

A History of Russia

B.Pares

January 5-18, 2011

Books are bought not necessarily for immediate consumption. As such they accumulate on your shelves and will in due time present seams to be mined at leisure. What is nicer than to sample the unread treasures of your library, books that might have been acquired thirty or forty years ago patiently biding their time. Of course anyone who collects a reasonable private library must do so with the understanding that a majority of it will never be read. On the other hand there is no way of knowing what books will be eventually read, so why not keep them all, even if it means staving off reasonable requests from those close to you. The present book - a history of Russia, must have been acquired back in 73-74, judging from the still extant bookmark provided by the Harvard Bookstore. I used to haunt those bookstores around Harvard Square, when books were still fairly cheap, and provided the main outlay of my student funds. I might have bought books most freely at that time of life, when there was of yet no substantial accumulation and the dreams of a library loomed enticingly. I read many Russian books in English translation, and what would be more natural than to pick up one of Russian history, with the object of once in my life reading it? It took almost forty years. Was it worth it? I did not pick it up on any kind of recommendation, I just found it in the bookstore. Books on history are usually thick and they are leavened with private opinions of their authors, opinions and prejudices usually hidden from view by the cloak of ostensible factuality. One should be careful. Who was this Bernard Peres after all?

Bernard Pares was a student at Cambridge who failed in the Classics and was thereby doomed to an obscure station in life as a secondary school teacher. This we learn from the preface written by his son Richard Pares. Pares Sr, however, did not resign himself to this fate, but did acquire an interest not to say a fascination for Russia, and went there for the first time in 1904. As his son remarks, his forte was not to be found in abstract thought but in the craft of a historian. He may not have been an exemplary father, his offspring admits, being so often away on his forays to the Soviet Union, but there is no denying his dedication to his work. In many ways he writes as an apologist, seeing as his mission in life to explain strange Russia to a Western audience. He died in 1947 in his early eighties, and thus he was to remain ignorant not only of Russian history in the 50's and on, but more significantly with the retroactive disclosures of Stalinist terror. To Pares, as to most of us, the Russian Revolution of 1917 was the defining hour, the most dramatic event in the entire Russian history, setting so to speak a year zero. Thus what happened before was a kind of pre-history, the purpose of which was to explain Russia, and if possible to identify continuities with the present regime. And in fact the history reads a bit tediously, presenting a bewildering array of names, battles, edicts and other sundry events, out of which it is not always so easy to see a larger picture. The narrative only picks up as we turn into the 20th century, and this is hardly surprising. It becomes even more arresting at the event of the revolution. The Stalinist years are treated with,

what we would now consider, undue respect. That Stalin was a dictator is not denied, but he comes across as a rather benign one, who labored under exceptionally difficult circumstances, and hence was not able to adhere to the kind of democratic niceties we ideally would have expected. The forceful collectivization of the reluctant peasantry is mentioned, and the famines are thought of as unfortunate consequences, partly due to the recalcitrancy of the peasants. However, in due time they are shown to adjust to their lots, and agricultural production as well as well-being dramatically improving. The Moscow trials are noted, but the confessions are taken for what they say, and it is presented as a way of Stalin to clean the party of old extremists, who individually were quite ruthless as well. In particular the author takes the line of Stalin against the old world-revolutionary Trotsky. Stalin after all just wanted to modernize Russia, bring it, kicking and screaming if necessary, into the 20th century. The genius and foresight of Stalin becomes evident in the Great War of the Fatherland, showing that he was more of a patriot than a Communist after all. Finally in an appendix written at the very end of his life, he discusses the very reasonable grievances the Soviet Union may hold against the West. After all, as he writes, Russia existed before 1914. It suffered a geographical collapse at the end of the First World War, and what would be more natural than as the primary victor in the struggle against Hitler, she should regain what she had so ignominiously lost? In particular the Baltic States, the acquisition of which had been the goal of Peter the Great, should be considered an integral part of the Soviet empire.

So what is Russian history? In fact it starts outside Russia, centered at Kiev, and organized along the river ways from the Baltic down to the Black Sea by Swedish Vikings. In particular the dynasty of Rurik was a Swedish Viking one, at least initially. This might be more legend than fact, and in any way the thin Swedish input was within a generation or two fully subsumed in the sea of the indigenous Slavic population. Remarkable too, is the telling fact that there exists almost no Scandinavian words in the Russian language, at most there are a few proper names, which with some good will can be thought of as of Swedish origin.

The history of those early times is not well-knowable, being so dependent on some isolated chronicles, which may provide not much more than a list of kings. This held on for some centuries and then it broke all off and came to an end, and other parts like ancient Novgorod came temporarily to the fore. There were other Slavic populations, or close to Slavic ones, such as the Lithuanians. Those of the West, such as what eventually would become the Poles, were far more advanced in State building, and also much more in contact with Western Civilization, their religion being the Latin Catholic Church coming from the West rather than the Greek Orthodox coming from the South. Basically on the wide plains of Russia, crisscrossed by rivers, dotted with forests and marshes, there was a growing population in a rather inchoate state of organization. The Slavs penetrated rather westward in Europe, to the Elbe, and much of what now is considered part of traditional Germany, was the result of an relentless 'Drang nach Osten'. They were surrounded by foreign tribes, especially along the Baltic, where German colonization was rampant, and the norther rims were sparsely populated by Finns and other boreal tribes. Russia, although the notion did not yet exist, was at the mercy of Eastern Nomads, suffering in the early Middle-Ages from a Tartar invasion. In its aftermath various duchies spontaneously

formed, and by acquisition some became larger than others, a process that tends to be self-fulfilling and accelerated. In this way the grand-duchy of Moscow formed, and from then on Russian political history starts.

Traditionally history is the history of Kings. This is now considered an outmoded view, yet it has its undeniable advantages. It makes for a personification, however irrelevant that might be considered, and thus gives to the chronicled time a structure and a set of pegs, which makes for a narrative that sticks in your mind. Especially when teaching children, this must be the preferred mode of historical instruction. After all we all have a great talent for recognizing human faces, and thus it should not be so strange if we have a similar propensity for human fates. Thus the first name that really stands out in Russian history is that of Ivan the Terrible, or as the author persists in calling him - John the Dread. In many ways we have here a case of a late Roman emperor writ small. A regional despot in a backward Slavic land. The boy certainly suffered traumatically in his childhood, and he certainly was both sensitive and intelligent and survived by strength of will. The psychology of a despot is no doubt rather complicated, home to many contradictory traits and impulses. No one is born a tyrant, but the tyrannic personality slowly evolves. With Ivan IV, there certainly was a development from bad to worse, yet of course his realm benefitted from his ruthlessness, and was greatly enlarged. Russia was becoming something which had to be reckoned with. However, its position, fluid in fact on its flat plains, with no natural borders save those of distance, was thwarted. For all intents and purposes landlocked. To the south there was the Turkish empire, far too powerful to be challenged. To the west were Poland and Lithuania, the dominant Slavic (and near Slavic) states, which were even united at times. And to the northwest the Baltic states dominated by German fiefs, and to the north Sweden, which was emerging a major military player. Russia was indeed as already noted for all intents and purposes landlocked, in fact the only outlet to the sea was in the very North, Archangel in fact, whose usefulness was due to a quirk of geology, if you so want, namely the Gulf Stream. Ivan the Terrible made some overtures to the West, namely mainly to England and to some extent Sweden, with which it fought for access to the Baltic. The English connection was clearly mercantile, made possible through the tenuous connection via the White Sea.

The son of Ivan was a non-entity, scorned by his father. As a consequence there were for almost a hundred year a big confusion in Russia. There were no strong Czars, there was no strong government, and thus the country was more or less helpless, an easy prey to the ambitions of its powerful neighbors. The Poles would nor have been adverse to appointing a Russian Czar of their own, anyway during the early 17th century it was free to move around at will, and did around 1610 even occupy Moscow. To the north Sweden almost made Ladoga into an exclusively Swedish lake, that brook the Russian would have big trouble jumping over, in the words of Gustavus II Adolphus at the treaty of Stolbova in 1617. Sweden would have other interests than the Russian east at the time, and apart from some temporary hold of Novgorod (Nygård in Viking parlance)¹, it left Russian alone in order to pursue more spectacular continental adventures. At the end

¹ The Swedish word 'gård' is clearly cognate with the Russian Город, while the former means a settlement of one family as well as translatable with the English 'yard' to which it also must be related, the latter means 'town', which at that time was not much more than a settlement. Thus it is tempting to

the Romanov dynasty was established, more by chance than by intention. Life at the top at the time was dominated by strife among the Boyars, the powerful landowners. The dominance of that section of the population is particularly obvious when the power of the King is weak. It brought about the gradual diminishment of the the rights and power of the peasant population, until serfdom had been established by the end of the century. Feudal society on the continent is of a very old progeny, but in the outskirts of civilized Europe it was of a later provenance. Russia was even late getting into the Medieval era.

If we do leap-frogging among the Russian regents the next name after Ivan IV must be Peter I. This is another larger than life personality in the Russian chronicle, not only metaphorically but also literally. A giant two meters tall, when the average height among ill-nourished males might have been only three quarters of that. Of Peter and his childhood we know much more than of Ivan the Terrible. What emerges is that of a boy keenly interested in mechanical devices, thus more of an extroverted talent than an introverted reflective kind, which is hardly surprising, as the latter seldom finds expression in statesmanship, and if so the results are catastrophic. Peter as a young man travelled West incognito and absorbed much of the technological advantages which were to be found there. Especially Holland was a favorite haunt of his. Back at home he also took an absorbing interest in military matters trying to create a modern Russian army. Now, as in the case of the Japanese awakening a hundred and fifty years later, one may speculate whether the main motivation for acquiring foreign technology was primarily to strengthen the military. Anyway Peter saw clearly that he needed to reach the sea, and the most natural quest was the Baltic shore. The Baltic shore was occupied by non-Russian people, and run by Germans (of the Teutonic Order) and politically under Swedish dominion. The natural enemy was Sweden, and in 1700 three countries attacked it taking advantage of the young inexperienced Swedish King Carolus XII. Now, this early-day playboy turned out to if anything to have the instincts of a soldier, and more than any other king in Swedish history associated to war. His ultimate defeat added tragedy to his exploits, and thus endowed him with legend of a pure heroism untainted by ultimate success. He quickly dispatched of the Danes down in Copenhagen, then he moved his forces across the Baltic and attacked the Russians at Narva routing a numerically much bigger force. Having disposed of his two minor attackers he now concentrated on his major foe, his cousin August the Strong of Saxony and King of Poland. Poland had less than fifty years earlier been devastated by Swedish forces under the grandfather - Carolus X of Carolus XII, and was now to suffer several years of Swedish military invasion. The monarchy in Poland had always been weak, and now the country was in disarray, the Polish gentry never being able to come to any decision. The Swedes had their King on the throne for some time, but they never managed to establish control over the unruly dominion. It is one thing to be victorious in battle, another thing to transform such triumphs into real power. (Something the Americans in Iraq are learning, or should so do). While the Swedish king and forces were embroiled in what in retrospect appears as a costly diversion, Peter the Great (as he was of course not yet known as) was licking his wounds and learning from his mistakes, and modernized the Russian army, for which there was an unending supply of manpower. He occupied Swedish

think of the latter as a Scandinavian loan. On the other hand the Swedish word 'torg' is supposed to be a Russian loan word entering the language at a very early stage.

territory and founded the new capital to be named St-Petersburg on the shores of Neva at the interior of the Baltic inlet - the Gulf of Finland. This was to be a futuristic capital, erected on marshes, among non-Russians, and in fact not only legally but literally being a capital with the distinction of not being part of the country it headed.

In 1708 Carolus XII tired of Poland decided to give the coup de grace. With a large army for the time, and also a very well-trained and professional one, he headed towards Moscow. Moscow had been taken before of course. By nomadic invaders from the east, but also by Poles from the west. There was no reason not to think that the Swedish King would repeat the performance. And to conquer Moscow would be to conquer Russia. But for some peculiar reason the King decided to make a detour to the south, maybe to add to his stack of cards, also revolting Cossacks. Mazeppa is a name I recall from my school-days. Maybe the temptation was irresistible. The result was that the Swedish army suffered from the ultimate Russian weapon, the tactics of the scorched earth. Furthermore the winter in Ukraine turned out to be one of the coldest in centuries. Predictably a large part of the Swedish army froze to death, and in the spring they could put up little resistance against fresh and numerically far superior Russian troops. They were routed, the Swedish King lost his army and fled to Turkey as an adventurer trying to induce the Sultan to wage war against the Russian. That engagement may have been a rather unremarkable clash between two armies, but the consequences were great. It gave Peter a free hand. He took possession of the Baltic provinces, invaded Finland and harrowed the Swedish coast. Finally at the Treaty of Nystad, Sweden gave up its Baltic provinces and were reduced to a second rate power; while Peter was triumphant and made Russia into the great Northern and Eastern power of Europe, with an ability to influence and direct internal Continental affairs. Peter lived on for a few more years, had many of his offspring married off to various European royalty. The door to Europe had been finally opened, and concomitantly with that a thorough reconstruction of the Russian Society had been effected, with a strict hierarchal system. Peter was of course a dictator, and like all dictators endowed with an inexhaustible supply of energy, a penchant for detail, and a desire to direct everything. Just as with the case of Ivan the Terrible, he left no off-spring worthy to continue his legacy. The result was a new chaos.

Yet, this chaos did not diminish the newly acquired power of the country. This power seems in retrospect inevitable, as after all Russia was a populous country, able to repeatedly put large armies in the field. It was admittedly a backward country, but so were in many ways most of its neighbors. However, as to military technology, the backwardness was not crucial. That Sweden would have been able to sustainably check the Russian advance likewise appears farfetched. Of course Carolus XII might have scored a few more triumphs, and he might have conquered Moscow, but that would only have postponed the inevitable with at most a decade or two. The Swedish disaster was compounded by her loss of continental footholds, although formally she held on to some of them for another hundred years because of French support until they became easy pickings for Napoleon², she lost all continental influence. When she later tried to redeem herself militarily against

² In a very formal sense Sweden held on to the town of Wismar until 1900. It had been pledged for a hundred years a century earlier, and when the time came to retain it, there were no funds, no will, no point in doing so.

the Russians, the result was farcical³.

It would be too confusing to list all the kings and queens that followed, so true to our principle, we will leap-frog to the next great Russian head of state - Catherine the Great. She started out as a German princess but was married to a Russian descendant and brought to Russia as a teenager. She despised her simpleton of a future husband⁴ but loved her new country and learned Russian with gusto. Still she would for the rest of her life be unable to speak it without an accent, and also her formal command of its written form was far from perfect. Her husband was emperor for a very short period until he was disposed, and unceremoniously killed, probably with the connivance of his less than fully devoted spouse, an understanding that probably helped her being elevated to the position of Emperor, and not just being appointed a temporary regent for her son.

Under her long reign the Russian court became fully integrated in the European scene. She was, what we should call a cultural groupie, except that she had the power and could call the ropes. She maintained a wide correspondence, not only with similarly attuned heads of states (and relatives) such as Fredric the Great and Gustaf III (whom she despised), but with the leading lights of the Enlightenment be they philosophers, scientists or literati. She also wrote her own treaties, but in such matters, Pares assures us, she was but an amateur, but in her letters she displayed great verve and charm. And this is what you can expect. Among her notable achievements were the creation of Russian academies into which she was able to lure international stars. The outstanding Swiss mathematician Euler was induced to spend a large part of his life in Russia, along with people such as Diderot. But unlike Fredrick the Great she was not able to lure Voltaire, whom she never meant in person. Now this was all taking place in St-Petersburg, which was as noted before, an artificial city and capital, which had very little organic connection to Russia as a whole, in fact in a sense being physically detached from it. Thus those academies were more like exquisite and expensive play things meant to enhance the prestige of the sovereign than to add to the country. It is not clear whether Euler ever learned Russian, or whether his presence really had any effect at all on Russian scientific society. After all he could as well have been on the moon. Catherine also engaged in warfare, and she made some notable conquests. In the North they had everything they wanted after the acquisition of the Baltic provinces (the case of Finland pending). In the South the Ottoman empire was weakening more and more and the complementary goal of reaching the Black Sea, ultimately to regain Constantinople for Christendom, became more and more of a focus. To the east there had been no opposition whatsoever, and Russians had rapidly colonized the entire Siberia, scarcely populated as it was of scattered nomadic tribes. By the end of the 17th century it was all run over, and Alaska soon followed suit. Widowed and not remarried she had the license to engage in affairs, which accounts for the fascination she has exerted on posterity and made her an ideal subject of popular history. There is a

³ An attack was made in the 1740's, when Elizabeth I (daughter of Peter) was emperor in Russia. The Swedes were lucky only having to shed a slice of Finland. Elizabeth dictated who should be the next king of Sweden, a German prince, incidentally the maternal uncle of the future Catherine the great. In 1790's his son Gustav III tried again. Some naval battles ensued resulting in a draw, and preservation of the status quo.

⁴ The author refers to him as an idiot. That assignment is probably not meant to be clinically accurate.

whole string of such ostensible lovers, one of whom she temporarily had placed on the Polish throne. However Potemkin may be the most well-known of them all, especially in connection with the notion of Potemkin facades, acting as an early stage manager, putting the right spin on things. In all those stories the sexual element is emphasized, with her lust for conduct even involving stallions. The truth is probably that the elements of friendship and emotional support outweighed all other considerations and tended to be long sustained. Although she was a prime example of a so called enlightened monarch, her good intentions were usually buried under the weight of more pressing business. So even if she would have entertained sympathy for the plight of the peasant, during her reign, as well as along the entire century, their status steadily got worse. In fact, while the crown peasants had usually lived under better conditions than those privately owned, she saw to it that a large section of them were transferred to private property, as she dispensed with favors left and right. She was succeeded by her son Paul whose tenure was rather short and ended in murder, maybe with his son Alexander being at least tacitly complicit. The reign of Paul was a parenthesis, that of his son, however, of an importance rivaling that of Peter.

1812 is one of the most important dates in the history of Russia, maybe only surpassed by 1917. It was the year of the Napoleonic invasion of Russia and the destruction of his army. The military triumphs of a Napoleon were legendary, and are still two hundred years later the subject of fascination and admiration. He was more or less making himself a master of continental Europe. Prussia was vanquished, and Austria humiliated, and even Russia burned its fingers. As a result Alexander I decided on a sudden reversal of his anti- Napoleonic policy and became a temporary ally. That bought him time, and also the opportunity to seize Finland from Sweden. A side show in Russian affairs, an unmitigated disaster from the Swedish point of view seeing its country almost halved in extension. But the alliance, or rather truce, was indeed nothing if not temporary, based on too unstable a foundation to be sustainable. The inevitable happened. So why did Napoleon come to grief? The standard explanation is that it was not the Russian army, let alone its leadership, that was responsible. It was Russian geography and climate. A vast, sparsely populated country, well suited to the 'scorched earth' strategy. The Napoleonic army simply starved and froze to death. Nature took its course, albeit directed by the spirit of the patriotism of the Russian masses. Modern historians beg to differ. Dominic Lieven argues ⁵ that Russia and its leadership should take much more credit than they have been willing to do. The Russian military action was not as passive as traditional accounts have lead one to conclude. They knew exactly what they were doing. Their main strategy was not to conduct a war on the terms of Napoleon, thus at all cost avoiding decisive battles, but instead taunt and harass and to make controlled retreats. In addition to the advantage of local knowledge of the terrain, and working channels of supplies, they had a much better cavalry, boosted both by a healthy supply of sturdy horses and the support of Cossacks, who may not have been first class military material, but were ideal for the missions involved. Battle could not be avoided indefinitely though, and at Borodino, outside Moscow it came to an engagement. From a strict objective point of view it might be considered a draw. After all the Russians were able to keep an intact army, while

⁵ Russia against Napoleon

the French were able to seize Moscow. The latter, however, was not of the importance it had been expected to become. Alexander I refused to budge and negotiate for peace, as Napoleon had counted on. Soon the city burned down as well, probably as a last desperate act of the scorched earth strategy, and the French were deprived of its comforts. Winter was approaching, and Napoleon had no choice. The rest is history. The Russians followed on his heels his retreat, and did in fact effectively throw him out of the country. But that was only the first stage, and only as decisive as it appears retrospectively. Napoleon was beaten, but not crushed. He could still stamp out of the ground huge armies⁶ and mount a second, potentially more devastating attack, having learned from his previous mistakes. The genius of Alexander I was, in opposition to his generals and advisors, to press for a further invasion into Europe and once and for all eradicate the Napoleonic threat. This also meant almost as much diplomatic work as military preparation, persuading the Prussian King and the Austrian emperor to join. A second campaign against Napoleon followed, now fought out on German and Austrian ground, involving notable battles at Dresden and Leipzig. Napoleon could have prevailed, but he did not. His forces were crushed and eventually, campaigning through the winter, in order to forestal yet another revival of Napoleonic strength, taking Paris. The Saga of Napoleon was at its end. Or almost so, there being a Post Script finished by Waterloo and Wellington. Napoleon may have been brilliant, and as with the German forces of the Second World War, undefeatable when engaged on equal terms; but in war what ultimately counts, are the resources that can be brought to the struggle. Napoleon was simply facing a superiority of men, cannons and maybe also will.

The result was that Russia became the most powerful country in Europe. And it certainly added to it a lot of prestige. From having been a distant eastern country of barbaric and backward nature, its presence became known to the inner salons of civilized society. The Russian elite proved itself to be as cultured, if not more so, than the westerners they ostensibly had emulated. In Russia itself the 19th century became something of its golden century. Literature and the arts flowered, and also scientifically it became distinguished. The notion of intelligentsia is supposedly a Russian one, and the intellectual climate was dominated by the opposition between the Slavophiles, who saw in Russia a unique identity and mission that should not be betrayed, and the Westernizers, who rather advocated a convergence with the West. The regime itself was suppressive, with police informers and vigorous Russification programs of conquered territory, and on its margins pogroms. The central internal question was the liberation of the Serfs, the dominating external question, was a Panslavic movement, involving an emasculation of the Ottoman Empire and a concomitant liberation of its Slavic populations.

The situation of the serfs had become intolerable during the 18th century. Even Catherine the Great was considering some reforms, but other matters took priority. Her immediate successor Paul, was too caught up in military posturing to get engaged, and her favorite grandson was too embroiled in the struggle against Napoleon to take any initiatives. The liberation of the serfs had obvious parallels with the anti-slavery movement in the United States, and was also enmeshed in similar difficulties. How to make a fair and

⁶ Although as Lieven points out, he was not able to reconstruct his cavalry, good horses being in more dear demand than foot soldiers.

workable transition? How much land would the peasants be given? And if so how should their former owners be compensated? Those questions also depended on where the peasants were tied down. In the south the soil was very fertile, while in the north it was scant and forested. It was the temperamentally conservative Alexander II, a nephew of Alexander I, who was to be the emperor to free the serfs in 1861. Of course the consequences were momentous. A large part of the population was free to move and to be employed in other ways. This enabled a late industrialization to take part, a modernization that accelerated and was during the immediate decades before the First World War proceeding at a very high pace. Russian capitalism was rampant in a way it would not be again for a hundred years. It also meant that Socialist and anarchist ideas could take on a mass following, or at least be served with an appropriate soil in which to take root. Of course radical ideas were rampant in the country during the whole century. When Nicholas I was to succeed his brother, there was an uprising by the so called Decembrists, which was nipped in the bud, the leaders of which were either executed or sent into internal exile. Terrorism is of course not a Russian invention, it has been with us since time immemorial, but in 19th century Russia terrorism by the very few became a powerful political instrument. It was not addressed at the innocent but focused at the pivots of powers, and in 1881 Alexander II was assassinated.

Russian foreign polices faced many setbacks. On one hand its expansion to the East and South East went on unabated, incorporating huge swabs of Turkish territory. As Bismarck held: Russia should do well to abstain from involving herself in European affairs, instead it should turn East where it had a definite civilizing influence. The Ottoman empire got weaker and weaker, and Russia and Austria were more than eager to carve it up, thus coming into conflict. Russia liberated the Bulgarians but their extent of their liberation as well as the control of the Bulgarians went entirely out of their hands at the humiliating conference in Berlin. Twenty years earlier there had been the Crimean war, an interlude of French and British intervention in the Black Sea to stall Russian advance to the south, putting its sight on Constantinople, a traditional goal of Russian foreign policy, only now becoming realistic. Russia was still a Continental player of course, traditionally since the Napoleonic wars allied with Prussia. But as Prussia expanded itself during German unification, the clashes of interest between the two countries became more and more pronounced, as Prussia no longer was content of being the junior partner. This lead to an approachment with France and what could, in the words of Kennan, be thought of a Fateful alliance. However, the most fateful and humiliating incident, was the far Eastern adventure, when Russia, a military super-power suffered defeat at the hands of the upstarts the Japanese. This led to a thorough upheaval, almost a revolution, and the harnessing of strong forces of constitutional reform, and the establishment of a Duma, although its power to act was wing-clipped from the very start.

And so one hundred years after the Napoleonic invasion there was the First World War which led to a Germanic invasion, which unlike the earlier one led to a complete social collapse, out of whose ashes, the Soviet Union emerged. The rest is so to speak history. The imposition of the Communist regime did amount to both a complete break with the past, as well as a return to it. Russia once again retreated into a position of almost medieval isolationism, although at the same time subjected to a frantic industrial

modernization, transforming the traditional agrarian society. It is not a coincidence that so many of the leading names in the times of Napoleon had been of German origin. The elite was very much dominated by foreigners, many of the Germans being of Baltic origin⁷. In the Soviet times that was all gone. The Soviet Union was a very Slavic enterprise. Not only had the capital moved back to the heart of the country, all the important actors were indigenous.

What happened after the revolution is more common knowledge, and has already been lightly touched on in the initial paragraphs.

January 18-20, 2011

⁷ But many foreigners were invited during the 18th century, and in addition one may find many Dutch and Scandinavian immigrants. The Dane Bering, of the Bering straits, is one of the most conspicuous examples. The situation was similar in Sweden during the 17th century, yet another example of a backward country having overextended itself.

