

## Book Review

**D.Ostrowski. *Muscovy and the Mongols: Cross-Cultural influences on the steppe frontier, 1304-1598*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998 (ISBN 2804738272)**

There are three prevailing views on the development of Muscovite political institutions and culture. The first is that these institutions are indigenously Russian and have developed to meet uniquely Muscovite needs; the second believes there was some borrowing from outside influences, but this was mainly from the west and Byzantium; and the last perspective accepts that there has been some Tatar contribution towards Muscovite institutional and cultural development, however, this contribution is seen as profoundly negative. Donald Ostrowski aims to challenge these views, by arguing that Muscovite politics, culture and warfare was influenced by over two centuries of Mongol rule. He also believes the Tatar's contribution was not negative nor did it retard Russia's development. In the second half of his work, Ostrowski puts forward the idea that Russian chroniclers did not portray the Mongols negatively between the 13<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries. The shift towards anti-Tatar and anti-Muslim rhetoric only began in the early 1500s, as a response to the fall of Orthodox Constantinople to the armies of Islam. In order to prove his thesis, Ostrowski looks at four specific areas: military and political institutions, the seclusion of women, economic repression and oriental despotism; Ostrowski highlights how, in each area, the Mongols developed Russian institutions for the better.

Ostrowski begins by claiming that Muscovy's dual administrative system (the existence of both military and provisional governors) was borrowed from the steppe. To prove his claim, the author demonstrates how the 'Secret History,' an official chronicle of Genghis Khan's reign, mentions two types of

governor, the 'daruyaci' (provincial governor) and the 'basqaq' (military governor). He also provides further evidence from medieval travel writers who visited the Tatar Khanates and testified to the existence of a dual administrative system. Ostrowski completes his argument by showing how, in numerous medieval Russian chronicles, there is mention of two types of governor: the 'daruga' and 'baskak.' In order to show how these ideas were transferred, Ostrowski puts forward two interesting ideas. The first is that Muscovite princes learned of the idea from their visits to Sarai (the capital of the Golden Horde). The second way these ideas may have been transferred is by Tatar princes who entered Muscovite service. This is, as Ostrowski himself admits, mere speculation, for it is impossible to comprehensively prove how these ideas travelled from the Steppe to Moscow. However, it does seem a plausible argument, for many Russian Grand Princes would have dealt directly with the provincial and military governors when they visited the Mongol capital to pay tribute. It must also be noted that this dual administrative structure was highly advantageous, for it provided a means to collect tax revenues, as well as improving military recruitment. Therefore, by comparing the two chronicles (a Muscovite and a Mongol) Ostrowski is able to argue, with some justification, that the Muscovite dual administrative system was borrowed from the Tatars.

Furthermore, Ostrowski believes the Russian armies of the medieval and early modern period copied their tactics from the Mongol hordes. He first shows how a Chinese general, by the name of Song, reported "it is their custom (the Tatars) when they gallop to stand semi-erect in the stirrup. Thus the main weight of the body is upon the calves" (81). This meant Genghis' troops could manoeuvre themselves in the saddle, delivering an arrow with devastating accuracy. The author then presents evidence from 16<sup>th</sup> century travel writers to Russia, who seem to support the claim that Muscovite armies borrowed their methods of warfare from the Mongols. Richard Chancellor in 1553 stated "they use a short stirrup in the manner of the Turks" (95) whilst Giles Fletcher, travelling to Muscovy in the 1580's, mentioned a similar phenomenon. However, is travel writing really the best

historical method to prove Muscovy borrowed military tactics from the Mongols? Many travel writers, including Richard Chancellor and Giles Fletcher, viewed Muscovy as inherently eastern even before they had arrived in Russia. As such, they would have been looking for evidence to prove their thesis. Furthermore, both were sheltered from many aspects of Muscovite life, and this means it is hard to say whether their views are an accurate reflection of Muscovite military practice. Lastly, Fletcher may only have travelled with the Russian army to the western theatres of war where cavalry was hardly used. So while Ostrowski's argument may hold some validity, it is a shame he does not address these drawbacks of travel writing.

For Russian nationalist historians like A.M. Sakharov, the Mongol-Tatar ravages destroyed Muscovy's economy, which explains Russia's backwardness vis-à-vis the West. The main problem facing Ostrowski here is that there is very little reliable economic data from medieval Muscovy, and most of the early chronicles on the Mongol period describe the Tatar destruction of Russian economic infrastructure. Ostrowski counters this claim in two ways, firstly, by drawing on other secondary historians such as R.H. Hilton who claim there was "little evidence for any overall decline in European Russia from the twelfth to the fifteenth centuries" (124), and secondly, he argues the chronicles only mention the destruction of 14 towns out of the 300 known. Therefore, the Mongols could not be held culpable for Muscovy's late economic development. This argument seems plausible, especially when we consider the Mongols would not have wanted to destroy the territories of Rus' as they relied on the principality for tribute. Therefore, by looking at early chronicles and records of devastation, Ostrowski is able to validate one of his key arguments, that the Tatars did not distort Russia's economic development.

The major criticism of Ostrowski's work is his tendency to make fanciful assertions without supporting them. In the late 16<sup>th</sup> century, Ivan the Terrible decided to 'abdicate' and place Simeon Bakbulatovic, a noble of Tatar heritage, on the Muscovite throne. Ostrowski argues this was a plot by the Boyars who wanted a Tatar on the throne instead of Ivan "in order to keep

the title of 'Tsar for their leader' (156) and to reinforce the idea that Muscovy was the legitimate successor to the Golden Horde. Not only does Ostrowski fail to provide evidence to support his thesis, but he does not take into account that the Boyars would not want to place a Tatar, with Muslim heritage, on the throne of Orthodox Muscovy. Ostrowski also makes similar offhand claims without providing historical proof, such as his assertion that the Muscovites borrowed their postal system from the Mongols. The author fails to mention how this took place, nor does he attempt to provide any historical evidence to support his claim.

Nevertheless, by using a variety of historical material ranging from textual analysis to secondary sources, Ostrowski is able to successfully demonstrate that Muscovy did borrow from her Tatar overlords, and in many instances this was for the better. His work is significant as it sheds new light on the development of Muscovy, viewing it from the lens of the east, rather than the west. The fact he is writing in the 1990s, after the fall of communism may also explain this move away from seeing Russia's political, cultural and economic development vis-à-vis the west. Marxist historians have continually stressed that Russia developed in a normal manner alongside western European nations, making Ostrowski's approach all the more refreshing. Ostrowski's scholarly work raises further important questions. Did Russia borrow from other Eastern empires, such as the Ottomans or Seljuk Turks? And if so, how did the flow of ideas move from these empires to Muscovy? Finally, by illustrating how Russia's institutions borrowed from her Tatar past, Ostrowski is changing the way we see the relationship between Russia and her Muslim neighbours, not as a history of conflict, tension or antagonism, but as a process of exchange that has shaped Russia for the better.

Reviewed By

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