

MILITARY

History

The Soviet Union was inhabited by many nationalities with complex origins and different histories. Its historical roots, however, are chiefly those of the East

Slavs, who evolved into the Russian, Ukrainian, and Belorussian peoples. The major pre-Soviet political formations of the East Slavs were, in order, medieval Kievan Rus', Muscovy, and the Russian Empire. Three other states--Poland, Lithuania, and the Mongol Empire--also played crucial roles in the historical development of the Soviet Union.

The first East Slavic state, Kievan Rus', emerged along the Dnepr River Valley, where it controlled the trade route between Scandinavia and the Byzantine Empire. By adopting Christianity from Constantinople, Kievan Rus' began a synthesis of Byzantine and Slavic cultures. Kievan Rus' was the collective possession of a princely family, a fact that led to armed struggles between princes and ultimately to the territorial disintegration of the state. Conquest by the Mongols was the final blow, and, subsequently, a number of states claimed to be heirs of Kievan Rus'. One of these was Muscovy, located on the northeastern periphery of Kievan Rus' and populated primarily by Russians. Muscovy gradually dominated neighboring territories and expanded into the Russian Empire.

The historical characteristics that emerged in Muscovy subsequently affected both Russia and the Soviet Union. One such characteristic was the state's dominance over the individual. Mongol, Byzantine, and native Russian roots all contributed to what was referred to as Russian autocracy: the idea that Russian rulers, or tsars, were unlimited in their power. All institutions, including the Russian Orthodox Church, were subordinated to the state and the autocrat. The idea of autocracy survived until the fall of the last tsar.

Continual territorial expansion was another characteristic of Russian history. Beginning with Muscovy's "gathering of the Russian lands," expansion soon went beyond ethnically Russian areas. As a result, Muscovy developed into the huge Russian Empire, eventually stretching from the border with Poland to the Pacific Ocean. Because of its size and military might, Russia became a major power, but acquisition of non-Russian lands and peoples posed continuing nationality problems.

- [600-1016 - Kharzar Empire](#)
- [732-1236 - Volga Bulgaria](#)
- [860-1462 - Grand Dukes / Veliki Kniaz](#)
- [1236-1502 - The Golden Horde](#)
- [1462-1917 - Czarist Russia](#)
- [1917-1991 - Soviet Union](#)

Expansion westward forced Russia to face the perennial questions of its backwardness and its relationship to the West. Muscovy had grown in isolation from the West, but Russia had to adopt Western technology to compete militarily in Europe. Thus Peter the Great attempted to modernize the country, as did subsequent rulers who struggled, largely unsuccessfully, to raise Russia to European levels of technology and productivity. With the acquisition of technology came Western cultural and intellectual currents that disrupted the development of an independent Russian culture. Native and foreign cultural values were often in contention, and questions of Russia's relationship to the West became an enduring obsession of Russian intellectuals.

Russia's defeat in the Crimean War triggered another attempt at modernization, including the emancipation of the serfs--peasants bound to the land they tilled. Despite major reforms, agriculture remained inefficient, industrialization proceeded haltingly, and new problems emerged. In addition to masses of land-hungry peasants, a budding industrial proletariat and a small but important group of middle-class professionals were becoming dissatisfied. Non-Russians, resentful of Russification, struggled for autonomy. In response to these continuing problems, successive regimes vacillated between repression and reform. The tsars were unwilling to give up autocratic rule or to share power. They, their supporters, and government bureaucrats became more isolated from the rest of society. Intellectuals became more radical, and some became professional revolutionaries.

Despite its internal problems, Russia continued to play a major role in international politics. Its defeat in the Russo-Japanese War, however, sparked a revolution in 1905. Professionals, workers, peasants, non-Russians, and soldiers demanded fundamental reforms. Reluctantly, the last tsar granted a limited constitution, but for a decade he circumvented it and continued autocratic rule. When World War I began, Russian patriotism at first compensated for the war's disruption and suffering. The government, however, proved incompetent in pursuing the war, and as war-weariness and revolutionary pressures increased, fewer and fewer defended autocracy.

The 1917 Russian revolution was followed by military intervention by fourteen foreign powers (including the United States, Britain and Canada) and an extended civil war. The destruction of seven years of war, revolution and intervention combined with severe drought, resulted in widespread hunger and starvation — the Russian famine of 1921-1922.

Having survived these hardships the Soviets launched the project that had no precedents in history: the building of a socialist society. They had to transform a backward state into an industrialized country with an effective agricultural sector. The USSR's "collectivization" and "industrialization" projects were aimed at accomplishing this task.

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