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# Constructing Justinian: National Memory In Modern Russia

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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines how the historical legacy of the Byzantine emperor Justinian I has been selectively reconstructed in modern Russia to support narratives of Orthodox and imperial identity. Justinian's sixth-century reign was deeply contradictory: his conquests expanded the Roman Empire, his codification of Roman law produced an enduring legal legacy, and his religious policies sought to enforce imperial orthodoxy, while his rule also generated warfare, fiscal strain, political repression, and religious persecution. Rather than treating these competing aspects as a balanced historical record, this paper investigates how modern Russian historiography, popular media, religious institutions, and school textbooks emphasize particular elements of Justinian's legacy while marginalizing others. This paper compares modern representations with Justinian's Roman political and cultural identity through close readings of Russian historical scholarship, contemporary media and educational materials, and primary sources from Justinian's reign, including Procopius, John Malalas, and other contemporary or near-contemporary writers. These sources—largely recognized as the 6th-century historical canon—are crucial for understanding Justinian within his historical context, and the contemporary Russian materials serve as their modern analogues. This paper argues that modern Russian narratives do not simply invent a favorable Justinian; instead, they elevate one strand of a long-contested historical tradition and suppress competing interpretations. Justinian is consequently transformed from a complex Roman emperor into a symbolic predecessor of Orthodox, centralized, and imperial authority. The paper concludes that the political use of Justinian illustrates a broader process through which states reconstruct the classical past to legitimize present-day conceptions of national identity, civilizational continuity, and political authority. While existing scholarship has covered "Russian Byzantinism" extensively, there is virtually no work on the modern Russian reception of Justinian I. This paper fills that hole, but does not contain an in-depth analysis of the influence of Justinianic law on the Russian legal system. Future scholarship could explore Russian civil law to identify more concrete, structural connections to Justinian's Roman Empire.

## INTRODUCTION

Few figures in Eastern Roman history inspire more controversy than the emperor Justinian I. Justinian's epoch-defining pursuit of *renovatio imperii* stands as one of the most polarizing imperial projects in history. This enterprise was not merely territorial, but also cultural and religious, permanently reshaping Roman society. To some, the boy from Tauresium burned as a beacon of orthodoxy and Roman renewal; to others, his reign was one of devastating warfare, religious persecution, fiscal strain, and authoritarian crackdown. This tension between staggering success and terrible tragedy, combined with his unusual

reach, has made Justinian a uniquely polarizing historical figure. Justinian's many afterlives, from the sixth century to the twenty-first, often obscure the complicated historical figure behind the legend, revealing less about Justinian than the societies that continuously reinvented him. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the national historical narrative of modern Russia, where his legacy has been selectively reconstructed to reflect contemporary political needs rather than sixth-century realities.

This paper examines how and why modern Russian historical memory has selectively reconstructed the legacy of Justinian I, and what this reconstruction reveals about the relationship between historical memory and contemporary Russian political identity. It argues that modern Russian narratives do not invent a new Justinian so much as selectively elevate one strand of his historically contested legacy (e.g., his Orthodox piety, legal achievements, imperial expansion, and centralized authority), while minimizing the violence, persecution, fiscal strain, and political instability associated with his reign. To distinguish Justinian's historical identity from his modern afterlife, this paper compares modern Russian representations with sixth-century Roman and non-Chalcedonian sources, including Procopius, John Malalas, and John of Ephesus.

## WHO WAS JUSTINIAN?

To properly understand how modern national interpretations of Justinian differ from the historical emperor, this paper must outline the broad strokes of his character and accomplishments. When people think of Eastern Roman history, many of its most recognizable symbols—from the monumental *Hagia Sophia* cathedral to the revolutionary *Corpus Juris Civilis* law code—are inseparably connected to the emperor Justinian I.[1] The larger-than-life emperor reigned from 527 to 565 CE, a period which ushered in an enormous societal, institutional, and cultural transformation for the Roman Empire.[2]

## JUSTINIAN: THE MAN

Justinian first rose to power alongside his uncle during the turbulent early sixth-century.[3] The Eastern Roman state was experiencing an economic and societal revival during an unfamiliar age of multipolarity—various barbarian kingdoms emerged from the ashes of the fallen Western Empire, as an expanding Sassanid Persia shifted its hungry eyes towards Constantinople's eastern frontier—creating an exceedingly volatile geopolitical environment.[4] This unique set of circumstances demanded an extraordinarily capable and energetic sovereign, qualities that contemporaries often attributed to Justinian. Historian Procopius of Caesarea's *Secret History* describes the emperor's industrious mindset with, "As a rule he dispensed with both rest and sleep"[5]

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[1] Sarris, Peter, *Justinian: Emperor, Soldier Saint*, Basic Books, 2023, p. 13-14.
[2] Kaldellis, Anthony, *The New Roman Empire: A History of Byzantium*, Oxford University Press, 2023, p. 249.
[3] Ibid., p. 253-254.
[4] Ibid., p. 261-263, p. 279-282.
[5] Procopius, *The Secret History of the Court of Justinian*. Translated by Ted Garvin (The Athenian Society, 2004). Accessed July 21, 2026, Chapter XIII https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/12916

Justinian himself even defined the office of emperor as men "who work day and night on the people's behalf."[6] It was these famous lines—contextualized by his supremely energetic and transformative tenure—which cemented, "The sleepless emperor" as one of the many titles which Justinian would go on to be remembered by.[7] Justinian's tireless dedication would become one of the defining features upon which subsequent generations constructed competing images of Justinian—as an ideal and proactive ruler to some, and as an overambitious tyrant to others.

## JUSTINIAN: THE CONQUEROR

Justinian's abundant energy and constant vigilance came with a heavy cost: boundless ambition. In his zeal, Justinian sent Roman armies across the Mediterranean in a series of wars which, according to contemporary historian Procopius of Caesarea, were "waged against the barbarians of the East and of the West".[8] With these conquests, the age of Mediterranean multipolarity ended as quickly as it began. Motivated by glory and opportunism—Justinian's Roman Empire took advantage of both its overflowing treasury and political weakness in neighboring kingdoms, expanding the Eastern Roman Empire to its greatest ever extent.[9] However, such unprecedented enlargement did not come without cost. The Italian countryside was left as a shell of its former self, ravaged and depopulated.[10] The city of Rome was hollowed out by war, largely abandoned during the ruin of Justinian's mid-sixth century conquests.[11] Tensions against Sassanid Persia exploded into mutual ruin, exhausting and draining the Eastern provinces without any lasting gains.[12] The ceaseless warfare in both east and west emptied the once-prosperous treasury, leaving the empire brittle and vulnerable.[13] Justinian's conquests—defined by both sweeping military glory as well as immense destruction—polarized his legacy. Successive generations would remember Justinian either as the gallant restorer of Roman glory, or as the architect of unnecessary Mediterranean-wide devastation.

## JUSTINIAN: THE LAWGIVER

Justinian's codification of Roman law into a standardized corpus—the *Corpus Juris Civilis*—became one of his defining legacies.[14] The emperor appointed the jurist Tribonian to lead the commission which compiled the *Codex Justinianus* and *Digest*, two of four constituent parts of the monumental *Corpus Juris*

[6] Kaldellis, *The New Roman Empire: A History of Byzantium*, p. 269.
[7] Ibid., p. 269.
[8] Procopius (edited and translated by Bill Thayer), *The Wars*, Harvard University Press, 553 (1914-1928), Book I (beginning).
[9] Sarris, *Justinian: Emperor, Soldier Saint*, p. 10-11.
[10] Ibid., p. 11.
[11] Kaldellis, *The New Roman Empire: A History of Byzantium*, p. 306.
[12] Ibid., p. 261.
[13] Ibid., p. 268.
[14] Evans, J.A.S., *The Age of Justinian: The Circumstances of Imperial Power*, Routledge, 1996, p. 23.

*Civilis*, with the other two portions being the *Institutes* and the *Novellae Constitutiones* (*New Laws*).[15] [16] Justinian intended for the Corpus Juris Civilis to act as the definitive and sole source of law within the

empire, governing all aspects of Roman life, including but not limited to religion, crime, administration, civics, commerce, family, and customs.[17] [18] The Eastern Roman Empire would continue to adapt and employ the *Corpus Juris Civilis* until its end in 1453 CE.[19] Even as Eastern Rome faded into history, modern Greek and Serbian law modeled their legal codes after the sixth-century document.[20] [21] In Western Europe, the *Corpus* would serve as the backbone of the single largest modern legal reform—*the Napoleonic Code*—cementing itself as one of the Western legal tradition's foundational documents.[22] Because of the enduring influence of the *Corpus Juris Civilis*, later generations often elevated Justinian as a monolithic great lawgiver, while overlooking the broader controversies which colored his reign.[23]

## JUSTINIAN: THE ADMINISTRATOR

Justinian's larger-than-life agenda was just as involved in internal Roman affairs. His reign saw sweeping efforts to both strengthen and centralize the imperial administration, from reforms to provincial government and taxation to ambitious programs of construction and urban renewal.[24] Most famously, following the destruction wrought by the Nika Riots of 532 CE, Justinian oversaw the reconstruction of a new Constantinople upon the burnt husk of the old, including the construction of the *Hagia Sophia's* current superstructure.[25] Yet, the material costs of constant warfare, plague, construction, and an increasingly degraded rural tax base placed significant financial and administrative pressures upon the empire.[26] Justinian's domestic administration therefore reflected the same contradiction that characterized much of his reign: extraordinary vision accompanied by immense and all-encompassing imperial strain. Because Justinian's administrative reforms could be remembered either as efficient state-building or as imperial overreach, they became another facet of his reign that later generations selectively emphasized.

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[15] Sarris, Peter, *Introduction: The Novels of the Emperor Justinian,* Cambridge University Press, 2018, p. 12–13.
[16] Jacob Burns Law Library, Roman Law Research: *Corpus Juris Civilis, Emperor Justinian and the Corpus Juris Civilis*, GW Law, 2026. Accessed September 10, 2026. https://law.gwu.libguides.com/romanlaw/corpusjuriscivilis
[17] Honore, Tony, *Justinian's Codification*, The Oxford Classical Dictionary, 2003, p. 803, 804.
[18] Kaldellis, *The New Roman Empire: A History of Byzantium*, p. 269-270.
[19] Ibid., p. 270.
[20] Mousourakis, George, *Roman Law and the Origins of the Civil Law Tradition,* Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2015, p. 231.
[21] Krkljuš, Ljubomirka, *Pravna istorija srpskog naroda*, Beograd: Pravni fakultet Univerziteta u Beogradu, 2015, p. 163-164.
[22] Vincenti, Umberto, *Roman Law*, The Classical Tradition, Harvard University Press, 2010, p. 513-518.
[23] Sarris, *Justinian: Emperor, Soldier Saint*, p. 22.
[24] Kaldellis, *The New Roman Empire: A History of Byzantium*, p. 257.
[25] Ibid., p. 276-277.
[26] Ibid., p. 297-300.

## JUSTINIAN: THE DEFENDER OF ORTHODOXY

To Justinian, the age of imperial religious tolerance had drawn on for far too long. From 527 to 565 CE, he would repeatedly attempt to bring Monophysitism—a Christological position concerning the nature of Jesus Christ—to an end, enforcing religious homogeneity under an imperial Chalcedonian status quo. Yet, the conflict between Monophysites and Chalcedonians was rooted in theological disagreements so complex—and at times so arbitrary—that, as Anthony Kaldellis argues, "few people – not even the leading theologians themselves" fully understood them.[27] Instead, "Christian identities formed around the narratives of persecution and righteousness, triumph and injustice, that evolved around the rival doctrines to the point where the latter became secondary."[28] Within this social and religious context, Justinian continued the persecution not only of Monophysites, but also of pagans, Jews, Samaritans, and other Christian groups who rejected imperial doctrine.[29] His most notable attempt at bringing religious dissent under imperial control came from 529-531 CE, where he targeted and erased the Platonic Academy of Athens, a school of philosophy and pagan bastion.[30] Justinian's relentless pursuit of a highly specific Chalcedonian Orthodoxy earned him sainthood in some traditions, and condemnation in others. This duality—between mainstream praise and the fury of the marginalized—makes religious policy one of the most contested aspects of his legacy.

This broad overview of Justinian makes clear that his reign defies any simple characterization, providing later generations with a wealth of achievements, failures, and contradictions from which to construct competing historical truths. However, in recent years, Russian state-sponsored historical narratives have increasingly—and selectively—presented Justinian as an idealized champion of imperial Orthodoxy while omitting the violence, coercion, overreach, and instability that colored his reign.[31] This paper focuses on Russia because it represents one of the most influential modern appropriations of Justinian's legacy, grounded through the "Third Rome" ideology, Pan-Slavism, broad political similarities, and Orthodox succession. By comparing the national Russian narrative with the contemporary primary source base, this analysis demonstrates how these selective portrayals construct politically useful images of Justinian that are fundamentally at odds with the complexity and nuance of the historical record.

## RUSSIAN HISTORIOGRAPHICAL CONTEXT

Interpretations of the Eastern Roman Empire and its emperors are heavily influenced by various cultural and political agendas. From Greece's attempted monopoly over Constantinople's memory fueling its 20th-century imperial aspirations, to Serbia justifying their expansionist ambitions with a 14th-century East Roman court title, most nations of the modern Orthodox world have attempted to take a slice of the

[27] Ibid., p. 6.
[28] Ibid., p. 6.
[29] Evans, *The Age of Justinian: The Circumstances of Imperial Power*, p. 240.
[30] Kaldellis, *The New Roman Empire: A History of Byzantium*, p. 273.
[31] Sarris, *Justinian: Emperor, Soldier Saint*, p. 11-12.

metaphorical "Byzantine pie".[32] [33] Modern Russia is no exception. While Russian self-preception as the "Third Rome" was thought to have died with the last Tsar, today's Russia has revived and repurposed the nation's imagined ties to the medieval Roman Empire.[34] To understand this phenomenon's historiographical roots, we must turn to one of the early giants in the field of Eastern Roman studies: George Ostrogorsky.

Ostrogorsky's 1956 *The History of the Byzantine State* was incredibly influential. The book's reception contributed to the gradual transformation of Eastern Roman history from an obscure sub-category of Classics or medieval studies, into a legitimate and autonomous academic discipline.[35] However, British historian Averil Cameron criticizes Ostrogorsky for his "Slavist agenda"—retrofitting connections between Slavic peoples where none existed historically—which made later political appropriation far easier.[36] To fully grasp this phenomenon, we will need to analyze an excerpt from Ostrogorsky's work:
"From this time dates the beginning of relations between Byzantium and the Russian kingdom, which had only just come into being, and of the missionary work among this people, hitherto almost completely unknown to the Byzantines, which was to have such important consequences in the future,"[37]

Though this statement appears relatively innocent, its implications are extremely significant. Even terms which appear the most inconspicuous hold the power to shape historical memory. Though the term "Kievan Rus" carries its own historiographical baggage, projecting a centralized, single-state identity onto a decentralized medieval network of East Slavic territories, Ostrogorsky goes even further. In the excerpt, he puts forth the term "Russian Kingdom," encouraging the reader to see Russia—in the sense of it as a continuous political subject—already existing in the ninth century. The evidence suggests that may not have merely been an innocent misinterpretation; even in the 20th century, "Russia" carries obvious national significance. Whether or not this was Ostrogorsky's intention, the terminology contains an implication that medieval Kyiv belonged straightforwardly to the history of a centralized Russian state.

Throughout the excerpt, Ostrogorsky consistently describes the religious interaction between Eastern Rome and the Kievan Rus as, "миссионерская работа" (missionary work).[38] While seeming innocent enough, this term—which many modern historians argue do not apply to Eastern Rome—carries significant interpretive implications. In the early days of the Byzantine studies (19th-early 20th centuries), what Dimitri Obolensky describes as the "Byzantine commonwealth" was generally accepted without

[32] Kaser and Halpern, *Historical Myth and the Invention of Political Folklore in Contemporary Serbia*, Anthropology of East Europe Review, 1998, p. 94-95
[33] Sotirovic, Vladislav, *"Megali Idea" And Greek Irredentism In The Wars For A Greater Greece, 1912−1923*, ResearchGate, 2018. Accessed July 16, 2026, p. 1-2.
[34] Cameron, Averil, *Byzantine Matters*, Princeton University Press, 2014, p. 2.
[35] Dunham, William Huse, Ernst Kitzinger, and Ihor Sevčenko, *Memoirs of Fellows and Corresponding Fellows of the Mediaeval Academy of America,* Speculum 52, no. 3, 1997, p. 774–76.
[36] Cameron, *Byzantine Matters*, p. 2.
[37] Ostrogorsky, George, *The History of the Byzantine State*, Rutgers University Press, 1956, p. 228.
[38] Ibid., p. 229.

significant systemic pushback.[39] Interestingly, this interpretation coincided with a general move amongst Russian Byzantinists to incorrectly "feudalize" the empire, largely driven by a historiographical need to prove that Orthodox states had advanced through standardized "European" phases.[40] By framing these interactions through the language of missionary expansion and intimate interaction, Ostrogorsky and some other early Russian Byzantinists constructed a stronger sense of civilizational continuity between Byzantium and the Rus than the evidence (Frankopan, Shepard) supports.[41] Through this, we can observe how Russian historical memory was shaped through the imprecise application of terminology.

## JUSTINIAN IN MODERN RUSSIAN DISCOURSE

Reading Ostrogorsky alongside other historians of the Russian scholarly tradition—from Upensky in the 1910s to the *Тетради по консерватизму* journal today—suggests a broader pattern in which Eastern Rome is incorporated into a continuous narrative of Russian civilizational identity.[42] [43] Although this academic framework has been substantially revised in the west—with Anthony Kaldellis's 2024 survey recently critiquing the model as an "extension of Russian imperialism"[44]—its underlying logic persists in contemporary Russian depictions of Justinian—where the emperor is refashioned as a mirror of contemporary ideological necessities rather than a complex historical figure.

In her 2014 *Byzantine Matters*, Cameron introduces a 2008 Russian pseudo-documentary titled: *The Destruction of an Empire: The Lesson of Byzantium*. She describes the product as "anti-western and nationalistic," created with the purpose of reasserting Russia's "true identity" as the heir of Eastern Rome while presenting its fall as a cautionary tale against western encroachment.[45] Within such a narrative ecosystem, Justinian I becomes an especially useful historical figure. His reign can be remembered not for its overwhelming controversy, catastrophic loss of life, relentless persecution, and financial expense, but as the story of a powerful, glorious Orthodox emperor who sought to assert imperial authority upon the west. In this selective retelling, Justinian embodies precisely the zenith of an Orthodox imperial civilization that supposedly stands in opposition to the modern West—ideals which contemporary Russian state narratives seek to project.[46]

With this in mind, this paper will now explore how Justinian is represented by the modern Russian state. A 2000 document of the Russian Orthodox Church, the *Основы социальной концепции РПЦ*, developed under Metropolitan Kirill, presents the "Saint-emperor Justinian" as a pious lawgiver, exalting his

[39] Obolensky, Dimitri, *The Byzantine Commonwealth: Eastern Europe 500-1453,* Weidenfield and Nicolson, 1971, p. 353.
[40] Vasiliev, Alexander*, History of the Byzantine Empire 324-1453,* Bedrosan, 1971, p. 483.
[41] Shepard and Frankopan, *Revisiting the Byzantine Commonwealth: Nodes, Networks, and Spheres*, Oxford Academic, 2025, p. 9.
[42] *Vizantiiskii Vremennik,* Moscow University Press, 1894. Accessed July 8, 2026. https://msupress.com/en/catalogue/magazines/istoriya/2463/
[43] Cameron, *Byzantine Matters*, p. 2-3.
[44] Kaldellis, *The New Roman Empire: A History of Byzantium*, p. 2.
[45] Ibid., p. 2.
[46] Ibid., p. 2

relentless waves of persecution against non-Christians.[47] Russian institutions such as the Russian Ministry of Culture Portal links the emperor to Orthodox holy days such as the Annunciation, dubbing his religious and secular reforms as a "temple to – justice", and a testament to what Orthodox nations could achieve without western intervention.[48] Russian popular media tells the same story; a 2008 article titled: *A Byzantine Warning: the Lesson of Byzantium*, highlights that Justinian's empire consisted of "Greeks and Slavs", framing the emperor as an ancient champion of the Slavic world.[49] Of course, this is not true—the Eastern Roman Empire of Justinian not only consisted of much more than two ethnic groups, but also contained no significant population of Slavic peoples. By the early-mid 500s CE, most Slavic groups had not yet embarked upon their mass migrations into the Eastern Roman Balkans.[50] In the previously mentioned pseudo-documentary *The Destruction of an Empire: The Lesson of Byzantium*, the conquests of Justinian are glorified, framed as the height of "incalculable wealth, – beauty, and elegance",[51] omitting the death, persecutions, and fiscal strain which cast a long shadow over Justinian's policies.[52] This film and its popularizers thus downplay any ambiguity—Justinian's reign is depicted as total success—a paragon of Orthodoxy, law, conquest, and statecraft.

This framework fits comfortably alongside approved state rhetoric. The modern Russia government officially promotes the idea of *Русский мир*—the "Russian World"—a transnational community of Orthodox Slavs bound by faith, culture, and civilizational destiny.[53] Within this belief system, the "Third Rome" narrative slots in seamlessly, positioning Russia's leader as the logical heir to both the modern Orthodox world, as well as the historical Eastern Roman Empire.[54] Justinian becomes central here: as the last emperor to rule what the Russian state views as a united, expansive, and Orthodox empire at its peak, he offers a premade model of imperial Orthodox authority.

## JUSTINIAN IN THE RUSSIAN CLASSROOM

This selective image of Justinian—presented not only in popular media but also through the Russian standard history curriculum—emphasizes much of the same message for the youth. Across the 2016 textbook *История Средних веков. 6 класс. Методическое пособие* (English translation: History of the Middle Ages. Grade 6. Methodological Guide) by Kolpakov, Tyrin, and Ponomaryov, Justinian appears as the central representative of a powerful, sophisticated, culturally superior, and highly centralized Roman state. He is shown as a glorious conqueror who temporarily restored the Roman Empire, a lawgiver whose

[47] Department For External Church Relations of the Moscow Patriarchate, *Fundamentals of the Social Concept of the Russian Orthodox Church*, 2000. https://mospat.ru/ru/documents/176-osnovy-sotsialnoy-kontseptsii-russkoy-pravoslavnoy-tserkvi/
[48] Olma Group, *КОДИФИКАЦИЯ ЮСТИНИАНА*, Ministry of Culture Portal, 2000. Accessed July 3, 2026. https://w.histrf.ru/articles/kodifikaciya-yustiniana
[49] Prokrovskaya, Anna, *A Byzantine Warning. On the new documentary film, The Fall of an Empire—The Lesson of Byzantium*, Pravoslavie, 2008. Accessed July 3, 2026. https://pravoslavie.ru/7411.html
[50] Kaldellis, *The New Roman Empire: A History of Byzantium*, p. 132.
[51] Archimandrite Tikhon, *The Text of the Film "The Fall of an Empire—The Lesson of Byzantium"*, Pravoslavie, 2008. Accessed July 3, 2026. https://pravoslavie.ru/7389.html
[52] Evans, J.A.S., *The Age of Justinian: The Circumstances of Imperial Power*, Routledge, p. 123-124.
[53] *Russkiy Mir Foundation*, russkiymir, 2014. Accessed July 8, 2026. https://en.russkiymir.ru/
[54] Cameron, *Byzantine Matters*, p. 48, 87.

*Corpus Juris Civilis* became one of the foundations of civil law, a patron of monumental architecture, and the ruler who introduced superior educational and cultural reforms.[55] The result is the same highly selective portrait, where Justinian's achievements receive considerably greater emphasis than the imperial overreach, religious persecution, economic costs, and civil strife which also colored his reign.[56]

This selectivity becomes especially clear in how the textbook describes Justinian's political authority. The textbook states that the Eastern Roman emperor was: "наместник Бога на земле" (English translation: "the vicar of God on earth")[57], and that "*Император назначал и смещал патриарха по собственному усмотрению*" (English translation: "the emperor appointed and removed the patriarch at his own discretion").[58] Rather than presenting the relationship between Roman imperial and ecclesiastical authority as a complicated, nuanced, and oscillating institution—as it was—the textbook presents the emperor's supremacy over the Church as a straightforward feature of Roman government. The emperor is shown to be simultaneously political sovereign as well as "the vicar of God on earth", while the highest ecclesiastical office—the patriarchate—is presented as a mere subordinate office. Historically, after Peter the Great abolished the Moscow Patriarchate and replaced it with the Most Holy Synod in 1721, the Russian Orthodox Church was brought under direct state supervision and effectively subordinated to imperial authority.[59] By describing the relationship between the Eastern Roman emperor and the Patriarch of Constantinople in strikingly similar, though historically oversimplified terms, the textbook manufactures a sense of continuity that makes Russia's claim to the legacy of both the Orthodox and Eastern Roman worlds appear almost self-evident.[60]

The section of the lesson describing Roman education during the time of Justinian provides an even clearer glimpse into the historical attitudes the textbook seeks to instill in its young readers.
"Поэтому грамотных людей в Византии было больше, чем в Западной Европе."[61]
(English translation: "Therefore, there were more literate people in Byzantium than in Western Europe.")

The claim is immediately followed by a description of state and private schools, the study of Homer and ancient Greek tragedy, rhetoric, the quadrivium, logic, physics, ethics, and controversially, Plato. As

[55] Abramov, A. V., M. V. Ponomarev, and S. V. Tyrin, *Методическое пособие к учебнику М.В.Пономарева, А.В.Абрамова, С.В.Тырина "Всеобщая история. История Средних веков": 6 класс* [*Methodological Guide to the Textbook by M.V. Ponomarev, A.V. Abramov, S.V. Tyrin "World History. History of the Middle Ages": Grade 6*], Digital Collection of the State Public Historical Library. Accessed September 10, 2026, p. 21-25. https://imk2020.shpl.ru/moodle/mod/resource/view.php?id=297
[56] Kaldellis, Anthony, *Procopius of Caesarea: Tyranny, History, and Philosophy at the End of Antiquity*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004, p. 17.
[57] Abramov, Ponomarev, and Tyrin, *Всеобщая история. История Средних веков,* p. 23.
[58] Ibid., p. 23.
[59] Riasanovsky, Valentine, and Steinberg, *The Reign of Peter the Great: A History of Russia. Vol. I*, Oxford University Press, 2011, p. 215-219
[60] Kaldellis, *The New Roman Empire: A History of Byzantium*, p. 234-235.
[61] Abramov, Ponomarev, and Tyrin, *Всеобщая история. История Средних веков,* p. 24.

previously established, Justinian persecuted the Platonic Academy of Athens from 529-531, yet the textbook narrative conveniently ignores that event.[62] Most significantly, the lesson concludes this section by explicitly instructing students: "Получив информацию о византийской школе, ученики могут сравнить процесс обучения в Византии и в Западной Европе."[63](English translation: "Having received information about Byzantine schooling, students can compare the process of education in Byzantium and in Western Europe.")

Here—during a lesson about Eastern Rome—Western Europe is not absent from the narrative. Rather, it functions as an explicit comparative foil. The Eastern Roman Empire is selectively portrayed as the heir to Classical learning—monolithically literate, urban, organized, sophisticated, and intellectual.[64] Meanwhile, Western Europe is implicitly positioned as the less developed counterpart against which those achievements become meaningful.

This exact pattern appears in the textbook's treatment of culture. The lesson repeatedly—across most sections and boxes—directs students toward the sophistication of Eastern Roman civilization. Achievements like Justinian's conquest of the West, Hagia Sophia, mosaics, frescoes, icons, Classical literature, schools of rhetoric, and schools of philosophy are brought to the forefront of the lesson. The conclusion exercise explicitly instructs students to recognize that after the fall of the Western Roman Empire, "Римской империи долгое время удавалось поддерживать своё влияние и могущество – она создала высокую культуру"[65] (English translation: "Byzantium for a long time succeeded in maintaining its influence and power and created a high culture.") The fact that the exercise serves as a direct transition into the textbook's chapter on Slavic state formation creates a coherent civilizational narrative: the Roman Empire falls in the West; the East survives; the Romans of the east preserve and develop Classical civilization; East Rome then transmits said civilization to the Slavs.

That final step is essential. The lesson begins by and ends with establishing Eastern Roman superiority through sophistication in the age of Justinian, and then immediately transitions directly into the Byzantine influence upon the Slavs. It emphasizes that East Roman culture had "Особенно сильное влияние оказала" (English translation: exerted an especially strong influence") on Slavic development, later teaching students about Cyril and Methodius, the Christianization of the Slavic world, and the formation of Slavic states. The result is a clear narrative of civilizational inheritance, in which the Eastern Roman Empire is presented as the source from which Slavic—and by extension Russian—civilization developed.[66]

[62] Kaldellis, *The New Roman Empire: A History of Byzantium*, p. 273.
[63] Abramov, Ponomarev, and Tyrin, *Всеобщая история. История Средних веков,* p. 24.
[64] Ibid., p. 24.
[65] Ibid., p. 25.
[66] Ibid., p. 25-28.

Justinian's utility also goes beyond symbolic succession: by suppressing religious dissent, centralizing imperial authority, and waging seemingly successful wars of conquest, he serves as a useful, albeit anachronistic, precedent for a modern Russian state which has been increasingly centralizing power under a strong executive.[67] Russian glorification of Justinian implicitly presents authoritarian governance as acceptable, showing that a strong autocrat is consistent with Orthodox tradition. To the modern Russian state, Justinian's empire is a mirror, and to acknowledge its flaws would be to shatter the carefully constructed reflection that the state wants to see.

## JUSTINIAN FROM THE SOURCES: ROMAN IDENTITY

But who was Justinian in his own historical context? What were his political and cultural identities, and how do they compare with the interpretations of Justinian in modern Russia? Justinian never claimed to rule an " transnational community of Orthodox Slavs bound by faith, culture, and civilizational destiny" He consistently presented himself as emperor of the Roman Empire throughout his reign—there is no evidence that his imperial ideology departed significantly from the previous Leonid and Theodosian regimes.[68] Coins from his reign refer to him as *Imperator Caesar Flavius Iustinianus*,[69] his *Corpus Juris Civilis* was written primarily in Latin,[70] and Procopius of Caesarea refers to him as the: "Αυτοκράτωρ των Ρωμαίων" (English translation: "Emperor of the Romans"). Contemporary historian John Malalas even measures his reign relative to Livy's proposed foundation date for Roman civilization:
"ἔστε δὲ καὶ ἀπὸ κτίσεως Ῥώμης ἕως τῆς δευτέρας ὑπατείας τοῦ θειο- 30 τάτου Ἰουστινιανοῦ ἔτη ασπ' μικρῷ πλέον ἢ ἔλασσον,"[71](English translation [Kiesling]: "From the founding of Rome until the second consulship [528 CE] of the Divine Justinian 1280 years, more or less,")[72]

Justinian's Roman empire was also extremely diverse linguistically. While the transition to Greek would intensify after Justinian's death in 565 CE, the sixth-century imperial bureaucracy, Italian, and Spanish provinces still utilized Latin for most of its day-to-day procedures.[73] Contemporary Romans certainly never spoke a Cyrillic language, which was developed more than 300 years after Justinian's death.[74] The vernacular dialect of the empire continued to vary widely: the Balkans, Greece, Southern Italy, Sicily, and Anatolia primarily spoke Greek.[75] In the Eastern Provinces, there were significant populations of Syriac and Armenian-speakers, with much of Egypt speaking Coptic.[76] Thus, it would be categorically incorrect to project even a Greek—much less a Cyrillic-speaking Slavic identity—onto Justinian's Roman Empire.

[67] Orttung, Robert W., *The Consequences of Putin's Centralization of Power,* Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization 30, no. 4, 2022, p. 433-434.
[68] Kaldellis, *The New Roman Empire: A History of Byzantium*, p. 300-301.
[69] Ibid. p. 153.
[70] Ibid. p. 148.
[71] Malalas (Niebuhr), *Corpus Scriptorum Historiae Byzantinae*, approximately 578 (1831), p. 428
[72] Malalas (Kiesling), *Malalas, Chronography BKS 1-7, 10-18,* § 18.428.
[73] Evans, J.A.S., *The Age of Justinian: The Circumstances of Imperial Power,* p. 198.
[74] David H. Levinson, *Cyril and Methodius, Saints and Eastern Orthodoxy, Missions ancient and modern*, Encyclopedia of World Cultures, 1991, p. 239.
[75] Kaldellis, *The New Roman Empire: A History of Byzantium*, p. 300-301.
[76] Evans, J.A.S., *The Age of Justinian: The Circumstances of Imperial Power,* p. 58.

From coins and chronicles, to dialects and codexes, it is clear that the sixth-century empire of Justinian I thought of themselves as Roman.

## JUSTINIAN FROM THE SOURCES: A PERFECT EMPEROR?

Beyond questions of identity, however, Justinian's actual record as emperor demands closer scrutiny. Was his reign truly the unblemished, inspiring success story portrayed by Russian state outlets? For most of history, Justinian I stood as an intensely polarizing figure. Justinian's relentless pursuit of imperial Orthodoxy involved unprecedented and devastating persecutions of Samaritans, Monophysites, Pagans, and Jews.[77] When the people (*demos*) of Constantinople rose in revolt—rampaging through the city during the 532 CE Nika Riots—Justinian sent in his generals to massacre, according to Procopius, thirty-thousand rioters, somewhere around 5% of the city's entire population.[78] Justinian's reconquests, while impressive, were accompanied by massive economic and human costs.[79] Even the aforementioned contemporary historian—Procopius of Caesarea—often found himself both praising and cursing Justinian in the same breath.[80]

In *The Wars*, Procopius generally speaks positively of Justinian.[81] However, in some instances, a more critical voice slips out. For example, in Book VIII, Procopius states: "Indeed,—the Emperor Justinian had—conducted this war very negligently."[82] Other chroniclers—such as the Constantinople-based John Malalas—express unilateral support for Justinian through their choice of language:[83]
"ὃ θειότατος Ἰουστινιανὸς – δωρεὰς κατέπεμψε πᾶσι τοῖς ὑποτελέσι τῆς Ῥωμαϊχῆς πολιτείας."[84]
(English translation [Kiesling]: "The most godlike Justinian – sent gifts to all the subjects of the Roman state.")[85]

This statement's veracity aside, it plainly registers Malalas's favorable views of Justinian's early reign—a perspective which is contextualized given he wrote with the hindsight of plague and military overstretch.[86] In contrast, another contemporary, John of Ephesus – writing from the Syriac tradition, remained critical

[77] Evans, J.A.S., *The Age of Justinian: The Circumstances of Imperial Power,* p. 240.
[78] Sarris, *Justinian: Emperor, Soldier Saint*, p. 150.
[79] Ibid., p. 24
[80] Kaldellis, *Procopius of Caesarea: Tyranny, History, and Philosophy at the End of Antiquity*, p. 17.
[81] Sarris, *Justinian: Emperor, Soldier Saint*, p. 47
[82] Procopius (edited and translated by Bill Thayer), *The Wars*, Harvard University Press, 553 (1914-1928). Accessed July 4, 2026, Book VIII.
[83] Malalas, John (edited and translated by Brady Kiesling), *Malalas, Chronography BKS 1-7, 10-18*, Topostext, approximately 578 (2019). Accessed July 4, 2026, § 17.422-§ 18.425. https://topostext.org/work/793
[84] John Malalas (edited by Barthold Georg Niebuhr), *Corpus Scriptorum Historiae Byzantinae*, Bonnae: Impensis E. Weberi, approximately 578 (1831). Accessed July 24, 2026, p. 422, 423. https://archive.org/details/bub_gb_tNUFAAAAQAAJ
[85] Malalas (Kiesling), *Malalas, Chronography BKS 1-7, 10-18,* § 17.422-§ 17.423.
[86] Sarris, Justinian: Emperor, Soldier, Saint, p. 294.

of Justinian's persecution of his Miaphysite kin.[87] The trend of Justinian appearing as a controversial figure would continue into the mid-late Eastern Empire, where Neoplatonic philosophers, namely Michael Psellos, scrutinized Justinian for his persecutions,[88] while deeply religious churchmen such as Theophanes the Confessor admired the emperor's piety.[89] This trend is not limited to the Eastern Roman world. Medieval and early-modern Western Europe almost unilaterally viewed Justinian as simply a great lawmaker whose name remained inseparable from his *Corpus Juris Civilis*.[90] However, the 17th century rediscovery of Procopius's slanderous *Secret History*, reintroduced Justinian as a complicated figure. Faced with a wealth of new information, some dismissed the new narrative, while others reframed their perspective entirely.[91]

## FINAL REFLECTION

Therefore, the Russian state did not invent a favorable Justinian—it elevated one particular strand of a long-contested historical tradition while marginalizing competing interpretations. Modern Russian interpretations of Justinian I illustrate how states do not need to entirely fabricate the past in order to use it politically. While modern Russia partially builds upon earlier Imperial and Soviet-era historiographical currents, employing universally accessible mass media and educational institutions allows the regime to stay in control of not only a political agenda, but also historical memory.[92] This resulting image of Justinian is not necessarily false, but profoundly incomplete. The historical emperor from the primary sources—from state-sponsored panegyrics to overt criticism—is one whose reign cannot be reduced to a simple symbol as a flawless Orthodox autocrat.

Justinian's Russian afterlife demonstrates that the Classical past is never merely inherited—it is continuously reconstructed to meet the ideological needs of the present. The historical Justinian that emerges from the primary source record is neither the flawless Orthodox autocrat of modern Russian narratives, nor a simple villain. Justinian was a deeply contradictory Roman emperor whose achievements and failures resisted binary categorization for over a thousand years. It is only right for Justinian's legacy to remain today—as it has for fifteen centuries—as a Roman emperor whose complex reign was marked by extraordinary achievement rooted within extraordinary controversy.[93]

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[87] John of Ephesus (edited and translated by R. Payne Smith) *The third part of the Ecclesiastical History of John, Bishop of Ephesus*, Oxford University Press, 588 (1860). Accessed July 4, 2026, [II. 46.]. https://www.tertullian.org/fathers/ephesus_0_preface.htm

[88] Michael Psellos (edited and translated by E.R.A. Sewter), *Chronographia*, Penguin Books, 1042-1078 (1953). Accessed July 4, 2026, p. 55.

[89] Theophanes the Confessor (edited and translated by Carl De Boor), *Chronographia*, Teubner, 810-815 (1883–1885). Accessed July 4, 2026, p. 197.

[90] Sarris, *Justinian: Emperor, Soldier Saint*, p. 22.

[91] Ibid., p. 318-320.

[92] Ibid., p. 103.

[93] Sarris, *Justinian: Emperor, Soldier Saint*, p. 2.

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