Chapter 5

The Mongol Conquest and Subjugation

The Mongols who conquered much of Asia and defeated and subjugated the Rus in 1237–1241 were actually a mixed group of mostly Mongol leaders and Turkic soldiers. Later Russian sources preferred the term "Tatar," itself of disputed origin, to designate these fierce peoples. For simplicity's sake, "Mongol" hereafter refers to all these conquering troops and officials.

For the remainder of the thirteenth century, the Mongols of the Golden Horde (or Kipchak) Khanate ruled over almost all the former Rus principalities, the southern steppes, the Volga valley, and much of western Siberia. Over the former Rus lands, they ruled indirectly, relying on cooperating Rus princes. Mongol administrators and armies ensured that the will of the khan was carried out, especially that tribute taxes were brought to him. As one scholar has noted, however, it was not the khan who decided what proportion of tribute would be paid by whom; rather "it was the Russian elite who made the tribute regressive, forcing the poor to pay the most."[1]

The conflict between princes, which had so characterized the late Rus period, continued under the Mongols. In fact, it was heightened by the khan's practice of granting power to princes who pleased him, which increased princely competition and further eroded respect for seniority rights. Just as Rus-era princes had often used Polovtsy nomads against their relatives, so now princes sometimes used troops furnished by the khan in their battles against their kinsmen.

Historians have long debated the effects of Mongol rule, which in the northeast would continue in varying degrees to 1480. The greatest impact was on economics and finance, administrative techniques, and military organization and tactics. Least affected were social and cultural life.

THE MONGOL EMPIRE AND THE INVASION OF RUS

By 1222, a large Mongol empire had already come into existence. From Mongolia it spread southeastward into northern China, including Peking, and westward

[1]Charles J. Halperin, *Russia and the Golden Horde: The Mongol Impact on Medieval Russian History* (Bloomington, 1985), p. 78.

over many peoples, especially Turkic, throughout most of Central Asia, Iran, and Afghanistan. In 1222, Mongol armies swept through the Caucasus and defeated the Ossetians and Polovtsy.

The reasons for Mongol successes were many, beginning with Chinghis Khan. He united the various Mongol tribes in 1206, and he directed the Mongol conquests until his death in 1227. He combined military and political skills with a belief that he was fulfilling the divine will of Heaven. Yet it was his fierce nomadic horsemen, incredibly skilled with their bows and arrows, and his many siege weapons for capturing cities that most terrified his enemies. Other reasons for the spread of the Mongols' empire included its sociopolitical and military system. As new territories and peoples came under their control and their military expanded, the Mongols skillfully built upon and adapted their basic clan-tribal structure. This adaptation was furthered by a religious tolerance that was noted by practitioners of the major religions of the day, including Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam.

Like many nomads before them, including the Varangian "nomads of the sea," the Mongols were primarily interested in economic gain, not warfare for its own sake or the spreading of any type of belief system. After completing the creation of their empire, the Mongols desired peace. It was necessary to stimulate trade and their own profits, which they did by such steps as the creation of custom-free trading zones.

Despite the success of the Mongols, there is no evidence that the Rus heard of their victories until 1222 or 1223. At that time, the Polovtsy father-in-law of Prince Mstislav of Galicia came to him requesting armed assistance against the Mongols. To win over his son-in-law, Khan Kotian dispensed gifts of horses, camels, buffaloes, and girls. Won over by these gifts and the belief that further Polovtsy defeats would make the Mongols an even more formidable foe, Mstislav agreed to help. He managed to convince the princes of Kiev and Chernigov that they should all mount a joint Rus-Polovtsy campaign against these fierce intruders.

Because forces from Smolensk, Turov, and Volhynia also joined in, it appeared that the Rus were mounting a rare unified campaign. But Novgorod and Suzdalia did not participate, and the *Galician-Volhynian Chronicle* wrote that princely discord at the beginning of the battle contributed to the Rus defeat.

After more than a week's ride into the steppes, the main battle took place on the Kalka River near the Sea of Azov.[2] The Mongols routed the Rus and Polovtsy forces, killing nine Rus princes. Three of them, according to the *Novgorod Chronicle*, were suffocated under boards sat upon by dining Mongols. After pursuing the remaining Rus forces, perhaps half the original contingent, back to the Dnieper, the Mongols soon turned back eastward beyond the Volga (see Map 5.1). The Rus hoped they had seen the last of them.

After first subjugating the Volga Bulgars and other peoples to the east of the Rus in 1236 and 1237, however, the Mongols came back. Under Batu, grandson of Chinghis Khan, they sent envoys to Riazan demanding one-tenth of everything from men to horses. They probably also demanded capitulation. The princes of

[2]Leo de Hartog in his *Russia and the Mongol Yoke: The History of the Russian Principalities and the Golden Horde, 1221–1502* (London, 1996), p. 25, suggests that the attack probably took place in 1222, not 1223 as generally stated.

Riazan and Murom rejected such a tithe and, according to some accounts, also sent a delegation seeking help from Prince Yuri of Vladimir-Suzdal. Once again, however, Rus unity was lacking and Yuri furnished no immediate assistance. Meanwhile, in December 1237, the Mongols assailed Riazan. Only then did Yuri send a small force. After five days, the Mongols captured the city—or rather its body-strewn and smoking ruins.

A few months later, after taking the small town of Moscow, the Mongols quickly conquered Vladimir, the capital of Suzdalia. They did so with weapons and equipment they often used to break the resistance of walled-in urban dwellers: catapults, battering rams, and scaling ladders. These supplemented their more traditional weapons of bows and arrows, swords, lances, and battleaxes.

The Mongols had learned of city-siege weapons from their enemies. The catapults were especially varied and effective and hurled all sorts of materials, including stones, clay pots with burning naphtha, and iron projectiles. In storming Vladimir, they hurled primarily stones. Some chronicle accounts wrote of stones falling like rain within the city.

Following the capture of Vladimir, Mongol armies won other battles in Suzdalia and took Torzhok in southern Novgorod. Then, after coming within seventy miles of the city of Novgorod, they inexplicably turned south. After a long siege of the northern Chernigov city of Kozelsk—seven weeks according to the *Galician-Volhynian Chronicle*—the Mongols took it.

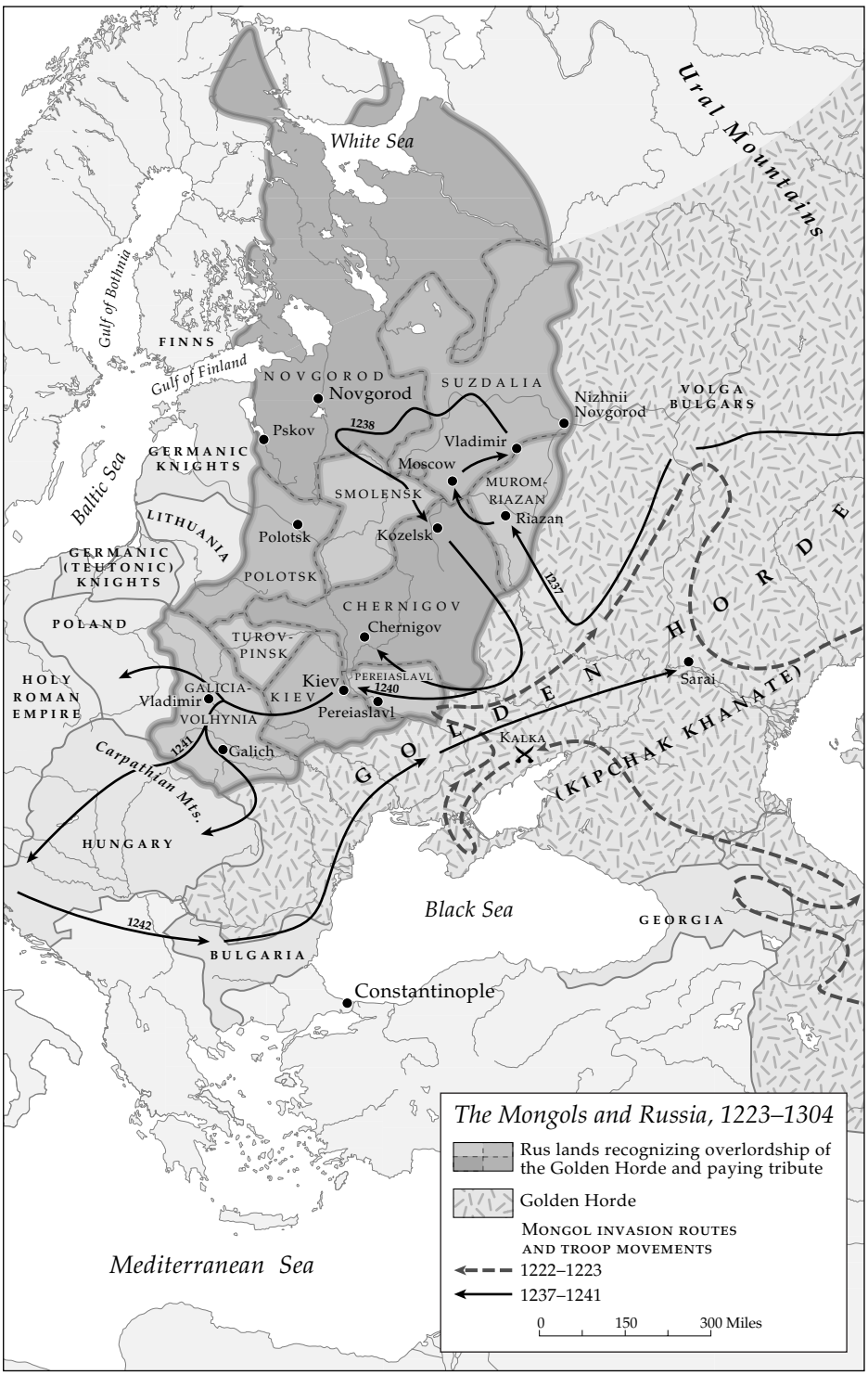
For a time beginning in the summer of 1238, the Rus were spared further devastation. Instead, the Mongols strengthened their control of lands to the south and east. In 1239 or 1240, however, they returned and took the major southern towns of Pereiaslavl and Chernigov. On December 6, 1240, the feast of St. Nicholas, patron saint of the Rus, the Mongols captured Kiev. The chief cities of Galicia-Volhynia fell early the following year.

The Mongols' treatment of those within the walled cities was merciless. Yet chronicle accounts, as John Fennell has pointed out, should not be taken too literally. True, the Mongols often used terroristic methods to help spread panic among their enemies, but acts such as slaying all of the people within a city, or raping nuns, or killing children still at their mothers' breasts, probably did not occur as often as chronicle writers stated.

The victories of the Mongols were due to many causes. Weapons, tactics, the skill and hardiness of their troops, their information-gathering techniques, and their effective use of captives and conscripts from among earlier enemies all played a part. Their troops in Rus lands—perhaps some 130,000 in 1237—also greatly outnumbered those available at any one time to the divided Rus. Although even a more united confederation probably would not have withstood the Mongol onslaught, there is little doubt that a woeful lack of cooperation among the various principalities made the Mongol's conquest easier than it might have been.

MONGOL RULE IN THE THIRTEENTH CENTURY

Following the conquest of Rus lands, the Mongols continued moving westward until they reached the Adriatic in 1242. Along the way, they defeated Poles,



MAP 5.1

FIGURE 5.1. Domes of the Cathedral of the Assumption, Vladimir. In 1238, after many townspeople had crowded into it seeking shelter, the Mongols cut them down or burned them to death.

Czechs, Germanic Knights, Hungarians, and others. Countries further west in Europe feared they would be next. Then Batu received word of the death of Great Khan Ugedei, the son and successor of Chinghis Khan. Probably to participate in determining the next great khan, Batu ceased his advance and returned eastward. Soon afterward he established his headquarters at Sarai, near the Volga, some sixty-five miles north of Astrakhan.

Sarai soon became the capital of the Golden Horde, one of several Mongol khanates. We know from a Western envoy, Friar William Rubruck, that already by 1253 Batu's capital was an enormous tent city of about ten miles. Batu's own large tents sat in the middle of it. In one of them he held court, sitting up on a big gilded seat with one of his wives. Friar William's account states that Batu's face was then covered with red spots and that he was "about the height of my lord John de Beaumont"—as the historian Karamzin said: "It's a pity we have not had the honor of knowing Monsieur de Beaumont!" Almost a century later another visitor, Ibn Battuta, wrote of it as "one of the finest cities, of boundless size . . . choked with the throng of its inhabitants, and possessing good bazaars and broad streets." He also commented on its cosmopolitan nature, inhabited as it was not only by Mongols but by Russian and Byzantine Christians and Middle-East Muslims.[3]

To administer the former Rus lands, the Mongols relied heavily on cooperating

[3]Ibn Battuta's observations are cited in Daniel C. Waugh, "The Pax Mongolica," available on the Silk Road Foundation website <http://www.silk-road.com/artl/paxmongolica.shtml>.

A Bishop's Sermon on the Mongol Invasion and Other Misfortunes

This selection, from Leon Wiener, *Anthology of Russian Literature: From the Earliest Period to the Present Time* (New York, 1902), Vol. I, pp. 105–106, is an excerpt from "A Sermon on Omens," by Serapion, Bishop of Vladimir (d. 1275). It gives the most common explanation for why God allowed such misfortunes as earthquakes and the Mongol devastation to be inflicted on the Christian Rus. This sermon also illustrates the point of Charles Halperin that Russian writers, while writing of the devastation of Mongol campaigns, preferred vagueness to an open recognition that Russia remained subject to Mongol political control. Bracketed material and ellipses are mine.

We did not obey the gospel, did not obey the apostles, nor the prophets, not the great luminaries. . . . It is for this that God is punishing us with signs and earthquakes. He does not speak with His lips, but chastises with deeds. God has punished us with everything, but has not dispelled our evil habits: now He shakes the earth and makes it tremble: He wants to shake off our lawlessness and sins from the earth like leaves from a tree. If any should say that there have been earthquakes before, I shall not deny it. But what happened to us afterwards? Did we not have famine, and plague, and many wars? But we did not repent, until finally there came upon us a ruthless nation [the Mongols], at the instigation of God, and laid waste our land, and took into captivity whole cities, destroyed our holy churches, slew our fathers and brothers, violated our mothers and sisters. Now, my brothers, having experienced that, let us pray to our Lord, and make confession, lest we incur a greater wrath of the Lord, and bring down upon us a greater punishment than the first.

Much is still waiting for our repentance and for our conversion. If we turn away from corrupt and ruthless judgments, if we do away with bloody usury and all rapacity, thefts, robbery, blasphemy, lies, calumny, oaths, and denunciations, and other satanic deeds,—if we do away with all that, I know well that good things will come to us in this life and in the future life . . . . When will we, at last, turn away from our sins? Let us spare ourselves and our children! At what time have we seen so many sudden deaths? Many were taken away before they could care for their houses; many lay down well in the evening and never arose again. Have fear, I pray you, of this sudden parting! If we wander in the will of the Lord, God will comfort us with many a comfort, will cherish us as His sons, will take away from us earthly sorrow, will give us a peaceful exit into the future life, where we shall enjoy gladness, and endless happiness with those who do the will of the Lord.

Riurikid princes, overseen by Mongol officials. The latter were responsible specifically for census taking, the collection of tribute or taxes, the conscription of local men for Mongol military service, and the suppression of any opposition to Mongol rule. At first, many of them resided among the conquered peoples. Later in the century, more remote Golden Horde officials and special envoys to the princes oversaw the compliance of the princes and populace. Either way, Mongol military forces from the steppes were always available, if all else failed, to act as enforcers.

Usually before a prince was allowed to rule a district he had to receive a *yarlyk*

or charter from the khan at Sarai or even from the great khan in the Mongolian capital of Karakorum (about 200 miles west-southwest of modern-day Ulan Bator). Fennell estimates that from 1242 to 1252, Suzdalian princes went to Batu or his son at least nineteen times and on four of these occasions were dispatched further to Karakorum. In Sarai, the princes had to endure humiliating rituals reminding them of their subservience to the khan. The khan also expected presents, and contenders for a princely charter no doubt realized that the worthier the gift, the better they might fare.

During the first sixty years after the Mongol conquest, the differences between former southern Rus principalities and those in the north greatly increased. Being closer to the Golden Horde and more directly under its rule, southern areas like Kiev quickly lost their lingering significance.

Being further to the west, and therefore further from Sarai, Daniel of Galicia-Volhynia was the south's strongest prince. But even he had to go to Sarai in 1246 and recognize the overlordship of Batu, although soon afterwards he attempted to throw off Batu's shackles. Although Daniel was unsuccessful in obtaining papal help for an anti-Mongol crusade, in 1253 Pope Innocent IV, via one of his representatives, did bestow a royal crown upon him. In 1259–1260, a Mongol army moved into Galicia-Volhynia and plundered some areas before retreating. Even though Daniel remained prince of the region until his death in 1264, he became a more obliging, if still resentful, Mongol vassal.

Other princes were even more unfortunate. For example, in Sarai, Batu executed Mikhail of Chernigov in 1246, probably for being too rebellious rather than—as chronicle accounts state—because he refused to worship Batu's idols.

MONGOL RULE AND RUSSIAN PRINCES: SUZDALIA AND NOVGOROD

Having briefly seen the early impact of the Mongols on the Rus in general, we now focus more specifically on Mongol dealings with the north, that is, with the Russians (Great Russians).

Alexander Nevsky

The first significant Russian prince to rule under the Mongols was Alexander Nevsky. When the Mongols conquered Rus, he was prince of Novgorod, and he soon led it to two important victories. For his first victory, against Sweden on the Neva River in 1240, he received (two centuries later) the appellation "Nevsky." His second victory, against the Germanic Knights on Lake Chud in 1242, brought him even more glory.

The Germanic Knights by this time represented a merger of two Catholic groups, the Livonian Order of Swordbearers and the Teutonic Knights. The first had existed for about forty years and had helped the Bishop of Riga subjugate many of the pagan people of Livonia (primarily modern-day Latvia). The second order, although founded in Palestine in the late twelfth century, had been active in the Baltic area for only a little over a decade (see Map 4.1).

FIGURE 5.2. Saint Alexander Nevsky. (*Sovfoto*.)

A few years after the merger of the two orders in 1237, these Germanic Knights began threatening Novgorod. With the aid of some southern Estonians and the prince of Pskov, who was obviously at odds with his townspeople, the Germanic Knights captured Pskov in 1240. By 1241, they were within about twenty miles of Novgorod. It was at this point that the Novgorodians sent a delegation to Alexander—who recently had abdicated—pleading with him to return as their prince. He did so, recaptured Pskov, and pursued the foreigners into German-held Estonian territory. There at the battle on the ice of Lake Chud he defeated them.

Regarding this clash and the life of Alexander generally, it is necessary to weed out the myths from the facts. Russian historians have often lavished praise on this hero, as has Eisenstein's great film *Alexander Nevsky*. The Orthodox Church eventually canonized him a saint. The English historian John Fennell has taken a different approach: He has been especially diligent attempting to debunk the myths that surround Nevsky's life.

Fennell has made at least four important points. First, several sources recounting the life of Alexander contain falsehoods. Second, the proportions of Alexander's two important victories have been greatly overblown. Fennell thinks it likely, for example, that a thirteenth-century Livonian chronicle is close to the truth when it writes of the losses of the German Knights at Lake Chud—twenty

killed and six taken prisoner, excluding any Estonian losses. Third, the threat of the Catholic Germanic Knights to Orthodox Russia has been exaggerated; no unified Western scheme of aggression against Russia existed. Fourth, Alexander betrayed his brothers and appeased the Mongols.

Although the first three points can be granted, the fourth requires further exploration. After the death of Alexander's father, Yaroslav, in 1246, Alexander's uncle Sviatoslav succeeded him as grand prince of Vladimir, followed in 1248 by Alexander's younger brother Andrei. In 1252, Alexander went to Sarai. While he was there, the Mongols sent out an army against Andrei, who chafed at continued subservience to the Mongols. Andrei was defeated and fled the country. The Mongols then made Alexander grand prince of Vladimir in place of Andrei.

Alexander remained as grand prince until 1263. He continued his policy of battling in the west (Lithuanians, Swedes, and Germanic Knights were his chief enemies) and cooperating with the Mongols. When Novgorodians rebelled against Mongol census takers and tax collectors, as they did on several occasions, Alexander enforced the Mongols' will. *The Novgorod Chronicle* entry for 1257 even has Alexander cutting off noses and plucking out eyes of some of the leading rebels.

Yet Fennell's use of the word "appeasement," with all its World War II connotations, implies more than just cooperating with the Mongols. It suggests unheroic behavior. Many Russian historians, however, maintain that Alexander was just being wise, that cooperation with the Mongols seemed the only sensible policy and helped avert greater tragedy. After townspeople in major towns of Suzdalia drove out tax collectors (in 1262), Alexander apparently pleaded with the khan in Sarai for clemency. On the way back in 1263, he died.

The Brothers and Sons of Alexander Nevsky

The next forty years were ones of increasing dissension and division among the Russian princes and increasing Mongol military expeditions to support one or another of the contentious princes. Even during Alexander's reign as grand prince of Vladimir, he did not exercise nearly the control or influence over other Rus princes that his grandfather Vsevolod III had. Outside of Suzdalia, only Novgorod was under his control—usually indirectly and sometimes tenuously. Moreover, in Suzdalia itself, princes of many smaller districts considered themselves heads of their own realms. As grand prince of Vladimir, Alexander's relationship to them was analogous to what the grand prince of Kiev's once had been to lesser Rus princes.

Of course, all the Russian princes were now under the authority of the Golden Horde, which attempted to prevent any one Russian prince from becoming too strong: thus, the Mongol practice of granting many minor princes each a patent (*yarlyk*), which allowed them the right to rule within smaller districts of the former principality of Suzdalia. When Grand Prince Alexander called upon lesser princes to come to his aid against a foreign enemy, a traditional right of grand princes, he did so only under the directions of the khan at Sarai. Such, for example, was the case when he mustered Russian forces for a campaign against the Teutonic Knights in 1262.

From Alexander's death until the death of his son Andrei in 1304, four grand princes of Vladimir attempted to maintain some semblance of Alexander's already limited authority. The first two (up to 1277) were his brothers Yaroslav and Vasili, the last two his sons, Dmitri and Andrei. On two occasions, with the aid of Mongol troops, Andrei seized the grand princely title from the older Dmitri.

All four of Nevsky's successors, with mixed successes, tried to exercise authority over obstreperous Novgorod and usually also acted as prince of that city. Their authority was after all an important key to their financial well-being, both because of Novgorod's payments to the ruling prince and because of its good trading location. Yet more often than not, it was the citizens of Novgorod who came out on top, further restricting the princes' property-holding and judicial rights. Not even the princes' occasional attacks on Novgorod with the help of Mongol troops could reverse the erosion of princely powers.

While the powers of the prince eroded in Novgorod, those of the boyar elite increased. It is during this period that a boyar Council of Lords is first mentioned, and it became increasingly stronger. It consisted of past and present important officials and boyar representatives from each of the city's five districts. It was headed by the city's archbishop, and from this period on the *posadnik* was chosen annually only from among its members.

After seizing the grand princely crown from his brother for a second time in 1293, Nevsky's son Andrei continued in power for another decade, but his influence over other Suzdalian princes weakened. By 1300, there were over a dozen smaller principalities within the Suzdalian lands, and their princes were reluctant to cede any of their powers. Two of them, the princes of Moscow and Tver, increasingly competed with him and blocked his attempts to gain more lands. He died in 1304 a frustrated prince.

MONGOLS AND RUSSIAN HISTORIOGRAPHY

Although we examine subsequent Mongol control along with the rise of Moscow, it is here appropriate to analyze the overall Mongol impact on Russia. Although Russian historians such as Sergei Soloviev and Sergei Platonov (1860–1933) have downplayed Mongol influence on Russian life, others such as George Vernadsky have emphasized its far-reaching and sometimes positive effects. Most Russian historians of its Communist period emphasized only the negative impact of the "Tatar yoke." Statements such as the following were common:

> The Tatar Mongol rule was a terrible calamity for the Russian people. … The invasion and foreign yoke were the main causes of the subsequent economic, political and cultural backwardness of Russia.
>
> It took centuries for economic and cultural life to be restored in Russia to the level of the first quarter of the 13th century.[4]

Some Soviet historians stressed that by absorbing the Mongol's blows, Russia

[4]S. Schmidt, K. Tarnovsky, I. Berkhin, *A Short History of the USSR* (Moscow, 1984), pp. 29–30.

saved Western Europe from a terrible invasion. But as we have seen, the savior of Europe was more the death of Great Khan Ugedei.

Most recent Western scholarship, for example that of Charles Halperin and Donald Ostrowski, provided a corrective to the Soviet historians' tendency to blame the Mongols for many of Russia's subsequent problems. Ostrowski attributed the creation of "the myth of the 'Tatar yoke'" mainly to the influence of fifteenth and sixteenth-century Russian Orthodox Church leaders. Halperin especially has downplayed any long-lasting Mongol impact on Russia's social life or culture. Although the Mongols had some influence on the development of Russian autocracy, its evolution owed more to internal factors than to outside influences, whether Mongol or, more significantly, Byzantine.

In other areas, however, the Mongol impact was considerable, although sometimes more positive than Soviet historians were willing to acknowledge. While the immediate economic consequences of the Mongol invasion were devastating and the Mongols for centuries continued to siphon off silver tribute, their rule also offered some economic advantages. By the fourteenth century, their international trading network contributed to Russian economic growth. Some regions and classes benefited more than others, but the economic hardships suffered by commoners were due as much to Russian princes as to the Mongols.

For their own benefit, these princes, especially in Moscow, adopted some Mongol financial, tax-collecting, and administrative methods. Other Mongol spheres influencing Russian practices were its postal system, military organization and tactics, and diplomatic rituals. Although not believing that autocracy was inherited from the Mongols or that they had much influence on Muscovite law or the treatment of women, Ostrowski has gone further than most scholars in maintaining that most fourteenth-century Muscovite civil and military institutions were of Mongol origin. He even thinks it likely that the *zemskii sobor* (assembly of the land), which came into existence in the sixteenth century (see Chapter 8), was heavily influenced by a similar institution that advised the Mongol khans.

Writing decades earlier, Vernadsky believed that the introduction of capital and more widespread corporal punishment under Moscow rulers was largely due to Mongol influence. Yet he admitted that harsh Western influences might have been more significant in western areas of Russia. Again, however, internal developments were probably more important than either outside influence. One final impact of the Mongols still needs to be treated—their role in Moscow's rise to power. This is discussed in Chapter 6.

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