Russia Between 800-1584 Essay, Research Paper

The history of Russia began many centuries ago. By the 800 s Slavic groups had founded many towns in what is now the European part of Russia and Ukraine, of which the two most important once are Novgorod and Kiev (1). In 882 a Viking chieftain named Oleg, captured the city of Kiev, situated on the Dnepr River. Kiev became the capital of the state Kievan Rus, and extended from the lakes north of Novgorod to south of Kiev. Kievan Rus became an important power and was recognized as a cultural and commercial center. It had a flourishing trade with the Bezantine Empire, with Constantinople as it s capital, as well as with western European and Asian states. The ruler of Kiev came to be called Grand prince and ranked above the other princes of Kievan Rus followed by the retainers of the prince, the druzhina. With the evolution of the Kievan state the retainers of the prince and the regional nobility fused into a single group named the boyars. The chief Kievan political institutions were the office of prince, the duma or council of the boyars, and the veche or town assembly, which have been linked to monarchic, aristocratic, and democratic aspects of the Kievan state. In both justice and administration the prince occupied the key position. The Kievan Russsians had two religions in succession: paganism and Christianity. In about 988, Grand Prince Vladimir of Kievan Rus accepted Eastern Orthodox Christianity from Bezantines. (4) The other East Slavs soon followed and a Christian civilization developed (2). Church in Kievan Russia obtained vast holdings of land and pre-empted such fields as charity, healing the sick, and sheltering travelers, in addition to its specifically religious functions. The Church also occupied a central position in education, literature, and the arts. Mosaics, frescoes and icon-painting flourished in Kievan Russia. Even a brief account of Kievan culture indicates the variety of foreign influences which it experienced. For example, Byzantine influence shapes the development of the visual arts, of architecture, and social institution such as alms houses, schools, and monasteries. The Cyrillic alphabet, a modified Greek alphabet created by Byzantine missionaries to translate the Scriptures and church liturgy into the Slavic language, gave impetus to the creation of a written history, literature, and law.(6)

The economy of the Kievan state was based on large-scale agriculture and on extensive trade with Byzantium, Asia, and Scandinavia. Culture.(5) Fundamental role of agriculture in Kievan economy determined the social character of the prince and his druzhina and indeed the class structure of Kievan society.

Kievan Rus grew into it s golden age under Prince Yaroslav(1036-1054). The structure of society was different from Europe s feudal system, where serfs worked the land as tenants in exchange for services to a noble landowner. In Kievan Rus farmland could be bought, sold, or bequeathed with little restriction, and serfs were free to move around. The Prince had his council called the duma. All free men could convene the veche, or town assembly. Power was rooted in the military strength of the Prince and his guard, but occasionally veche did rise in revolt against a Prince. At time of Yaroslav s death Kievan Rus was a large federation, extending it s authority from the Ural Mountains to the shores of the Caspian and Black Seas, to the Gulf of Finland (6).

Kiev s power began to decrease after the mid-1000 s. The rulers of other Kievan Rus principalities grew in power, and they fought many destructive wars. Badly weakened by civil wars, and without strong central control, Kievan Rus fell to huge armies of Mongols (4).

During 1200 s, Mongol armies swept across Russia from the east, destroying one town after another (1). Changing trade roots, and wars with nomadic peoples, weakened the Kievan state (2). In 1240, when Mongols destroyed Kiev and Russia became part of Mongol Empire (Golden Horde). The capital of the Golden Horde was in Sarai (4). There were numerous uprisings against Mongols, but the Russians also fought against Lithuanians, Germans crusaders, and the Swedes (6).

For more then two centuries, the Mongols were the overlords of the region. Mongols forced Russian princes to pay heavy taxes or tribute. To keep Russia divided, the Tatars played one prince against another (3). Mongols also appointed the Russian Grand Prince and forced many Russians to serve in their armies (conscription for life for one out of every ten Russian men into the Mongol military service). But they interfered very little with Russian life in general. Mongols were mostly interested in maintaining their power and collecting heavy taxes (4)

During the period of Mongol rule, the new ideas and reforming spirit of the Renaissance were dramatically changing many aspects of life in Western Europe. But under Mongol control Russia was to a great extent cut off from these important Western Influences (4).

The social structure of appanage Russia represented a continuation and a further evolution of the society of the Kievan period. The prices occupied the highest rung on the social ladder. They acted as virtual rulers of their large estates, levying taxes and administering justice. Votchiny, hereditary landholdings, prevailed in the appanage period. Peasants constituted the bulk of the population. Political division, invasions, and general insecurity increased the peasant s dependence on the landlord and his bondage. However, the peasant could still leave his master once a year, in late autumn, provided his accounts had been settled. The veche ceased to exist. In the appanage period the Church maintained and developed its strong and privileged position. It enjoyed the benevolence of the khans and received exemptions from taxation

In the appanage period, education was in eclipse. The Mongol devastation and relative isolation and poverty led a diminution in culture and learning.

In about 1318 Prince Yuri was appointed Russian Grand Prince. Mongols also started to allow the Grand Prince of Moscow collect taxes for them. This practice started with Ivan I (Moneybag) about 1330. Princes and boyars started to serve in Moscow s army and government. In addition, Ivan persuaded the chief bishop of the Russian Orthodox Church to remain in Moscow. Until then Kiev had been the spiritual center of Russia.

In 1380, Grand Prince Dmitri defeated a Mongol force in the Battle of Kulikovo. The victory briefly freed Moscow of Mongol control. Mongols recaptured Moscow in 1382, but they no longer believed that they could not be beaten (4).

During 1400 s Moscow became the most powerful Russian city. It was finally Moscow that overcame the Tatars. Moscow effectively became independent in 1450, it became rich and powerful. In 1468 Ivan III took the throne. By 1480 the tributes to the Mongols stopped, and Ivan III, had made the final break from Mongol control and took the title of czar . In addition the Russian Orthodox Church declared that it is no longer part of a Greek Orthodox Church. It believed that because Constantinople was in Muslim hands, Moscow had become the third Rome, where Christianity would survive (3).

During the 16th century, Russia continued to expand, especially down the Volga River and eastward to Siberia, and settlers moved into these areas. The power of czar had increased, and the freedom of the Russian people had declined (3).

In 1547 Ivan IV(Ivan the Terrible) became the first ruler to be crowned czar. Ivan was brutal, extremely suspicious, and at times insane. Ivan IV, reign began with a series of administrative, legal, and military reforms. Some of those changes were aimed at limiting personal freedoms so people at every level would serve the czar unconditionally (6). He formed a special police and began a reign of terror in which he ordered the arrest and murder of hundreds of aristocrats. Ivan burned many towns and villages, and he killed church leaders who opposed him. A crafty and cruel leader who passed a series of laws that bound the peasants to the lands as serfs, making them part of landowner s property. He did much to suppress the boyars, or hereditary nobles, and also he laid the foundation for the growth of Russia. Under his rule, Russian forces crossed the Ural Mountains to conquer Kazan, Astrakhan, and western Siberia, opening the way for Russia to cross the continent to the Pacific Ocean (2). Ivan also tried to win lands northwest to the Baltic Sea, but was defeated by Lithuanian, Polish, and Swedish armies (4). Ivan s IV s reign of terror had left the country in an economic shambles after his death in 1584.