



2022 History Essay Contest Homeschool 7/8th Grade Winner

Saint Olga of Kiev

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Many people have influenced the times and places in which they lived. Their important historical contributions continue to influence the future generations. Olga of Kiev was one of these amazing people. Her actions as ruler changed the path of her nation's history, and continues to do so today.

Olga was born in 890 A.D. in Pleskov, Kievan Rus, most likely of Viking origin. At fifteen, she married Prince Igor of Kiev and was mother to Prince Sviatoslav. She was young, strong, and powerful; Olga had everything anyone could want. One day Prince Igor went to collect tribute from a tribe of Drevlain people who had recently stopped paying their taxes. He was captured and killed in a horrible and bloody manner (Catholic Online, 2022). Now alone, Olga could have sought protection through exile or marriage if she had been of a weaker character. Instead, she rose to the occasion and demonstrated courage, determination, wisdom, and a strong sense of vengeance (Arnaldo, 2022). Olga wasted no time avenging Igor. Twenty ambassadors arrived with a marriage proposal from Prince Mal, the killer of her husband. Olga sent a message saying that she wanted to honor them in front of her people. That night Olga's subjects dug a deep pit under her instructions. The next day the ambassadors' boat was lifted up on the shoulders of many royal peasants. Then the peasants dumped the boat in the pit they had dug the night before and Olga ordered them buried alive (Saint Olga of Kiev, 2022). Prince Mal thought she had accepted his proposal and sent a larger group of noblemen to meet the princess that would be their queen. Olga invited them to bathe before meeting with her so they could rest and relax and be tidy when they

presented themselves before her. As soon as they entered the bathhouse, she had the doors shut and bolted. Then she lighted the bathhouse on fire and burned them to death (Montanari, 2022). Then Olga told Prince Mal, who still knew nothing of the men that he had sent to her, that she needed to hold a funeral feast for Prince Igor before she could possibly marry again. He accepted and provided a large amount of an alcoholic beverage called mead. Many Drevlains attended the funeral feast. Olga wept for her dead husband and promised to kill even more of the people that took him away from her. After the Drevlain people had eaten and drank lots of mead, they fell asleep. Olga had her soldiers kill them all. Next, Olga asked Prince Mal for many doves and sparrows from the Drevlain cities. Of course, Prince Mal consented. She had her men tie cloth to the feet of the birds, light them on fire, and send them home. Whole cities were burned up. Olga killed more than seven thousand Drevlain people. Those who escaped the flames were captured by Olga's men. Some of them were killed then and the others she later sold as slaves. She was a formidable woman. Olga embodied the pagan leadership of her time. She was positioned to have a legacy as one of the most blood thirsty rulers in all of Eastern Europe (Kosloski, 2022). However, Olga's life would soon take a dramatic turn (Saint Olga Saints and Angels Catholic Online).

Sometime after her vengeance was exacted, Olga traveled to the city of Constantinople. She was still ruling as regent for her young son, who was most likely still under ten years of age, and had established herself as a powerful European monarch. She traveled to meet the Byzantine Emperor Constantine VII. He was smitten. Constantine said that she was worthy to reign with him in Constantinople. Olga was in a precarious position. Constantine VII was very powerful. She could not turn down this proposal the same way she had with Prince Mal. Marrying him would mean losing her place as regent and leaving Kiev, and leaving her young son to the care of someone else, or having the entire Kieven Rus made part of the Byzantine Empire, in which case her son would not inherit at all. Also, if she married Constantine, she would have to obey him because he would be the head of her family. Once again, she used her wits and claimed that marriage was impossible because she was still a

pagan and he was Christian. Constantine began instructing her in Christianity, calling her daughter because she was his student in faith and hence his goddaughter. Olga embraced the Christian faith and rejoiced, but managed to use it to side step Constantine's proposal, since Christianity did not permit marriage between goddaughter and godfather (Catholic Online, 2022). Later on, when she had returned to her own country, Emperor Constantine VII demanded payment in furs and wine for all he had done for her. She said that she would only give him payment if he came and stayed in Kiev as long as she had stayed in Constantinople. He never visited her, and she out smarted him once again (Olga of Kiyv, the vengeful Viking widow princess).

Olga's wit maintained her position as ruler and secured her country's independence. She truly embraced the Christian faith, and brought it back home to Kiev. All of the passion and zeal that Olga had for power and vengeance was now directed at cultivating the Christian faith in her country. She realized how evil she had been and repented of her years of cruelty. She set about building many churches throughout her kingdom (Kosloski, 2022). Two of the churches that she built are still standing. Saint Nicholas was built on the tomb of Askold, who was one of the founders of Kiev. The other church is Saint Sophia Cathedral in Kiev (St. Olga, 2020). Olga tried to convert her son Sviatoslav; he would not convert to Christianity because he feared being mocked. There were few Christians in Kiev at that time, and they were often made fun of. Sviatoslav would not become Christian, but out of respect for his mother, he permitted Christianity in the country and did not hinder anyone else to wish to be baptized a Christian (Kosloski, 2022).

Saint Olga died of illness in 969 after receiving Last Rites. She had a Mass said instead of a pagan funeral feast. Both her Christian and pagan subjects mourned losing her. Her son never converted, but her grandson Vladimir did 988 and ruled as a Christian, and became a saint himself. He is known as Saint Vladimir the Great. At the time of Olga's death, most of her kingdom was still pagan, but she set the scene for Christianity. It would soon be a Christian country with the help of Saint Vladimir the Great, and his sons, Saint Roman and Saint David (Catholic Online, 2022).

Olga's life and leadership determined the course of her Kingdom's history. She started as a ruthless ruler. Olga's brutal tactics and political strategy maintained her country's independence and identity. The hand of God is clear in Olga's story; even though her pagan tactics were cruel, they permitted her to safe guard her monarchy and ensure a Christian future for her kingdom. Sometimes we wonder why God lets some horrible things happen. But, like in Saint Olga's story, God always has a plan. Olga did so much for Christ in Eastern Europe that the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church calls her *Isp`o`stolos*, which means "Equal to the Apostles" (Catholic Online, 2022). Saint Olga was one of the first people to teach about Christianity as a good thing. She built so many churches that she is often shown in icons holding a church. Saint Olga of Kiev set the Rus people on the path to Christianity, influencing her own time and future generations.

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