Russian History and the Roots of Stalinism

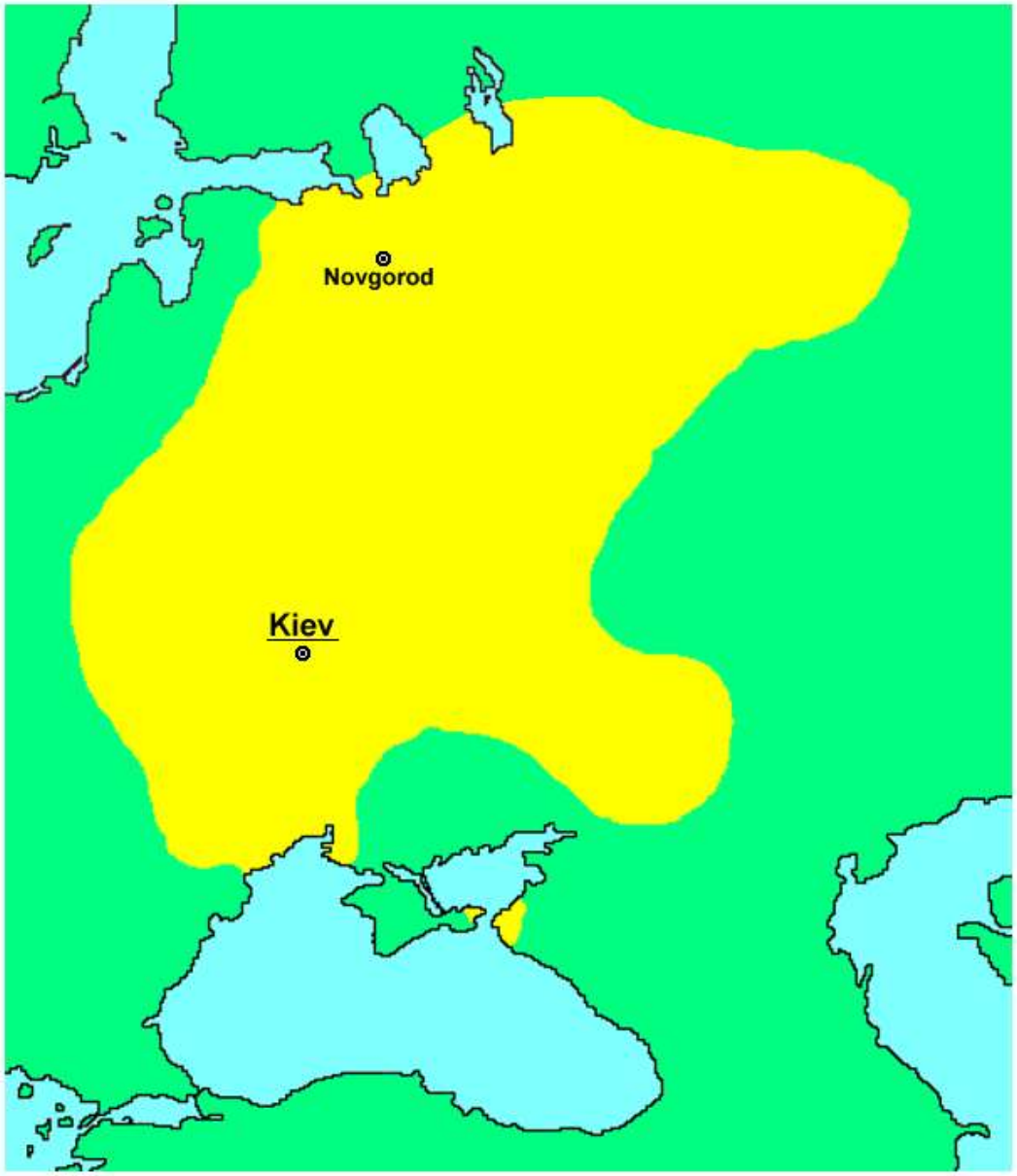
- On account of Vladimir Lenin's untimely death in 1924, it was not he who distinguished Soviet Russia, but a manipulative, behind-the-scenes party bureaucrat named Josef Stalin, whom Lenin himself had hoped to isolate. Under the dictatorship of Stalin (whom recent research suggests was a paranoid Schizophrenic—literally a mad man), Russia embarked upon a path of forced industrialization, the rapidity and fierceness of which the world had never seen. In the process, some twenty-million people either died from state-sponsored famine, disappeared into the "Gulag Archipelago" of Siberia, or were executed in the purges of the late 1930s. Russia was forever transformed, becoming a leading industrial and military power able to defend itself during World War II. At the same time, it was saddled with a top-heavy economy whose long-term legacy was inefficiency, inferior quality, and environmental catastrophe. For Russia and the world, the period spanning the "October Revolution" of 1917 to Stalin's death in 1953, when he was planning a new round of purges, was one of the most revolutionary and, indeed, catastrophic.

- Before examining the events immediately preceding Stalin's rise to power, like the October Revolution, we need to consider some of the deeper history, and certain characteristics thereof, that helped lay the ground work for his rule.

- The origins of Russia lie along the Dniester and Dnieper rivers, which drain into the Black Sea. At the height of the Byzantine Empire (centered on Constantinople at the mouth of the Black Sea), these rivers were key routes between northern Europe and the riches of the eastern Mediterranean. Beginning in the early ninth century, they became "highways" for Viking traders, and the region surrounding the rivers therefore became critical to the Viking way of life. In the ninth century, chaos among the local Slavic tribes living on the banks of both rivers made trade through the region difficult. The Vikings—or the "Rus'," as the locals called them—decided to establish some sense of order. The result, the records also tell us, was the establishment of the first "Russian" state. This was essentially a formal trading network centered on the commercial hub of Kiev (currently the capital of the Ukraine). Named after the Vikings (i.e., the "Rus'") who organized it and ruled it, this "state" has gone down to history as "Kievan Rus'". As the years passed, Kiev's reach grew, as did its level of organization and law. The Viking rulers soon married into the local population, and by the year 1050 Kievan Rus' was a viable, relatively civilized network of cities, towns, and trade routes. Indeed, according to most historians, it was the first "Russia."
- The reason I point this all out is that the history underscores a point of confusion Russians face when examining their origins. According to this narrative, the first Russian rulers were Vikings, and the name of Russia itself is of Nordic origin. One might argue that a "functional" country needs a usable past—a history that progresses in a logical, clear way to the present. One can argue that Russia does not have this history. "Viking" origins certainly muddle the narrative, given that they were not Slavs. Indeed, during the Soviet period—and in particular under Stalin—this history was removed from the history books.

- Kievan "Russia." Note the Dniester and Dnieper rivers, which flow into the Black Sea. These two key means of transit were the existential reason for the first Russian state.

Viking trade route (in blue) around which the first Russian state was organized.



- Kievan Rus', greatest extent, 11th century

- Kievan Rus' rose and fell with the Byzantine empire. So long as "Byzantium" remained viable and wealthy, as it did during the eleventh century, Kievan Rus' prospered. But, as it crumbled in the twelfth century, so did Kievan Rus'. After 1200, the various princes of Kiev fought increasingly amongst one another over the declining wealth of their trading network. This infighting and the slow disintegration that accompanied it made Kiev ripe for defeat at the hands of the new enemy that soon emerged on the horizon: the Mongols.
- In 1223, a large Mongol army defeated the princes of Kiev at the Battle of Kalka River. Fourteen years followed without incident, but in 1237 the Mongols returned with a full-scale invasion force of 35,000 mounted archers and utterly defeated the princes of Kiev once and for all.
- More than two hundred years of what has gone down to history as the "Mongol Yoke" followed. The remnants of the Kievan empire crumbled into various independent principalities; each was forced to pay regular tribute to the Mongols—or "Tartars" as they were sometimes called. The Mongols did not technically "occupy" the region; they preferred to reside to the southeast, just beyond its boundaries, in a kingdom known as the "Golden Horde." They nonetheless had significant influence over the now collapsed regions of Kievan Russia. Indeed, according to historical records the Mongols established the first postal system in the area, conducted the first census, and, due to the requirements of the regular tributes, instituted the first fiscal system.

Mongols in Asia

at death of Kublai Khan 1294


Mongols in Europe
1223 – 1380
RUSSIAN
STATES
Vladimir
Moscow
Riazan
BATTLE OF KULIKOVO 1380
1236
Gt. Bulgar
Kozelsk
Chernigov
GOLDEN HO
Sarai
1240
1242
1223
KALKA
Azov
Kiev
1241
Liegnitz
Warsaw
VOLYNIA
POLAND
GALICIA
HOLY ROMAN EMPIRE
TEUTONIC KNIGHTS
LITHUANIA
Baltic Sea
DENMARK
CARPATHIANS
Vienna
Buda
Pest
HUNGARY
MOLDAVIA
WALLACHIA
BULGARIA
SERBIA
BYZ. EMP.
Constantinople
TURKS
Black Sea
CAUCAS
GEORGIA
Adriatic Sea
ITALY
Rome
Milan
FRANCE
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- The significance of the Mongol yoke (ca. 1237-1480) to Russia, Russian history, and the Russian identity is controversial. Some historians have argued that an indelible "Asian stamp" colored the Russian narrative thereafter, removing Russia forever from what might otherwise have been a more western (i.e., European) directed history. Had the Mongols not destroyed Kievan Russia, these historians argue, Russia might have integrated itself with western Europe—into the "western tradition," as it were. Indeed, before the invasion Russia's direction was directed to the west, in particular towards Constantinople (embodiment of the western tradition) and towards the Holy Roman Empire (i.e., Germany).
- The structure of rule that persisted under the Mongols was, as described by numerous historians but most memorably by Karl Marx himself, "Oriental despotism." Via the requirements of the tribute system, the Mongols forced the Russian people into a form of slavery and transferred Russia's wealth and potential to the East. The result was a "hemorrhaging of history." For two centuries, Russia remained separate from the evolution of the west (i.e., Europe and Byzantium)—in a sense mired in historical mud. As Marx would have said, for the better part of three centuries Russia "fell asleep."
- Russia was thereafter forever jaded by the "Asiatic" mode of despotism. The population became used to being ruled, rather than ruling itself (i.e., via democracy). Tyranny "from above" (in this case the Mongol kings) became the mode of rule to which the Russian state, and the Russian people, became accustomed. The route to Stalinism was, thereby, paved. Indeed, numerous historians have described Stalinism as a form of "oriental despotism." *Like the Mongol kings, it can be argued, Stalin enslaved the Russian people, forcing them to pay regular tribute, particularly through collectivization and the confiscations that accompanied it, to the Russian state.*

- Siege and sack of Kievan cities by the Mongols.

- In 1380, the Russian princes served up their first defeat to the Mongols, at the Battle of Kulikovo. In this instance, it was not the prince of Kiev that led the Russian forces (Kiev had lost its dominance among the Russian princes long before), but Dmitri Ivanovich, ruler of what had been a provincial backwater at the height of Kiev's power: Muscovy, with its capital at Moscow. The battle did not repel the Mongols permanently. Indeed, tribute in one form or another was paid to the Golden horde for another century. But the battle did mark a turning point—the point whereby parts of Russia, especially Muscovy, began to reemerge from the oppression of the Mongols. It also marked another turning point: the rise of what would eventually become the center of Russian power and the Russian state: Moscow.
- Seen from an earlier era, Moscow did not appear the likely bastion of a future state. As distant from the centers of civilization, like Constantinople and the European capitals, as one could have imagined at the time, it was a distant beacon. But what its people and its rulers lacked in culture, civilization, and commercial wealth, they made up in brute force and steely determination. *The austere character of Moscow—its distance from civilization—would characterize its Russian imprint, including--indeed especially--during the era of Stalin.*

- It was Ivan III (1440-1555) who finally broke the Tartar yoke once and for all. In 1476, Ivan refused to pay the customary tribute. Four years later, a Mongol army under Akhmat Khan attempted to force Ivan into submission. Attempting to break into Russian territory at the Ugra River, Khan's forces were repelled after a four day battle. A three-week stand off followed—known to history as the "Great Stand at the Ugra River." Worried by the increasing numbers of Russian forces he saw assembling on the opposing bank, Khan eventually ordered his forces to retreat to the south—never to return.

- The years that followed witnessed the rapid ascent of Muscovy as the major Russian power center. Territories were acquired at a rapid pace, and Moscow developed into an important trading center. The consolidation and growth of what we now know as “Russia” had begun.

Ivan the Terrible (1547-1584)

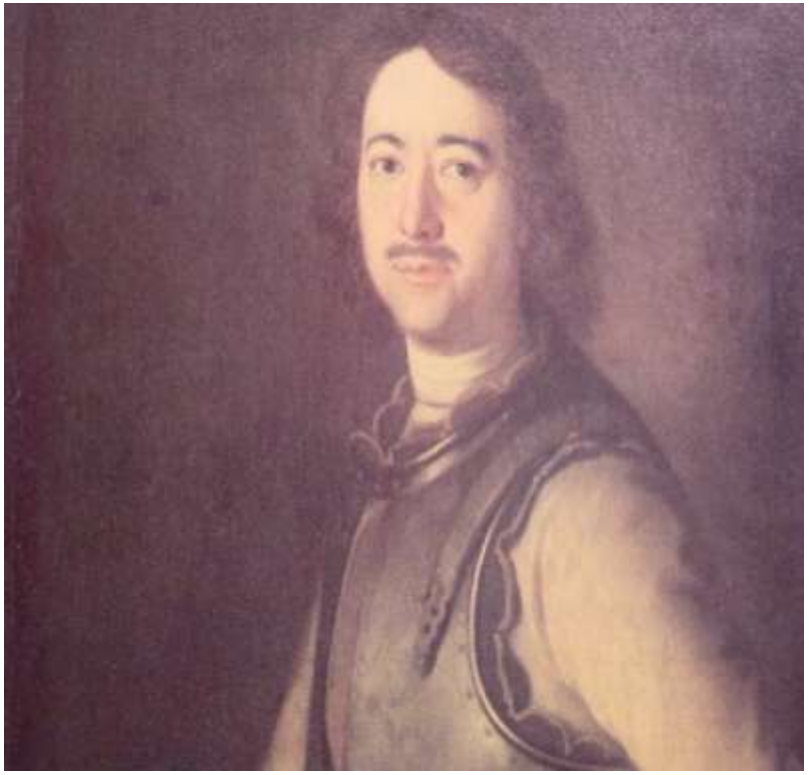
- Crucial to the establishment of Muscovy as Russia's forge was Ivan the Terrible. Ivan is important for our purposes because he showed numerous "Stalinarian" qualities: Paranoia, capriciousness, and wanton, unpredictable cruelty. Indeed, in one fit of rage Ivan knocked his own son over the head with a scepter, mortally wounding him. In 1570, Ivan became so fed up with the rebellious population of the trading hub of Novgorod (he thought they would defect from Russia) that he had thousands of the city's leading citizens massacred. Some sources from the time claim a number as high as 27,000 (relative to the city's population a victim ledger on par with some of Stalin's). But nothing is more important to remember in comparing Ivan's rule with Stalin's than the insidious *Oprichniki*—Ivan's secret police. A law unto themselves, members of this organization sought out all enemies of the Russian state—real and imagined—torturing, executing, and imprisoning them. Understanding Ivan's rule is crucial to comprehending Stalinism, because so many future elements were already apparent four hundred years before.
- With the personage of Ivan the terrible, we return to the issue of "Oriental Despotism." The rise of Muscovy from the yoke of the Mongols, the forging of the "second Russian state" (i.e., Moscow) via the paranoid cruelty of Ivan the terrible--does this mean that Russia followed a distinctly "abnormal" historical path, one that diverged from the "normal" historical paths of European countries like France and Britain? Are democracy and liberal traditions alien to the Russian political consciousness? These are questions we will return to repeatedly in this class.

“Ivan the Terrible at the Deathbed of His First and Most Beloved Wife, Anastasia Ramanovna,” by Georgy Sedov (1875). Like Ivan, Stalin claimed that he only really loved his first wife, Ekaterina Svanidze (1880-1907), who like Ivan’s Anastasia, also died young. Stalin and Ekaterina were married in 1903, and she died just four years later of typhus. At the funeral, Stalin is rumored to have muttered that with Ekaterina’s death “all human feeling died with him.” Ivan pursued multiple loveless marriages thereafter, divorcing at least one of his wives only a week after the wedding. Stalin may have shot his second wife, Nadezhda Alliluyeva, in a fit of rage.

“Ivan the Terrible Killing his Son,” by Ilya Repin

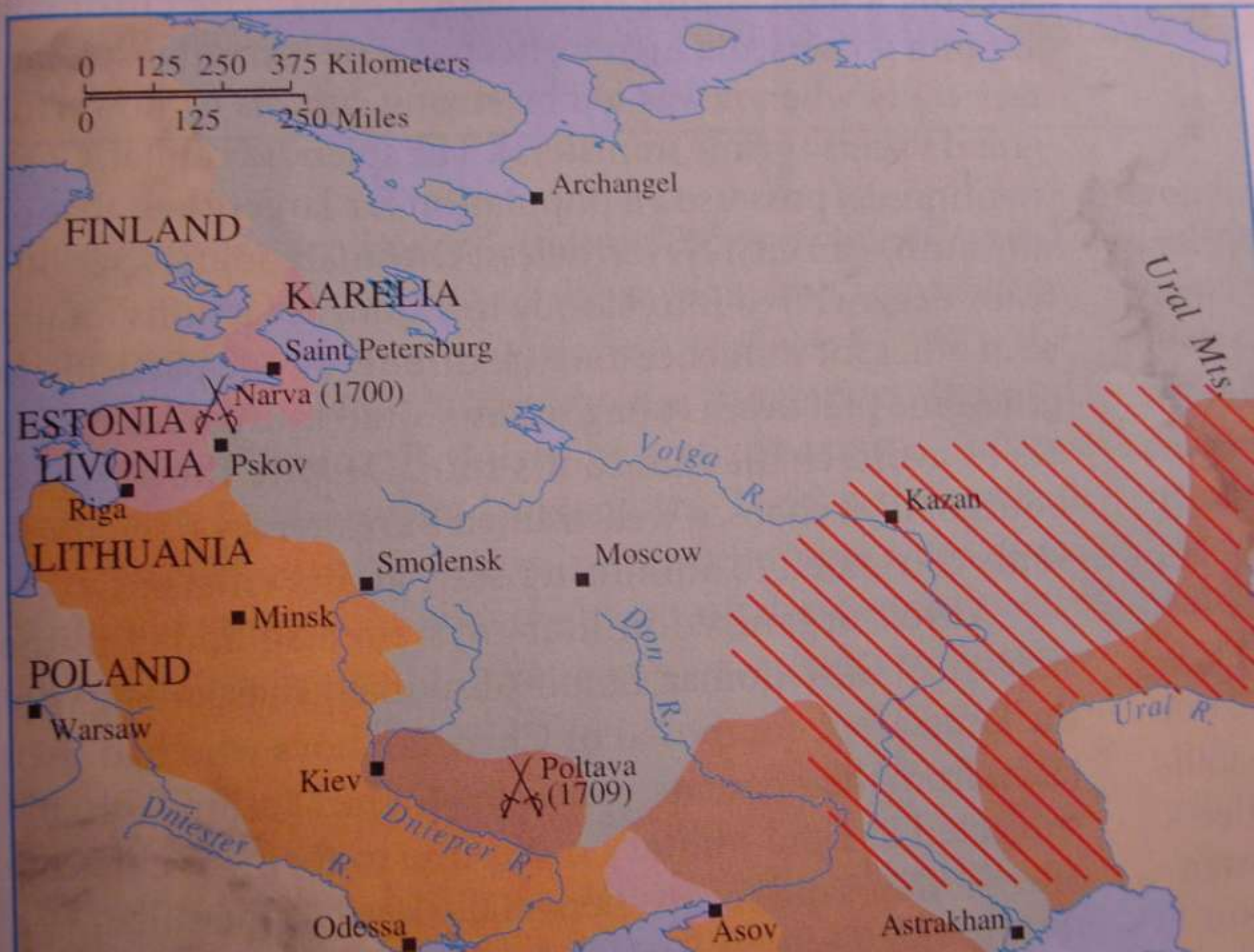
Peter the Great (reigned from 1689-1725)

- The next leader of importance was the famous Peter the Great. Indeed, Peter was great, for he placed what by his time could be called “Russia,” rather than the “Muscovy” of Ivan’s era, on the world map. No longer a regional power, Russia became a European, even world player. Peter did this via numerous means. First, he defeated the Swedish at the Battle of Poltava in 1709. Before this, Sweden had been the most formidable northern European entity; now Russia began to take its place. Second, he annexed Russian territory all the way up to the Pacific Ocean. Third and possibly most important, he established a western-style administrative system. Ministries, the army, the navy, the church, taxation, even the nobility were all realigned to fit western models As a young man, Peter studied France’s and Britain’s systems while traveling in Europe, and he did his best to take the best examples from both countries. In 1703, he moved the capital from Moscow to St. Petersburg in an effort to direct Russia towards western Europe. He even made the nobility cut their beards and dress in the fashion of Louis XIV’s Versailles in order to realign Russian culture more with the west. Indeed, the court language switched from Russian to French during the period of his rule.



- On account of the above reforms, some have called Peter the Great “enlightened.” After all, they argue, he even learned dentistry and boat building and showed a genuine interest in science. However, such arguments neglect a more sinister underside to Peter’s rule. This self-declared “emperor” had St. Petersburg built from scratch out of the swamps of the Neva estuary, a monumental undertaking reminiscent of “oriental despots” like the pyramid-building (and slave-labor-using) pharaohs of ancient Egypt. In the process, more than one thousand Russian workers either drowned or died of exposure. During Peter’s rule, the nobility’s grip over the peasantry—meaning the vast population of farmers who toiled on the landowners’ vast estates—increased dramatically. Indeed, it can be argued that during Peter the Great’s rule a veritable form of slavery—as opposed to serfdom, in which some residual rights remained—was instituted over much of Russia. Under Peter the Great, “serfs” could now be bought and sold like cattle; children and relatives could be sold away from their families. As we will see later in this course when we discuss Stalin’s collectivization program, Russia would continue to have a form of farm-based slavery even in the twentieth century. Collectivization was very much of a Russian—and Petrian--mold.

The fortress at St. Petersburg


0 125 250 375 Kilometers
0 125 250 Miles
Archangel
FINLAND
KARELIA
Saint Petersburg
Narva (1700)
ESTONIA
LIVONIA
Pskov
Riga
LITHUANIA
Smolensk
Moscow
Minsk
POLAND
Warsaw
Kiev
Poltava (1709)
Dniester R.
Dnieper R.
Don R.
Volga R.
Kazan
Ural Mts.
Ural R.
Odessa
Asov
Astrakhan

Russian Expansion 1533 - 1894

Catherine the Great (reigned from 1762-1796)

- Like Peter, Catherine the Great is often remembered as being "enlightened." She did indeed correspond with Voltaire and showed an interest in "liberal" principles. At the same time, she conquered western Ukraine and instituted the merciless Russian form of "serfdom" (i.e., slavery) on a region that had previously known greater freedom. In other words, this "enlightened" monarch actually enslaved millions.
- Catherine's harsh policies vis a vis the peasantry throughout Russia were reflected in Pugachev's Rebellion (1773). A massive uprising of millions of poor serfs against Catherine's harsh policies, the rebellion was only barely put down..Afterwards, Catherine's iron rule hardened.

The “Failed Revolution”

- In the years following Peter the Great’s, Catherine’s, and other despots’ reigns, Russia was, therefore, not really a “modern” country when it entered the nineteenth century. Indeed, over the previous 100 years its population—the vast majority of whom were now serfs tied to the nobles’ land—had become less, rather than more free.
- Had there been a democratic revolution, or at least some sort of successful uprising against the status quo, the old oppressive Czarist system might have come tumbling down. But Russia would never have its revolution; the “old order” would not be destroyed until the twentieth century, amidst the tumult and collapse of World War I. The closest thing to a revolution occurred in December of 1825. A large group of officers who had witnessed Europe’s relatively advanced way of life after Napoleon’s defeat, decided that Russia had to change. When czar Alexander I (1801-1825) died, they refused to endorse his successor, Nicholas II. For a full day—December 23, 1825--this brave group of officers stared down the imperial army outside the Winter Palace in St. Petersburg. Demanding a constitution, they stood ready to overthrow the Czarist order. But, as the sun was setting, the order was given to fire upon them, and fire the imperial soldiers did. Catastrophe ensued with numerous among the officers shot dead. The survivors were summarily court martialed; many of their leaders were executed.

- **The “Decembrist” officers are fired upon**

- This “failed revolution,” as the famous historian of Russia, Adam Ulam, has called the “Decembrist Uprising,” is directly important to Stalinism, because it marked one of the central instances in which Russia’s “page did not turn.” Russia did not “begin a new chapter” and overturn its oppressive, autocratic system. A successful uprising might have triggered the passage to a liberal, modern, democratic society while there was still time. Alas, there was none, and time was running out. Britain had begun constitutional reform in 1215, with the *Magna Carta*. In Russia, it was the middle of the nineteenth century, and reform had not even begun. *Stalinism grew directly out of Russia’s failure to assimilate, like many (though by no means all) European countries, democratic, un-authoritarian traditions and attitudes.*

- The Decembrist Revolt was Russia's last attempt at a major transformation until the twentieth century. In this sense, it was Russia's last real chance to turn the clock forward. As we will learn in our lecture for Week 2, the next revolution would only come in 1905. It, too, would fail. The ultimate revolutionary moment would, therefore, be 1917. This revolution, as we will also learn, would not fail. It would, indeed, "succeed"—with epic consequences for Russia and the world.