

G U R P S[®]

ЄЛРІЯЄ † ЄИІГЛД † ЄРІЄ

RUSSIA

BY S. JOHN ROSS

STEVE JACKSON GAMES

FROM RUSSIA, WITH BLOOD

Enter a land of white snow, red blood and black humor. Explore the world of Russian folklore and fairytales, where all sorts of interesting – and often chillingly malevolent – creatures dwell. Visit the many seats of Russian power, where a slip of the tongue won't lose an emissary his head – for that would be far, far too painless.

Within, you'll find the history, folklore and daily life not of the Soviet Union or of the Imperial Age, but of medieval Russia – a culture all but forgotten in the 20th century. *GURPS Russia* offers a unique opportunity to explore these forgotten times and people from the mundane to the magical.



CHRONICLED BY
S. JOHN ROSS

TRANSLATED FROM THE ORIGINAL BY
**SPIKE Y JONES AND
SUSAN PINSONNEAULT,
WITH MIKE HURST**

ICONIC ILLUSTRATION BY
GENE SEABOLT

ILLUSTRATION BY
**HEATHER BRITTON, ERIC HOTZ
AND RAMON PEREZ**

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GURPS Basic Set, Third Edition Revised is required to use this supplement in a *GURPS* campaign; both *Compendium I: Character Creation* and *Compendium II: Combat and Campaigns* may be useful. The detailed historical setting will support medieval or fantasy adventure with *any* game system!



G U R P S

R U S S I A

E m p i r e . E n i g m a . E p i c .

By S. John Ross

**Additional Material by
Romas Buivydas, Graeme Davis,
Steffan O'Sullivan and
Brian J. Underhill**

**Edited by Spike Y Jones and
Susan Pinsonneault,
with Mike Hurst**

**Cover by Gene Seabolt, based on
a concept by S. John Ross**

**Illustrated by Heather Bruton,
Eric Hotz and Ramón Pérez**

**GURPS System Design by Steve Jackson
Scott Haring, Managing Editor
Page Layout and Typography by
Amy J. Valleau**

**Graphic Design and Production by
Carol M. Burrell and Gene Seabolt
Production Assistance by David Hanshaw
Print Buying by Monica Stephens
Art Direction by Carol M. Burrell
Woody Eblom, Sales Manager**



Playtesters: Captain Button, Graeme Davis, Kenneth Hite, Dean Kimes, Marshall Ryan Maresca, Michael Rake
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This book is dedicated to the memory of Reader's Haven, the finest bookshop ever to go out of business in Havelock, North Carolina, and to the gamers there, for "putting the quarter into John."

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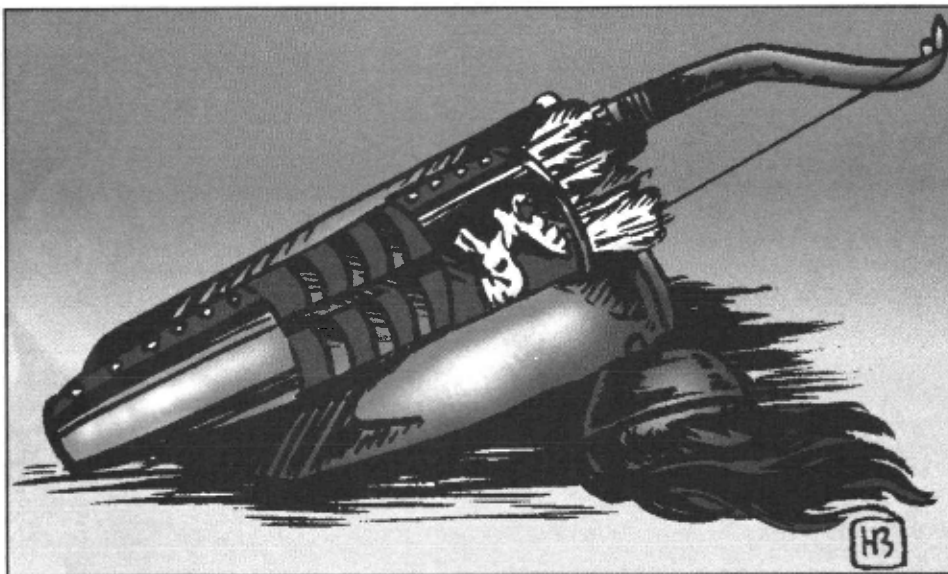
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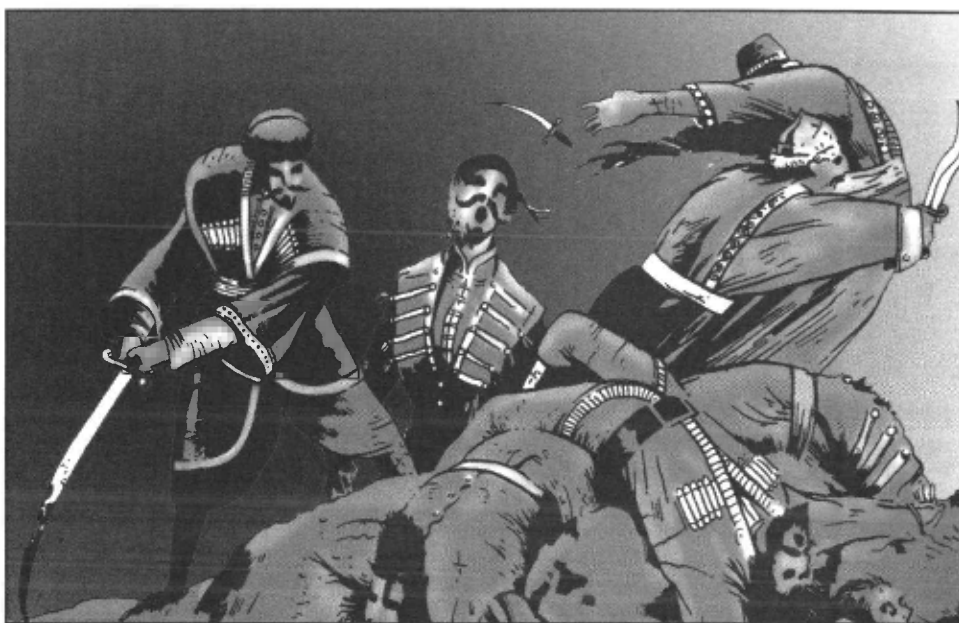
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ИТЯФДИЦИФН

About GURPS

Steve Jackson Games is committed to full support of the GURPS system. Our address is SJ Games, Box 18957, Austin, TX 78760. Please include a self-addressed, stamped envelope (SASE) any time you write us! Resources now available include:

Pyramid. Our bimonthly magazine includes new rules and articles for *GURPS*, as well as information on *In Nomine*, *Illuminati: New World Order*, *Car Wars*, *Toon*, *Ogre Miniatures* and more. It also covers top releases from other companies – *Castle Falkenstein*, *Traveller*, *Call of Cthulhu*, *Shadowrun* and more.

New supplements and adventures. *GURPS* continues to grow, and we'll be happy to let you know what's new. A current catalog is available for an SASE. Or check out our Web site (below).

Errata. Everyone makes mistakes, including us – but we do our best to fix our errors. Up-to-date errata sheets for all *GURPS* releases, including this book, are always available from SJ Games; be sure to include an SASE with your request. Or download them from the Web – see below.

Q&A. We do our best to answer any game question accompanied by an SASE.

Gamer input. We value your comments. We will consider them, not only for new products, but also when we update this book on later printings!

Internet. Visit us on the World Wide Web at www.sjgames.com for an online catalog, errata and hundreds of pages of information. *Illuminati Online* supports SJ Games with discussion areas for many games, including *GURPS*. Here's where we do a lot of our playtesting! Dial 512-485-7440 at up to 33.6K baud – or telnet to io.com. We also have conferences on CompuServe and America Online. *GURPS* has its own Usenet group, too: rec.games.frp.gurps.

GURPSnet. Much online discussion of *GURPS* happens on this e-mail list. To join, send mail to majordomo@io.com with "subscribe GURPSnet-L" in the body, or point your World Wide Web browser to www.io.com/~ftp/GURPSnet/www/.

Page References

Rules and statistics in this book are specifically for the *GURPS Basic Set, Third Edition Revised*. Any page reference that begins with a B refers to the *Basic Set* – e.g., p. B23 means p. 23 of the *Basic Set*. An M refers to *GURPS Magic, Second Edition* and CI refers to *GURPS Compendium I: Character Creation*.

GURPS Russia presents the Russian world from its beginnings in the 10th century to its *new* beginnings in the early 18th. It unfolds the history, folklore and daily life, not of the Imperial Age or of the Soviet Union, but of *medieval* Russia – a culture all but forgotten in the 20th century. To most Westerners, the word "Russia" is synonymous with Communism, nuclear war, competing space programs and World War I-era farm machinery tending the fields of The People.

To those readers, I bid a welcome to a world that just might surprise you with its depth of character. Russia isn't a *nice* place, not now and not then, but Russians themselves can be very kind. The lowliest peasant will offer you bread and salt when you come through his door. If you're polite, he'll give you a seat on top of the stove and maybe get you drunk! He probably won't *trust* you, but if you had been raised on stories of constant invasions and hatred by Mongols from the east, Poles from the west and Turks from the south, you'd be leery of foreigners, too.

GURPS Russia provides sufficient information to play anything from a pagan sorcerer in the days of early Christianity to a Cossack pirate in the days of Peter the Great. If you favor politics and espionage, you'll enjoy the machinations of the Shuiskys and Romanovs in the dreaded Time of Troubles. If you're fond of the dark side of humanity, you'll discover the black riders of the *oprichnina* – the Russian Inquisition of Ivan the Terrible. And if you like magic, you have a whole Otherworld to explore, beyond the Thrice-Nine Lands, where thunder heralds the *zmei's* flaming wings and the grim laughter of Baba Yaga demands your respect.

— S. John Ross

АВФЦТ THE АЦТФЯ

Born in 1971 to a military family, S. John has lived in both the United States and Japan. He has yet to set foot on Russian soil, but is determined to stand in Kitai Gorod in this lifetime. He's held a bizarre collection of unskilled-labor jobs, including a stint as Associate Editor in charge of war games at *Interactive Entertainment*, the world's first monthly magazine on CD-ROM.

He cooks, sings, plays the harmonica and does an uncanny David Pulver impression. The parts of his leisure time that aren't dedicated to books and films are spent attending science-fiction conventions. He's been an adventure gamer since Spring 1986, when he discovered *Car Wars*, *AD&D* and *Nuclear War* in the same weekend. His fascination with folklore and history grew out of the same period.

His professional credits include articles and adventures in *Roleplayer* and *White Wolf*, an adventure module for *Tales From The Floating Vagabond*, cartoon art in *Dragon Magazine* and co-authorship of *GURPS Grimoire* and *GURPS Black Ops*. He wears his T-shirts backwards.

THE STRAIGHT LINE

GURPS Russia is an experiment. The subject appeals mostly to hardcore roleplayers and history fans – not a large market. But we really *like* this book . . . so we're printing 2,000 copies, and they will only be available directly from SJ Games. You can reach our Web catalog at www.sjgames.com. If this goes well, maybe we'll publish other "straight-to-you" titles . . . books that won't work in standard distribution but are too good to ignore. We'll see.



1

МОТHER RUSSIA

*“Loe thus I make an ende: none
other news to thee.
But that the country is too cold, the
people beastly bee.”*

**Ambassador George Turbeville,
in a report on Russia made to
Elizabeth I**

Medieval Russia was a wilderness – a cold forest all but unfit for human habitation. Russia, born with hopes of becoming Earth’s final empire, was instead fated to be a cultural outcast, left out of the European Renaissance.

Despite this adversity and admitted backwardness, Russia gave birth to some of the most fantastic heroes and villains in human history. Seen by western Europe as a frozen, barbarous woodland, Old Russia was the home of people unique in their dark humor and loyalty to one another.

The term “Mother Russia” has been woven into prayers, battle cries and laments for centuries, and stirs emotion even in today’s Russians. The grim motherland was protector and provider to Russians of every era, from the time of the primitive Eastern Slavs to the height of the Empire, and Russians revered it.

CITY LIFE IN OLD RUSSIA

In the 16th century, Paris was the greatest city of western Europe, boasting a population in excess of 100,000 people. In the same century, Moscow was four times that size. Even in the 11th century Kiev boasted an estimated population as high as 80,000. Cut off from the intensive routes of Western trade and politics, the great cities and towns of Russia remained almost unknown to West Europeans, who, upon visiting the tsar's country, were often shocked by their size.

Urban Layout

The oldest part of any Russian city was the *kremlin*, the heavily fortified core. While modern usage limits the word to the Moscow Kremlin, the term was a general one, and nearly every Russian city had one. The typical *kremlin* contained the palace or house of the city's rulers and local nobles, and often a church or cathedral. In the earliest days of the town, the *kremlin* was the only part of the city to have fortifications. Houses were clustered close to it, and townsmen entered it in times of crisis or invasion.

As the population of a Russian city grew, so did the city itself, expanding outward in rings, much like trees. Even when the local landscape didn't permit the traditional concentric layout (such as in Yaroslavl and Pskov, both of which were wedged between rivers), important royal and official buildings were arranged in a semicircle. As cities grew, their walls would be surrounded by buildings, and so a new wall would be built to surround *those*, and so on. In contrast, most cities of medieval Europe stressed limiting the size of the city wall, and extended *faubourgs* (walled extensions around gates) only when absolutely necessary.

The main streets radiated from the *kremlin* to the outside walls, with lesser streets crossing them spiderweb-fashion. Neighborhoods formed between and along streets, divided by function. Most businesses clustered by type, and there was usually a 'quarter' set aside for non-Orthodox foreigners. The largest and best-known of these "German Quarters" was in Moscow (see p. 20).

Northern Russian cities differed in one very important respect from their West European counterparts. Whereas the streets of London and Paris were characterized by two-story buildings huddled tightly together and facing narrow streets, buildings in Russian cities had small yards, separated from each other and the streets by wooden fences. And while most city homes were similar (see *Fires*, p. 11), they didn't always face the street; a house might occupy any position within its fence. Walking through the streets of Old Novgorod or Moscow was a considerably less claustrophobic experience than a stroll along the *Ruelle des Chats* in Troyes.

Of course, to the West European visitor of the time, the most noticeable difference might have been the people. Russian city-dwellers, by the standards of the West, were always a few centuries too primitive. Russian customs and manners were seen as crude and uncivilized; the Russian burgher spat where he pleased, wore a huge, crude beard and the very "non-European" caftan, and seemed to possess an unbelievable capacity for poor temper and extreme humor. Dozens of diaries and travel logs exist from visitors to Old Russia, particularly in the 16th and 17th centuries, and most exude a stunned sense of fear beneath attempts at clear report.

Events and Scenes

The Russian city was a place of vigorous existence; even in the depth of winter, the icy streets were filled with crowds and huge carts and sleds carrying goods to and from the open markets. Burghers owned small, personal sleds (with capacities similar to modern shopping carts) that they dragged behind them by ropes. At any moment, a group of unclothed bathers might emerge from a steaming



Terms of Endearment

Familial terms were used in all parts of Russian life. Any elderly woman could be referred to as *babushka*; the terms "grandmother" and "old woman" were synonymous. From the Russian viewpoint, Russia was a large family. The soil was the *matushka* (mother), while the sovereign (whether Slavic chief, Varangian prince or Muscovite tsar) was the *batiushka* (father). Traditionally, the *matushka* was given the higher place in the hearts of Russians, while the *batiushka* was the source of order and punishment for misdeeds.

The "-shka" ("dear") ending could be added to any noun in the Russian language to make it friendlier, or (more often) to add irony. A good example of this comes from more recent Russian history. The elite Soviet airborne troops of the 1980s were known for their habit of adding "-shka" to the name of just about every piece of their military equipment. Their blue-and-white-striped undershirt became known as the *telnyashka*, and they even called the BRMD armored fighting vehicle *BRMDeshka* – the equivalent of a U.S. Marine referring to a "Bradleykins."

The Mongols at War

The 13th-century Mongols were, debatably, the most devastating body of warriors that Europe or Asia had ever seen, proving their superiority against all manner of foes. They were ferocious, swift and cunning, using a combination of light and heavy cavalry formations combined with Chinese war machines. Their skill at mounted archery was unmatched, and they possessed a dedicated corps of scouts and spies.

The Mongols divided their forces (including their administration and taxation units) into groups of 10 (*arbans*), 100 (*jaguns*), 1,000 (*minghans*) and the 10,000-man *tumen*, two or three of which formed an army. The system created an efficient chain of command, as no officer had to give orders to more than 10 subordinates. The Mongols were ruthless in enforcing this structure; transfer between units was not allowed, and if part of an *arban* was captured in battle, the survivors were executed for their failures. This increased the ferocity of Mongol attacks; if a single man in an *arban* was slain, the rest had no fate better than to die on the battlefield, taking as many foes as possible with them!

From the Russian standpoint, the most remarkable feature of Mongol armies was their ability to campaign at the height of winter, attacking when Russians were huddled on their stoves awaiting the spring thaw.

Mongol Tolerance

In nearly every way, the Mongols permitted the subject Russians to run their own culture. Especially surprising to Russians was Mongol religious tolerance. Even after the Mongols adopted Islam, the Russian Orthodox Church was not only tolerated, but exempt from taxation on its extensive landholdings. Russian clergy were exempt from conscription, as Batu Khan believed that the prayers of all holy men, regardless of faith, were of value. A Tatar charter of 1308 reveals that they would execute any man guilty of insulting the Russian Church and any Russian leader attempting to tax clergy or their families. In return for Mongol generosity, the clergy prayed regularly for their Mongol conquerors, and a diocese was established for the Golden Horde.

Social Achievements

Ivan was concerned about more than new territories and freedom from the Tatars; he wanted foreign respect for his empire. In 1472, he wed Sophia Paleologus, a niece of Constantine XI, the last Byzantine emperor. Constantine XI had perished on the walls of Constantinople in the final, successful, Turkish assault, and the wedding was sponsored by the Roman Church in the hope that Russia could be brought under the wing of Catholicism and the political might of its pope.

Ivan, on the other hand, saw himself as the rightful (now *legally* so) heir to Constantine's position as protector of the Orthodox people. Philotheus, a Russian monk of later years, wrote that, "the first Rome collapsed owing to its heresies, the second Rome fell victim to the Turks, but a new and third Rome has sprung up in the north, illuminating the universe like a sun," and many others recorded their agreement with this sentiment.

Ivan's perspective had a price. By taking such a view of the western Church, and refusing to establish links with Rome, he cut Russia's final ties with the West.

Nevertheless, he still envied other Europeans, and felt insecure and barbarous when considering the glories of their cities and ceremonies. Seeking to imitate them, Russia became a land of stifling pomp and ritual. Foreign ambassadors, accustomed to the "mere" absurdities of Western courtly behavior, found the Russian system tedious, vain and humiliating.

Ivan brought in craftsmen and artists from distant lands, and ordered the construction of a new palace for himself and three new cathedrals which still stand in the Moscow Kremlin. He adopted the Byzantine double-headed eagle as the symbol of Russia, adding it to his own family's crest. And to emphasize his new position, he created a new title for himself: tsar, or "Caesar."

THE МУСКОВИТЕ ЕЯ

(1505-1682)

When medieval Russia is mentioned, it is the Muscovite Era which usually comes to mind. With the seeds planted in Kiev, and allowed to grow under the rulership of the Tatars, a real nation, truly Russian in thought and practice, arrived after the reign of Ivan the Great. This period saw the growth of the Russian Church, attempts (and failures) at cultural ties to the West, and a cast of notable heroes and villains.

Vasili III, Ivan the Great's son, continued gathering the last of the resistant towns of the west (and fighting repeated skirmishes with Poland) and developing diplomatic ties with the leaders of distant lands, including the sultan of Turkey, Suleiman the Magnificent, and Babar (a descendant of Tamerlane), founder of the Mogul Empire in India.

Under his rule, many foreigners came to permanently dwell in Russia and the "German Quarter" appeared in Moscow (the Russian word for "German" meant simply "one who cannot talk," and was used to refer to all Westerners who weren't "Latins," such as English "Germans"). But Vasili's role in history was overshadowed by the reign of his son, the madman Ivan IV.

Ivan the Terrible and Western Europe

During the reign of Ivan Grozny Russia was not well-known beyond eastern Europe. In England, Russia was seen as a wild land of barbarous cannibals and fabulous beasts. It was from this England that Richard Chancellor, an explorer, sailed in 1554 seeking a northern sea route to the Far East. Just as Columbus had discovered the Americas sitting between Europe and India when he sailed west, Chancellor sailed into the White Sea and "discovered" Russia, landing near the mouth of the northern Dvina River.

Traveling south overland, Chancellor was surprised to find Russia civilized. He met the tsar, and left in 1555 with a trade agreement between England and Russia. England established the Muscovy Company which traded with Russia through Arkhangelsk, bringing both goods and skilled Englishmen to Russian soil.

This agreement stimulated the tsar's desire for contact with the West. Unfortunately, the coastal regions of the Baltic, known then as Livonia, now as Latvia and Estonia, were controlled by Sweden and Poland. Sweden and Poland had everything to gain by keeping Russia isolated and ignorant, and this sparked the Livonian War, Ivan's campaign toward the Baltic, which stretched on for years causing nothing but stress in Moscow.

Ivan's Insanity

Ivan seemed to grow steadily more insane, as shown in his correspondence with Prince Andrei Kurbsky, a *boyar* who fled Russia in 1564 after his formerly good relationship with the tsar broke down.

"The Devil," wrote Kurbsky, "has brought to your side most foul parasites and madmen . . . instead of a brave army, the children of darkness or blood-thirsty *oprichniks*, hundreds and thousands of times worse than hangmen . . ."

Continued on next page . . .

Boris Godunov

Upon Ivan's death his eldest son, the feeble-minded Feodor, became tsar. Unfit to rule, Tsar Feodor submitted completely to his advisors, chiefly his brother-in-law, Boris Godunov, a service gentryman of Tatar stock.

Godunov, an illiterate but brilliant leader, used his position to bring about an age of comparative peace between Russia and foreign empires. He continued Ivan's anti-*boyar* policies, but without the meaningless bloodshed and confusion.

Some blood that *might* have been spilled in Godunov's rise was that of young Dmitri, Ivan's other surviving son, who was found with his throat slit. The townspeople rioted against his guardians, accused by his mother of stabbing Dmitri. Godunov sponsored an investigation, led by Prince Vasili Shuisky and Metropolitan Gelasy, which determined that the boy had been playing with a knife, and had stabbed himself during a fit of epilepsy (see *Dmitri's Death*, p. 63).

Many Russians, especially the Romanovs, the *boyar* family of Ivan IV's first wife, attacked Godunov, spreading rumors that he had had the young prince assassinated to further his own ends. When Tsar Feodor died in 1598, there was no legitimate heir to his throne. His wife, Tsarina Irina, did not wish to rule, becoming a nun, and Boris Godunov was named tsar, thus ending a bloodline that originated with Rurik at the very beginnings of the state.

From the beginning, Boris Godunov's reign was another time of terror for the Russian people. Ironically, unlike the terror propagated by Ivan Grozny, this tsar was not at fault. Godunov's rule was as skilful as ever. He maintained good foreign relations, and formed sound trade agreements with England and others. He attempted to bring enlightenment to Russia by founding a university at Moscow, but the Church, fearing the contamination of other cultures, stopped the plan.

Famine

In 1601, the period of relative calm that began with the death of Ivan the Terrible ended. Beginning in 1591, western Europe was struck by a decade-long famine dubbed "the great dearth." As conditions began to improve in the West, Russia was struck. In 1602 and again in 1603, the crops failed and millions died. Godunov tried desperately to help; the government tried to feed the poor free of charge and to keep supply lines open to distant towns, but there was simply not enough food, and 100,000 people died in Moscow alone. Many who survived turned to scavenging, eating grass, bark and even other people. Huge bands left their villages and wandered as marauding packs of killers and thieves, and the fearful fled for the frontier, leaving too few people to man the fields even when the weather finally turned favorable.

Many believed that God was punishing Russia for its sins, and many eyes turned to Boris Godunov. The *boyars*, eager to have the "ignoble" Godunov removed from power, portrayed him as a criminal, usurper and murderer. More importantly, a rumor spread that Dmitri, the young son of Ivan IV, had not been killed after all, and that Godunov had killed an impostor while the real prince had escaped, soon to return. Russians suddenly had faith in a reprieve, the "messiah" Dmitri, rising Christ-like to return to his throne.

False Dmitri

Answering the cry of the Russian people, their "savior" returned. Known to history only as False Dmitri, a young man claiming to be the son of Ivan Grozny appeared in Russia, ready to take the throne that was "rightfully" his. Many believe



The First Romanovs (1612-1682)

The next three tsars, Michael, Alexis and Feodor Romanov, were unremarkable and weak rulers. However, they provided a period of stability during which Russia was allowed to heal once more into a whole country.

Strict social stratification returned in greater force than ever, and short-term attempts to form the *zemsky sobor* into an almost parliamentary democratic body failed utterly. Both the *sobor* and the *boyar дума* became effectively defunct, and years after the bloodshed by the savage *oprichnina*, Ivan the Terrible's dream of absolute autocracy had finally come to pass.

Aside from a Cossack rebellion in 1670 (see *Stenka Razin*, p. 67), and a series of lesser revolts in Ukraine, which was, after many years, becoming part of Russia again, the early Romanov years served only as a prologue to the last great era of Old Russia: the time of Peter the Great.

THE BEGINNING OF THE END

(1682-1725)

Peter the Great was seen by Russians as a villain, a despot and even the anti-Christ. He stands out as one of the most determined men in history, and his military and social achievements had repercussions in every corner of the world. He was obsessed with the Westernization and modernization of Russia, at any cost; Peter was determined to drag Russia "kicking and screaming into the 17th century."

Peter's Youth

At age 10, Peter I was co-tsar with his mentally deficient half-brother, Ivan V. His older half-sister, Sophia, ruled Russia as regent, which satisfied Peter, who showed no real interest in the duties of state. Peter reached his majority in 1689 and deposed Sophia, and in 1696, upon the death of Ivan, he took the reins of Russian rulership as his own.

Shunning his home in the Kremlin, young Peter spent most of his time in Moscow's "German Quarter," where he developed a fascination with foreign custom and language, and appetites for drinking, lechery and joke-telling that shaped his career and image. He spent time with craftsmen, developing an obsession with ability over birthright, and showing an astonishing capacity to learn. He later boasted knowledge of 15 different trades, and carried a bag of teeth that he had pulled to prove he was an able dentist. Even in later years he sometimes voluntarily took the lowliest positions on the battlefield, entering the fray or serving as a gunner, rather than commanding his army until he thought himself worthy of leadership.

Azov and the Grand Embassy

When Peter finally took on the responsibilities of government, he had several goals in mind: Russia had to expand physically, gaining ports on the Black and Baltic Seas to increase trade and international prestige, and it had to modernize for much the same reasons.

He immediately began a war with Turkey, determined to capture Azov on the Black Sea. This was the first of many campaigns; there was only a single year (1724) in Peter's entire reign in which Russia was not at war.



Dmitri's Death [Continued]

Several times in the past, Bitiagovsky had been guilty of spiteful words and actions against Dmitri's family (the Nagois), who still held "appanage pretensions." The furious townsfolk attacked Bitiagovsky's house and the office of the town prefect; 10 people were killed.

Boris Godunov immediately sponsored an investigation, led by Prince Vasili Shuisky and Metropolitan Gelasius of Moscow. They declared the death accidental suicide. The Nagois' were found guilty of inciting violence, and the townsfolk of murder and robbery. Dmitri's mother was confined to a monastery. Dmitri was buried in Uglich Cathedral, which was unusual (members of the tsar's family were customarily taken to Moscow). Tsar Feodor did not attend Dmitri's funeral.

Many suspect Boris Godunov in Dmitri's death. Essentially the ruler of Russia at the time, he would have had no difficulty arranging the murder. And as Godunov became tsar in name as well after Feodor's death, he certainly benefited. But did Godunov really need to kill Dmitri to rise to power?

The Russian Orthodox Church legally permitted a man only three wives in a lifetime. Technically, Dmitri was a bastard, since he was Ivan the Terrible's son by his seventh wife from a period when he had cast aside Christianity. Therefore, Dmitri had no *legitimate* claim to the throne. When Dmitri died, Feodor was only 30; there was no reason to assume he would remain childless, giving Godunov the opportunity to step in when Feodor died heirless. And Tsar Feodor had officially granted part of his power to his wife, Irina; in the event of his death, Irina would have had a right to rule.

Continued on next page . . .

Koschei's Death: Koschei The Undying (see p. 99) was immortal because his soul (he called it "his death") was hidden in an egg which itself was hidden far from Russians, somewhere within the Thrice-Tenth Kingdom. The location (which varied) was one of extreme danger and surpassing strangeness.

The Crystal Mountain: Much of the Otherworld was taken up by a huge Crystal Mountain, in which the largest *zmei* lived. The mountain seemed, in some tales, to be *growing*, absorbing all of the Thrice-Tenth Kingdom over a period of many years. This may have been the "glass mountain" upon which sat the land of the dead. To destroy the mountain, the hero had to slay the 12-headed *zmei* and cut open its body. In its left side was a coffer, in the coffer was a hare, in the hare was a duck, in the duck was an egg, and in the egg was a seed. If the seed was set afire and brought near the mountain, the mountain would melt.

The Sea: The Otherworld had a vast sea that took weeks to cross, and in it were various islands. In one story, Koschei's death was found on one of these islands, under an oak tree, in a coffer, in a hare, etc.

Otherworld Peasants: The Otherworld had forests and fields just like those of Russia, and many peasants and ordinary folk lived there. The forest had no *towns*, only isolated huts. The inhabitants could be anything from intelligent animals to lone hunters, or even groups of friendly maidens guarding magic treasure.

ROLEPLAYING FOLKLORE

Russian folklore, like that of most cultures, is difficult to game in its purest form. While a story of three brothers, two strong and wise and the third foolish, going hunting, quarrelling over a barrel of salt, and fighting dragons in the meantime might be entertaining at fireside (especially if there is *vodka* to be had), it doesn't translate well into adventures. For one thing, most fairy tales involve only a single hero, or multiple characters who don't cooperate. Most *GURPS* campaigns focus on a small group of people who are, if not necessarily friends, at least working toward a common goal.

However, there are many *themes* of Russian fantasy that can be adapted to play, and doing so imparts the feeling of a fable without the limitations. Three examples follow:

Generosity

Russians valued hospitable and generous behavior, and this was impressed upon children in folk-tales. For example, Ivan needed a magical horse and he knew that Baba Yaga had a stable of them. He set off into the forest, hoping he could get one of her magical steeds and that he wouldn't get eaten.

The journey took much longer than it should have, and the hero's provisions ran out. Soon he was weak with starvation. He spied an eagle nesting over her chicks and resolved to kill and eat it. As he aimed his bow at the bird, it cried, "Don't kill me, Ivan! Don't leave my children as orphans!" Ivan was nearly unconscious, but he overcame his need for food and spared the eagle. Within the hour, he arrived at the hut of Baba Yaga and gained entry.

Baba Yaga welcomed him and listened to his request. She fed him and said, "Tend my horses for three days. If you can keep them from running away, you are worthy to own one. If not, your flesh will feed my daughters and your skull will light my yard."





Samobranka (Magic Tablecloth)

Many Russian fairy tales feature an endless supply of food, and *samobranka* (literally “self-foodmaker”) was a popular myth. When laid over a flat surface and ordered firmly, this ordinary seeming tablecloth provided a sumptuous feast (food and drink, hot and cold, with temporary vessels and plates) with no limit to the number of times it could be used.

Servant Box

The Servant Box could only be found on a throne in a small house in the Thrice-Tenth Kingdom. When opened, either 12 or 24 (50% chance) men leapt out and asked the wishes of the owner. The men were super-workers, and could build nearly anything; assume that they have all the tools and raw materials to build nearly any mundane item imaginable. In addition, each was worth a workforce of 1,000 men. Thus, a project requiring 1,500 man-hours (such as a 30-oar shallow boat) could be completed by a 12-man crew in just under eight minutes!

Skull-Lantern

Created from the skulls of Baba Yaga’s victims, skull-lanterns adorned her yard, and she was known to give them to worthy seekers. A skull-lantern was a human skull filled with light that shone from the eye sockets and mouth, lighting up a room much like a modern camp-lantern. At sunrise, the light disappeared and the lantern became a normal skull; at sunset, the light returned. Baba Yaga could create these lanterns as easily as killing a trespasser, but no other character in Russian folklore knew the secret of their manufacture.



РЯФЛИИЕНТ РЕФЛЕ

While many of the most common figures in Russian folklore are best described as monsters, some of the most monstrous are best described as characters.

Baba Yaga the Bony-Legged

Baba Yaga was probably the most familiar and powerful image of Russian folklore. She was associated directly with both the forest and the Otherworld, and seemed to have direct control over the powers of life, death and animals.

Physically, Baba Yaga was a huge old woman, too heavy even to walk. She filled her small hut almost entirely, and was often found lying on the stove with her gigantic, disfigured nose jammed into the ceiling or stirring the coals of her fire. She sometimes worked a spinning wheel, wove, or herded her flock of geese simply by staring at them. Her teeth and fingernails were made of iron, and she sharpened both in anticipation of her dinner. The sight of Baba Yaga invariably caused fear and revulsion (Fright Check at -6).

Her powers were many; she knew much of the Otherworld, and, if properly convinced, would help heroes find it, and things within it. She was prophetic but extremely cryptic, ensuring that only the clever benefited from her advice. She made poisons and potions, and had access to the healing waters of life and the deadly waters of death. She spoke to and controlled beasts of the forest, and turned her hapless victims to birds, frogs or even stone. She also had the power to create skull-lanterns. If a Russian hid in her house, she could tell by the smell;



Fire and Vermin

Crucial to understanding much of the symbolism in Russian folklore are two of the most powerful images known to the Russian peasant: fire and vermin.

Fire

Old Russia was cold, dark and made of wood. It is hardly surprising that fire was a sacred and feared thing. From 1330 to 1453, no less than 17 major fires destroyed much of Moscow, and the recorded history of medieval Novgorod notes over 100 blazes. The great Russian celebrations of winter and spring often began as drunken carnivals and ended in tragedy, as entire towns and villages burned to the ground. Forest fires were common and could be gigantic; the steady breeze and unbroken forest could carry a blaze for a week across Russia, leaving ruin in its wake and forcing starving wolves to search for food in villages.

Fire was seen as a “clean,” destructive force, as opposed to “unclean” vermin. In a Russian monastery, fires (even cooking fires) could not be lit without ceremony, with flame brought from the sanctuary lamp. Things burned were seen as being taken to Heaven. One 17th-century visitor to Russia wrote that “to make a conflagration remarkable in this country there must be at least 7,000 or 8,000 houses consumed.”

The earliest form of drama in Russia was the Byzantine “furnace pageant,” a dramatic presentation of the rescue of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego from Nebuchadnezzar in the biblical Book of Daniel. Russians gave the show new glory by adding *real* fire to the staging. The most common biblical events used in Russian services and quoted in tales were those dealing with either divine or infernal flames; Elijah, who rode to heaven in a fiery chariot, was one of the best loved biblical figures.

The colloquial personification of fire was “the red rooster;” to commit arson was “to set the red rooster free.” Barns and houses in medieval Russia were often decorated with paintings of roosters to appease fire and keep it away.

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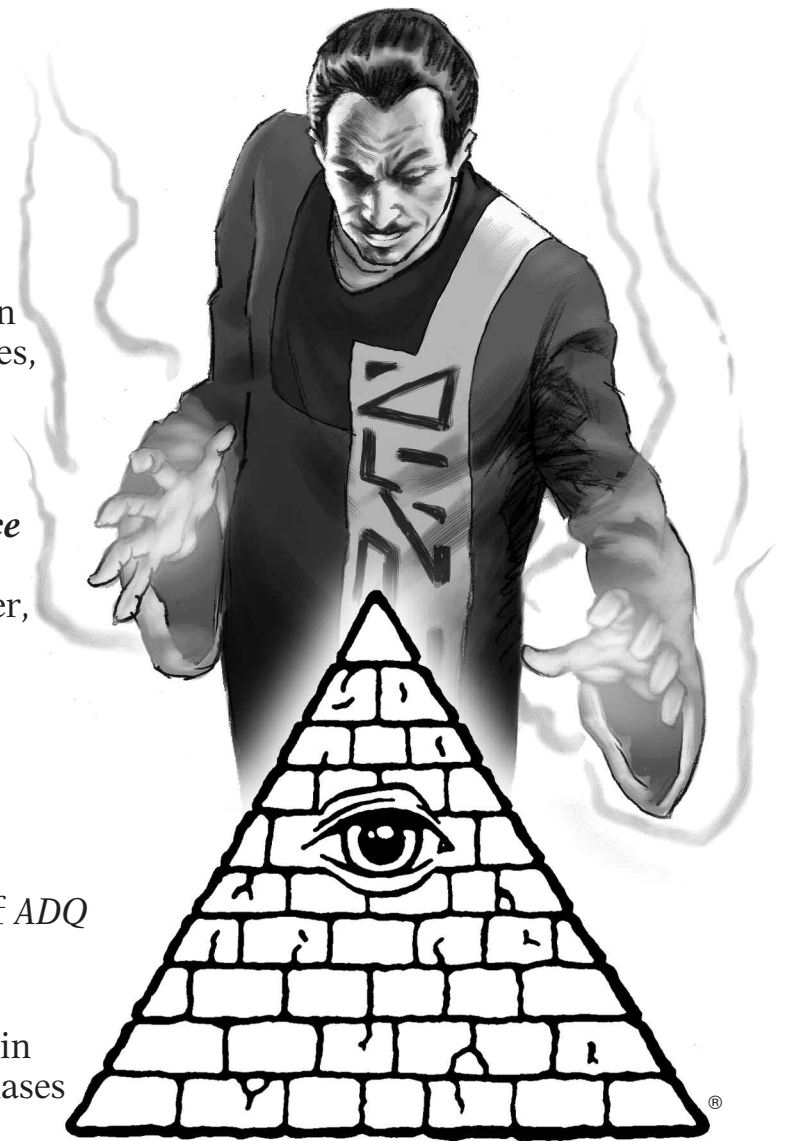
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