

THE CONVERSATION

The Byzantine history of Putin's Russian empire

Theodore Christou

March 15, 2018 6.29pm EDT

Russian athletes were [conspicuous in their neutral colours](#) during this year's Winter Olympics and Paralympics due to a ban based on doping allegations.

In Vancouver in 2010 and in Sochi in 2014, however, Russia's Olympic hockey jerseys [prominently featured a two-headed eagle](#) exactly where Canada's jerseys highlighted the maple leaf.

This two-headed eagle is not a modern invention. It is "Byzantine."

The eagle was, if we travel 1,800 years back in time, [the imperial symbol of the Byzantine Empire](#). It is still at the core of Orthodox Christianity — Greek, Russian, Ukrainian, Romanian — throughout the world.

The importance of this Byzantine Empire is not missed by Russia. It has, however, been suppressed within western history education.

It has been suppressed because it looks to the east and, here in the west, we do not.

What was Byzantium?

In a nutshell, Byzantium was Rome.

More specifically, Byzantium was the Rome that existed after Constantine I (306-337 AD) turned the Roman world from its "pagan" roots towards Christianity, and after the city of Rome ceased to be the capital of the Roman Empire in 330 AD.

Byzantium was an ancient Greek city that was rebuilt from its very foundations and became an imperial capital under Constantine I. This empire extended from the Atlantic Ocean across the entirety of the Mediterranean Sea, including what we consider today to be northern Africa, the Middle East, Turkey, and eastern and western Europe, extending to the Black Sea.

Constantinople, now Istanbul, was the beating heart of Rome — of Byzantium — from 330 until 1453 AD.

Moscow as the third Rome

So why would Russian athletes want to wear Byzantine eagles on the crests of their uniforms?

Simply put: Moscow wants to be the third Rome.

When Constantinople was conquered after 11 centuries as the Roman capital, by Ottoman Turks under the leadership of Mehmed II in 1453, Russia had become a central part of the Byzantine alliance.

The Russian tsar — a derivative of the Latin Caesar, or imperial ruler — assumed, or presumed, the role of the imperial head of the Roman empire.

Following the Bolshevik Revolution and the establishment of the communist, secular United Soviet Socialist Republic in 1922, this imperial legacy was largely lost.

Reclaiming the legacy

In recent history, historians are reclaiming this Byzantine history and its Russian legacy. Under Vladimir Putin, [Russia's history has been largely Byzantine](#).

Putin has associated Russia with Byzantium in ways that are apparent to countries with an Orthodox legacy, but not necessarily clear to the rest of the world.

Byzantium matters. It matters if we want to associate Russia today with imperial Russia at its zenith.

If you recognize the double-headed eagle of Byzantium, Russian uniforms over the last decade make a lot of sense. If you do not, it is important that you ask why this symbol does not have as much resonance as the hammer and sickle or the maple leaf have.

Russia is reclaiming the legacy of Byzantium. Of Rome. Of antiquity. Of Orthodox Christianity. This is not a threat. But this is why Byzantium matters.

Suppression within western history

As a teacher educator, a member of the Ontario College of Teachers, and an associate dean of graduate studies and research at Queen's University, I believe this history matters.

Years ago, when I started my academic career at the University of New Brunswick in Fredericton, I struggled to find a way to make social studies instruction meaningful for future teachers, who were the vast majority of students that I worked with.

I devised a scheme, crude in hindsight, for them to be in the positions of the students they would teach — that is, the elementary schoolchildren we ask to learn about medieval times and classical civilizations.

Mount Athos, where 20 monasteries and houses of learning established during the Byzantine period have been preserved. (Theodore Christou), Author provided

I am not challenging these subjects, pervasive as they are, in curricula across Canada. However, the rationale for their inclusion in various curriculum documents is unclear. Why every student in Ontario seems to create a medieval coat of arms in Grade 4 is beyond me, and not only because it reveals a western-European curricular bias.

I asked every teacher candidate to participate in a research project that would explore Byzantine history. Why? To situate each future teacher in the position that they are asked to place their students.

Lies in our history books

Unexpectedly, as I conducted this project, I learned that our textbooks lie.

Every publication that I could find relating to the history of education, the philosophy of education and educational “foundations” (a term that includes sociology) failed to mention Byzantium.

The common historical narrative included: China (but only sometimes), Greece, Rome, The “dark” or “medieval” ages, the Renaissance, the Enlightenment and current times.

Historians periodize. They artificially create spaces and contexts that will allow them to look back and talk about things that stay the same and things that change over time. Dynasties and confederations emerge, change, fall and evolve.

And we suppress Byzantine history.

The textbooks that I reference state that Rome was conquered in 476 AD. This is an untruth. The city of Rome was conquered on this date but it had long ceased to be an imperial capital.

At best, Rome was important to memory, to consciousness and to the western part of Rome, which was largely Latin speaking (as opposed to the eastern parts of the Empire, which had been “hellenized” since the days of Alexander the Great, meaning they were fundamentally Greek in linguistic and cultural terms).

Byzantium is alive and well

Again — we suppress Byzantium because it looks to the east and we do not.

Byzantium harkens to Russia, which is [depicted as corrupt in athletic and political spheres](#).

It points to [Greece, which is economically disadvantaged](#) and wrestling under the yoke of economic austerity and concerns about its bookkeeping.

Iveron Monastery, built between 980-983 AD, whose library holdings contain over 20,000 books and 2,000 manuscripts from the Byzantine era. (Theodore Christou), Author provided

It alludes to the former Soviet block and to the Balkans, which are [still wrestling to find their identities](#).

It hearkens to the [“Orientalism” that Edward Said pointedly identified](#) — a patronizing depiction of eastern lands by western Europeans, whose frames of reference were both imperial and colonial. Said was speaking specifically of the Middle East, but, again, this region of the world was a vital part of the Roman and Byzantine worlds.

Byzantium is alive and well. One cannot find Byzantium on a map, but its culture persists. I have travelled to monasteries, libraries and churches across Greece, Cyprus, Turkey and North America. It persists in the constitutions of countries, in the literary traditions and the poetic imaginary of millions and in the worldview formation of more than 250 million people.

Byzantium also exists as propoganda — as an historical bridge between historical spaces and geographical continents.

All this we know, and yet we have no reference points in our history books, and nor do our future teachers and students.