

A SHORT HISTORY OF RUSSIA

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A Short History of Russia by Lucy Cazalet

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LUCY CAZALET

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OF RUSSIA**

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OF

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BY

LUCY CAZALET

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CHAPTER I

THE SLAVS

WHAT is now European Russia—the great plain of Eastern Europe, bounded on the north by the White Sea, on the east by the Urál Mountains, on the south by the Black Sea, and on the west by the Baltic—was about the ninth century A. D. inhabited, in its central portion, by the various tribes of the Eastern Slavs, who had originally migrated there from the banks of the Danube.

These Slavs dwelt together in independent tribes, in towns and villages surrounded by wooden stockades and ditches, as a protection from wild beasts and other enemies. Their houses were rude wooden huts, and in every family the father, as head of the house, held absolute sway and exacted implicit obedience.

Matters of public importance, such as the carrying on of war, or the defence of the towns, were decided upon in council by the members of each community, and this council was called the *Véché*, and was, more or less, the equivalent of the Saxon Witena-gemot.

The Slavs hunted in the vast forests and bogs that covered the country, fished in the rivers, tilled

the ground in a rude and primitive manner, and even carried on a certain amount of trade in natural products with their neighbours.

The women performed all household duties, brought up the children, and on the death of their husband were burned on his funeral pyre, together with his weapons, his horse, and any other cherished possessions he might require in the after-life.

The Slavs believed in the immortality of the soul, and thought the life beyond the grave would be a continuation of the earthly life.

The religion of the Slavs consisted of a deification of the great elemental forces of Nature, and they consequently had many gods, of whom the greatest were: Perun, god of thunder and lightning; Dazhbog¹ or Hors, god of the sun; and Stribog, god of the winds. Besides these gods, the founder of every household was supposed, after his death, to return to earth in spiritual form, and as the Domovoi or House-god, protect his descendants from many evils.

The Slavs erected no temples to their gods and had no regular priesthood, but the head of each family offered up prayer and sacrifice in his own house. In early times they made no idols to their gods, but later large figures of wood or stone were set up for worship in public places, and before them human sacrifices were occasionally offered, the victim being chosen by lot. Wizards, witches, pixies and mermaids of course played a great part

¹ *Bog* in Russian means *God*.

in their superstitions, and were supposed to have marvellous powers.

The Slavs had three great festivals in the year, two in honour of the sun—celebrated approximately about Christmas and midsummer—and the third to welcome the coming of spring.

Hospitality was considered the greatest virtue, and a poor man was even justified in stealing what was necessary for the entertainment of a stranger.

CHAPTER II

THE ORIGIN OF RUSSIA

ALTHOUGH the Slavs lived in independent tribes, there were frequent quarrels and wars among them, which not only gave their warlike neighbours ample opportunity of raiding them and exacting tribute, but generally interfered with the peaceful development of the country.

This state of affairs at last decided the Slavs, worn out by internal strife and outside oppression, to seek help from the Norsemen who lived on the shores of the Baltic.

They sent an embassy to the Norse tribe of Russia and said: 'Our land is wide and fertile, but there is neither law nor order in it; come and reign over us, and be our princes.'

The Norsemen accepted the invitation, and in 862 three Viking brothers, Rurik, Sinius, and

Truvor, settled in the Slav towns of Novgorod,¹ Bélo-ózero,² and Izborsk. From this time the land of the Slavs took the name of Rus, or Russia.

*Two years later Sinius and Truvor died, and then Rurik annexed their lands to his principedom of Novgorod, and became sole ruler.

Two of his captains, Askold and Dir, went south as far as Kiev, and asked the townsfolk to whom they paid tribute. 'To the Hozars,' replied the men of Kiev. 'Then pay it to us instead,' said the Norsemen, and, with the consent of the townsfolk, they made themselves rulers of Kiev and refused to pay tribute to the Hozars, who were a nomadic tribe living in South Russia.

When Rurik died, his son Igor³ was an infant, so his kinsman Oleg³ reigned during his minority.

Oleg raised a great army, conquered Smolensk, and then sailed down the Dnieper to Kiev, where he asked Askold and Dir to meet him on the banks of the river, and charged them with having usurped the principedom of Kiev. He then put them to death and was proclaimed Prince of Kiev, with little Igor as his successor. He raised Kiev to be the capital and called it 'the Mother of Russian cities'.

A few years later Oleg carried on a successful war against the Greeks. He besieged and captured Byzantium, and returned home with enormous

¹ New town. ² White lake. ³ *Oleg* and *Igor* are the Russian forms of the Scandinavian names *Helgi* and *Ingvarr*.