

Muscovy and the Mongols: Cross-cultural Influences on the Steppe Frontier, 1304-1589

Review Number:

129

Publish date:

Monday, 1 May, 2000

Author:

Donald Ostrowski

Date of Publication:

1998

Pages:

329pp.

Publisher:

Cambridge University Press

Place of Publication:

Cambridge

Reviewer:

Will Ryan

Ask most people, including Russians, who have a modest familiarity with European history what they know about medieval Russia and their answer will probably be brief, but will include something about the Mongols, perhaps even 'the Tatar yoke' (for a succinct statement of the difference between Mongols and Tatars see Ostrowski's preface, p. xiii). This 'Tatar yoke', still often invoked, especially in Russian writing (tatarskoe igo) is one of those historical catchphrase categories, like 'the Dark Ages', which may be occasionally convenient to teachers, popular writers and political ideologists, but more often serve to blur a whole period or topic and discourage any further examination. In the case of the Mongols/Tatars their invasion of Kievan Russia certainly happened (the first Russian defeat at the hands of a marauding Tatar army was in 1223 and in the period 1237-1240 most of Russia was subjugated) and could easily have extended further west if circumstances had been just a little different. And the consequences of the invasion were certainly profound and helped to shape Muscovite and modern Russia, perhaps even its role in recent world history. Exactly what the consequences were, however, has been a matter of debate ever since Russia's first great historian Karamzin in the early nineteenth century (his view was that 'the calamity was a blessing in disguise' since it unified the Russian principalities). While there has been no school of 'Tatar yoke denial', the sensitivities and propaganda of national pride and politics have certainly played their part in Russian and Soviet attitudes to the period (see Eisenstein's *Alexander Nevskii*), just as some non-Russian historians, not least in the Cold War period, used the long period of Mongol overlordship to disparage Russia ('scratch a Russian, find a Tatar'), and later, by implication, the Soviet Union. In most cases both Russian and non-Russian historians have seen the Mongol invasion as a disaster for Russia, one over which the Russian people heroically triumphed (at one end of the historiographical spectrum), or one which led to cultural and political backwardness and slavish oriental despotism (a view shared by many non-Russian writers and Russian Marxists). Soviet writing often managed to adopt both these attitudes at the same time.

The facts of the case have been difficult for a non-specialist and non-Russophone reader to assemble and

assess. It will now be a little easier. Donald Ostrowski has written an invaluable book which charts the historiographical debate and analyses the impact of the Mongols on Russia more fully than any other single work. Even better, it has that fast disappearing aid to scholarship: good, informative and argumentative footnotes. The title of the book, it must be said, is slightly misleading: the book is really about the origins of Muscovite Russia and its institutions, and the 'cross-cultural influences', though looked at in a very broad context and in considerable depth, are examined primarily to that end the subtitles of the two parts of the book make this very clear: *Part 1 'Mongol influence: what's what and what's not'; Part 2 'Development of an anti-Tatar ideology in the Muscovite Church'*. 'Cross-cultural' does not mean you will find anything here on Russian influence on the Mongols.

Ostrowski carefully defines his aims and terms in his preface, and in his Introduction outlines the historiography of his subject. Perhaps fortunately for him, the subject has encouraged a good number of historians into making succinct statements of their position, all of which are duly and readably quoted. Ostrowski is fairly even-handed here, apart from properly castigating those Russian historians who espouse virgin birth theories on all aspects of Russian culture. I would offer only one criticism in this context: one of his two chosen examples of excessively local interpretation, the view of some Russian historians that the dragon-slaying figure on Muscovite seals is 'a mounted tsar', is more complicated than his argument and his quoted sources might suggest, and the alternative St George interpretation offered here is itself open to challenge; some consideration should be given to the literature on zmeevik amulets and the 'Thracian rider' motif, which would certainly strengthen the case for external influence.

Ostrowski then offers his own 'synthesis for the purpose of the further study of Muscovite culture' (p. 13 ff.). Essentially this is an identification of five models and an ecumenical plea not to denigrate the work of scholars who adhere to a view you disagree with, together with a chronological division of 'early', 'middle' and 'late' Muscovy. 'Early' Muscovy is defined as covering the period 1304 to 1448, a period of competition with other principalities of northern Rus', Byzantine in its high culture and religion, part Kievan and part Mongol in its law, heavily Mongolized in its politics and warfare (but why this starting date is chosen is not explained, and the preceding sixty years of Mongol domination in the principalities of Rus' are not much referred to in the argument about influences); 'Middle' Muscovy is defined as the period from 1448 to 1589, at the beginning of which the Muscovite Grand Prince was still paying tribute to the Qipchaq khan but was more or less politically independent, the Church had begun to appoint its own metropolitan, and in the course of which Muscovy began to absorb most of what is now European Russia, and began to claim to be the successor to the Byzantine Empire, as well as developing anti-Tatar propaganda. The 'late' Muscovy is defined as the period of 1589 to 1722, from the establishment of the Moscow Patriarchate to the death of Peter the Great, a time of increasing Westernization, the institutionalization of serfdom, and territorial expansion into Siberia and the Ukraine. This is a contentious but defensible scheme, with the 'late' period perhaps most likely to provoke dissent the Polish intervention, beginning of the Romanov dynasty, the Nikonian schism, the Ulozhenie code of law, and several episodes in Peter's reign can all be considered watershed points.

The introduction ends with a somewhat naive plea for the training of future historians of Muscovy in Slavic and West European languages and history, together with Byzantine, Central Asian and Chinese languages and history. Even in Ostrowski's Harvard I suspect this will sound hopelessly unrealistic; from the remaining Slavists in the universities of Britain (a book every five years for the Research Assessment Exercise please) and Continental Europe, with managerial strategies aped from MacDonalds, and the steady decline of Slavic studies in general, the most likely reaction will be a hollow laugh. Historians of early modern Russia with training or even minimal expertise in even half these disciplines may by some fortunate accident appear in future, perhaps even be given a university post on condition that they also teach something 'relevant' ('Gendering the Great Dictators' perhaps?) but who would bet a single euro on it? Which should make us all the more grateful for Ostrowski's contribution.

Part 1 of Ostrowski's book discusses the extent of Mongol influences. It's first chapter, 'Setting the scene', is a brief but very useful overview of the political and cultural map of the Eurasian landmass from the fourteenth to the sixteenth century, and leads directly into chapters on the main areas in which Mongol

influence in Muscovy has been claimed: administration, political institutions, and the military; seclusion of women; oriental despotism; economic repression of the 'Tatar yoke'. Of these Ostrowski considers only the first to be justified, and begins Ch. 2: 'The key to understanding the Muscovite administration is the dual structure it adopted from the Qipchaq khanate', ultimately of Chinese inspiration. This claim is then demonstrated persuasively if not conclusively.

Ch.3, on the seclusion of women among the Muscovite elite, gives a detailed and well supported analysis of the status of women in Muscovite life and law, dismisses the claim of Mongol influence, mostly on the grounds that the Mongols did not in fact treat their women in this way, and prefers to see Byzantine influence, although this explanation raises difficult questions of another kind, as Ostrowski admits.

In Ch. 4, on 'oriental despotism', we enter a contentious area of loaded terminology and political propaganda. Ostrowski covers a lot of comparative ground, much of it Chinese or Byzantine, but to my mind misses a few tricks in not paying enough to the increasing significance of Western Europe in his 'middle' period when Muscovy was beginning to make imperial claims and political moves aimed westwards as well as eastwards. Here, as earlier in his rather perfunctory discussion of the term tsar', perhaps a little more linguistic attention here to comparative titulature might have strengthened his argument (I am reminded that Isabel de Madariaga has observed more than once that the most appropriate translation of samoderzhets is not 'autocrat' with its pejorative associations in modern English, but 'sovereign'), or the whole topic could have been referred forward to Ch. 8 where it is dealt with in far more satisfactory detail. It is also a little surprising that Ostrowski does not mention that any historiographical discussion of 'oriental despotism' should take into account that its use by Marx gave it a particular terminological skew in Marxist, and therefore Soviet Russian, historical writing. But Ostrowski is surely right to conclude that: 'the entire issue of "oriental despotism" is a false one, concocted initially in the eighteenth century by critics of the French monarchy as a means of criticizing that government' (p. 107).

Ch. 5, on economic oppression, examines the conventional view that Muscovy suffered long-term economic devastation under the 'Mongol yoke'. Ostrowski dryly observes: 'This view of economic destruction by the Mongols and their reducing of Rus' to an almost purely agricultural economy has a metahistorical appeal both to Russian nationalists and to Marxist historians', and having surveyed a substantial literature opts for the not entirely new revisionist position that after an initial period of deprivation Muscovy for the most part flourished.

Part 2 of the book (chapters 6-11) is devoted to the 'Development of an anti-Tatar ideology in the Muscovite Church'. In Ch. 6 Ostrowski defines his concept of ideology, as distinct from mentalit, outlines the growth of a more or less independent Muscovite Church and a new power balance between ruler and Church, and the development of 'an agreed-upon virtual past, and the setting-up of an interpretative framework by which to "explain" Muscovite-Tatar relations' (p. 143). In Ch. 7 Ostrowski notes that the various Russian chronicles have no anti-Tatar bias in the entries for the years 1252-1448, in which period the Russian Church followed the policy of the Byzantine Church in accommodating itself to the khanate as its overlord by the will of God. The detailed textual argument here concludes that 'the Church-concocted virtual past of Rus' princes struggling to free the Rus' land from the Tatars is a post-1448 invention' (p. 163). I like this discussion of the manipulation of history by people one might not have thought of as historical sophisticates. Ostrowski does not, however, discuss the various apocalyptic texts circulating in Russia, mostly from about the twelfth century, i.e. before the Muscovite period, and continuing into modern times, in which first the Pechenegs and then the Tatars are identified as Gog and Magog, the unclean tribes locked up beyond the Caucasus, who will be released to disastrous effect in the 'last days' of Antichrist. This does weaken Ostrowski's position a little, but his overall argument that there was an essential historical, ideological, and cultural tension between the Church and the Grand Prince/tsar' is well argued.

Ch. 8, 'Fashioning the khan into a basileus', details in a rather dense flurry of historiographical and textological argument the main lines of the anti-Tatar myth-making propaganda of the Church (e.g. the legends of the ancient classical genealogy of the princes of Vladimir, the crown of Vladimir Monomakh sent by the Byzantine emperor) and its political effect in defining the limits of secular power. It also discusses in

detail the development of the concept of the ruler and his title (pp. 174-85). Ch. 9 develops this theme further in showing how the clergy were able to use Byzantine ideas and precedents to try to shape a polity in which the grand prince, later tsar', and his advisors, and the Church, were in an acceptable (to them) relationship.

In Ch. 10 'Third Rome: delimiting the ruler's power and authority' Ostrowski turns to that over-quoted notion and discusses its origins and development. He comes down firmly for the view that it was originally a concept employed in ecclesiastical polemic between Moscow and Novgorod, that it was generally rejected by the Church in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and only in the mid-seventeenth century was it associated with the Muscovite state. Not all will be entirely convinced that this was not a part of an attempt at *translatio imperii*, given other evidence of a trend in that direction.

If the myth of the 'Third Rome' takes a knock in the previous chapter, the 'Tatar yoke' takes another in the next and last chapter, which is also the author's peroration. The 'Third Rome', Ostrowski shows, came into use in the late sixteenth century as part of the anti-Tatar propaganda and has become a catchword in mainstream of Russian historical writing thereafter. Ostrowski explains the apparent contradiction between the actions of Muscovite rulers and the dominant ideology as evidenced in Old Russian literature, in a passage which summarizes the argument of his book : The main question of this book has been why Muscovite secular rulers seemed to be acting in ways that were inexplicable in terms of Church-based views. In other words, why do the sources present such contradictory evidence about what was going on in early and middle Muscovy? My answer has been that the ecclesiastical and secular establishments were affected by two different outside influences -Byzantium and the Qipchaq Khanate, respectively. The traditions, practices, doctrines, and values of the Byzantine Empire drew on those of the Christian Roman Empire (the largest empire in the West in the ancient world), developed them, and transmitted them through the Church to Muscovy. The traditions, practices, doctrines, and values of the Qipchaq Khanate drew on those of the Mongol Empire (the largest land empire in world history), developed them, and transmitted them through the governmental apparatus to Muscovy. (p. 247)

There are weaknesses in this book, some of which have already been noted. Some of the claims are contentious; some possible alternative arguments are passed over; the book is not quite what its title promises and one occasionally has the feeling that one is reading very detailed speculative or polemic essays written at different times and not always well sewn together (e.g. the two attempts at explaining tsar' mentioned above); it not infrequently mentions in passing quite important things without explanation or even adequate footnote references (see for example the first reference to the Oprichnina on p. 21, or any of the references to the Judaizers under 'heresy, Novgorod-Moscow' in the index). The balance of relevance is also a little insecure. For example, the discussion of the 'Third Rome', though certainly an alleged part of Muscovite political ideology, has little to do with 'cross- cultural influences on the steppe frontier', while at the other extreme the emphasis on the two big ideas, Mongol influence in political matters and Byzantine in ecclesiastical matters and the bookish tradition, almost excludes other possible additional dimensions - for example, the possible influence of Westerners and Jews in Muscovite ideological debate (Judaizers again, doctors, printers, ambassadors, Nicolaus of Lubeck, Muscovite familiarity with the 'Donation of Constantine'), or the views of Ivan Peresvetov, or the *Secretum secretorum*; or the millenarian anxieties at the end of the fifteenth century, or the interest in some quarters in the Spanish Inquisition.

Even with these caveats, this book is a major achievement. It raises the level of debate, and it brings together into a coherent argument a vast amount of disparate scholarship in many disciplines to illumine a difficult area in history. In particular it reviews traditional and revisionist writing in a grand re-evaluation of those clichés 'the Tatar yoke', 'Oriental despotism' and 'the Third Rome'. Future writing on this topic will have to engage with Ostrowski's analysis one way or another.

Other reviews:

[2]

Source URL: <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/129#comment-0>

Links

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/739>

[2] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews>