

The Roots of Russia

They came suddenly, like thunder from God. Two hundred boats and eight thousand men. They attacked the city with frenzied brutality and unbelievable force. The Christian inhabitants were taken completely by surprise, and they thought it was a punishment for their sins. This strange tribe, who looked to the people of Constantinople more like animals than men, had travelled many hundreds of miles to reach the Second Rome. The most powerful empire in Europe could not withstand them. There was nothing they could do except pray. This misfortune was shameful too—that the great city should be hurt by an unknown Barbarian people; an obscure people, a people of little importance, a people considered slaves.

They had travelled in boats made of tree trunks, from oak forests in a distant land. They had braved rapids on the river Dnieper, full of rocks where they had had to leave the water and carry their boats overland. Then they were in danger of being attacked by the wild Pechenegs, who haunted this country looking for plunder. At a ford where the Pechenegs often lay in wait for travellers, they offered sacrifices of food to pacify the gods, and killed cocks. After that, they put masts and sails on their boats, and at last they were ready. At this point, it is likely that they invoked the thunder god for strength and success: some of them would have called him Perun, and others Thor. For it was a mixed company; some of them had come from Scandinavia in the beginning, and others were Slavs. Together they created the first state in the country which is now called Russia, and their descendents would rule as princes and tsars for hundreds of years.

At this time, around the year 860, the Norsemen were terrorizing their enemies from Ireland in the west, to Russia and Constantinople in the east and south. In the years to come, they established many new states, including the Kingdom of Mann and the Isles, Normandy, and Russia itself. In the stories, and perhaps in reality, Riurik is named as the first king of Russia, and father of every nobleman and every tsar until Ivan the Terrible. Riurik was born in Jutland, and was invited to rule in Novgorod and Ladoga, because the tribes had been fighting with one another and wanted to re-establish peace. As in our islands, in a few generations the Norsemen had abandoned their own customs and language, and had become just like the indigenous inhabitants.

But the story of the Russians begins long before that, at the end of the last ice age. The people of Russia today are the descendents of the group of humans who sheltered in Ukraine in the ice age, and when the weather became warmer again, they began to move north little by little. At the same time, plants and animals were filling the landscape once more. First came such plants as were able to endure the cold: small tough plants for the most part, and then trees: aspen, birch, fir, hazel and willow, and then when the weather was milder about seven or eight hundred years ago, the hornbeam and the lime appeared. In places which were suitable for them, the oak and the elm flourished. In the south there was nothing but the wide steppe, with few trees, because of the strong, dry winds which blew in from the east, and the scarcity of rain.

Animals came too. First the small insects like the industrious bee, and fishes such as salmon, ducks and other water fowl, and eventually larger animals: hares, beavers, deer, foxes, wolves, lynxes and brown bears. After these, humans appeared as well. They

followed the animals as they moved northwards; they hunted them, and eventually they tamed some of them. They learnt to sow seed as well, and grew crops to make flour and bread. But the soil was not too good, and they still relied on the wild world, and the hunting—for meat, and in addition, fur, feathers, horns and bones, from which they made many useful artefacts. They had to adapt their way of life according to the sort of land they were now living in, and gradually their bodies and appearance changed too. As they went further into places where the sun was weak, their hair and skin became lighter; their noses grew a little longer so that the air would have more time to be warmed before it reached the lungs. And though kingdoms, empires and wars have come and gone, the Russians are for the most part the same race which first migrated north to the steppes and the forests. Science has discovered that they have the same genes now, which link the people of today to their forebears thousands of years ago.

Their life began to change with the coming of the iron age when there was more trade; they were growing more on the land as well, for they had new tools, such as the iron sickle, and as people became richer, the population rose too. And they were able to spread out across the country, and through the forests as well, since iron axes made it easier to cut down trees. They practised the method of agriculture called ‘slash and burn’, which was a good way to cultivate the land. But it was still very difficult, for the conditions of the country, the weather and the soil are all far worse than the rest of Europe. It is cold nearly all year, and even in the south it is colder than central Europe. The ground often freezes even before the snow falls. There are many marshes and bogs, which still hinder farming to the present day. And apart from the Black Earth region in the south, the land is very poor and it is difficult for a farmer to grow enough for himself and his family; it is even more difficult to grow enough to sell, or to give as taxes to a lord or ruler. For this reason the rulers, who were now appearing, often used force, or the threat of it, to compel their subjects to grow a surplus, for there were few other incentives. But however hard they worked, the land could yield only a very small surplus, and the rulers had to extend their power further and further afield, in order to get a sufficient income. Some people say that this is one reason for the tendency the Russian state has to expand and enlarge, and moreover, the reason why Russian rulers have so often used oppression and force of arms throughout the country’s history.

Because summer is so short in Russia, spring comes so late and winter so early, the farmers had to be very speedy both sowing and reaping, and therefore it was advantageous for them to work together, and rely on each other. The Russians might not have been natural communists, as the Soviets claimed, but perhaps there was some truth in this saying, for the condition they were in pushed them together, forcing them to think of their neighbour’s need as well as their own, and enabling them to endure suffering. After a while towns and cities appeared: some of them grew up around the place where the chief ruler lived, and others were market towns, where people came and lived to buy and to sell. But the market towns needed protection and government, and the rulers had goods to sell, so the two purposes of the first cities were mixed. Soon small kingdoms appeared, and then larger kingdoms, like the one Riurik was invited to rule over.

In the south it was another people, the Khazars, who came to rule over the Russian tribes. The Khazars had a trading state, and through them links were established between Russian merchants and the Muslim world. The Khazars themselves were sandwiched

between Christian Byzantium and the Muslim Caliphate, and to ensure they would not be taken over by one or the other, the Khazar leaders decided to convert to Judaism, something which might be thought strange, though it must be remembered that the Jews were among the most successful merchants in the world. The Russian tribes had to pay tribute to them each year: a silver coin and a squirrel skin from every household. But before long these Barbarians would become a power themselves, and the tribal world was over: the first Russian state was born. This state is often called the 'Kievan Rus'.

Riurik's great grandson, Igor, was murdered by the leaders of the Derevlans, a tribe which did not want to be subject to the Kievan Rus, after they had been made to pay tribute. The Prince of the Derevlans offered to marry Igor's widow, but Olga had other ideas. She is the first of many strong and powerful women in the history of Russia. She took a terrible revenge on her enemies: some of them were tortured, some were killed, and the rest were taken as slaves. But this Olga is also venerated as a saint, because she became a Christian. Olga was baptized in Constantinople, with the emperor himself as her godfather, and she took the name Helen: Helen was the mother of the first Christian emperor, Constantine, and Olga wanted to set herself up as the mother of the Rus.

So the Russian Orthodox Church was born, though it was still under the care of the patriarch of Constantinople. But a couple of generations went by before paganism was finally rooted out. It is said that one of the princes after Olga sent out messengers all over the world to see which religion would be best for his country. The messengers told of the Muslim Bulgarians around the river Volga, that there was no happiness among them, only sorrow and a dreadful stench; and they did not like their religion because strong drink and pork were forbidden; at this point, according to the story, the prince said, "Drink is the joy of the Rus." He did not think much of the religion of the Jews, because he thought they had lost Jerusalem because God had abandoned them. He turned to Christianity. In the dark Roman churches his messengers saw no beauty; but in the church of the Holy Wisdom, Hagia Sophia, in Constantinople, where a festival was being held in the Byzantine Church, they found what they were looking for. "We did not know whether we were in heaven or on the earth," they said afterwards. In addition Vladimir gained more power and wealth by his new connection to Byzantium.

The good fortune of Russia lasted almost three hundred years, but when the Mongol armies came, the second great power in the story of Russia, the country was already weak, and split into little kingdoms, because of the custom by which an estate, goods and power were given to each son, not only to the eldest. The result of this was that there was no one powerful ruler to resist enemies, and all the petty princes were constantly fighting one another.

Now it was the Khan of the Tatars, as the Mongols came to be called, who ruled over the Russians, chose their princes, and levied taxes from them. But at the same time there was greater unity among the oppressed people, and the Church grew stronger and richer. Pious rulers, merchants and land-owners all gave gifts and money to the Church, to ensure that their sins would be forgiven, and that they would have a place in heaven. Besides religion, the Church also encouraged literature, learning, the wisdom of rulers, and promoted the economy. Monasteries have an important place in eastern Christianity, and though parish priests can be married, bishops must be celibate monks. It was the monasteries which spread Russian influence further and further afield: monks in small

groups lived in the forests at the edge of the country, beginning farming, and then other people would follow on behind. The new wealth of the Church also paid for many grand and magnificent churches, in which priests in black robes held very long and very beautiful services, with much use of icons and powerful incense. If you go into an Orthodox church, it is a bit like a Roman Catholic one, but there is also much that is strange and unfamiliar. The Eastern Church has changed little in two thousand years: there was no Reformation, and according to the Orthodox, Protestantism and Catholicism are almost the same, both built on the strange ways of the West.

In reality, the order and language of the service are the biggest difference between Rome and the East. In the Slavic countries Christians used the language of the people, and that is the language still used today. Church Slavonic comes from old Bulgarian, and now Russians only half understand it. There are only a very small number of differences of belief between the West and the East. They both uphold the apostolic succession of bishops, priests and deacons; they both honour Mary and the other saints, and use images in their worship. They fell out over three issues.

Firstly, the Eastern bishops did not like the power the Pope was seeking to get for himself over them; they did not believe that the Bishop of Rome had authority or rights above the other bishops. Now that the Roman Church says that the Pope is infallible when he proclaims a teaching, they are even less happy. Secondly, Catholics use unleavened bread in the mass, but the Orthodox use risen, leavened bread. The Catholics say that their bread is the sort Jesus himself used in the last supper, but the Orthodox Church claims that the bread of the Catholics is flat and dead: their bread symbolizes the Resurrection. Additionally, the Orthodox believe that the bread and wine do not change until the end of the prayers, but for Catholics it changes earlier. For this reason the Orthodox accuse the Catholics of bread-worship. And thirdly, the Orthodox do not accept that there is a purgatory before penitents go to heaven; neither do they profess that the Virgin Mary was conceived without sin. Apart from that, there is no great difference between them as regards belief, but much resentment, suspicion and misunderstanding.

Though these disputes did not directly affect the Russians, since they happened hundreds of miles away, nevertheless since they professed the eastern faith, they were obliged to fight many times against enemies they regarded as enemies of the true religion, and there would always be some uneasiness in their dealings with the countries of the west which remains to this day. Indeed, the city of Moscow, whose prince was becoming the most powerful ruler in Russia, and where the metropolitan lived, came to look upon itself as the centre and defender of Orthodoxy. After Constantinople had been taken by the Turks in 1453, the Church and the high prince believed that Moscow would become the Third Rome. The Russian bishops thought that Constantinople had fallen as a punishment since its rulers had turned their back on their faith by fraternizing with the Papists at the Council of Florence. Many Greeks came to Moscow seeking refuge as well, with the necessary experience to build an empire.

The power of the Tatars had dissolved, and the Golden Horde had broken up, and in the time of the high prince Ivan III, Muscovy went from being a small regional power to the foundation of one of the greatest empires in Europe, and the other European rulers had to deal with the prince of Moscow as one of their own number, though a short while before most of them had not known who he was or where Moscow and Russia were situated. Ivan

extended the power of Russia further and further, and against the will of the other princes, he declared himself “sovereign over all the other sovereigns of the Russian land”. He forged links with many countries, and when the Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II offered him the title of ‘king’ in 1489, he refused it at once. He wanted a greater title than that. After the death of his first wife, he married Zoe Palaeologos, the niece of the last emperor of Constantinople. In this way, the blood of the Byzantine emperors ran in the veins of Ivan’s descendents, and they were eager to get the most out of it.

Along with the offer of the title of ‘king’, Frederick II offered Ivan’s daughter the hand of certain lowly and unimportant princes. Ivan replied that the rulers of Russia had ever had bonds of love and friendship with the Roman empires, who had given Rome to the Pope, while they themselves ruled from Byzantium even until the days of his own father-in-law, John Palaeologos, and therefore it was not right that his daughter should marry one of these lowly princes: perhaps Frederick’s own son would be suitable.

It was in the time of Ivan III’s grandson, whose name was also Ivan, that the power of Russia increased in a way not seen before; but after him the country would be almost destroyed as well. This Ivan is often called Ivan the Terrible, though it must be remembered that he was not much worse than other kings and rulers of that age: Louis XI of France was guilty of the Saint Bartholomew’s Day massacres, in which five thousand people perished—and Mary the Queen of England saw fit to have many Protestants burnt. But Ivan’s crimes were indeed terrible enough: he and his followers murdered or terrorized anyone they had suspicions about; he executed the Metropolitan of the Church, and he killed his own son in a fit of rage. In addition he married seven times, though only three are allowed according to the canons of the Orthodox Church, he stormed out of his capital in a huff whenever someone opposed him, and he personally engaged in a passionate debate about theology with a Jesuit messenger from the Pope.

But he did many other things which were very cunning and effective to consolidate his own power, strengthen his empire, and put a façade of holiness and righteousness around himself and his ancestors. He sent for knowledgeable men from Western Europe to bring the secrets of explosive devices and German science to Russia. He expanded the army, and established new arms factories. In his first months as tsar, thirty-nine new saints were canonized, many of them his own ancestors of the house of Riurik. This made him look like the protector of Orthodoxy; and when he started a war against the Tatars, it was as a holy war, with icons and banners of Christ and of saints carried at the front of the army. Every war was holy: for every enemy was either heathen or heretic. In this way, Ivan expanded Russia further and further south, until he came to the Caucasus mountains. Russians began to move east as well, and eventually Siberia came under the power, though neither they nor their tsar appreciated the great importance of that country, or the riches their descendents would win from it in the future. Neither did the kings of England and France at that time imagine that their little colonies over the sea would one day grow to be great empires.

Before long Ivan’s armies were locked in a furious war with his neighbours in the east; but at the same time he had to maintain his power in his own country. For that reason he set up a peculiar organization called the *Oprichnina*, which means ‘something apart or separated’; it was above the law, and owned a lot of land. Men whom Ivan trusted were

members of it, and they wore black robes and hoods, rode black horses, with the likeness of brooms and dogs' heads on their saddle pommels. These signified that they would sweep treachery out of the country, and sniff it out like hounds. The actual result of this was that they passed the time intimidating and murdering both peasants and nobles, anyone they suspected of being against the tsar. This was the first Reign of Terror, and the blame is often laid on Ivan's paranoia. The organization was like an order of monks, with Ivan himself as abbot. In 1560, they laid waste the city of Novgorod, and killed thousands of people.

At the same time, the system of serfdom was established. The state did not have much money to pay its servants, but plenty of land, which was however useless without people to work it. Many were moving from the north and middle of the country to the south and the east. Therefore the state had to make laws to put a stop to this tendency, and to force peasants to stay where they already lived. They were allowed to travel only in the winter. So the wealth of those who served the state was assured, but the freedom of the common people was lost, and the oppression of serfdom, which was close to slavery, began.

But when Ivan the Terrible died, Russia was weak after the wars, and the heir to the throne had been killed by Ivan himself. Another son, Dmitrii, died as well, and there was only one son left, Fyodor, who was apparently a halfwit. A group of ministers ruled in his stead, including a clever man named Boris Godunov. There was a rumour going around that it was he who killed the tsar's brother, Dmitrii. Nevertheless, when Fyodor died without leaving an heir, Boris was popular enough to be invited to sit on the throne, even though he was not of the house of Riurik. It was said that God himself had chosen him. The patriarch said, "Blessed be God who wanted this. May the will of God be done, for the voice of the people is the voice of God."

But the will of the people soon changed. There was a very cold winter, followed by a famine, and then a very wet summer, so that the crops were destroyed. People were starving, and they blamed everything on the sins of Boris. The stories about Dmitrii's strange death and the evil man Boris who had usurped his place multiplied and spread as the discontent of the people grew. Whatever Boris did, selling his own grain for example, it was never enough and people throughout Russia were turning against their ruler. In the south a man appeared who pretended to be Dmitrii who had escaped and fled. Now he had risen from the dead, and many powerful lords followed him and before long there was a great rebellion under way. Boris died, and the false Dmitrii became tsar. He ruled for only ten months. People said that he was really a monk who had been expelled from a monastery; besides that they accused him of Roman Catholicism, debauchery, and witchcraft. He was killed a fortnight after his own wedding, but the bride escaped.

A nobleman was placed on the throne; but few people accepted him. Rumours persisted that Dmitrii was still alive. Dmitrii's body was found far from the grave where it was buried. There were new stories, and it was thought that the devil was playing tricks; that the Lapps had taught Dmitrii how to die and rise again to life; that he had been so evil that the earth would not accept him. Therefore, his body was burned in public on a cart painted with pictures of hell. Then, in order finally to suppress the rumours, the true Dmitrii's body was 'discovered' in the town where he was killed.

But despite that, another false Dmitrii appeared, and there was a new rebellion. This time he did not manage to reach the throne, but he took over large parts of Russia. And

another almost unbelievable twist in the story: the wife of the first false Dmitrii, Marina, recognized the second false Dmitrii as her husband!

If one name is associated with the birth of modern Russia, it is Peter the Great, the tsar who founded St Petersburg, who won access to the sea for his country, who dragged Russia out of the Middle Ages, and promoted Western ideas and customs. Peter became tsar when he was a child, and like many young boys, he loved games with soldiers and battles, but there was a difference: it was not toys he played with, but real soldiers, with real guns, and real deaths! At least he would have some practice before he had to fight the Turks and the Swedes.

Though rulers before him had stayed in their palaces and had let others do the hard work, Peter preferred to be outside with his soldiers and servants, above all on ships. He had an ambition to build a navy equal to those of England, France and other countries, though Russia was not connected to the sea at that time. To rectify this, he decided to make war against the Ottoman Empire which ruled all the country north of the Black Sea, including the Crimea, and the port of Azov. The tsar's armies besieged this town, and though the Russians had no knowledge of boats, they built an adequate navy to attack the Turks from the sea, and they were victorious. But it was an empty victory, because the Russians were trapped in the Sea of Azov. They could not leave that sea, let alone pass through the Bosphorus Strait and Istanbul itself.

Therefore Peter turned his attention towards the Baltic, where Russian territory was close to the sea, though the coast itself was ruled by Sweden, and its young king Karl XII. Sweden had a formidable army, but Karl was only eighteen years old, so the tsar thought he could defeat him. He did not that the boy king was a military genius, one of the cleverest commanders ever to have lived, and indeed he was interested in nothing apart from war. The Russians attacked the Swedish port of Narva. but the Karl's soldiers came riding out of the snow and the tsar's army was driven away. But after a few years, the allies of the Scandinavian nation, the Poles, deserted them, and the mighty Sweden was finally defeated. In the meantime Peter had started a project which did not seem very hopeful: he intended to establish a new city on the coast, close to Narva, in the middle of a great swamp. The place was disease-ridden and unhealthy. Thousands of men died building it. But in the end the empire had a grand new capital, designed according to the custom of Western Europe, and it was less exposed to attack than anywhere else on the Baltic.

Besides war, the tsar changed much within Russia as well. He encouraged many Western customs, including the ordered police state, European science, and European clothing. He personally hacked off the traditional long robes of the Russian nobles; he also cut off their thick beards, according to the ways of the West, though to the pious Orthodox men this was an assault on their masculinity and the image of God. He wanted a modern, civilized, prosperous state, but still he was inclined to heavy punishments for criminals, and often put the guilty to death with his own hands. And he took seriously his duties, both as a father and a tsar in disciplining his son. This son was opposed to Peter in every way. He was not fond of war, or ships, or European customs; but loved the very old Russian customs his father despised; he preferred Moscow to St Petersburg, and he was faithful to the Orthodox Church and the idle lifestyle of the nobility in olden times. Eventually he

could put up with it no longer, and fled to Vienna with his mistress. He sent a letter to his father, in which he renounced his right to the throne of the tsars, and promised that he would not help foreigners against Russia or bother Peter in any way, if he would only let him live in peace. But Peter found out where his son was living, and sent a messenger to him as well. He begged his son to return to Russia, saying that he would not be punished but forgiven. In great joy, the tsarevich came home. Then he was tried and convicted of treason, and tortured until he died in agony. His father was present when he died.

It was during the reign of Peter the Great that the Russian language was first standardized. It is a Slavic language, closely related to the languages of Ukraine, Belarus, Poland, Serbia and more distantly to most of the languages spoken in Europe, Iran and India. These are all descended from a single language called Indo-European which is thought to have been spoken about six thousand years ago. Therefore Russian has the same origin as Manx, English, French, German, Greek, Farsi, Hindi and many other languages, which still share many common words to this day. Here are some examples of words in Russian and English whose common origin is still visible:

English	Russian
mother	мать - mat'
brother	брат - brat
sister	сестра - sestra
cack	какать - kakat' - to poop (children's speech)
(Latin - nebula)	небо - nebo - sky, heaven
night	ночь - noch'
(Latin - vesper)	вечер - vecher - evening
snow	снег - sneg
linen	лён - Lyon
salt	соль - sol'

There are other features of Russian which are similar to Manx. There is no verb corresponding to English 'to have' or French 'avoir': to say 'I have a sister', you say 'there is a sister at me', as in Manx:

У меня есть сестра - u menya yest' sestra
at me is sister

And like Manx and especially Irish and Scottish Gaelic, each Russian consonant has two sounds, one neutral and one palatal. When a soft sign ь is written after a consonant, it is like making a broad sound slender.

For example:

брат - brat - brother
брать - brat' - to take

(in Gaelic orthography брат would be written 'brat' and брать would be written 'brait')

Russian nouns have three genders, but it is easy to know which gender a word belongs to because it depends on which sounds are at the end of the word: if it is a consonant, it is masculine; if it is -a, it is feminine, and if -o, it is neuter. But Russian has six cases, like Latin. For comparison there are only four cases in the Manx of the Bible, and they are shown mostly by mutations; but in Russian there are many different forms and many irregularities.

Russian: брат - brother		
<i>case</i>	Singular	Plural
Nominative	брат	братья
Accusative	брата	братьев
Genitive	брата	братьев
Dative	брату	братьям
Instrumental	братом	братьями
Prepositional	brate	братьях

Manx of the Bible: braar - brother		
<i>case</i>	Singular	Plural
Nominative	yn braar	ny braaraghyn
Genitive	yn vraarey	ny braaraghyn
Dative	da'n vraar	da ny braaraghyn
Vocative	vraar	vraaraghyn

Another thing that causes trouble to learners of Russian is the way verbs have two forms: The meaning of пить (pit') is 'to drink', but in a general, non-specified sense, without saying what or how much or when you drink. Я хочу пить (ya khochu pit') means 'I want to drink', but it is usually translated as 'I am thirsty', because you are saying only that you want to drink, not that you want any particular drink. But if we place по (po) at the start, and make it я хочу попить (ya khochu popit'), that is like saying 'I want to have a drink'. This happens with almost every verb: but there are several different prefixes which can be used, and some verbs change internally instead or in addition.

Because of the cases, word order is freer in Russian than it is in Manx, English and many other languages. For example, for 'I see a woman', you can say:

я вижу жену - I see woman (ya vizhu zhenu)
 вижу я жену - see I woman
 вижу жену я - see woman I
 я жену вижу - I woman see
 жену я вижу - woman I see
 жену вижу я - woman see I

Lastly, the Russian language is very fond of forms which give a sense of smallness or familiarity. For instance, the name Aleksandr becomes Sasha when it is his family or friends who are talking to him. Such forms are used with things as well:

водá + ка = вóдка
 voda + ka = vodka
 water little water!

In this example we see another problem for learners: the stress. Stress moves around a lot in Russian and you cannot predict, unless you know the language well, where the stress in a word will fall.

But the thing which gives the most trouble to learners from Western countries is the letters. These letters are called ‘Cyrillic’ after St Cyril who invented the Glagolitic alphabet, from which the modern letters were to a certain extent taken. St Cyril and St Methodius first brought Christianity to the Slavs; they came from Greece, therefore most of the letters are based on Greek ones. For example, you will recognize the Russian letter ‘p’, from the Greek ‘pi’ which is used in mathematics for measuring circles:

$$\pi > \Pi$$

Other letters look and sound almost the same in the two alphabets:

Aa Ee Kк Mм Oo Tт

But there are false friends as well:

Bб = v (Бб = b)

Hн = n

Pп = r

Cс = s

Some others very obviously come from Greek:

Гг = g

Дд = d

Зз = z

Фф = f

Xх = kh

And others were specially created:

Цц = ts

Чч = çh

Юю = yu

Яя = ya

Two letters were taken from Hebrew:

Цц = צ = ts (tsadi)

Шш = ש = sh (shin)

The way the alphabet is hand-written is different from the way it is printed, which causes even more trouble for learners:

т > *m* This is different from the Russian ‘m’: м > *m*

Can you guess these Russian names?

Дмитри Медведев

Владимир Путин

Пётр Чайковский

Борис Ельцин

Лев Толстой

Иосиф Сталин (Answers at the back of the book.)

A hundred years after the time of Peter the Great, Russian literature flourished at last with the work of Aleksandr Pushkin, who is considered the greatest poet and writer in the history of the Russian language—equivalent to Shakespeare in English or Goethe in German—and after him came many other giants: Gogol, Turgenev, Dostoyevsky, and Tolstoy, who are counted among the best writers ever to have lived. Lev Nikolayevich Tolstoy is the most famous, for his novels, *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina*, are often esteemed as some of the greatest (in both senses of the word!) in world literature. They are without a doubt excellent, though Henry James was not entirely wrong when he called *War and Peace* ‘a large loose baggy monster’. Nevertheless he thought very highly of the books, and said, “Tolstoy is a reflector as vast as a natural lake; a monster harnessed to his great subject—all human life!” Indeed all human life is to be found in his stories, from the most truthful accounts of battles which have ever been written, to the daily life of the peasants on the land. His understanding of the hearts and minds of all sorts of men and women is entirely incomparable. He is not afraid to criticize and to condemn the noble society in which he was born, or to pity the lowest criminals and prostitutes.

Tolstoy was born in central Russia in 1828. He read oriental languages and law at the University of Kazan, and after a dissolute youth, he took part in wars which inspired him to write *Sevastopol Sketches*, which established his reputation as an author. He married a woman called Sophie Behrs in 1862, and she bore him thirteen children. Family life finally satisfied him and gave him the meaning and purpose he had been seeking for so long; it inspired him to write his greatest novels. But as he grew old, his opinions became more and more extreme; he hated the government, the Church, land-owners, and the justice which separated husbands from wives, children from mothers, which made people who were healthy and full of life waste away in dirty prisons, and put a rope round the neck of anyone who stood up for what they believed in. These opinions and the anger he felt are seen beautifully in Tolstoy’s last novel, *Resurrection*, which he wrote to pay for a persecuted religious sect to escape from Russia.

He was excommunicated from the Orthodox Church, but the government dared not give him any trouble, because he was well-loved all over the world. He gave up all he owned to live the simple life of a peasant, though his wife did not approve. After a bitter row with her in 1910 he fled to seek refuge in a monastery. But on the way he fell ill and died at a small railway station. This is very strange, as anyone who has read *Anna Karenina* will know, because the eponymous heroine dies in a railway station after running away. Thousands of peasants came to his funeral.

But Tolstoy lives on in his stories which comfort and inspire readers around the globe, and he took part in other matters which few people know about. For example, Tolstoy

founded the International League of Vegetarian Esperantists; and in the last year of his life he wrote four letters to a young man studying in South Africa. Many years later this man would return to India, and his name was Mohandas Gandhi. It was from Tolstoy that he derived many of his ideas about non-violent resistance, and he established a farm called the Tolstoy Farm which is still in existence.

In the books of Tolstoy and other 19th century writers, rebels and revolutionaries were often mentioned, but the actual Revolution occurred seven years after Tolstoy's death. The tsar and his family were thrown into prison in Yekaterinburg, and then murdered. The 'bourgeoisie', the old nobility, and the Church were suppressed, and indeed Orthodoxy almost died out in Russia during the seventy years of communism which followed the October Revolution. But now a new church has been built over the site where the family of tsar Nicholas died; they are venerated as saints and martyrs throughout Russia. The country is going back to its roots, but also to its old troubles, such as fear and hatred of the outside world. We may think many things about Russia, but we cannot ignore her.

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Answers:

Dmitrii Medvedev
 Vladimir Putin
 Pyotr Chaikovskii
 Boris Yel'tsin
 Lev (Leo) Tolstoy
 Iosif Stalin

This is a strange comparison between Manx and Russian: the name Stalin means 'made of steel' (Manx for steel is 'staillin', pronounced the same).

