

Deconstructing the myth of the Tatar Yoke

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Analysing and comparing the various conventional and revisionist narratives on what is known as the ‘Tatar Yoke’, this article aims to show that Western historiography has long been critical of the dominant negative view on the Tatar–Mongol rule over Russian principalities and that in Russia we find similar revisions in history – with some exceptions – only in post-Soviet times. This article aims to demonstrate how the revisionist views on the Tatar–Mongol rule contributed to the political and cultural transformation of contemporary Russia. In the part which analyses the revisionist discourse in Russia the emphasis lies on the new Tatar narrative. For Tatars the new interpretation of the Tatar–Mongol rule is of outstanding importance because it functions as a means to enhance Tatar national pride, and it contributes to Tatarstan’s sovereignty project.

Keywords: ‘Tatar Yoke’; East and West; changing Tatar nationalism; reviving Tatar national pride; Russian–Tatar relations

Introduction

At the beginning of the thirteenth century the Mongols and associated peoples named ‘Tatars’¹ swept out of the east and conquered most of the territory of what was then named Rus’. Labelled later as the ‘Tatar Yoke’,² this invasion of ‘Asian hordes’ and their rule over Russian principalities, as well as their raids on Western countries, has been interpreted as one of the most dramatic events of medieval European history. The nature and effects of this invasion are currently being reinterpreted and revised by scholars of ethnic Russian and non-Russian backgrounds alike. This article aims to demonstrate how the revisionist views on the Tatar–Mongol rule that are spelt out in the text, contributed to the political and cultural transformation of contemporary Russia. It is specifically argued that more positive and nuanced interpretations of Tatar–Mongol rule are instrumental in establishing positive relations between ethnic Russians and Tatars in the Russian Federation and enhancing Tatar national pride. Accordingly, the focus here is on a new interpretation developed by scholars in Russia in general, and the contribution of Tatar scholars in particular. The argument is presented in four parts. The first part presents conventional narratives. The second part elucidates Western perspectives. The third part analyses the Soviet perspective. The fourth part discusses the post-Soviet perspective in Russia developed by both non-Tatar and Tatar scholars.

Conventional narratives

Within the Russian context, the ‘Tatar Yoke’ became a perennial topic which after 1448 found expression in literary works as well (Ostrowski 1998, p. 164). It was universally applied and ‘conjures up images of barbarian Asiatic nomads engaged in cruel oppression and parasitic exploitation’ (Halperin 1985, p. 15). This simplistic perspective was shared by imperial Russian, Soviet and Western historiography alike. Mongol hegemony over Muscovy was

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described as ‘a sad chapter of history’, a ‘period of national humiliation’, ‘the greatest calamity for the Rus’ lands’ (Sczcesniak 1972, pp. 92, 95, 97). ‘The “Tatar Yoke” is still often invoked, especially in Russian writing, as one of those historical catchphrase categories, like “the Dark Ages”, which may be occasionally convenient to teachers, popular writers and political ideologists, but more often serve to blur a whole period or topic and discourage any further examination’ (Ryan 2000). ‘Tatar–Mongol rule was an unmitigated disaster for Russia. I do not see any evidence that should lead us to reconsider that.’ This is what Alexander Nazarenko, a specialist with the official Institute of World History in Moscow, said recently (Weir 2003).

Western perspectives

Analysing Russian historiography in a study published at the beginning of the twentieth century, Rambaud pointed to the fact that even Russian historians were not entirely in agreement as to the nature and degree of influence exerted by the Mongol Yoke on Russian development (Lang 1990, pp. 123–129). This refers to M. Bestoujef-Rioumine, who estimates the influence to have been specially exerted on financial administration and military organization (Lang 1990). In current Western historiography several scholars criticize the negative picture painted in the Soviet and post-Soviet narratives. Ostrowski describes the Russian interpretation of the history of Muscovy in Soviet and post-Soviet times as an inherently Manichean view that does not allow for any outside influences on the building of the Muscovian state. Within this perspective the rule of the Mongols over ‘Russia’ could be nothing but negative and destructive (Ostrowski 1998, pp. 5, 244). Ostrowski persuasively argues that ‘to ignore non-Muscovite influences on Muscovy is to run the risk of faulty conclusions about institutions and practices’ (Ostrowski 1998, p. 14). Among the contemporary critics of an exclusively negative impact of Mongol rule are the American historian Charles J. Halperin and his German colleague Günter Stökl. Halperin (1978, pp. 188–191, 1982) touched upon this topic in several of his publications. In his *Russische Geschichte*, first published in the 1970s, and one of the standard works intensively cited by German scholars up to present times, Stökl stressed the ‘civilizing’ influence of the Tatar–Mongol rulers and pointed to the fact, that they did not disturb the ruling elite of the conquered Russian principalities and that their main interest was a financial one. They collected taxes (*dan*) from the conquered regions and to a certain extent installed a political leadership (Stökl 1997, pp. 136–153). Kozys stresses that collection of taxes was one of the chief concerns of the Golden Horde in dealing with Russian dependency. This task was handed over to Russian grand dukes and princes. This strengthened the dynastic position of some of the ruling families, as for instance the princes of Moscow. These princes mainly came to be looked upon, not as spokesmen of local interests before the Mongol power, but as agents of the Khan (Kozys 2007). By retaining a substantial part of the taxes, Muscovy benefited economically from Mongol protection. This found clear expression in the nickname ‘Ivan Kalita’ (Ivan the money-bag) given to Ivan I. Ostrowski. Halperin and Johnson came to similar conclusions. Halperin (1985, p. 21) states that ‘though the Mongols played an active role in Russian politics, they did so without displacing the political infrastructure of the Russian principalities’. Johnson (2008) emphasizes that the Khan at the castle was the final arbiter of all political disputes and continues: ‘Given the absurdity and fratricide of the old system, this is far from a negative attribute. If anything, the Khan gave the Russian nation its social salvation in that only a single ruler can provide the necessary military unity to survive in the tough neighborhood of central Eurasia.’ Furthermore, ‘the Mongols developed the head tax, rather than the land tax, a practice to be resurrected later by Peter I. This tax was far heavier than Russians had been used to, and therefore, it was largely these payments that sparked off local revolts. The Mongols used local nobles and princes as their tax gatherers, and it is this practice that will see the end of Mongol

domination, but it will also create synergy between Russian and Mongol elites, a synergy that will give birth to modern Russia.' He states that at the time of the Mongol conquest Russia was badly divided, and 'at the end of the Mongol rule Moscow not only became the centre of power, but also possessed the tools required to eventually control an empire that rivalled that of the Mongol Horde in size, and it lasted until the end of the 20th century' (Johnson 2008). Rempel (n.d.) states, that 'the blending of the Byzantine tradition embodied in the church and Mongol ideas and administrative patterns paved the way for the establishment of the semi-oriental absolutism of the Muscovite tsars'. According to him, the devastation wrought by the invasion was great, but conquerors made surprisingly few changes in the pattern of the Russian government. The rulers mostly showed respect for Russian traditional institutions and confirmed in office the princes who appeared to be entitled to it by precedent and custom. When more than one prince appeared to claim the position the Khan usually selected the prince who promised to raise the most tribute.³ While the above-mentioned scholars focus on the Rus' and Muscovy in general, Galina Yemelianova⁴ develops her critique of the 'Tatar Yoke' by exploring the history of Islam in Russia. In one of her many publications on this issue Yemelianova focused on three aspects of the Golden Horde rule over Russia, the socio-economic, the political and the cultural. According to her, Muscovy was based on three columns, the Slavic, the Tzhingizid-islamic and the Byzantine traditions (Yemelianova 2002, p. 15). This is similar to what Ostrowski asserts. Like others, Yemelianova stresses the fact, that the Golden Horde had a unifying influence on developing Russian statehood. Yemelianova stated that Tatars had contributed significantly to the Eurasian identity of the Slavic peoples. Furthermore, Yemelianova (1997, p. 543) also discloses an intensive transfer of Tatar culture. While she is sometimes heavily critical of the Tatars and their nationalizing project, a fact that makes her suspicious of Tatar historians, the observations presented here will be found laudable.

The Soviet perspective

To understand the revisionist discourse in Russia we need to reflect on the Soviet perspective. The Soviets decreed a historiography that construed Russian history as a triumph over backward models of society and depicted the Russians as the modernizing avant-garde and the 'Big Brother' of the non-Russian peoples of the USSR. The Stalinist model of history, presented as fixed steps from tribal society to feudalism to capitalism and finally communism, described the Golden Horde as a feudal nomadic society that could be nothing but backward. This narrative either disregards or denies any positive influence of Tatar–Mongol hegemony over Russia. Nomadic peoples in general were presented in an overall negative light. The invaders were described as 'wild hordes' without any culture and as 'primitive barbarians' (Shnirelman 1998, pp. 66–71). According to this narrative, the conquest of Russian territory by the Tatar–Mongol invaders in the thirteenth century was the beginning of the 'Asiatic threat' with nothing but negative impacts on Russia's political, cultural and economic development. This viewpoint already entered the mainstream of history writing by the middle of the sixteenth century (Ostrowski 1998, p. 247). It was the general thrust of Soviet history writing too. The rule of the Golden Horde was interpreted as devastating with most damaging consequences for the conquered peoples, their civilization, economy and culture. A shining example is the following statement of Kargalov (1984, p. 65) when considering the end of the rule of the Golden Horde: 'The self-awareness of the Russian people increased, united by the great historical goal – to overthrow the hated Horde yoke and to attain national independence.' The Soviet narrative of the Muslim peoples of the Volga–Ural-region painted a picture of close friendship between the indigenous Muslim and pagan populations and the Slavs at the time when the Tatar–Mongol invaders conquered the Volga–Ural region. Together, this perspective holds,

they heroically fought side by side against the invaders. This narrative fitted perfectly with the myth of the 'Friendship of Peoples' (*druzhba narodov*) propagated by the Soviet ideology. Sergei Soloviev in his 'Russian History', published in the middle of the 19th century, provides us with a less one-sided picture. Carefully, albeit in the spirit of history writing of his time, he explored the Russian chronicles. They depict a picture of changing alliances between Mongol Khans and Russian princes. Soloviev showed that the Mongols pursued a policy of *divide et impera* and Russian princes used the Mongols to achieve their own goals (Soloviev 2000). The Soviet narrative construed the incorporation of the successor states of the Golden Horde, the Khanates of Kazan', Siberia and Astrakhan' into Muscovy in the middle of the sixteenth century as a civilizing project for the conquered Turkic people (who were all named 'Tatars'). Accordingly, the term to define this incorporation was '*prisoedinenie*', implying a peaceful incorporation that was fruitful for the conquered peoples. Whenever there were attempts to criticizing this interpretation, they were suppressed by the Soviet authorities. Concerning the Tatar scholars, this went so far as to forbid them to explore any questions relating to the Tatar–Mongol invasion and the time of the Golden Horde and forbid Tatar historians from depicting the Tatar–Mongol invaders as the ancestors of the titular nation of Tatarstan. This happened after Naki Isanbet published his Idegei Epic in the early 1940s. Idegei is a national hero of many central Asian Muslim peoples. He was a military leader who functioned as the real ruler of the Golden Horde at the turn of the 14th to the 15th century. For Soviet authorities Idegei was a reactionary leader who launched several raids into Rus' (Iskhakov and Izmailov 1991). In Isanbet's epic Idegei appeared as the national hero of the Tatars. After heated discussions in Moscow the Central Committee of the Communist Party passed the decree of 9 August 1944 stating that, by making Idegei a hero of the Tatars, the epic was written in the 'spirit of anti-Russian patriotism' (Iskhakov and Izmailov 1991). Participants of the debate claimed:

The endeavour of some Tatar literati to put the epic at the same level with the best of all oral traditions of the peoples of the USSR is without any base, because this epic does not describe progressive historical events. In its content and ideas, it can by no means be compared with works like 'David Sasunik' or 'Kalevala'. (Bordiugov and Bucharaev 1999, pp. 39, 40, my translation)

The Tatar newspaper *Soviet Aedaebiiaty*, where the epic had been published, later accused Isanbet to have collaborated with 'bourgeois nationalists'. In his epic Isanbet defined the Muslim peoples of the Middle-Volga as descendants of the Golden Horde (*Soviet Aedaebiiaty* 1944, Iskhakov and Izmailov 1991). This was against Soviet historical dogma that only the Muslim population inhabiting the Volga–Ural region at the time of the Tatar–Mongol conquest, then named 'Bulgars', where the ancestors of the titular nation of Tatarstan and the invaders their enemies.⁵

Post-Soviet perspectives in Russia

Non-Tatar scholars

According to Nikolai Ulianov, deconstructing the myth of the Tatar Yoke is a popular narrative of the revisionist historiography in Russia drawn up by a group of scientists of the Russian Academy of Sciences. In the post-Soviet period some scholars of the Academy have determined that whatever the economic and political consequences of the Mongol invasion may have been, the cultural consequences were far more significant. Cut off from Western Europe by the Mongols and oriented instead toward Asia and nomadic culture, Rus' developed independently of the great humanistic influences embodied in the Renaissance and Reformation (Ulyanov 2001). Petr Fomenko came to the conclusion that there was no Tatar–Mongol occupation of

Rus' at all. Instead, several princely families of both Slavic and Tatar origin employed military force in order to merge disunited Slavic principalities into an empire. He asserts that there was no discord between Tatars and Russians in medieval Rus'. Together they had lived as a historically integrated multi-ethnic community (Ulyanov 2001). During a multi-national roundtable⁶ of the right-wing journal *Rodina* in 1997, some discussants stated that there was no reason to claim negative effects of the Tatar–Mongol invasion. On the contrary, it had to be regarded as the beginning of the formation of a powerful state with a multi-ethnic people covering a vast territory and thus making Russia a part of that state (*Rodina* 1997, p. 85). Other contributors to this new interpretation are Alexander Dugin and Lev Gumilev, leading members of Neo-Eurasianism, a new right-wing movement in Russia. Neo-Eurasianism imagines Russia as a special geographical and cultural space between Europe and Asia and pursues the idea of a Eurasian identity of the Russian people. To some extent their arguments are similar to those of the leading Eurasianist of the 1920s, Nikolai Trubetskoi, who asserted that 'the Russian state is the inheritor, the successor of the historical work of Tzchingiz Khan' (Trubetskoi 1925, cited Ostrowski 1998, p. 8). Gumilev and Dugin claim a significant influence of Asiatic elements on Russian mentality and state-building. Moreover, they are in no doubt that Russians have always been the intellectual, political and economical leading force and successful rulers of the huge Russian Empire. Gumilev describes the Golden Horde as a highly civilized state which formed the model for Russia. He denies that there was a 'Tatar–Mongol yoke' at all. For Gumilev the time of the Tatar–Mongol rule over Russia was a period of peaceful symbiosis, beneficial for both Russians and Mongols, whose authority was a great blessing for Russia, since it allowed cohabitation and has rescued Russia from absorption by Europe (Faustova 2002).

Dugin defined Eurasianism as a non-Western imperial project that allowed small states to retain their identity under a big Russian umbrella.⁷ Dugin's theory is that Russian nationalism and the centralism of the Russian state were the reasons for the collapse of the USSR. His vision of Russia is as a new Eurasian state, whereby each of Russia's regions would receive as much freedom in its political and social arrangements as it wished. Those regions with predominantly Muslim populations could live according to their strict Muslim laws. Even polygamy would be permitted. This might be the main line of arguments that convinced Tatar spiritual leaders such as Mufti Talgat Tadzhuiddin to join the Eurasian Movement in the early 1990s.

New Tatar perspectives

In the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union, Tatars underwent a lively process of nation-building where history writing played an outstanding role. Numerous books and articles on Tatar history have been published in Kazan' during the 1990s and early 2000s.⁸ One of the central topics of the new discourse is the deconstruction of the myth of the Tatar Yoke. In this context, Tatar scholars currently widely discuss the above-mentioned Party decree of August 1944. This decree put an end to all positive narratives of Tatar historians on any Tatar–Mongol leader. Tatar scholars currently interpret this decree as a 'spiritual genocide' (*duchovnyi genocid*) against the Tatars. This is a telling illustration of the degree of humiliation felt by many Tatar intellectuals (Iskhakov and Izmailov 1991). Within the Tatar scientific community we find at least two different positions about the Tatar–Mongol invasion, one pursued by the so-called 'Bulgarists', and the other developed by the so-called 'Tatarists'. Their main, sometimes aggressive, dispute is on the question of whether the Bulgars of Volgabulgaria or the Mongol–Tatars of the Golden Horde – together or without the Bulgars – are the ancestors of the titular nation of Tatarstan (Izmailov 2002b, p. 165). The backing of the negative picture of the Tatar–Mongols on the 'Bulgarist' side and deconstruction of the myth of the Tatar Yoke on the side of the 'Tatarists' launched a dispute as to whether or not the Tatars (i.e. the titular nation

of Tatarstan) should be renamed 'Bulgars'. When the invaders came to the Middle-Volga, the region was inhabited by a Turkic people in their own statehood named 'Volgabulgariia'. Their name was 'Bulgars'. Bulgarists made several attempts to get the ethnonym of the titular-nation of Tatarstan changed into 'Bulgars' as a means to emphasize the distinction between the Turkic peoples coming with the invaders and the indigenous population of Volgabulgariia. The leading Bulgarist, Mirfatykh Zakiev, holds that it was necessary to change the ethnonym in order to avoid the negative connotations of the ethnonym 'Tatar' clearly expressed in the stereotype 'Tatar Yoke'. He claimed that the Soviets introduced this ethnonym for the titular-nation of the Tatar Autonomous Republic in order to make it clear that they are descendants of the 'wild' and 'barbarian' Asiatic hordes (Zakiev 1995, p. 5). The ethnonym 'Tatar' has been adopted by those ethnic groups who are currently seen as the titular nation of Tatarstan relatively late. As endonym it has been fixed only under Soviet rule (Bilz 2007, p. 239). Many different names had been used before. The turn to the ethnonym 'Tatar' was a product of the Jadidist reform-movement emerging at the turn of the twentieth century. The major Tatar Jadidist Shigatbuddin Mardzhani explained the hesitation to adopt the ethnonym 'Tatar' as a means of avoiding the negative connotations of this name which was widespread, and not only in Russia (Izmailov 2002a, p. 247). The 'Bulgarists' accept the view that a 'Tatar Yoke' existed and that the Muslim population of the Volga-Ural region suffered under it in common with the peoples of the Rus'. They claim either a lack of impact or a negative impact of the Tatar-Mongol conquest of Volgabulgariia, and stress that this Muslim state preserved its sovereignty during the Mongol rule (Chamidullin 2000, p. 63.) However, to a certain extent even the Bulgarists contribute to the deconstruction of the myth of the Tatar Yoke. One example may be found in Bulat Sultanbekov's emphasis that the Tatar-Mongol invasion, which was described as extraordinarily cruel, was no crueller than other wars in Medieval times (Sultanbekov 1993). For 'Tatarists' – the majority position – the Russian period of Tatar history was far more devastating than Tatar-Mongol rule. Their general line of the history writing is that the Golden Horde was a great Eurasian Empire and had significant impact on Russia (Iskhakov and Izmailov 2001b). For Tatarists, the Golden Horde was the cradle of the Tatar people. They claim that, at the time of the Golden Horde, a change of cultural identity and a new process of identity formation took place, so that from that time onwards one can speak of the development of a new people: the 'Tatars'.⁹ The 'Tatarist' narrative idealizes the Turkic peoples of the Golden Horde and downplays the influence of the Mongol aristocracy. By over-emphasizing the viewpoint that Mongols were widely Turkicized, they turn the 'Tatars' into the real leaders of the Golden Horde. The Tatar relationship to the narrative of Eurasianism is ambiguous (Batredinov 2005, Umland 2007, pp. 2–4). Only Gumilev is widely accepted among the Tatar intelligentsia (Kochanek 1999, p. 189). Gumilev's assumption that Muslim peoples had a positive effect on Russia's culture and civilization is welcomed. Tatars embrace Gumilev's narrative because he describes the Golden Horde as a highly civilized state that formed the model for Russia. This argument backs the new Tatar narrative, or more exactly the new 'Tatarist' narrative. Tatarists share the view of Gumilev and others that a 'Tatar Yoke' never existed. Gumilev's views were enthusiastically welcomed by Tatarstan's President Mintimer Shaimiev in his keynote speech at the Conference of the 'World Congress of Tatars' in 1992 where he said that Gumilev was a shining example of new perspectives on the Tatar-Mongol rule (Bötentdön'ia tatar kongressy 1992, p. 153).

Views on Dugin are more complicated. Batredinov (2005) goes as far as assuming that, 'despite superficial appearance of being a Turkic-friendly ideology, Dugin's theory has the ultimate goal of creating a global empire dominating the entire world'. Given this statement, it is more than understandable that Tatar intellectuals do not share all of Dugin's views. In general, Tatar scholars dislike Neo-Eurasianism as a political movement because it uses the

incorporation of Asiatic elements to construct Russia as superior to Europe. This does not fit with ideas of Tatar nationalism where Turkic civilization is seen as equal or even superior to European civilization. Tatar scholars often relate this to the question of the impact of Russian rule over Tatar territories. Instead of stating that Tatars have been civilized by the Russians, Tatar scholars have now developed theses to the effect that it was the Tatar–Mongol rulers who civilized Russia. A good example of this viewpoint is Rafael Khakimov's statement:

If, on the one hand, a union of the Russians with the Mongols protected Rus' from invasions from the West, then, on the other hand, it laid the foundations of a new statehood. The unification of the Russian lands around Moscow began and took place thanks to the Golden Horde. We should remember the lamentable condition of Russian principalities at that time, having bled each other dry through mutual struggle. (Khakimov 2006, p. 76)

Saelam Alishev (1991, pp. 76–83) came to the convincing conclusion that the unifying effect of the Golden Horde led to creation of a Russian Tsardom. The German historian Jens Fischer backed this, stating that the Tatar–Mongols have been the main driving force uniting Russia. Russian identity had been developed under the strong influence of Central Asian cultures. According to Fischer (1998, p. 47), there was a brotherhood of Orthodoxy and Islam, Orthodoxy and Buddhism.

For me this is quite a daring thesis regarding the leading role of the Orthodox Church throughout Russian history, not only in contemporary Russia. Damir Iskhakov (2002, p. 13) claims that a *zolotoordynsko–tatarskaia étnicheskaia obshchnost'* (Golden Horde–Tatar ethnic community) emerged during the time of the Golden Horde and fully developed in the Khanate of Kazan'. Rafael' Khakimov (1999, p. 126) holds that the Rus' and the Golden Horde were a 'union (*soyuz*), living in a symbiosis because the Mongols had been either pagans or Christians and thus had a great sympathy for Russian Orthodoxy. Khakimov (2000, pp. 169–181) used Giovanni Plano Carpini's report as a source for this thesis. Carpini, a Franciscan friar, visited Tzhingiz Khan's court in Karakorum in 1246. Also referring to Carpini, Sergei Soloviev (2000, p. 30) in his *Istoriia Rossii s drevneishikh vremen*, published between 1851 and 1879 wrote that some members of the Khan's family were Christians. I am doubtful about Khakimov's assumption about a symbiosis of Tatar–Mongols and Rus' and their great sympathy for Orthodoxy. In the part of Carpini's report published in Kazan' 2000 the friar emphasizes that the 'Tatars' believe in one god but had a lot of idols and worshipped to the sun, the moon and fire (Khakimov 2000, pp. 174–175). The friar emphasizes that the 'Tatars' often humiliated Russian Orthodox Russian princes (Khakimov 2000, p. 178). In some cases they even killed them. This was the case of Mstislavich Chernigov, Prince of Kiev, who was beheaded in 1246.¹⁰ This does not fit Khakimov's assumption of a Tatar–Rus' symbiosis. The Tatar historian Sh.F. Mukhamed'iarov (2003, p. 322) came to the conclusion that the Russian civilization is heavily influenced by the two main religions: Christianity and Islam. According to him (Mukhamed'iarov 2003, p. 265), this led to a 'Russian–Euro–Asiatic Civilization'. Uwe Halbach (1996, p. 6) backed this assumption by stating: 'The Russian civilization is Euroasiatic with a religious and syncretistic character of religiousness.' One result of the deconstruction of the myth of the Tatar Yoke was that Tatar politicians made attempts to convince the federal authorities to put an end to celebrating the Battle of Kulikovo. This anniversary has a long tradition to remind Russia of the demise of the Tatar Yoke.

According to Halperin (1985, p. 12), this victory should not be seen as a full Russian triumph because the tales of the Battle of Kulikovo did not proclaim Russia's freedom.

In April 2001 President Mintimer Shaimiev of Tatarstan urged Vladimir Putin to cancel celebrations of the Kulikovo anniversary (Ulyanov 2001). A survey conducted in 2002 by Elena Chabenskaia (2003, p. 69) showed that challenging the myth of the Tatar Yoke by Tatar intellectuals was welcomed by many ordinary Tatars. In a letter to the newspaper

Vecherniaia Kazan, the Tatar craftsman V. Kil'deev (1998) wrote that he was pleased to read that the Mongols were only a small minority in the Golden Horde and that the Tatars of the Horde were the intellectual elite. He welcomed the narrative about the Golden Horde as a highly civilized system. In recent years (early 2000s), a lively discussion arose about new history textbooks. Tatar commentators blame Russian textbooks for still attributing atrocities to the Tatars. Tatars were still described as 'malicious' (*poganye*), and thus, these textbooks reinforce the myth of the Tatar Yoke. 'Yes, we teach the Mongol period with an emphasis on an enemy who rapes, plunders, and burns', says Tatiana Koval, a history teacher at Moscow's School No. 218. 'This is what the primary sources of Russian history tell us. And anyway, why should modern Tatars be offended by that?' (Weir 2003, p. 3). Marat Gibatdinov (2006, p. 132) from the History Institute at the Tatar Academy of Science found out that in Russian (federal) textbooks the term 'Yoke' is still invoked when dealing with the Golden Horde. Furthermore, these textbooks include only the history of the Russians. The many non-Russian peoples are hardly mentioned (Gibatdinov, p. 131). Tatar historians are currently developing new textbooks in order to avoid further narratives perpetuating negative views of the Tatars. The Tatar Ministry of Education launched a project of new history textbooks for pupils of primary schools. For the first time in Tatarstan, history will be taught from the first class onwards. Several new history textbooks have already been published. Russian scholars look somewhat critically to these new textbooks. Volodina (2005) writes: 'These textbooks describe a glorious succession of "states of the Tatar people" from the Turkic Kaghanate of the sixth century C.E. to Kazan Khanate of the sixteenth century. Russia then conquered the region, and there followed a long period of suppression and suffering. From that moment on, according to these texts, Moscow was a monster and the Tatars abject victims.'

Conclusion

New perspectives on the Tatar Yoke have brought to an end the notion of the Tatar–Mongol invaders as backward and inferior to Russian Orthodox Christians. This move can be regarded as one of the means to enhance the relationship between ethnic Russians and the more than five million Tatars in the Russian Federation. Taking into account the clashes in Chechnia, it is all the more important for Moscow to maintain a good relationship with the Muslim populations in the core of the country. With regards to Tatarstan, an economically well-developed region with substantial resources of oil and gas, the new perspective on the Tatar–Mongol invaders can be regarded as one of the factors that can stabilize the good relationship between Moscow and Tatarstan established gradually in the 1990s. In the case of Tatar scholars, the deconstruction of the myth of the Tatar Yoke meets additional goals. By claiming that the Tatar–Mongol invaders civilized Russia and not the other way round, Tatar scholars depict the Tatars as superior to the Russians. This is a strong argument to revitalize Tatar national pride and to help the Tatars to overcome the inferiority complex developed mainly when, in Soviet times, the Russians were defined as their 'Big Brother'. The deconstruction of the myth of the Tatar Yoke by contemporary Tatar historians significantly contributes to the success of Tatarstan's sovereignty project, launched in the late 1980s, fixed in a treaty between the Russian Federation and Tatarstan in 1994, and pursued up to present days. Alongside these political and cultural implications in Russia, the new interpretation provides us with a more differentiated view of medieval Russian history.

Notes

1. For the complex history of the ethnonym 'Tatar', see Iskhakov and Izmailov (2001a, pp. 41–42).
2. According to Donald Ostrowski (1998, p. 244), the term 'Tatar Yoke' first appeared in the middle of the sixteenth century. Halperin (1985, p. 17) dates it back to the seventeenth century.

3. G. Rempel, The Tatar Yoke, Available at <http://mars.wnec.edu/~grempel/courses/russia/lectures/07tatar.html> [Accessed 17 February 2008].
4. Yemelianova is of Russian origin. She is here included in the Western perspective because she is a researcher at CREES in Birmingham (UK).
5. For the complicated history of the ethnogenesis of the titular-nation of Tatarstan, see Chamidullin (2000, pp. 62–67); Iskhakov and Izmailov (2001a, pp. 42–44); Tatarskii Ėntsiklopedicheskii Slovar' (1999, pp. 566–567).
6. Meaning that Tatars and scholars in Russia of another ethnic background took part.
7. Shlapentokh (2001) characterizes Dugin as follows: 'In fact, Russia's best-known Eurasianist, Dugin, has become an increasingly prominent figure in Russia. A polyglot autodidact who once worked in the archives of the Soviet intelligence services, Dugin dabbled in esoteric extremism in the early 1990s. As the decade wore on, he adopted a Eurasianist ideology and started to make contacts with the political establishment. In 1998, he became an adviser on strategic and geopolitical questions to the speaker of Russia's parliament. With Putin's ascent, Dugin broke into the mainstream. Today, he runs the International Eurasian Movement, appears on national television, and publishes in big-name newspapers.'
8. To mention some examples: Abdullin (1990, 1996, 1998, 1996, 2000), Chalikov (1993a, 1993b, 1994), Iskhakov (1995, 1997a, 1997b, 1999), Khakimov (1993, 2002).
9. For the various peoples known as 'Tatars', used as an ektonym, see Boeschoten (1998), Iskhakov (1995, p. 56), Izmailov (2002a, p. 245), Zakiev (1995).
10. See the description of the Chernigov Dynasty in: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prince_of_Chernigov [Accessed 3 March 2008].

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