

Anastasia Tenchurina, Viking Age Russia and Czech-Russian Contacts in the Early Middle Ages. Bachelor thesis. Prague: Charles University, Faculty of Humanities 2023, 66 pp.

reader's assessment

The origin of Russia and its people represents a crucial debatable issue in Russian historiography with far-reaching political consequences. Anastasia Tenchurina chose a very topical subject with respect to the present situation in Eastern Europe.

Her bachelor thesis consists of two parts. The first part is focused on disputes over Normanist theory, i.e. what role the Vikings played in the establishment of Kievan Rus. Her analysis is based on the confrontation of numerous edited narrative sources of Russian, Byzantine, Arab, and Frankish origin used in English translation (among others, The Rus' Primary Chronicle, Scandinavian sagas, the writings of Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus, The Annals of Saint-Bertin, The Great Menaion Reader, Ibn-Fadlan's account) supplemented by archaeological findings with the different perspectives in Russian, Soviet and post-Soviet historiography. The second part brings a brief overview of trade, religious, and dynastic contacts between Bohemia and Kievan Rus.

It is necessary to highlight some advantages of this thesis. First, I find the interpretation of contacts between Bohemia and Kievan Rus from the viewpoint of contacts with the Vikings to be seminal. Second, I appreciate the use of numerous edited sources and source anthologies (24 titles) as well as rich literature (74 titles) which enabled the author to summarize discussion concerning the Normanist theory, particularly in the works published in the Russian language.

Although I am conscious of the high demands that such a thesis places on bachelor students, I cannot ignore some weak points of this work. They concern ambiguous terminology and insufficiently elaborated methodology.

The use of exact terms is one of the primary tasks in scholarship. The use of Czechia for Bohemia in the early medieval period is incorrect just as Russia for Kievan Rus. In doing so, the author unwittingly takes a propagandistic stand of the present Russian government. It is questionable to what extent Kievan Rus can be considered a part of Russia because Russia did not exist at that time. Kievan Rus included not only a part of today's Russia but also Poland, Lithuania, and some other countries. In my opinion, the author does not reflect adequately that they were two different states in fact. These mistaken terms caused by insufficient critical hindsight are used in the whole work. It's absurd to write, for example, "Abbot Prokop stayed for a certain time in Russia at the court of Prince Vladimir's Czech wife" (p. 56). Respectable scholar publications like The Cambridge History of Russia (2008) strictly follow terms like the Rus' primary chronicle, the Rus' principalities (1125–1246), etc. instead of Russian. Another medieval Latin name for Rus' that could be used was Ruthenia (Nazarenko 2001). Each respectable historical work has to follow medieval terminology and separate it from the concepts of those historians who consider Kievan Rus a part of Russia.

The methodology represents another problem. The most important task of the works dealing with historiography is the choice of relevant authors representing particular research streams. Regrettably, Anastasia did not formulate any criteria according to which she made a choice among many titles concerning the chosen topic. She puts forward an overview of different opinions rather than their critical evaluation. The interpretation of historical facts is always subjective and influenced by many factors. That is why the quality historiographical analysis should be based on the examination of broader context and putting questions as follows: Why and when the book/article has been written? What motivations stood behind it? To what extent were Russian scholars' opinions conditioned by political circumstances or Russian mentality and how concretely? For example, could the fact that Florovsky, Vernadsky, and many other influential Russian exile scholars worked in inter-war Czechoslovakia (the Seminarium Kondakovianum), somewhat influence their view on the Vikings and their role in Kievan Rus? What was the impact of the discussed historical works? Such questions stayed mostly unanswered. In short, Anastasia submitted a promising work on a topical issue, but she only partly succeeded in discussing the topic in a detailed manner that would cover related connections.

My next criticism is aimed at some minor shortcomings. There are mistakes in the local and personal names (Sázava Monastery instead of Sazav monastery, Horníčková instead of Hornichkova Přemysl instead Přemyslov, Přemyslid dynasty). The conclusion is too general which is caused by a lack of research questions. On the other side, the author's attempt to show the issue in its complexity and contradictoriness is a positive aspect of the thesis.

For the above-mentioned reasons, I suggest evaluating the presented bachelor thesis with **grades 2 or 3** depending on the quality of the defense.

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PhDr. Roman Zaoral
Department of historical sciences
Charles University, Faculty of Humanities