

# **THE SOVIET UNION**

Second Edition

R. W. Davies and Denis J. B. Shaw

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SOVIET POLITICS



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THE SOVIET UNION

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Edited by  
R. W. DAVIES  
AND  
DENIS J. B. SHAW

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# THE SOVIET UNION

Second Edition

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*Edited by*

**R. W. Davies**

*Professor of Soviet Economic Studies  
Centre for Russian and East European Studies  
University of Birmingham*

with the assistance of

**Denis J. B. Shaw**

*Department of Geography  
University of Birmingham*

Boston

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## *Preface*

*The Soviet Union* provides a general introduction to the contemporary Soviet Union for sixth-formers and non-specialist students. It was originally based on a short course provided annually for first-year students at Birmingham University, whose main fields of study range from engineering to fine arts.

The importance of the subject is beyond doubt. The Soviet Union is by far the largest country in the world, occupying as much as one-sixth of the earth's surface, and is perhaps better endowed with mineral wealth than any other country. It is second only to the United States in total industrial production and, together with the United States, is one of the two military superpowers.

But the significance of the Soviet Union in the modern world extends far beyond its economic and military might. Ever since the Revolution of October 1917, it has offered the challenge of what claims to be a new social, economic and political order – a planned socialist system. Together with the other countries that form the Communist world, the Soviet Union (officially known as the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics) presents an alternative to Western capitalism in both ideology and organisation.

No consensus exists about the nature of the Soviet alternative or the extent of its success. Marxist is divided from Marxist, non-Marxist from non-Marxist. Some Marxists see Soviet developments as a successful adaptation of Marx's doctrines to the conditions of a developing country; for them, the Soviet Union today is a genuinely socialist state, carrying the torch for the rest of the world. For other Marxists, such an assessment is a distortion and a betrayal of Marxism: the Soviet Union is a new kind of class society, dominated by a privileged bureaucracy, and no element of socialism remains. Non-Marxists also differ strongly among themselves. Some argue that much that is positive can be learned from Soviet experience. They believe that poor countries like India, while avoiding Soviet mistakes, can base themselves on Soviet planned industrialisation to bring speedy economic progress to their hungry masses. But other

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non-Marxists reject the Soviet system as undemocratic, bureaucratic, illiberal, and inhumane; according to them, it should be studied as a foremost example of what not to do.

For an understanding of modern Soviet society it is, therefore, particularly important to be aware not only of the agreed facts but also of the principal issues involved in assessing them. The 13 authors of the present volume, all specialists on the themes of their own chapters, have endeavoured both to provide the basic facts about their subjects and to introduce the readers to major disputes and unsolved problems. The book has been deliberately constructed to provoke informed controversy; it will soon become clear to the reader that the individual authors differ considerably among themselves in their approaches to the study of the Soviet Union.

The first edition of this volume was published in 1978 as *The Soviet Union*. Six of the 14 chapters in the present volume are entirely new, and the remaining chapters have been revised.

Great changes are taking place in the Soviet Union; international and internal events are moving rapidly, and a serious effort is being made to carry through major reforms of the system. This upheaval has been in the forefront of our minds in writing or revising our chapters. We have not refrained from trying to peer ahead into the Soviet future, albeit with due academic caution.

It is also important to see present developments in historical perspective. The Soviet system was established in a specific country at a specific time, and we are firmly convinced that it is impossible to make a satisfactory assessment of the system without some knowledge of the historical background and culture of the Russians and other peoples who make up the Soviet Union, and of the international context in which the Soviet Revolution took place and was consolidated. Therefore, we begin our account with a consideration of the geography and history of the Soviet Union (Chs 1–4) before turning to the present political, social and economic system, and the efforts to adapt it to the requirements of the closing years of the twentieth century (Chs 5–9). We then discuss two important aspects of Soviet life and culture: education and the arts (Chs 10 and 11). Further chapters place Soviet developments in their past and present international context (Chs 12 and 13). The brief concluding chapter draws attention to the major controversies referred to in the course of the book and to the divergent opinions expressed by different authors (it also presents my own opinion). A list of major dates and a

*Preface*

glossary are designed to help the reader who is unfamiliar with the Soviet scene. A bibliography, divided by subjects, provides a guide to further reading.

Dr Denis J. B. Shaw was responsible for collecting the photographs and preparing maps and diagrams; I am most grateful to him for his efficient help.

The authors also wish to express their thanks to Tim Grogan, who drew or redrafted the maps and diagrams, to Pat Short, who drew the illustrations from the first edition, and to Ms Irene Brezowski, photo librarian at the Society for Cultural Relations with the USSR, for her most efficient and willing help with the photographs. They also wish to thank Lisa Freeman and Michael Holdsworth, present and past editors at Unwin Hyman, for their helpful advice and encouragement, and Betty Bennett, Nancy Moore and Anthea Roth for efficiently preparing the typescript for the publisher.

R. W. Davies  
University of Birmingham

## Notes on the Contributors

**R. W. Davies** is Professor of Soviet Economic Studies at the Centre for Russian and East European Studies of the University of Birmingham and was Director of the Centre from 1963–78. He is the author of *The Development of the Soviet Budgetary System, Foundations of a Planned Economy 1926–1929*, vol. 1 (with E. H. Carr), and a multi-volume history of Soviet industrialisation. The third volume of this history, *The Soviet Economy in Turmoil, 1929–1930*, has just been published.

**Denis J. B. Shaw** is Lecturer in Soviet Geography in the Department of Geography and Associate member of the Centre for Russian and East European Studies, University of Birmingham. He is a specialist on the settlement of early Russia and has published many articles on Soviet urban and regional planning. He is a co-author of *Planning of the Soviet Union and Landscape and Settlement in Romanov Russia*.

**Maureen Perrie** is Lecturer in the Centre for Russian and East European Studies and the School of History, University of Birmingham. She is the author of *The Agrarian Policy of the Russian Socialist Revolutionary Party from its Origins through the Revolution of 1905–7* and *The Image of Ivan the Terrible in Russian Folk-Lore*.

**M. Lewin** is Professor of History at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia and was previously Professor of Soviet History and Politics in the Centre for Russian and East European Studies, University of Birmingham. He is the author of *Russian Peasants and Soviet Power, Lenin's Last Struggle, Political Undercurrents in Soviet Economic Debates*, and *The Making of the Soviet System*.

**Ronald Amann** is Director of the Centre for Russian and East European Studies and Professor of Soviet Politics, University of Birmingham. He specialises in science policy and the interplay between economic and political change in the USSR. Recently, with Julian Cooper, he edited an inter-university study on *Technical Progress and Soviet Economic Development*.

**David Lane** is Professor of Sociology in the Centre for Russian and East European Studies, University of Birmingham, and a former Fellow of

*Notes on the Contributors*

Emmanuel College, Cambridge. He is the author of *State and Politics in the USSR*, *Soviet Economy and Society*, *Soviet Labour and the Ethic of Communism*, and several other studies on politics and society in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe.

**Philip Hanson** is a Professor of Soviet Economics at the University of Birmingham. His research has been mainly on the Soviet domestic economy and on East–West trade. His books include *Trade and Technology in Soviet–Western Relations*. His articles on the Soviet economy have appeared in *Radio Liberty Research*, *Soviet Studies*, and *Soviet Economy*, and he has also written for *The Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, and *The Guardian*.

**Julian Cooper** is Lecturer in Soviet Technology and Industry, Centre for Russian and East European Studies, University of Birmingham. Publications include *The Technological Level of Soviet Industry*, edited with Ronald Amann and R. W. Davies, *Industrial Innovation in the Soviet Union*, edited jointly with Ronald Amann, and articles on Soviet industry, science and technology, and economic history. He is Editor of the journal *Economics of Planning*.

**R. E. F. Smith** was formerly Head of the Department of Russian Language and Literature, University of Birmingham, and is the author of several books on farming in Russia from early times, including *The Enserfment of the Russian Peasantry*, *Peasant Farming in Muscovy*, and (with David Christian) *Bread and Salt*. He is also compiler of the *Russian–English Dictionary of Social Science Terms*, a new edition of which is in preparation.

**John Dunstan** is Senior Lecturer in the Centre for Russian and East European Studies and the Faculty of Education, University of Birmingham, and Deputy Director of the Centre. He is the author of *Paths to Excellence and the Soviet School* as well as many articles on Soviet education, and editor of *Soviet Education under Scrutiny*.

**G. S. Smith** is Professor of Russian in the University of Oxford and Fellow of New College. He has taught at the universities of Nottingham, Birmingham, Liverpool, Indiana, and California at Berkeley. He is a specialist on 18th-century Russian literature and also writes on recent Russian poetry; he is the author of *Songs to Seven Strings: Russian Guitar Poetry and Soviet 'Mass Song'*.

**Jonathan G. Haslam** is Senior Research Fellow in Politics at King's College, Cambridge University. From 1975 to 1984, he was Lecturer in Soviet Diplomatic History at the University of Birmingham; from 1984 to

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1988, he taught at various universities in the United States. He is the author of *Soviet Foreign Policy, 1930–33: The Impact of the Depression* and *The Soviet Union and the Struggle for Collective Security in Europe, 1933–39*.

**David Holloway** is Professor of Political Science and Member of the Center for International Security and Arms Control at Stanford University. He is the author of *The Soviet Union and the Arms Race* and a co-author of *The Reagan Strategic Defense Initiative: A Technical, Political and Arms Control Assessment*. He contributed to Amann, Cooper, and Davies (eds.) *The Technological Level of Soviet Industry* and to Amann and Cooper (eds.) *Industrial Innovation in the Soviet Union*.

## *The Geographical Reality*

DENIS J. B. SHAW

Physical environment, with its many dimensions, provides people and their organisations with both opportunities and limitations. Even a modern and highly organised state, such as the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), cannot overlook the facts of geography, sometimes blatant but more often subtly felt, that inexorably bring their influence to bear upon human activity. This chapter investigates some of the most obvious of these influences and traces their consequences.

### SIZE AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

The USSR is by far the largest nation in the world. Covering an area of 22.4 million square kilometres (8.6 million square miles), it is more than twice the size of China or the United States and no less than ninety times the size of the United Kingdom, amounting to 15 per cent of the entire land surface of the world. From west to east, the USSR stretches through 10 000 kilometres, or eleven time zones. For those who normally visualise the United States and the Soviet Union as occupying opposite sides of the northern hemisphere, it is salutary to remember that the westernmost tip of the United States in Alaska (Prince of Wales Cape) is only 90 kilometres from Cape Dezhnev, the easternmost point of Siberia. The two are separated by the grey waters of the Bering Strait, which freezes over in winter.

From north to south, the longest axis across the USSR is somewhat less (4800 kilometres), but along this axis the physical changes are very great. The northernmost point of Soviet territory, on the islands of Franz Josef Land, experiences subzero temperatures throughout virtually the entire year and is situated only a few



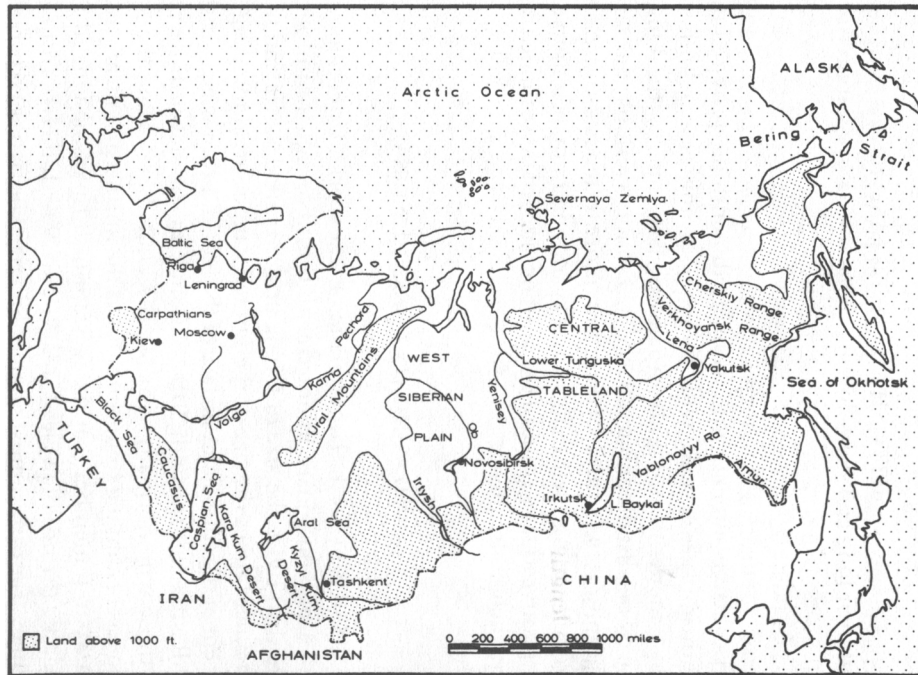


Figure 1 *The USSR: major physical features and cities*

### *The Geographical Reality*

hundred kilometres from the North Pole. The southernmost portion of Soviet territory lies on the borders of Afghanistan and within a short distance of the frontiers of India and Pakistan (Fig. 1). The USSR is truly a giant among nations.

Vastness brings both advantages and disadvantages to a nation. Territory must be held and administered, involving costly communications over long distances. In the past, communications could be exceedingly slow. The Russians attempted to make maximum use of their long and slow-flowing rivers for transportation (though the northward-flowing Siberian rivers were of limited use in this respect) and in winter had recourse to the sledge; but many outlying provinces remained extremely remote from the centre of power in the days of the Tsarist Empire. An old Russian proverb, 'God is in his heaven, and the Tsar far away', reflects the isolation of the provincial governor of those days, and there can be little wonder that many governors ruled their districts like personal fiefs. Communications even today are often difficult and expensive. The average length of haul for goods travelling by rail is considerable, and many northern and eastern settlements, remote from the main centres of population and the networks of road and rail, can be reached only by air or water.

Travel by air is very popular in the Soviet Union especially in less populated regions. (*Society for Cultural Relations with the USSR, London*)



### *The Soviet Union*

Defence of such a vast territory is complicated and difficult. The Soviet Union shares land borders with 12 other countries, and her seacoast, including the many offshore islands, is exceedingly long. High mountains to the south and east, however, have rendered defence somewhat easier; in past centuries, the only really major challenge to Russia in this area (apart from the British in India) came from the Chinese, who in the 17th century successfully checked the eastward Russian advance. For a time at the beginning of the present century, Japan menaced Russia from the east; in the past 35 years, a reinvigorated China has again asserted herself and in Soviet eyes sometimes seems to threaten both Central Asia and the Far East.

To the west, by contrast, the Soviet frontiers have little natural protection. Russian and Soviet history has been characterised by a series of major invasions from the west — by the Poles in the 17th century, the Swedes in the 18th century, Napoleon and his Grand Army in 1812, and twice by the Germans in the present century. During the German invasion of 1941–45, more than 20 million Soviet lives were lost, with a devastating effect on the Soviet labour force. This momentous fact, coupled with the need to protect the many outlying and vulnerable areas, helps explain the heavy Soviet emphasis on defence, with a huge defence budget, a large programme of national service, and much military propaganda.

On the other hand, the vast territory of the USSR has been an important strategic resource as well as a liability. This was amply demonstrated by the defence-in-depth strategy successfully used by the Russians both in 1812 and from 1941 to 1945.

Over this huge Soviet territory natural conditions vary enormously. This is important from the point of view of both natural resources and land use. About half the territory of the USSR, for example, lies within the boreal forest zone, dominated by the northern coniferous forests. This zone makes the Soviet Union the world's most important possessor of softwoods (Fig. 2). Much of this softwood, especially in the east, is poorly exploited, but in the more populated regions to the west the heavy demand for timber for paper, construction, and wood chemicals leads to overcutting in many areas. To the south of the boreal forest and the zone of mixed forest, lie the forest-steppe and steppe grasslands, which are coincidental with the rich *chernozem* or black-earth soils. The black earths are among the world's most fertile soils, and consequently the steppe grasslands are now almost entirely ploughed for grain. Other

## The Geographical Reality

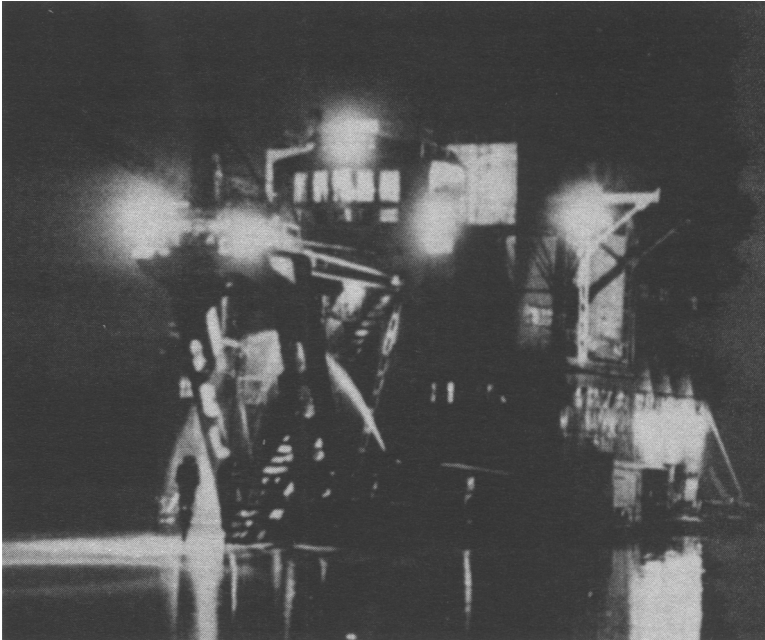


Figure 2 *The USSR: major natural regions*

resources of this type include the huge rivers, which make a substantial contribution to the power industry through the highly developed network of hydroelectric power stations, and the extensive areas of peat bog, especially in the swampy areas in the north and west of European Russia, which even today supply a certain amount of peat fuel for power generation. Even climate is a resource. The USSR is large enough to include both the far north, where no cultivation of any type is possible, and such areas as Central Asia and the Transcaucasus, where subtropical products can be cultivated, including tea in the wetter parts of the Transcaucasus and cotton under irrigation in some drier locales.

Soviet natural resources include vast mineral wealth, and the Soviet Union is able to satisfy most mineral requirements from her own resources. But many minerals are poorly located relative to the Soviet population and the major industrial regions. Remote territories in the north, on the Central Siberian Plateau, and in the mountains of the Far East are exploited for gold, lead, zinc, diamonds, nickel, tin, copper, and apatite.

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A diamond-extracting dredge on the remote Irelyakh River in the Yakutian taiga, north-eastern Siberia. (SCR)

Perhaps the most important of all Soviet natural resources are the sources of energy. Coal, oil, and natural gas account for more than 90 per cent of the fuel consumption of the Soviet Union, but she is having to turn to even remoter areas to satisfy energy needs. For coal, greater reliance is being placed on the eastern fields, such as the Kuzbass in West Siberia, because of the growing costs of mining in the Donbass in the south of the European USSR. Soviet coal reserves are huge (perhaps enough to last for several thousand years at present rates of extraction); but some of the biggest potential reserves lie in such hostile and inaccessible regions that they are unlikely to be exploited in the near future. The Soviet reserves of oil and natural gas are also extensive and make a major contribution to exports as well as to internal fuel supply. In recent years, West Siberia has become by far the most important region for the production of oil and natural gas in the USSR, accounting for almost two-thirds of oil production and almost 60 per cent of gas production by the mid-1980s. This is a remarkable achievement: oil deposits are

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mainly found under a vast swampland in the middle of the hostile West Siberian Plain, and the gas is found far to the north in the treeless tundra regions bordering the Arctic Ocean. Summer fog and savage winter wind are only two of the hazards threatening those who live and work in this bleak coastal environment.

All these examples illustrate not only the vast natural resources of the USSR but also major geographical and historical difficulties. Whereas many of the most important and promising Soviet natural resources, especially mineral resources, are to be found in the remoter north and east, the bulk of the population lives in the west and south — in European Russia and Central Asia. This discrepancy, discussed later in this chapter, poses enormous problems for communications, investment, and industrial development. Its solution is one of the most urgent tasks facing the Soviet economy today.

### TERRITORIAL EXPANSION

The present vast size of the USSR is the product of a long period of evolution. The early history of the Russians and their kinsmen, the Ukrainians and Belorussians (together known as the Eastern Slavs), is lost in the mists of antiquity. In early medieval times, the Russians achieved a degree of political unity under the highly developed Kievan State, but this later fell apart due partly to internal squabbling. The Russian peoples particularly suffered under the depredations of the Mongols in the 13th century, and thereafter Russia was split into a series of loosely connected princedoms. One of these, the princedom of Moscow, gradually assumed pre-eminence and from the 14th century began to gather the others under its rule. By the middle of the 16th century, a united Muscovy was strong enough to challenge the successors to the Mongols (the Tatars) and began to expand both southward toward the Black Sea and eastward into Siberia. Referring to this process, the eminent Russian historian, V. O. Klyuchevskii, declared colonisation to be the dominating theme of Russian history. The first Russian settlement on the Pacific, Okhotsk, was established in 1647, and in 1696 the Russians took Azov, the key to the Black Sea. During the 17th and 18th centuries, a series of struggles against the Swedes, the Poles and the Turks expanded the Russian frontier westward to embrace the Gulf of Finland, the Baltic coast, the Ukraine, Poland

### *The Soviet Union*

and the Crimea. In the 19th century, the Russians acquired Finland, subdued the peoples of the Caucasus and Central Asia, and annexed fresh territory in the Far East from China.

In the course of 600 years, Muscovy expanded many times over — from a mere few thousand square kilometres in the 14th century to more than 20 million by the time of the Bolshevik or Soviet Revolution of 1917. With some exceptions, notably Finland, Poland, and the Baltic states, all this territory came under the jurisdiction of the Soviet regime after 1917. The Baltic states were reannexed in 1940. The Soviet Union is thus almost coterminous with the pre-revolutionary Russian Empire. Although the new revolutionary government after 1917 at first denied the importance of territorial continuity with the Tsars, Soviet policies undoubtedly have been strongly influenced by this geographical and historical fact.

Territorial expansion on this scale means that the USSR today is not only a large state but also a multinational one. More than a hundred languages are spoken within her boundaries. The Russians are the linguistic and cultural majority, with 52 per cent of the total population; another 20 per cent are also Slavs. Other races include the Turkic and Iranian peoples of Central Asia, the Caucasians, the Baltic peoples, Finno-Ugrians, Mongols, and various minor groups. Almost all learn Russian, which is the major language for business and other purposes. The numerical preponderance of the Slavs is slowly diminishing, however, as birth rates among the Russians and other Slavs are significantly lower than among the peoples of Central Asia.

The administrative structure of the USSR caters to this racial diversity through its organisation as a federal state. The USSR consists of fifteen Union Republics, each of which corresponds to a major nationality. These Republics vary in size from the enormous Russian Federation, which occupies three-quarters of the entire country, to tiny Armenia. They have their own capitals, flags, official languages, and, theoretically, the right of secession. Lesser nationalities are often represented by Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republics (ASSRs) contained within the Union Republics. Finally, such entities as the Autonomous Oblast serve the national aspirations of minority groups. Each nationality is represented within the Soviet of Nationalities, one of the two houses of the Supreme Soviet (or parliament) in Moscow.

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POSITION AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

Another factor of immense significance for the USSR is its position relative to the world's great oceans and continents. The country is situated astride the vast Eurasian landmass, the largest continuous land area in the world — what Sir Halford Mackinder, the eminent Oxford geographer, called 'the world island'. This means that much of the Soviet Union is situated far from the moderating influence of the world's oceans. Moreover, the Arctic Ocean, the one extensive body of water near Soviet territory, is frozen for most of the year. There can be little wonder, then, that most of the USSR suffers an extremely harsh continental climate, characterised by long, cold winters and rather short, hot summers.

The climatic consequences of this continental position are rendered more severe by two other factors. First, the absence of high mountains along the north coast means that the country is open to incursions of cold Arctic air, especially in winter, while mountains in the south cut off warm, moist air coming from the Indian Ocean. Late frosts and early autumns are frequent hazards for Soviet agriculture. Second, the northerly position of the Soviet Union adds to the severity and length of the winter. The historic core of the Russian nation, for example, lies fairly far to the north compared with the rest of Europe. Moscow lies roughly at the latitude of Edinburgh, Leningrad at that of the Shetland Islands. Approximately nine-tenths of the country is situated closer to the North Pole than to the equator.

Temperature and precipitation are the two great variables influencing the people and their activities in the USSR. The long, hard winter is usually characterised by anticyclonic conditions that discourage the formation of clouds and the incursion of moderating depressions. Stable air conditions and clear skies produce very low temperatures that actually worsen toward the east. Moscow, for example, experiences an average January temperature of about  $-10^{\circ}\text{C}$  ( $14^{\circ}\text{F}$ ), whereas Novosibirsk in Siberia averages  $-19^{\circ}\text{C}$  ( $-2^{\circ}\text{F}$ ). Within Siberia January temperatures drop especially quickly toward the northeast; around Verkhoyansk and Oymyakon, the world's 'cold pole',  $-50^{\circ}\text{C}$  ( $-60^{\circ}\text{F}$ ) is common, and even lower temperatures have been recorded on occasions. Only the virtual absence of all air movement renders human life possible in such conditions.



## *The Soviet Union*



A Siberian road in winter. (SCR)

Spring comes quickly in the USSR, and the melting snows and thawing rivers produce the period traditionally known as *rasputitsa* (the Thaw), a time of year notorious, especially in historic times, for floods and for appalling road conditions. Floods are especially prevalent at this time of year in Siberia, where the sources of the northward-flowing rivers naturally tend to thaw before the mouths far to the north.

Although the winter in the Soviet Union is noted for its low temperatures, the summer tends to be warm. In Moscow, July temperatures of 20°C (68°F) or more are common; in Central Asia, 30°C and even 40°C (85–105°F) are frequently experienced. On the Arctic coast, on the other hand, the temperature rarely rises much above freezing, and the Arctic islands remain frozen for almost the entire year.

The consequence of temperature variations in the USSR is that the temperature range between summer and winter, and hence the