



From Muscovy to the Russian Empire

By Trevor Getz

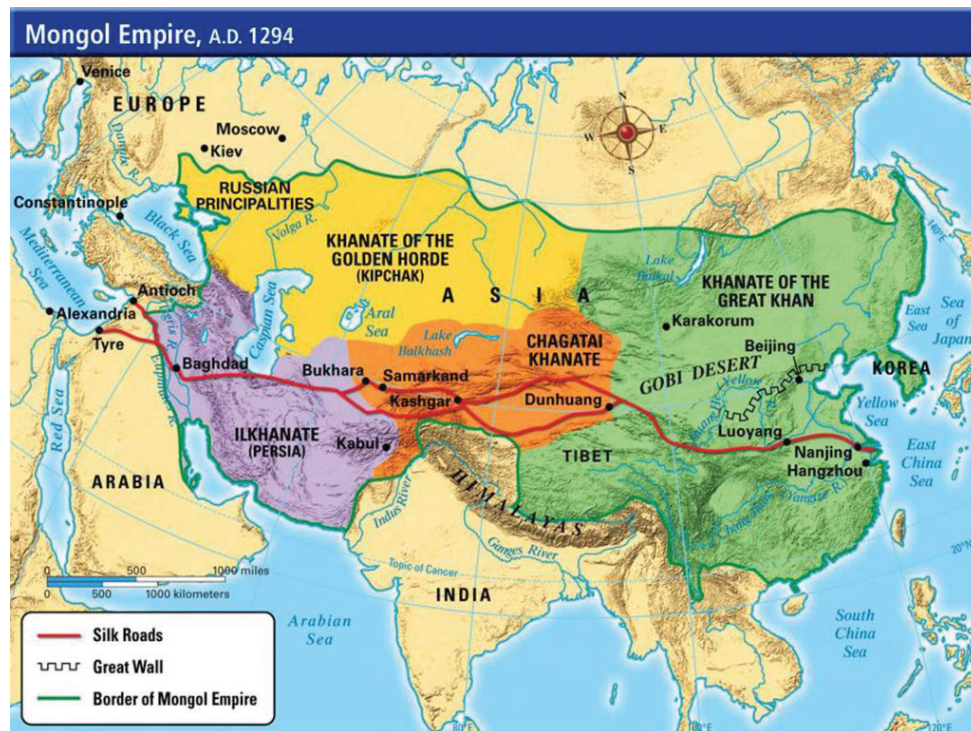
As Mongol power declined in northern Eurasia, Russia emerged as a world power, both an intensely centralized state with a national identity, and a multi-ethnic empire of many religions spread over a vast territory.



The long history of Russia

Historians' attention has often been drawn more to southern Eurasia, whose population centers led to the large cities, big states, and thick trade routes, than to the chillier regions further north. After all, southern Eurasia's agriculture-friendly temperatures and soils stretch from China through Southeast Asia, South Asia, Persia and Mesopotamia, and into the Mediterranean. Dense populations developed in these regions, and the trade routes connecting them—especially the so-called "Silk Routes"—were often thick with vehicles, animals, and people carrying new ideas and technologies.

Meanwhile, the region to the north was colder, mostly made up of marshes, dense forests, and grasslands with poor soil and infrequent rains. It was often seen as a domain of pastoralists, and as such a region that was less important and developed. Of course, the emergence of the Mongols from these northern areas proved that it was wrong to dismiss the north, but even the Mongol leaders tended to settle down to rule the more comfortable regions they had conquered, like China, Persia, and Mesopotamia.



Map of Mongol territory at its height, c.1294 CE. Many other groups lived in this northern region. © Freeman-pedia.

Many other groups, besides the Mongols, lived in these vast territories. Among them were Slavic-speaking peoples, who mostly settled in the forested regions of the north bordering Europe. There, they mixed and traded with other communities—mostly selling furs. Viking settlers, attracted by this trade, built communities among them. Greek-speaking merchants and settlers similarly moved in from the Balkan Peninsula to the south. In the eleventh century, a series of minor, often allied principalities emerged based on small cities like Novgorod, and Kiev. Many of them adopted the Orthodox Christianity brought by the Greek-speaking community. In the thirteenth century, the Mongol Khanate known as the "Golden Horde" conquered these states, which were forced to pay tribute, like so many other people around Eurasia. In return, they benefited from many of the technologies the Mongols brought, including an excellent bureaucracy. Some local rulers, like the Dukes of Muscovy, or Moscow, collected those tributes in return for a share of the power to rule the region. But they also chafed under foreign rule.

Emerging from Mongol imperium

The fourteenth century collapse of the Mongol Empire created an opportunity for the many Slavic princes, and none more so than Moscow's Grand Dukes. This particular principality was geographically well-situated along rivers and roads, and also the center of the Christian Church in the region, which was the Russian Orthodox Church. The Grand Dukes had been paying tribute to the Mongols for over a century, but in 1380 the rulers of Moscow led a combined army to drive them out of the area. While the Mongols of the Golden Horde would continue to raid their territory, the Grand Dukes could now turn their attention to consolidating their rule over the region.



A nineteenth-century image of Ivan III, figuratively illustrating his fights against the Mongols, or Tatars, of the Golden Horde. This confrontation in the throne room never really happened. By Aleksey D. Kivshenko, public domain.

For the next century, Moscow and its neighbors fought over territory. Finally, in 1478, the Grand Duke Ivan III defeated the principality of Novgorod. He soon claimed to rule all of the Russians. His successors, especially Ivan IV, turned southward into regions whose population was mostly not Slavic and not Christian Orthodox, unlike the people of Muscovy. He conquered the Muslim Khanates of Kazan and Astrakhan, creating a multi-religious and multi-ethnic empire. However, Ivan's attempts to push westward to the Baltic coast in Europe were less successful. In fact, by the early seventeenth century, the state had broken into civil war. It was being invaded by armies from Europe, and was even divided between two nobles who claimed the throne. This era was known as the "time of troubles."

Serfs and Boyars

A unified Russia would not re-emerge until 1613, when representatives from the cities (and some rural regions) elected a new ruler, Michael Romanov as emperor, or *tzar*. His family, the Romanovs, would rule the empire until the Russian Revolution of 1917, a period of three hundred years.

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Michael Romanov modernized the military of Russia, which, despite possessing some gunpowder weapons, including cannon, had been dominated by cavalry with bows, swords, and spears. His government began to build a buffer zone with European states to the west by creating alliances with the Cossacks in Ukraine. Internally, the Romanovs demanded loyalty and service from the class of nobles known as the *boyars*. But the boyars wanted something in return: rights to totally control the peasants who lived on their land. The Romanov rulers cooperated in this process, formally creating the status of *serf*. Serfs were peasants who could not leave their land at all, and who were heavily taxed. Any serf who ran away was formally a fugitive, and the state agreed that nobles could hunt them down and force them to return. Many serfs resisted. There were a series of riots and uprisings in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, both among peasants and especially the Cossacks, who were used to a rather more egalitarian society. But in each case they were put down by Romanov armies.

The Romanovs were also aided by the Orthodox Church, whose leaders lived in Moscow and were financially supported by the Romanovs. Although some religious leaders supported the uprisings at times, the Church generally taught the serfs that it was virtuous for them to support the state and obey the boyars.

Expansion under the Romanovs

With the full support of their nobility, and a newly organized army, the Romanovs created a vast gunpowder empire. They were assisted in this by commercial companies, similar to those in other parts of Europe, who wanted access to the fur-rich territory of Siberia and trade with Central Asia. They were also assisted by Orthodox priests who went into these territories as missionaries. Still, the Romanovs were careful not to alienate their Muslim subjects in the south.

The Russian Empire now expanded rapidly. Under Tzar Peter, often called Peter the Great, a war with Sweden finally led to the annexation of the Baltic Coast in 1721. This secured the western boundaries, and allowed future tzars to push eastward. The early nineteenth century would see Russian forces racing across Siberia to the Pacific. It would also see them coming into conflict with the Ottoman Empire to the south. But that story will have to wait.



Map of the expansion of Russia, 1533-1896. By MIA, CC BY-SA 2.0.

Conclusions

By 1750, Russia was poised both to expand eastward into forested Siberia and the grasslands of Central Asia, and to play a major role in Europe. This meant that it would have to compete with both European maritime trading states and the great Eurasia land empires such as the Ottomans and Qing Dynasty China, both of which would become neighbors of Russia. It would also benefit from ideas and new technologies coming from all of these neighboring states. Russia would have to figure out how to apply them, or reject them, while ruling a multi-ethnic, multi-religious population spread across a vast territory.

For these reasons, Russia in 1750 is often depicted by European historians as facing in two directions, or being a bridge between two regions. These images aren't wrong, but it is also important to note that Russia was at the same time developing two *internal* senses of itself. One was as a Slavic, Orthodox Christian, highly centralized nation, and the other was as a multi-ethnic empire. For the Romanovs, figuring out how to balance these identities was a more pressing issue than whether Russia was an eastern or a western power. Some of the Romanov Tzars did better at this balancing act than others. One of the best, Catherine the Great, would take power in 1762.

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Trevor Getz

Trevor Getz is Professor of African History at San Francisco State University. He has written eleven books on African and world history, including *Abina and the Important Men*. He is also the author of *A Primer for Teaching African History*, which explores questions about how we should teach the history of Africa in high school and university classes.

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