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What Russia Is and What It Is Not



HISTORY IS NOT WRITTEN IN A VACUUM. FOR THE past several thousand years, men (and more recently women) have busied themselves with writing factual stories about the human past. The most popular of them—the Hebrew Bible, Herodotus’ *Histories*, Gibbon’s *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*—have, by an imperceptible process, seeped into our consciousness. In this way, the musings of one age about an earlier period become the mental furniture of a later era. As the reader of this book will surely realize, we are in possession of a lot of such mental furniture about the Russians. Medieval monks, Renaissance scribes, Enlightenment belletrists, and a discordant chorus of modern scholars, pundits, and scoundrels have bravely attempted to divine the secrets of Russians and the history they made. Some of what they produced is valuable. Much of it, however, is not, for reasons that should be made clear in the course of the following presentation. It is only appropriate, then, that we begin our investigation by clearing away this accumulated underbrush

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so that we may better see the true visage of Russia and its people.



Of the myriad foolish things that have been said about the Russians, the most foolish is perhaps that they are somehow predisposed to authoritarian government. This notion has a slight grounding in reality but departs rapidly from it with a whole host of ill-considered inferences. There is no ignoring the fact that Russia has been ruled for most of its history by monarchical or oligarchical political regimes. Fantasies about medieval popular councils, Assemblies of the Land, or Boyar Dumas are just that—wishful thinking about what never was and might have been. But to infer from this unquestioned historical regularity that Russians are somehow particularly fit for nondemocratic government is to conveniently ignore another unquestioned historical regularity, namely, that popular government is extraordinarily rare in world history, particularly before the twentieth century. It would probably not be an exaggeration to say that democratic government as we understand it is purely and uniquely a product of modern Europe. Before the recent advent of the European-style democratic nation-state (and the weapons that supported and exported it), government basically meant nondemocratic rule. Russia was no different. The exception was western Europe, a point we will have occasion to revisit.

Another misunderstanding concerns the supposed inborn tendency of Russians to expand their borders by war. As with the authoritarian predisposition hypothesis, we have an accepted regularity taken completely out of its proper histor-

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ical context. That Russia has grown since its birth cannot be seriously doubted, and that Russia has expanded by making war is equally clear. But to claim that Russians are uniquely or particularly imperialistic is to wear historical blinders. The truth of the matter is that nearly all states busy themselves with war-making and expansion, or at least they have until recently. The reasons for this violent propensity are not far to seek. Prior to the later nineteenth century, states were ruled more often than not by warriors; the business of warriors is conquest; and the fruits of conquest are, frequently, territorial gain. It would be ridiculous to expect a prideful, militarized ruling class not to make war. It would be equally preposterous to expect that a warrior elite would yield territory for no reason after conquering it. In short, the Russian elite acted like every other military governing class—it fought other elites for honor and territory. The difference in the Russian case—which commentators almost always miss—is that the Russians usually expanded into territories that were lightly populated by traditional, indigenous peoples. Siberia is the best case in point. The Russians were able to conquer (if not control) all of this vast region in a matter of decades. A look at a map gives the impression that the Russians were master imperialists. But actually they were comparatively poor at the game of conquest. Generally speaking, whenever they fought to advance their western border into heavily populated, well-organized, technically adept Europe, they failed. When they succeeded, their victories proved ephemeral. They could never hold on to their gains.

Often associated with the idea of innate Russian imperialism is innate Russian messianism, and it is equally wrong-headed. The idea of Russian messianism was the brainchild

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of late-nineteenth-century Russian historical philosophers, men who had read a bit too much Hegel for their own good. Having misunderstood a number of banal sixteenth-century texts concerning *translatio imperii*, they speculated that the Muscovites believed they were the true inheritors of the Roman imperial legacy and its supposed mission to save the known world. Sketchy though it was, the theory of “Moscow, the Third Rome” gained considerable popularity among the chattering classes in Russia and Europe. By the early twentieth century it was quite common to speak of an ingrained Russian messianism. This error was only compounded by the arrival of the Bolsheviks on the scene. Soon after 1917, pundits were explaining the millenarianism of the Soviets with reference to the supposed messianism locked in the Russian soul. As Nikolai Berdiaev put it, the Third Rome became the Third International. Happily, fewer and fewer people took these sort of uninformed rants seriously, particularly as it became clear that the Kremlin’s goals—then as now—were rather more temporal than spiritual.

And this brings us to what is perhaps the most widespread misconception about Russia and Russians—that they are European. There is, of course, a very limited sense in which this is true. The Russian heartland is located on the European continent. But as anyone who has ever looked soberly at a map of the world knows, Europe, and every other continent for that matter, is as much a product of human history as it is a given fact about the arrangement of landmasses on the globe. Why, for example, is Europe a continent and India not? They are roughly equal in size, and both are similarly geographically distinct. The answer is plainly that the peoples of India did not decide what should be a

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continent and what shouldn't. The peoples of Europe decided this question for the rest of humanity, and they did so with selfish European values in mind. That Russia ended up in Europe, therefore, is the result of a relatively arbitrary historical accident, namely, European dominance and the force it afforded European geographical conceptions.

Russia, then, is accidentally in Europe. But is it *of* Europe? Russians have wrestled with this question since the eighteenth century, a time in which being European in a cultural sense had great cachet (particularly for Russia's European rulers such as Catherine the Great, a German). At first the Russian elite said yes, Russia was European (under Catherine); later they wavered (in the era of Slavophilism); and still later they proclaimed the question moot (under the internationalist Bolsheviks). Today they have, in the wake of the Soviet collapse, begun to revisit this question with confused and troubling results. Europeans, for their part, have muddied the waters for self-serving reasons. At first they said that Russia was not European, citing the obvious differences between life in, say, London and Moscow in the seventeenth century (as we see in early European travelers' accounts). Then in the eighteenth century some of them embraced the Europeanizing projects of Peter the Great and Catherine the Great and proclaimed that Russia was becoming European (the philosophes, for example). Then, in the era of the democratic revolutions, "despotic" Russia again returned to Asia ("scratch a Russian, find a Tatar"). And finally, a host of starry-eyed socialist fellow-travelers loudly shouted that Russia was more European (read "advanced") than even Europe. Today Westerners (as they now call themselves) are unsure of where Russia is culturally, but many of

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them still feel that Russia is basically France, just a bit down at the heel.

Nothing could be further from the truth. Anyone who has ever lived in Russia for any length of time knows that the similarities between the West and Russia are painfully superficial, particularly for Russians. It is true that Russia produced brilliant poets and path-breaking scientists and even sent men into space. But the often-heard litany of Russian cultural achievements only serves to amplify the sense of disorientation one feels when standing on Nevsky Prospect, watching a clutch of grandmothers sweep the pitted streets that run past decrepit, cookie-cutter housing complexes. How could a nation that produced such cultural, scientific, and military greatness live in such poverty? This question, which will occupy us for much of this book, is difficult. But a good way to begin addressing it is by admitting that, historically speaking, Russia is not a European country. If it were, then we would anticipate that it would be something like, say, Sweden—a large, northern nation peopled by a prosperous, progressive, democratically minded citizenry. But Russia is not at all like Sweden. It is a large, northern nation with an impoverished, confused, and politically disorganized citizenry.

If Russia is not European in any but an arbitrary geographical sense, then what is it? This query brings us to another misconception of the cartographical variety—that Russia is somehow Asian. Again, we have a tiny kernel of truth: Part of Russia (or rather, the Russian *empire*) is formally located on the Asian landmass. But like Europe, the continent of Asia is a European construct, not a natural fact. This is easily demonstrated. The Ural Mountains are sup-

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posed to divide Europe and Asia, but they don't do a very good job of it: They aren't very high and they don't even run the length of the continents they are said to divide. If we accept the puny Urals as a natural continental divide, we might as well say the Appalachian Mountains separate the small continent of Atlantica from the larger continent of North America. This might please the citizenry of the southeastern states, but it hardly makes geographic or historical sense.

So we are forced to admit that Russia is in Asia by historical happenstance. But is it *of* Asia? As they did with the European question, Russians have expended a lot of energy thinking about this issue. Their answer depended largely on the way they felt about being (or not being) European: Catherine and her occidentally minded courtiers liked the idea of being European, so Asia was out; although the Slavophiles didn't like Europe, they were ambivalent about being Asian; a group of Russian exiles in Prague in the 1920s split the difference, claiming that Russia was Eurasian, though they weren't really thinking about geography; and the Soviets dictated that it was a nonissue. Contemporary Russians, reflecting on the failure of Soviet power and the poverty it brought, have taken to saying they are Asians in a distinctly uncomplimentary sense. Europeans have considered the Asian question as well. The earliest travelers to Muscovy sometimes said the Russians were Tatars; Enlightenment opinion distanced Russia from "Tataria"; the nineteenth-century European press liked to call the Russians "Asiatics," again in an unfriendly way; some twentieth-century Western observers noted the similarity between totalitarianism and what they called "oriental despotism." At present (for exam-

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ple, in discussions of NATO enlargement) the Western pundits would have Russia emerge as a regional power, predominantly in Asia.

But Russia isn't Asian, because no place is really Asian. The concept itself is a useless artifact of the clumsy, homogenizing European imperial gaze. Europeans proved very adept at making fine distinctions within their own civilizational house—a product, perhaps, of being profoundly and politically multiethnic. Yet they failed completely to capture the diversity of the world they came to dominate. Nowhere is this truer than in Asia. What in the world do Iran, Sri Lanka, and Vietnam have in common? Not much, except they were all uncomfortably lumped into the same bulbous civilizational category. They were all somehow “Asiatic.” For its part, Russia—even its geographically eastern parts—shares virtually nothing in common with any of the major Asian cultures, so it could hardly be considered Asian.

If, then, Russia is neither European nor Asian in a cultural sense, what is it? The answer follows necessarily from the observations we have already made: It is *Russian*. As the following presentation will show, the East Slavs who migrated from central Europe to the area that became the Russian heartland were pioneers. They brought with them only the slightest knowledge of the Judeo-Christian or Greco-Roman traditions—the twin bases of Europeanness in a deep-historical sense. Neither did they carry much in the way of general Asian civilization (whatever that might be) or particular Asian civilizations (in fact, they knew nothing of the classical cultures of the Near East, Transoxiana, the subcontinent, or China). Some centuries after their arrival in the north, the East Slavs encountered representatives (to put it

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neutrally) of all these cultural streams: Scandinavians from the west, Greeks (and their South Slavic emissaries) from the south, and Mongols from the east. But despite these contacts, Russia remained a distant, northern principality, far off the beaten track and therefore far removed from the greater civilizational streams flowing in Europe, the Near East, the Oxus region, and East Asia. It was in this relatively isolated context that Russia and Russianness emerged.

In what follows, we will explore the origins, rise to power, and sudden decline of Russia in an attempt to make plain the meaning of the Russian experience for world history. We will begin by tracing the migration of the Slavs to the north and describing their encounter with a group of Vikings from whom they took their name. Thereafter we will investigate the process by which the Rus' became Russians and emerged as a regional Eurasian (in the strictly geographic sense) power. We will then discuss the fateful turn of the Russians toward Europe and its consequences. One of these consequences, as we will see, was the radical transformation of Russia into an early modern society, one at once similar to and very different from that found in Europe. After this we will track the progress of this new society in the succeeding periods and try to explain why it proved so remarkably resilient. Finally, we will outline the reasons for the collapse of the Russian project in the twentieth century and speculate a bit about the meaning of Russian history in a world-historical context.