

# RUSSIA

## BERNARD PARES

THE COUNTRY • THE RUSSIANS (and others) • THE OLD RUSSIA • THOUGHT, LETTERS and ART • EAST or WEST? • A LIBERAL RUSSIA • WAR and REVOLUTION • LENIN and the BOLSHEVIKS • MILITANT COMMUNISM and CIVIL WAR • STALIN VERSUS TROTSKY • INDUSTRIAL PLANNING • AGRICULTURE COLLECTIVISED • ANTI-RELIGION • HITLER APPEARS • STALIN'S REPLY • SOCIAL SERVICES • FOR a "UNITED FRONT" • RUSSIA'S WAR POLICY • THE ROAD TO ALLIANCE • A WORLD CONFLICT and WORLD ISSUES.



**A WAR-IMPORTANT BOOK**



INFANTRY JOURNAL - PENGUIN BOOKS



## BERNARD PARES

**F**EW writers are as well qualified to give an accurate, undistorted picture of the real Russia as is Bernard Pares. From the time of his graduation from Cambridge in the 1890's down to the present he has been associated with Russia and with Russian studies. For many years he made annual trips to Russia, and was a member of various British societies whose purpose was to cement Anglo-Russian friendship. He was an honorary usher at the first Russian Duma. In the last war he was the official correspondent of the British Government on the Eastern Front. For this and other work performed in Russia during that conflict he was awarded the Soldier's Cross and Medal of St. George.

Since the Revolution he has visited the Soviet Union four times; has been a professor of Russian in London University; and has lectured widely in Britain and America. In England he has found that his largest and most friendly audiences have been in the blitzed towns and cities. The explanation, he says, is simple: Residents of the bombed-out areas are grateful to Russia for the way she has battered the Nazis, and particularly for the fact that she has kept the Luftwaffe concentrated in Eastern Europe, far from British shores.

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BY BERNARD PARES

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CONTENTS

	PAGE
I. THE COUNTRY .....	1
II. THE RUSSIANS—AND OTHERS.....	10
III. THE OLD RUSSIA.....	31
IV. THOUGHT, LETTERS AND ART.....	49
V. EAST OR WEST?.....	64
VI. A LIBERAL RUSSIA (1903-14).....	75
VII. WAR AND REVOLUTION (1914-17).....	89
VIII. LENIN AND THE BOLSHEVIKS (1903-18).....	100
IX. MILITANT COMMUNISM AND CIVIL WAR (1918-21).....	111
X. COMPROMISE AND IRONY (1921-28).....	122
XI. STALIN <i>versus</i> TROTSKY (1924-28).....	134
XII. INDUSTRIAL PLANNING (1928-33).....	146
XIII. AGRICULTURE COLLECTIVISED (1928-33).....	157
XIV. ANTI-RELIGION (1928-33).....	169
XV. HITLER APPEARS (1919-33).....	180
XVI. STALIN'S REPLY (1934-37).....	192
XVII. SOCIAL SERVICES .....	204
XVIII. FOR A "UNITED FRONT" (1934-38).....	218
XIX. RUSSIA'S WAR POLICY (1939-40).....	236
XX. THE ROAD TO ALLIANCE.....	246
XI. A WORLD CONFLICT AND WORLD ISSUES.....	259
INDEX .....	271

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## THE COUNTRY

RUSSIA is a country covering about one-sixth of the land surface of the world. That, of itself, makes it impossible to ignore it—least of all at a time when force is the dominant factor.

Its history has been one of continuous colonisation—for the most part less by governments than by peoples, prompted by a desire to escape the close attention of governments. Russia has been the classical land of evasion, a feature which even pervades the Russian language—there is no word for "the," or for "a"; "is" and "are" are usually omitted; the reflexive is the same as the passive—and, just like the language, the colonisation has at different times sought out the lines of least resistance.

In early times even European Russia could not for the most part have all been properly included in Europe, which in the south was for generations bounded by the higher western bank of the Dnieper; outside that line were fluid nomad peoples, of Asiatic origin and successively on the move.

In European Russia, as it is now, the mountains are all on the circumference—in the east the Urals, which are not very high; in the south-east, the far higher Caucasus; the natural boundary on the south-west, which even after the latest annexations still lies outside the Russian State, is the Carpathians, from which in early history much of the Russian or eastern branch of the great Slavonic family migrated on its march of eastward colonisation. The bulk of present European Russia is a vast plain resting on a granite foundation, with a wide central plateau, which forms the main basis of Russian history; this plateau is only slightly elevated, but with the clear crisp air it makes one feel quite high up: I have had that feeling when standing all night in the Kremlin.

The most definite thing in Russian geography is the rivers, and they are also the most regular in their behaviour



among all the citizens of Russia. They originate in great reservoirs of marsh: there is a greater proportion of marsh in Russia than anywhere else in Europe. It was not difficult, even in early Russian history, to connect them by "portages," so that light boats could be carried from one water system to another. The rivers flow quietly onward through a crumbly soil, which assists their power of fertilisation. In a present-day Russian railway guide, something like a third will be taken up by the water routes. Moscow owed her importance largely to the fact that she controlled the head waters of the various systems, which were at first her refuge from invasion and later the roads of her imperial advance. The rivers of Siberia, which are even greater than those of European Russia, nearly all flow northwards into the Arctic Ocean—which very much tends to limit their usefulness, but here, too, the process of colonial advance, easy enough in almost unpopulated country, was an advance from one river system to another. It was just in the most confused and disorderly period of Russian history that this advance eastwards took the biggest dimensions.

The Russian rivers were the main roads of Russian history. Between them lay vast hinterlands of forest or marsh, or both together, in which the harassed population might find a refuge. One river after another would light up into a history of its own: the Dnieper system with its capital at Kiev, the Volga system with Moscow, the Volkhov-Neva road, first with Novgorod the Great, now almost a village, but once the greatest merchant city in Russia, and later, near the end of its course to the sea, with St. Petersburg, planned by Peter the Great as his window opening on Europe. The main rivers—Dnieper, Don, Volga—through most of their way flow from north to south, and by a curious "tilt of the earth"—as it has been described by Russian scholars—the western bank, the line of defence against the invading nomads, is generally considerably higher than the eastern—almost like a series of steep ramparts against Asiatic invasion. The lordly rivers of Siberia flow northwards through vast park-like tracts of virgin forest, almost uncharted and unexplored. At Krasnoyarsk a piece of this

virgin forest was left untouched as the park of the new town.

As the rivers were the only lines of light on the map, they were practically the only centres of traffic; so much so, that the early Scandinavian Vikings, advancing along the great water road of their time, described Russia as Garderyk, or the Kingdom of Towns. An ancient monkish chronicler, in his just claim that early Russian history belongs to Europe, tells how the waterway of Volkhov-Dnieper is only the eastern link to a vast belt of water communication completed by the Baltic, the North Sea, the Atlantic, the Mediterranean, and the Black Sea. And the Vikings, who were the first founders of the Russian State and not long afterwards accepted Christianity, did indeed traverse this round route, and the easiest part of their navigation was through that eastern link formed by the rivers of Russia, which were also the eastern belt of Europe and Christendom, and were defended by them against the nomads who unceasingly poured in from Asia.

The northern mass of European Russia was, and largely still is, thick forest. It was through unending forest that Napoleon marched to Moscow in 1812. Silver birches, pines and firs; firs, pines and silver birches. It is far easier to lose one's way in a square half-mile of these forests than in a square mile of our smaller ones. The passer-by turns down a twig here and there as he goes, to help any wayward wanderer to find an exit. Here, Russian peasantry, seeking shelter in the woods from the invading nomads, blended with the primitive Finns, who racially belong to Asia, and formed the Great-Russian family, perhaps now the largest national block in the world. Even well into the nineteenth century the majority of Russians lived in forest.

Agriculture was hard in these surroundings and in this climate—far harder than on the wonderful southern soil from which they had been driven. The great water-roads had fostered that vast and broad sociability which is today the charm of Russia for every Western visitor, and it was this that has given the guarantee of State unity. It was not natural that the dominion over any of these great water-



roads should have been for long divided. But here in the remote backwoods, near the head waters of smaller, tributary rivers—each of which in that time of divisions might form a separate little principality united to others only by a loose family tie—it was fear and caution that prevailed. The lonely worker in the forest, as he blazed the roots of trees to obtain a short-lived stimulus from the poor clay soil before moving on further, did not know what danger of man or beast might spring out on him from behind any tree. It was the forest that made that constant wariness which is the chief characteristic of the Great-Russian peasant, as also it made that world of fancies and musings in which he is absorbed, especially in the long winter nights. It was first the forest that made the Russian peasant, or the Russian peasant soldier, the champion evader in the world.

He has a native instinct for the slightest gradation of cover. So one thought as one saw him crawling forward on his belly into No Man's Land when on the attack. A soldier, guiding me at night through the same "interesting" region—that was their word—kept turning from right to left and back without any apparent reason. "Why do you do that?" I asked. "I feel it in my legs," he said simply, and I think I know what he meant.

South of this great mass of forest which covers most of the north of European Russia and most of Siberia, lies another great belt of almost treeless plain. It is the famous "black soil" formed by the attrition of glacial action, which provides the greatest granary in Europe, the long-sought goal of German ambitions. It is called Ukraine, or Borderland, and its people speak a strong variant of Russian. They have not the Finnish admixture of the north; and, indeed, the early Russian State, of which Kiev was the capital, was based on this part, though it covered a lot of the north, and its reigning family later migrated thither, ultimately to centre itself at Moscow. In this great plain, reeds grew high enough to give cover to man and horse, but it is a land of vast horizons, and it was over this most fertile country that the nomads, in their time of predominance, advanced on Europe. History long eschewed the forest world, but was

early at work on the black soil, and it was therefore a land of constant struggle and combat and deeds of daring, such as filled up the lives of the free Cossacks who escaped hither from the serfdom which grew up in the north. Here the fighting man had his value—and this life of adventure has contributed greatly to Russian poetry and to that spirit of daring in thought and action which is another of the great charms of Russia. The Ukrainians have never had a real State of their own. A legend says that when the Creator distributed his gifts to others, he left them out, but in the end he comforted them with the gift of song; and, indeed, the folk song of Ukraine, deeper than the German and more melodious than the Great-Russian, is probably the most beautiful in the world.

Yet forest and plain, traversed alike by the great rivers, were designed by nature to be one great State. There are no natural boundaries to divide them; and economically they are vital to each other and interdependent. Moscow, at the head waters, stands almost at the junction of the two. And over them alike, in the absence of mountains, flows evenly with only gradual variation, the same stern climate, becoming more and more continental as it approaches the great block of Asia, with sharper extremes of heat and cold. The deserts of Central Asia send their harsh and blasting winds into European Russia, and it is only in the north-west, which originally was not inside the Russian frontiers but later housed the artificial capital of Peter the Great, that there penetrate feeble off-shoots of the beneficent and moderating sea-winds of Europe. The good that they do here, by the way, is little enough, and the damp and dreary climate of Leningrad is far more trying to the health than the strong and stimulating air of Siberia.

The Russian climate is a stern one, with long months of winter and, in the north, of darkness, when no agricultural work can be done. Yet the frosty sky is bright and blue and the hard, powdered snows make a merry road to anywhere. Then comes the sudden spring, when all movement seems forbidden, while the great snows and the great river ice melt; and then wild flowers break out everywhere, so that



to the Russian peasant it can seem no mere fiction that death is followed by resurrection; and Easter, like so many saint's days that mark in his calendar the changes of the seasons, seems indeed also a great feast of Nature. It is not long before the summer becomes hard and brazen and dry, and gradually breaks in heavy thunderstorms. The early autumn is wonderfully even and beautiful, and everyone and everything again recover their balance. Then another period of cold rain and broken roads till King Frost resumes his cheery rule.

The Russians do not disregard their climate as we do; they defend themselves against it. The houses, even of the peasants, are terribly overheated. Even the trains have double doors, so that the passengers, after fastening themselves well up, can pass by gradations into the cold outer air; and foreigners will probably find that they have to show something like the same respect for the climate as the Russians.

The potential wealth of Russia was always prodigious: there can hardly be any country which could be richer or any where the natural resources have been more neglected or wasted. In the earliest times Constantinople was so dependent on Russian supplies that it made the most precise trade treaties by which the Russian traders obtained unusual privileges and facilities: they carried thither in small ships down the Dnieper waterway the forest wealth: furs, honey, wax—and slaves. In the Middle Ages Novgorod the Great possessed vast reserves of forest wealth, coveted by the German cities of the Hansa League. Peter the Great, in his masterful way, did all he could to develop this wealth; but after him Russia had to wait for further development till the economic revolution initiated by the emancipation of the serfs in 1861, which was led into profitable channels by three notable Finance Ministers—Vyshnegradsky, Witte and Kokovtsev—who brought the country to its highest level of prosperity in the period before the Great War.

Russians were always talking of their "inexhaustible treasure house" and dreaming hazy dreams about the future, but ordinarily the country was content to jog along on a level

which quite often sank below that of starvation. Famine would come almost periodically for three years at a time. The country was divided into the producing provinces in the south and east and the consuming provinces in the north. Even more than half-way southward from Petersburg to Moscow there will hardly be a week of summer without one night of frost. The black soil of the south is twice the size of France, and as good as the best land in France or Belgium, but it has to supply the poor clay soil of the north. It takes no more than a breakdown of transport to produce a famine. Western Siberia is one of the greatest areas for farm products in the world, and cold storage made them invaluable to Western Europe, yet an idiotic internal customs duty was laid on them to hamper their competition with the producers of European Russia. It was only the railway building of Witte that made these supplies readily available.

Yet agriculture is far and away the most important industry of Russia. From unknown antiquity up to 1906 northern Russia was farmed on the primitive principle of communal land tenure, which till the eighteenth century prevailed all over Europe, but was abandoned then because it was a hopeless obstacle to initiative and improvement. In Russia it was preserved even after the emancipation of the peasants in 1861 because it offered a lazy and inadequate substitute for poor law relief. The land belonged to the village community as a whole, and each member was therefore supposed to be assured of "a bit of bread"; but for the sake of fairness—a very strong instinct in the Russian peasantry—it was divided up into innumerable cumbrous strips, constantly diminished in width by the rise of population; I have frequently met peasants who had one hundred and fifty scattered over many square miles, and probably the man had only one horse—some had none. I have stretched my legs across a strip so narrow that an ordinary plough had no room to turn round on it. Then, as the State balance chiefly depended on the export of grain, huge amounts were sent abroad which were sorely needed at home; a correspondent of *The Times* once wrote that our food supply



Of manganese, mostly in the Caucasus but also in parts of the Urals. Russia has vastly the greater part of the whole world supply.

Everyone knows of Russia's stores of petrol. On the Volga one was always passing the tankers bringing it up from Baku, the main centre of supply; but a so-called "second Baku" is being developed in the Urals, and there are even workings close to the Arctic coast on the Pechora. But enough has been said to show that Russia was already more than ripe for State planning.

Russia has nearly everything that could make her self-supporting; and yet she lived on foreign loans, sought her technical experts from abroad, and had to send thither for spare parts when, as so often, her machinery broke down. It is not surprising that Lenin should have declared her to be a colonial dominion.

## II

### THE RUSSIANS—AND OTHERS

#### THE RUSSIANS

THE RUSSIAN people, that lives in this great land, has the instinct of its greatness—and of the littleness of the individual self.

The Russians have a wonderful physique. Perhaps this is a survival of the fittest, for the nation has lived through numberless famines and epidemics. They are often largely and loosely built: the Great-Russian is broader and stockier than the Ukrainian. What they can stand is surprising: the soldiers used to tell me they couldn't go through more than *four* nights running without any sleep; and a Scottish surgeon, landed in Russia in the last war, said: "I don't think there can be a wound from which the Russian can't recover: you cut off his leg without anæsthetics, and he says 'Thank you, Sir.'" There is a fine Russian word for a fine Russian quality—*vynoslivost*, "lasting a thing out," and it applies not only to the man but to the nation, not only to the body

but the mind. No counting on quick returns for your labour. On the other hand, in accordance with his climate—the long bright summer and the long dark winter—the Russian is habituated to working in great bursts, if they can be followed by long intervals, and all his intervals are usually very long.

The Russian enjoys space, and what he likes before all things is elbow room—elbow room, with brotherhood with his fellowman, but without compulsion, which he is always seeking to avoid. Russian life is fluid—that is how, quite apart from government action, it has come to spread itself over so great a part of the world. The Russian was always a born wanderer—and that not only the Russian of the ruling classes. He has a wonderful knack of getting on with anybody and loves to add to his knowledge. Even language hardly seems to be an obstacle, and anything distant fascinates him. Maurice Baring tells how he dozed off to sleep while a number of Russian soldiers talked of the Red Sea, the White Sea, the Black Sea, the Yellow Sea—they may have added a few more colours: they got them all mixed up, but they were terribly interested in all of them.

The Russian had enough of compulsion if he stayed near the centre. It did little for him, and its futility came to a head shortly before the events which led to the Revolution, when the Government itself felt compelled to summon a commission representative of the inhabitants and to set it the ominous problem of "the impoverishment of the central provinces." Villages were electing "walkers" (*hodoki*) who trekked far away into Siberia—hitch-hikers who slept anywhere, got surreptitious lifts on trains, or tramped patiently for uncounted miles, to find some "good land" to which perhaps the village might migrate more or less wholesale later, quite against the law. When the Home Minister of the last Tsar called his attention to this, Nicholas II very sensibly asked how many were doing it and, on being told, he remarked that it seemed wiser to foster the movement than to repress it. But assiduous bureaucratic fostering never drew such sturdy elements as these early Pilgrim Fathers, who later in their new homes came to be known as the "old