The beautiful provincial town of Yelabuga cozily nests on the high shore of the Kama River right across from the huge industrial city of Naberezhnie Chelny. Little in the town hints of the typical dull vistas of Russia’s industrial heart just on the other side of the river; you cannot even hear the hum of the massive truck assembly lines or the screeching noise of nearby oil rigs. Surrounded by industrial giants, Yelabuga manages to preserve the charm of an old merchants’ town. Well-built squat and solid stone houses with warehouses on the ground floor hide behind secure iron-clad doors and window trellises. The vistas from the Kama shore would do nicely on the cover of a “Beauty of Russian Landscape” photo album. And yet, paradoxically, the runaway industrialism of the Heartland provides the necessary contrast that makes Yelabuga seem like such an idealized Russian scene. Little wonder that the Russian landscape painting tradition originated in the Heartland, and its founder, Ivan Shishkin, was born, lived, and discovered inspiration in Yelabuga.

The city seems a strange spot indeed, all the more so because this very Russian place and archetype of Russian landscapes ironically is located on Tatar land.

It was the end of another day, and as he left the mammoth River Rouge industrial complex, the worker mused about the immense contrasts that repeatedly confronted him. Within miles of crumbling brick factories abandoned decades ago were stylish steel structures within which computer-controlled robots assembled new vehicles while workers maintained supervisory watches. The gleaming glass-walled offices of multi-national corporations stood beside modern shopping malls and hotels, which were connected by an automated transport system of small vehicles scurrying along on elevated monorails. After a few turns, however, the worker drove down a thoroughfare that might well have been in 1970s Beirut, as numerous small shops and restaurants owned by Lebanese and other Middle Eastern immigrants crammed into storefronts that once housed German markets.

He passed through areas where small, battered houses stood amid weed-and-asphalt-covered lots and zones where mansions lay protected behind security gates and dense woods. The latter clearly spoke of the promise that so many people had realized in the area. But as the man listened to radio news reports of industrial plant closings and a new wave of random murders, he realized that for many people, the promise was past and the future looked grim.
MOTHER VOLGA: SOMETHING SACRED AND INDUSTRIAL

The region that embraces the middle section of the Volga river basin is the land which is the cornerstone of the sprawling Russian state. The Core may bind the country with invisible threads of political and intellectual control, but the Heartland cements Russia through its pivotal location and intense economic metabolism. While the Core had to build its supremacy purposefully by imposing over Russia a spidery web of radial roads, the Heartland is Russia’s predestined transportation hub. Here the mighty north-south tendency trunk of the Volga branches to the west and the east, and this tree-shaped river system provides easy outlets into Central Asia, the Caucasus, and Siberia. In the era before railways, this great inland waterway was Russia’s commercial mainstreet, and later the road of trade became the road of industry. If the Core is an emanation of Moscow as the nation’s commanding brain, the Heartland was “made” by the Volga, the muscular working river which is the country’s backbone.

For Russians, the Volga has always been much more than just a river. Its popular image was well captured by the philosopher Rozanov: “a lot of what is sacred and something industrial.” The river’s unique life-nurturing and nation-building role is comparable to that of the Nile for Egypt. For a landlocked country, the Volga was the great internal sea, which opened wide horizons to the mind and many opportunities to enterprising souls. Little wonder that the river is venerated in folk culture as “Mother Volga,” the benefactor who breast-fed early Russian trade and industry, and it was on the shores of the Volga that Muscovy made a decisive step to become Rossiya, the world’s largest state.

Actually you can read the whole history of Russia in its shifting centers of gravity from one river basin to another. Early on and before the Muscovite period, ancient “Rus” chugged cautiously to the North’s waterway which linked Viking and Byzantine lands, an imitative society out on the periphery of Europe. But with a bold step into the basins

MIDWEST: THE BACKBONE OF AMERICA

Soon after he resigned as President of General Motors to become U.S. Secretary of Defense in 1953, Charles Wilson stated, “For many years I thought what was good for our country was good for General Motors, and vice versa.” This declaration generated considerable controversy, as many Americans objected to its implicit assertion that a primary role of government was to serve the interests of private corporations. That perspective still engenders lively debate nearly a half-century later, but from another perspective, Wallace’s observation that the fates of major companies like General Motors and the nation as a whole are highly correlated still rings true. When the nation’s economy booms, when most people are working, when sales are high, General Motors has prospered. But when the American economy sours and the output of its factories sputters, many GM workers find themselves unemployed. In 1991, when the deficit of the federal government exceeded $350 billion, General Motors posted a loss of $3.5 billion, a mammoth amount for a private corporation. Just as the health of a body is related to the strength and consistency of the beating of the heart, so the economic and cultural health of the United States has been reflected in the prosperity and degeneration of the Heartland of America.

Commonly identified as part of the “Middle West,” the region may also be called “MidAmerica.” “Middle” is in many ways the key word describing the region. The middle-sized town served as the formative environment of the midwestern personality, and popular and literary images of American “Middletowns” have their prototypes in such places as Muncie and Kokomo, Indiana. The Midwest invented skyscrapers and is dominated by major metropolises today, but many of its cities have been described as lacking the cosmopolitan vigor of cities in the Core. Large corporations dominate the modern Midwestern industrial economy, but it also remains a region of healthy medium-sized farms. Henry Ford, J.D. Rockefeller, and other prominent industrialists
of the Oka and Upper Volga rivers, Muscovy (the Core) truly emerged and Russia almost severed its umbilical chord to Europe. Finally, the conquests of the Middle and Lower Volga from the 16th through late 19th centuries created a springboard for the impressive Russian thrust to the East that followed. Within a hundred years Russians jumped from the Volga shores all the way to the Pacific, and what had been the small core of Muscovy became the Russian Empire. It was here in the Heartland that Russia first emerged as an uneasy synthesis of European and Asian, Christian and Islamic worlds. The Heartland, with its largely non-Slavic population, became the model Russian melting pot.

Industrial growth in the 20th century only strengthened the region’s role as Russia’s strategic and geopolitical heart. During the Second World War the importance of the Heartland was recognized both by the Nazis, who saw control of the Volga as the key to victory, and the Soviets who chose Samara (Kuibyshev) as a reserve capital in case Moscow fell.

Swift Rapids and Quiet Eddies of Povolzhye

The traditional title for this region in Russian is Povolzhye, literally “along the Volga”, and its shape does indeed suggest the line and flow of the river itself. The major cities of the Volga, all with populations now ranging up to 1.5 million, were vital to the industrial expansion of the 1930s-1960s that solidified the character of Povolzhye as the industrial Heartland. Old cities which were once Russian fortresses, such as Kazan, Simbirsk (Ulyanovsk), Samara, Saratov, and Nizhniy Novgorod (Gorky), acquired industrial satellites on the opposite bank of the river. Thus, a string of dual cities was created and the region’s urban corridor functioned much like the main channel of the powerful Volga.

who hailed from the region started out on farms and in small-town shops. Recent history shows the vulnerability of the corporate behemoths they established, but the family businesses likely would not have grown to such prominence had it not been for the economies of scale that could be achieved in this pivotal location.

It was in the Heartland that America really arrived as a mature world of its own rather than a European transplant clinging gingerly to the Atlantic seaboard. In the minds of many people in other parts of the world, things American are Midwestern. Cultural geographer Raymond Gastil commented, “It is a commercially minded area because of its New England heritage, yet ruggedly individualistic as a heritage from the Upper South. It is here that the rationalism of nineteenth-century Yankees fused with the familism and folk beliefs of central Pennsylvania and the Upper South to produce a new industrial folk ideology. The American cult of the average, which in fact gives the average man a good deal, owes much to the Middle West. In this region reform has generally been a middle-class rather than upper- or lower-class concern. This naturally follows, for the middle class rules.” The Heartland has historically served and largely remains as the backbone of America the citadel of its values and economic might.

In the Shadow of Smokestacks

The American Heartland is first and foremost a set of industrial cities. The major urban corridor running from Buffalo, Cleveland, and Toledo along Lake Erie to Milwaukee and Chicago on Lake Michigan lines the Great Lakes, the unsurpassable natural artery of commerce. Many smaller aging industrial cities speak of the former importance of local resources.

Geographers traditionally have seen the Heartland as the western part of the “American Manufacturing Belt.” The Belt is not limited to the U.S. though. Across the transparent border, southern Ontario is a spillover of the same industrial Heartland, replete with
subsidiary plants of many U.S. corporations, while Toronto is regarded as a twin of Chicago, one of the most representative American cities. Most of the remainder of the Manufacturing Belt falls within the Core, but only in a small stretch of upstate New York do the Core and Heartland abut against each other. Though the corridor south of Lake Erie links the Atlantic Coast and the interior areas, the cities at each end of it look in opposite directions both literally and figuratively. Buffalo may be within the same state as New York City, but the latter faces across the Atlantic and considers itself the senior sibling in a family of ports that includes Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Boston, while Buffalo faces west and sees its problems and potentials mirrored in cities like Cleveland and Detroit. Finance, trade, and other forms of commercial activity may be more common in the cities of the Core, but Heartland metropolises have throbbed to industrial rhythms. The Heartland’s boundary from the west is that line beyond which the smokestacks and storage tanks of Heartland factories cast deep shadows over nearby fields, and agriculture takes a backseat to industrial enterprises.

In other directions, the boundaries of the region are the product of natural forces that led other areas to be less conducive to industry. As you head south toward the Ohio River, you move away from the areas of recent continental glaciation which scooped out the Great Lakes into more rough terrain. To the north, denser forest cover and thinner soils that reflect harsher climatic conditions and more frequent glacial erosion inhibit development. Thus the Heartland is surrounded by areas of greater natural wealth in terms of forests, minerals, and soils, but the costs of moving goods, or processing them in the more rugged terrain are higher. The Heartland has always relied on the relative ease with which it could establish and maintain superior transportation networks, and its central location among diverse neighbors to draw in raw materials for processing in its factories. As a result, the magnitude of the circulation of people and goods has been one of its most distinctive characteristics.

But the Heartland is also a place of quiet backwaters in its outer boundaries. These rural hinterlands have largely non-Slavic people which creates the melting pot image of the region. What links them to the main channel are urban centers located on the tributaries of the Volga, possessing the same diversified manufacturing base as the larger cities. These linking cities are themselves largely Russian and belong to the region’s main urban rapids. For example, heavily industrialized Izhevsk also serves as the capital of the nominally non-Slavic Udmurtian republic, and Ufa, a major petrochemical center and million-plus city, is the capital of Bashkortostan. Several smaller centers on the Volga (Cheboksary, Yoshkar-Ola and Saransk) are the capitals of other autonomous republics of the non-Russian peoples of the Middle Volga area. The compact blocks of native populations appear on the map to be facing away from major river corridors, cut off by nearly uninterrupted currents of Russian predominance. On all four sides the middle-Volga variety of native people is encircled by purely Russian territories, and this ethnic divide helps to draw the boundaries of the diverse region. The area north of the latitudinal stretch of Volga and Kama with its forests and Finno-Ugric speaking native Mary and Udmurt people strongly resembles the North. South of that line, fertile soils dominate, and the native people speak Turkic languages (with the exception of the Mordvinians). With such a diverse ethnic and economic landscape, it is no surprise that it takes a river like the Volga, the Heartland’s great inland waterway and backbone, to hold the region together.

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THEME 1: RUSSIA’S MAIN STREET

Even before the arrival of Slavic populations, the Volga region enjoyed unique advantages of location that helped it become a Main Street through the Eurasian continent. What it was to be Russia’s Heartland long ago was also the focus for commerce and kingdoms of many diverse peoples. Just as trade along the Dnieper created the early Slav state of Kievan Rus, so commerce that linked Europe with the Islamic Orient via the Volga created a cradle where many states were formed along the great river. By the 10th century both areas had adopted the religion of the southern ends of their trade routes: Christianity on the Dnieper and Islam on the Volga. The first Volga state was formed by a branch of the same people who gave their name to modern Bulgaria. These Volga Bulgars traded with Central Asia by way of Astrakhan and across the Caspian Sea or by caravan routes. After the Mongol invasions of the early Middle Ages swept through, the Kazan Khanate (a kingdom governed by a “khan” or leader) inherited this trade. The Volga (or Kazan) Tatars are thus descendents of the ancient Bulgars and other local tribes, but with a strong Mongol element. This complex genesis is mirrored in the confusion surrounding the very name “Tatars.” The Mongols used “Tatar” as a pejorative term for all conquered people, but gradually as the never numerous Mongols were dissolved among the conquered masses, they came to be called Tatars themselves. For Russians, the name “Tatar” became synonymous with “Mongol.” This original mistake has fed early and persistent Russian biases against Tatars, manifested in the saying “An uncalled-for guest is worse than a Tatar.” But in reality the Volga Tatars were vastly different from the fierce nomadic Mongols. In the words of Rozanov, “Since long ago, Asia and in particular Islamic Asia created here a home not for nomadic hordes, but for civilization; for long trading and industrial peoples, the Bulgars established a foothold here; even before the times when Russian Slavs started building the first Christian churches along the Oka and did not even dream about claiming the region for European civilization, Bulgarians listened to the teaching of Qu’ran on the shores of the Volga and Kama.”

THEME 1: MAIN STREET U.S.A.

The story of the transport supremacy of the Heartland began with opening of the famous “gangplank” route West from the Core along lake Erie. This route followed navigable streams and relatively flat terrain, but its value was not fully realized until 1825, when the state of New York completed work on the Erie Canal, the “Big Ditch” that extended for more than 360 miles. Although boats were pulled along the canal by horses, shipping times from Buffalo to New York City were reduced from twenty to eight days, and freight costs dropped to five percent of their previous levels. West of the Appalachians, the natural features favored westward movement. The chain of Great Lakes to the north and the Ohio River and its tributaries to the south were both oriented along the westward axes of expansion. Using these routes to gain access to the Mississippi River, people could move along tributaries that flowed across the Great Plains. More than two-thirds of the continent’s width thereby could be spanned, and within 30 years, American expansion rolled on to the Pacific. The Heartland’s early transportation routes therefore made it an empire-builder, a crucially important region that served as springboard for the major thrust of frontier movement.

Leaders in the rapidly settling states of Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois saw great opportunities for building canals between the streams draining into the Great Lakes and tributaries of the Ohio River. But despite the improvements the canals provided, they quickly fell into disuse when railroads arrived in the region and provided even broader, better, and cheaper service. By 1870 the Heartland had the nation’s densest rail network. Freight costs fell dramatically, and shipments reached eastern ports in three days or less. Detroit’s pivotal location along the waterways connecting Lake Huron and Lake Erie epitomized the locational advantages of waterway-based centers, but Chicago took greatest advantage of the railroad. Using land grants and investment schemes, Chicago made itself the terminus of more than a dozen lines. For nearly a century, rail shipments passing through the north central U.S. were transferred from one line to the next rolling clouds of the prairie a moving mass of steel. An irritable clank and rattle beneath a thickened blue. New automobiles and tar-paper shanties and silos like red towers, of clumsy speech and hope that is boundless.
~Sinclair Lewis, Main Street, NY, 1920
Thus never barbarian, the early Heartland became the scene of rivalry between two matched and intermingling rivals, as the Russian and Tatar states met and established emisary cities along their mutual Main Street. The Kasimov Khanate on the Oka River served as a waiting station for Moscow-backed claimants to the Kazan kingdom. In turn, the Russian city of Nizhni Novgorod was founded on the Volga in the 13th century to spearhead downstream colonization movement and has been the connecting hinge between the Core and Heartland ever since.

In the 16th century, with the formal annexation of Kazan (which had been Russia’s dependency for much of its brief history) and Astrakhan as the Caspian end, Russian merchants inherited their trade routes to the Orient. Commerce was long limited, however, to luxury items because of primitive transport technology. Flat-bottomed boats were pulled upstream by teams of the so-called burlaks, the famed Volga boatmen or barge-haulers, and the journey could take months. Economic growth on the Volga was greatly spurred only with the wide introduction of steamboats in the 1850s, when the Volga truly became the Main Street of the country at last. The eastward shift of Russia’s population helped propel the changes. By the early 19th century, Russia’s population east of the Volga had caught up with that to the west, and the Heartland could enjoy a pivotal location in the emerging all-Russian market. Grain from the Breadbasket and salt from Kazakh saltpans were carried upstream, later supplemented by far more important cotton from Central Asia, coal from Donetzk basin and oil from the Caucasus. Downstream, the main commodities were northern lumber and industrial products from the Core. Trade thrived in those prime locations where the Volga made sharp bends and several overland routes converged. Thus, Kazan is located near the point of confluence of the Volga and Kama rivers. Samara prospered on the famous loop of the Volga where it flows around the so-called Zhiguli mountains.
Innovators. In part, early development of steam-powered devices was encouraged by the flatness of the terrain, which ruled out extensive use of waterwheels.

The advent of railroads strengthened, rather than undermined, the competitive advantage of the Volga emporiums. Since the formidable width of the majestic Volga severely limited the number of bridges, a few large cities became the major transshipment points where industrial processing developed. Particularly representative of the flurry of commercial activity in Volga cities was Nizhni Novgorod, long the home to Russia's largest annual trading fair. With its huge turnover and national scope, the fair was crucial to the evolution of the all-Russian market (it was there that the gold ruble's exchange rate was determined). Nizhni Novgorod also developed as Russia's major early free labor market, beginning with the annual congregation of huge numbers of people who were needed as burlaks. According to estimates in the 18th century there were as many as four-hundred thousand burlaks hauling barges on the Volga. Recruited among the restless 'drifter types' attracted by the freedom of life on the river and strongly organized into collectively bargaining teams (artels), the fearless and loud-mouthed burlaks and hands in the Volga's ports became Russia's first true proletarians. One of them, Maxim Gorky (a pen name meaning "bitter"), for whom Nizhni Novgorod was renamed in the Soviet period, came from the very bottom of Russian society.

After years of vagabond drifting up and down the river and intense self-education, Gorky emerged as an immensely successful realist writer. His characters were self-made industrialists and steamship owners, heirs to the great Volga merchant families who also climbed from the lower rungs of the social ladder. These were the people who combined business grip with civic spirit and deep religiosity with patronage of the arts, who pursued material success but also felt a very Russian guilt about their wealth. Such contradictory pulls are typical of the Russian character, but only on the Volga could they peacefully coexist within "balanced" single personalities. On the whole, the Heartland seems the only Russian region where there was no stigma attached to "new" (as opposed to inherited, land-based) wealth.
Large-scale transport projects undertaken between the 1930s and the 1950s improved the Heartland’s position as a transport hub. Three canals, the Volga-Baltic, Volga-Don, and Volga-Moscow, finally created the unified system of waterways for all of European Russia conceived so many years earlier. Even if these improvements arrived when the role of river transport was increasingly taken over by railroads, automobiles, and pipelines, the region’s transport supremacy persisted. All major oil and gas pipelines from Siberia still cross this ancient Main Street on the way west to domestic and foreign consumers.

Marketplace Turned Workshop

The industrial ascendency of the Heartland started modestly with lumber and flour mills at transshipment points, but the energetic drive of the Volga merchants soon assured it a prominent place in technical innovation and industrial growth. It was on the Volga that oil was used in railway and ship engines for the first time in the world, or the first Russian mechanized lumberyards appeared. From modest beginnings in ship repair, Sormovo works in Nizhni Novgorod grew into Russia’s major general engineering manufacturers, ship-builder, and car-maker. But the real development spurt arrived during the Soviet industrial revolution. With the general shift of Soviet industry to the east, the Heartland found itself midway to Siberian mineral resources. During the Second World War large-scale oil production began in the Tatar and Bashkir republics, and before the later oil bonanza in West Siberia, the Heartland was the nation’s leading producer, accounting for 60 percent of oil output. Nowadays the share of the region has dwindled to 20 percent, but its leadership has already been firmly established in petrochemical and chemical industries. Location of other heavy industries was promoted by the attraction of abundant water and cheap electricity from the large hydroelectric stations on the Volga.

The Foundry Turned Rustbelt

The long-established link between the Heartland’s transport role and its economic profile was only strengthened with the 20th century arrival of the automobile industry. Building on earlier successes in wagon and carriage production, the Detroit area emerged as a production center for motor vehicles in the first decades of the century. Henry Ford ensured his company leadership in the nascent industry by using mass-production techniques to rapidly assemble large numbers of inexpensive yet dependable cars. As Detroit’s two largest firms, General Motors and Ford, rapidly expanded, the Heartland became the preeminent motor vehicle manufacturing center in the world. The two giant companies sped the establishment of related industrial operations throughout the Heartland as they strove to control nearly all aspects from iron mining and steel production to the transportation of finished cars to dealers. The explosive growth of automobile sales throughout the first half of the century sent repeated waves of automobile-related manufacturing expansion across the Heartland. Such industries as rubber in Akron and glass in Toledo provided products used by other industries, and manufacturing diversified in the region.

By 1950 almost one third of the value added in U.S. manufacturing came from the Heartland. But by 1986, that share dropped to less than one quarter, as many relative advantages of the Heartland faded. To a great extent, Heartland industries fell victim to their earlier success. Many of the massive investments in facilities and equipment made in earlier decades became obsolete. Many industries also seemed to lose the determination that fueled their earlier ascendancy. Both Ford and General Motors, which had pioneered automobile manufacturing, were known for their conservatism by the 1970s, and only when foreign autoubuilders severely eroded their markets did they respond with new designs and operating procedures. The assembly lines constructed during World War II were becoming obsolete, and the skilled labor forces of Heartland cities became increasingly expensive and superfluous as many operations were
As if oil alone were not enough, other transport-related industry was drawn into the region, continuing the symbolic link between the Heartland’s main street role and its industrial profile. The Heartland is the dominant automobile-manufacturer in Russia. The three biggest automobile producers in the country formed “auto triangle” within the region. Its three apexes were in Naberezhnie Chelny (where the KAMAZ truck factory is located), Togliatty (the VAZ factory mass-produced the Soviet “people’s car” -Zhiguli) and in Nizhni Novgorod (GAZ factory turned out cars and trucks). KAMAZ and VAZ were conceived on a grand scale as breakthrough projects in the Soviet attempt to overcome the backwardness of the auto industry, and they are the worlds two largest individual auto factories. Togliatty and Naberezhnie Chelny may well be the world’s largest company towns as well, both growing from scratch in the 1960s to exceed a half-million by 1990. In the smaller towns, these automobile giants spawned a whole panoply of supporting industries turning out anything from car electronics to tires to draperies. Faithful to its romance with the transport industry, the Heartland is also the major focus of the nation’s civil and military aviation industry. In the turbulent world of post-Soviet ethnic resurgence, control of the major industrial and transport assets of the Heartland has become a trump card in the hands of new nationalist movements. Tatarstan alone is in a position to block the supplies of practically all Russian oil and natural gas, and to cut the trans-Siberian and Volga routes. Such threats are a sharp reminder that the great river of Russia is not so Russian after all, but the melting pot of many nationalities.

THEME 2: THE ETHNIC SALAD BOWL

Intense economic metabolism aside, the Heartland’s pivotal location also set in motion some intricate ethnic chemistry: An insight into its peculiarly Russian “melting pot” is provided by the history of the Tatars, who experienced a longer period and greater degree of Russian political control, cultural influence and modernization than any automated and as new factories were built in places where labor costs were far lower. The massive blast furnaces that symbolized the power of the steel industry became obsolete as new technologies reduced the demand for heavier metals or offered new, smaller scale ways of producing them. Between 1977 and 1986, the number of industrial jobs in the region declined by nearly 20 percent. The precipitous drop in manufacturing left the Manufacturing Belt reeling, inspiring the new and somewhat pejorative name “Rustbelt” for the region. Still, even as smokestacks retreat into memories, industrial decline is countered somewhat by the construction of new plants in new Heartland locations where the most advanced technology reestablishes the region’s competitiveness. While no longer the dominant industrial concentration within the United States, the Heartland remains an area where diversified manufacturing operates at scales evident in few other places on the globe.

THEME 2: THE ETHNIC SALAD BOWL

The region was not only a crucible of American industrialism, but also a melting pot for the evolving mainstream culture. The roots of the region’s remarkable population diversity were established quite early, soon after American independence, when a series of forced Native American land cessions were converted into the sale of individual tracts to new settlers. Eager migrants converged on these easily cultivateable flat lands from all directions. Immigrants from New England and New York who used the Erie route generally flocked to the northern parts of the Heartland. Those coming from Pennsylvania and states farther south traversed the mountain passes that conveyed them into the Ohio River system along the Heartland’s southern margin. The arrival of many southerners helped create a representative cross-section of “old stock” Americans. The linguistic blending of these diverse people produced a dialect that many believe provides the norm of standard American speech.

As if oil alone were not enough, other transport-related industry was drawn into the region, continuing the symbolic link between the Heartland’s main street role and its industrial profile. The Heartland is the dominant automobile-manufacturer in Russia. The three biggest automobile producers in the country formed “auto triangle” within the region. Its three apexes were in Naberezhnie Chelny (where the KAMAZ truck factory is located), Togliatty (the VAZ factory mass-produced the Soviet “people’s car” -Zhiguli) and in Nizhni Novgorod (GAZ factory turned out cars and trucks). KAMAZ and VAZ were conceived on a grand scale as breakthrough projects in the Soviet attempt to overcome the backwardness of the auto industry, and they are the worlds two largest individual auto factories. Togliatty and Naberezhnie Chelny may well be the world’s largest company towns as well, both growing from scratch in the 1960s to exceed a half-million by 1990. In the smaller towns, these automobile giants spawned a whole panoply of supporting industries turning out anything from car electronics to tires to draperies. Faithful to its romance with the transport industry, the Heartland is also the major focus of the nation’s civil and military aviation industry. In the turbulent world of post-Soviet ethnic resurgence, control of the major industrial and transport assets of the Heartland has become a trump card in the hands of new nationalist movements. Tatarstan alone is in a position to block the supplies of practically all Russian oil and natural gas, and to cut the trans-Siberian and Volga routes. Such threats are a sharp reminder that the great river of Russia is not so Russian after all, but the melting pot of many nationalities.

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Intense economic metabolism aside, the Heartland’s pivotal location also set in motion some intricate ethnic chemistry: An insight into its peculiarly Russian “melting pot” is provided by the history of the Tatars, who experienced a longer period and greater degree of Russian political control, cultural influence and modernization than any
other Islamic people in Russia, and yet appear today to be far from Russified, possessing a thriving ethnic culture and strong nationalism. With 5.5 million people, the Tarats are the Russian federation's largest minority.

As diverse elements mixed in the homogenizing environment of the Heartland, the prototypical Middle Western character was formed, of which Alan Parker asked, “Is it too fanciful to see in its upper reaches the drives, acuity, shrewdness, and hardness of the Yankee combined with the animal energy, competence and sturdiness of the German peasant, and among its common people an emotionality, tempered by a sophistication about human suffering, that must have belonged to a people that grew up among the moral and human ambiguities of southern slavery?” Finally, Pennsylvanian Quakers added to the mix, and their steadfastness and careful behavior were traits which became a hallmark of Midwestern business.

Following the “old stock” population were Italian, Irish, and East European immigrants, who arrived in the Heartland in greater numbers than in either the North or the South. This new wave first appeared in the latter decades of the 1800s, when new opportunities increasingly concentrated in the region’s cities. The industrial jobs seen as less desirable by already established Americans were filled willingly by newer immigrants. It was during this time that Chicago earned its reputation as the second most populous Polish city in the world, and Cleveland’s West Side became an amalgam of eastern European nationalities as complex and diverse as the lands between the Baltic and Adriatic seas. As industrial development continued, employment opportunities in Heartland cities attracted Americans from the south. Many blacks forsook the economic bonds that left them shackled to the rural south for decades and moved to Heartland industrial centers, with major movements occurring during both world wars and continuing into the 1960s.

This mixture of peoples seemingly made the Heartland the nation’s preeminent melting pot. However, the coalescence of significant numbers of so many types of people from so many different places was highly uneven. Groups more similar to the white, English-speaking, economically successful citizens that came to symbolize American culture tended to assimilate themselves into that culture, readily discarding their old practices...
in order to conform to the norm. People who were more distinctively different because of their skin colors, accents, or ways of life were less likely to be accepted, however, and discriminatory practices and sometimes violence accompanied their settlement in the region. More so than in any other part of the nation, wealthier and middle-class residents of Heartland cities responded to growing diversity through rigid spatial segregation of communities. In record numbers they moved to suburban locations where houses and lawns were larger, schools were funded amply to provide better education, and fewer people who were different were encountered. Countless old neighborhoods were allowed to deteriorate, turning many locales into readily recognizable symbols of inner city decay and racial tension. Heartland commentators once pointed with pride to the emergence of a hybrid American culture created in the “melting pot,” believing that the best characteristics of those groups blended together in a distinctive new entity. As the end of the 20th Century approached, however, observers seeking to cast reality in the best possible light came to talk of a demographic “salad bowl” within which different people maintained their own distinct identities while working together.

In addition to being the place where a composite American identity was being forged, however incompletely, the Heartland was instrumental in working out quite a few valuable elements of the American cultural heritage. Although the region acquired wealth rapidly, and life focused on economic enterprise, its social character did not degenerate into the individualistic pursuit of profit at any price. The foundations that preserved the essential liberalism of that society were education and justice. The respect for practical education was deeply imprinted in the psyche of major groups that settled the region, especially the Puritans and Quakers. Since the mid-1800s, a proliferation of land grant universities set high educational standards and produced armies of skilled public servants. Southern individualism was balanced by the Puritan belief that freedom in society includes the willing acceptance of an orderly discipline.
This freedom was derived and also curbed by laws, which emerged as a real foundation of American society.

Building on the earlier frontier spirit of mutual aid, the region helped shape a very American answer to the dilemma of how to reconcile individual rights with collective responsibilities. Alan Parker thought that this response was best illustrated by the phenomenon of individualistic friendliness. Individualistic in their businesses, Midwesterners “were generous to neighbors and combined readily in community projects. Clubs, churches, circles, lodges, societies flourished in the Midwest soil the more so because their members felt themselves to be free and equal individuals. And certainly there were some who found in such association the means to respect and status that seemed so hard to achieve in a near-egalitarian society.” The blunt character of intellectual and political life in the Middle West was the reverse side of this venerable egalitarianism. Seeing themselves as pragmatic doers, Heartland residents often have taken what they like to think is a no-nonsense, business-like attitude to the world. Such an approach often has appeared to others as overly simplistic. The region’s political culture is strongly job-oriented, in contrast with more liberal, issue-oriented politics in the North, or the Core.

If Midwestern beliefs and values are not universally accepted in the United States today, they remain close to the image that many people in other nations have of America as a whole. This foreign association may result from the fact that in the period when America was rising spectacularly to world dominance, the Midwest was America. The region largely embodies the great period of industrial revolution, booming growth, swelling immigration, and socio-economic change roughly from the Civil War through the 1930s. Those were self-confident times when fortunes accumulated with regularity, and the values of capitalism and American democracy were hardly ever questioned. Not coincidentally, the period was an era of Republican Party dominance. Over a 44-year period from 1860 to 1913, six of nine U.S. presidents hailed from Ohio, and one

The Volga has not become a Russian river in the narrow ethnic sense, but more in a spiritual sense, the unifier of Rossiya and its culture which transcends narrow ethnic limits. Even though the Heartland opened the history of Russian expansionism, it is far more representative of the expansiveness of the Russian character, of its ability to adapt to other cultures and to peacefully coexist with them. Among the people of the Volga, the eternal contradictions of the Russian soul were tempered by traditions of learning and pragmatism. The educational feats of the Tatars reflect the belief of Volga peoples in practical learning as a vehicle for individual achievement. It was in the Heartland that the first Russian provincial university was opened in 1804, and it enjoyed far wider than provincial fame, especially in sciences. Quite in contrast to the refined intellectuals of the capitals, the Volga peoples were distrustful of education for education’s sake. These were self-made practical people, whose careers were due not to aristocratic privilege, but to abilities. The most action-oriented (and successful) of all Russian social democrats, Vladimir Lenin, obtained at Kazan university the practical profession of a lawyer. Another lawyer who came from Simbirsk was Kerensky - the prime minister of Russia’s short-lived democratic republic in 1917. And appropriately enough, Lenin’s and Kerensky’s fathers were both educators. Spirituality and pragmatism, Lenin and Kerensky, solid merchants and unruly burlaks - many mutually opposite Russian traits and types were fostered by and peacefully coexisted on the Volga. The river had room for both individualism and collectivism, provoking in such thinkers as Rozanov a purely Russian answer to universal dilemma of individual vs collective - the notion of sobornost' (togetherness), where balance is reached on a moral basis.

In the words of Rozanov, the Volga “…moved everything ahead, moved somehow nobly, without imperiousness or coercion.” The Heartland is indeed the embodiment of Russia “on the move.” The heyday of the region was in the great period of economic change and cultural florescence in Russia, roughly between 1861 and 1917, the
of the other three came from the Heartland portion of upstate New York. As the relative economic stature of the region has slipped in recent years, however, so has its political prominence. Since 1930, the only Heartland residents to fill one of the nation’s top two positions were Gerald Ford and Dan Quayle.

times of fast-growing and self-confident capitalistic Russia. Will the region, long overshadowed by Moscow’s omnipotence, regain its prominence in the new times of change? It may be too early to tell, but Nizhnii Novgorod’s leadership in market-oriented economic reforms may be a harbinger of the region’s revival as Russia’s inner heart.