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A Concise History of Russia

Accessible to students, tourists, and general readers alike, this book provides a broad overview of Russian history since the ninth century. Paul Bushkovitch emphasizes the enormous changes in the understanding of Russian history resulting from the end of the Soviet Union in 1991. Since then, new material has come to light on the history of the Soviet era, providing new conceptions of Russia's pre-revolutionary past. The book traces not only the political history of Russia, but also developments in its literature, art, and science. Bushkovitch describes well-known cultural figures, such as Chekhov, Tolstoy, and Mendeleev in their institutional and historical contexts. Though the 1917 revolution, the resulting Soviet system, and the Cold War were a crucial part of Russian and world history, Bushkovitch presents earlier developments as more than just a prelude to Bolshevik power.

Paul Bushkovitch is a professor of history at Yale University, where he has taught for the past 36 years. He is the author of *Peter the Great: The Struggle for Power, 1671–1725* (Cambridge 2001); *Religion and Society in Russia: The Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (1991); and *The Merchants of Moscow, 1580–1650* (Cambridge 1980). His articles have appeared in *Slavic Review*, *Russian Review*, *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas*, and *Kritika*. He is a member of the editorial board for the *Cahiers du Monde Russe*.

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“For any student trying to get a grasp of the essentials of Russian history this book is the place to start. To cover everything from the origins of the Russian people to the collapse of the Soviet Union in one short book requires great skill, but Paul Bushkovitch is one of the leading experts on Russian history in the world and he manages this task with great insight and panache.”

– Dominic Lieven, Trinity College, Cambridge University

“This is a lively and readable account, covering more than a thousand years of Russian history in an authoritative narrative. The author deals perceptively not only with political developments, but also with those aspects of modern Russian culture and science that have had an international impact.”

– Maureen Perrie, University of Birmingham

“If you want to understand Russia, and the story of the Russians, you can do no better than Paul Bushkovitch’s *A Concise History of Russia*. Bushkovitch has performed a minor miracle: he’s told the remarkably complicated, convoluted, and controversial tale of Russian history simply, directly, and even-handedly. He doesn’t get mired in the details, lost in the twists and turns, or sidetracked by axe grinding. He tells you what happened and why, full stop. So if you want to know what happened and why in Russian history, you’d be advised to begin with Bushkovitch’s masterful introduction.”

– Marshall Poe, University of Iowa

“Both learned and accessible, this short history of Russia’s troubled passage to the present tells a story of a state and a people who created an empire that much of the world saw as a threat. Whether as the ‘Gendarme of Europe’ or the ‘Red Menace,’ Russia and its Soviet successor (even Putin’s Russia today!) have been as much misunderstood as they have been feared. Paul Bushkovitch brings us a sober reading of Russia’s difficult rises and falls, expansions and contractions, reforms and revolutions. Rather than seeing the preceding millennium as a prelude to the seventy years of the Soviet Union, he gives us a rounded portrait of a country hobbled and humbled by its own geography, institutions like autocracy and serfdom, and grandiose plans to create utopia. Judicious in its judgments, this gracefully written work ranges from high politics to music and literature to open a window through which a reader might begin or renew an acquaintance with the enigmas that were Russia.”

– Ronald Grigor Suny, University of Michigan

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ABBREVIATIONS

BRBML	Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library
LOC	Library of Congress
LOC PG	Library of Congress, Prokudin-Gorsky Collection
NASM	Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum
NYPL	New York Public Library
YCBA	Yale Center for British Art

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Maija Jansson suffered through the long gestation and birth pains of the book, putting up with a distracted and often crabby author. She read the whole manuscript, some of it several times, and kept reminding me that it would come to an end, and so it did. To her I dedicate the result.

PROLOGUE

Russia is not an idea. It is a specific country, with a particular place on the globe, a majority language and culture, and a very concrete history. Yet for most of the twentieth century, outside of its boundaries, it has been an idea, not a place – an idea about socialism. Tremendous debates have raged over its politics, economics, and culture, most of them conducted by and for people who did not know the language, never went there, and knew very little about the country and its history. Even the better informed wrote and spoke starting from presuppositions about the desirability or undesirability of a socialist order. Some were crude propagandists, but even the more conscientious, those who learned the language and tried to understand the country, began by posing questions that came from their assumptions about socialism. The result was a narrow agenda of debate: was a planned economy effective or not? How many political prisoners were there? How could the Soviets put a man in space? Should the system be called socialism, communism, or totalitarianism? Was “communism” a result of Russian history? Did the Russian intelligentsia prepare the way for communism, unintentionally or not? Did the gradual modernization of Russia make 1917 inevitable? In all these debates the history of Russia up to the moment of the revolution was just a preface.

In Russia the collapse of the Soviet Union brought to light a flood of historical publications. These publications include numerous monographs on a great variety of topics, many biographies, and a massive quantity of publications of the various records of the

Soviet regime, including the deliberations of its leaders. The aim of these publications was to illuminate the areas previously closed to investigation, and naturally the first post-Soviet writings were devoted to the most controversial or mysterious issues. Books on the Ribbentrop-Molotov pact of 1939, collectivization, and famine; publications of Stalin's private correspondence; and other issues were first on the agenda. Western historians participated in these publications, which gave a whole new understanding of the contentious issues of Soviet history. Yet the result is far from perfect. As the document publications and monographs continue to pour out in Russia and abroad, they pose more and more questions that historians used to the politicized debates of the Cold War era never thought about. Paradoxically, it seems harder rather than easier to understand the story of the Soviet era of Russian history. The present work reflects this difficulty, and the reader will find many questions left unresolved.

The collapse of the Soviet Union, paradoxically, has had as much or more effect on the writing about Russia's history before 1917. Now the earlier history is not just a preface but a millennium of time that no longer ends in the Soviet experience, however important that may be. The flood of new publications, in this case mainly from historians in Russia, includes virtually every period and aspect of Russian history before 1917. There are now not just biographies of tsars and empresses, but also of major and minor political figures and fairly ordinary people. Local history has come into being, providing the kind of concrete knowledge of the variety of the country's history that has been routine in other countries for a long time.

Russia in its history and in its present is a mix of many different elements. Until the fifteenth century the people called themselves and their land "Rus," not Russia ("Rossiia"), and it included many territories not now within Russian boundaries. From its inception it contained peoples who were not Russian or even Slavic, but whom Russians understood as integral parts of their society. By 1917 the tsars and millions of Russian settlers in the steppe and Siberia had acquired a territory far beyond the original medieval boundaries, and the Soviet state conserved most of that area. Consequently its history has to extend beyond the boundaries of today's Russian

Federation and incorporate the various incarnations of Russia as well as its diversity.

A society economically backward until the twentieth century, Russia shared many traits with nearly all pre-industrial societies – primitive agriculture, small and few cities, mass illiteracy. Russia's historical fate was to become the largest contiguous political unit in the world and eventually expand over the whole of northern Asia. It was a realm equally distant from Western Europe and from the Mediterranean world. It covered huge areas but was extremely thinly populated until the end of the seventeenth century. For the first seven hundred years its peripheral status was strengthened by its adherence to Europe's minority Christian faith, Orthodoxy, rather than any of the Western European churches. Then, with Peter the Great, Russia entered European culture within a single generation and participated in all phases of European cultural life onwards, starting with and including the Enlightenment. Cultural evolution was easier and faster than social and political change, creating a society with a modern culture and an archaic social and political structure. The rapid industrialization of Russia after 1860 in turn created tensions that led to the spread of Western ideas that were not necessarily the dominant ones in the West. Thus for most of the twentieth century Marxism, an ideology born in the Rhineland out of the philosophy of G. W. F. Hegel combined with British economics and French utopian socialism, reordered Russian society while remaining marginal in the lands of its birth.

In the West itself, Russia was simply remote. For the English poet John Milton it was “the most northern Region of Europe reputed civil.” Milton's view reflected the way Europeans perceived Russia from the Renaissance onward, as part of Europe and as “northern” rather than “eastern.” It is only in the nineteenth century that Russia became “eastern” to Europeans, and to many Russians as well. In nineteenth-century Western Europe, “eastern” was not a compliment: it implied that Russia, like the lands the West was then colonizing, was barbaric, despotic, and dirty, and the people probably were inferior in some way. Europeans did not learn Russian, and they did not study the country, and neither did Americans, until the beginning of the Cold War. Even when Tolstoy and Tchaikovsky had become part of the Western pantheon, the country as a whole

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Prologue

was still a mystery, as Winston Churchill insisted. The uniqueness of the Soviet order only increased that element of mystery. In contrast, when the French Revolution occurred, it took place in the center of Western Europe among a people whose language had become the principle language of international communication. The Russian Revolution took place in a far country, and few outside Russia knew the language or had any understanding of the country and its history. Even though the Bolsheviks created a new society following a Western ideology, it necessarily remained an enigma in the West.

Had the Russian Revolution found no followers abroad, perhaps Soviet society would have remained a peculiar system studied only by a few devoted scholars. Its impact however, was enormous, and remains so to this day. China, the world's most populous country is still ruled by a Communist Party that shows no signs of sharing power, whatever its economic policies. Communism was the central issue of world politics for two generations of the twentieth century. The inevitable consequence was that commentators in the West, journalists or scholars, even ordinary tourists looked at an idea, the Soviet version of socialism, not at a specific country with a specific history. With the end of the Soviet Union, Russian history no longer has to be the story of the unfolding of one or another idea. It has become the continuous history of a particular people in a particular place. The present book is an attempt to reflect that change. It seeks above all to tell the story and explain it where possible. In many cases explanations are hard to come by, but it is the hope that the reader will find food for reflection in a history that is nothing if not dramatic.

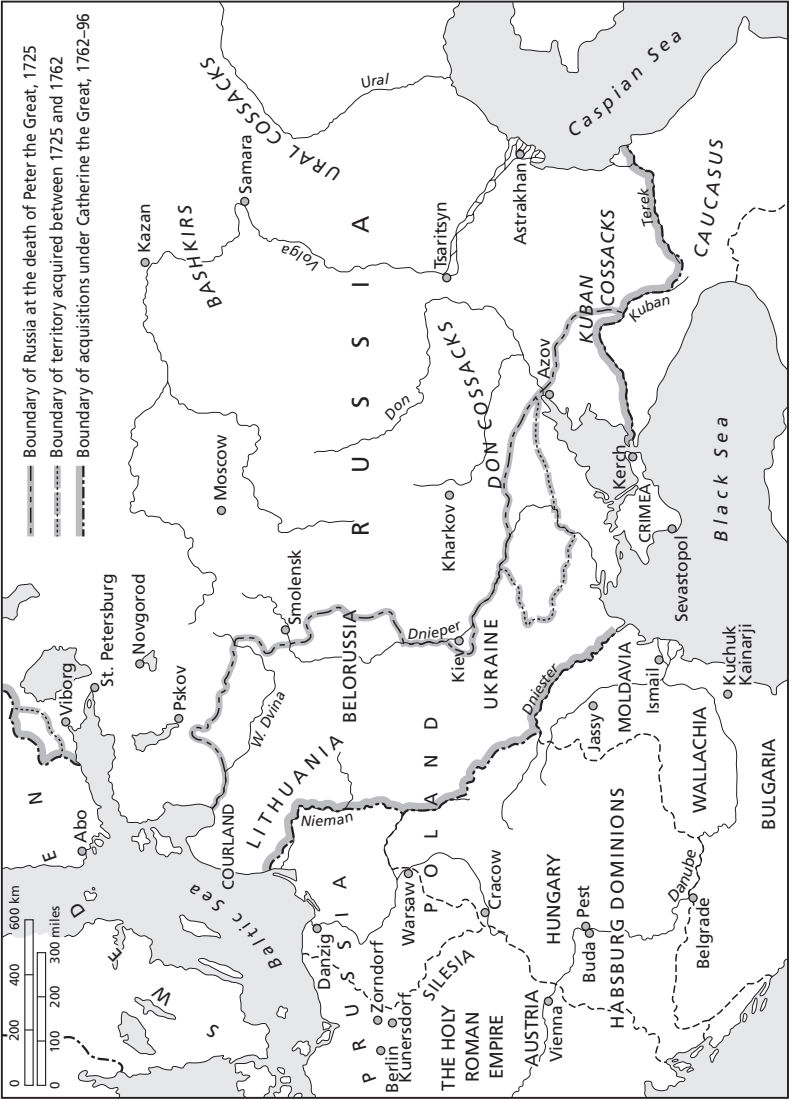


Map 1. Kievan Rus' in the Eleventh Century.

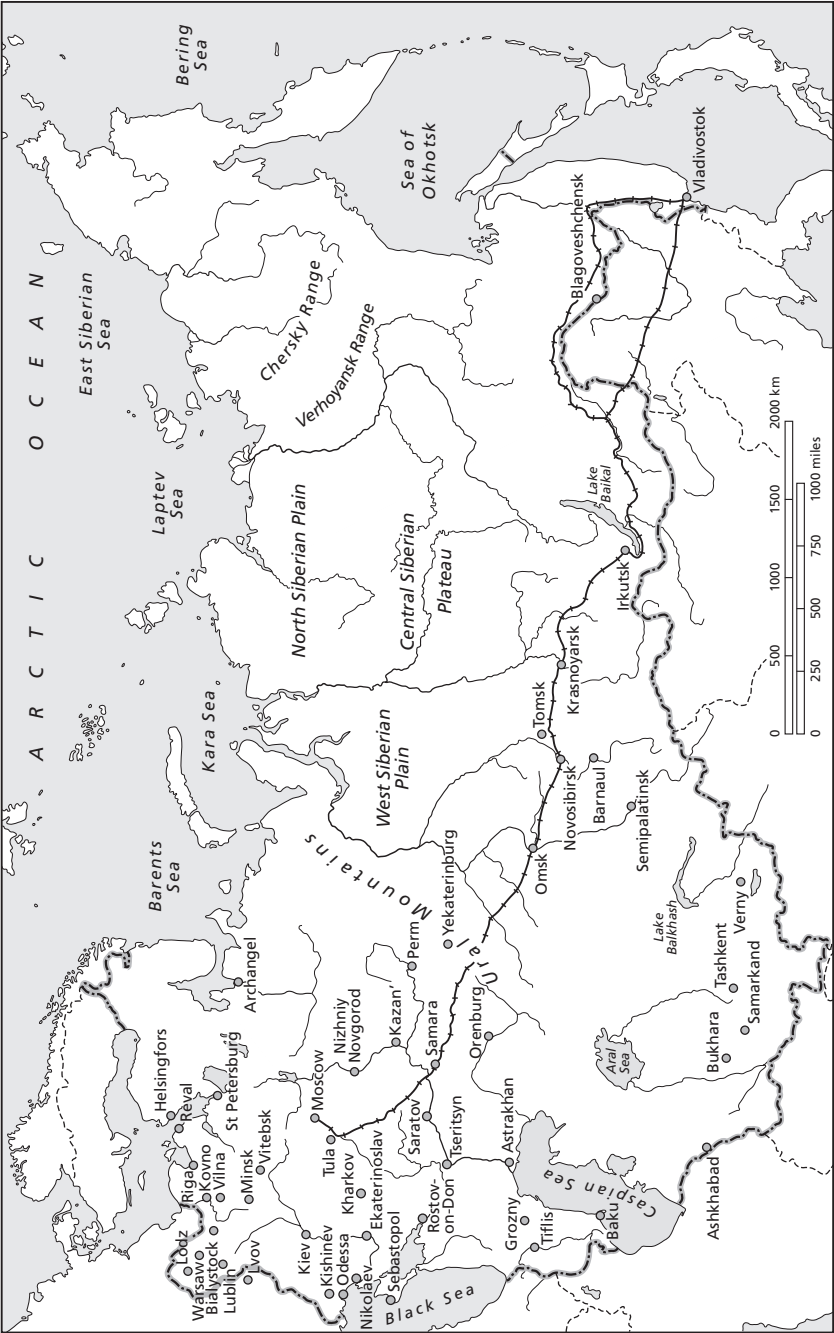




Map 3. Russia at the Time of Peter the Great.



Map 4. Russia in 1796.



Map 5. Russia in 1913.



Map 6. Soviet Union in the Second World War, 1941-5.