Great Novgorod

The city of Novgorod exercised considerable independence from other parts of Russia. Even before it was officially founded as a city in the mid-tenth century, Novgorod served as a political center on the Baltic-Volga trade route. In the late-tenth century, it also became an ecclesiastical center for the Orthodox Church when it adopted Christianity. During the Mongol invasions in the mid-thirteenth century, Novgorod escaped destruction, solidifying its independence and importance in northern trading networks. In addition to being a center of trade, Novgorod was also a center of culture. Known for its icon paintings, book production, and architecture, Novgorod has the earliest mentioned fortress, or kremlin, and had a flourishing school by the 1030s. However, the city was perhaps best known for its tradition of charters, treaties, parliamentary assemblies, and choice of its own princes. Until its takeover by the Muscovite ruler Ivan III in 1478, Novgorod had a parliamentary assembly populated by representatives of the aristocracy.

Novgorod’s relationship with its princes demonstrates the independence of the region and the power of its aristocratic assembly. At times inviting princes to rule, and at other times refusing the imposition of princes from other regions, as they did in 1096 and 1102 when Kiev attempted to appoint princes, the Novgorod assembly forced princes to agree to certain guarantees of rights for its citizens. When princes violated these agreements, they were dethroned. Such was the case with Prince Vsevolod. Becoming prince in 1117, he violated his agreement with the people of Novgorod and was jailed for his offenses. By the mid-thirteenth century, the assembly drew up formal treaties with princes. This coincided with instituting annual re-election to the assembly, drafting formal treaties of privileges with German merchants operating in and around Novgorod, and establishing special merchant courts to collect customs and other trade revenues. Beginning in the mid-fourteenth century, when Muscovy broke away from the Mongol Empire under the leadership of Ivan III, the growth of Muscovite power centered in Moscow became a major threat in the mid-fourteenth century. By the 1330s, Novgorod began accepting princes appointed by Moscow leadership. But when Moscow attempted to rule Novgorod, which it saw as its primary competitor, directly in 1397, the city successfully rebuffed the intrusion. It responded by bolstering its assembly by increasing the number of representatives and the frequency of elections. Despite these efforts, the Muscovite rulers in Moscow defeated Novgorod in 1456. In 1478, Moscow annexed Novgorod to its territories of direct rule.