
SUSANA TORRES PRIETO, *The Early Slavs: The First Centuries of Eastern Europe* (Routledge Studies in the History of Russia and Eastern Europe). London – New York: Routledge 2025. 211 pp. – ISBN 978-1-032-25113-4

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It is not easy to critique a book when the objective of that book is not entirely clear. The subject of TORRES PRIETO's latest book is indicated in its subtitle rather than its title: it is not a study of the early Slavs (*los antiguos Slavos* of the Spanish version published in 2020), but a study of East European history between the 9th and the 14th centuries. After an introduction and a chapter on written and archaeological sources, SUSANA TORRES PRIETO devotes one single chapter to the 'earliest Slavs.' The claim that the early Slavs had no metallurgy (pp. 6 and 23) is not corroborated by archaeology, at least not by the clear evidence of 6th- to 7th-century iron smelting and bronze casting from the Lower Danube region in which the written sources place the early Slavs. Moreover, the claim that because of not using metals much, they 'do not seem to have been very preoccupied about burial practices' (p. 6) makes no sense. It may seem that archaeology is treated in this book as a key source of information when supposedly providing information about slavery in Moravia, for example (p. 66). In fact, TORRES PRIETO only has room for an ancillary use of the discipline: 'archaeology provides valuable information by either correcting or supplementing a written source' (p. 10). Because of that, one would expect a greater reliance on written sources, but TORRES PRIETO ignores Menander the Guardsman, Agathias, John Malalas, the Bavarian Geographer, Widukind, the *Legenda Christiani*, Vincent of Prague, Vincent Kadłubek, the *Chronicle of Halych-Volyhnia*, and George Akropolites. Moreover, she wrongly assumes that Theophylact Simocatta used Procopius of Caesarea and the *Strategikon* (p. 15). The *Strategikon* is not a 'manual for governance' (p. 14) and was not written 'for the instruction of future emperors' (p. 16). Regino of Prüm was not 'an almost contemporary to Fredegar' (p. 18) and ibn Fadlan never visited Atil (p. 21). Ibrahim ibn Yakub did not have first-hand knowledge of Mieszko (p. 21), whom he never saw in person and who never led any revolt of the Polans (p. 89). The *Chronicle of the Czechs* written by Cosmas of Prague is not about 'the history of the world

from its creation to the reign of Vladislav I', the *Deeds of the Princes of the Poles* by an unknown author conventionally called Gallus Anonymus is not 'written in verse', and the *Primary Chronicle* is not 'the only chronicle written in East Slavic Church Slavonic and in prose' (p. 22). More importantly, the motif of a plowman becoming duke is in the story of Cosmas of Prague about Přemysl, not in that of Gallus Anonymus about Pazt (Piast). At any rate, that is not a 'common biblical tale of *origo gentis*' (p. 90) by any stretch of the imagination.

In the third chapter, TORRES PRIETO deals with trade and slavery, in which she takes several sources (such as Fredegar) at face value to argue that Slavic slaves were 'one of the most profitable commodities at the time' (p. 64). She also claims that slavery played a key role in the rise of the Slavic states. The paucity of evidence in that regard leads TORRES PRIETO to build great edifices on small foundations. For example, she assumes that a slave named Drogus and mentioned as *graeculus* in a Carolingian source was a 'Byzantine Slav' who may have not preferred 'martyrdom to castration in order to be employed in the courts' [sic!] as eunuch (p. 68). This is presumably in line with her idea that 'trade with Christian slaves was officially, only officially, forbidden in the Byzantine and Frankish empires' (p. 70). Be that as it may, after concocting for Drogus a Slavic identity out of thin air, on the next page TORRES PRIETO claims that the Arabic term *Rusiyyah* 'does not really allow us to purport a clear-cut ethnic origin of the people' (p. 69).

Chapter 4 is a survey of political history between the 9th and the 14th century, with subsections devoted to Moravia, Bohemia, Poland, Bulgaria, Croatia, Serbia, and 'Kyivan Rus'. She ends the chapter with a lengthy discussion of DIMITRI OBOLENSKY's idea of Byzantine Commonwealth, a topic to which she returns in the epilogue.

Chapter 5 deals with the conversion to Christianity. The discussion does not hold together well. It seems disconnected and patchwork, and, for all the interesting information made available, the reader is not provided with a clear picture of what was most certainly a critical stage of the historical development. One's confidence in the argument is further undermined by a series of statements that have no place in a piece of serious history. At one point, the reader is told that 'there is only so much a human can do in order to regain communion with God' (p. 143). At another, one learns that some form of paganism managed to escape 'the bourgeois superstructure of Christianity' (p. 144). Elsewhere, one reads that Gregory Palamas's de-

fense of Hesychasm was a ‘dualist heresy’ (p. 146) and that Bogomilism is both an ‘original theological movement’ and ‘a movement of contestation against the Byzantine empire and its official church’ (p. 145–146).

Perhaps the most interesting and, in some ways, innovative part of the book is the sixth chapter that deals with the written culture. Exploring the relation between languages (Old Church Slavonic and Church Slavonic) and scripts (Glagolitic and Cyrillic), TORRES PRIETO traces the convergent uses to which both languages and scripts were put by those who commissioned and used manuscripts.

The main weakness, however, it is not to be found in the individual chapters but in the book’s central organizing thesis. The ‘Slavs’ in the title are understood as ‘the vast majority of people’, not the elites. Nonetheless, TORRES PRIETO believes that ‘the ordinary life of the vast majority of the Slavs, from the time they are described by foreigners until the time this volume ends [sic!], is, and will remain, shrouded in mystery’ (p. 6). To her, the notion of ‘Slavdom’ makes no sense except in a linguistic sense, ‘and this with reservations’ (p. 164). This is problematic on two levels. First, if ‘Slav’ refers to ‘a speaker of a language belonging to the Slavic family of languages’, how could anyone write the history the ‘early Slavs’ before the 10th century, the date of the earliest, extant evidence of (Old) Church Slavonic? Since Common Slavic is a linguistic construct, not an actual language, how can one even speak of a ‘Common Slavic society’ (p. 176)? In the epilogue, TORRES PRIETO’s main point is that until the 13th century, the ‘early Slavs’ had much more in common than after that. But she spent much time, ink, and energy in Chapter 4 describing the differences that grew between Moravia, Croatia, and ‘Kyivan Rus’ during the early Middle Ages.

One may take issue with the way the author treats several regions of Eastern Europe. To TORRES PRIETO, Romania, Moldavia, and Wallachia are three separate geographical entities (p. 3), with Wallachia falling ‘under the Catholic sphere’ (p. 147) and Romania being ‘predominantly Catholic’ (p. 165). More than 600 years in advance of the birth of the Old Bolshevik Mikhail Ivanovich Kalinin, King Otakar II of Bohemia founded the city of Kaliningrad (p. 87). According to TORRES PRIETO, Croatia and Slavonia were separate, independent Balkan states in the 13th century (p. 101). In fact, the book abounds in factual errors: the early Slavs did not have ‘a pretty [sic!] horizontal form of government’ (p. 43); Thietmar of Merseburg was never defeated in battle (p. 19); *Vita Constantini* and *Vita*

Methodii were not written in Bulgaria (p. 23); the Byzantine port of Dyrrachion was not established by Amalfitans (p. 55); the Pechenegs are not also called Cumans (p. 82); the first Bulgarian Empire did not have ‘ports in the Black, Aegean, and Adriatic seas, which meant an incessant source of revenue’ (p. 97); the emperor responsible for the creation of the archbishopric of Ohrid is Basil II, not John Tzimiskes (p. 99); Bulgaria was not conquered by the Ottomans in 1366, but in 1396 (p. 101); there was never any *župania* of Zadar (p. 106); the Khazars never traded with Francia (p. 111); Methodius was ‘incarcerated’ in Reichenau, not Salzburg, and never lived in the eastern Balkans (pp. 136 and 154); Stefan II Nemanjić is known as the ‘First-Crowned’ (*Prvovenčani*), not ‘Twice Crowned’ (p. 137); Bohemia was not Christianized ‘initially as a member of the Orthodox Church’ (p. 154). TORRES PRIETO compares Samo with Rurik, but unlike the latter, the former was not invited by the Slavs to become their ruler, certainly not in 588 (p. 17). If Charlemagne’s son Pepin (not ‘Pippin the Short’, who was Charlemagne’s father, not son) ‘finally expelled the Avars from Pannonia’ in the late 8th century, how could Emperor Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus still fight against them in the 10th century, supposedly with the assistance of the Croats and the Serbs (p. 133)? The *filioque* was inserted into the Nicæan Creed in the late 6th, not in the 4th century (p. 140), and Cosmas the Presbyter wrote in the 10th, not in the 12th century (p. 145). Another anachronism is at work when TORRES PRIETO claims that the Rus’ described by Emperor Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus in the 10th century established commercial contacts with the ‘Hanseatic ports from the north, and with the Khazars and the steppe peoples from the south’ (p. 63). There was no ‘Orthodox form of Christianity’ in the 9th and 10th century, only Christianity *tout court* (pp. 134 and 137). Liudevit did not rule over the entire Carpathian Basin ‘from the stronghold of Sisak’ (p. 13) and Aleksandr Nevskii was not a ruler of Kyivan Rus’ (p. 114). What TORRES PRIETO calls a ‘brief’ revival of Bulgaria ‘in the so-called Second Bulgarian Empire’ lasted more than two centuries (p. 99).

Some errors may be the result of poor editing. For example, Symeon of Bulgaria was defeated by Croats, who were presumably allies of the ‘Frankish Empire’, not by the ‘Frankish Empire’, which was ‘allies of the Croats’ (p. 97). Elsewhere, attempts to use gender-neutral language may be blamed for the misuse of plural pronouns: only ‘male members’ of the Rurikid dynasty competed for power, but ‘each contender chose their foreign allies’ (p. 115; similarly on p. 116). TORRES PRIETO employs sentences ending with conjunctions, supposedly for rhetorical effect: ‘It would be

easier if one could neatly separate ethnically, racially, or religiously the exploiters from the exploited, but the picture presented in studying slavery in the European Middle Ages is anything but' (p. 63). Another sentence begins with a conjunction: 'Except that evidence does not necessarily follow the model' (p. 86). There are also sentence fragments without a predicate: 'Also by the legal provisions made in the earliest legal texts in Rus' regulating the ownership of slaves'. At times, the text reads like a phone message: 'And yet' (p. 131). There are also many misspellings and typos: 'Hinemar of Rheims' instead of 'Hincmar of Reims' (p. 18); 'Normandist' for 'Normanist' (p. 62); 'Staria Ladoga' instead of 'Staraiia Ladoga' (p. 69); 'Librunia' for 'Liburnia' (p. 103), 'župainas' instead of 'županias' (p. 105); 'Mikhael IV the Paphlagoian' for 'Michael IV the Paphlagonian' (p. 106). TORRES PRIETO describes the bibliography of her book as 'updated' (p. 7), but she ignores fundamental works by EDUARD MÜHLE, STANISLAW ROSIK, DANIJEL DŽINO, PIERRE GONNEAU, FEDIR ANDROSHCHUK, TSVETELIN STEPANOV, and MARTIN WIHODA, to name just a few authors of important books published in the last five years. She knows CURTA's *Making of the Slavs* (2001), but not his *Slavs in the Making* (2021).

The essentialized distinction between *Slavia Orthodoxa* and *Slavia Latina* masks TORRES PRIETO's preferences: 'The distant relationship to the text, the shunning of individuality so popular in *Slavia Orthodoxa* did not really take place in *Slavia Latina*, where authorship was beginning to be acknowledged in ways similar to those adopted in the rest of Western Europe' (p. 168). Culture appears here as an auxiliary in the unchanging confrontation between 'East and West, between Orthodox and Latin Christianity' (p. 145) in an ahistorical conflation of diverse interpretations, preoccupations, and situations that does justice neither to historical sources, nor to the complexity of the East European history in the Middle Ages.

Keywords

medieval Eastern Europe