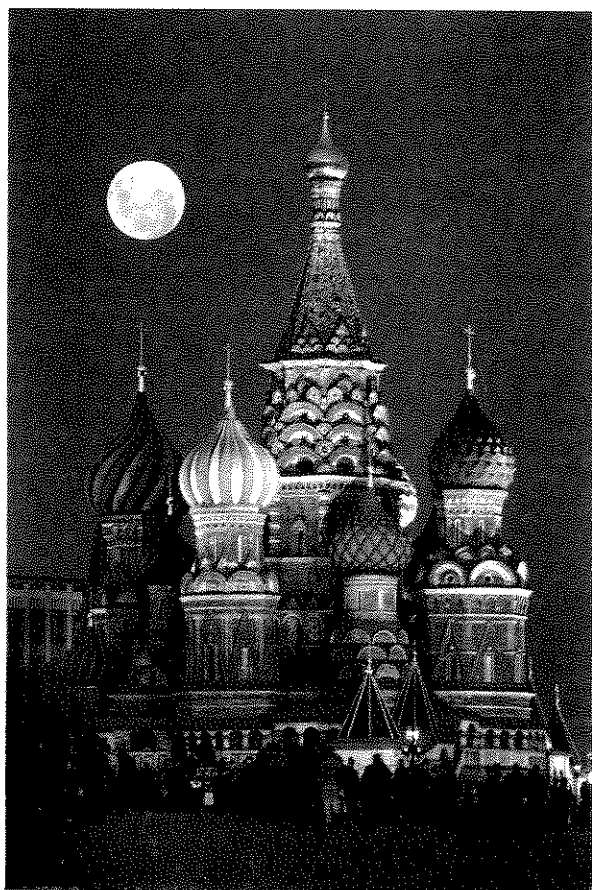




St. Basil's Cathedral

Ivan the Terrible, the first czar of all Russia, built St. Basil's Cathedral. Legend says that when the church was finished, Ivan ordered its architect to be blinded. This, the czar hoped, would prevent him from ever creating anything so beautiful again. However, the architect did go on to design another cathedral.



18.7 Russia: The Largest Nation on Earth

Imagine observing from space as your country breaks apart and then ceases to exist. That's what Soviet astronaut Sergei Krikalev did in 1991. He flew up to the Mir space station as a citizen of the Soviet Union. While he circled Earth 16 times a day, the Soviet Union collapsed. When he finally set foot on land, he was still a citizen of the largest nation on Earth. But that nation was now Russia.

Rich Resources in a Vast Land Although Russia is not as large as the Soviet Union was, it's still huge. It has vast forests and large deposits of coal and minerals, with its most important resources being oil and natural gas. Because of its cold **climate**, however, less than 8 percent of Russia's land is suitable for farming.

During Soviet rule, the government owned and operated this vast country's farms, factories, and businesses. When Soviet rule ended, the government sold these factories and businesses. But these sales did not help the Russian people. Powerful political leaders grabbed the best businesses for themselves.

Today most Russian businesses are privately run, but not always run well. Many of the factories the government sold were old, run down, and in need of modernization, but often the new owners had no money to make the changes. Other businesses made goods of such poor quality that no one wanted to buy them. As a result, many businesses failed.

In spite of all its challenges, Russia's economy has been growing every year. Oil exports are a big reason for this growth.

The Challenges Facing Russians Today Life is not easy in Russia. The crime rate is high. Housing is very costly. The nation faces a major challenge due to negative population growth. Alcohol abuse and pollution are big concerns that threaten people's health.

Ethnic nationalism and religious divisions have caused problems in Russia as well. Russia's 142 million people come from dozens of ethnic groups, not all of which are pleased to still be a part of Russia. In addition, most Russians belong to the Russian Orthodox Church, but Russia also has minority religious groups such as Muslim, Jewish, Buddhist, and non-Orthodox Christian. The law limits the activities of some religious groups. For example, some of them are not allowed to print religious literature or operate religious schools.

In an area of southwest Russia known as Chechnya, opposition to Russian rule has led to outright rebellion. During the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, a group of Chechen leaders declared independence from Russia. But in 1994, Russian tanks rolled into Chechnya to crush the independence movement. More than 100,000 Chechens died in the war that followed. Though a cease-fire brought an official peace to Chechnya in 1996, the conflict continues. Battles, bombings, and terrorist attacks have killed thousands of people on both sides of the conflict.