

Was There a Mongol Yoke? The Historical Difficulties with the Mongol Invasion of Russia

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In the Russian-language literature, the traditional story of the “Mongol-Tartar” Yoke is almost entirely discredited. Few believe that there was ever a “Mongol yoke” over the Russian population starting in the 13th century. The Russian Historical Society has stopped using the “Mongol Yoke” and related terms in its sanctioned textbooks. One of the more prominent historians of the matter is Valery Artemov.

He makes several arguments. The most clear among them is that there are no contemporary records at all, including in Asian languages. There seemed to be no real desire to fight these invaders. As Plano Carpini made his way through the region right after this invasion, he recorded his impressions in a work that is valuable for its insights. He makes no mention of any “Mongol” people or cognates. Most importantly, nomadic peoples do not suddenly develop the capability to launch major military operations and sophisticated forms of rule over far-flung foreign dominions (Artemov, 2008).

These are serious objections that are not easily answered. In fact, after scouring the sources in Russian, there are almost no attempts to do so. The upshot is that there was certainly war and destruction and there was an “occupation” of a sort, but not by Asians from the far eastern steppe. The “occupiers” were the forebears of the Cossacks.

The traditional story goes like this: It was the harsh natural conditions in the region of northern China that vitiated any attempt at productive agriculture and the settled life. Mongol tribes that roamed the steppes of Central Asia clashed over pasture and cattle, and overgrazing became an important reason for the Mongol need to extend their range outward.

The nomad is always at a disadvantage because the weapons of war and trade are the products of the surrounding, settled peoples. There is a constant attraction to settle and take advantage of exploiting others. Those who were already in power could easily envisage this augmented as settled conditions create the civilization that alone can enforce class relations.

This is felt first in the elite's desire for luxury goods the demonstration effect makes attractive. Quickly the goods of the settled society were incorporated as status goods. The XII century saw increasing pressure put on the Asiatic nomads. The 1206 meeting of the Asian tribes saw Genghis granted the title of Khan.

The growth of a ruling class under increasing pressure from settled societies around them made settlement almost irresistible. The closest that they could get to this sort of dominance without themselves becoming settled was expanding the range of their conquest and tribute gathering.

Genghis used the slowly increasing resources due to his new status to increase centralization over the military organization. Taking northern China was essential in this development. Around 1211-1215, China and the surrounding regions were suffering a period of decay as Genghis manifest his military genius. In Gumilev's explanation, the passionary impulse

of Genghis and his officer corps radically altered nomadic behavior in general. Significantly, Genghis realized the importance of technology and siege weaponry and began the regular employment of Chinese labor.

In the autumn of 1236 Batu's forces devastated the detested Volga Bulgars and the following year destroyed the equally loathed Polovtsy. Russians simply treated the newcomers as just another nomadic tribe tormenting the southern parts of Rus. In smashing the Polovtsian tribes, Genghis sent ambassadors for the first time into Russia. In meeting Mstyslav the Bold, the emissaries were executed and war was declared. The battle of Kalka in 1223 was the final punishment for the disunity and destruction of the Kiev fragmentation era. The ignorance of Mongol martial arts and the typical lack of coordination, the fragmented Russians were defeated. Genghis died in 1227 and his empire divided among his sons.

The sheer number of Mongol and allied forces was shocking to Russia. Estimates of Mongol forces, including allies and auxiliary units, range from 100,000 to 600,000. Ryazan was the first principality attacked and her resistance was noteworthy. The divisions among Russians were again the cause of defeat, since no one came to the aid of Ryazan. The city was razed to the ground.

Using the frozen rivers in wintertime, the Mongols came up the Oka and attacked Kolomna which was also defeated. The road was then open to Vladimir in 1238 and the battle was the only time where princes were capable of coordinating their actions. Yuri Vsevolodovich tried in vain to create a northern coalition against the nomads and failed. Given the approach of Spring, Novgorod was spared. Surrounded by swamps soon to be thawed and impassable, the Mongols backed off.

This first incursion of the Mongols into Russia was an utter disaster for the Slavs. Resting, the nomads returned in 1239 and attacked the southwestern states of Pereslav and Chernigov. The following year Kiev and Galicia were taken. Though Europe was open to conquest, the death of Ogedei forced the local commanders to hasten back to China.

The expansion of the Crusaders in the Baltic States was Europe's answer to Russia's suffering. While Russia was bleeding from the invasion of Batu, its north-western borders were threatened by a new danger – German-Swedish aggression. German knights were Crusaders operating with the support of Rome and the German Empire (or rather, marcher lords with a great degree of independence from the Ottonian state) began to penetrate the Eastern Baltic, inhabited by Lithuanian, Latvian and Finno-Ugric tribes. These were non-Christian peoples who violently resisted the forced conversions of the Crusading orders.

Even after the defeat of the Crusaders by Alexander on the Neva, the Livonian knights took Pskov and the Novgorod hinterlands. Substantially weakened, the Order could not maintain its possessions and were forced out of Novgorod in 1242.

Certainly, the traditional view is not all false. The Mongolian state was later called the Golden Horde, and stretched from the Carpathian Mountains to western Siberia and the Black Soil regions of Eurasia. Its capital was founded by Batu in the Lower Volga city of Sarai. The Mongols were exhausted and constantly tempted by the eternal threat of settlement. Since nomads were cattle raisers, Russian forest was a threat even further. Thus, to a great extent, Russia maintained its vague independence. This is the basic outline of the “Yoke” in most works in the field.

The traditional view has been challenged to the point that in Russia today, references to the “Mongol Yoke” are being removed from official history textbooks in high school. The work

of GR Erikeyev argues that there was no Mongol “Yoke” and that the Mongols were not even primarily Asiatic. Ivan IV, for example, saw the Tartars as kin when he installed a converted Mongol on the throne. Much of the Russian language has Mongol roots and ultimately, these are both Slavic peoples. The idea of the “Tartar” was a catch-all term for Eurasian fighters. They knew the Russian terrain too well to be really foreign. Ultimately, about 35,000 of the full Mongol Horde of 130,000 were actually Asian.

In many ways, this approach cannot square the theory that Genghis was able to collect a group of warring nomads from the eastern plain and create, almost overnight, a massive army and civilization capable of controlling far more advanced civilizations.

First of all, there is logistically no way a massive mounted army could sweep through Asia and into Russia. Second, there seemed to be no real occupation. When the Horde conquered Vladimir-Suzdal in 1240, all it amounted to was a change in ruler. Yaroslav becomes prince without any “foreign” occupation. The Mongols were mostly Russian. They did not occupy Russia and were not opponents of the Russian state.

All princes used Tartar forces, and the phrase Rus-Tartar were not uncommon. At the very least, they were perceived as Russian. Carpini said that the Tartars and the Rus one people. Under Peter I, the Astrakhan documents were burnt and the histories attached to the noble families (that dictated their “place” in society) were destroyed. The Mongols used the double eagle. Even more, a Tartar force helped remove the Crusaders from Constantinople. Alexander Nevsky had a large Tartar army and most served Russian interests. It seems odd that the Mongol conqueror never left a garrison in Russia.

In Europe at the time, Russia was called “Great Tartary” and a “Tartar” was simply someone in the service of the Tsar, not an ethnic marker. In medieval Russian chronicles miniatures Russian troops are indistinguishable from Tatar. Same helmets, the same armor, the same weapons and battle flags yet in paintings of the war against Sweden, differences are clear.

Genghis Khan was a redhead, according to all contemporary accounts. He was not Asian. The Persian historian Rashid-Din (a contemporary of the Mongol occupation) writes that the children of Genghis Khan were “born mostly with gray-blue eyes and blond hair.” There seems to have been no Mongols in Russia, nor a Mongol empire. A winter invasion of hundreds of thousands of horsemen boggle the imagination. No horses can travel on ice for long. The term “Tatar” as an ethnic group appeared about three hundred years ago for the first time. “Mongol” is from the Greek “megalo” or “great.”

Another problem is that, despite having no siege weapons, Russian cities caved into the Mongols almost immediately. Kiev, the center of Old Russia, fell to the invaders in a matter of days. However, during the Polish invasion during the Time of Troubles, they laid siege to the city of Smolensk which lasted from September 21, 1609 to June 3, 1611. The defenders capitulated only when the Polish artillery broke through the impressive doorway in the wall, and the besieged were extremely exhausted by hunger and disease.

Whether this is accurate or not, there was an economic dependence and was limited to the payment of tribute, emergency levies, and the general privileges of being the supreme overlord of Russia. This is consistent with both the revisionist view as well as the traditional view. The clergy was tax exempt, strongly suggesting a Russian background to the Tartars, since there is no good reason for foreigners to so privilege this class. Scientists, doctors and the poor were also exempt.

There would be no reason for an occupation force to permit large armies of natives under native rulers. Yet, Moscow was precisely this, with one faction of the “Mongols” building Russia

at the expense of another. If this is true, it would be unprecedented. The “Horde” of course, was always the Russian army. The church grew and developed under Mongol rule, something that makes little sense since this was a strongly nationalist institution seeking the centralized, royal rule of an Orthodox king. Again, this makes no sense from the “Mongol” point of view

There are other arguments that the “Yoke” was little more than the “Oprichnina” idea in an earlier guise. The Tsar and the “Mongol Khan” or the “Great Emperor” were the same. Cossacks and Tartars were often spoken of as synonymous in the later middle ages and calling Russians “Tartars” was not unheard of. There was no invasion as is normally argued.

The concept that the Horde “retarded” Russian development is also false. Marco Polo marveled at the postal service and infrastructure of Russia under the Horde. In the battle of Kulikovo, the very first firearms were used. The concept of “backwardness” developed only in the reign of Peter I to justify his policies and depict a Russia desperately in need of his reforms.

There is no mention of Asian soldiers in the “Mongol” army. From the very first battle with the “invaders” there were Russians on all sides. Mongol seemed to refer to any nomads at all, similar to Cossacks. The notion of a “yoke” was not contemporary, but the development of later, post-Petrine thought.

The Tartar “yoke” was not inconsistent with Russian independence. The political development of Russia under the yoke. The first prince, received the Horde shortcut to the Grand Principality was the brother of the deceased Yuri - Yaroslav Vsevolodovich, soon poisoned in the Karakoram due to political intrigues.

After the invasion, the Russian princes were divided into two groups. One, headed by Andrei Yaroslavich (Grand Duke of Vladimir from 1249 to 1252), and Daniel of Galicia, supported by the princes of western Russia, opposed the Mongols and advocated active resistance. The west was the least affected by the invasion. The other, which consisted mainly of the princes of north-eastern Russia, was inclined to accept Mongol rule as an inevitability. The policy of compromise with the Horde began with the acceptance of Mongol rule by Alexander Nevsky as the lesser of two evils; the second evil being western occupation by the Knights.

Considering the disastrous effects of open opposition to the Mongols, they were hoping to use their power to deal with the Western Catholic danger. In the popular mind, this was perceived as a serious threat to the Orthodox faith, and hence the existence of Russia itself. The Mongols were tolerant, the west was not. According to the Russian emigre historian GV Vernadsky, Alexander Nevsky, in order to preserve religious freedom, sought to accept Mongol rule. His goal was to save Orthodoxy.

In the revisionist, Russian-language journal Hypotheses and Facts, an anonymous author makes some startling claims, claims that are very difficult to refute. First, there are no local written records of the existence of the Mongol empire (that is, in Mongolia). Even more, they are not mentioned in those Russian chronicles universally deemed authentic.

They have left behind zero architectural monuments. There was no linguistic, legal or cultural borrowing from the Mongols. There are no discernible economic consequences of their empire. The author states: “Two-thirds of [Russian wealth] was taken by these Eurasian nomads, and there seems to be nothing they have taken home. Maybe not libraries, but at least some gold, stripped and torn down for their their temples – there is nothing at all.” There is also no ruins on the normally accepted capital city of Sarai. Nothing in this location that would suggest anything significant happened there.

There are no military formations taken from Mongols nor weapons of any kind. Possibly most importantly, there is no local folk memory among Mongols. While Mongols have a strong folk tradition of their “golden age,” this phantom empire is not part of it. Finally, there is no trace of this Asian DNA among Russians.

In his argument that there could have been no empire deriving from nomads on the Steppe, he writes:

I - Nomads, in principle, could not capture China (Russia, Persia, etc), Because:
a) the population density of the nomadic peoples is hundreds of times less than the density of settled peoples and so their mobilization potential is incomparable;
b) war is not really about armed men fighting each other, but is rather the confrontation of social systems in which, other things being equal, the most efficient system wins. Nomadic peoples feature a form of social organization that is tribal in nature. It simply cannot compete with a strong state [such as China – MRJ] having a professional army and cannot win even a brief war of attrition.
c) Strong states possess a vast technological superiority over stateless peoples and nomads which is fully manifested in the military. Nomads possess no metallurgy; they possess no technical means of communication, neither a system of command and control. They have no military infrastructure such as fortifications, magazines, stockpiles, supplies for mobilization, a mechanism of deployment or any base for combat operations.

<http://gifakt.ru/archives/index/kak-istoriki-sochinyali-mongolskuyu-imperiyu/>

Challenging the clearly Eurocentric view of most liberal historians, George Vernadsky writes:

Obedying rulers of the house of Genghis Khan, the Russian state was politically included in a great historical world stretching from the Pacific Ocean to the Mediterranean Sea. The political scope of the world is manifest in the great Mongolian *kurultays* (курултаях) of the XIII century: these *kurultais* participated (in addition to the Mongol princes, elders and administrators throughout Central, North and East Asia), Russian grand dukes, Georgian and Armenian kings, Iconium (Seljuk) Sultans, Kirmanchi and Mossulskie Atabay and others (Vernadsky, 1927: 160-161).

The argument here is that, while not directly a part of the eastern Roman world, this was not inherently a problem. The unargued assumption of western historians is that the liberal benchmarks of the renaissance and Reformation passed the Rus by. Therefore, her development cannot be “normal” precisely in that it cannot be liberal. She must be forced into that mold. This is the origin of Churchill's stupid phrase about the mystery of the Russian people. It had something to do with an onion. The point is that there is nothing specifically superior to the western, modern events over those marking the eastern empires of China or even the “Mongol-Tartar Yoke.”

The consequences of the invasion was primarily the destruction of Russia's cities. Out of 74 cities of Russia in the 13th century, 49 were destroyed. The Mongols deported the most skilled workers, hence undermining the craft guilds and deformed the development of the Russian

economy. These ruined cities, the impoverishment of the population, collecting tribute and the outflow of silver strengthened the agrarian economy and preserved the patriarchal Russian countryside.

The “yoke” was in fact the rule of a Cossack Horde. Nomads don't suddenly create an intensely centralized state that leaves no records. There is not the slightest memory of the great Mongol empire anywhere in Mongolia or nearby. There are no records or any structures, ruins or documents about this massive “Mongol” empire. Russians always fought invaders with the exception of these “Mongols.” Further, the large Russian armies permitted by the Horde generally suggests that this was not a foreign, colonial empire at all.

Besides the cities, the secular lords suffered extensively. This meant that the state was able to grow in power. In the future, the elite boyars became more dependent on their princes than in the era of pre-Mongol Russia. They could not freely dispose of their possessions, meaning that many turned from allies of the prince to his subjects. In general, the transformation of Russia into the *ulus* of the Golden Horde led to its civilizational orbit moving east.

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