Chapter 6

Moscow and Its Rivals, 1304–1533

Between 1304 and 1533 the successive princes of Moscow gradually emerged as the leaders of a new Russian state. They did so by first becoming the Mongols' most trusted viceroys and then by demonstrating their strength against increasingly divisive Mongols and other enemies. The support the Moscow princes generally received from the Orthodox hierarchy also helped them. Sometime before 1300, the metropolitan had moved from Kiev to Vladimir and in 1325 began residing in Moscow.

By his death in 1505, Ivan III had brought most of Russia under his control, including powerful Novgorod and Moscow's chief Russian rival for so many years, Tver. Furthermore, he won from Lithuania other lands, primarily Ukrainian, which it had long dominated. He also increased the prestige of his throne. The collapse of the Byzantine Empire in 1453 and Ivan III's marriage to the niece of the last Byzantine Emperor helped to inflate claims in his behalf. So did a Mongol retreat from his armies in 1480. Some high churchmen encouraged him to use the title tsar, which he occasionally did. His son, Vasili III, continued his father's work. By Vasili's death in 1533, Moscow had expanded from a small principality to a Muscovite state (Russia) some sixty times larger than in 1300. This remarkable expansion was driven primarily by the desires of Moscow princes and their followers for economic gain. Trade, tribute, and taxes remained as important to them as they had been to Rus princes.

EMERGENCE OF MOSCOW, 1304–1389

Moscow's first chronicle mention was in 1147, and Prince Yuri Dolgoruki soon strengthened this small settlement by putting wooden walls around it. It sat above the Moscow River, on the western portion of the modern-day Kremlin. Only after Alexander Nevsky gave the area to his youngest son, Daniel, however, did it begin to be a major force in northeastern politics. By 1304, Daniel and his son Yuri, who succeeded him in 1303, had almost tripled the size of the Moscow principality by taking over the districts of Kolomna, Mozhaisk, and Pereiaslavl-Zalesskii (see Map 6.1).

When the death of Andrei in 1304 created a vacancy for the position of grand prince of Vladimir, Yuri of Moscow (his nephew) and Mikhail of Tver (Andrei's cousin) vied with each other for the khan's patent. This began a period of intense rivalry between the princes of Tver and Moscow for the khan's favor.[1] For the next quarter century, the khan, pursuing a policy of playing the two princely houses against each other, favored first one then the other with the coveted title of grand prince of Vladimir. Finally in 1327, townspeople in Tver revolted against Mongol troops who had been sent there, and the Mongol khan in Sarai retaliated by sending troops to devastate Tver and other towns in that principality. Among those who led the troops was Prince Ivan of Moscow (later called Kalita or moneybag), the brother of Yuri, who had ealier been killed by a Tver prince.

Besides Tver's revolt, its growing closeness to Lithuania, a new rival of the Mongol Golden Horde, seems to have persuaded Khan Uzbeg to rely more now on Moscow's prince as his chief Russian vassal. After a brief interlude, the khan bestowed grand princely powers upon Ivan Kalita, probably in 1331. While enriching himself, Ivan proved a faithful vassal up to his death in 1341. He collected Mongols' taxes efficiently and made numerous trips to Sarai. For the Daniilovich dynasty (the descendants of Daniel, son of Alexander Nevsky), his two major accomplishments were gaining Orthodox Church backing for the dynasty[2] and the khan's support of his oldest son, Simeon, as his successor as grand prince.

The reigns of Simeon and his younger and only surviving brother, Ivan II (1353–1359), are bracketed between the more notable reigns of their father and of Ivan II's son, Dmitri Donskoi (1359–1389). In general, Ivan I's two sons continued the policies of their father. For most Russians, the most significant happening of the brothers' two decades of rule was the Black Death, which killed many Russians including Simeon and his two remaining sons (see Chapter 7).

When his father died in 1359, Prince Dmitri was only nine. Ever since Metropolitan Peter had come to reside in Moscow in 1325, the metropolitans generally had supported Moscow as opposed to Tver. Upon the death of Metropolitan Peter's successor in 1353, Moscow's Prince Simeon was able to obtain the appointment of Bishop Alexei of Vladimir as the new metropolitan. In 1362, Metropolitan Alexei helped the young Prince Dmitri obtain the grand princely patent. And along with leading boyars, Alexei helped direct state affairs while Dmitri was still a boy.

Although Dmitri obtained the khan's patent, his reign (1359–1389) marked a new chapter in Mongol-Russian relations. Internal conflict weakened the Golden Horde—in the first two decades of Dmitri's reign, coups helped insure an average of one new khan per year—and gave Dmitri the opportunity to adopt a less subservient, more aggressive position to the reigning khan.

[1]Janet Martin argues in *Medieval Russia, 980–1584* (Cambridge, England, 1995), pp. 174–75, 178–79, 375–79, that a succession system similar to the collateral system mentioned in Chapter 2 was respected by most Rus princes after the Mongol conquest, and by that system Moscow's princes had no legitimate claim to the grand princely throne. She further asserts that this deficiency made Moscow more dependent on the Mongols and on "fashioning new bases of legitimacy."
[2]Martin, pp. 192–98, 391–93, 398, has pointed out that this backing was not absolute or without exceptions, and she emphasizes Orthodoxy's role in assisting the rise of Moscow less than I do. My position follows more those of Robert O. Crummey. *The Formation of Muscovy, 1304–1613* (London, 1987) and John Fennell, *A History of the Russian Church to 1448* (London, 1995).

MAP 6.1

Dmitri made gains in three principal ways. First, he greatly strengthened Moscow's prestige and claim to the grand princely title; he was the first, for example, to dare bequeath the grand principality of Vladimir in his will. Second, by adding territories primarily to the north and east of Moscow, he more than doubled Muscovy's size. Third, by achieving at least some success against Mongol troops in two battles of 1378 and 1380, he increased Muscovite confidence that Mongol control could eventually be overthrown.

None of these gains was made easily. Princes of some of the other northeastern principalities challenged his leadership. This was especially true of Tver, which once again appeared strong for six or seven years until finally defeated by Dmitri in 1375. At different times it even had Lithuanian and some Mongol help. At times, Dmitri and competing Russian princes sought the grand princely patent from competing khan claimants. Despite some temporary setbacks, however, Dmitri generally maintained Mongol recognition of his grand princely rights. Ironically, however, the chief fame of this Mongol-supported prince rests on his battles against the Mongols.

Conflict had been simmering between Dmitri and Mamai, the leader of one of the two major competing Golden Horde forces, ever since Mamai had supported Mikhail II of Tver's claim to the grand princely title in 1370. The princes of Nizhnii Novgorod, with Dmitri's encouragement, improved their region's defences. Taking this as a hostile action, Mamai dispatched Mongol troops in 1374 to their capital, the city of Nizhnii Novgorod. The townspeople soon reacted to this action by rising up and killing many Mongols. Mamai then retaliated by twice ordering the ravaging of this Volga city, once in 1377 and again in 1378. Following these attacks, he sent an army directly against Dmitri's own territories. Dmitri's forces met it on the Vozha River (south of Kolomna), and routed it.

Two years later, after arranging for Lithuanian help, Mamai himself led a large army up the Don River. The Russian prince of Riazan also agreed to support him. Receiving word of Mamai's preparation, Dmitri gathered a large Russian force from various districts. It seems, however, that Novgorod, Nizhnii Novgorod, and Tver failed to respond to his call. The Russian troops—numbering perhaps 70,000—rendezvoused at Kolomna, southeast of Moscow, and headed for the Don. Shortly after crossing it, they engaged the Mongol forces at Kulikovo Field (southeast of Tula). Unfortunately for Mamai, neither the Lithuanians nor Riazan forces arrived in time. Exactly what happened at Kulikovo is difficult to determine, but later Muscovite accounts insist that Mamai was defeated and forced to flee south.

But even if Mamai was decisively defeated, which Ostrowski doubts, the Mongol hold over Russia was not yet ended. Two years after Kulikovo, a rival Mongol leader named Tokhtamysh, after earlier defeating Mamai, ravaged Moscow. Dmitri once again became a loyal tax-collector for this new khan and brought troops into Novgorodian territory in 1386 to enforce payment of a special assessment to him.

Tokhtamysh's successful 1382 campaign also weakened Dmitri's influence among Russian princes. A few had even helped Tokhtamysh defeat Dmitri. His leverage over the Orthodox Church also lessened during the last years of his life—his mentor Metropolitan Alexei had died in 1378. But these setbacks were only temporary. The strengthening of Moscow, both in relation to other parts of Russia

The Battle of Kulikovo

The excerpt that follows is from the military tale *Zadonshcina* by Sofoni of Riazan, who apparently wrote it within a decade and a half of the famous 1380 battle it depicts. It is a poetic, not completely factual, rendition, yet most later Russians saw the conflict in the same general way: as a Moscow-led Christian Russian holy war against Muslim Tatar oppression (Islam had become the official religion of the Golden Horde early in the fourteenth century). The excerpt is from Leo Wiener *Anthology of Russian Literature: From the Earliest Period to the Present Time* (New York, 1902), Vol I, pp. 108–111. Bracketed material and ellipsis are mine except for the ellipsis in the third paragraph, where they appear in Wiener's translation

All the Russian princes came to the aid of Grand Prince Dmitri Ivanovich, and they spoke as follows: "Lord Grand Prince! Already do the pagan Tartars encroach upon our field, and take away our patrimony. They stand between the Don and Dnieper, on the river Mecha. But we, Lord, will go beyond the swift river Don, will gain glory in all the lands, will be an object of conversation for the old men, and a memory for the young.". . .

. . . the Russian princes have attacked the Tartar might, and they strike with their steel lances against the Tartar armour; the tempered swords thunder against the Tartar helmets on the field of Kulikovo, on the river Nepryadva. Black is the earth under the hoofs, but they had sowed the field with Tartar bones, and the earth was watered with their blood . . . . and they vanquished the Tartar horde on the field of Kulikovo, on the river Nepryadva. . . .

All over the Russian land there spread joy and merriment: the Russian glory was borne through the land, but shame and destruciton came on the pagan Tartars, evil Mussulmans. . . . The Grand Prince by his own bravery and with his druzhina vanquished pagan Mamay for the sake of the Russian land and the Christian faith. The pagans deposited their own arms under the Russian swords, and the trumpets were not sounded, their voices were silent. Mamay galloped away from his druzhina, howled like a grey wolf, and ran away to the city of Khafest [Kaffa in the Crimea].

and to the Mongols, would continue after Dmitri's death in 1389. He had shown dramatically that the Mongols could be defeated in battle.

THE LITHUANIAN CHALLENGE

One of Moscow's chief enemies and rivals was Lithuania. Partly in reaction to the pressure of the Germanic Knights, Prince Mendovg (Mindaugas) united the Lithuanian tribes in the middle of the thirteenth century. Before his death in 1263, he expanded Lithuanian control into a portion of the former Rus principality of Polotsk.

For the remainder of the century, Lithuanian gains over former Rus lands were minimal. Lithuania was more concerned with its own internal political order and the expansive Germanic Knights on its western and northeastern borders. Its expansion began to accelerate again under Gedymin (Gedyminas), who ruled from 1316 to 1341. Through a shrewd combination of warfare, dynastic marriages,

and diplomacy, he spread Lithuanian control over the rest of Belorussia and began penetrating southward into Ukraine. He also exercised strong influence on Novgorod and Pskov, both of which welcomed a counterweight to play off against Muscovite interference, and he established good relations with the princely house of Tver.

Gedymin's two sons Olgerd (Algirdas) and Keistut (Kestutis), who ruled jointly after him, continued Lithuanian expansion to the south and east. Olgerd was especially successful. Defeating Mongol forces, he established his authority over the lands of Kiev, Chernigov, much of Smolensk, and the rest of Volhynia. In 1368 and again in 1370, he attacked Moscow in support of his ally Mikhail II of Tver, although on neither occasion was their combined force able to capture the city. Before Olgerd's death in 1377, the Grand Principality of Lithuania was the largest state in Europe. It controlled about half of the old Rus lands, and a majority of its people were descendants of the Rus and were Orthodox.

The leaders of Lithuania had created a large political federation more by co-option than by conquest. Many East Slavs welcomed them as preferable to Mongol overlords. Once brought into the new federation, these East Slavs made up the bulk of Lithuania's armies in the south, which battled mainly with the Mongols and their supporters.

A political, social, and cultural merging also took place. While Lithuanian princes were given control over large principalities, such as Volhynia and Kiev, many Slavic princes and nobles maintained their positions and estates. Numerous Lithuanian princes and nobles intermarried with their Slavic counterparts and accepted many of their customs and even Orthodoxy. Ruthenian, the Slavic language spoken by most of the Slavs in the new state, became an official government language. Olgerd consciously thought of himself as a gatherer of the Rus lands, and many Ukranian historians, following the example of Hrushevsky, have maintained that the Grand Principality of Lithuania continued the traditions of the Rus more faithfully than did Moscow.

Both Gedymin and Olgerd realized the political importance of Orthodoxy. Olgerd himself possibly accepted Orthodoxy—his sons certainly did, although some later changed to Catholicism. Gedymin and Olgerd only occasionally were able to persuade the patriarch in Constantinople to appoint a separate Orthodox metropolitan for their country. Otherwise, the Moscow metropolitan had jurisdiction over the Lithuanian Orthodox. Olgerd, however, complained of the favoritism Metropolitan Alexei showered upon Moscow.

There was some justification to Olgerd's charge. There were also more Orthodox believers in the Lithuanian territories than in those under Moscow's control. Thus, Patriarch Philotheus in Constantinople responded by appointing in 1375 a Bulgarian named Cyprian to a separate metropolitanate in Lithuania. The patriarch intended for it to exist only temporarily—until the death of old Metropolitan Alexei of Moscow, at which time the conciliatory Cyprian was to become metropolitan over the Orthodox in both Russia and Lithuania.

Olgerd died in 1377 and Metropolitan Alexei in 1378, but Dmitri Donskoi still had more than another decade to live, and he supported his own metropolitan claimant. Only after Dmitri's death in 1389 did Cyprian assume full control over a single united metropolitanate, once again headquartered in Moscow.

By then, however, a more momentous event had occurred in the struggle for Orthodox hearts and the Rus legacy. Threatened by the Germanic Knights and some internal challenges to his authority, Olgerd's son Jagiello (Jogailo) had allied with Poland. In the Treaty of Krewo (1385), he promised to marry the Polish queen, Jadwiga, and, along with his nobles, convert to Catholicism. Although Lithuanian nobles continued to insist on certain privileges denied to foreigners, including Poles, and not all of them converted to Catholicism, the treaty did mark the beginning of four centuries of dynastic and later (1569) constitutional union with Poland and brought many advantages to the Lithuanians. In the long run, however, it weakened their hold over former Rus lands. As the Catholic religion and Polish culture increasingly influenced the Lithuanian elite, the gap widened between Catholic Lithuanians and the Orthodox Slavs they ruled over in Belorussian and Ukrainian lands.

MOSCOW'S STRUGGLES AND SUCCESSES, 1389–1462

During the long reigns of Vasili I (1389–1425) and Vasili II (1425–1462), son and grandson of Dmitri Donskoi, Moscow's ruling dynasty became stronger. But Moscow's rise was a ragged one with many rises and plunges. Before the dynasty could emerge strengthened, it had to overcome Lithuanian and Mongol challenges, differences with the Orthodox patriarchs in Constantinople (who pursued their own religious-political agenda), and civil wars within Muscovy. Moscow's ultimate successes were due less to the political skills of the first two Vasilis than to the increasing handicaps hampering its enemies and rivals.

Lithuania, the Mongols, and Moscow

At first, the acceptance of Catholicism by Jagiello in 1385 did not noticeably hinder Lithuania in its struggle with Moscow. Jagiello's marriage and conversion seemed to create an awesome new Polish-Lithuanian union. But his championing of Catholicism and unleashing of Polish influence in his grand principality, along with other causes, soon awakened opposition. It came from both Orthodox Slavs and Lithuanians, especially the former. Apparently with some encouragement from Moscow, a forceful challenger to Jagiello rose to lead them, his cousin Vitovt (Vytautas). In 1392, Jagiello was forced to recognize his de facto control over Lithuania. This rivalry, however, did not seem to hamper Lithuania in its policy of eastward expansion.

By his death in 1430, Vitovt appeared to have strengthened Lithuania's dominance in the old Rus lands. He gained additional territory in the Smolensk area and was recognized as the protector of Tver as well as of the upper Oka River princes south of Moscow. Furthermore, the princes of Riazan and Pronsk signed a treaty shortly before his death, acknowledging him as their sovereign. In Pskov and Novgorod, he wielded considerable influence, forcing both to pay indemnities for ceasing campaigns against them (in 1426 and 1428, respectively). Surprisingly enough, he accomplished all this while generally maintaining good relations with Moscow. In 1391, he married his daughter Sophia to Vasili I. Thereafter, he exercised some influence on his son-in-law, and after Vasili I's death, Vitovt

supported Vasili II (his own grandson) in his battle against other claimants to the Moscow throne. Further south, despite losing a major battle to the Golden Horde in 1399, Vitovt took advantage of the Horde's gradual disintegration to extend Lithuanian dominance to the Black Sea.

In the religious sphere, however, Vitovt was less successful despite treating the Orthodox Church in his territories favorably. When Metropolitan Cyprian died in 1406, Vitovt nominated one successor and Vasili I another. The Byzantine patriarch chose Vasili's candidate, Photius, and Vitovt ultimately had little choice but to recognize him as the spiritual head of Lithuania's Orthodox subjects.

The next important episode in this ongoing spiritual saga centered around Photius's successor, Isidore. He was previously a Byzantine abbot sympathetic to reunion between Catholics and Orthodox. Like his patriarch, he hoped reunion would bring Western help against the Muslim Ottoman Turks, then slicing away at the Byzantine Empire. In 1437, Isidore left Moscow in charge of a delegation to an ecumenical council in Italy. At this Ferrara-Florence council, he played an important role in reestablishing Orthodox-Catholic union.

After returning to Moscow in 1441, Isidore proclaimed the new church unity, but was then arrested by Vasili II. The prince then met with a council of Russian bishops, and both found the terms of the Ferrara-Florence reconciliation unacceptable. They believed too much had been forsaken, especially the Orthodox belief regarding the Holy Spirit's procession from God the Father alone and Orthodox opposition to papal supremacy. They now rejected both Isidore and his message of reunion.

At the end of 1448, after Isidore had long since left Russian territory, another council of Russian bishops met and selected, on their own, a new metropolitan, Bishop Iona of Riazan. The break with the Byzantine patriarch, now realigned with Rome, was complete. When in 1453, Constantinople finally fell to the Muslim Turks, many Russian Orthodox leaders saw it as God's punishment for Byzantium's apostasy.

The effect of all these Russian-Byzantine church dealings was to solidify just what the Lithuanian leaders had always feared: too close a relationship between Moscow and the metropolitan. Even after the first Turkish-appointed patriarch returned to Orthodoxy, the Russian Orthodox Church continued to act independently.

A Lithuanian response also occurred. In 1447, one of Jagiello's sons, after first serving as grand duke of Lithuania and gaining some Polish concessions to it, was crowned Casimir IV, king of Poland. This Catholic king now ruled a more united Poland-Lithuania, and in 1458 he accomplished what his predecessors had failed to do: he established a permanent Orthodox metropolitanate in Kiev. Thereafter the Catholic Polish-Lithuanian lay leaders, while mindful of the complex ethnic and religious makeup of the Lithuanian territories, controlled Orthodox religious appointments in their realm. Although an apparent victory for Casimir, the separate metropolitanate just further isolated Moscow's metropolitan, making him more dependent than ever on the Orthodox Moscow grand prince.

From all these slowly evolving Orthodox religious developments in the lands of old Rus, Ivan III of Moscow would soon begin collecting more tangible gains. If these gains were still largely in the future, Moscow's dividends from growing Mongol disunity were already being cashed in. First, there was the conflict between the Golden Horde's Khan Tokhtamysh and the infamous conqueror and

empire-builder Tamerlane, who by 1370 had become the real power in the Mongol Chagatai khanate. In the early 1390s, Vasili I took advantage of Tokhtamysh's troubles to annex parts of the Nizhnii Novgorod area. After Tokhtamysh fled to Lithuania, allied with Vitovt, and continued his fight against Tamerlane's victorious Golden Horde ally Edigei (d. 1419), Vasili noted the challenge to Edigei and suspended tribute payments to him.

Although racked with internal divisiveness, the Golden Horde did not expire without some last attacks on Moscow. In 1408, for example, Khan Edigei raided Moscow, pillaged areas around the city, and left only after Moscow agreed to pay him 3,000 rubles.

During the reign of Vasili II, the Golden Horde finally split apart. Out of it emerged three main khanates: those of Kazan, the Crimea, and Sarai (later Astrakhan). The division did not mean an end to Mongol demands or raids upon Russia, but it greatly reduced their effectiveness. Vasili II and his successors now could play off various Mongol factions against each other. In the second half of his reign, Vasili even recruited sons of one of the rival khans, along with their followers. The most prominent of them, Kasim, formed a Russian puppet khanate on the Oka River, southeast of Moscow. This khanate of Kasimov, as it was called after its founder, became a vital defensive outpost against Mongol attacks.

Princely Conflict over Moscow

When Vasili II came to the throne in 1425, he was only ten, and the first decades of his reign were punctuated with challenges to his authority and with civil war. The chief challengers were Vasili's uncle Yuri of the northern region of Galich, who died in 1434, and then his sons Vasili and Dmitri (Shemiaka). Moscow's Daniilovich dynasty had been fortunate to this point in that births and deaths within it had made it easy to determine successors, but uncle Yuri insisted on the collateral principle—succession passing first from brother to brother, rather than father to son. In 1433, Yuri marched on Moscow and briefly grabbed power; in 1446, after Vasili II had returned from four months as a Mongol prisoner, Dmitri did the same. Following both these brief interludes, Vasili II regained his throne, although on the second occasion not before being blinded on Dmitri's orders. This blinding was a reciprocal act for the earlier blinding of Dmitri's brother Vasili on orders from Vasili II.

Aided by his own internal victories and Mongol divisiveness, Vasili now strengthened both Moscow's standing and his own authority. In 1448, he made his eight-year-old son, Ivan, co-ruler and heir to his throne, and he did it without seeking Mongol approval. The next year he signed a treaty with Casimir IV of Poland-Lithuania, allowing both rulers to concentrate more on other matters than their disputed mutual borders. Among other provisions, the treaty recognized Moscow's predominance in Novgorod and Pskov. In 1456, while Casimir was fighting a war with the Germanic Knights, the blind Vasili and his army attacked and defeated Novgorod, which had earlier given final support to his rival Dmitri. Finally, Vasili increased his control over junior appanage princes who ruled over small Daniilovich territories (like Mozhaisk and Serpukhov).

Although he had begun his reign as a ten-year-old boy sitting shakily on his throne and subsequently suffered many ups and downs, when Vasili died in 1462

he left a much stronger Muscovy to his son. Both Moscow and the office of grand prince now held unchallenged supremacy, if not yet complete control, over other Great Russian areas and princes. The Golden Horde was no more, and Muscovy was stronger than any of its remnants. Although still mighty under Casimir IV, Poland-Lithuania was preoccupied with other matters at home and abroad, and its dominant Catholicism left it vulnerable in its Orthodox border territories.

THE END OF NOVGORODIAN INDEPENDENCE AND THE TRIUMPH OF MOSCOW, 1462–1533

Ivan III (1462–1505) and his son, Vasili III (1505–1533), completed Moscow's quest to dominate Great Russia. Of the two rulers, Ivan III (the Great) accomplished the most, and Russian historians have called him "the gatherer of the Russian lands."

Ivan III and Vasili III: The Men and Their Goals

The only physical description left to us of Ivan III was by the Italian Ambrogio Contarini—one of a growing number of foreign observers who now appear in Russia. Contarini said Ivan was tall, thin, and handsome. Ivan's youthful experiences—observing the plots against his father, being named co-ruler at eight, married at twelve, a father at eighteen, leading a campaign against a Mongol army at eighteen or nineteen—must have helped mature him early. After coming to the throne at twenty-two, his words and deeds reveal a skillful politician: active but cautious; cold-blooded, but not blood-thirsty; opportunistic, yet possessing an ultimate goal. His goal was to expand Muscovite territory and to create a strong, centralized government to run the expanded state.

Although also strong and clever, Vasili III's character is a bit harder to discern. He was the son of a Byzantine princess (Ivan's second wife) and, like his father, had military and government experience before assuming the throne at twenty-six. He also had undergone some trying times before succeeding his father. Ivan had first designated as his heir a grandson, the son of a deceased son from his first marriage. Only about five years later, in 1502, did he reverse himself and name Vasili as heir. Like his father, Vasili also had two wives. He sent the first one to a convent to become a nun (she had produced no children) and then married a Lithuanian immigrant princess, Elena Glinskaia. Apparently to please his young bride, he shaved off his beard, a highly unusual act for a Russian ruler.

As with earlier Muscovite princes, economic considerations remained important to these two rulers. It affected their dealings with Novgorod and other Russian and foreign lands and many of their internal policies.[3]

Moscow's Conquest of Novgorod and Other Russian Lands

When Ivan III became grand prince of Moscow in 1462, four other independent Great Russian principalities still existed—Yaroslavl, Riazan, Rostov, and Tver—

[3]See also Chapter 7 for Ivan III's will and examples of Vasili III's possessiveness.

plus the independent city states of Novgorod, Pskov, and Viatka. The first areas Ivan III annexed (by 1474) were the small ones of Yaroslavl and Rostov, both already under Moscow's dominance. He also solidified Moscow's influence over Riazan by marrying his sister to Riazan's Prince Vasili. But his largest conquest was Novgorod. In 1471, he defeated it in battle and in 1478 annexed it.

By the beginning of Ivan III's reign, Novgorod had declined from its heyday. It had always depended on fur tribute, especially from Finnic tribes, and on exporting fur as an essential part of its extensive foreign trade. During the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, Novgorod's government and upper classes had developed an extensive network for gathering and trading grey squirrel skins, a type of fur that had become fashionable in Europe. The chief buyers of these skins were German merchants, some of them part of the Hanseatic League, a powerful Germanic trading association with a branch in Novgorod's foreign compound of Peterhof. By 1462, however, Novgorod's fur gathering and trade were being undercut by (1) shifts in upper-class European tastes (toward more luxurious skins), (2) trade disputes and other differences with German merchants, and (3) Moscow's steady encroachment on lands that once paid fur tribute or taxes to Novgorod. The latter two factors also harmed other aspects of Novgorod's trade and economy.

In Novgorodian politics, the *veche* continued to exist, but the boyar elite, which had become more powerful than ever, dominated it. Novgorod still selected its own prince and restricted his rights, and with its weak military, it remained susceptible to outside attacks. At first, following in the footsteps of Alexander Nevsky and other grand princes, the Muscovite princes had occasionally attacked Novgorod as enforcers of Mongol tribute demands. Later, even though Muscovite princes sought and generally gained Novgorod recognition as its "protector," they still sometimes attacked it, as Vasili II had done in 1456. To understand why necessitates a more thorough look at Novgorod's internal and external relations.

Novgorodian society was quite stratified, from boyars and "well-to-do people" (*zhitye liudi*) at the top to slaves at the bottom. By the mid-fifteenth century, Novgorodian politics was dominated by several dozen powerful boyar clans, whose wealth derived both from land and from trade. Also powerful was Novgorod's archbishop, who presided over the otherwise boyar-dominated Council of Lords and sometimes acted as the city-state's chief representative. As head of the Novgorod Church, he controlled lands worth more than those of any single landowner. Less significant, but still influential, was the archimandrite, who had his own jurisdiction as head of Novgorod's monastic community and its prosperous lands. Yet the political-religious elite was by no means united, nor were Novgorod's more common citizens, some of whom occasionally displayed their hostility to boyar wealth and privileges.

Splits within Novgorodian society were heightened by the Lithuanian-Moscow competition for dominance in the former Rus lands. Caught between two expanding powers, most Novgorodians believed they had to ally with one or the other of these "superpowers." The choice of which one divided the boyars as well as other Novgorodians.

Preference for Moscow or Lithuania was partly a question of economics. Since the days of Ivan I, Moscow had contended with Novgorod for tribute and tax

payments, often in the forms of furs, from peoples in northern Russian lands. In the late fourteenth century, thanks partly to the missionary efforts of St. Stephen of Perm, some Finnic Permians switched their fur tribute from Novgorod to Moscow. Contention and conflicts over other areas of the north followed in the first half of the fifteenth century.

Novgorod's support of the rebellious Dmitri Shemiaka in his civil war against Vasili II was partly motivated by Novgorodian wishes to regain access to some of the fur and fur routes it had earlier lost. Vasili's victory against Dmitri strengthened Moscow's hand in the north, however, and Vasili's subsequent attack on Novgorod in 1456 cost the Novgorodians dearly. By the terms of the treaty ending the war, Novgorodian boyars had to relinquish to Moscow all the lands they had obtained from the appanage princes of Rostov and Beloozero. Novgorod also had to pay a 10,000-ruble fine, agree to Moscow approval of any documents issued by its *veche*, and cease providing sanctuary to any enemies of Moscow's grand prince.

During the next decade and a half, Moscow continued chipping away at northern territories formerly under Novgorodian control. The desire for the area's luxury furs, such as sable, now in fashion in Europe, was one reason for the continuing struggle.

Thus, a sharp economic rivalry for land, fur, and trade routes motivated some Novgorodian boyars who adopted an anti-Moscow stance. Economic considerations, however, influenced other prosperous Novgorodians to believe they would be better off with a pro-Muscovite policy. Good relations with Moscow seemed to offer the possibility of smoother, less disruptive east-west trade, important for Novgorod, which traditionally had acted as an intermediary for such activity. Besides, Novgorod itself depended on Russian lands to its southeast for such valuable imports as grain. Despite some historians' contention that the wealthy were pro-Lithuanian and the commoners pro-Muscovite, the reality was more complex.

Besides economic issues, religious-cultural and political considerations also affected the Lithuanian or Moscow choice. As the center of Russian Orthodoxy, Moscow was undoubtedly a magnet attracting some Novgorodians, whereas Lithuania's dominant Catholicism and increasingly Polonized culture were much more foreign to Orthodox Novgorodians. Yet some clergy supported a pro-Lithuanian policy for political reasons. Like some of their fellow Novgorodians, they feared that embracing the Muscovite grand prince would lead to the end of Novgorodian independence, whereas the Lithuanian monarch would be less interfering in their affairs.

In 1470, with the pro-Lithuanian faction temporarily dominant, Novgorod's government requested Casimir IV of Poland-Lithuania to send them a prince. They also sought his aid in having their archbishop-elect consecrated in the newly established metropolitanate of Kiev, which Casimir had worked so hard to establish. An Orthodox and Slavic prince, Mikhail of Kiev, then arrived in Novgorod, briefly serving as its prince before changing his mind. Casimir's subsequent lack of confidence that he could control the behavior of such leaders sent from his realm was one reason why he failed to pursue a more vigorous Novgorodian policy in the years ahead.

Moscow's Ivan III viewed Novgorod's actions as cause for war and claimed that Orthodoxy was being threatened. He mobilized his troops and attacked Novgorod. In 1471, aided by Novgorod's internal divisiveness and Lithuania's failure to send help—Casimir was then more concerned with Hungarian and Bohemian affairs—Ivan won a major battle on the Shelon River.

Ivan followed up his victory by ordering the beheading of at least four anti-Muscovite leaders. One of them was the son of the widow Marfa Boretskaia, a powerful boyar woman who played a leading role among Novgorod's pro-Lithuanian faction. Chronicle accounts also mention some plundering and burning before Novgorod sent a delegation to Ivan, pleading for mercy.

Considering Ivan's strong position, his terms were restrained. The crux of the treaty was that Novgorod was to remain loyal to Moscow and to the Moscow metropolitan and cease its attempts to deal directly with Poland-Lithuania. Novgorod and its boyars also had to recognize Moscow's claims to the lands east of the Northern Dvina that Muscovites and Novgorodians had been struggling over in recent decades. But traditional Novgorodian institutions such as the *veche* were permitted to continue.

From 1471 until 1477, turbulence gusted in Novgorod. Pro-Moscow and anti-Moscow factions contended with one another in the *veche* and elsewhere. After the *veche* ordered the execution of some of Ivan's Novgorod supporters, he declared war in 1477. This time there was not even a battle. Ivan's large force just surrounded Novgorod. Realizing resistance was hopeless, Novgorod accepted Ivan's humiliating terms, and he returned to Moscow early the following year. His terms stipulated the annexation of Novgorod and its still vast territories; gave him personal control over specified lands, including some of the church; and abolished independent institutions such as the *veche* and office of *posadnik* (mayor). As a crowning humiliation, Novgorodians saw their *veche* bell removed and carted off to Moscow.

Some Novgorodians, however, plotted to regain their freedom. During the next dozen years, Ivan cut down remaining suspected opponents. He imprisoned and exiled thousands of "traitors," mostly of the upper class, and he confiscated their property. But they were more fortunate than others who were tortured and executed. Altogether, Ivan ended up confiscating about 3 million acres of arable land. These lands were then turned over to about 2,000 "service men," allowed to hold them only as long as they served the Moscow prince.[4] This system of mass land confiscation, exile, and resettlement set a precedent for similar actions in future years.

Novgorod's annexation now left Tver surrounded by the expanding Muscovite state. After Tver's Prince Mikhail tried several times to solidify relations with King Casimir of Poland-Lithuania, Ivan invaded and annexed his principality in 1485.

Next, it was the turn of the independent republic of Viatka, located north of Kazan. Like Novgorod, it had offered support to Dmitri Shemiaka against Vasili II, and its independence blocked greater Muscovite control of the fur trade. Although Vasili II defeated the Viatkans and they pledged allegiance to him in 1460, they

[4]See Chapter 7 on the *pomestie* landholding system.

FIGURE 6.1. Novgorod's kremlin sitting above the Volkhov River. After Ivan III's conquest of Novgorod, the earlier stone walls were replaced by brick ones, and the kremlin appeared much as it does today.

later reverted to their independent ways until Ivan III finally subjugated them in 1489.

During the late fifteenth century, Moscow also subjugated several Finno-Ugrian tribes east of Viatka. Reacting against the Christianizing attempts of the Russians a century earlier, the Yugra, the Voguly, and some of the Perm had fled eastward as far as the Ob River in northwest Siberia. By 1500, they were all paying sable tribute to Moscow.

After Ivan III's death in 1505, Vasili III continued his father's work by fully annexing Pskov (in 1510) and completing the annexation of Riazan during the following decade. In Pskov, Vasili ordered its *veche* bell removed. In Riazan, he arrested its prince and charged him with negotiating with the khan of the Crimea. In both territories, he repeated the Novgorodian pattern of arrests, confiscations, thousands of deportations, and then resettling lands with faithful "service men." Chronicle accounts of arrested Pskovians and their families being exiled at night with only a few possessions have a chillingly twentieth-century ring.

Moscow Versus Lithuania and the Mongols

Even before the death of Poland's Casimir IV in 1492, Ivan III attempted to win over Lithuanian East Slavic and Orthodox border princes and nobles, along with their hereditary properties. To do this, he used persuasion, raiding parties, and, at times, more full-blown military campaigns. Following Casimir's death, Ivan increased military operations along the whole border area, especially in the

Viazma area between Moscow and Smolensk. Casimir had left the Lithuanian part of his kingdom under the direction of his son Alexander, and in 1494, the young man agreed to peace terms favorable to Ivan.

By the treaty, Alexander recognized Ivan's control over Viazma and a large band of territory both east and west of the upper Oka River. That same year, Ivan agreed to the marriage of his daughter Elena to Alexander, provided that she was allowed to continue practicing her Orthodox faith. The marriage occurred the following year. Ivan probably hoped that Elena would act as a Russian Orthodox trojan horse inside the Catholic court of Lithuania.

By 1500, strengthened by an alliance with the Crimean Tatars, Ivan was ready for a full-scale campaign against Lithuania and began his attack that spring. His pretext was Lithuanian mistreatment of Orthodox believers, including his daughter Elena and some border-area princes who announced they were switching their allegiance from Alexander to Ivan. Families were even being broken up, Ivan charged, in the Lithuanian attempt to force Catholicism upon the Lithuanian Orthodox. Alexander's denials of religious persecution and his attempts to prevent war were of no avail.

After great successes in 1500, Ivan made little further headway in the next two years. In 1503, there were peace talks but no peace treaty. Elena's assurances to her father that her husband had not persecuted her or other Orthodox had no softening effect on him. He did, however, agree to a six-year truce. By its provisions, he held on to the areas his armies had taken, including the Belorussian city of Gomel and a northeastern part of Ukraine, including the city of Chernigov. Moreover, he insisted that he had a historic right (exactly how so is not clear) to additional East Slavic lands. During the reign of Vasili III, war broke out again with Lithuania, and in 1514 Russia gained the important city and region of Smolensk.

Although Russian territorial gains from Lithuania were significant, Ivan IlI's reign is better known for ending the "Tatar yoke." In 1480 the Mongol khan of the Great Horde of the lower Volga, Akhmad, marched toward Moscow with a large army, apparently to force Ivan to renew tribute payments. The khan expected to meet up with Lithuanian forces sent by King Casimir. Ivan was supported by the Mongol khan of the Crimea. Ivan's forces moved south to an Oka River tributary, the Ugra. On the south side of the Ugra, Khan Akhmad waited for the Lithuanian troops, but (as in 1380) they never appeared. Except for a Mongol attempt to cross the river, which Russian arrows and guns beat back, there was little fighting. A little more than a month after reaching the Ugra, Khan Akhmad mysteriously retreated—the Lithuanians' absence plus news of a Russian expedition against his lower Volga headquarters were perhaps the chief reasons. Whatever the reasons, the retreat marked an important psychological-moral victory for the Russians, even if it was not quite the decisive turning point that some Russian ideologues and historians later made it out to be.

Actually, for about a century, from the mid-fifteenth until the mid-sixteenth, Russian-Mongol relations remained in a state of flux. Russians made incursions into Mongol lands, especially to the east into the khanate of Kazan, and Mongol forces attacked Russian lands. For example, horsemen from the Crimean khanate devastated and plundered southern Russia almost up to Moscow's walls in 1521. Considerable diplomatic activity also went on, with both Russia and Lithuania

now allying with one Mongol khanate and then another. Although the Russians no longer paid regular tribute to Mongol khans after 1480, and perhaps had not even done so for decades before, they did in shaky times continue sending "gifts" to various khans.

EVOLUTION OF MUSCOVY'S GOVERNMENT

The government inherited by Ivan III in 1462 was still a fairly primitive one. It had evolved mainly from the grand prince's estate management staff and was primarily concerned with insuring maximum economic gain for the prince. Maintaining law and order was a means to this end.

To assist him and his growing staff, the grand prince depended on five to ten boyars, with the number expanding slightly after 1462. After a man became a boyar, his descendants or clan became part of a boyar elite. By the end of the fourteenth century, the Muscovite prince usually selected his boyars from among the heads of these elite clans. As Kollmann states: "There were fewer than 15 boyar families in existence at any one time in the fourteenth century, and the number of boyars from those families fluctuated between about five and ten."[5]

Although it was possible for new families to break into this exclusive circle, or older ones to lose boyar status, many boyar clans maintained their position for at least several generations. Some boyar families had long resided in the Moscow area, and others were newcomers; some came from princely lines, and others were untitled.

Boyars relied on marriage alliances, kinship ties, and patronage networks to strengthen their families and themselves. Most important, however, in maintaining their status was the valuable service they rendered the grand prince. They were his chief advisers, provided cavalry troops for battle, and helped him administer Muscovy's internal and foreign policies.

The boyars were the elite of a landed military class, and for their services the Muscovite grand prince generally showered rewards upon them. Gaining such rewards was no doubt one reason for the intense competition for boyar positions. Despite such competition, the boyars generally cooperated to maintain a system that benefited them. Their relationship to the grand prince was a personal one that stressed loyalty. Although they possessed real power and influence, they did not think of themselves as a "class" competing with the prince for political power, and they made no collective efforts to restrict his legal powers.

As Moscow grew, so too did its court and government. Prior to Ivan III's reign, however, it remained small, especially outside the Kremlin. At first, the Moscow princes depended chiefly on selected individuals to ride around different areas collecting taxes and the Mongol tribute, while also acting as traveling courts of appeal. By the end of the fourteenth century, the grand prince relied more on governors and district administrators—by then there were only about 15 of the former and 100 of the latter. Instead of salaries, they were allowed to "feed themselves"

[5]Nancy Shields Kollmann, *Kinship and Politics: The Making of the Muscovite Political System, 1345–1547* (Stanford, 1987), p. 33.

(the infamous *kormlenie* system), which meant that the people they administered were to provide for their maintenance, and in addition these administrators were allowed to keep for themselves a share of court fees and taxes.

The tremendous expansion of Muscovite territory under Ivan III and Vasili III required significant adaptations to this basic system. Ivan III was especially skillful in integrating princes and aristocrats from annexed principalities into his own administration and military. By the middle of the sixteenth century, the "Sovereign's Court" consisted primarily of a few thousand noble landowners who acted as both an elite military unit (the sovereign's bodyguard) and a pool from which he selected important military and government officials. The ruler's court also included an increasing number of scribes (or state secretaries), who were of mixed social origin. Some of them became proficient and influential in areas such as finance and diplomacy, but, compared to the boyar clans, they possessed little power at court.

A final group that at first glance might seem powerful were the younger brothers of the grand prince. By their father's will, they were given appanage territories over which they could rule, as long as they passed the "Tatar tribute" (even if no longer paid to the Mongols) on to their older brother. Strong rulers like Ivan III and Vasili III, however, made sure that none of their brothers became serious challengers to Muscovite rule. These two princes also prevented their brothers from having too many children (possible future rivals to them or their heir) by delaying or prohibiting the marriages of most of their brothers.

While adding new territories, both Ivan III and Vasili III, as well as Orthodox churchmen, elevated the prestige of the Muscovite grand prince and of Muscovy itself. Ivan was the first Muscovite ruler to refer to himself as "tsar" (from the Latin *Caesar*, meaning emperor), a term that earlier had been used to designate both Byzantine rulers and Mongol khans. During Ivan III's reign some Russian churchmen argued that the only true tsar since the end of the Byzantine Empire was the Russian ruler, and the metropolitan urged Ivan to adopt the term, plus that of autocrat (*samoderzhets* in Russian), which had also been part of the Byzantine emperor's title.[6]

Besides the 1480 Mongol defeat and the Turks' earlier obliteration of the Byzantine Empire, Ivan's victories over his Russian rivals and Lithuania also contributed to his new exalted image. So too did his marriage in 1472—five years after his first wife's death—to Sophia (earlier Zoe) Paleologue, the niece of the last Byzantine Emperor.

The marriage of Sophia and Ivan had been encouraged by the pope, under whose influence Sophia had been educated. He probably hoped, unrealistically as it turned out, that Sophia would promote church unity based on the Ferrara-Florence accord and help enlist Ivan in a crusade against the Ottoman Turks. Despite Ivan's use of the marriage to bolster his prestige, he did not immediately adopt selected Byzantine symbols and ceremonial practices, as historians have

[6]At first *samoderzhets* was meant to imply that the Russian ruler received his power from God and was subject to no foreign ruler, but in the sixteenth century, especially under Ivan IV, the term evolved to also mean that the tsar was legally unrestricted in his powers. See Isabel de Madariaga, *Politics and Culture in Eighteenth-Century Russia: Collected Essays* (London, 1998), pp. 43–45.

sometimes suggested. The use of the two-headed eagle as a Muscovite emblem, for example, came only in the 1490s and then was occasioned more by imitation and rivalry with the Holy Roman Empire than by a desire to copy Byzantium, which also had used the symbol.

Yet it was no accident that during the reigns of Ivan and his son, some clergymen began writing of Muscovy being a "new Israel" or "the Third Rome"—the first two Romes (Rome and Constantinople) having both fallen as God's punishment, the Byzantines because of the Ferrara-Florence accords. Although Daniel Rowland has convincingly argued that the new Israel image was more important than the Third Rome one, both representations indicated that the Muscovites were God's new chosen people. Ostrowski has also downplayed the significance of the Third Rome idea, perceiving it as stressing primarily the Muscovite ruler's obligation to Christianity. And he has emphasized increasing attempts by late fifteenth and sixteenth-century churchmen to depict Mongol influences and past activities as evil and portray the Muscovite ruler as being in the Byzantine tradition of a Christian ruler. In the early sixteenth century, "The Tale of the Vladimir Princes" appeared, which claimed that Russia's ruling princes descended from a brother of the Roman emperor Augustus. The claim was later repeated in the *Book of Degrees of the Imperial Genealogy*, compiled later in the century (see Chapter 12), and was alluded to by Ivan the Terrible, apparently helping to popularize false claims of distinguished foreign ancestors among other princes.

The efforts of Muscovite monarchs and churchmen in the late fifteenth–early sixteenth centuries to upgrade the prestige of the Muscovite grand princes and Muscovy built upon an earlier religious-political tradition. Muscovite princes attempted to create an image of themselves as God's instruments in ruling over the faithful Muscovite believers. Vasili II made especially effective use of the cult of the abbot Sergius (d. 1392), who became Russia's most revered medieval saint. Ivan III and Vasili III followed Vasili's example. By such means as pilgrimages to the dead abbot's Holy Trinity–St. Sergius Monastery and lavishing gifts upon it, supporting his recognition as a saint, and making him appear more a backer of the Daniilovich dynasty than he actually was, these monarchs took advantage of a genuine cult that had begun from below. By identifying the Muscovite princely house with such a humble and loving saint, they increased their own significance.

Many ceremonies at court, including coronations, the observation of religious holy days (sometimes involving public processions), royal weddings, and funerals, reinforced the Muscovite ruler's religious image. One such ceremony toward the end of Vasili III's reign was a three-day affair revolving around the consecration of the Church of the Ascension at the monarch's Kolomenskoe estate near Moscow. Vasili had commissioned the church's construction in 1529 in thanks for the birth of his son Ivan (the future Ivan the Terrible). Its towering tentlike roof was unprecedented in brick or masonry construction. "As an expression of the Muscovite ruler's special relation to the deity, the form of the Ascension at Kolomenskoe can be compared to a votive candle, a fortress tower, a beacon—all serving as metaphors of the authority of the grand prince, the endurance of the princely dynasty, and the centrality of Moscow in the formation of the Russian state."[7]

[7]William Craft Brumfield, *A History of Russian Architecture* (Cambridge, Eng., 1993), p. 119.

The acquisition of new territories, the collapse of the Byzantine Empire, and the final overthrowing of Mongol rule, all combined to spur the Muscovite monarchs to expand their government and upgrade their prestige and that of their country. Although their centralizing efforts were limited by certain practical considerations, such as Muscovy's diverse lands and peoples and financial constraints, these efforts did integrate more thoroughly the Russian people.

In these tasks, the Muscovite monarchs were assisted by the country's political-religious elite. Even though boyar clans or church leaders attempted to increase their own powers or influence, they were content to do so informally, behind what Kollmann has labeled "the facade of autocracy." In dealing with Vasili III's son, Ivan the Terrible, as well as later rulers, the nature of Russian autocracy and whether it was primarily a facade or a more substantial construction will become clearer. (See Chapter 10 for an extensive analysis of autocracy.)

CAUSES OF MOSCOW'S SUCCESS

In achieving its dominant role in Russia, Moscow benefited from its Mongol policies of cooperation and then later leading the effort to end Mongol controls. It also was aided by the support it received from the Orthodox metropolitans, who resided in Moscow beginning in 1325. Although not agreeing on all issues with the Muscovite prince, the metropolitan generally backed him in his battles with other areas, like Tver or Novgorod. Sometimes a metropolitan relied on persuasion; other times he used spiritual weapons, such as excommunication or the withholding of his blessing from the people of a rebellious prince. The backing of the Moscow metropolitan was also vital in Moscow's conflicts with Poland-Lithuania for the hearts and minds—and territory—of the Orthodox East Slavs who had come under Polish-Lithuanian control.

Moscow's advantage in these two areas, Mongols and metropolitans, becomes even clearer if we look at its two strongest competitors in northern Russia, Novgorod and Tver. Novgorod had an especially uncooperative attitude toward the Mongols. The khans were determined to tap into its rich revenues, however, and Moscow helped in this regard. As for Tver, its rebelliousness against the Mongols in 1327 cost it dearly in the leadership contest with Moscow. Its generally close relations with Lithuania provided another reason for the Golden Horde to favor Moscow over it.

The attempts of Tver and Novgorod to use Lithuania as a counterweight to Moscow failed for many reasons. Certainly religion was one of them. At the end of the 1360s, Metropolitan Alexei excommunicated Mikhail II of Tver for allying with the Lithuanian Olgerd, thought to be a pagan. The subsequent conversion of Lithuanian leaders to Catholicism continued to alienate them from Moscow's metropolitans. Other causes that aided Moscow include its geographic position, economic factors, and the administrative and political abilities of its rulers.

Among Moscow's geographic advantages was its central location amidst the Russian lands, which exposed it less to attacks from outside enemies and furthered its trade and expansion in all directions. Situated on the Moscow River, it had access to the Volga, via the Oka River. It was also close to the sources of two

FIGURE 6.2 Church of the Ascension at Kolomenskoe royal estate, near Moscow, commissioned in 1529.

other major rivers the Dnieper and the Don. It should be noted, however, that a few other principalities such as Tver, located about 100 miles northwest of Moscow and on the Volga, also had certain geographic advantages.

Economic causes for Moscow's rise overlap with its relationship to the Mongols and its geographic position. Although there is no denying the economic burden placed on the Russians generally, Moscow did profit from being the Mongol's chief tax-collector. Furthermore, the Mongols' more frequent punitive raids on other Russian areas hurt them economically and encouraged both their nobles and commoners to seek safer shelter in Moscow. Mongol trade policies also aided Moscow. One example was the rerouting of the Urals' fur trade so that it came to Sarai via Moscow.

The abilities of the Moscow princes were demonstrated in many ways. We have already seen their capacity to outmaneuver their rivals in vying for the Sarai khan's favor. Many Moscow rulers were also sound businessmen, seldom missing a chance to earn a profit. The nickname of Ivan I (Kalita or moneybag) is just one indication of this. The Muscovite grand princes helped insure the financial well-being of their successors by willing them a much larger share of their property than was customary in other principalities. To take just one example, Vasili II bequeathed as many towns to his grand princely heir, Ivan III, as to his remaining four sons combined.

The wills of the Muscovite grand princes demonstrate not only their business sense, but also their eventual desire to deviate from the old collateral principle of succession. As Kollmann has indicated, their establishment of primogeniture (succession from father to eldest son) made them unique among the Riurikids. Although it began more by accident—no surviving uncles to contest primogeniture in 1353, 1359, and 1389—it was solidified by Vasili II's victories over the family of his uncle Yuri of Galich in the 1430s and 1440s. Although the Muscovite grand princes would continue thereafter to pass on some territories to their younger sons, the grand princely title went only to the oldest son. Increasingly, so too did most of the Muscovite lands and wealth—upon his death in 1505, Ivan III bequeathed two-thirds of Muscovy's towns to his oldest son, while his other four sons were left with appanages containing only one-third of the towns. This preference for the oldest son helped make Muscovy more stable and less divided than other Russian princedoms.

Medieval supporters of Moscow would have added still another cause for Moscow's success and perhaps even thought it the most important: Divine assistance. Today, historians rightfully are more humble about knowing such things. Whatever the cause, Moscow did benefit from some good fortune. Some examples include the failure of Lithuanian troops in 1380 (and again later in 1480) to appear in time to aid Mongolian forces against Moscow, internal problems in both Poland-Lithuania and the Golden Horde in the fifteenth century, and the generally good health and long reigns of Moscow's rulers. If we discount the challengers to Vasili II in the 1430s and 1440s, Moscow had only five rulers from the accession of Dmitri Donskoi in 1359 until the death of Vasili III in 1533.

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