Siberia is Russia’s wild west, its land of extremes. A deft history charts the endless attempts to control it.

HISTORY
Vanora Bennett

SIBERIA A History of the People
by JANET M HARTLEY
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Siberia – eight time zones of it, stretching from the Urals mountains east to the Pacific and north to the permafrost, and so inhospitable that it has taken four centuries to settle and (partly) tame – has always been Russia’s version of the American Wild West.

True, it has a more threatening reputation. It’s known not just as a vast, cold emptiness and home to bears, wolves, tigers, but also for punishment. For a Russian state that found dissent hard to handle, Siberia’s remoteness made it an ideal dumping ground for troublemakers. Convicts sent there before the railways and the 20th-century gulags were supposed to walk east at 15 miles a day in leg irons that caused gangrene. Their sentence only technically started when they arrived – even though the journey could take years for those who survived. One prisoner reached Irkutsk after eight years, “and when he entered the factory there, this marked the first minute of his remission.” No wonder the region’s very name is a byword for desolate exile.

Yet Siberia has also always drawn people who were in search of riches, or just the chance to live by their own rules, and were prepared to go anywhere to get it. For fur trappers, peasants escaping Russian serfdom, religious dissenters such as the self-casting skeptics (who removed their sex organs in the hope of escaping original sin), railway entrepreneurs, 20th-century idealists building a bright Soviet future (and riding the extra Siberian pay) and anyone today exploiting the region’s fabulous oil, gas, coal, timber and gold deposits, Siberia has been a land of promise, wealth and – paradoxically – freedom.

Siberia starts where Europe ends, and faces into Asia. It’s easy enough to be so overwhelmed by its exotic geography – 10% of the earth’s surface, 77% of Russian territory, permanent snow, volcanoes, the world’s biggest lake and vast mineral wealth – that you look no further. But, in this excellent book, Janet M Hartley, professor of international history at the London School of Economics, delves deep into a bigger force. She elegantly captures the essence of a place of extremes by describing its people, both the settlers and the settled, the few and the many.

Hartley tells her tale chronologically, starting with the 17th-century conquest, in Ivan the Terrible’s day, of “Itaka” – a kingdom east of the Urals, and only a small part of what we now consider Siberia – by the fur-trapping Stroganov family and Cossack forces.

It took two more centuries for Russians pushing north and east to defeat the Chinese on the Amur river basin and make a port on the Pacific – Vladivostok means “Rule the East” – that gave Siberia its modern shape. (It’s unsatisfying that it took so long once Hartley explains how many of the soldiers manning primitive garrisons were in their fifties and sixties. One whom she uncovers in a 19th-century fort on the Sea of Okhotsk was 82. Russia’s)

Sent to the gulag to die

Siberia was home to some of the most telling stories of the Russian gulag, which, though not as famous as the Soviet prison camps, were nonetheless filled with horror. Hartley has plucked a few of the last 10,000 sent to Kolyma and, with little detail about the gulag’s history, details the experience of these prisoners who died in Siberia.

Taming Russia’s wilderness

Russia’s rich history is illuminated by the lives of individuals, from the nobility to the proletariat, and Hartley’s research is deeply informative. Her book is a must-read for anyone interested in Russian history or Siberia.

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