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# A History of Moscow

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## Introduction

Moscow's story is the story of Russia itself—a tale of resilience, reinvention, and transformation stretching across nearly nine centuries. At once an ancient stronghold, imperial seat, revolutionary hub, and modern metropolis, Moscow is a city whose fate has shaped the contours of Russian civilization and left an indelible mark on the course of European and world history. From a modest fortified outpost on the bank of the Moskva River to the formidable capital of one of the world's largest nations, Moscow's journey has been both tumultuous and triumphant.

The origins of Moscow are cloaked in the veils of legend and fact. Its first appearance in written records, in 1147, marked the beginning of an era that would see the city emerge from obscurity through resilience in the face of devastation. The early centuries were marked by cycles of destruction and renewal, as Moscow endured invasions, plagues, and the tyranny of distant overlords. Yet, each challenge reinforced its importance in the tapestry of Russian principalities, forging a spirit of determination that would define its people.

As centuries passed, Moscow transformed from a regional center to the heart of an expansive and unified Russian state. Under visionary leaders, its political and spiritual stature grew, culminating in the formation of the formidable Muscovite Tsardom. The city's story is deeply entwined with the sweep of Russian Orthodoxy, the ambitions of princes and tsars, and the struggles for freedom from foreign rule. The Kremlin's ancient walls, cathedrals, and squares still bear witness to moments of glory and tribulation.

Moscow's fortunes waxed and waned with those of the Russian empire. The city's identity was challenged by catastrophic fires, reimagined during sweeping urban reconstruction, and redefined through industrialization and the tectonic shifts of revolution. Despite losing—and regaining—its status as capital, Moscow persisted as Russia's beating heart, a repository of culture, tradition, and innovation that reflected both the continuity and restless energy of the Russian people.

The 20th century brought transformations more rapid and far-reaching than any Moscow had known before. As the seat of Soviet power, the city underwent vast expansion, modernization, and ideological remaking. Grand avenues and monumental architecture rose beside ancient churches and bustling markets. The city withstood siege and hardship during global conflict, only to emerge as the command center of a postwar superpower, its population and influence swelling with each decade.

Today, Moscow stands as both a relic and a vanguard: a city where the echoes of

medieval traders and imperial intrigue blend with the pulse of modern finance, art, and politics. Through revolution and restoration, occupation and liberation, decline and rebirth, Moscow has remained the lodestar of Russian identity. This book traces the remarkable arc of its history, exploring the myriad ways in which Moscow's fate and character have been formed by larger currents in Russian and global history. Readers are invited on a journey through epochs of change, destruction, and renewal, to discover how Moscow became—again and again—the heart of Russia.

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## CHAPTER ONE: The Land Before Moscow: Prehistoric Origins

Long before the chroniclers first etched the name "Moscow" into history in 1147, the land where the city now thrives was far from empty. It was a dynamic landscape, shaped by ancient geological forces and inhabited by successive waves of peoples whose lives were intricately tied to the rivers and forests of what would become Central Russia. The story of Moscow doesn't begin with Prince Yuri Dolgoruky's banquet; it stretches back through millennia, into the mists of prehistory, revealed to us through the patient work of archaeologists.

Imagine this region thousands of years ago. Instead of the sprawling metropolis we know today, visualize a land of dense forests, meandering rivers, and scattered lakes, a part of the vast East European Plain. The Moskva River, which gives the city its name, was then, as it is now, a central artery, its banks and floodplains providing fertile ground and vital resources for early inhabitants. The landscape was carved by the retreat of glaciers, leaving behind a mosaic of terrain that offered diverse ecological niches for flora, fauna, and, eventually, human communities.

The earliest whispers of human presence in the Moscow region date back to the Paleolithic period, the Old Stone Age. While evidence from this distant era is sparse, scattered finds suggest that nomadic hunter-gatherers ventured through these lands, following migrating animals and utilizing the abundant natural resources. These were ephemeral visits, leaving behind little more than stone tools and the faintest traces of their passage.

As the last Ice Age receded and the climate warmed, around the Neolithic period (the New Stone Age), more permanent settlements began to appear. Archaeological digs have unearthed evidence of these early communities, particularly along the Moskva River and its tributaries. Sites like the one discovered at Dyakovo village, now within the Kolomenskoye museum-reserve, point to a settled lifestyle as far back as the 4th millennium BC. Here, and in other locations across the Moscow region, artifacts such as stone axes, fishing hooks, and pottery belonging to cultures like the Lyalovo culture have been found, indicating a transition towards more settled ways of life, including fishing and early forms of agriculture.

The Bronze Age, following the Neolithic, saw the introduction and development of metalworking in the region. While bronze was a valuable commodity, archaeological finds from burial sites, particularly those associated with the Fatyanovo culture, suggest the presence of nomadic cattle breeders who also crafted tools and

decorations from this new material. These discoveries, found in various parts of the Moscow region, illustrate a continued human presence and evolving cultural practices.

Transitioning into the Iron Age, roughly from the 7th century BC onwards, archaeological evidence becomes more substantial, pointing to increasingly settled communities. The Dyakovo culture, spanning over a thousand years into the first millennium AD, is particularly significant. Named after the type site at Dyakovo, these settlements were often located on high ground overlooking rivers, strategically chosen for defense and access to water.

Excavations of Dyakovo culture sites have revealed a society engaged in farming and cattle breeding, as evidenced by the discovery of domestic animal bones, iron sickles, and querns for grinding grain. These people were not just subsistence farmers; they were also skilled craftspeople, producing distinctive pottery and working with bone and later, iron. Bronze ornaments and clay artifacts found at these sites suggest a developed tribal identity.

Interestingly, the earliest inhabitants associated with the Dyakovo culture are believed to have been Finno-Ugric tribes. Peoples such as the Merya and Meshchera inhabited this area for centuries before the arrival of Slavic tribes. The Moskva River basin, in the 9th century, formed a zone of contact between these indigenous Uralic peoples and expanding groups, including Turkic, Germanic, and Slavic peoples.

The name "Moscow" itself may have roots in these earlier Finno-Ugric languages, with theories suggesting connections to words related to "water," "river," or even characteristics of the Moskva River like being "muddy" or "wet." While the exact etymology is debated, the linguistic possibilities serve as a reminder of the deep history of habitation by non-Slavic peoples in this region.

Around the turn of the 10th and 11th centuries, a significant shift began to occur with the gradual migration of Slavic tribes into the upper Volga watershed and the Oka River basin, the wider area encompassing future Moscow. Among the earliest East Slavic tribes recorded in this expansion were the Vyatichi and the Krivichi. The Vyatichi, in particular, are strongly associated with the land that would become Moscow.

Archaeological evidence of Slavic presence from this period includes burial mounds, a characteristic feature of Slavic cultures. Traces of Slavic settlements dating from the 10th and 11th centuries have been found in various locations within the modern bounds of Moscow, often near water sources, indicating their agricultural lifestyle and reliance on rivers for transport and sustenance.

Even within the territory of the future Kremlin, archaeological investigations have uncovered layers predating the traditional founding date. Charcoal samples from near

the Kremlin have been radiocarbon-dated to as early as 890 AD, suggesting construction and arable activity on the site centuries before 1147. While not necessarily indicating a city, these finds point to a continuous or at least intermittent human presence and development in the area.

Hoardings of 9th-century coins discovered in the Kremlin area further suggest that this early settlement, or the cluster of settlements in the vicinity, had established trade connections with distant lands, including Armenia and Central Asia. The presence of a Byzantine amphora from the 12th century on Manezhnaya Square also highlights the growing importance of this location within regional trade networks leading up to the city's official mention.

These archaeological discoveries paint a picture of a land that was far from a wilderness when Yuri Dolgoruky arrived. It was a place with a long history of human settlement, where different cultures had flourished and interacted. Finno-Ugric tribes had established a settled agricultural and metalworking culture, leaving behind distinct artifacts and potentially influencing the very name of the river and future city.

The arrival of Slavic tribes brought new customs and likely led to a gradual assimilation and intermingling of populations. By the 11th and early 12th centuries, the area was dotted with Slavic settlements, strategically located along the rivers that served as vital trade and communication routes.

The land's natural features, particularly its location on the Moskva River and its tributaries, provided inherent advantages. The river offered access to a wider network of waterways, facilitating trade and movement. The surrounding forests and the marshy areas along the Oka River provided a degree of natural defense, a factor that would become increasingly important in the turbulent centuries to come.

Thus, the stage was set. The physical geography of the Moscow basin, with its rivers and strategic elevations, had attracted human settlement for millennia. Successive waves of people, from early hunter-gatherers and Neolithic farmers to Bronze Age herders and Iron Age settled tribes, had left their mark on the landscape.

By the time the first written record mentions "Moscow" in the 12th century, the site was not a random clearing in the wilderness. It was a place with a history, a location already recognized for its strategic and economic potential, built upon the foundations laid by countless generations who had lived, worked, and died on this land. The vibrant, complex history of Moscow was already unfolding, deep beneath the soil, long before its official debut in the chronicles.

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