CHAPTER I

THE RIVER WORLD AND THE KIEVAN STATE (UP TO 1240)

§ 1. THE GEOGRAPHICAL FACTOR IN RUSSIAN HISTORY

Russia is a land of rivers. The element of frustration in Russian history comes from the fact that all the rivers of the Great Eurasian Plain debouch into land-locked or ice-packed seas. The fine rivers of Siberia spend themselves in Arctic waters. The Dvina, north-westward artery from the Central Russian river system, flows to the Baltic. Southward the Dniestr, the Dniepr and the Don descend to the warm waters of the Black Sea to find the single outlet to the Mediterranean through the narrow straits which separate Europe from Asia. Eastward the Volga, greatest of Russian rivers, casts its waters into the Caspian, the largest of Asiatic lakes.

The rivers offer to the whole Eurasian Plain the possibility of a close-knit unity. Rapids are rare—those of the Dniepr are famous; the rivers are broad and slow flowing over the vast level plain. Only the enterprise of man was necessary to convert the primeval streams into a system of communications. Geographically, a north-south development of historical life would seem inevitable; and from early times the river routes from the Black Sea to the Baltic were known to the trading communities of the Mediterranean. Yet the very network of rivers which gives promise of a unified and ordered development of life over the Eurasian Plain offers at the same time opportunity for the intrusions of alien elements. So the early history of the Eurasian Plain is the history of the penetration of the region by successive invasions from east, west and north, and of the percolation of the most diverse influences. Regional cultures were created by exterior action, and, so far as there is evidence in historical times, by the fusion of invaders, generally not very numerous, with the conquered inhabitants. This was certainly the case with the medieval states of Novgorod and Kiev, where a Scandinavian warrior and trader class imposed themselves on a primitive Slav population.

The third and youngest cultural growth in medieval Russia was that which radiated from Moscow. Here, owing to the proximity of the Volga and the close relation between the Grand Duchy of Muscovy and the Golden Horde, Mongol and Islamic influences
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imparted a peculiarly sombre and conservative tone to the reviving Russian state. The ‘Asiatic’ character of this third Russian culture may be contrasted with the enterprising ‘western’ complexion of ‘Baltic’ Novgorod and with the ‘Mediterranean’ brilliance of southern Kiev.

The Volga had always been a channel through which Oriental influences penetrated towards the north. In the days of the Khazar kingdom in the eighth century Persian, Arab and Jewish elements were strong. Klyuchevski, moreover, has emphasized the significance of the Finno-Ugrian substratum in the primitive population of the Volga basin. Here Voguls, Cheremises, Voryaks and other primordial Finnic tribes were enserfed by the Suzdal princes in the twelfth century. The new Russia which emerged in the Grand Duchy of Muscovy, and which for the first time conquered the river network of the Eurasian Plain from within, was a different Russia (less Slav and less European) from the Russias of Kiev and Novgorod.

The north-south trend in Russian history, which should found a unity upon the river network, is countered by a pull east-west. The Great Eurasian Plain has no limit north-westward till it reaches the Baltic and the North Sea; none westward till the Carpathians; while south-eastward it is lost in the Aralo-Caspian desert zone which stretches to the T’ien-Shan and beyond to the Khingan. Thus in comparatively recent times temporarily great powers like Poland and Sweden have exercised a formidable pressure upon the undefined borderlands. In earlier times the Germanic peoples in migration swept through to the Black Sea; the Goths ruled the South Russian land for two centuries. From the east successive waves of the Altaian peoples rode in from the desert zone of Inner Asia. The Hunnish and Avarian invasions of the southern steppelands on the way to Central Europe are very comparable to the later Mongol invasions of the thirteenth century. The Mongols were in fact merely the final wave of the Altaian peoples, who established themselves rather more effectively and for a longer period of time because their ruthless military qualities had been refined by the competence of Chinese and Persian statecraft.

The exposure of the Russian land both towards the west and towards the south-east made chronic the factors of instability and uncertainty which have affected all phases of Russian history. The fluidity of frontiers and the repetition of invasions have introduced complicated racial issues. The Russian state of the Muscovite Tsars was founded upon a real geographical unity, and it was a natural response to the slackening of pressures from the east. But the state which the first Ivans compounded out of Slav, Finnic and Tatar
material was never a racial unity, and when the Russian Empire expanded outward without limit, as its enemies had formerly pressed inward without limit, it absorbed into its sphere peoples, Slav and non-Slav, who were historically attached to other regions and who felt the attraction of other cultural worlds.

§ 2. SOUTH RUSSIA BEFORE THE SLAVS

Many peoples occupied South Russia before the Slavs. Numerous cultures flourished there before the beginnings of written history. The fan of rivers round the Black Sea (from east to west, Kuban, Don, Dniepr, Bug, Dniestr, Pruth, Danube) nourished a vast area which linked the Asiatic with the Trans-Danubian and Mediterranean worlds. At periods in archaeological time a common culture appears to have covered the whole area between the Caucasus and the upper valley of the Danube. This common cultural background of forms and designs does not, of course, necessarily imply a racial uniformity. In fact the remains of different physical types and differing burial practices indicate the movements and settlements of a diversity of peoples.

The first historical period in South Russia began with the Greek colonization, the origins of which go back to the eighth century B.C. The Greeks themselves were undoubtedly the heirs of older thalassocracies in the Pontus—Minoan and Mycenaean. The Xth, XIth and XIIth Books of the Odyssey and the legend of the Argonauts suggest the existence of more ancient cultural epochs, which the archaeological wealth of the Kuban affirms.

The Greek colonial civilization in the Pontus has been well described by Minus and Rostovtsev. The Greek colonists round the northern shores found the Scythians in possession of the South Russian steppelands. The Scythians were probably an Altaian nomad aristocracy with an Iranian language and culture ruling over a variety of subject peoples, many of whom were cultivators. The influence not only of Greece but also of Iran and Upper Asia is to be discovered in the remarkable art which flowered under the patronage of the Scythian princes. The economy of the Scythians, based on stock-raising and agriculture, was complementary to that of the Greek states, and for several centuries both the Greek colonial cities and the Scythian rulers of the Pontic hinterland grew rich on the enormous trade which developed between the steppelands and the Mediterranean. Athens became dependent on Scythian wheat, particularly during the Peloponnesian War, and the Pontus was often an issue in the politics of the Hellenic world. Peisker thinks that the demand
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for grain in Greece caused the nomad Scythians to utilize wholesale the agricultural populations who were under their subjection. He recalls that Herodotus includes various peoples, nomads and husbandmen, evidently not of the same origin, under the name Scythian; the latter sowed grain ‘not for food, but for sale’, and he considers that there can be no doubt that Slav tribes were included among these transplanted agriculturalists.

The fourth century B.C. was the heyday of the Pontic cities, when the Greco-Scythian kingdom of Bosporus, dominating the Straits of Ketch (Cimmerian Bosporus), tapped the rich wheatlands of the Don and the Kuban and controlled the transit trade which passed between the Black Sea littoral and the peoples of interior Asia. Other cities attained great wealth and sheltered varied populations—Tyras by the Dniepr, Olbia at the mouth of the Bug, Chersonesus Taurica in the Crimea, Tanais in the delta of the Don.

The peculiar world around the Pontus, steppeland chieftains, Greek city-states and Anatolian potentates, attained a passing unity under the genius of Mithradates Eupator. Reinach has illuminated the grand mind of Mithradates, who aspired to win in the east when Hannibal had already lost in the west. Mithradates failed, and the Romans became the heirs of the Greek foundations round the Black Sea. But the days of the Helleno-Scythian synthesis were over. In the second century B.C. the relatively long peace of the steppe had been disturbed by the Sarmatians, another nomad people, probably of Iranian speech, living to the east of the Don, descendants of whom are still perhaps to be identified in the Ossetes of the central Caucasus. Dislodging and absorbing the Scythians, the wilder Sarmatians moved over the steppe towards the west. The old economic unity of the south of Russia was disturbed. Chersonesus, Olbia and Tyras could only enjoy security behind strong walls and under the protection of Roman garrisons. In the first and second centuries A.D. the Roman Empire became involved in a difficult struggle with the Sarmatians along the line of the Danube; Trajan’s victory over them brought images of these distant barbarians to adorn the reliefs on the column dedicated to him in Rome.

During the second and third centuries A.D. the Sarmatians were mastered by the Germanic Goths and Herules. The kingdom of Bosporus was conquered; Chersonesus Taurica was hemmed in; Tyras and Olbia were destroyed. The Gothic kingdom lasted two centuries and ‘was the only non-nomadic episode in the history of the steppe’. The hordes of Asia were in movement. Before the end of the fourth century the Goths had been broken by the Huns—the first of the known Altaian peoples who were to ride against the ancient world.
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After them were to come Bulgars, Avars, Khazars, Magyars, Pechenegs, Kipchaks, Mongols. ‘Like the huran, the furious tempest of the steppe, each of these hordes drove its predecessor in wild flight over the civilized lands of Europe, extirpated the Slav peasantry which had settled in the grass steppe, and passed over the tree steppe plundering and murdering so that the Slavs were forced to leave this zone too and to withdraw into the marshes of Polesia’. (i)

§ 3. THE ORIGIN OF THE SLAVS

The nomads played a dominating part in the history of the South Russian steppeland from prehistoric times until the fifteenth century A.D., and in Central Europe their sinister and destructive intervention was to affect the course of European history at intermittent periods between the fifth and thirteenth centuries. In fact not a few of the problems of modern Europe are traceable to the impact of the Asiatic nomads upon the homelands of the Slav and Germanic peoples.

Peisker, in brilliant chapters in the Cambridge Medieval History, contrasts the character of the two racial stocks whose compound was to form the basis of the population of Russia and of the greater part of Central and South-Eastern Europe.

‘The nomads of the Asiatic background’, in the opinion of Peisker, ‘all belong to the Altaian branch of the Ural-Altaic race…. Everything speaks for one single place of origin for the mounted nomads, and that is the Turanian-Mongol steppes and deserts. These alone, by their enormous extent, their unparalleled severity of climate, their uselessness in summer, their salt vegetation nourishing countless herds, and above all by their indivisible economic connection with the distant grass-abounding north—these alone gave rise to a people with the ineradicable habits of mounted nomads.’

In contrast to the Altaian nomad the Slav has always been the peaceful tiller of the soil—the natural victim of the riding Asiatic horseman and of the Scandinavian river pirate and trader. In the view of Procopius the Slavs were not malignant and villainous, but harmless and naïve; according to Maurice: ‘They are hardened to heat, frost, wet, nakedness and hunger, and are well-disposed to strangers.’ Adam of Bremen found that there were no more hospitable people than the Slavs of Pomerania.

The Slavs form with the Balts (the Lithuanians, Latvians and original Prussians) the Balto-Slavonic group of the Indo-European family. Their languages have much in common with German on the one hand and with Iranian on the other. ‘The differentiation of Balto-Slavonic into Old Baltic and Old Slavonic, and then of Old
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Slavonic into the separate Slavonic languages, was caused partly by the isolation of various tribes from one another, and partly by mutual assimilation and the influence of related dialects and unrelated languages. Thus it is not a matter of genealogy only, but partly due to historical and political developments.

A vast literature exists on the subject of the original homeland of the Slavs. Peisker accepts the view of the Polish botanist Rostafinski, based on evidence from botanical geography, that the differentiation of the Slavs from the Balts took place in prehistoric times in the region of Polesia—the great region of marshes which forms a rough triangle between the modern towns of Brest-Litovsk, Mohilev and Kiev.

Originally the Slavs, like the Germans, had no collective name; in Peisker's view the name of the Slavs is correctly Slovène (sing. Slovénin); it is probably a nomen toponym meaning roughly 'inhabitants of the slapy'. Another view is that Slovène means the people with the 'word' Slovo, as opposed to the Némsky, the Slav word for German, i.e. the 'dumb' people who cannot 'take in' what you say. The name applied originally only to one populous tribe. The East Romans came into contact at first with a part of this tribe and thus named all other Slav tribes north of the Danube Sklavenoi, Sklavoi.

Peisker emphasizes how the salt-desert zone of the Asiatic background developed the wild mounted nomad. Just as the mounted nomad was the son and product of the arid salt deserts, so the Slav fisher and husbandman was the son and product of the marsh. 'The Slav and the mounted nomad, like the lands of their origin, are diametrical extremes, and the murderous irony of fate made them neighbours. The one was a soft anvil, the other a hammer hard as steel. A second not less weighty hammer (the Germans) came into play, and the anvil was beaten flat.'

Peisker has analysed the fundamental difference in character between the expansion of the Germans and the expansion of the Slavs: 'Dry and tolerably fertile forest land contains so much cultivable soil that it cannot easily be over-peopled: so here men form societies and states arise. But primitive man cannot wrest a foot of land from the marsh; on the contrary, he extends it by making dams, transforming small streams into great fish-ponds. Thus as the cultivable oases become smaller, the population huddles closer together. Dry forest land makes its inhabitants stronger, but the marsh has a degenerating influence. Forest land, however, is not inexhaustible; when what has been reaped from it is not made up by dunging, or by allowing it to
lie fallow—in short, when the soil is merely worked out—it can no longer support the growing population, and compels migration or expansion at the cost of the neighbourhood. But the unwarlike inhabitants of the marshland can conquer nothing, and can only spread gradually where they meet with no resistance. This is upon the whole the difference between the expansion of the Germans and that of the Slavs. The Germanic migration was eruptive as a volcano, the Slavonic a gradual percolation, like that of a flood rolling slowly forward. Some Germanic people or other leaves its home; in the search for a new home they rouse their neighbours, and they in turn rouse theirs, and so it goes on until a hemisphere is thrown into commotion, strong states fall to pieces, mighty peoples perish, and even the Roman Empire quakes. And the Slavs? They have occupied and thickly populated immeasurable regions unnoticed by the annalists, and even now we ask in vain how this could have taken place so noiselessly, and whence have come the countless millions of Slavs.’

The Slavs thus enter into history during the period of the great migrations—harried and conquered by the Germans, and ravaged and driven by the Altaian nomad peoples. And long before the ninth century the inhabitants of the marshy forests along the great rivers were already suffering from the depredations of Scandinavian pirates. Germano-Slavic and Altaïo-Slavic states began to form. The third century A.D. had seen a Germanic state on the Dniepr. But it was the Altaians who formed the great Empires and who swept the uprooted Slav agriculturalists with them into Central and South-Eastern Europe. In the fifth century the Hunnic Empire stretched from the Don to the lower Rhine; in the seventh century the Avars ruled from the Baltic to the Peloponnesus; and the Bulgars and the Magyars successively dominated Central Europe between the Adriatic, the Aegean and the Carpathians. But there remained of the great Altaian Empires, after they had disappeared from history, only the numerous Slav peoples whom they had forced along with them, and who formed peasant states in the lands which the nomads had conquered from the Romans and the Germans. In the Avar Empire, Peisker shows that ‘the dominating Avar nomad class was absorbed as a nation and language by the subjugated Slavs, but even after the destruction of the Avar Empire it survived socially with Slav names’. The same social phenomenon is to be observed later in the Varangian—Scandinavian Empire which arose in South Russia.

After the collapse of the Avar Empire in the first decade of the seventh century, following the revolt of the Slav peasant masses against the nomad overlords, the first Slav states emerged in Central Europe, in each case under peasant princes, for the line in Slovenian
Carinthia, the Bohemian Přemyslids, and the Polish Piasts were all of peasant origin. In widely differing geographical environments, subject to a variety of cultural influences, and undergoing processes of racial admixture with neighbouring peoples, the Western Slavs became a part of Europe and grew into distinct nations. Meanwhile those groups which had escaped the great Altaian tempests, and which had remained in the marshes and the forests along the primeval rivers, were multiplying and spreading into the vast untouched lands which held the destiny of Russia. In the seventh century, following the overthrow of the Avar Empire in Central Europe, Slav tribes were settling along the Dniepr. In the following century they are found scattered along its affluents as far as the upper reaches of the western Dvina. At the beginning of the ninth century they had already occupied the lake district which was to form the future territory of Novgorod. (3)

§ 4. THE RIVER WORLD: KHAZARS AND VARANGIANS

The great industrial and commercial revival of the Mediterranean and Middle Eastern lands following the social and moral revolution effected through the successful propagation of Islam was undoubtedly an important factor in the opening up of the river world of the Great Eurasian Plain. The establishment of the Khazar kingdom on the Volga was almost contemporaneous with the conquest of Persia and eastern Caucasia by the Arabs. The Khazar kingdom was similar in character to the earlier Scythian and Sarmatian kingdoms, in that a nomad ruling class—in the case of the Khazars certainly of Altaian stock—controlled an area inhabited by a variety of populations, both sedentary and nomadic. And the Arabs had to the Khazars something of the relation which the Greeks had had to the Scythians. In the eighth century the Khazar walled camp, placed where the angle of the Volga approaches closest to that of the Don, had already become transformed into the cosmopolitan metropolis of Itil. Here a varied population lived and traded in peace under the protection of the Khazar Khaqan. People had settled there from the four quarters of Asia—pagan Finns and Slavs, Christian Greeks and Georgians, Jews and Muslims from Iran and the Arabian countries. There is a story, based on the second-hand accounts of one or two Muslim travellers, to the effect that the Khazar Khaqans had adopted the Hebrew faith, which has passed into history. Recently Grégoire's researches have challenged interested exaggerations of this tradition. It is clear, however, that the influence of the Jews, who had become the most active agents of the commerce of the Caliphate,
was substantial in the Khazar kingdom, and it is probable that the
commonly observed mongoloid type among East European Jews,
particularly in the Ukraine, Poland and Roumania, derives from the
conversions and intermarriages which were no doubt frequent in the
swarming trading camps of the Khqaqs.

In the eighth century the Khazar kingdom assumed formidable
political pretensions; the Khqaqs had a preponderating influence
in Black Sea politics and negotiated on equal terms with the Byzan-
tine Emperors; marriages were arranged between the courts of Itil
and Byzantium. At the same time, in spite of their partial dependence
on the traffic with the Muslim cities of Iran, Shirvan and Iraq, the
Khqaqs did not hesitate to challenge the Caliphs for the control of
Derbend and the eastern Caucasus.

The Khazars had established themselves along the river ways which
led down to the shores of the Caspian and the Black Sea. The great
Volga route apparently was already used in the seventh century.
Along the Kama, where the Bulgars had settled, was carried a trade
with the Urals and Siberia. By the affluent of the Volga access could
be had to the streams which flow north-west into Lake Ladoga.
From there down the Neva was the way to the Baltic Sea. (4)

The Scandinavians were aware of this route to the south and east.
Scandinavian settlements arose among the Finnish tribes living on the
shores of Lakes Ilmen and Ladoga and on the White Lake, and along
the upper Volga. Their posts were at the same time of a trading and
of a military character. The Scandinavians, the fearless Varangians,
afforded protection to the merchant flotillas which went down along
the waterways in the direction of the Khazars, or which were pro-
ceeding up to the Baltic Sea. The Khazar kingdom, in the days of its
prosperity, offered an open market to all trading guests.

The almost simultaneous spread of the Slavs round the shores of
Lake Ilmen and along the banks of the Dniepr favoured the search
of the Scandinavians for another and more westerly route towards
the south which might enable them to trade direct with the Byzan-
tine world without their having to depend upon the Khazar rivers.

During the ninth century the famous way ‘from the Varangians
to the Greeks’ was opened up. From the Baltic the trading flotillas
travelled up the Neva to Lake Ladoga, whence they navigated the
Volkhov to Lake Ilmen; from Ilmen they went along the Lovat to
the region of the affluent of the western Dvina. After conquering
all the obstacles of a difficult portage, they proceeded up the
western Dyvina to the point where it meets the Dniepr. Thence they
made use of the smaller rivers to shorten the new short cut, and the
way down the Dniepr led into the Black Sea. Immense hardships
and difficulties must have been overcome before the Vikings looked at last upon the sea which could carry them to the capital of the ancient world. But the ‘golden Tsargrad’ of the Slavs lay beyond the endless rivers, and drew on the avid seamen, as in another age the legend of Eldorado drove their descendants across the oceans to the conquest of new continents.

The Slav settlements along the rivers had made it possible to penetrate into lands which had been uninhabited before. And the great waterway which the Varangians travelled served as a link between the Slav tribes scattered over the wide spaces of the Great Russian Plain. Along that water road Russia was born.

The system of the Khazar market towns along the rivers served as a ground plan for the Varangians. Cities were built: Kiev on the Dniepr, Novgorod on Lake Ilmen, and others later. And these were Russian towns—the towns of ‘Rus’. No one ever called Kiev the town of the Polyan, nor Novgorod the town of the Slavs, nor Smolensk that of the Krivichi. The Finns called the people who crossed the Baltic Sea ‘Ruotsi’. The Varangians were called ‘Rus’ by the Slavs, who had borrowed the name from the Finns. The name was also used by the Khazars and Arabs and by the Byzantines, and penetrated with the same meaning into Western Europe. (5)

Soon after the middle of the ninth century, Varangian rulers appear almost simultaneously in Novgorod, in Polotsk on the western Dvina and in Kiev. Oleg (Helgi), generally recognized as the founder of the peculiar ‘Varangian-Russian’ state in Kiev, was a typical Viking ‘konung’ who alternately traded and waged war. He pushed back towards the Don the Khazars who had reached the Dniepr and who were levying tribute on the local Slav population. He continued, however, to trade with the Khazar kingdom, making use of the ‘Khazar way’—which followed the Desná, an affluent of the east bank of the Dniepr, then its tributary the Seym, and further the smaller affluents of the Donets, which in its turn falls into the Don.

In the same way Oleg made war on and traded with the Greeks. The campaign which brought him to the walls of Constantinople in 911 was successful not so much on account of the booty secured as in the agreement which he exacted defining the trading rights and privileges of ‘Rus’.

After Oleg, Igor (Ingvar), and his talented and energetic wife Olga (Helga), pursued the Varangian undertaking in the south of Russia. In his military activities against Byzantium, Igor was not very fortunate, but he succeeded, in the year 945, in concluding another trading agreement with the Greeks. Among the signatures on this agreement are those of the envoys of Igor and Olga, of