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A GEOGRAPHICAL NOTE

> Russia! what a marvelous phenomenon on the world scene! Russia — a distance of ten thousand versts * in length on a straight line from the virtually central European river, across all of Asia and the Eastern Ocean, down to the remote American lands! A distance of five thousand versts in width from Persia, one of the southern Asiatic states, to the end of the inhabited world — to the North Pole. What state can equal it? Its half? How many states can match its twentieth, its fiftieth part? . . . Russia — a state which contains all types of soil, from the warmest to the coldest, from the burning environs of Erivan to icy Lapland; which abounds in all the products required for the needs, comforts, and pleasures of life, in accordance with its present state of development — a whole world, self-sufficient, independent, absolute.
>
> POGODIN

> Loe thus I make an ende: none other news to thee
> But that the country is too cold, the people beastly bee.
>
> AMBASSADOR GEORGE TURBEVILLE
> REPORTING TO ELIZABETH I OF ENGLAND

> These poor villages,
> This barren nature —
> Native land of enduring patience,
> The land of the Russian people!
>
> TIUTCHEV

THE RUSSIAN EMPIRE, and more recently the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, represents a land mass of over eight and one-half million square miles, an area larger than the entire North American continent. To quote the leading Russian encyclopedia: "The Russian empire, stretching in the main latitudinally, occupies all of eastern Europe and northern Asia, and its surface constitutes 0.42 of the area of these two continents. The Russian empire occupies $\frac{1}{22}$ part of the entire globe and approximately $\frac{1}{6}$ part of its total land surface."

Yet, this enormous territory exhibits considerable homogeneity. Indeed, homogeneity helps to explain its size. The great bulk of Russia is an immense plain — at one time the bottom of a huge sea — extending from central and even western Europe deep into Siberia. Although numerous hills and chains of hills are scattered on its surface, they are not high enough or sufficiently concentrated to interfere appreciably with the flow of the mighty plain, the

* A *versta* is not quite two-thirds of a mile.

largest on the entire globe. The Ural mountains themselves, ancient and weather-beaten, constitute no effective barrier between Europe and Asia, which they separate; besides, a broad gap of steppe land remains between the southern tips of the Ural chain and the Caspian and Aral seas. Only in vast northeastern Siberia, beyond the Enisei river, does the elevation rise considerably and hills predominate. But this area, while of a remarkable potential, has so far remained at best on the periphery of Russian history. Impressive mountain ranges are restricted to Russian borders or, at the most, borderlands. They include the Carpathians to the southwest, the high and picturesque Caucasian chain in the south between the Black Sea and the Caspian, and the mighty Pamir, Tien Shan, and Altai ranges further east along the southern border.

Rivers flow slowly through the plain. Most of them carry their waters along a north-south axis and empty either into the Baltic and the Arctic Ocean or into the Black and the Caspian seas. In European Russia, such rivers as the Northern Dvina and the Pechora flow northward, while others, notably the Dniester, the Bug, and the larger Dnieper, Don, and Volga proceed south. The Dnieper and the Don empty into the Black Sea, the Volga into the Caspian. Siberian rivers, the huge Ob and Enisei, as well as the rapid Lena, the Indigirka, and the Kolyma, drain into the Arctic Ocean. The exception is the Amur, which flows eastward, serves during much of its course as the boundary between Russia and China, and empties into the Strait of Tartary. South of Siberia in Russian Central Asia both the Amu Daria and the Syr Daria flow northwestward to the Aral Sea, although the former at one time used to reach the Caspian. These rivers and their tributaries, together with other rivers and lakes, provide Russia with an excellent system of water communication. The low Valdai hills in northwestern European Russia represent a particularly important watershed, for it is there that the Dnieper and the Volga, as well as the Western Dvina and the Lovat, have their sources.

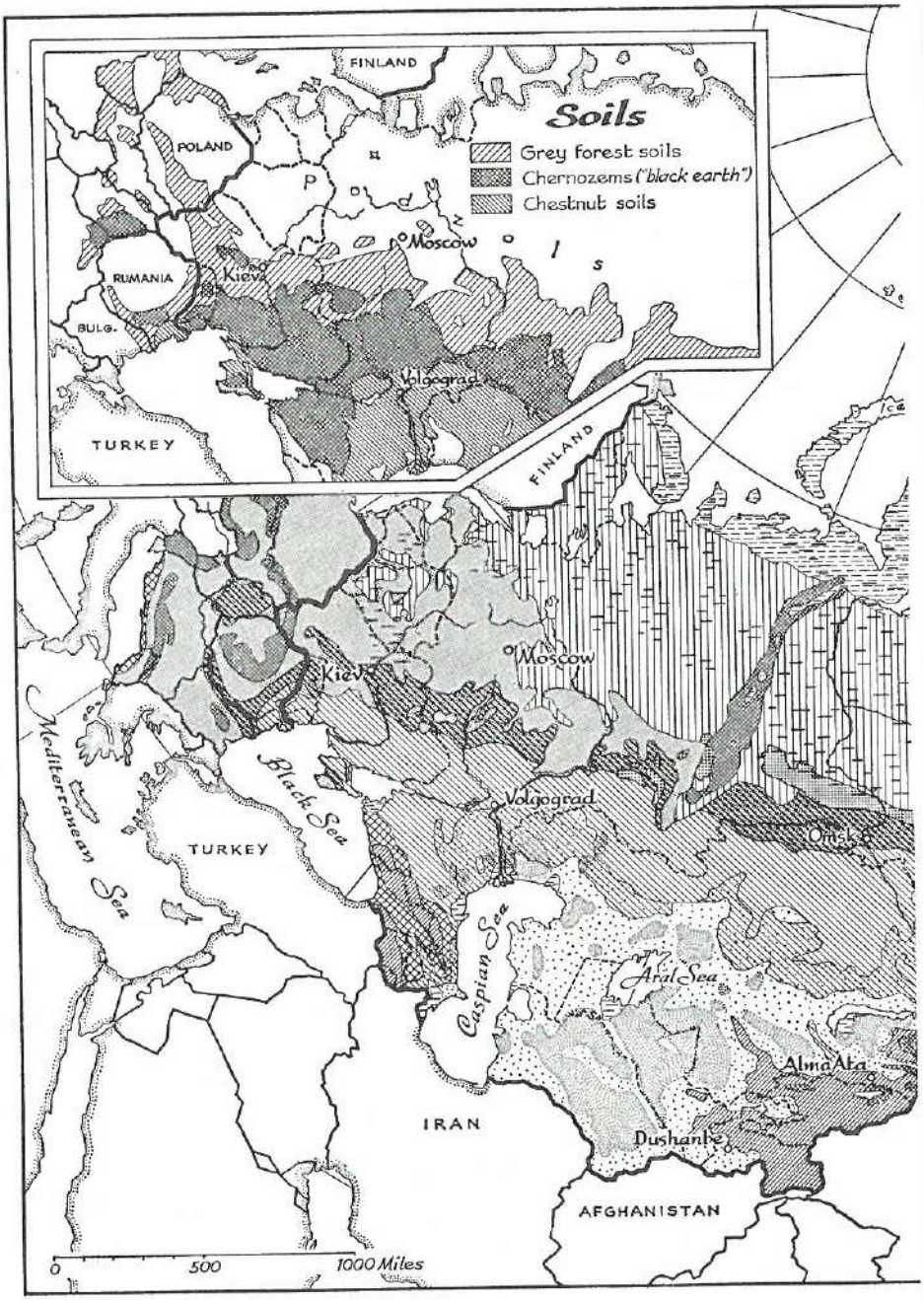
But while Russia abounds in rivers and lakes, it is essentially a landlocked country. By far its longest coastline opens on the icy Arctic Ocean. The neighboring seas include the Baltic and the Black, both of which must pass through narrow straits, away from Russian borders, to connect with broader expanses of water, and the Caspian and the Aral, which are totally isolated. The Aral Sea is also entirely within Russian territory, and it has been listed with such major Russian lakes as Ladoga and Onega in the European part of the country, Balkhash in Central Asia, and the huge and extremely deep Lake Baikal in Siberia. The Russian eastern coastline too is subject to cold and inclement weather, except for the southern section adjacent to the Chinese border.

Latitude and a landlocked condition largely determine Russian climate, which can be best described as severely continental. Northern and even

central Russia are on the latitude of Alaska, while the position of southern Russia corresponds more to the position of Canada in the western hemisphere than to that of the United States. The Gulf Stream, which does so much to make the climate of western and northern Europe milder, barely reaches one segment of the northern coastline of Russia. In the absence of interfering mountain ranges, icy winds from the Arctic Ocean sweep across European Russia to the Black Sea. Siberian weather, except in the extreme southeastern corner, is more brutal still. In short, although sections of the Crimean littoral can be described as the Russian Riviera, and although subtropical conditions do prevail in parts of the southern Caucasus, the overwhelming bulk of Russian territory remains subject to a very severe climate. In northern European Russia the soil stays frozen eight months out of twelve. Even the Ukraine is covered by snow three months every year, while the rivers freeze all the way to the Black Sea. Siberia in general and northeastern Siberia in particular belong among the coldest areas in the world. The temperature at Verkhoiansk has been registered at as low as −90° F. Still, in keeping with the continental nature of the climate, when summer finally comes — and it often comes rather suddenly — temperatures soar. Heat waves are common in European Russia and in much of Siberia, not to mention the deserts of Central Asia which spew sand many miles to the west.

Climate determines the vegetation that forms several broad belts extending latitudinally across the country. In the extreme north lies the tundra, a virtually uninhabited frozen waste of swamps, moss, and shrubs covering almost 15 per cent of Russian territory. South of the tundra stretches the taiga, a zone of coniferous forest, merging with and followed by the next zone, that of mixed forest. The two huge forested belts sweep across Russia from its western boundaries to its eastern shoreline and account for over half of its territory. Next comes the steppe, or prairie, occupying southern European Russia and extending into Asia up to the Altai mountains. Finally, the southernmost zone, that of semi-desert and desert, takes up most of Central Asia. Being very wide if considerably shorter than even the steppe belt, it occupies somewhat less than one-fifth of the total area of the country.

One important result of the climate and of this pattern of vegetation in Russia has been a relative dearth of first-rate agricultural land. Only an estimated one million square miles out of an area more than eight times that size are truly rewarding to the tiller of the soil. Other sections of the country suffer from the cold and from insufficient precipitation, which becomes more inadequate as one progresses east. Even the heavy snowfalls add relatively little moisture because of the rapid melting and the quick run-off of water in the spring. In Central Asia farming depends almost entirely on irrigation. The best land in Russia, the excellent black soil of the southern steppe,


Soils
Grey forest soils
Chernozems ("black earth")
Chestnut soils
FINLAND
POLAND
RUMANIA
BULG.
TURKEY
Kiev
Moscow
Volgograd
Mediterranean Sea
Black Sea
Caspian Sea
Aral Sea
Omsk
Alma Ata
Dushanbe
IRAN
AFGHANISTAN
0
500
1000 Miles


ALASKA
Arctic Ocean
Pacific
Ocean
Yakutsk
Novosibirsk
Irkutsk
MANCHURIA
Vladivostok
MONGOLIA
CHINA
Vegetation
Tundra
Pine and fir forest
Larch forest
Deciduous mixed forest
Birch forest
Steppe with some trees
Steppe
Semi-desert
Desert (loose sand)
Warm temperate broadleaf forest
Mountain meadow
Mountain forest
Peat bog and marsh

offers agricultural conditions comparable to those on the great plains of Canada rather than those in warmer Iowa or Illinois. Russia, on the other hand, is fabulously rich in forests, more so than any other country in the world. And it possesses a great wealth and variety of natural resources, ranging from platinum to oil and from coal to gold. On the whole, however, these resources remained unused and even unexplored for a very long time.

Ever since Herodotus historians have been fascinated by the role of geographic factors in human history. Indeed the father of history referred to the broad sweep of the southern Russian steppe and to the adaptation of the steppe inhabitants, the Scythians, to their natural environment in his explanation of why the mighty Persians could not overcome them. Modern historians of Russia, including such leading Russian scholars as Kliuchevsky and especially his teacher S. Soloviev, as well as such prominent Western writers as Kerner and Sumner, have persistently emphasized the significance of geography for Russian history. Even if we reject the rigid determinism implicit in some of their views and refuse to speculate on such nebulous and precarious topics as the Russian national character and its dependence on the environment — speculations in which Kliuchevsky and others engaged in a fascinating manner — some fundamental points have to be made.

For instance, it appears certain that the growth of the Russian state was affected by the geography of the area: a vast plain with very few natural obstacles to expansion. This setting notably made it easier for the Moscow state to spread across eastern Europe. Beyond the Urals, the Russians advanced all the way to the Pacific, and even to Alaska and California, a progression paralleled only by the great American movement west. As the boundaries of the Russian empire ultimately emerged, they consisted of oceans to the north and east and, in large part, of seas, high mountains, and deserts to the south; only in the west, where the Russians merged with streams of other peoples, did the border seem unrelated to geography. The extremely severe climate contributed to the weakness of the tribes scattered in northern European Russia and of the various inhabitants of Siberia, leading to their utter inability to stem the Russian advance. Whereas the Russians could easily expand, they were well protected from outside attack. Russian distances brought defeat to many, although not all, invaders, from the days of the Persians and the Scythians to those of Napoleon and Hitler.

Occupied territory had to be governed. The problem of administering an enormous area, of holding the parts together, of co-ordinating local activities and efforts remained a staggering task for those in power, whether Ivan the Terrible, Nicholas I, or Stalin. And the variety of peoples on the great plain was bound to make such issues as centralization and federation all the more acute. One can appreciate, if not accept, the opinion of those thinkers, prominent in the Enlightenment and present in other periods, who related

the system of government of a country directly to its size and declared despotism to be the natural form of rule in Russia.

The magnificent network of Russian rivers and lakes also left its mark on Russian history. It is sufficient to mention the significance of the Dnieper for Kievan Russia, or of the Volga and its tributaries for the Moscow state. The landlocked position of the country and the search for an access to the waterways of the world made the Russians repeatedly concerned with the Baltic, the Black Sea, and the Straits. Climate and vegetation basically affected the distribution of people in Russia and also their occupations. The poor quality of much agricultural land has led to endemic suffering among Russian peasants and has taxed the ingenuity of tsarist ministers and Khrushchev alike. Russian natural resources, since they began to be developed on a large scale, have added immeasurably to Soviet strength. Both the wealth of Russia and the geographic and climatic obstacles to a utilization of this wealth have perhaps never stood out so sharply as in the course of present efforts to industrialize eastern Siberia.

The location of Russia on its two continents has had a profound impact on Russian history. The southern Russian steppe in particular served for centuries as the highway for Asiatic nomads to burst into Europe. Mongol devastation was for the Russians only the most notable incident in a long series, and it was followed by over two hundred years of Mongol rule. In effect, the steppe frontier, open for centuries, contributed hugely to the militarization of Russian society, a trend reinforced by the generally unprotected and fluid nature of the western border of the country. But proximity to Asiatic lands led also to some less warlike contacts; furthermore, it enabled Russia later in turn to expand grandly in Asia without the need first to rule the high seas. Recently the Eurasian school of historians, represented in the English language especially by Vernadsky, has tried to interpret the entire development of Russia in terms of its unique position in the Old World.

Russian location in Europe may well be regarded as even more important than its connections with Asia. Linked to the West by language, religion, and basic culture, the Russians nevertheless suffered the usual fate of border peoples: invasion from the outside, relative isolation, and retardation. Hence, at least in part, the efforts to catch up, whether by means of Peter the Great's reforms or the Five-Year Plans. Hence also, among other things, the interminable debate concerning the nature and the significance of the relationship between Russia and the West.

As the examples above, which by no means exhaust the subject, indicate, geography does affect history, Russian history included. It has been noted that the influence of certain geographic factors tends to be especially persistent. Thus, while our modern scientific civilization does much to mitigate

the impact of climate, a fact brilliantly illustrated in the development of such a northern country as Finland, so far we have not changed mountains into plains or created new seas. Still, it is best to conclude with a reservation: geography may set the stage for history; human beings make history.

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RUSSIA BEFORE THE RUSSIANS

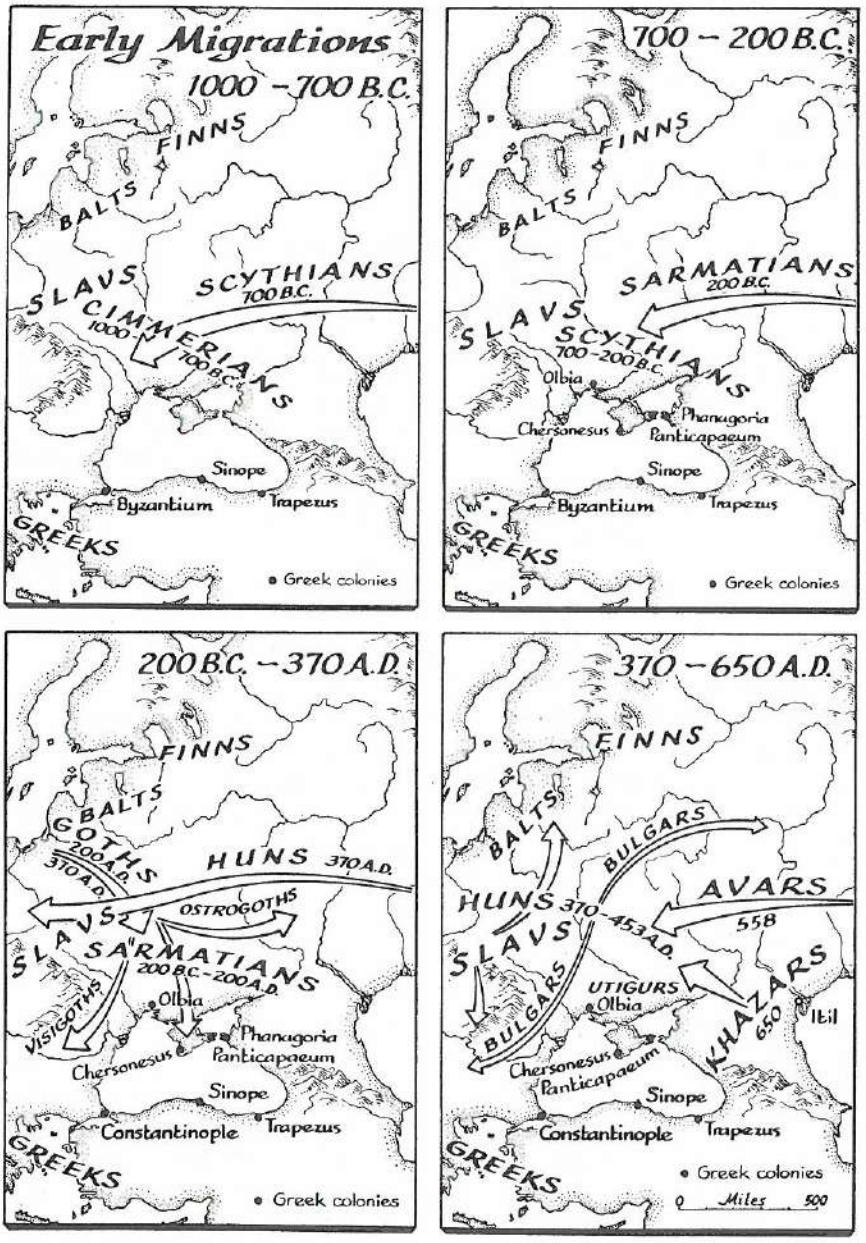
> We have only to study more closely than has been done the antiquities of South Russia during the period of migrations, i.e., from the fourth to the eighth century, to become aware of the uninterrupted evolution of Iranian culture in South Russia through these centuries. . . . The Slavonic state of Kiev presents the same features . . . because the same cultural tradition — I mean the Graeco-Iranian — was the only tradition which was known to South Russia for centuries and which no German or Mongolian invaders were able to destroy.
>
> ROSTOVTZEFF

> Yes, we are Scythians. Yes, we are Asiatics.
> With slanting and greedy eyes.
>
> BLOK

CONTINUITY is the very stuff of history. Although every historical event is unique, and every sequence of events, therefore, presents flux and change, it is the connection of a given present with its past that makes the present meaningful and enables us to have history. In sociological terms, continuity is indispensable for group culture, without which each new generation of human beings would have had to start from scratch.

Non-Slavic Peoples and Cultures

A number of ancient cultures developed in the huge territory that is today enclosed within the boundaries of the U.S.S.R. Those that flourished in Transcaucasia and in Central Asia, however, exercised merely a peripheral influence on Russian history, the areas themselves becoming parts of the Russian state only in the nineteenth century. As an introduction to Russian history proper, we must turn to the northern shore of the Black Sea and to the steppe beyond. These wide expanses remained for centuries on the border of the ancient world of Greece, Rome, and Byzantium. In fact, through the Greek colonies which began to appear in southern Russia from the seventh century before Christ and through commercial and cultural contacts in general, the peoples of the southern Russian steppe participated in classical civilization. Herodotus himself, who lived in the fifth century B.C., spent some time in the Greek colony of Olbia at the mouth of the Bug river and left us a valuable description of the steppe area and its population. Herodotus' account and other scattered and scarce contemporary evidence



have been greatly augmented by excavations pursued first in tsarist Russia and subsequently, on an increased scale, in the Soviet Union. At present we know, at least in broad outline, the historical development of southern Russia before the establishment of the Kievan state. And we have come to appreciate the importance of this background for Russian history.

The best-known neolithic culture in southern Russia evolved in the valleys

of the Dnieper, the Bug, and the Dniester as early as the fourth millennium before Christ. Its remnants testify to the fact that agriculture was then already entrenched in that area, and also to a struggle between the sedentary tillers of the soil and the invading nomads, a recurrent motif in southern Russian, and later Russian, history. This neolithic people also used domestic animals, engaged in weaving, and had a developed religion. The "pottery of spirals and meander" links it not only to the southern part of Central Europe, but also and especially, as Rostovtzeff insisted, to Asia Minor, although a precise connection is difficult to establish. At about the same time a culture utilizing metal developed in the Kuban valley north of the Caucasian range, contemporaneously with similar cultures in Egypt and Mesopotamia. Its artifacts of copper, gold, and silver, found in numerous burial mounds, testify to the skill and taste of its artisans. While the bronze age in southern Russia is relatively little known and poorly represented, that of iron coincided with, and apparently resulted from, new waves of invasion and the establishment of the first historic peoples in the southern Russian steppe.

The Cimmerians, about whom our information is very meager, are usually considered to be the earliest such people, again in large part thanks to Herodotus. They belonged to the Thracian subdivision of the Indo-European language family and ruled southern Russia from roughly 1000 B.C. to 700 B.C. At one time their dominion extended deep into the Caucasus. Recent historians have generally assumed that the Cimmerians represented the upper crust in southern Russia, while the bulk of the population consisted of indigenous elements who continued the steady development of culture on the northern shore of the Black Sea. The ruling group was to change several times during the subsequent centuries without destroying this fundamental cultural continuity.

The Scythians followed the Cimmerians, defeating them and destroying their state. The new invaders, who came from Central Asia, spoke an Iranian tongue and belonged thus to the Indo-European language family, although they apparently also included Mongol elements. They ruled southern Russia from the seventh to the end of the third century B.C. The Scythian sway extended, according to a contemporary, Herodotus, from the Danube to the Don and from the northern shore of the Black Sea inland for a distance traveled in the course of a twenty-day journey. At its greatest extent, the Scythian state stretched south of the Danube on its western flank and across the Caucasus and into Asia Minor on its eastern.

The Scythians were typical nomads: they lived in tentlike carriages dragged by oxen and counted their riches by the number of horses, which also served them as food. In war they formed excellent light cavalry, utilizing the saddle and fighting with bows and arrows and short swords. Their military tactics based on mobility and evasion proved so successful that

even their great Iranian rivals, the mighty Persians, could not defeat them in their home territory. The Scythians established a strong military state in southern Russia and for over three centuries gave a considerable degree of stability to that area. Indigenous culture continued to develop, enriched by new contacts and opportunities. In particular, in spite of the nomadic nature of the Scythians themselves, agriculture went on flourishing in the steppe north of the Black Sea. Herodotus who, in accordance with the general practice, referred to the entire population of the area as Scythian, distinguished, among other groups, not only "the royal Scythians," but also "the Scythian ploughmen."

The Scythians were finally defeated and replaced in southern Russia by the Sarmatians, another wave of Iranian-speaking nomads from Central Asia. The Sarmatian social organization and culture were akin to the Scythian, although some striking differences have been noted. Thus, while both peoples fought typically as cavalry, the Sarmatians used stirrups and armor, lances, and long swords in contrast to the light equipment of the Scythians. What is more important is that they apparently had little difficulty in adapting themselves to their new position as rulers of southern Russia and in fitting into the economy and the culture of the area. The famous Greek geographer Strabo, writing in the first century A.D., mentions this continuity and in particular observes that the great east-west trade route through the southern Russian steppe remained open under the Sarmatians. The Sarmatians were divided into several tribes of which the Alans, it would seem, led in numbers and power. The Ossetians of today, a people living in the central Caucasus, are direct descendants of the Alans. The Sarmatian rule in southern Russia lasted from the end of the third century B.C. to the beginning of the third century A.D.

It was during the Scytho-Sarmatian period that the Graeco-Iranian culture developed on the northern shore of the Black Sea and in the Russian steppe. The Iranian element was represented in the first place by the Scythians and the Sarmatians themselves. They established large and lasting military states which provided the basic pattern of political organization for the area. They brought with them their languages, their customs, their religion emphasizing war, an original style in decorative art known as the Scythian animal style, and generally vigorous and varied art and craftsmanship, especially in metalwork. The enormously rich Greek civilization came to the area primarily through Greek colonies. These colonies began as fishing enterprises and grew into major commercial centers and flourishing communities. They included the already mentioned Olbia, founded as early as the middle of the seventh century B.C., Chersonesus in the Crimea near present-day Sevastopol, Tanais at the mouth of the Don, and Panticapaeum and Phanagoria on either side of the Strait of Kerch, which links the Sea of Azov to the Black Sea and separates the Crimea and the Caucasus. The

Greeks engaged in varied trade, but especially significant was their importation of southern Russian grain into the Hellenic world. The settlements near the Strait of Kerch, enjoying a particularly favorable position for trade and defense, formed the nucleus of the Bosporan kingdom which was to have a long and dramatic history. That kingdom as well as other Greek centers in southern Russia fell in the first century before Christ under the sway of Mithridates the Great of Pontus and, after his ultimate defeat by the Romans, of Rome. Even after a retrenchment of the Roman Empire and its eventual collapse, some former Greek colonies on the northern shore of the Black Sea, such as Chersonesus, had another revival as outposts of the Byzantine Empire.

Thus for many centuries the Iranians and the Greeks lived and worked side by side. It has been noted that the Scythians and the Sarmatians made no sustained effort to destroy Greek colonies in southern Russia, choosing instead to maintain vigorous trade relations and other contacts with them. Intermarriage, Hellenization of Iranians, and Iranization of Greeks proceeded apace. The resulting cultural and at times political synthesis was such that the two elements became inextricably intertwined. As Rostovtzeff explains in regard to the Bosporan kingdom, a prize example of this symbiosis: "It is a matter of great interest to trace the development of the new community. A loosely knit confederation of cities and tribes in its beginning, it became gradually a political body of dual nature. The ruler of this body was for the Greeks an elected magistrate, for the natives a king ruling by divine right." Today one can readily appreciate some of the sweep and the glory of the ancient Graeco-Iranian culture in southern Russia after visiting the appropriate rooms of the Hermitage or of the historical museum in Moscow.

The Sarmatian rule in the steppe north of the Black Sea was shattered by the Goths. These Germanic invaders came from the north, originally from the Baltic area, reaching out in a southeasterly direction. In southern Russia they split into the Visigoths and the Ostrogoths, and the latter eventually established under Hermanric a great state stretching from the Black Sea to the Baltic. But the Gothic period in Russia, dated usually from A.D. 200 to A.D. 370, ended abruptly with the appearance of new intruders from Asia, the Huns. Furthermore, while the Goths proved themselves to be fine soldiers and sailors, their general cultural level lagged considerably behind the culture of southern Russia, to which they had little to contribute.

The Huns, who descended upon the Goths around A.D. 370, came in a mass migration by the classic steppe road from Central Asia to southern Russia. A remarkably mixed group when they appeared in European history, the Huns were, on best evidence, a Turkic-speaking people supported by large Mongol and Ugrian contingents. Later, as they swept into central and even western Europe, they also brought with them different Germanic

and Iranian elements which they had overwhelmed and picked up on the way. Although one of the most primitive peoples to come to southern Russia, the Huns had sufficient drive and military prowess to conquer that area and, indeed, to play a key role in the so-called period of great migrations in Europe. Even after their defeat in the battle of Châlons, deep in France, in 451, they invaded Italy and, according to tradition, spared Rome only because of the influence of Pope Leo I on their leader, Attila. But with the sudden death of Attila in 453 the poorly organized Hunnic state crumbled. Its successors included the large horde of the Bulgars and the smaller ones of the Utigurs and the Kutrigurs.

The next human wave to break into southern Russia consisted again of an Asiatic, Mongol- and Turkic-speaking, and relatively primitive people, the Avars. Their invasion is dated A.D. 558, and their state lasted for about a century in Russia and for over two and a half centuries altogether, at the end of which time it dissolved rapidly and virtually without trace, a common fate of fluid, politically rudimentary, and culturally weak nomadic empires. At the height of their power, the Avars ruled the entire area from eastern Russia to the Danubian plain, where they had their capital and where they remained after they had lost control in Russia. Avar armies threatened Byzantium, and they also waged major, although unsuccessful, wars against Charlemagne and his empire.

In the seventh century A.D. a new force emerged in southern Russia, to be more exact, on the lower Volga, in the northern Caucasus, and the southeastern Russian steppe in general: the Khazar state. The impact of the Khazars split the Bulgars sharply in two: one group definitely settled in the Balkans to dissolve in the Slavic mass and give its name to present-day Bulgaria; the other retreated to the northeast, eventually establishing a state at the confluence of the Volga and the Kama, with the town of Great Bulgar as its capital. The Utigurs and the Kutrigurs retrenched to the lands along the Sea of Azov and the mouth of the Don.

Although the Khazars were still another Turkic-speaking people from Asia, their historical role proved to be quite different from that of the Huns or of the Avars. To begin with, they fought bitter wars against the Arabs and served as a bulwark against the spread of Islam into Europe. When their own state assumed form in southeastern European Russia, it became notable for its commerce, its international connections, and the tolerance and enlightenment of its laws. Although a semi-nomadic people themselves, the Khazars promoted the building of towns, such as their capital of Itil — not far from the mouth of the Volga — Samandar, Sarkil, and certain others. The location at the crossroads of two continents proved to be of fundamental importance for the Khazar economy. In the words of a recent historian of the Khazars, Dunlop: "The prosperity of Khazaria evidently depended less on the resources of the country than on its favorable position

across important trade-routes." The Khazar revenue, consequently, came especially from commercial imposts as well as from the tribute which increased as the Khazar rule expanded westward on the Russian plain. Pagans, Moslems, Christians, and Jews mingled in Khazaria, where all enjoyed considerable freedom and autonomy to live under their own laws. In the eighth and ninth centuries the Khazars themselves embraced Judaism, or at least their ruler, who bore the title of khakan, and the upper class did, thus adding another exceptional chapter to their unusual history. The Khazars have also been cited as one of the first peoples to institute a permanent paid armed force. The development of Khazaria, with its close links to the Arabic and Byzantine worlds, as well as to some other civilizations, its far-flung trade connections, and its general cosmopolitanism, well represents one line of political, economic, and cultural evolution on the great Russian plain at the time of the emergence of the Kievan state. It may be added that, while the Khazars were outstanding in commercial development, varied commercial intercourse on a large scale also grew further north, in the country of the Volga Bulgars.

The East Slavs

Cultures on the northern shore of the Black Sea and in the southern Russian steppe, from the neolithic period to the time of the Khazars, form an essential part of the background of Kievan Russia. Yet it is true too that the people of the Kievan state who came to be known as Russians were not Scythians, Greeks, or Khazars, much as they might have been influenced in one way or another by these and other predecessors and neighbors; they were East Slavs. Therefore, East Slavs also demand our attention. The term itself is linguistic, as our better classifications of ancient peoples usually are. It refers to a group speaking the Eastern variety of Slavic. With time, three distinct East Slavic languages developed: Great Russian, often called simply Russian, Ukrainian, and White Russian or Belorussian. Other branches of the Slavic languages are the West Slavic, including Polish and Czech, and the South Slavic, represented, for instance, by Serbo-Croatian and Bulgarian. The Slavic languages, in turn, form a subdivision of the Indo-European language family which includes most of the tongues spoken today in Europe and some used in Asia. To be more precise, in addition to the Slavic this family contains the Teutonic, Romance, Hellenic, Baltic, Celtic, Iranian, Indic, Armenian, and Thraco-Illyrian subfamilies of languages. The Cimmerians, it might be recalled, belonged apparently to the Thraco-Illyrian subfamily, the Scythians and the Sarmatians to the Iranian, and the Goths to the Teutonic or Germanic, while the Greeks are, of course, the great representatives of the Hellenic. Early Russian history was also influenced by other Indo-European peoples, such as the Baltic Lithuanians, as well

as by some non-Indo-Europeans, notably by different Turkic tribes — some of which have already been mentioned — the Mongols, and Finno-Ugrian elements.

Languages are organically and intrinsically related within the same subfamily and also within the same family. By contrast, no fundamental connection, as distinct from chance borrowing, has been established between languages in different families, for example, the Indo-European and the Ural-Altaic. In fact, some specialists believe that speech originated on our planet in a number of separate places, division thus being the rule in the linguistic world from the very beginning. To explain the relatedness of the languages within a family and the much closer relationship of the languages of the same subfamily, scholars have postulated an original language and homeland for each family — such as for all Indo-European peoples whence they spread across Europe and parts of Asia — and later languages and homelands for different linguistic subfamilies before further separation and differentiation. Within the framework of this theory, the Slavs have usually been assigned a common homeland in the general area of the valley of the Vistula and the northern slopes of the Carpathians. Their split has been dated, by Shakhmatov and others, in the sixth century A.D., and the settlement by the East Slavs of the great plain of European Russia in the seventh, the eighth, and the ninth. In reconstructing Slavic migrations, allowance has frequently been made for the fact that the East Slavic languages are closer to the South Slavic than those of either of these branches to the West Slavic ones. It should be emphasized that in relying on original languages and their homelands one is dealing with languages, not races. The categories listed above are all linguistic, not racial, and do not necessarily correspond to any physical traits. Besides, intermarriage, conquest, imitation, as well as some other factors, have repeatedly changed the number and composition of those speaking a given language. Today, for instance, English is the native tongue of American blacks as well as of Yorkshiremen. An entire people can lose a language and adopt a new one. Invaders have often been absorbed by the indigenous population, as in the case of the Turkic Bulgars in the Balkans. Other invaders have been able to overwhelm and incorporate native peoples. Thus some historians explain the Germanic expansion in eastern Europe by a Germanization, not an extermination, of different Slavic and Lithuanian tribes. There are also such puzzling cases as the language of the Lapps in the far north of Scandinavia and Russia: it is a Finno-Ugrian tongue, but, in the opinion of certain specialists, it appears to be superimposed on a radically different linguistic structure.

Recent scholarship has subjected the theory of original languages and homelands to a searching criticism. At present few specialists speak with any confidence about the historical homeland of the Indo-Europeans, and some reject it even as a theoretical concept. More important for students of

Russian history, the Slavic homeland has also been thoroughly questioned. The revaluation has been largely instigated by discoveries of the presence of the Slavs at a much earlier time and over a much larger area in Russia than had been traditionally supposed. To meet new evidence, some scholars have redefined the original Slavic homeland to include parts of Russia. Others have postulated an earlier dispersal of the Slavs, some suggesting that it proceeded in several waves to explain both their ancient presence on the Russian plain and their later migration thither. Still others have given up the Slavic homeland altogether. While recent work concerning Slavic prehistory has produced many new facts, it has lacked a convincing general theory to replace that which has been found wanting.

The first extant written references to the Slavs belong to the classical writers early in our era, including Pliny the Elder and Tacitus. Important later accounts include those of the sixth century produced by the Byzantine historian Procopius and the Gothic Jordanes. The terms most frequently used to designate the Slavs were "Venedi" and "Antes," with the latter coming to mean the East Slavs — although "Antes" has also been given other interpretations, such as pre-Slavic Iranian inhabitants of southern Russia or Goths. Soviet archaeologists insist that Slavic settlements in parts of Russia, notably in the Don area, date at least from the middle of the first millennium B.C. It is now assumed by some historians that the Slavs composed a significant part, perhaps the bulk, of the population of southern and central Russia from the time of the Scythians. For instance, they may be hidden under various designations used by Herodotus, such as "Scythian ploughmen." It is known that the East Slavs fought against the Goths, were swept westward with the Huns, and were conquered by the Avars; certain East Slavic tribes were paying tribute to the Khazars at the dawn of Kievan history. At that time, according to our main written source, the Kievan *Primary Chronicle* of the early twelfth century, the East Slavs were divided into twelve tribes located on the broad expanses of the Russian plain, from the Black Sea, the Danube, and the Carpathian mountains, across the Ukraine, and beyond, northward to the Novgorod territory and eastward toward the Volga. Their neighbors included, in addition to some of the peoples already mentioned, Finnic elements scattered throughout northern and eastern Russia and Lithuanian tribes to the west.

By the ninth century A.D. East Slavic economy, society, and culture had already experienced a considerable development. Agriculture was well and widely established among the East Slavs. Other important occupations included fishing, hunting, apiculture, cattle-raising, weaving, and pottery-making, as well as other arts and crafts, such as carpentry. The East Slavs had known the use of iron for centuries. They had also been engaging in varied and far-flung commerce. They possessed a remarkable number of towns; even Tikhomirov's count of them, some 238, is not complete.

Certain of these towns, such as Novgorod, Smolensk, and Kiev, a town belonging to the tribe of the Poliane, were to have long and important histories. Very little is known about the political organization of the East Slavs. There exist, however, a few scattered references to the rulers of the Antes and of some of the component tribes: for example, Jordanes's mention of Bozh, a prince of the Antes at the time of the Gothic wars; and the statement of Masudi, an Arabian writer, concerning Madzhak, apparently a prince of the East Slavic tribe of the Duleby in the Avar period.