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Rus'/Russia and the Mongols: Some Remarks on the Historical Meaning and the Present Debate of the *Mongol-Tatar yoke*

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Abstract

The Mongol conquests and the following dominations have long been the subject of historical reevaluation by the scientific community. The spread and progressive specialization of Mongolian studies of the latest decades have also affected the western-most of the four khanates resulted from the division of the Empire: the ulus Jochi, better known as Golden Horde. Russia's territorial vastity, its proximity to Western Europe, and its multicultural characters have all attracted the historians' attention to the Mongol era. By retracing the crucial historiographical passages, from nineteenth-century studies to the present day, this article aims to provide a broad and updated perspective of how the scientific debate has developed internationally and its relationship with the macro-levels of the Russian society today: from politics to public opinion.

Keywords

Russia – Mongol Empire – Golden Horde – Ulus Jochi – Tatar Yoke

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1 A 'Sensitive' Issue, and a Challenging Historical Factor

In 2017 an international conference was held in Kaluga entitled *Velikoe stojanie na reke Ugre i formirovanie Rossijskogo centralizovannogo gosudarstva: lokal'nye i global'nye konteksty* (*The Great Stand off on the River Ugra and the formation of the Centralized Russian State: Local and Global Contexts*). A few weeks later, representatives of the region formally presented a bill to the central government to establish 11 November as a national holiday. The proposal was rejected.

Almost a year ago, in November 2019, the governor of the Kaluga Oblast, Anatolij Artamonov, in agreement with Gennady Sklyar, the representative of *Edinaja Rossija* (the Majority Party of the Russian Federation), tried again and proposed 11 November as a national holiday referring to what in Russia is called *Ugorshchina*, the great battle that on 11 November 1480 saw the armies of the Grand Duke of Moscow Ivan III and the Khan Akhmat of the Golden Horde face off on the Ugra River. The battle was not decisive and did not even have a certain winner. Nevertheless, according to those who want to establish a day of celebration, that event represented the end of Mongol oppression and the liberation of Russia from the *Tatar yoke*. In a country which, out of a total population of around 147 million, has over 5.5 million Tatars, such a proposal could not go unnoticed.

Rustam Minnichanov, President of the Republic of Tatarstan, spoke up immediately in relation to the proposal. Minnichanov relied on the scientific community and asked for an opinion before making an official move. After a while, he responded, not without some irony, that Tatarstan proposed to celebrate the 1799 military campaign of the Russian-Austrian army led by Field Marshal Aleksandr V. Suvorov in Switzerland, as precisely 220 years had passed since the event took place. Others, such as PKRF (The Communist Party of the Russian Federation) M.P. Hafiz Mirgalimov, suggested that Governor Artamonov ought to undergo a medical examination. In Russia, the conspicuous Islamic community reacted through the mufti Talgat Tajuddin who said that the celebrations should unite and not divide people, especially in a multi-ethnic and multi-confessional country like Russia.

The Duma upheld the negative point of view and decided to reject the bill, hoping that the debate would die down in the following weeks. Still, arguments did not end and, despite the almost unanimous opinion of the scientific community in favor of Tatarstan's position, it has opened old wounds and generated discontent in a country where 85 federal units and 22 autonomous republics coexist.

The correlation between Mongol domination and the periodization of Russian history is still controversial today. Russia cannot fail to come to terms

with that experience and its consequences – a period it is worth noting that covers 250 years. The concept of the *Tatar yoke*² has profoundly influenced Russian historical thought.³ Since the 1240s, the Mongols have constituted a highly decentralized state, partly superimposed on the Kievan Rus', a region that they conquered.

Kievan Rus' was born in the late 9th century as a unitary state⁴ on a vast territory ranging from western Rus' to the Baltic up to Poland's eastern borders.⁵ It reached the height of its power in the 1000s, but in the following century it fragmented into autonomous principalities whose political focus was the pre-eminence of Kiev. The Russian principalities⁶ were directly bound up – west to east – with Christian Europe, the Baltic, the Byzantine Empire, and the world of the Asian steppes on yet another.⁷ This triangulation, to which we could add

2 On the political use of the concept, see Halperin, C., "Omissions of National Memory. Russian Historiography on the Golden Horde as Politics of Inclusion and Exclusion", *Ab Imperio*, 111 (2004): pp. 131–44.

3 For a thorough bibliographic overview see Vasary, I., "The Tatar Factor in the formation of Muscovy's Political Culture", in Amitai, R. and Biran, M. (eds.), *Nomads as Agents of Cultural Change: The Mongols and Their Eurasian Predecessors* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2015): pp. 252–70. On *Ugorshchina* and its controversial historical meaning, see Kudriavtsev, I.M. "Ugorshchina v pamjatnikakh drevnerusskoj literatury, Letopisnye povesti o nashestvii Akhmata i ikh literaturnaja istorija", in *Materialy i issledovanija po drevnerusskoj literature*, 1 (Moskva: Akademija Nauk SSSR, 1961); Orchard, G.E., "The Stand on the Ugra", *New Review*, v/1 (1965): pp. 34–43; Nazarov, V.D., "Konets zolotoordynskogo iga", *Voprosy istorii*, x (1980): pp. 104–20; Kargalov, V.V., *Konets ordynskogo iga* (Moskva: Isdatel'stvo Nauka, 1980); Collins, L.J.D. "On the Alleged 'Destruction' of the Great Horde in 1502", in Bryer, A. and Ursinus M. (eds.), *Manzikert to Lepanto: The Byzantine World and the Turks 1071–1571* (Amsterdam: Hakkert, 1991): pp. 361–99.

4 The term "state" would deserve a broad explanation. The scholarship on it is vast since the seminal studies of Claessen, H.J. and Skalnik, P., *The Early State* (The Hague: Mouton Publisher, 1978). I use it here for the sake of convenience.

5 Among the seminal studies on Kievan Rus' see Vernadsky, G. and Karpovich, M., *A History of Russia: Kievan Russia* (New Heaven, CT: Yale University Press 1963); Rybakov, B.A., *Drevnjaja Rus': skazanija, byliny letopisi* (Moskva: Izdatel'stvo Akademii Nauk 1963); Frojanov, I.Ja. and Degtjarev, A. Ja. *Drevnjaja Rus'* (Sankt Ptersburg: Zlatoust 1995); Krivosheev, Ju.V., *Russkaja srednevekovaja gosudarstvennost'* (Sankt Peterburg: Sankt-Peterburgskij Gosudarstvennyj Universitet 2008); Hanak, W.K., *The Nature and the Image of Princely Power in Kievan Rus', 980–1054: A Study of Sources* (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2013); Novikov, V., *Rus' ot Varjagov do Mongolov* (Moskva: Litres 2017); Nazarenko, A., *Drevnaja Rus' i Slavjane* (Moskva: Rossiskaja Akademija Nauk 2017); Petruchin, V.Ja., *Rus' v IX–X vekach. Ot prizvanija Varjagov do vybora very* (Moskva: Litres 2019).

6 Meaning here the principalities of Rus'.

7 Still valid is the first part of Vernadsky, G. *Kievan Russia* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press 1948); Lazarev, V.N., *Vizantija Juzhnye Slavjane I drevnjaja Rus', Zapadnaja Evropa* (Moskva: Nauka, 1973); Pelenski, J., *The contest for the legacy of Kievan Rus* (New York: Boulder, 1998);

Islam, has always made it challenging to interpret Russian history before the Mongol invasion. It is misleading, therefore, to place the Russian principalities as fitting neatly into a European dimension.

Indeed, the Mongol invasion had profound and unhinging effects on the Russian principalities' history, but the hopelessly negative view of nomadic domination is linked to what Russia could have been and not what Russia was. It is a representation in place of historical reality.

Mongol domination began in the 1230s, during a divided, fragmented, and politically and economically diversified Rus', which ultimately gave birth to the Golden Horde.⁸ Between the end of the fourteenth and the first half of the fifteenth century, the Golden Horde entered an irreversible phase of decline. In November 1480, the Horde Khan Akhmat attacked rebellious Moscow who had decided to stop paying its tribute to the Khan. The Russian army faced the Mongols on the Ugra River. In 1552 Ivan IV conquered Kazan and put an end to the khanate of the same name. In 1556 the Astrachan Khanate fell and in 1582, the Siberian. The last remnant of Mongol Russia persisted in the Crimean khanate which, after swearing allegiance to the victorious Ottoman Empire under Constantinople's walls, surrendered to the Russian army in the eighteenth century.

Approaching the debate on the characteristics and consequences of Mongol domination over Russia means, first of all, clashing with the fallout produced by centuries of ideological oppositions: on the one hand, there is the view of those who have seen in that experience a rupture, the dragging of Russia towards the East and its condemnation to a fate of backwardness with respect to Europe. Others have seen in the constitution of the Golden Horde a founding moment of modern Russian identity, a process of construction of Russian peculiarity in which a multi-ethnic and transversal patchwork between Europe and Asia in which Eastern spiritualism was allowed to prevail over the decadent materialism of the European West.

Today the positions are more nuanced. The ideological aspect has gradually given way to a growing determinism derived from the sources, where denying

Martin, J., *Medieval Russia, 980–1584* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995 [repr. 2007]).

8 Scholarship on the Mongol conquests is huge. This is not the place to provide a complete bibliography. For a recent and well-documented study on the subject see May, T., *The Mongol conquests in world history* (London: Reaktion Book, 2012). The name *Golden Horde* appears in the Russian chronicles only from the sixteenth century. On the history of the Golden Horde and its impact on Russia, see the old but still fundamental Grekov, B.D. and Jakubovskij, Ju.A., *Zolotaya Orda i ee padenie* (Moskva: Akademija Nauk SSSR 1950). More recent is Halperin, C., *Russia and the Golden Horde: The Mongol impact on medieval Russian history* (Bloomington, ID: Indiana University Press, 1985); Ostrowski, D., *Muscovy and the Mongols. Cross-cultural influences on the steppe frontier, 1304–1589* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

the profound influence of almost two and a half centuries of domination seems futile. At the same time, there is a tendency to avoid the positive/negative schematic approach by focusing on the relationships that matured over time and on the whole Horde territory, though in an inevitably unequal way.

The term *yoke* is not Russian, and no medieval chronicles nor other Russian historical documents contemporary to the Mongol domination mention it. The first to coin the expression was the Polish historian Jan Długosz (1415–80), who credited Ivan III with having cast off ‘the Tatar yoke and freed himself and all his lands from their servitude.’⁹ G. Vernadsky showed that, in the seventeenth century, 15% of the Russian aristocracy had Mongolian or Asiatic origins.¹⁰ Much of contemporary Russian vocabulary owes more or less direct debts to the Mongolian or Turkic languages, especially in the commercial sphere.¹¹ Furthermore, census, conscription, tax networks, communications, and postal systems (*yam*) reforms were introduced in Russia during the Mongolian domination. The officials of the Golden Horde managed to implement this new modernizing course in the easternmost part of ‘Mongol’ Russia with relative ease, while it was impossible, except in a sluggish and imperfect manner, in northwestern Russia. Paradoxically, the eighteenth-century Petrine idea of Russia’s ‘westernization’ could be pursued precisely because of this organizational apparatus initiated by the Mongolian bureaucracy.

2 History and the ‘Ideological’ Actuality of the Concept. From Radishchev to Gumilëv

In a valuable article from 2013, Evgenij V. Nolev concluded his analysis by saying that ‘the *Mongol yoke* concept has now exhausted its ideological and epistemological potential. The application of this concept today does not correspond to the scientific debate, but on the contrary, can have destructive consequences

9 *The Annals of Jan Długosz. Annales seu cronicae incliti Regni Poloniae*, edited by M. Michael, comment by P. Smith (Carlton, Chichester: IM Publications, 1997): p. 599, sub anno 1480. See also Knoll, P.W., “Jan Długosz, 1480–1980”, *The Polish Review*, xxvii/1–2 (1982): pp. 2–28; Wyrozumski, J., Elster M., and S. Abraham-Thisse, “Portrait d’un chroniqueur polonais du XVe siècle: Jan Długosz et son œuvre”, *Médiévales*, xx (1991): pp. 41–52. See also Ostrowski, *Muscovy and the Mongols*: p. 244, who dates the first mention of the *yoke* to 1575’s report by the Baltic diplomat Daniel Prinz, and links it to the adoption of the title *Tsar* by Ivan IV.

10 Vernadsky, *History of Russia*, III. *The Mongols and Russia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953): pp. 385ff. A thorough attempt to establish how many Russian families have a Turkic origin was carried on by Baskakov, N.A., *Russkie familii tjurkskogo proiskhozhdenija* (Moskva: Nauka, 1979).

11 Vasary, “Tatar Factor”: p. 258.

in the field of inter-ethnic relations'.¹² Nolev anticipated the argument that arose in 2017 with the Kaluga bill that was presented to the Federal Duma.

In the last two centuries, the term itself has changed in the scientific discourse. Russian historiography of the imperial age used the term *Tatar yoke*. During the period of the USSR, the term changed and became *Tatar-Mongol yoke*, which in turn became the *Mongol-Tatar yoke* by the end of the 1960s.

The centuries of Mongol domination over Russia should not be seen as 'an event' but as a series of events. There are three stages to keep distinct in the historical analysis: invasion, domination, and, finally, the consequences of the latter. The invasion began in 1236 and lasted for over five years. It was a destructive event that alarmed greater Europe. As a matter of fact, in Russia, the material damage was perhaps less than in Central Asia, where, for instance, the Mongol advance swept through the major trade routes, and some of the most populated cities of Khwarezm were besieged and razed to the ground. Domination is itself a prism with many facets since the Mongols did not conquer the entire Russian territory. The whole Republic of Novgorod' remained excluded and was subject to a rather tenuous vassalage subjugation in contrast to other more eastern regions. So, to which of these stages of the Mongolian experience in Russia does the concept of yoke refer? Perhaps it would be appropriate to ask which of these stages has most influenced historiography and how such influence has shaped the scientific debate and public perception of a historical event whose scope was undoubtedly decisive for the configuration of contemporary Russia.

Since the 1980s, the studies of the American historian Charles Halperin¹³ have imposed a general revision of the *Tataryoke* concept, giving a new rhythm to scientific thinking on the subject. The systematic and in-depth analysis of Russian chronicles conducted by Halperin has revealed quite a few surprises regarding the birth and development of the *yoke* concept. Russian sources never mention, with rare and late exceptions (as in the case of Mamaï), the political dimension of the Mongol domination. Nor do they mention an irresolvable and oppressive subjugation. It is what Halperin called the *ideology of silence*.¹⁴ The Russian chronicles write about surrender and submission to their new conquerors as inevitable because it is God's will. It is an act of violence based on religious and even eschatological notions, one that can be hard to

12 Nolev, E.V., "Mongolo-Tatarskoe igo: ideologicheskij i metodologicheskij aspekt istoricheskogo diskursa", *Vestnik Burjatskogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta*, VIII (2013): pp. 92–6.

13 Whose bibliography is vast. See Halperin, C., *The Tatar Yoke* (Columbus, OH: Slavica Publishers, 1986).

14 *Ibid.*: pp. 192–3.

understand, but which has nothing to do with the ideological implications that arose and became intransigent in the following centuries. On the other hand, the very concept of Russia arose from the conflict with the Golden Horde and therefore from the need to build a shared memory that would provide a collective identity, or an ideological justification.¹⁵

The *Tatar yoke* idea originated in a particular political context, that of the 'westernized' Russia of Peter the Great. The first person to use the expression *Tatar yoke* in Russia concerning the political and social conditions of the country was Aleksandr N. Radishchev (1749–1802), a man of the Enlightenment, harshly critical of Catherine II's politics and an author of a famous work entitled *Journey from Petersburg to Moscow* (1790).¹⁶ It was not by chance that a few years earlier, in 1784, the last Khanate in Russian territory, that of Crimea, had definitively entered the orbit of the Russian empire.

However, the introduction of the term in public debate is due to the historian Nikolaj M. Karamzin (1766–1826), whose authoritativeness drove the conviction of a barbaric domination into the bowels of Russia's collective consciousness. Karamzin's phrasings, that Russian sovereigns 'would have renounced the rights of a free people to bow to the yoke of the barbarians'¹⁷ and, again, that 'the shadow of barbarism has spread over the Russian horizon, hiding us from Europe'¹⁸ are notorious.¹⁹

Aleksandr Pushkin himself wrote that it was thanks to Russia that medieval Europe could 'evolve' into Humanism and the Renaissance, becoming the most civilized area on the planet, because Russia absorbed the great Asian migrations (invasions) from the early Middle Ages to their climax represented by the Mongols' attack.²⁰ In the years when Pushkin wrote those words – and Karamzin had recently died – the Academy of Sciences launched a competition for publishing research on the relationship between Mongol domination

15 Nolev, "Mongolo-Tatarskoe igo": p. 93.

16 The first edition of Radishchev's *Journey* was published in St. Petersburg in 1790. The most recent English edition is Radishchev, A., *Journey from St. Petersburg to Moscow*, edited by I. Reyfman and A. Kahn (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020).

17 'торжественно отреклись от прав народа независимого и склонили вью под иго варваров', Karamzin, N.M., *Istorija gosudarstva Rossijskogo v 12 tomach*, v (Sankt Petersburg: Tipografija N. Grecha, 1819): p. 380.

18 Ibid: p. 369.

19 Karamzin was the first Russian historian who acknowledged and assimilated the European model, and so the concept of *yoke* too.

20 Which refers to the concept of *antemural* developed in Poland since the Renaissance. See Weintraub, V., "Renaissance Poland and the *Antemurale Christianitatis*", *Harvard Ukrainian Studies*, III–IV (1979–80) [*Eucharisterion: Essays presented to Omeljan Pritsak on his Sixtieth Birthday by his Colleagues and Students*]: pp. 920–30.

and Russia. No proposal was accepted by the jury, neither in 1826 nor in 1832. Nevertheless, the interest of the country's highest cultural institution on the subject testifies to its importance in the first decades of the nineteenth century.²¹ The Great Patriotic War against Napoleon had pushed the Russian national idea further towards the East.

Another crucial step in the development of the concept occurred with a new generation of Russian historians, numismatists, archaeologists, and linguists.²² Oriental Studies developed rapidly in Imperial Russia. However, the most influential figure of the late nineteenth century was Vasily O. Kljuchevsky (1841–1911), who was in his twenties when Zar Alexandr II formally abolished serfdom in 1861.²³ Kljuchevsky was profoundly influenced, as many of his generation, by the monumental work of Sergej M. Solovëv (1820–79), whose *History of Russia from the Earliest Times* represented a milestone in the investigation of a Russian past.²⁴

Kljuchevskij concluded that the Tatar yoke was a disaster for Russia, but it was especially so economically because of the heavy tributes, both in the form of money and human resources, imposed by the Khans. Nevertheless, the Russian historian was the first who identified the hierarchical relationship between dominators and dominated based on the fiscal rather than their political-vassallatic bonds. Kljuchevskij's ideas influenced Russian historiography and, together with Solovëv's vision, remained dominant until the shake-up caused by the Revolution.

21 Nolev, "Mongolo-Tatarskoe igo": p. 95.

22 It will suffice here to mention some of the most remarkable works. Fren, Kh.M., *Monety khanov Ulusa Dzhuchieva ili Zolotoi ordy, s monetami raznykh inykh Mukhammedanskikh dinastii v prib* (Sankt Petersburg: Tipografija Akademii Nauk 1832); Savel'ev, P.S., *Monety Dzhuchidov, Dzhagataidov, Dzhelairidov i drugije, obrashchavshisja v Zolotoj Orde v èpokhu Tokhtamysha*, 2 vols. (Sankt Petersburg: Tipografija Èkspedicii zagotovlenija Gosudarstvennykh bumag, 1858); Sablukov, G.S., "Ocherk vnutrennego sostojanija kipchakskogo tarstva", *Pribavlenie. Saratovskie gubernskie vedomosti* (1844): pp. 26–30, 32–6 (Repr. Kazan': OAIÈ pri Kazanskom universitete 1895); Berezin, I.N., "Ocherk vnutrennego ustroistva ulusa Dzhuchieva", *Trudy Vostochnogo otdelenija Russkago arkheologicheskogo obshchestva*, VIII (1864): pp. 387–494; Grigor'ev, V.V., *O dostovernosti jarlykov dannykh khanami Zolotoj Ordy russkomu dukhovenstvu* (Moskva: v' Universitetskoj Tipografij, 1842). For a complete bibliographical survey, see Halperin "Omissions of National Memory".

23 Kljuchevsky, V.O., *Sochineniya*, 9 vols. (Moskva: Mysl' 1987): esp. v; Id., *Proiskhozhdenie krepostnogo prava v Rossii* (Moskva: Prospekt 2013); Byrnes, R.F., "Kljuchevskii's View of the Flow of Russian History", *The Review of Politics*, LV/4 (1993): pp. 565–91.

24 Solovëv's *History (Istorija Rossii s drevnejshikh vremen)* was published from 1851, and when the author died in 1879 it consisted in 29 volumes.

3 Between the Two Wars: The Soviet Period

In the 1930s, Stalin compared the *Tatar yoke* to Austro-German foreign policy and influenced public opinion in the country.²⁵ The Soviet period marked a further passage in the historical and social elaboration of the *Tatar yoke* concept. The Soviet built a narrative on the writings of the Classics of Marxism-Leninism. In his essay *Anti Dühring*, published in 1878, F. Engels wrote that 'Every conquest by a more barbarian people disturb of course the economic development and destroys numerous productive forces.'²⁶ Marx's observation, that the Mongols established a systematic terror regime in Russia based on punitive raids and mass murder, is well-known.²⁷

The twentieth century demonstrated that Europe, for the first time, was prey to an unstoppable tendency towards self-destruction. The most 'advanced' continent on the planet exploded in endogenous barbarity. The most catastrophic conflict in history was not the outcome of an invasion against the prosperous and civilized Europe, but an internal one, which effectively changed the very definition of barbarity and barbarians.²⁸ Both during the First and Second World War, Russia and the Soviet Union played a very peculiar role. A colonial power itself, Russia came out of the first conflict after the largest mass revolution in history by accepting a heavyweight treaty in Brest-Litovsk to end the slaughter. In the 1930s, Stalin compared the *Tatar yoke* to Austro-German foreign policy and influenced public opinion in the country.²⁹

During the Second World War, the Soviet Union built the narrative of itself as a martyred people, first invaded by an invincible enemy, and finally emerging victorious thanks to the 'Great Patriotic War'. In both cases, Russia escaped the inevitable revisionism of the concept of barbarism and, indeed, has changed the trajectory of the barbarism itself by overturning it. The *Herrenrasse* or 'pure race' of National Socialists was defeated by a hybrid civilization of mixed Asian blood. In this view, the civilizer becomes barbaric and is ultimately defeated by the civilized barbarians.

25 Grekov, Jakubovskij, *Zolotaja Orda i eë padenie*: p. 255.

26 Engels, F., "Anti Dühring", in *Collected Works of Marx and Engels*, xxv (London: Lawrence&Wishart 1987): p. 170.

27 Marx, K., *Secret Diplomatic History of the Eighteenth Century* (London: Sonnenschein&Co. 1899): p. 78: 'The Mongol Tartars established a rule of systematic terror, devastation and wholesale massacre forming its institutions'.

28 See De Bonis, B., "Dalla paura dell'altro alla sua idealizzazione. Il mito dei Tartari nella letteratura europea (1904–2011)", *Griseldaonline*, xv (2015): pp. 1–18.

29 Grekov, Jakubovskij, *Zolotaja Orda i eë padenie*: p. 255.

When in 1944, the Central Committee of all Bolshevik communist parties (ЦК КП) ordered academics to review ancient Russian history by eliminating any embellishment of Mongol domination, the concept of the *yoke* became even more ossified.³⁰ The Soviet propaganda needed to reinforce the idea of inevitable attraction: Russia was so civilized that the inferior nomads at the end were glad to join. Yet, post-war Soviet historiography continued to paint Mongolian domination in Russia in dark hues.

The climate surrounding the concept of the Tatar yoke changed thanks to the studies of Lev Gumilëv (1912–92),³¹ a controversial ethnographer and historian, son of two prominent figures of twentieth-century Russian culture, the poets Nikolaj S. Gumilëv (1886–1921) executed by the Bolsheviks, and Anna A. Akhmatova (1889–1966). During his life, Lev Gumilëv received honors and punishment, spent years in and out of Soviet camps of the regime, but never stopped studying and researching, often challenging the official historical and ethnographic doctrines of USSR. He rejected the term yoke in favor of symbiotic relations (русско-ордынские отношения как симбиоз). In his view, there could not be any yoke since Russia belonged to the steppes, and the Mongols brought it where it belonged. Gumilëv's idea of *ethnos*³² not as a condition, but as a process and *superethnos*, as the result of the merge of more *ethnos*, is the foundation of the *symbiotic* theory. The steppe peoples and the Russians of the middle ages belong to a *superethnos* opposed to the invasive power of Catholic Europe. Gumilëv achieved notoriety and academic respect in the late years of his life, especially after the *Perestroika*, becoming one of the most celebrated historians in Russia and the former Soviet Republics.³³ His theories are very influential in Russia today.³⁴ Study centers in major Russian and Central Asian cities have been named after Gumilëv; streets, mountains,

30 Nolev, "Mongolo-Tatarskoe igo": p. 94.

31 On Gumilëv's *mystique* and thought, see Citati, D., *La passione dell'Eurasia. Storia e civiltà in Lev Gumilëv* (Milano-Udine: Mimesis, 2015). A thorough analysis on Gumilëv scientific production and theories is Bassin, M., *The Gumilev mystique: Biopolitics, Eurasianism, and the Construction of Community in Modern Russia* (Ithaca-London: Cornell University Press, 2016).

32 '[The *ethnos*] is a collectivity that differs from others for its own behavioral stereotype and opposes itself to all other collectivities': Gumilëv, N.S., *Konec i vnov' nachalo* (Moskva: Nauka 1990): p. 81.

33 Bassin, *The Gumilev mystique*: p. 2.

34 For a critic view on Gumilëv's 'fantastic theories' and their influence on Russian-Mongol studies see Halperin, *Omissions and National Memory*: p. 137 and Bassin, *The Gumilev mystique*: esp. pp. 273ff.

and the Astana University bear his name. Vladimir Putin has never hidden the link between Russian foreign policy and Gumilëv's scientific reflection.³⁵

4 Current Historiographical Discourse on the Tatar yoke in Russia and Abroad

After the dissolution of the USSR, studies on the Golden Horde have multiplied in Russia and abroad. Particularly in those regions of the country where the communities related to Mongolian history are still numerous and link their origin to Mongol domination, such as Tatarstan where the majority Muslim population claims a past that for years had been instrumental to Russian history. The systematic approach to written and material sources, with the edition and re-edition of published and unpublished manuscripts and excavation campaigns has produced important results. The study of the different communities living in the Golden Horde has brought to light new and little studied aspects in the past. An increasing focus to regionalization and the selectivity of individual thematic aspects of Mongolian history have radically innovated studies on the Golden Horde. After the seminal works of C. Halperin, Devin DeWeese's research on Islamization in the Golden Horde has offered an innovative perspective and given new impetus to the studies.³⁶ In 1998 Donald Ostrowski published *Muscovy and the Mongols*, a thorough analysis of the Mongol influence on the Russian history. According to Ostrowski, the weakness of the Byzantine Church allowed the Russian clerics to develop an anti-Mongol narrative in order to break the link between the Muscovite nobility and the Tatars. Therefore, the 'yoke' was not an invention of the West, but of Orthodox Church. The Russian clerics wanted to develop the narrative of Moscow-third Rome whose power did not depend on the Mongol support, but descended from God's Grace.³⁷

In the same decade, three dominant historiographical trends have developed in Russia, linked to the historical debate on Mongol domination and the concept of *Tatar yoke*. In 1997, the journal *Rodina* published a broad discussion among specialists entitled *Forests and Steppes. Unknown Pages*.³⁸ Interventions by specialists from Russia and Tatarstan came together to discuss various

35 Bassin, *The Gumilev mystique*: pp. 2–3.

36 DeWeese, D., *Islamization and Native Religion in the Golden Horde* (Philadelphia, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995).

37 Ostrowski, *Muscovy and the Mongols*: pp. 144 and 245–6.

38 "A bylo li igo? Polemika o roli mongol'skogo nashestvija (materialy kruglogo stola)", *Rodina*, III–IV (1997): pp. 85–92.

theories. Their conclusions were diverse, sometimes even opposed, demonstrating how much Mongol domination remains a historically controversial subject in Russia. The essays that appeared in *Rodina* formed the epistemological and methodological basis underlying the current debate on the subject.

Some scholars such as V.P. Darkevich evaluate the Mongolian experience in Russia as deeply negative, while D.M. Iskhakov takes a more nuanced and in some way revisionist position, as do V.V. Trepavlov³⁹ and A.I. Kurchki, all seeing Mongol domination a catalyst for economic development and, in contrast to scholars like Darkevich, a politically unifying force in medieval Russia. In this regard, the most innovative intervention in that issue of *Rodina*, was that of Iskander L. Izmailov, director of the Department of Medieval Archaeology of the Academy of Sciences of Tatarstan, who protested that he still had to deal with an issue that he called ridiculous.⁴⁰ According to Izmailov, the question is not whether Mongolian domination has influenced Russia in negative or positive ways because two and a half centuries are a very long period within which progress and decadence follow and overlap without always being able to be identified as absolute characteristics. The consequences of Mongol influence were both positive and negative over the years, across the different regions of Russia at different times, on different strata of the population and different economic sectors. According to Izmailov, the real issue is to understand how much Mongol domination determined a 'new political space', in other words, how such developments eventually led to the birth of the

39 Trepavlov in particular has insisted on the institutional structures assimilated by Muscovy from the Mongols (i.e., the concept of *Dual Kingdom*). See Trepavlov, V.V., "Tjurkskaja znat' v Rossii (Nogai na tatarskoj sluzhbe)", *Vestnik Evrazii*, 1–11 (1998): pp. 101–14; Id., "Vostochnye èlementy rossijskoj gosudarstvennosti: k postanovke problemy", in Panarin, S.A., *Rossija i Vostok: problemy vzaimodejstvija*, I (Moskva: Institut Vostokovedenija RAN 1993): pp. 40–52; Id., "Status 'Belogo tsarja': Moskva i tatarskie khanstva v XV–XVI vv.", in Panarin, S.A., *Rossija i Vostok: problemy vzaimodejstvija*, II (Moskva: Institut Vostokovedenija RAN 1993): pp. 302–11; Id., "Rossija i kochevye stepi: Problema vostochnykh zaimstvovanij v rossijskoj gosudarstvennosti", *Vostok*, 11 (1994): pp. 49–62.

40 Izmailov was also one of the most critical of the Kaluga region's proposal to establish a national holiday on 11 November in memory of the battle on the Ugra River in 1480, saying that it made no sense to establish a holiday that would only cause divisions among the peoples of the Russian Federation. Similar positions are expressed by Usmanov, M.A., "Sostojanie i perspektivy istochnikovedenija istorii Ulusa Dzhuchi", in *Istochnikovedenie istorii ulusa Dzhuchi (Zolotoi Ordy): ot Kalki do Astrakhani. 1223–1556* (Kazan': Institut Istorii AN RT, 2001): pp. 3–14. In an important virtual round table published on the journal *Ab Imperio*, Usmanov claimed the necessity to approach the History of the Golden Horde in a multidisciplinary way and exit the boundaries of Russian history. See Usmanov, M.A., "Zaochnyj kruglyj stol « Ot Ordy k Rossii »", *Ab Imperio*, 111/1 (2002): pp. 205–38.

empire. The theses presented by Izmailov were confirmed by the reflections of A.A. Gorski, who, in the same issue of *Rodina*, and many subsequent works,⁴¹ has argued that Mongol domination must be studied as an organic component of Russian history.

V.N. Rudakov has stated and still maintains similar positions today when he affirms that the term *yoke* itself is meaningless when applied to the reality of Russian-Mongol relations between the thirteenth and the fourteenth centuries. These relationships were changing, characterized by collaboration and confrontation, rapprochement and war, alliances and punitive expeditions, trade agreements, and the imposition of taxes. It was a long period of time that cannot be narrowly labeled. The term *yoke*, therefore, is an anachronism.⁴²

In Russian-Mongol studies, the consensus that appears to be forming today relies upon questioning the types of ties that the Golden Horde established in the different regions of conquered Russia. One of the most prominent specialists, Ju. V. Krivosheev's, conducted studies that have been moving in this direction since the mid-1990s. Krivosheev coined the term *tributary state* as a defining expression for the Golden Horde.⁴³ The historian argues that the constraints imposed by the Mongols on Russian principalities were based exclusively on the levy (tax and military conscription) and that this produced a related social structure. In other words, the Mongols required the Russian nobility to pay taxes and serve in the military. To do so, they deployed collection officials on the ground (*basqaqs*). Those officials became a ruling class of tax collectors that influenced the character of the communities at the time. However, those Mongol bureaucrats were soon replaced by indigenous officials, often the Russian princes themselves. According to Krivosheev, the Mongols influenced the physiognomy of Russian society without, however, distorting it. The local aristocracy always maintained, except for the first years of domination, substantial political, economic, and legislative autonomy. Taking a similar position was the German scholar G. Stökl, who stressed the political autonomy left by the Mongols to the Russian aristocracy.⁴⁴

In this interpretive space was placed the scientific production of N.N. Kradin, one of the most prolific authors of the contemporary Russian Academy. Kradin, who has dealt with nomadism for at least two decades, agrees with Krivosheev's thesis and states that the Golden Horde was a state whose economy was based

41 Gorskii, A.A., *Russkie zemli v XIII–XIV vekakh: puti politicheskogo razvitija* (Moskva: Nauka 1996); Id., *Moskva i Orda*, (Moskva: Nauka 2005²).

42 Nolev, "Mongolo-Tatarskoe igo": p. 95.

43 Which seems to be a borrowing from the history of the Ottoman Empire.

44 Stökl, G., *Russische Geschichte* (Stuttgart: Alfred Kröner, 1997): pp. 137–53.

on collecting taxes as its first resource, not only in Russia. Nomads and farmers lived together in the same regulatory and institutional environment but in different ecological zones. The exploitation of Russia's resources by the Mongols was, therefore, a remote process.⁴⁵

Kradin and Krivosheev studied the concept of 'the border' in Russian sources, since the existence of the term itself is proof that at least a semantic division between the Golden Horde and Russia existed. The border was an abstract concept in the Middle Ages. Therefore, it is difficult to think of a narrow and oppressive domination by the Mongols over a territory whose very border alone was at least two to three hundred kilometers away. That is why Krivosheev insists on the concept of *remote* domination, the opposite of a *yoke*.⁴⁶

Studies on Russian-Mongol relations have become more and more refined in recent years and have acquired a more widespread and compartmentalized character, moving away from comprehensive theories and inevitable generalizations. I.I. Nazipov pointed out that the region of northwest Russia had been politically independent of the Horde for many years, though formally remaining a vassal state. In recent times studies by Sh.B. Chimitdorzhiev and V.V. Trepavlov have insisted on the meaning of the Mongol term *ulus*. Since the *ulus* was a human rather than territorial concept for the Mongols (Vladimircov's research had already highlighted this aspect, more recently see T.D. Skrynnikova), the result was a fiscal rather than political relationship. For the Mongols of the Golden Horde, the Russian principalities were not vassals totally dependent on the Khan, but tax states to which political autonomy was guaranteed.

The interest in Golden Horde's history has consolidated and even grown in the latest years also thanks to the Mardzhani Institute of History of Tatarstan Academy of Sciences of Kazan', that since 2013 publishes the the *Golden Horde Review* (*Zolotoordynskoe Obozrenie*), directed by Il'nur M. Mirgaleev. The aim of the journal is to promote the collaboration of International specialists and the interdisciplinary approach to the history of the Golden Horde. In seven years of activity, the *Golden Horde Review* has produced hundreds of articles in Russian and in English. The diverse methodological and ideological orientations of the

45 Usmanov, M.A., "Zaochnyi kruglyi stol": pp. 228–30.

46 Literally: *Дистанционной эксплуатации*; pp. 193–4; see also Nolev, "Mongolo-Tatarskoe igo": p. 95. See also the concept of 'ruling from the outside' by Durand-Guédy, D., *Ruling from the Outside. A New Perspective on Early Turkish Kinship in Iran*, in Mitchell, L. and Melville, Ch. (eds.), *Every Inch a King Comparative Studies on Kings and Kingship in the Ancient and Medieval Worlds* (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2013): pp. 325–42.

contributions and the different academic background of the authors have produced a decisive progress in the field, consolidating the dialogue among scholars and the collection and intersection of a large amount of data. Scholars can now find new spaces for their research.

Another crucial step forward in the 'particularization' of research on the Golden Horde is the ponderous book published by Dariusz Kołodziejczyk, *The Crimean Khanate and Poland-Lithuania: International Diplomacy on the European Periphery*, with almost 500 pages of documents on diplomacy from 1461 to 1742.⁴⁷ Kołodziejczyk's research show that the Crimean Khanate was a decisive player in the Eurasian political and diplomatic game, particularly in relations between Poland-Lithuania and Muscovy. Like the nomads of the steppes with Rus', the Crimean Mongols also chose the ally to support based on political reasons. Kołodziejczyk paints the complexity of the Crimean Khanate, with its political, economic, and social specificity.

The efforts of Marie Favereau on the late history of the Golden Horde and the meticulous research of Nicole Kançal-Ferrari (mentioned above) on the architecture of the Crimean Khanate deserve to be cited. The historical reflection of M. Favereau, culminated in the recent publication of a special issue of the *Revue des mondes musulmans et de la Méditerranée*, titled "L'Orde d'Or et l'islamization des steppes eurasiatiques" (n. 143, 2018) that put together the most prominent specialist on the field such as T. Tanase, D. DeWeese, A. Peacock, R. Hautala, N. Kançal-Ferrari, I. Landa and others. Already in 2005,⁴⁸ the French historian highlighted how the Mongol domination of Russia developed over the decades towards a specific political, social and economic model in continuity until its last years of life. For decades 'bien plus que le reflet des réalités sociales de l'époque, elle traduit l'essoufflement et les désordres d'un discours historiographique qu'il est nécessaire de repenser'.⁴⁹ In other words, historiography on the Golden Horde has suffered from an external, antagonistic perspective, which has penalized a systematic study of all available sources. The idea of a castrating domination for Russia – the Tatar yoke – attracted the attention of historians on the 'first phase'⁵⁰ effectively ignoring the fifteenth century.

47 Kołodziejczyk, D., *The Crimean Khanate and Poland-Lithuania: International Diplomacy on the European Periphery* (Leiden: Brill, 2011 [The Ottoman Empire and its Heritage, 47]).

48 Favereau, M., "La horde d'or de 1377 à 1502. Aux sources d'un siècle 'sans Histoire'", *Labyrinthe*, XXI (2005) : pp. 153–8.

49 Favereau, "La horde d'or de 1377 à 1502": p. 154.

50 If we accept the traditional periodization on the history of the Golden Horde: origins, 1223–1377; decline, 1377–1430, and the end, 1430–1502.

According to M. Favereau 'L'histoire de la Horde d'Or n'a, ainsi, jamais été réellement séparée de l'histoire étatique russe et continua aujourd'hui à jouer un rôle ambigu dans les représentations de l'identité nationale'.⁵¹ But it is from 1430, when the Horde is divided into six independent khanates, that the geo-political characteristics on which the 'great state constructions of the future' are born: the Crimean khanate, the Shaybanid-Abulkhairids and the Kazan-Tatarstan khanate.⁵²

In recent years, historical research has been accompanied by studies of so-called hard science conducted in genetics and biological laboratories. In 2016 a research group led by Elena Balanovskaya and Oleg Balanovsky, published an article in *Vestnik Moskovskogo Universiteta* that was the result of an investigation of a thousand individuals considered to be descendants of the Volga, Crimea and Siberia Tatars. The research used 50 SNP markers of the Y chromosome to identify a common genetic origin for Tatars. The reaction of Mongolian historical specialists was harsh. Iskander Izmailov described the study as 'full of errors typical of amateurs'. Izmailov's major criticism was aimed at the very purpose of the research: establishing a common origin for Tatars. Historians and archaeologists know very well that this is not possible because the Tatars, as well as any other people, are the result of a historical flow made of local elements, migrations, contributions of all kinds, mergers, decompositions, and recompositions. It would be like trying to establish the common ethnic root of the English by analyzing the genetic make-up of a thousand inhabitants of Liverpool.

5 Some Concluding Remarks

For more than two and a half centuries, the Mongols controlled, directly or indirectly, a huge territory that stretched from Europe's borders to East Asia. The Golden Horde was a complex state, with an articulated political and administrative apparatus. Power relations within it reflected the condition of the Russian principalities. The Mongols indeed demanded a tribute and other services from the Russian nobility. Structures existed within Mongolian society and consisted in a range of activities such as the Khan's journeys into the depths of Asia and Karakorum, military conscription, punitive expeditions, movements of highly qualified personnel, and the imposition of Mongolian

51 Favereau, "La horde d'or de 1377 à 1502": p. 155.

52 Ibid.: pp. 155–6.

officials on-site – all were imposed structures, but so was the organization of transport and communications, the promotion of trade, and the protection of merchants.

The Mongol domination of Russia was so idiosyncratic and uneven that it is still debated today whether Russia before Russia is actually Russia. Everywhere the Mongols conquests were followed by mass destruction. It took decades to recover from the damage inflicted by the wars on trade, production, which affected both the countryside and the cities. The Mongol invasions as well as their domination of certain areas, however, did not manifest themselves in the same way and with the same intensity in every single place. The way in which the Mongols dominated was a process of evolution, and if in the first decades it was narrower and more direct, over time it loosened and became more and more *remote*, as Krivosheev has put it.

As we have seen, the written sources never mention the less visible methods of political, economic, and social domination, but merely criticize the evil of the pagan, and later infidel, invaders. From this point of view, too, Halperin's proposal when he speaks of the *ideology of silence* appears convincing.

The historiographical tradition, especially from Peter I onwards, built a myth necessary for the formation of a shared memory that would justify Russia's state prior to that of Europe. It was a model that was acquired by the ruling classes of the time that eventually lead to the rebirth of the nation. Occidentalism and Slavophilism were in opposition to one another. This brought Mongolian domination into play until a new cultural current took hold: the Eurasianist movement, which arose within post-revolutionary emigration. What emerges in Russia is effectively a model of virtue that opposes European materialism, identifying precisely in the Mongol invasion and in the synthesis between the Asian matrix and Byzantinism the peculiarity of the Russian spirit, destined to prevail over a putatively decadent Western civilization.

Therefore, the ideological and cultural edifice built up from the Mongol domination of Russia stood on projections rather than on sources. Over the centuries, prejudicial convictions and pre-established conclusions have overlapped on a much more complex and different era than generic theorizing can easily circumscribe. In Russia and outside of it, current historiography has at least reached a common denominator: there is no 'round' continuity between Kievan Rus' and Moscow Russia. Mongol domination was not a marginal interruption of Russia's continuous historical flow, but an integral factor whose consequences cannot be hidden or underestimated. Current historiographical tendencies seem to be a positive answer to C. Halperin's hope, when he writes that 'Russian historiography would benefit from a less insular, more multi-disciplinary approach which integrates the orientalist's understanding of the

Golden Horde, its political, social, economic and cultural structures and institutions, into analysis of Horde policies toward its Rus' subjects'.⁵³

Recent historiographical revisionism by scholars has not canceled the idea of a *Tatar yoke* which, positive or negative, has been profoundly integrated into the Russian common conscience. Nevertheless, and although some interpretative divergences persist, scholars agree that the Tatar yoke is today a lexical anachronism and an outdated historical category. But whether it comes out from the archives and libraries or archaeological excavation sites, the debate on the *Tatar yoke* may take dangerous paths that have little relationship to historical reality. One can state with certainty that there is a great need for continuing the multi-disciplinary group approach that has grown in the latest years. Professionals must speak with the public, so that they are well aware of what was and not what could have been.

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53 Halperin, “Omissions of National Memory”: p. 143.

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