

A SHORT HISTORY OF RUSSIA

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Jack Wheeler

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[Note the date. Written in 1985 during the Cold War, when Russia formed the basis of the Soviet Union. First posted in TTP March 2004, it is reposted now to provide a historical context for the current Russian invasion of Ukraine.]

My crampons dug into the ice as Nick belayed me up the summit ridge of Mount Elbrus. If I slipped, and Nick failed to arrest me, I would fall into a cluster of large rocks bulging out of the glacier a thousand feet below.

As I carefully made my way up to him, over 18,000 feet in the sky, it never occurred to me that my life was umbilically connected to, dependent upon, a Russian.

The man above me, whom I was counting on to save my life if need be, was Nikolai Chernyi — a Russian Communist, whose government is the sworn enemy of my country and has countless megatons of nuclear bombs aimed at my home — but in that moment, he was simply Nick, a fellow mountaineer, whom I trusted on the mountain without reservation, as he did me.

When we reached the summit, to stand on the very pinnacle of Europe [1], we did so as fellow human beings experiencing a bond of spiritual exultation that only a shared victory in the sky can bring. The thought that we were, or should be, enemies would have been absurd.

At various times in her history, America has been at war with and has had as deadly enemies: the French, the English, the Spanish, the Germans, the Italians, the Mexicans, and the Japanese. All are today our friends and allies. There is nothing in the nature of things that makes it impossible for this to someday be the case with the Russians as well.

Yet it is important to understand how the Russians are not like us — how their history enabled them to transform themselves into Soviets running an Evil Empire called the Soviet Union.

The original Russians are often — but mistakenly — thought to be the Slavic-speaking people of the Dneiper river valley who founded the principality of Kievan Rus' in the tenth century in what is now central Ukraine.

Migrations of East Slavs into the area had been occurring since the sixth century. Along with Novgorod and Smolensk, the town of Kiev became a headquarters along the Viking trade route between the Gulf of Finland and the Black Sea.

A healthy commerce soon developed between Kiev and Byzantium, the East Roman Empire, from whose capital, Constantinople, missionaries sallied forth to convert the welter of Slavic tribes north of Byzantium to Orthodox Christianity. The date of conversion for the Kievan Rus' is given at 988 A.D., the year Prince Vladimir Svyatoslavich (r. 980-1015) was baptized.

By the death of Yaroslav the Wise in 1054, Kiev had expanded its borders substantially, Christianizing and Slavicizing the Finno-Ugrian pagans of the forest belt to its north and east. But thereafter, its territory disintegrated into a dozen or so independent and often warring principalities [2].

One of them was Vladimir-Suzdal, named after its principal towns, but which also contained a trading center and fort, first mentioned in 1147, named Moscow. It is this obscure forest principality, Vladimir-Suzdal, or Suzdalia, that is the ancestor of modern Russia.

The princes of Vladimir-Suzdal were about to embark on an expansion program targeting the Volga Bulgars to the east when some unexpected guests arrived: the Mongols of Genghiz Khan.

The first raids came in the 1220's. Then, in the winter of 1237-38, using the frozen rivers as highways for their cavalry, the Mongol hordes led by Genghiz's grandson Batu [3] attacked in full fury, obliterating every Suzdalian community in their path. In 1240, Kiev itself was sacked, and by 1245, all dozen principalities, containing a handful of survivors escaping annihilation, were absorbed into the Khanate of the Golden Horde.

The Mongol conquest of what was to become Russia is the seminal event in Russian history. Most especially in the psychological history of the Russian people, because *it is from their Mongol conquerors that the Russians learned their basic moral, social, political, and economic concepts: in particular those of equality and justice, and those regarding the intrinsic worth of the individual and the value of individual liberty.*

The Mongols were not simply destroyers — exterminating entire civilizations, slaughtering entire populations (for example: over one million people in the city of Herat, in present-day western Afghanistan). They were builders, empire-builders, driven not simply by a crazed, barbarian lust to conquer and destroy, but by a dream to create a world-wide empire based on equality and justice.

At its peak, the Mongol Empire created by Genghiz and his successors extended from the Yellow Sea to the Baltic, from the Indus River to the Euphrates, containing all of China and most of the present-day Soviet Union.

Mongol equality and justice, however, are wholly antithetical to our notions. *Equality, for the Mongols, meant equality of submission*

: everyone, without exception, must submit totally to the wishes and edicts of the Great Kha Khan.

No one has rightful claim to any special privileges, all are equal in front of the ruler, whose judgment is absolute. The Khan may grant privileges to those who please him, but they are entirely conditional upon the continuance of the Khan's favor.

Justice, for the Mongols, meant the justice of submission: everyone, without exception, is equally unfree before the will of the Khan.

The claim of inalienable rights, or of any rights and basic dignity pertaining to the individual subject that the ruler must respect and not violate, was alien to the Mongol mind. And so it remains to the Russian mind to this day.

That the Russians have never possessed any tradition of individual rights was noted by Russian dissident writer Andrei Amalrik: Such a concept “simply arouses bewilderment” among most Russians. *“One can respect strength, authority, even intellect or education, but it is preposterous to the (Russian) mind that the human personality should represent any kind of value.”* [4]

This is so because the Russians never experienced the Renaissance. The Mongols conquering the proto-Russians would be to us as if the Persians had conquered the Greeks — the flowering of Classical Greece, which formed our seminal concepts of the worth of the individual and of individual liberty, would never have occurred. The Renaissance was the “re-birth” (renaissance in French) of those values, together with the rediscovery of the cultures of Classical Greece and Rome.

Russians have thus harbored an ancient resentment towards the West, believing that they suffered and sacrificed in holding off the Mongol hordes, so that the West could safely flourish. This deeply-rooted grudge results in a love-hate relationship with the West, a paranoid xenophobia, and a profound sense of inferiority.

New York Times correspondent David Shipler tells a poignantly revealing story about a Moscow policeman who stopped a German newsman from filming a hotel fire in which 20 people were killed, explaining, “We do not want to let foreigners laugh at our misfortune.”

Shipler comments: “In all my experience in the Soviet Union, through more than 40,000 miles of travel and thirty-six cities, that policeman's statement remains with me as one of the most haunting expressions of the dark agony in the Russian's sense of himself and of the larger world. To imagine that foreigners are eager to laugh over a tragic hotel fire must require an extraordinary measure of self-persecution, an anger and fear and loneliness of unfathomable pain.” [5]

A famous saying attributed to Napoleon by Victor Hugo is: “Scratch a Russian — find a Tatar (Mongol).” It is, of course, far more complex than that.

For centuries, Russian historians have referred to the 235 years of the Mongol conquest as “The Tatar Yoke.” But for centuries preceding the conquest, the East Slavs had traded, intermarried, and allied with their enemies on the steppes, nomadic tribes such as the Pechengs or Polovtsy.

The Mongols left the political infrastructure of Suzdalia intact, and ruled Suzdalia indirectly from their capital, Serai, via envoys (posoly) to native princes who were responsible for raising the required tribute and taxes [6].

The Suzdal princes profited so handsomely from this arrangement that they paid enormous bribes to the Khan to gain the throne of Suzdal. Taxation was regressive, with the poor paying the most; crown lands were tax-exempt.

Prior to 1480, tribute was five to seven thousand silver rubles a year; subsequently, it dropped to one thousand: but the princes continued to exact the same amount of taxes from the peasants and kept the difference [7].

Early in the 1300s, the princes of Moscow ceased resisting Mongol domination and made an alliance with the Khanate. As a reward, the Mongols transferred the throne of Suzdal (known as the Throne of Vladimir) to Moscow, thus initiating a process of violently transforming the Suzdalia principality into that of Muscovy, ruled by the Grand Dukes of Moscow.

Through this alliance, the original Duchy of Muscovy was able to expand throughout the 1300's and early 1400's from a tiny circle of villages around Moscow, an area of some 600 square kilometers, to subjugate all of Suzdalia for control of Mongol tax collection.

Muscovy not only enjoyed Mongol protection from its East European enemies, Poland and Lithuania, it persuaded the Mongols to attack Muscovy's rivals, the principalities of Tver to the north and Ryazan to the south, and joined with its Mongol allies in raids upon Muscovy's neighbors, sharing in the loot [8].

In 1480, after the Muscovite troops of Ivan III and the Golden Horde's soldiers of Khan Akhmad faced each other off inconclusively at the "Stand on the Ugra River," Muscovy declared itself sovereign, with the tribute to the Khanate greatly reduced.

Territorial expansion proceeded rapidly in all directions: westward to absorb Lithuania and much of Poland; east across Siberia, reaching the Pacific coast in 1649; south to the Caspian and Black Seas; north to the Barents and Baltic Seas, and into Finland.

By the end of the 19th century, Imperial Russia was one of the world's great colonial powers, ruling an area larger than any other empire of its day. The Bolshevik seizure of power in 1917 provided an opportunity for enormous sections of this empire to free themselves from Moscow's rule.

Within a year, Latvia, Estonia, Lithuania, Finland, Georgia, Ukraine, Byelorussia, Armenia, the Emirates of Khiva and Bukhara, and others all declared themselves sovereign, independent nations. All were subsequently invaded by the Red Army and forcibly subsumed within the borders of the Soviet Union. Only Finland managed to finally escape.

The Soviet Union is thus a virulent synergy of Russian imperialism and revolutionary Marxism. The Russians are both victims and accomplices. There are values embedded in the Russian soul which make Soviet rule possible. There is no word for "privacy" in the Russian language, for example; the concept does not exist. There is no word for "freedom" either.

Ronald Reagan was once widely criticized for this assertion; the critics proffered the Russian term *svoboda* to demonstrate the President's loose grasp of facts.

But the President was correct: *Svoboda* means *license*, not freedom in our sense. There is an emotional aura around the word "freedom" that is positive for most any American. Say the word to yourself, and note your emotional reaction: feels good, doesn't it?

But for the average Russian, the word "svoboda" has a negative aura around it: it feels frightening, threatening. It means the freedom, or license, to be socially irresponsible, to be selfish and egotistical, to be indifferent to hurting others for your own gain, to commit the unpardonable sin of seeing yourself as an individual instead of

as a member of the *kollektiv* [9].

Individual liberty is not valued or respected in Russia; adhering to the perceived will of the Collective is. Pride of individual accomplishment is socially unacceptable and is sublimated into a pride of Soviet power, a thrill at the world trembling before Soviet military might and intimidation.

The Russians' fear of freedom makes them incapable of appreciating the concept of individual responsibility and of a society based on it, i.e., a democracy founded on the consent of the governed and inviolate individual rights.

It makes them incapable of seeing an alternative between anarchy and tyranny, between lawless anarchic chaos where every one is out for himself and the ruthless rule of the Kha Khan, the Czar, or the Politburo of the Communist Party.

For many centuries, the Russian mind has had a mystical reverence for central authority. The Czar was affectionately called "The Little Father" by his subjects. The Russians today possess the same worshipful affection for Lenin.

Nonetheless, Russians are not aliens. Before 1917, Russia was a part of Europe and of Western culture. The list of contributions made by Russian culture to the world — writers such as Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky, and composers such as Tchaikovsky, Rimsky-Korsakoff, and Rachmaninov, are but examples — is a very long and distinguished one. After 1917, those contributions came to an end.

In a post-Soviet Russia, those contributions could flower anew. Once liberated from Soviet tyranny, Russians will be free to create the Renaissance they never had — and finally break the Tatar Yoke over their souls. Let's hope they choose to do so.

NOTES

1. Elbrus, known to the ancients as Strobilus, the mountain upon which Prometheus was chained, is the highest mountain in Europe, at 18,481 ft. (Mont Blanc is much lower, at 15,771 ft.), and lies in the Caucasus Mountains between the Black and Caspian Seas. The Caucasus and the Urals, both in the USSR, form the Europe-Asia watershed. This climb took place in September, 1981.
2. *Cf. The Times Atlas of World History* (London: Times Books, 1979), p.115.
3. Genghiz, or Chengis in some transliterations, died in 1227.
4. Andrei Amalrik, *Will the Soviet Union Survive Until 1984?* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), p. 34.
5. David Shipler, *Russia: Broken Idols, Solemn Dreams* (New York: Penguin, 1984), p. 18.
6. Initially, the Khan placed resident Mongol officials called *baskaki* in direct charge of tribute collection, but this soon changed to indirect rule through the native *posoly*. *Cf.* Charles Halperin, *Russia and the Golden Horde* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), pp. 31-32.
7. *Ibid*, pp. 78, 84.
8. *Ibid*, pp. 78-79; and *The Times Atlas of World History*, *op. cit.*, p. 163.
9. *Cf.* Amalrik: "To the majority of (Russians) the very word "freedom" is synonymous with "disorder or the opportunity to indulge with impunity in some kind of antisocial or dangerous activity." *Op. cit.*, p. 34.