

RUSSIA

A HISTORY



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1

THE BIRTH OF MOSCOW “GOD PUT IT INTO HIS HEART”

For centuries, the Kremlin - that colorful mishmash of buildings that dominates Moscow's skyline - has inspired awe, hope, and fear in the hearts of everyday Russians. Yet, its history remains sketchy; little more is known about it today than in the seventeenth century.

The word kremlin means citadel.

From the ninth to the middle of the thirteenth century - during the days of the loose federation of principalities known as the Kievan Rus' - many Russian cities were built around a kremlin, but few people had ever heard of the one in Moscow; the citadels of Kiev, Novgorod, Tver, and Vladimir were much more prominent. Although archaeological evidence suggests that Moscow existed in ancient times, it isn't noted in the Russian Chronicles until 1147 and then only briefly. But beginning in the late fourteenth century, the rulers of the Muscovite kremlin often held in their hands the fate of the whole country.

Aside from its historical importance, Moscow's Kremlin ranks among the world's treasures because of its architectural splendor. Resting atop a sixty-five-acre hill that crests to 125 feet at its center, the oddly shaped structure is bounded on either side by the Moscow and Neglinnaya rivers. Surrounding the citadel are massive walls, ranging in girth from twelve to sixteen feet; from these walls rise nineteen ornamented towers - the tallest and most elegant of which is the 238-foot Savior's Tower. Most impressive of all are the diverse, vibrantly colored structures - all built at different times - that stand within the Kremlin walls: cathedrals, palaces, monasteries, a theater, a museum, an office building, and the Palace of Soviets, where many of Russia's most valuable artistic and historical treasures are housed.

With no reliable history of their capital, Russians concocted their own stories to explain Moscow's rise. According to one of the better-known legends, Prince Daniel of Suzdal chanced upon the "beautiful hamlets of the goodly boyar [high-ranking nobleman] Stephen Ivanovich Kuchka" near the Moscow River in 1180. Kuchka's two sons ("in all the Russian lands, there were no such beautiful youngsters") impressed the prince, and he invited them to serve at his court. A reluctant Stephen agreed to let his sons go - a decision he would soon regret. Al-

though the young men enjoyed the prince's favor and were quickly promoted to important posts, they succumbed to the delights of the prince's wife, Ulita, a passionate woman reputedly in league with the devil. Fearing that their adultery might be discovered by the prince, the three sinners decided to murder him. The Kuchka brothers stalked their prey while he was on a hunting trip, speared him to death, cut off his head, and concealed his body in a secluded hut. To prove that the deed was done, they presented the prince's bloodstained clothes to Ulita - and then resumed their life of depravity.

When Prince Andrew of Vladimir, Daniel's brother, heard of the heinous crime, he assembled an army and marched on Suzdal, where he seized Ulita and executed her "by all manner of torture." He then pursued the Kuchkas to their father's estate and tortured both the father and his sons to death. Having avenged the wrongs his brother had endured, Andrew seized the Kuchkas' lands. At that point, "God put it into his heart" to build a city on the site - a suggestion the good prince was too pious to ignore. According to the legend, Moscow was believed destined for a great future.

Although the story is largely apocryphal, it does contain elements of truth. A family of boyars named Kuchka did at one time live in the Moscow region in a small, rural district referred to in the fifteenth century as Kuchkovo pole (Kuchka's Field), and as late as the seventeenth century, the Moscow River was widely known as "Moscow, the Kuchka River." But the history of the Kuchkas, like that of Moscow itself, is shrouded in mystery and improbabilities.

When compared to this legend, the few facts we have about the origins of the Moscow Kremlin seem rather colorless. In 1147, according to the Russian Chronicles, Yuri Dolgoruky, prince of Suzdal, invited his ally, Prince Sviatoslav of Novgorod, to Moscow, where Dolgoruky entertained his guest with a "mighty dinner," which infers the existence of a building in which to toast his fellow sovereign. Nine years later, Yuri laid the foundation of Moscow by constructing a wooden wall around that building and surrounding it with a moat. This small fortress, situated at the western corner of Kremlin Hill, comprised one third - or at most one half - of the territory the citadel occupies today.

For about a century, Moscow was under the jurisdiction of junior princes, or *knyaz*, none of whom stayed very long or did much to promote its growth. During the last decades of the twelfth century, Prince Gleb of Ryazan, some 122 miles south of Moscow, came upon the city and burned it and its surrounding villages to the ground.

As the era drew to a close, Moscow was sacked by the Tatars (Mongols), a fate that befell much of Kievan Russia in the 1230s and 1240s. The Tatar domination of Russia, which lasted almost 250 years, is one of the most remarkable sagas of conquest in the annals of history. During that period, 1 million Tatars, led by a highly disciplined and superbly trained army of roughly 200,000 warriors, conquered and proceeded to rule more than 100 million people. Their empire stretched from the shores of the Pacific Ocean to the Adriatic coast, from China to Hungary.

The Tatars, who hailed from what is now Mongolia, did not interfere directly in Russian life, but they did demand regular payments of tribute and recruits for their army. One of the few cities in Russia to escape devastation during their domination was Novgorod, which owed its good fortune to the courage and acuity of its ruler, Alexander Nevsky. Threatened at the time by the Swedes and Teutonic knights, as well as by the Tatars, Alexander wisely decided to fight only those he thought he could defeat.

In this case, Alexander judged the weaker enemy to be the Swedes. In 1240, the two armies met on the banks of the Neva River where the Russians crushed the would-be invaders. Fighting in the front lines, Alexander wounded the Swedish commander and almost fell into enemy hands. Two years later, he routed the Teutonic knights on the ice of Lake Peipus, an epic victory that has been celebrated in songs and stories, as in the musical compositions of Sergei Prokofiev, and in a film by Russian director Sergei Eisenstein. At first, the Germans seemed to be overpowering the Novgorodian army, but at the decisive moment, Alexander led a savage attack against the enemy's flank that reversed the situation. As he did, the spring ice suddenly broke, and many Germans were plunged into the frigid lake.