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A History of Moscow

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Introduction

Moscow, the heart and soul of Russia, stands as one of the world's great cities—a place where history is always present, and the past pulses powerfully through the present day. Its story is as old as it is intricate, weaving together the threads of conquest and resilience, faith and revolution, artistic brilliance and political intrigue. This book, *A History of Moscow*, invites the reader on a comprehensive journey through more than eight centuries of tumult and triumph, exploring how a small fortress town on the banks of the Moskva River transformed into a global capital whose influence extends well beyond Russia's borders.

To understand Moscow is to understand the evolution of Russian civilization itself. Since its legendary founding in 1147 by Prince Yuri Dolgoruky, the city has grown and changed in ways few could have foreseen. Enduring destruction by invading Mongols in the thirteenth century, Moscow rose from its own ashes time and again—becoming first a principality, then the seat of the Orthodox Church, and eventually the center of a unified Russian state. The Kremlin, the city's fortified heart, has long symbolized not only power and authority but Moscow's remarkable ability to survive and adapt.

Yet Moscow's fate was never assured. The city has been threatened by fire, invasion, chaos, and political upheaval. In the tumultuous centuries that followed its founding, it was claimed, sacked, and rebuilt numerous times. During the Time of Troubles, Moscow experienced occupations and near ruin only to reemerge with the rise of the Romanovs. Even when Peter the Great shifted Russia's capital to Saint Petersburg, Moscow's symbolic status as the soul of the nation remained unchallenged, maintained through its centuries-old cathedrals, universities, and vibrant marketplaces.

The modern era brought new challenges and transformations. Invasion by Napoleon in 1812, the rise of industry and a burgeoning population, and the volatile years of revolution and civil war all left deep marks on the city. The Soviet period saw Moscow reassert itself as the nation's capital, undergoing dramatic urban redesign, becoming the nerve center of global communism, and standing at the very heart of the Cold War. During World War II, the city's people and defenders repelled the Nazi advance in a moment that changed not just Moscow's fate but perhaps the destiny of the world.

The story does not end with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Instead, a new Moscow emerged—one shaped by capitalism, global investment, and a rapid transformation into the largest city entirely within Europe. Today's Moscow is at once modern and historic, combining Soviet-era grandeur with futuristic skyscrapers and a pulsating business district. Its streets and squares remain stages for triumph and contention, echoing with the footprints of tsars, revolutionaries, artists, and ordinary people.

A History of Moscow is an exploration into the people, events, and ideas that define this extraordinary city. Drawing on both legendary tales and well-documented events, this book follows Moscow from its mythic origins through periods of foreign domination, artistic renaissance, brutal conflict, and dynamic renewal. The chapters that follow chronicle Moscow's journey—always changing, always vital, a city whose story is inseparable from the history of Russia itself.

CHAPTER ONE: Dawn on the Moskva: Prehistoric Settlements and Early Evidence

Long before the first chronicler’s pen inked the name "Moskva" into the annals of history, the land itself was ancient, sculpted by ice and water, and teeming with life. The future site of a sprawling metropolis lay nestled within a vast expanse of dense mixed forests, primarily spruce and pine interspersed with birch, oak, and linden. The Moskva River, a vital artery, meandered through this green ocean, its waters clearer and its course perhaps wilder than we know it today. Joined by numerous smaller rivers and streams like the Neglinnaya, Yauza, Setun, and Presnya, it carved a landscape of gentle hills, fertile floodplains, and strategic bluffs – a tapestry of natural features that would, over millennia, prove irresistible to human settlers.

The air would have hummed with the calls of forest birds, the rustling of unseen animals, and the whisper of wind through the primordial woods. Beavers dammed the smaller streams, creating marshy wetlands rich in resources. Fish, including pike, perch, and roach, thrived in the rivers, while the forests sheltered elk, wild boar, bear, wolf, and smaller game. It was a land of abundance, but also of challenge, demanding resilience and ingenuity from any who sought to make it their home. The very soil, though often podzolic and requiring effort to cultivate, held the promise of sustenance for those who would learn its secrets.

While the grand narrative of Moscow often begins in the 12th century, the human story in this region stretches far deeper into the mists of time. Archaeological investigations, though often complicated by the layers of subsequent urban development, have painstakingly pieced together a mosaic of early human presence. The earliest, most fleeting traces of humankind in the wider Moscow Oblast, the region surrounding the city, may date back to the final stages of the Paleolithic era, or Old Stone Age, as the last ice sheets retreated northward. These would have been small, nomadic bands of hunter-gatherers, following herds of reindeer or mammoths, their existence precarious and their impact on the landscape minimal.

Definitive evidence of settlement directly within the boundaries of modern Moscow becomes clearer with the Mesolithic period, or Middle Stone Age, beginning roughly ten thousand years ago. As the climate warmed and forests spread, life changed. People adapted, hunting smaller game, fishing more intensively, and developing a wider array of more refined stone and bone tools. Sites like Skhodnya, on the river of the same name just northwest of modern Moscow, have yielded flint microliths – small, sharp stone blades that could be hafted onto wooden or bone handles to create composite tools like arrows and spears. These Mesolithic communities were likely small, perhaps seasonal, their lives still intimately tied to the rhythms of nature and the availability of resources along the riverbanks.

The real blossoming of sustained human settlement in the Moscow area, however, belongs to the Neolithic period, or New Stone Age, commencing around the 5th millennium BCE. This era brought revolutionary changes, most notably the development of pottery and the beginnings of agriculture and animal husbandry, though hunting and fishing remained crucial. One of the most significant Neolithic cultures identified in the region is the Lyalovo culture, named after a site discovered near the Klyazma River. Lyalovo people established small settlements, often on sandy river terraces or lake shores. Their pit-dwellings, semi-subterranean homes offering protection from the elements, were a common feature.

Lyalovo pottery is distinctive, often characterized by its pointed or rounded bases and intricate "pit-comb" ornamentation – patterns created by pressing toothed stamps or sharp objects into the wet clay. These pots were essential for cooking, storing food, and perhaps even for ritual purposes. Finds of stone tools from this period include polished axes and adzes for woodworking, scrapers for processing hides, and arrowheads for hunting. The presence of net sinkers also attests to the importance of fishing. While agriculture was still in its infancy in this northern forested zone, the groundwork for a more settled way of life was being laid.

Another significant Neolithic culture that left its mark on the Upper Volga and Oka basins, including the Moscow vicinity, was the Volosovo culture, which flourished later in the Neolithic, overlapping with the early Bronze Age. Volosovo sites often show a greater density of artifacts, suggesting larger or more stable communities. Their material culture included elaborate flint and bone carvings, amber ornaments indicating trade connections, and a rich variety of pottery. Some scholars suggest the Volosovo people were primarily forest hunters and fishers, their adaptation to the woodland environment highly specialized. The interplay and succession of these Neolithic cultures illustrate a dynamic period of development and interaction.

The transition to the Bronze Age, beginning in the 2nd millennium BCE, heralded further significant changes, primarily through the introduction of metallurgy, even if bronze items remained relatively rare and prestigious in this region initially. One of the most prominent Bronze Age cultures to influence the Moscow area was the Fatyanovo-Balanovo culture, part of a wider network of "Corded Ware" cultures stretching across much of Europe. These people are often associated with the arrival of Indo-European language speakers into the region. They were pastoralists, raising cattle, sheep, and pigs, and also practiced agriculture.

Fatyanovo sites are often identified by their distinctive burial practices – individual interments in pits, often under small mounds or kurgans, with the deceased accompanied by grave goods. These goods typically included polished stone battle-axes (a hallmark of the culture), flint tools, and pottery decorated with cord impressions or incised geometric patterns. The presence of battle-axes has led to speculation that Fatyanovo society was more warlike than its predecessors, perhaps organized into distinct warrior elites. Their settlements, though less well-studied than their burials, seem to have been small and possibly seasonal, reflecting their pastoral lifestyle.

The limited availability of copper and tin, the constituent metals of bronze, in the local area meant that stone tools continued to be widely used alongside the newer metal ones. However, the knowledge of metalworking, even if its products were scarce, represented a significant technological leap. It fostered new skills, new trade routes for acquiring raw materials, and potentially new social hierarchies based on access to these valuable resources. The Fatyanovo people gradually assimilated or displaced earlier Neolithic populations, leaving a lasting imprint on the genetic and cultural landscape of the forest zone.

As the Bronze Age drew to a close and the Iron Age dawned, around the 7th century BCE, another distinct cultural horizon emerged in the Upper Volga and Oka basins, including the area of future Moscow: the Dyakovo culture. This culture, named after the Dyakovo Gorodishche (fortified settlement) located near Kolomenskoye, just south of modern Moscow's center, would dominate the region for over a millennium, from roughly the 7th century BCE to the 5th-7th centuries CE. The Dyakovo people are generally considered to be ancestors of the Finnic-speaking tribes historically documented in this part of Eastern Europe, such as the Merya and Muroma.

The Dyakovo period is characterized by the establishment of numerous small, fortified settlements known as "gorodishcha." These were typically situated on naturally defensible positions – prominent river capes, steep hillsides, or islands in floodplains. Borovitsky Hill itself, the future site of the Kremlin, with its commanding views over the Moskva and Neglinnaya rivers, would have been an ideal location for such a Dyakovo stronghold, and archaeological finds from the Kremlin grounds do include Dyakovo-era pottery. These settlements were usually protected by earthen ramparts and wooden palisades, indicating a need for defense and a more settled, territorial way of life.

Inside these fortifications, the Dyakovo people lived in longhouses, often accommodating multiple families. Their economy was based on a mix of slash-and-burn agriculture (cultivating millet, barley, and flax), animal husbandry (cattle, pigs, horses), hunting (especially for fur-bearing animals like beaver and marten), and fishing. The development of ironworking was a key feature of the Dyakovo culture. They learned to smelt iron from local bog ores and forged a variety of tools and weapons, including axes, knives, sickles, arrowheads, and spearheads. This local production of iron marked a significant step towards self-sufficiency and technological advancement.

Dyakovo pottery is typically handmade, often undecorated or with simple textile impressions on the surface. Other characteristic artifacts include bone and horn tools and ornaments, clay loom weights (indicating weaving), and so-called "house-shaped" clay idols, small figurines enigmatic in their purpose but likely connected to domestic rituals or beliefs. Trade clearly played a role in Dyakovo society, as evidenced by finds of imported glass beads from the Black Sea region and Roman coins, suggesting connections to distant cultures, perhaps mediated by Scythian and Sarmatian traders to the south.

The Dyakovo culture persisted for many centuries, evolving slowly. In its later stages, from around the 3rd to 5th centuries CE, settlements became larger and fortifications more substantial. There is evidence of increased social differentiation and perhaps the emergence of tribal chieftains. However, by the middle of the 1st millennium CE, the Dyakovo culture began to decline and transform, partly due to environmental changes and partly due to the increasing pressure and influence of new groups migrating into the region – most notably, the early Slavs.

The arrival of Slavic tribes in the lands that would become Central Russia was a gradual process spanning several centuries, beginning perhaps as early as the 6th or 7th centuries CE. The specific Slavic tribal union that came to occupy the basin of the Moskva River was the Vyatichi. They are believed to have migrated from the west or southwest, following river routes and gradually colonizing the territories inhabited by Finnic peoples like the Merya, with whom they interacted, sometimes peacefully, sometimes contentiously, eventually leading to a degree of assimilation.

The early Slavic settlements in the Moscow region, known as "selishcha," were typically small, unfortified agricultural villages, often located on river terraces suitable for farming. They lived in semi-subterranean dwellings (poluzemlyanki) with timber frames and earthen roofs, usually equipped with a clay or stone oven in one corner. Their economy was based on agriculture (rye, wheat, oats, barley), cattle breeding, hunting, fishing, and beekeeping. Ironworking was well-established, and they produced a range of agricultural tools, weapons, and household items.

Slavic pottery of this period is distinct from the earlier Dyakovo wares, often being wheel-turned or molded, with characteristic shapes and sometimes simple linear or wavy ornamentation. Archaeological finds from Vyatichi sites include iron knives, axes, sickles, arrowheads, spearheads, fragments of chain mail, and various personal ornaments like temporal rings (temple pendants worn by women, often distinctive to particular tribes), bracelets, and beads. Burial practices also differed, with the Vyatichi initially practicing cremation, placing the ashes in urns or small pits, often covered by kurgans (burial mounds). Later, inhumation became more common under the influence of Christianization, though this process was slow in the Vyatichi lands.

By the 10th and 11th centuries, the Vyatichi had established a significant presence in the Moscow River basin. While still largely retaining their tribal autonomy, they were increasingly drawn into the orbit of the emerging Kievan Rus' state. They paid tribute to Kievan princes, sometimes willingly, sometimes under duress, and participated in trade networks that connected the Baltic to the Black Sea and beyond. The forests provided valuable furs – "soft gold" – which were a major export commodity.

It is crucial to remember that at this stage, on the eve of its first historical mention, "Moscow" as a specific, named settlement of significance did not yet exist in the way we understand it. The landscape was dotted with numerous small Dyakovo-era gorodishcha (some possibly still occupied or re-occupied by Slavs for defensive purposes) and Slavic selishcha. The area around the confluence of the Moskva and Neglinnaya rivers, particularly Borovitsky Hill, was undoubtedly a strategically advantageous location, likely hosting one or more of these earlier settlements. Its elevated position offered good defense and control over river traffic.

The rich archaeological tapestry woven from these millennia of human endeavor reveals a land constantly being shaped and reshaped by its inhabitants. From the first tentative footprints of Mesolithic hunters to the established villages of the Vyatichi, the region around the Moskva River was a crucible of cultural development, adaptation, and interaction. The legacy of these prehistoric and early historic peoples – their knowledge of the land, their trade routes, their fortified strongholds, and their agricultural practices – formed the deep, often unseen, foundations upon which the future city of Moscow would be built. The stage was set, and the resources were present for a new chapter to begin, one that would eventually see a minor border outpost rise to global prominence.

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