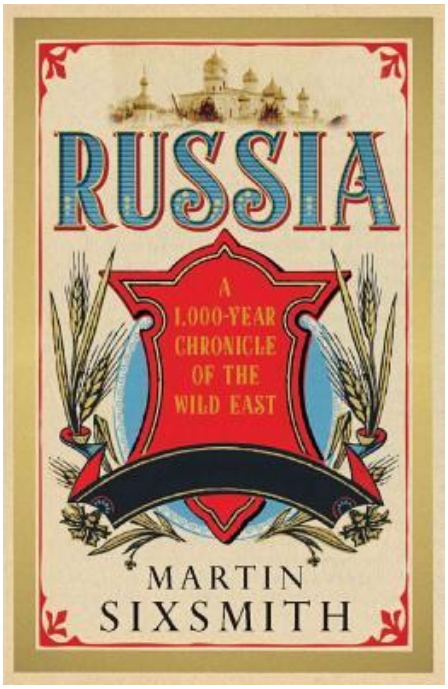

Russia: A 1000-Year Chronicle of the Wild East

Martin Sixsmith

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Russia: A 1000-Year Chronicle of the Wild East Martin Sixsmith
Covering politics, music, literature and art, he explores the myths Russians have created from their history.

Marking the twentieth anniversary of the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Russia is essential reading for anyone who wants to understand the complex political landscape of Russia and its unique place in the modern world.

Russia: A 1000-Year Chronicle of the Wild East Details

Date	:	Published March 15th 2012 by Harry N. Abrams (first published May 2011)
ISBN	:	9781590207239
Author	:	Martin Sixsmith
Format	:	Hardcover 624 pages
Genre	:	History, Cultural, Russia, Nonfiction, Russian History, European History, Politics

From Reader Review Russia: A 1000-Year Chronicle of the Wild East for online ebook

Olya says

Very comprehensive without being didactic or textbook-like. Somewhat disappointed with the abrupt ending, but definitely worth a read otherwise.

Amy Tipper-Hale says

Martin Sixsmith (my new best friend) elegantly does what you want all good historians to do; ambush contempt and accepted social narrative to reveal something far more complicated, interesting and closer to the truth. Read on long bus journeys through Dalston for soviet vibes.

TheSkepticalReader says

This is a good book if you want to test the waters with Russian history a bit, but not one I'd recommend for a thorough understanding of Russia.

For one, it doesn't cover the 1K period it suggests it does. While I understand that earlier history of any region is difficult to establish because there is often little evidence to work with, majority of this book is history from mid-19 century and after.

Secondly, while I think the author does a good job of stating that we cannot judge the history of such a unique country with our own preconceived notions of what is right or wrong, I think he also passes a few judgements that needn't be there.

Overall, it's an OK book. But there are likely better works of nonfiction to seek out if you want to learn about Russia in all its glory.

Nathan Cox says

It is evident, almost immediately, that the author of this book is a journalist and not a historian; and this is not just because he announces it (though he does), rather it's due to his prose style--it is written from start to finish in a relaxed journalese. He also inserts himself in the history, as a kind of TV travel host (which I gather he may have been once upon a time), but mostly sticks to the telling of Russia's tale.

I wish he had dwelled on the early history of Russia a bit more. Russia's first thousand or so years--from 862 to the end of the nineteenth century--comprise, roughly, 160 pages of the book's 530 pages: all the rest is devoted to the past 110 years. But I suspect that the lack of early resources and his own area of Russian expertise accounts for his choice of focus.

He tends to highlight piquant anecdotes and incidents to make his general point: Russia has two forces that shape its identity, Asiatic despotism, and European liberalism. However, the former almost always wins out, and for every small urge towards any sort of liberalizing reform there is always a larger and reactionary return to despotism or autocracy.

Amit says

Very compact and readable. Sixsmith keeps the narrative interesting, though the book leans too much on the recent past of Russia. And while, he quotes widely from the great Russian writers, often using their words as a mirror of history, it would have been great had he dwelt a bit more on their own lives. Nevertheless, a good reference for a lay reader.

David Bales says

Outstanding, impressive monumental chronicle of Russian history, from the princes of medieval Rus to the presidency of Vladimir Putin. Well edited and gripping, especially from the years of Nicholas II to the end of the Breznehv era, with heavy emphasis on the Russian Revolution and the crimes of Stalin and Lenin. After reading this it's hard to understand how anyone ever survived living in Russia beyond the age of one. A truly great book, the best of the year that I've read, by British journalist Martin Sixsmith who lived in the Soviet Union as a child and later became a BBC correspondent there in the waning days of communist rule.

Judith Johnson says

I appreciated the work Martin Sixsmith put into writing this, which was also a book accompanying a radio series. Naturally, as authored by a journalist, and covering such a long period, it's not going to have the same detail as something written by an academic historian (see the superb trilogy on The Third Reich by Richard J Evans), but nevertheless it's a great introduction, for me, to Russian history. It's a bit like getting one of those Big Red Bus tours of a city: you get an overall picture of the main sights and where they relate geographically, then you can go back and take a longer, closer, more detailed look at the bits that interested you. I remember Martin Sixsmith on the news when I was younger - always good to listen to.

I feel it was really well worth reading this, especially for the clarification of the Gorbachev/Yeltsin period. Will be reading more about Russia! (I've lent a friend my book on Putin's Russia by the late lamented Anna Politkovskaya, as he has a very Russia Today influenced view of Putin, which perhaps needs some information written from an alternative point of view).

Alexus says

Decent history, but I have a few problems with it. First, it's more a history of the Soviet Union than of Russia. All of pre-Soviet history is covered within the first hundred pages or so and almost all the rest of it is Soviet Union. Second, I take issue with the author's identification of "Asiatic" with oppressive, despotic, and irrational while "Western" or "European" represents everything enlightened, grand, and great. This is a pretty

old, simplistic, and false prejudice that really only belongs in the 19th century.

Parul says

The perfect guide to Russian history from the Romanovs and before to Cold War.

Igor Ljubuncic says

A good book with a twist.

The premise is simple: Europe vs Asia. Western mentality versus Eastern mentality. Democracy vs Autocracy. And so the author goes over a 1,000-year history of Russia, starting with the Vikings all the way modern-day era.

Early periods are full of poems, fables and ancient records found in old churches. Then we get a glimpse into the three important rules of the medieval era, so to speak - Ivan, Peter and Catherine, and reasons why each one of these used autocracy as their modus operandi. Then, there's the more recent history, focusing on the late imperial days, the reforms, the revolts, and the birth of revolutionary ideas.

Most of the book is actually dedicated to Lenin and Stalin, and there's no mistaking the author's agenda. He wants to show us that Russia always chooses the 'iron rule' in the hour of need. What I never like is when authors feed me opinion. I don't need you to think for me. Give me facts and I'll decide for myself whether the Bolsheviks were tyrants, peasants, dictators, or else.

If you disregard the occasional reminder that Russia does what Russia does, the stories are truly fascinating. It's an amazing basket of chaos, power play, the misuse of economics, the great political games, the ruthless gambles, the wars. Then, we also get a glimpse into the Soviet era under Brezhnev and Khrushchev, and again, there's an endless supply of witty stories and references that makes one wonder how the world did not end in a nuclear war 50 years ago.

The last section is dedicated to the rapid deterioration of the Soviet economy, the attempt to gain liberalization and democracy, and the recent Putin era, all of which Martin portrays with a solid dose of skepticism. He eagerly embraces opinions and memories of anti-Soviet and anti-modern-Russia people, but he does not believe the official word. Nor does he give any context as to how things are for the common person in Russia today other than the offhand reference to improved stability and economy in the past 15 years, which is a gross generalization that does not do justice to an otherwise in-depth and detailed work. These are critical factors that cannot be ignored, because they were major factors in the uprisings and protests of the late 19th and the early 20th century, as so they must be treated with the same importance as the past events.

Anyway, with the BS filter turned on, I really liked reading this, as I've learned a lot of cool stuff, things like Ivan the Terrible and his letters, Catherine's love life, Lenin's mannerisms, Stalin's style, Brezhnev's Kuzma's Mother, and many other interesting tidbits.

But ...

There's a problem.

I've found three big factual errors in this book.

1. Martin mentions Tsar Bomba, a thermonuclear device detonated by the Soviets in 1961. He writes about the 100MT yield. In fact, the weapon was de-rated to 60MT from its original yield, for the fear of completely destroying the delivery aircraft and the photography escort.

2. He mentions thousands being fatally irradiated in the Chernobyl disaster. This is not true. The total death toll from the disaster is less than 100 people, mostly firefighters on the first day. Many people were treated for thyroid cancer (about 5,000), but without a single fatality. Lastly, the prediction is for about 5,000 fatalities for the overall population of about 8 million over the next 100 years as a result of the disaster (this is less than smoking and alcohol rates). I really have no idea where he got this information.

3. He writes that Russia bombed Georgia after it took control and imposed order in South Ossetia. Factually, the Russians intervened following the shelling of Gori by Georgian forces. This has nothing to do with taking sides. Just being factual. But I guess the author's dislike for Russian's leaders and style in the past 15 years - it's evident from the tone and style of writing, which goes from being highly colorful, detailed and informative to speculative, possibly because Martin lived in Moscow for a bunch of years, witnessed the Perestroika and cannot really remain impartial - got in the way.

All in all, I found this book extremely entertaining and interesting.

I'm just not sure how much of it can be trusted.

Read with a pinch of salt and your Western goggles on.

Igor

Terry Tse says

This book is deeply biased but a very interesting read nonetheless. Its central thesis is that Russian national identity is split between "European liberty" and "Asiatic tyranny", and Russians had forever embraced a statist ideology after the Mongol rule. The failure of Kiev to fend off invaders hardened that view in the Russian psyche.

The bias runs deep throughout the book. The author laments every event and every turn in medieval and early Modern Russia as a failure to embrace European values, and to bring Russia into the Western fold. It is definitely not for the lack of the knowledge on the part of the author. Martin Sixsmith wrote his postgraduate thesis on Russian poetry. Perhaps it was his years in the BBC and the British civil service that compelled him to fall into the official line of the Western worldview.

As many reviewers have pointed out, the book is heavily lop-sided. More than half of it is devoted to the events after 1917. The author's bias actually served him well in the second half, as he described how liberalism failed after 1917 and how it failed again after 1991. He had first hand knowledge of the matters as

a BBC correspondent, and personally knew many of the actors in the unfolding drama. It is a much more interesting read than the first half.

Nonetheless Martin Sixsmith writes lucidly and masterfully interweaves his personal anecdotes in Russia into the grand narrative. The chronology, maps and photographs also help to guide the reader. It is a good broad introduction to Russian history despite its flaws. For those who would like to delve into the depths of the Russian character from a Russian perspective, I recommend the historical works of George Vernadsky.

Amy says

Russia: A 1000-Year Chronicle of the Wild East

This was actually a book I found just on the shelves at B&N. Usually I research books in a lot more detail before I buy them and read full descriptions, etc. Every now and then I like to go into a bookstore and just pick something sort of random. This was one of those. :) Probably easier to do this review as a pro/con list.

Pros:
-I never studied Russian history...really at all, so this was wonderful in providing a really broad framework. Now as I study more things, I will have a good outline in my mind to "plug things into."
-The parts about Kievan Rus were super fascinating to me.
-The author, a British journalist, spent time in Russia during the Cold War era and afterwards, so he weaves in personal experiences where possible and appropriate
-It made me want to read more about Russian history...so it was engaging enough for me to get through 600+ pages and still want to know more.
-I learned about the Bolshevik Revolution and Communism in much more detail...I feel like we always glossed over it quickly in history classes, the Cold War has always been a weak point in my education, and this was a step in remedying that.
-I LOVE LOVE LOVE the weaving in of folk songs, literature, and similar works. I wish there was a lot more of it, I thought that added a lot to the narrative.

Con:
-Written by a Brit (this is both a pro and a con), so while it's interesting to have an outside perspective (and can be important sometimes), it didn't give me as much insight into the Russian "mindset" as I had hoped. I think I'd like to read a book about Russia written by a Russian. It helps to have an outsider's pov, but since I don't know enough about Russia or Russian thought, I wanted a counter-balance. The author felt very removed throughout and almost seemed to "other" Russia. In contrast, I read a book about Hermann Rorshach recently, who was a Slavophile and wrote passionately about how beautiful Russia was [while also reserving criticism for what it became after the revolution]. I wanted more passion and a little less distance here. Or at least less "othering." I think that you can still love something and think its beautiful without completely losing objectivity.
-The 1000 years is a bit of a misnomer. It's 200 pages on the first 900 years, then the remainder of the book on the last 100 or so years. I supposed that's to be expected to some extent, but honestly, I feel like it moved so quickly through everything that came before the Bolshevik Revolution.
-I really like looking at themes in history, patterns are my jam. However, it's the same way I felt about "The Cave and the Light"--the author for that book tried to pin all of the history of thought to Plato or Aristotle and framed historical/scientific developments as a war between the two. That felt like a stretch SO much of the time. In THIS book, the author constantly refers to two themes: Russia's experimentation with democracy

and its inevitable return to its love-affair with authoritarianism. And, similarly, what the author calls its tension between Europe/the West and the "wild" East.
There are numerous problems with this. For one, the author doesn't really define West vs. East very well (he means it in more than a geographical sense) or why he calls the East "wild". I'm presuming it's related to the authoritarian-style of government. Also, it feels very prejudiced, especially coming from a European. Finally, it shoehorns things into these paradigms that doesn't always seem to fit. One of the things that's wonderful about Russia, IMO, is that it isn't really fully Western or Eastern. Yes, maybe there's a tension there, but maybe it's just its own unique thing and there are benefits to that.
-I was surprised that for all of the Cold War stuff, there was almost nothing about the KGB. I mean, there was a little, but not very much.
-This is really a political history. I wish more areas had been incorporated more fully.

If you, like me, don't really have a framework for Russian history and feel like sitting down with 600+ page volume, then this would maybe be of interest to you. It's got some great moments, and I'm glad I read it, though it left me wanting more.

Rebecca says

There's nothing like a good chronological history to make you realize how much you know out of order.

I was pleased to realize that I actually knew a fair amount of Russian history through reading about tangentially connected topics, from lives of the saints (including St Cyril) to a biography of Voltaire (including his correspondence with Catherine the Great) to a history of the Franco-Prussian War. Fiction, too--Horatio Hornblower, *War and Peace*, and Tom Clancy have all given me strange little windows. To have the whole thing laid out end-to-end, in order, makes everything suddenly make so much more sense. Among other things, I've perpetually confused events from the lives of Nicholas I, Alexander II, Alexander III, and Nicholas II (the last four tsars). When you can actually see, oh, *this* one was assassinated, which made *that* one halt the reforms, things start to make more sense.

It becomes particularly compelling (and a bit embarrassing) as the narrative approaches the present day. When I got to events that happened during my childhood that I remember but did not understand, I was fascinated. When I got to events in the last ten or so years, I think I was more embarrassed than anything else. In many cases, I remember reading articles about them, but I realize now that I had no idea why the events were happening or what they meant. I knew more about Alexander II's blundering emancipation of the serfs than I did about the fundamental causes of the Chechen War.

Overall, Sixsmith's theme is that the Russian people have repeatedly approached the idea of an open, democratic society, and every single time have turned around and re-chosen autocracy. It's increasingly tragic, as again and again Russia is plunged back into repression and then marvels at how they remain a backwater despite being absolutely enormous and possessing abundant resources. Somehow, the common people always end up in some form of slavery, without enough to eat.

Sixsmith does a good job of staying focused on Russian history, but occasionally providing touchstones of what was going on elsewhere in the world at the time so you can keep oriented. He was a BBC correspondent in Russia for years, so he often interjects bits of descriptions of current day Russia or small anecdotes from his own career to illustrate points. It's dangerous--it could easily become overly self-absorbed or annoying--but overall, he manages this deftly, giving just enough humanize the history without

becoming distracting.

My one objection is that far more of the book is focused on the last century, with more coverage given to each successive decade, it seems. So there's almost nothing at all about the Crimean War, but we get nearly a full chapter of a blow-by-blow account of the attempted coup against Gorbachev. It's somewhat understandable, given the author's focus, and if a reader's goal is to understand modern Russia, it's a sensible approach. I'll admit, though, that I was just as if not more interested in Catherine's rule as I was in Brezhnev's. I would have preferred a more even pacing.

I now have such a compulsion to go back and re-read Tom Clancy's books, now understanding what the heck was going on.

Joe Noteboom says

Mixed feelings. Well written and very readable, even gripping at times. Considering he was trying to cover 1000 years in just over 550 pages, Sixsmith did a pretty decent job (obviously a lot had to be left out - I'd probably be more upset if I knew more about Russian history). He seemed to be well versed in the arts (esp. literature) and was able to tie a lot of the better known authors/poets into their historical moments.

All that said, there were fundamental problems that rubbed me the wrong way. Mainly, Sixsmith seemed to be viewing all of Russian history from an ivory tower of some modern Western liberal democratic ideal, and judging all else as objectively worse or backward. Throughout the book he made a distinction between Western, liberal, democratic (i.e., Good) and 'of the Asiatic despot' (Bad). Through this lens, there is very little room for historical or political nuance, leading to an almost complete lack of distinction between, say, Ivan the Terrible, Stalin, and Putin (BAD). Meanwhile, both Peter and Catherine the Great might have been Good, but then they were Bad. It didn't ruin the book, as I still learned a lot and was able to put some things in order in my head, but it was overly simplistic.

Linnea Hartsuyker says

Very engaging, but the pacing was strange. In a thousand year history, almost half the book is spent on the years between 1900 and 1960. I would have liked more early history and more modern history.
