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## REVIEWS

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### THE BYZANTINE COMMONWEALTH: EASTERN EUROPE, 500-1453.

By *Dimitri Obolensky*. History of Civilization series. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1971. xiv, 445 pp. £ 4.00. New York: Praeger Publishers, 1971. \$15.00.

In spite of the vast literature devoted to some aspects of Byzantine relations with Eastern Europe, no comprehensive treatment of the influence of Byzantium on medieval Slavic civilization has been available to Western readers. Most recent historians have addressed themselves to aspects of Byzantine relations with individual East European nations rather than to universal themes. The publication of a general study by a scholar with Professor Obolensky's qualifications is therefore an event of significance for Byzantine and Slavic historians as well as for the general reader for whom the History of Civilization series is intended. As the title of his work indicates, Obolensky is not interested solely in tracing relations between the Byzantine Empire and the emerging Slavic nations. It is the thesis of his study that the political ideas, religion, literature, language, and art transmitted from Byzantium to Eastern Europe during the Middle Ages created a universal civilization which may best be described as a "commonwealth." The "bonds" of the commonwealth were a belief in the supremacy of the universal emperor, the Orthodox religion, and a Slavic literary culture based largely on translations of Greek religious works. Although none of these features have been unrecognized by scholars, this work succeeds brilliantly in the dual function of describing the course of Byzantine relations with the diverse nations of Eastern Europe and assessing the diffusion of Byzantine culture from the viewpoint of both Byzantium and the recipient Slavic civilizations.

The first chapters are devoted to a discussion of the geography of Eastern Europe, with an emphasis on rivers and roads as routes of communication. Eastern Europe is defined elastically as that area, centered in the Balkans and the northern Caucasus and extending up the Danube plain, which was at some time within the cultural orbit of medieval Byzantium. Thus Hungary and Bohemia, affected only marginally by Byzantium, are included, but Poland is not discussed. Geographical factors are emphasized throughout. The author notes that Byzantine civilization was transmitted early over long distances to areas connected by rivers and trade routes, while some mountainous areas in Greece remained pagan *sclovinias* to the end of the Middle Ages.

The early chapters trace the development of Byzantine relations with the East European nations on a regional and chronological basis, with chapters devoted to the Balkans, East Central Europe, the northern Caucasus area, and Russia. For the student and the general reader these sections provide an extraordinarily lucid description of the politics and institutions of the various Slavic nations as they relate to the Byzantine Empire—a subject which too often becomes an incomprehensible maze of wars and dynasties. Obolensky emphasizes institutional and cultural development in his discussion of politics and religion. Thus Symeon's wars with Byzantium are considered important as an indication of the Bulgarian

acquisition of Byzantine political theories, and Bogomilism is interpreted in part as a facet of popular resistance to the dominance of Byzantine civilization in Bulgaria.

In a final section Obolensky provides a general analysis of the factors which aided in the diffusion of Byzantine culture and hindered its reception in various countries, and discusses the features common to the commonwealth—literature, art, religion, and law. The consistency of Byzantine policy toward its northern neighbors throughout its history is stressed. From the time of Justinian, Byzantine diplomacy developed a complicated network of alliances with the peoples beyond its borders which stretched deep into the Caucasus and the steppes of Central Asia. Imperial patronage of missionary activity from the seventh century emphasized Orthodoxy and the supreme position of the universal Christian emperor as inseparable. Throughout Eastern Europe, finally, it was Byzantine monasticism which became the vehicle of cultural diffusion. From the point of view of the Slavic countries, Obolensky believes, the greatest appeal of Byzantine culture lay in the ideas and institutions it offered to monarchy. If East European monarchs acknowledged the theoretical suzerainty of the Byzantine emperor, they were also autonomous rulers of their own peoples, and through conversion to Christianity they gained divine sanction for their rule as well as the impressive trappings of the Byzantine court. Resistance to Byzantine culture, the author concludes, was deep-seated and long lasting, and expressed most strongly as a resistance to Christianity. In pagan revivals, magic, and the development of popular heresies the residue of resistance to Byzantine culture may be detected in Russia as well as Bulgaria. Finally, Obolensky discusses the appeal of Byzantine culture in the late Middle Ages, and concludes with an epilogue on the survival of Byzantine traditions after the fall of Constantinople.

This is a rich book of great importance. The format of the series prescribes that the work emphasize narration and interpretation rather than extensive bibliographical discussion. Nevertheless, the depth of the author's scholarship is evident at all times. This work will be invaluable for students of Byzantine history or Slavic history, and scholars will gain equally from Obolensky's considered judgments.

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ENSERFMENT AND MILITARY CHANGE IN MUSCOVY. By *Richard Hellie*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1971. ix, 432 pp. \$14.50.

Dr. Hellie is convinced that the enserfment of the Russian peasantry must be accounted for either on the basis of state decrees or of broad economic and social developments in which the state did not play the major role; he condemns "the many futile attempts which have been made to combine the uncombinable." With this in mind he surveys all suggested interpretations, from the amateur Tatishchev, who, like Karamzin, worked on the "decree" principle, through the mature professional historians, such as Kliuchevsky and Platonov, who developed "non-decree" interpretations, continued by Soviet historians until the Stalin period. Yet his own position is: "A decree interpretation seems to be correct in the light of the evidence currently available." To be sure, this rests on the definition of