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Imagining Byzantium: An Introduction

Since the 19th century, the peoples of Eastern and Southeastern Europe have faced phases of intensive nation-building. These processes were manifold, and they remain to this day the key topic not only of the national historiographies, but of current discourses within the societies. With the breakdown of socialism and the process of European integration, the question of the place of the own state and nation among others is discussed as intensively now as it was in the 19th century. Throughout the two hundred years discussed in this volume, contexts and patterns varied, but, all in all, these discourses had as common subjects processes of exchange, transfer and entanglement with central and western Europe. If we look at the already-historical model of nation-building so brilliantly outlined by Miroslav Hroch some forty years ago[1], the 19th century was the period of nation-building brokers, who tried to foster their specific project of a nation, some of them building it incrementally under a weaker and weaker Ottoman rule.

The nation as an »imagined community« and the role of elites in putting the ideas of imagined communities forward is still important[2]. In the vivid revival of the public discussion what a nation, what the »own nation« might be, the perspective of Rogers Brubaker seems important from an analytical point of view[3]. By shifting the analytical focus from identity to identifications, from groups as entities to group-making projects, from shared culture to categorization, from substance to process, Brubaker shows that ethnicity, race, and nation are not things *in* the world but perspectives *on* the world.

In our volume, we cannot and will not discuss all the patterns and all the traces of historical reference used for identification through time. The focus here is the use of Byzantium (in a very broad sense) in modern Eastern and Southeastern Europe. That the educated elites had to come to terms with the Byzantine past was obvious in the case of the new states in Southeastern Europe, but also for the states that, though they belonged to the Orthodox world, had never been part of the Byzantine realm, like the mighty Russian Empire.

During the rise of national movements in Europe, everywhere debates arose about history and the respective historical narratives, which aimed at establishing new political orders[4]. At the same time, the meaning and significance of the Byzantine millennium were discussed as a possible reference point for imagining and constructing new collective and national identities in Eastern and Southeastern Europe. As contributors to this collection, we try to examine the impact and reception of Byzantine history and culture in 19th- and 20th-century Europe and its use as an argument. We are not so much interested in reconstructing what traces we find of Byzantine tradition, but in how people used this imagined tradition in a historical moment for a certain purpose, be it manifest or hidden in the discourse. Thus, we will try to deconstruct the purposes of actors and their texts.

The focus lies on Eastern and Southeastern Europe as a political, cultural and religious bridge between Orient and Occident. Therefore, we would like to discuss how scientific, ecclesiastical, and political elites dealt with (pseudo-)Byzantine items, narratives, and paradigms in various contexts in order to strengthen their own identity, to stage or legitimize their power, as well as to justify certain political strategies. In the awareness that some excellent work has already been done in the field[5], our conference touched – however briefly – upon at least five broad topics, which I would like to introduce here:

Orthodoxy

Eastern Orthodoxy spread throughout the Roman and later Eastern Roman (Byzantine) Empires and beyond, playing a prominent role in European, Near Eastern, Slavic, and some African cultures. During the centuries of Christian history, most major intellectual, cultural, and social developments in the Christian Church took place within the Byzantine Empire or in the sphere of its influence, where the Greek language was widely spoken and used for most theological writings[6].

As a result, the term »Greek Orthodox« was sometimes used to describe all of Eastern Orthodoxy in general, with the word »Greek« referring to the heritage of the Byzantine Empire. However, the appellation »Greek« was never in official use and was gradually abandoned by the non-Greek-speaking Eastern Orthodox churches[7]. In the period

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1 See his classic study: Hroch, Vorkämpfer.
2 Anderson, Communities.
3 Brubaker, Nationalism. – and even more importantly: Brubaker, Ethnizität 19-95.
4 Calic, Südosteuropa 277-289, 315-328.

5 The following case studies may serve as examples: Kolovou, Byzanzrezeption. – Marciniak/Smythe, Reception. – Hösch, Byzanz. – Makrides, Byzantium.
6 On the example of Russia: Scheliha, Russland. – Kraft, Moskaus Jahrhundert.
7 Nitsche, »Nicht an die Griechen«.

addressed in the volume, the Patriarch of Constantinople was not the leading figure of Orthodoxy. The Russian Orthodox Church, wealthy and influential politically, especially in the Slavic-speaking world, tried to give protection and money as well. But from the viewpoint of tradition and reference »Byzantium« held its importance[8]. The transfer, metamorphosis, and endurance of liturgy, theology, monasticism etc. and their reflection in (Church) historical writing will be a topic in some of the papers. The connection of nation-building and Orthodox faith will be touched on as well. The functionalizing of an imagined Byzantine-Orthodox religion for nation- and state-building[9] can still be seen today.

Statehood, autocracy and patterns of Rule

This field may be summed up with the catchword »Byzantinism« or »Byzantism«. I include the political system and culture of the Byzantine Empire, and its spiritual successors, in particular, the Christian Balkan states (Bulgaria, Greece, Serbia) and Orthodox countries in Eastern Europe (Georgia, Ukraine, Belarus, and most importantly Russia). The term »Byzantinism« itself was coined in the 19th century and often used in the West to characterize an autocratic and reactionary form of rule. This, for example, was the perception of the reign of Nicholas I in the West. Thus, even the Crimean War was interpreted as an Orthodox crusade to restore autocratic rule in Constantinople[10]. The term retains its primarily negative connotations. This narrative foregrounded the confusing complexities of the Empire's ministries and the elaborateness of its court ceremonies – an abundance of bureaucracy headed by an autocrat. Whereas contemporaries did not necessarily see autocracy as a system of rule in Byzantium or early modern Muscovy negatively[11], the perception changed with the Enlightenment and the modern age. Autocracy was seen as not bounded by law and thus as a petrified form of absolute, often tyrannical rule. Likewise, the »Byzantine system« also suggests a penchant for intrigue, plots and assassinations and an overall unstable political state of affairs[12]. The term has been criticized by modern scholars for being a generalization that is not very representative of the reality of the Byzantine aristocracy and bureaucracy, but as a pejorative term which still exists and continues to be applied to authoritarian and autocratic regimes in our contemporary world.

Architecture

Architecture was something like a narrative of the Byzantine legacy built in stone. In contrast to the fine arts architecture, mostly in the form of church buildings, was present in the everyday life of the ordinary people. Neo-Byzantine architecture as a variant of historicism spread all over Europe and North America[13]. The Neo-Byzantine as an architectural revival movement, most frequently seen in religious, institutional, and public buildings, was a variation of historicism. It emerged in the 1840s in Western Europe and peaked in the last quarter of the 19th century in the Russian Empire and throughout Eastern and Southeastern Europe.

Neo-Byzantine architecture incorporated elements of the Byzantine style associated with Eastern and Orthodox Christian architecture dating from the 5th to the 11th century, notably that of Constantinople and the Exarchate of Ravenna. In the Russian Empire, for example, the revivalist fashion emerged in the 1850s and became the officially endorsed and preferred architectural style for church construction during the reign of Alexander II (1855-1881). Alexander III changed this policy in favour of what he thought could be a revival of Russian medieval architecture, but Neo-Byzantine architecture flourished during his reign (1881-1894) and continued to be in fashion until the outbreak of World War I[14].

The historical context was the persistent expansion of Russia – either in the form of colonization of territories acquired earlier in the west and south (partitions of Poland-Lithuania, Novorossiya, the Crimea, the Caucasus) or in the form of increasing intervention in the Eastern Question. The aforementioned Nicholas I shared his predecessors' aspirations towards the Bosporus and the Dardanelles and engaged in a dispute with France over control of shrines in the Holy Land, which provoked the Crimean War[15]. The eastern policies of the state aroused public interest and sponsored academic studies in Byzantine history and culture. The expansion of Russian Orthodoxy into the new territories created new large-scale construction projects that needed to be integrated into local environments.

The Imperial Academy of Arts supported studies of the Orient and specifically Byzantium, although Nicholas himself despised Byzantine architecture. Ivan Strom, one of the architects of the cathedral of Saint Vladimir in Kiev, recalled Nicholas saying »I cannot stand this style, yet, unlike others, I allow

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8 In the Russian Church, too, the idea of Orthodox unity remained strong, despite the contradictory Latin and Greek influences. See Scheliha, Russland 17.
9 Brubaker, Grounds 85-119.
10 Echoed in: Figes, Krimkrieg, especially 29-58.
11 Runciman, Byzantine Theocracy 1-2, 162-163. – Philipp, Gedankliche Begründung.

12 For instance in Leont'ev, Byzantinizm.
13 An excellent introduction is: Bullen, Byzantium.
14 Savel'jev, Vizantijskij.
15 Figes, Krimkrieg 28-39.

it«[16]. Imperial approval was made possible by the academic studies of the architecture of Kievan Rus in the 1830s-1840s, which, for the first time, attempted to reconstruct the original shape of Kievan cathedrals and established them as the missing link between Byzantium and the architecture of Veliky Novgorod[17].

The cathedral of Saint Vladimir became the first neo-Byzantine project approved by the Czar (1852). The Crimean War, lack of funds (the cathedral was financed through private donations), and severe engineering errors delayed its completion until the 1880s. The first Neo-Byzantine project to be completed appeared after the death of Nicholas. Prince Grigory Gagarin, who had served in Constantinople and the Caucasus as a diplomat, became the most influential supporter of the Byzantine style through his published studies of vernacular Caucasian and Greek heritage as well as through his services to Empress Maria Alexandrovna and Grand Duchess Maria Nikolayevna (Alexander II's sister and president of the Imperial Academy of Arts). As early as 1856, Empress Maria Alexandrovna expressed her desire to see new churches executed in Byzantine style[18]. The first of these churches was built between 1861 and 1866 on the Greek Square of Saint Petersburg. Architect Roman Kuzmin (1811-1867) loosely followed the canon of the Hagia Sophia. Another trend was launched by David Grimm's design of Saint Vladimir's church in Cherson (1858-1879). The church, built on the ruins of an ancient Greek cathedral, was sponsored by Alexander II.

Church construction and the economy in general rebounded in the reign of Alexander III (1881-1894). In thirteen and a half years, the Russian Orthodox church grew by more than 5000 places of worship; by 1894 there were 47 419 churches and chapels, including 695 major cathedrals. The turn in state preferences can be traced in two architectural contests (1881-1882) for the design of the Church of the Saviour on Blood in Saint Petersburg. Both contests were dominated by Neo-Byzantine designs, yet Alexander dismissed them all and eventually awarded the commission to Alfred Parland, setting the stylistic preference for the next decade[19]. Highly publicized features of the Saviour on Blood – a central tented roof, excessive ornaments in red brickwork and a clear reference to Moscow and Yaroslavl relics of the 17th century – were instantly copied in smaller church buildings. But these church relics relied on the imagination of Byzantine architecture as well[20].

Initially, Neo-Byzantine buildings were concentrated in Saint Petersburg and the Crimea, with two isolated projects launched in Kiev and Tbilisi. In the 1880s Byzantine designs became the preferred choice for Orthodox expansion on the frontiers of the Empire – Congress Poland, Lithuania, Bessarabia, Central Asia, the northern Caucasus, the Lower Volga, and the Cossack Hosts; in the 1890s, they spread from the Urals into Siberia along the construction of the Trans-Siberian Railway. State-sponsored Neo-Byzantine churches were also built in Jerusalem, Harbin, Sofia, and on the French Riviera, making the style an architecture of Empire. Thus, one might discuss how Neo-Byzantine architecture as a »national« style in Southeastern Europe[21] related to the imperial aspirations Russia expressed in financing such churches in Bulgaria and elsewhere in Southeastern Europe.

The Neo-Byzantine era of architecture in Russia was brought to an abrupt end by the revolution of 1917 but found an unexpected afterlife in Yugoslavia through the personal support of King Alexander Karadjordjević. Alexander sponsored Byzantine church projects by émigré architects in Belgrade, Lazarevac, Požega, and other towns. Serbia and Montenegro became a new home to over a thousand construction workers and professionals from Russia. The Yugoslav government welcomed Russian immigration as a means quickly to replace professionals killed in World War I[22]. Aleksandar Ignjatović will discuss the Serbian case further in this volume. Nevertheless, the imagination of Byzantium in the architecture of Modern times is a topic worth examining further in an interdisciplinary approach.

Establishment of Byzantine Studies

Without the establishment of Byzantine Studies as a discipline in its own right, deriving from history and classical studies in a broad sense, we could not gain a broader knowledge of what was transferred, remembered, and used as arguments in debates from the 19th and 20th centuries up to the present. It helps to deconstruct myths, for example the amalgams used in contemporary public discourse. An example is the documentary »Lessons of Byzantium« shown on Russian TV in 2008. On the other hand, Byzantine Studies have profited from political trends[23]. The foundation of a specialized institute in Istanbul before World War I by the Russian Empire and the establishment of the discipline in the German *Kaiserreich* or the British Isles did not come by chance, but due to a political interest in the Balkans, the Ottoman Empire, and the Near East. Nor is it by chance that the history of Byzantine Studies as an integrative, multidisciplinary approach will be addressed as such in the volume presented here. It concerns not only the treatment of Byzantium in historiographies[24], but on interaction between the disciplines of history, philology, art, and architecture as well as – and sometimes foremost – archaeology on the one hand and public discourse on the other.

16 Quoted in Savel'jev, Vizantijskij 28.
17 Kiškinova, »Vizantijskoe vozroždenie«.
18 Savel'jev, Vizantijskij 31-33.
19 Kirikov/Christova, K istorii, especially 204-245.
20 Kiškinova, »Vizantijskoe vozroždenie« 180-207.

21 Pantelić, Nationalism.
22 See for the Serbian tradition some of the articles in: Merenik/Simić/Borozan, Imagining the past.
23 Jeffreys/Haldon/Cormack, Byzantine Studies.
24 Leveque, La vision.

Narratives

Narratives, constructed in fictional or non-fictional texts, are in fact the focus of this volume, as they feature in all the four fields briefly sketched above. Just two examples of works that influenced the perception of Byzantium in very different ways should be mentioned here.

The first example cannot be overestimated in its effects. It is, of course, Edward Gibbon's »The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire«[25]. On the base of vast variety of sources, Gibbon offered an explanation for the fall of the Roman Empire, a task made difficult by the nature of these sources, specifically their lack of comprehensiveness[26], though he was not the only historian to attempt it. According to Gibbon, the Roman Empire had succumbed to Barbarian invasions in large part due to the gradual loss of civic virtue among its citizens. They had become weak, outsourcing their duty to defend their Empire to Barbarian mercenaries, who then established themselves in such numbers that they were able to take over the Empire. Romans, he believed, had been unwilling to live a tougher, military lifestyle. In addition, Gibbon argued that Christianity had created a belief that a better life existed after death, fostering indifference to the present among Roman citizens, thus sapping their willingness to make sacrifices for a larger purpose. He also believed that Christianity's comparatively prominent pacifism tended to hamper the traditional Roman martial spirit. Finally, like other Enlightenment thinkers and British writers of the age steeped in institutional anti-Catholicism, Gibbon held in contempt the Middle Ages as a priest-ridden, superstitious Dark Age. It was not until his own era, the »Age of Reason«, with its emphasis on rational thought, that human history could resume its progress. Even contemporaries criticized Gibbon for this narrative. But neither they nor historians and writers of the 19th and 20th centuries could free themselves from his perspectives. John Julius Norwich for example, despite the admiration for his furthering of historical methodology, considered Gibbon's hostility towards the Byzantine Empire flawed and blamed him for having founded negative stereotypes that had continued to plague the subject throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries[27]. However, the Russian historian George Ostrogorsky writes, »Gibbon and [Charles de] Lebeau were genuine historians — and Gibbon a very great one — and their works, in spite of factual inadequacy, rank high for their presentation of their material«[28].

Gibbon may stand for historiography in an age of beginning professionalization. He also had an impact on writers of fiction, a very challenging field of perceptions and images of Byzantium in popular culture.

I just want to mention very briefly Felix Dahn's »A Struggle for Rome (Ein Kampf um Rom)«, a historical novel that appeared in 1876[29]. Far less than its racist and *völkisch* connotations it was the negative characterization of Byzantium, which had a lasting impact on me, when I read this piece of fiction in my youth.

The novel is, when it comes to Byzantium, centred not so much around the Emperor Justinian I and his scheming wife Theodora than his marshals Belisarius and Narses, who

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25 Original edition: Gibbon, Decline and Fall. See also: Roberts, Edward Gibbon.
26 See: Nippel, Gibbon.
27 Norwich, Byzantium. Especially in the last volume of his trilogy on Byzantium, Norwich seeks to rectify the negative impressions perpetuated by Edward Gibbon.

28 Ostrogorsky, History 5.
29 This book has appeared in countless editions. I used: Dahn, Kampf um Rom.

shaped the campaigns for the reconquest of the Italian peninsula. Throughout the military campaigns, historian Procopius was present to record the progression. He is in fact the main source of the Gothic War (535-552) and thus the main source on which Felix Dahn based his novel. Procopius's Secret History is loosely interwoven as a subplot about Theodora scheming and cheating on Justinian I. Dahn thus offers a reading of Gibbon and Procopius as well[30]. He warns his readers of decadence and evokes the competition among young nations to overthrow the old empires, which was of interest not only to German readers of the time.

The popularity of the book lasted well into the 20th century. The film producer Arthur Brauner wanted to compete on the field of the sword-and-sandal genre by adapting it as »The Last Roman«. Although it was filmed with international stars and directed by Robert Siodmak, the movie, released in two parts in 1968 and 1969, was a flop at the box office and was received as a piece of trash popular culture. Nonetheless, the many of its viewers saw a depiction of Byzantium and its ruling elite – for example Orson Welles as Justinian – they would have expected. Thus, such a film, too, is part of imagining Byzantium.

The brief consideration of the reception of an imagined Byzantium may serve to illustrate what this book is about. We are not interested in whether the depiction of Byzantium is true, justified, or logical. We are interested how Byzantium is used to argue for one's goal. These goals of authors, artists or politicians are inscribed in their texts, works, and actions, although their intention is not always as obvious as in the case of Vladimir Putin on Mount Athos in the end of May 2016 (**fig. 1**)[31]. The reference to Byzantium is quite often made to underscore the might of one's own nation.

One might add other narratives that were influential and that will be addressed in the following papers[32]. All of the case studies presented here will inquire into the context and the potential contribution to a given elite project, be it nation-building or empire-building. Thus, the book is a contribution on the deconstruction of popular myths and their political appropriation – beyond »Imagining Byzantium«.

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30 See: Dahn, Prokopius.
31 Dowe, Putin.

32 For an excellent overview see: Marciniak, Mythos.

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Summary / Zusammenfassung

Imagining Byzantium: An Introduction

The article is brief consideration of the fields, where an imagined Byzantium as an political argument played a major or minor role as an politcal argument in Eastern and Southeastern Europe. It is a sketch on the interests why and how Byzantium was used to argue for one's goal. These goals were inscribed in texts, works of art, archtiecture and even music. The reference to Byzantium was quite often made to underscore the might of one's own (mostly young) nation. The article serves as an introduction to whole volume and pleas for the deconstruction of popular myths and their political appropriation – beyond »Imagining Byzantium«.

Imagining Byzantium: eine Einleitung

Der Artikel ist eine kurze Erörterung jener Felder, auf denen ein »imaginiertes Byzanz« als politisches Argument in Ost- und Südosteuropa genutzt wurde. Es ist eine Skizze über die Interessen, warum und wie dieses Byzanz in der Argumentation für eigene politische Ziele gebraucht wurde. Diese sind eingeschrieben in gebaute, gemalte und geschriebene Narrative, in denen die Referenz auf Byzanz vor allem im 19. Jahrhundert, aber auch bis in unsere Gegenwart benutzt wurde, um Macht und Größe der (oft jungen) Nation zu unterstreichen. Zugleich dient der Artikel als Einleitung für den gesamten Band, der in Fallbeispielen eben jene Zusammenhänge vertiefen wird.