

The Scourge of God: The (in)Visibility of Mongols in Russian History and Memory

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Abstract: Despite having a long and fascinating national history, there is a two-hundred year period that is regarded by the Russian people as a horrendous and humiliating black mark upon their nation's past. This was consequently titled (by Russians) as the Mongol Yoke. Why is it that Russians continue to carry an eight-hundred year old grudge, rather than accept that the Mongol conquest directly contributed to the rise of the powerful Russian Empire? It is this question that this paper will attempt to answer.

The role of the Mongol conquest of Russia in the thirteenth century is an interesting one in Russian history and collective memory. The degrees of brutality and swiftness adapted to form this vast, pagan and 'infidel' Mongol Empire resulted in the negative exaggeration of this experience in Russian national history. The stereotypes and myths surrounding Chingis (or Genghis) Khan and his Mongol army are the theme of this paper, and I will examine the perceptions and acceptance of the Mongols in Russian history and collective memory. What makes Russia's experience unique from that of China, India, and Central Asia is its geopolitical positioning between Europe and Asia. As a Eurasian nation, Russia has struggled throughout the centuries to be a "civilized" and "progressive" Western nation despite its empire being three-quarters Asian. As such, Russian sentiment towards their Asian past has been rife with contempt and humiliation. The memory of the Mongol invasion inspires feelings similar to those evoked by remembrance of Russia's embarrassing loss to Japan in 1905. Given these sentiments, the Russians have dismissed and downplayed the two-hundred year Mongol conquest of their country. Whenever they could not avoid admitting to this defeat, they over-emphasized the severity of the invasions, and savagery of the Mongols. I will not, by any means, attempt to deemphasize the horrible atrocities committed by the Mongols across their empire. However I wish to remind the reader that the use of extreme violence in warfare was not a uniquely Mongol characteristic. In fact, some of history's most disturbing atrocities were carried out by so-called Western, Christian crusaders.

Around the year 1197, a nomadic warrior by the name of Chingis Khan became the leader of a small confederation called Mongols.¹ By

¹Gerard Challiand, *Nomadic Empires: From Mongolia to the Danube*, trans. from French by A.M. Berrett (London, 2004), 59-60.

favouring the promotion of humble war chiefs of other various tribes, Chingis garnered loyalty and authority from Central Asian tribes and united them under the single designation of Mongols. By establishing a highly regimented military organization as well as a system of customary Mongol laws called The Great Yasa, Chingis created one of the most efficient and effective war machines of the middle ages. The Great Yasa gave structure and diplomacy to the Mongols, encouraging them to embrace and respect various religions, to respect innocent people, to grant envoys diplomatic immunity and punish those of their own people who did not abide by these rules.² Although this may come as a surprise to those accustomed to tales of Mongol savagery, the Mongols invaded Russia and the rest of the Mongol Empire under these guidelines and followed them closely for hundreds of years.

Following a concept similar to the United States' Manifest Destiny, the Mongols expanded their empire, believing that they were preordained to establish order on earth. By 1223, the Mongols reached the steppes of Hungary – it was here that the Mongols entered the Russian historical record.³ By this time, Chingis Khan had died, leaving his vast empire to his sons to divide amongst themselves. One of them, Batu, had been granted lands to the farthest west of the empire's edges, and was told that whatever land he conquered would be his new kingdom, or khanate. In this Western campaign, the Mongols were originally warring with the nomadic Polovtsy, and sent envoys to Kiev requesting that the prince remain neutral. The Kievan prince slaughtered the Mongol envoys which went against steppe custom and was an immediate declaration of war.⁴ A brief but bloody battle ensued between the Rus' and the Mongols ending, predictably, in the defeat of the Rus'; however, as suddenly as they arrived the Mongol army disappeared East again. As much as the Rus' preferred to claim that their military prowess forced their flight, the Mongol's sudden departure was due to the poisoning of Greath Khan Ugedei, Batu's older brother, who supposedly died at the hands of an aunt. The Mongols would never attempt to invade Europe after this withdrawal, thus, as one historian pointed out, "This woman, whoever she was, must be considered the saviour of Western Europe."⁵

When the Mongols returned to Kievan-Rus' in 1237, it took less than a year for most of the principalities to fall, including Riazan, Moscow,

² George Vernadsky, *The Mongols and Russia* (New Haven, 1953), 102-107.

³ Charles J. Halperin, *Russia and the Golden Horde: The Mongol Impact on Medieval Russian History* (Bloomington, 1985), 20.

⁴ Halperin, *Russia and the Golden Horde*, 46.

⁵ Vernadsky, *The Mongols and Russia*, 58.

and Vladimir.⁶ At this time, Kievan-Rus' was divided into various principalities, ruled by princes who were constantly at war with one-another. These squabbles and lack of unity led to their swift defeats at the hands of the Mongols. The Mongols' war machine and siege weapons, adapted by the Chinese, were unstoppable; by 1240, the great city of Kiev was razed to the ground and with it 200,000 Kievans were slaughtered and only 200 houses remained standing. The city of Novgorod was miraculously spared. By the spring, rather than achieving supreme military authority, thick, deep mud created by the infamous Russian thaw - considered impassable for an army of 200,000, each soldier with at least two horses - prevented the Mongol's advance into Novgorod.⁷

The atrocities recorded during this violent and lightning-quick conquest of Russia are disturbing, yet many are unrealistic in their savagery, and most are likely exaggerated. Reports of Mongols taking delight in killing old ladies and gnawing on their bones can easily be dismissed; however, others of rape, murder, arson and unusually cruel forms of torture are viable, as there are similar contemporary recorded examples across the Mongol Empire. That the Mongols were terrifying is undeniable. However, it must also be taken into consideration that the Mongols followed the Great Yasa, granting the Rus' the freedom to maintain their elected leaders as well as their religion: Russian Orthodoxy. Before an attack, Mongols sent envoys to a city to request surrender – if accepted the Mongols would allow them to preserve their ruling family and religion for the price of paying a tribute of 10% of all the city's wealth and goods to the Mongols.⁸ If the city refused to surrender (as they usually did) the Mongols would kill every adult male, enslave the women and children and raze the city, which is what happened in Kiev, and the destruction there was profound.

The western region established under Batu would be called the Golden Horde and its capital Sarai was established in the steppes near the Volga basin. Russian princes had to travel to Sarai in order to renew their patents to rule or plead their rights to the throne. Sarai's distance from Rus' – and the fact that the Russian princes were allowed to keep their thrones – meant that the Mongols ruled Russia in a fashion similar to that of an absentee landlord.⁹ Mongols would use Tatar middle-men to collect the taxes from Russian cities, and later, this job would be given to a

⁶ Paul Harrison Silfen, *Influence of The Mongols on Russia: A Dimensional History* (New York, 1974), 13-14.

⁷ Silfen, *Influence of the Mongols*, 14-15.

⁸ Jack Weatherford, *Genghis Khan and the Making of the Modern World* (New York, 2004), 146.

⁹ Halperin, *Russia and the Golden Horde*, 51.

prince of Rus' under the title Grand Prince of Vladimir. Any prince (and his principality) who was conferred the title was immensely enriched by hoarding collected monies and fierce competitions between principalities vying for the title often led to open warfare. The Mongols responded by either crushing the battle or by taking sides, usually favouring the prince who bore the title of Grand Prince of Vladimir.

Despite what modern history suggests, the 200-year Mongol rule over Russia was relatively peaceful and cooperative, except, of course, amongst rivaling princes. Many Russian princes fought alongside the Mongols in campaigns against other peoples, and many other Russian nobles and artisans spent months amongst the Tatars and Mongols in Sarai, often intermarrying or offering their skills to service the Golden Horde. As Charles Halperin suggests, Rus' offered very little to the Golden Horde in regards to trade or resources, and the people there remained relatively free from direct rule. As internal stability within the Mongol Empire disintegrated, the Mongols (now referred to as Tatars after the Horde's conversion to Islam) committed less and less energy to controlling their Russian subjects. As such, the independence and power of the Russian princes grew.¹⁰ The Tatar's aim was to extract as much from Russia as possible with minimum effort and manpower. Russians often believe that it was their fierce spirit that kept the Mongols at bay yet, in reality, Rus was simply not valuable enough to warrant the Mongols' attention. By the mid-fifteenth century, the Russians were strong enough to gain their independence from the Golden Horde. Civil Wars, the plague and constant change in leadership led to the demise of the formal Mongol Empire's breathtaking authority and geographical reach. By learning the successful warring methods of the Mongols and Tatars, the Russian princes fought and won significant battles against their overlords; by 1480, Russia emerged as its own small empire under the leadership of the Grand Prince of Moscow, from that point referred to as "Tsar," a term related to "Caesar" which the Russians had been using to address their Mongol or Tatar khans.

Surprisingly, the Mongol or Tatar Yoke proved beneficial to the Russian people. Not only did their country emerge as a united nation as well as an ascending Eurasian power, the Russians also inherited from their Tatar overlords their administrative, autocratic and military organizations.¹¹ The rise of Moscow as Russia's greatest city is also attributed to the Tatars; the Tatars eventually favoured the Grand Princes of the Moscow principality by continuously conferring on its prince the

¹⁰ Halperin, *Russia and the Golden Horde*, 30.

¹¹ Donald Otowski, *Muscovy and the Mongols: Cross-Cultural Influences on the Steppe Frontier, 1304-1589* (Cambridge, 1998), 132.

title of Grand Prince of Vladimir. With this title, the city grew far more prosperous than its rivals of Lvov and Novgorod and by cooperating with the Horde to subduing resisting principalities, Moscow gained the trust of Sarai and was eventually given the Grand Duchy of Vladimir, which began expanding and absorbing many of the eastern principalities under its authority.¹² By the time of the Horde's demise, Moscow was the only remaining powerful city and the undoubted successor of the Golden Horde's western realm.

What we think of as Muscovite Russia was a direct descendant of the Golden Horde. Its government, administration, and military organization were all adapted from the Mongols and Tatars. They also influenced vocabulary, diplomacy, commercial and social interacting, taxation methods, criminal punishment and the postal system.¹³ These influences are noteworthy because they demonstrate how significant the Mongol Yoke was in creating the Russian empire, despite the fact that the Russian people attempt to deny this fact.

While there was a short-lived fascination with Tatars and Mongols in the sixteenth-century when the Muscovite tsars played on their role as successors of the Golden Horde in order to conquer Kazan and Astrakhan, the general perception of the Mongol conquest has since been one of Russians beginning to create imaginary barriers between their culture and that of the Mongols. Muscovite Russians viewed their Rus' ancestors as victims and slaves to the barbaric hordes of the East, and refused to believe that the savage Asians could have had any positive impact on Russian society. As Richard Pipes states:

The subject of Mongol influence is a very sensitive one for Russians, who are quick to take offence at the suggestion that their cultural heritage has been shaped in any way by the orient, and especially by the oriental power best remembered for its appalling atrocities and the destruction of great centres of civilization.¹⁴

The Mongol conquest has been accused of disrupting the development of Russian culture and society, and the Mongols and Tatars blamed for Russia's backwardness compared to the rest of Europe.¹⁵

Russian Orthodoxy played the biggest role in creating anti-Tatar sentiments in Muscovite Russia. During the actual Tatar Yoke, the laity generally cooperated with their overlords by fighting for them, collecting

¹² Silfen, *Influence of the Mongols*, 37-40.

¹³ Otrowski, *Muscovy and the Mongols*, 51.

¹⁴ Otrowski, *Muscovy and the Mongols*, 11.

¹⁵ Moshe Gammer, "Russia and the Eurasian Steppe Nomads: An Overview," in *Mongols, Turks, and Others: Eurasian Nomads and the Sedentary World*, eds. Reuven Amitai and Michal Biran (London, 2005), 493.

taxes and suppressing uprisings of their own people. Russian nobility learned the Tatar language, lived among them as well as intermarried with converted Tatar women. The Russian Orthodox Church, however, remained steadfast in its opposition to the Mongols and Tatars. Despite the Tatar's tolerance of the church's existence, the Church viewed the Mongols as pagans and their Muslim descendants, the Tatars, as infidels. Unlike lay Muscovy, the Church regarded Russia's tsars as the descendants of Augustus Caesar, an ancestor much more suitable to the church than Genghis Khan and his successors. In the sixteenth-century, the Church purposely inflated the memory of the oppressive and destructive parts of the Tatar Yoke in order to rewrite Russian history and destroy the links between Russia and its infidel past.¹⁶ To do this, it constructed concepts of the terrible yoke, emphasizing Muscovite resistance and their effort to liberate Russia. Examples of intrinsic fabrication and purposeful neglect are found in the Chronicle of Novgorod and the Nikonian Chronicle. The chronicles, written during the Tatar Yoke, were recorded by churchmen, and thus only described Mongol and Tatar brutality, leaving out positive occurrences as well as the cooperation of the princes with their 'infidel' lords. This Charles Halperin terms "the ideology of silence."

Because the existence of pragmatic relations with infidels violated the fundamentals of two exclusivist religions - Christianity and Islam - Russian churchmen preferred to stay mute about cooperation between Tatars and Russians as well as about any positive influence on Russian society. Thus, such relationships are not found in contemporary Russian chronicles, but are found in various secular records. Historian Moshe Gammer believes that there were two purposes behind these negative constructs of the Mongols' image in Russian history. The first was to erase the memory of any collaboration between the Russians and their Mongol-Tatar rulers. The second was to delegitimize the lure of the nomadic way of life to deter the flight of runaway outlaws, serfs and debtors to the steppes to join the ranks of the troublesome Cossacks.¹⁷ The true impact of the Mongols and Tatars on Russian history and society was therefore diminished, hidden or denied in contemporary accounts that ultimately damaged both Russian popular sentiment and collective memory. The neglect of positive Mongol and Tatar influence on society continued to be reflected in subsequent histories as well as in

¹⁶Charles Halperin, "The Ideology of Silence: Prejudice and Pragmatism on the Medieval Religious Frontier," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 26, no. 3 (July 1984), 465.

¹⁷ Gammer, "Russia and the Eurasian Steppe," 488-489.

Church-based education, resulting in the continuation of the myth of the Tatar Yoke up to today.

In the seventeenth century, Tsar Peter the Great was determined to transform Russia into a great, western European state. His policies of westernization, which forbade the wearing of beards and traditional Russian clothing, introduced further resentment of all things Asian or Eastern. No longer would Russia look East for cultural influence, but would instead turn westward. During this time, the Russians became aware of what they perceived as their extreme backwardness in comparison to Europe and, as a result, the Mongol Yoke was further blamed for destroying the culture of Kievan-Rus' causing the Russians to fall behind Europe. Any positive elements of the Mongol reign were forgotten as Russians became ashamed and embarrassed about their past, a sentiment that remains true today. As Russian author Fyodor Dostoevsky wrote in the nineteenth century, "in Europe we are Tatars, but in Asia we too are Europeans."¹⁸ Rejected by Europe while simultaneously rejecting barbaric Asia, the Russians faced an identity crisis. Their Mongol past became further alienated from and resented by Russian society. As retribution, the Russian Empire slowly conquered what had been the expansive Mongol Empire, extending all the way to the Pacific Ocean by the seventeenth century.

With Peter's policy of westernization, European notions of progress and science entered Russia -- Imperialism, Orientalism and racial scientific classifications altered the Russian state's policies and collective thought towards nomads, Asians and Russia's Mongol Yoke. It was believed that barbaric, primitive Asians originated in Mongolia, indicating to Westerners that the Mongols were the most underdeveloped peoples. As a consequence, they were often compared physically and mentally with Orangutans in medical journals.¹⁹ The fact that the Russians were conquered by these underdeveloped people for two hundred years only added to their humiliation about their past, and fuelled their inferiority complex with respect to Western Europe. From such scientific notions also came racial classification. The term "Mongoloid" was originally meant to define a category of race comprising of Mongols, Inuit, Tibetans, Chinese, Turks and Japanese; however, a medical doctor by the name of Downs altered the meaning of the word "Mongoloid" when he saw a facial resemblance between Mongols and mentally handicapped Caucasian children.²⁰ Downs

¹⁸ Marlene Laruelle, *Russian Eurasianism: An Ideology of the Steppe* (Washington, 2008), 3.

¹⁹ Weatherford, *Genghis Khan*, 257.

²⁰ Weatherford, *Genghis Khan*, 257.

inaugurated the connection between the term “Mongol” and mental retardation, arguing that the mentally underdeveloped and child-like Mongols were quite similar to children born out of incest. Atavistic Mongolism blamed the Mongols for the levels of mental retardation among white children, crime and feeble-mindedness of the Western world, which were believed to be planted in Europeans via the rape of white women during the Eurasian domination of the Mongol Empire. It is no wonder that such “discoveries” would further embarrass the Russian people about their Mongol past.

There were groups of intellectuals that emerged in the nineteenth century embracing Russia’s unique, non-European past. These were the Slavophiles and Eurasianists who both disliked Russia’s obsession with the west and recognized Russia as a unique nation with a unique history. As such, these groups embraced their role as a Eurasian country, including the Asian influences on their culture. The “motto” of the Eurasianist school, “in every Russian there is a drop of yellow blood,” reveals their belief in the Muscovite empire as the successor to the Mongol one.²¹ I will not go into detail about these groups, except to note that whenever Russia was at odds with the West, Russians were much more accepting of their Asian roots, seeing everything Eastern as better than anything Western. However, such sentiments were confined to small groups of intellectuals, not popular opinion. The general perception of Mongols would continue to be a negative one, and as education became more widespread by the nineteenth century, the Orthodox Church’s opinion of the Mongol Yoke became even more deeply engrained in Russian collective memory.

During Soviet times, the Mongol Yoke was seen as an historical catastrophe that the glorious Russian people managed to overcome and overthrow. Stalin’s “correct” version of Muscovy’s liberation credited the Russian people with struggling against the Mongols, not the Russian nobility. Such stories of collective uprisings were recalled during World War II to inspire patriotism against the outside enemies. The German invasion was purposely compared to that of the Mongols to encourage national pride and remind the Russian people that they had overcome a similar circumstance in their glorious past. In order to sustain this patriotic sentiment, the Soviets ensured that positive attributes of the Mongol Yoke were left out of Soviet history writing. Soviet historians refused to work with Slavophiles and Eurasianists resulting in further disregard of Mongol contributions and the continuation of the belief in Russian collective memory that the Mongol Yoke was a black mark on their people’s history.

²¹ Laruelle, *Russian Eurasianism*, 43.

An extreme example of anti-Mongol sentiment in Russian society is Stalin's anti-Mongolian campaign in the 1930s, which resulted in the death of over 30,000 Mongols, most of whom were believed to be descendants of Genghis Khan.²² Stalin viewed the glorification of Genghis Khan as a threat to his own authority, and, as a result, entire families thought to be Chingisids (Genghis Khan's descendants) were shot, and thousands more were exiled to the gulags. Additionally, religious objects were destroyed and ancient libraries torched – it is also believed that the historic spirit banner, or standard, of Genghis Khan was stolen from the Mongol people and destroyed. These purges in Mongolia destroyed an entire generation of Chingisids, linguists, historians and archaeologists who could have greatly contributed to the study of the Mongols and the history of their ancient empire.

The Mongols' reputation as relayed in Russian history is unfortunately inaccurate. Now, thanks to the groundbreaking work of Eurasian and Eurasianist scholars and archaeologists, historians are beginning to piece together an accurate history of the intricate and interesting Mongol Empire. Historians now agree that the stereotypical perspective of the Mongol Yoke as a barbaric, oppressive, and brutal reign is incorrect, and that the Muscovites were actually the freest subjects of the entire Mongol Empire, save for the Mongols themselves. As with all relationships, the one between the Mongols and the Muscovite people was far more complex and cooperative than Russian history reveals. The "ideology of silence" that occurred in Russia is now being challenged and deconstructed as facts about the Mongol reign are coming to light. It can only be anticipated that the negative stereotype of the barbaric Mongol as the scourge of God and underdeveloped savage, will also be deconstructed as Russians and people across the globe are introduced to the outstanding organization, military prowess and advanced complexity that was Chingis Khan's legacy. The relationship between captor and conquered is never as simple as history portrays it. It is the hope of this historian that, in light of new and exciting research, the infamously long collective memory of the Russian people will forget the imagined Mongol Yoke and accept that the Mongols influenced the progress and advancement of a fragmented realm, contributing to its transformation into what became modern Russia.

²² Weatherford, *Genghis Khan*, 264.