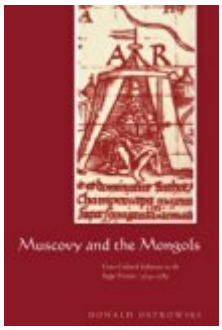
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Donald Ostrowski. *Muscovy and the Mongols: Cross-Cultural Influences on the Steppe Frontier, 1304-1589.* New York and Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1998. xvi + 329 pp. $59.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-521-59085-3.



Reviewed by Russell E. Martin

Published on H-Russia (November, 1999)

This is one of those books that happily comes along every once in a while that lets everyone know where things stand to date in a given field. It is one of those back-to-basics books--highly dependent on the secondary literature, immersed in the historiographical traditions, and offering new ways of looking at old problems and sources. These kinds of works tend to be read widely and they find their way into most bibliographies of specialized studies that appear in print afterward. But they also tend to be under-appreciated books. Their authors sometimes get taken to task for putting "old wine in new bottles." These books tend to be assessed as creative but ultimately disappointing rehashings of what we already know about the topic. It's frequently not true, but the criticism is all too common.

And especially in this case, sour reviews are not warranted. Ostrowski's *Muscovy and the Mongols* is in fact an extremely valuable, well-researched book that, while not without some flaws, certainly ought to be required reading for anyone interested in Muscovite history, or, for that matter, topics in the history of Eurasia. Ostrowski argues that "no society arises ex nihilo. Outside influences contribute to the making of all societies," including Muscovy (p. 14). He seeks to place Muscovy in the broader, more general narrative of world history and to identify what components of Muscovite culture, society and politics appear to have been borrowed from abroad, and the ways and extent to which Muscovites made these borrowings their own.

Muscovy was positioned on the burr of a cultural superhighway, where language, religion, cultural habits and political ideologies were exchanged among the peoples living in and around the Qipchaq Steppe and Black Sea basin. Placing Muscovite history in this broader context makes it possible to apprehend more fully the complexity, dynamism and adaptability of Muscovite society and culture. This broader perspective also allows for the debunking of some "myths" that run rampant in the historical literature, and for new insights into the origins of some of the more characteristic features of Muscovite society from the fourteenth through seventeenth centuries.

According to Ostrowski, Muscovite history can be broken down into three periods: early (1304-1448), middle (1448-1589), and late (1589-1722). This periodization is largely determined by the shifting proportions and directions of cross-cultural influences on Muscovy. In the early period, "high culture"--including religion but also art, architecture and written culture--was largely influenced by Byzantium, probably because the Rus' Church was subordinate ecclesiastically to its Greek Mother Church. But in terms of the political structures and the military, Muscovy was drenched in Mongol influences, largely because of the political dependency of Muscovy on the Qipchaq Khanate. The Mongols were not then seen as villains and despoilers necessarily, in the way later Muscovite ideology would portray them. Mongols were merely one of the players in steppe politics, players that Rus' princes either fought against or allied themselves with, depending on the changing fortunes of the times. This two-directional borrowing would remain a fundamental structural component of Muscovite society down even to the time of Peter the Great.

Middle Muscovy witnessed territorial expansion, increasing political autonomy from Sarai (in politics) and ecclesiastical independence from Byzantium (in Church affairs). The rise of an anti-Tatar ideology dates from this period, sponsored, says Ostrowski, by the Church. It is in this period that many of the characteristic features of Muscovite culture appear: the seclusion of elite women, the introduction of gunpowder and musketeer regiments, and the rise of serfdom. Middle Muscovy ends with the establishment of the independent Russian Church under its own patriarch in 1589, a crucial moment, according to Ostrowski, in the creation of a virtual past--a virtual past that would transform Mongols into the villains that they appear to be in much of the historical literature on the period.

Late Muscovy proceeds until 1722, when Peter the Great established the Table of Ranks, which "established a new system of social status and military rank" after the abolition of ***mestnichestvo*** in 1682 (p. 18). Ostrowski argues that this period is marked by the increasing importance of influences from Western Europe and the transformation of the Church into a department of the state. In all three periods, there is substantial borrowings; and the real difficulty in understanding the dynamics of this borrowing, Ostrowski believes, is sorting out where things come from and how they get Russianized.

Ostrowski tackles the key historiographical debates about the role of the Mongols in Russian history in turn, devoting a chapter to each of the major questions that appear and reappear in the scholarly literature. In Part I of the book ("Mongol Influence: What's What and What's Not") he explores what administrative and military institutions were borrowed from the Mongols and makes a compelling case for a dual system of administration in early Muscovy, borrowed wholesale from the Mongols (the ***daruga*** and ***baskak***--civilian and military governors, respectively). Ostrowski next looks at the seclusion of elite women and argues that, contrary to prevailing views, it was likely not borrowed from the Mongols, who had no such custom. A better speculation about the origins of seclusion, says Ostrowski, is that it was borrowed from the Byzantines, who did seclude elite women up until about the eleventh century. Seclusion, like royal bride shows, may have come to Muscovy centuries well after their extinction in Byzantium through the Orthodox "book culture" that served as a conduit of cultural borrowing.

He next debunks the notion that the economy of the East Slavic lands was adversely affected by the Mongol "yoke." Instead, Ostrowski points to the findings of other scholars that speak of an initial downturn in economic life, but soon afterward an economic stimulation that might be credited to the Pax Mongolica. In Part II ("Development of an anti-Tatar ideology in the Muscovite

Church") Ostrowski examines ideology, particularly the questions of where the Muscovite autocracy originated, and what the "Third Rome theory" was. These chapters (Six through Ten) are in many ways the best in the book and reveal his command of the source base. For Ostrowski, Muscovy's political ideology was more an adaptation of Byzantine monarchical and ecclesiological theory, rather than some assimilation of the lessons and models of Mongol rule.

There are other arguments, too, that deserve special mention. Ostrowski is one of the few specialists in this field to emphasize the role of Tatar immigrants in the Muscovite elite. Many of these families would become powerful regional players, and some would even make their careers in the court. His suggestion that ***pomest'ia*** (military land grants) originated as a means of providing support for some of these early Tatar immigrants serving in the Muscovite army is compelling. The topic deserves more space than could be given it in this book, but the evidence Ostrowski marshals in defense of his argument will likely be debated by specialists in this field for some time to come.

There are the rather detailed insights that Ostrowski offers about specific sources, like the texts of the Kulikovo cycle, the "Tale of the Princes of Vladimir," and the various texts containing the Third Rome theory. Ostrowski has been working with these texts for years, and he takes the opportunity in this book to summarize the (sometimes very technical) scholarship on these texts and to offer his own insights as well. These textological offerings do sometimes disrupt the flow of the narrative overall in this book, but they are valuable just the same.

As useful and necessary as this book surely is, some things are problematic. First, it might be pointed out that the title of the book, however alliterate, seems not to be entirely descriptive. The title might suggest that the work is devoted only to the relationship between Muscovy and the Mongols and their successors on the Steppe and along the Volga. But in fact this book examines Muscovite borrowings in general, with about equal treatment of what came from the Qipchaq Khanate and what came from the Byzantine Empire. To be sure, the Mongols are on center stage here. But not all the "cross-cultural influences" mentioned in the title originated in the Steppe. Indeed, it is Ostrowski's basic argument that, if Muscovy borrowed administrative practices, military land grants, and military technologies from the Mongols, they took at least as much in ecclesiastical culture and political ideology from the Byzantines. One would never guess that from the cover.

The organization of the book also raises some questions. At the outset, Ostrowski promises to examine Muscovite-Steppe relations in the context of world history, a refreshing and necessary (and new) perspective, to be sure (p. 27). But the book is organized around the major historiographical debates that have appeared in the historical literature over the past 150 years, which sometimes serves to divert the reader's attention from this objective. Nowhere is this better seen than in the first sentences of some of the chapters. "One of the practices that has been most often associated with Mongol influence is the seclusion of women among the Muscovite elite" (Chapter Three, "Seclusion of Elite Women"). "The historiographical tradition of attributing Russian autocracy to Mongol despotism is a long one" (Chapter Four, "Oriental Despotism"). "The consensus view in the historiography is that Rus' suffered long-term economic devastation as a result not only of the Mongol conquest but also of the oppressive taxation policies during the so-call 'Tatar Yoke'" (Chapter Five, "Economic Oppression"). The later chapters (in Part II) are better on this count, but nonetheless this book sometimes reads more like a collection of articles than a synthetic work on a single subject.

But perhaps the major criticism that might be raised about this work is that Ostrowski sometimes seems to see cultural borrowings in places

where a case could just as plausibly be made for indigenous origins. Ostrowski pledges to offer a more balanced view of Muscovite cultural borrowings than found in the literature presently. He warns that "to exclude outside influence altogether is to fall into a trap. To concentrate only on outside influence is to fall into another trap. Once can avoid these traps by considering fairly not only indigenous origins and development but also outside origins and influence" (p. 15).

He's right, of course. But when Ostrowski discusses the spread of Muslim military land grants (the *iqta*) to Western Europe, Byzantium, the Ottoman lands, and Muscovy (pp. 48-54); or the role of China in world history (pp. 87-88); or the external (especially Swedish) influences upon Peter the Great's reforms (p. 106), Ostrowski appears to reveal a preference for historical explanations that stress borrowings over indigenous innovations. This is not to say that Ostrowski falls into the "traps" that he rightly has identified in the historiography. His treatments of women's seclusion (see especially pp. 79-84) and of the conventions of formal address in petitions to the sovereign (pp. 88-92) are models for even-handedness and balance of focus. But avoiding "traps" is hard; and though he succeeds by and large (a rare accomplishment worth our praise), he reveals his hand from time to time.

Then there are the smaller things. The book desperately needs maps--of northeastern Rus', of the Qipchaq Steppe, of the silk route, of the relevant regions in China. This is a sweeping study that takes the reader across the length and width of Eurasia at sometimes dizzying speeds. A well-placed map here or there might help to orient the reader. Also, the glossary at the end (pp. 251-53) is wholly inadequate. A miniscule percentage (I would estimate less than 20 percent) of the terms used in the text that might be unfamiliar to non-specialists (and who else is a glossary for?) are actually included in it. Twenty-three terms on two and one-quarter pages is just not enough for a book that plunges the reader into so many different cultures and languages.

And finally, there are times when one might wish that some claims were supported with footnotes, like when Ostrowski says that "[t]hrough the Mongols and the Qipchaq Khanate, Muscovite rulers became familiar with the concept of the Mandate of Heaven" (p. 95). It should be said, however, that these moments when the reader seeks in vain for a citation are rare; this is a book that is generally well-documented. Indeed, the bibliography (actually, a works cited) is remarkably complete for titles is several languages on the various themes addressed in this book. Cambridge University Press ought to be applauded for printing it (it consumes 45 pages), especially at a time when some presses are omitting bibliographies altogether (a very distressing new trend, indeed).

Ostrowski is to be congratulated for offering a book that is both erudite and readable. He has taken on a well-worn topic and succeeded in delivering a fresh and insightful new treatment. Despite the flaws, Muscovy and the Mongols is the best place to go now for an examination both of the role of the Mongols in Russian history, and for a more general treatment of the problems of cross-cultural influences in the Eurasian space. This new bottle certainly contains lots of new wine.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/h-russia

Citation: Russell E. Martin. Review of Ostrowski, Donald. *Muscovy and the Mongols: Cross-Cultural Influences on the Steppe Frontier, 1304-1589.* H-Russia, H-Net Reviews. November, 1999.

URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=3545