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# *Muscovy and the Mongols*: What's What and What's Maybe

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Donald Ostrowski and Charles Halperin are among the handful of specialists in medieval Rus′ who have taken the trouble to examine the Mongol period in excruciating detail, albeit without the benefit of expertise in "Oriental" languages. Each is familiar with the history of several other regions and is comparative. Each has raised crucial questions in his book(s) and articles. And each has made singular contributions to the study of East Slavic history. I am therefore honored to be asked to referee, as it were, Halperin's comments here on Ostrowski's recent, broadly interpretive monograph, *Muscovy and the Mongols: Cross-Cultural Influences on the Steppe Frontier, 1304–1589*, and to add a few comments of my own.[1]

The major problems that Ostrowski wishes to explore in this work are best stated in the titles of his two sections: "Mongol Influence: What's What and What's Not" and "Development of an Anti-Tatar Ideology in the Muscovite Church." Stated simply, in Ostrowski's view the overall, positive Mongol influence on Muscovy's secular order and mentality was not only much greater than most specialists have been willing to admit, but paramount well into the 16th century. The Church, in contrast, having fully acquiesced to Mongol rule from around 1256 to 1448, subsequently cultivated and spread a Byzantinesque outlook, which demonized the Mongols.

In the first section, after a brief review of the zones of civilization influencing Rus′ (Chapter 1), Ostrowski explores: Mongol influence on Muscovite institutions generally (Chapter 2); the absence (despite the opinion of many historians) of Mongol influence on the seclusion of elite women (Chapter 3); the question of "Oriental despotism" (Chapter 4); and, finally, the notion that Rus′ suffered from economic oppression at the hands of the Mongols (Chapter 5). In the second section, following an excursus into the nature of pre-modern ideology

[1] For a parallel examination of Donald Ostrowski, *Muscovy and the Mongols: Cross-Cultural Influences on the Steppe Frontier, 1304–1589* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), I point the reader to Halperin's review, which I did not consult before I wrote this essay. See *Sixteenth Century Journal* 30: 2 (1999), 517–18. Nor did I see the reviews of Eve Levin, Valerie Kivelson, and Marshall Poe, which underscore the controversial nature of Ostrowski's endeavor and also take issue with some of his conclusions: *Slavic Review* 58: 2 (1999), 478–79; *American Historical Review* 104: 2 (1999), 625; *Russian Review* 58: 4 (1999), 695–96.

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(Chapter 6), he investigates, in turn: anti-Mongol interpolations in the chronicles and the dating of the Kulikovo tales (Chapter 7); the exercise of Muscovite kingship in both the Byzantine and Mongol mirrors (Chapter 8); the Church's adaptation of Byzantine political thought (Chapter 9); and the problem of the much heralded, but barely significant idea of the 'Third Rome' (Chapter 10). Ostrowski concludes the book by proposing that the idea of a "Tatar Yoke" is a Muscovite myth. The notion itself may have circulated orally in the late 16th century, but found its first East Slavic literary formulation only in the 1660s (Chapter 11).

The heart of *Muscovy and the Mongols* lies in the chapters on institutional borrowing, economic effects, literary myth-making, and kingship. If Ostrowski is correct, then the following holds. Northeastern Rus′ not only recovered from the Mongol invasions by the 1280s, but subsequently expanded due to the commercial opportunities afforded by the *pax mongolica*. Under the Mongols, the early Moscow rulers virtually reinvented East Slavic princely governance on the Qipchaq Khanate model. After Mongol power receded, Russian churchmen promoted an anti-Mongol outlook, devising, among other things, a blatantly false image of princely resistance to the Mongols. In contrast, Muscovite (grand princely, then tsarist) kingship continued, consciously, to exhibit Tatar traits, a process which peaked under Ivan IV. Nevertheless, as emblematized by the establishment of the Russian patriarchate in 1589, the neo-Byzantinism of the churchmen eventually gained the upper hand over the Mongol orientation at court, even if the remnants of Mongol-influenced institutions lasted into the 19th century.[2]

I do not think that it would be unfair to say that Professor Ostrowski, bolstered by his ecumenical curiosity and pedagogical devotion to world history, has boldly and admirably stuck out his neck. In turn, the equally universal and inquisitive Professor Halperin, while ever respectful, gracious, and courteous, has gone right for the scholarly jugular. He rightly identifies the inner core of *Muscovy and the Mongols* to be the hypothesis of Moscow's conscious and fundamental institutional copying or adaptation from the Khanate.[3] While admitting several borrowings (*den′ga, tamga, iam*, military tactics, steppe diplomacy, perhaps *pravezh,* some modes of record keeping and other administrative practices[4]),

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[2] Ostrowski, *Muscovy and the Mongols*, 61.

[3] As Halperin notes, this argument was first outlined in Ostrowski's "The Mongol Origins of Muscovite Political Institutions," *Slavic Review* 49: 4 (1990), 525–42.

[4] Halperin's list of possible borrowings, of course, can be expanded. I wonder, though, if *tarkhan*, except for the word, belongs in this category, since pre-Mongol Rus′ also knew immunity grants. The Muscovite *iam*, however much inspired by the Mongols, may have been a totally new system of postal roads. Pre-Mongol Rus′ also practiced steppe diplomacy, but not, apparently, within the

Halperin systematically undercuts Ostrowski's source base and logic in order to refute several of his major theses. Here, I would say, Halperin is correct.[5] Moreover, he justly concludes that if Ostrowski's cornerstone is wobbly, then the entire edifice of the second part of the book, which sets a Mongol-oriented, Middle Muscovite state against a Byzantine-thinking Church, may be weak.

Many of Ostrowski's major points, however, can be affirmed whether or not his position concerning extensive Mongol influence is true. In fact the Mongols had no need to alter the basic Rus′ institutions, which Baty and his successors could, without major changes, integrate and subordinate within their own imperial system. The Rus′ principalities contained their own internal tributary networks, hierarchies, and hegemony structures (even if more than one hegemon for all of Rus′ had become the norm in the pre-Mongol period).[6] The Rus′ government was suited to an agrarian and forest-product society; those of the Mongols – to a pastoral society, with secondary interest in the forests. The Rus′ and Mongol bases for levying soldiers were totally different. Fiscal similarities there were. In both Rus′ and the Khanate, tribute levying and commerce played crucial roles in generating income for the state, or, maybe one should say, the ruling classes.[7] Not surprisingly, it is precisely in the realms of commerce and commercial taxation, political control, and the extension of Mongol hunting and trapping into lands earlier tributary to Rus′[8] that we see the clearest signs of direct Mongol influence. Ostrowski is surely right that the Muscovites did not despise the Mongols. As he points out, the continuous influx of Tatars into Muscovy, the service of Mongol *tsarevichi* in the high political posts, and the

same context of competing hegemony systems which prevailed with the decline and fragmentation of the Qipchaq Khanate, the recrudescence of Persia, and the rise of the Ottoman Empire.

[5] Ostrowski himself hedges at the end of his book, with his admission that he used Yüan and Ilkhanid sources to reconstruct the Qipchaq Khanate institutions allegedly employed by the Muscovites. See Ostrowski, *Muscovy and the Mongols*, 246. He also hedges concerning the purported influence of the *iqta*, after he asserted its seminal role in the development of cavalry service land in Western Europe as well as Russia. See Ostrowski, *Muscovy and the Mongols*, 48ff., esp. 61.

[6] Andrei Bogoliubskii's attempt to be *samovlastets* of Rus′ from northern Vladimir had crumbled before his assassination. Vsevolod Bol′shoe Gnezdno was more successful because he was less imperious, and he had to accept expulsion from his share of Kiev's southern marches. Neither Konstantin nor Iurii II dared pretend to be hegemon of all Rus′, unless one so interprets their brother Iaroslav's brief occupancy of Kiev in 1235. In contrast, Vsevolod's treatment of the Riazan′ princes and the latter's bloody internecine strife show that the Rus′ princes dwelled in a political universe, which was, at the top, in some respects, not so distant from that of the Mongols.

[7] Ostrowski's focus on just the commercial base as the foundation of the economy seems too narrow.

[8] Uwe Halbach, *Der russische Fürstenhof vor dem 16. Jahrhundert. Eine vergleichende Untersuchung zur politische Lexikologie und Verfassungsgeschichte der Alten Rus′* (Stuttgart: F. Steiner Verlag, 1985), 288–89, 299.

marriages between elite Mongols and Muscovites under Vasilii III and Ivan IV provide sufficient indication of a favorable secular orientation towards friendly Tatars.[9] Moreover, as Janet Martin has shown, on a lower societal level, Tatar immigrant farmer-servicemen helped repopulate the Novgorodian lands in the late 16th century.[10] A vibrant and continuing Mongol influence was present, and anyone who asserts a blanket Muscovite hostility to Tatars and to the Mongol legacy after, say, 1450 or 1480 has no business speaking or writing about Muscovy. Indeed, Ostrowski is quite aware that the Church, in using Byzantine ideas to promote its own interests, had no problem in including genuine and phony Mongol *iarlyki* along with the Donation of (pseudo-) Constantine in its legal arsenal.[11] Rather than argue that the Church was trying to have it both ways, he could have just as easily used Metropolitan Makarii's manipulation of *iarlyki* to show how potent one of the central aspects of the Mongol legacy remained within the citadel of Muscovite Byzantinism.

Overall, Ostrowski is on firm ground in his discussion of the economic recovery and prosperity of northern Rus′ under the Qipchaq Khanate, even if he may be presenting a rosier picture than I deem warranted. My guess, based in part on the same statistics concerning masonry churches calculated by David Miller which Ostrowski used, is that the real recovery in Northeastern Rus′ came somewhat later than the 1280s;[12] that there was no secular economic growth; and that only after the end of the plague and the civil war in the mid-15th century did the Northeastern towns exhibit signs of greater prosperity than the last half century or so before the Mongols.[13] But all of this is open to question: for the last century or more before the reign of Ivan III, Northeastern Rus′ was sufficiently prosperous for Muscovite elites to have had a favorable attitude towards the Mongols and their system of rule. In the context of an era that witnessed unspeakable brutalities all over the globe, the Qipchaq Khanate, which as an entity outlasted by more than a century the other three successor *ulus*-khanates of Chingiz's united empire, functioned as a decentralized commonwealth. It had its

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[9] Substantiation that such a crucial figure in the first years of the Oprichnina as the Kabardian/Circassian Temriuk was of Tatar descent would be desirable. See Ostrowski, *Muscovy and the Mongols*, 193.

[10] Janet Martin, "The Novokreshcheny of Novgorod: Assimilation in the 16th Century," *Central Asian Survey* 9: 1 (1990), 13–38.

[11] Ostrowski, *Muscovy and the Mongols*, 162–63.

[12] David B. Miller, "Monumental Building as an Indicator of Economic Trends in Northern Rus′ in the Late Kievan and Mongol Periods, 1138–1462," *American Historical Review* 94: 2 (1989), 360–90.

[13] Probably a greater case can be made for more or less continuous demographic and hence economic development of the rural parts of northern Rus′ from the 10th or 11th centuries into the mid-16th, if not beyond.

own share of civil wars and centrifugal forces, but it was a true commonwealth nevertheless.

Yet Ostrowski's attempt to assess various Mongol influences on Muscovy is problematic in and of itself, and Halperin rightly directs us to some of the nuances required by Ostrowski's judgments. As I read and re-read *Muscovy and the Mongols*, the words schematic, categorical, and reifying continuously appear in my mind's eye.[14] An excellent example of these tendencies is provided by his blanket statement, "secular government sources present actions taken within a Mongol frame of reference."[15] If this is so, then how do we account for the similarity between these two key legal documents of the era, *Russkaia Pravda* and the 1497 *Sudebnik*, neither of which points to any Mongol frame of reference at all?

> The *Pravda* established for Rus′ when Iziaslav, Vesvolod, Sviatoslav, Kosniachko, Pereneg, Mikyfor the Kievan, and Mikula Chiudin convened.[16]

> In the year 1497, in the month of December, Grand Prince Ivan Vasilevich of all Rus′ with his children and boyars, laid down this judicial code for how boyars and *okol′nichie* shall administer justice.[17]

I also wonder if Ostrowski is not imputing to the Muscovites, concerning their cultural and historical awareness, a critical, differentiating consciousness which did not exist then. For him it is as if the Russians themselves made a clear separation in their minds between what was specifically Tatar and what was not. The simplest explanation, however, for the specific anti-Tatar motifs in Muscovite writings of the mid-15th century onward is the ongoing cross-frontier conflicts among relative equals – Muscovy and the neighboring Tatar polities. This motif also provided a convenient pretext for Russian writers to elevate the prestige of Moscow's three dominant actors or social groups: the ruling dynasty,

[14] For example, Ostrowski is categorical that Mongol clan relationships underlay *mestnichestvo;* that Byzantium had a two-century long alliance with the Mongols (for which a reasonable case may be made); and that the Muscovites had an image of a Mongol khan limited by four *beylaribeys* in contrast to an autocratic Byzantine *basileus*. See Ostrowski, *Muscovy and the Mongols*, 104, 138–39, 168.

[15] Ostrowski, *Muscovy and the Mongols*, 247–48.

[16] Adapted from the translation in Daniel H. Kaiser and Gary Marker, eds., *Reinterpreting Russian History* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press 1994), 28.

[17] Adapted from the translation in Horace W. Dewey, *Muscovite Judicial Texts, 1488–1556* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1966), 9.

the boyars, and the Church.[18] But it is not only the Muscovites who did not normally identify "X" as Tatar and "Y" as Byzantine. Ostrowski himself readily concludes that we have no way of knowing if defunct Byzantine practices or current Islamic ones influenced Muscovite seclusion of elite women.[19] What's maybe may be clearer than what's what.

In this regard, Ostrowski's hard line on textual analysis is certainly most welcome. Tending to be skeptical of authenticity when reliably datable parchment or paper is lacking, he urges us to privilege textual evidence over the contextual, when the two are in conflict.[20] In other words, we should seek a context that matches the textual evidence. Here, for example, his skepticism toward the purported Mongol *Yasa*, his argument for a late date for the *Tale of the White Cowl*, and his presentation of the real dilemma posed by *III Ezra* as a source for Filofei's three *Romes* seem in order.[21] Yet Ostrowski, and before him Gol′dberg, may be going too far in arguing that the original Third Rome formulation had *romeiskoe tsarstvo*, when it so obviously is *rossiiskoe* or something like it.[22] Muscovite authors certainly understood what a logical sequence was.[23]

On a completely different plane, however, Ostrowski's handling of "Oriental despotism" begs for commentary. He makes some interesting observations, but seems to miss the heart of the issue. From the start he goes down a perilous path by supplying his own definition, which is more akin to arbitrary and centralized tyranny than to what the key theoreticians of despotism, starting with Aristotle, Bodin, and Montesquieu, had in mind.[24] This is not the place to investigate the problem of despotism or the concrete utility (or futility) of this notion, though a fine start for the perplexed might be a collective work issued not too long ago by Moscow's *Institut vostokovedeniia*.[25] Suffice it to say that several of Ostrowski's

[18] In the context of state rivalry and the development of two distinct metropolitanates following the Council of Florence, the Muscovite dynasty, aristocrats, and Church also appear in the chronicles and in some purely ecclesiastical writings as champions against Lithuania, whence, as in the case of Tatars, friendly immigrants were welcomed.

[19] Ostrowski, *Muscovy and the Mongols*, 66–67, 84.

[20] Ostrowski, *Muscovy and the Mongols*, 225.

[21] Ostrowski, *Muscovy and the Mongols*, 62–63, 220, 230–37.

[22] Ostrowski, *Muscovy and the Mongols*, 229.

[23] Rome, Constantinople, Rome makes no sense whatsoever.

[24] Ostrowski, *Muscovy and the Mongols*, 85–87.

[25] N. A. Ivanov, *Fenomen vostochnogo despotizma. Struktura, upravlenie i vlasti*, ed. A. I. Ivanov (Moscow: Nauka and Izdatel′skaia firma "Vostochnaia literatura," 1993), reviewed by this author in *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas* (forthcoming). Karl A. Wittfogel, of *Oriental Despotism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957) fame or notoriety, by allowing his rabid anti-communism to warp the brilliance of some of his analysis, stimulated unwarranted hostility to the very no-

observations are consistent with what many contemporary Europeans, some of whom had lived in Muscovy for years and well understood at least Aristotle's notions of tyranny and despotism, concluded.[26] Among these are: all land belongs to the sovereign, first in practice, then abstractly (but with potent eminent domain);[27] the notion that the sovereign had unlimited power;[28] the Chinese and Mongol precedents of the principle of massive collective guilt justifying wholesale massacres of rivals and their possible adherents;[29] as well as the postal road system.[30] Ostrowski never really tackles two key aspects of despotic socio-political systems, which may not be politically tyrannical and may have consensus rule at the top – the principle of universal service (except for the privileged) and the labor levy, both of which were basic aspects of Muscovite statecraft. Nuanced interpretations of such expressions as *kholop tvoi* and *chelom b′et* – both of which were commonly used by the highest service princes and boyars in addressing the *gosudar′* – do not alter the simple fact that no European state west of the Dnieper or Dvina enjoyed the power over land, lives, and labor that Muscovy did.[31] Ostrowski's objections to the prejudices of Orientalism are justified, but he need not dismiss despotism as a "false" issue.[32] An understanding of early modern Russian "despotism" (however called) can still help us understand modern Russia's dilemmas, where law and property are weak; where the state, however inept and inefficient, continues to own most of the land and retains arbitrary powers of confiscation; and where the most prevalent form of social power is gangster tribute-collecting, not productive or commercial capital.

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tion of despotism – hostility which reverberates powerfully in scholarship. See, for example, Perry Anderson, *Lineages of the Absolutist State* (New York and London: Verso Press, 1964), 462–549.

[26] See Marshall Poe, *"A People Born to Slavery": Russia in Early Modern European Ethnography, 1476–1748* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, forthcoming). Some 17th-century observers were also familiar with Bodin.

[27] Ostrowski, *Muscovy and the Mongols*, 16–18, 88. In arguing that the period of Chinese influence on the Mongols was not one of despotism, Ostrowski misses Wang An-shih's land-nationalization policies of the mid-12th century.

[28] Ostrowski, *Muscovy and the Mongols*, 194.

[29] Ostrowski seems to miss the problem posed by the assertion that the khan was *primus inter pares* and the fact of several massacres of rivals and their families during succession struggles. See Ostrowski, *Muscovy and the Mongols*, 86, 195–96.

[30] Ostrowski, *Muscovy and the Mongols*, 47.

[31] Ostrowski, *Muscovy and the Mongols*, 89–90. Cf. Marshall Poe's investigation of the uses of *kholop tvoi, chelom b′et′* and *gosudar′*, by Muscovite elites: "What Did the Russians Mean When They Called Themselves 'Slaves of the Tsar'?" *Slavic Review* 57: 3 (1998), 585–608. Nothing in the article proves or disproves that Muscovy was despotic, which, as I understand this notion, relates not to ceremony but to power relations between wielders of authority and subjects.

[32] Ostrowski, *Muscovy and the Mongols*, 107.

Ostrowski, however, raises a host of other theoretical issues in ways which we as scholars and teachers should applaud. He probes such problems as the nature of institutional borrowings[33] and of pre-modern ideology.[34] His inventive qualitative tables illustrate the value of his urge to schematize. For example, Table 4.1, "Ideological Components," foregrounds what may be an essential distinction between Muscovy and Byzantine society: the latter had digested Christian values to a much greater extent than the former. Surely, however, for some Muscovites "Christ's Kingdom" was more important than *mestnichestvo*, which I take to be Ostrowski's code term for the nexus of social relations based on status, while secular status took precedence over "Christ's Kingdom" for some Byzantines. Nonetheless, Ostrowski has given us a novel way of examining and comparing societies.[35] Table 9.1, "Relations between Temporal Ruler and his Advisors,"[36] depicts the ideal structures and actions according to standard ("Iosifite") Muscovite thinking, and Table 9.2, "Spheres of Responsibility of Temporal and Spiritual Rulers,"[37] does justice to its subject. Both of these, with due credit, should go directly from Ostrowski's book onto our classroom blackboards, overhead transparencies, or PowerPoint slides.

Constraints of space prevent further discussion of the many issues which Ostrowski raises in his original and daring exploration of *Muscovy and the Mongols*, such as the identification of Ivan IV by Belek Bulat (that is, the father of Simeon Bekbulatovich) as a "Chingizid."[38] All in all, we should be grateful to him for forcing us to consider and reconsider such a wide spectrum of problems relating to this formative period of Russian history.

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[33] Ostrowski, *Muscovy and the Mongols*, 16.

[34] Ostrowski, *Muscovy and the Mongols*, 135–36.

[35] Ostrowski, *Muscovy and the Mongols*, 105.

[36] Ostrowski, *Muscovy and the Mongols,* 204.

[37] Ostrowski, *Muscovy and the Mongols*, 209.

[38] Ostrowski, *Muscovy and the Mongols*, 182–83. I checked his source and found that the Nogai *mirza* Belek Bulat had indeed claimed that Ivan's title meant that he was (in the Russian translation) "*chingisovyim priamym synom i priamym godusarem tsarem*." See *Drevniaia rossiiskaia vivliofika. Prodolzhenie* 8 (1793), 316.