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Rome for Russian Consumption:
Translatio Imperii on Screen*

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A film entitled *The Fall of an Empire: The Lesson of Byzantium*,[1] came out in Russia in 2008. It has all the features of a documentary. The film's director-producer also functions as its narrator and sole character. This person, Arkhimandrit Tikhon Shevkunov (born in 1958), was understood to be the personal priest of Vladimir Putin's ex-wife and, most probably, of President Putin too.[2] An advisor in religious matters to Mr Putin, the Arkhimandrit was appointed to the Board of the President of the Russian Federation to represent the areas of culture and the arts. In Soviet times and before becoming an Orthodox priest, Mr Shevkunov studied cinematic scriptwriting. *The Fall of an Empire*, his third film, has enabled him to combine his religious interests with his skills as a film director and actor.[3]

This film, however, does not principally engage with Byzantium, nor is it a documentary. The title and the 109-minute long lecture that make up *The Fall of an Empire* refer figuratively to Russia and the fall of the Soviet empire. At times directly, but mainly by implication, the narration emphasises Moscow's own metropolitan status, its entitlement to be the centre of Empire and aims to reignite interest in the age-old Russian identity narrative of Moscow as the 'Third Rome'. The 'Rome-based discourse of identity' and Russia's self-branding itself as the 'Third Rome' have stood publicly unchallenged, albeit profoundly obscure, since the early sixteenth century.[4] The term has been treated domestically as an axiomatic and incontrovertible

reference to the country and its capital while outside Russia the concept is largely unknown except for those studying Russian culture. Geographically, culturally and historically, Russia has been isolated from the Western Mediterranean and prominent European civilisations. It has not been affected either by Scholasticism, Renaissance Humanism (about which Shevkunov is overtly dismissive), the Reformation movement or – in any meaningful way – by the Enlightenment either.[5] It has never established research centres of international excellence for the academic study of ancient Greece or Rome, apart from in the field of linguistics.[6] Against this background, it comes as no surprise that attempts to locate Russian culture's provenance in Rome's past have aimed to point at Russia's future imperial mission but have lacked historiographical foundations.[7] It will be the purpose of this chapter to reassess the use to which 'Rome' is put within the discourse of 'cultural authorities' in today's Russia. To this end we shall interpret Shevkunov's film and unpack attempts to resuscitate the pseudo-myth of Russia as the 'Third Rome', first articulated in the early 1500s. Using stereotypes as kernels for narratives in cultural products, journalism and history for the purposes of nation building appears to be the *modus operandi* of present day Russia. When a stereotype is well established, we tend to focus on those traits within a narrative which substantiate it and ignore the ones which contradict it.[8] In the words of Richard Dyer, stereotypes "express particular definitions of reality, with concomitant evaluations which in turn relate to the disposition of power within society".[9] The film represents the thinking of the centre of power in the Putin era and, relying on discourse analysis, I will have a close look at how it attempts to transmit and consolidate assigned content for the national consciousness.

Conceived and realised at the end of the first Putin presidency, prior to the succession of Mr Medvedev as Prime Minister, the film uses the

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5   Cf. Thompson (2000) 15–52.

6   Shevkunov claims that prior to 1917 'serious' research on Byzantium was conducted in Russia but he omits to say by whom. We learn from him that the Soviets banned the academic study of Byzantium until 1943 when Stalin ordered that a Department of Byzantine Studies should be opened at Moscow State University. At this 'critical hour' in Russian history, the narrator tells us, 'Joseph Dzhugashvili – the former seminarian – understood from whom they should be learning history'.

7   Cf. Rowland (1996) 591.

8   Cf. Lippmann (1922) 116; 119.

9   Dyer (1977) 14.

sophisticated, state-of-the-art technologies available for the visual media with the obvious purpose of gaining populist backing for the state. The film's production benefitted from what was clearly a generous budget. This comes as no surprise given the close relationship of Arkhimandrit Shevkunov to Mr Putin. Upon its release in the winter of 2008, three airings on *Planeta-RTR*, the government-controlled cable and satellite television channel, facilitated its distribution to large numbers of viewers. Father Shevkunov in his capacity as reporter-actor-narrator promises at the outset to enable the viewers to *see* for themselves how the world's 'longest-living' Empire – Byzantium – fell to the Islamic Ottoman Turks after an existence of 1023 years. We learn that, while the Byzantine Empire experienced internal 'irregularities', the real responsibility for its fall lies with a conspiring Western, capitalist union – centred in Venice – of 'Italians', 'Germans', Scandinavians, 'Anglo-Saxons' and the 'French', not to forget the workings of the 'internal enemy' within Byzantium itself.

Within the Russian narrative tradition, disguising hostility towards Western, especially English-speaking, civilisations behind the mask of an unidentified white, male narrator – lacking an identified nationality and endowed with the reassuring voice of unbiased reason – is by no means Shevkunov's invention. In a manner well-known from famous literary works by Tolstoy, Bunin and Zamyatin, to name just the authors whose names come most immediately to mind, the Russian subject of articulation in the film maintains silence about itself while providing the taxonomising gaze for the viewer.[10] We see Russia itself only for a few glimpses at the start and finish: the first shots were taken outside Moscow's snow-covered Sretensky monastery, built in the fourteenth century, and the final shots offer images of Russian worshippers crossing themselves and kissing a panel of glass covering an icon inside a church. The setting for the rest of the film is outside Russia. Dressed in his priestly vestment, Shevkunov either faces the viewers or walks about in the crowd. He either supplies voice-over narration or talks directly at his implied audience. Besides urban noise – recorded in present-day cities or in the mock-up of cities of the past, conjured up with up-to-date cinematic technology – the monologue of the narrator supplies the only coherent discourse. A paucity of specific references surrounds the highly favourable description of Byzantium and the demonisation of its

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10   Cf. Barta (1998); for example Lev Tolstoy's 'Lucerne', Ivan Bunin's 'The Gentleman from San Francisco' or Yevgeny Zamyatin's 'Islanders'.

adversaries. Repetitions highlight points of ideologically crucial importance. One extra, a young man with Southern Mediterranean features, appears repeatedly as a representative of the artistically inclined citizens, or perhaps students, in Constantinople and then, for good measure, also as a 'typical' present-day Russian worshipper inside the church at the film's end. Other recurring figures wear long-nosed, Venetian masks, presumably to characterise conspiring, shady Westerners. Constantinople within the film's virtual reality, in full colour, dazzles the eyes: recurring images capture chariots, grand palaces, public buildings – one of which even includes a surprisingly modern-looking lift – and large numbers of works of art. But, conspicuously, one episode lacks colour: following the lavish demonstration in the beginning of the film of the glories of Constantinople, it is in black and white that the barbaric Western Europeans in the 'dark' Middle Ages appear.

Unlike evidence-based, researched documentaries which aim to spread balanced views and knowledge to viewers, this film combines the rhetoric of didacticism with proselytising. Its propagandistic 'representation' aims not to analyse but to exacerbate conflicts between civilisations.[11] Shevkunov's style draws upon the *'agit-prop'* format of Soviet cultural production. 'Socialist realism' did not of course invent this method whose origins reach back to nineteenth-century classic realism. As Lilian R. Furst put it, realist fiction engages in the 'game of the name'.[12] This device aims for the work of art to provide the effect of verisimilitude by its clever mixing of the factual and the fictional. In the case of *The Fall of an Empire*, the factual fuses not with the fictional but with stereotype-inspired misrepresentations of historical knowledge. It is propaganda which hides its distortions behind the appearance of history. The narration is framed within spatial and temporal indeterminacy. Shots juxtapose documentary footage of contemporary Turkey and Italy with images of Byzantium and medieval Europe recreated with the help of extras wearing historical costumes on a set. We hear unspecific references to the world's first university in Constantinople, its 'elegant' young students and also other imperial institutions of higher learning. Names of individuals and historical details – when mentioned – tend to refer to the final two centuries of the Byzantine Empire.

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11   Cf. Burbank/Cooper (2010) 70.
12   Cf. Furst (1995).

A continuum of harmony, prosperity and sophistication characteristic of the reign of Justinian (527–565) is projected as the supposed status quo of some eight centuries. This seemingly idyllic state of affairs is attributed to the power of the Orthodox faith. To say that this is historically inaccurate is hardly newsworthy: the history of Byzantium has been extensively researched and is readily available for further study. Byzantium itself receives all the credit in the film for its civilisational accomplishment: its coinage, aqueducts, roads, education and legal systems. Shevkunov says nothing, however, about the building of a system of fortification along the Dardanelles, the Sea of Marmara and the Bosporus – bodies of water that separate Europe from Asia Minor – in the fifth century, turning Constantinople into the Roman world's most powerfully defended city. On the European side of the Bosporus, the 'Long Walls' protected the peninsula through which access to the strait could be gained. Constantinople itself was surrounded by three layers of protective walls. Such defences in addition to Roman naval superiority offered much better protection for the city against invaders than Rome itself had. Successful attempts were made, for example an understanding reached with Persia by the fifth century, peacefully to resolve differences so the Eastern Empire was not simultaneously threatened both from West and East.[13] In Shevkunov's film, Rome with its long history – including the five centuries during which the Republic accumulated most of the territories of the Empire – remains hidden in the background. Shevkunov talks about the pre-Christian culture of ancient Greece and Rome as 'pagan' and in unfavourable terms. He associates the gods of classical antiquity with the supposedly depressed, suicidal, alcoholic people of Constantinople in terminal decline in the fifteenth century. The imagery used for describing the latter sounds reminiscent of the discourse of Russian nationalists attributing the moral and economic crises of post-communist Russia to the demise of the Soviet Union. The narrator tells viewers that 'opportunistic' young people in Constantinople went to study in the West, while the scientists emigrated, when conditions deteriorated. Typically no specific references substantiate these egregiously ahistorical claims.

The film is perhaps most telling about the director-narrator's assumptions about his target audience. He assumes the manner of the professional expert well-known to today's television audiences from

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13   Cf. Ward-Perkins (2005) 58–62.

documentaries. As the title of the film advises, this is a 'lesson' and, as it has been historically customary within the Russian system of education, the mode of discourse is monologic. The straightforward lecture does not incorporate any interviews with reputable historians, classicists or archaeologists, nor does it elicit questions or discussion. Instead it invites viewers to consume, rather than interrogate or ponder upon, the film's account about the supposed past. This manner of presentation would not raise too many eyebrows among the viewing public: in Russia, disciplines in the humanities have tended to require pupils to memorise politically acceptable interpretations of texts rather than to undertake interrogative analyses of historical data, literary prose or historical documents. Television channels in Russia in Soviet times, and again in recent years, complement patriotic feature films with political pseudo-documentaries, reinforcing the message about the country's imperial mission and its entitlement to prevail over 'the' West. The culture of manipulating the media today facilitates the unhindered impact of Shevkunov's distortion, exaggeration or falsification of extant scholarship on the target audience's knowledge of the world. For example, in emphasising the superiority of Byzantium, Shevkunov tells us that Constantinople's Hippodrome exceeded the size of the Colosseum in Rome by three times. Such a statement, however, conveys a misinformation: the Colosseum did not function either as a stadium or as a hippodrome, nor did it replicate the role of the Circus Maximus. Other puzzling comments include references to the shortness of the lifetime of empires that succeeded Byzantium. The viewers 'learn' that the British Empire lasted for 150, the Austro-Hungarian Empire for 100 years without any comment on how these surprisingly round figures were arrived at. In calculating the lifetime of the Russian empire, Shevkunov automatically assumes as incontrovertible – as will no doubt most of the viewers – that the Soviet Union was not Russia's empire after the Bolshevik takeover in 1917 but a union of 'free' republics (as the lyrics of the 1977 version of the Soviet national anthem confirm). It has been discussed elsewhere how Shevkunov corroborated contemporary obsessions following the collapse of the Soviet state within his 'lesson' about Byzantium.[14] Rousing music deployed for its emotional impact and the abundant use of carefully chosen adjectives – added to an ideologically charged manner of delivery – embed comments about the Byzantine Empire's 'liberals', its privatising oligarchs who sold out their country to

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14   Cf. Papkova (2009); Semenoff-Tian-Chansky-Baidine (2011) 100–101.

'the' West, unreliable intellectuals and the 'internal enemy' spying and eventually seeking political asylum abroad.

For his narrative of imperial identity, Shevkunov relies on a conceptual framework widely accessible to members of a mass audience: such a 'broadcast' code ensures that the information comes across as customary, familiar and believable.[15] This is the world of 'common-sense', truisms, half-truths, generalisations and clichés used to spoon-feed content to the consciousness of the masses. He triangulates Rome, Byzantium and Russia: the 'pagan' Rome's skills at building empire are attributed to Christian Byzantium whose strengths and weaknesses strongly resemble its Orthodox successor, Russia. The representation of events that could have but did not happen merges smoothly with historical data. When dictators, strongmen, autocrats wish for accounts of the past to be 'usable' for their purposes, history becomes especially compromised.[16] Not only was Muscovy a 'poorly documented society';[17] in 'times of troubles' such rulers as Ivan the Terrible or, for that matter, Stalin, in addition to various regimes of secret police aiding the state throughout the centuries, ensured the disappearance of undesirable documents. When data is not available, reliable history cannot be produced. Following in Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's footsteps Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels controversially claimed that prior to colonisation and the availability of a written language, tribal societies in Asia and Africa – subsequently to be ruled by the Europeans – had no record of the past of any relevance.[18] Pyotr Chadaaev's famous 'Philosophical Letter' in a similar vein suggested in 1829 that backward and entropic Russia had no 'history', greatly augmenting a feeling of inferiority even as his argument was hotly contested chiefly by the nationalists.[19] Attempts to integrate the story of Russia's past into the archetypal Western narrative had, however, been around for centuries. The idea that Russia is the 'Third Rome' has been useful both as a religious history of 'chosen peoples' entitled to rule over others and as a source for a 'memory' of descent from ancient Rome.[20]

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15 Cf. Hall (1980) 132.
16 The concept of a 'usable past' was first articulated by Van Wyck Brooks in *America's Coming of Age* (New York 1915).
17 Cf. Rowland (1996) 596.
18 Cf. Said (1994) 168.
19 'First Philosophical Letter', in Raeff Marc (ed.), *Russian Intellectual History: An Anthology*, New York, 1966.
20 Cf. Rowland (1996) 591.

Mythical imagination resolves both the problems of temporal distance and spatial divisions, serving as fertile ground for tenacious stereotyping.[21] It also gives credence to thinking of history in deterministically circular, rather than linear, terms: hence, events of the past are anticipated to recur in the future. The influential discourses of origin that informed Roman identity could be put to profitable use in producing the Russian 'Third Rome'.[22] More than a city and imperial centre, ancient Rome functioned as an ideological concept and the myth of «*Romanità*» has been present ever since the demise of the Roman Empire.[23] The city of Moscow likewise provided symbolism and rhetoric for the state religion.[24] Rome needed to nominate an antecedent and its mythopoetic texts located Troy as such. But the works of Vergil, Horace and Propertius, relying on the authority invested in such figures as the goddess Juno or the prophet Cassandra, emphatically insisted that Troy must never rise again in its own right and that it must remain in the past for Rome to prosper.[25] Likewise, for the 'Third Rome', the 'first' and 'second' `Romes' must be terminally anchored in the past.

Rome's ideological legacy incorporated concerns about its foundation, origins and questions about its antecedents – complicated by a sense of cultural inferiority to ancient Greece. But there was no shortage of subsequent candidates endeavouring to copy Rome to fill the gap left by its fall. Constantine, the first Christian emperor, referred to the second capital of the Roman Empire on the Bosporus named after him as the 'New Rome', even though apparently no surviving document confirms this. [26] The population of the Byzantine Empire – or what Russians tend to refer to as the 'Eastern Roman Empire' – called their country until the thirteenth century 'Romania'.[27] This appellation came later to signify the South-East European country, today's Romania, quite closely linked to Latin linguistically and to Byzantium in terms of the Orthodox religion. Many 'second Romes' followed in the Middle Ages: Aix-la Chapelle, Tournai, Reims, Treves, Pavia. Even Washington – the capital of the United States –

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21   Cf. Kalb (2010) 7.
22   Cf. Edwards (1996) 3.
23   Cf. Nelis (2011) 171.
24   Cf. Kalb (2010) 7.
25   Cf. Verg. Aen. 12,826–828; Hor. carm. 3,3,57–64; Prop. 4,1,87; Edwards (1996) 2; 64.
26   Cf. Melville-Jones (2006) 10.
27   Cf. Litavrin (1986) 369; 373.

came to be referenced as the 'Second Rome'.[28] Of course calling a place 'Rome' may have intended to elicit associations with the ancient city state but it provided little else as Thomas Moore's ironical poem about Washington illustrates (Moore [1869] 100):

> In fancy now, beneath the twilight gloom,
> Come, let me lead thee o'er this 'second Rome'
> Where tribunes rule, where dusky Davy bows,
> And what was Goose-creek once is Tiber now

Like the Russians, the Italian Fascists also called their capital the 'Third Rome', «*Terza Roma*».[29] Mussolini's «*Romanità*», wishing to unify the legacies left by emperors and popes, aimed immodestly not only to replace but also to better the ancient metropolis.[30]

Rome then has proved to be durable, both as a city and as a concept. Its name outlasted most of the palaces, temples, arches and works of art that once comprised the capital of the ancient Empire. The poet Horace—and imitating him, the Russian Pushkin – recognised the ability of memorable words to withstand time better than architectural constructions in *Exegi monumentum*, concluding his third book of *Odes* (3,30,1–5):

> *Exegi monumentum aere perennius*
> *regalique situ pyramidum altius,*
> *quod non imber edax, non Aquilo inpotens*
> *possit diruere aut innumerabilis*
> *annorum series et fuga temporum.*

And the first stanza in Alexander Pushkin's poem, `Exegi monumentum', reads:

> I've raised a monument not made by human hands.
> The public path to it cannot be overgrown.
> With insubmissive head far loftier it stands
> Than Alexander's columned stone (trans. A. Z . Foreman)[31]

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28 Cf. Rowland (1996) 614. See M. Malamud about Rome in American popular culture (2001) 200-201.

29 Cf. Kostof (1973) 8–10.

30 Cf. Nelis (2011) 36.

31   http://poemsintranslation.blogspot.it/2013/10/pushkin-exegi-monumentum-from-russian.html.

What then was so desirable for Russians about Rome so long after its Empire had collapsed?

As Edwards puts it, following Livy (2.1.5), Rome inspired 'love': it transformed citizens' attachment to the region where they were born into an emotional bond with the centre of history's largest and most prominent city-state. The term *Romanus* signified citizenship not ethnicity: being Roman entitled one to a set of legal rights rather than designating one's place of birth.[32] In Antiquity most 'Romans' neither came from Rome nor were they connected personally to the city.[33] Instead of relying on national or racial definitions, the *populus* identified itself as 'Romans' as opposed to those outside the Empire.[34] Under Augustus the populations of colonies – like hitherto those of the *municipia* – gained the right to citizenship with all the privileges of freeborn Romans. Rome was a thoroughly urban civilisation: metropolis and empire, *urbs* and *orbis* became closely tied.[35] From the time of Augustus, under Claudius, Trajan, Hadrian and the Severi, Roman values and the *Pax Romana* (common law, government, morality and religion) applied in all colonies, however remote and isolated. [36] Such imperial institutions of government as the council or the collegial magistracy stamped the presence of Rome in all towns and even in the military camps on the borders. These performed more than merely defensive roles by demonstrating the values of the Roman way of life. Such outposts of Roman civilisation from Pannonia to Hispania, from Britannia to Armenia aimed to impress and attract outsiders by their advanced social structure: the *curia* and *comitium*, plus the temples to Jupiter, Juno and Minerva – the principal divinities of the Roman Pantheon – were present in all of them.[37]

Rome, the imperial metropolis – 'mother city' and hub for all provinces – unsurprisingly became the model of empire-building for states eventually to emerge in Europe. [38] The synecdochic relationship between Rome and Romans became desirable – albeit unachievable – for most empires to follow. As such authors as Lucan (*Bellum civile* (5.30) and Herodian (1.6.5)

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32   Cf. Edwards (1996) 18; 89; 134.
33   Cf. Edwards (1996) 134.
34   Cf. Catalano/Siniscalco (1992) xiii.
35   On *Urbs* and *orbis*, see Varr. ling. 5,143. Cf. Serv. ad Aen. 1,12: *Romanae spatium est Urbis et orbis idem.* Ov. fast. 2,684, cf. ars. 1,174.
36   Cf. Orr (1983) 93; Stambaugh (1988) 247.
37   Cf. Stambaugh (1988) 247; 251; Burbank/Cooper (2010) 90; Sewell (2010) 9.
38   Cf. Edwards (1996) 87.

put it, Rome was not buildings but people; Rome was where the Emperor was. In the third century CE, for example, not only did emperors spend little time in Rome – keeping their headquarters near the borders of the empire – but they did not even know the city especially well. This, however, did not alter organisational and ideological practices across the Empire. An entirely different situation applied in the Byzantine Empire but also in the institution of papacy as the Avignon chapter in the history of Roman Catholicism illustrates.[39]

Unable to replicate the Empire's strengths, successive states with imperial ambitions drew heavily for their own symbolic economies upon the conceptual framework present in Roman imagination. The title *Caesar* for example found its use within the process of *translatio imperii*.[40] In addition to the *Kaiser* of German-speaking states, including the Holy Roman, Habsburg and the 'unified' German empires, the British 'emperors of India', Russia's '*tsars*' (the term of course derived directly from the name *Caesar*) all vied for the entitlement to be the successors of *Caesar*. The conceit of *imperium sine fine* in Vergil's *Aeneid* (1,279) turned out to be very durable within ontological justifications for subsequent aspiring empire builders with great ambitions, most notoriously for Stalin, Hitler and Mussolini. The right to self-define oneself as 'Roman' caused frictions between the Byzantine and the Carolingian Empires and also the papacy in Rome.[41] Mussolini's 'Third Rome' lasted for the «*venti anni*» but the longest claim to be the 'Third Rome' has been maintained by Russia's rulers as witnessed in the most recent attempt to rekindle this pseudo-myth by the Putin regime in Shevkunov's film.

Shevkunov's management of the subject relies on a Manichean binary of the favourably valorised self and the vilified other. Rome is the symbolic centre in the film and functions as a shifting signifier. Ancient Rome by way of Byzantium becomes incorporated into the self while Catholic, 'Western', Rome underpins the construct of the other. Anxieties about 'the' West's condescending gaze, the fear of being deemed barbaric and uncivilised, became fully articulated by nationalists in the nineteenth century. Fyodor Dostoevsky's eloquent account of a trip to Western Europe, entitled '*Winter*

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39   Cf. Edwards (1996) 66–67; 70; 97; Burbank/Cooper (2010) 66.
40   Cf. Burbank/Cooper (2010) 64; Kalb (2010) 11.
41   Cf. Litavrin (1986) 373.

Notes of Summer Impressions',[42] offers an apotheosis of defensiveness. Along similar lines of logic, his speech written to commemorate the hundredth anniversary of Pushkin's birth, very definitely implied the superiority of Russians over others. Dostoevsky's Pushkin, however, resembles an idol composed selectively out of the poet's biography and his oeuvre. He argued that Pushkin embodied the protean abilities of Russians who are supposedly blessed with the gift to incorporate within their identity the qualities of all other 'civilised' – meaning Western European – nations. In short, Russians are so special that they can synthesise and surpass the qualities of other cultures as they did with the two previous 'Romes'.[43] Dostoevsky's essays on Western Europe and on Pushkin share a significant methodological feature with Shevkunov's film which goes back to the days of medieval Kiev: the Rus' state selected from its presumed Byzantine sources only those ones which served its political interests.[44] This practice does not so much engage with the subject as it picks and chooses from details in order to make the case it wishes to argue. Inspired by Dostoevsky and the philosopher Ivan Solovyov's essay '*Byzantism and Russia*' (1896), the 'Silver Age' of Russian culture and Russian Modernism witnessed a flurry of writings linking Russia with ancient Rome in works by Merezhkovsky, Briusov, Blok, Vyacheslav Ivanov, Kuzmin and Bulgakov.[45]

Russian feelings of inferiority gave new energy to what Judith Kalb calls 'Rome-envy' in her book *Imperial Visions, Messianic Dreams, 1890–1940.* The term of course alludes to Sigmund Freud's 'Oedipal' fixation with its coexistent 'penis-envy'. At the time of the emergence of Russian high culture in the eighteenth century, the literary topos of defensiveness finds embodiment in the conceit of the superiority of the Russian 'soul' to that of the calculating and rationalistic 'West'. The eighteenth century Russian writer and leading intellectual figure, Mikhail Lomonosov, equates Russia with ancient Rome and Mikhail Chulkov's tales depict ancient Slavonic kingdoms whose level of civilisation supposedly exceeded that of classical Greece and Rome.[46] The twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have done little to ease a sense of vulnerability and wounded pride as the Soviet and post-

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42   Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Winter Notes of Summer Imoressions*. Transl. Kyril Fitzlyon. (Richmond, 2008).
43   Cf. Kalb (2010) 6; 17.
44   Cf. Tidy (2006) 22.
45   Cf. Kalb (2010) 6; 17.
46   Cf. Kalb (2010) 9.

Soviet states remained areas from where individuals as well as conquered territories and 'protectorates' have unrelentingly attempted to break away. Nothing could be further than this phenomenon from ancient Rome with its *peregrini*, its large, multi-ethnic population and immigrants drawn in by its metropolitan sophistication.[47]

Within the logic of the film, Byzantium (Russia) becomes the object of Western 'envy', resulting in its fall (the collapse of the Soviet Union). That it makes no sense to talk of 'Europe' for most of the lifespan of the Byzantine Empire does not matter because of the temporal indeterminacy in Shevkunov's script which we discussed earlier. He cavalierly bandies about references to the French, Germans and Italians. In truth the designation of people as 'Franks' appears only at the time of their king Charlemagne when he is crowned 'Emperor' by the Pope in Rome in 800. Such claims that the barbaric West accused Byzantium of being the 'evil empire', lacking European values and displaying 'Pravoslav' conservatism, inevitably sound manipulative and historically inaccurate. Stereotypical thinking further facilitates implications that sustain racism and xenophobia. Thus we learn that Venice – the 'New York' of the thirteenth century (sic!) – witnessed the accumulation of the first 'Jewish' fortunes obtained by way of speculation in relics stolen from Byzantium. The unmistakable imprint of anti-Semitism finds its match in even larger measures of hostility to Islam. The Byzantine Empire is discussed exclusively within the context of a Christian divide between East and West. We hear no reference made to Harun al-Rashid and the caliphate in Baghdad – the third empire of note besides the Carolingians and the Byzantines in the eighth and ninth centuries. Equal silence shrouds the Sassanian Empire in Persia. References to the Crusade of 1204 admonish 'the' West for its anti-Byzantine disposition. Shevkunov tells viewers that instead of sacking Constantinople, the 'Europeans' should have directed their efforts entirely to the 'liberation' of the Holy Land, implying that, to that end, the murder of large numbers of Islamic and Jewish people would have been justifiable.[48] Carefully placed comments about the Sultan's lusting after, and harem of, boys associate the Muslims replacing Byzantine rule in Constantinople with homosexuality, while the shots of scarfed women with many children and impoverished, badly dressed people in

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47   Cf. Edwards (1996) 110.
48   Cf. Burbank/Cooper (2010) 62; 86; 89.

contemporary Istanbul produce an unfavourable depiction of this city in social and cultural terms.

Shevkunov's essentialising bipolarity condenses the complex events of the past simplistically yet systematically. The long history of relations between Byzantium and Venice – as well as other parts of the Italian peninsula – and the Carolingians, remains silenced while a few events – often out of context – receive detailed elaboration. The kinship between Russians and Byzantines, for instance, features prominently. Further to pontificating about ubiquitous human greed – 'even among Russians' – Shevkunov offers his audience reassurance that Russians differed from 'other Europeans' in demonstrating greater interest in Byzantium's community of 'true' faith than in its treasures: thanks to Prince Vladimir's ambassadors, 'Russians found God'. In keeping with Soviet imperial practices, Shevkunov considers the early Kiev state, converted to Byzantine Christianity in the tenth century, unproblematically 'Russian'.[49] In another 'oversight', Shevkunov ignores the fact that, besides Muscovy, Georgia too followed the Orthodox religion at the time of the fall of Constantinople and that, in addition to the Pravoslav church, the religion of the Byzantine Empire inspired the versions of Orthodoxy in its Greek, Coptic and Armenian variants too.[50] While Shevkunov acknowledges that Byzantium comprised a variety of languages and ethnic groups, its religious intolerance remains notably outside the focus of attention. The narrator comments on the need to convert to Orthodoxy to obtain full acceptance in Byzantine society, but he says nothing about the complete ban on the practice of the pre-Christian religion of ancient Greece and Rome. The damaging effects of the frequent and bitter doctrinal disputes and accusations against 'heretics' do not inform the narrator's lecture either.[51] Nor does he talk about Byzantium's own initial acquisition of artistic treasures and monuments from Athens, Ephesos, Delphi, Rhodes and Crete, even as he lends a great deal of his eloquence to detailed accounts of how the 'Western alliance' plundered the wealth of the 'Eastern Roman Empire'.

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49   Cf. for example Udal'cova (1986) 404: "On the part of the ruling class of old Russia it meant turning to the culture of the most advanced European country of the time, i.e. turning to the highest, most complicated and refined models. And that culture was just right for the Russian people and fitted the high requirements of its development."

50   Cf. Burbank/Cooper (2010) 66.

51   Cf. Burbank/Cooper (2010) 64; 70.

Shevkunov aims mainly to emphasise that Byzantium represented 'God's Kingdom'; its people therefore were 'chosen' and they bequeathed this legacy to Moscow: Church and Empire were closely tied together and the ruler was god's 'sole regent on earth'.[52] Such a combination of religious and political functions within Russia's identity narrative that Shevkunov's film rearticulates resulted in the requirement to be a follower of the Pravoslav faith in order to be Russian as far as the official definition of nationality was concerned.[53] This was a departure from ancient Rome which of course was not a theocracy. The process of syncretism within a polytheistic system in fact allowed for the easy assimilation of other peoples' gods and the lowering of ethnic divisions. In spite of the indisputable centrality of the gods to Roman identity, society was not based on religious belief as monotheistic Byzantium would be.[54] The medieval notion of the 'True Faith' and the accompanying concept of the right only of followers of this religion – regarded as the 'chosen people' – to exist and for its leader to rule over the rest differs profoundly from Roman ways.[55] But it does underpin the term 'pravoslav' which means 'the correct religion', the 'true' knowledge of god. This particular view of history as a sequence of 'chosen peoples' arises in Muscovy: an alternative term to 'third Rome' in referencing the city state of Moscow was the 'New Israel'.[56] Slavophiles – the born-again nationalists of the nineteenth century and their followers – returned to the idea that Moscow was the centre of civilisation. Thus it was up to Moscow – the third and final Rome – to save the world from the Apocalypse, thanks to its possession of the Pravoslav and only true faith.[57] Shevkunov inspires new life into the old stereotype: his populist take on Byzantium resurrects the notion of the Orthodox church as a means of connecting the ruler and the people: indeed, the *Imperator Romanorum* in Constantinople was venerated as 'God's sole regent on Earth'.[58] The doctrine in nineteenth-century Russia

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52   Cf. Litavrin (1986) 373.
53   Cf. Lotman/Uspensky (1984) 54.
54   Cf. Burbank/Cooper (2010) 66.
55   Cf. Litavrin (1986) 369.
56   Cf. Rowland (1996) 591.
57   Cf. Kalb (2010) 16. This idea – championed by nineteenth-century writers, most notably by Dostoevsky – features prominently once again in contemporary Russian literature. See for example the novel *Afrikanist* by Alexandr Prokhanov, winner of Russia's 'National Bestseller Prize' in 2002 (cf. Barta [2006]).
58   Cf. Burbank/Cooper (2010) 66.

first emerged under Tsar Nicholas I., in support of the interconnected trio of Orthodoxy, Autocracy and Nationalism designed for the purposes of nation building. Western European powers tended to maintain a division between church and state: the authority of the Pope and the Catholic monarchs was kept separate. This was even more the case in predominantly protestant countries. Martin Luther's reformation movement – happening at the same period as the emergence of the idea in Moscow of the 'Third Rome' – saw an essential need for the separation of state and church. Shevkunov predictably focuses on the perceived threat posed by Catholicism to state-controlled Russian nationalism: he elaborates upon the hostility and animosity between the Vatican and Constantinople in emphasising the periods in late Byzantium of the forced conversion to Catholicism between 1204 and 1453. He opts to ignore the fact that the split between Byzantine and Roman Christianity was not definitive before 1054, nor was Venice until the thirteenth century a rival or threat to Byzantium.[59]

Thus, Rome in the discourse of Russian nationalism, as in *The Fall of an Empire,* connects to two signifieds: (1) ancient Rome-*cum* Byzantium-*cum* Moscow; (2) Catholic Rome of the 'West'. Within the first of these, the Rome-based identity narrative Shevkunov elaborates has two main plots.[60] One of them traces the foundations of Muscovite identity in Constantinople whose 'fall' to Muslim Turks signifies the rise of Orthodox Moscow. The other identifies direct and unmediated links with ancient Rome itself. This 'double-decker' scheme also rationalises the two settings for Shevkunov's film in Istanbul and in Italy. The suggestion that the Russian state has its origins in Rome is believed to have been articulated by a monk in the first half of the 16th century, called Philotheus, or Filofei of Pskov. His letters in terms of their ideological significance are considered to be the most significant documents of the period.[61] This idea paved the way to 1547 when Ivan IV took the title '*Tsar*' for himself. He claimed the existence of a direct connection between the ruling dynasty in Russia and Emperor Augustus.[62] Supposedly, Augustus had a 'mythical brother' called '*Prus*' from whom Riurik – the legendary Varangian chieftain and, at least according to the

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59   Cf. Burbank/Cooper (2010) 66.
60   Cf. Kalb (2010) 6.
61   Cf. Rowland (1996) 593.
62   Cf. Rowland (1996) 613.

Primary Chronicle, the forebear of the princes of the Kiev state – descended.[63] Such distinguished 'ancestors' justified the Tsar's entitlement to Kiev which was added to the lands ingathered during the Tatar Khans' overlordship to make up 'the Russias'. But this implied kinship was obviously also a great source of pride: Ivan the Terrible warned King Johannes III of Sweden not be 'belittle' him as he was 'descended from Augustus Caesar'.[64] Ivan IV's coronation in fact brought together carefully constructed 'symbolic' objects confirming his descent both from Rome and Byzantium: Augustus's cup' and Constantine Monomachus's hat. The latter was no less inaccurate than Ivan's descent from Augustus: as Burbank and Cooper put it, "the crown [i.e. the 'hat'] was made in Central Asia and had nothing to do with Byzantium except in the effective disinformation campaign carried out by Moscow clerics".[65] It has also been suggested that half of the coronation ritual's text was plagiarised from a source transmitted in the corpus of pseudo-Basil around 500 CE (itself ironically of uncertain authorship).[66]

Following the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople in 1453 and the marriage in 1472 of Ivan III to Zoe Paleologue, the niece of the last Byzantine emperor – events that signified the onset of the age of the 'Third Rome' – a concentrated effort got under way to 'Romanise' Moscow.[67] In the 1480s, architects, painters and sculptors from the Italian peninsula received significant commissions to work in Moscow.[68] The fort that eventually emerged as the Moscow Kremlin – replete with palaces and churches – was obviously intended as a new *pignus imperii*, in imitation of the Capitoline Hill, where the Temple of Jupiter – rebuilt and perfected by Augustus – stood for the city, the empire and the religion. Why did Muscovy make such a forceful attempt to incorporate Rome into its foundation?[69]

Russia had not only imperial ambitions but it was eagerly seeking recognition as a European state. History's most persistent attempt to legitimise the country as part of Europe took shape in the building of the city of St Petersburg. It served as the capital of the Russian Empire from the time of its foundation by Peter I in the early eighteenth century until 1918.

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63   Cf. Kalb (2010) 4.
64   Cf. Lotman/Uspensky (1984) 53.
65   Burbank/Cooper (2010) 194.
66   Cf. Ševčenko (1954) 164.
67   Cf. Kalb (2010) 11.
68   Cf. Voyce (1954) 18–21.
69   Cf. Edwards (1996) 70; 72; 85.

That year marked the re-establishment by the new Soviet regime of Moscow as the capital and the ultimate failure of Peter I's attempt – that lasted for two hundred years – culturally to re-orientate Russia.[70] Not only in the city's name ('Sankt-Peterburg') did Peter depart from Russian conventions but also in Latinate references to himself as 'emperor' (*Imperator*) and *Pater Patriae* ('*otets otechestva*'). These terms nevertheless echo Ivan IV's wish to emphasise the ties supposedly connecting Russia with imperial Rome. A fortress with a cathedral named after St Peter and St Paul was built with the intention of serving as the centre of the new capital. The Cathedral subsequently became the resting place for most of the Romanov dynasty's *tsars*. The name of the fortress – as indeed that of the city – partially commemorates the city's founder but it also suggests a connection with the 'Basilica Papale San Pietro' in the Vatican. In their influential book, *The Semiotics of Culture*, Jurii M. Lotman and Boris A. Uspensky provide a detailed analysis of allusions in the coat of arms of the city of St Petersburg to that of the Holy See.[71]

Undoubtedly Peter the Great aimed principally to remove from Moscow the entitlement of claiming to be the 'final' Rome to the new capital he had established. Those hostile to his attempts to westernise his country never accepted this,[72] nor did they wish to see any readjustment in the ideology towards Western forms of Christianity away from its focus on Byzantium. Narratives about the 'Russian Rome' have been told and retold for over 500 years: the first version drew upon Kiev's *Primary Chronicle* of the early twelfth century which referred to Prince Vladimir as the 'new' Emperor Constantine.[73] The double-headed eagle – emblematic of the Byzantine Empire – came to symbolise the Russian monarchy and today is to be seen on the Russian presidential flag.[74] All the symbols and stories of origin, in addition to attempts to associate Rome with each of the Tsarist and Soviet Empire's three principal cities – Moscow, Petersburg and Kiev – have not sufficed to enable the Russian state to date to succeed in domesticating the fundamental concept of the *civis* which regulated the relationship between the state of ancient Rome and its citizens.[75] Rome's sense of universality discouraged the insecurities, rivalries and ethnic conflicts that nationalism

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70   Cf. Lotman/Uspensky (1984) 54.
71   Cf. Lotman/Uspensky (1984) 29.
72   Cf. Lotman/Uspensky (1984) 64.
73   Cf. Rowland (1996) 600.
74   Cf. Kalb (2010) 11.
75   Cf. Catalano/Siniscalco (1992) xiii.

triggers and which the Russian Establishment, with a great degree of consistency, has been stoking since the days of Muscovy. Shevkunov's film makes a new contribution to the body of works that 'write Rome'[76] even as it accommodates justification for policies at home, the 'near abroad' and abroad in the age of Putin within a well-rehearsed cycle of stories.

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76   Edwards (1996).

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