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The example of the Golden Horde highlights important aspects of society, the economy, and imperial politics in a large region of the empire. Since the relationship between the Mongols and urban centers is often misunderstood, it is of particular interest to learn about the cities of the Golden Horde. The relations between the Mongol rulers of Ulus Jochi and their Russian subjects evolved from policies of direct political control to those of indirect rule. There is considerable controversy over the impact of Mongol rule in Russia and Ukraine, since the national myths of the conquered paint a picture of unrelied oppression, the effects of which were still being felt into modern times. Such one-sided assessments of the Golden Horde need to be reconsidered.


g  e  n  g  h i s  K  h a n  h a d  a  s  s i g n e d  t h e  w e s t e r n  p o r t i o n  o f  t h e  M o n g o l  e m p i r e to his oldest son, Jochi, (fig. 1), but when Jochi predeceased his father (fig. 2), his share fell to his son Batu. The extent of his domains was yet to be defined, as major portions of the territory given to Jochi (Ulus Jochi) in Russia and Ukraine had not yet been conquered by the Mongols. Batu’s armies eventually reached the Adriatic and the valleys of Austria before they retreated in 1241. He began to rule his state—better known as the “Golden Horde,” a name given it much later by non-Mongols—from Sarai, a city he founded not far from the mouth of the Volga River. The power and prosperity of the Golden Horde peaked during the second quarter of the fourteenth century, but were shattered by Tamerlane’s invasion in 1395. Successor states in its territory—the Crimea and Khiva—were ruled by Ghengissid dynasties far longer than were any other parts of the empire, the first remaining independent until the late eighteenth century, and the second lasting until the twentieth century.

When Mongol armies first appeared in eastern Europe in 1223, the steppe nomads who lived there, the Polovtsy (Cumans), turned to the east Slavic princes for aid (fig. 3). The Mongols’ shattering victory over this combined force on the River Kalka near the Sea of Azov foreshadowed their conquest in the 1230s. Genghis’s son Ögödei sought to follow up on his father’s conquests, and, in particular, to extend his empire westward. After defeating the Jin dynasty and seizing North China, Ögödei launched an invasion west, with his nephew Batu and other grandsons of Genghis joining in the campaign. Although the cousins were often at odds, the campaign proved remarkably successful, in part because they did not face a united Russian
Withdrawing to the east, hoping to when Batu learned of Ögödei’s death and their forces had reached 1241 insigniﬁcant Moscow. The Mongols then following year conquering the important center of Vladimir-Suzdal and the as-yet occupied the middle Volga region, and the

rather than resume the campaign to Western Europe, he chose to consolidate his rule over the Ulus Jochi from the lower Volga. Once the Mongols had paciﬁed Russia and Ukraine, they took over the traditional nomad routes used by the Polovtsy up and down the main rivers (ﬁg. 4). Batu would spend summers near Bulgar on the middle Volga and winters at his new capital, Sarai. The Franciscan John of Plano Carpini, who traveled as a papal emissary, visited Batu in 1245 en route to Mongolia and recorded how other members of the Mongol elite set up nomad camps along the Dnieper, Don, and Ural (Yaik) Rivers.

The chaos and destruction of invasion had disrupted ﬂourishing commercial and craft emporia that were central to the Mongol empire’s sustainability. In the consolidation and reconstruction of the following era, the Mongols, unlike earlier nomadic polities, incorporated into their long-established cities on the edge of the steppe world. Thus, Bulgar, at the border between the forest and steppe; Kafra, a port in the Crimea; and Urgench, in the lower reaches of the Amu-Darya River in Khwarazm south of the Aral Sea, were important cities of the Golden Horde. The khans also founded new cities where previously there had been none. Prime examples are Batu’s Sarai (the Selitrennoe Fort site) and the city founded under Khan Özbeg in the beginning of the fourteenth century had passed since Mongol invasions had devastated the lands of the Khwarazm-shah and destroyed Bulgar on the Volga (ﬁg. 8):

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The Golden Horde workshops tended to incorporate some of the motifs, but often with different color combinations. The steppe cities of the Horde included elite "estates," often on the outskirts of town, with multiroom mansions built of substantial masonry and their own craft shops and servants’ quarters (fig. 28). Some of these compounds have the remains of ger platforms, a reminder that the Mongol elite did not completely adopt sedentary life. Although Ibn Battuta was impressed by the urban culture in Sarai, he was taken aback by the open observance of nomadic social customs that violated Islamic norms. The elite residences seem to have flourished into the second half of the fourteenth century, at which time growing political instability led their owners to build defensive walls in the same way that previously unfortified cities were then being walled. The bubonic plague undoubtedly played a major role in cities’ decline. As early as the 1370s, many of the mansions fell into disrepair and their compounds were being converted into cemeteries, well before the wars of the next decades destroyed the cities of the lower Volga and Crimea. The study of the elite residential complexes sheds light on other aspects of social and economic change. Modest structures that probably were living or working space for servants and craftsmen evolved over time from semi-dugout huts with no heating system into more sophisticated houses with stoves. Whether this means slave families were now gaining their freedom and moving up in social and economic terms is difficult to prove.

Ibn Battuta had noted only in passing that the residents of Sarai included Russians. He had no interest in the fact that there was a Russian Orthodox bishop there whose main function was probably to facilitate relations between the khans, on one hand, and the Russian principalities and the Byzantine empire, on the other. Of greater interest to the Moroccan was the fact that one of the khan’s wives was the daughter of the Byzantine emperor. Indeed, Byzantium, by virtue of its strategic control over communications with the Mediterranean, must have been more important to the Horde economically and politically than were the Russian principalities.

But even Byzantium was incidental to the Horde economically and politically when the Golden Horde had already been substantially weakened by internal strife. Neither could this inhospitable region of modest resources have contributed much to the prosperity of the Horde. The Russian example illustrates well Mongol relations with subject peoples. However, establishing the exact nature of those relations and their long-term consequences is difficult: the medieval sources often are silent about important topics, and when they do speak, they have a pronounced anti-Mongol bias. Trying to discern the truth is further hindered by the anti-Mongol bias of too many modern assessments. Long after the Mongol invasion of the Russian principalities in the years 1237–40, a monk described how “there is nothing to be seen in [Razan] except their ashes, and barren earth . . . instead of joy, there are only uninterrupted lamentations.”

Other cities that resisted met the same fate, although the impact was uneven. The important city of Novgorod in the north escaped destruction, ostensibly because the spring thaw melted the ice on the rivers, which the Mongol horsemen had been using to travel through this unpromising land of swampy, roadless forests. In a territory where the population still lived largely in isolated villages, the destruction of what was only a handful of towns could not be expected to have a permanent impact on social and economic development. Neither could this inhospitable region of modest resources have contributed much to the prosperity of the Horde.

Initially, the Mongols ruled their territories in Russia directly from the center of the empire that was being built at Khara Khorum, with only a limited local presence of Mongol administrators, census takers, and military contingents. Russian princes had to travel to Mongolia to receive their patents of office (tarlyks) from the Great Khan. John of Plano Carpini reported on the poisoning there in 1246 of Prince Iaroslav of Vladimir, the senior principality of northeastern Russia. His son, Alexander Nevsky (1220–1263), a Russian hero for his defeat of the Swedish knights on the Neva in 1240, managed to survive his own visit to Mongolia and went on to become a dutiful servant of the khans in helping to put down Russian resistance to their rule. His descendants ruled Moscow. By the fourteenth century, the locus of political and fiscal control over Russia had shifted to Sarai, although some tax revenues continued to be sent to the Great Khan. Russian princes still were expected to appear when summoned to the khan’s court, either in Sarai or at his summer camp in the Caucasus foothills. The khans bestowed the patents for rule and approved the princes’ wills, but largely did not interfere in the established patterns of princely succession. Intermarriage often strengthened the ties between Russian princes and their overlords. The relationship was one that could be manipulated successfully on both sides for political advantage especially as the Horde itself weakened. The emergence of Moscow as the preeminent Russian principality may be explained by its princes’ success in cultivating their relations with Sarai.

There is little evidence to show, as some scholars would have us believe, that the khans were continually plotting ways to keep the Russian princes weak. Nor is it the case that the Russians seized every opportunity to rebel in order to throw off the “Mongol yoke.” In the national mythology, the high point of this struggle was the battle of Kulikovo in 1380, where Moscow prince Dmitrii Ivanovich “Donskoii” (“of the Don River”) is portrayed in hagiographic terms. Yet the battle was not simply a victory of good, Christian Russians over “pagan” Mongols, but a complex affair involving conflicting allegiances on both sides in a period when the Golden Horde had already been substantially weakened by internal strife. Beginning around 1330, the Moscow princes became tax collectors for the khans and took advantage of administrative mechanisms that would later help them consolidate increasingly independent political power. Evidence that they adopted Mongol bureaucratic procedures does not necessarily mean, as some have claimed, that they also borrowed larger political structures or political theory. By the time the Russian
Ivan had every reason to think that his endeavors enjoyed divine sanction and that he was the real heir to the khan in Sarai.

Whether Ivan or his Muscovite heirs consciously articulated claims to that succession is uncertain. The term, “White Tsar,” with which rulers in the steppe, the Ottomans, and even princes as far as Italy at times addressed the Russian ruler, might be taken in the Mongol color- and directional-coded terminology to mean the “Khan of the West.” The Muscovite princes had an interest in regalia associated with the khans of the Golden Horde. Of the many royal crowns in the treasury of the Kremlin, the most important is the so-called “Cap of Monomakh,” which some have argued is a prime example of the filigree gold work that was popular among the Mongol elite (Figure 31). Whether it was once part of the khan’s regalia before being acquired by Ivan’s Muscovite ancestors in the fourteenth or fifteenth centuries is still debated. Although the crown probably dates from the thirteenth century, Russian legends associate it with the eleventh-century Byzantine Emperor Constantine IX Monomachos rather than admit to any Mongol connection.

When Grand Prince Ivan IV (r. 1533–84) became the first Russian ruler to be crowned tsar in 1547, the title, which derives from “Caesar,” asserted the prestige associated with imperial Rome, not the tradition by which Russians had termed the khan “tsar.” Having incorporated the successor states of the Golden Horde—Kazan (1552), Astrakhan (1556), and Siberia (ca. 1581)—Ivan IV then added the titles Tsar of Kazan, and so on, as explicit recognition that he had replaced the Genghissid khans. Where it served their purposes, the Muscovite rulers respected the imperial charisma of the Genghissid line, even if they did not shape their policies after those of khans whose rule in Russia had long ago ended. The characteristic institutions Muscovy bequeathed to the Russian empire—notably, autocracy and serfdom—developed later and gradually as responses to internal needs of the evolving state, not as a result of Mongol rule.