



Eastern Europe & Russia



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Primarily located in: Austria, Belarus, Czechia, Hungary, Moldova, Poland, Russia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Ukraine

Also found in: Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Estonia, Germany, Lithuania, Romania, Serbia

Our Eastern Europe and Russia region stretches from the Baltic Sea in the north to the Adriatic in the south. The landscape is a mix of mountains, rivers, and plains and stands at the crossroads of Europe and Central Asia. By the 5th century A.D. Slavic peoples were moving west into modern-day central Europe, followed by Magyars, who settled Hungary. The Slavic peoples are now the largest linguistic and ethnic group in Europe, and the region's legacy of beauty and civilization lives on in famed world cities such as Prague, Kiev, Moscow, and Budapest.

Early Population Origins

Before the Roman Empire's conquests between 35 B.C. and 400 A.D., modern-day Eastern Europe was largely populated by Slavic and Baltic tribes in the north, and Celtic, Thracian, and Illyrian tribes in the south. The Roman Empire conquered the Thracians in 46 A.D., but the Balts in the north managed to avoid Rome's rule.

Post Roman Empire

Roman control of the area was relatively weak, partly because the population was largely rural. After the Western Roman Empire collapsed, the southern part of the region, including Bulgaria and Romania, remained part of the Byzantine Empire. Much of the rest of the region was invaded by Huns, Alans, and other nomadic tribes from the Pontic steppe. Slavic tribes, possibly displaced by the invasions, spread south toward the Balkans.

The Avars and Bulgars arrived in the 7th century. These tribes established kingdoms called khaganates in the south Balkans, pushing the Byzantine border south toward the Aegean Sea. However, in the conquered lands, the native Slavic tribes' cultures persisted, and the invaders were assimilated and "Slavicized," creating new Slavic national identities.

The Magyar, a Uralic tribe from the northern part of the Asian steppe, settled in the Carpathian Basin around 900 A.D., and established the Kingdom of Hungary. Unlike the Avars and Bulgars, the Hungarians resisted Slavic influence and maintained their language, which is closely related to Finnish and Estonian.

Meanwhile, the Slavs had split into what linguists recognize as eastern, western, and southern branches. The East Slavs moved north into modern-day Belarus and Ukraine and then into the northern region of the Volga River and east of modern-day Moscow, eventually becoming part of the Kievan Rus'.



Prince Árpád crossing the Carpathians. A detail from The Arrival of the Hungarians by Árpád Feszty, now displayed at the Ópusztaszer National Memorial Site in Hungary

The Kievan Rus'

In the area that now includes Belarus, Ukraine, and western Russia, a confederation of Slavic tribes known as the Rus' established a kingdom with its capital at Kiev. According to legend (though some scholars disagree), the Rus' were ruled by a small group of Scandinavian warriors called the Varangians. Scandinavian or not, the Rus' were entirely Slavicized by the 10th century. Russia and Belarus are named after this kingdom and claim the Rus' as cultural ancestors. The Rus' borrowed from Byzantine culture, including Orthodox Christianity, which influenced Slavic culture.



The Invitation of the Varangians by Viktor Vasnetsov: Rurik and his brothers Sineus and Truvor arrive in Staraya Ladoga

Mongol Attacks

Led by two grandsons of Ghengis Khan, the Mongol raids and invasions of eastern Europe were violent and fearsome. Medieval European tactics were ill-suited to fight the mounted archers of the invading hordes. The kingdoms of the Rus' fell to the Mongols, who swept quickly across the steppe and into the Carpathian Mountains. Hungary was the main target of the Mongol campaign in eastern Europe and was poorly prepared to defend itself after centuries of relative peace. Nearly half of the population was killed. The Mongol Empire expanded to include Ukraine, Russia, Poland, Hungary, and Bulgaria.



Mongol Cavalrymen Engage the Enemy, illustration from early 14th-century manuscript. Bibiotheque nationale de France, Paris



Mongol invasion, about 1240 A.D.

Rise of the Ottomans

In the late 1300s, Ottoman Turks vanquished the remains of the Byzantine Empire. They expanded into eastern Europe, eventually conquering Bulgaria and the Serbian Empire of the south Balkans. However, the Turks met fierce resistance in Wallachia and Hungary. Vlad III (also known as Vlad the Impaler), a Wallachian prince, was one of the Ottomans' greatest foes and played an important part in preserving the culture of Romania. Meanwhile, the Magyars of Hungary were better prepared to resist the Ottomans, having built heavy fortifications against a feared second Mongol invasion.



The Ambras Castle portrait of Vlad III, c. 1560, reputedly a copy of an original made during his lifetime

The Age of Empires

Around 1500, the eastern Europe region had evolved into four stable, primary groups. In the south, the Balkan region remained under Ottoman rule for the next 300 years. Hungary aligned with Austria, creating the formidable Austro-Hungarian Empire, which endured until World War I. The Austro-Hungarian Empire became the largest state in Europe (excluding the Russian

which endured until World War I. The Austro-Hungarian Empire became the largest state in Europe (excluding the Russian Empire). In the Baltic region, Lithuania and Poland joined together, forming a commonwealth government that lasted until the late 1700s.

Meanwhile, the Grand Duchy of Moscow had become a dominant power in the east. They had thrown off Mongol rule and laid the groundwork for what became the Russian Empire in 1721. The Russian Empire would grow to be the third-largest empire in history, reaching all the way across northern Asia to the Pacific, and millions of Russians migrated eastward as the empire expanded.

Did you know?

In the decades following World War II, much of this region fell under the Eastern Bloc, which was politically aligned with the former Soviet Union (USSR). Belarus, Russia, and Ukraine were absorbed into the USSR, while Poland, Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary, and East Germany were members of the Warsaw Pact, a military defense alliance among eight communist states.