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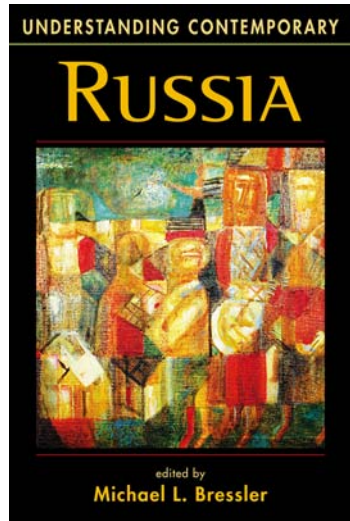
Understanding Contemporary Russia

edited by
Michael L. Bressler

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Introduction

Michael L. Bressler

During the Cold War, Russia's standing as a superpower (then the Soviet Union) ensured that it would be the primary focus of foreign policy makers in the West and a ready source of headlines for news organizations around the world. With the loss of its superpower status following the Soviet system's collapse in 1991, Russia was no longer the principal concern of Western foreign policy. Throughout the 1990s, interest in Russia declined, so much so that just a few years ago a number of US experts on Russia expressed their concerns about the future of Russian studies in the United States (see Hanson and Ruble 2005).

Of late, however, Russia has reclaimed at least a part of its former status as a result of its growing economy, its expanding influence in energy markets, and its increasing assertiveness in foreign policy. Indicative of Russia's return to center stage was *Time* magazine's choice of President Vladimir Putin as its 2007 "Person of the Year." Just a few years ago, with Russia's economy and society in decline, many observers questioned its importance in global affairs. With energy prices reaching record levels and Russia's economy rebounding, few question its significance now.

Although public awareness of Russia's importance seems to be increasing, this does not necessarily reflect a deeper knowledge or understanding of the country and its people. This seems especially true of those who have no memory of either the Cold War or the Soviet Union or of a time when the "Russians" dominated our news and focused our attention. For this younger generation, Russia waits to be discovered anew. *Understanding Contemporary Russia* is designed specifically to aid in this discovery and to promote the study and exploration of a country that continues to intrigue all who encounter it.

Almost twice the size of the United States and occupying nearly a third of the immense Eurasian landmass, Russia is by far the largest country in the world. A diverse land of harsh tundra, vast forests, rugged mountains,

semiarid expanses, and seemingly endless steppes, Russia is graced not only by incredible natural beauty but also considerable natural wealth. As is the case around the world, the impulse in Russia to exploit its seemingly limitless stores of natural resources (including oil, gas, minerals, metals, and timber) poses a constant threat to the health of a natural environment that includes such wonders as Lake Baikal and the Ob and Yenisey rivers.

A country on such a scale, so varied in its ecologies and landscapes, must also be diverse in its peoples and cultures. Even though nearly 80 percent of its population is ethnically Russian, Russia is home to nearly 160 other officially recognized ethnic groups. Religiously, the country is also diverse. Although Russian Orthodoxy dominates among believers, Islam is Russia's second largest religion. Buddhism, Judaism, various forms of Western Christianity, and a number of traditional ethnic faiths also have adherents. At the same time, as one legacy of the communist era, nearly a third of the population is made up of nonbelievers.

In considering the many links between Russia's past and its present, one is struck by the centrality of its relationship with the West. For more than three hundred years the more modern West has posed a significant challenge to Russia. Although Russia's leaders have tended to view the question primarily in military and economic terms, more often than not the challenge from the West has been social and political. On occasion Russia has responded effectively, as it did under Peter the Great, the first Russian leader who sought to reduce the West's lead in science and technology. Frequently, however, Russia has fallen short in its efforts, at times with catastrophic results. Imperial Russia's ruin in 1917 and the Soviet Union's demise in 1991 are perhaps best understood as failures of two different Russian systems (one tsarist and one communist) to cope with the challenge of the West. Not long after the Soviet system's collapse, Boris Yeltsin's launching of "shock therapy" represented yet another attempt to modernize and transform a country that was lagging far behind the West.

As much as the West has influenced Russia, so too has Russia influenced the West. During much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries Russians played a central role in transforming the arts through their music (for instance, Alexander Borodin and Igor Stravinsky), dance (Sergei Diaghilev and the Ballets Russes), literature (numerous authors, including Lev Tolstoy and Anton Chekhov), painting (for example, abstract artist and theorist Vasily Kandinsky), and theater (Konstantin Stanislavsky and the Moscow Art Theater).

Russia's contributions in the sciences and social sciences were also great in such fields as psychology (by Ivan Pavlov, whose work on conditioned responses earned him a Nobel Prize), chemistry (by Dmitri Mendeleev, who developed the periodic law and the first comprehensive periodic table), and mathematics (by Nikolai Lobachevsky, one of the founders of non-Euclidean geometry). During the communist era the Soviet Union ushered in the space age by beating the United States into outer space not once but twice: by

launching the first artificial satellite, *Sputnik 1*, in 1957, and by completing the first successful manned space flight, by cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin, in 1961. Although the Soviets never managed to put a man or woman on the moon, early success in their space program spurred their Cold War rival, the United States, into action. Thus, even as Russia has struggled and sometimes failed in its efforts to meet the challenges posed by a more modern West, its influence on the West and the world has been both real and substantial.

From their first encounters with the Russians several centuries ago, Western elites have tended to distort Russian realities, sometimes idealizing the country and at other times demonizing it. These Western views of Russia, Martin Malia (1999) argues, have often reflected political and socio-economic currents inside the West as much as they have conditions inside Russia. When Russia seems to look more like the West, regardless of what is actually going on inside the country, relations between Russia and the West have grown warm. When Russia appears to diverge from the West, however, Western perceptions change and relations cool.

As its relationship continues to evolve with the West, Russia faces a number of challenges, not least of which is the transformation of its political and economic systems. Nearly two decades after the Soviet system's collapse Russia is still finding its way, at times seemingly converging with the West and at times apparently moving away from it. A number of other questions also demand Russia's attention, each defying simple solutions: holding together a multiethnic, multiconfessional society; coping with a public health crisis that threatens the long-term viability of the Russian state and its people; dealing with the many negative effects of environmental degradation; and reforming a corrupt bureaucracy. The question of Russian identity also looms large in the policies of ruling elites who, much to the dismay of many observers in the West, seem increasingly convinced that Russia must strike out on a uniquely "Russian" course in its political, economic, and social development.

Understanding another country and appreciating the many challenges facing it is hard work. How easy it is, Malia (1999) reminds us, to allow our own interests and fears to influence what we grasp and perceive. Undoubtedly, this is true of any relationship between peoples of different histories and cultures. The authors of this volume have endeavored to provide a fair appraisal of contemporary Russia and a thoughtful assessment of where the country is, how it got there, and where it might be going. We hope the reader will gain a greater understanding of a country that has long struggled to find its place in the world and to be at peace with itself.

* * *

This book is the result of a collaborative effort by eleven scholars who have devoted much of their lives to the study of things Russian. During the

recruitment of authors for this project, the near universal reaction was that the publication of such a volume was long overdue. Interdisciplinary in design, *Understanding Contemporary Russia* is intended primarily for use as a core text in introductory Russian survey courses. The authors do not assume an in-depth knowledge or understanding of Russia on the part of the reader. Accordingly, the book is straightforward both in content and design. At the same time, the authors, by drawing on the best research in their fields, have resisted the temptation to be simplistic in their approaches. Although not an exhaustive survey, this book aims to provide students with a sophisticated yet accessible treatment of Russia. In this way, the authors hope to leave students with a finer appreciation of the many challenges facing Russia and its people.

This first chapter has provided a brief overview of the subject with special attention paid to Russia's relationship with the West. It is followed by detailed chapters on Russia's geography (Chapter 2) and history (Chapter 3), which taken together provide the foundation for the rest of the volume. Mindful of the many links between Russia's past and present, subsequent chapters examine the country's politics (Chapter 4) and economics (Chapter 5) as well as Russia's place in the international system (Chapter 6). From here the book considers some of the more important issues facing Russian society today: ethnicity and identity (Chapter 7), population and health (Chapter 8), the environment (Chapter 9), the role of women (Chapter 10), and religion (Chapter 11). No survey of Russia would be complete without a detailed examination of Russian literature and film (Chapter 12). Finally, in the closing chapter, the book reflects on where Russia has been and speculates about where it might be going.

■ A Note on Transliteration

Because the Russian language is rendered in Cyrillic letters, not in Latin script, the transliteration of Russian words poses a challenge to any editor. This volume generally follows the Library of Congress's transliteration scheme. In cases in which other forms are more common (such as Yeltsin, instead of El'tsin), the more common form is used. In instances in which Russian and English first names are essentially equivalent (such as the Russian "Aleksandr" and the English "Alexander") the English form is used. In cases in which Russian and English first names are not quite as close, either in pronunciation or transliteration (for example, the Russian "Mikhail" and the English "Michael"), the Russian form is used. With the exception of their use in bibliographic entries, diacritical marks (for soft signs and hard signs) are omitted.

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