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The Trans-Siberian routes offer insight into changing flora and fauna, and the landscapes: taiga, desert, steppe and mountains.



History of the Railway

In the second half of the 19th century, the more advanced industrial states contested with each other for strategic advantage, economic fortune and imperial expansion. The stakes were high – no less than continental conquest and, in Russia's case, claim over the still undeveloped and even undiscovered natural wealth of Inner Eurasia. Up until this time, the distance between St Petersburg and the Pacific was measured in an arduous overland trek or a hazardous sea voyage. Russia's solution was to construct the world's longest railroad – the great Siberian railway.

Russia's Railways & Visionaries

A latecomer to the Industrial Revolution, Russia had long been dominated by a bloated autocratic state tied to an obsolete, landowning aristocracy. By the mid-19th century, Russia was slipping from the ranks of Europe's great powers. In 1857, Tsar Alexander II issued a railway decree, through which the state determined to reinvigorate the economy's pre-industrial infrastructure with modern railway routes.

The new railroads connected the central industrial region to the raw materials of the Urals and the agricultural products of the Black Earth region. Moscow became the hub of the national rail system, as the terminus of nine different lines. This spurt of construction was mostly confined to European Russia, but fear of British encroachment from the Indian subcontinent prompted the construction of a trans-Caspian line, which penetrated deep into Central Asia in the 1880s. Much to the chagrin of Siberian nationalists, some of whom believed that forces in the capital were even deliberately trying to hinder their region's development,

Worth tracking down is the out-of-print *To the Great Ocean* by Harmon Tupper, a well-researched, lively and interesting take on the construction of the Trans-Siberian Railway.

TIMELINE

Early 1580s

Yermak Timofeevich and his Cossack brigands capture Isker, the capital of the Turkic khanate Sibir abandoned by Khan Kuchum as the Cossacks approach, beginning Russia's expansion into Siberia.

1601

A customs house is erected at Verkhoturys in the Urals, and this town becomes the only legal entry and exit point for those crossing the Urals to and from Siberia.

1619

The Northern Sea Route along Siberia's north coast is closed completely to hinder the British and Dutch, whose search for a new sea route to Asia rouses territorial concerns.