THE MONGOL YOKE REVISITED: DID IT HOLD RUSSIA BACK OR PROPEL IT FORWARD?

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Abstract:

Many in believe that the cause of Russia's lag vis a vis Europe was caused by the Tatar-Mongol invasions of the 13th century. Russia, under Mongol domination was isolated from European developments and therefore failed to participate in the crucial events of the period 1240-1480 that propelled Europe into the modern age. However, since Russia was practicing swidden (slash and burn) farming at that time, there was no subsistence basis on which to build a powerful state. Mongol taxation encouraged intensification of production, and by the 1460's movement on peasant mobility and the European 3-field system were being introduced into Russia, which became the economic bases of the Muscovite state. Thus without Mongol taxation, Russia might have remained in swidden for much longer than it did, with a consequent greater lag in development than was actually experienced.

Russia's major historic problems have been its relations to the countries of the west, mainly an effort to keep up with them and avoid conquest, both military and cultural from that direction, and its relations to the countries to its southeast, by whom it was first dominated but which it later dominated itself, as part of the Russian Empire and Soviet Union. It is common opinion in Russia that its weakness vis a vis the West was caused by the Mongol domination of the 13th through 15th centuries. This 'Mongol Yoke' is thought to have isolated Russia from the West and therefore prevented it from participating in the Renaissance and Reformation as well as the commercial transformations that produced strong modern states in Western Europe. According to this scenario, Russia was thus left behind.

Here, I will present an alternative interpretation of the effects of Mongol hegemony in Russia. Rather than holding Russia back, it pushed Russia forward.

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My thinking is based on the theory of Antonio Gilman, who relates subsistence modes to state formation. Gilman outlines the existence of four subsistence modes in pre-industrial societies: hunting and gathering, swidden, pastoral nomadism and agriculture. Gilman states that in the first 3 systems, primary producers can simply run away from a would-be exploitative ruler, and thus hierarchy and class-based states seldom form in these societies. But with the transition from swidden ('slash and burn') cultivation to agriculture, the primary producers become vulnurable to domination and exploitation. He says that the "…desire for material security led later Neolithic (swidden) farmers to create productive works of long-term and general utility. These assets would be of value to others than their creators. Thus capital-intensification of subsistence transfers the problem of security from the material to the social field. The investments of labor to insure future production would have to be defended. But the value of these same assets would dampen the potential for social fission, so that it would be difficult to check the aspirations of those to whom the defense had been entrusted.

In the face of a protector whose exactions seem excessive, the household's choices are limited: it may abandon the asset for which it sought protection; it may find another protector (who may prove no less self-aggrandizing than his predecessor); or it may submit to the excessive exactions. Over the long term, these options favor the protectors. In the end there would have arisen a permanent ruling class." (Gilman, p. 7)

It is the establishment of this ruling class, which seldom exits outside of agricultural and industrial societies, that is the basis of state formation in pre-modern times. While the states and ruling classes were a severe burden to the cultivators, they were also the basis of strong state structures, which do enhance the power of the societies that are subject to them, and enable societies newly organized as states to compete with already existing states.

Ernest Gellner has noticed the same pattern resulting from the immobility of resources in agrarian society, although he doesn't appear to be aware of Gilman's earlier explanation.

"…though pastoral societies possess storable wealth, it is mobile wealth, and those who own it may escape the dilemma of the pre-emptive conflict. They do not need to become either oppressors or oppressed, and they can flee those who would oppress them.

Something similar is true of peasant societies in difficult terrain. Generally speaking, peasants are tied to their fields and therefore eminently exploitable: they cannot run away. Nevertheless, if their fields are located in terrain that is difficult of access, then the imposition of domination may be too arduous to be worthwhile." (Gellner, p. 150).

Turning to Russia, it should be noted that it had a swidden economy until at

least the late 15th century. The main reason for this was their northern location and the consequent shortness of their growing season, which limited agricultural productivity there, much as excess heat and rainfall limit it in the tropics.

In the early Middle Ages, Russia's swidden economy was host to intertribal wars that produced captives. These were encouraged by the Vikings who invaded Russia in the 9th century, who besides, simply went slave-raiding in the weakly organized swidden countryside. With slave-hungry empires nearby, it was profitable to sell the captives down the river, in this case the Dnepr or secondarily, the Volga. The main purchasers were the Byzantines and a succession of Islamic Empires. Kiev was the southernmost of the Russian towns of the forest zone, inhabited by Slavic swidden cultivators and thus it was the closest Russian town to the major imperial customers for Russian furs, lumber, and metals, as well as slaves. Thus at an early period it became the most important center of Russian export trade and of imported wealth and culture. Its location determined its importance.

The Mongol invasions of the 13th century upset this pattern by reorienting the bulk of this trade from the Dnepr to the Volga, where the Tatar-Mongol Golden Horde built its capital, Serai. The Horde ruled the Russian forest indirectly, collecting tribute from native princes through a series of envoys who were backed by the threat of invasion if the Horde felt the need of it.

During this period the Russian cultivators moved freely, making swidden clearings wherever the farming seemed best. In general this movement was from west to east, gradually taking land from hunting and gathering peoples deeper within the continent. Neither Mongols nor local princes tried to stem this flow. The latter simply taxed, at a relatively low rate, whoever happened to be farming in their district. The fact of the peasant's ability to move, because he was still a swidden farmer, combined with a general shortage of labor, kept seignorial abuse within bounds. (Hellie, p.77.)

Russia, under pressure to pay taxes to the Horde, needed to organize itself for tax collection. In one sense it was the scale of the nomads' reach that enabled this change. If each prince who ruled a small area tried to increase taxes, the swiddeners could decamp, but if all the princes were compelled to collect taxes over a very large area, the farmers would gain little or nothing from moving, for the princes could no longer compete for labor by offering lower tax rates. This would tend to dampen peasant movement.

I cannot prove that the Horde's exactions were directly responisible for the binding of peasants to the land (serfdom) nor the intensification of farming that led to a switch from swidden to full-scale agriculture. Yet the logic of the situation, that production had to be intensified to pay the taxes, points in that direction. What is known is that the pressure from both more powerful neighbors and military

rivalries at home created more militarized and bureaucratized state structures, and there was a need to intensify production to raise the income to support them.

It is also a fact that the right of peasants to move was first curtailed between 1455 and 1462 when the Muscovite prince Vasilii II, needing the support of the economically powerful Troitse Sergiev monastery in his prosecution of a civil war, granted the monks the right to tie peasants to the land (Hellie, p. 81). Hellie states that: “This step was of great importance in that it initiated the legal enserfment of the peasantry, a step taken by the state power at the request of a particular monastery which was to become the weathiest in all Rus’ by the time all the peasants had become enserfed in 1649” (p. 82).

Sometime before 1470, other monasteries won the right to restrict the movement of peasants to a period following the autumn harvest. It became the rule that they could go only within a two-week period around St. George's day, November 26, and only after paying off their debts. This became general throughout Muscovite lands in 1497 (p. 83).

Furthermore, the three field system was introduced in the 1460's and there was also "...a need for limiting the extremely wasteful assartage (podseka), system of agriculture which was inherited from much earlier times and was only significantly limited in Ivan III's reign (1462-1505)”. (Hellie, p.85) 'Assartage' is another term for swidden. All of this had the effect of making the peasants much more vulnerable to taxation, and it is noted by Halperin (Halperin, p.84) that the Muscovite state economy flourished during this period. This was probably because they were now squeezing more from the farmers than they had before. Thus the critical events that got the process of enserfment in motion did take place in the latter part of the ‘Mongol Yoke’ period.

Halperin also observes that during the Mongol period, although Russia was taxed, "Oriental goods such as silk, glass, beads, cowrie shells, and boxwood combs have been dug up at village sites throughout the Russian countryside." (p.81) What was probably happening was that the Russian elites were being taxed by the Mongols, and they naturally complained of it in their chronicles, thus we get the impression that they were sorely pressed. The mobile (and mute) cultivators were still beyond the reach the kind of taxation that they were to experience once agriculture and the accompanying serfdom were firmly in place, and thus had something to spare for little luxuries during the earlier period.

When they had the chance, cultivators returned to swidden. During the chaos of the latter years (1570's-80's) of the reign of Ivan IV (Grozny), peasants decamped from lands in central Muscovy at a great rate, partly because better lands had been made available to the south and east of the forest zone, and swidden was reestablished in the old forest zone of Russia (Hellie, p. 94). This alarmed those of the noble and military classes who depended on peasant production for their

support. As a result, the remaining rights to mobility were gradually curtailed beginning in 1581 (pp. 95-6). This trend culminated in the law of 1649, which forbade moving altogether and locked the system of Russian serfdom in place. This must have impoverished the farmers, who were not rich to begin with.

The terrible poverty of the Russian countryside in the 18th and 19th centuries was the result of the enforced settlement of the 15th, 16th and 17th, which enriched the nobles by subjecting the farmers to much heavier exactions than they had ever experienced before. The violent peasant rebellions of the 17th and 18th centuries were a direct consequence of these new burdens.

Throughout this period, Russia gradually came into direct military and cultural competition with the European states to its west, particularly Sweden, Poland and Lithuania. Much of the intensification of production and the need to force peasants to settle was driven by the need to finance the military forces needed to resist the western threat. But without the start given by the 'Mongol Yoke', it probably would not have been a competition at all. Russia also had the good luck to face Europe's least developed powers. The unfortunate peoples of Africa (another swidden region), by contrast had to deal with the Portuguese, Dutch, English and French, Europe's strongest states, hence they were overcome when the Europeans got around to bothering to do so.

The study of the process of the intensification of agriculture in the Mongol period is thus important to the understanding of the long term development of the Russian state and its relations with its neighbors. It is my hope that younger scholars with the appropriate language skills, many of whom exist in the Central Asian republics, would pursue such research. If the process of intensification can be tied to the Mongol taxation, it would suggest a major revision of our view of the causes of Russia's difficulties in accommodating to the West.

References:

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