Alexander Nevsky as the period from 1941 to 1945. Stalin personally recognized the prince as one of the key historical figures whose example should inspire Soviet people to fight the Nazi aggressors. Images of Alexander appeared on posters, leaflets, postcards, pictures and theatre stages. In 1943, the Order of Alexander Nevsky was established, military units were named after him, and in order to influence the feelings of believers in the atheist-minded USSR, even the cult of the Holy Prince was revived (Rostovtsev & Sosnitsky, 2017; Stepnov & Fominyh, 2019).

In the post-war period, the image of Nevsky in the USSR continued to serve the interests of the patriotic education of the population during the Cold War. During the 1950s, the party leadership financed a number of archaeological expeditions, the task of which was to find the site of the Battle on the Ice (Krivosheev, 2020a, 2020b, 2021). And although the XX Congress of the CPSU in 1956, which debunked the cult of Stalin, gave rise to a number of attacks on Alexander Nevsky for belittling the role of the people in the fight against an external threat, it was impractical to completely get rid of him - and the reproduction of the image of Alexander Nevsky formed in the Stalin era continued until the collapse

of the USSR in 1991. In many ways, it remains present up till now; however, the achievements of modern science allow comprehensive assessment of the historical events in the 13th century and the role of Nevsky. The researchers study the relationship of Nevsky with representatives of the Golden Horde, European sovereigns and other Russian princes (Gorsky, 2019; Jackson, 2017; Maslova, 2019; Zhumaganbetov & Sundetova, 2019). There are studies that consider not the historical figure and the deeds of the famous prince per se, but his epoch, to which little attention was previously paid (Abukov, 2019; Chernov, 2017; Gorsky, 2020; Gromig et al., 2019). Some researchers analyze the figure of Nevsky and his image in regards to political science and philosophical aspects, revealing new, not yet explored facets of this contradictory historical figure for the scientific community and the general public (Filyushkin, 2017; Kalinchev, 2017; Sokolov, 2017; Torkunov, 2021).

7. Conclusion

“Whoever comes to us with a sword will die by the sword” is the line pronounced by the actor N.K. Cherkasov in the cult movie by S.M. Eisenstein; it became an integral part of the image of the hero of the Battle on the Ice, but in reality it has nothing to do with the Novgorod prince Alexander Yaroslavich who lived in the 13th century. Reproduced in school textbooks, historical monuments, scientific literature and fiction, this phrase itself has become the embodiment of a myth that continues to exist nowadays. However, the very fact of mythologizing does not depreciate the significance of history as a science, as well as the image that was created for Alexander Nevsky over generations during military conflicts, during the nation-building and in ideological debates - after all, it is the many-sided figure of the Prince which, though being far from the historical original, convincingly represents the epoch that gave rise to this image, but not the events of distant past which became the basis for its creation.

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