

The Making of Modern Ukraine

05 - Vikings - Slavers - Lawgivers - The Kyiv State

Link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=36XiKhamtQo>

00:00 All right, everybody, greetings.

Happy Tuesday.

It's good to see you all.

I'm used to being wired and I'm used to teaching classes, but I'm not used to being wired while I teach classes.

And so this has led me to a certain number already of missteps.

Like, for example, in the previous lecture, when I unwittingly doxxed my TFs by telling, saying what their name was and making them stand up and turn around, as a result of which, they're all now getting thousands of emails from the admirers of all of the stages of their short lives, right? (students laugh) So I didn't think of that, guys.

I'm sorry.

The other interesting feature of doing it this way is that like for every one of you, there are literally like 10,000 other people watching, or 1,000, let's not exaggerate, but there's like behind you, there are like 1,000 people out there who are watching.

01:01 And it turns out they also have views, which is interesting.

And like they're just writing.

You know, they're not coming to office hours.

Oh, speaking of which, come to office hours.

Some of you have come to office hours.

It's really nice to be able to get to know you personally, if only for a moment.

And it helps me teach, if I figure out what you're actually getting and what you're actually not getting.

Okay, I promise you that by the end of this lecture, something's gonna happen.

In the previous lectures, we've been mainly trying to set things up.

We've been thinking about what history is.

We've been thinking about basic problems of history.

We've been working on the colonial perspective, and how you work your way out from under a colonial perspective.

By the end of this lecture, I promise there will be a state which is in Kyiv.

I'm going to deliver on that promise.

That is definitely gonna happen.

But I'm gonna begin with one more remark about what we're doing, because it's really important.

Like, as we're in the middle of a war in which crimes are being committed and people are dying and killing because of certainties about what had to happen in the past, or what has to happen in the future, it's very important to understand that history is not that.

02:07 History is not about predetermination.

It's not about what has to be.

History can do, is it can be a kind of guide to what was possible, right? So there is a Ukrainian society and Ukrainian state today, which means that it must have been possible.

The most we can do is we can guide ourselves towards a greater understanding of how such a thing was possible.

But when we get to that border of how much we can understand, there always has to be room for what the people actually did, right? Not just the people today, but the people all the way back 1,000 years ago or more, that we'll be talking about today.

Had their choices been somewhat different, then other things also would have been somewhat different.

So even as we push our understanding forward as far as it can go, we're always keeping in mind that what people do and the choices that people make are beyond our ability to predict.

03:01 And that's why history is, in a way, like it's a science, we're trying to figure things out, but it's also a humanity, where we leave room for human agency.

We try to understand human agency.

At the same time, we know that human agency, you don't understand it with the same methods that you understand mountains and rivers.

Okay.

So the big idea today is how you get to a state.

And that is a big idea, right? I mean, like you might have noticed that whenever there's a country, whenever there's a state, there's always a legend about how it came to be.

Like, for example, there's an American legend of how America came to be.

This isn't my strong suit.

You guys can correct me, but I think George Washington felled the cherry tree.

And then 13 cherries fell, and from each of them came a colony, something like that.

I don't know, but everyone has a.

Thank you. Okay.

(laughs) Good.

We have an American studies student here who says, "Yep, that's what it was." All right.

So, but everyone has an origin story, which mixes usually some element of what happened with some element of what it would be nice to think about what happened.

04:02 And the reason why everybody has an origin story is that it's hard to explain how you get from no polity to a polity.

And it's usually complicated, and it's best to have a story about us and them, and how it's very simple.

And those stories are never true.

But it is authentically hard.

So in this lecture today, we're gonna be talking about some general causal forces which made it likely that there would be states coming into being in Eastern Europe around the

year 1000.

And those general causal forces are things like Christianity, and what Christianity could do for people, for rulers and for others.

Secondly, the fact that Christianity was not a singularity, but Christianity was a plurality.

There were two versions of Christianity that were emerging.

From our point of view, a Western version and a Southern version, a Frankish version and a Byzantine version.

And those two versions of Christianity, it wasn't their theological differences that mattered so much.

It was that they were represented by two strong political units that were pushing outward imperially into our region, in competition with one another.

05:11 In competition with one another.

And then underlying all this is the basic economic status of the place we're talking about, where nomads are still coming and going, where slavery is still very prominent.

And when you think of what statehood does for people, one of the things that statehood does for people, and this is not just true in Eastern Europe, this is a sort of general characterization of what a state is, statehood protects the people that the state recognizes from being enslaved by other people.

So the basic economics of the globalization that we're in at this point, circa 800, 900, 1000, is a globalization of a slave trade, in which the human beings of our part of the world are being shipped, very far distances sometimes, in order to be enslaved.

06:03 That is a form of global economics.

It persists and expands and continues well beyond our region, well beyond this time.

What a state can do is put a stop to that locally.

A state can say, "We recognize you.

"We have the coercive means to make sure "that you will not be sold into slavery.

"We also have the coercive means to tax you.

"So we prefer," making a very long story short, "We prefer that you stay here and work the land, "and we tax you, "rather than we capture you "and sell you into slavery." And, you know, not to make you too cynical about the world, because I know you're, you know, young and naive, but the same people who do the enslaving are also often the same people who start the state.

And that's gonna be true in our case as well, right? The people who are doing the enslaving are also gonna be the same people who, by the end of the story, are gonna start the state.

So there's a general story about causality here, but then there's a particular story that I want you to keep in mind, too, and be thinking about, which is, okay, maybe Professor Snyder is right, that Christianity, the clash of two Christianities, this economic and human issue of slavery, that these made it likely that there would be states.

07:12 Fine, but why some states and not others? Why some states and not others? From the point of view of a national historiography, this question never arises, right? Your state is always inevitable.

Others people's states might be questionable, but yours is always inevitable, but it's a real question.

Why some states and not others? Why Kievan Rus'? Why Kievan Rus'? And here, we're gonna get into particularities, which involve Vikings, which involve rivers, which involve Khazars, and which also involve, and this is very important, the presence of other Slavic states.

So a huge amount of politics is copying.

A huge amount of politics is taking things which someone else has already done in a neighboring place, and applying them yourself.

So it's very important for Kievan Rus', that there was already Moravia and that there was already Bulgaria.

08:03 Okay, so you remember the basic setup of where we are.

We've tried to set up this period in various different ways.

Europe is being created, right? So again, Europe seems self-evident, but the difference between Europe and the classical world is that Europe is north of the Mediterranean, and the classical world goes around the Mediterranean, right? So when the classical world blends into Europe is when Islam begins, in the 7th century, and the line between Europe and what's not Europe then becomes a Christendom, non-Christendom sort of divide, right? There are famous, you know, examples of when we should think of this.

The 720s, when the French stop Arab armies in Poitiers.

The 750s, when the Khazars stop Arab armies in the Caucasus.

Those are kind of symbolic.

But the basic idea is that Europe is now north of something, whereas the classical world encircled something, right? So Europe is coming into being, and is coming into being as the failure of Christianity south of the Mediterranean, or the serious decline of Christianity south of Mediterranean, and the spread of Christianity north of the Mediterranean, up into, eventually into Scandinavia, around the year 1000, and into Eastern Europe, around the year 1000.

09:23 Remembering that these are territories, Scandinavia, Eastern Europe, which were not directly part of the classical world, right? So they're going from their own versions of paganism, which we've talked about, into Christianity.

Okay, so this brings us to the question, which we're gonna look at now in a little more depth, of what is Christianity at this time, right? And this is tough because, I mean, many of you will have been raised Christians or have some contact with Christianity.

And the Christianity that we have in the third decade of the 21st century has all kinds of varieties.

And these varieties all have their traditions, some of them going back to this thing called the Reformation or the Counter Reformation.

10:06 We need to sort of clear our minds of all that, and try to think what Christianity looked like to pagans, from the point of view of the 9th and 10th and 11th centuries.

And to make a long story short, it's almost always true that when you convert as a ruler, you're not converting because you believe.

I'm sorry.

You might believe, I'm not saying it's impossible, but you're generally converting because the religion in question is bringing something to you that your native cult does not have.

Like, for example, a written language, a set of elites who can use that written language, who can be your ambassadors and your bureaucrats, like legitimacy with other states, right? So from the point of view of pagan rulers looking outward at this world, the math was working against them.

11:00 What do I mean by the math? The math of slavery, okay? So if you're a pagan, everyone can enslave you.

And for a while, you might say, "Well, I can enslave everyone else.

"I can enslave other pagans.

"I can enslave Christians.

I can enslave Muslims." And so long as the power balance is on your side, that may seem like an acceptable answer.

And for the Grand Duchy of Lithuania that we'll be talking about next lecture, that was an acceptable answer all the way until the 14th century.

They did much more enslaving than people did, enslaving of their people.

They stayed pagans for a very long time.

It worked for them.

But what I mean by the math is that Christians are not supposed to enslave Christians.

Muslims are not supposed to enslave Muslims.

When Christian and Muslim states fight, they'll do exchanges and so on.

But so long as you're a pagan, you're fair game for everyone.

And so territorially, as Christianity spreads into Europe, there are more and more of them, and fewer and fewer of you, right? So every time some other state converts to Christianity, the math is getting worse for you as a pagan.

12:06 There are more and more situations where you can be enslaved, and fewer and fewer situations where you're gonna find it practicable to enslave other people.

It's just kind of a general logic.

Okay, I realize that's a strange answer to the question of what is Christianity, but what is Christianity is fundamentally a way of joining a Christian order of states in which you're not supposed to enslave the other people, who are also subjects of a Christian order of state.

More specifically, Christianity means these two varieties of Christianity.

So when I say that Christianity is a power and that it brings with it recognition, okay, recognition by whom? Recognition by the Franks coming from the west, or recognition from the Byzantines coming from the south? As you know, the Franks and the Byzantines have two different accounts of what happened to the Roman Empire.

It fell, and we rebuilt it.

Very beautiful. That's the Franks.

Or it never fell. We are it.

13:01 Also very beautiful.

That's the Byzantines.

So these are two relationships to the classical world, but more importantly, these are two powers that are moving into Eastern Europe.

The Franks, so let's get some more detail about this.

The great leader of the Franks.

So this is not a course in French history, but you'll find that we have to talk about what the French, 'cause France, frankly, was very important, okay? So we will keep coming back to things that happened in what's now France and Germany because France and Germany are very important.

The turning point here, the coronation of Charlemagne as king of the Franks on Christmas Day of the year 800.

Very easy to.

He calls it the.

(indistinct) He calls it the restoration of empire.

Christmas Day, 800.

Charlemagne just means Charles the Great.

And incidentally, the word Charles.

So there's now another king called Charles, right? Am I up on my news? So the word Charles

in Slavic languages.

14:05 Well, how do you say like Charles in a Slavic language? Any Slavic language.

Hm? - Karel.

- Karel. Karel is good.

Okay, so that name Charles becomes the Slavic word, or a Slavic word, for king, which is, I mean, that's kind of impressive, right? Like, I mean, that's the sort of thing, like if you were a rapper, you would want your name to become the word for king, right? And I'm just gonna say now, no rapper is ever going to achieve that, right? I mean, no rapper is ever gonna outdo Charlemagne on this front, I don't think.

Okay.

I mean, I'm just, I'm happy to have that prediction on tape.

So Charles, in French, Charles, Charles, becomes Karl or Karol in Slavic languages, which is the word for king.

In Polish, it's Karol.

Ukrainian, Karl.

So the very idea of kingship is coming from this kingdom of the Franks established in 800.

15:03 And it is a new model state.

It's the model state which is then going to prevail in Europe, very importantly, where the king accepts that he is a Christian ruler, and he accepts, for example, that he can be crowned by a pope, but he's not subordinate to the pope.

Whereas in the south, in Byzantium, the idea of kingship is going to be very different.

The idea is that the secular ruler and the religious power are very much in alignment.

We'll return to that.

So the word for ruler in much of Eastern Europe is czar, which comes from Caesar, right, which comes from Rome.

That's the Byzantine tradition.

So the very words that you have for the supreme leader in a political system are coming from these two rival powers.

Okay, so what can we say about the south? We've already said a lot of it.

16:00 Byzantium, the Byzantine empire.

Capital in Constantinople, which is today Istanbul.

There's a song by They Might Be Giants about that, which I'm sure those of you who are into oldies know.

It's been the capital of the Roman Empire since the 4th century.

From the point of view of Byzantium, there's an unbroken succession of legitimate Roman emperors the entire time.

They refer to themselves as the Romans.

They do so speaking Greek.

That's Byzantium.

That city, Constantinople, is unparalleled in the Europe of the time.

It's 10, 20, 30 times bigger than.

It's 30 times bigger than Paris.

You know, we don't know exactly how big, but maybe something like a million people.

A tremendous scale of a city for the time.

And gloriously beautiful in a way which no European city can vaguely think of rivaling.

And still worth a visit, by the way.

Still lovely, Istanbul.

17:00 Worth a visit.

I was there on my honeymoon.

It was worth it. Okay.

So the differences between the Franks and the Byzantines.

We've listed several of them.

Two claims to the Roman inheritance, right? Two varieties of Christianity, although the theology's not so important.

Two different relationships between state and secular power, where in Byzantium, state and, sorry, state and religious power, state and spiritual power are much more carefully lined up.

Two relationships between lords and vassals.

In the Frankish political tradition, the vassals are gonna be lined up in something which we think of as a feudal system, where they have the right to property and have a certain amount of autonomy.

That is going to be less true in Byzantium.

But both of them are in Europe, and both of them are in a Europe which is pushing into the pagan world.

There are the Scandinavians to be converted, there are the Celts to be converted and there are the Slavs to be converted.

The Celts.

The Celts, you know, the Scots, the Irish, they're out of reach of Byzantium.

18:03 The Scandinavians, it turns out, are also out of reach of Byzantium, except for the Scandinavians who travel to Kyiv, which we're gonna get to, but the Slavs are not out of reach.

And the Slavs are the biggest group, the Slavs are the biggest prize, and the Slavs are an object of direct and explicit competition between these two powers.

Byzantium is already there, with its missionary activity.

We mentioned Cyril and Methodius.

That's an example of missionary activity from Byzantium.

The Franks set up an archbishopric in the German city of Magdeburg in 962.

And that is a kind of outpost of missionary activity.

So when you think of these archbishoprics.

So the way that the Christian Church in the West is set up, there are bishops, and the bishop of Rome is the highest bishop, and he's known as the pope, right? Underneath the pope, there are archbishops, who have territory.

19:04 Underneath the archbishops, there are bishops, and they have territory.

Underneath the bishops, there are priests, and the priests have territory.

And that territory is known as a parish.

It's all beautifully organized.

But when you think of these archbishoprics, you should be thinking of imperial expansion, too.

Magdeburg is about imperial expansion to the west.

And Bremen, by the way, is about imperial expansion to the north.

So when the German speakers are trying to convert the Scandinavians, they're doing it from Bremen.

In the meantime, people are also trying to convert the Scandinavians from England.

But the Scandinavians are out of reach.

I just mentioned this as another example.

This is also a nice place to visit.

The Scandinavians are out of reach, but the Slavs are not.

Okay.

This all hooks together.

It all connects when everyone.

And, you know, if you try to think, like, what is the one thing which causes this? Things are always connecting, right? So if I say, "What does religion have to do with it?" Well, religion has to do with creating a state, but it also has to do with not being enslaved, and eventually, it has to do with what people actually believe, and these things are all connected.

20:09 If I say, at this part of the lecture, "What do the Vikings have to do with it?" The Vikings come in to the history of both the Franks and the Byzantines, right? Because this period that we're talking about is the Viking age.

The Viking age begins in 793.

That's when the Vikings first make themselves known.

And if you say the Viking age, it's like now we cut to a completely different movie, right? We forget everything else.

It's just the wooden ships with their beautiful bows and the burly men and the beards and the horns and the throwing the spears over the enemy, which probably is a myth, and the berserker thing, which is also probably a myth.

But we're cutting to a completely different story, right? And that's what we can't do, because the Viking age is happening simultaneously with the expansion of the Franks and with the expansion of the Byzantines, and it's related to these two things.

It is the expansion of the Franks which probably provokes the Vikings to test out their own naval technology by plundering the Franks. (laughs) And then, realizing they can do this, they can get down rivers, they can do interesting things, they can also go out to sea and do interesting things.

21:12 So the Vikings are probably best understood as a reaction to Charlemagne.

And in their reaction, as they realize that there are an awful lot of rivers they could go down in river in Europe, and there's an awful lot that could be plundered, or looking at it more sympathetically, trade routes to be established, this brings them to Eastern Europe and to Byzantium.

And I know you guys are wondering why I keep obsessing about the mountains and the rivers and all these things that don't matter anymore because the internet, I know, but you can't figure out what the Vikings are up to without knowing where the rivers are.

The Vikings are trying to get from north to south, because they're trying to make a huge amount of money.

There's a lot of silver down there with the Arabs, and they can get that silver, and they can bury it in big hoards, which is what they like to do, for mysterious reasons.

22:05 It's really great for archeologists and for historians, because we can say, "Okay, look, "here is a hoard of coins, "which were clearly minted "in an Arab-speaking place at this time.

"But look, it's in Northwestern Russia." And how do we explain that? And we explain it with the Vikings, right? So the Vikings are trying to make a lot of money by trading from north to south.

And they do that with their technology, which is the boat, but they have to find a way, right? So they try to get down with the Volga, which doesn't work.

They try to get down with the Dnipro, which does work, right, the river which runs through the middle of Ukraine.

They eventually find their way down and they eventually start to trade.

But this means that our Vikings, these Vikings, who are known as the Rus', these Vikings come into contact with Byzantium.

They come into contact with Byzantium, right? Byzantium is the big economic and political power down there in the south.

And they're aiming for Byzantium.

23:00 They're trying to get down to Byzantium.

And a midpoint, a beautiful trading post along the way, is Kyiv, right? So our Viking age is not just like, you know, Erik the Red and Iceland and the sagas, all of which is cool.

And by the way, some of our Ukrainian figures actually appear in Icelandic sagas, which gives you a sense of how it's all connected.

But the Viking age is about the Franks, and it's also about Byzantium, because the Vikings are trying to make their way down to Byzantium, and that's why they get to Kyiv, which has already existed for several centuries.

Okay.

So Eastern Europe, what is Eastern Europe? One is always struggling for a reason to explain why Eastern Europe, and not Western Europe.

What's special about our little zone, which includes Kyiv and what's gonna be Ukraine, in this context, is that it is between these two different kinds of Christianity.

Not just in some kind of metaphorical way, like lands in between, blah, blah.

It's between them in the sense that the Franks and the Byzantines are striving to control these territories.

24:05 But it's also in between, in the sense that it's Eastern Europe, or at least our part of Eastern Europe, where the Vikings, who have been in contact with both the Franks and want contact with the Byzantines, make their way.

Okay, so those are a lotta the important pieces, the Franks, the Byzantines, Vikings.

Oh, how the Vikings make their money, they are slavers.

I mean, it's not really romantic.

That's what they do.

They sell other things, as well, but they're slavers.

And so when they go from the north to the south, they are enslaving people as they go down and they're trading.

Now, I probably told you this already, but the Vikings, although they were marvelous seamen, could not actually deal with the rapids.

I told you this, right? They couldn't actually deal with the rapids of the Dnipro.

So how did they pass them? They made the slaves carry the boats.

And at their places where they failed to ride the rapids, they left runic markers of the Vikings who died, some of which we still have, right? The first people who could actually deal, to my knowledge, with the rapids are the Kazakhs, who we're gonna get to.

25:07 Don't worry, we'll get to them six or seven centuries down the line.

Okay.

So we have many of the pieces here.

We have the Franks, we have the Byzantines and we have the Vikings, who have to do with both the Franks and the Byzantines.

What we also need are the other Slavic states.

So, as I said before, every state is gonna tell a story about how it emerged from nothing, right? It emerged from nothing.

Our people came from a mysterious place over the sea.

You know, there was a city on a hill, whatever.

Like, our people came from nothing.

That's how it always starts.

There's a blank slate.

There were our people. It's wonderful.

In fact, there's always a tremendous amount of copying, which is very awkward for the national legends, but very important for history.

So the state that emerges in Kyiv could not have come into existence.

Again, we're talking about possibility, not necessity.

Could not have come into existence without Moravia and without Bulgaria.

26:00 Okay. What's Moravia? Moravia is so hugely important because Moravia was the first Slavic state.

It's the first one we know about.

Early 9th century.

The first mention of it is in 822.

Quite a long time ago.

Moravia is where the Czech Republic is now, roughly.

And it was heavily under the influence of the Franks.

To make a long story short, and I've mentioned this before, Moravia sets up the classic geopolitical situation, which is, okay, you're a little Slavic state.

You have to be Christian.

Why do you have to be Christian? Because you need to be recognized, right? If Islam had come further north.

And remember, of like from the point of view of 822, this almost happened, right? If Islam had come further north, then you could be recognized by Muslim states, and that would also have worked, but that just barely didn't happen.

And because it just barely didn't happen, the states you wanna be recognized are the ones that are around you, namely the Christian states, namely the Franks.

27:04 Okay.

The Moravians are heavily under the influence of the Franks.

Their ruler, who's a man called Rostislav, Rostislav does the natural thing, which is he sends an embassy to Byzantium.

By the way, it's only very recently that embassies are buildings.

It used to be that embassies were people who were sent with missions, with diplomatic missions.

So they sent an embassy to Byzantium.

Why? To balance.

And this is the story everywhere.

Maybe you have to be Christian, but you wanna get the best deal possible, right? If you didn't wanna get the best deal possible, you would be a terrible ruler of your people.

You'd be a terrible power calculator.

And it's this conjuncture, this rivalry between the Franks and the Byzantines in Moravia, which generates the mission of those two gentlemen who we mentioned before, namely.

28:01 What was their names again?

- Cyril and Methodius.

Right, Cyril and Methodius.

So Cyril and Methodius are Slavs, probably, and they are Slavs who create a written language for other Slavs.

That is another huge breakthrough and also an act of human creativity, right? It's an act of human creativity, the importance of which lasts right down to the present day.

If they had made it up differently, any little thing they had done differently would have meant an entirely different cultural history for all of our region, right? At this point, these two men are the ones who lay it down.

Now, they're laying it down for a purpose.

They're translating parts of the Bible.

They're missionaries.

There's a distinct reason why they're doing what they're doing, but they're the ones who lay down a Slavic written language, which we now call Church Slavonic or Old Church Slavonic.

They're the ones who make, in principle, the Bible accessible for a much larger group of people.

Okay, so this mission to Moravia fails, as missions will, but it has two long-term consequences, which I want you to note.

29:11 The first consequence of its failure is Poland.

So this is not a course in Polish history, but as it will become clear over time, you can't really do Ukraine without Poland.

And a very important thing to know about Poland is that it is a Western Christian country.

So why is Poland a Western Christian country? It's a Western Christian country because of the Czechs, because the Czechs got there first.

The Czechs were a Western Christian country.

In Poland, just like in other Eastern European countries, there is Old Church Slavonic.

There is a Polish declension of Old Church Slavonic.

It was not fated that Poland was gonna be a Western Christian country, but it became one when a Polish ruler married a Czech who was already a Christian, and that leads to conversion.

So that's a consequence of the failure in Moravia.

30:01 So the Czechs, but also the Poles, are Western Christians, and they still are, right? That's the way it's gonna be.

The other consequence of this failure is that the followers of Cyril and Methodius have to run, as one does.

They and their students end up in Bulgaria.

And it's in Bulgaria where the Glagolitic script, which Cyril and Methodius invented, was shifted over to a Cyrillic script, which is much easier to read and which is basically the alphabet that, you know, a bunch of people in this room were educated to learn when they were in kindergarten, with some minor changes.

So by the time Cyrillic script was created, which is around the year 893, we now have an availability of an alphabet and a language for other states.

The most important one of these states is Bulgaria.

Again, Bulgaria, not our subject.

31:01 I couldn't personally do a whole semester on Bulgaria, but one could do a whole semester on Bulgaria.

It's a fascinating place.

Who were the Bulgars? I know that when you woke up this morning, you were thinking, I hope Professor Snyder gets to this question of who were the Bulgars.

I know this has been troubling you.

And it is authentically confusing.

The Bulgars are a Turkic people, some of whom stayed in what's now kind of south-central Russia and converted to Islam.

So there are Turkic people who stay in Russia, become Muslim.

And just, if we were doing the history of Russia, and we'll do a little history of Russia, this is very important.

A lotta the territory of Russia is inhabited by people who are Muslim.

When I was in Ukraine last week, I was talking to a woman who had, in Chernihiv oblast, who had five Russian soldiers in her basement.

And, of course, none of them were from European Russia.

And two of them, I think, were Muslims.

32:01 That's Russia, right? Russia has been a Muslim country from the get-go, among other things.

But some of the Bulgars, okay, some of the Bulgars migrate and come to dominate part of the Balkans.

And they seem to convert to Christianity around the year 865.

And that's the prehistory of the Bulgarian nation that we know and love today.

And the Bulgarian found a state which is Orthodox, Eastern Christian, that is, but which is in rivalry with Byzantium.

And that's a very important model, right? That you can be Orthodox and Christian, but not be actually part of the Byzantine Empire.

That's a model of statehood.

Very important, right? The Bulgarian get there first.

And part of the way they get there is that they use the legacy of Cyril and Methodius.

They use Old Church Slavonic.

They develop, you know, a slightly national version of Eastern Christianity, but they're also creating a model of statehood.

33:05 Okay, by the way, you've probably been wondering like, you know, the Russian president's name is Vladimir, and the Ukrainian president's name is Volodymyr.

So like is Volodymyr a Ukrainian name or is it a Russian name? It's a Bulgarian name. (laughs) It's a Bulgarian name.

The Volodymyr who's gonna convert to Christianity at the end of this lecture, his name was actually a Bulgarian name.

It's a cultural borrowing from Bulgaria.

Copying is really important.

It's much more important than we think.

Okay, this brings us to the special case that we're gonna land on, which is the case of the Rus'.

And when we talk about the Rus' and the creation of Kievan Rus', we need to now know who the local competitors for power are.

The local competitors for power in the 8th, 9th and 10th century here are the Rus', who we've talked about a little bit, these Scandinavian slavers who come down from the Baltic Sea, and the Khazars.

The Khazars are already present, and the Rus' are on their way down.

34:07 So let's talk first about the Rus', and then let's talk about the Khazars.

Okay, so some of you have asked me about names, and it is very, I mean, names are very powerful.

What we name things does have a certain power, and there's a tendency to say what something is named now, it must reveal something essential about it.

And, you know, we all have names and like we're called by our names, and it runs very deep.

But one has to be a little careful about this.

So like America is called America, but we're not all Italian mapmakers and so on and so on and so on, right? But we still unproblematically call ourselves America.

Rossiia, Russia is called Russia as a reference to Rus', but Rus' is itself the name of a Scandinavian, probably a Scandinavian trading company.

In any event, a group of Vikings.

35:02 So, and the reason they were called Rus', no one is quite sure.

It's close to a Finnish word which means rudder.

So our best guess is that modern Russia is named after an old Finnish word for our rudder, right? But that doesn't mean that the Russians are actually medieval Finnish rudders.

So the name that something has now and like working it back doesn't actually have any magical quality, right? So, you know, why Belarus is called Belarus, or Ukraine is called Ukraine, is interesting, but it doesn't necessarily reveal anything essential about the country.

Okay.

Right.

So that's the Rus'.

So what do we know about them? As I said, they're seeking a trade route south.

The first mention we have of them in our part of the world is in the 840s, 850s, 860s.

They're mentioned as Scandinavians engaged in the slave trade in order to gain silver.

36:01 As I mentioned before, we have these silver hoards, which is part of the evidence for what they were doing.

They are still nomads, right? They're marine nomads.

They move mainly by sea, but they're nomads.

And one of the big underlying transitions here, I've emphasized it in terms of slavery versus peasantry, right? But another way to think about this is nomadism versus settlement.

When the people in power are still moving, that's one situation.

When the people in power settle and build cities, or take over someone else's cities, that's a different situation.

So what the Vikings did was they overwhelmed sedentary civilizations.

They took cities.

They negotiated trade terms, which is what you do.

That's just normal.

What's special is that they end up settling in Kyiv, and that's when we get a state, and I'll talk about that.

So as I mentioned, they tried to go down the Volga River, which is in the middle of Russia.

37:01 They were blocked by the Bulgars, the Muslim Bulgars.

And then they went down the Dnipro.

And went down the Dnipro, then we're setting up the history where we are.

The people who dominated Kyiv and Ukraine at the time were the Khazars.

The Khazars are tough to figure out.

We have no written documents at all that are directly from their state.

It was a multiethnic and multi-confessional realm, which had some Christians and some Jews and some Muslims in it, but also had lots of non-monotheistic believers in it as well.

The Khazars came to an end in a way which is also incredibly confusing.

There was rivalry among the various monotheisms about which monotheism they all converted to.

And it's actually not clear they converted to any of them.

There's a beautiful novel, though, about this called "The Dictionary of the Khazars" by a Croatian writer called Pavic, which I don't know if you like read "Choose Your Own Adventure" stories as a kid, but it's like, it's a novel, which is set up as three dictionaries, a Christian, a Jewish and a Muslim, where you kind of choose like in what order you read it.

38:12 It's very beautiful.

But it gets across the kind of lack of narrative that we actually have about the Khazars.

We have very little.

Oh, Cyril visited them.

That's interesting, Cyril, our same Cyril who went to Moravia, also visited Khazaria in 860, in order to try to spread Christianity.

So we know that they weakened and we know that they faded into, married into the Rus' in some way.

We know this partly because of language.

When the Rus' settle down and start to try to rule Kyiv, they called their leader a khagan, and that's a Turkic word, right? That's a word that they got from the Khazars.

Their ruler is first called a khagan.

39:01 Okay.

So the Rus' are settling into Kyiv, late 800s, early 900s.

We know they dominate Podil.

That's the part of Kyiv from which you would trade.

We know they dominate, they control Kyiv by about the year 900.

They're basically taking over what the Khazars left them.

They're taking tribute from the people who used to be paying the Khazars tribute.

That's a sign of who's in charge that historians can follow pretty well, is who's getting the tribute, right? Who can make other people regularly pay money.

By 911, a ruler of the Rus', called Oleg, is signing a treaty with Byzantium, right? They're reaching Byzantium, but not with violence.

They're now reaching Byzantium with diplomacy.

But you can tell that they're still, they're not just traders.

They're people who are feared.

A provision of this treaty with Byzantium is that the Rus' are only allowed to go through one gate of the city, a specified gate, and they can't come in more than 50 at a time, right? So there's a sense that perhaps these people, you know, might cause a certain amount of trouble if you just let them come in in large numbers.

40:14 Okay.

To put this back into perspective, we're getting towards the year 1000.

I'm gonna deliver the promised conversion of Volodymyr before this is all over.

But I want you to notice that in this time in the 900s, the 10th century, this is the time of a lot of other conversions as well.

This is the time when the Vikings in Scandinavia are starting to move towards establishing the Danish and the Swedish and the Norwegian states, which are also associated with Christian conversions.

The 10th century is a time when the Vikings are settling down and founding states everywhere, including in continental Europe.

So in 911, the same year of this treaty, is when Charles the Simple of France grants Duke Rollo, who's a descendant of the Vikings, Normandy.

41:06 Normandy being Northern France.

Normandy also being the launching point for the Normans, who then control Great Britain.

So this is a time of Viking conversion, a time of Viking state creation.

Our story is special because it's taking place amidst different kinds of people, amidst the Khazars.

It's taking place with different kinds of models, the Slavic models.

And fundamentally, because it's taking place at a time when there was a choice between two different versions of Christianity.

The first time. Okay.

When you convert.

The story always goes, you convert.

You believe it.

All of your people convert.

It's like everything (snaps fingers) changes all at once.

That's not how it happens.

Olga, who rules from 945 to 962, does convert, but her kids don't convert and her grandchildren don't convert, and her people don't really convert.

She converts to Eastern Christianity, but then she asks for some German missionaries to come a couple of years later.

42:05 Her son, Sviatoslav, which is a great name, still borne by many lovable people.

Sviatoslav rules from 962 to 972.

He's a pagan.

Her kid is a pagan.

We have few sources about why, but I really like one of them, where he basically says, he's asked why he can't convert to Christianity, and he says, "Well, like my crew "would all make fun of me." (laughs) (students laugh) And that is kind of what Sviatoslav did.

He, in the 960s, he seems to have destroyed the remnants of the Khazar state.

And then in the late 960s, early 970s, he campaigned in the Balkans to try to gain control of the Balkans, and failed.

When he was leaving, this is one of the reasons we know he was a pagan, in 971, he invoked two Slavic pagan gods, Perun, who's the god of thunder, and Veles, who is the god of the earth and of the harvest.

43:02 And by the way, in the Slavic mythology, which is kind of like the Scandinavians are clearly influencing it.

But in the Slavic mythology, Perun and Veles are in this kind of embrace, where you explain the change of the seasons by battles between the sky, which is Perun, and the earth, which is Veles.

It's actually kind of beautiful. Okay.

So in 972, on his way back, Sviatoslav is killed on the Dnipro by Pechenegs, who make a cup from his skull, as one did in the time and place.

So that leaves us open.

There's then a very complicated succession struggle, at the end of which the person who comes to power is Volodymyr, who's remembered as Volodymyr the Great, who is the person who actually converts.

So I'm gonna read you the passage from a primary source, which is the "Primary Chronicle." It's from about 100 years later.

The story goes like this.

44:00 This is after the fact.

It's 100 years after the fact.

So just think about, I mean, how reliable a source 100 years after the fact is generally going to be.

It sketches things out in a way that makes them seem plausible, but it's kind of more revealing about how things look in retrospect, but it's still fun to read.

Okay.

So this is about how you make a choice for Christianity, and it aestheticizes it and makes it all very clear.

The Bulgars, means the Muslims, right? The Bulgars bow down and sit and look hither and dither, and there is no joy among them, but only a dreadful stench.

Their religion is not good.

Then we went to the Germans, the Western Christians, the Franks.

Then we went to the Germans, and we saw them celebrating many services in their churches, but we saw no beauty there, right? Eternal complaint about Germans and their churches.

Then we went to the Greeks, the Byzantines.

Then we went to the Greeks, and they led us to the place where they worship God, and we knew not whether we were on heaven or Earth, right? So it's all very clear.

It's all very aestheticized.

But having gotten this far in the class, you know that it has to do with other things.

45:04 It's gonna have to do with power.

It's gonna have to do with the choices of a particular ruler.

Volodymyr himself, no particular religious preferences.

Maybe flirted with Islam at one stage in his life.

Certainly tolerant of, encouraging of pagan worship in Kyiv when he took power in Kyiv in 980.

We know that Perun, the god of thunder, was worshiped.

What he had was an opportunity, and he took it.

The great power in the south, the Byzantines, were in internal turmoil.

There was a rebel who sought to take power from the Byzantine emperor, and Volodymyr threw the power of Rus' on the side of the Byzantine emperor and helped to win, helped the Byzantine emperor to preserve power in a campaign in, you guessed it, Crimea.

So Volodymyr, having done this, then says, "I would now like to marry "the sister of the emperor," which is a big ask, but the circumstances were what they were.

46:04 And the Byzantines answered, not surprisingly, "Yes, but there's a little proviso, "which is that you must convert to Christianity," okay? It's a little power play, the Rus' helped the Byzantine ruler, but then there's the larger power play, which is happening all over Eastern Europe, which is that one or the other of these large states is eventually gonna get you to convert to its version of Christianity.

This time, the conversion sticks.

There's a permanent link now between Byzantium and Rus'.

Rus' soldiers remain in Constantinople as an imperial guard.

The Byzantine emperor sends Greek-speaking churchman to Kyiv.

Churches are built, most famously Saint Sophia, which still stands in the center of Kyiv, in all of its beauty.

Volodymyr ensures that the population of Kyiv converts.

Idols and temples that he himself had raised, or allowed to be built, he destroys, has thrown into the river.

47:02 And as a result, Rus' becomes part of the Byzantine world, and in a couple of ways, part of the classical world.

One way is continuity.

The continuity of Greece, Rome, Byzantium and Rus'.

That's one way.

But the other way is that Rus' is now going to extend territorially northwards, this classical civilization, which had never gotten so far north.

Which is, it's a big part of the history of the Slavs in general, of Eastern Europe in general, is that, sure, there are these models that come from the south, and now they are going further north, which brings me to Serhii Plokhy.

So we've been doing this little derby about whether there are any other lecture classes on Ukraine in the United States of America.

And so far, this is the only one, but alert people have pointed out that there's like, in some provincial university in Boston area, there is actually one, but it starts in 1500.

48:08 So I'm gonna say that we're still the only survey lecture class, because we're five lectures in, and we're not even close to 1500 yet, right? So we're still five centuries, five good centuries away.

But in all seriousness, that class is taught by Serhii Plokhy, who is a giant among historians of Ukraine and Ukrainian historians, and who is the author of the book that you're reading "Gates of Europe." And he makes the very important geographical point, which I hope you've been following, about how the creation of Ukraine is not about east and west.

That's a much later point of view.

But about south to north.

It's about south to north, and north to south, where south to north has to do with the ancient world, the Greeks, the Byzantines, the Black Sea, and the northern coast of the Black Sea, and things moving up towards Kyiv.

And now the north to south has to do with the Vikings.

49:00 They're moving down the Dnipro River, seeking Byzantium.

And the Kievan state, you know, putting it very grandly, is a kind of encounter of a movement from north to south, and another movement from south to north, which meet each other in the city which already existed and was dominated at the time by the Khazars.

Okay, so that's gotten us as far as I thought we could get.

Volodymyr has converted.

The state of Kievan Rus' has been founded.

A state in the sense that it will be recognized by other states.

A state in the sense that it belongs to a monotheistic religion, Christianity, the Eastern version, which will be recognized by other Christians.

A state in the sense that it has a language, a written language, and people who are literate to use it.

A state in the sense that it is building, and a state in the sense that it's gonna recognize its subjects, which we're going to talk about.

The weakness of the system, which I'm just gonna leave you with, because it's important, the weakness of this system.

And it's important, also, when you think about the heritage of Rus' and people who claim the heritage of Rus' today, the weakness of the system was the principle of succession, or the absence of a principle of succession.

50:04 There was no idea that, for example, the oldest son would inherit or anything like that.

Basically, parts of Rus' were given out to various sons, and there tended to be lots of sons.

Volodymyr managed to keep seven different districts under his control by wit, but it wasn't simple, this business of having sons.

So just to keep this in perspective, before he married Anna, his most famous wife.

She was not the only one, I'm afraid.

There were about half a dozen others.

But before he married Anna, the sister of the Byzantine emperor, he already had 800 concubines.

Presumably, he didn't mention that to the Byzantine emperor, nor would the Byzantine emperor have been impressed by the number.

I mean, just for the record, but (students laughs) that gives you a sense of the succession problems that you might have.

There are going to be a lot of male offspring.

And when the father is weak or the father leaves the scene, there's gonna be competition.

So next time, we're gonna start talking about law and how this state recognized its citizens, and how the state found a particular, citizen subjects, how the state found a particular way to do so, which then becomes a legacy that goes on for centuries.

51:10 But in this tradition of law, the weak point was succession.

The weak point was how the state actually reproduces itself over time.

We'll talk more about that.

All right. Thanks.