Russia’s epic history is stacked with larger-than-life characters, such as Ivan the Terrible, Peter the Great, Stalin and Boris Yeltsin – rulers who run the gamut from enlightened reformers to murderous despots. From its very beginnings it has been a multiethnic country, its inhabitants a colourful and exhausting list of native peoples and invaders, the descendants of whom are still around today.

**EARLY HISTORY**

Human activity in Russia stretches back a million years, with evidence of Stone Age hunting communities in the region from Moscow to the Altai and Lake Baikal. By 2000 BC a basic agriculture, relying on hardy cereals, had penetrated from the Danube region as far east as the Moscow area and the southern Ural Mountains. At about the same time, peoples in Ukraine and southern areas of European Russia domesticated the horse and developed a nomadic, pastoral lifestyle.

While central and northern European Russia remained a complete backwater for almost 3000 years, the south was subject to a succession of invasions by nomads from the east. The first written records, by the 5th-century-BC Greek historian Herodotus, concern a people called the Scythians, who probably originated in the Altai region of Siberia and Mongolia and were feared for their riding and battle skills. They spread as far west as southern Russia and Ukraine by the 7th century BC. The Scythian empire ended with the arrival of another people from the east, the Sarmatians, in the 3rd century BC.

In the 4th century AD came the Huns of the Altai region, followed by their relations the Avars, then by the Khazars, a Turkic tribe from the Caucasus, who occupied the lower Volga and Don Basins and the steppes to the east and west between the 7th and 10th centuries. The crafty and talented Khazars brought stability and religious tolerance to areas under their control. In the 9th century they converted to Judaism, and by the 10th century they had mostly settled down to farming and trade.

**SLAVS**

The migrants who were to give Russia its predominant character were the Slavs. There is some disagreement about where the Slavs originated, but in the first few centuries AD they expanded rapidly to the east, west and south from the vicinity of present-day northern Ukraine and southern Belarus. The Eastern Slavs were the ancestors of the Russians; they were still spreading eastward across the central Russian woodland belt in the 9th century. From
the Western Slavs came the Poles, Czechs, Slovaks and others. The Southern Slavs became the Serbs, Croats, Slovenes and Bulgarians.

The Slavs’ conversion to Christianity in the 9th and 10th centuries was accompanied by the introduction of an alphabet devised by Cyril, a Greek missionary (later St Cyril), which was simplified a few decades later by a fellow missionary, Methodius. The forerunner of Cyrillic, it was based on the Greek alphabet, with a dozen or so additional characters. The Bible was translated into the Southern Slav dialect, which became known as Church Slavonic and is the language of the Russian Orthodox Church’s liturgy to this day.

VIKINGS & KYIVAN RUS

The first Russian state developed out of the trade on river routes across Eastern Slavic areas – between the Baltic and Black Seas and, to a lesser extent, between the Baltic Sea and the Volga River. Vikings from Scandinavia – the Varangians, also called Varyagi by the Slavs – had been nosing east from the Baltic since the 6th century AD, trading and raiding for furs, slaves and amber, and coming into conflict with the Khazars and with Byzantium, the eastern centre of Christianity. To secure their hold on the trade routes, the Vikings made themselves masters of settlements in key areas – places such as Novgorod, Smolensk, Staraya Ladoga and Kyiv (Kiev) in Ukraine. Though by no means united themselves, they created a loose confederation of city-states in the Eastern Slavic areas.

The 9th-century legendary figure Rurik of Jutland is the founder of the Rurik dynasty, the ruling family of the embryonic Russian state of Kyivan Rus and the dominant rulers in Eastern Slavic areas until the end of the 16th century. The name Rus may have been that of the dominant Kyivan Viking clan, but it wasn’t until the 18th century that the term Russian or Great Russian came to be used exclusively for Eastern Slavs in the north, while those to the south or west were identified as Ukrainians or Belarusians.

Prince Svyatoslav I made Kyiv the dominant regional power by campaigning against quarrelling Varangian princes and dealing the Khazars a series of fatal blows. After his death in 972, his son Vladimir made further conquests, baptised Kyivan Rus as a Christian state and introduced the beginnings of a feudal structure to replace clan allegiances. However, some principalities – including Novgorod, Pskov and Vyatka (north of Kazan) – were ruled democratically by popular veči (assemblies).

Kyiv’s supremacy was broken by new invaders from the east – first the Pechenegs, then in 1093 the Polovtsy sacked the city – and by the effects of European crusades from the late 11th century onwards, which broke the Arab hold on southern Europe and the Mediterranean, reviving west–east trade routes and making Rus a commercial backwater.

Vladimir I, the illegitimate son of Svyatoslav I, slays his half-brother Yaropolk and establishes himself in Kyiv as leader of breakaway Kyivan Rus.

Vladimir I persuades the Patriarch of Constantinople to establish an episcopal see – a Church ‘branch’ – in Kyiv, marking the birth of the Russian Orthodox Church.

The reign of Yaroslav the Wise, who united the principalities of Novgorod and Kyiv, marks the zenith of Kyivan Rus in terms of military might and cultural splendour.