

MAUNO KOIVISTO



THE RUSSIAN IDEA

TAMMI

"Few nations know and understand the Russians better than the Finns, and among the latter Mauno Koivisto stands out."

- STEPHEN KOTKIN

Mauno Koivisto

THE
RUSSIAN
IDEA

Translated by Timothy Binham



tammi

80 YEARS

HELSINKI



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The Finnish original: *Venäjän idea*

First published in 2001

This translation © Timothy Binham 2023

Cover: Timo Numminen

Tammi Publishers is a part of Werner Söderström Ltd

ISBN 978-952-04-5802-7

Printed in the EU

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INTRODUCTION

*The border opens, a yawning crevasse,
Before me lie Asia, the East.
Behind me the West and Europe,
I the sentinel, standing guard.*

These lines by Uno Kailas¹ were read in all Finnish schools in the 1930s. I read them too; I knew them by heart. I still remember the first verse.

The remaining verses are ruder. I only remember snatches of them.

War came to Finland, a bitter war. Another poet, Yrjö Jylhä², described how the Winter War felt: “The winter’s day halfway spent. No attack, only cannon fire – a wounded man quietly sighs: ‘Brothers, give me a drop of water.’”

It was not really Asia that lay beyond the border in the East; it was Russia, which had long sought to establish

1 Uno Kailas (1901–1933), Finnish poet.

2 Yrjö Jylhä (1903–1956), Finnish poet. Jylhä’s collection *Kiirastuli* (Purgatory), dealing with the experiences of the Winter War against the Soviet Union, marks a milestone in Finnish poetry.

itself as the rightful heir to the Roman Empire – Rome as it had once been, before it split in two and fell.

The Christian Church of the East styled itself Orthodox, of true doctrine. The Eastern Church did not seek to explain mysteries; it accepted them at face value. The Western Church, and especially the Protestant Church that broke away from it, tried to understand and explain things that could not be understood or explained.

Both Christian Churches sought to expand, spreading the Word to ever new peoples. The Eastern Church arrived first in Finland, but the Western Church followed soon after in full force.

The two Churches advanced depending on how deeply their message impressed people, but also on how well they enabled people to control nature and their fellow human beings.

The Eastern Church concentrated on devotion, whereas the Western Church emphasized action. Russia embraced the Eastern branch of Christianity and, from the 16th century on, focused on expanding eastward. The peoples that adopted the Western form of worship eventually conquered most of the rest of the world. This conquest started from southern Europe, but it was continued by many other European countries, all the way north to Denmark.

In the 19th century, Russia saw the development of a social philosophy influenced strongly by the Enlightenment. The proponents of this philosophy were known as *Zapadniks* (*zapadniki*), or Westernizers. Another influential school of thought, the Slavophiles,

preferred to build on traditional Russian values and a community-based social fabric.

These two schools were not opposed to one another, at least not diametrically; their differences were in emphasis and nuance. Many notable Russian thinkers defended each philosophy in turn; the distinctions were fine.

Therefore, even if we say that the eastern border of Finland separates East and West, it only does so in the sense that it separates two Christian Churches – a border that divides Europe, but still an internal European border.

This book asks the key question: Is Russia East or West? In seeking the answer, the book traverses one thousand years of Russian history. It was not my aim to write a general history of Russia describing every single important event. I have confined myself to a handful of events that I consider significant, sometimes drawing on sources that are not widely known.

Helsinki, 8 March 2001

Mauno Koivisto

THE PEASANT AND THE TSAR

In 1968, the Helsinki City Theatre put on a highly successful staging of the play *Agricola and the Fox* by Paavo Haavikko³. The play was set in the 16th century, when King Gustav Vasa of Sweden sent Mikael Agricola⁴ to Moscow to negotiate peace with Russia. My wife and I went to see the play in the company of the author.

In the production, Tsar Ivan the Terrible was dressed up as Stalin and the head of the Swedish delegation as President Paasikivi⁵. When I asked Haavikko for an explanation of this rather obvious symbolism, the playwright replied that these were the interpretation of the director, Kalle Holmberg⁶.

History is always a matter of interpretation.

3 Paavo Haavikko (1931–2008), Finnish poet, playwright, prose writer and publisher.

4 Mikael Agricola (c. 1510–1557), Finnish bishop, religious reformer and Bible translator later known as the father of written Finnish.

5 J.K. Paasikivi (1870–1956), Finnish statesman and diplomat, President of Finland from 1946 to 1956.

6 Kalle Holmberg (1939–2016), one of the leading theatre directors of his generation.

The sixteenth century was a turning point in the history of Northern Europe. In the East, Moscow consolidated its position as the Russian capital. Russia began an expansion that continued for about 400 years. In the West, the Kingdom of Sweden established itself as a sovereign state in the modern sense, as did Finland as a political entity.

King Gustav Vasa of Sweden proclaimed Finland a Duchy and made his son John Duke of Finland. King Gustav thereby sought to assert his authority against the Russian Tsar Ivan the Terrible.

By this time, Sweden had rejected Danish suzerainty and seceded from the Kalmar Union, and Russia had freed itself from the Tatar yoke.

Gustav Vasa, who came to power in Sweden in 1521, encouraged the Finns to colonize the border province of Savo and the lands further north of the border drawn two hundred years earlier in the Treaty of Nöteborg. For this and other reasons, he went to war against Russia.

When Gustav's war began to falter, he sued Ivan the Terrible for peace. Unwilling to recognize Gustav as an equal, Ivan initially declared that the King of Sweden should negotiate with the Prince-Governor of Novgorod, who – according to Ivan – was of equal rank in the international hierarchy. Ivan the Terrible considered himself an equal of the Holy German Emperor and the Sultan of Turkey, whereas Gustav Vasa and his sons were “mere Småland peasants”.

It is true that Gustav Vasa was an upstart without proper aristocratic roots, as Sweden's nobility had been

decimated by King Christian II, the Danish ruler of the Kalmar Union.

Ivan's reaction was an insult, since by then Novgorod was a mere principality under Muscovite rule. Gustav Vasa responded by creating the Duchy of Finland, designating his son John Duke of Finland, and proclaiming that Finland had the same ceremonial rank as Novgorod, while Gustav himself was Ivan's peer.

On ascending the Swedish throne, John III assumed the title 'Grand Duke of Finland and Karelia'. John also highlighted Finland's status with heraldic symbols. Ivan had inserted a bear – the heraldic animal of Kokemäki castle fief in Finland – in the Novgorod coat of arms; John retaliated by including a lion in the Finnish one. As the lion is considered the nobler animal in heraldry, this made it clear that John ranked the Duchy of Finland higher than Novgorod.

In the Finnish coat of arms, the lion treads on a sabre and holds a straight sword in its forepaws. This has sometimes been interpreted to depict the Finnish lion trampling on a Russian curved sabre. However, the same version of the Finnish arms continued to be used under Russian rule. It is also possible that the sabre represented a Muslim scimitar.

Nowadays little more than a light pastime, in the old days heraldry was a serious business. The heraldic symbols representing nations and their sovereigns were not chosen merely for their ornamental value. Heraldry was used to communicate important messages. Its symbols listed past achievements and hinted at future aspirations.

Princes regularly sought to accentuate their rank by increasing the length of their list of titles. Gustav Vasa certainly did so, needing to consolidate his position vis-à-vis Denmark, which had been the most important and powerful Nordic country up to that time. Gustav proclaimed himself 'King of the Swedes, Goths and Wends'. The Wends were a West Slavic tribe living on the south coast of the Baltic Sea, but by the Vasa period their population had already dwindled considerably. To this list, John III added the title 'Grand Duke of Finland and Karelia'.

By the time that a proper truce with Russia was achieved, John had acceded to the Swedish throne. The truce was concluded between Ivan, on behalf of Novgorod, and John, on behalf of Finland.

THE VARANGIAN KINGDOM

Let us begin the story of Russia with the Varangians (or Varyags), as the Vikings were called in the East. The Vikings played a key role in Russia for several centuries. In the West these Norsemen were known as raiders, but in the East they were nation builders up to the end of the 16th century, when the Rurikid dynasty was ousted.

Ivan the Terrible himself was a descendant of Vikings, one of the last Rurikid rulers.

The history of Russia is considered to have begun with the Viking nobleman Rurik. His story is recounted in the *Chronicle of Nestor*, a compilation of folklore narrating the origins and early history of the first Rus state. According to Professor Jukka Korpela⁷, the first version of this ‘mother of all chronicles’ (also known as the *Russian Primary Chronicle* or the *Kyiv Chronicle*) was compiled between 1037 and 1039, the second between 1060 and 1073 and the third between 1093 and 1095. On the basis of these texts, Nestor, a monk at the Monastery

7 Jukka Korpela (b. 1957), Finnish historian.

of Caves in Kyiv, produced his own version, known as the *Chronicle of Nestor*, in 1112.

The *Chronicle of Nestor* includes the so-called ‘invitation legend’. According to this legend, in the year 862, the Chuds, the Slovenes (Slavs), the Krivichians and the Ves invited three Rus noblemen, Rurik, Truvor and Sineus, to rule them: “Our land is great and rich, but there is no order in it; come to rule and reign over us.”

Rurik settled in Novgorod, Sineus in Beloozero to the southeast of Lake Onega, and Truvor in Izborsk near Pskov. On account of these three Vikings, the people of Novgorod named their country *Russkaya zemlya*, Land of Rus. After his brothers died, Rurik ruled alone. According to one theory – disputed by Russian nationalist historians – Rurik’s family hailed from Sweden.

Europe was going through a turbulent period at the time. In the turmoil caused by the Barbarian migrations, the Western Roman Empire collapsed. Many peoples had migrated from the East, conquering new homelands for themselves. The Middle East saw the emergence of a new and powerful religion, Islam. The Muslims conquered Northern Africa and entered Europe in the Balkans and in Spain. In Western Europe and Russia, the Vikings were making their forays, having mastered the arts of seafaring and warfare.

With the 500th anniversary of Columbus’ discovery of America approaching in 1992, the Romance-speaking countries in the United Nations proposed that this event should be celebrated. The representative of Iceland reportedly agreed with the idea, but suggested a slightly

later date, the millennium of the discovery of America by the Vikings. Recent archaeological studies have established the location of Viking settlements in North America. History books have frequently stated with some scepticism that these events are mentioned only in the Norse sagas, but it was with the help of the sagas that the remains of these settlements were found in present-day New Brunswick. Even old sources can prove useful.

Whereas the Vikings of present-day Denmark and southern Norway travelled west and south, those living in Central Sweden headed east and southeast.

The Vikings were not a large population. The men went off on their expeditions, and the women stayed behind to run the household. The women thus assumed tough responsibilities. Some of the men returned; a good many did not.

As they travelled east, the Vikings passed along the south coast of Finland, and a few took a Finnish bride. A number of Finnish men joined the expeditions or were pressed into service. On Russian maps, Finland was marked as Varangian country. Although no evidence of permanent Viking settlement has been found in Finland, archaeological finds demonstrate that the Viking expeditions to the East included people from the Finnish mainland. Moreover, the people of the Åland archipelago have long believed that their islands housed at least intermittent Viking settlements.

The Vikings opened up a waterborne trade route from the North to Byzantium. The Eastern Roman Empire and its capital, Constantinople, were hemmed in and

needed to establish new connections with the Silk Road leading to the Far East. The Mediterranean had become a troubled sea, while the ancient trade routes to India and China had become dangerous.

The Vikings travelled along the Gulf of Finland coast to the mouth of the River Neva, then on to Lake Ladoga and upstream along the River Volkhov to Lake Ilmen and the River Lovat. A portage led from the Lovat to the River Daugava (Western Dvina), and another from the Daugava to the River Dnieper, providing direct access to the Black Sea and Byzantium. There was also a route to the Caspian Sea via the River Volga. This route from the Baltic Sea to the Caspian and the Silk Road seems to have consisted mostly of rivers, with perhaps no more than one per cent land travel. Maps clearly show that only a narrow isthmus east of Lake Ilmen separates the Baltic river system from the Volga, which discharges into the Caspian Sea.

The Vikings who sailed west developed extremely seaworthy ships, enabling them to cross the stormy North Sea and the North Atlantic. Those who travelled eastward used lighter boats which could be pulled over the strips of land separating the rivers.

In the West, the Vikings initially contented themselves with quick raids, after which they returned home. Later, they began to take an interest in governing the lands they raided, and founded dynasties. The eastern routes offered little in the way of loot, so here the Vikings assumed the role of nation builders, opening trade routes and establishing permanent settlements.

In the East, the Vikings came to be called *Rus*. This name appears to be related to the Finnish word *Ruotsi* (Sweden); according to one theory, their common root is a proto-form of modern Swedish *ro* 'to row'. Indeed, the Vikings travelled the eastern routes as rowing crews.

The Vikings in Russia were also called 'Varangians', a word probably derived from the Old Norse precursor to the Swedish *våringar* 'sworn companions'. On their travels, some Vikings seem to have taken service as mercenaries with the riverine towns on the way, swearing fealty to their new masters.

In both East and West, Viking power was based on the construction of sturdy fortresses. Rurik reigned in Novgorod, while his son Igor was simultaneously the ruler of both Novgorod and Kyiv. The master of Kyiv was called the Grand Prince, but there were also numerous smaller city-states ruled by local princes from the same family. This was the origin of a dynasty that united the East Slavic tribes living in Russia under its rule. Kyivan Rus was the first phase in the development of present-day Russia.

A CHILLINGLY TOPICAL CLASSIC OF POLITICAL HISTORY

This book examines Russia from a geographical neighbour's perspective. In *The Russian Idea*, Finland's ex-President sets out to understand Russian thinking through the lens of historical events and to anticipate its influence on Russia's future choices. Following Russia's attack on Ukraine in February 2022, the book is today more topical than ever.

While outlining the key episodes in Russian history, Koivisto explores the essence of what Russia and Russianness stand for. What was the significance of Moscow's self-proclamation as the Third Rome, and how did Russia become an empire? What impact did the existence of that empire have on Finland's independence?

In *The Russian Idea* (first published in Finnish in 2001), Koivisto combines a review of Russian political history with an introduction to the Russian history of ideas. He describes the Russian intellectual heritage as a combination of Orthodox religion, Pan-Slavism and Socialism.

Few nations know and understand the Russians better than the Finns, and among the latter Mauno Koivisto stands out.

"Russia's current weakness is an exceptional situation,"
he correctly foresaw in 2001, as recorded here.

"The Russians will seek to overcome the present weakness."

— STEPHEN KOTKIN

Mauno Koivisto (1923–2017) served as President of the Republic of Finland for two consecutive terms, from 1982 to 1994. Before that, he was Prime Minister from 1968 to 1970 and again from 1979 to 1982. Koivisto started studying Russian early in the 1950s, and Russian studies remained a lifelong interest.



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ISBN 978-952-04-5802-7