

the essential guide to
customs & culture

CULTURE SMART!

RUSSIA



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Anna King

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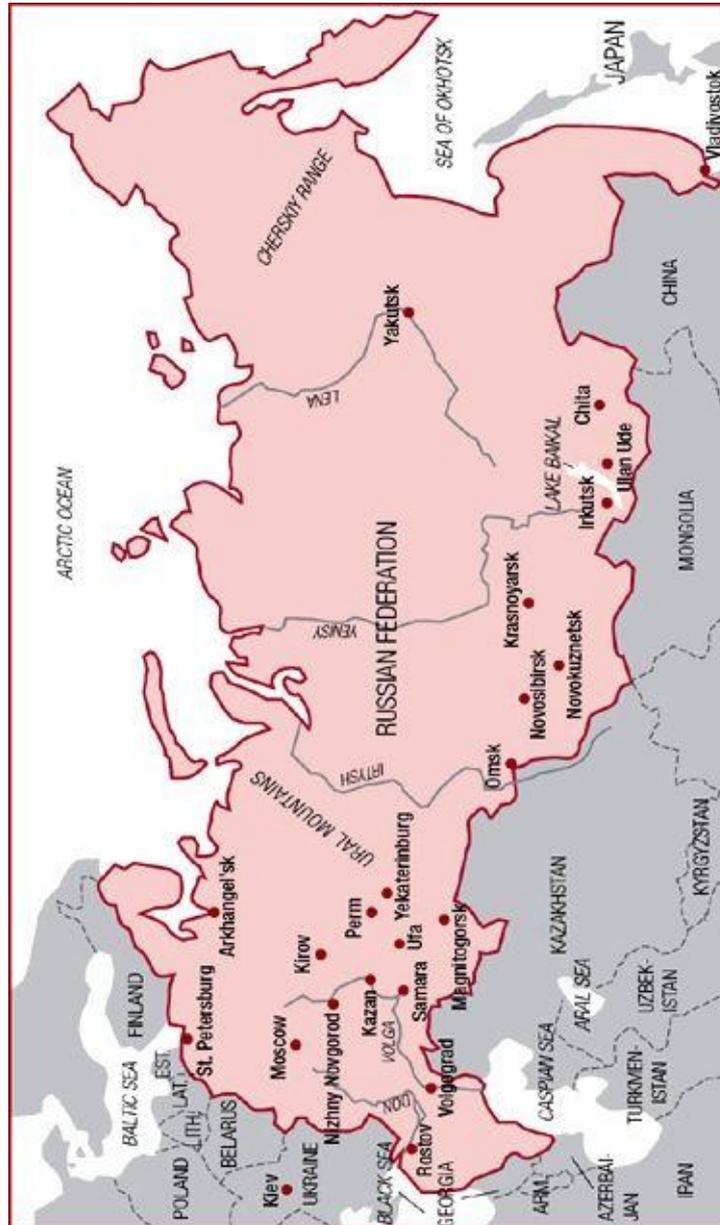
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Acknowledgments

Map of Russia



introduction

Russia is the largest country in the world, and one of the most enigmatic, complex, and difficult countries to write about. Several stereotypical impressions of Russia are imprinted on our psyche—be it an unsmiling *babushka* in a thin, shabby coat and headscarf or a glamorous model swathed in furs; the echoing crunch of boots on parade in Red Square, or the featherlight grace of ballerinas in Tchaikovsky’s *Nutcracker*; the gold Rolex of a nouveau riche, or the shining domes of the Sergiyev Posad Lavra.

Everything in Russia is about contradictions, from its Eurasian geographical position and extremes of climate to its changing economic regimes and conflicting modern values.

Russia’s military and political power, as well as the rich contribution of its art and culture, are the result of an inner dynamic not always understood by outsiders. The Russian language and the Russian Orthodox religion are unique; Russian history is tragic; and the people are unpredictable.

It would, of course, be wrong to generalize or to try to pack 141 million people into a single box, extending from Europe to the Pacific. The Muscovite will not behave in the same way as the Kazakh from the southern region of Kuban, the hunter from the far north as the plant worker in the Urals. And yet politicians, writers, and philosophers keep returning to the “enigma of the Russian soul,” and referring to the uniquely “Russian way” of behavior and development. Despite the undoubted regional differences there is a shared base of history, tradition, and values.

Travelers to Russia seek answers to the same questions: “What should I expect? How do I make friends? Are there any particular ways of conducting business?” This completely revised edition of *Culture Smart! Russia* sets out to help you become a more perceptive and tolerant traveler, and to make your trip more personally fulfilling. It explores the connections between Russia’s turbulent past and its paradoxical present. Using illustrative anecdotes it describes present-day values and attitudes, and offers practical advice on what to expect and how to behave in different social circumstances. It aims to reintroduce the Russian people to you, their generous qualities of character, what they believe, aspire to, and feel, how they entertain, and how they conduct business. If your curiosity extends beyond *matryoshka*, troika, and balalaika, this book is for you. *Dobro pozhalovat!*

Key Facts

Official Name	The Russian <i>Federation</i> (<i>Rossiyskaya Federatsiya</i>)	Russia is negotiating membership of the World Trade Organization.
Capital City	Moscow	Population 10.4 million
Major Cities	St. Petersburg (second city); population approx. 4 million	Nizhny Novgorod, Samara, Kazan, Perm, Ufa, Rostov-on-Don, Volgograd, and Novosibirsk.
Area	6,592,800 sq. miles (17,075,400 sq. km)	The biggest country in the world; about one-ninth of the world's total area.
Borders	Norway, Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Belarus, Ukraine, Georgia, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Mongolia, China, and North Korea.	Several former member states of the USSR are no longer contiguous.
Climate	Varies enormously across the huge land area, from the Arctic north to the southerly latitudes of the Black Sea and the moderating maritime influences in the west.	Broadly speaking there is a long cold winter with snow and ice from November to April, a spring thaw from April and May, and a hot summer from June till September.
Time Zones	Russia covers 11 time zones.	Moscow and St. Petersburg are 3 hours ahead of GMT and 8 hours ahead of New York.
Currency	Ruble = 100 kopeks	
Population	Recent estimates give around 142 million, 75% of whom live in cities.	Three quarters of the population live in European Russia.
Ethnic Makeup	81% of the population is Slav, but there are significant minorities.	Minorities incl. Tatars, Ukrainians, Chuvash, Belarussians, Bashkirs, Chechens.
Language	Russian	Other languages also spoken in the autonomous republics.
Religion	Russian Orthodox Christianity	Other religions: Islam, Buddhism, Judaism, and non-Orthodox Christianity.

Government	Multiparty democracy with an elected executive president and a bicameral legislature	There are 89 administrative areas, with varying degrees of local autonomy.
Media	The main newspapers are <i>Komsomolskaya Pravda</i> and <i>Kommersant</i> . The news agencies are Itar-Tass and RIA-Novosti (state-owned) and Interfax (private).	
Media: English Language	<i>Moscow Times</i> and <i>St. Petersburg Times</i> . Many hotels have internatl. satellite TV.	
Electricity	220 volts, 50 Hz. Two-prong plugs	Adaptors needed for US appliances
Video/TV	PAL/SECAM system	NTSC TV does not work in Russia.
Internet Domain	.ru	
Telephone	The code for Russia is +7. Moscow's code is 495; St. Petersburg's code is 812.	To dial out of Russia, dial 8 (for outside the city), then 10, followed by the country code.

LAND & PEOPLE

chapter one

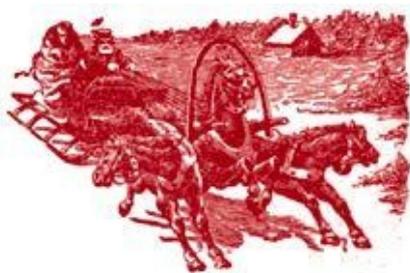
GEOGRAPHY OF THE SOUL

Contradictions begin from the moment you look at the map. Some American geography books define Russia as “a country in the northern part of Asia.” President Putin recently declared that “Russia has extended European borders to the Pacific.” Russia has been described as being sandwiched between Asia and Europe, with the Ural Mountains serving as the geographical divide, though “sandwiched” is hardly an appropriate word for a country that stretches from the Baltic Sea to the Pacific Ocean, covers one-sixth of the world’s landmass, and extends through eleven time zones.

“We are Scythians! Asians!” wrote the poet Aleksandr Blok in the early twentieth century, yet Russia’s contributions to European literature, art, and music are outstanding. While two-thirds of Russia’s territory are in Asia, three-quarters of the population live in the European part. Moscow, St. Petersburg, and Yekaterinburg are the largest cities.

Each September the first lesson of the Russian school year traditionally begins with a talk about “our Motherland, and its space one can’t embrace.” Vast open plains cover most of the territory: the Eastern European (Russian) Plain, the Mid-Siberian Plateau, and the Central Yakut Plain. It is an eight-hour flight from Moscow to the Pacific coastal city of Vladivostok.

“There is a strong connection between physical geography and the geography of soul, a correlation between the boundlessness of the Russian lands and the Russian spirit. Russian people have in their souls enormous spaces, the boundless eternity of the Russian plains ...,” wrote the philosopher Nikolai Berdyayev.



“He has a wide soul,” Russians often say about somebody sympathetic and supportive.

The enormous Russian spaces have another effect. Visitors cannot but notice that everything is done on a large scale, from architecture to drinking. People you meet, when they open up to you, are larger than life, both in joy and in anger.

In that first lesson of the school year, you would also hear the teacher describe Russia as the richest country in the world, though only the most progressive teacher would add in a whisper, “potentially.” Russia has a quarter of the world’s mineral resources—from oil, gas, gold, and diamonds to nonferrous metals and timber—but the obstacles of a harsh climate, great distances, and a lack of human resources (Russia

has only 2.5 percent of the world's population) have hindered its development. Add to this the permafrost that covers half the landmass, leaving only 8 percent of the land arable; active volcanoes in the Kuril Islands; spring floods and summer forest fires throughout Siberia; and earthquakes on the Kamchatka Peninsula; and you will agree with that progressive teacher.

CLIMATE

Russia encompasses all climate zones except the tropical. Most of the country has a harsh continental climate, with a dramatic difference between summer and winter temperatures. The village of Oymyakon, in the autonomous Sakha Republic, for example, is one of the world's coldest places, with an average winter temperature of -56.6°F (-47°C). A monument there marks the day it fell to -96.16°F (-71.2°C). Global warming might well change things: January 2007 was the first January on record in Moscow without snow.

Southern Russia has a subtropical climate, where year-round temperatures remain above 46°F (approx. 8°C), and summer temperatures range between 79° and 90°F (26° and 32°C), though occasional extreme heat waves might exceed 122°F (50°C).

Winter in Russia lasts much longer than in Europe, and there are only three or four summer months in which concentrated agricultural labor is possible. This may explain the characteristic Russian *shturmovshina*—short bursts of extremely intense work. Short harvest periods and unpredictable weather can lead to risk taking in sowing, and planting *na avos*—a “what if” approach—hoping for a good outcome. And besides, if the harvest fails one can always go fishing. This attitude may go some way to explaining the resilience that is part of the Russian character—the ability to bounce back after losing everything, after forceful relocation due to the whims of politicians, or after economic crises.

RUSSIAN WATERS

Russia's 120,000 rivers stretch for 1,864,114 miles (3 million km); two million fresh and saltwater lakes are scattered across the country. *Volga Matushka*, "Mother Volga," the national symbol of Russia and the longest river in Europe, rises northwest of Moscow and flows all the way to the Caspian Sea. Rivers are extremely important in Russian life; they bring food, transportation, and trade (the famous Nizhny Novgorod trade fair, for example, grew up on the confluence of two major rivers, the Volga and the Oka).

Though Russia is surrounded by seas—the Arctic Ocean, the Black Sea, the Baltic Sea, and the Pacific Ocean—there are huge internal territories that do not have access to seaports. Sociologists talk about the "continental," inward-looking Russian mentality, typical in countries where the majority of the population is isolated from international influences. Most Russian territory is situated more than 250 miles (402 km) from the sea.

THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION

The patchwork of climatic and ecological zones gives rise to different densities of population in the various Russian regions and, inevitably, to ethnic and cultural differences. Geographers have often tried to define those regional parameters. I. Ryazantsev and A. Zavalishin developed the interesting concept of the “Russian cross,” which divides the country into four major regions by climatic conditions, culture, and history.

The West: European Russia and the Urals

This area is the cradle of Russian civilization; it has the highest density of population and is the most economically developed. Forty-eight out of fifty-five deposits of natural resources are in the Urals, as well as the major military plants and a huge industrial base. The area was the main laboratory of the Soviet and post-Soviet social and economic experiments, and the main arena of the “battle of minds” between the reformist center and the conservative, provincial “red belt” of Communist supporters.

The East: Southern Siberia, Lake Baikal, and the Southern Part of the Far East

These are the areas around the Trans-Siberian railway and the Pacific coast. The population is less dense here, and there is a strong sense of regional identity. Those who live in Siberia are known as *sibiryaky*, and those who live in the Far East as *dalnevostochniki*.

The *sibiryaky* are tough and hardworking, with a strong survival instinct. They are either the descendants of the Siberian pioneers of the eighteenth century or the grandchildren or children of ex-prisoners: it was in Siberia that the majority of Stalin’s camps were situated, and one-third of those who survived their ordeal decided not to return (or were not allowed to return) to Central Russia. The social system of mutual support and camaraderie is stronger here than in other regions.

The *dalnevostochniki*, who live on the Pacific coast, are more detached and self-contained. They are an eight-hour flight away from the central government decision makers. Those who moved here were ready for start-up difficulties, and relied on their own resources and skills.

The Eurasian North

This includes the territories north of around 60° latitude. Here normal agriculture is

practically impossible due to the harsh winters, permafrost, and long polar nights. The population consists mainly of hunters, fishermen, deer herders, and those working in the mining industries.



The South

This includes the autonomous republics of the Northern Caucasus and the basin of the Don River. The local conflicts here go back more than a century. The Russian Empire gained political control of the Caucasus in the 1860s, and the region, especially the Checheno-Ingush region, has been a constant source of conflict ever since.

The southern mentality represents a melting pot of 112 ethnic groups, mixing the customs of the Kazakhs, whose ancestors escaped from Ukraine in search of freedom, with the aspirations of the local ethnic minorities to preserve Caucasian customs, identity, and independence.

According to the 2002 census, the ethnic groups in the Russian Federation are: Russian, 79.8 percent; Tatar, 3.8 percent; Ukrainian, 2 percent; Bashkir, 1.2 percent; Chuvash, 1.1 percent; others, 12.1 percent.

The Federal Structure

The Russian Federation is divided into eighty-seven administrative units officially known as “Federal Subjects.” Of these, thirty are defined by ethnicity, and fifty-seven by territory. According to the constitution all the regional units are equal in their relationship to the center; in reality, there are subtle differences in the degrees of autonomy they enjoy. They are divided into the following categories: twenty-one republics; nine territories (*krai*); forty-eight regions (*oblast*), and nine autonomous regions (*avtonomnaya oblast*, or *avtonomny okrug*). Moscow and St. Petersburg are regional units in their own right and are called “Federal Cities.” If you find this confusing, imagine trying to manage and coordinate this entity in a unified way.

Since 2000, President Putin has overseen a sustained recentralization of power in the relations between the center and the “subjects of federation.” Russia has been divided into seven federal districts, overseen by presidential envoys (*polpredi*). Five out of those seven envoys are former officers of the security services. Their first task has been to harmonize federal and regional legislation, which in some cases had diverged widely in the 1990s. Budgetary relations between the center and the regions

have shifted in favor of the federal government. In December 2004 the President abolished the direct election of regional leaders and reverted to the earlier system, whereby leaders are appointed by the President, subject to approval by the regional legislature. A process has begun of consolidating regions into larger, supposedly more manageable units. The first to merge were Perm Oblast and Komi-Permyak Autonomous Okrug. Further mergers are in the pipeline. But despite those efforts, the relations between the federal center and the regions still follow the *matryoshka*, or Russian doll, principle: “subjects of federation” are self-governing islands of various sizes within one big doll.