THE NORTH
Thomas Baerwald

In the New England autumn, the old graveyard in Massachusetts seems sad and bleak. The oldest of the markers are tumbled down on the eastern hillside, the flagstone cracked with names barely readable in old script. When you walk among the graves, the red maple leaves at your feet rustle in the cold twilight. From the hill, you can look out over North Weymouth to the sea. Earlier, it was a colonial settlement, but then evolved into a blue-collar suburb of Boston. The cemetery itself tells the history: Pilgrim family names now share the earth with Irish and Italian souls, and the simple slate graves of many a Congregationalist lie horizontal and flat beside elaborate and vertical Catholic angels. In the distance, where the Fore River runs into Boston Harbor, the old shipyard and industrial plants still stand; but many are empty now. The newer area of town has more prosperous neighborhoods built with Route 128 high-tech salaries. Perhaps the future lies with the younger families who have moved into the town, drawn by the quaintness of the Cape Cod houses - people with college degrees and employment in Boston. Yet tonight there is something in the autumn beauty which draws out a kind of warning: winter will be here soon, and it will be long and harsh. Meanwhile it is quiet on this lonely hillside. You can almost hear the ghosts of Pilgrims and sea captains, millwrights and farmers, all coming together on the north wind of October. ~ K. Braden

THE NORTH
Aleksei Naumov

In late May, the rivers and lakes near Cherepovets are thawing, and the air is filled with the lapping sounds of cold waves, the screams of seagulls, and the whistles of passing ships. Navigation and life are at long last returning to the Russian North. The first thing that strikes the imagination of a tourist peeking from the window of a cruiseship cabin is the solid wall of trees blocking the horizon. Yet along the rivers are still seen quite a few sturdy, two-story log houses or glimpse the gracious silhouette of a wooden church from the 17th century. Here and there are the formidable stone walls and cupolas of a monastery - outposts of orthodoxy and the Russian spirit. Are these images purely idyllic? No, for beyond the stately pines lie thickets of pulp mills and the belching blast furnaces of the city. Even a closer look at the forests themselves reveals they are far from virgin: logging has exploited their treasures and left only thinned-out stands. Navigation lasts a mere three to four months; and in September, when for Muscovites Indian Summer is at its height, the ships have already pulled in for the winter. In a few weeks, waterways will be frozen again and falling snow will hide the northern flank of Russia in a white blanket, frozen stiff and seemingly dead until the next fleeting summer.
THE NATURE OF THE NORTH

For many Russians the image of the North is that of the harsh periphery of Russia, associated with the well-known lines from Lermontov’s poem:

In the North, wilderness stands in solitude,
On the bare peaks is pine.
And in slumber lurching, and with snow
Covering her in a mantle.

All of the North is heavily forested and sparsely populated, and the severity of climate in its eastern part is quite Siberian. In contrast, the weather of the more western parts is moderated by proximity to the Baltic sea and the Atlantic, making the North one of the two early cradles of Russia and its major interface with the western world. Yet even in this more Maritime area, the harsh north climate influenced important departures from what came to be all-Russian patterns, and the standard Russian label for it is “Northwest” – a region of northern nature but western parentage.

The Northwest - Russia’s Window to Europe

During the ninth century, two cultural flows met on the Russian Plain: the northern flow, originating from the young Scandinavian and Baltic countries (made up of German merchants and Viking raiders); and the southern flow of religious influence from the Byzantine Empire. Both flows traveled along the rivers from the Neva to the Dnieper, forming the two apexes of the ancient waterway from the Baltic to Constantinople. The Varangian (Viking) culture of the north was quite different from the Greek at the other end, yet the trade route crackled like an electric current between the opposites, and the two early cradles of the future Russian state were born: the southern one in Kiev and the northern one in Novgorod. The city of Novgorod still...
proudly shows many relics of its ancient glory including one of only three surviving churches in Russia dating back to the 11th century. From the beginnings of its history, the North closely resembled Western Europe, which eventually made the region the “odd one out” with respect to the rest of Russia. This departure can be traced all the way from the republican government of medieval Novgorod to St. Petersburg's role as the cradle of Russian revolutions. Due to its advantageous position for trade with Europe, the early Russian state (Novgorod Rus) experienced the emergence of a mercantile city economy. In the cruel climate, where grains frequently had no time to ripen before the first frosts, non-farming occupations (trade and crafts) were far more important. Engaged in riverine trade with places as far afield as Persia, Novgorod was even a member of the medieval Hanseatic League of Baltic city-states. As in the Western cities of that time, artisans were divided into guilds, each concentrated in its own part of the city. The political life of the North was fully dominated by city interests, and even the huge territorial possessions of Novgorod were ruled as colonies to individual districts of the city. Whereas in the rest of Russia, the autocratic rule of the princes was already tightening and the state increasingly emulated oriental despotism, Novgorod hired its “princes” to serve as mercenaries guarding the city's wealth. Ruled by an oligarchy of rich merchants, Novgorod was, at least ostensibly, a republic, where important decisions were taken by popular vote at town meetings. When Novgorod was finally subjugated to Moscow in the 16th century, the first deed of the new rulers was the destruction of the bell that called people for town meetings. For landlocked Russia, the Northwest long remained the only window to the West. When Russia periodically opened to the West and experimented with pro-Western reforms, the North became a primary testing ground. Tsar Peter the Great staged the most significant of such social experiments when in 1712 he moved the seat of The deep initial imprint left by the period of Puritan control persevered in later years, making the early cradle region something of an odd man out with respect to the same country it helped create. The very success of these stubborn people in the cold country on stony ground was very English. In many ways, the culture and institutions of past and present New England are closer to those of Europe than to what became the American norm. Almost from the outset New England was ruled by urban leaders and urban values, and the town came to be the focus of all life. In politics, consensus and oligarchic rule by the “brahman” elite deviated sharply from later mainstream U.S. democracy that evolved in the Core region. In economy, success was based on commercial enterprises, since rocky soils gave few other options. The excellent pine forests that covered large parts of New England were soon tapped to become masts for the British royal Navy and merchant ships, with ship-building, maritime trade, fishing and other sea-bound activities soon developing in the area itself. New England’s easterly location made it closest to Europe of all British holdings in North America, and for roughly 150 years, the character of the region's people was influenced by close commercial contacts with Europe. In fact, it is the distinctive Yankee culture that makes New England (along with the South) the most recognizable of American vernacular regions, and it is habitually defined as the six smaller states in the northeastern corner of the U.S. However, it is only in culture and stubborn self-identity that New England maintains regional integrity today. Because of its metropolitan character and the influx of suburbanites from New York City, most of the state of Connecticut is clearly a part of the Core. In its economy and lifestyle, even Boston is part of Megalopolis, sharply contrasting with sparsely settled parts of Maine or Vermont. And yet, all of New England has more than history in common: this proud cradle of the nation is today largely a bypassed region, the periphery of the national Core.
government from Moscow to newly founded St. Petersburg - a city dumped into the desolate swamps, far from the center of “true” Russia but close to the Europe Peter loved.

A Region of Grievance and Resilience

The eventual relative decline of the Northwest is the typical story of an aging region that was once the foremost pioneering cradle. The Northwest dominated the Russian industrial scene first in Imperial Russia. St. Petersburg was the largest city, and, relying on its advantages as a capital, it ruled the industrial scene of the country. In the mid-19th century Petersburg was larger than Moscow by half and had twice as many industrial workers, but these unique advantages were not to last. The abolition of serfdom in 1861 triggered a swelling tide of indigenous Russian capitalism in the Core region, signaling the relative decline of St. Petersburg. By 1917 Moscow had caught up with Petersburg in numbers of industrial workers and overall population. Much more advantageously located for the domestic market, Moscow attracted self-made native Russian entrepreneurs, whereas St. Petersburg’s industry was mostly controlled by foreigners or run by the state. The revolution of 1917 took away St. Petersburg’s status when the capital was moved back to Moscow. The North ultimately lost its competition with the Core, and today Petersburg’s population is only half that of Moscow. Suspicious of its liberal traditions, Stalin routinely discriminated against Peter’s city, forcing it into acceptance of the role of just another oblast center. Leningrad was left to take comfort in the feeling of intellectual superiority to Moscow. The city still enjoys a reputation as the most cerebral city of Russia, a place of refinement and high-brow culture. The image of the soft-spoken, polite and reserved Petersburgian is the opposite of the ebullient, expressive Muscovite, and Petersburghian types were always perceived as the cream of Russian intellectuals.

A Region of Grievance and Resilience

New England, in comparison to the rest of the United States, experienced the fate of a teacher outstripped by her pupils. Several times the region dominated the nation as the focus of innovation, but even as waves of new ideas were spreading out, New England was losing its leadership role. During the first century of European settlement, New England was at the top of the national ladder, attracting more immigrants than other colonies. But with competition from more fertile regions, many began to leave their farms and join the migration west in search of better land. It was said that the only crop New England’s fields could produce were rocks and that their only export was people; and by the time of the American Revolution, the region’s leadership already was more spiritual than economic. Nevertheless, it emerged once more as the national leader during the Industrial Revolution which had blossomed beside waterfalls in the cities of New England during the 1800s. But by the middle of the same century, misfortune again took over, and the first signs of aging and inflexibility in the once young and innovative region appeared. Shipping and shipbuilding sharply declined after 1860 because the region clung too persistently to sailing ships. The larger labor pools, coal fields, and mineral deposits, and the more fully developed railroad networks of the Core and Heartland soon placed the North in a secondary position, and by the early 20th century the South had lured away its textile industry. During the post-World War II transformations that resulted in the modern, high technology- and service-oriented economy, the North again experienced early success that was not sustained. The Route-128 beltway around Boston became synonymous with the rapid expansion of computer and related industries in the 1960s, but the Silicon Valley of northern California soon surpassed Boston-area enterprises. Feeling outrun and bypassed since the 19th century, New England developed a sense of “area grievance.” While Boston natives finally acknowledged that New York’s
Although the Northwest lost its role as the economic frontrunner of the country, it preserves the advantages of accumulated industrial tradition and the propensity for technical innovation. More than a mere appendage to the Core, St. Petersburg maintains its lead in high-technology industries and continues to be home to some of the biggest and most technologically advanced factories in the country, such as Electrosila, producing super turbines for power stations, or the shipyards which turn out nuclear icebreakers. St. Petersburg draws such innovative firms with its highly educated workforce; in fact, the North was long known for superior educational standards (even medieval Novgorod claimed a literate populace who maintained their correspondence on birchbark paper).

Yet beyond the sprawl of St. Petersburg, the Northwest is essentially a bypassed region. For potential migrants, the Northwest does not have the “Long Ruble” rewards of areas farther north (high salaries paid to compensate for locations where few want to live). The Northwest has been caught between the pioneer zone of the Northwoods and industrial cities of the Core, both sides luring out its population. The countryside is almost empty and has turned into a mockup frontier of sorts for residents of Moscow and St. Petersburg who come here to fish, pick berries, canoe on the numerous rivers, and enjoy vacations in cottages cheaply purchased in emptied-out villages. The once glorious ancient cities are unnoticed by passengers of express trains between Moscow and St. Petersburg. The schedules of the line were put together to accommodate the interests of bureaucrats shuttling between the two metropolises, so the trains whiz non-stop through this abandoned land to be in either terminus by the beginning of business day.

exceptional transportation connections gave it commercial supremacy, they never made concessions on the cultural front. One of America’s most literate periodicals, The Atlantic Monthly, continues to be composed in editorial offices in Boston. Culturally, the region persistently lays claim to universalism and intellectualism of a rather European brand. Early on, it developed a sense of “civilizing” mission with respect to the rest of the nation and rendered it great service by exporting its public school system, high educational standards and thousands of teachers. Education remains the just source of regional pride, and residents of Northern states have some of the highest literacy rates in the nation. A larger percentage have attended college than in most other regions, and support has been given to a dense network of private colleges including the best known “Ivy League” schools. The foremost complex of higher educational institutions in the U.S. is along the northern side of the Charles River, where Harvard University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology sprawl in stately splendor. The higher educational levels of Northern residents are reflected in their incomes. In Massachusetts and New Hampshire, median household incomes exceed the national average by nearly 20 percent and poverty rates are well below the national average.

Yet industrial resiliency and intellectual leadership are essentially limited to southernmost New England, while its north is a sea of forest. Hillsides of trees angle down to picturesque lakes. A few cabins dot the shores, but many are empty for much of the year. Small villages center on churches and a store or two, but the sawmills, creameries, and factories around which economic life once revolved have long since closed. With the ongoing abandonment of farm land in New England, the forests seem to return from their temporary exile; while in the harsh environment of the Northwoods, they never left in the first place.
THEME 1: A DIFFICULT ENVIRONMENT - THE FIRST SIBERIA

The seal of neglect and the economic dependence on territories to the south are felt even more strongly in the eastern part of the region. In this densely forested Northwoods area winter lasts up to six months, and January temperatures sometimes reach down to -80°F. Huge, sturdy houses, often two to three stories tall, were built from pine, and to conserve warmth, served as living quarters, grain storehouse, and cattlepen all under one roof. In terms of climate and environment, the Northwoods is the doorstep of Siberia, while historically it served as the forerunner of the Siberian frontier.

Initially explored by Novgorodians interested in tapping its wealth in furs, the area was long a frontier appendage to the Northwest. During the trade fairs of old northern cities, pelts were collected from surrounding forests and even from beyond the Urals. Both Russian trappers and indigenous tribal hunters visited the fairs, and their reindeer teams and tents lent those northern cities a frontier flavor. The harsh nature of the North inevitably hardened the northern character, creating here a pioneer spirit of self-reliance and independence, qualities which were strengthened by the virtual absence of serfdom in this region. Enormous expanses of land encouraged wanderlust in northerners and bred the talent for traveling great distances. The Northwoods was the birthplace of many famous explorers who pushed the boundaries of Russia into Siberia in the late 17th and 18th centuries. Semyon Dezhnev (the first to circumnavigate Asia from the northeast), Vladimir Atlasov (who gave the Russian monarchy Kamchatka), and Erofei Khabarov (who led the first expeditions to Maritime Far East and Manchuria) all hailed from the Velikiy Ustyug area. The city of Totma, now a small district center without a single paved street, even served as the de facto headquarters of the Russian-American trading company that ruled Alaska.

THEME 1: A DIFFICULT ENVIRONMENT - THE FIRST NORTHWEST

In terms of landscape, the Northwoods are a preview of the great interior wilderness of North America. In this portion of the North region, the southern boundary (starting in northwestern Minnesota and curving to the southeast) coincides with the limits of the area dominated by conifer forests when Europeans first entered the region three centuries ago. Farther south, mixed forests fell before the lumbermen to give way to cropland, but in the North, the climate was too harsh and the soils too poor to permit viable agriculture except on scattered dairy farms. It is revealing that historically the Northwoods was termed "the Northwest," as if in anticipation of future Pacific Northwest, the culmination point of the great expansion across the interior of the continent.

The settlement of the Northwoods was long retarded until loggers swept through the Upper Great Lakes in the timber boom of the late 19th century. Lumbermen were originally dominated by French Canadians from Maine, and later were mostly Scandinavian. However like most activities in the Northwoods, the lumber industry was Yankee-owned and directed, and "Yankee" descendants became the most dominant group that settled the Upper Great Lakes states. Though the North looks split on the map, movement between New England and the Northwoods across the Canadian "bridge" was easy and traffic busy. The Grand Trunk and Soo Line railroads were built across the bridge to provide access to Chicago.

While timber resources remain one of the mainstays of economy of the Northwoods, its geologic history helped turn the area into an important resource appendage to the American Manufacturing Belt. If the massive glaciers that moved out of northern Canada left in their wake rugged, barren terrain unfit for agriculture, they also brought the mineral wealth of Canadian Shield closer to the surface. Large-scale mining is concentrated in the impressive open pits of northeastern Minnesota where iron ore is...
Yet Siberia was won not for Novgorod, but for Moscow. Novgorodian tenure in their far-flung commercial empire was always precarious. The east-west link between the Northwoods and the Northwest was assured by rivers and portages, but the eastern area remained almost unpopulated, and was eventually colonized from the south. Using the rivers that flow from the raised platform of Central Russia, colonists from the Core region literally floated downstream toward the low Arctic coastlines in a movement first foretold by fortified monasteries. The only obstacles to this colonization were along the edges of the Northwoods: in the barren granite cliffs of Karelia and the equally bare foothills of the Ural, where the indigenous populations of Finno-Ugric Karelians and Komi survive.

Thus Muscovy, the newly ascendant Core of recent centuries, not only relegated the Northwest to peripheral status, but also stole from its orbit the Northwoods which it turned into a private resource storehouse. In economic terms, the North remains a poorly integrated region: the Northwest gravitated to St. Petersburg, while the Northwoods was tied to Moscow. Since Peter's times the principal wealth of the Northwoods was in its boreal conifer forests, the taiga. The North exported timber, tar, and bauxite mining are equally important. The new industrial projects of the Soviet period (such as the blast furnaces of Cherepovets) were characterized by gargantuan “Siberian” scale and also by the wide use of prison labor. The original concentration camp of communist times was opened in 1921 on Solovetskiy Archipelago in the White Sea. Political prisoners and exiles felled the forest, built coal mines, and laid new railways in the taiga and tundra. Even in recent times, prisoners accounted for every third or fourth adult resident in the Komi Republic.

removed from the Mesabi range. But as barges loaded with iron ore or logs float south down the rivers and the Great Lakes, relatively little income returns to the North since further stages of manufacture are located outside the region.

The livelihoods of Northerners are dependent on the fast-paced economy of the Heartland and the Core in yet another way. The eyes of Americans increasingly turn toward the rugged yet beautiful natural environments of the North, especially to the resource that the North has in greatest abundance - water. The numerous lakes of the North attract hundreds of thousands of visitors. Strips of summer cottages have lined the surfaces of that state during the opening weekend of the fishing season, an especially impressive figure when one realizes that the entire state's permanent population is only 4.4 million. The North's forests complement the lakes, providing what many find is an especially restful environment.

But the gifts of the North are not for everyone. While many visitors enjoy the bracing weather and the thrill of various activities, they return to their more temperate homes remarking that the North is a marvelous place to visit, but they couldn't imagine living there. Yet a significant minority of Americans find that the same characteristics that others believe they couldn't endure are exactly what convinces them to stay. For example, a number of elderly individuals have converted their recreational homes – “the lake place up North” – into permanent residences. As a result, the band of counties dubbed by geographer Phil Gersmehl as “the Midnight Sun Belt” has experienced population growth since 1970. The snow makes daily life more difficult, but the white blanket helps many places become year-round recreational destinations, as cross-country skiing and snowmobile trails follow the same paths where hikers trek during the spring and summer and leaf-watchers amble during the fall. This belt of
The cold climate of the Northwoods allowed it to preserve the purity of its culture. As if kept in a “cold storage”, the villages in the area still hold to many customs, songs and dress of long ago. The people speak a very distinct northern dialect, immediately recognized by any Russian. The survival of the indigenous Finno-Ugric-speaking populations is another aspect of the region’s role as a refuge. Only one hundred years ago, rich collections of tales and legends which were passed orally from generation to generation were written down by scholars touring remote northern from the universities of the capitals still wander around the North in the summer, but to little avail. The last famous storyteller of northern epics died in the 1940s, and nowadays northern culture mostly survives in its museums and unique wooden church architecture. The distinctively “nordic” stubborn culture is the major unifying bond between the two parts of the North.

THEME 2: A STUBBORN CULTURE

Lying well north of the main track of nomadic invasions, the North has preserved what many believe to be pure Russian culture. Remoteness also protected the North from the periodic outbursts of administrative “initiatives” from centralizing Moscow. For example, the traditions of the Old Believer Movement (which originated in the 17th century as a rejection of reforms undertaken by the official church) are still alive in many northern villages. In the communist period, the North suffered comparatively less from militant atheistic politics, and preserved most of its distinctive stone monasteries and wooden churches.

While the impacts of remote Central Russia were weak, west European influence has left many tangible imprints on the region. A famous northern breed of livestock, the Kholmogorskiy milk cows, were bred from Holsteins. The windmills and famed lace-making of Vologda evoke Holland, and architecture in and around St. Petersburg imitate European styles. A great admirer of things European, Peter saw his urban belt of recreation and retirement counties stretches from the Maine coast through New Hampshire, Vermont, into northeastern New York, and reappears in northern Michigan, Wisconsin and Minnesota.

The North remains a place of small towns, but life in both parts of the region fully depends on what is happening beyond its southern border. Little wonder that many people who live in the northern parts of Michigan, Wisconsin, and Minnesota periodically call for secession from those states and the establishment of a new state called Superior, which is expected to serve this area in its own context rather than from the perspectives that dominate in Detroit, Milwaukee or Minneapolis-St. Paul. The latter metropolises are strictly peripheral to the Northwoods, and in many ways its regional focus is still in New England. After more than two centuries of being separated by the wedge of Canada, relatively few people in New England and the Upper Great Lakes area realize the similarities of their situations, especially obvious in the “nordic” stubbornness of the northern culture.

THEME 2: A STUBBORN CULTURE

The challenging environment of the North may help explain the emotional reserve and hardiness of the stereotypical northern character. Residents of the North have developed reputations for a reserved stoicism that verges on the extreme. The laconic speech of the “Down East” residents of Maine is widely lampooned, but discussions in other parts of the North can be equally terse. The classic “town meeting” form of government in New England is often characterized as seemingly endless discussions among townsfolk about trivial issues, but the real wonder of the North is that citizens can condense a year’s worth of discussions about how their governments should function into a single night.
creation as either the “Venice of the North” or as “New Holland.” Fyodor Dostoevsky, all of whose novels take place in the St. Petersburg of palaces and hovels, believed it to be “the most abstract and conjured up city in the world.” There is something of an air of fantasy about the place. The regular baroque layout of St. Petersburg’s center, the numerous canals, venetian palazzos, and Italian architecture, sharply contrast with the charming irregularity of Russian traditions exemplified by Moscow.

Despite this outward westernization, the North is widely held to be a refuge of “truly Russian” spirit, pilgrimage of tourists from mostly urban background who stream here to commune with the soul of “The Real Russia.” The apparent contradiction in regional identity stems from an attempt by both romantic nationalists and westernized intellectuals to reinterpret Russian history - rejecting its “oriental” Muscovite pages as deviations wrought by external forces, the Mongols. Since northern Russia was never conquered and did not know serfdom, qualities attributed to its population (business-mindedness, industriousness and self-reliance) may therefore be interpreted as “true” Russian traits.

On the other hand, one could maintain that northerners are self-centered and isolationist, with aspirations to a worldliness which may be alien to people of the Russian Core. The revealing episode is the failed attempt to reform the Orthodox Church in a manner resembling North European reformation. Undertaken almost simultaneously with the advent of Luther’s ideas in Europe, this movement was most successful in the rich monasteries of the North, believed by many to be the buttresses of orthodoxy, yet perhaps more remarkable for their successful entrepreneurial activities. From early on, the monasteries became the nuclei of settlement and economic development in the North. Even as late as the turn of the twentieth century, Solovetskiy Monastery owned a shipping company, a shipbuilding wharf, a hydroelectric plant, and a radio station to communicate with the mainland.

Although quiet evenness is a primary characteristic of many Northerners’ personalities, a certain air of superiority often underlies their attitudes. The American poet Robert Frost championed New England in his verse and represented well this regional pride. He wrote in his poem “New Hampshire”:

She's one of the two best states in the Union.  
Vermont's the other. And the two have been  
Yoke-fellows in the sap-yoke from of old  
In many Marches. And they lie like wedges,  
Thick end to thin end and thin end to thick end,  
And are a figure of the way the strong  
Of mind and the strong of arm should fit together...

The spirit of superiority that sometimes borders on smugness is energized by beliefs that Northerners have reached their present status through hard work in difficult conditions. New England’s culture in particular has been described as moralistic. On the one side, there is restraint and moral idealism (especially in the attitude to hard work); on the other, a tendency to self-righteousness and moralizing about the faults of others. Many traits of this northern culture appear to be strikingly different from the mainstream, almost un-American. In the words of George Pierson, Northerners tend to be pessimist rather than optimist; introvert, not extrovert; frugal, not wasteful. The region emphasizes the importance of words and ideas as opposed to the simple calculation of interest. Not surprisingly, in terms of politics many states of the North are the most liberal. Wisconsin and Minnesota display the greatest extent of social experimentation at voters’ request, somewhat resembling the “welfare state” philosophy of Scandinavia from where many residents came. The American belief that the best governed are least governed has been historically weak in the region. Yet another Europe-like departure from the American norm may be seen in the deep social and cultural cleavages between the elite and proletarians, especially in New England. Even when the newer immigrant
Ties between Europe and the Russian North may have had their benefits, but they were still overshadowed by an often icy military and political standoff. What was at stake was not only control over the bleak eastern shores of the Baltic in what is now modern Latvia and Estonia, but also a choice which was to define the very character of Russia. While the Core to the south was being overrun by Mongols from Asia and becoming a vassal state to these Asian invaders, a decisive battle was fought in the North when Prince Aleksandr of Novgorod defeated the Swedes on the Neva River in the 13th century. Thus the great name “Aleksandr Nevsky” came into Russian history, and his victory symbolized a choice between dependency on the Mongols (many of whom adopted Russian culture) and struggle against crusading Germanic neighbors from Europe whose purpose was to wipe out Eastern Orthodoxy. That choice of battle front was one of the decisive turning points for the subsequent course of Russian history as it saved the independence of Russian civilization and religion. Nevsky is therefore either a hero or culprit, depending on whether one’s sympathies are nativist or pro-western. Since the erection of the first fortresses guarding the approaches to Novgorod and Pskov, Russia has tried to strengthen its northwestern borders, and has succeeded to some degree – it is the only place where Russia’s boundary is the same now as 1000 years ago. No other part of the country has such a concentration of both ancient and relatively recent fortresses. Peter the Great built his city as an opening to the West, but the northwestern boundary of Russia seems not so much a wide-open window as a narrow embrasure in a fortress wall. This standoff on the western “front” continued right up to the twentieth century; the Baltic states have long played the role of a shatterbelt between Russia and Germany. Thus annexation of Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia by the USSR in 1940 may have served Stalin’s geopolitical purposes, but one can also view it as part of a cycle of revenge for Germany for defeats suffered centuries before. In fact, one year later, the pendulum swung back against Russia, as a heroic 900 day-long defense of besieged Leningrad in World War II began.

underclasses (like the Irish) produced their own strong leadership, it came to emulate the ways of the old aristocratic elite of New England, such as its intellectual and social exclusiveness. In fact the uniqueness of northern culture was born largely by exclusion. Colonies established by the Puritans were to a surprising degree free of British rule, and later New England was largely self-consciously distanced from mainstream American developments. The resulting culture is extremely stubborn in its self-perpetuation. Puritans became Yankees, and in the 19th century sections of the North became dominated by the Irish, Italians, French Canadians or Scandinavians, and yet the political attitudes of the Catholic clan of Kennedys continue the New England tradition. The exclusiveness of the North, which still in many ways faces across the ocean, was largely due to the fact that it was excluded from the frontier movement. As the settlers moved westward, they were blocked not so much by the mountains as by the activities of the French, established in Quebec since the early 1600s. One colonial leader complained that the French were “running all along by the back” of the British settlements. It was the French-Canadian fur traders, the riverborne voyageurs, who initially opened the Northwoods to Europeans and left on its map a rich splattering of French names. France ceded Quebec to England in 1763 only after a whole series of British-French conflicts. But Britain discouraged its American colonists from further incursions into the western frontierlands which would anger the indigenous tribes, and in 1763 established the Proclamation Line that ran along the western edge of New England.

When Britain, rather than France, became the major opponent, conflicts continued. During the War for Independence the North was the setting for many battles, such as the successful American taking of Fort Ticonderoga on the western front at Lake Champlain. Several decades later, the North once again framed the scene for conflict
At the same time the history of the Northwest was closely interwoven with that of the Baltics, conquered by Peter at the same time that Petersburg was founded. German elite from Baltic provinces traditionally made up the higher echelon of Imperial bureaucracy of Petersburg, and for Dostoevsky and many others the city was a “German blot on the map of Russia.” In the late 1980's Leningraders were the most avid supporters of Baltic independence, some even harboring plans of a Baltic Commonwealth including Leningrad.

Perhaps regions, as peoples, are the sums of opposites. The two contrasting faces of the North are represented by the westernized Northwest on the one hand and the ethnographic refuge of the Northwoods on the other. Blending into one in the city founded by Peter the Great, the western and oriental streams of Russia's soul come together in a dazzling complex of both culture and conflict.

**ST. PETERSBURG**

On the marshes at the mouth of the Neva River, Peter the Great was determined to build a great city in the early 1700s, and St. Petersburg was thus born despite the whims of the harsh northern environment. The fight cost Russia many casualties, as thousands of lives were lost from deprivation and disease during the construction. A Russian historian named this proud capital, boasting of its European architecture, a “paradise built on human bones.” Conceived and built as a challenge to Russia’s traditions, St. Petersburg has developed into a generator of social upheavals. Nowhere else in Russia were social gaps so wide. The accumulated “negative energy” of discontent reached critical mass in the 19th century. The city of bureaucrats and imperial triumphs was fast becoming one of the global centers of capitalism, the center of Dostoevsky’s “The Insulted and Humiliated.” The spark that ignited the discontent was liberal thought imported from the West via the city, exploding violently on the more Asiatic soil of Russia. A series of tumultuous events have thus torn St. Petersburg, beginning with Great Britain, as naval engagements occurred along the Great Lakes during the war of 1812. If all the British lands in North America had become part of the U.S., vast portions of Quebec and Ontario would have become part of the North, linking New England with the interior Northwoods; but the failure to acquire Canada left New England stranded on the coast. It is indeed ironic that the region that so fiercely opposed European control of America was also the one that saw itself as the foothold of European refinement in the young nation. The cousin-regions of Northwoods and New England thus became permanently separated by geographic fate, but still united in a uniquely northern character and history.

**BOSTON**

The paradoxes of the North are all on display in the city of Boston. The small peninsula known to the local Indian people as Shawmut was not particularly imposing in 1630 when John Winthrop and Richard Saltonstall moved there from Salem. It would have been hard to believe that by the nineteenth century, the people of Boston would regard themselves as the center of the known world. Today, Boston is still proud of the history that thrives on every street and draws in tourist dollars each summer along the “Freedom Trail.” West of Boston are more sacred spots of Americana: the green at Lexington and the bridge at Concord where the Revolutionary War was sparked. New Englanders can be a perverse folk, stubborn in their consciences and old ties: Concord holds a monument not only to the American colonials, but also to the British soldiers who fought there. And when the commander of the troops who shot down the city’s civilians during the 1770 “Boston Massacre” needed legal counsel, he found help from an unlikely source: a Boston colonial lawyer named John Adams who was to become the second President of the United States 27 years later. Boston thrived after independence as the core city of the North, nourished by maritime trade with Europe and a second “revolution” - this time an industrial one, as textile factories relying on the...
with the abortive Decembrist rebellion in 1845 and culminating in the two revolutions of 1917. To this day, the city still spawns extreme political movements from both right and left.

Peter's city retains its universal intellectual pretensions. It is rational and detachedly speculative, just as Moscow is irrational and feverishly active. The superb art created in St. Petersburg bears an imprint of the west, but much of it is a refined art for art's sake, and something of the northern cold creeps into its beauty. Fittingly enough, the period of unprecedented cultural florescence at the turn of the century was called the Silver Age, the color of cold glitter evoking the eerie light of Petersburg's famous white nights. Nostalgia for decadent arts more than fits the decaying city. A murderous climate, treacherous marshes and a lack of maintenance are slowly destroying the "northern Venice." The seal of decay marks numerous palaces, many of which are now honeycombs of congested communal apartments, and much recent renovation has only been bought by foreign investors. Many intellectuals are defecting to Moscow, and the intolerant proletariat of the "city of revolutions" may be poising itself for a new eruption. There is a sad beauty in the slow death of a once proud city, and the question remains: even if it is Leningrad that is dying, will the resurrected St. Petersburg be the same without its lost empire?

water power of New England rivers brought money into the city's economy. While the Erie Canal and superior railroad connections shifted the Core focus southward to New York City, Boston's intellectual and cultural pride was still at its peak in the nineteenth century as a series of literary figures emerged (Longfellow, Lowell, Whittier, Emerson, Thoreau, Alcott, and Hawthorne). Boston spawned many firsts in America: a college, a daily newspaper, a public school. The stuffy upper class, mainly of white Anglo-Saxon Protestant ancestry and with names like Lowell, Cabot, and Winthrop (often called "Boston Brahmins") began to believe that their city was indeed the Hub of the Universe. But by the early twentieth century, Boston started a downward slide in its economic fortune. Industry had begun to leave, while immigrant families arrived needing jobs. Boston became a city rich in ethnic neighborhoods, but with a shrinking tax base as wealthier families moved to suburbia. By the early 1970s, a busing program to integrate Boston's schools resulted in violence. Yet the city of Proper Bostonians has also been the cradle of such leaders as John Kennedy, Martin Luther King, and Malcolm X. Today, the old revolutionary zeal is alive in both the intellectual communities of Boston and the sports fans who fill Fenway Park or scream for (and at) the Bruins and Celtics. And some of the stubborn streak is still there - just try to drive or park on Boston streets. It is a city which has survived many an economic "revival" and is looking to heal the wounds of racial division. Boston may have long ago lost the battle for supremacy to New York City, but there is perhaps no other city in the U.S. which has such a strong sense of identity. The universe has been shifting around a bit, but Bostonians still know where they are.