

RUSSIA AND THE RUSSIANS

A HISTORY



GEOFFREY
HOSKING

*Russia
and the Russians
A History*

GEOFFREY HOSKING

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PREFACE

Russia is one of history's great survivors. In one form or another it has existed for more than a thousand years, and for part of that time it has been the largest territorial power on our planet. Today it is one of the most formidable powers in Eurasia, and it will remain so.

It is worth insisting on these facts, since in recent years there has been a tendency among Western policymakers to assume that Russia need no longer be taken seriously, that, as threat or as potential ally, it does not merit concentrated attention any more. In this respect our views have been highly volatile even during the last decade. Ten years ago Russia—then in the form of the Soviet Union—was the toast of Western leaders, the partner who was about to adopt democracy and the market economy and join in a great alliance to build global peace and harmony. Nowadays, since these hopes have not been swiftly realized, and Russia has in the process become weaker, we assume that the country can be largely ignored in our thinking about international affairs.

Both today's attitude and that of ten years ago are illusions, and they rest on ignorance about the nature of Russia—an ignorance which this book attempts to do something to dispel. Russia will not go away; it will continue to play a major part in shaping the twenty-first-century world, and by no means a negative part.

There is another motive for studying Russia closely. For most Europeans and North Americans, Russia is the great Other, understood yet not understood, the culture in whose mirror we better appreciate our own. It is

sufficiently near to us and sufficiently like us for its fate to be important to all of us. When we talk to Russian colleagues, when we read Tolstoi or listen to Chaikovskii, we know we are in touch with part of our own civilization, the more illuminating because it is of such high quality and because it comes from a society which is in many ways so different from our own. Russian literature and music continue to be very popular in most Western countries, for very good reason, and we are discovering the richness of its visual arts in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

This combined distance and closeness means that we do not have about Russia the stable illusions which Edward Said accuses us of harboring toward the Orient. There are good historical reasons for our ambivalence. Over the centuries, Russia has changed its nature and its boundaries many times. Its peoples have differed sharply among themselves about what they mean by "Russia." In July 1998 the last emperor, Nicholas II, and his family were buried in the Peter-Paul Fortress in St. Petersburg—an occasion, one might have assumed, when Russians of all persuasions might have come together both to mourn and to celebrate their own history. On the contrary, politicians of most parties stayed away, as did the patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church; even the president decided only at the last moment to attend. The past still divides Russians as much as the present. Even today there is no final agreement about the national flag, the words of the national anthem, or even the name of the country: most Russians would not identify the present Russian Federation as being what they understand by "Russia."

This book is an attempt to seek the roots of our ambivalence toward Russia and of Russians' ambivalence toward their own country. It focuses on the variety of identities which Russia has assumed over the centuries. It contains a basic narrative, which should make it suitable for readers coming to the subject for the first time. At the same time, it is laid out thematically, so that readers wishing to pursue particular subjects can readily do so.

The School of Slavonic and East European Studies at University College London, particularly the History Department and the Centre for Russian Studies, has provided a supportive environment and congenial colleagues for my work on this book, while the contribution of its library cannot be overstated. I thank HarperCollins for permission to reproduce text from *A History of the Soviet Union* (third edition, 1992) and from *Russia: People and Empire, 1552–1917*; and to the *Slavonic & East European Review* for permission to reproduce material from my article "Patronage and the Russian State," in

volume 78 (April 2000). I am especially grateful to Bob Service for reading and commenting on the whole of an earlier draft, and to Roger Bartlett, Pete Duncan, Susan Morrissey, and my daughter Katya for their comments on part of it. Any mistakes and misconceptions which remain are due to my stubbornness. My heartfelt thanks also to Murray Pollinger and Bruce Hunter, assiduous literary agents; to Aida Donald and Stuart Proffitt, dedicated, expert, and caring editors; to Caroline Newlove, departmental administrator, who cheerfully shouldered routine jobs which authors hate but normally have to do themselves; and above all to my wife, Anne, and my daughter Janet, who tolerated for years a grumpy, preoccupied, and frequently absent husband/father.

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INTRODUCTION: GEOPOLITICS, ECOLOGY, AND NATIONAL CHARACTER

The north Eurasian plain is not only Russia's geographical setting, but also her fate. From the Carpathians in the west to the Greater Khingan range in the east, a huge expanse of flat, open territory dominates the Eurasian continent. It divides into four bands of terrain, running from west to east. In the south is desert, broken only by oases along the rivers which run off the mountains along the southern and eastern rims. Then comes steppe, lightly watered country with a thin and variable covering of grasses and scrub, again broken intermittently by oases, gullies, and river valleys. Farther north is a belt of coniferous forest, interspersed toward its southern edge with deciduous trees; only to the west of the Urals does this deciduous belt broaden to become a large and independent ecological zone. Finally comes the tundra: frozen wastelands and swamp, with broad rivers flowing through them to the Arctic Ocean, itself frozen for much of the year.

This is the area which one may refer to as "Inner Eurasia": it consists of the territory ruled over by the Soviet Union in 1990 plus Xinjiang and Mongolia. Bounded by mountains to east and south, and by usually frozen ocean to the north, this territory lies open to the west. The Ural Mountains, situated toward its western end and conventionally marking the border between Europe and Asia, are too low and easily penetrable to form a serious barrier to movement. Besides, the rivers, with brief portages here and there, offer

a relatively easy means of movement throughout the area. It is very unusual to find such broad, long rivers in open flat country. Asian traders who entered the Volga from the Caspian Sea thought that such a majestic river must flow from a high mountain range, whereas actually its source lies in the modest, low-lying Valdai Hills, south of Novgorod.

The southern two ecological bands, and especially the steppe, were classic nomadic country. The sparse vegetation, low precipitation, and open terrain rendered these regions difficult to exploit for settled agriculture, even though much of the soil was very fertile. Agriculturalists without elaborate irrigation systems could expect only meager returns, and they were permanently vulnerable to the raids of their more mobile neighbors. However, herds of cattle, sheep, goats, and in places camels could feed on the foliage, moving on when they exhausted it in any particular locality. The human beings who tended those herds lived largely on hides, meat, and dairy products but—and this is crucial for the history of Eurasia—could not depend on them for all their needs, and hence were compelled to seek some kind of interaction with the oasis dwellers in their midst and with the civilizations around the periphery of their pastoral lands. Inner Eurasia, in short, had to interact with Outer Eurasia. Yet in trade the pastoralists were always at a disadvantage, since they had little to offer except the products of their animals, which settled peoples could also produce for themselves. Hence the tendency for the relationship to become violent: only by honing their military skills and raiding adjacent civilizations could pastoral nomads provide properly for their own way of life.

Kinship groups of fifty to one hundred formed the most convenient way of exploiting this ecology. To defend their terrain and herds, clans would form confederations and devote much attention to the training of horses and riders. Cavalry warfare became much more fearsome after the invention of the stirrup about 500 A.D., which allowed a skilled horseman to use both hands to manipulate weapons, whether lance or bow and arrow.¹

However, though nomads were supremely skilled warriors, they were inept state-builders. (The history of their most successful empire, the Mongol one, demonstrates this: in its full form it was short-lived, and began to break up almost before it was put together.) Hence in a way it was natural that the most enduring empire of Inner Eurasia should be formed at its extreme western end—in a terrain, moreover, not typical of it, in the broad belt of deciduous woodland found mainly to the west of the river Volga. The first major East Slavic polity was founded at the southern edge of this belt, in Kiev, the second toward its northern edge, in Moscow. Both sites afforded some protection from nomadic raids, Moscow more effectively than Kiev, which probably explains its ultimate ascendancy.

The first East Slavic state was able to establish itself thanks above all to trade, standing as it did athwart north–south routes from Scandinavia to Byzantium intersecting with east–west routes from Persia, India, and China to western Europe. These routes were precarious, for they depended on the nomads' willingness to keep them open. Their decline explains in part why the center of gravity of East Slav civilization shifted northeastward, from the eleventh through the thirteenth centuries, to a region where a rather marginal agriculture combined with fishing, beekeeping, logging, and the fur trade to afford a tolerably stable basis for wealth.

However, once a major state, as distinct from a tribal confederation, was established in Inner Eurasia, there were many reasons why it should prove durable. Such a state commanded a zone so extensive, so strategically placed, and so abundantly endowed with resources that its rulers and subjects could survive almost indefinitely. They could retreat virtually without end, recover from devastating setbacks and reverses, bide their time almost limitlessly, and probe the weaknesses of their neighbors without being fatally undermined by their own.

At the same time, that heartland had its own grave drawbacks. Most of it was relatively infertile, cut off from the sea and thus from easy contact with the outside world, and hampered by very difficult internal communications. These handicaps made the mobilization of people and resources extremely cumbersome. Unless the whole of the heartland and all its major approaches could be occupied, its frontiers were open and vulnerable. Its expanses were settled by numerous peoples with diverse languages, customs, laws, and religions: building and maintaining a state which could assimilate all of them proved to be a complex, costly, and at times apparently vain enterprise.

This paradoxical combination of colossal strength and almost crippling weakness has imparted to the Russian Empire its most salient characteristics.

1. Territorially, Russia has been the most extensive and by far the most labile of the world's major empires. Its boundaries have shifted thousands of miles over the plains in one direction and another. It can readily both invade and be invaded—and over the centuries has both inflicted and suffered aggression repeatedly. With one exception, though (the Mongols in the thirteenth century), the really destructive invasions have come from the west, while the more continuous nagging threats have been from east and south, through the broad “open gates” which stretch from the Caspian Sea to the Urals. Over the centuries Russia has had to divert huge resources to defending extensive vulnerable borders: from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries it placed at least half of its armed manpower on the *zasechnaia cherta*, its fortified steppe frontier in the south.

It dealt with threatening vacuums on its frontiers by exploiting the relative weakness of disorganized nomadic clans and tribes, and even of larger ethnic groups, to invade and absorb their territories—only to go through periods of overreach, when it imploded, leaving its borderlands vulnerable and once again in the hands of others. In that respect the period since 1989 is not unprecedented. At all times the peoples along the frontier, from the Bashkirs and the Cossacks to the Poles, have proved volatile in their attitude to the empire: at times loyal subjects, at times wary allies, at times bitter foes. In this respect also, the period since 1989 is not an aberration, but a resumption of a historically typical pattern.

2. Russia has usually been a multiethnic empire without a dominant nation, ruled by a dynasty and a heterogeneous aristocracy—at least until nineteenth-century attempts to make the Russians dominant. Unparalleled (except perhaps for the British Empire) in its ethnic and religious diversity, it has normally kept order by means of a multiethnic ruling class drawn from many, though not all, of its subject nationalities. This approach has rendered the distinction between internal and foreign affairs much less well-defined than in most polities. This lack of discrimination applied even to the Soviet Union, which until 1943 dealt with foreign countries partly through the Commissariat of External Affairs and partly through the Comintern, a branch of the Communist Party. One historian has called Stalin the “last of the steppe politicians.”²

3. It has been an economically underdeveloped empire, situated in a region of extreme temperatures, and after the fifteenth century remote from the world’s major trade routes. The sheer size of the country frustrated efforts to mobilize its uniquely diverse and abundant resources. The really important feature of its relative backwardness, however, is that it is due not only to natural handicaps (otherwise Canada would be equally backward), but also to its tendency at each stage of historical evolution to replicate itself. At all stages, vulnerability and poverty have required devoting a large proportion of the wealth of land and population to the provision of armed forces and to the creation of a cumbersome official class for administration and the mobilization of resources. Economic growth was generated more by expanding territory than by capital accumulation or technological innovation, much of which in any case came from abroad.

4. The Russian Empire has been permanently situated between two or, arguably, three ecumenes. In its administrative structures it has been an Asian empire, building upon or adapting the practices of China and the ancient steppe empires. In its culture it has been European for at least three centuries, borrowing heavily from both Protestant and Catholic countries.