How does Russia’s geography influence where people live?

Russia’s forests, lakes, and rich cropland influence where people live.

circumpolar countries lands that are around or near either the North or South Pole

habitation the act of living in a particular place

Russia and Canada are the two largest countries in the world by area, each covering thousands of kilometres of land in the northern hemisphere. They are referred to as Pacific Rim countries because they include lands that border on the Pacific Ocean. They are also called circumpolar countries because they are in the northern latitudes on the globe, close to the North Pole. Natural, social, and political environments affect habitation in both countries.

Physical Features of Russia

Russia is the world’s largest country by area. It stretches almost halfway around the planet. Today, a plane flight from one end of Russia to the other takes 11 hours. It took the early explorers more than a year to cross Russia’s dense forests, wide plains, and high mountains as they made their way east to the Pacific Ocean. Most of the journey involved crossing Siberia, or the Asian part of Russia, including the vast West Siberian Plain.
**A Vast Land**

Russia spreads across two continents, Europe and Asia. The Ural Mountains separate European Russia from Asian Russia. European Russia is located east of Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, Belarus, and Ukraine. Asian Russia lies immediately north of China, Mongolia, and Kazakhstan. See the political maps of Europe and Asia in the Atlas at the back of the book.

The Russian Plain covers much of European Russia. It stretches east to the Ural Mountains. South of the Russian Plain are the Caucasus Mountains. These mountains run east–west between the Caspian Sea and the Black Sea. They form the southern border between European Russia and Asia.

East of the Urals is the broad West Siberian Plain. Farther east are central and eastern Siberia. This huge area consists of rugged plateaus framed by high mountains on the east and south. Many of these spectacular mountains are volcanic in origin. Some are covered by glaciers year-round.

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**Map Skills**

How are the physical features and natural resources of Russia similar to and different from those in Canada and Saskatchewan? Give examples to support your answer.
Russia’s Rivers and Water Bodies

European Russia’s longest river, the Volga, flows into the Caspian Sea (see map on page 67). This river is famous in the songs and stories of the Russian people. Russia’s European rivers also include the Don, which flows into the Black Sea, and the Dvina, which flows north to an arm of the Arctic Ocean.

In Siberia, there are many other large rivers that flow north to the Arctic Ocean. These include Russia’s longest, the Yenisey, as well as the Ob and Lena. Another important Siberian river is the Ankara. Far to the east is the mighty Amur River, which forms the border between Russia and China.

In addition to its long rivers, Russia has many large lakes and seas. Perhaps the most famous is Lake Baikal in the heart of Siberia. More than one and a half kilometres deep, Lake Baikal holds about one fifth of Earth’s fresh water—more than all of the North American Great Lakes combined.
Climate and Vegetation

Vast areas of Russian lands lie just south of the Arctic Circle and have a subarctic climate with limited precipitation, cool summers, and very cold winters. This climate is similar to that of northern and central Saskatchewan. North of this area is the tundra or Arctic climate region, a cold, dry, treeless area covered in snow for most of the year. This is similar to the climate north of Lake Athabasca in Saskatchewan. European Russia in the southwest has a continental climate, similar to central and southern Saskatchewan’s parkland. These areas have long, cold winters and warm summers. Parts of southern Russia have a semi-arid, or moderately dry, climate similar to that of southwestern Saskatchewan.

Russia’s natural vegetation is closely tied to its climate. In the cool continental climate north of Moscow, conifers (evergreen trees with needles and cones) grow in thick forests like those around Lac La Ronge in north-central Saskatchewan. South of Moscow are temperate forests. To the east, vast areas of grasslands, called steppes, cover the land. Here, mild, moist summers and rich soils make good farmland. This area is similar to Saskatchewan’s southern grasslands.

Near Yakutsk, Siberia, a family hauls water that they took from a hole in the ice on a local lake. Yakutsk has a subarctic climate with long, cold winters.
In Siberia, winters are long and cold. Cold, dry conditions are ideal for tundra, a type of low-lying vegetation. Tundra covers about one tenth of Russia, stretching all the way from the Finnish border to the Kamchatka Peninsula.

South of the tundra is the Russian taiga (commonly called boreal forest in Canada), a swampy area with coniferous forests that covers more than 8 million square kilometres. In Saskatchewan, taiga is found across the northern part of the province, north of Lake Athabasca. One of the many challenges for human settlement in northern Russia is permafrost. This is permanently frozen soil that often lies beneath the tundra and the taiga. It makes construction of roads, railways, and housing difficult.

**Russia’s Resources**

Russia has rich mineral and energy resources, especially in Siberia. Its resources also include timber and fish. Vast reserves of oil and natural gas in West Siberia have made Russia wealthy in recent years.
Russia has metal ores, such as iron, gold, cobalt, nickel, and platinum. Although Russia is one of the top 10 producers of uranium in the world, Canada has higher-grade uranium ore and produces more uranium than Russia.

It can be difficult to mine Russia’s rich natural resources because they are so hard to reach. Long distances and harsh climates separate resources from processing plants and markets.

**The People of Russia**

Russia has a population of about 140 million people. About three quarters of them live in the European part of the country, and Russia’s two largest cities are in this area. Moscow, the capital, is the largest metropolitan area in Russia with more than 10 million people. St. Petersburg, located on the Baltic Sea, is Russia’s second-largest city with about 4.5 million people.

Russia’s most densely settled areas have the best climates and soils for agriculture. In contrast, Siberia is sparsely populated. Siberia has a population density of about three people per square kilometre, which is similar to Canada’s national population density.
Canada’s Population Density and Distribution

Like Russia, Canada has a very uneven population density. Canada has a population of about 34 million people. In the most densely populated areas, including cities such as Montreal, Quebec, or Toronto, Ontario, there can be more than 4000 people per square kilometre. In contrast, some northern regions are sparsely populated with fewer than one person per square kilometre.

Similar to Russia, people in Canada live close to the best climate and soils for agriculture. They live along coasts where they can fish, or near ports that ship goods to other countries. They settle around economic, political, and transportation centres, such as the 14 million people who live in between Windsor and the Quebec City region. People also establish communities around traditional hunting and fishing grounds. Some of these communities are located in remote places, such as the Far North in Canada and Siberia in Russia.
Russia’s Indigenous Peoples

Russia’s huge population includes many Indigenous peoples, each with their own languages and customs. Before Europeans arrived, Indigenous peoples occupied much of the land and made use of its natural resources. Some Indigenous peoples in Russia led a mostly migratory life of hunting and fishing. Several groups also relied on reindeer for their food and transportation. With the arrival of Europeans, many Indigenous peoples lost their independence and had to struggle to keep their languages and cultures. In recent years, the Russian government has passed laws to protect Indigenous peoples’ cultures and lifestyle.

The Russian census of 2002 noted that there were 40 different Indigenous nations, with a total population of about 211 000 people. The largest group is the Nenets, with a population of around 40 000. They live on the Yamal Peninsula, which is in northwestern Siberia on the Arctic Ocean. Like the Inuit in Canada, the Nenets have a close relationship with the land and the animals that inhabit the northern ecosystem. While the Inuit depend on caribou, the Nenets make their living by herding reindeer. In the past, they raised reindeer for their own use. Today they also sell the meat to earn money.

The Importance of Reindeer to the Nenets

“I’ve lived all of my life in the tundra. The reindeer for us are everything—food, transport, and accommodation. The only thing I hope is that we will be able to carry on with this life.”

—Jakov Japtik, Nenets reindeer herder

Map Skills

1. How is the location of Russia’s Indigenous people related to the natural environment?
2. What factors in the political environment might influence the location of Indigenous peoples?
Canada’s Aboriginal Peoples

More than 1 million Aboriginal people live in Canada. They represent more than 50 different cultural groups and languages. According to the 2006 census, Canada’s largest Aboriginal populations are in Ontario and the western provinces.

Nearly 142 000 Aboriginal people are members of 70 different First Nations communities in Saskatchewan. These diverse people speak different languages, including Cree, Dene, Nakawē, Dakota, Lakota, and Nakota languages. There are also about 48 000 Métis (who speak the Michif language) living in Saskatchewan. They represent about five percent of the province’s total population. Approximately 200 Inuit live in Saskatchewan, most of whom live in urban areas such as Saskatoon, Prince Albert, and Lloydminster.

Canada’s Aboriginal population is growing. Some experts predict that by 2045 Aboriginal people will make up about one third of Saskatchewan’s total population.

Aboriginal peoples the descendants of the original inhabitants of North America; this is a broad term that includes First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples in Canada

First Nations Aboriginal people who are descendants of the original inhabitants of North America; the term First Nations does not include the Inuit or Métis

Métis Aboriginal people who have First Nations and European ancestry and are distinct from other Aboriginal peoples

Inuit the Aboriginal peoples indigenous to the Arctic, in northern Canada, living mainly in Nunavut, the Northwest Territories, northern Quebec, and Labrador

Thinking It Through

Key Ideas
1. What factors influence where people live?
2. How is population density related to geography? Give examples from both Canada and Russia.

Thinking Critically
3. What regions in southern Canada have a low population density? Why might this be the case?
4. How are population density and distribution influenced by physical and social environments? What other factor might influence population density and distribution?

Chapter Focus Question
How do people’s interactions with natural and political environments affect their lives?

5. How do physical features, climate, vegetation, and natural resources affect where people live in Saskatchewan? How do these factors affect people in your community?