

THE IN A HURRY SERIES

Russia *in a Hurry*

Empire, revolution, and the long shadow

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The Whole Thing in One Page

One glance at Russia's map invites a single explanation: size. The map is enormous, the winters are hard and the frontiers are long, so the state must be centralised and suspicious. Geography is real. Destiny is not. The more useful pattern is historical: Russian states repeatedly expanded faster than they developed uniform institutions across the territory they claimed.

Muscovy conquered Kazan and Astrakhan, then pushed across Siberia. The Romanov Empire absorbed Baltic lands, much of Poland and Ukraine, the Caucasus and Central Asia. Different rulers answered the resulting governing problem with nobles, military settlers, local elites, churches, bureaucrats, police, railways and eventually mass party organisations. Control was always uneven, and the methods changed radically.

Empire therefore came before a settled Russian nation. In the 1897 census, people recorded as native speakers of Great Russian made up roughly 44 per cent of the population. The state ruled Poles, Finns, Jews, Tatars, Ukrainians, Georgians, Armenians, Kazakhs, Siberian peoples and many others. State, empire, people and civilisation overlapped without matching.

Reform repeatedly strengthened the machinery of government while creating social forces the centre struggled to accommodate. Peter the Great built a war-making state. Alexander II abolished serfdom and created courts and local councils. Railways, industry, education and a larger public sphere followed. The monarchy became more capable and more politically exposed at the same time.

The revolutions of 1917 destroyed the dynasty and much of the old social order. The Bolsheviks created a new party-state, planned economy and formally federal union of national republics. It could mobilise resources on an extraordinary scale. Forced collectivisation, terror and deportation showed its coercive reach. Victory over Nazi Germany, bought with roughly 26.6 million Soviet lives, showed its capacity for survival. Yet the same hierarchy punished bad news and made correction difficult.

When Mikhail Gorbachev loosened the system, republican institutions, economic crisis and elite conflict combined to pull the union apart. Russia emerged in 1991 as a new state, not a smaller Soviet Union with a different flag. The chaos of the 1990s then made stronger central authority attractive to many citizens. Under Vladimir Putin, the presidency rebuilt revenue and control while narrowing political competition and independent feedback.

Russia's seizure of Crimea in 2014, followed eight years later by its full-scale attack on Ukraine, relied on imperial narratives, security arguments and deliberate political decisions. They were not programmed by Russian history. The same is true of earlier turning points. Defeat could produce reform or repression. Diversity could be managed through autonomy or forced assimilation. A strong centre could build capacity or conceal failure. The important continuity is therefore a recurring set of pressures, not one Russian political essence.

The long shadow is the unresolved relationship between power and territory, centre and institution, empire and nation, memory and sovereignty. The subject becomes clearer once those relationships are kept separate long enough to see when rulers deliberately fused them, and what the fusion cost the people governed from the centre and at the edges of political power.

That is the book.

Why You Should Care

At the end of December 1991, the Kremlin changed flags while almost everything physical around it remained in place. Moscow had not fallen to an invading army. Nuclear weapons, ministries, factories, barracks and apartment blocks were still there. What disappeared was the political union connecting fifteen republics. A state that had beaten Nazi Germany, launched the first human into orbit and matched the United States as a superpower ended without a final battle.

That is the first reason Russia is worth understanding. States can look solid because they possess armies, borders and bureaucracies while the political

agreements holding them together are already failing. The Soviet collapse was unusually dramatic, but the question is general. What makes a large state cohere? Force matters. So do revenue, information, legitimacy, institutions and the willingness of regional elites to keep playing by the same rules.

Russia also matters because its choices travel. The Russian Federation spans Europe and Asia, borders fourteen internationally recognised states, has more than 143 million people, is a major producer of oil and natural gas, holds one of the world's two largest nuclear arsenals and is one of the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council. Russian wars affect food, energy, defence budgets, migration, shipping and alliances far beyond its borders. Russia is too consequential to be understood as a distant national story.

The harder reason is that public discussion of Russia is full of bad shortcuts. One says that Russia has always been despotic because the country is large and cold. Another says that every modern action follows from an eternal imperial instinct. A third turns the whole Soviet experience into Russian history and makes Ukrainians, Kazakhs, Georgians, Balts and others disappear inside it. A fourth does the opposite and treats 1991 as a clean break after which history ceased to matter.

None works. Institutions changed radically. Borders moved. Social classes appeared and vanished. The state went from Orthodox monarchy to revolutionary party rule to a post-Soviet presidential federation. Yet some problems remained available for each new regime to inherit: vast distances, uneven development, contested borders, multilingual populations, fear of political fragmentation and the temptation to treat strategic depth as security.

The distinction between inheritance and destiny matters. History can make an option easier to imagine without making it unavoidable. The Romanov Empire did not compel Stalin's terror. The Soviet Union did not compel the political order built under Putin. Imperial memory did not compel the invasion of Ukraine. Decisions still have authors.

Understanding Russia therefore teaches two things at once. It teaches a specific history of conquest, reform, revolution, mobilisation, collapse and recentralisation. It also sharpens a more general political question: when rulers answer insecurity by accumulating control, how do you tell the difference between a stronger state and a more brittle one?

Russia gives unusually large examples because its rulers kept trying to govern unusually large spaces. The interest lies in how different regimes solved that problem, what those solutions achieved, and what they broke.

There is also a practical reason to care about the distinction between Russia and the Soviet Union. It changes how you read maps, casualty figures, cultural claims and political language. A Ukrainian soldier in the Red Army was Soviet, not therefore Russian. A medieval church tradition shared with Kyiv is historical connection, not a modern title deed. A former imperial frontier is not automatically a natural security zone. Once those categories are separated, arguments that previously sounded inevitable become choices that can be examined.

And Russia is a useful warning against judging states by spectacle. Parades, missiles, palaces and presidential decrees are easy to see. Tax collection, local competence, truthful statistics, succession rules and the ability of officials to contradict a superior are less visible. Those quieter mechanisms often decide whether a state survives pressure.

The Core Ideas

1. Expansion Often Came Before Consolidation

The map matters, but not in the way geographical determinism suggests. Russia did not become centralised because an empty plain issued political instructions. The more important pattern is historical: states centred on Moscow repeatedly acquired territory before they possessed the administrative machinery to govern it evenly.

Muscovy began in the forest zone of north-eastern Rus'. Its rise came after

the Mongol conquest of the thirteenth century shattered the old political order. Moscow benefited from location, dynastic luck, church support, service to the khans of the Golden Horde and ruthless competition with neighbouring principalities. By the late fifteenth century Ivan III could present himself as sovereign of a much larger domain. Under Ivan IV, the conquest of Kazan in 1552 and Astrakhan in 1556 pushed the state down the Volga and brought large Muslim populations under the tsar.

Then came Siberia. Cossacks, merchants and state agents moved east along river systems in search of fur and tribute. The speed is startling. By the mid-seventeenth century Russian expeditions had reached the Pacific. A state with limited roads, small bureaucracies and uneven cash revenues had acquired a continental domain.

That did not mean Moscow controlled every village in the modern sense. Rule could be thin. Tribute collectors dealt with local chiefs. Frontier garrisons were small. Native peoples negotiated, resisted, fled or were drawn into trade. The centre's claim on a map could be stronger than its daily presence on the ground.

This gap between territorial claim and administrative reach shaped later choices. When direct bureaucracy was expensive, the state governed through intermediaries: nobles, church hierarchies, military settlers, Cossack hosts, local elites and communal institutions. Coercion could substitute for information. Privilege could substitute for uniform law.

The Romanov Empire later became far more capable. Peter the Great created colleges, a regular army and new taxation. Catherine II expanded provincial administration. The nineteenth century brought railways, ministries, courts, schools and statistics. Yet administrative density remained uneven across a territory that kept growing.

The mistake is to turn this history into a law. Large space does not cause autocracy. Political actors make institutions, and neighbouring societies facing similar pressures made different bargains. What Russian geography did was raise the price of movement, defence and information. Expansion

then magnified that price. A ruler who wanted quick results had strong incentives to command through hierarchies that already existed.

The result was a recurring temptation rather than a permanent constitution: when the territory seemed insecure, concentrate the centre first and ask later whether the institutions beneath it could carry the load.

The pattern also explains why frontiers mattered politically long after conquest. A border province could be a tax source, a military buffer, a trade corridor and a population with its own political memory at the same time. The centre therefore tended to treat local autonomy as more than an administrative question. In a strategic region, it could look like the beginning of defection. That fear was sometimes rational. Poland rebelled repeatedly. The Caucasus required prolonged conquest. National movements later did seek sovereignty. But the fear could become self-reinforcing when central coercion made separation more attractive.

2. Empire Came Before a Settled Nation

Modern national maps train the eye badly. They encourage us to imagine a Russian people living inside Russia, then spilling outward into an empire. Historically, the order was much less tidy.

By the time nationalism became a major political force in nineteenth-century Europe, the Russian state already ruled a vast collection of peoples. The Romanovs had taken the Baltic provinces from Sweden, participated in the partitions of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, incorporated most Ukrainian and Belarusian lands, annexed Crimea, conquered the Caucasus and expanded across Central Asia. Finland had its own laws and institutions under the emperor. Poland repeatedly rebelled. The Baltic German nobility retained privileges. Muslim elites along the Volga and in parts of the steppe entered changing bargains with the state.

The empire therefore did not administer difference through one policy. It used hierarchy, autonomy, conversion, military force, legal pluralism and selective Russification in different places and periods. The Caucasus was conquered through prolonged war. Finland enjoyed unusually wide

autonomy before late imperial attempts to tighten control. Central Asian khanates were defeated or subordinated and then governed through imperial administrative categories that changed local political life. Jewish subjects were concentrated by law in the Pale of Settlement and faced restrictions and recurrent violence. There was no single imperial experience.

Nor was there a settled answer to who counted as Russian. The old term *russskii* usually referred to Russian ethnicity or culture. *Rossiiskii* could refer more broadly to the imperial state and its subjects. Orthodox thinkers, bureaucrats, nationalists and revolutionaries drew the boundaries differently. Ukrainians and Belarusians might be treated by officials as branches of a wider Russian people, while their own national movements increasingly rejected that claim.

The first empire-wide census in 1897 shows the scale of the problem. It asked about native language rather than ethnicity in the modern sense. Great Russian speakers accounted for roughly 44 per cent of the population. Even allowing for the limits of the categories, the central fact remains: the empire was not a Russian ethnic majority governing a few small minorities around the edge.

This matters because modern disputes about historical unity are often arguments about which layer of identity should govern the others. Shared religion does not settle sovereignty. A common medieval inheritance does not create a modern right of rule. Language can cross borders without dissolving them.

The history of Rus' shows why claims can become combustible. The medieval Rus' political world had major centres at Kyiv, Novgorod and elsewhere across lands that now fall inside Ukraine, Belarus and Russia. After its fragmentation and the Mongol invasions, political centres developed in different directions. Muscovy later claimed Rus' inheritance, but it did not own the past in any exclusive modern national sense.

Russia's long argument over nationhood therefore grew inside an imperial shell. That made territory part of identity and identity part of security. Losing

land could be imagined as losing people who ought still to belong. That idea never had one uncontested meaning, but it became politically potent whenever borders moved.

The empire also changed Russians themselves. Service in distant provinces, migration into Siberia, military settlement, commercial links and the status of Russian language all made imperial rule part of Russian social development. Empire was not something happening only to peoples beyond a fixed Russian core. It helped shape the institutions, elites and self-image of that core. This is why post-imperial adjustment can be difficult even when formal borders are clear: the old hierarchy may survive inside habits of thought long after the administration has disappeared.

3. Strong Rulers Often Governed Through Weak Institutions

Russian autocracy is easy to overestimate because its rulers spoke in absolute language. The tsar was an autocrat. Decrees travelled under his name. Rebellion could be crushed violently. Yet a ruler's formal supremacy is not the same thing as a state that can observe, tax and regulate society directly.

For much of imperial history, the state had too few officials and too little money to do everything it claimed. It therefore relied on social groups whose private power performed public work. The service nobility supplied officers and administrators. Landlords disciplined peasants and extracted resources. Village communes allocated obligations. The church registered lives, taught doctrine and linked loyalty to sacred monarchy.

Serfdom was central to this arrangement. By the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, millions of peasants were legally bound to estates and subject to extensive landlord authority. Serfdom strengthened elite control of labour and helped the state secure taxes and military service indirectly. It was a sign of coercive power, but also of administrative limitation. The centre outsourced much of rural government to property holders.

Peter the Great made the state more demanding. His wars required money,

men, ships, weapons and information. He imposed the poll tax, reorganised central administration, expanded compulsory noble service and created the Table of Ranks. St Petersburg itself advertised the ambition: a new capital built on the Baltic as a command post for a state determined to compete with European powers.

The reforms increased capacity. They did not create neutral institutions above the ruler. Office remained tied to service, patronage and hierarchy. Law could be codified without becoming a reliable limit on sovereign power.

The same distinction helps with Stalin and Putin, though the systems are radically different. Stalin's Soviet Union could reach far deeper into society than the Romanovs ever could. It registered citizens, planned factories, collectivised agriculture, censored media and maintained a mass security apparatus. Yet officials still concealed information to protect themselves. A command system can be administratively dense and institutionally weak in another sense: rules are vulnerable when personal authority can override them and bad news becomes dangerous.

Modern Russia has courts, ministries, elections, regions and a written constitution. Their existence is real. The question is how independently they can constrain the executive and how reliably rules survive conflict with political power. Under Putin, national television, major business interests, governors and opposition politics were progressively brought under tighter central control. The formal state remained complex, but key political decisions became increasingly concentrated around the presidency and security elite.

This is the distinction to remember: state capacity and institutional constraint are different dimensions. A government can collect taxes, build weapons and police dissent while remaining poor at correcting senior mistakes. It can be strong in command and weak in feedback.

There is a second distinction inside capacity itself. Extensive power reaches many places. Intensive power changes behaviour reliably once it arrives. Imperial Russia often possessed the first on paper and less of the second in

practice. A decree might apply across a province while local implementation depended on a governor, noble or village elder. The Soviet state increased both forms dramatically, but even then informal bargaining remained essential. Counting formal commands therefore exaggerates how uniform rule ever was.

4. Reform Strengthened the State and Destabilised Its Bargains

Russia's famous reformers are often described as people dragging a reluctant country towards Europe. The more revealing pattern is narrower. Major reforms were usually undertaken because the existing state had failed at something important, especially war, revenue or administration. Reform sought to increase capacity. The political question was how much autonomy the centre was willing to let the new capacity create.

Peter the Great is the obvious case. Defeat at Narva in 1700 exposed military weakness. The Great Northern War drove a massive expansion of taxation, military organisation, shipbuilding and bureaucracy. Peter opened elite life further to European techniques and styles, but his project was not liberalisation. It was competitive state-building under an autocrat.

The same logic returned after the Crimean War. Russia's defeat by Britain, France, the Ottoman Empire and Sardinia exposed the limits of an economy and military system still tied to serfdom. Alexander II emancipated the serfs in 1861, created elected local councils known as zemstvos, reformed courts and changed military service.

These reforms mattered. Emancipation ended landlords' legal ownership of serfs. New courts introduced more professional procedures. Zemstvos built schools, roads and medical services. Universities, professions and a larger reading public expanded. Economic growth accelerated as railways and industry spread.

Yet emancipation left many peasants with difficult land settlements and redemption obligations. Local institutions had bounded authority. The representative principle did not rise to national sovereignty. Political police

remained. When radicals turned to terrorism, including the assassination of Alexander II in 1881, the state answered with repression and retrenchment.

That left a structural problem. Modernisation created groups capable of organised public life without giving them dependable channels to govern. Lawyers learned law in a system where sovereign authority was not fully bound by it. Local politicians learned administration without gaining a national parliament until 1905. Industrial workers entered huge urban workplaces where strikes could become political. Educated critics became an intelligentsia precisely because public thought carried political weight outside formal power.

Late imperial industrialisation deepened the contradiction. Finance minister Sergei Witte promoted railways, foreign investment and heavy industry. The Trans-Siberian Railway stitched the empire more tightly together. Cities grew. Yet political institutions lagged.

The revolution of 1905 forced Nicholas II to concede a parliament, the Duma, and a constitutional framework of sorts. The monarchy then worked to limit the Duma's power. Russia was no longer the old autocracy, but it was not a parliamentary monarchy either.

Reform therefore did not fail because Russians were incapable of it. It repeatedly succeeded at creating new capacity. The danger lay in stopping halfway between social modernisation and political accommodation. Each success produced people, institutions and expectations that the old centre had to bargain with or suppress.

That helps explain the strange political importance of culture in nineteenth-century Russia. Censorship limited direct political organisation, so novels, journals, universities and private circles carried arguments that elsewhere might have moved through parties and parliaments. The question of what Russia was, European, Orthodox, imperial, peasant, modern or something distinct, became a literary and philosophical dispute with political consequences. The state created educated subjects and then feared the public they formed.

5. Revolution Created a New Multinational State

The collapse of tsarism in 1917 belongs in detail to *The Russian Revolution in a Hurry*. Here the important question is what the revolution built afterwards.

The Bolsheviks inherited a shattered empire. War had destroyed legitimacy, transport and supply. National movements had declared independence or autonomy. Civil war followed, fought by Red and White armies, peasant forces, national governments, foreign troops and shifting local coalitions. The Bolsheviks won most of the old imperial core by combining central organisation, control of crucial cities and railways, military coercion and political promises that varied by audience.

The state they created was not a restored Romanov monarchy. Private landed estates were destroyed. Industry was nationalised. The Communist Party claimed a monopoly on political power. Religion was attacked as a rival authority. Class rather than dynasty became the official language of legitimacy.

The national question produced one of the system's most important innovations. The Soviet Union, founded in 1922, was formally a federation of national republics. Early policies known as *korenizatsiia* promoted local languages, schools and cadres. Bolshevik leaders believed that overt Great Russian domination would alienate non-Russian peoples and damage socialism.

This policy had consequences that outlived the regime. Republics acquired territorial boundaries, institutions, educated elites and standardised national cultures. Moscow could overrule them because the Communist Party ran through the whole union, but the republics were not fictional decorations. When the centre weakened in the late 1980s, they became platforms from which sovereignty could be claimed.

Stalin transformed the social and economic order through forced collectivisation and rapid industrialisation. Peasant resistance was met with confiscation, deportation and violence. Famine struck several regions.

Soviet Ukraine suffered the Holodomor. Kazakhstan suffered a separate catastrophe as forced settlement and livestock collapse devastated a pastoral society. These events should not be flattened into one generic story of hardship. Policies, local conditions and national experiences differed, and the question of intention in Ukraine remains central to the genocide debate.

The Great Terror of 1937 and 1938 struck party members, officials, officers and ordinary citizens, while mass operations targeted categories defined as socially or nationally suspect. The security state killed on a scale that made tsarist repression look small. Entire peoples, including Chechens, Ingush and Crimean Tatars, were later deported under collective accusations of disloyalty.

Yet Soviet nationality policy was not reducible to repression. Literacy, urbanisation, education and cultural institutions expanded across the union. Non-Russian citizens could rise through republican structures and the wider Soviet system. The state both built nations and constrained their sovereignty.

That contradiction matters more than the slogan that the Bolsheviks recreated the empire. The Soviet Union was an imperial power in important respects, especially in unequal command from Moscow and its control over neighbouring states after 1945. It was also a formally federal state that institutionalised national territories in a way the Romanovs had not. Its collapse is impossible to understand without both halves.

The distinction also protects non-Russian agency. Ukrainians, Georgians, Armenians, Uzbeks, Kazakhs and others were not merely passive subjects acted on by Moscow. Their elites helped build Soviet institutions, advanced within them, resisted particular policies, bargained for resources and later used republican offices to pursue sovereignty. A multinational state cannot be understood by watching the centre alone, because the centre itself depends on actors who can become alternative centres when the bargain changes.

6. Mobilisation Made a Superpower and a Feedback Trap

No Russian or Soviet government ever mobilised people and resources as intensely as the Stalinist and post-Stalin Soviet state. That capacity is why the Soviet Union survived its greatest catastrophe and became a superpower.

When Nazi Germany invaded on 22 June 1941, the Soviet system initially suffered enormous losses. Stalin had purged much of the officer corps, ignored or discounted warnings and joined Hitler in the 1939 Nazi-Soviet pact that divided parts of eastern Europe into spheres. Soviet forces were caught in disastrous encirclements. Millions of soldiers became prisoners.

Then the system demonstrated what central mobilisation could do. Factories were dismantled and moved east. Women entered industrial and military work on a huge scale. Entire regions were reorganised around war production. Soviet armies absorbed losses that would have destroyed most states and eventually pushed the Wehrmacht back to Berlin.

Victory was multinational. Russians formed the largest group in the Soviet population and armed forces, but Ukrainians, Belarusians, Kazakhs, Georgians, Armenians, Uzbeks and others fought and died in enormous numbers. Occupied Ukraine and Belarus experienced some of the worst destruction and mass murder. The accepted demographic estimate is roughly 26.6 million Soviet war dead, military and civilian.

The victory transformed legitimacy. The Great Patriotic War became the most powerful story the Soviet state could tell about itself: sacrifice, unity, industrial strength and rescue from annihilation. It remains central to Russian public memory because the event itself was immense, not because memory was invented from nothing.

After 1945, Soviet power reached further. The state acquired nuclear weapons, dominated eastern Europe, funded science and heavy industry, and competed with the United States across the globe. Sputnik in 1957 and Yuri Gagarin's flight in 1961 showed that a country devastated sixteen years

earlier could lead the world in strategic technologies.

Daily life changed too. Most Soviet citizens did not experience the post-war decades as permanent mobilisation. They experienced mass schooling, urban apartments, public transport, work organisations, queues, holidays, television, communal expectations and the mixed security of a system that promised employment while rationing consumer choice. After Stalin, terror receded sharply even though censorship and political repression remained.

The system's weakness lay less in an inability to do anything than in its inability to know when its own commands were wrong. Plans required factories to meet targets. Managers learned to negotiate targets downward, hoard inputs and report success. Prices conveyed limited information about scarcity. Citizens adapted through informal exchange and personal networks. Officials could solve local shortages by bending rules that the centre treated as scientific management.

The political version of the same problem was harsher. Senior leaders had few incentives to welcome information that challenged the line. The 1986 Chernobyl disaster exposed the cost of secrecy dramatically, but the wider mechanism was older: when careers depend on pleasing superiors, information changes as it travels upward.

By the 1970s and 1980s, growth slowed. Oil and gas exports brought revenue, but the economy struggled to convert scientific strength and educated labour into flexible civilian productivity. Military commitments remained heavy. National institutions inside the union endured. The system could still launch spacecraft and produce missiles while finding it difficult to reform a shop, enterprise or ministry without threatening the bargains around it.

The Soviet paradox was therefore not that central planning never worked. It worked impressively for some tasks, especially forced industrialisation, military production and large projects. The problem was that the same hierarchy that concentrated resources also weakened correction. Mobilisation could overcome scarcity for a priority. It was worse at deciding

which priorities should change.

This is why the familiar contrast between a powerful Soviet military and an unimpressive consumer economy is more than a joke about shops. Defence ministries could command resources because strategic priority was politically settled. Consumer demand was dispersed, changing and hard to translate into plan targets. A hierarchy is strongest when it already knows what matters. It becomes less impressive when millions of people are signalling different preferences every day.

7. The Post-Soviet State Solved One Crisis by Creating Another

The Soviet Union's collapse changed the political map more radically than any event since 1917. Fifteen union republics became independent states. Russia lost direct rule over territories that imperial and Soviet governments had governed for generations. Millions of ethnic Russians now lived outside the Russian Federation. The Russian state had to decide what kind of country it was after empire and union.

The early answer was unstable. Boris Yeltsin's government tried rapid economic reform while building new political institutions. Price liberalisation ended many Soviet shortages but destroyed savings through inflation. Privatisation transferred assets at extraordinary speed and helped create oligarchic fortunes. Tax collection was weak. Wages and pensions went unpaid. Violent crime became a visible part of public life.

Federal power was also contested. Regions bargained for privileges. Chechnya attempted to leave and fought two brutal wars with Moscow. In 1993, conflict between Yeltsin and parliament ended with tanks firing on the Russian White House. The constitution that followed created a powerful presidency. The democratic opening of the 1990s was real, as were competitive media and elections, but the institutional settlement already concentrated authority heavily in the executive.

Putin inherited this system in 1999 and 2000. Rising oil prices and economic recovery gave the centre resources the Yeltsin state had lacked. Federal

districts and legal changes reduced governors' autonomy. After the Beslan school siege in 2004, direct gubernatorial elections were abolished for a time. Major television channels came under state control or the control of loyal owners. Oligarchs were taught that wealth could survive if it did not become an independent political base. Security officials, often grouped under the term *siloviki*, gained influence.

For many Russians, the contrast with the 1990s was persuasive. Incomes rose strongly during much of the 2000s. Salaries and pensions were paid. The state looked present again. Political centralisation therefore did not rest on coercion alone. It was connected to a social memory in which disorder, humiliation and material insecurity were associated with a weak centre.

Over time, the bargain changed. Economic growth slowed. Political competition narrowed. Protest movements were contained through legal restrictions, policing, media control and selective repression. Constitutional changes reset Putin's presidential term count, allowing him to remain in office beyond the limits that would otherwise have applied. He began another presidential term on 7 May 2024.

Foreign policy became increasingly tied to the unresolved boundary between Russia as a state and Russia as a historical civilisation. The 2008 war with Georgia, the annexation of Crimea in 2014, support for armed separatists in eastern Ukraine and the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 each had distinct immediate causes. They also drew on a wider political language in which the post-Soviet settlement could be described as historically unjust, Russian-speaking populations as belonging to a shared civilisational space, and western alliances near Russia as an intolerable security threat.

Those claims do not settle the argument. Ukraine is a sovereign state whose territorial integrity is recognised under international law. Its population made an overwhelming choice for independence in the 1991 referendum, including majorities in every region that voted. Russia's annexation of Crimea was rejected as invalid by the United Nations General Assembly. The full-scale war continued in 2026.

The central lesson is not that Russian history made war inevitable. It is that the post-Soviet state never fully resolved the relationship between national identity, imperial inheritance and sovereign borders. Putin turned particular versions of that history into state doctrine and policy. Other choices remained possible.

The causal loop now closes. Expansion had repeatedly left the centre trying to secure a territory larger and more diverse than its institutions could govern evenly. In 1991, the old union broke because coercion, revenue and legitimacy no longer held that political space together. The post-Soviet response rebuilt the centre inside Russia. It solved genuine problems of fiscal weakness and fragmented authority, but it also weakened independent political feedback and made succession more personal again.

A strong centre can therefore be both cure and risk. It can restore capacity quickly because fewer actors can block action. It can also make correction more expensive because fewer actors can challenge error before it becomes policy.

That trade-off became sharper as the modern state personalised. A governor who owes his position upward has less reason to build an independent regional mandate. A television system dominated by loyal narratives can coordinate public messaging while reducing the flow of unwelcome information. Business elites who know that political independence threatens property have incentives to stay inside the bargain. None of this abolishes bureaucracy or public opinion. It changes the risks attached to contradicting the centre.

How It Actually Works

Rus', the Mongols and the rise of Moscow

The story starts before Russia existed. In the ninth and tenth centuries, trading and warrior networks linked towns along the rivers between the Baltic and Black seas. The polity historians call Kyivan Rus' was ruled by the Riurikid dynasty from centres that included Kyiv, Novgorod and others. Prince Volodymyr's adoption of Byzantine Christianity in 988 connected the ruling house to the Orthodox Christian world.

Rus' was not a Russian nation-state waiting to mature. It was a medieval dynastic order whose lands now lie mainly in Ukraine, Belarus and Russia. It fragmented through succession and regional rivalry. The Mongol invasions of the thirteenth century destroyed major centres and subordinated many principalities to the Golden Horde.

Moscow rose inside this post-Mongol order. Its princes collected tribute for the khans, competed with Tver and other rivals, cultivated ties with the Orthodox Church and gradually accumulated territory. Ivan III stopped paying tribute to the Horde and expanded Muscovite sovereignty. His grandson Ivan IV became the first ruler crowned tsar in 1547.

Kazan changed the scale. Its conquest in 1552 removed a major rival on the Volga and brought Muslims and non-Slavic peoples into the tsar's state. Astrakhan followed. Expansion into Siberia accelerated from the 1580s as Cossacks and merchants moved through river corridors, collecting fur tribute and establishing forts.

This was conquest, but it was not uniform occupation. Indigenous peoples resisted, bargained, migrated and adapted. Epidemic disease and tribute demands could be devastating. The state depended heavily on frontier intermediaries because its own administrative reach was thin.

The frontier also generated its own societies. Cossack communities combined farming, raiding, military service and local autonomy. Merchants cared about fur and routes more than uniform administration. Orthodox

missions sometimes followed conquest but conversion was uneven. The empire grew through a patchwork of bargains long before officials could imagine one standard province stretching to the Pacific.

Romanov recovery and the service state

The Riurikid dynasty ended in 1598. A sequence of famine, disputed succession, rebellion and foreign intervention plunged the state into the Time of Troubles. An assembly in 1613 selected Michael Romanov, founding the dynasty that remained on the throne for the next three centuries.

The seventeenth-century state rebuilt military and fiscal capacity while tightening peasant dependence. The 1649 law code entrenched serfdom by making the pursuit of runaway peasants effectively permanent. Noble service, landlord power and peasant obligation became part of the machinery through which the centre supported war and administration.

For peasants, this was lived through household and village rather than through constitutional theory. The commune helped allocate land and taxes, mediated disputes and could restrain movement. Landlords varied from resident managers to distant owners. Rural life contained markets, seasonal migration, family strategies and local custom alongside legal subordination. The state was powerful because it could make these structures carry obligations, not because an official stood in every field.

At the same time, the empire absorbed new Ukrainian territories after the Cossack revolt against Polish-Lithuanian rule and the 1654 Pereiaslav agreement. The political meaning of that agreement remains contested because the parties understood the relationship differently and because later Russian rule transformed it. What matters here is that Moscow's western expansion brought it into deeper competition with Poland-Lithuania and tied the history of Ukraine more closely to the Russian state without erasing Ukrainian institutions or identity.

Peter, Catherine and imperial competition

Peter I turned state-building into emergency mobilisation. The Great Northern War against Sweden began badly with defeat at Narva. Peter responded by expanding the army, creating a navy, reorganising taxation and administration, and forcing elite service. Victory gave Russia access to the Baltic and a new capital, St Petersburg.

The visual westernisation of the elite was memorable, but the institutional purpose was harder. Russia needed soldiers, money, technical expertise and a bureaucracy capable of sustaining great-power war. The reforms made the empire more formidable and placed heavier demands on society.

Catherine II extended the pattern. She corresponded with Enlightenment thinkers and presented herself as a reforming monarch, yet her reign also deepened noble privilege and imperial expansion. The Pugachev rebellion of 1773 to 1775, drawing in Cossacks, peasants and frontier peoples, terrified the government. Catherine strengthened provincial administration afterwards rather than weakening autocracy.

Her reign also brought the annexation of Crimea in 1783 and major gains from the partitions of Poland. The empire now governed still more peoples with different legal, religious and social arrangements. Uniformity was neither possible nor always desired. Local privilege could be useful when it kept elites loyal.

Nineteenth-century empire, society and reform

Napoleon's invasion in 1812 became a defining national memory, but the familiar picture of winter defeating France is incomplete. The Grande Armée had already been damaged by distance, supply failure, disease, combat and the Russian strategy of retreat before the worst cold. Moscow burned, French supply collapsed and the retreat turned catastrophic.

Victory increased Russia's prestige while sharpening a domestic question. Officers who had marched through Europe returned with political ideas that clashed with autocracy. The failed Decembrist revolt of 1825 was small, but

it revealed a new type of elite opposition.

Nicholas I answered with censorship, police surveillance and the official formula of Orthodoxy, Autocracy and Nationality. Yet the empire's own needs kept generating change. Universities and professional life expanded. Writers made Russian literature a place where social and moral criticism could operate with unusual force. Pushkin, Gogol, Turgenev, Tolstoy and Dostoevsky were not a parallel decorative culture. Literature became one of the arenas in which a society with restricted formal politics argued about authority, class, faith and Europe.

The Crimean War then exposed military and administrative weakness. Alexander II's Great Reforms followed. Emancipation, new courts, zemstvos and military reform altered daily life and public institutions. Railways accelerated movement across the empire. Industrialisation brought workers into cities and widened the gulf between a modernising society and a monarchy determined to keep sovereign power above representative politics.

Meanwhile the empire kept expanding. The Caucasian War ended with Russian victory and mass displacement, including the expulsion of large numbers of Circassians into the Ottoman Empire. Central Asian khanates were conquered or turned into protectorates. Imperial rule brought railways, markets and administrative change alongside coercion, land pressure and racialised hierarchy.

By the end of the century, the empire was both more integrated and more politically combustible. Russian nationalism, Polish nationalism, Ukrainian cultural activism, Jewish political movements, Muslim reform, Armenian and Georgian politics, socialism and liberalism all developed inside the same state.

Industrialisation made the change visible. St Petersburg and Moscow drew migrants into factories where clocks and foremen replaced part of the seasonal rhythm of village life. Baku became an oil city of global importance and a meeting place of Armenian, Azerbaijani, Russian and foreign capital.

The Donbas became a major coal and industrial region. Economic modernisation was therefore imperial as well as Russian, and many of the social conflicts that exploded in 1905 and 1917 were generated far from the old rural centre.

1905, war and the end of the monarchy

Defeat by Japan in 1904 and 1905 produced another shock. Protest spread after troops fired on a peaceful march in St Petersburg on Bloody Sunday. Workers formed soviets, peasants attacked estates and national movements pressed their demands. Nicholas II conceded the October Manifesto and a Duma.

The new system never settled. The Duma mattered, parties organised and public debate widened, but the monarchy retained enormous power and altered electoral rules when it disliked the result. Prime minister Pyotr Stolypin combined agrarian reform with repression. Russia entered the First World War with a more modern economy than the caricature suggests and a political system that still lacked deep trust.

War broke it. Military losses, inflation, transport failures and food shortages discredited the government. Nicholas II took personal command of the army, tying the monarchy still more closely to failure. In February 1917, strikes and mutiny in Petrograd brought the dynasty down.

The detailed contest that followed belongs elsewhere. By October, the Bolsheviks had seized power in the capital. Civil war then determined whether their government would survive and what territory it would control.

Party rule, planning and terror

The Bolshevik victory created a one-party state over much of the former empire. The New Economic Policy briefly restored limited private trade after the devastation of civil war. Lenin's death in 1924 opened the succession struggle that Stalin won.

From the end of the 1920s, Stalin forced agriculture into collective farms and channelled resources into heavy industry. The policy produced factories,

mines and cities at extraordinary speed. It also produced mass coercion, deportation and famine.

The transformation reached private life. Millions moved from villages to industrial towns. Education expanded. Women entered paid work in large numbers, though domestic burdens remained heavily gendered. Religion was persecuted. Housing shortages produced communal apartments in major cities, where unrelated families shared kitchens and bathrooms. The state was no abstraction. It arrived through work assignments, ration cards, schools, passport rules and the knock of the security police.

The Great Terror then devoured parts of the system itself. Officials, officers and party members who had enforced earlier campaigns could become enemies overnight. The precise totals depend on category, but archival evidence shows hundreds of thousands of executions during the mass operations of 1937 and 1938 and far more people passing through prisons, camps, exile and forced labour across the Stalin period.

Terror also changed information. Confessions could be manufactured because investigators were rewarded for uncovering enemies. Local officials learned that failure might be interpreted as sabotage. The leadership received reports produced inside the incentives it had created. This does not mean Stalin was ignorant of repression. It means a system designed to expose hidden enemies could manufacture the evidence proving that hidden enemies were everywhere.

War, recovery and superpower

Germany's 1941 invasion brought devastation on a different scale. The Soviet victory rested on soldiers, industrial relocation, allied material aid, enormous sacrifice and the failure of German strategy. The eastern front destroyed the bulk of Nazi Germany's land forces and became decisive to the outcome of the European war.

After 1945, the Soviet Union dominated eastern Europe and became one pole of the Cold War. Nuclear weapons changed security permanently. The state invested heavily in education, engineering and science. Gagarin's

spaceflight offered a clean symbol of Soviet modernity.

Stalin died in 1953. Nikita Khrushchev denounced parts of his terror, released prisoners and attempted economic reforms. Leonid Brezhnev later provided stability that many citizens valued, but his era became associated with bureaucratic inertia and slower growth.

The Soviet social contract was never one thing. Citizens received employment security, education, health care and subsidised housing, while facing shortages, censorship and limits on mobility and political choice. National republics developed their own institutions and elites within the union. Russian language and personnel had privileged positions, but Soviet identity did not erase national identities underneath it.

The ordinary texture matters because it explains why the system could outlive Stalin by nearly four decades. For many families, the Soviet state was the provider of a first university place, a technical profession or a separate apartment. A dacha garden, a holiday entitlement or access to a workplace clinic existed beside queues and political conformity. Citizens could mock official language, use personal connections and distrust the party while still valuing parts of the social order. Collapse later removed both restrictions and securities together.

Gorbachev, republican sovereignty and 1991

Gorbachev became general secretary in 1985 believing the system could be repaired. *Perestroika* sought economic restructuring. *Glasnost* widened public discussion. Competitive elements entered elections. The reforms were intended to rescue socialism, but they loosened controls that had held together party authority, economic coordination and the union itself.

Old grievances became speakable. Baltic independence movements grew. Violence erupted in parts of the Caucasus. Russian, Ukrainian and other republican leaders discovered that sovereignty could be used against the union centre. Economic conditions deteriorated as old planning mechanisms weakened before new market institutions could replace them.

In August 1991, hardliners attempted a coup against Gorbachev and failed. Yeltsin, already elected president of the Russian republic, emerged stronger. On 1 December, Ukrainians voted overwhelmingly for independence. Days later the leaders of Russia, Ukraine and Belarus declared that the Soviet Union no longer existed and created the Commonwealth of Independent States.

The union formally ended later that month. The Russian Federation inherited the Soviet seat on the UN Security Council and most of the central institutions and nuclear responsibilities, but it was legally and politically a different state.

The transition also produced a problem of memory. Russians had been the largest nationality in the union and Russia its largest republic, yet many central Soviet institutions had never been experienced as specifically Russian. Suddenly there was a Russian presidency, Russian borders and a Russian foreign policy inside a territory smaller than any tsarist empire since the eighteenth century. The new state had to invent a post-Soviet national story while millions of Russian speakers lived in neighbouring states that possessed their own national projects.

From Yeltsin to Putin

The first post-Soviet decade combined political opening with social dislocation. Markets appeared quickly. Institutions did not. Privatisation, inflation and weak law enforcement made ownership uncertain and concentrated wealth. The state fought separatism in Chechnya with devastating force.

Putin's promise was less a new ideology than a restoration of order and state capacity. The government benefited from energy revenues and rebuilt federal fiscal control. It reasserted authority over governors and oligarchs, strengthened security institutions and narrowed independent national media.

The political system became increasingly personalist. Elections continued, but the field around them changed through control of television, candidate

access, law and repression. Comparative democracy datasets record a steep long-term decline in electoral competition and liberal constraints during the Putin era.

Foreign policy also hardened. NATO enlargement, wars in the former Yugoslavia, the colour revolutions, the 2008 Bucharest summit declaration on Ukraine and Georgia, the 2014 Ukrainian revolution and long-standing Russian beliefs about great-power status all formed part of the security context. Context is not the same as legal or moral entitlement. Russia chose to annex Crimea in 2014 and launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

By 2026, the war had lasted more than four years. Sanctions redirected parts of Russian trade, especially energy, towards Asia. The economy remained industrial and resource-rich, but war spending and external restrictions changed its composition. The political system became more repressive at home.

The war also made the old mobilisation question immediate again. The state expanded defence production, recruitment and patriotic education while trying to protect normal life in major cities from the full costs of war. The ability to sustain that combination is a present political fact, but not a verdict on long-term strength. Wartime output can rise while demographic pressure, technological restriction, fiscal choices and succession risk accumulate underneath it.

The historical line that matters is not an unbroken march from Ivan the Terrible to Putin. It is the repeated problem of governments trying to reconcile territorial ambition, security, diversity and control, each with different institutions and ideologies. Sometimes the centre acquired new tools. Sometimes society acquired new expectations. Sometimes the territory itself changed.

That is also why the break points matter as much as the continuities. 1861 ended a legal order that had organised rural power for generations. 1917 removed dynasty, landlordism and plural politics in quick succession. 1953

reduced mass terror without ending one-party rule. 1991 destroyed the union framework and private ownership returned. A history that notices only recurring centralisation cannot explain how different life became across those ruptures, or why institutions inherited from one order sometimes became weapons against the next.

How we know

The evidence changes with the period. Medieval Rus' is reconstructed from chronicles, archaeology and foreign sources whose dates and agendas require caution. Muscovite and imperial history becomes richer through law codes, church records, military accounts, censuses, estate archives and a huge bureaucratic paper trail. Soviet history changed dramatically after archives opened in the 1990s, allowing firmer estimates of repression and closer study of how the party-state worked.

The record is still uneven. Governments document what they care about and hide what they fear. Imperial categories can freeze fluid identities. Soviet statistics can be technically sophisticated and politically manipulated at the same time. Current Russian wartime information is heavily contested, and exact battlefield or casualty figures change too quickly to carry the argument of this book.

The safest method is to separate what is securely established from what depends on interpretation, and to avoid turning one regime's categories into timeless facts about the people it ruled.

What People Get Wrong

"Russia began in Moscow"

It did not. Moscow is a later political centre within a much older and shared East Slavic history. Kyivan Rus' was centred on Kyiv and other towns across lands now divided among several states. After fragmentation and Mongol conquest, different successor centres developed in different directions.

Muscovy became one of the most successful claimants to Rus' inheritance,

but success in later state-building does not grant exclusive ownership of the medieval past. Ukrainian, Belarusian and Russian histories all intersect with Rus'.

The correction matters because modern political claims often move silently from historical connection to modern sovereignty. A shared past can explain why identities overlap. It does not decide which state has the right to rule another in the present.

The myth became persuasive because Moscow later became the centre of the strongest surviving East Slavic state and because imperial and Soviet histories often narrated earlier Rus' backwards from that outcome. The political winner acquired the cleanest genealogy. Modern scholarship instead treats Rus' as an inheritance with several later claimants.

"Geography made Russian autocracy inevitable"

Geography increased certain costs. Distance made communication slower. Open plains exposed some frontiers. Sparse settlement made administration expensive. Rivers shaped trade and conquest. None of that mechanically produced autocracy.

Political choices converted pressure into institutions. Muscovy used service elites and coercion. Peter expanded bureaucracy. The Soviet Union created a party hierarchy and planned economy. The post-Soviet federation adopted a strong presidency, then became more centralised under Putin. These were different systems.

The deterministic story survives because it sounds scientific while excusing agency. If geography made the outcome inevitable, rulers become weather. The better model is incentives and constraints: size makes some problems harder, but there is still more than one way to solve them.

It also mistakes persistence for inevitability. Once a state has invested in central institutions, elite careers and security doctrines, those structures can reproduce themselves. That is path dependence, not geographical fate. Human choices made earlier alter the menu available later.

"The tsars ruled a Russian nation-state"

The Romanov Empire was not a nation-state with a few minorities. It was a multilingual empire in which Great Russian speakers were only about 44 per cent of the population in the 1897 census category of native language.

Poles, Finns, Jews, Tatars, Ukrainians, peoples of the Caucasus, Central Asians, Siberian peoples and many others lived under different combinations of law, privilege and coercion. Russian nationalism grew inside this empire rather than preceding it in a settled form.

The correction matters because it explains why borders and identity became entangled. The state did not first define a Russian national core and then add colonies neatly outside it. Nation-building and imperial rule developed together.

The nation-state image became persuasive because twentieth-century maps place every country inside a coloured border and because the Russian Federation today has a clear international legal boundary. Looking backwards through that map makes older imperial diversity disappear. The 1897 census is a useful corrective precisely because it shows how poorly the modern picture fits the old empire.

"Napoleon and Hitler were defeated by the winter"

Winter hurt both invasions. It did not defeat either army by itself.

Napoleon's 1812 campaign was already disintegrating through long supply lines, disease, combat, horse losses and the Russian refusal to offer the decisive political settlement he wanted. The retreat from Moscow then met worsening weather and turned into catastrophe.

Hitler's invasion in 1941 failed for different reasons: Soviet resistance, German logistical overreach, immense distances, strategic errors, industrial mobilisation and the ability of the Soviet state to raise new armies. Mud and cold intensified German problems, especially because equipment and clothing were inadequate, but the Red Army was fighting in the same

climate.

The myth survives because weather is vivid, memorable, dramatic, visually obvious, easy to remember and comfortably impersonal to direct human responsibility. It removes strategy, logistics and human agency from the explanation. It also compresses two distinct wars into one national fairy tale in which foreign invaders make the same mistake and nature rescues Russia each time.

It also flatters the idea of Russia as a natural fortress. In both wars, human decisions made distance lethal: scorched resources, retreat, transport limits, destroyed railways, partisan action, military resistance and failed enemy planning. Climate mattered because armies had already been placed in conditions where cold could finish what logistics had started.

"The Bolsheviks only rebuilt the Russian Empire in red"

They rebuilt continental control over much former imperial territory, and Moscow remained the commanding centre. That makes the comparison understandable. It is still incomplete.

The Bolsheviks destroyed the monarchy, noble landed order and old property system. They created a one-party state and a planned economy. More unexpectedly, they created a federation of named national republics and promoted non-Russian languages and cadres during the early Soviet period.

Those republics had limited sovereignty under party rule, but their borders and institutions mattered. In 1991 they became the legal and political containers of independent states.

The correction changes the collapse story. If Soviet federalism were pure theatre, it would be hard to explain why republican institutions became such powerful tools when central authority weakened.

The myth became attractive to both critics and defenders of the USSR. Critics could describe communism as old Russian imperialism with new

symbols. Defenders could portray national separation in 1991 as an artificial betrayal of a natural whole. Both readings miss the institutional work done by seventy years of republican borders, schools, bureaucracies and political careers.

"The Soviet Union was Russia"

Russia was the largest and most powerful Soviet republic. Russian language and culture held privileged positions. Moscow was the union capital. That does not make the USSR another name for Russia.

The Soviet Union contained fifteen republics by its final decades and hundreds of recognised nationalities. Ukrainians, Belarusians, Kazakhs, Georgians, Armenians, Uzbeks, Balts and others were Soviet citizens without becoming Russians. Their republics had institutions, elites and distinct historical memories.

This correction matters most when discussing the Second World War and the Soviet collapse. Calling every Soviet soldier Russian erases millions of non-Russians. Describing 1991 as Russia losing possessions also misses the fact that union republics possessed constitutional and political identities of their own.

The confusion persists because Russia inherited the Soviet permanent seat at the UN, much of the armed forces, the largest population and the capital. In international shorthand it often looked like the continuation state. Legally and diplomatically that continuity mattered. Historically it still does not turn the union's other peoples into Russians.

"Modern Russia is explained by Putin alone"

Putin has shaped modern Russia enormously. Major wars, constitutional changes, repression and the personalisation of power bear his decisions. Removing his agency would be bad history.

Making him the whole explanation is bad history too. He inherited the 1993 constitution, a traumatised memory of the 1990s, weak courts, oligarchic wealth, a security bureaucracy, a federal system already under strain and a

society negotiating the loss of superpower status. Rising energy revenues gave his government opportunities that Yeltsin had not possessed.

He then changed those conditions, often deliberately, in ways that strengthened the presidency and narrowed alternatives. The result is interaction, not destiny: institutions shaped the leader, and the leader reshaped the institutions.

That distinction matters for the future. A successor would inherit more than a chair. The deeper question is whether Russia can build durable rules for succession, federal bargaining and political correction that do not depend on the preferences of one centre.

Personalisation also changes how policy error works. When institutions compete openly, a bad decision can be challenged by courts, legislatures, media, regions or rivals inside government. When those channels weaken, correction depends more heavily on the leader recognising the mistake or on private elite pressure. The system may look calmer while becoming more dependent on judgement at the top.

Use It

Separate state, nation and empire

Whenever a government talks about historical unity, ask which relationship is being claimed. Shared language is cultural. Citizenship is legal. State borders are political. Empire is a relationship of unequal rule. Civilisation is a looser historical idea. They can overlap without becoming interchangeable.

This distinction is useful far beyond Russia. Many conflicts become harder to think about when a medieval kingdom, modern ethnic group and current sovereign state are treated as the same object. Historical connection can be real and politically meaningful while still failing to confer a right of rule.

A practical test is to rewrite the claim in precise nouns. Instead of saying two peoples are historically one, ask whether they share language, ancestry, church institutions, citizenship or political loyalty. The vaguer the original

claim, the more revealing the rewrite becomes.

Measure reach, not rhetoric

A state can sound absolute while depending on private intermediaries. It can also look bureaucratically dense while allowing local rules to be bent constantly.

Ask what the centre can observe, tax, enforce and correct. Who collects the revenue? Who supplies the soldiers? Who owns the information? How expensive is it to disobey? How quickly can a mistaken order be reversed?

This separates coercive spectacle from administrative capacity. Imperial Russia often relied on landlords and local elites. The Soviet state penetrated society far more deeply, yet still suffered from distorted reporting. Modern Russia can execute high-priority decisions while leaving other institutions uneven.

The same lens prevents a common analytical mistake: assuming repression proves competence everywhere else. A security service may monitor dissidents effectively while a health system, local council or procurement chain performs poorly. States are bundles of different capacities, not single overall scores on one simple scale.

Follow the bargain beneath centralisation

Centralisation is rarely sold as centralisation. It is sold as an answer to a problem: invasion, disorder, oligarchy, separatism, corruption, terrorism or economic failure.

The useful question is what social bargain makes the concentration of power acceptable. Peter demanded service in return for imperial strength. Soviet citizens accepted many restrictions inside a system promising employment, education, welfare and superpower security. Putin's early legitimacy was tied partly to the contrast between the stability of the 2000s and the disorder associated with the 1990s.

Power becomes easier to understand when you identify the problem it

claims to solve and the benefit its supporters believe they receive.

Then ask whether the bargain is changing. Stability can lose value if living standards stagnate. National pride can rise in importance when economic performance weakens. Wartime security can justify controls that would have been harder to sell in peace. Legitimacy is therefore dynamic, not a fixed national preference for one style of rule.

Distinguish mobilisation from adaptability

Some systems are excellent at concentrating resources on a priority. That does not make them equally good at changing priorities.

The Soviet Union could build tanks, rockets and steelworks at immense scale. It had more difficulty allowing failing enterprises to disappear, prices to transmit scarcity or officials to admit that a plan was wrong. The distinction is between mobilisation and adaptation.

Use it when judging companies, militaries and governments. The ability to execute one clear objective can hide weakness in learning. A system that can force an answer may be poor at discovering a better question.

This is especially useful in crises. Emergency command often deserves temporary priority because delay is costly. The danger comes when the emergency structure becomes the normal structure and no mechanism exists for returning authority, testing assumptions or admitting that the original threat has changed.

Treat memory as infrastructure

Historical memory is not decoration laid over politics after the fact. It can shape what citizens fear, what rulers can justify and which borders feel natural or intolerable.

In Russia, the Second World War carries enormous moral weight because the losses were enormous and victory was real. The Soviet collapse can be remembered as liberation, catastrophe or both depending on who is speaking. Imperial history can be narrated as expansion, state-building,

colonisation or a mixture.

When a political argument invokes history, ask what work the memory is doing now. Is it explaining? Mourning? Ranking victims? Defining belonging? Claiming territory? Making dissent look like betrayal? The past is often most powerful when it supplies the categories in which current choices are presented.

Memory also has custodians. Schools, monuments, television, churches, veterans' organisations and family stories can reinforce or contest an official account. A state may control the loudest version without controlling every private memory. That gap can remain politically quiet for years and then matter suddenly when a crisis reopens the past.

One final test is to compare the memory with the institution it is being used to defend. A victory in a war may justify honouring sacrifice without proving that current borders are sacred. A past period of disorder may justify concern about state weakness without proving that independent media cause chaos. Historical analogy becomes most dangerous when the emotional truth of the memory is used to bypass the institutional question directly in front of you right now. Ask what has changed since the remembered event, which actors are missing from the analogy, and whether the proposed lesson would still make sense without the patriotic story attached to it.

The limits

No single model explains Russia. Geography matters without dictating politics. Empire matters without making every Russian institution imperial. Orthodox Christianity shaped identity but never determined a single political programme. Marxism-Leninism transformed society but did not erase older languages, borders or administrative habits. Energy wealth helped the post-Soviet state but cannot explain its whole political order.

The country also contains lives that escape the state-centred story. Families, workplaces, literature, religion, migration, consumer life, local identities and private moral worlds do not reduce to what rulers wanted. A

one-hour book necessarily gives politics unusual weight because the subtitle promises empire, revolution and their shadow.

Most important, explanation does not remove responsibility. A government can believe its security concerns and still use them to rationalise aggression. Historical grievance can be genuine and still fail to create legal entitlement. Institutions shape leaders without making their choices unavoidable.

The model also has a selection bias towards the centre because empires leave archives and rulers leave decisions. Millions of people experienced Russian and Soviet history through farming, migration, worship, military service, family life and work rather than grand strategy. Those experiences sometimes supported the state, sometimes evaded it and sometimes transformed it from below. Any account that makes ordinary people look like raw material has reproduced the perspective of the rulers it is trying to explain.

The one thing to keep

Keep one distinction: command is not the same as strength.

Russian history contains rulers who could order immense things. Peter could remake elite service. Stalin could move factories and populations. The Soviet state could build a nuclear superpower. Putin could bring governors, national television and major political competition under far tighter control than in the 1990s.

Each achievement can look like proof that concentration itself creates capacity. Sometimes it does, especially when the task is clear and the centre can impose a priority. The harder test comes later: can the system learn, bargain, replace leaders and correct mistakes without a crisis?

That is where the long shadow changes shape. The problem is not that Russia has always had one kind of ruler. It is that repeated crises made concentrated authority attractive, while concentrated authority repeatedly weakened some of the institutions that make crisis less necessary next time.

The map is still large. The state is no longer the empire of 1897 or the union of 1991. The permanent question is whether power can become institutional enough that Russia does not have to choose, again, between a centre that cannot govern and a centre that cannot be answered.

Terms

Rus'. The medieval East Slavic polity and cultural world associated with Kyiv, Novgorod and other centres. It is a shared historical inheritance claimed by Russians, Ukrainians and Belarusians, not the same thing as the modern Russian state.

Muscovy. The conventional English term for the Moscow-centred principality and tsardom before the Russian imperial title became standard. It helps distinguish early Moscow rule from later Russia.

Tsar. A title derived from Caesar, used by Russian rulers from Ivan IV. It signalled sovereign and imperial status rather than merely kingship.

Autocracy. In imperial Russia, the doctrine that the tsar held undivided sovereign authority. It describes the constitutional principle, not an all-capable bureaucracy.

Boyar. A member of the high aristocracy in medieval and early Muscovite Russia. Boyars sat close to dynastic power and could be formidable political actors. Their autonomy was gradually reduced as rulers expanded service institutions.

Service nobility. Landholding elites whose status was tied to service to the ruler, especially military and administrative service. Their relationship with peasants became central to state extraction.

Serfdom. A legal system tying peasants to estates and landlords, restricting movement and giving landlords extensive authority. It was abolished in 1861.

Orthodoxy. Eastern Orthodox Christianity. The Russian Orthodox Church shaped monarchy, ritual, culture and ideas of national belonging.

Church-state relations changed sharply across imperial, Soviet and post-Soviet periods, including severe Soviet persecution and a later public revival.

Cossack. Members of frontier military communities, especially in the steppe borderlands. Cossacks could resist the state, bargain with it or serve imperial expansion depending on period and place.

Yasak. Tribute, often paid in furs, demanded from many Indigenous peoples during Russian expansion across Siberia. It reveals the thin, extractive character of early frontier rule.

Russification. Policies encouraging or imposing Russian language, culture, administration or Orthodoxy among non-Russian populations. Its intensity and methods varied greatly by period and region.

Zemstvo. An elected local-government institution created in the reforms of Alexander II. Zemstvos developed schools, health care and roads while remaining subordinate to central authority.

Intelligentsia. Educated people who understood public thought and criticism as a moral vocation. The term carried stronger social and ethical meaning than the English word intellectual. Restricted formal politics made literature and intellectual life unusually political.

Duma. A representative assembly. The State Duma created after the 1905 Revolution was Russia's first national elected legislature, though the monarchy retained major powers. The modern Russian parliament also has a State Duma, but it belongs to a different constitutional system.

Soviet. A Russian word meaning council. Workers' and soldiers' councils became important during the revolutions, and the term later gave its name to the Soviet state.

Bolshevik. Lenin's revolutionary faction within Russian socialism. It took control of the central government in late 1917 and developed into the Communist Party that monopolised Soviet political power.

Korenizatsiia. Early Soviet indigenisation policies that promoted non-Russian languages, institutions and local cadres within the union republics and autonomous territories.

Collectivisation. The forced reorganisation of peasant agriculture into collective and state farms from the late 1920s. It enabled tighter state extraction and caused immense social disruption and famine.

Gulag. The Soviet forced-labour camp administration and, by extension, the wider camp system. Millions passed through forced labour, imprisonment or exile under Stalin.

Great Patriotic War. The Soviet and later Russian name for the 1941 to 1945 struggle with Nazi Germany. It is the dominant public frame for remembering wartime sacrifice, destruction and victory.

Nomenklatura. The system of politically controlled appointments to important Soviet posts and, more loosely, the officials who occupied them. Advancement depended on party trust as well as technical competence, making personnel management a central tool of rule.

Samizdat. Texts copied and circulated privately to evade Soviet censorship. The practice ranged from literature to political and religious dissent. Its physical form, often carbon copies passed hand to hand, made readers themselves part of the wider distribution network.

Glasnost. Gorbachev's policy of greater openness and public discussion. It exposed suppressed history and current failure while weakening the party's monopoly over information.

Perestroika. Gorbachev's attempt to restructure the Soviet economy and political system. Reform disrupted old mechanisms faster than stable replacements emerged.

Union republic. One of the constituent national republics of the USSR. By the end there were fifteen, each with territory and institutions that became important in 1991.

Oligarch. In post-Soviet usage, a business magnate whose wealth gave major political influence, especially during the privatisations and weak-state conditions of the 1990s.

Siloviki. Officials and power networks associated with the security services, military, police and related institutions. They became especially influential under Putin.

Federal subject. One of the territorial units of the Russian Federation, including republics, regions, territories and other categories. Some republics are associated with titular nationalities and possess their own constitutions and official languages. Their formal federal status coexists with strong central control.

Near abroad. A Russian political term for the other former Soviet republics. The phrase distinguishes them from ordinary foreign countries and often implies that these independent states form a special zone of Russian security or political interest.

Sovereign democracy. A phrase associated with the Putin era arguing that Russia's political system should be judged as an independent national model resistant to external political standards or intervention.

Go Deeper

For a brisk overview: Mark Galeotti, *A Short History of Russia* (2020).

This compact survey runs from medieval origins to the Putin period while repeatedly testing the stories Russians and outsiders tell about the country. Read it next if you want the chronology reinforced without another long volume. Its speed means social and regional histories receive less space than they deserve, but it is accessible and clear. Galeotti also writes with enough scepticism about national myths to stop the chronology hardening into destiny. Start here if you want one more compact account before moving to heavier scholarship.

For empire and Russian identity: Geoffrey Hosking, *Russia: People and Empire, 1552-1917*, enlarged edition (1998). Hosking examines the

cost of building an empire before a settled civic nation had formed and asks what that did to Russian identity and political life. The argument is older than some recent scholarship, but it remains a powerful way to think about the tension between empire and nation. Its focus on the costs of empire to Russian civic development directly challenges triumphal stories of expansion. Read it critically beside newer work on non-Russian agency and differentiated imperial rule.

For the end of the Soviet Union: Serhii Plokhy, *The Last Empire: The Final Days of the Soviet Union* (2014). Plokhy reconstructs 1991 through the decisions of republican leaders, especially in Russia and Ukraine, and resists the simple story that the United States defeated the Soviet Union from outside. It is the best follow-on for understanding why institutions created inside the USSR became instruments of its dissolution. The book is detailed without becoming a full history of the late Soviet period, so it is especially useful after a broad survey.

For contemporary political power: Timothy Frye, *Weak Strongman: The Limits of Power in Putin's Russia* (2021). Frye explains how personalist rule depends on institutions, elites, information and public expectations rather than treating Putin as an all-powerful individual. It is particularly useful for understanding why apparent political dominance can coexist with constraints, bargaining and uncertainty underneath. The book predates the full-scale invasion of 2022, so use it for the political model rather than current-war coverage. Pair it with current sources for developments after publication. Frye's comparative approach is useful because it prevents Russian politics becoming exotic: patronage, information problems and leader dependence are features of personalist systems elsewhere too, which makes the Russian case easier to analyse without treating it as uniquely mysterious. The comparison is a useful antidote to explanations that rely too heavily on national character.

Notes and Sources

The Whole Thing in One Page and Why You Should Care

The central argument distinguishes geography from political determinism and territorial expansion from administrative consolidation. It draws especially on Valerie Kivelson and Ronald Suny's work on empire, Geoffrey Hosking on people and empire, and Brian Taylor and Timothy Frye on modern state capacity and personalist rule.

The 1897 census used native language rather than ethnicity in the current sense. Great Russian speakers made up roughly 44 per cent of the population. The figure is used only to establish that the empire was not an ethnic Russian majority state in a simple modern national sense.

The World Bank reports a Russian Federation population of 143,513,328 for 2025. The U.S. Energy Information Administration's 2025 country analysis describes Russia as one of the world's leading producers of crude oil, condensate and dry natural gas, with trade shifting towards Asia after 2022. SIPRI's 2026 nuclear-force estimates show Russia and the United States holding by far the largest national nuclear inventories.

Rus', Muscovy and imperial expansion

The treatment of Kyivan Rus' follows standard modern scholarship in rejecting its presentation as the childhood of a single modern nation. The Mongol conquest and Moscow's rise are treated through Charles Halperin, Janet Martin and broader syntheses. The conquest of Kazan occurred in 1552 and Astrakhan in 1556. Siberian expansion relied heavily on river routes, Cossacks, merchants, tribute and local intermediaries.

The discussion of Indigenous Siberian peoples avoids treating Russian cartographic claims as complete local control. *Yasak* and frontier coercion are used to show how early imperial reach could remain thin.

Serfdom, Peter and Catherine

The 1649 law code entrenched the legal pursuit of runaway peasants and is a major landmark in the consolidation of serfdom. Peter's reforms are treated as wartime state-building rather than a general conversion to western liberalism. Catherine annexed Crimea in 1783. The Pugachev rebellion ran from 1773 to 1775.

Imperial governance varied markedly by region. Finland, Poland, the Baltic provinces, Muslim regions and Central Asia cannot be collapsed into one administrative model. Kivelson and Suny are especially useful on the empire's differentiated rule.

Reform, nationalism and the road to 1917

The emancipation of the serfs was proclaimed in 1861. The zemstvo and judicial reforms followed during the 1860s. The Crimean War is treated as a major stimulus to reform without claiming it was the sole cause.

The 1897 census categories and late imperial national movements require caution because language, religion, estate and political identity did not map cleanly onto current ethnic labels. The book therefore avoids converting imperial administrative categories into timeless national populations.

The Russian Revolution of 1905 followed military defeat by Japan and mass unrest. The October Manifesto created new representative commitments, but the Fundamental Laws and later electoral changes preserved substantial monarchical power.

Soviet federalism, famine and repression

The USSR was founded in 1922. Early *korenizatsiia* promoted local languages and cadres before later Stalinist centralisation and Russification changed the balance. Terry Martin and Francine Hirsch are central to the interpretation of the Soviet Union as both a centralised party-state and a system that institutionalised national territories.

Collectivisation began at the end of the 1920s. The Holodomor refers

specifically to the catastrophic famine in Soviet Ukraine and is recognised as genocide by Ukraine and many other states. Scholarly debate continues over intention, all-Union policy and the distribution of mortality. Kazakhstan experienced a distinct famine catastrophe tied to forced settlement and the destruction of pastoral herds. Anne Applebaum and Sarah Cameron are used to keep these histories separate.

Archival research after the Soviet collapse established far firmer evidence for Stalinist repression. The book avoids using one number as a total for all forms of terror, imprisonment, deportation and forced labour.

War, superpower and Soviet society

The official post-Soviet demographic estimate of Soviet Second World War losses is roughly 26.6 million people, military and civilian. The figure is a reconstruction rather than a literal count and remains subject to specialist debate over categories.

The account of 1941 to 1945 treats Soviet victory as a combination of military resistance, industrial relocation, mobilisation, allied material support and German strategic failure. Weather is an intensifier, not a sufficient cause.

The treatment of post-war Soviet society draws on social histories that emphasise housing, work, education, consumption and informal networks as well as high politics. The book avoids describing the post-Stalin decades as if mass terror continued unchanged.

1991 and the Russian Federation

Ukraine's referendum of 1 December 1991 produced an overwhelming majority for independence across the republic. The Belavezha agreements signed by Russia, Ukraine and Belarus followed later that month. Serhii Plokhy's *The Last Empire* is the principal source for the final political sequence and the role of republican sovereignty.

The 1993 confrontation between President Yeltsin and parliament ended in armed conflict and the adoption of a constitution with a powerful presidency.

Modern analysis of the Putin system draws on Timothy Frye, Henry Hale, Brian Taylor and Gulnaz Sharafutdinova.

Current Russia, Crimea and the war against Ukraine

The official Kremlin website confirms that Vladimir Putin began another presidential term on 7 May 2024 and remained president in August 2026. V-Dem's *Democracy Report 2026* and dataset provide comparative evidence for Russia's low electoral-democracy scores and continuing concentration of political power. These are academic measurements, not the Russian state's own descriptions.

United Nations General Assembly Resolution 68/262 affirmed Ukraine's territorial integrity and rejected the validity of the 2014 Crimea referendum as a basis for changing the peninsula's status. Russia launched its full-scale invasion on 24 February 2022. United Nations reporting in 2026 confirms that the war continued into its fifth calendar year. Exact current casualty and front-line figures are deliberately excluded because they change rapidly and are not required for this book's explanatory model.

Current demographic, energy, nuclear and war-status claims were rechecked on 10 August 2026 against the World Bank, U.S. Energy Information Administration, SIPRI, the United Nations, V-Dem and the official website of the President of Russia.

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