A Note to Students

Over a century ago, the Russian socialist Alexander Herzen wrote that his father once picked up Karamzin's *History of the Russian State*, but then contemptuously put it down saying: "All these Iziaslaviches and Olgoviches, to whom can that be of interest?" To prevent a similar reaction and help you make some sense of all the "Iziaslaviches and Olgoviches," this text clusters many names around several main topics: (1) the struggle for and against political authority, including autocracy and dictatorship; (2) the expansion and contraction of Russia and its dealings with other nationalities and foreign powers; and (3) the life and culture of the Russian people.

While keeping these topics in the forefront, the text also reflects the realization of what Marc Raeff has referred to as the "messiness of history." Although we need generalizations to make sense of history, not all important historical facts fit into neat categories.

Archaeological and documentary evidence provide a sufficient enough foundation for us to begin our study of Russia in the late ninth century A.D. We begin, however, not with a Russia centered around Moscow, but with Rus (sometimes called Kievans Rus), a unique state that was the common starting point for the history of all three of the East Slavic nations: Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus.

From the very beginnings of Rus, we will be dealing with a complex ethnic mosaic made up primarily of Slavs, Scandinavian Vikings (the Varangians), Finno-Ugrians, and Balts. Later on, after the Mongol invasion of the thirteenth century and the eventual rise of Moscow, we will see the expansion of a Russian state that at its height encompassed well over a hundred different nationalities. The story of that expansion—and later contraction—and Russia's dealings with these nationalities is an important part of Russian history. But this book's primary focus is on Russia; it barely touches on any distinct aspects of the social and cultural lives of Ukrainians, Georgians, Armenians, or other nationalities that were once a part of the Russian Empire or Soviet Union. Students desiring to know more about these nationalities and nations should turn to some of the excellent histories about them that are available. (See the section on nationalities and peoples in the General Bibliography at the end of this volume.)

The great Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy once criticized the historian Sergei Soloviev for concentrating too much on just the Russian government and neglecting those who "made the brocades, broadcloth, clothes, and damask cloth which the tsars and nobles flaunted, who trapped the black foxes and sables that were given to ambassadors, who mined the gold and iron, who raised the horses, cattle, and sheep, who constructed the houses, palaces, and churches, and who transported goods." In this history text, such everyday life is not ignored. Special attention is paid to the lives of women, children, and families; the material culture of the people (their food and drink, their health and housing); and their legal and illegal dealings with the state, including their crimes and the punishments they suffered.

Chapter 1

Land and Peoples: From Ancient Times to the Present

As German troops discovered in late 1941, when fierce winter weather hindered them from taking Moscow, geography affects history. Although Russia's geography helped defeat the forces of Hitler, for centuries it had made life more difficult for Russians than for people located in less harsh lands.

Until the modern era, Rus and then Russians as well as other peoples were much more immediately affected than we are today, in our world of electricity and automobiles, by fields and rivers, crops and animals, heat and cold, rain and drought, and lightness and darkness. Thus, the physical world that surrounded them, their geography, was of utmost importance in determining their existence. Most Russians produced the majority of their own food and clothes. In their huts and log cabins, they had no more illumination than the weak light of a slowly burning wood splinter (*luchina*). Even the candlesticks and clay lamps of those who could afford them gave off little light. If people traveled, it was by foot, horse, or boat.

THE LAND: PHYSICAL FEATURES, CLIMATE, AND RESOURCES

The amount of territory controlled by Rus, Russian, and Soviet governments has varied considerably throughout Russia's long history (see Map 1.1), but the enormous size of Russia throughout most of its history has made centralized rule more difficult than in smaller countries. Prior to his death in 1015, the Rus prince Vladimir I ruled over about 800,000 square kilometers. In 1533, after substantial expansion but before moving into Siberia, the Russian government ruled over 2.8 million square kilometers. At the height of the Russian Empire, under the last Emperor, Nicholas II, the empire contained eight times as much territory (22.4 million square kilometers). Although the new Soviet government ruled over slightly less land in the period between the two world wars, victory in World War II enabled the U.S.S.R. to become as large as the Russian Empire had once been. Following the collapse of the U.S.S.R. at the end of 1991, Russia was left with 17.1 million square kilometers, or 76 percent of the former Soviet Union.

Growth of Russia 1533–1900

Russia (Muscovy) in 1533 | Russian Empire in 1900

Union of Soviet Socialist Republics in 1930

Russian Empire in 1900 | Soviet Union in 1930

MAP 1.1A,B

Union of Soviet Socialist Republics in 1950

Soviet Union in 1930 | Soviet Union in 1950 | Republic boundaries

Russia in 1993

Boundary of the Soviet Union in 1950 | Capitals of U.S.S.R. successor states

MAP 1.1C,D

Although smaller than the former U.S.S.R., Russia remains the largest country in the world and is about 1.8 times the size of the United States. From east to west, it extends about 10,000 kilometers (over 6,000 miles) and traverses eleven time zones. From north to south, it spans more than 4,000 kilometers (or about 2,500 miles). Alaska, which once belonged to Russia, and today is separated from Siberia only by the narrow Bering Straight, is closer to much of eastern Siberia than is Moscow.

Russia is part of the vast Eurasian land mass, and in recent centuries the Ural Mountains have been considered the dividing line between European and Asiatic Russia. But Europe is more of a cultural concept than a geographic one, and scholars such as Christian, who believes the above division is artificial, have chosen to emphasize more Russia's Eurasian character. Christian stresses the significance of Russia being part of what he calls Inner Eurasia, which includes most of the former Soviet Union, Mongolia, and China's Central Asian territory. Without ignoring his insights, however, we will continue to use the Urals as a convenient dividing line. In so doing we may note that the Russian Empire and the U.S.S.R. contained Asiatic territories besides Siberia, but Asiatic Russia today can be thought of as synonymous with it (this definition of Siberia includes Russia's Far Eastern Provinces, which are sometimes dealt with separately).

European Russia is primarily a large plain, as is western Siberia, which extends from the Urals to the Enisei River. The Urals are not very high, reaching only a little over 6,000 feet at their highest point. East of the Enisei River, the Siberian terrain becomes more hilly, and east of the Lena River stretching to the Pacific Ocean are various mountain ranges. Other mountain ranges exist in south-central and eastern Siberia, and the Caucasus Mountains are along Russia's southern border between the Black and Caspian seas.

Russia possesses many large rivers and lakes. The longest rivers are three Siberian ones, the Lena, the Irtysh and the Ob. The Enisei is fifth in size, behind the Volga River, European Russia's (and Europe's) largest river and almost as long as the American Mississippi. Most of the main Siberian rivers flow south to north and empty into the Arctic Ocean. The Irtysh flows through Kazakhstan before entering Siberia and empties into the Ob. The Amur River, which forms part of the Chinese-Russian border before turning northward and entering into the Pacific Ocean, is an exception and flows mainly west to east.

Although not as long as the greatest Siberian rivers, several of Russia's European rivers, such as the Dnieper and Volga, have played a greater historical role. In European Russia, most of the major rivers also flow northward, such as the Northern Dvina and Pechora, or southward, such as the Volga and Don. As in Siberia, many tributaries are located on an east-west axis. Several important rivers have their headwaters southeast of the city of Novgorod in the Valdai Hills. Here in heights of only about 1,000 feet above sea level, lakes and marshes give birth to the Volga, the Western Dvina, and the Dnieper. West of these Valdai Hills, some fifty to a hundred miles, are the Lovat and Volkhov rivers, divided by Lake Ilmen. Via connecting rivers, portages, and later in history, canals, the Lovat-Volkhov waterway and the three bigger rivers (the Volga, the Western Dvina, and the Dnieper) have provided water routes between the Baltic and the Black and Caspian seas.

Often, however, Russia was cut off from access to these seas. Its desire to obtain access, especially to the Baltic and Black seas, and then play a larger maritime role became significant in Russian foreign policy. Despite the breakup of the Soviet Union, Russia still has coastline on both seas, although not as much as earlier. The Western Dvina and Dnieper rivers, for example, now empty into sea waters outside Russian borders. Although its vast Arctic and Pacific ocean coastlines (the latter first reached in the seventeenth century) have been less significant in Russia's historical development, they have become more important in recent centuries.

Although lakes are especially numerous in the European northwestern part of the country, the greatest lake (in Russia or the world) in terms of water volume is Siberia's wondrous Lake Baikal. Despite being called a "sea," the Caspian, which Russia shares with several other former Soviet republics and Iran, is actually the world's largest lake if measured by surface area.

Russia's extreme northern location, comparable to Alaska's and Canada's, has combined with other factors to make Russia's climate harsh. Average January temperatures in some parts of northeastern Siberia are between –50°F and –60°F, although these areas can also experience very hot, but short, summers. Further south and west, temperatures are less extreme, but winters are still long and summers short. Average January temperatures in Novosibirsk hover around 0°F and in Moscow are about 14°F, only about 7° below Chicago's.

Russia's rainfall pattern is also less than ideal. Precipitation is heaviest in the northwest and diminishes as one moves southeast. In many parts of the country, including the Moscow area, rain tends to be less plentiful in the spring and early summer, when it would most help crops, and instead falls more heavily in the late

FIGURE 1.1. Lake Baikal and a small settlement on its western shore.

summer. Taken together, Russia's northern location and unfavorable rainfall patterns have adversely affected Russian agriculture, which, in turn, has affected many other aspects of Russian life from the people's diet to population density and state revenues. Some scholars, such as the contemporary Russian historian L. V. Milov, claim that these unfavorable agricultural conditions are one of the chief explanations for why both Russian serfdom and autocracy developed and continued for so long.

Not counting transitional areas, Russia can be divided into four main vegetation zones: From north to south, they are the tundra, taiga, mixed forest, and steppe (see Map 1.2). The tundra region is a treeless one where much of the ground beneath the surface remains permanently frozen year-round. Permafrost also extends south into much of the taiga forest zone. This is an area primarily of coniferous trees like the pine. Next comes the smaller mixed forest belt of both coniferous and leaf-bearing trees. This area is much more densely populated than the taiga and contains many of Russia's larger cities including Moscow. Taken together, Russia's two forest areas equal almost one-quarter of the world's total forest lands. South of the mixed forest is a steppe or prairie zone that originally contained few trees. A Central Asian desert zone that existed in the Soviet Union and the Russian Empire at its height is no longer under Russian control.

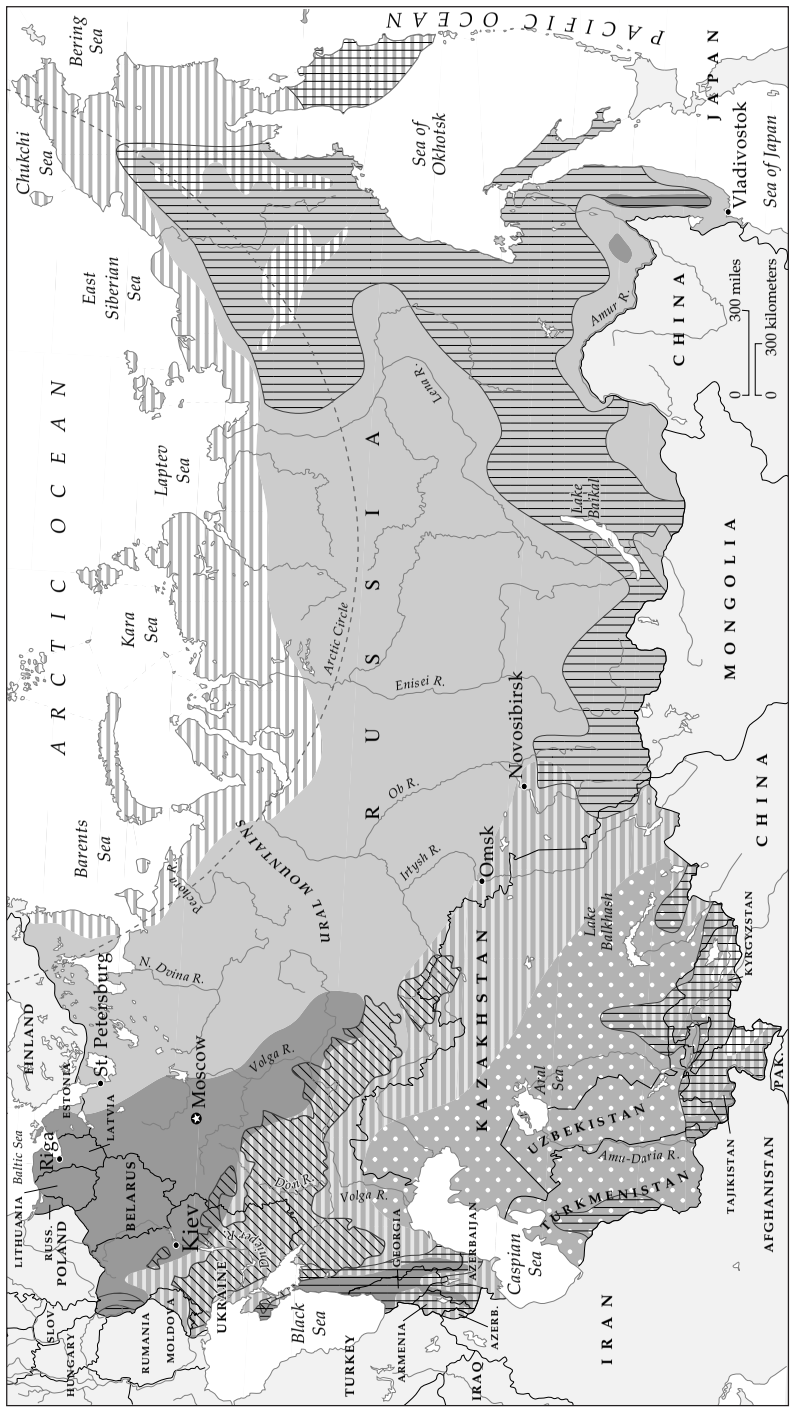
Russia's most fertile soils lie in a black-earth belt that can be found in the transitional area between the mixed forest and steppe and in the steppe itself. Because the transitional area receives more rain during appropriate times, it is the most productive agricultural area.

Further north, the soils of the mixed forest zone are not as favorable but have been farmed throughout much of Russian history. In early Russian history, peasants used the "slash-and-burn" technique of clearing lands by cutting trees and burning the stumps (the ashes making good fertilizer) before farming.

Literally from the cradle (made of wood) to the grave (in a wooden coffin), the forest and its products surrounded most Russians. The peasants often lived in pine or oak cabins amidst forest clearings. They and the town-dwellers used the wood of the forest not only for most houses, churches, and other buildings, but also for firewood, bast shoes, boats, icons, fortresses, city walls, plows, tools, and utensils. The forest provided furs and foods, such as meat, mushrooms, berries, and honey. Finally, it provided some protection, whether from steppe warriors in earlier times or from German invaders during World War II. But, as the great Russian historian Vasili Kluichevsky (1841–1911) noted, the people's attitude toward the forest was ambivalent. With its darkness and denseness, its bears and brigands, it was like a harsh parent who both provided and punished.

The Rus and Russians had a different type of ambivalence toward the steppes, which were not only fertile, but also fearsome. Steppe plunderers often attacked Rus border regions, devastating towns and townspeople and carrying away slaves. Rus would finally come tumbling down when the last of the great steppe nomads, the Mongols, attacked not only borderlands, but also far into the interior of Rus.

If the people had ambivalent attitudes toward the forest and the steppes, Kliuchevsky thought that toward their rivers they had only unequivocal love, for these waterways provided fish and nourishing waters for humans and fields.



MAP 1.2

Whether in summer or winter, the rivers were the best highways in the country and acted as the arteries of trade and contact with those beyond one's village or town.

Ancient folklore, however, suggests at least some Rus ambivalence toward the rivers. This folklore often perceived water spirits as being as dangerous and malicious as those of the forest. The female *rusalki* (nymphs), for example, lured and tickled young men to death in both river and forest.

Whereas nature has been harsh to Russia in some regards, it has been generous in others. Besides its great timber resources, Russia has possessed abundant wildlife, including many valuable fur-bearing animals. And it is a world leader in the possession of mineral resources, including mineral fuels. Among its abundant resources are coal, petroleum, natural gas, iron and iron alloys, copper, diamonds, gold, silver, lead, zinc, mercury, asbestos, potassium, magnesium, salt deposits, phosphate ores, sulfur, and limestone. Aluminum is about the only major mineral resource that Russia lacks. Of course, large quantities of many of these materials are in areas of Russia, especially Siberia, that have not always been part of the Russian state, and harsh climactic conditions have often made extraction costly and difficult.

GEOGRAPHY'S IMPACT ON COLONIZATION AND NATIONAL IDENTITY

Kliuchevsky believed that the history of his country was one of colonization, and there is little doubt that Russia's geographical conditions helped stimulate its colonization and expansion. Among other reasons, the Russians expanded to acquire better agricultural lands, Siberian furs, and access to warm-water ports.

This colonization was also encouraged by few natural barriers; an excellent artery of rivers; and fluid, poorly defined frontiers. Such porous frontiers, however, could be a danger and a source of contention as well as an opportunity. They contributed to the heavy emphasis on the military throughout most of Russian history. Russia today, like the U.S.S.R. before it, borders on more nations than any other country in the world.

Colonization led to the absorption of many non-Russian peoples and the creation of a multinational empire. Ruling over so many non-Russians affected both Russian domestic and foreign policies. In 1991, the difficulties of ruling over so many differing peoples helped lead to the collapse of the U.S.S.R.

The Eurasian location of Russia—part European, part Asian—was another geographical factor that had a significant impact on Russian history and culture. During the nineteenth century, Russian Slavophiles and Westernizers debated whether Russia was culturally part of Europe or not. Later on, the émigrés from the Russian Empire who founded "Eurasianism" in 1920 emphasized the importance of a Eurasian location. Just a few years earlier, the great Russian poet Alexander Blok had foreshadowed their doctrine in his poem "The Scythians." There he depicted Russians as between Europe and Asia, but also wrote: "Yes, we are Scythians! Yes, we are Asians."

Today, more than a decade after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russians are still debating their national identity and relationship to the West.

THE PEOPLES: FROM ANCIENT TIMES TO THE PRESENT

Long before there was any recorded history in the area known as Rus, a succession of nomadic warriors dominated the southern steppes of modern-day European Russia and Ukraine. This region was near the western end of a vast steppe area stretching almost uninterrupted from Manchuria to Hungary. From about 1000 B.C. to about 200 B.C., it was briefly the Cimmerians and then the Iranian-speaking Scythinas who controlled the high grassy area north of the Black Sea. Although historians know little of the first group, much more is known of the Scythians, thanks largely to ancient Greek sources and some fascinating archaeological finds displayed in museums such as St. Petersburg's Hermitage.

By about 200 B.C., various groups lumped together by Greek writers under the name Sarmatians had defeated the Scythians and then dominated the steppe until the Germanic Goths defeated them about 400 years later. In the 370s A.D., the Asiatic Huns displaced the Goths, who fled westward. Between Hun domination of the southern steppe and the beginnings of the Rus confederation in the late ninth century, other Asiatic groups, such as the Avars, Turks, Bulgars, and Khazars, succeeded each other in prominence in the region.

Both before and after the establishment of Rus, the nomadic peoples of the southern steppe tended to display similar characteristics. They generally were loose tribal federations. At first, they survived by breeding their horses and other animals on vast pastures, moving constantly to prevent overgrazing. Although the nomads could survive on their own, they almost always sought to enrich their lives through raiding or trading with more sedentary peoples. In both types of activities, their hardy horses were their most valuable asset, either as cavalry mounts or as trading commodities. More sedentary peoples needed to purchase the nomads' surplus horses for both domestic and military purposes—for more than 2,000 years (until the gunpowder revolution at the end of medieval times), horse-mounted warriors dominated warfare.

As time passed, at least some of the nomadic peoples became seminomadic, establishing permanent winter camps and becoming involved, at least for part of the year, in more sedentary occupations. Among both the Scythians and the Khazars, for example, the pure nomadic life became increasingly a privilege available to only elite elements within their tribal confederations.

Prior to the beginning of Rus recorded history, the Turkic Khazars were gathering tribute from many peoples, including some of the East Slavic tribes, who often paid it in furs. The Khazars forged an important commercial state centered around the city of Itil, near the mouth of the Volga River. From there they directed a tribute-gathering and trading empire ideally situated to do business with Byzantines, Arabs, Persians and other Asians, Volga Bulgars, Slavs, and Varangians (Scandinavian Vikings in the East Slavic lands). Although by the late ninth century many upper-class Khazars and their ruler had converted to Judaism, they were tolerant of other religions.

In the centuries that followed, the Rus, Russians, and other peoples of the forest traded, competed for steppe land, paid or collected tribute, warred, and sometimes allied with the peoples of the steppe (who included the Mongols). The impact of the steppe peoples on Russian history has been hotly debated, but most recent

research indicates it was greater than the majority of past Russian and Soviet historians acknowledged.

No one knows for sure when the East Slavs first moved into the European lands they dominate today, primarily into the forest zone or the transitional belt between forest and steppe. The closeness of various Slavic languages has led some historians to suggest a common homeland for all Slavs—north of the Carpathian Mountains—and then a split, by the seventh century A.D., into southern, western, and eastern Slavic groups. From the first came the Slavs of Bulgaria and the Croats, Serbs, and Slovenes of what was once Yugoslavia. From the second came the Poles, Czechs, Slovaks, Moravians, and other smaller groups. From the last would eventually emerge the Russians, Ukrainians, and Belorussians.

In the Rus era, however, the three East Slavic nations were not yet distinct, and they and the state they formed, along with other peoples, became known simply as Rus. The Rus chronicles divide the East Slavs only by tribes—about a dozen of them at the dawn of the Rus era (see Map 2.1). Overwhelmingly these Slavs were a farming people.

Prior to the extensive Slavic colonization of northern Rus, a process that continued throughout the Rus period, the area was settled primarily by many Finno-Ugric and Baltic peoples. By the ninth century, another group was present in future Rus territories—Scandinavian Vikings similar to those who burst upon other parts of Europe in this era. They already had sailed into the rivers and lakes leading from the Baltic to the Black and Caspian seas and begun to exploit the area—indeed the name "Rus" appears to have been first applied to these Vikings (or Varangians) before finally being used in its wider sense. Like many southern steppe peoples, these "nomads of the sea" were raiders and traders. They eventually played an important role in organizing the multiethnic trading and tribute-gathering elite that founded and furnished the political leadership for the Rus state. In the multiethnic lands that would become part of Rus, there were still other peoples, including descendants of those who had earlier inhabited the southern steppes.

By the time the Rus state collapsed in the thirteenth century, a Great Russian ethnic type was emerging from the East Slavic intermingling with the Finnish peoples of northern Russia. Some Finnish tribes, however, such as the Komi, the Mordvins, and the Mari, although subject to various pressures throughout Russian history, maintained their separate identities. (Komi, Mari El, and Mordovian Republics exist in present-day Russia, although the native peoples are outnumbered in each by Great Russians).

As the Russian state expanded in medieval and modern times, over one hundred other nationalities were brought under Russian control. Among them were the peoples of modern-day Ukraine and Belarus, Siberia, part of the Baltic area, the Caucasus, and Central Asia. By 1795, Russians were perhaps already less than half of the Russian Empire's population. In the census of 1897 (which excluded Finland), those who listed their native language as Russian composed only 44.3 percent of the population. Using language as a rough guide to ethnicity, Ukrainians made up 17.8 percent; Poles, 6.3 percent; and Belorussians, 4.7 percent. Among the non-Slavic population, the many Turkic peoples, primarily in Central Asia and the Caucasus, together composed 10.8 percent. Jews were 4 percent, and

FIGURE 1.2. Peoples of the Russian Empire from an early nineteenth-century engraving. (From Robert Wallace and the Editors of Time-Life Books, *Rise of Russia*. Time Inc., New York, 1967, p. 132.)

other nationalities (such as Armenians, Georgians, Latvians, Lithuanians, and Finnish peoples) each composed a smaller percentage.

At the time of the breakup of the Soviet Union in December 1991, the Russians were just a bare majority in the U.S.S.R. In the new post-Soviet Russia, however, the Great Russians in 1992 made up greater than 80 percent of the total population of almost 150 million people. Although Tatars and Ukrainians were the only other nationalities possessing more than 1 percent of the total, more than one hundred national groups still existed within Russian borders. Conversely, the 25 million Russians residing in other former Soviet republics almost equaled the number of non-Russians still inside Russian borders.

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