



Russia: A Short History

Abraham Ascher

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This concise and informative volume covers the entire sweep of Russian history, from the earliest settlers to the state of this complex country at the end of the 20th century. It pays particular attention to the events of the last 300 years, beginning with the reign of Peter the Great, before continuing to chart the development of economic, social and political institutions right up to the fall of the Communists in the 20th century. At the centre of the book is the highly topical theme of national identity, bringing Russian history to life and heightening its relevance for students, travellers and interested readers alike.

Russia: A Short History Details

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Brian says

I rate this "It was OK".

I understand that covering over a thousand years of history in 250 pages is a real challenge. I think the author misses the mark for other reasons.

The chapters on the Tsars often twist in time. Five pages after a Tsar has died, well into a new reign, the book suddenly goes back to the prior Tsar, without any reason or linkage to the new subject.

There is a lack of footnotes (19 for the whole book) which, when the author challenges widely held assumptions, does not lend credence to some of his thoughts.

He discusses Catherine II (the Great) who ruled during the Age of Enlightenment and is credited with some reforms. He states that "Catherine merely paid lip service to the principles of enlightenment" His example is the Pugachev rebellion (1774). But in describing it, he notes that Catherine refused to let Pugachev be tortured, and that he was executed before his body was dismembered (Dismemberment while alive was the punishment for treason). There is ample evidence that she tried, with some successes, to curb some of the army's and nobles excesses.

Other reviewers have noted the tone change in the section on Vladimir Putin. This is an added section in the 2nd edition. Although I wouldn't challenge any of his facts about Putin, it is too editorial a tone for a "history".

Also in need of some editing cleanup. The Organic Statute of 1832 under Nicolas I says: "the kingdom of Poland shall never cease to be an integral part of our empire - and that they shall henceforth form with the Russians one single nation, one fraternal people."

Poland was part of an indivisible Russia, not an "invisible part" as the book reads.

Justin says

Excellent concise history of Russia. It turns out that I knew almost nothing about Russia; it wasn't really taught in school and I wouldn't have had the patience at the time. But the social movements, the boldness of leaders, the ever-present instability-- it's amazing.

Shannon Schmoll says

It is a very good summary of major political changes in Russia over a thousand years. It helps put the current relationship between Russia and the west in perspective. However the writing a times is a little confusing. When talking about events it will refer back to other events that influenced them without any prior mention and assumes you know what it is referring to. In that way it is clearly written from an academic perspective. Even so, it is trying to distill a complicated subject down to a few hundred pages.

Flaviu Vescan says

Make sure you read the 2017 revised version. It's 30% longer than the first edition. It is exactly what I wanted, a book about the history of Russia. There were a lot of gaps in my knowledge and this book was perfect to fill them. It's too bad it ends in a giant WW3 cliffhanger (joke).

Ned Charles says

A very difficult task. As the author states early in the book, it is not possible to provide the desired detail in only 320 pages, consequently many significant things go unmentioned or briefly at best. This is not a book for a person who is well informed on Russian history, but very good for a person wishing for an overview prior to choosing specific periods to study and enable some understanding. The book is easy reading, but frustrating in the lack of important detail on matters such as subjects covering the health of the country and its residents through the years.

Martin says

This book was what I'd expect from a "short history". Short and sweet. Although I was a bit disappointed in the last chapter that was added for this Revised Edition. Sounded more like a New York Times editorial and less like something a historian would write, but otherwise a decent overview in ~300 pages.

Melissa says

This book was exactly what I was looking for. It gave me basics about the history and current politics of Russia. i feel that I know have a much better insight to this country and what topics about it I might wish to look into further. I would definitely recommend this for anyone who just wants more information about Russia and how it came to be, the things it has gone through, and perhaps how they may look at Western cultures today. It was an easy read and made comparisons through out to where western cultures were in terms of politics and development.

Tracy Reilly says

I don't know how this book managed this: making thousands of years of Russian history interesting and understandable to me. This is in part because Russian history IS so very interesting and chaotic. The other part, as my Russian friends will probably want me to realize, is that it has been majorly condensed, important elements left out, etc...it is, after all, only 252 pages long.

All I know is I feel much more knowledgable than I did before I read it. I don't feel confused, or manipulated by ideology--the writer I think made a pretty fair attempt to address the East vs. West tug of war that has always happened there, will continue to happen.

I think this book especially puts Putin into perspective, and the people who continue to support him. I see the Russians this way: they are an incredibly intelligent and deep thinking people, but they are also used to bearing pain and keeping their large and soulful thoughts to themselves, or deflecting them into the arts. Part of the Russian need to feel longing and pain as a part of their character, or something. It is a land of beauty, creativity, and strong patriotism.

The nasty side of Russia is its continued ineptness at practical solutions for its society, its inevitable corruption that has morphed through various government systems and leaders. The workers have always been used, and they retaliate by dragging their feet and succumbing to corruption. Sometimes it feels in this book that the government changes in name only: idealized leaders hold centralized power for long periods of time, opposition be damned. Russians are more susceptible, I think to being attracted to the cult of personality, whether it is a tzar, Rasputin, Lenin, Stalin, Khrushchev, Brezhnev, Yeltsin or Putin. They want the devil they know, I think, fearing above all else the instability that has returned again and again to wreck their country. They will believe against hope.

Anyone who thinks that the Russians are going to become more Westernized or Americanized in the coming years needs to read this book and some Russian tea leaves. Although oil is presently holding up the Russian economy for some lucky Russians, the state of affairs for many others is not so nice. Russians are immigrating west in droves--probably eliminating more of the liberalizing elements that could make Russia a better place. Putin has learned the Russian leadership game that a title bears little meaning: he has been ruling Russia as its head for something like 18 years --bouncing between the presidency and prime minister office (sometimes substituting in Medvedev as a placeholder) : is it small wonder that in the US the average person has no idea what office runs the show in Russia--no office, it's Putin.

Russia will be Russia, and although the internet and other Western influences will probably keep it from sinking into the horrors of Stalinism, it's doubtful it will assimilate with the West for the sake of world peace. Putin, like many of his countrymen is a competitive man--he wishes us to know Slavic greatness.

Edgar says

I enjoyed this book as a primer the political history of Russia. According to this book, for most of its history, the Russian people have lived miserable, impoverished lives because they have accepted the fact that whoever governed them had the right to rule all aspects of their lives - despite the fact that all evidence pointed to the fact that the rulers were inept - and used cruelty to cover up their ineptitude. The people didn't feel like the government existed to serve the citizenry - in fact, the people existed to serve the government and to enrich those in power. Highly recommend.

Peter Ellwood says

The book does what it says on the label, and duly delivers a potted history of Russia/Soviet Union from its earliest beginnings – around 1,000 years ago, but mostly from the rise of the Romanovs, around 300 years ago.

In a way, I bought it in order to answer one central question to myself, namely when exactly was Russia a “great” nation? I’m not sure I know the answer any more clearly now – quite a significant criticism of a book surely designed to offer instant insight.

At one or two points Ascher actually mentions Russia's 'greatness' in passing, as in the phrase 'Great Power'. But there's little in the text to support the idea. A large army, perhaps? What else? There's precious little beyond that.

Perhaps I'm being slightly unfair to look for nuance in such a short (270 pages) account, which restricts itself more or less completely to a factual account of who did what politically. Not much room left to paint a picture of what Russian society tasted like, or Russian culture felt like. He does mention Pushkin (once) as the father of the Russian language, and Turgenev gets a quick mention too (but only as the inventor of the word 'nihilism'). There's a tantalising paragraph or so too, on Russia's own sense of exceptionalism in the nineteenth century – apparently, one that rivalled America's contemporary conviction of its own superiority. But there isn't really anything of substance to explain why it should have felt that way, labouring as it did under the weight of one incompetent Tsar after another, and trailing at least a century behind Europe in most other spheres. I still find myself wondering whether Russia was only 'great' because Catherine happens to have acquired a lot of mostly empty land.

Another modest feature of the book is that, according to Ascher, pretty much every single leader Russia/Soviet Union has produced was either useless or a defective person – or both. Not even the two "Greats" – Peter and Catherine – escape that entirely; to the point where I found myself almost waiting for the barbs when a new person stepped into the frame. Maybe he was right, maybe they were all unsavoury characters, but I find myself wanting to read something more detailed to be sure!

It's a bit of a contradiction, it turns out, to write a potted summary that satisfies. Certainly, I found this one left me wanting to know more at many junctures. But as a sort of schoolboy crib, cramming the facts for an exam, it certainly isn't bad. Otherwise, look for a more detailed account!

Sachin Thopate says

A good book to read for those who want to start dig into Russian history.

Meir Javedanfar says

Russia in particular it has been to the two countries which have always been important to me: Israel and Iran. I have often wondered why it was able to defeat Iran on so many occasions in the 19th century, and why it played such an important role in Israel's history, both before and after the founding of the state in 1948. This book, provides short, yet informative and concise account of Russia's history from the Mongol invasion until very recently. Its easy to read, yet full of useful information. Four out of five. Recommend this book

Jason Sands says

Good overview

This is a good overview for those like myself with little knowledge of Russian history. Read this, then decide which parts of Russian history that you want to research more.

Proseb4hos says

Was exactly what I wanted, a introduction to Russian history. Definitely needs rereading, it's hard to remember details over such a long time period. Already helping me with contextualizing Russian lit!

Falynn - the TyGrammarSaurus Rex says

A whistle stop of Russian history (not surprising when trying to fit 1000 years into 300 pages).

Mr Ascher does a good job of trying to keep everything straight, although as you can imagine there are a lot of different names some of which are very similar (3 tsar Alexanders in a row seems a touch excessive) which can get confusing.

A useful oversight and jumping off point to explore particular periods in more detail. I am turning to Orlando Figes' A people's century next for more on the revolution, but also want to return to the Napoleonic campaigns when I get the chance.

The version I read was republished very recently in 2017 and the final chapter attempts to summarise recent developments (up to and including Trump becoming president). Whilst history requires a certain amount of hindsight and this chapter does not pretend to be definitive, it does provide a useful summary of recent events - and a slightly scary glimpse of our future and a potential 2nd cold war.
