
The nature and extent of the impact of Mongol rule upon the development of Muscovite political and social institutions has long been a matter of intense controversy among historians of Russia. Was Mongol civilization more influential than that of Byzantium or Kievan Rus' in shaping the development of Muscovy? Did the Mongol conquest mark a clean break with the socio-political system that had evolved during the Kievan era, and did it sever Russia irrevocably from the mainstream of European civilization and “progressive” developments in Western Europe (to wit, the Renaissance, Reformation, and Enlightenment)? Were the Mongols responsible for inculcating the authoritarian, autocratic style of rulership that became synonymous with Russian political life? Can the blame for the economic backwardness that is widely assumed to have held sway in Muscovite Russia be laid at their feet? Were Mongol cultural norms responsible for “Oriental” Muscovite social practices such as the seclusion of women?

Although the traditional approach to the study of the Tatar Yoke has been to portray that era as one of unrelenting Mongol oppression that was finally ended by heroic Muscovite resistance and to ascribe to Mongol influence all that has been despotic, backward, oppressive and xenophobic in Russian history, some revisionist historians have called these assumptions into question. For example, the American Charles Halperin in his *Russia and the Golden Horde: The Mongol Impact on Medieval Russian History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985) has noted that relations between Mongols and Muscovites may have been a good deal more congenial and mutually fruitful than is suggested by the “dominance-resistance” model. Harvard University’s Donald Ostrowski, the author of numerous articles on Muscovite political, cultural, and religious history, builds upon this revisionist approach. The first half of *Muscovy and the Mongols* investigates the Mongols’ impact upon Russia in four areas in which the Tatar Yoke has widely been assumed to have exerted a strong influence: administrative and military institutions, the seclusion of women, “Oriental despotism,” and the economic oppression and devastation attributed to Mongol/Tatar domination. The remainder of the book concentrates upon the origins of the traditionally negative view of Mongol rule.

Ostrowski sees the greatest impact in the area of administrative and military institutions. For example, on the basis of a close reading of the linguistic and documentary evidence, he concludes that the Muscovite offices of dual civilian and military governors—the *namesniki* and *volosteli*—can be directly traced to the Mongol/Tatar *darughacín* (Russ. daruga, doraga, doroga) and *basqaq* (Russ. baskak), which were themselves the results of Mongol borrowing from the Chinese, who possessed similar officials (the *tai-shou*, or civilian governor and the *duwei*, or military governor). A host of military practices can also be attributed to Mongol influence, for example, the use of reflex bows and short stirrups and the use of silk shirts under mail armor as an additional layer of protection (an arrow that penetrated the wearer’s flesh could be removed with less damage to the surrounding tissue, since the barbed arrow head would be wrapped in silk and would not cause additional injury when pulled out). Here, at least, Mongol influence is incontestable.
It has often been assumed that the Muscovite practice of secluding elite women from contact with non-relative males, noted by Sigismund von Herberstein and other early Western visitors to Muscovy, was the result of Mongol/Tatar cultural influence. Writers ranging from the nineteenth-century Russian literary critic Vissarion Belinskii to the historian of Russian gender issues Dorothy Atkinson deemed the seclusion of women a mark of oppression and misogyny stemming from Mongol domination—either directly, under the influence of Mongol custom or indirectly, as a result of the brutalization and harshening of social mores brought about by the Mongol Yoke. Yet, as Ostrowski points out, neither the Mongols themselves nor their Tatar auxiliaries practiced female seclusion; indeed, Mongol and Tatar women enjoyed greater personal freedom and social and political influence than their Muscovite counterparts. Ostrowski admits that the origins of Muscovite female seclusion remain elusive, but textual evidence suggests an earlier Byzantine precedent.

“Oriental despotism”—an impressionistic concept at best—has traditionally been ascribed to the Mongols, who allegedly adopted it from China and imposed it upon an unwilling Muscovy. Ostrowski dismisses Mongol influence here, noting that recent research by Elizabeth Endicott-West and others has shown that Mongolian khans’ style of rule was more conciliar and decentralized than previously believed; indeed, he suggests that even the Chinese emperors’ exercise of power was checked (in theory, at least) by the need to maintain the “Mandate of Heaven” upon which their power rested. Moreover, even in supposedly despotic Muscovy, the ruler’s power was checked by the Boyar Council, the Church, and the system of mestnichestvo (the practice of assigning military posts or administrative offices based on hereditary clan ranking, rather than the ruler’s preference). Thus “Oriental despotism” cannot be laid at the Mongols’ feet.

Most historians of Russia have posited that the era of the “Tatar Yoke” was one of “economic destruction by the Mongols and their reducing of Rus’ to an almost purely agricultural economy” (p. 108) The effects of Mongol rule have been used by nationalists and patriots to excuse Russia’s alleged backwardness vis-à-vis the West, and by Marxists to elucidate the origins of Russian feudalism. Yet, as Ostrowski shows, after a brief period of decline brought on by the invasion, the Muscovite economy was on the mend by the early fourteenth century and had even begun to flourish by the mid-1300s, as evidenced by a flurry of masonry construction and an expansion of commercial relations between Russia and European and Asian trading centers (thanks to the mantle of protection afforded traders by the pax mongolica).

Whence, then, our overwhelmingly negative view of the nature and consequences of Mongol rule in Russia? Ostrowski finds its origins in the misrepresentations and embellishments that saturate the writings of Russian churchmen (for example, the sixteenth-century Nikon Chronicle). Previously, the “Rus’ Church [had taken] a position of accepting the overlordship of the khans as the will of God in accordance with the fact that the Byzantine Empire was then in alliance with the Qipchaq Khanate” (p. 145), but by the late fifteenth century, the churchmen had began to evolve an anti-Tatar ideology, supporting Muscovy’s growing religious and national independence. (In 1448, the Patriarch of Constantinople ceased to select the metropolitan of the Muscovite Church, and after 1462, the Russian Grand Prince was no longer appointed by the khan of the Golden