
CHAPTER 3: Russia as a “Corner Piece” of the Puzzle

When solving a puzzle, one does not randomly pick a piece out of the box, and then another, and then another, and try to fit them together, even if they look a lot alike. Everyone knows that the best way to solve a puzzle is to find the corner pieces first, and from there to start connecting them along the edges. If you start a puzzle that way, you quickly get a framework, and you know where everything else goes. It becomes much easier to solve the whole thing from then on.

Think of history as a puzzle, and its facts as pieces.

What’s the best way to “solve” it?

Should you just start putting pieces together because they “look alike”—the pieces that have to do with ancient Egypt, the pieces that have to do with America, the pieces that have to do with China, etc.—in the hope that some of them will just “stick together”? Maybe after years of working the puzzle—which has *many thousands if not millions of pieces* in any normal textbook—you’ll know...something? Who knows what! But something.

It didn’t work for your parents. It didn’t work for me.

You may have a really good memory. Unfortunately, if you do, you’ll just convince yourself that you can manage, even with regular history textbooks, despite the fact that none of it adds up or actually matters.

There is definitely a better way. It consists of identifying the “corner pieces”—the cardinal cultures, and connecting them along the “edges”—the histories that have joined them into one world.

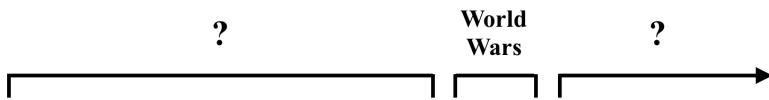
The next corner piece of the story is *Russia*.

Russia is a huge country next to Europe. Their histories are interlocked and follow essentially the same pattern, which makes Russia's the perfect story to learn next.

RUSSIAN HISTORY 1.0: APPLYING THE TEMPLATE

Russian history is the story of a culture that developed in isolation to the east of Europe during the Dark Ages. Increasing contact with Europe in modern times led eventually to its entanglement in the *world wars*, and to an exaggerated, almost paranoid nationalism in defense of Russian culture, which is what makes Russia what it is today.

As you can see, the basic pattern is: an initial story, which leads to the *world wars*, and then another story. Thus the template we developed for European history is also the best way to capture the sweep of Russian history.



We begin where we must always begin: the present.

What exactly is Russia today?

During most of the last century, Russia was a “communist” country, which means it was a country with no individual rights or liberty, where the government controls all property supposedly for the good of society as a whole. This proved to be a very corrupt system, and it failed in **1991**.

Since then, Russia's government has mostly been controlled by one man named Vladimir Putin. There are elections in Russia, but they don't seem to matter. The same small group of powerful leaders, who are all friends and allies of Putin, has essentially been in charge since **1991**.

The name for this kind of government *by* and *for* those with power is "fascism" (pronounced "fah-shism"). It comes from the Latin root word "fasces," a symbol of *power* in ancient Rome.

This is an important fact, because fascism is also the kind of government that Nazi Germany had during **World War II**, and today's Russia shares a key feature with the Germany of Hitler's time: an exaggerated nationalism and malevolence towards others.

There are certainly degrees of such sentiment, but it is nonetheless true that Russian culture today is *supernationalist*.

That's right! The first corner piece of history in our time is *supranationalist* Europe. The second corner piece is *supernationalist* Russia.

Both of these cultures became what they are because of the *world wars*, which almost destroyed Russia just like they almost destroyed Europe.

The difference is that Russia came out on top.

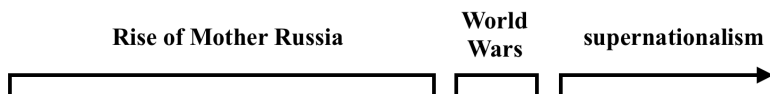


Russia's experience of the *world wars* was that of being attacked by Europe, so when Russia emerged as the most powerful country in the region, it decided to conquer as much of Europe as possible, and rule it.

People of my generation call that period “the Cold War,” because supernationalist Russia seemed like it might be able to take over the world and force everyone else to live under communism. Russia had the largest military in the world, including the world's largest arsenal of nuclear weapons. The only major power truly standing in Russia's way was the United States. The two sides never fought an actual “hot” war—the kind where two country's armies actually shoot at each other—but they were on military alert 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, always ready to fight each other. It certainly was not a time of peace. That's why people use the term “cold war.” (The American side of that story is featured in the next chapter.)

Although Russia no longer represents the same kind of threat to the world that it did while championing communism, an exaggerated nationalism remains a part of its culture since **1991**. Russians still live and breathe allegiance to “Mother Russia”—against Europe, and against America. Watch the Russian national anthem on Youtube with subtitles. It features lyrics such as “*We grew our army in battles, We will sweep the vile invaders out of the way!*” The refrain includes the great rallying cry, “*Sing to the Motherland, home of the free!*” It's a very powerful song indeed.

Let us now explore the story of the *Rise of Mother Russia*, followed by the story of the *World Wars*, which together explain the uniquely powerful culture of Russian supernationalism.



The story begins not long after the failure of the **Frankish Union** in Europe. Around **862 AD**, Viking invaders from Scandinavia (Sweden and surrounding areas) conquered the local peoples known as “Slavs.”

This conquest planted the seed of what would become “Mother Russia.” At the time, the Viking leader Rurik called his new kingdom something slightly different: “Kievan Rus.” The word “Rus” was a Viking word, and “Kievan” means that its capital was the city of Kiev.

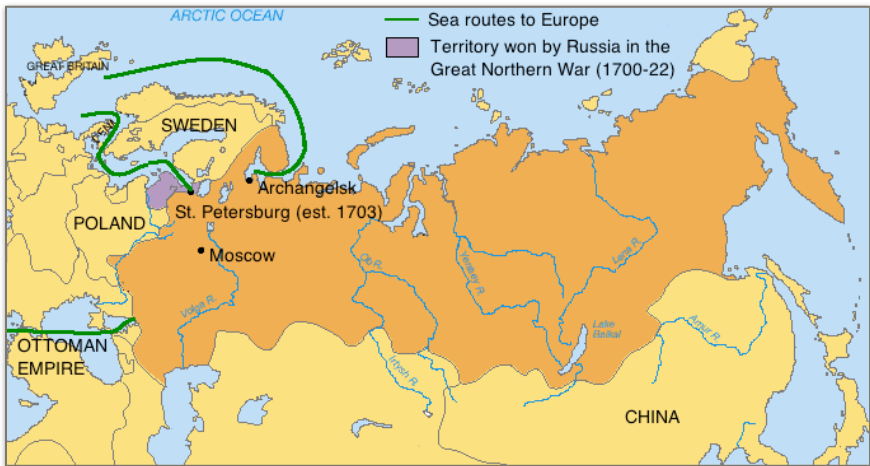
An interesting way to think about the *supernation* of Russia historically is that unlike the **Frankish Union**, it is a union that succeeded. If the **Frankish Union** had worked, there would be a *supernation* of Europe, with the French and the Germans as one people. The union of Vikings and Slavs did work, and one large, single culture emerged to become Russia.

(Another sense in which Russia is a *supernation* is that its people then colonized the entire vast region of Siberia across to the Pacific ocean, making Russia by far the largest country in the world.)

From **c.862** onward, Russia was mostly isolated from French and German-centered Europe. Because of the rise of various medieval kingdoms and empires, such as Poland and the Turkish Ottoman Empire, Russia continued to be cut off from contact with Europe until the Europeans themselves started exploring the world to find sea routes to Asia in the “Age of Discovery.” Even then, contact between Russia and Europe remained very limited until a Russian

king (in Russia, the title is “tsar”) named Peter “the Great” decided to make Russia a part of Europe.

In the **Great Northern War of 1700-22**, Peter led Russia against Sweden, in order to capture a small but precious piece of real estate on the Baltic Sea. Once successful, he had a new, *European* capital constructed there for Russia called “St. Petersburg.”



Blocked by land by Sweden, Poland, and the Ottoman Empire, Russia had only an arctic sea route to Europe (impassible most of the year) until the **Great Northern War (1700-22)** gave Russia access to the Baltic Sea.

Being part of Europe came with advantages and disadvantages. The advantages were that Europe had become the most scientifically and technologically advanced culture in the world by that point. To be a part of Europe meant being able to partake in that progress. On the other hand, Europe had become a culture of many separate and antagonistic nations. The Europe of *nations* was continually at war. To be a part of such a culture meant having to choose sides in European alliances and participate in European wars.

At first, Russia was able to manage well enough. Being on the far eastern edge of Europe was, in a way, advantageous, because it meant that Russia was not closely connected to the wars between Europe's most powerful western nations. That situation did not last long, however.

Soon France and Germany were engaged in a vast European war that required a Russian response. In our history of Europe so far, we have not had cause to look at the events in question, which are known as the *French Revolution* and the *Napoleonic Wars*. Whether you recognize these terms or have previous experience with them is not crucial at this time. We will circle around to them eventually. For now, we will look at them from a Russian perspective only.

France, where the people had rebelled against their king in order to create a democracy, had been attacked by Germany and other European countries whose kings felt threatened by the idea of government by the "will of the people." The attacks backfired when a military genius named Napoleon Bonaparte came to France's rescue. Napoleon conquered almost all of Europe and, at first, seemed willing to make a deal with the Tsar of Russia. The deal was simple: the *supernation* of France, with its emperor Napoleon would rule the West, and the *supernation* of Russia, with its tsar, would rule the East.

The deal seemed like a good one, except that it included an important restriction on Russia. It would not be allowed to trade with Napoleon's greatest enemy: the island nation of Great Britain. Russia believed such a restriction was workable, but over time, the trading opportunities between Russia and Napoleon's Europe proved to be a poor replacement. The Tsar decided to back out of the deal.

So in **1812** Napoleon invaded Russia with the largest army assembled in European history up to that time.

The Russians were no match for Napoleon militarily, so they practiced a defensive strategy called a “scorched earth” policy. As the French and their allies advanced, the Russians retreated, taking what they could with them, and destroying everything else. To cross from the Russian frontier with Europe all the way to Russia’s most important city, Moscow, was the equivalent of marching from Massachusetts to the Mississippi river. It was a long and arduous journey that used up an incredible number of supplies, which armies normally counted on plundering from the countryside as they advanced. The Russian policy thus denied the French access to critical resources.

Napoleon still managed to make it to Moscow, but he found the city burning, and its leaders gone. If his invasion could be counted as successful by virtue of taking the key city of his enemy, it certainly was a hollow victory. He did not have the means to rule. Russia was too big, too empty, and would soon be much too cold.

Napoleon seems to have realized that too late.

Abandoning Moscow to return to Europe, Napoleon’s army was caught in the Russian winter. By the time he escaped, his forces had dwindled from near 700,000 at the start of the campaign down to 10,000 due to starvation and freezing.

For Russians, the cost was high too. But there was a special element of pride they could draw upon in causing the downfall of the greatest conqueror Europe had known. To them the Napoleonic invasion of Russia became the “**Patriotic War of 1812.**”

Almost every generation of Russian people in modern times has known some kind of patriotic struggle against Europe, or, if one includes America as an adversary, the “West.”

The greatest of these, of course, were the *world wars*.

In both *world wars* Russia was attacked by Germany. In both the wars, Russia barely survived, at the cost of *millions* of lives.

Only after the *world wars* did Russia achieve what Peter the Great had hoped. With the rest of Europe exhausted by war, Russia became the strongest nation in Europe: Europe’s one and only *supernation*.

SUMMARY AND INTEGRATION



Russia is one of the few countries in the world that is itself a cardinal culture of the world we live in. It stands alone in terms of the combination of its size, military power, and exaggerated nationalism. Russian *supernationalism* championed by president “SuperPutin” is a modern reflection of a long history that begins with the founding of Kievan Rus by Rurik and the Vikings **c.862 AD**. After centuries of isolation to the east of Europe, Russia became a European nation by fighting its way into Europe in the Great Northern War of **1700-22**. The pluses and minuses of doing so are the key to the story of the *Rise of Mother Russia*. Modern Russia has come through three great “patriotic wars,” starting with Napoleon’s invasion in **1812**, and most importantly, the *world*

wars, which propelled the proud people of Russia to primacy in Europe. Though attached to the theory of communism for much of their recent history, Russia's powerful leaders have moved on, and since **1991** are the champions of one thing only: *Russia*.

CHAPTER 3 SELF-CHECK

1. Russian culture acknowledges no greater good than the nation of “Mother Russia,” and even seeks to control and influence other countries to serve the nation. What is the name for this type of culture?
2. What is a belief in a “common good” above individual freedom? What is the name of the form of government practiced in Russia that denies private property and individual liberty in that name of that common good?
3. European culture today is the product of a failed union. Russian today culture is the product of a successful one. What are the two parts in each case?
4. How did Russia become a European country? What city is the symbol of the *Europeanization* of Russia?
5. Draw the diagram of Russian history from memory, labeling the periods and dates. Label it “Russian History 1.0.” Check it and fill in any parts you missed, so that it is complete.

[ANSWER KEY PROVIDED AT: <http://historyatourhouse.com/4hh>]