

approaches tragedy. Nicaraguan opposition to Anastasio Somoza Debayle was, as Christian makes clear, unusually broad-based. It included the Catholic Church, the business community, trade unions, many politicians, and the newspaper *La Prensa*, as well as the guerilla forces of the FSLN. The goal of most Somoza foes—a pluralistic, democratic society—was not, Christian emphasizes, that of the Sandinistas. Yet the democratic opposition believed that it lacked the muscle to topple the Somoza dynasty. So it joined forces with the Sandinistas. The Sandinistas willingly went along with the united-front strategy, encouraged by no less a figure than Fidel Castro.

The dangers of such an alliance soon surfaced. The democratic opposition, enlisting the aid of other Latin American leaders, urged Carter to pressure Somoza to step down so that they, the moderates, could retain control of the revolution. Carter hesitated, fearing charges of U.S. intervention. The result was an unnecessarily bloody war and the emergence of a Marxist-Leninist "vanguard" with a military grip on the nation's future.

Nicaragua is, in many ways, a test case of U.S. policy toward its traditionally authoritarian allies throughout the Third World. Considered in light of Christian's analysis, the principle of "nonintervention," on which such high value has been placed in the postcolonial world, appears particularly deficient. For over two decades, the United States had nurtured political alternatives in Nicaragua. It supported independent labor groups, aided a range of nongovernmental institutions, and maintained regular contact with opposition politicians. But at the critical moment, writes Christian, "because of its desire to adhere to the nonintervention principle, the Carter administration could not make Somoza go."

The post-Vietnam curse that hangs over the word "intervention"—and particularly the assumption that intervention must be equated with military force—clearly shaped the outcome of the Nicaraguan revolution. The lesson that emerges from Christian's analysis is that there is no escape from responsibility for the United States. Nicaragua, for all its particularities, is still a sobering example of what could happen tomorrow in Chile, the Philippines, or South Korea.

—George Weigel '85

**MEDIEVAL RUSSIAN
CULTURE**

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and Michael S. Flier
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Of all subjects pertaining to Russia, no two have been more widely neglected than its medieval history (prior to Peter the Great) and its cultural heritage (prior to the great 19th-century novels). The vast pre-Petrine expanse is generally regarded as a period of darkness and Mongol influence; in fact it was a time of considerable artistic accomplishment. One, therefore, welcomes a volume that provides some of the best scholarship in

the East and the West on the medieval culture of the Eastern Slavs.

Early Russia was shaped not just by Byzantium but by the forgotten

medieval civilizations of Bulgaria and Serbia. Its historical mythology came from the city of Novgorad as much as from Kiev or Moscow. Andrzej Poppe, a Polish scholar, demonstrates that Novgorad's prelates invented some of the "antiquities" of Russia (icons and other holy relics) precisely to counter the rising power of its morè land-locked and eastward-looking rival, Moscow, during the 15th century. Of course, the rival eventually emerged victorious as its rulers, the princes of Muscovy, assumed the imperial title of tsar. One of the volume's editors, Michael Flier, relates the apocalyptic expectations of Moscow as the "third Rome" (after the fall of Constantinople, the "second Rome," in 1453) to the emergence of the new name for Sunday, *voskresenie*, or "resurrection," a usage that, among Slavic languages, is unique to Russian.

The influence of pagan folklore is another topic well explored. Konrad Onasch, an outstanding East German scholar, explains that many of the great figures on the icons had pagan as well as Christian origins. The icon of the female martyr Parasceve-Pjatnica, for instance, subtly recalled "the pre-Christian Finnic patron of domestic activities— spinning and weaving — and of trade."

Alas, the philologists talk largely to one another, refuting half-forgotten hypotheses from the past rather than providing much of an overview. The exception is the brilliant and imaginative Boris Uspensky of Moscow State

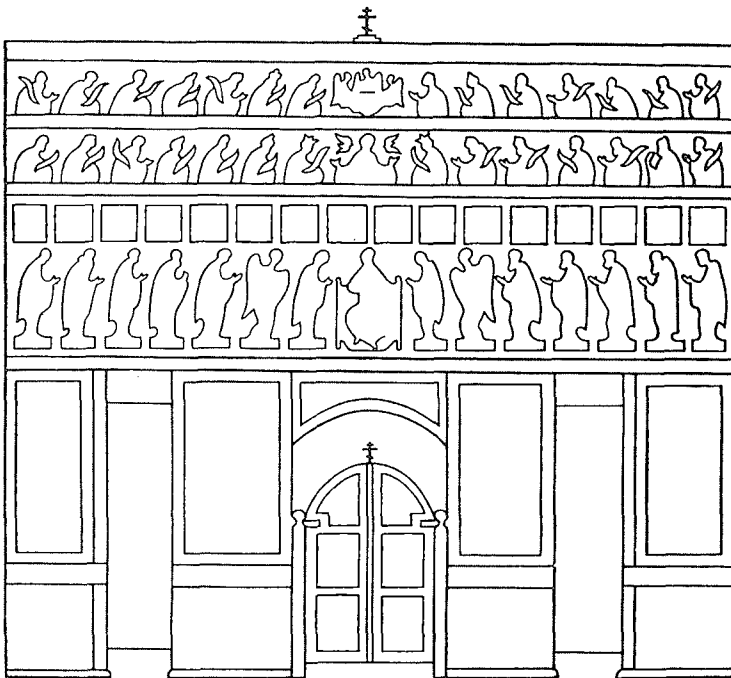


Diagram of an Old Russian icon screen.

University. He suggests that the old Muscovite Russia was not truly bilingual, with church Slavonic existing alongside a more vernacular Russian. Instead, a condition of "diglossia" prevailed, with both linguistic systems existing within the framework of a single-speech community.

Ricardo Picchio of Yale points the way to a better future understanding of Old Russia by stressing the importance of church culture to both Russian language and literature. His essay has particular salience today, as Russia approaches the one-thousandth anniversary of its conversion to Christianity in 988. Unfortunately, most scholars in the West, and in the officially atheistic Soviet Union, have paid scant attention to the role of religion during the long period of Russia's rise and its colonization of the northeastern frontier of Europe. Yet it was this church-inspired culture that brought Russians across the Bering Straits to Alaska and down within sight of San Francisco Bay by the early 19th century.

Despite past scholarly neglect, there are signs that a new generation of young Russians is beginning to show a keen interest in its distant heritage. There are, for instance, currently over 30 million members of the Soviet Society for the Preservation of Antiquities. And the fact that two American scholars, both professors of Slavic literature at the University of California, Los Angeles, took the lead in preparing this volume is an encouraging indication that interest is spreading westward.

—James H. Billington, Director
