

A Man for the Ages: Historiography, Framework, and the Masculine Ideal in Kyivan Rus’
Anna Guethoff, 2026

Postmodernity in many ways heralds the final death of tradition; and yet, ‘tradition’—along with its concomitant ‘traditional values’—occupies the heart of contemporary discourse in Russia. Especially with regard to gender, the term has served as an instrument to argue for a return to a perceived status quo of man and woman. In fact, Russia’s 2013 anti-LGBTQ+ law—expanded in 2022—explicitly employs the term “*netraditsionnyye*” or “non-traditional” to describe sexual relations and gender expressions that deviate from the Kremlin’s stated vision of appropriate Russian custom. As a student of history, nominal ‘tradition’ has always conceptually irked me because no one has ever deigned to attach a *date* to their rhetorical appeal. My summer research project, then, arose as an intervention, an attempt to concretize ‘tradition’ by analyzing constructions of masculinity—already a contested topic today—at the earliest point in recorded East Slavic history: Kyivan Rus’ (9th–13th c.), a medieval polity deemed ‘national progenitor’ by Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus alike.

Consequently, I began the summer with the intent to produce a source-driven essay, a piece of gender analysis drawing on the characterizations of the princes, monks, and warriors found in primary accounts from the Kyivan period, especially the *Povest’ Vremennykh Let (PVL)*—the 12th-century chronicle and principal record of the period that narrates the history of Rus’ from Creation to 1110 CE. However, as I transitioned into a targeted reading of related secondary literature, I was confronted with a salient lack of scholarship regarding masculinity in Kyivan Rus’. This was expected. What I had not anticipated, however, was how useful it would be—in the short- and long-term—to examine academic treatises as primary sources in their own right. As such, I shifted my initial source-based approach to a historiographical one—that is, how history is interpreted and discussed over time. To anchor my research, I selected a series of authoritative texts—monographs and journal articles—on Kyivan Rus’ history over the last 170 years. It was particularly important to me that these books captured distinct intellectual moments in time, meaning they typify five major schools of thought: 19th-century Russian Imperialism, early 20th-century Soviet Marxist-Leninism, mid-century Orthodox-centric émigré thought, late 20th-century Western interdisciplinarity, and, most recently, post-Soviet decolonization. Beyond these texts, I also analyzed a diverse body of masculinity-focused literature by Western, Byzantine, and Muscovite medievalists before interrogating the few topical examples about Kyivan Rus’ that do exist to devise a method for harmonizing Western postmodern theory with a non-Western premodern subject.

As revealed through my historiographical essay, Kyivan Rus’ has never been a static entity in Russian memory; yet, more crucially for my research interests, the scholarship itself has never intensively engaged with the gendered dimensions of annalistic record-keeping, even when historians purport their treatises are ‘social histories.’ It is not as if the *PVL*’s imagined masculine (and feminine) ideals have gone entirely unnoticed by academics; as early as 1851, historian Sergey Solovyov acknowledged archetypal parallels between princes—and indeed between Grand Prince Oleg and Princess Regnant Olga. Unfortunately, these insights have rarely been labeled in terms of masculine and feminine, and where they have, no broader scholarly discussion has brought them into dialogue. In this way, my research this summer was a first step in compiling the diverse—albeit limited—secondary literature concerning masculinity in Kyivan Rus’, synthesizing a corpus of knowledge previously disconnected and mutually exclusive. More than that, it deepened my analytical and methodological skills while teaching me how to interpret the ways arguments evolve in changing political and social contexts. Looking ahead, I am eager to leverage these perspectives and skills as I return my attention to primary sources in my honors project.

I am deeply grateful for the opportunity to conduct this research, an experience made possible by the benefactors of the Surdna Foundation Undergraduate Research Fellowship Program. My sincere thanks also go to my advisor, Prof. Page Herrlinger, for her constant support and insightful guidance. I eagerly anticipate our continued work this fall.

Faculty Mentor: Prof. Page Herrlinger

Funded by the Surdna Foundation Undergraduate Research Fellowship Program