Russia has three main geographic regions that shaped early life there. The northern forests have poor soil and a cold climate. A band of fertile land farther south attracted farmers. The southern steppe—an open, treeless grassland—provided pasture for herds. It allowed nomads to migrate easily from Asia into Europe.

Two peoples came together to form the first Russian state. The Slavs migrated from Asia to southern Russia. Vikings came from Scandinavia. The Vikings traveled south along Russia’s rivers, trading with the Slavs and with Constantinople. The city of Kiev was at the center of this trade.

Russians date the origins of their country to 862, when a Viking tribe called the Rus began ruling from Novgorod in the north. Rus lands expanded to include Kiev, which became their capital.

In the 800s, Constantinople sent missionaries to Russia. Two Orthodox monks, Cyril and Methodius, developed the Cyrillic alphabet, which is still used in Russia. During the reign of the Rus king Vladimir, Orthodox Christianity became the religion of the Rus and they aligned themselves with the Byzantines.

Between 1236 and 1241, Mongols advanced into Russia. They were known as the Golden Horde. They burned Kiev and ruled Russia for the next 240 years. However, as long as they received tribute, the Mongols let Russian princes rule and they tolerated the Russian Orthodox Church. Although trade increased under the Mongols, Mongol rule cut Russia off from Western Europe at a time when Europeans were making great advances.

The princes of Moscow gained power under the Mongols, and Moscow became Russia’s political and spiritual center. In 1380, these princes led other Russians in defeating the Golden Horde at the battle of Kulikovo. A driving force behind Moscow’s successes was Ivan III, or Ivan the Great. Between 1462 and 1505, he brought much of northern Russia under his rule. He tried to limit the power of the nobles, and sometimes called himself tsar, the Russian word for Caesar. His grandson, Ivan IV, became the first Russian ruler officially crowned tsar. However, Ivan IV became unstable and violent. The ways in which he used his power earned him the title Ivan the Terrible.

Review Questions
1. Why do Russians consider 862 as the year when their country began?

2. What Russian ruler first called himself tsar?