

DREAMS OF

# TSARGRAD

CONSTANTINOPLE AND THE BLACK SEA  
IN RUSSIAN IMPERIAL IMAGINATION

THE SWEDISH RESEARCH INSTITUTE IN ISTANBUL

OCTOBER 21–22, 2024



With the Treaty of Küçük Kaynarca in 1774, Russia replaced the Ottoman Empire as the main imperial power in the Black Sea. For almost a century and a half, the tsars would put enormous energy into extending their presence and asserting their dominance around the sea: by taking control of Ukraine and Crimea on its northern side; by supporting national independence movements against the Ottomans in the Balkans; by infiltrating the Caucasus in the East.

From the very onset, the symbolic prize and strategic goal of this expansion was Constantinople, the former Byzantine capital that controlled the crucial straits – the Bosphorus and Dardanelles – between the Black Sea and the Mediterranean, and which the tsars considered it their historical fate to rule as champions of Orthodox Christianity. “Tsargrad”, as the city was popularly known in many Slav countries, became an object of political, cultural and ideological imagination in the 19th century.

The road to Constantinople went back to the Byzantine period, when the early Kievan Rus states were Christianized from Byzantium, and East Europeans started appearing on the pilgrim routes to Constantinople and Jerusalem. The Mongol invasions of the Rus, and the Ottoman conquest of the former Byzantine heartlands, added an ideology of Christian reconquest to the emerging mythology of Tsargrad in Moscow and later St Petersburg, from which the new Russian imperial power emanated.

Russian and British competition in Central Asia and the Levant, Russian and French rivalry over the Middle East, and Russian and German enmity in Eastern Europe and the Balkans all took place along paths that, in some way or another, seemed destined to lead back to Constantinople. Symbolically, it also became the place where hundreds of thousands of tsarist loyalists ended up after the 1917 Bolshevik revolution – not as conquerors, but as refugees in a city that would soon be known as Istanbul.

This conference aims to take a broad look at the way in which “Tsargrad” became the prize of Russian imperial aspirations, cultural imagination and religious devotion, and eventually a real or fantasized place of refuge – from the emergence of Muscovy to the creation of the Soviet Union. The conference has been made possible thanks to the joint efforts of the Swedish Research Institute in Istanbul, the French Institute of Anatolian Studies, and the American Research Institute in Turkey.



# PROGRAM

## SUNDAY, OCTOBER 20

18:00 Welcome drink at the SRII

## MONDAY, OCTOBER 21

### Panel I (Chair: Olof Heilo)

9:00 Alexandra Vukovich (King's College, London), *Khan or Basileus?*

9:30 Roman Shliakhtin (independent scholar), *Re-imagining Constantinople: Reading Nestor Iskender in North-Western Eurasia of the Sixteenth Century*

10:00 Konstantinos Vetochnikov (Collège de France, Paris), *Tsar of Moscow or Basileus Romaion?*

10:30 Coffee

### Panel II (Chair: Zeynep Simavi)

11:00 Sergey Ivanov (Northwestern University, Evanston), *“From Sevastopol to Tsar’grad”: Catherine II’s Greek Project from a Byzantine Perspective*

11:30 Mogens Pelt (Copenhagen University), *Geopolitics and Rebellions in South-Eastern Europe and the Greek Revolution, 1768–1821*

12:00 Lunch

**Panel III (Chair: Philippe Bourmaud)**

13:00 Fani Gargova, (Leibniz Institute of European History), *De-Ottomanizing Sofia: Russian Byzantinism and the Construction of a New Capital City in the Balkans*

13:30 Arman Khatchatryan (Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography of the Republic of Armenia), *The Role of Armenians in Allied Strategies during the First World War*

14:00 Coffee

**Panel IV (chair: Igor Torbakov)**

(will be given in Russian)

14:30 Elena Astafieva (Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, Paris), *Constantinople and Jerusalem as two Centers of the Russian Eastern Question*

15:00 Türkan Olcay (Istanbul University), *The Russian Archaeological Institute in Constantinople (RAIK)*

15:30 Walk to the former building of the RAIK and the old Russian neighbourhood in Karaköy

19:00 Reception at IFEA, Palais de France  
(Nur-i-Ziya Sokak 10)

**TUESDAY, OCTOBER 22**

**Panel V (Chair: Christian Kamill)**

9:30 Julie Hansen (Uppsala University), *Tsargrad as refuge and concept in the life and work of Ilia Zdanevich*

10:00 Igor Torbakov (Uppsala University), *Tsargrad into Leningrad: Constantinople in Russian Political Imagination after the 1917 Revolution and the First World War*

10:30 Coffee

11:00 Helena Bodin (Stockholm University), *Three Dreams of Tsargrad – from Bunin’s “Stambul” to Bulgakov’s Flight*

11:30 *Concluding remarks* (Christian Kamill, former Ambassador of Sweden to Azerbaijan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan)

12:00 Lunch



# ABSTRACTS

Alexandra Vukovich, King's College, London

## **Khan or Basileus?**

Literature on the Muscovite period of Rus insists on the Byzantine character of the state's pretensions, focusing on the notion of autocracy or the symphony between Church and State, as well as the fashioning of the Muscovite prince, later tsar, as a Byzantine basileus. These notions find their most complete expression in marginal (and later central) expression of Moscow as the so-called Third (and final) Rome. This paper focuses on a parallel dynamic, that of the Muscovite prince and, later, tsar, as a Mongol khan, contending that the Mongol influence was central to Muscovite notions of power.

Roman Shliakhtin, independent scholar

## **Re-imagining Constantinople: Reading Nestor Iskender in North-Western Eurasia of the Sixteenth Century**

The text "Tale of Nestor Iskender" is one of the main sources of the Fall of Constantinople in North-Western Eurasia. In a marginal note in the only extant manuscript of the "Tale," the author identifies with a person present at the siege of Constantinople in the ranks of the Ottoman artillery corps. A recent study of Hanak and Philippides discusses "The Tale" in the framework of the siege events. The present paper focuses not on the text but on the marginal notes in the manuscript of "The Tale". These notes date back to the first half of the sixteenth century and provide a glance at the reading of 1453 among the literati of the Grand Duchy of Muscovy in the sixteenth century. Contrary to expectations, the author of the notes was interested in the military details of the siege much more than in the future capture of the City by the Christians.

Konstantinos Vetochnikov, Collège de France

## **Tsar of Moscow or Basileus Romaion?**

In 1561, the Ecumenical Patriarchate issued an act granting the Grand Duke of Moscow the title of Tsar. The name of this act, *evergetirion gramma*, is typical and is used when granting any post or title of patriarchal archon. Nevertheless, this act was of great importance for the subsequent development of the idea of the Third Rome in the kingdom of Moscow. The Moscow Tsars often saw themselves as successors to the Byzantine Emperors, but it is interesting to understand how their authority was perceived by the Ecumenical Patriarchate. For the Greek hierarchy, the Tsar of Moscow remained a foreign monarch. In the patriarchal acts of the Ottoman period, the Moscow Tsars are barely mentioned outside the Russian context. It should also be noted that references to the Moscow Tsars do not use the traditional wording characteristic of documents from the Byzantine period concerning Byzantine emperors.

Sergey Ivanov, Northwestern University, Evanston

### **“From Sevastopol to Tsar'grad”: Catherine II's Greek Project from a Byzantine Perspective**

The paper seeks to explore how Catherine the Great envisioned the "Eastern Empire" she aimed to revive, particularly her visualization of Byzantine Constantinople, and to what extent her utopian project was informed by the scholarly knowledge of her time. If we carefully read all contemporary texts which mention "a/the Byzantine Empire," the intended result of Catherine the Great's "Greek Project," an uncertainty emerges regarding the most crucial question: was the empress planning to build something new or to restore something old? It seems that the creators of the Greek Project themselves did not have a clear answer to the question, and this becomes apparent when analyzing the available details of the project.

Mogens Pelt, Copenhagen University

### **Geopolitics and Rebellions in South-Eastern Europe and the Greek Revolution, 1768-1821**

My argument is that to understand the processes which lead to the Greek Revolution in 1821 we have to include the great geopolitical changes which began some 50 years before with Russia's massive expansion in the Ottoman lands. It was not a unilinear simple progressive sequence. It was a process of constant interaction between local Greek Orthodox elites and the geopolitical changes which took place in the space where they lived. My talk will focus on the elites in the lands which most resembled self-contained political units, the Danubian Principalities and the Peloponnese. It was a process that included calculations about balancing one's interest with the changes but also a process that included evaluations concerning ideas of statecraft.

Fani Gargova, Leibniz Institute of European History (IEG)

### **De-Ottomanizing Sofia: Russian Byzantinism and the Construction of a New Capital City in the Balkans**

Russian military involvement in the Bulgarian independence movement of the 1870s was of great importance with regard to the ideological Christian reconquest of Ottoman territory. It brought Russian ambitions for territorial expansion both by land and by the Black Sea closer to Constantinople/Tsargrad. In order to advance Russia's agenda, Sofia's urban landscape was symbolically transformed from a Muslim to a Christian city, as well as from an "Oriental" to a "European" capital. The process was divided into two distinct stages. The first phase was a military one, characterized by imperial strategy and its, at times, violent implementation. The second phase was a more subtle cultural one, marked by Russian architects' involvement in church-building campaigns at the turn of the twentieth century, with a deliberate use of a Russian Byzantine style rather than a vernacular architectural vocabulary. Both had a significant and lasting impact on Sofia's urban fabric and cityscape.

Arman Khatchatryan, Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography of the Republic of Armenia, Yerevan

### **The Role of Armenians in Allied Strategies during the First World War**

From the start of the Congress of Berlin (13 June–13 July 1878), Great Britain, France, and Russia advocated for the protection of the rights of the Ottoman Empire's Christians. This included immediate reforms in the empire's western Armenian provinces, bringing the Armenian Question into the realm of international diplomacy, which these powers successfully leveraged in political confrontations against the empire until the First World War. With the commencement of World War I, the Allied Powers increasingly involved Armenians in various military and economic efforts aimed at securing victory over the Ottoman Empire. At the start of the war, thousands of Armenian volunteers from Eastern Armenia enlisted in the Tsarist Russian Army, forming Armenian volunteer squads that participated in the liberation battles of significant parts of the Western Armenian vilayets, where Turks, Kurds, and Circassians had massacred the Armenian civilian population. Amidst the war, the Armenian Legion was established within the French Army, drawing Armenians from the emigrant camp in Port Said and the broader Armenian diaspora, which began its military operations on the Palestinian Front. This research will shed light on the Allied Powers' policy of utilizing Armenian personnel in military operations throughout the war against the Ottoman Empire, as well as the Armenians' aspirations in the event of an Allied victory.





Elena Astafieva, Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, Paris

### **Constantinople and Jerusalem as two Centers of the Russian Eastern Question**

The Eastern Question emerged as a major issue for Russian power under Catherine II, who wanted to gain access to the Straits and to conquer Constantinople. During the reign of Nicholas I (1825-1855), the problem of the Straits remained dominant in the “Russian Eastern Question”. However, unlike his predecessors, Nicholas I pursued a much more active policy in Jerusalem and Syria, through diplomatic agents as well as Russian religious actors (Orthodox, Jewish or Muslim). The Eastern Question became an acute issue in Russia's international policy at the time of the Crimean War (1853-1856), which was provoked by religious conflicts between different denominations over the Holy Places. Russia's defeat in this war led to profound changes in its Eastern policy. To achieve its new objectives “in the East”, at the end of the 1850s, and even more so in the 1880s, imperial power stepped up its action in the Holy Land, and above all in Jerusalem. In this presentation, I show how, despite the important place occupied by Tsargrad in Russian culture throughout the 19th century thanks to the writings of M. Pogodine, N. Danilevsky, K. Leontiev, and above all F. Dostoyevsky, from the 1880s-1890s, through the actions of the imperial family but also of private companies (Orthodox and Jewish), Jerusalem became the center of Russian Eastern policy, and therefore, of the “Russian Eastern Question”.

Türkan Olcay, Istanbul University

### **The Russian Archaeological Institute in Constantinople (RAIK)**

The Russian Archaeological Institute in Constantinople (RAIK), founded in 1895, is the first Russian scientific and educational institution abroad, as well as the first foreign scientific center in the Ottoman Empire. The Institute focused on Istanbul as the Byzantine capital and the cradle of Orthodoxy. The survey of Istanbul was conducted in three directions: excursions to study ancient topography, research of Byzantine architectural monuments, and description of ancient manuscripts of the Ottoman Palace Library. The analysis of the projects carried out by RAIK for a detailed survey of Istanbul is the subject of this report.

Julie Hansen, Uppsala University

### **Tsargrad as refuge and concept in the life and work of Ilia Zdanevich**

The modernist author, artist and publisher Ilia Zdanevich (1894–1975; known by the pseudonym Iliazd) spent a year in Constantinople in 1920–21 while waiting for a visa for France. Iliazd subsequently resided in Paris for the rest of his life, but this transitional period of displacement in Constantinople proved to be formative, serving as material for his later works. This paper will examine the role of Constantinople as a place of refuge as well as a source of ideas for this artist and author.

Igor Torbakov, Uppsala University

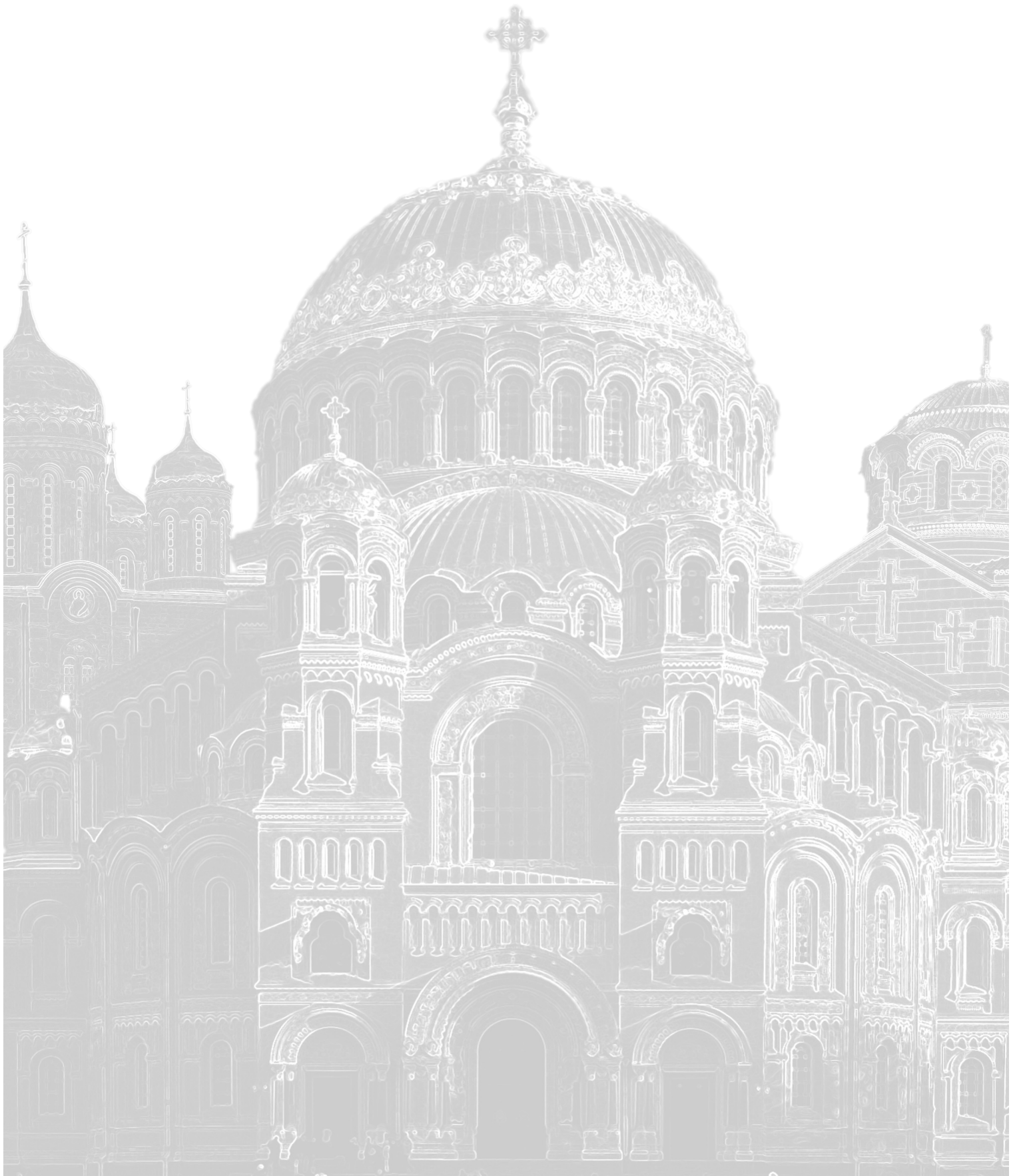
### **Tsardgrad into Leningrad: Constantinople in Russian Political Imagination after the 1917 Revolution and the First World War.**

This paper intends to explore how the “Tsargrad myth” has exercised Russian imagination after the fateful 1917 divide. It will be demonstrated that, Russian imperial collapse notwithstanding, Constantinople’s allure was still strong enough both in Bolshevik Moscow and among the masses of Russian refugees who fled to the Bosphorus shores to generate outstanding literary works, artistic production and, last but not least, geopolitical fantasizing.

Helena Bodin, Stockholm University

### **Three Dreams of Tsargrad – from Bunin’s “Stambul” to Bulgakov’s *Flight***

My talk presents a cavalcade of Russian dreams of Tsargrad interspersed with British dreams of Russians in Constantinople as they appear in poetry and drama in three historical situations of the early twentieth century: before, during and after the wars and revolutions 1914–23 (the First World War, the Russian Revolution, and the Turkish War of Independence). These distinct stages are represented by a few of the selected poems – Ivan Bunin’s “Stambul” of 1905, in which the empty Seraglio is compared with a dead nomad camp; Wyndham Lewis’ vorticist prayer from 1915, that Constantinople should become the Southern Russian capital for artists; and “the tsar of cockroaches” in the dreams (not acts or scenes) of Mikhail Bulgakov’s play *Flight*, set among Russian refugees in Constantinople in the early 1920s. It is demonstrated how Russian dreams of a Tsargrad of Eastern stillness is turned into a violent waking up in a no more imperial but unmistakably modern city.





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