

Edge of the world
Trappers in Siberia on the
hunt for ermine and sable

Siberia is Russia's wild west, its land of extremes. A deft history charts the endless attempts to control it

HISTORY

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SIBERIA A History of the People
by JANET M HARTLEY
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Siberia – eight time zones of it, stretching from the Ural mountains east to the Pacific and north to the permafrost, and so inhospitable that it has taken four centuries to settle and (partly) tame – has always been Russia's version of the American Wild West.

True, it has a more threatening reputation. It's known not just as a vast, cold emptiness and home to bears, wolves, tigers, but also for punishment. For a Russian state that found dissent hard to handle, Siberia's remoteness made it an ideal dumping ground for troublemakers. Convicts sent there before the railways and the 20th-century gulags were supposed to walk east at 15 miles a day in leg irons that caused gangrene. Their sentence only technically started when they arrived – even though the journey could take years for those who survived. One prisoner reached Irkutsk after eight years, "and when he entered the factory there this marked the first minute of his sentence". No wonder the region's very name is a byword for desolate exile.

Yet Siberia has also always drawn people who were in search of riches, or just the chance to live by their own rules, and were prepared to go anywhere to get it. For fur trappers, peasants escaping Russian serfdom, religious dissenters such as the self-castrating skoptsy (who removed their sex organs in the hope of escaping original sin), railway entrepreneurs, 20th-century idealists building a bright Soviet future (and liking the extra Siberian pay) and anyone today exploiting the region's fabulous oil, gas, coal, nickel and gold deposits, Siberia has been a land of promise, wealth and – paradoxically – freedom.

Siberia starts where Europe ends, and faces into Asia. It's easy enough



Taming Russia's wilderness

to be so overwhelmed by its exotic geography – 10% of the earth's surface, 77% of Russian territory, permafrost, volcanoes, the world's biggest lake and vast mineral wealth – that you look no further. But, in this excellent book, Janet M Hartley, professor of international history at the London School of Economics, deftly pulls off a bigger feat. She elegantly captures the essence of a place of extremes by describing its people, both the settlers and the settled, the free and unfree.

Hartley tells her tale chronologically, starting with the 17th-century conquest, in Ivan the Terrible's day, of "Sibir" – a khanate east of the Urals, and only a small part of what we now consider Siberia – by the fur-trapping Stroganov family and Cossack forces.

It took two more centuries for Russians pushing north and east to defeat the Chinese on the Amur river basin and make a port on the Pacific – Vladivostok means "Rule the East" – that gave Siberia its modern shape. (It's unsurprising that it took so long once Hartley explains how many of the soldiers manning primitive garrisons were in their fifties and sixties. One whom she uncovers in a 19th-century fort on the Sea of Okhotsk was 82. Russia's

exacting 20-year-plus terms of military service had uprooted these men, leaving them with nowhere to go in later life; the fortresses essentially became old people's homes.)

Those were years of heroism – Bering's charting of the Arctic seas, scientific explorations of the Kamchatka volcanoes – but also of astonishing harshness. Adminis-

tration, haphazard even in central Russia, became crueller and more random on the periphery. The tax man might rob or kill you. It took years to make a complaint.

Boomtime came with the Trans-Siberian railway, which, as the 20th century began, joined up the scattered settlements and made economic sense of them at last. The line facilitated long-distance trade, including the sale of Siberian butter in Britain, and pushed Siberia's economy ahead of European Russia's. (It also hastened the start of a brief, humiliating war with Japan in 1905. The Japanese, scared that the railway would tip the regional balance of power Russia's way, wanted to strike before the line was complete.)

Being connected by train brought peasants pouring in from Russia – 600,000 a year between 1906 and 1911, a larger number than ever before. The Siberian population, today 30m, rose from 5.8m in 1888 to over 10m in 1913. This railway-powered migration was as big as mass emigration from Europe to the United States in the same years.

The new Siberians came seeking agricultural wealth, and they got it. With global markets beckoning, they modernised their farming methods. The amount of land cultivated dou-

bled. Grain exports tripled. By 1917, Siberia was exporting nearly a third of its grain, earning foreign currency, and fast becoming the breadbasket of the Russian empire.

But many disasters followed the 1917 revolution: the worst blood-letting in the subsequent civil war, the agonies of collectivisation, the gulag. Yet there was wild hope, too, with mass immigration, a grandiose project to make the rivers run backwards, a special science city and even a short-lived Jewish republic.

Siberia was hit harder than other parts of Russia by the 1991 Soviet collapse. Yet tomorrow, with almost all Russia's mineral wealth in its ground, it could become the gateway to the lucrative markets of the Far East.

Hartley's beautifully chosen and told compendium of life stories down the centuries illuminates a region where, today, Asiatic faces are as numerous as Slavic ones, and believers are as likely to be Buddhist or shamanic as Christian – a place that's still more full of human extremes than pretty much anywhere else, and all of them brought about by Russian rule.



Sent to the gulag to die

Siberia was home to some of the most notorious of the Soviet Union's punishment gulags, above. Temperatures in the Kolyma region in Siberia's remote northeast, for instance, fell to -45C or lower in winter, and up to a quarter of inmates would die. Many perished even before arriving: of the first 16,000 sent to Kolyma, only 10,000 actually got there.