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The image of Alexander Nevskij in the battle of Ivan IV against the infidels

This paper is based on presentation *Alexander Nevskij and the Holy War* I held this year in Leeds international medieval conference, and explains why the text is written in English. When commenting it, please feel free to use Finnish.

1) Introduction

Using the term *Holy War* is not very simple, especially when we are talking about the wars of the orthodox princes of medieval Russia. The concept of the Holy War is first of all connected with the western religious mission where fighting against the infidel conquerors of the Holy Land, the Saracens of Palestine, became the duty of the aristocracy. Even though the crusading ideology stayed alien to the orthodox tradition, there is still some resemblance in the attitude to the justification of war.

In this paper I want to question if it is justified to use the term *Holy War* in Alexander Nevskij's case, and if it is, then in what sense can we use it. Alexander Nevskij (1220-1263) was a prince who confronted the western troops who were carrying out the papal crusading mission in the Baltic area in the middle of the 13th century. He is a much disputed figure, who for Russians has for centuries represented a warrior ideal defending their country and religion. It has been a standard in Russian historiography to present the image of Alexander as a hero who cut out the western crusade movement to the lands of Russia. Also Finnish nationally minded historiography has stressed the participation of a Finnish Bishop Tuomas in the Swedish campaign on the Neva in 1240 giving the poorly reported Neva campaign a full scale crusading status.

Recently, some historians have doubted the significance of the battles of Alexander, the one fought against the Swedes by the river Neva in 1240 and the one that was fought against the Germans in the Lake Peipus in 1242. Inevitably this makes one doubt if the large-scale western Crusade movement ever took place in northern Russia during Alexander's reign. According to the new views, the battles in question, which were earlier considered to be so fateful and in which the "aggression of the Catholic Church" was quelled, would be more accurately characterised as border skirmishes typical of the period, and the significance of these skirmishes did not particularly differ from other battles fought in the border regions of Russia.

Alexander's image as a warrior who cut out the western crusading movement is mostly based on his hagiography, *The Life of Alexander Nevskij*, one of the most popular medieval prince descriptions of Russia. It is a source that creates a coherent, well known and in all its harmony and perfection an iconlike image, with which people's impressions of Alexander Nevskij have been influenced.

In the *Life* his battles are compared to the Israelian wars against their enemies. These biblical references give us a clear idea of the just war where God stands on the side of the righteous one. This illustrates the eschatological side of the Holy Wars. The just war is a war in which God's will has been manifested and only on the other side of the participants, the God's chosen people, are morally perfect. The *Life of Alexander* represents the heavenly battles between the forces of light and darkness in its battle descriptions. In the just war tradition, the enemy is an ultimate threat, the ultimate evil, which justifies the bloody and violent war.

Alexander Nevskij was officially canonised only in the year 1547, which made him an officially venerated all-Russian saint after three centuries after his battles against the western enemies, the "Romans" - like the *Life* called the Swedes. Alexander's righteous example made him one of the Stalin's figureheads when appealing to the Soviet people to take a last stand against the ultimate evil, the nazism in the Second World War. But again, can we really claim Alexander as a Holy Warrior? And if so, in what sense?

2) *Soldiers of the faith*

When observing Alexander's image as a holy warrior there is no way to escape the strong influence of the Russian medieval literary tradition describing its princes in battles. I have dealt the popular image of the warrior king and the antique and Byzantine models of Alexander Nevskij before, and here it should only be noted, that the writer of the *Life of Alexander* was very well aware of the chivalric code known in whole Europe at that time

The Vladimirian prince Andrej Bogoljubskij (1111-1174) precedes the paragons of the fighting warrior king that Alexander in his *Life* expresses. Prince Andrej Bogoljubskij has had an enormous influence in the Russian history, and he has been lifted to a position of almost a mythical leader, who moved the capital of the Russian princes away from Kiev to northern Vladimir on the Kljazma. Later Muscovian chroniclers lifted him therefore to a glorified position, which legitimised the transfer of the Kievan prestige behind the northern forest of Vladimir and afterwards from Vladimir to Moscow.

Not only Andrej's followers, but also Andrej himself during his lifetime made an ambitious literary propaganda through which an image of the holy prince was constructed. His edition, the *Bogoljubskij svod* of the Vladimirian chronicle sacralized his reign and elevated the events of his life into the deeds of a semi-divine hero. This highly ideological and ambitious writing, which is still visible in the Laurentian and Hypatian chronicles, gives us a presentation of Andrej Bogoljubskij as a warrior in God's grace.

The soldier-warrior Andrej is highly stylised and idealised as a fearless Christian warrior who responds to a divine call. After a series of battle descriptions, the Laurentian Chronicle tells us, how Andrej's deeds become ultimately sacralized by the Mother of God through her miracle working icon. His image as a Christian soldier gets its climax in 1164, in the war against the Volga-Bolgars. The icon of the mother of God led the Vladimirian troops to victory against the infidels and Bogoljubskij's image can be seen even as a military crusader.

Andrej established the whole chain of the Marian cults, which strengthened the ties of Vladimir to the most holy imperial city of Constantinople, and made its ruler equal to the Byzantine emperor. Ultimately that made the Vladimirians the chosen people of God, who had the support of the Mother of God and her Son also when fighting against the fellow Russians, the citizens of Kiev and Novgorod.

In spite of his ardent literary propaganda Andrej Bogoljubskij was canonised only during the reign of Catharine the Great in the 18th century. The Vladimirian Laurentian Chronicle is able to show, never the less, the image of prince with a divine calling.

The religious fervor is even more emphasized in the stories, written in the early 15th century about the battle of the Muscovian grand prince Dmitri Donskoj against his infidel Tartar enemy Mamai. Especially the "Skazanie o Mamaevom poboiche" depicts the battle of Kulikovo (1380) as a devoted Crusade for the Christian religion having its closest literary example in the war of Gideon weighed against the Midianites in the Bible. (Judges 7)

True, Alexander Nevskij had his biblical parallel in Hezekiah who confronted the Assyrian king Sennacherib. (2 Kings 18-19), but the *Life of Alexander Nevskij* lacks the intensified religious message. Its earthly depiction has been a subject of an active discussion and the questions about the religious aims of the story have often been raised. As the late Academician D. S. Likhatshev has thoroughly pointed out, the literary models depicting a prince came from the south-western Russia, and more specifically from Galich, whose chronicle accounts of their local hero, prince Daniil Romanovich, functioned ultimately as the model for the *Life of Alexander Nevskij*. Daniil Romanovich represents a chivalric hero *par excellence* in the whole Russian chronicle tradition.

The picture of the handsome and brave Prince Daniil and his brother Vasilko is a lively and captivating story of the wars that the brothers waged during the many years of Daniil's reign. The Galichian princely chronicle gives us a realistic and detailed picture of a man who is very much flesh and blood and who enters the battles with almost an honourable joy in his heart. If

you compare that picture to the stiff and stereotyped image of Alexander Nevskij, you could easily demonstrate the image of the fighting warrior king as a drawing, where prince Daniil is a living human being, a detailed presentation of a man who fought for his living and was very much devoted to it. Alexander's image is a faint simplification, an abstraction of that ideal, giving not the picture of a man, a true person, but rather the ideal of a warrior prince of God's grace.

The popular idea of the attitude to war is loudly manifested in numerous battles described in the Galician chronicle: "*The Victory does not come from the people, but from God.*" You can find the same idea also in Alexander's *Life*, expressed in a different phrase: "*God is in truth, not in power.*" What this means is a simple idea that God's will is manifested in the result of the battle, and neither the manpower, weapon arsenal or any kind of human efforts can be an obstacle in the implementation of God's will. That is why the great emphasis has been laid on the accounts that describe how Alexander's enemy always had the superior man power.

3) *Boris and Gleb as the Protectors of the Russian lands*

Essential in the image of Alexander Nevskij as a holy defender of his lands are the saints connected with his two great battles described in his *Life*. Here once again, the battle of Neva is of the main importance. It is said in the *Life*: "*On Sunday, July 15th - on the day when five hundred and thirty Holy Fathers who attended the Council of Chalcedon, as well as the holy martyrs, Kyrik and Julita, are remembered - he moved against his enemies because he relied upon the help of the holy martyrs, Boris and Gleb.*"

It is tempting to observe the saints used in Alexander's *Life* as his heavenly helpers when characterising the nature of his wars. The traditional date given in the *Life* as the day, when Alexander confronted the Swedes in the Neva was July 15th, which is the commemoration day of martyrs Kirikos and Iuletta. The Council of Chalkedon is actually celebrated on July 16th, but for some mistake it has been connected also to the same day. Except these saints, who

have only been mentioned mechanically simply because of the day, a great emphasis has been laid on the appearance of the saints Boris and Gleb, who had been in a vision by chief Pelgusij, one of the elders of the local tribe in Ingria, who “...heard a loud noise from the sea and saw a moving ship, and in the midst of the ship stood the holy martyrs, Boris and Gleb, dressed in crimson vestments and embracing each other. The men rowing appeared as if in clouds. And Boris said: “Brother Gleb, order them to row in order to help our relative, Alexander.”

Boris and Gleb were the first canonised Russian saints and they are generally characterised as *topos* fighting for Russia. Boris and Gleb were canonised in 1072, and since that the rivalry in owning their relics has been going on among the Russian princes. Gail Lenhoff investigated the liturgical texts used in the office on Boris’ and Gleb’s feast day and paid attention that The Novgorodian service from the 15th century projected strongly an image of the martyred princes as patrons of imperial power, while in the earliest services the majority of prayers were directed to healing and purification.

Helen Prochazka sees the main feature in Boris’s and Gleb’s function in war tales as the indicator of the God’s chosen side. This indeed seems to be the case. The God’s chosen side is also reflected in the second war tale in Alexander’s *Life*, in the battle of Lake Peipus, where Alexander calls God to help him as he had done with Moses against Amalek and prince Jaroslav against the “cursed” brother Svjatopolk.

Israelian wars against their enemies give us a *topos* of fighting with God’s chosen side.

And the Lord said unto Moses, Write this for a memorial in a book, and rehearse it in the ears of Joshua: for I will utterly put out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven. And Moses built an altar, and called the name of it Jehovah-nissi (*The Lord is my banner*): For he said, Because the Lord hath sworn that the Lord will have war with Amalek from generation to generation. (Exodus 17:8-16)

The Amalekian war was thus a model for all the wars thereon. The Bible itself said that the Amalekian war's were to be continue from generation to generation. Thus the God's chosen people were in allegorical way always confronting Amalek. As a sign for the chosen side God's angels or his heavenly troops were seen in both Neva and the lake Peipus. According to this simple view the humiliation and self-sacrifice of the martyr brothers itself plays no role in the *topos* of Boris and Gleb when they are depicted participating in the battles of their kinsmen.

4) *Connection of the battle of Neva to St Vladimir*

Beside Boris and Gleb, also another important princely saint was connected with the battle of Neva for the time being. St. Vladimir's feast day is for the first time connected with the day of the battle of Neva, 15th July, in the version of the *Life of Alexander Nevskij* introduced in the 14th century Laurentian chronicle. After that many later Chronicle versions of the *Life* mention St. Vladimir among then saints who are to be remembered on July 15th. Thus the *Life of Alexander* is one of the most important sources when tracking the birth and development of the official cult of St Vladimir.

It is evident that the cult of the Kievan prince Vladimir who brought Christianity to Russia has a very strong bond to Alexander's *Life*. From all accounts it becomes evident, as professor Fennell pointed out, that Vladimir was canonised sometime between the writing of the first redaction of the *Life*, around the year 1280, and the writing of the Laurentian Chronicle edition in 1305.

The fact that the date of the battle of Neva happened to be the same as the date of the death of prince Vladimir who baptised the Russian lands gave Alexander significance as the warrior who fought for the true Christian religion. The appearance of St. Vladimir could be attached to the *Life* giving Alexander more emphasis as a warrior who did not only fight for his rights to the land, but also for the true Christian Orthodox religion.

5) *Moscow's Holy War against the Infidels*

Emphasis on St. Vladimir was especially strongly stated in the 16th century Muscovian redactions of the *Life*. In the redaction of Jona Dumin, from the year 1594, Alexander Nevskij has been made a new Constantine, another Vladimir, an invincible defender of the piety and the protector of the Christians. But was this new highlighted emphasis of Alexander's role as a protector of the Christians to signify Alexander's victory over the Germans and Swedes? Surprisingly, no. This was to point out Alexander's victory over the infidel, the bloodthirsty malevolents of the Russian lands, the Mongols, or the Tartars, as the Russians themselves called their conquerors. This is the crucial change in the image of Alexander Nevskij.

I strongly agree with David B. Miller when he stated that Alexander was not canonised in 1547 because he beat the Swedes, but it was rather his relationship to the Tartars that eventually counted. But then I have to disagree with Miller when observing Alexander's relationship to the Tartars. Miller says that Alexander was canonised because of his voluntary submission to the Tartars, as if he sacrificed himself, gave himself and his pride to the service of his people.

Alexander Nevskij made an opportunistic use of his alliance with the Mongols, on account of which he made his way from his rivals to reach his goals, to get to the top of the power and to the seat of the grand prince. The chronicles have always been very laconic in their statements about Alexander's policy, even Novgorod's chronicles don't seem to judge him for that. According to Charles Halperin this attitude reflects the ideology which he calls the *ideology of silence*. According to this very logical explanation, the bloody and rude Mongol conquest was something which was very hard to explain. If God was on the side of the righteous ones, then how could the infidels take so easily the lands that God, Mary, Her Son and all their saints were supposed to protect?

The simple phrase, repeated in all the Russian Chronicles, "*it was all because of our sins*" was not enough. The other way was to ignore the conquest. The fact that the Mongols did not

establish other firm institutions except the tax-collection, made it possible to keep on living like nothing had happened. The princes who were left alive to rule in their hereditary lands were not conquered or enslaved, but they were left alive “... *like God saved David from the hands of Saul*” as stated in the Laurentian Chronicle. Also the first redactions of the *Life of Alexander Nevskij* have a very neutral attitude towards the Mongols. The Mongol khan Batu is presented in a respectful tone as a distant tsar, who has heard about Alexander’s reputation and therefore wants to meet him to see him with his own eyes, as the Hellenistic and Byzantine war tales had described their kings and emperors wanting to test their strength with the military heroes like Alexander the Great and Digenes Akrites.

Concerning the heroic image of Alexander the attention always tends to be drawn to his co-operation with the Mongols. Alexander’s opportunistic co-operation has ever since been a matter of national embarrassment. This was something that the chroniclers were silent about, and then, in their turn, the modern Russian historians drew a veil over. The nationally minded historians have explained how Alexander’s non-resistance towards the Mongols was the only solution to rescue Russian lands from even worse faith. But the Muscovian state ideologists had a very good escape from this embarrassment. The message of Alexander’s Muscovian *Life* is very hard to be recognised as a praise to bowing himself in front of the infidels. Quite the contrary. The message is more easily recognisable as an open declaration of war against the infidels, and there is no sign of humility in it. It is striking to notice how Alexander Nevskij couldn’t escape from his battle against the bloody conquerors of the Russian lands after all.

The new tendency in describing the Mongol conquerors as a bloodthirsty pagans willing to drink Christian blood is vividly depicted in two 16th century versions of Alexander’s *Life*. The other one is the *Redaction of Vasili Varlaam*, presumably written by Moscow orientated monk from the city of Pskov in the middle of the 16th century. Even more hostile attitude against the Mongols is given in the *Redaction of Jona Dumin* which latest survived MS is dated in the year 1594.

Being a saint made it possible for Alexander to take part as a saint in the wars that his kinsmen, the later Muscovian Princes, waged against the infidel Tartars. Alexander helped

both Dimitri Donskoj in Kulikovo in 1380 and Ivan IV in 1572 against the Crimean Tartars in their battles against the enemies of the Christians with his miraculous heavenly assistance. It is stated in the *Redaction of the Jona Dumin*, how the Grand Prince Ivan Vasil'evich, the autocrat of the whole Rus' won the godless Agaryans with the help of God, Mary and the prayers of their saints.

In this last phase of the medieval image of Alexander Nevskij he finally begun his battle against the bloodthirsty mongrel, as the Muscovian redaction describes the Batu Khan. This is a striking contrast compared with the earlier redactions of the *Life*, which always represented the Mongols in a very polite and diplomatic way. In this way Alexander Nevskij finally begun his war against the infidels after his death.

The idea about the forefathers of the Tsar Ivan IV participating in the campaign against the infidels is visually illustrated in the icon "The Church Militant" from the 1550s, where the long gone kinsmen of the Tsar lead the way to Moscow's battle for the Christendom. The identification of the impersonally depicted characters in the icon has raised some critical remarks from several scholars, but what usually is stated, is that the Archangel Michael and Ivan IV lead the victorious Christian army toward the heavenly city of Jerusalem, allegorically depicted New Jerusalem, Moscow over which presides the Mother of God. Behind the heavenly host burn the sinful city Sodom, which is allegorically depicted Kazan. This icon is a powerful statement which affirms the message of the new redactions of the *Life of Alexander* with a new message that has a clear indication to a Holy War.

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As a conclusion one should try to answer the question raised above: Can we really claim that Alexander Nevskij was depicted as a participant of the *Holy War* in his *Life*? The materials of the image of Alexander Nevskij as the holy warrior were already presented in the first redaction of his *Life*, but due to the vagueness of its ideological or religious message, the image stuck to its stiff literary models when depicting its hero. It was not until in the 16th century when Moscow added the religious and ideological pathos to that image, that

Alexander Nevskij finally got his chance to take part in the Holy War against the cursed infidels in the way the medieval knights confronted the Saracens in the Holy Land. The irony was that in that phase the edge of Alexander's sword was not directed towards his western enemies in the Baltic region, but towards the infidel Mongols, against whom he never raised his hand during his lifetime.

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In commentation I would appreciate all comments that relate to the Muscovian 16th century intellectual thinking. It is common to describe The Muscovian Russia as a state which after centuries of Tartar influence absorbed the eastern influences in itself and drifted out of range of the western cultural inheritance. I am not that convinced that the Muscovians themselves were thinking that way. Quite the contrary. The ideological message in hagiographies of Alexander Nevskij proofs that Moscow was very ardent in presenting itself as a protector of Christian religion against the eastern Islamic intruder.