



RUSSIA: FROM MONGOL RULE TO EMPIRE



St. Basil's Cathedral on Moscow's Red Square

Unit Overview

In early times, clans of Slavs migrated from Asia and settled in small villages along the Dnieper, Volga and Don Rivers. The Vikings also established a presence there and blended with the Slavic peoples. A thriving trade developed between the Byzantine Empire and what became known as the Russians. Unified by the Mongols, the

Russians drove out their conquerors and laid the foundation of a great empire. Let's see how it all happened.

Russia and Its Geography

Traditionally, the **Ural Mountains** have marked the dividing line between Europe and Asia. Worn down by glaciers, these mountains did not prevent the Russians from building an empire that stretched from Europe to the borders of China. Their territory included three distinct climates, and each one contained different but valuable resources that the others did not possess. The northern regions were covered with forests which provided lumber for construction and fuel. The forests also were home to fur-bearing animals, such as foxes, wolves and beavers whose hides were prized by trappers and hunters. Farmers settled in the area around the modern nation of Ukraine. Here, warmer temperatures and fertile fields with good soil produced wheat, oats and other grains that were difficult to grow in the north. Further to the south, a grassy plain or **steppe** offered pasture for cattle and horses. These three climates zones were connected by a network of rivers that transported people and products. The **Dnieper River** and Europe's longest river, the **Volga**, turned into important trade routes.



Map Showing the Expansion of the Russian Empire

The Slavs and the Vikings

While the Romans still ruled Western Europe, clans of **Slavs**, who migrated from Asia, arrived in Eastern Europe. One group moved northward and built small villages along the rivers. The access to water routes encouraged these Slavs, who eventually became known as the **Russians**, to trade with one another. By the 700s, the **Vikings** or the **Varangians**, as the Slavs called them, had begun to sail their long ships on the rivers bordering the Slavic villages. They traded with the Slavs and agreed not to destroy their towns as long as they received the required tribute. The Vikings built forts along the rivers and settled with the Slavic people. Their ships carried lumber, honey, animal hides and wax on the water routes to **Constantinople**, the rich capital of the **Byzantine Empire**. The Russians gained wealth through trade and built the city of **Kiev**, which became the base for their thriving trade network.



Artist's Rendition of a Viking Ship on a Russian River

Missionaries arrived from Constantinople to convert the Russians to Christianity. They translated the Bible into Slavic language by adapting the Greek alphabet into the **Cyrillic alphabet**. This became the foundation for the written form of the Russian language and is still used today. As the number of Byzantine Christians increased, the Russians began to create their own religious art from the Byzantine style. For example, Russian churches were often designed to include the onion-shaped domes that were popular in Constantinople. The Christian church in Russia became known as the **Russian Orthodox Church**. Russian leaders controlled the church just as the Byzantine emperors had done.



Gold Onion Domes on the Bell Tower of Ivan the Great

The Mongol Invasion

As the Byzantine Empire struggled to survive, trade declined, and this negatively impacted the once prosperous city of Kiev. At the same time, Russian princes, motivated by jealousy and greed, argued bitterly among themselves. This left the city unprepared to face the Mongol invaders when they arrived in 1236. The **Golden Horde**, a Mongol force named for the color of its tents, was led by a grandson of Genghis Khan. These warriors completely destroyed Kiev and carried off its treasures. By 1241, the Mongols controlled all of Russia and continued to do so for over two hundred years.



Mongols Raiding a Russian Village in 1238

Although the Mongols could be ruthless, they were mostly interested in collecting tributes from the people whom they had conquered. As long as the required payments were made on time, Russian princes were generally permitted to rule as they pleased. The Mongols, who were Muslims, also allowed Russian Orthodox Christians to practice their faith. However, they did force what had been a group of small, independent kingdoms to live under one rule. This was the beginning of a united Russia. Mongol leadership resulted in a period of relative peace, but, at the same time, it isolated Russia from Western Europe. This became a disadvantage because the West was making rapid advancements in science and technology.

Moscow's Rise to Power

Following the Mongol conquest, the princes of **Moscow**, a small town in the northern forests, worked steadily to increase their authority. Located near the headwaters of the Don, Dnieper and Volga Rivers, the city was in perfect position to control the travel and trade of European Russia. Moscow began its rise to power under the leadership of **Ivan I**, a Russian prince who served as a tax collector for the Mongols. They appreciated his efficiency and did not object when he added several small states near Moscow to his kingdom. In 1328, the leader of the Russian Orthodox Church announced that he was moving his headquarters to Moscow. This made the city a

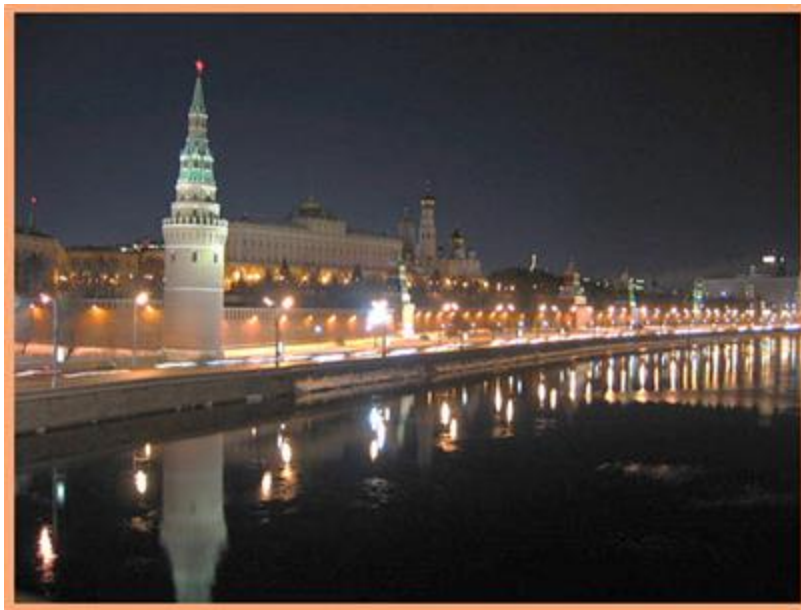
religious as well as a political center. When the Mongol Empire weakened, Moscow seized its opportunity and refused to pay the annual tribute to the Mongols. This led to the **Battle Kulikovo** in which **Prince Dimitri Donskoy** of Moscow and his Russian forces defeated the Golden Horde in 1380. Although the Mongols continued to raid Russian territory, this victory was considered the turning point in the quest to end their rule of Russia.



Statue of Prince Dimitri

Ivan the Great and Ivan the Terrible

Much of Moscow's continued success resulted from the efforts of **Ivan III** or **Ivan the Great**. During his forty-three year reign, Ivan III tripled the size of the kingdom by putting almost all of northern Russia within his realm. Under his leadership, Russia became an empire. Using the double-headed eagle as his symbol, Ivan III gave himself the title of **czar** from the Russian word for Caesar. Determined to be an absolute ruler, he refused to share power with the **boyars** or large landowners. Because he wanted his capital to be impressive, Ivan took on a number of building projects. The **Kremlin**, an ancient fort in the center of Moscow, was rebuilt with massive walls that were fifteen feet thick. Three new churches were commissioned, and a new palace was designed for the czar and his family. When he died in 1505, Ivan ruled a united Russian nation with no legal restrictions on his authority. This set a precedent for future Russian leaders.



Towers and Walls of the Kremlin: Moscow, Russia

After the death of Ivan III, his son **Vasili** became the next ruler of Russia, but his reign was brief. **Ivan IV**, grandson of Ivan the Great, was next in line for the throne, but he was only three years old. The boyars saw this as an opportunity to limit the czar's power and plotted against the young boy. In fact, there is some evidence that his mother was poisoned while trying to protect him. Ivan survived his boyhood, but he viewed the boyars with suspicion and mistrust for the rest of his life. For a few years, Ivan IV ruled successfully. He led armies that turned back the Mongol raiders, established a fair legal code and made an effort to increase trade with Europe.



Portrait of Ivan IV

Following the death of his wife, however, **Ivan IV** became increasingly unstable. His distrust of the boyars turned to violent rage. The czar organized his own agents to terrorize anyone whom he suspected of being disloyal. The ways in which he misused his authority earned him the name **Ivan the Terrible**. Because Ivan IV had killed his son and heir to the throne, the years following his death brought chaos to Russia. Disagreements over succession, foreign invasions and peasant uprising resulted in a period of Russian history remembered as the **Time of Troubles**.

At last, a group of church leaders and nobles met and named **Michael Romanov** as the new czar. This established the **Romanov Dynasty** which ruled Russia until 1917. Under the Romanov leadership, the Russians continued to expand their empire and developed as a world power. While the citizens of Western Europe began to demand limitations on the authority of their rulers, the czars governed as **autocrats** or individuals with total control over government and society. While Europe entered the Industrial Age, Russia remained an agricultural economy, and millions of peasants were still tied to the land. These factors shaped the course of Russian history and the country's interaction with the rest of the world.

What Happened Next?

For centuries, Muslim and Italian merchants controlled the exchange of goods between Asia and Europe. By the 1400s, however, European nations recognized the advantages of discovering their own trade routes. Improvements in technology and better maps inspired exploration and the world's First Global Age. Before moving on to these topics in the next unit, review the names and terms listed in the word bank below; then, complete Questions 21 through 30.