

Understand Your Journey

HISTORY OF THE RAILWAY330

In the late 19th century, Russia began constructing the world's longest railroad – the great Siberian railway.

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Over the centuries, Siberia has seen its share of travellers, explorers and oddball characters passing through.

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President Putin has turned his attention to Ukraine, raising concerns over a new cold war.

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Taiga, desert, steppe and mountains.

History of the Railway

Spurred initially by the political whims and expansionist policies of Imperial Russia, the facts of how the Trans-Siberian Railway became a reality are but the prelude to an epic history that spans not only the great expanses of Siberia and the Russian Far East but monumental events of the 20th century including revolution, civil and world wars, the Gulag and the highs and lows of the Soviet Union and modern-day Russia.

Rail historian Christian Wolmar's *To The Edge of The World* (2013) focuses on the development of the Trans-Siberian and BAM lines, and is a pacy, fact-packed read summing up the route's construction and impact.

Birth of Russia's Railways

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 Ural Mountains and the agricultural products of the Black Earth region. Moscow became the hub of the national rail system, serving 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, Siberia remained a distant, exotic land whose potential was not fully realised.

The Lure of the East

In the 1840s, a geological expedition discovered that the Chinese had left the Amur River region unsettled and unfortified. Shortly thereafter, Tsar Nicholas I appointed the ambitious and able Nikolay Muravyov as the governor-general of Eastern Siberia. Unlike his predecessors, Muravyov was not another corrupt official, but a strong advocate of developing the Siberian Far East. With the tsar's approval, he collected some Cossacks

TIMELINE

Early 1580s

Yermak Timofeevich and his Cossack brigands capture Isker, the capital of the Turkic khanate Sibir, beginning Russia's expansion into Siberia.

1601

A customs house is erected at Verkhoturys in the Ural Mountains, and this town becomes the only legal entry and exit point for those crossing the Ural Mountains 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.