**Russian political system, history and culture**

- When was the Russian Federation set up?

- The Russian Federation was set up by the Constitution of 1993. After its destruction the Soviet Union was broken up into independent Russia and 14 other new, sovereign nations 1991.

- Who is the head of the Russian Federation?

- Under the Constitution of 1993 Russia is a Presidential Republic. It is headed by the President who is elected for a four-year term. The President is commander-in-chief of the armed forces, he makes treaties, and enforces laws, appoints the prime minister, cabinet members, and key judges. The President can override and in some cases even dissolve the national parliament, the bicameral Federal Assembly.

- What are the branches of the Russian government?

- The government consists of three branches: legislative, executive and judicial. Each of them is checked and balanced by the President. The legislative power is vested in the Federal Assembly. It consists of the Federation Council (upper house) and the State Duma (lower house). The members of the State Duma are elected by popular vote for a four-year period. The Federation Council is not elected. It is formed of the heads of the regions. Each Chamber is headed by the Chairman. Legislature is initiated in the State Duma. But to become a law a bill must be approved by the Lower and Upper Houses and signed by the President. The executive power belongs to the Government. The judicial branch is represented by the Constitutional Court, the Supreme Court, and regional courts.

- What are Russia's state symbols?

- Today the state Russian flag is three coloured. It has three horizontal stripes: white, blue and red. The white stripe symbolizes the earth, the blue one stands for the sky, and the red one signifies liberty. It was the first state symbol to replace the former symbols in 1991. The hymn of Russia is created by Alexandrov and Mikhalkov. Now the national coat of arms is a two-headed eagle. It is the most ancient symbol of Russia.

- What is the official language of the Russian Federation?

- Russian is the official, but not the only language which people speak in the country. Members of more than 60 other ethnic groups who live in Russia speak their own languages. The people of the Altaic group speak mainly Turkic, and Mongolian languages. The members of the Uralic group speak Uralic languages. The representatives of the Caucasus group speak various languages of the North Caucasus region of Russia. The people of Paleosiberian groups speak variety of languages of far-eastern Siberia.

- What religions do the peoples of the Russian Federation confess?

- Religions are diverse on the territory of Russia. The Slavs are mostly Orthodox Christian. The Turkic speakers are mainly Muslim. The Mongolians are customarily Buddhist.

- When did the Early Russian State come into being?

- Russia's history dates back to the year 862. In the 9th century AD the Early Russian state came into being with the cities of Kiev, Novgorod and Vladimir as its centres. The newly established state started to rival with the Byzantine Empire. During the middle and late 10th century, Svyatoslav, grand prince of Kiev, began to unite the land of Rus; his son Vladimir continued the unification. He baptized Russia in 988.

- Did Russia develop like the rest European countries of that time?

- Yes, it did. As feudalism advanced, just as everywhere in Western Europe the Early Russian state began to disintegrated into separate principalities. The rulers of the Golden Horde took advantage of it and overran the Russian land. After the Mongol conquest of most of Russia about 1240, such principalities as Novgorod continued to prosper; others, such as Moscow and Tver, became important centres; and others declined. Ivan IV the Terrible was the first tsar of Russia. His military campaigns against the Tatars added several non-Slavic states to the empire. Ivan was succeeded by his son, Fyodor I. His brother-in-law Boris Godunov in fact ruled as regent and, after Fyodor's death, as tsar. But 15 years of dynastic upheaval, known as the Time of Troubles (1598-1613), ended with the election of Michael Romanov as tsar.

- What changes took place in Russia in the 18th century?

- The 18th century is the time of great reforms. Peter I the Great not only carried out a number of administrative and military reforms, but he Westernized the country's culture and style of life His aim was to transform Tsarism into a European kind of absolute monarchy.

- How did Peter I reform education in Russia?

- Peter I started to reform Russian education. The Tsar introduced secular education and made it compulsory for all state servants. Peter founded the Naval Academy. He organized the Academy of Sciences as an institution for scholarship, research, and instruction at the higher level.

- What was one of the most fundamental legacies of Peter I?

- The creation of a national standing army on Western model was one of the most fundamental legacies of the Tsar. By appropriating the Baltic provinces and areas along the Caspian Sea, Peter I the Great established Russia as a legitimate European power.

- What title did Peter I the Great assume in 1721?

- In 1721 he assumed the title of emperor (imperator), thus announcing in name as well as fact anew Russian Empire. From 1721 to 1917 Russia was the political centre of the Russian Empire.

- Who consolidated Peter I's reforms?

- Many of Peter I's reforms were consolidated by the empresses Elizabeth and Catherine II the Great. Catherine added the Crimea and Ukraine, as well as Polish territory, to the empire.

- How did Russia develop in the 19th century?

- Alexander I's attention was diverted from reforms by the Napoleonic Wars. Opposition to serfdom had been growing since the time of Catherine the Great, who had hoped to end it but was forced to extend it. The institution was finally abolished by Alexander II. The "Emancipation Manifesto" made bondaged peasants free. But the "Tsar Liberator" was assassinated by the revolutionaries in 1881.

- What happened at the beginning of the 20th century in Russia?

- Russian autocracy was defeated in the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-05. Months of students' disorders, scattered peasants' uprisings, mounting strikes and riots forced Nicholas II to agree to form a national Duma (parliament) with advisory powers. In the October Manifesto the emperor promised to create a legislative assembly and guarantee civil liberties. The October Manifesto inaugurated a period of constitutional government.

- What do you know about the Dumas?

- The First Duma was elected on a broad franchise, though it fell short of the franchise demanded by the parties of the Left. The old State Council became a party elective upper house. Nicholas II promised that no bill could become law without the Duma's approval. But the Duma's budgetary powers were limited, and though Duma deputies could question ministers, the latter were responsible only to the Tsar. The First Duma, which was dominated by the Cadets, met only from April to July. The bill for expropriation with compensation, of the lands of the gentry and others led the government to dissolve Duma. Between 1906 and 1917 several Dumas, often with left-wing majorities, were elected and dissolved, but there was little progress in reform owing to the stiffness of the monarchy and the resistance of the aristocracy.

- How did the Bolsheviks come to power?

- Russia's entry into World War I was a disaster for the nation. By the autumn of 1915 the country had lost more than a million men. In February 1917 the Romanov dynasty was overthrown, and a democratic Provisional Government was established. In October (November, New Style), the Bolsheviks seized the power. Russia withdrew from World War I, and the Bolsheviks defeated their opponents in a civil war, forming the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. The Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic became the largest and central component of the Soviet Union.

- How did the country develop after the October Revolution?

- In the 1930s the Soviet Union underwent rapid industrialization and collectivization. The USSR developed into a world power and played a major role in the defeat of Germany in World War II During the 1960s and '70s the Soviet Union tried to spread its influence world-wide. Mikhail Gorbachev's coming to power in 1985 marked the beginning of new changes in Soviet society - chiefly a restructuring (perestroika) of the nation's political and economic systems and a new openness (glasnost) in public discussion, debate, and cultural expression. By the 1990s, reformism had eroded the Communists' grasp on power, both at home and in eastern Europe. An attempted coup d'etat by Communist hard-liners on August 19-21, 1991, failed, permitting the further advance of political pluralism and democratic institutions - spearheaded by Russian President Boris Yeltsin popularly elected in June 1991.

- Is Russia's population literate?

- Yes, certainly. Russia's population is literate. Education is free at all levels and compulsory between the ages of 6 and 17. The educational system includes four-year primary schools and general, technical, or vocational secondary schools. University admittance is determined by competitive examination.

- Can Russia be proud of its cultural life?

- Literature, music, and dance have always occupied the most important places in Russian cultural life. The country's best-known writers are - Aleksandr Pushkin, Nikolay Gogol, Ivan Turgenev, Leo Tolstoy, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Anton Chekhov, Boris Pasternak. They are popular throughout the world. The greatest Russian composers are Aleksandr Borodin, Modest Mussorgsky, Nikolay Rimsky-Korsakov, and Peter Ilich Tchaikovsky. Their legacy is evident in more contemporary music, notably that of Sergey Rachmaninoff, Igor Stravinsky, Sergey Prokofiev, and Dmitry Shostakovich.

- What are Russia's most important cities?

- Russia's most important cities are Moscow and St. Petersburg, formerly Leningrad.

- What can you tell us about Moscow?

- Moscow is the capital of Russia. The date of its foundation is the year 1147. Moscow began to rise in the 14th century. Under Ivan III the Great, in the mid- fifteenth century, Moscow became the principal city of the state of Muscovy. Nowadays Moscow is the largest city of Russia. It is a political, administrative, economic, industrial, educational and cultural centre of the country.

- Are there many educational institutions in Moscow?

- Moscow has a large concentration of educational institutions. Its centres of higher education draw students from throughout Russia. Moscow State University is the leading educational institution. The city's many specialized educational institutions include the Moscow Timiryazev Academy of Agriculture and the Moscow Tchaikovsky State Conservatory.

- Where is the growth of Moscow evident?

- It is possible to trace successive epochs of its development by the Boulevard Ring and the Garden Ring - both following the line of former fortifications - the Moscow Little Ring Railway, and the Moscow Ring Road. They facilitate suburban commuter traffic.

- What is located beyond the Garden Ring?

- Beyond the Garden Ring is a middle zone dominated by 18th and 19th-century developments; many factories, railway stations and freight yards are located there. Since 1960 extensive urban renewal has occurred, producing neighbourhoods of high-rise apartment buildings.

- Is public transportation well developed in Moscow?

- Yes, it is. Muscovites heavily rely on public transportation provided by the Metropolitan (Metro) subway, buses, street cars, and trolleybuses.

- What is the centre of the city?

- The Kremlin is the centre of the city. It is the historical heart of Moscow. Its redbrick walls and towers were erected at the end of the 15th century. The former Senate building, the Kremlin Great Palace, and the modern Palace of Congresses are located within the walls of the Kremlin. The white bell tower of Ivan III the Great, the Armoury Museum, and the Arsenal are grouped around Cathedral Square. The Kremlin contains several cathedrals designed by Italian architects in a style combining Renaissance details with Russian architectural tradition.

- What is the ceremonial centre of Moscow?

- Red Square is the ceremonial centre of the capital.

- What is located at the ends of Red Square?

- The State Historical Museum closes off the northern end of the square. The Church of the Intercession, or Cathedral of St. Basil the Blessed, is situated at the southern end of the square. It was built for Tsar Ivan IV the Terrible from 1554 to 1560 by the architects Barma and Postnik. The Cathedral is the final expression of pure Russian architectural fantasy in which Byzantine elements detached from their original meaning, were multiplied in unbelievable extravagance.

- What Moscow theatres and art galleries are world-known?

- The State Academic Bolshoi Theatre, Mali Theatre, and Moscow Art Theatre are world-known. Of the many museums and galleries, the State Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts and the State Tretyakov Gallery are especially notable.

- What do you know about St. Petersburg?

- St. Petersburg is one of the most beautiful cities of Europe. It has played an important role in Russian history. Founded by Peter I in 1703 it was the capital of the Russian Empire for two centuries. St. Petersburg was the scene of two revolutions. During World War II the city was besieged. The modern city is important as a cultural and industrial centre and as the nation's largest seaport.

- Is St. Petersburg the city of rich cultural traditions!

- St. Petersburg developed as a city of culture. There are a lot of theatres there. The Mariinsky Theatre has long enjoyed an international reputation, and its resident company is frequently on tour abroad. Other important theatres are the Mali, Gorky, Pushkin, and Musical Comedy theatres. Famous museums include the Hermitage and the State Russian Museum.

- What is your favourite St. Petersburg museum?

- The Hermitage is my favourite museum. It was founded in 1764 by Catherine the Great as a court museum. Under Nicholas I the Hermitage was reconstructed. It was opened to the public in 1852. After the October Revolution of 1917, the imperial collections became public property. The Hermitage has a rich collection of western European painting since the Middle Ages, including many masterpieces by Renaissance Italian and Baroque Dutch, Flemish, and French painters. Russian art is well represented. The Hermitage also has extensive holdings of Oriental art.

- Are there any other Russian cities of historic importance?

- Yes, there are. Vladimir, Suzdal, Yaroslavl played a very important role in the making of our state.

- What can you say about Vladimir?

- The city of Vladimir was founded in 1108 by Vladimir II Monomakh, grand prince of Kiev. In 1157 Prince Andrew Bogolyubsky moved his capital there from Kiev. The city suffered several Mongols attacks. In the 15th century it became a minor local centre. Today the city is proud of some superb examples of early Russian architecture. Especially noteworthy among these are the Kremlin; the Cathedral of the Assumption, built in 1158; the triumphal Golden Gate of 1158, restored under Catherine II. The Great; and the Cathedral of St. Dmitry.

- How did Suzdal develop?

- During the 12th to 14th centuries Suzdal principality achieved great political and economic importance. It became prominent during the reign of Andrew Bogolyubsky, who transferred the title of "grand prince" from Kiev to Suzdal, then to Vladimir. He and his brother and successor, Vsevolod III, organized a strong monarchical political system and, as rulers of the Grand Principality of Vladimir, became the most powerful of the Russian princes. They encouraged their subordinate princes to develop the principality and build churches, palaces, and new cities. Suzdal-Vladimir disintegrated into small principalities in the 13th and 14th centuries. In 1237 Suzdal became subject to the Golden Horde. In 1392 Prince Vasily I Dmitriyevich of Moscow annexed the Suzdal-Nizhny Novgorod region. The ancient cathedrals and monasteries still stand in their glory in Suzdal.

- What is Yaroslavl notable for?

- Yaroslavl is famous for its history and cathedral architecture. Established in 1010 by Prince Yaroslav the Wise, it served as the capital of an independent principality from 1218 until 1471. Then it came under the rule of Moscow. The opening of trade with the West during the 16th century brought prosperity to the town. By the late 18th century Yaroslavl had become an important industrial centre. Now Yaroslavl's industries produce heavy machinery, refined petroleum products, textiles, and synthetic rubber and tires.

- What churches survived in Yaroslavl?

- Many churches survived in Yaroslavl. Among them is the Transfiguration Cathedral (1505-16) of the Saviour Monastery. The churches of Elijah the Prophet, Nikola Nadein, and St. John the Baptist date from the 17th century.

- Are there any other places of interest in Yaroslavl?

- Yaroslavl has a university, four theatres - including Russia's first public theatre, founded in 1750 - an art gallery, several museums, and a symphony orchestra. Russia is a vast country. In every part of it there are places that contributed to its well being.