

The Early Russian Empire

When the Western Europeans were building their empires in the Americas, the Russian empire was starting to expand. By 1480, the city of Moscow, the center of a small state, was coming to power after 200 years of Mongol rule. Their army began conquering nearby Russian-speaking cities and incorporated them into their territory. Over the next 300 years the empire would expand to the south and east, across the steppe lands and as far east as the Pacific Ocean. It also spread westward, adding Poles, Germans, Ukrainians, Belorussians, and Baltic people into their empire.

The Russian eastward expansion ruled over only 220,000 people (by the 17th century), who spoke over 100 languages. However, the people were secondary to Russian rule. The primary focus was economic, for furs from the different animals in Siberia. Their pelts were in high demand, especially during the Little Ice Age and great profits could be made. To protect the frontiers and trading centers the Russians built wooden forts for protection.

To encourage settlers to the eastern regions, the Moscow government offered economic and social situations that were superior than they had at home in the west. People were offered better and more areas of land that were ruled by fewer lords and government officials. The government also encouraged the migration of people from the west as they had begun to convert the “savages” that lived in these regions to Christianity and civilization. The government hoped that these new emigrants would feel more secure in a more religious environment.



Creating such a vast empire meant that military force had to be used and there were several areas of resistance. However the Russians with their new gunpowder technology had little difficulty defeating the nomadic people of the open grasslands and forests. Once conquered, the native people had to take an eternal oath of allegiance to the tsar. They also had to pay a tribute (yasak) in cash or goods produced.

The early Russian conquerors destroyed many of the Muslim mosques in these regions and forced them to convert to Christianity. However, during the reign of Catherine the Great, this would be overturned and she established religious toleration through a state agency for Muslim affairs.

The might of the Russian army was seen with the **Cossacks**. They were bands of fiercely independent warriors consisting of peasants who had escaped serfdom as well as criminals and mercenaries. They were famous for their horse-riding skills and cavalry charges as well as using cannons and muskets. For recreation when not in battle, their dancing routines soon became famous.



The eastern region of the empire saw great changes by the end of the 18th century. Approximately 700,000 people from the west had relocated east. The original nomadic Siberian people of the east were now only 30% of the population. Large scale agriculture, growing grain, sugar, tea, and tobacco and the making alcohol had displaced pastoralism. Intermarriage, prostitution and sexual abuse created mixed-races. Unlike Latin America, these offspring were absorbed into Russian society rather than becoming unique classes of people. The Russian empire had now become a true agrarian society.

Additional change was seen as the Russian empire became increasingly multiethnic. Despite being politically superior, the number of true Russians decreased as a proportion of the overall population. Slavic-speaking Ukrainians and Belorussians were the dominant cultures.

Russian expansion in the western regions faced several military rivals, namely the Ottoman Empire, Poland, Sweden, Lithuania, Prussia, and Austria. During the late 17th and early 18th centuries, Russia acquired large regions of the Baltics, Poland, and Ukraine due to militarism. However Russia was still seen as a “backward” country compared to others in Western Europe.

Westernization was the plan of **Peter the Great** (1689-1725). His rule saw major administration changes, the enlargement and modernization of the Russian military, a new education system for the sons of nobles, and special focus on manufacturing enterprises.

Under Peter the Great, Russian nobles were instructed to wear European styles and shave off their sacred and treasured beards. Failure to do so resulted in a beard-tax.

This is the famous cartoon of a Russian noble forcibly having his beard removed.



Peter the Great's efforts were followed by Catherine the Great (1762-1796). She continued the plan of Europeanization, in particular aligning herself with the cultural and intellectual ideas of the Enlightenment. Catherine expanded her empire by military campaigns, especially targeting the need for a **warm-water port** to be taken from the Ottoman Empire. (See map on page three).

Russians eastward expansion also created conflicts with China, India, and Persia. Many of these regions saw a confrontation between Christianity and Islam.

The Russian Empire would eventually become the world's largest state. Their achievements had both similarities and differences compared to the other Western European nations during their conquest of the Americas.

Similarities: - Both empires used conquest, settlement, exploitation, religious conversion, and feelings of superiority.

Differences: - The Spanish and British conquered and colonized an area previously unknown until 1492. They acquired these regions only after establishing themselves as distinct European states.

The Russians absorbed adjacent territories at the same time as their empire was taking shape.

The Spanish, Portuguese, and British in the Americas would experience revolutions in the colonies. The Russian Empire will stay intact until the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. However most of the steppes still remain an important part of the Russian state today.



Map of the Black Sea, with the Crimean Peninsula, an area conquered by Russia to obtain a warm-water port.

Text Source: Strayer and Nelson, *Ways of the World*, 4th edition. (565 to 569)
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