

The Mongol Connection: Mongol Influences on the Development of Moscow

MICHAEL VOGEL

Communicated by: Dr. Dmitry Shlapentokh
Department of History

ABSTRACT

The Mongols ruled Russia for 240 years during the 13th to 15th centuries. One of the greatest effects of Mongol rule in Russia was the rise of Moscow as not only the preeminent city in Russia but also the central power of a large and expanding empire. This paper explores the connections and influences between Mongol rule and Moscow's rise to power.

At the time of the Mongol conquest Russia was badly divided, a mere collection of city-states, and Moscow deserved mention only as one of the lesser towns sacked by the Mongol general Batu (The Chronicles 82). By the end of Mongol rule, Moscow not only became the center of power, but also possessed the tools required to eventually control an empire that rivaled that of the Mongol Empire in size, and lasted until the end of the 20th century. This paper explores how this Mongol connection made it possible.

Current knowledge of Mongol activities is largely based on Russian chronicles because Tamerlane destroyed the Horde's archives when his forces sacked Sarai, the Golden Hordes' capital in 1395 (Halperin 44-45). These sources must be further qualified by two factors. First, is what Halperin describes as the 'ideology of silence' adhered to by the chroniclers themselves. By omission, Russian chronicles from the 13th to the 15th centuries denied that Russia had been conquered (Halperin 20). Secondly, many of the original texts of the chronicles were amended in the 15th and 16th centuries to reflect Moscow's interests (Paszkievicz 257).

Well chronicled was the succession of rulers in the Russian principalities and the divisions of their estates. In Russia, the rules for succession had been set down in Yaroslav's testament in 1054 as the next oldest brother in line (Silfen 76). As each ruler tried to provide for his sons and appease any brothers who might contest, smaller and smaller political units were created. This continually weakened the nobility since they didn't have enough land to support themselves (Riasanovsky 64). This is referred to as the appanage period, and it left Russia badly divided against its many enemies. Throughout its history, Russia has been surrounded by enemies with virtually no natural barriers to protect it. The primary goal of all Russian governments was defense. Vikings, Teutonic Knights, Swedes, Lithuanians, Poles, Mongols and assorted other nomadic peoples (The Great Migration passed through southern Russia), Ottoman Turks, and in modern times, Napoleon and Hitler have all attempted invasions of Russia. Only the Mongols suc-

ceeded.

The Mongols defeated Russia in two rapid winter campaigns from 1237 to 1240. There is disagreement about the true extent of the devastation, but the dead certainly numbered in the hundreds of thousands (Silfen 15). In Batu's campaigns of 1237-40, the south, which suffered more than the north, was extensively depopulated, and many inhabitants were killed or carried off as slaves. Plano Carpini, traveling through the Kievan area a few years later on a mission for the Pope, wrote of seeing innumerable bones and skulls on every roadside. The great city of Kiev was a ruin; no more than two hundred houses remained (Paszkievicz 142-143). Moscow and Tver were somewhat protected by forests, and both had favorable positions for trade. Many refugees from the devastated southern areas of Russia settled there (Hartog 74).

"The slaughter and destruction of 1237-40 and later years was intended to strike fear into the defeated peoples and convince them of their own helplessness" (Paszkievicz 138). After 1240, Mongol raids were not indiscriminate but designed to alter the balance of power (and acquire plunder). The Mongol raids influenced the balance of power among the Russian Principalities by affecting the size of their populations (Halperin 79).

Unlike Persia and China, the Mongols did not occupy Russia. The enormous pastures of the Pontic and Caspian Steppe supported large nomadic armies close enough that actual occupation was unnecessary (Halperin 126). The threat of invasion allowed the Mongols to collect tribute and to control Russia without the costs of garrisoning the cities. This policy limited the cultural impact on most of the Russian people, since they had no contact with the Mongols. The Mongols were primarily destroyers and tax collectors, not direct rulers.

The Mongol impact on the ruling class was much greater. Russian princes had to journey to the Horde to receive a patent, or *yarlic*, from the Khan, as the Mongol ruler was known, to rule a specified area (Silfen 17). In this manner their position was totally dependent on the good graces of the Khan.

The consensus view among historians is that Rus-

sia suffered long term economic depression because of the invasion and oppressive taxation, the so-called Tartar Yoke (Ostrowski 108). Pushin argues that the Mongols made Russia "miss" the Renaissance (Halperin 122). The Renaissance, though, was intrinsically a phenomenon of the Latin West (Halperin 122). Russia's heritage was Greek, not Latin (Ibid.). The Eurasianist view can explain this: instead of viewing Russia as a backward European country, it can be looked on as an Asiatic one. This avoids the western preoccupation with individual liberties as a barometer of progress. The 'rights' of the individual in Asian societies is relatively unimportant (Riasanovsky 74). Viewed in this context Russia is far less 'backward'.

Alexander Nevsky, the Russian hero who had defeated the Swedes by the river Neva in 1240 and the Teutonic Knights in 1242 (the massacre of the Ice), submitted to the Khan even though the Horde had failed to reach his capital, Novgorod (Riasanovsky 80). Batu made him Grand Prince of Vladimir-Suzdal. Alexander's motives were unclear; was it for his own benefit, possibly to defend the church, or simply a question of realpolitik? The Mongols practiced religious tolerance while the Swedes and Knights were fighting under a papal mandate to bring Orthodox Christians back under Latin leadership (Hartog 50). The Catholic Church cast its vote by canonizing Nevsky in 1547. Nevsky was an active collaborator, using force to fulfill the Tartar census of 1259. The census was the basis for tax collection and recruits for the Mongol armies. Minsky refers to Russian troops in China in the 1330s (Silfen 24). Hartog argues that "his standpoint became the essential basis of the policies of the later Grand Princes of Moscow" (58).

What the Khan really wanted, other than subservience, was tribute. The chronicle of Novgorod gives details on the tribute demanded of the city of Ryazan, the first to fall to the Mongols. "Demanding from them one-tenth of everything: of men and Knyazes and horses—of everything one-tenth" (The Chronicles of Novgorod). Mongol tax collection and administrative systems were far more exploitive than any known in Russia before (Halperin 89).

At first, the tribute was collected by the Mongols themselves (basqaqs), but by the 1320's the Russian princes took this over (Hartog 56). The Mongols found it more efficient to use the Russian princes as opposed to their own tax collectors. The Russian Grand Princes found that being in charge of collecting the tribute was very profitable. The Mongols were indifferent as far as how much was collected, or from whom, as long as they got theirs. Embezzlement was dangerous so the Grand Princes exempted their own land and increased the burden on others (Halperin 78). The Novgorod chronicles state that in 1339 Ivan the First demanded of Novgorod, "and in addition give me the Tsar's demand, what the Tsar has de-

manded from me" (133).

Ivan the First was the prime example of this form of corruption. He earned the nickname 'money bags' (Kalita) and there was excellent evidence that the Grand Prince was getting rich off his role as tax collector (Ostrowski 121). Yet no prince was more faithful to the Khan than Kalita; he journeyed to the horde nine times, and his son and successor Simeon (1341-1353) went five times (Silfen 43). After the death of Kalita, Muscovite princes occupied the Throne of Vladimir almost without interruption (Paszkievich 243). There is also evidence that whenever there was upheaval in the Golden Horde, such as the period from 1359 to 1379 when there was a succession of fourteen different Khans, the Grand Prince would keep all the tribute. Edegei Khan's message in 1408 complains that no tribute had been delivered since the time of Janibeg Khan (1342-1357) (Hartog 92). Silfen argues that "it was this withheld Tartar tax money that was the origin of Moscow's rise to power and its extraordinary growth" (55).

Moscow benefited from being weak when the Mongols were strong. The Mongol divide and rule policy meant the Horde usually backed the weaker principality. In Moscow's struggle to overtake the city of Tver as the strongest principality, they could generally expect Mongol support. This culminated in 1327, when citizens of Tver rioted and killed a group of Mongols. Kalita raced to Sarai and returned with a Mongol army to sack and burn Tver (Hartog 82).

Moscow also benefited from being strong when the Horde was weak. The Mongols needed a stronger ally against the expansion of the Lithuanians from the west, and help in keeping the lesser Russian princes in line. The Horde backed Kalita in 1339 who was the stronger, not their usual policy, leading to the execution of Aleksander of Tver and his son Fedor. Uzbek, Khan at the time, wanted a relatively powerful and united Northeastern Russian state to stop Lithuanian expansion (Fennell 158).

After the Russian victory over the Mongols at Kulikovo Pole in 1380, Dmitri, soon to be named Dmitri Donskoy (of the Don), embarked on a new phase in Russian-Mongol relations. Although Tokhtamysh sacked Moscow in 1382, bringing a return of tribute payment, it did not bring a return of the yarlic (Fennell 307). In his will of 1389, Dmitri bequeaths Vladimir to his son. "I bless my son Prince Vasily with my patrimony the grand principality" (Fennell 306). The Khan is no longer who chooses the Grand Prince; the succession is now hereditary.

Although Russia was to remain subject to another 100 years of Mongol rule, it was often in name only since it helped to balance the threat from Lithuania. By the time of Ivan III's famous stand on the Ugra, in 1480, he had already set up a new Khanate under Moscow's guardianship known as the Kasimov Khanate. It was a military colony that made it easier

for other Tatars to enter the service of the grand-prince of Muscovy (Hartog 133). The Hordes' retreat after a five-month standoff proved that the Horde could no longer use force, or the threat of it, to control Russia.

The Russians adopted many of the military lessons learned from their conquerors. In 1237 they met the Mongols with an army typical of most European armies of the time. Based primarily on foot soldiers, disorganized and slow moving, it proved completely inferior to the fast moving, highly disciplined mobile cavalry of the Mongols. Evidence of the Russian change in tactics comes from Richard Chancellor, an English traveler in Moscow in 1553. "The main part of the Muscovite army fought not on foot but altogether on horseback, and they use short stirrups in the manner of the Turks" (Ostrowski 51). By Turks, he is referring to the Mongols, also known as the Tatars.

In many instances this Turkish (or Tatar) use of cavalry was more than mere imitation. In the early 15th century semi independent groups of Tatars operated as mercenaries in the service of Moscow. They would later be called Cossacks, a word from the nomadic Polotusti, which meant guard (Hartog 115). They would continue to be a potent force on the steppe until the Russian civil war in the 1920s (Chant 10). Although now using guns and sabers instead of bows and arrows, their mobility and brutality were still as feared as that of their Mongol ancestors in the 13th century.

Autocratic rule is often cited as one of the major influences of the Mongols. This Eurasianist view that the Mongols "transformed weak and divided appanage Russia into a powerful, disciplined and monolithic autocracy" (74) is argued against by Riasanovsky. He argues that the Mongols stayed apart from Russia, except when raids and invasions occurred (Riasanovsky 74). However this ignores that the Grand Princes, and those aspiring to the position, (the future autocrats) were completely under their control, through the yarlic. The Russian princes risked their lives every time they visited Sarai, the capital. Some didn't return, and at least a few fell ill on the homeward journey and died. Illness on the homeward journey was always viewed with suspicion; the Mongols had a reputation for the use of poison.

The Russian term Tsar, which literally means Caesar, was used for both the Byzantine Emperor and the Mongol Khan. It was not officially used as the title for the Russian ruler until Ivan IV in 1547 (Ostrowski 180). Here a distinction needs to be made on the difference between autocratic rule and despotism. Autocrats had some limitations, often minor, on their power. Many European rulers fell into this category, sharing power with a strong nobility. Despots, however, had no limitations. The Mongols operated on this principle of total authority, and so would the Russian Tsars, perhaps best illustrated by Ivan IV,

known as Ivan the Terrible. Hartog argues this best: "Autocracy was inherited from both the Mongols and Byzantium. But despotism must be seen as following in the Mongol footsteps" (164).

Control over such large areas required good communications. One of the innovations brought by the Mongols and adopted by the Russians was the ability to communicate over large distances rapidly. The Mongol postal system, called the Yam, was the best in the world (Halperin 93). Resting places as well as fresh horses were provided. Hartog refers to it as "one of the pillars on which the Mongol Empire rested, and it is still acknowledged as an exceptional example of organizational skill" (165). Riasanovsky argues against this being a Mongol influence by attributing the Yam to adoption of former Kievan practice of obligation to supply officials with horses and supplies (73). He also states that "a real postal system came as late as the 17th century, and from the west" (Riasanovsky 74). The first argument ignores that this system ran throughout the Mongol Empire and predates the conquest of Kiev. The second ignores the 400-year timespan between these dates. Communication was absolutely vital in maintaining a centrally controlled empire over immense distances. The Yam would later serve Moscow as effectively as it had the Horde.

One of the greatest challenges to maintaining an empire, especially a multi-ethnic one, is keeping the population under control. The principle of collective guilt entered Russian law from the Mongols and lasted at least through the late 19th century (Ostrowski 195). This law meant not only was the perpetrator punished, but also their family, and sometimes even the entire village. This collective responsibility, when brutally enforced, allowed fear of reprisals to replace garrisons and police forces. The use of terror proved proved to be as efficient a means of subjugation for the Russians as it had for the Mongols.

For Russia, surrounded by enemies, the military's needs were paramount. The rise of autocratic power is based on this military need much as it was for the Mongols originally. Autocratic (not necessarily despotic) rule is very efficient when it comes to war. The Mongols, as the victors, set a fine example of this. They also set the stage for Russian despotism by strengthening the position of grand prince while the Kievan principle of lateral succession continued to weaken all the other nobility. They did this not for any altruistic reasons but only because it increased the efficiency of tribute collection.

The Russians learned the lessons from the Mongols that were needed to build an empire. The ability to communicate over distances (the Yam) was a vital factor in maintaining a large empire, such as Moscow would create. The use of mobility in warfare, something the West wouldn't learn until the mid 20th century was learned the hard way by the Russians in the

13th, and was a basic requirement for military action over large geographic distances. Collective guilt, combined with brutal repression, allowed the maintenance of empire at a much lower cost (at least to the rulers).

The rulers of Moscow gained, at the expense of blood and suffering, the tools necessary to build one of the largest empires in history, an empire that survived until late in the 20th century. This was the Russians' Mongol heritage.

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Michael Vogel is a senior History major scheduled to graduate in 2003. This paper was written for H201, *Russian History I*.