

The Eternal Russia  
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Russia is a victim of geography; everything unpleasant, violent, paranoid, and dark can be traced back to its place in the world: a place that is too far north to be able to feed itself dependably; too wide open from its beginnings to defend itself from invasion; and too big to govern without fear of disintegration unless totalitarian. In the 15th century, one capable noble prince, Michael Romanoff, was selected by all the other princes to be the Czar, a name taken from the Roman Caesars. That first Romanoff Czar was the last of his family to have been "elected." The rest were hereditary absolute monarchs, until the Russian Revolution, which, in theory, ended the monarchy. What replaced it was the Communist Dictatorship ruled by pseudo Czars, beginning with Lenin, followed by Stalin, and on through the various dictators until the collapse of the Soviet Union.

The Soviet Union, although supposedly based on the ideas of Marx and Lenin, was really a continuation of the patterns established by the Romanof family. During the revolution, all the colonies occupied by Russia, extending all the way to the Pacific across Siberia and the buffers of Poland, the Baltic states, and the Caucasus, were initially freed, but ultimately re-absorbed into the new Soviet Empire. This high-handed naked power created an underground resentment. Those freed by the collapse of the USSR fear, with good reason, being retaken.

Russian paranoia is not without cause. During the reign of Romanof Czar Peter the Great (1689-1725), Sweden, then an ambitious military power, nearly rolled them over. Peter became aware of what a backwater Russia was, and how badly it needed to catch up with the rest of Europe if it wanted to survive. He set about this modernization in exactly the same way as did later dictatorships (Kamal Ataturk in Turkey and Reza Shah Pahlavi in Iran in the 1920s and 1930s).

He weakened the Russian Orthodox Church, taking away most of their power and bringing them in under central government control. Next, he took on the powerful nobility, taking their children and giving them modern secular educations. He sought out talent, no matter the class of the young men, and sent them to Europe to learn modern languages and technologies, particularly focusing on Holland and its modernizing shipbuilding industry. He built the country's first factories to make armaments. Until then, Russia had to buy contemporary weapons from Europe. He organized and brought in European specialists to create a modern army, an army that would be loyal to the Czar, not to the old nobility. And finally, he began a process that has not yet stopped: conquering the neighborhood to the east, west, and south, as buffers against Western European invasion.

Peter's next important successor was Czarina Catherine the Great (ruled 1762 to 1796), She was the longest reigning monarch in Russia's history (much like England's Queen Elizabeth I) with nearly absolute power. Catherine opened Russia to European culture: arts, sciences, manners, and carried on erudite correspondence with Europe's best thinkers.

During the 19th century, the Russian Empire expanded to its ultimate size, embracing 11 time zones. From mid-century until the Russian Revolution, Russian artistic creativity exploded, making up for centuries of cultural sleep. Painters, musicians, authors, emerged who would be judged some of the best in the world. But for World War I, Russia might have continued to join the modern world as a major player.

Communist Russia became modern in some ways, providing universal education, industrializing, and centralizing their domination over their far-flung empire. What they did not do was to join the western world's movement to Liberal Democracy (democracy with division of powers and rule of law).

Today's Russia has a leader not much different from his czarist predecessors. His Russia looks like a modern state, but is really still, in many ways, medieval and paranoid. Ethnic Russians are in meltdown, today's population half of what it was in 1950. Putin's malevolent interference in his rival powers' democracies will not protect Russia falling victim, as always, to its geography and its history.

684 words

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