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Understanding Contemporary Russia

SECOND EDITION

edited by
Michael L. Bressler

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1

Introduction

Michael L. Bressler

Throughout much of its history, Russia has occupied a prominent place in international affairs. Its size alone, spanning the vast Eurasian landmass, ensured that it could not be ignored by the world's other great powers. As the Soviet Union it was at the height of its strength and influence, so much so that it could wage a decades-long Cold War with the West. As one of the world's two superpowers, its only real rival was the United States. The eventual loss of its superpower status, however, following the collapse of the Soviet system more than a quarter of a century ago, relegated Russia to the ranks of the also-rans of world politics. No longer, it seemed, would Russia hold the world's attention as it struggled, often ineffectually, to get its internal affairs in order. So desperate were its circumstances, as the new millennium approached, that there seemed to be little hope that Russia could ever right itself.

Rising global energy prices, however, and the election of Vladimir Putin as its president, had a dramatic effect on Russia's fortunes. Indeed, during Putin's first two terms in office (2000–2008), Russia 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 Putin as its 2007 "Person of the Year." Although Russia's economic performance has been uneven since then, largely because of two dramatic drops in the price of oil (first in 2008, and again in 2014), Russia has remained in the news. In the realm of international security, Russia has made its presence felt, often in negative ways from the perspective of the West. Its intervention in support of separatist groups in eastern Ukraine, beginning in 2014, along with the seizing and annexation

of Crimea, resulted in the levying of economic sanctions against it by the United States and the European Union (EU). Direct Russian military intervention in Syria, beginning in 2015, has played a decisive role in propping up Bashar al-Assad's regime. More recently, Russia's efforts to influence the internal politics of several countries in the West, including presidential elections in the United States and France, has heightened anxiety among US and European policymakers and publics over the nature of Russia's role in the world. With this anxiety has come a renewed awareness of how important it is to know as much as possible about Russia and the Russians (for example, see Horowitz 2014; Demirjian 2015; Cole 2017; Philp 2017).

With an aim to deepen public understanding of contemporary Russia and to encourage the creation of a new generation of experts, this volume is intended to provide readers with an essential introduction that we hope will inspire people to engage in further study of a country that continues to play a vitally important role in international affairs. 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 ecosystems and landscapes, must also be diverse in its peoples and cultures. Even though nearly 78 percent of its population is ethnically Russian, Russia is home to more than 140 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, a quarter 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 300 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 re-

sults. 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, President Boris Yeltsin's launching of "shock therapy" represented yet another attempt to modernize and transform a country that was lagging far behind the West. The skepticism with which Russia's current leader, President Putin, views the West can easily be understood as the latest chapter in a relationship between Russia and the West that is at times marked by cynicism and mistrust.

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 and poets, including Lev Tolstoy, Anton Chekhov, and Marina Tsветаeva); painting (for example, Russian Futurist painter Natalia Goncharova, and abstract artist and theorist Vasily Kandinsky); and theater (Konstantin Stanislavsky, Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko, and the Moscow Art Theater).

Russia's contributions in the 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' perceptions of Russian realities have shifted back and forth over time, sometimes idealizing the country and at other times demonizing it. These Western views of Russia, Martin Malia (1999, 7–8) argues, have often reflected political and socioeconomic currents inside the West as much as they have conditions inside Russia. Furthermore, argues Malia (1999, 12), when Russia seems to look more like the West to Western observers, regardless of what is actually going on inside the country, relations between Russia and the West have grown warm. When Russia appears to differentiate itself 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. 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 readers 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 the first edition, the near universal reaction was that the publication of such a volume was long overdue. Interdisciplinary in design, *Understanding Contemporary Russia* is, in part, intended for use as a core text in introductory Russian survey courses and courses in Russian politics. But it is also well suited for general readers who wish to go beyond headlines and sound bites and immerse themselves in a sophisticated yet accessible treatment of Russia. The authors do not assume an in-depth knowledge or understanding of Russia on the part of readers. Accordingly, the book is straightforward in both 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 commentaries. Through this approach, their intention is to leave readers with a finer appreciation of the many challenges facing Russia and its people.

This first chapter has provided a brief overview of the subject. 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 and Russia's environmental movement (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 normally used. In cases in which Russian and English first names are not quite as close, in either 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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