Fedor Solntsev, a pioneering preservationist, spent his life drawing the antiquities and ethnic dress of the peoples of the Russian Empire. An artist-archaeologist, he provided imaginative renditions of past events, archaeological objects, and historic monuments that romanticized things medieval. In his illustrations and designs Solntsev selectively incorporated and often combined his interpretations of Byzantine, Rus’, and Muscovite motifs in an effort to formulate a coherent style that would reflect Russian national identity. Positing the Russian Orthodox Church as the successor of Constantinople’s ecclesiastical authority, his pseudo-Byzantine designs borrowed elements from the medieval art works of Greece and Asia Minor pre-dating the fall of Constantinople to the Ottoman Turks in 1453. The Rus’ elements referenced the eleventh- through thirteenth-century churches of Kiev, Vladimir-Suzdal, and Novgorod, as well as the fifteenth- and early-sixteenth-century churches of Moscow inspired by pre-Mongol Rus’ monuments.

Rus’, a vast medieval polity that emerged in eastern Europe in the second half of the ninth century, extended from the steppes north of the Black Sea to the regions beyond the upper Volga River and Lakes Ladoga and Onega and was settled largely by East Slavic peoples. The dominant Riurikid dynasty, the Slavic language, and, after 988, Orthodox Christianity contributed to shared political-cultural imperatives among the numerous centers of power throughout Rus’. Kiev held seniority as the dynastic and ecclesiastical center of Rus’. After the
Mongol invasions of the 1240s, the already loosening ties among Rus’ centers of power deteriorated and further promoted their autonomous development. During the fourteenth century, in the northern area of Vladimir-Suzdal, Moscow emerged as a center of power laying the foundation for the state of Muscovy. Kiev and southwestern Rus’ lands gradually fell under Lithuania and Poland, and on the plains of the Dnieper basin, Cossack society evolved. With the rise and expansion of Muscovite power in the second half of the fifteenth century, the grand prince Ivan III began to claim that all Rus’ lands should fall under Muscovite jurisdiction. Today, the three modern nation-states of Belarus, Russia, and Ukraine all trace their origins to the Rus’ polity. In the nineteenth century, however, Russian imperial visual culture projected an uninterrupted linear continuity with the Rus’ past. Juxtaposed with the historicizing Byzantine and Rus’ motifs were designs referencing the monuments of late sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Muscovy, a period linked with an idealized perception of Russian autocracy and one providing a historical precedent for nineteenth-century imperial expansion.

Solntsev’s body of work, carried out under the imperial patronage of Tsar Nicholas I and Tsar Alexander III, reflected the imperial desire to define a collective and unifying historical and cultural inheritance that could serve nineteenth-century Russian national and monarchial interests. Solntsev’s illustrations appear in nineteenth-century Russian publications on ethnography, culture, and history. Their meticulous detail suggests the artist’s familiarity with the depicted subjects and implies the accuracy of the renditions. At the same time, the images

---


5 On sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Moscow and Russia, see *The Cambridge History* 1:213–662.