

## Russia 1500-1800<sup>1</sup>

**Pre-1500 Significant Events:** In ancient times the Slavs lived as a single people in central Europe, but after migrations in late Roman Empire, they split into 3 groups. Between the 5<sup>th</sup> and the 9<sup>th</sup> century the E Slavs (Ukrainians, Russians, White Russians) moved into what is today European Russia and the Ukraine. In the 9<sup>th</sup> c Vikings (Varangians) appeared in the lands of the E Slavs and dominated the region economically and politically. Unlike W portions of Christendom in the Middle Ages who lived on rural manors, Russian rulers lived in cities, e.g. Kiev and Novrogod, which controlled trade on the Dnieper and Volga rivers, resp. The Vikings were active in trade—esp. the slave trade, hence the word we now use for slaves. Vladimir I in the late 10<sup>th</sup> c chose Orthodox Christianity as the religion of Kiev as a means of strengthening it vis a vis surrounding territories—also helps assimilation of leaders to Slavic (as opposed to Scandinavian) identity. Nevertheless, Christianity penetrated the population slowly—pagan uprisings in the 11<sup>th</sup> c and people still clinging to pagan healing and marital practices in the 12<sup>th</sup> c. In the 13<sup>th</sup> c Mongols sacked Kiev—Khanate of the Golden Horde controls a large chunk of Russian territory. Between 1050 and 1300—ec. and demographic growth—decline of serfdom by 1300. The plague hits in 1346, and the devastation caused helps to bring back serfdom to the peasantry E of the Elbe River. This development means that the nobility in E Christendom will enjoy more political power than in W Christendom. Between 1462 and 1505 Ivan III unites Russia under the rule of Moscow and throws off Mongol rule.<sup>2</sup>

**Rise of Romanov Power:** Moscow replaced Kiev as being the politically dominant city, forming a new state—Muscovy. Muscovite ruler Ivan IV, aka the Terrible, assumed the title tsar (from caesar), and he expands borders eastward. In the 17<sup>th</sup> c Muscovy suffered from occupations by Sweden and Poland, and Muscovite rulers were forced to depend on the Russian aristocracy, the *boyars*<sup>3</sup>, one of whom eventually took power as tsar: Mikhail Romanov (r.1613-1645). Russian expansion was blocked by the then powerful Ottoman and Safavid empires.

**Peter the Great (r. 1689-1725):** For centuries Turkic speaking peoples lived on the borders of Russia. They tended to make their living herding, trading, or as soldiers; whereas Russians spoke a Slavic language and lived as farmers, hunters, builders, scribes, and merchants. The lines between these groups were not hard and fast until the age of this ruler, who was determined to secure a warm water port that would facilitate his wars with the Ottoman Empire. Under his reign Russia broke Swedish control of the Baltic Sea, establishing more direct contact with W Europe. He established the city of St. Petersburg, establishing it as the capital in 1712, and he encouraged elite consumption along W European lines in housing, clothing, and socializing. Peter was an absolutist ruler who clarified the power and authority of the tsar vis and vis the people and the church. His 43 year rule saw only one year of peace.

**Eastern Expansion:** Siberia was important for furs, timber, gold, coal, and iron. Russia's eastward expansion meant that it could dominate the fur trade and shipping industries of the N Pacific. This expansion had started under Muscovite rulers and continued through Peter and his successors. By the death of Catherine the Great (r. 1762-1796) Russia extended from Poland in the W to Alaska (colony in 1799) in the E, and from the Barents Sea in the N to the Caspian Sea in the S.

**Enlightened Absolutism Under Catherine the Great:** A German princess who married into the Romanov dynasty and overthrew her ugly, unintelligent husband in a palace coup, Catherine never questioned the notion of absolute monarchy. Her three main goals were to bring the culture of W Europe to Russia, bring about domestic reform, and territorial expansion.

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<sup>1</sup> Information taken from Bulliet, et. al., *The Earth & Its People* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2001) and McKay, et. al., *A History of World Societies* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000).

<sup>2</sup> With the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople in 1453, Russian rulers felt as though they were heirs to the Orthodox tradition.

<sup>3</sup> The *boyars* were the descendents from Viking warriors—also noteworthy b/c they held their land as private property.