THE MIDDLE VOLGA—AN EMERGING FOCAL REGION IN THE SOVIET UNION

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RECENT SPECTACULAR DEVELOPMENTS in Siberia should not eclipse the fact that the bulk of the Soviet population and industry remains west of the Urals. Within European Russia itself no region has its star more clearly in the ascendant today than the Middle Volga, which finds itself possessed of great power resources and good communications, close to the population centre of the rapidly developing Soviet Union (Fig. 1). In contrast to the typical industrial region further east, springing up overnight on practically virgin land, the “new” Middle Volga is being superimposed upon a traditional economy and a long succession of human cultures. Thus a brief regional biography is a desirable preliminary to the main purpose of this paper, which is to attempt a portrait and geographical assessment of the region as it is beginning to play an exceptionally important part in the fortunes of the Soviet Union.

*Its extent and physical character.*—The core of the region lies about the remarkable loop of the river, centred on the city of Kuybyshev. At this point an east–west axis of population straddling the loop is bisected at right angles by another, following the main course of the river from Kazan’ to Saratov. The boundaries of the region are necessarily vague, but a radius of 200 miles or so from Kuybyshev would comprehend it adequately; this is indicated by the blank circle round Kuybyshev in Figure 1.

Physically the Middle Volga is Russia in microcosm—a great river weaving south through the latitudinal warp of the “natural zones,” emerging from podzolic forests below Kazan’ and descending into semi-desert scrub and *salonetz* soils beyond Saratov. There are extensive areas of tolerably good soils, but their usefulness over much of the region has been vitiated by the deficiency and unreliability of the rainfall and the dessicating *sukhovei* which blows out from the deserts of Central Asia.

*Fig. 1. The Middle Volga in its national context*
Nowhere does the crystalline bedrock come to the surface and the overlying sedimentary formations have proved exceptionally favourable to the occurrence of petroleum, though much less suitable for hydro-electric construction projects. The relief is generally subdued, the chief feature being the asymmetrical valley typical of South Russia, the high right bank of the river forming the edge of the Volga upland, a dissected plateau whose ridges may rise to about 1000 feet above sea level (Fig. 2).

![Map of the Middle Volga](image)

*Fig. 2. The Middle Volga in its regional context. Note: The Stalingrad reservoir will be full in 1960–61.*

The river itself is in the process of being tamed and put to work. Its natural regime is highly irregular, with flood levels in April and May followed by quickly subsiding levels and eventually four or five months' paralysis by ice. As the “Great Volga Scheme” gets under way, and the river becomes a string of lakes (Fig. 2), floods, soil erosion and navigation snags are being mitigated and electricity and irrigation water provided. The spreading water-body in the middle reaches of the river, leading to more intensive use of the water as well as increased evaporation, is
accelerating the fall in the water level of the Lower Volga and the Caspian Sea. The decline in the fortunes of the latter region seems to be inversely proportional to the rise of those of the Middle Volga, but the reasons for this decline are manifold and profound and the trend could only be partially arrested even by the projected diversion into the Volga basin of water at present flowing to the Arctic.

**Early settlement.**—For many Russians the Volga is “Little Mother” (*matrushka*), a symbol linked with nationality and personified in songs and tales. And yet, in what has been called the “ethnological museum” of the Middle Volga (today more aptly called a melting-pot) the Russians are comparative newcomers. From the ninth to the twelfth centuries, when the first seeds of Russian nationality were germinating about Kiev and Novgorod, the Middle Volga lands were settled by the Bulgars, farmers and traders, speaking a Turkish language and practising Islam. They had subdued several Finnish-speaking tribes and all were in turn overwhelmed in the early thirteenth century by the Tatars, who remained in control of the Middle Volga region for over three centuries, adopting the language, religion and commercial practices of the Bulgar civilization. Finally the Russians, under the new leadership of Moscow and Ivan the Terrible, gained control of the Middle Volga during the second half of the sixteenth century, established scattered farming colonies and towns such as Samara (Kuybyshev) and Saratov and attempted to russify their subject peoples. At this time also private Russian merchant adventuring, associated with such names as Stroganov and Yermak, began to penetrate to the Urals and deep into Siberia. Asian invaders like the Mongol Kalmucks continued to batter on the Volga settlements and there were serious revolts directed against the central government under Razin and Pugachov, in which Russian serfs and the Moslem peoples frequently made common cause. Russian political control was finally made effective towards the end of the eighteenth century when, under Catherine the Great, the Turks were driven from the Crimea, thus cutting the links between the Volga Moslems and Constantinople, and colonists from Germany and other parts of Central Europe were planted on the right bank of the Volga. The subsequent Russian incorporation of Central Asia and Caucasus created a new position for the Middle Volga as part of the inner territories of the Russian Empire.

**The scene towards the end of the nineteenth century.**—In spite of its undoubted importance as a traffic artery, the Volga south of Kazan was still very much a “frontier” at the turn of the century. The right and left banks were differentiated as markedly in their cultural landscape as in their physical. On the right bank, serfdom had been much more highly developed, and after its abolition in 1861 most of the emancipated peasants remained there under the *mir* (village community) system, so that land-hunger and overpopulation quickly became acute. The three-field system, regular annual migrations in search of supplementary work and an existence on the brink of famine made up the pattern of rural life. But the left bank was still “Siberia” with all that that implied in terms of lack of social cohesion, economic development and communications. It had been to some extent a refuge for “Cossacks” and other fugitives who were beginning to develop a more specialized and commercialized farming.

Travellers from Western Europe characterized the Volga lands in such terms as “the *ultima thule* of the civilized world,” or “the link between ancient and modern times.” The Russian villages were contrasted unfavourably with those of the German colonists, and even of the Chuvash and Tatar people with regard to neatness and prosperity, and the towns were described, for instance, as having “a dead-alive look” or as being “in a condition of suspended animation.”

There is little doubt, however, that the function of the region as a meeting-place for merchandise from Europe and Asia was enhanced greatly during the nineteenth century with the incorporation of Turkestan and Caucasus into the Empire. The great fair at Nizhni Novgorod (Gor’kyi), where Sheffield steel goods jostled Persian carpets and Chinese tea, was only the most spectacular and highly concentrated of these markets; the Tatar merchants of Kazan had built up a long tradition of trade with their Moslem kinmen of Central Asia, and Samara was also belatedly beginning
to realize its strategic location. However, apart from the river itself, transport provision was primitive. It was not until the turn of the century that the Trans-Siberian Railway was being pushed eastwards and the Turkestan Railway south-eastwards, to illuminate and endow with new meaning the Middle Volga’s geographical assets in the national context. Among the more important immediate consequences of this development were the increasing geographical division of labour in Russian Asia (especially the export of cotton from Turkestan, with the corollary of greatly increased food imports) and the increasing migration of peasants from the Volga region along the newly blazed trail to the east.

The industrial revolution, which had come, belatedly, to the Moscow region and the Ukraine during the latter part of the nineteenth century, had passed the Middle Volga by. Only about 5 per cent. of the population was employed in industry, and cottage or craft (khustarni) industries were much more important than factories (zarudny and fabriki). Of the latter, in 1897, over three-quarters were directly based on agricultural raw material, such as flour milling, distilling, tanning and soap making. In terms of value Saratov, a centre for the Volga German community, was considerably more important than either Samara or Kazan. The more prominent of the non-agricultural industries were shipbuilding, cement and timber.

An exhaustive study of the Volga basin on the eve of the Bolshevik Revolution concluded that as it was “mainly an agricultural district, the question of the provision of power is not important ... the use of the rivers for water-power is entirely precluded, not only by the weakness of the current owing to the slight fall in level, but also by ice in winter and drought in summer. Any scheme for the provision of electrical power for industrial use would, therefore, apparently be dependent on steam for its generating force.” Apart from some asphalt and shale near Syzran’, no minerals, metals or industrial fuel of any kind were obtained from the Middle Volga, and at the time when Baku was the world’s most productive oilfield there was no inkling of the existence of the even greater store of oil which extended north-eastwards from the middle reaches of the river.

On the eve of the Second World War.—During the twenty years following the Revolution the Middle Volga was something of a Cinderella among the Soviet regions. This is not to suggest that substantial growth did not take place, but that, in the context of the headlong economic development of the period, the Middle Volga lagged behind the other regions with comparable resources and locational advantages, such as the Moscow region, the Eastern Ukraine, the Urals and the new industrial regions of Siberia. The Middle Volga lands were visited by severe famines in the early nineteen-twenties and by 1926 the industries were just as solidly based on agriculture as they had been in the previous century. It was only in the mid-thirties that foundations were laid for metal-using industries, and even then the emphasis was primarily upon agricultural machinery.

On the completion of the Second Five Year Plan (1937) the Middle Volga still had virtually no power supply of its own. Although the Volga-Ural oil-bearing region had been discovered and was being exploited at scattered points, it only contributed 3 per cent. of the Soviet output and there was almost no refining in the area. Moreover, no work had yet been started on the development of hydro-electric power from the middle reaches of the Volga. Communications were still very inadequate. The Moscow–Volga canal was being completed, but the vital water connection with the Don, which would bring the needed access to coal and steel, had not begun to be cut. The few railways ran west-east, so that during the considerable part of the year when the river was frozen or the water level too low for navigation the cities along the Middle Volga were hardly accessible to each other. However, as the forebodings of war grew in Central Europe, there was a sudden acceleration in the Soviet policy of moving industry and population to the east which, inter alia, inaugurated for the Middle Volga the modern phase of development, in which the region has increasingly been “found” in a geographical sense and its relative importance in the Soviet Union as a whole greatly enhanced.
The present transformation.—Only in the last three or four years has it become abundantly and suddenly clear that the character of the Middle Volga and its role in the national scheme have been drastically changed. Although several regions underwent such a metamorphosis during the first decades of Soviet rule, the experience of the Middle Volga in the last two is virtually unique. The rate of economic development, which seems to have been accelerating ever since the eve of the late war, shows no sign of slowing down in the foreseeable future. The region has in fact only begun to emerge from the transitional stage between its pre-war character as a largely agrarian backwater, with a serious shortage of industrial power, and its new function as an industrial focus and a national source of power.

Petroleum.—There is little doubt that the Middle Volga is now the greatest powerhouse in the Soviet Union and that this is, above all, what has breathed new life into the region. Petroleum takes pride of place. The war, which highlighted both the approaching exhaustion and the strategic vulnerability of the Baku field, lent urgency to the need for exploiting the known Volga-Ural province. Much exploratory drilling was done during the forties, but by 1950 the Volga-Ural region still contributed little more than a quarter of the Soviet oil. Since then its rise has been phenomenal. By 1956 it accounted for two-thirds of Soviet crude oil output and half the refining capacity, while absolute production figures had risen five-fold since 1950. Moreover, it is now calculated that this region contains over four-fifths of the oil reserves of the U.S.S.R., the same proportion as was credited to the Caucasus-Caspian fields in 1930. These basic facts are all the more significant since recent policy pronouncements make it clear that the place of oil in the Soviet economy is to be greatly enlarged in the future. Up to the present coal has dominated the Soviet fuel supply situation to the extent of about two-thirds, while oil has even declined slightly in relative importance over the past twenty years. However, the announced aim is to reverse this proportion by 1972, when oil (with gas) is to supply over two-thirds of the Soviet fuel demands.

Within the Volga-Ural region itself, most of the prolific wells and fastest growth rates are now found in the Middle Volga rather than the Ural orbit, although the first producing centres in the thirties were situated on the Ural side. The most remarkable record is being set by the Tatar fields (mainly around Al'met'yevsk) where the daily output has already far surpassed that of Baku, even though production in 1950 was insignificant. Tatar oil is the cheapest in the country and production is apparently being held back because of the lag in pipeline and refinery provision. A very productive group of oil wells is found astride the Great Volga bend near Kuybyshev and Syzran, while the chief focus for gas exploitation is Saratov, whence a pipeline was laid to Moscow as early as 1946. In conclusion, the future for Volga oil (including gas) seems bright when the cheap and plentiful supplies are considered in relation to the long-term priority now accorded to oil in the Soviet economic plans, and to the region's high degree of accessibility to the consuming centres. Already Volga oil is being distributed by pipeline, waterway and railway throughout the industrial centres of European Russia, and a 2000 mile pipeline, already more than half built, is to link the oilfields with the rapidly developing Yenisey-Angara-Baykal industrial region. The dearth of proven oilfields in Siberia so far lends special national significance to this transcontinental connection. The turning of the tables vis-à-vis the Caucasian oilfields and the unbalance between production and refining capacity is highlighted by the fact that the Saratov-Astrakhan pipeline, originally used to carry Baku petroleum products northwards, now takes crude oil from the Volga fields south to the Caspian refineries.

The Volga “cascade.”—Although oil is providing the chief stimulus for the present boom on the Middle Volga, and will probably continue to do so for at least a generation, there is little doubt that the “Great Volga scheme,” now under way, will prove in the long run to be the most solid and lasting foundation for regional development. Elaborate plans for a series of hydro-electric sites, which would also conserve water for irrigation, iron out the wasteful and dangerous seasonal differences in water level,
arrest soil erosion and improve navigation, were made in the early thirties. Three relatively small stations, at Ivanovo, Uglic and Rybinsk (Shcherbakov), in the river’s upper reaches, had just begun to operate before the German invasion. It was not until 1954 that the first-fruits of the resumed post-war development appeared with the opening of the station above Perm’ (Molotov) on the Kama, soon to be followed by the one above Gor’kiy at Gorodets and finally by the giant Kuybyshev dam at Zhigulevsk (Fig. 2). The final generating unit was installed at this latter station in 1958, bringing its capacity up to over two million kilowatts, or considerably more than the rest of the installed hydro-electric capacity of the entire Volga basin. The erection of this dam (700 metres long, 80 metres high) in a region of sands and clays was a major achievement, and both the capacity of the station and the reservoir created behind it are at least as large as any in the world. It is already transmitting power to Moscow and to the Urals, and constitutes an important contribution to the unified grid system for European Russia (including the Urals), which is due to be completed in the next few years. The size of the Kuybyshev undertaking is indicated by the fact that it alone accounted for one-fifth of the total Soviet hydro-electric capacity in 1957. In 1960, when the Stalingrad station is expected to be working to capacity, one-third of the Soviet hydro-electric capacity will be concentrated in those two points on the Volga. In fact the Stalingrad station, whose reservoir will eventually back up as far as Balakovo, and which began producing electricity in 1958, will apparently have an even greater capacity than that of Kuybyshev. Nor will this mark the completion of the “Volga scheme.” Dams are now being constructed at Balakovo, above Saratov and at Votkinsk on the Kama (projected capacity about one million kilowatts each), and at some future date it is planned to build dams at Cheboksary and Yelabuga (at the twin northern limits of the present Kuybyshev reservoir). If this total plan is completed (and there have been major changes of policy in the past on the location and feasibility of particular dams?), there will be a virtually continuous string of lakes along the Volga from the north of Moscow to Stalingrad and on the Kama south of Solikamsk. In this event hydro-electric capacity in the Volga basin would roughly equal the U.S.S.R. total for 1957 and at least a third would originate in the Middle Volga region. However, in contrast to the case of oil, in which the Volga-Ural region can be expected to increase its share of the national output, the Volga cannot but decline in the regional hydro-electric hierarchy when such provinces as the Angara-Yenisey become properly harnessed.

The industrial revolution.—The industrial personality of the region is being drastically changed in response to the rapid transition from poverty to affluence in its supplies of fuel. The burden under which its industrial development recently laboured is underlined by the fact that, as late as 1955, coal comprised over half of the total fuel used in the Middle and Lower Volga. Moreover, at least half of this wholly imported coal was apparently hauled from the Kuznetsk basin or Karaganda. The new power developments have given birth to several distinct groups of manufacturing industry. First there were the vital precursors, such as cement, ferro-concrete, hydro-turbines, excavators and petroleum-boring and pumping equipment, and the region is becoming more and more important as a supplier of these things for projects in other parts of the Union, especially east of the Urals. There followed the growth of a wide range of industrial derivatives from the massive output of crude oil, such as synthetic rubber and other fibres, fertilizers and alcohol. Finally, the provision of plentiful power in itself has attracted a variety of industries not associated with native Volga enterprises or raw materials, especially in the engineering group (from machine tools to automobiles). Although the lack of coal will discourage the establishment of a steel industry, non-ferrous metal-working, especially aluminium, is beginning to be attracted by the cheap hydro-electric power. The greater Kuybyshev area has proved to be the most powerful magnet for industry—in fact the Kuybyshev oblast has shown the fastest rate of industrial growth in the nation since 1940 (Fig. 3).

Farming.—The older industries devoted to processing the products of farming and providing the machinery for their exploitation are continuing to thrive because of the
steady agricultural expansion of the present decade. Though the scale of farming operations has been enlarged through mechanization, extension of the sown area and improved productivity, the dichotomy between the right and left bank territories substantially remains. The Trans-Volga (left bank) lands, generally south of Kuybyshev, form the western limits of the zone of “virgin and long-idle lands,” which have experienced a massive expansion of wheat growing in recent years and which are becoming increasingly significant as a means of freeing suitable parts of the Ukraine and the North Caucasus for the change-over to a “corn-belt” economy. Even before the inauguration of the “virgin lands scheme” Saratov oblast was an important pioneer in the growing of durum wheat, now recognized as having a vital role in marginal dry-farming areas. In 1951 this oblast grew as much durum wheat as the combined oblasts of northern Kazakhstan, and the majority of its wheat was already

Fig. 3. Growth of industry in the Soviet Union 1940–56. Note: The oblast units are used in the R.S.F.S.R. but elsewhere the S.S.R. figures have been used in the absence of comparable oblast data

of that variety. This region has been the most prominent of the Trans-Volga lands in the expansion of the sown area in recent years. Wheat remains easily the chief product, but extensive ranching (sheep, chiefly for skins and wool, and beef cattle) is also being developed. In the northern and western regions of the Middle Volga, longer farmed and better watered, sugar beet has recently been introduced, while pigs and dairy cattle are multiplying through an intensification of emphasis upon fodder crops. Finally it may be noted that the new reservoirs, though inevitably flooding much former alluvial garden land, are greatly increasing the production of hay for the dairy industry, are being stocked with fish and are storing irrigation supplies. The stage is now set for implementing some of the long-laid irrigation plans in the Trans-Volga lands, which were formerly hamstrung by shortage of power, high costs and industrial priorities elsewhere. Although it had generally been assumed that wheat would be the chief beneficiary of such projects, it has recently been recommended that greater emphasis should be placed on corn (maize) and fodder crops as a basis for animal husbandry, and also on rice, sugar-beet, fruits and vegetables.
Transport.—The Middle Volga region is much more closely knit by lines of communication both internally and externally than it was before the war. The value of the axial waterway has been considerably enhanced in recent years, first and foremost by the opening of the Volga–Don canal in 1952. The significance of the link-up between the Volga system, which carries nearly half the inland water transport tonnage of the U.S.S.R., and the Black Sea and the industrialized Ukraine can scarcely be exaggerated. Further, the work in connection with the hydro-electric installations is resulting in a reduction of actual navigational distance and a much more stable depth of water, while a steadily increased turnover of freight is leading to the expansion and modernization of port facilities.

No longer has the river a monopoly of north-south communication. During the war a railway was laid parallel to the river on the right bank from Zelenodol'sk (near Kazan') to Stalingrad. Recently a rather more piecemeal counterpart has been built on the left bank from the Middle Kama region, through the centre of the oil country to Kuybyshev and beyond. Saratov is now also connected directly by rail with Central Asia and Kazan' with the Urals, while the Trans-Siberian railroad from Syzran' and Kuybyshev to Novosibirsk has lately been electrified.

Urban growth and the rise of Kuybyshev.—The urban population of the Volga region has grown more quickly than that of any other of European Russia between 1939 and 1956. The rate of growth was twice as high as that of the central industrial district (Moscow region), four times that of the Ukraine and 50 per cent. higher than that of the Soviet Union as a whole. Centrally situated in its region, Kuybyshev and its environs have reflected most strikingly the meteoric rise in the fortunes of this region.

Kuybyshev was estimated in 1956 to be one of the eight largest cities in the Soviet Union. While Kuybyshev doubled its population between 1939 and 1956, none of the other seven cities (all with over three-quarters of a million people in 1956) increased by more than 50 per cent. over this period. Kuybyshev has outstripped the
other two large cities of the Middle Volga, Saratov and Kazan', which were more populous earlier this century (Fig. 4). Several neighbouring “satellite” towns have shared in this growth and there are now about a million people within 30 miles or so of the city centre. Its phenomenal growth is to be understood in relation to its function as the focal point of a region which is rapidly developing its newly found wealth and which itself has a focal role on the national scene. Kuybyshev, on the great loop of the river, is undoubtedly well placed in relation to the new resources and well served by transport links with other parts of the region and the nation (Fig. 5). It was selected as a temporary capital during the war and, if geographers were kings, Kuybyshev might well be voted the “ideal” capital for the Soviet Union of today and tomorrow.

Fig. 5. Kuybyshev and its environs

Summary and conclusions.—In discussions of the current social scene in the Soviet Union it is common to contrast the “New Look” of the nineteen-fifties with the “Old Order” and to discern a radical difference of outlook between the older and younger generation of people. Similarly, the character of geographical regions is very much a product of their time. In the case of industrialized regions this character stems primarily from the nature of the power base. Thus the Kuznetsk region in Central Siberia is an authentic geographical expression of the early Five Year Plan era, when coal and steel were the twin gods. The Middle Volga, in spite of its eventful, sometimes crucial, role in the historical geography of Russia, is still young as an industrial region, and will probably turn out to bear, more clearly than any other Soviet region, the stamp of the industrial revolution of the nineteen-fifties. Having long lain dormant industrially, and having only recently ceased to be a somewhat stationary “frontier,” the region began to awake on the eve of the Second World War, and has been growing more important in the geographical scheme of things in the Soviet Union ever since. Its zenith is not yet in sight.

The age of oil in the Soviet Union has only recently been inaugurated, and the Middle Volga has within its orbit the most productive part of the oil-bearing region which has at least four-fifths of the nation’s reserves and two-thirds of its production. Hydro-electric power has been proclaimed as an economic panacea from the very early Soviet days, but projects were slow to materialize until the nineteen-fifties, during which capacity has been nearly trebled. The largest hydro-station in the world is in the heart of the Middle Volga region, its generating capacity amounting to a fifth of that of the nation as a whole. In short, the Middle Volga has become the greatest
powerhouse of today’s U.S.S.R., with enough to spare for neighbouring regions, and for its own rapidly expanding industries, and this is the fundamental fact underlying the present transformation of the region. Its former dominantly agrarian character has been receding quickly alongside a steady expansion and diversification of farming. Its role as a frontier has given way to one as a bridge and a cross-roads. The fact that it is near the population centre of an economically unified super-state, in which the geographical trend is eastwards away from the older centres, together with the fact of greatly improved transport links with all parts of the nation, provide the key to the superlative value of the new power resources. These are the forces which are combining ever more effectively to create in the Middle Volga a new focal region for the Soviet Union. More specifically they explain the unique growth of Kuibyshev, the heart of the region, since the war, and promise for it an auspicious future.

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