

EARLY RUSSIA

- The early history of Russia, like those of many countries, is one of migrating peoples and ancient kingdoms. In fact, early Russia was not exactly "Russia," but a collection of cities that gradually coalesced into an empire.
- Russia includes territory from the Black and Caspian Seas in the south to the Baltic and White Seas in the north. The territory includes a series of ecological zones running from east to west and is crossed by several navigable rivers.
- In its early years, Russia was peopled by a number of ethnic groups with different languages, and their territories shifted from century to century. What emerged was a general pattern of Slavs in the East, Finns in the North, and Turkic tribes in the south.
- Forest dwellers, steppe nomads, and farmers in the various ecological zones traded with each other. Long-distance caravan trade linked Russia to the Silk Road trade network. Other significant groups included the Varangians, relatives of the Vikings, who were active traders on the rivers and northern coasts, and the Khazar Turks who built a trading kingdom at the mouth of the Volga.
- The rise of the Kievan state provides a good example for demonstrating the geographic and cultural connectedness of the Byzantine and Russian civilizations. Its development was tied to several important conditions.
- The Rus were societies of western Slav farmers ruled by Varangian nobles. Their most important cities were Kiev and Novgorod, both centers of trade. Kiev became the center of a trade route between Scandinavia and Constantinople, and Kievan Rus' as the empire came to be known, flourished for the next three hundred years.
- In 980 Vladimir I became Grand Prince of Kiev. He chose Orthodox Christianity as the religion of his state and initiated the culture of the Byzantine Empire, building churches, adopting the Cyrillic alphabet, and orienting his trade toward the Byzantine markets. Byzantine missionaries and traders made frequent contacts with Vladimir's officials via the Dnieper River. When Vladimir decided that the Orthodox Church would be the official state religion, he ordered that he and his subjects be baptized *en masse* in the freezing Dnieper River → ***It is said that Vladimir decided against Islam partly because of his belief that his people could not live under a religion that prohibits hard liquor.***
- Vladimir was succeeded by Yaroslav the Wise, whose reign marked the apogee of Kievan Rus'. Yaroslav codified laws, made shrewd alliances with other states, encouraged the arts, and all the other sorts of things that wise kings do. Unfortunately, he decided in the end to divide his kingdom among his children, expecting them to cooperate and flourish. Of course, they did nothing of the sort. Within a few decades of Yaroslav's death, Kievan Rus' had broken up into regional power centers.
- Kievan food output was poor, due to poor soil, a short growing season, and primitive farming technology. Therefore, the Kievan state relied more on trade than on an agricultural economy.
- At this time, the cities of Kiev and Novgorod had populations of 30,000 to 50,000.
- Christianity spread gradually in the Kievan state. Pagan customs and polygamy remained until the end of the 1100s. The Orthodox Church gradually became more powerful as church officials doubled as tax collectors for the state while building the authority of the church.