

Chapter 1: Silent History

The Soviet communist regime came into power in Russia in 1917 and its rule officially ended in December 1991. In 1917 the Bolsheviks led the revolution and took over the reins of power and in 1992 Boris Yeltsin who had replaced Mikhail Gorbachov declared the Communist Party to be illegal. Even before this the Soviet Union had begun to disintegrate and the different republics had declared their independent existence. The Communist Party had inherited the Czar's empire. Though the Soviet Union had to give up its dominance over Poland, the Baltic States and other such regions during this transfer of power, it had regained control over a large part of this territory in the period following the outbreak of the Second World War. In this situation while considering the history of the Soviet Empire it becomes imperative to take a look at the history of Czardom and in order to study and understand Czardom, it seems creditable to take note of the centuries preceding Czardom. Just as children inherit some of the good and bad qualities of the parents we see a similar process in society. While studying contemporary society it is useful to conduct some research on its long-term cultural, social, political and economic history.

Soviet power emerged in 1917. The reign of power of the Romanov dynasty that was overthrown by the revolution had held sway for almost three hundred years. However, the known history of Russia is not less than two thousand years old. Another factor to note is that just as geography affects society and changes history, history too changes geography. Therefore it would be worthwhile to also take note of the geography of Russia. The land mass of the Russian Empire was spread out over 81,000,000 square miles. This means that it was more than the land mass of the entire North American continent. This land mass was traversed by many rivers and whatever mountains were there were along the borders of this country. Most of the land mass was plain. This country is spread far and wide and consists of miles and miles of Steppes and forests. To the north-west are two immense lakes 'Ladoga' and 'Onega'. There are no lakes in the whole of Europe that can compare with these. There is no lake in the whole of Asia that can compare with 'Baikal' lake in Siberia. The Volga River flows for 2,400 miles. It is not surprising therefore if this geographical enormity and vastness influence the Russian mindscape and Russian literature. Be it Tolstoy's "War and Peace" or Pasternak's "Dr. Zivago" they are set against the grand landscape of the Steppes, the plateau and snow covered regions. The famous Russian film director Grigori Kozintsev while adapting "King Lear" to the screen has been successful in preserving its geographical and psychological grandeur. So it is only natural that he should have named his book about the film as "The Space of Tragedy".

The Arctic Ocean is adjacent to Russia but be it the Baltic Sea or the Black Sea these are close to Russia's borders. Similarly, the Caspian Sea is also close to its borders. While there are some parts of Russia which experience desert like weather conditions there are also territories

which have sub-zero temperatures. There is about 1,000,000 square miles of first grade land. The rest of the land is of a poor quality and part of this becomes even worse due to the sand carried by the winds blowing from desert regions. Yet all this is compensated for by its forests and mineral wealth. Russia has vast forests and several mines rich in gold, iron, copper, coal, platinum and oil. Russia is sandwiched between the continents of Europe and Asia and is often referred to as 'Eurasia'. That is why Russian philosopher and political analyst Plekhanov had said that Russia is more European as compared with Asia and less European when compared to Europe. Today too the situation is not very different. Out of Russia's land mass three-fourths is in Asia and one-fourth is in Europe. However, the population of this European part is nine times as much as the population of the remainder of the provinces. Being situated right in between Europe and Asia, the Steppes to the South of Russia were often converted into a battlefield by the aggressive bands from Europe and Asia. This gave rise to a military tradition. Owing to this tradition along with geographical and political reasons, migration and invasion became permanent features of the Russian way of life. **Cyclic invasions** and different Russian kings invading each other's territories are seen to have become a permanent feature of Russian history. Hordes of people would suddenly appear from somewhere or migrate to some other place.

The Russian historian Klyuchevsky had said that the three geographical features of Russia had influenced the formation of Russians. Commenting on this the British historian Edward Peres said that the Steppes are entirely free for communication during normal weather conditions. The endless horizon makes people dream of far off places and during this period people are living active lives and taking risks. It was in these parts that the **Christians of Binny** who stopped people from invading Europe were trained and so also the Kazaks. Kazaks were warriors and nomads. They were always ready to work for wages or wage war. Wherever there was a possibility of earning something they would launch an attack there. They were expert horsemen and traders too. They also worked as soldiers. At times they would even indulge in stealing. More than half of the Russian population lived in the forest. The forests gave rise to very different tendencies. A lone man would clear the forest wielding his sickle and make the land fit for cultivation. But due to the ordinary quality of the land and the elementary implements used the land would be rendered infertile after seven years. Therefore migration was inevitable. The forest taught caution. Danger lurked behind every tree. The land along the banks of the river was just the opposite. The river taught peace and trade. Water transport was of any use only if there was peace. Therefore maintaining peace became important. Also in general, there was constant migration of people due to the unfavorable weather conditions and more so due to the poor quality of the land. Rivers taught the people to be free.ⁱ

The vast expanse of the Steppes stretching out to the North of the Black Sea being adjacent to the Greek, Roman and Byzantine Empires was influenced by them. The history of this region of the 4th of 5th centuries BC is available in written form. Herodotus, the father of history, had lived for some time in the 5th C BC in Albia, a Greek colony, on the banks of the River Bug. According to accounts written by him and others, people living in the river basins of

the Bug and Dnieper Rivers were involved in farming even in the 4th C. There would be battles between the people who had settled there and were doing farming and aggressive gangs who came from outside. They would use animals for farming and they were also skilled at knitting. From the articles found during excavations it can be surmised that the handicraftsmen living in the Kuban river basin, north of the Caucasus, made use of copper, gold and silver.

In the 7th C the Khazars rose to power. One of their branches moved to present day Bulgaria and the other began to reign in the river basin between the Volga and Kama Rivers. They spoke the Turkic language. They had a longstanding enmity with the Arabs. As they clashed with the Arabs they helped to hold back the spread of Islam in Europe. Although they lived in tribes their trade was quite huge. Therefore they would come in contact with many people and countries. Their laws were liberal and their behavior was tolerant. They built cities and this encouraged the development of architecture. They are counted among the first people to have a policy of maintaining a paid army. Their kingdom consisted of people of different religions like Christians, Jews, Muslims etc. and they were free to execute their own laws. It was only natural therefore that when the Kiev republic was formed it was influenced by this culture that had flourished in Khazaria.

Among the people who entered South Russia there were many who spoke the Turkic language and some experts say that this factor even influenced the history of 20th century Russia. In this context, some sentences from Archie Roosevelt's "For the Lust of Knowing", quoted in the 1993 summer edition of the journal "Foreign Affairs" are noteworthy. Roosevelt says, "Much of Russia's history is about the battles between Turks and Slavs fought in the border regions. This struggle had been going on ever since the establishment of the Russian state about thousand years ago. This struggle with their Eastern neighbor tells us not just the history of Russia but also helps us to understand the temperament and characteristics of Russians. The Turks had spread out over a vast territory and this kept the Russians engaged. In order to understand the objective conditions of Russia it is important to note this fact."

The people living in the state of Kiev were neither Scythian, Goth nor Khazars. They were more or less influenced by these tribes. Yet they were of a different descent. They were known as the Eastern Slavs. Slavs were spread out right from the river basin of Vistula to the territory north of the Carpathian Mountains. The people of Czechoslovakia and Poland both speak the Slav language. The style and flavor are however different. The Slavs got divided in the 6th century and from the 7th to the 9th century some of them settled down in the European part of Russia. These were the Eastern Slavs. They settled down in Russia, Ukraine and Byelorussia. The Czechs, Slovaks, Polish etc. constituted the Western Slavs and the Croatians, Slovenians and the Macedonians made up the Southern Slavs. Most of the Eastern Slavs accepted the orthodox Christian religious sect and the Western Slavs became Catholics. These Slavs lived in the ancient continent of Asia. By the 2nd or 3rd century they had moved to Eastern Europe. In the 5th – 6th century migrated towards the East, West and South due to the German invasion. From among them the Eastern Slavs can be considered as the ancestors of the Russians. King Morris who

ruled in the 6th – 7th century was an analyst. While narrating his experience he has said that the Slavs are always migrating. They live in small houses in the forest or on the banks of the river and are always prepared to migrate.

Procopius, an author had said that the Slavs find solutions to their requirements and problems collectively by discussing them amongst themselves and there seems to be a form of democracy that operates amongst them. King Morris writes, “The Slavs enjoy freedom. They do not acknowledge uncontrolled authority or domination. Also it is not an easy task to subjugate them.” According to another emperor, Leo, the Slavs are independent people and they do not accept subordination to anyone. ⁱⁱ

(However, eventually it was seen that later they failed to exhibit this aspiration for freedom and gave in to uncontrolled domination for a very long period!) In their characteristics they resemble the Latinos and are enthusiastic and emotional like them. They do not show any likeness to the Germans. Their nomadic characteristic and a tendency towards a chaotic way of life acted as obstacles in the formation and development of their culture for a long time. Their nature is flexible and willing to follow others which are characteristics especially seen in Russian and Polish people. Therefore they stress upon copying or reinventing what others have done rather than depending on their own inventions. The Western Slavs were influenced by Rome while the people from the East were influenced by Byzantine Empire.

It is not as if inspiration of the first order was lacking among the Slavs. Quite to the contrary, one could say that an ideological revolution and religious reform were two campaigns which did not come to Russia but instead it was due to the insistence of the Slavs on the freedom of thought that this movement spread to Europe. Raymond Hutchinson has given one reason for the ideological revolution and religious reform not taking root in Russia. According to him the Tatars ruled over Russia for two hundred years. The Russians had to spend all their time in protecting themselves from these rulers during this period which is why Russia was deprived of an ideological revolution and religious reform. ⁱⁱⁱ Copernicus preceded Galileo and was Polish. John Huss was a religious reformer and preceded Luther. Among those of Slav descent in Poland and Bohemia there were many who had earned fame in the fields of Literature, Science and the Art of Warfare. They were leading in Music too. Their songs bore the flavor of poetry of the people from the West.

From recent research it can be concluded that ever since Scythians came to Russia there was a considerable population of people of Slav origin settled there. At times these Slavs had to fight the Goths and at others the Huns would try to drive them out. During the very early period of the history of Kiev they would pay protection money to the Khazar rulers. For some period of time there were invasions by people of different origins and they even occupied the land. Yet this did not affect the Slav people to a great extent. The author writing about Russia in the Encyclopedia Britannica has said that this is the “silent history of the Slav people”. The economic and cultural development of these Slav people took place around the 9th century. They

had become skilled in farming, fishing, breeding of animals, knitting, making earthen pottery, carpentry and other crafts. They were enthusiastic about building cities because of which many cities like Kiev, Novgorod and Smolensk are seen to have been established during that period. While studying the history of the Russian and Soviet Empires it is very important to study Kiev.

Ref.

ⁱ Edward Peres, A History of Russia, pg. 7-9;

ⁱⁱ (Editor) Henry Smith Williams, Historians History of the World, Vol.17, pg.88;

ⁱⁱⁱ Raymond Hutchinson, Soviet Economic Development, pg. 10-11;