

DAVID KHUNCHUKASHVILI, *Die Anfänge des letzten Zarentums. Politische Eschatologie in der Moskauer Rus' zwischen Byzanz und dem Heiligen Römischen Reich (Europa im Mittelalter 42)*. Berlin – Boston: De Gruyter 2023. 409 pp. – ISBN 978-3-11-079010-8

• SUSANA TORRES PRIETO, IE University Madrid/Segovia  
(susana.torres@ie.edu)

The comparative method has a long and illustrious history. Going back to FRANZ BOPP's studies of Indo-European linguistics in 1814, it has advanced philology and other humanistic disciplines more than any other method has done in the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. If applied rigorously, its benefits are clear. Unfortunately, it is also easily abused and can become a facile way of venturing into the seemingly unknown. Needless to say, one can compare anything to anything: one can compare, in principle, the verbal system of ancient Greek with Chinese verb constructions, or pagan myths with biblical tales, or the Aeneid with the lyrics of Taylor Swift. The methodology, however, is only effective, as KHUNCHUKASHVILI realised, if the terms under comparison are close enough for a logical explanation of their resemblance to be conceivable, and dissimilar enough for common features not to be merely the result of common descent. More importantly, comparison should only be a method, not an end in itself: BOPP compared verbal structures in order to find regularities in the way languages change. Something must have gone wrong in the book under review if its author can conclude, after 346 pages of discussion: "Warum träumten russische Kleriker im Vergleich zu den katholischen Geistlichen nicht von der eschatologischen Weltherrschaft? Diese Frage kann zum heutigen Zeitpunkt noch nicht abschließend beantwortet werden. Das Problem liegt nicht zuletzt darin, dass sie weder aus der vergleichenden Perspektive herausgestellt wurde, noch es zum heutigen Zeitpunkt eine ausreichende quellenkritische und wissenschaftliche Basis für ihre Beantwortung gibt. Diese Beobachtung gilt sowohl für die west- als auch – und eigentlich in viel höherem Maße – für die osteuropäische politische Eschatologie. Eine präzise Antwort auf diese Frage kann nur aus zukünftigen vergleichenden Untersuchungen des religiös-politischen Empfindens der vormodernen Christentümer gewonnen werden."

The volume opens with the ambitious proposal of examining different understandings of political eschatology in Western and in Eastern Europe during the late medieval or early modern periods: “Auf welche Weise wurde das politisch-eschatologische Gedankengut in der Moskauer Rus’ rezipiert und zum Zweck der Herrschaftslegitimation herangezogen? Worin bestehen die Gemeinsamkeiten und Unterschiede in der Aktualisierung dieses Gedankenguts in der Moskauer Rus’ im Vergleich zu den anderen christlichen Reichen? Und schließlich: Wie können diese Gemeinsamkeiten und Unterschiede erklärt werden? Diese Fragestellungen sind bedeutend, weil sie erlauben werden, aus der transkulturellen Perspektive auf eschatologische Herrschaftsvorstellungen nachzuweisen, dass die Geschichte der Rus’ ein immanenter Bestandteil der Geschichte des mittelalterlichen und frühneuzeitlichen Europas ist” (p. 2). And here a first red flag. Or several. If the author aims to prove that Rus’ (whose chronological definition is another problem that will be discussed below) was part of medieval and early modern Europe, maybe studying biblical eschatology is not the best means of doing so. At the end of the day, even if we want to follow the iconoclastic path, opened some years ago, of thrashing traditional concepts such as “Byzantine Commonwealth”, “Byzantine Empire”, “Eurasia”, or even “dynasty”, the problem, lest we get involved in never-ending nominalist controversies, is to give conclusive answers and sufficiently justified new terms that would replace the former ones, preferably using all evidence available. If, as KHUNCHUKASHVILI says, his purpose is to examine conceptual (“dieses Gedankenguts”) similarities and differences, the definition of the corpus under study, aside from biblical texts that were common to all Christians, is fuzzy. And finally, if the comparison is between Muscovite Rus’ (whatever that is) and “den anderen christlichen Reichen” (which? how many? from which parts of Europe?), in a period covering at least 800 hundred years, the selection is poor.

The book consists of an Introduction (pp. 1–22), a Conclusion (pp. 342–348), and three long chapters. The first of these (“Die Zeit vor dem eschatologischen Zarentum: Die Rezeption des politisch-eschatologischen Gedankenguts in der Kiewer Rus’ in vergleichender Perspektive” pp. 23–117) discusses the presence of political eschatology in Kyivan Rus’. The interpretative analysis is based on well-known sources: mainly chronicles plus other works such as the Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius of Patara. It seems that the Western side of the comparison is a brown bag of texts, from Sibylline oracles to Benzo of Alba. There is also a long discussion if Michael III of Byzantium (is that an European point of comparison or

not?) was actually understood to be the Last Emperor – or was Frederick II Hohenstaufen a better candidate? The underlying question is whether political eschatology was linked to the figure of the Last Emperor.

The second chapter (“Die Geburt des eschatologischen Zarentums: Endzeiterwartungen und politische Eschatologie in der Moskauer Rus’ in vergleichender Perspektive” pp. 118–243) focuses on the apocalyptic expectations around AD 1492 (which coincided with the year 7000 from the Creation of the World), the consequences of the Fall of Constantinople, and the reception of this event among Roman Catholic scholars. The textual analysis ranges from chronicles to epic works, and the discussion invariably focuses on the *translatio imperii* and the idea of Moscow as a Second Constantinople. The writings of Zosima and Filofei are analysed, almost interpreted, to prepare the ground for the following and last chapter, “Die Entwicklung des eschatologischen Zarentums: Judizialastrologie und politische Eschatologie zwischen dem Heiligen Römischen Reich und der Moskauer Rus’” (pp. 244–341), which is probably the most surprising one. The author brings into the discussion a seemingly new textual corpus (“Die Judizialastrologie an der Schwelle zur Neuzeit” p. 246), where he thinks he finally finds the ideas of Nicolaus Bülow realised in Moscow (apparently we still are in Muscovite Rus’). Maximus the Greek makes an appearance – together with a whole array of other characters, from Muscovy and abroad, interested in astrology and almanacs. In sum: “Bei allen Unterschieden zwischen den in diesem Kapitel besprochenen west- und osteuropäischen politisch-eschatologischen Herrschaftsvorstellungen gibt es dennoch einen wichtigen Zusammenhang, der alle diese Machtentwürfe verbindet: Es ist die omnipräsente eschatologische Stimmung, die sowohl die westeuropäischen als auch die russischen Herrschaftsimaginationen dieser Zeit durchdrang und die in der ersten Hälfte des 16. Jahrhunderts an Rhein, Tiber und Donau genauso spürbar war wie an der Moskva, der Volga oder dem Volchov” (p. 341).

But what kind of a conclusion is this? That somewhere, at some point, in a span of a hundred years or more in various places of the world which despite practicing Christianity under different rites shared the same religion and the same eschatological foundational texts, some scholars showed some concern for the end of the world? Nothing about how millenarism might have been perceived by lay people, or how it was interpreted in other arts, or what made it different or not in Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism. If the point is that Muscovite Rus’ was less concerned with the figure of the Last Emperor than Western Christianity was, maybe the

ecumenical idea of Orthodoxy as imperial religion should have been analysed first. If KHUNCHUKASHVILI thinks that Filofei of Pskov saw the fall of empires as apostasy rather than military defeat, then comparing “selected works of Western Christianity over 800 years” is redundant. If what the author wanted to say all along is encapsulated in the last paragraph of the book (“Diese Beobachtungen gelten im Großen und Ganzen auch für die außerhalb der vorliegenden Untersuchung liegende Regierungszeit der letzten Rjurikiden – Ivans IV. und Fedors – sowie der ersten Romanows – Michails, Aleksejs und Fedors. Als die Moskauer Rus’ unter Peter dem Großen endgültig zum europäischen Imperium emporgestiegen ist, war die politische Eschatologie als Mittel zur Herrschaftslegitimation, wie bekannt, unwiderruflich irrelevant geworden. Das aufstrebende petrinische Imperium sah sich nicht mehr als der letzte, *biß an das endt* bestehenbleibende Zufluchtsort des wahren Glaubens, sondern vielmehr als das ewige irdische Zarenreich”), the preceding analysis of what East Slavic clerics apparently strove to formulate in their writings for over 600 years is unnecessary. And there is certainly no comparison to anything, East, West, North or South, that justifies the title.

**Keywords**

comparativism; political theory; eschatology