

# A HISTORY OF RUSSIA

MEDIEVAL, MODERN, CONTEMPORARY  
Second Edition



PAUL DUKES

# A History of Russia

Medieval, Modern, Contemporary

2nd Edition

PAUL DUKES

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## *Preface*

While this History of Russia does not claim to be any better than its many predecessors, it does aim at providing a distinctive interpretation, even if through change of emphasis rather than complete novelty. Its basic purposes may be placed in two main groups:

1) Since the Revolution of 1917, and particularly since the death of Stalin, Soviet historians have produced an impressive amount of useful information and interpretation, which has still to receive the recognition it deserves in works produced primarily for those who do not read Russian. While all too obviously suffering from an imperfect acquaintance with Soviet historiography, I have tried to take coverage of it at least a little further. At the same time, with similar handicaps, I have attempted to make use of pre-revolutionary Russian historical writing and of the publications of Western scholars, old and new.

2) Economic and cultural developments are sometimes considered as appendices to the mainstream of political analysis; this book aspires to inclusion in the number of those which have achieved thematic integration. Similarly, its division into three distinct sections – medieval, modern, contemporary – has been implemented as an expression of agreement with those who hold that history has a fundamental pattern rather than constituting a disconnected series of essentially unique events. Moreover, it attempts to reveal the limitations of an exclusively national approach to Russian history and to contribute to its analysis in a comparative framework. To put it briefly, my intention has been to adhere to the view of history put forward by E. H. Carr.

The errors and misunderstandings in the book are all my own work. For the rest, I have depended heavily on the published work of others, the principal debts being acknowledged in the Select Bibliography and References. Of those who have helped directly in the writing of the book, I owe most to Barry Hollingsworth of the University of Manchester. He has made penetrating comments on the entire manuscript, and his comprehensive erudition tempered by a profound charity has been invaluable. Next I am pleased to record my gratitude to Rosie Mackay for her patient and careful reading of successive drafts; to Ron Grant for his incisive appraisal of most of the contemporary section; and to David Longley for giving me the

benefit of his specialist understanding of the Russian Revolution. I have received generous advice from the History Department, King's College Library staff and others at the University of Aberdeen. These include Roy Bridges, John Hiden, Jean Houbert, Leslie Macfarlane, George Molland and Bill Scott, and all the members of the Russian Department – Jim Forsyth, Richard Hallet, John Murray, Jo Newcombe and Cor Schwenke. Maureen Carr, Lily Findlay, Ann Gordon, Christine Macleod and Ann Murray all helped prepare the typescript.

A more general debt is to the hundreds of students at the University of Aberdeen who have contributed to the unfinished process of my historical education. I consider myself more than lucky to have studied the subject under consideration with them in a locale which has many connections with it. Not many miles from here, an embassy from Ivan the Terrible was wrecked on the north-east coast of Scotland. Patrick Gordon and many other Russian mercenaries set sail from the local harbour. Aberdeen was a port en route from and to Petrograd during the momentous years of the Russian Revolution. There are Soviet fishing boats and timber ships at its docks today. A few technical matters need to be touched on. The system of transliteration used is a variation of that adopted by the *Slavic Review*. Final -ii is rendered thus rather than -y, and all hard and soft signs have been omitted. Russian names are strictly transliterated on their first major appearance, but are normally given in their most usual form, particularly when they are well known. The names of Western scholars of Russian descent are given as they themselves spell them, and the authors of books and articles given as on the title page. Measurements have been made metric: those used most frequently are the hectare – just under 2½ acres; the kilometre – just over  $\frac{3}{5}$  mile; and the metric ton – a little less (36 lb) than the avoirdupois ton. Billions are American rather than British, that is a thousand million rather than a million million. The maps drawn by Lawrence Maclean are intended to give no more than location. For further geographical reference, the items listed in the Select Bibliography should be consulted.

Dates from Chapter 5 to Chapter 10 inclusive are given Old Style: eleven days behind New Style in the eighteenth century, twelve in the nineteenth and thirteen in the twentieth.

*King's College, Old Aberdeen*  
*December 1973*

PAUL DUKES

## *Preface to the Second Edition*

The mostly positive response to *A History of Russia* on its first appearance and since have encouraged me to produce this Second Edition, adding two new chapters on the Brezhnev years and a fuller conclusion which takes in some of the developments since 1985, as well as revising the whole of the original text. As to the book's special features:

(1) As far as possible, I have attempted to illustrate recent developments in Soviet and Western historiography. *Glasnost* and *perestroika* have made a huge impact on the Soviet treatment of some periods, especially the 1930s, but have left others comparatively untouched: I have attempted to indicate differences between 'traditional' and 'new' thinking wherever they exist. In the past fifteen years or so, there has also been a vast flood of relevant publications in the UK, USA and Canada, the Antipodes, everywhere in the English-speaking world. As much of this as possible has been noted either in the Notes or Select Bibliography. Certainly, as before, it would have seemed inappropriate to present a work, even of this general nature, without giving a clear indication of the sources of information and ideas.

(2) Equally, economic and cultural developments have appeared even more worthy of integration with the political narrative and analysis for each period, rather than being added without full regard for chronological sequence. I am also more convinced than before that the medieval, modern and contemporary division of Russian history has an intrinsic validity as well as making for a greater degree of clarity. In general, although his reputation has been under severe attack since his death, I continue to hold to the view that E. H. Carr made a greater contribution than any other Western academic analyst towards the establishment of the study of the Soviet Union on a

sound, scholarly basis while giving as good an answer as any to the question *What Is History?*

I acknowledge with deep gratitude the comments and advice readily given by colleagues here and elsewhere: Lindsey Hughes, Roger Bartlett and Bob Service, all of the School of Slavonic and East European Studies, London – the medieval, modern and contemporary sections respectively; Simon Franklin, Clare College, Cambridge – Chapter 1; David Saunders, Newcastle – Chapters 7 and 8; Peter Gatrell, Manchester – the economic sections of Chapters 8 and 9; Ray Pearson, Coleraine – Chapters 9 and 10; Bob Davies, of the Centre for Russian and East European Studies, Birmingham – Chapters 11 and 12; John Keep, formerly of Toronto – Chapters 15 to 17. Here in Aberdeen, David Longley rendered a similar service on Chapter 2, while Jim Forsyth made a number of useful observations on the text in general and on the maps. The errors and misunderstandings are again all my own work. Ann Gordon and Moira Buchan of the History Department and associates of the Arts Faculty Office all made indispensable contributions to the completion of the project. A succession of editors at Macmillan, most recently Vanessa Graham, must be saluted for their polite patience.

Back again at Aberdeen, I remain fortunate enough to attempt to teach and certainly to learn Russian history at an institution founded when Ivan III was tsar. In 1496, the year after Pope Alexander VI issued the Bull incorporating what became known later as the University of Aberdeen, a herald originating from this city if sent from Denmark, was received by Tsar Ivan in Moscow. Thus, in a somewhat indirect manner, began a chain of connections between Russia and NE Scotland virtually unbroken from the sixteenth century onwards. If Soviet fishing boats and timber ships appear more rarely than in the early 1970s at the local docks, representatives of the Soviet oil and gas industry are often to be found here, while an academic exchange has been set up between the University of Aberdeen and the Institute of History of the USSR of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR in Moscow.

The technical apparatus remains the same as in the First Edition, as does the dedication.

*King's College,  
Old Aberdeen  
February 1990*

PAUL DUKES

To My Brothers and Sisters  
and Their Children

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## *Acknowledgements*

Arthur Ransome, *Six Weeks in Russia in 1919*, reprinted by permission of Mrs Arthur Ransome.



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## General Introduction

Everybody knows that the Russian land is vast, cold and mostly flat, with mighty rivers but little access to the sea. Like most common knowledge, this particular sample is in an important sense correct, but it also requires some modification. Taking up one-sixth of the world's land surface, the Soviet Union is by far its largest state; anybody who does not appreciate this basic fact should spend a week or so on the Trans-Siberian Railway. It is also among the coldest, with winter warmth to be found near the Black Sea only. In summer, heat is more widespread, but roughly a half of the Soviet Union is too cold for agriculture of any kind to be carried on, and a large part of Central Asia is too dry for it to be attempted without irrigation. The extraction and processing of the U.S.S.R.'s natural resources have been hampered by difficult problems of distance and climate.<sup>1</sup>

These problems combine with a uniform geological structure and relief involving a widespread unvarying landscape to produce, in the view of many observers from at least as far back as the eighteenth century, a strongly centralised political arrangement. After each extension of the area of settlement, the government soon attempted to impose its control. The huge Eurasian plain, with no clearly demarcated frontiers except for the rivers and part of the Urals, has been the wide stage for the continuous process of colonisation which the great pre-revolutionary historian Kliuchevskii singled out as the major theme of Russian history.<sup>2</sup> Towards the end of this process, it is true, the frontiersmen came up against the Arctic and Pacific Oceans to the north and east and high mountains to the south, but before the nineteenth century they were essentially plainsmen.

The flat monotony is to some extent broken up by the variation in soil and vegetation from north to south. First, there is the *tundra*, where little grows naturally except for shrubs and mosses. Then

comes the *taiga*, coniferous forest for the most part, and the source of great wealth in the shape of timber and furs. Next there is the mixed forest in which deciduous trees join with the conifers. This area, which is wide in the west but tapers towards the Urals, has been the centre of Russian civilisation from early days onwards, even though it provides by no means ideal conditions for agriculture. Finally, we come to the steppe, wooded to the north and desert to the south, with the grassland in between. Here is the best farmland, at least to the west of the Volga.

Cutting through these zones are the mighty rivers, most of which flow north to south, like the Volga, Don and Dnepr, or south to north, like the Dvinas west of the Urals and the Siberian rivers east of them. But the tributaries often flow laterally, as it were, thus enabling people and goods to move across the country without insuperable difficulty before the coming of the railroad.

The 'urge to the sea'<sup>3</sup> that many analysts have seen as another of the great themes of Russian history is too strong to be denied. The struggle for outlets to the Black Sea and the Baltic, then to the Pacific Ocean, occupied the attention of successive governments for many centuries. And yet the sea has not been so absolutely vital to the prosperity of Russia as it has to that of smaller states. With a whole continent to explore and develop, and then to control, governments have been obliged to look inwards at least as much as outwards. Even today, the Soviet leaders are deeply concerned with such problems as the improvement of agriculture and the development of Siberia at the same time as attending to the various aspects of international relations. Inevitably, they still have to strive to coexist with their inhospitable climate and the other problems of their immediate environment as well as attempting to put into practice their policy of 'peaceful co-existence' in the world at large. Theirs is an inheritance which comes not only from 1917 but from thousands of years before it.

In the early days of human history, the warmer regions to the south first encouraged the growth of organised tribal communities. Neither the Black nor the Caspian Sea is far from the valleys of the rivers Tigris and Euphrates, which have often been called the cradle of civilisation, and archaeological discoveries have revealed the connection between the ancient cities of the Middle East and the peoples to the north of them. Greece and Rome then colonised the Black Sea in particular; Byzantium followed in their wake, sending expeditions up the Dnepr and other rivers. As a result of such contacts as well as

migration and internal evolution, tribal organisations gave way to that of an embryonic Slavonic state from the seventh to the ninth centuries. During this period, towns such as Novgorod and Kiev came into existence. In their hinterlands, settled agriculture came to be practised as the steppe and the forest receded before the plough. Foreign contacts were established not only with Byzantium but with other peoples to the east and west. Intercourse with the Islamic and Christian cultures of Central Asia and Transcaucasia was mutually beneficial, as was that with fellow Slavs, Germans and Norsemen.<sup>4</sup>

Of all these contacts, it is the last, with the Norsemen, Vikings or Varangians that has been the most famous or notorious in Russian history. These restless itinerants came down the rivers from the Baltic to the Black Sea not only to trade and to fight, but also to settle. As well as making good use of the commercial route to Byzantium, they hired themselves out as mercenaries to one Russian city in its struggle with another. In this manner, they probably came to furnish Novgorod and Kiev with their first well-known dynasty. But they were not complete conquerors or cultural innovators; they rather worked hand in glove with the native ruling class and became assimilated by it. The controversy still rages about the origin of the word 'Rus' and many other aspects of the birth of medieval Russia, but many Western specialists now agree with their Soviet colleagues that both 'Rus' and most of the characteristics of its civilisation were conceived on native soil rather than being a foreign insemination.<sup>5</sup>

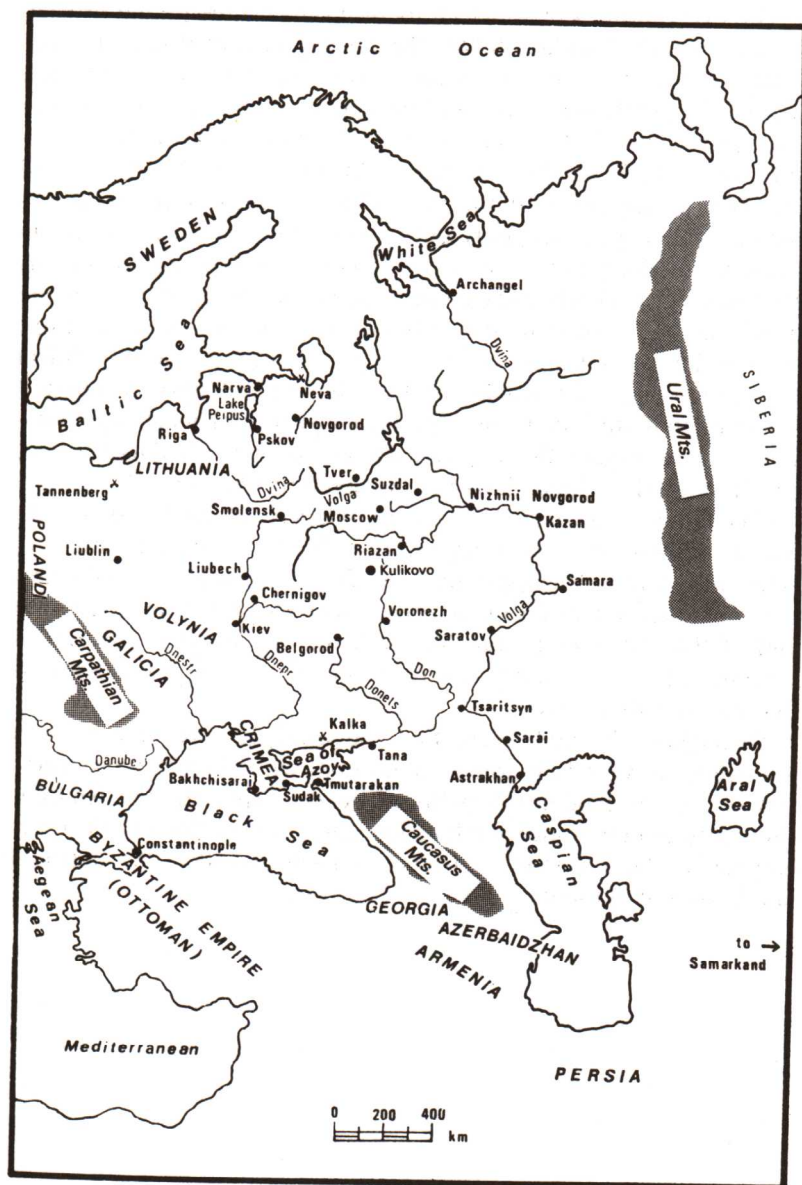
## *Part One*

### *Medieval Russia: Kiev to Moscow*

#### *Introduction*

The myth persists that Russia was cut off from Western civilisation until the reign of Peter the Great. In fact, ties were often close with West as well as East during the early medieval period in the political, economic and cultural spheres of life. Nevertheless, the Western contacts that were established during the prosperous days of Kiev were severely curtailed during the worst days of the so-called 'Mongol yoke'. They grew again by fits and starts with the rise of Moscow.

The first chapter commences with a brief analysis of another myth – that Kievan Rus was the creation of immigrant princes rather than the culmination of a process unfolding itself during the course of several centuries. Most attention, however, is given to Kievan Rus from its construction and development in the ninth, tenth and eleventh centuries, to its collapse in the twelfth century. At its peak, Kievan Rus was not only a powerful state carrying on diplomatic and economic relations with a large number of its fellows throughout Europe and the Middle East, but also the centre of a remarkable culture. Some of its princes deserve inclusion among the ranks of the great rulers of medieval times. Nor should it be forgotten that, during the same period, a high level of civilisation was reached in the regions of some of the future Soviet republics in Transcaucasia and Central Asia.



1 Medieval Russia, 882-1645

The two centuries or so which followed the disintegration of Kiev were among the least helpful for the development of Russia. For the major part of that time, the Mongols dominated the fragments into which the state had broken, and their general influence was for the most part negative. German, Polish, Lithuanian and Swedish incursions from the West added to the problems faced by Novgorod and the other principalities. While many of the figures who passed across the national stage in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries remain shadowy to the point of anonymity, there are individuals such as Alexander Nevsky who have come to occupy a prominent place in the pantheon of national heroes. Moreover, processes were at work leading the way towards the emergence of a new centre of political unity, Moscow, and it would also be wrong to look upon this period as one of undiluted economic depression and cultural inactivity. Some scholars have argued that even the Mongol influence had its positive, constructive side. Such views are discussed in Chapter 2.

Chapter 3 is devoted to the consolidation of the Russian state under Moscow. It is there argued that this was a process in broad conformity with a European pattern. The chronological termination of the chapter and of Part One comes after Moscow's collapse at the end of the sixteenth century in the Time of Troubles with its resurgence at the beginning of the seventeenth century under a new dynasty, the Romanovs.

Throughout the medieval section, the principal underlying theme is feudalism. It must be borne in mind that, while Western historians concentrate on feudalism's political aspects, especially the relationships between the prince and his subordinates, their Soviet colleagues emphasise the economic aspects, in particular the ties between landlords and peasants.<sup>1</sup>



# 1 *The Construction and Collapse of Kiev, 882-1240*

'Let us seek a prince who may rule over us, and judge us according to the Law', said the warring tribes of ancient Russia to each other in 862 according to the *Primary Chronicle*. And so: 'They accordingly went overseas to the Varangian Russes: these particular Varangians were known as Russes, just as some are called Swedes, and others Normans, English and Gottlanders . . .' As the old story continues, the tribes then said to Varangian Russes: 'Our whole land is great and rich, but there is no order in it. Come to rule and reign over us.'<sup>1</sup> Three brothers in particular were chosen, and the eldest of them, Riurik, settled in Novgorod and began the princely dynasty that was to rule over Kiev from 882 onwards. On such a foundation was developed in the eighteenth century the so-called Normanist theory of the beginning of the history of the Russian state.

The old story is colourful and persistent, but essentially Russian history no more began in 862 than British history in 1066 or American history in 1776. Moreover, the making of Kievan government could hardly be the exclusive achievement of a small group of men, as the Soviet historian B. D. Grekov strongly insists:

We reject the naive conception that a state is formed by individual heroes. We know that the formation of a state is not a sudden occurrence, but is the result of prolonged social development. We know that states appear in a period when society has already become divided into classes, when relations between them become aggravated and when the economically strongest class assumes power and subordinates the masses. Consequently in our attempts to discover the origins of the state of Ancient Rus we should discard outdated scientific conceptions and study the history of the people as a whole, rather than the activities of individuals.<sup>2</sup>