When we mentally picture Byzantinism, we see before us . . . the austere, clear plan of a spacious and capacious structure. We know, for example, that in politics it means autocracy. In religion, it means Christianity with distinct features, which distinguish it from Western churches, from heresies and schisms. In the area of ethics we know that the Byzantine ideal does not have that elevated and in many instances highly exaggerated notion of terrestrial human individual introduced into history by German feudalism.

—Konstantin Leontiev, *Byzantism and Slavdom*, 1875

One of the great hopes of the last generation was that Russia, once freed from the bonds of communism, would rejoin the family of nations as an equal, free, and democratic state. Russia’s progress since the collapse of the USSR has of course not proceeded as some might have expected. As Dimitri Obolensky has commented, “There is much in contemporary Russia that seems unfamiliar and puzzling to the modern Western observer—ideas, institutions, and methods of government that seem to run counter to the basic trends of his own culture.” With economic and demographic collapse followed by boom, and with the progress of democracy questionable at times, the early hopes of 1991 have long since faded, replaced with a realization that Russia would not
ever be a mirror image of any Western state. Though Russia is presumably through the worst of its times, on many counts it strikes many in the West as not a reliable partner but still a potential enemy. "A new Cold War" has been detected by some.\(^2\) One matter that causes particular concern in the West is the behavior of Russia’s security services and their relationship with the central authority of the state.

It is clear that the security services in Russia today are as critical and central as they were under communism. As an analyst at one American think tank has stated, Russia is "a state defined and dominated by former and active duty security and intelligence officers."\(^3\) One Russian researcher has noted that more than 25 percent of Russia’s current governing elites have backgrounds in either the military or security services, including former president and current prime minister Vladimir Putin as a former KGB and FSB officer.\(^4\) The question posed by several thinkers since the collapse of the USSR is if there has been any real change in the management of Russia and its security services.\(^5\) As Amy Knight commented in the mid-1990s, there had been cosmetic change in the security services, but they remained substantially the same structures because "Lubianka still stood and, although there had been changes at the helm inside, the long-awaited reform of the security services had yet to happen. Indeed, by August 1995, the security services had recaptured much of the ground lost in the first days after the August 1991 coup."\(^6\) Part of the answer to the question of "why have the Russians not changed their political behavior significantly since the end of communism?"—really the question that runs throughout the work of Amy Knight and, more recently, that of Edward Lucas—can be answered by saying that Russia’s political behavior between 1917 and 1991 did not seem peculiar to the West because it was communist but because it was Russian. Accordingly, if we want to understand Russia’s political behavior now, we must understand its cultural origins. Russia has political traditions that did not develop out of the Renaissance and Reformation in Western Europe, and before that from the political and religious traditions of Rome. Rather, Russia’s traditions originate from a source largely forgotten in the West: the Byzantine Empire.

One can make more sense of Russia’s security and intelligence culture—as opposed to specific communist or postcommunist cultures—by tracing their common philosophical and historic roots back to their point of origin, between five hundred and a thousand years ago in Constantinople and its empire, the long-lived eastern successor of the Roman Empire. The Byzantines had a strongly bureaucratized and institutionalized intelligence and security culture, which formed the heart of their overall political system, and which strongly influenced the behavior of Tsarist and Communist Russia—and likely still influences it today. "There can be no doubt," wrote the Russian Byzantinist Dimitry Obolensky, "that the influence of Byzantium on Russian history and
culture was far more profound and permanent than that of the Turko-Mongol hordes and more homogenous than that of the modern West." If not the sole driver, Byzantium is a key driver of Russian political, strategic, and intelligence culture. Thus, understanding the Byzantine security culture can help one understand Russian security culture even today. As we note elsewhere in this volume, culture may not suggest what a people will do, but it may suggest how they might do it.

The Byzantine Mark in Russian Political Culture

The tsars of Russia considered their state the legitimate and direct political successor of the Byzantine Empire. As the great Russian-born historian of Byzantium, George Ostrogorsky, wrote in his seminal History of the Byzantine State:

Ivan III, the great liberator and consolidator of the Russian lands, married the daughter of the Despot Thomas Palaeologus, the niece of the last Emperor of Byzantium. He assumed the imperial Byzantine two-headed eagle in his arms, introduced Byzantine ceremonial into Muscovy and soon made Russia the leader of the Christian East as Byzantium had once been. Russia became the obvious heir of the Byzantine Empire and it took over from Constantinople Roman conceptions in their Byzantine form: if Constantinople was the New Rome, Moscow became the “Third Rome.” The great tradition of Byzantium, its faith, its political ideas, its spirituality, lived on through the centuries in the Russian Empire. 8

Whether one agrees completely with Ostrogorsky’s specific point—and many do not—is not entirely relevant, because what we see in Russia through the first Russian Empire is an emulation of Byzantine norms and, especially, Byzantine political thought, through whatever motivation. 9 Key aspects of this thought included the close pairing of the Church to the state to a degree not seen in the Western traditions surrounding Rome, with the tsars of Moscow regarding themselves “as the successors of the Byzantine emperors, and as the representatives of God upon Earth.” 10 This dual conception is referred to by modern theorists as caeseropapism: the political combination of temporal and spiritual control in the hands of a strongly centralized or despotic head of state. 11 It is a political idea often perceived in the “Byzantine Commonwealth” (roughly the modern Orthodox world), and it is perhaps unsurprising that the Byzantine clergy were keen to spread it as they proselytized in the Slavic world “as the Byzantines must have looked on the doctrine as a particularly advantageous export.” 12 Ultimately, it pointed all converts to the Holy City of Constantinople, and thus to the power of their patriarch and their emperor.13

Through their overlapping existence the Russians adhered to the religious leadership of Constantinople, the “second Jerusalem,” and their patriarchs were appointed by the patriarch of Constantinople until near the end of the empire.
Only when Constantinople fell to the Turks in 1453 did the Russians seize the mantle both as the temporal inheritors of the empire and also the spiritual inheritors, Kiev and then Moscow assuming leadership (in their minds, if not that of the patriarch in Constantinople) of the Orthodox world. The Soviet scholars I. M. Lotman and B. A. Uspensky commented that “it is characteristic that the idea of Moscow, the Third Rome, could quite soon be transformed into the idea of Moscow, the Third Jerusalem,” implying in Russia, as in Byzantium, a sense of universal authority and the duty to spread their Right Belief (the meaning of the Greek word “Orthodox”) to the rest of the world.14 The late-nineteenth-century political theorist Konstantin Leontiev positively used the term “Byzantism” to describe the type of society that the Russian Empire needed to counter the “degenerating” influence of the West. Leontiev praised the Byzantine Empire and the tsarist autocracy as societies with a political system that comprised the authoritative power of the monarch and devout following of the Russian Orthodox Church.15 A number of scholars have pointed out these traits in the communist empire of the Soviets that succeeded the Russian Empire. Obolensky says “it would be difficult to resist the impression that there is at least something in common between the religious messianism of the Second and the Third Rome and the belief of the Russian Communist in the exclusive truth of the Marxist Gospel, immortally enshrined in the collective works of Marx.”16

John Dziak, scholar of Soviet security systems, observes that in the Soviet Union one saw something resembling the idea of Christian Empire, but with the Christianity replaced by an alternate ideology: “In a sense a secular theocracy was born in which a priesthood (the party), served by a combined holy office and temple guard (the Cheka), sought to exercise its will.”17 Toynbee saw in the inheritance of Byzantine political theory the seeds of totalitarianism in Russia and the USSR.18

Modern Russia is certainly not a modernized simulacrum of Byzantium; this would take the comparison too far, ignoring the many other influences—Eastern, Western, and indigenous—on Russia since the collapse of Byzantium and its “commonwealth.”19 This chapter attempts to make the comparison on a much more restricted scale, by looking primarily at the Byzantine culture of intelligence and security. If we are to discern whether there is some noticeable or significant remnant of Byzantine intelligence and security culture left in modern Russia, we first must establish what that Byzantine culture looked like. We can point, however, to a number of incidents that have led many commentators to say that postcommunist Russia is a very similar polity to the USSR before it: Putin’s autocracy and near-permanency at the head of government, deeply flawed elections and press censorship, Russia’s behavior in Chechnya and Georgia, its often lethal treatment of political critics of the regime domestically and abroad, and even the persecution of non-Orthodox religious groups.20
can take the constructivist view that Russia’s political *culture* is greater than its particular political *ideology*—whether imperial, communist, or officially federal and democratic—and that it is this culture that most greatly influences how the state handles such matters as security.

The Byzantine Culture of Intelligence and Security

The Byzantine Empire itself was the direct political successor to the Roman Empire ("Byzantine" is, in fact, a modern term, and these people at the time thought of and called themselves Romanoi, Romans). Indeed, there is no clear agreement on when "Roman" ceases and "Byzantine" begins in terms of empire, though one might say either 324 (the founding of Constantinople) or 395 (the death of Theodosius I). The Byzantines lived alongside what most imagine as the classical Roman Empire of its eponymous city for a troubled century, then continued its evolution from that point, eventually becoming a political entity sui generis, with the politically centralized state organs of the Romans overlaid with the religious/ideological mantle of Orthodox Christianity.

The root of this political system, we must recall, clearly comes in the inheritance of the Roman Empire. The role of the government in Rome was to provide for the security of the polity. In Byzantium we have the addition of the Christian God, and his close association with the emperor, allowing the new theory "that the purpose of action of any kind was to foster the smooth operation of the state machine, of the empire *by the grace of God.*"21 Thus the infrastructure of the state was there primarily for purposes of what we would now call security, specifically that of God through the person of the emperor—not directly for the welfare of citizens. One might look for a modern political equivalent in what Dziak calls the "counterintelligence state."22 He describes this as a political system that displays "an overarching concern with ‘enemies’ both internal and external. Security and extirpation of real or presumed threats become the premier enterprise of such systems."23 The fixation on security, as he describes it, demands that "all societal institutions" are constructed for the aim of security. In this structure, he says, the "security service is the principal guardian of the party; the two together constitute a permanent counterintelligence enterprise to which all other major political, economic and social questions are subordinated."24 Replacing the word "Church" for "party," Dziak's description of the Soviet state holds up remarkably well when compared with the structures of the Byzantine state.

Byzantium’s existence was always precarious. It was the single biggest political entity in the Mediterranean for most of the period from the ninth to twelfth centuries, and was certainly the richest as late as the twelfth century.25 It had no firm allies, and hungry upstart competitors like the Lombards, Normans, Bulgars, and Turks sought to take from its riches. It was almost constantly at...
war during the 1,100 years of its existence, and its views on intelligence would have been conditioned by the fact that no foreign (i.e., non-Orthodox and, later, non–Greek-speaking) person or state could be trusted. Indeed, one might argue that the Byzantines would have viewed war as the natural state of being, with peace as an aberration, rather the opposite of the current mindset in the West. What is more, the Byzantines knew that war was expensive and dangerous. As John Haldon has written, the Byzantine self-image “was one of a beleaguered Christian state fighting the forces of darkness, with foes against whom it had constantly to be on its guard.”26 This mindset—of constant, dangerous, expensive conflict—naturally put the Byzantines’ thoughts toward how to avoid war despite its prevalence.27 As Haldon continued, the Byzantines sought to “evolve a whole panoply of defensive techniques, among which warfare was only one element, and by no means necessarily the most useful.”28 Intelligence, covert action, trickery, and gold-lubricated diplomacy were thus the natural recourse of a state that sought to manage the threats to God and emperor that lurked at every single border.

Byzantium was, in short, paranoid—and justifiably so. In Constantinople the whole machinery of state was geared to security: State infrastructure served to facilitate the movements of armies and the intelligence that triggered their deployments; the functionaries of state—both internal and external, and central and provincial—had as their main duties the detection of enemies or their destruction; and the Orthodox Church, the source of religious legitimacy for the emperor, played a central role in the security of the state through actual intelligence functions as well as offering strong diplomatic entrée abroad. As with Dziak’s description of the USSR, in the Byzantine world all the organs of state were designed to ensure the “self-perpetuation” of the state rather than its well-being.29 Examining this infrastructure in detail helps in understanding its pervasiveness in the medieval state.

One piece of security infrastructure inherited by the Byzantines from its Rome-based antecedent was the postal system. The sixth-century historian Procopius notes in his Secret History that the “earlier emperors, in order to gain the most speedy information concerning the movements of the enemy in each territory, seditions or unforeseen accidents in individual towns, and the actions of the governors and other officials in all parts of the Empire, and also in order that those who conveyed the yearly tribute might do so without danger or delay, had established a rapid service of public couriers.”30 If a modern Westerner were to be told that their state’s postal system was there primarily to spy on external enemies, governors, and citizens alike, they would likely be slightly concerned, but this system was a natural consequence of the strategic and political environment in which the state existed and which was the cause of its elaborate governance. As a system designed for purposes of security and intelligence, it should not be a revelation that those who worked for the post were in turn security
functionaries, the *agentes in rebus* (literally “agents for things,” perhaps best translated as “general agents”). Their duties included the supervision of the roads and inns of the *cursus publicus* (later the Hellenized δημουσίος δρόμος), the carrying of letters, and verifying that a traveler was carrying the right warrant (*evectio*, δρνθημα) while using the *cursus*. Other tasks of the *agentes* included supervising the provincial bureaucracy and delivering imperial commands, often staying in the area to ensure their implementation. Being outside the control of the provincial governors, some *agentes*, the *curiosi* (Greek: διατρέκοντες), were appointed as inspectors and acted as a sort of secret police reporting to the emperor. They were used, also, to supervise the arrest of senior officials as required, to escort senior Romans into exile, and so even to assist in the enforcement of government regulation of the Church—a requirement of the *caeseropapist* state.

The public post was part of a larger internal security structure. The tenth-century great hetaeriarch (μέγας έταιρειάρχης), or captain of one of the guard units, was the chief officer responsible for protecting the emperor against plots. One might presume that it was these officers who “at once informed” Emperor Alexius I of the senatorial/military plot against him in 1083, the officers’ plot of 1091, the nobles’ plot of 1094, and half a dozen other plots besides. Byzantine history is infamous and eponymous for its endless cycle of plots—the contemporary chronicler Michael Psellus describes some nineteen serious plots against emperors in the period 976–1081—and in reading the various Byzantine primary texts, one sees how often these were smashed, often based on what the chroniclers describe only as the information “of a peasant,” perhaps “a priest,” or often just “somebody.”

Ultimately, Byzantium resembles to a good degree Dziak’s “counterintelligence state,” where people were constantly searching for plots that were assumed to always be present—which in the case of Constantinople they likely were. It was a dangerous business being a Byzantine emperor; between the years 395 and 1453 there were 107 Byzantine emperors, with an average of ten years on the throne. Only 34 of these emperors died natural deaths. Psellus recounts the advice given to the great warrior-emperor Basil II (who would convert the Kievan Slavs to Christianity and begin the great relationship between the Byzantines and the Russians) from his would-be overthower, Sclerus: “Cut-down the governors who become over-proud. . . . Let no generals on campaign have too many resources. Exhaust them with unjust taxations to keep them busied with their own affairs. Admit no women to the imperial councils. Be accessible to no one. Share with few your intimate plans.”

One might think these words were those Stalin himself might have uttered. We can surmise that Alexius I, founder of the Comnene Dynasty, ran a large network of agents to protect his reign. With regard to plotting, phrases such as “the Emperor, however, was not unaware of it” or “he had reliable information”
from “many informants” dot the Alexiad; indeed, they are pointedly made by Anna Comnena in her The Alexiad to show her father’s shrewdness in beating the enemies of the state through superior information. The eleventh-century provincial official Kekaumenos offers this advice in his Strategikon: “If you hear of [an accusation] against your official, that he is plotting against your majesty, do not let the evil lie hidden within your soul and aim to destroy him. Instead, make a thorough investigation, at first keeping things secret. But if you then discover the truth, the charge against him should be made openly.” Failing to collect all the evidence with enough skill, the text then seems to say (it has lacunas), “You then make [him] your enemy and many other [enemies] on account of him.” Being clever enough to weed out and condemn plotters had a practical and social value in Byzantium. A sound-minded Byzantine ruler, Kekaumenos suggests, always distrusts the motivations of his servants and actively works to protect against their plotting. We should add that this is not a uniquely Byzantine view of Byzantine life; the Crusaders who came into contact with the empire almost uniformly viewed the Byzantines as perfidious, treacherous, and undependable, as well as unmanly for being so.

Let us go back to the official security structures of the state, which may have helped emperors such as Basil II and Alexius I secure their thrones for so long. As the Byzantine Empire moved past the near-fatal crisis of the Arab invasions of the seventh and eighth centuries, the administration of the postal system evolved, with the senior officer becoming the senior minister and principal adviser to the emperor until superseded in the twelfth century by the logothete of the secreton (offices or bureaus, μονοθέτης το σεκρέτον), a position not unlike the “principal secretary” post filled by Sir Francis Walsingham in Elizabethan England. Thus effectively, the roads and the post—the intelligence infrastructure—were managed by the closest thing the Byzantines had to a combined foreign minister and prime minister, which shows the importance of security and intelligence gathering in the governance of the state. Perhaps more interestingly, for our purposes here, it was administratively grouped either with or alongside the Scrinium Barbarorum (βύξαβραγος), or Bureau of Barbarians. Mistaking the Bureau of Barbarians as an espionage office, as has been done by some, betrays a Western cast of mind: that such duties are entrusted to a single agency, whereas in Constantinople security intelligence was the job of much of the government. Regardless, the bureau was established in the mid-fifth century, and it is first mentioned in the Constitution of Theodosius II. It was still in existence at the time of Philotheos in the tenth century, and it is presumed by J. M. Bury to have “exercised supervision over all foreigners visiting Constantinople.” Although, on the surface, it was a protocol office—its main duty was to ensure that foreign envoys were properly cared for and received sufficient state funds for their maintenance, and it kept all the official
translators—it clearly had a security function as well. Though not directly associated with the Bureau of Barbarians, an anonymous work called On Strategy from the sixth century offers advice about foreign embassies and envoys that was no doubt shared by the Bureau: “[Envoys] who are sent to us should be received honorably and generously, for everyone holds envoys in high esteem. Their attendants, however, should be kept under surveillance to keep them from obtaining any information by asking questions of our people.”44 This was the job likely fulfilled by the bureau. A twelfth-century Italian ambassador to Byzantium, Bishop Liudprand of Cremona, spits venom about his Greek minders, whom, he perceived accurately, were there as his jailers rather than his protectors.45 We know such surveillance failed from time to time; the Arab hostage Al Jarmi sent back to the caliphs of Damascus a detailed Byzantine order of battle in the year 845.46

The Byzantines knew well that embassies and envoys were as much for intelligence purposes as for diplomatic, that indeed the former was a precondition for the latter.47 A number of Byzantine texts thus speak of the role of envoys and how they should be selected and trained, with a premium placed on religious orthodoxy and reliability: “The envoys we send out should be men who have the reputation of being religious, who have never been denounced for any crime or publicly condemned.”48 This same work stresses that the envoy must be able to dissemble and lie about Roman intentions, and not to give too much of the empire’s intentions away if he happens to find the receiving state unexpectedly unfriendly. Theophanes offers the example of Daniel of Sinope, an envoy sent to Emir Walid of Syria not really to discuss terms, but “to make a precise examination of the Arabs’ move against Romania, and their forces.”49 Above all, the envoy was there to protect the security of the emperor (and thus empire) in any way he could. As Bréhier notes: “It was above all in the relations with the established states, whose power could menace Constantinople, that imperial diplomacy had to deploy all its resources, following with attention the evolutions of their internal politics and producing intelligence on their forces, in an era where the idea of permanent embassies did not exist. Thanks to its strong traditions and its ability to discover the weak points of its enemies, [Byzantine diplomats] several times preserved the existence of the Empire, in instances where [information] proved more advantageous than military force.”50

For the Byzantines diplomacy was the handmaiden of intelligence, and intelligence was the shield of the state. It seems the polities within the Byzantine sphere of interest understood this well. On receiving a Byzantine envoy in the tenth century, the khagan of the Central Asian Turks asked, “Are you not those Romans who have ten tongues and one deceit?”51

The Church, as well as diplomats, was always a potential source of intelligence for the Byzantines. Interestingly, it was monks who were involved in the most famous case of Byzantine industrial espionage: the theft of silkworms from
China. According to Procopius and Theophanes, two Nestorian monks offered to steal the secret of silk from China so that the Byzantines could cultivate it themselves. Other priests, monks, and religious figures appear in Byzantine intelligence practice, and this is reflected even in the Arabic record, as Al-Asmari notes in chapter 6 of this volume. In 756 and 757, Theodore, the patriarch of Antioch, was exiled by Salim of Damascus for “revealing their affairs to the Emperor Constantine by letters.” Theophanes hastens to note that this was a false accusation. In the compilation on governing commissioned by Constantine VII, Porphyrogenitus, we read that itinerant monks acted as secret messengers, and perhaps spies, for the empire in the intrigues against the Armenian princes. One should not be terribly surprised by the role of the religious establishment in the intelligence role. In part, one can point to the intense association of Orthodox Christianity with the throne, making sense of the actions of Patriarch Theodore, who would have viewed Constantine as the protector of the faith against the satanic “Agarenes” (i.e., the “Sons of Hagar,” as the Byzantines often called Muslims, and a term still used in the Russian Orthodox Church).

This same “symphony” of Church and state made the Byzantine clergy and monastic community inevitably part of the administrative systems of the empire—and, from 1039 to 1448, when Constantinopolitan bishops served in Kiev and Moscow, the main part of the Russian administrative system as well—and thus both intimately part of the security state and at times even attached to various factions of government. They were most intimately involved when the Church felt the security of the state threatened by heretical sects. When the Church detected heresy, the whole weight of the state’s force was laid against them. An Orthodox state was one that took spiritual direction from the patriarch of Constantinople, and because the emperor was the protector of the Church, any truly Orthodox state was by definition an ally of the empire—Bulgaria became an enemy in the tenth century by declaring its Church autocephalous, that is, independent from Constantinople. So the work of men such as Constantine (“Cyril”) and Methodius in composing Cyrillic, and keeping parts of what is now Moravia and Romania within the imperial fold while excluding the influence of Rome, was key in turning potential foes into loyal subjects of the one true “holy catholic and apostolic Church” of Constantinople. This is very much akin to the Soviet ideal of spreading Communist ideology to ensure allies, both diplomatic and military, throughout the world, and the vitriol spread by Moscow against any divergent ideology was as strong as that of the Patriarchate against heterodox churches, which included its peer-competitor, Rome. The existential role the Church played in the security of the empire cannot possibly be overstated.

The empire, however unitary and centralized it appeared, depended inevitably upon its governors and generals. By the reign of Emperor Constans II (641–
68) the empire was defended by what was called the “thematic” system, themes being provinces ruled by military governors and defended by militias of settled ex-soldiers.59 The thematic armies were thus largely static and nonprofessional, and were bolstered by the Tagma, the smaller imperial professional field force kept near the capital. Worse, from the mid-seventh to early tenth centuries, the empire was on the defensive on many fronts, surrounded by enemies, and with never enough troops to deal with everyone at once. Accordingly, much of the day-to-day defense of the empire was delegated to the thematic governors, who had to absorb attacks as best they could, conduct guerrilla and small-unit harassment as they could, and hope the tagmatic forces might show up in time to assist in the destruction of the enemy as it retreated loaded with booty. 60 Edward Luttwak argues persuasively that this “elastic” defensive system suited the empire’s more limited military means and naturally placed a premium on intelligence.61

Moreover, the enemies of the state varied, and field army commanders needed to know who they were fighting to know how they were going to fight. As the great warrior-emperor Maurice (582–602) says in his Strategikon: ‘We must now treat of the tactics and characteristics of each race which might cause trouble to our state. The purpose of this chapter is to enable those who intend to wage war against these peoples to prepare themselves properly. For all nations do not fight in a single formation or in the same manner, and one cannot deal with them all in the same way.’62 Following this is a description of the tactics, techniques, and procedures of many of the neighboring peoples, and in this we can perceive the great intelligence structures the Byzantines maintained. Constantine VII’s De Administrando Imperio is a critical guide to foreign policy and diplomacy written for the emperor’s youthful son, and spends much of its substantial length giving detailed descriptions of the empire’s neighboring peoples, their internal politics, and thus how the empire could best deal with them. Romilly Jenkins, an editor of the work, notes how some of the material in this “secret and confidential document” is clearly derived from secret sources.63 We also know that though Constantine authored this work in his long years of enforced idleness, some of the material is drawn from other, preexisting sources.64 Was there in Byzantium a system whereby information from diplomats, governors, the Church, the Bureau of Barbarians, the logothetes, and other sources was compiled and pushed out to consumers in government and in military commands? We have no information to indicate whether this was the case, but it is possible that it existed at points before the early thirteenth century.

To understand the fullness of the Byzantine approach to intelligence, one therefore needs to look to the numerous military manuals published for the edification of both emperors and governors alike. In the defensive centuries of the empire, a premium was placed on knowing the enemy and on trying to
predict its aggressive actions, in order to make the thematic-tagmatic system of defense function. The military governors needed to have information superiority over their opponents in order to allow their smaller forces to cope effectively with the larger field armies of their varied enemies. Spying was thus viewed as part and parcel of both governorship and military strategy. In the first instance, these military manuals place great weight on the standard military practice of a “good number of competent and trustworthy scouts.”

But scouting is not the complete solution for defense, notes another tenth-century work titled Campaign Organization, given that “actual spies, however, are the most useful. They go into the enemy’s country and can find out exactly what is going on there and report it back to those who sent them.” What is interesting is the universality of the responsibility to spy, and among whom: “The Domestic [the Byzantine equivalent of the commander of land forces was titled the “Domestic of the Schools”] and the generals along the border should be sure to have spies not only among the Bulgarians, . . . [but also among all neighboring peoples, even those at peace,] so that none of their plans will not be known to us.” Espionage was a job of all field commanders, both central and provincial, and against all neighboring nations. Everyone was a potential enemy or ally.

The texts spend some time discussing the tradecraft of spying. We have seen how the Byzantines conducted espionage under diplomatic cover at the highest level; at the lower level they also made use of business or commercial cover. They understood that they were working in hostile environments and had to pay special attention to security protocols. On Strategy’s author notes:

Before leaving on his assignment each spy should speak in secrecy about his mission to one of his closest associates. Both should agree upon arrangements for communicating safely with one another, setting a definite place and manner of meeting. The place could be the public market in which many of our people, as well as foreigners, gather. The manner could be on the pretext of trading. In this way they should be able to escape notice of the enemy. One offers our goods for sale or barter, and the other gives foreign goods in exchange and informs us of the enemy’s plans against us and of the situation in their country.

Because of the nature of communications in the ancient world—high-speed imperial couriers notwithstanding—the thematic governors had to maintain relations with their corresponding magnates in neighboring provinces. These relations should be used, Nikephoros notes, for the purposes of intelligence. Playing on the deceits that earned the Byzantines such disdain from the later Western Crusaders and Victorian historians, the local governor “should pretend to make friends with the emirs who control the castles in the border regions. He should also write to them and send out men with gift baskets. As a result, with all this coming and going, the general might be able to get a clear picture of the plans and intentions of the enemy.” Like the author of On Strategy, the
emperor suggests that the governor ought to attempt redundant coverage of the foe: “He ought also to have the businessmen go out” to spy. Byzantine leaders were not too class conscious, however, and also “sent spies disguised as beggars,” as Leo the Deacon says.

The Byzantines, as one can see, had a very highly developed conception of the role and practice of intelligence. Unlike any other organized polity until the modern era, they maintained bureaucratically organized security structures (though never intelligence organizations specifically), which century after century ensured a constant flow of information about the external and internal enemies of the state to leader and field commanders. All levels of the state leadership were engaged in spying on the emperor’s ubiquitous foes, in what closely matches Dziak’s description of the counterintelligence state. The role of the entire structure of governance was “to put it briefly, to make sure that nothing which [the enemy] might be thinking of will escape us.” Because everyone who was not Orthodox or Byzantine was almost by definition a foe, intelligence needed to be an ongoing and natural part of governance. Luttwak argues persuasively that two key tenets of Byzantine “operational code” were “gather intelligence on the enemy and his mentality, and monitor his movements constantly” and “subversion is the path to victory.” This ongoing and ambient need for intelligence, and the stress on covert action, made the Byzantines distinct from their predecessors in Rome, Greece, and elsewhere—and were part of what links them to modern Russia.

**The Reflections of Byzantine Intelligence in Modern Russia**

Knowing that there is a strong Byzantine link in general Russian culture, and then coupling that with what we can construct of the Byzantine intelligence tradition, we might thus be able to see if there are noticeable artifacts of Byzantium’s security state within recent and current Russian practice. To reiterate the point made in the introduction to this volume about political inheritance, “the people and the rulers of the Kievan State had good opportunities of becoming acquainted with the main principles of Byzantine political philosophy, . . . [and] it can be seen that many Byzantine ideas were incorporated into the political structure of the State of Kiev, and that they became a basis for Russia’s further evolution.” Establishing direct antecedence is not the purpose of this chapter, and is really not possible anyway. It is also clear that Byzantine writings on things such as espionage and intelligence are actually quite restricted within the overall restricted literary legacy of Byzantium—we should likely never say that political Russia was ever directly influenced by Byzantine military treatises, for instance. What is being argued here is that the way the Byzantines managed their security and intelligence was a function of the political culture of the state, the same political culture that was inherited later by the Kievan and then
the Russian state, and that has served the Soviet and subsequent post-Soviet Russian state.

There are links that show the Tsarist and then Soviet security apparatus to have a Byzantine pedigree based on inherited political culture. The secret chancery, or prikaz tainykh del, is described by Russian historians as the personal chancery of the tsar in the seventeenth century. Initially, it was led by a secret clerk called a d’yak. This word is interesting because it is etymologically derived from the Greek work diakonos (deacon), a monastic or Church rank that hints at the strong role of Byzantine Church governance in Kievan and early Muscovite Russia. The main function of the secret prikaz was to supervise both other prikazy and other officials of the tsar, such as diplomats and military officers. The d’yak reported directly to the sovereign. A subsequent organization was the eighteenth-century Tainaya rozysknykh del kantseleyariya. Under the leadership of A. I. Ushakov, a veteran from the previous secret chancery, this office supervised the investigation of political suspects throughout the empire and took immediate responsibility for the most dangerous delinquents. These offices bear a resemblance, in bureaucratic terms, to the logothetes and secretum of tenth-century Byzantium, not surprising given the clerical origin of both. It is in these organizations, modeled at least in part on Byzantine methods of government, that we find the predecessors of the modern Russian security apparatus. The Cheka, the NKVD, and eventually the KGB were all the successors of the Ohkrana “in at least equal size and in more merciless temper, if in somewhat different form.” The FSB and SVR would emerge from the Soviet structures much more seamlessly.

One can draw no specific indication of Byzantine bureaucratic organization in the organization of the Soviet and subsequent Russian state, but in spirit, the way the Soviets organized their government for security purposes is still quite Russian. Few would argue that in his control of the security organs of the state, Joseph Stalin’s Soviet Union behaved in an imperial fashion and forms the model of Dziak’s counterintelligence state. Like the Byzantine system, Amy Knight observed that in early post-Soviet Russia “the president ‘directs the activity’ of the security services, and [the law] diminishes the role of parliamentary oversight entirely.” Other observers have noted, as mentioned above, that modern Russia’s government and elites come in large part from the security services. Like their Byzantine forebears, the Soviets drew no particular distinction between “overt” and “covert” in the persecution of the enemies of the state. Diplomacy in the Western usage tries to draw a broad line between its proper functioning and the underhanded methods of the state’s intelligence agencies, to the point where organizations such as the UK Secret Intelligence Service (a.k.a. MI-6) are entrusted with the specific task of “secret diplomacy” where their Foreign Office colleagues could not tread. The Soviet term “active measures” (aktivinyye meropriatia) took in both overt and covert actions to
influence foreign countries, whereas most other terms used in the West focus on the covert. As Richard Shultz and Roy Godson point out, the terms “special activities” and “covert actions” tend to indicate that they are made of separate stuff from the substance of foreign policy, but “in the Soviet view, . . . no such distinctions are apparent.”

Whereas a Western ambassador might balk at purposefully deceiving an interlocutor for fear of losing credibility, the Byzantine, Russian, or Soviet diplomat would not, as might be witnessed in the story of Soviet diplomatic disinformation surrounding the Cuban Missile Crisis.

Of the purges and show trials of Stalin’s Russia, we have ample evidence in the Byzantine state. Theophanes notes Justinian’s behavior after discovering a plot against him by one Herakleios, who

was brought in bonds from Thrace along with all the other officers who were his comrades. Justinian hanged them all on the wall. He also sent men into the interior who rooted out many more officers and killed them, those who had been active against him and those who had not alike. . . . Justinian blinded the patriarch Kallinikos and exiled him to Rome. . . . [He] destroyed an uncountable number of political and military figures; many he gave bitter deaths by throwing them into the sea in sacks. He invited others to a fine meal and hanged some of them when they got up; others he cut down. Because of all this everyone was terrified.

If one were to change the names from Herakleios and Kallinikos to Tukachevsky and Zinoviev, and substitute Stalin for Justinian, this story retains a frightening degree of fidelity. Such Soviet-sounding stories are repeated in Comnena’s The Alexiad, who notes even her adored father’s use of torture to uncover plots against him.

The Russians and Byzantines also share a penchant for disposing of dissidents in particularly brutal fashion. As with the assassination of Georgi Markov in London by the Bulgarian secret police, or the assassination of Leon Trotsky in Mexico by the NKVD, so the Byzantines were willing and able to destroy enemies of the state abroad. After making a peace treaty with the Bulgarians, Emperor Constantine V “sent men into Bulgaria who seized Sklabounos the ruler of Sebereis, a man who had worked many evils in Thrace. Christianos, an apostate from Christianity who headed the Skamaroi, was also captured. His hands and feet were cut off at the mole of St. Thomas. . . . [He was eviscerated] and then he was burned.”

Look at what is described here: Imperial agents did not just execute a traitor, they also kidnapped him and returned him to imperial territory so that he could be executed spectacularly. Examples of such “extraordinary rendition” are noted several times in Byzantine texts. The poisoning of Alexander Litvinenko, as it is suggested, by his former Chekist peers would not seem strange to the Byzantines in any aspect other than the particular method. They would likely heartily agree with the assassination’s necessity.
For the Byzantines, various populations along the borders were troublesome, and so they were forcibly uprooted and moved to parts of the empire where they had less opportunity to cause harm. The heretical Athenganoi, the Paulicians, and much of the Armenian aristocracy were relocated between the eighth and tenth centuries "to remove recalcitrant elements which, if left in their homeland, might have become serious sources of trouble." Such forced movements of populations, most often minority groups perceived as security risks, were a frequent recourse of Stalin, who took thirteen entire minority nations that "totaled more than 2 million people [and] deported [them] to internal exile." This has even occurred in post-Communist Russia, though to a much smaller degree. Beyond these, however, is a general climate of security. Like the Byzantines, Russia has for most of its political existence viewed itself as being surrounded by threats. As George Kennan put it in his famous "Long Telegram," at bottom a "neurotic view of world affairs is [a] traditional and instinctive [part of the] Russian sense of insecurity." Causation and correlation are hard to distinguish here. Do the Byzantines and the Russians look alike simply because they share, randomly, a similar worldview? Or do they share a similar worldview because of a shared religious/ideological background? Here the "layer cake" of culture and the thickness of the intervening centuries of history make it hard to give a definitive answer.

One of the most curious aspects of the current Russian security environment is the resurgence of religion. In the 2000 National Security Concept, the Putin administration stated, "assurance of the Russian Federation's national security also includes protecting the cultural and spiritual-moral legacy and the historical traditions and standards of public life, and preserving the cultural heritage of all Russia's peoples. There must be a state policy to maintain the population's spiritual and moral welfare, prohibit the use of airtime to promote violence or base instincts, and counter the adverse impact of foreign religious organizations and missionaries." Here we have the highest authority directly relating the health of Russia's traditional religion, Orthodoxy, to the security of the state. Several significant works of scholarship have identified that this "tendency to see religious difference as, at least in part, a potential security threat is shared" by both the Orthodox Church and Vladimir Putin, and presumably the current government. Equally interesting is the fact that Putin, an apparently practicing Orthodox Christian himself, ensured that in 2002 the Federal Security Agency (FSB) rededicated its traditional Orthodox chapel in the Lubyanka. This, wrote Julie Elkner, "set the seal on the special relationship between the FSB and the Russian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate)." Deputy FSB director Vladimir Shul'ts hailed the consecration of the church as a "truly emblematic event," which, Elkner suggests, should be "viewed in the light of the complex and dramatic history of relations between the secret police and the Orthodox Church." One commentator has convincingly described how...
the Russian Foreign Ministry has been harnessing the Orthodox Church as a tool to control expatriate Russian communities outside Russia via the reuniting of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia with the Patriarchate in Moscow. 

Although John Anderson relates this increasing state Orthodoxy to the politicized Patriarchate under Peter the Great, it is clear on review that the tradition of politicized state religion has a longer pedigree indeed, and one can note the similarity to Byzantine views on the subject going back nearly a millennium. What will be interesting to see is if this view continues with the current degree of energy once Putin has left the political scene. Regardless, that Orthodoxy should be so resurgent in Russia after seventy years of enforced atheism shows the resilience of cultural habit over the longer term. It reinforces our argument in the conclusion of this volume that culture is an indicator not of what but how.

Echoes of Empire

By no means is it the case that Russia is solely bound by its Byzantine heritage, for though there are many similarities, differences abound as well. As was noted in the introduction to this volume, there are simply too many unaccountable variables that scholars simply cannot untangle. At each stage of Russia’s history since the founding of the Kievan and Muscovite states, the Russians as a people have been a unique and independent force in European and Asian history. There have been many influences on Russia over the centuries, each piling on top of the other like layers in a cake: Byzantine, Mongol, Western European, and the powerful rules of men like Ivan IV, Peter the Great, Lenin, and Stalin, who shaped history and culture with sheer force of personality. But just as biblical scholars and paleographers seek the “ur-text” as they trace their work’s history, so in the field of intelligence and security one can seek some original source of behaviors that predate any future evolutions. In Russia one has a clear source of this in the history of the Byzantine Empire.

The importance of this particular argument can neither be overstated nor ignored. As explained above, it must be clear that the Russians are their own people, with a political and social volition beyond their cultural antecedents. When the nations of the West, conversely, try to understand the behavior of the Russian state—or the historic behavior of its Soviet or Tsarist predecessors—some keys need to be provided to unlock the behavior and make sense of it. Especially when dealing with the behavior of Russia in its security culture and its manifestation in intelligence, a heritage significantly different from that of the Western European and Anglo-Saxon states is clearly at work. It is in the parallels to the great empire of Constantinople where one may begin to see inside, or rather deeply behind, many Russian behaviors.
Can one extend the argument made here about Russia’s Byzantine inheritance to other states of the Byzantine Commonwealth, such as Romania, Bulgaria, Serbia, and the closest inheritor, Greece? Perhaps to some degree. Here one would also need to account not only for the reimported Russian influence of the Communist era but also for more than five hundred years of the Ottomans’ occupation—and the latter featured rule by their dragoman and hospodar client rulers, often Phanariote Greeks, which, though strongly Hellenic, was more clerical in tone. Greece under the colonels was strongly authoritarian and had all the features of a police state, and Bulgaria and Serbia have clearly had their troubles with authoritarian security cultures since their post-Communist independence; yet just as clearly, states such as Romania (noted for its strong Phanariote political culture as late as the nineteenth century) have altered their political culture radically since the end of communist rule and cut a hard course toward democracy and an accountable security structure in a Western European mold. Ultimately, as quoted elsewhere in this volume, as W. Somerset Maugham asserted, it is clear that “tradition is a guide and not a gaoler.”

Epigraph and Acknowledgment


Notes

6. Knight, Spies without Cloaks, 244.
7. Obolensky, Byzantium and the Slavs, 83.


23. Ibid., 1.

24. Ibid., 2.


35. Comnena, Alexiad, 201, 384.
37. Comnena, Alexiad: “was not unaware,” 184, 202, 278, 297; “reliable information,” 130; “informants,” 142.
42. Theodosius II, Novitia. 21.
43. Bury, Philotheus, 93.
50. Bréhier, Institutions de l’Empire, 316; author’s translation.
51. Obolensky, Byzantium and the Slavs, 19.
56. Meyendorff, Byzantine Legacy, 8.
57. Obolensky, Byzantium and the Slavs, 109.
59. John Haldon, Byzantium in the Seventh Century (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 208ff.; some scholars say it was established under Emperor Heraclius, by 640.


61. Luttwak, Grand Strategy, 5–6, 416.


64. Constantine VII was first under the regency, then the rule, of the former admiral Romanus Lecapenus, who made himself emperor and ruled from 922 to 940. Only on Romanus’s death did Constantine VII rise to be sole emperor.


68. On Skirmishing, para. 7, 163.

69. Ibid.


71. Campaign Organization, para. 18, 293.


76. Ibid., 532.


78. Knight, Spies without Cloaks, 221.


81. Ibid., 323.


84. Comnena, Alexiad, 384.

85. Theophanes, Chronicle of Theophanes, para. 436, 125.


89. B. Nahajlo, “Forcible Population Transfers, Deportations and Ethnic Cleansing in the
90. George Kennan, “The Long Telegram,” cable, Embassy in Moscow to State Depart-
ment, February 22, 1946.
92. John Anderson, “Putin and the Orthodox Church: Asymmetric Symphonia?” Journal
94. Daniel P. Payne, “Spiritual Security, the Russian Orthodox Church, and the Russian
Foreign Ministry: Collaboration or Cooptation?” Journal of Church and State 52, no. 4 (2010).
95. L. S. Stavrianos, The Balkans since 1453 (London: Hurst, 2002), 270. The Phanar was
the neighborhood in Constantinople left to the Greeks after the conquest of 1453, and
repopulated in the decades after by Greek speakers from other parts of the Ottoman Empire,
often traders. Their language skills were harnessed by the Ottomans, and the term “Drago-
man” means “translator,” the representative of the Ottoman governor, who himself would
remain distant from the local population.
96. Ibid., 692.
97. Larry L. Watts, “Intelligence Reform in Europe’s Emerging Democracies: Conflicting