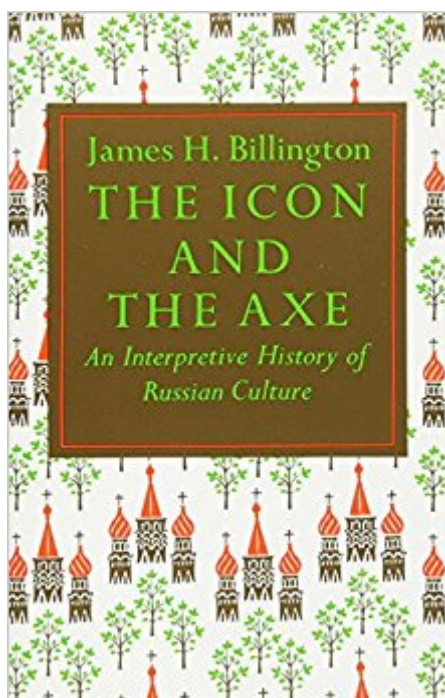


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# The Icon And The Axe: An Interpretative History Of Russian Culture (Vintage)



## Synopsis

"A rich and readable introduction to the whole sweep of Russian cultural and intellectual history from Kievan times to the post-Khrushchev era." - Library Journal. Illustrations, references, index.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"A rich and readable introduction to the whole sweep of Russian cultural and intellectual history from Kievan times to the post-Khrushchev era." - Library Journal. Illustrations, references, index.

'...I cannot begin to touch on the riches of this book. It is packed with detail without being dry, vivid without being 'colorful,' and wide-ranging without crying up special theories. This is, moreover, a cultural history in which is implicit the knowledge that ideas do not follow simply from other ideas, that cultural history interprets and modifies political and economic history but rides on their currents and is swayed by their events.

The Icon and the Axe: An Interpretive History of Russian Culture, first published in 1966 and made available here by Vintage Books, by renowned Russian scholar James H. Billington is a fascinating and highly detailed account of Russia's unique cultural history. James H. Billington (1929 - ) is a renowned Russian scholar who was a professor at Harvard and Princeton and is currently serving as the Librarian of Congress. His work has chiefly focused on Russian history and culture and also revolutionary movements including his excellent book Fire in the Minds of Men (1980).

Billington's scholarship is of the highest caliber, but his books may prove difficult for some given the fact that they are heavily footnoted and extremely scholarly. Billington defines this book as an "interpretive history of modern Russian thought and culture" and explains that resulting from his own reflections it offers a selective account of the rise and development of Russian culture and thought in the last 600 years. Russian culture offers a unique heritage and this book explores that heritage as it has existed in Russia's history. In his Preface, Billington explains that two artifacts have been chosen to serve as the title for this book - the icon and the axe - and that each has a unique and important meaning. The icon or holy picture represents Russia's spiritual heritage; while the axe is an unholy weapon. Both of these artifacts may be found "hung together on the wall of the peasant hut in the wooded Russian north" and "suggest both the visionary and earthy aspects of Russian culture". However, as the author notes ironically, the icon has been wielded by charlatans and demagogues while the axe has been wielded by saints and artists. Several important components play into Russia's cultural heritage including the history of the tsars, the lives of the peasants represented strongly in the traditions of their religion Eastern Christianity, and later the arrival of the Marxists who took over Russia in the form of Bolshevism. Billington identifies three supra-personal forces at work in Russian culture - nature itself, Eastern Christendom, and the impact of the West. This book explores all such important components in detail. The book is expertly footnoted and includes several detailed maps and various images and pictures. Billington begins his book with a Preface in which he explains his understanding of an interpretive cultural history, explores the notions behind the artifacts of the icon and the axe, and traces out his cultural history of Russia. This is followed by a section detailing his Acknowledgements. The first part of the book is entitled "Background". Here, Billington begins by detailing the earliest history of modern Russia as it existed in "Kiev", the role of the Slavs and Mongols, and the arrival of Christianity in the form of Eastern Orthodoxy. Billington explores ancient Russia literature and various sagas and lays. Following this, Billington turns to "The Forest" where he traces out Russia's earliest history, noting the relationship between the ancient tribes, how Eastern Christianity came to dominate, and the history of earliest Russia. Billington details this through sections exploring "Axe and Icon" and "Bell and Cannon". The second part of this book is entitled "The Confrontation" and explores the early Fourteenth to the early Seventeenth centuries. Billington traces out "The Muscovite Ideology", noting the rise of Moscow as the "third Rome", tracing the heritage of the Russian rulers from the time of the semi-legendary Riurik, and exploring the mystical traditions of the Eastern Church and the Hesychasts. Billington next examines "The Coming of the West", noting the problematic role of Russia's relationship with the West. Billington discusses such things as "Novgorod", ""The Latins"",

""The Germans""", and "The Religious Wars". In particular, Billington notes the importance of Spain on Russia, the relationship between the Eastern churches and the Roman Catholics, the role of the tsars and the tsar seen as an Old Testament king, the notion of "Holy Rus", and various other relationships between Russia and the West. The third part of this book is entitled "The Century of Schism" and discusses history between the periods of the Mid-Seventeenth to the Mid-Eighteenth centuries. Billington discusses such things as "The Split Within" mentioning the schism of 1667 and considering such responses as "The Theocratic Answer", "The Fundamentalist Answer", and "The Great Change". Billington also discusses "The Westward Turn" mentioning such things as "New Religious Answers", "The Sectarian Tradition", "The New World of St. Petersburg", and "The Defense of Muscovy". The fourth part of this book is entitled "The Century of Aristocratic Culture" and discusses the Mid-Eighteenth to the Mid-Nineteenth centuries. Billington first discusses "The Troubled Enlightenment". Here, Billington examines such topics as "The Dilemma of the Reforming Despot", "The Fruits of the Enlightenment", "The Alienation of the Intellectuals", "Novikov and Masonry", and "The Frustration of Political Reform". Following this, Billington examines "The Anti-Enlightenment". Billington examines the forces operating against the Enlightenment in the form of the "Catholics", the "Pietists", the "Orthodox", and "The Legacy". Next, Billington considers ""The Cursed Questions"", examining the problems taken up by aristocratic intellectuals. Billington examines such topics as "The Flight to Philosophy", "The Meaning of History", "The Prophetic Role of Art", "The Missing Madonna", and "The "Hamlet Question"". The fifth part of this book is entitled "On to New Shores" and examines thought as it developed in the second half of the Nineteenth Century. Billington examines such issues as "The Turn to Social Thought", "The Agony of Populist Art", and "New Perspectives of the Waning Century" (including discussion of "Constitutional Liberalism", "Dialectical Materialism", and "Mystical Idealism"). The sixth part of this book is entitled "The Uncertain Colossus" and examines the period of the Twentieth century including the rise of the Soviets. Billington first devotes a section entitled "Crescendo" in which he examines periods following the revolution of 1917 and discussing such things as "Prometheanism", "Sensualism", and "Apocalypticism". Following this, Billington discusses "The Soviet Era" mentioning such topics as "The Leninist Legacy" and "The Revenge of Muscovy". Next, Billington discusses "Fresh Ferment", mentioning some of the accomplishments in Russian culture under Bolshevism. Here, Billington discusses such things as "The Reprise of Pasternak" and "New Voices". This part ends with a discussion of "The Irony of Russian History". Here, Billington discusses the concept of irony and absurdity, traces the role of Russian history from the time of the tsars to the post-Stalinist era, and discusses Russia in a post-Stalinist world. The book ends with an extremely detailed Bibliography,

References, and an Index. This book offers an extremely rich source of valuable material on Russia's unique and lasting cultural contributions. Many themes play out throughout the book including the natural spirituality of the Russian people and the role of the Eastern churches, the history of the Russian tsars and the courtly culture, the role of aristocrats and intellectuals, the role of artists, writers, and poets, the problematic of Russia's relationship with the West, and finally the rise of the Soviet state and Russia under the Soviets. If one seeks to understand these contributions of Russian culture, one can surely look in no better source than here. While the book is difficult, it remains an essential study meandering through the threads of Russian cultural history and bringing forth much detailed and rich information. It is highly recommended to all those who seek to understand in depth Russian culture.

This book is easier to understand and more enjoyable than other books on similar topics. (I am only half the way through). I would buy this book again.

It is called an interpretive history, so I guess some of the impressions formed by the author are understandable on that basis -- he's not calling those impressions facts. Other than that, I thought it was an interesting and erudite treatment of a subject not easy to research.

The Icon and the Axe. This book is a classic treatment of the topic: densely researched, gracefully written, and quick-paced throughout its 800 pages (rivaling many Russian novels in this latter respect). Delivery by Books Land was prompt, and both icon and axe arrived carefully wrapped and in great shape. Five stars all around.

I had expected this book to be a more traditional political and military history, a "who and where" type. This book is actually a very thorough handling of Russian religion, art and literature. The author seems to assume that the reader already knows basic facts of Russian history, such as its leaders, its major wars, etc. However, even if the reader is not familiar with these aspects of history, the book is still very readable. I feel I have a greater understanding of Russian literature and culture than I might have with a more traditional history. It is unfortunate that the the book only covers up to the mid 1960s, because the events of the past 15 years are unprecedented since the revolution of 1917.

Impressive erudition and clarity. Makes you think of Einstein. "You really know something when you

can explain it to your granny and she understands it"

I've read through this several times over the years, and I enjoy it every time I pick it up again.  
Thorough and well written.

This is a superbly rich discussion of Russian culture by an author whose command of fact is infused with intuitive wisdom. It's best read at a leisurely, not a break-neck pace.

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