

The Conquest of a Continent

Siberia and the Russians



W. Bruce Lincoln



JONATHAN CAPE
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Prologue

Nations are born of battle, and conquest makes them great. Agincourt, Trafalgar, and El Alamein defined the greatness of England. France had some of her finest hours at Austerlitz and Jena, while modern Germany took shape against the background of her victories at Königgrätz, Sedan, and Tannenberg. The United States of America came into being at Concord and Yorktown, preserved her union at Gettysburg, and took the stage as a world power at Château-Thierry and the Battle of Midway. For Russia, the process of birth and conquest has taken longer, beginning with the triumph of Moscow's Prince Dmitrii Donskoi over the Mongols at Kulikovo Field in 1380. Since then, Russia has fought titanic battles against Europe—Poltava in 1709, Borodino in 1812, and Stalingrad in 1942—but the conquest that has defined her greatness has been in Asia. What has enabled Russia to rise among the great powers of the world and supplied her with the means to maintain that position once she achieved it has been her conquest of Siberia. Begun in 1582 with the victory of the cossack chieftain Ermak Timofeevich over the Sibir Tatars near present-day Tobolsk, Russia's Siberian conquest has extended across four hundred years, from the days of Ivan the Terrible until the end of the Brezhnev era.

The Russians took Siberia as part of a larger process of conquest and defeat that reached back more than three thousand years to the days when the political churning of Inner Asia drove the Scythians westward

along the great grass road that lay to Siberia's south. Some seven centuries before Christ, these nomads took the Western world by storm, marking the way for later waves of warriors to stake their claims to the steppe lands that divided Siberia from Central Asia. Some of the finest light cavalry the world has ever seen, these horsemen of the steppes presided over more than two thousand years of Asiatic triumphs against the armies of the West and the Near East. Never retreating and rarely tasting defeat, they shaped the history of the world's peoples from Cathay to Canterbury.

Moving slowly west around 700 B.C., the Scythians were the first to cross the steppes in search of grass for the horses and cattle on which they centered their daily lives. About four centuries later came the Sarmatians, advancing more swiftly and overwhelming their foes with their heavy cavalry, the likes of which the West had never seen. Cruel barbarians who consecrated their treaties with toasts of human blood drunk from a human skull, Attila's Huns followed the Sarmatians to build an empire that, by the fifth century A.D., reached into the plains of Hungary. Then, not long after the death of Charlemagne, the collapse of the Huns' empire opened the way for the Avars, the first of several new nomadic waves that struck against the edge of Europe before Christendom celebrated its first millennium. The Mongol armies of Batu Khan came last of all, more fearsome and brutal than any yet to reach Europe, but the last of the Asiatic invaders to ride out of the east.

On the eve of modern times, when the cutting edge of military technology—and, with it, the ability to claim Eurasia—shifted toward Europe, the pattern of Eastern triumphs and Western defeats began to change. Beginning in the 1580s, the Russians moved toward the east, taking a route that avoided the great centers of civilization that dotted the Eurasian steppe and shunning the massive battles with the armies of Central Asia that such a campaign in the steppe would have cost. Crossing Asia much farther to the north, the Russians worked their way along the great rivers and portages of Siberia so that the wild forests and tundras between the Urals and the Pacific became their prize, not the steppes and desert oases that the horsemen from Asia had conquered in years gone by. Bounded by the Ural Mountains on the west, the Arctic Ocean on the north, the lands of Kazakhstan, Central Asia, Mongolia, China, and Korea on the south, and the Bering Sea, the Sea of Okhotsk and the Sea of Japan on the east, Siberia increased the size of medieval Russia more than a hundredfold.

Once they entered Siberia, the Russians at first moved hesitantly into the valleys of the Irtysh and the Ob, the westernmost of the great

Siberian rivers that flowed from the highlands of Inner Asia to the seas that formed the Asiatic edge of the Arctic Ocean. Facing little opposition in lands whose average population was less than one person for every twenty-five square miles and finding the richest furs the West had ever seen, the Russians quickened their pace as the seventeenth century opened. Before 1620, they reached the valley of the Enisei, a thousand miles east of the Irtysh. Just a decade later, they crossed the Lena, a full twelve hundred miles beyond the Enisei and then, in 1639, reached the Pacific, more than three thousand miles east of their starting point. Nine years after that, they reached the Chukotka Peninsula, more than twelve hundred miles to the northeast and a scant hundred miles from Alaska's westernmost tip. At least in a formal territorial sense, with only a handful of cossacks and trappers marking their advance with a scattering of frontier forts and trading posts, Russia had conquered Siberia in sixty-six years.

Stretching for five thousand miles from the Urals to the edge of the Bering Sea and encompassing five and a third million square miles of territory, the Russians' Siberian conquest allowed them to build the modern world's largest land empire. On the eve of the First World War, the single Siberian province of Yakutsk was larger than all of India, and Eniseisk, Siberia's second largest province, encompassed more land than the combined territories of all the European combatants in the Great War except for Russia. Siberia was so large that almost two million square miles of space would be left over if the entire contiguous continental United States were placed into its center. Drawn to the scale used in Britain's famous Ordnance Survey maps, one nineteenth-century traveler explained to his readers, a map of Siberia would cover the entire tip of Manhattan from the Battery to Wall Street.¹ Western notions of time and space did not apply in this land where sunlight at midnight in one season became darkness at noon in the next. "When I thought I had covered at least half the ground between the Pacific Ocean and the Urals," one traveler from Vladivostok confessed, "I saw inscribed on the government notice-board at a post-station: 'To St. Petersburg, 5000 versts [3,300 miles].'"²

As rich in resources as it was large in size, Siberia brought the Russians a sixth of the world's gold and silver, a fifth of its platinum, and a third of its iron. A quarter of the world's timber grows within its boundaries, and its supplies of coal, oil, and natural gas are still difficult to estimate. Larger than Belgium and a mile deep, Lake Baikal, which stands midway between the Urals and the Pacific, holds a fifth of the earth's fresh water, and Siberia's navigable rivers are more than long

enough to encircle the globe. Diverse and monotonous, sinister and romantic, rich and impoverished, Siberia to this day remains a virtual continent unto itself, in which nature and history have juxtaposed an endless array of contradictions and opposites.

The Russians' conquest did not immediately give them access to Siberia's vast resources. Its huge reserves of gold were not discovered until the nineteenth century, and its even larger stores of coal, oil, and natural gas did not become known until well into the twentieth. Historically, Siberia has been reluctant to yield her resources to her Russian conquerors, yet it has been those resources that have supported a large part of Russia's claim to greatness. In the new balance between East and West that has emerged during the past four hundred years, the possession of Siberia's vast natural wealth has thus become a vital element in determining the place that Russia occupies in world affairs.

To explore this vital process of conquest and integration is the purpose of the pages that follow. The story begins in the days before Russia became Russia, when Siberia was not yet called Siberia, and when the Mongol hordes stood at Europe's eastern gates in the last of the East's great victorious campaigns against the West. Mongols ruled in Peking, Samarkand, and the lands of the Near and Middle East. Their armies were about to turn the great medieval Ukrainian city of Kiev into a wasteland and ride over Roman Catholicism's eastern bastions at Krakow and Budapest. The West and Christendom stood at a crossroads. Faced with what seemed to be certain destruction at the hands of these "satellites of Antichrist,"³ there appeared to be no escape from a course of events that men and women could explain only as the product of God's wrath. To the people of the West in the year 1238, it seemed that the cruel and dark forces of the pagan East stood poised to overwhelm them all.

Siberia is huge—the entire United States plus all of Western Europe could fit into it comfortably, with room to spare. Until the middle of the nineteenth century, a typical journey across it took upwards of a year. Within it are four rivers larger than the Mississippi...a quarter of the world's timber, a third of its iron and manganese, a fifth of its platinum, a sixth of its gold and silver...cities the size of Glasgow, Birmingham, Cardiff, Sheffield and Leeds. Yet it remains sparsely settled, and best-known to the rest of the world as the terrifying locale of the Gulag, the archetypical place of exile.

Appropriately, the story of Siberia's conquest is on a comparably dramatic scale, a tremendous tale of adventure, military exploits, economic development (and despoliation), human triumph and tragedy extending over half a millennium. It is that story W. Bruce Lincoln tells, with all the verve and authority of Robert Massie or Hedrick Smith.

Here are the Huns under Attila, sweeping out of Asia to terrorize Europe, and the Mongol hordes of Genghis Khan creating an empire larger than the Soviet Union. Here are freebooters like Ermak Timofeevich, the Cossack adventurer who took a small private army eastward to challenge—and defeat—the Tartar khans. Here are the tough founders of the merchant dynasties who breached the Urals and opened the lands beyond—first the Stroganovs, building fortunes and vast landholdings on salt and furs, then the Demidovs, whose iron smelters equipped the armies of Peter the Great out of Siberian ore. Here are larger-than-life

(continued in back flap)

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—From *The Conquest of a Continent*

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