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Czars to Bolsheviks

By Stephen Kotkin

RUSSIA

A History.

Edited by Gregory L. Freeze.

Illustrated. 478 pp. New York:

Oxford University Press. $45.

A HISTORY OF TWENTIETH-CENTURY RUSSIA

By Robert Service.

Illustrated. 654 pp. Cambridge, Mass.:

Harvard University Press. $29.95.

Far in the northeast of Europe, the extreme northwest of Asia, amid thick forests and bogs, lived sparse tribes of hunters, fishers and agriculturalists who spoke languages identified as Finno-Ugric and East Slavonic. Around the turn of the ninth century, via the formidable rivers between the Baltic and the Black Seas, vikings arrived in pursuit of furs and silver. Known as Rus in Arabic sources, Rhos in Byzantine ones, the Scandinavians assimilated and helped establish a series of principalities grouped around a single family and its many branches. Within less than 100 years, one of that family's offspring, Vladimir, built a hilltop palace south on the Dnieper River, at Kiev, near the livestock-herding nomads of the forested steppe and the open wild fields.

In Kiev, the pagan Vladimir considered entreaties from Jews, Muslims and Christians. Of Judaism and Islam he learned that both necessitated circumcision and prohibited the consumption of swine. Islam further banned alcohol, though it permitted a man to have a large number of women.

What to do? According to "The Tale of Bygone Years," first compiled two centuries later in the 1180's, Vladimir listened to the Muslims, "for he was fond of women and indulgence. . . . But
circumcision and abstinence from pork and wine were disagreeable to him. 'Drinking,' he said, 'is the joy of the Russes. We cannot exist without that pleasure.' Vladimir took the plunge for the Christian faith. He also availed himself of an estimated 800 concubines.

Historians tend not to accept this straightforward explanation for Vladimir's baptism. They prefer to emphasize the trade links to Constantinople, the hard bargain the Rus leader drove with a strife-torn Byzantium and his inability to conquer Muslim peoples holding the Volga. Specialists also call attention to the initial resistance by the city of Novgorod in the north and Christianity's slow diffusion beyond urban elites. But if nothing else "The Tale of Bygone Years" reminds us that the choice for the new religion, which over time brought a unifying legitimacy and participation in a wider cultural community, was not preordained. What if the decision had been for Islam? How would that have affected subsequent world history, particularly the balance of forces between European Christendom and Islam?

Such counterfactual speculations may seem idle. But they help to expose problematical assumptions. Almost without exception, "Russia" is portrayed as a continuous entity for the millennium following Vladimir's conversion around 988. Retrospectively, multiple trajectories are hidden by the imposition of a linear development. Moscow is said to supplant Kiev as the center following the incursion of the Mongols in the 13th century, as if that turnabout could be reduced to a relocation of venue. The more than two centuries when most Rus principalities were outlying provinces in the Mongol empire are related as an interlude in the long story of Russia's rise. Of course, if the once mighty Mongol steppe empire had endured, the myth-laden thousand-year cause of Kiev-Muscovy-Russia might today be a guerrilla movement, or forgotten. Vladimir's conversion would not be a grand historical event. Present-day statehood too often is allowed to tyrannize the past.

With the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the boundaries of Russia have changed (again), and presumably so have the boundaries of Russian history. Perennial assertions by Ukraine that it and not Moscow is the true successor to Kievan Rus would seem more difficult to ignore since independence. At the same time, large chunks of what had been Kievan Rus are today part of Poland and Lithuania. Belarus, too, can reasonably claim Russian and Ukrainian lands as well as Polish or Lithuanian ones. Central Asia, Bessarabia, the Caucasus, Finland, Alaska and northern California were once Russian. Should territories that have ceased to be part of Russia be included in Russian history? Would their inclusion, however compelling historically, ratify Russian imperialism? Is the current Russian Federation the proper unit of Russian history, at least for the time being? Where is Russia? What is Russia?

None of these questions is confronted in "Russia: A History," a handsomely produced, 13-author work incorporating state-of-the-art scholarship. Gregory L. Freeze, a professor at Brandeis University and the book's editor, singles out two themes: Russia's "difficult process of development"
and its "veneer of omnipotence" hiding "a huge void of operational power." Freeze asserts that he and the other authors will also "de-Russify" Russian history. But the handling of 1654, when leaders in the lands of Ukraine and Moscow reached an accord that Moscow interpreted as annexation and Ukraine as a military alliance, is perfunctory. The perspective of distinct regions, including ones that transgress political boundaries, arises in an early chapter but is not sustained. The continental contest between pastoral nomadism and settled agriculture is scarcely mentioned. The 19th-century drive into Turkestan merits a paragraph. Yet to peer forward rather than backward in time, Muscovy's eventual domination over much of the Eastern Orthodox world and Eurasia seems as improbable as the contemporaneous case of the Ottomans, a small chieftainship that became the center of the Islamic world. Even without studied comparisons, it would have been worth pointing out that the czars ruled more Turks, by language group, than did the Ottoman sultans.

Historiographical concerns born of immense erudition structure the book. We learn in the fine chapter by Nancy Shields Kollmann, a history professor at Stanford University, that the 16th-century doctrine of Moscow as the Third Rome, after Rome and Byzantium, was but a "minor theme" embraced only by marginal religious dissenters and that Ivan the Terrible's significance has been "inflated." Smashing other icons, Hans-Joachim Torke, a professor of Russian history at the Free University of Berlin, decrees that Peter the Great's reforms "hardly constituted a 'revolution,'" since the self-conscious emancipation from Old Russia occurred in the 17th century, Torke's period. Enter John T. Alexander, a history professor at the University of Kansas and a specialist in Peter the Great, who recalls that his subject was the first Russian ruler to be titled emperor, the first to travel widely at home and abroad, and the first to be buried in his new capital of St. Petersburg. Gentle turfing stirs the informative narrative.

A visual respite from the main story of the state (and its limitations) comes in the illustrations depicting icons, wooden architecture, onion domes and modernist design as well as novelists and playwrights. These cultural allusions, however, rarely appear in the body of the text, whose great strength proves to be institutional and social history (which is even better illustrated). Peasants and magnates, professionals and policemen, rebels and ministers, all receive their due, broadening the understanding of the political. In a tour-de-force elucidation of 18th-century social structure, Gary Marker, a history professor at the State University of New York at Stonybrook, observes that "in a country without a fixed law of succession, where the death of every ruler evoked a political crisis . . . it is indeed surprising that 'autocracy' should have remained firmly entrenched." In lieu of an explanation he poses a question: "What did . . . 'autocracy' really mean . . . in so vast a realm with so primitive a bureaucracy?" Here and throughout, analysis of the symbolic and cultural dimensions of politics would have been illuminating.

Factoring in geopolitics and foreign policy constitutes another of the book's achievements. In the chapter on 1890 to 1914, Reginald E. Zelnik, a professor of history at the University of California at
Berkeley, adroitly summarizes the accumulated burdens of Russia's great-power status, and the impossibility of the Romanovs renouncing it. Well-founded prudence frequently succumbed to adventurism. Humiliation in the 1905 war with Japan helped trigger domestic revolt. The autocracy survived, only to entangle the empire in an even greater war. Daniel Orlovsky, a history professor at Southern Methodist University, appropriately covers the revolutions of 1917 in connection with World War I, during which the Czar abdicated and hell broke loose. Anti-Bolshevik forces divided over the fate of the empire, most of which the Bolsheviks managed to recapture and recast. Persistent reminders of the state's limited operational capacity retain their poignancy only against the Prometheus scale of Stalinist social engineering. World War II, according to William C. Fuller Jr. of the United States Naval War College, claimed at least 25 million Soviet lives, left another 25 million homeless, leveled more than 1,700 Soviet towns and 70,000 villages and obliterated one-third of the country's wealth. Victory was followed by drought, famine, typhus and purges.

Robert Service, a professor at the University of London's School of Slavonic and East European Studies and the author of a three-volume biography of Lenin, offers "A History of Twentieth-Century Russia," in which virtually everything worth emphasizing, all significant initiative, begins not merely in the capital but with a single man, the schemer in the Kremlin, and reflects back on him. Unlike Lenin, though, Service confines himself to the Russian republic. With predictable awkwardness he admits that the 1918-1921 armed struggle "was never merely a 'Russian' civil war" after he has presented it just that way. Moreover, he aims to trace the crystallization of what he calls in chemical metaphor "the Soviet compound," which was imperial to the core. He insists that Lenin invented "the compound," as if a deserved indictment of the Bolshevik leader were a suitably complex analysis for understanding the upheavals and multifaceted changes of 20th-century Russia. By vehemently denying the Leninist myth, Service remains a captive of it, still fighting political battles that history settled in 1991.

Momentarily shifting from personalities to the social bases of politics, Service notes that "interviews with Soviet citizens who fled the U.S.S.R. in the Second World War showed that support for welfare-state policies, for strong government and for patriotic pride was robust -- and this was a sample of persons" who had voted with their feet "by leaving the country." He never explains those welfare-state policies, when they came about, or why. His account has no factories or farms, no schools or dreams, no life. Following Stalin's death, Nikita Khrushchev becomes the focus. He delighted in gifts of rifles and scientific instruments, we are told, and "would have loved handheld computer games!" Momentous postwar developments become measuring sticks for Khrushchev's popularity (he was disliked). The gathering Soviet collapse, as narrated by Service, appears to have been a problem primarily for Mikhail Gorbachev. Boris Yeltsin garners less of the author's sympathy, but Service suggests that Russia might yet astound pessimists, for in addition to renowned scientists and writers, it "produced Lenin, Khrushchev and Gorbachev." If only the vikings could have been forewarned or the original Vladimir taught the risk of liver disease.
Photo: "Lenin has died."
"England has recognized the U.S.S.R."
"100,000 workers have joined the Russian Communist Party."
So read the captions in this 1924 drawing by Boris Yefimov of a foreign capitalist reacting to the news. (FROM "A HISTORY OF TWENTIETH-CENTURY RUSSIA")