The Eurasian Steppe: People, Movement, Ideas

Warwick Ball

The history of movement across the Eurasian steppe since prehistory and its effect on Europe.

The steppe is a geographical entity, not a political one, connecting the western and eastern parts of the Eurasian land mass. As such, it is always open, subject to constant movement between Asia and Europe. The peculiar nature of the steppe has resulted in peoples originating in parts of Asia forming a permanent part of the European community, and that movement has affected European history and identity since earliest times.

Taking a panoramic view, Warwick Ball covers the history of that movement from prehistory to the present, challenging our ideas of 'Europe' and 'European' identity as we know it.
About the Author

Warwick Ball is a Near Eastern archaeologist and author who spent over twenty years carrying out excavations, architectural studies and monumental restoration throughout the Middle East and adjacent regions. Over the past fifty years he has lived, worked and travelled in most countries between Europe and China covered by this book, in particular in remote parts of Inner Asia. He has excavated in Iran, Libya, Ethiopia, Afghanistan (where he was Acting Director of the British Institute of Afghan Studies), Jordan, and Iraq (where he was Director of Excavations with the British School of Archaeology in Iraq). For five years he was founder editor and Editor-in-Chief of Afghanistan, the journal of the American Institute of Afghanistan Studies published by Edinburgh University Press. He has written widely on the history and archaeology of the region, including Syria: An Architectural and Historical Guide (3rd edition 2006) and The Monuments of Afghanistan. History, Archaeology, Architecture (2008). His book Rome in the East: The Transformation of an Empire was winner of the James Henry Breasted History Prize and was Choice Outstanding Academic Book in 2000, and in 2016 it was revised for a second edition. In 2019 two major academic books, The Archaeology of Afghanistan (Edinburgh University Press) and a revised edition of the Archaeological Gazetteer of Afghanistan, were published. The University of St Andrews confirmed in 2020 that it would be offering the honorary degree of Doctor of Letters on the author in recognition of his work in Near Eastern archaeology. Born in Australia, he now lives in the Scottish Borders.
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What is the legacy of what were arguably the most destructive invasions in history? At first glance the Mongol legacy appears to be wholly one of destruction, having no long-term effect. However, one can make a clear distinction between the impact of the initial invasions, which were without doubt of a nature almost without parallel, and the recovery that came after. For there was recovery and even resurgence, much of it, moreover, under Mongol rule. Some of this has already been referred to in passing in the last chapter, in relation to Ilkhanid Iran and Yuan China. But what of the legacy in the West?

The Mongol invasions fundamentally changed the course of European history in many ways, albeit often indirectly. At the end of his chapter appropriately entitled ‘The Mongol Whirlwind’, Peter Golden concludes:

The Mongol Empire marked the greatest incursion of the steppe peoples into settled society. It brought the steppe, the forest zone, and many of the neighbouring states (China, Iran, Medieval Rus’) into a vast world realm, the largest, contiguous, land empire in human history. It profoundly influenced global history, putting into place international networks of communications, the beginnings of an early ‘world system’ in the period 1250–1350, the precursor of the modern world.

In examining the legacy of the Mongol invasions in this and the next chapter, mainly in Russia, many of the conventional ideas of what it is to be ‘European’ and where Europe’s boundaries lie are questioned. But before that it is necessary to take a last glance at the steppe empire that succeeded the Mongol – and penetrated Europe, albeit briefly – and unwittingly gave one of Europe’s greatest civilisations a last-minute reprieve.
Under the shadow of Genghis Khan: the house of Tamerlane

The decline of the Mongol Empire in the Inner Asian heartland created a vacuum of conflicting rival groups and families, all fighting to succeed the Mongols. It was Teimur – Tamerlane – at the end of the fourteenth century who filled this vacuum. Although he traced his descent (albeit tenuously) back to Genghis Khan on the maternal side, Tamerlane was a Chaghatai Turk born in about 1336 in the region of Chaghanian south of Samarkand with its capital at Kish (present Shahr-i Sabz). During the course of the 1370s Tamerlane was able to unite the various factions in the region and raid Iran and Afghanistan. With success the raids soon became more far-reaching, becoming full-scale campaigns of conquest to establish a new Eurasian Empire.3

Tamerlane’s invasions seemed like the Mongol devastations all over again. Central and Western Asia, barely reviving, saw its rebuilt cities and resettled populations destroyed once more, and even cities that had escaped the earlier holocaust were destroyed. Baghdad at one end of Asia was captured in 1393, and Delhi at the other end, which even the Mongols did not reach, five years later. Tamerlane even advanced as far as Moscow but turned back, campaigning down the Volga in pursuit of Khan Toqtamish, a former protégé of his who had become khan of the Golden Horde, sacking the capital of Sarai in 1395, forcing Toqtamish to flee. The year 1402 sees one of Tamerlane’s greatest victories at the Battle of Ankara against the Ottoman Turks when Sultan Bayazit was killed (incidentally giving the dying Byzantine Empire an eleventh-hour reprieve from the Ottomans for a further fifty years). At first, Tamerlane stood in awe of the memory of the Mongol Empire and hesitated to challenge even the shadow of Mongol power that survived in Inner Asia. He never claimed the supreme title of ‘Khan’, for example, or even ‘Sultan’, but remained content with the modest ‘Amir’ throughout, even though he built almost as great an empire as his predecessor. But after a victory against a Mongol force, Tamerlane stood unchallenged, no longer under Genghis Khan’s daunting shadow. How great an empire Tamerlane might have created can only be guessed at. His death at Otrar in 1405 interrupted his most ambitious campaign to date: the conquest of China (birthplace of his wife, Bibi Khanum, whom his great mosque in Samarkand commemorates).

Tamerlane’s destruction was never quite as wholesale as that of the Mongols. Horrific though it was, Mongol destruction nearly always had a purpose (usually extortion, admittedly). With Tamerlane, on the other hand, one senses barbarity that was more gratuitous: the pyramids of decapitated heads were as much to satiate sheer cruelty as to punish. But Tamerlane was as great a builder as he was a destroyer. He instigated a resurgence of the arts and architecture, and his dynasty remained as rulers until the nineteenth century. His capital of Samarkand remains one of
the great monumental cities of Asia, and a visible legacy of the dynasty’s founder (Figure 12.1).

Although the personality of Tamerlane himself is marked – indeed, marred – as much by acts of barbarity as by building, in the dynasty he created he left behind one of the most talented families in Asia’s history. His son, Shah Rukh, moved the capital in the early fifteenth century to Herat, establishing one of the most brilliant schools of Persian painting – as well as other arts and sciences – in Iranian and Central Asian history. Today, gems of Timurid architecture can still be found not only in the great cities of the Timurid Empire – Samarkand, Bukhara, Herat and Mashhad – but in the remote countryside as well, such as at Khargird in Iran or the vast Shrine of Ahmad Yassavi in the remote steppe at Turkestan in Kazakhstan, perhaps the most spectacular building of Tamerlane’s era of giganticism (Figure 12.2). These monuments, often to be found in mere villages, are masterpieces that sometimes exceed those of Samarkand. This perhaps more than anything is a true mark of Timurid greatness: a great rural as well as an urban civilisation.

But Samarkand, for all its glories, was just a one-generation capital, for Tamerlane’s son and successor Shah Rukh moved the capital to Herat. Samarkand was left in the hands of Shah Rukh’s son, Ulugh Beg. In addition to being an enlightened and tolerant governor, Ulugh Beg was a great scholar and astronomer, whose star charts became the standard work

Figure 12.1 The Gur-i Amir, the tomb of Tamerlane in Samarkand
of reference in Europe until the sixteenth century as well as in the lands of Islam. After Ulugh Beg’s murder in 1449, Samarkand declined, eventually being taken over by the Uzbeks under Shaybani Khan after 1500. But it was not the last of the house of Timur: indeed its greatest days were yet to come. The Timurid court continued to flourish in Herat under the successors of Shah Rukh. In particular, under Husain-i Baiqara in the latter half of the fifteenth century Herat witnessed a golden age, the age of the great poets Shir ‘Ali Nawa’i and Jami and the painter Behzad and his school.

The revival of the house of Timur came from the Ferghana Valley in the heartland of Central Asia with the rise of a new conqueror in the early sixteenth century, Babur, a descendant of Tamerlane. Babur is one of the most extraordinary rulers in history – if only because of the memoirs he left behind, among the more remarkable ever written. His conquest of India and establishment of the Mughal dynasty was probably the greatest legacy of the Timurid dynasty. The dynasty is mis-named because of the Mongol, or Mughal, element in the army. The Mughal Empire of India is only marginal to this history. But the first Mughal Emperors – Babur, Humayun, Akbar, Jahangir, Shah Jahan and Aurangzeb – were variously mighty conquerors, brilliant generals, wise rulers, talented writers, poets, painters and builders, true successors to Tamerlane’s extraordinary house. The house finally came to an end with the exile of Emperor Bahadur Shah II by the British to Burma after 1857. The era of Tamerlane and his successors was a gigantic era:
gigantic personalities, gigantic achievements, gigantic buildings. From Samarkand, Bukhara and Herat to Agra, Delhi and Lahore, the Timurid legacy is one of the world’s more extraordinary.

**A people of Europe?**

The main history of the Mongols in English, by David Morgan, opens with the statement that “The Mongols are not very obviously a “people of Europe”’, in reference to the series *Peoples of Europe*, of which the book forms a part. Morgan justifies its inclusion, however, because of the huge effect that the Mongols had upon European history (although in the revised version of the book he concedes that if it were to be published now for the first time, a ‘people of Asia’ might be deemed more appropriate). This is true to an extent, but in fact some Mongols at least are a ‘people of Europe’ – and have been for some eight centuries. Of course, the argument only goes so far: Mongolia itself is in no way ‘European’. But there are Mongols who are. Just as Finns, Bulgarians and Hungarians, people whose origins lie similarly beyond the boundaries of Europe, are unhesitatingly considered to be ‘of Europe’, so too are a number of Mongol communities. For it is not often appreciated that the Mongol invasions were more than just a brief, albeit destructive, ‘whirlwind’ in Europe: they came, they conquered and they stayed.

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*Map 12.1 The Tatar khanates of Europe*
The first Mongol state in Russia was that of the Golden Horde established by Batu, Genghis Khan’s grandson, with its capital at Sarai on the lower Volga soon after 1227. The term ‘Golden Horde’ is of uncertain origin and does not appear until the seventeenth century. The fifteenth-century Russian traveller Afanasy Nikitin, on his journey from Tver to India, refers to the Tatar Khanate in 1487 simply as ‘the Orda’. Marco Polo refers to the Golden Horde as the ‘Lord of the West’ as opposed to the ‘Lord of the East’, which was the Ilkhanate of Iran. Its official name was the Ulus Jochi or Qipchak Khanate after the Qipchak steppe and the large number of Qipchak Turks – perhaps outnumbering the incoming Mongols – already in the area. This led to the gradual Turkification of the Mongols in the west. Many of the soldiers under Batu’s command in the invasion of Russia were Turkish auxiliaries from Central Asia. On entering Russia, Batu incorporated more Turks into his army from Europe, both the Turk Cumans/Qipchaks of southern Russia and the Turk Bulgars of the upper Volga. This resulted in Turkish soon becoming the main – and eventually the only – language of the Golden Horde.

As early as the 1280s Turkish replaced Mongolian as the language on coins. Mongol or Turk, the European name that stuck to them was Tatar, a people related to the Mongols, for reasons given in the previous chapter. Hence, it is as Tatars that all descendants of the Horde are universally now known in Russia, both by the Russians and now by the Tatars themselves, the term applying not only to the incoming Mongols but also to the earlier Cumans and Bulgars.

Berke, the fourth ruler of the Golden Horde, was the first to convert to Islam, although only later under Özbeg, the ninth Khan (1313–41), did the Golden Horde become officially Muslim. In fact, adoption of the religion of the conquered was a characteristic of the Mongol dynasties, just as the Ilkhanids in Iran also adopted Islam and the Yuan in China adopted Buddhism (and most of Mongolia today is Tibetan Buddhist). One wonders, however, how different the history of Russia might have been had the Golden Horde adopted Christianity, just as the Russians had under Prince Vladimir in the tenth century (or indeed as many Mongolians did in their homeland). Doubtless there would have been less hesitation in accepting them as ‘of Europe’.

For the first century and a half or so after its establishment the Golden Horde was by far the main power in Russia, demanding heavy tribute from the Russian states. Indeed, it extended deep into central Europe

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* ‘Russia’ used anachronistically here (but as a convenient shorthand), as the Russian state did not exist then, and did not extend as far as the Volga until the fifteenth century.
† ‘In China the Mongols remained Mongols, but frequently ceased to be nomads. In the Golden Horde they remained nomads, but ceased to be Mongols’, as Khazanov (1985: 250) observed.
beyond the Danube, establishing permanent administrative centres whose remains still survive (Figure 12.3). In Russia and Poland there were complex and constantly shifting balances of alliances and warfare between Poles, Teutonic Knights, pagan Lithuanians and the Golden Horde. The Lithuanians were driven eastwards by the Teutonic Knights in crusading zeal. They formed an alliance with David of Galicia against the Mongols which was at first successful. Alexander Nevsky viewed the Lithuanians and Swedes as a greater threat to Russia than the Tatars, so negotiated a deal with them in order to concentrate on the others. Indeed, he formed a blood brotherhood tie with Sartak, the son of Batu Khan, in 1240 and in the ensuing alliance Alexander Nevsky was able to defeat the Teutonic Knights with the aid of Mongol contingents in his army. The relationship worked both ways: Russian mercenaries recruited by the Golden Horde, for example, were used as guard units in Mongol Yuan China in the mid-fourteenth century.

By the latter half of the fourteenth century, however, the princes of Moscow began to unite the various other Russian states and, under their leadership, Russia was beginning to retaliate against the Horde. With it united under Dmitri, the son of Ivan II, Tatar raiders were defeated in front of Riazan in 1365 and in 1367 they were driven back from Nizhny Novgorod. In 1374 a Tatar force of some fifteen hundred was slaughtered at Nizhny Novgorod. It was not all plain sailing, however, and there

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Figure 12.3 A fourteenth-century Golden Horde bath house at Orheiul-Vechi in Moldova, probably the westernmost architectural remains of the Golden Horde.
were some reverses: a Russian force was routed in 1377 and in 1378 the Tatars fired Nizhny Novgorod. This culminated in the Battle of Kulikovo on 8 September 1380 when a Russian force, estimated between 140,000 and 400,000, defeated a Tatar army, but only forty thousand Russians survived.\(^{11}\)

Victories, therefore, were often pyrrhic, there were notable reverses, and a modified form of tribute to the Tatars remained in force. There was also collusion as well as conflict: there were even Tatars fighting alongside Prince Dmitri at Kulikovo, and the ensuing centuries would see more and more assimilation of the Tatars into the Russian mainstream.\(^{12}\) But Russian advances remained real nonetheless, for what counted more than military victory was psychological: the myth of Tatar invincibility had been removed. No longer were they men from hell but men of flesh and blood just like the Russians themselves. This factor was worth even all the dead of Kulikovo: the removal of the Tatar threat was now at least conceivable.

**Poland-Lithuania and the Horde versus Muscovy and Crimea**

There was some revival of the Golden Horde after Kulikova under Khan Toqtamish, but it declined after the sack of Sarai by Tamerlane in 1395. In 1438 it divided into two: the Great Horde remaining at Sarai, and a separate Khanate at Kazan on the middle Volga (Figures 12.4 and 12.5). Further divisions were created a few years later in the time of Ivan III with the establishment of the Khanates of Astrakhan and Crimea in 1441, the latter founded by Edigei Khan with its first capital at Stari Krim and allied with Moscow against the Golden Horde (Figures 12.6–12.9). The new Crimean Khanate was put on a firm footing by Mengli Girai, who founded a dynasty and allied himself with the rising power of the Ottomans. Both Astrakhan and Crimea lay claim to the legacy of the Golden Horde. The Girai dynasty of Crimea had the stronger claim, as the founder of the dynasty (as opposed to the state, founded by Edigei) was Hajji Toktamish Girai, a grandson of the last Khan of the Golden Horde and a descendant of Batu. Hence, the Girais always claimed historical suzerainty over the Russian principalities. However, the Astrakhan Khans claimed to be the continuation of the Golden Horde, occupying much the same territory, in rivalry to the Crimean Khans.

The year 1447 saw the creation of another Khanate from an entirely unexpected quarter: Ivan III created the Khanate of Kasimov from Muscovite territory to the south-east of Moscow. This was partly to reward those Tatars who joined Moscow and partly as a buffer against Kazan to the east. Remains in Kasimov today include the Shah-Ali Tekkiye, dated 1555, a mosque and minaret dated 1457, and many inscribed Muslim
The end of the fifteenth century thus sees five Mongol states in Russia: the original Golden Horde – or Great Horde – at its old capital of Sarai, the Kazan Khanate upstream on the Volga, the Astrakhan Khanate only just downstream from Sarai, the Crimean Khanate and the Kasimov Khanate (Map 11.2).

There were other Mongol Khanates further east, such as those of the Nogays and Sibirs. The Nogay Khanate ruled mainly east of the Urals, as did the Khanate of Sibir north-east of the Urals around Tobolsk (both rulers also descended from Genghis Khan). However, although centred around the Sea of Azov, groups of Nogay Tatars did roam the Kuban steppe in the south of European Russia from the sixteenth century onwards, coming successively under Russian, Ottoman, Crimean and Kalmyk claims to hegemony in the region. By the late eighteenth century they numbered about seventy thousand ‘households’ (tents) and were often confused with the Kalmyks; many of the present-day inhabitants of Astrakhan are probably descendants of the Nogay.

The late fourteenth century also saw the rise of Poland-Lithuania under the Jagellonian dynasty, which formed an alliance with the Tatars. Jogaila, the founder of the dynasty, had formed an alliance with Khan Mamai of the Golden Horde for a joint attack on Muscovy, but following Mamai’s defeat at Kulikovo nothing came of the plan. Jogaila’s successor Vytautas (Witold) ‘the Great’ of Lithuania (1392–1430) renewed the Tatar alliance with Khan Toqtamish, who now ruled the Golden Horde after Mamai’s defeat. Vytautas gave refuge to Toqtamish when he was forced to flee the invasion of Tamerlane (Toqtamish later died in Siberia). In the Battle of Tannenberg on 15 July 1410 between Vytautas and the Teutonic Knights, the Lithuanians were aided by a Tatar unit commanded by Jalal ad-Din, the son of Toqtamish. The alliance resulted in complete victory over the Knights, who never again threatened Lithuania.

Between 1454 and 1475 the Ottomans made Moldavia a vassal and annexed the Genoese colonies of the Black Sea, recognising the Crimean Khan Mengli Girai as a vassal in 1475. Caffa (modern Feodosiya) was made the seat of the Ottoman Sanjak of Crimea. Formerly, Poland-Lithuania had enjoyed cordial relations with the Genoese colonies, an informal ‘Catholic alliance’ across the steppe that encouraged trade between the Baltic and Black Seas. With their loss, Poland-Lithuania was confronted with a new hostile power to the south in the form of Crimea and the Ottomans, in addition to a hostile Muscovy to its east. It also questioned much of the balances of power elsewhere in Europe: both Poland and Astrakhan, hostile to both the Ottoman Empire and Muscovy, even sent a delegations to the Turks’ most vigorous opponent in Europe, the Republic of Venice, in 1476 to propose alliances, but nothing came of the discussions.

In 1477 the Astrakhan Tatars formed an alliance with the Lithuanians for a planned joint attack on Moscow. In 1480 Ivan III abrogated the
Figure 12.4 The Kremlin at Kazan built by Russia after its conquest, dominated by the new twenty-first-century mosque supposedly referencing the original Tatar mosque.

Figure 12.5 The first mosque in Kazan since the conquest, built 1787 after Catherine the Great legalised the building of mosques in Russia.
Figure 12.6 The Kremlin at Astrakhan built by Russia after its conquest.

Figure 12.7 Nothing remains of Tatar Astrakhan, but the Persian caravanserai built by the Russians in the eighteenth century is a reminder of its eastern links.
tributary status to the Golden Horde and proposed an alliance with Crimea against both Poland-Lithuania and Astrakhan. This was formed in deliberate opposition to the alliance between Astrakhan and Poland-Lithuania. As a consequence there emerged two opposing axes in the late fifteenth century on the steppe that cut completely across the ethnic, linguistic and religious divide: a Muscovy/Crimea alliance versus a Poland-Lithuania/Astrakhan alliance.

As if this were not confusing enough, Genoa in the meantime entered into secret negotiations with both King Casimir Jagellion of Poland and Khan Mengli Girai of Crimea in the 1480s for a return of the Genoese ports in the Black Sea and support against the Ottomans, although Casimir had already signed a treaty with the Ottomans. Lacking support from the in-fighting Italian states and other Mediterranean powers, however, Genoese designs for the return of the Black Sea possessions collapsed. Mengli Girai too, while favouring the Genoese and resenting his khanate’s tributary status under the Ottomans, was pragmatic enough to recognise its greater power, joining them in a raid on Ruthenia. Poland, however, still managed to hang on to its southern territories until 1672 when the Ottomans advanced further into south-eastern Europe, capturing the
Polish fortress town of Kamyanets-Podolski and establishing the Ottoman province of Podolia. A Turkish minaret still stands over the converted Polish cathedral in Kamyanets-Podolski today (Figure 12.10) (although it reverted to the Catholics when the Ottomans retreated in 1699).

The Tatar khanates, in other words, had become another European power in the constant shifting of alliances and balances of power across eastern Europe. Crimea, furthermore, despite resentment at its inferior status, was strengthened by its alliance with the Ottomans. Ironically, therefore, it was the might of the Ottoman Empire coming to the support of Crimea that led, first, to the decline of Astrakhan, and second, indirectly to the eventual rise of Muscovy. The Turkish historian Halil Inalcik rightly views this Ottoman–Crimean co-operation in the period from 1492 to 1532 as ‘a period crucial for the rise of the Muscovite power, which is understandably ignored in Russian historiography’.

Figure 12.9 A madrasa at the first Crimean Tatar capital at Stari Krim
The Ottomans and the Poles over the Ukrainian steppe would also lead later to the rise of the Ukrainian Cossack state.

A result of the alliance between Astrakhan and Poland-Lithuania was the establishment of Tatar communities in the territory of the latter in the fifteenth century. Ghillebert de Lannoy describes Tatar settlements in Lithuania as early as 1414. Although the Lithuanian Tatars lost their language after the fifteenth century, they proudly maintained their religion and identity. There were even Polish Tatars fighting on the side of King Jan Sobieski’s relief of the Siege of Vienna in 1683, fighting against the Crimean Tatar allies of the Ottomans. Tatars remain a distinct, albeit heavily Polonised, minority in Poland, Lithuania and Belarus today, where they are known as the Lipka.19

In 1492, Ivan III was able to invade Lithuania with his ally, Mengli Girai of Crimea. In 1500 a Crimean raiding party of just a thousand seized five thousand Lithuanians and the following year fifty thousand Lithuanians were captured. Indeed, after West Africa, eastern Europe was the largest source of slaves in the world: a Tatar raid on Austria in 1567, for example, captured ninety thousand slaves, a trade in human trafficking that had the tacit support of Muscovy (even though Russians were often

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* The Hollywood actor Charles Bronson was an ethnic Lipka.
the victims). One recalls that the most famous – and most powerful – of Ottoman Sultans, Roxelana the wife of Sultan Süleyman, was a former Ruthenian or Ukrainian slave.

Moscow, for all its rise to pre-eminence, still remained surprisingly Tatar in character (and nominally at least a Golden Horde vassal). Up until 1480 Muscovite coins still carried inscriptions in Arabic. As late as 1531 Vasili III of Moscow was still paying tribute to the successors of the Golden Horde: Crimea, Kazan and Astrakhan. Between 1512 and 1551, however, Crimea, which had destroyed the power of the Great Horde in 1502, gradually extended hegemony over Kazan and Astrakhan. Out of the competing patchwork of Russian principalities and Tatar khanates that had existed up to now, therefore, the balance of power in Russia was resolving on just Crimea and Muscovy. The old alliance between the two would inevitably lead to confrontation. Because of rivalry with Poland over Moldavia, the Ottoman Sultans Selim I and Süleyman I (1512–66) continued to maintain good relations with Muscovy until Khan Sahib Girai of Crimea (1532–51) convinced the Ottomans of the greater threat.

Europe’s last Mongol state

The collapse of Kazan and Astrakhan left Crimea the sole surviving state descended from the Mongols in Europe. In its isolated peninsula, the Crimean Khanate ruled from its capital at Stari Krim, and after the late sixteenth century at Bahchyserai, was able to mount devastating raids into Russia (Figures 12.11 and 12.12). In about 1565 an allied army of Crimea and the Ottoman Empire invaded Russia to try to liberate and re-establish the Khanate of Astrakhan, which was besieged in 1569 under Kasim Paşa. It was Ottoman distraction further west with the war against Spain, culminating in 1571 with Lepanto, that probably meant that Astrakhan – and ultimately Kazan – remained Russian. At its height the Crimean Khanate was able to raise an army of 120,000. In 1571 Crimea under Khan Daulet Girai was even able to sack its former ally, Moscow, reportedly killing 800,000 and taking 130,000 off into captivity to be sold in the slave markets of Caffa. The Crimeans returned in 1573 but were driven off. In the last half of the sixteenth century Crimean-Ottoman policy was aimed at limiting Russian expansion southwards along the Volga. To this end a Don–Volga canal project was proposed by Süleiman’s prime minister, Söküllü Mehmet Paşa, along with a grand strategy to establish a string of Turkish–Tatar buffer principalities along the steppes as far as the Caspian. By the 1580s the policy had failed, and Astrakhan was unable to be retaken due to heavy Russian fortifications (Figure 12.6). However, Astrakhan remained a cosmopolitan city with a large Tatar population, as well as Russian,
The Eurasian Steppe

Armenian, Persian, Indian and even Chinese communities (Figures 12.7 and 12.8).22

The seventeenth century sees the emergence of new steppe groups on the southern steppes. These were the Cossacks. To call them a ‘people’ in the strict ethnic sense is perhaps incorrect. The Cossacks comprised mainly Russians – usually renegades, escaped serfs or criminals – but they also included Turks, Tatars and remnant Polovtsi. The name Cossack is of Turk origin, the same root as the name Kazakh, both deriving from the Turk qazak meaning ‘roam’. And although of the Russian Orthodox faith – indeed, fiercely so – they emerged

Figure 12.11 The eighteenth-century Tatar palace of Bahchyserai in Crimea

Figure 12.12 The Tatar mosque in the palace of Bahchyserai
with a distinct identity that was quite separate from the Russian and often resisting Russian attempts at rule. By the seventeenth century there emerged two groups, the Zaporozhian Cossacks on the Dnieper and the Don Cossacks with their capital at Starocherkassk (Figure 12.13). In 1648 the Zaporozhian Cossacks in the Ukraine formed an alliance with the Crimean Tatars in a revolt against Polish attempts to impose Roman Catholicism. The Cossacks were aided for a while by a Tatar army from Crimea. Then in about 1650 the leader of the Dnieper Cossacks approached Khan Islam Girai III (1644–54) with the proposal to establish a Cossack vassal state in the Ukraine under the Ottomans, similar in status to those of Ottoman Moldavia and Transylvania. The proposal was passed on to Constantinople, but was rejected due to Ottoman preoccupation with the war in Crete (1645–69).

Campaigns deep into Europe continued in the seventeenth century: the Crimeans raided Moscow as late as 1570, Cracow in 1648 and the outskirts of Vienna in 1683. In the 1686–9 Balkan war, Crimea came to the aid of its Ottoman ally and fought against Austria. The absence of Crimean forces on the Black Sea, however, allowed Russia to capture the great fortress of Ak-Kerman overlooking the mouth of the Dniester (Figure 1.12). Furthermore, an agreement that Russia made with Poland in 1647 had ended their rivalry and created a common front against the
Crimean Tatars. But ultimately, it was the Ottomans’ preoccupation with the Mediterranean and south-eastern Europe that led it on a number of occasions to turn its back upon Crimea and the Russian steppe. This was one of the major factors ensuring that it would be the Russians who eventually dominated the southern steppe, not the Tatars.

The Crimean Khanate can thus be seen as a wholly European state participating in European politics – and at over three and a half centuries an unusually long-lived one. However, in the end it remained essentially what its original parent state (the Golden Horde) had been: a steppe society. There were few towns and little attempt to create any economy beyond booty and slaves – foreign conquest was viewed solely in these terms rather than as any attempt to extend the state’s border and establish a permanent empire.

With the establishment of Russia as a major power in the eighteenth century by Peter the Great, this sole remnant of Batu Khan’s once-powerful Golden Horde became increasingly insignificant. By the time the last Crimean Khan, Shagin Girai, came to power in 1779 after a long series of khans being deposed as rapidly as they ascended the throne, he was little more than a Russian puppet. In 1783 Khan Shagin finally made the Khanate over to Catherine the Great, who immediately annexed it to Russia. Thus ended over half a millennium when Mongol-Tatar states were European powers – and hence Khan Shagin was the last descendant of Genghis Khan to rule a European kingdom.25

The last migration

The Mongol invasions were probably the most important – and certainly the most devastating – episode in the later history of the movement of steppe peoples into Europe. However, it must be emphasised that they – like the Turks before them – are very much a part of a continuous history, and not a distinct episode, a part of constant movement across the Eurasian steppe. This ongoing fluidity of Europe’s open gateway is effectively demonstrated by the last major tribal movement into Europe, that of the Kalmyks.26

In the seventeenth century a group of nomadic Mongols migrated from Jungaria in western China into Central Asia. This was caused by their traditional grazing lands becoming encroached upon by both Kazakhs and rival Mongol tribes. Known to themselves as Oirats or Jungar, they are better known in the West under the Russian name of Kalmyks. Initially practising Shamanism, in the course of the seventeenth century the Kalmyks converted to Tibetan Buddhism. This was in line with most other Mongol tribes, as well as many Siberians such as the Buryats and Tuvans, although elements of Shamanism remained. The Buddhist conversion provides
another possible motivation for their migration: according to the Kalmyk tradition, the Buddha Maitreya (the future Buddha) would appear from the north.27 In the 1620s pressure from Chinese expansion into grazing areas forced the Torgut Mongols, a branch of the Oirats, to leave Jungaria led by their khan Khö Örlökh with 200,000–250,000 of his tribe. They eventually arrived into the area of the lower Volga and Don in southern Russia, in turn displacing the Nogay Tatars who were forced to leave the Don in the 1650s for Crimea.

The Kalmyks were thence caught up in the interplay between Russia and Crimea, particularly after the annexation of Ukraine by Russia in 1654 and the subsequent Russian expansion to the Black Sea. The first agreement between the Russians and Khö Örlökh was drawn up in 1655. This set the pattern for subsequent agreements whereby Russia offered protection against the Tatars and other enemies in return for military allegiance by the Kalmyks. By 1690 the Kalmyk ruler, Ayuki, had been invested as khan by the Dalai Lama. This was shortly afterwards recognised by Russia as an acknowledgement of the Kalmyks as the most powerful military force in southern Russia, although they remained in close contact with Jungaria and Tibet. The Kalmyks became a noted fighting force, contributing important contingents to Peter the Great’s campaigns against the Swedes, Turks and Persians. There was a historic meeting between Peter and Ayuki at Saratov in 1722 to cement the alliance. Ayuki grew wealthy as a result.
The Russian authorities paid subsidies to the Kalmyk leaders both for stability on the steppe and for a ready supply of horses. However, incoming Russian settlers increasingly encroached upon Kalmyk grazing lands, impoverishing many of the nomads and forcing them off the land. As a result, many Kalmyks were forced to settle in shanty towns on the outskirts of the new Russian towns as a poor underclass. Many Kalmyk children were even offered for sale, effectively becoming slaves. There were also Russian missionary efforts aimed at converting the Kalmyks to Orthodoxy, as well as a leadership crisis following the death of Ayuki Khan in 1724. Inevitably tensions built up between Russians and Kalmyks.

Aggressive Russian colonisation in the 1760s forced more and more Kalmyks away from good pasture land, resulting in even further destitution and antagonism. In 1770, therefore, the Kalmyk leader who had emerged following leadership disputes after Ayuki Khan’s death, Ubashi Khan, proposed to return to China with his people. The following year some 300,000 Kalmyks with 10 million head of sheep and cattle embarked upon a mass migration to the east. This was viewed as an act of treason by Russia, but efforts to halt the exodus were mainly unsuccessful, although some were persuaded to remain. Fighting also broke out with the Kazakhs en route, who captured and sold many into slavery. Many more died from cold and exposure, and by the time they re-entered Chinese territory their numbers were depleted by almost two thirds.

However, about fifty thousand Kalmyks did stay behind and some also managed to find their way back. Although their leaders lost many of their former privileges, their quality as a fighting force continued to be recognised. Kalmyks formed three regiments in the Russian army that fought all the way to Paris, spearheading the victorious Russian entry into that city in 1814. The Kalmyks were commanded by a Kalmyk cavalry officer, Serenjab Tyumen, the head of Khosheut tribe of Kalmyks; in 1818, Tyumen, being thankful to Buddha for victory over Napoleon, sponsored the construction of a Buddhist temple at Rechnoye on the west bank of the lower Volga – probably the only Buddhist temple in the world built in commemoration of Napoleon’s defeat (Figure 12.14).28

Russian relations with the Kalmyks were not always antagonistic, and there were many cases of mutual co-operation and cross-marriages – Lenin, notably, was part-Kalmyk. The doctors at the Moravian colony of Sarepta on the Volga in the nineteenth century practised acupuncture and ‘Tibetan medicine’, practices that they could only have adopted from the Kalmyks.29 Their travels and travails, however, were still not over: in 1943 the entire Soviet Kalmyk nation was deported to Siberia because of Stalin’s suspicions of Kalmyk complicity in the German invasion, where they remained for thirteen years until allowed back in the Krushchev era.

Today the distinct Kalmyk identity and history are recognised in the form of the Republic of Kalmykia within the Russian Federation, even
though, with a population of less than 300,000, it is one of the smallest in the Federation. Unsuspected by most Europeans, Europe includes a Tibetan Buddhist state with a Mongolian population: its capital Elista, in the middle of the steppe between Astrakhan and Rostov-on-Don, is adorned with Tibetan temples and photographs of the Dalai Lama (Figures 12.15–12.19).

**Figure 12.15** A Kalmyk Buddhist monastery outside Elista

**Figure 12.16** The main Buddhist temple in Elista, capital of the Republic of Kalmykia
In Elista today, images of the Dalai Lama compete with those of Buddha, Genghis Khan and Lenin; the Kalmyk steppe stretches in the distance.

Lenin, the part-Kalmyk atheist, overlooking the central Buddhist pagoda in Elista.
Figure 12.19 A people of Europe: Mongols at prayer, rest and play in Elista
CHAPTER 13

A MODERN STEPPE EMPIRE
Russian Identity and the Steppe

Russia is not in Europe alone, but also in Asia, because a Russian is not only European, but also Asian.
– Dostoevsky

What a people! They are Scythians! What resoluteness! The barbarians!
– Attributed to Napoleon

In the middle of a busy street in the centre of modern Novosibirsk stands a small chapel that in its way is one of the more significant churches in Russia: the Chapel of St Nicholas built during the First World War to mark the exact geographical centre of Russia (in fact demolished by the Bolsheviks but rebuilt in the 1990s: Figure 13.1). In many ways this structure encapsulates Russia’s ambivalence: its centre is in Asia, some fourteen hundred kilometres east of the Urals, 3,400 east of Moscow; Novosibirsk (or Novonikolaevsk as it was then called after Nicholas II) is on about the same longitude as Lucknow. As Michael Khodarkovsky points out, the Russian double-headed eagle faces east as well as west.

Russia east or west?

The influence of Kievan Rus upon the development of the Russian state has been downplayed in some studies, which have argued that it has been exaggerated in order to establish Russia’s European (as opposed to Asiatic) credentials. Edgar Knobloch, for example, makes a case for the equal if not greater nomadic and Asiatic influences on the development of Russia, arguing that Russia is as much Asiatic as European. Even the Kievan Rus state and society, it is argued, was organised essentially along nomadic lines, effectively a continuation of the Sarmatian, Hun and Khazar states that had existed in the same area before, and its claims of connections with Byzantium overrated. The nomadic steppe title ‘khagan’ had been adopted by European steppe societies: a Varangian chief on the upper Volga adopted the title in the mid-ninth century, for example, and even Yaroslav the Wise of Kiev, who died in 1054, incorporated it into his titles.
Knobloch views the concept of ‘Holy Russia’ or ‘Mother Russia’ as ‘far more the mystical concept of Mother Earth derived from nomadic ideology rather than a political concept of Fatherland’ (and Stalin’s promotion of the Mother Russia cult is discussed in Chapter 5).

Prince Vladimir’s adoption of Christianity in the tenth century was purely circumstantial, and he might just as easily have opted for Islam (or even Khazar Judaism, as noted in Chapter 10), as Kiev oscillated between Byzantium and Baghdad. The reign of Sviatoslav from 964 to 973 consolidated the Kievan state. Sviatoslav extended his rule across the steppe, defeating the Khazars. In doing so he adopted the techniques and warfare of the steppe nomad: in other words, Kievan Rus was at first simply another steppe nomad state, albeit with a Scandinavian element. Sviatoslav never decisively defeated the Pechenegs and was killed by them in 963, and his skull was made into a cup in steppe tradition.

Kiev’s successor, Muscovy, adopted and continued many Mongol systems, institutions and even state ceremonials and titles. Knobloch further argues that Russian serfdom is unrelated to the European medieval system, but rooted in the essentially nomadic steppe relationship between the chief and people whom he ‘owned’. The Soviet-Leninist system might be viewed as rooted, on the one hand, in the Byzantine Caesaro-Papist legacy and, on the other, in the steppe nomad tradition of chieftain rule and centralised chain of command. Geoffrey Hosking emphasises the paradox of how the perennial theme of the client–patron relationship in Russian history was ironically reinforced by the very efforts to change it,
such as those by Peter the Great or the Bolsheviks. Both Peter and Lenin, in drawing upon this relationship to bring about change, simply ended up reinforcing the status quo.9

Such interpretations of Russian history are perhaps controversial. But there can be no doubt that the effect of the steppe legacy upon Russia is fundamental. Michael Khodarkovsky estimates that the money poured just into Crimea in the first half of the seventeenth century alone—both directly in the form of tribute and indirectly in the form of redeemed slaves—cost Russia the equivalent of twelve hundred small towns. ‘That Russia was under-urbanized in comparison to its Western European neighbors is an undisputed fact, but that this shortage of urban centers may, in no small degree, be related to the nature of Russia’s southern frontier is poorly understood.’10

The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw a romantic rediscovery of Russia’s Asiatic-steppe roots. Anthropology also showed many ‘Russian’ folk customs to have originated with the Chuvash, Bashkirs and Tatars rather than the Slavs.11 Stravinsky’s Rite of Spring in 1913, a celebration of steppe roots, was a part of this movement, and eastern elements are also recognised in the music of Glinka, Balakirev, Borodin, Rimsky-Korsakov and Mussorgsky. It continued into the middle of the twentieth century with many of the works of Khachaturian and Shostakovich (and the movement was not confined to Russia: composers from Mozart to Szymanowski and Britten have borrowed oriental elements). Many Russian intellectuals and writers—notably Lomonosov, Lermontov, Pushkin and Tolstoy—became attracted to a ‘romantic orient’ following the Russian campaigns in the Caucasus: Pushkin in particular, with his Fountain of Bahchyserai based on the legend of a Tatar prince in Crimea, and his Imitations of the Koran, a cycle of nine poems on the life of Muhammad, whose exile resonated with Pushkin’s own. Pushkin’s fascination with Islam, however, was never more than a temporary flirtation, tempered by later disillusion.

Tolstoy studied at the University of Kazan, one of the foremost centres of oriental studies in Europe, where he was a student of the Perso-Russian orientalist Mirza Kazem-Beg. He accordingly came under the spell of the romantic orient after his service in the Caucasus campaigns, but he also looked beyond the Caucasus to India and China, even corresponding with Gandhi (who in turn was influenced by Tolstoy). Kazan is one of the oldest and most important universities in Russia (Figure 13.2). Its most active faculty was the School of Oriental Studies until 1854 when it moved to St Petersburg. ‘Part of an archetypal institution of the Western Enlightenment, Kazan University joined Oriental “other” with Occidental “self” more than any other school in Europe . . . the Kazan school . . . reminded Russians that they could learn from Asians just as they might from other Europeans.’12
The Mongol legacy

Russia is heir to a more diverse range of external influences than most: Scandinavian via the Vikings; the Finno-Ugrian cultures of the forest belt; Byzantine, and through that Greek and Roman, via Kievan Rus; Polish-Lithuanian, and through that the Catholic; and Mongol-Tatar. Yet according to national myth, the Mongols left no mark on Russian culture or character: Russian civilisation is viewed as rooted primarily in Byzantine Christianity and only slightly less in Scandinavian and German traditions. In his massive 28-volume *History of Russia from the Earliest Times* by the nineteenth-century historian Sergei Soloviev, for example, the Mongols are passed over in just three pages. If Russians referred at all to their Mongol inheritance, it was in terms of their having stemmed the tide of the Mongol horde and saved western Christendom at heroic self-sacrifice from the 'Tatar yoke'.” The only attribute acknowledged is the old myth of ‘oriental despotism’: that despotism by its very definition must be oriental, as opposed to occidental notions of freedom. As Ostrowski cautions,

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* To some extent this finds its echoes in the attitude of many Russians to the Second World War, or 'Great Patriotic War' as it is known in Russia, who view Russia as having single-handedly saved the West from Nazism at huge self sacrifice. The Nazi–Soviet pact is denied, and I was once even assured by an otherwise educated articulate Russian that ‘England and the United States only entered the War in 1944’.
'We should be very careful about trying to use it [the term 'despotism'] as a scholarly tool to explain how a particular government functioned, especially governments in Asia'. The Mongol legacy in Russia, in other words, is regarded as minimal.

The effect, however, was fundamental. For through the Mongols came influences from China and the steppe, as well as from the Turkish, Persian and Islamic worlds. After the Mongol invasion Russia would never be the same. The future of Russian greatness was both a response to and a legacy of the Mongols. Up until then Russia was a series of disunited Slavic petty states: Kiev, Moscow, Riazan, Novgorod, and others. There is every reason for assuming that this might have remained so until the modern period, just as the German or Italian states remained separate – there was no inevitability in the emergence of Russia as a unified state. But the Mongol invasions forced the states to unite in self-defence, eventually under the banner of Moscow.

Indeed, to a large extent Muscovite power was a creation of the Golden Horde: the khans required a stable central authority as a client state which could be relied upon to raise auxiliaries for the khan’s armies and to collect and deliver taxes and tribute. Moscow fitted the bill, so the Golden Horde deliberately strengthened it against the other Russian cities and appointed its prince as their chief tax collector. At the same time the Pax Mongolica brought Russia, hitherto isolated and off the main international routes, for the first time since the Abbasid silver trade into an international system that spanned Eurasia. The early fourteenth century also sees a substantial increase in stone (as opposed to timber) construction in Russia. This was mainly in churches, but also in fortifications, and this was prompted by the Pax Mongolica. The Mongols, in other words, brought about the emergence of Russia.

The Mongols create a Church

Surprisingly, the one Russian institution that gained most from the Mongols was the Orthodox Church. For the official Mongol policy of religious toleration (or at least disinterest) awarded the Church the status of tarkhan, ‘a charter of immunity’ for priests and church lands. Tarkhan was also a title for a high-ranking commander, and is possibly of Xiongu or Scytho-Sarmatian origin; it also occurs among the Tuoba Northern Wei, the Rouran, the Hephthalites, the Turks, the Orkhon inscriptions, and the Khazars. Priests therefore were exempt from tribute, indented labour.

* It is also the root of the place name Astrakhan; it resurfaces in C. S. Lewis’s *The Chronicles of Narnia* as the term he adopted for the knights of his mythical oriental Empire of Calormen, the 'Tarkaans'. 
and military service, and the church was allowed to own land not subject to tax. Many Russians accordingly flocked to the clergy to escape military service, and there was a rise in monasticism. Orthodoxy became increasingly Russian in its identity, becoming more distant from its Byzantine roots. The monasteries, not having to pay tribute, became increasingly removed from the secular power which had to pay tribute to the Horde. At the time of the Mongol conquest, much of Russia (perhaps most?) was still pagan; by the end most had become Orthodox. By ensuring that the Church stayed outside and above the rival Russian states, the Mongols ensured its future power – and ultimately the pre-eminence of Moscow. Hence, when the Patriarch moved his headquarters from Kiev to Moscow rather than to other more obvious and more powerful cities such as Suzdal or Vladimir or Novgorod, Moscow’s rise was ensured.17

Claims have been made – for example by some Ukrainian and other western Slav nationalist historians – that the western Slavs were freedom-loving but that Russians were servile, a Tatar legacy of ‘oriental despotism’. Donald Ostrowski dismisses the myth of economic oppression under the ‘Tatar yoke’ out of hand. On the contrary, Russia did very well under the Mongol economic system. The church in particular became very wealthy. Indeed, the Patriarchate of Moscow was more wealthy than its parent Patriarchate in Constantinople in the late fourteenth century – wealthier even than the Byzantine Emperor himself – and there is evidence for large donations to Constantinople from Russia around that time.18

The seclusion of women in Muscovy is often cited as a legacy of the Muslim Tatars. But the high status of nomad women, even under Islam, has been emphasised in Chapter 5: Muscovite female seclusion, therefore, is more likely to have been a Byzantine legacy. In summing up his account of the relationship of Russia with the Mongols, Ostrowski emphasises that we can speak of Mongol influence on the military and on the civil administration of Muscovy. Military influence in regard to weapons, strategy, and tactics is primary and direct. Administrative influence is secondary but still direct: dual civil and military administration from China and iqtā from Islamic countries came through the conduit of the Qipchaq Khanate. We cannot speak of Mongol influence in either a primary or a secondary way, either direct or indirect, on the Muscovite practice of seclusion of elite women, or on theories of despotism or autocracy. No doubt the Mongol invasion of 1237–40 brought death and destruction. But the long-term economic devastation of northern Rus’ has been exaggerated. Following the apparent economic stagnation of the second half of the thirteenth century, northern Rus’ in general, and northeastern Rus’ in particular, displayed vital signs of recovery in the early fourteenth century, followed by a flourishing economy from the mid-fourteenth century on. This economic revival was based primarily on commercial activity, and resulted in the acquisition of wealth not only by the grand princely court and the Church but also by merchants, craftsmen, and artisans.19
Muscovy becomes a steppe empire

Thus strengthened, it was an opportune time for Muscovy to begin moving against the Khanates, and matters came to a head with the emergence of a powerful new ruler in Moscow, Ivan IV, ‘The Terrible’. Even Ivan, however, could not do entirely without Tatar help, and in 1550 he formed an alliance with the Nogay Khan east of the Urals in order to encircle the Kazan Khanate. Then, in 1552, Ivan IV led an army of a hundred thousand against Kazan. The city fell after immense fighting and its citadel and mosque burnt to the ground. Ivan commemorated the event with the construction of a victory church in Moscow supposedly modelled on the Kazan great mosque: St Basil’s Cathedral (Figure 13.3).* The fall of Kazan left Astrakhan increasingly isolated, and in 1553 the Khan of Astrakhan requested Ivan to nominate a prince for them. Ivan eventually annexed it in 1556. Of Ivan’s conquests, Bernard Pares observes: ‘Russia [of Ivan the Terrible] already bid fair to be and has since become the largest national unit in Europe; and the oneness of its language, its instincts, its atmosphere, its aroma, is henceforward one of the cardinal factors of European history.’

After Ivan IV’s conquests of Kazan and Astrakhan, Tatars† formed the third-largest ethnic group in the Russian Empire after the Russians and Ukrainians (and perhaps more numerous than the latter). Russian conquest of the Tatars henceforward had to be as much accommodation as suppression. The creation of the Khanate of Kasimov to the south-east of Moscow by Ivan’s predecessor had already demonstrated the benefits of this policy. When Ivan IV invaded Livonia a short time after the capture of Kazan, he appointed a Tatar khan, Shad Ali, as the head of his troops. By the late sixteenth century Tatars were beginning to be admitted to the Russian nobility as rewards for loyalty. Tatar nobles, both converts to Christianity and non-converts, rose to senior court positions in Muscovy – there was (at least at first) no trace of any prejudice against people of Tatar origin. Peter Ordyansky, for example, was at once a Tatar noble and a Russian count, and (later) a Russian Orthodox saint. Thus, there arose the paradox of Russian Christian serfs in the service of Tatar nobles, ensuring that Russia would ultimately be a Eurasian empire rather than a

* The design of the ‘reconstructed’ Great Mosque of Kazan after 1996 in the Kazan Kremlin is based partly on contemporary descriptions and partly is an acknowledgement of St Basil’s supposed resemblance. See Figure 12.5. In the French occupation of Moscow in 1812, Moscow was viewed as an Asiatic city with ‘oriental domes’ more akin to Delhi than Paris – indeed, Napoleon thought the churches looked like mosques. See Figes 2002: 155. ‘St Basil’s Cathedral’ – officially the Church of the Intercession – is often viewed by non-Russians as the archetypal Russian church, but in fact is unique and quite unlike the standard form of Russian church (and, needless to say, nothing like a mosque).

† With the fall of the khanates I henceforth use the term ‘Tatar’ rather than ‘Mongol’ unless where retrospectively referring to the initial conquest and administration.
European nation state. Ivan IV, the first Russian to proclaim himself ‘Tsar’ (in Russian the title is actually Тиезар), added Ulugh Khan, ‘Great Khan’, to his titles.21

This ‘Tatarisation’ of Russia amounted to more than simply awarding Russian titles to tame Tatars. Institutions in the emerging Russian state

* The Ottomans for their part refused to recognise Moscow’s title of Tsar, ‘Caesar’, as it was one – Кaysar – that the Sultans themselves claimed.
were also adopted from the Tatars. Even by the fourteenth century the
civil and military institutions of Muscovy ‘were overwhelmingly Mongol
in origin’.22 The Mongols had inherited the Chinese systems of adminis-
tration from the Qara Khitai, whose system of imperial administration
they adopted wholesale, and these in turn were passed on to Russia. The
Russian institution of the zemskii sobor, first called in 1549, derives from
the Mongol quriltai. Thus, in his conquest of Kazan, Ivan IV took over
not only many of the trappings but even the institutions of the khanate:
in effect, Ivan created a ‘Moscow Khanate’. Ivan also adopted the Mongol
policy of ‘collective guilt’ where all male relatives and retainers of a guilty
man would be executed, a policy even extended to entire communities.
Stalin’s similar policy was a continuation of this.23 Ivan was as much a
continuer of the Tatar legacy as its destroyer.

The term ‘Tatar yoke’ first appeared in 1575. Ostrowski argues that
the myth of the Tatar yoke was deliberately formulated by the Orthodox
Church to ‘divert the Muscovite ruling class from a pro-Tatar orientation’.
As a part of this, the title Tsar, which did not appear officially until 1547,
and the purported descent of the Monomakh dynasty of the medieval
princes of Kiev from Augustus, were all a part of a deliberate policy by
the Orthodox Church to ‘de-Tatarise’ the Moscow monarchy. Ostrowski
emphasises that ‘Only now, with a better understanding of the evidence,
can we historians come out from under the oppressive myth of the Tatar
yoke’.24

In its later medieval and modern history, Russia on the one side faced
aggression from Lithuanians, Poles and Swedes; on the other, from the
Mongols. Stalin himself remarked in 1941 that Russia ‘was beaten by the
Mongol Khans, she was beaten by the Turkish Beys, she was beaten by
Swedish feudal lords, she was beaten by Polish-Lithuanian Pans, she was
beaten by Japanese barons, she was beaten by all’.25 Such threats from
all sides both defined and determined Russia. But it was the Mongol
invasions from the east that have haunted the Russian mind, and the fear
of holocaust from the east remained ever-present in the Russian mentality.
Rimsky-Korsakov’s opera The Invisible City of Kitezh illustrates this very
graphically when a city’s only possible defence against the Mongols is to
become invisible. Even the gigantic Amazonian memorial to the Siege of
Stalingrad in Volgograd (Figure 5.4) does not face west, the direction of
the German invasion, but east. Hence, to prevent it ever happening again,
Russia embarked upon eastern conquest. At first, this was against the
Khanates of Kazan and Astrakhan in the sixteenth century. Then Russia’s
very first entry into Siberia in 1581 was a raid led by the Cossack adventurer
Yermak, who attacked the Tatar Khanate of Sibir. Thus were the origins
of the Russian Empire. Between about 1500 and 1900 Russia expanded by
an average of fifty square miles per day.26 Hence, Bernard Pares emphasises
that ‘[t]he Russian march to the Pacific had begun. It was to be marked
by singularly few armed conflicts, rather by the sheer force of flowing, and by 1643, with but little help from the government, Russian colonisation had reached the Pacific – and beyond, to Alaska and down the coast of California to Fort Ross (‘Rossiya’), almost on the outskirts of San Francisco. Such Russian dread of the East at the same time forced Russia to look to the West for its identity. This culminated in the westernising revolution of Peter the Great. The Russian tradition of extreme centralisation and self-dependence, characteristic of both the Peter the Great and the Soviet eras, was also a manifestation of this.

Many Russian noble coats of arms include symbols such as sabres, arrows, crescents and eight-pointed stars, evidence of Tatar ancestry. It even went further when many Russian noble families invented a Tatar ancestry when the Tatar legacy was still strong between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries, and there was a revival of Tatar interest in the nineteenth century. The supposed ‘crown’ of Prince Vladimir Monomakh (1113–25), the first Kievan Russian prince to convert to Christianity and a grandson of the Byzantine Emperor Constantine Monomakh, was venerated as a holy Russian symbol as late as the nineteenth century, but was probably fourteenth-century Tatar in origin.

The legacy left an indelible mark upon Russian ethnicity. Many of the great names of Russian history are Tatar in origin: Turgenev, Rachmaninoff, Kutuzov, Suvorov and Yusupov, to give just some of the best known. Tsar Boris Godunov himself was of Tatar descent. General Yermolov, the Russian conqueror of the Caucasus in the early nineteenth century, while a fierce – indeed, fanatic – Russophile, claimed descent from Genghis Khan. Russia’s most famous dancer, Rudolf Nureyev, was a Tatar. Anna Akhmatova’s surname was the name of a Tatar ancestor on her maternal side (Akhmat is the Russianised form of Ahmad). The list covers all walks of Russian life: artistic, religious, scientific, literary, military, political and royal. The list is virtually endless.

Eurasia as politics

A minor – albeit increasing – political movement that has roots in the steppe is Eurasianism. To some extent its roots go back to orientalising ideas by George Vernadsky in the 1820s and the idea of a ‘historical symbiosis’ of Slavs and steppe nomads into a ‘Turanian superethnos’. In 1837 the philosopher Pyotr Chaadaev wrote that ‘[Russian culture was] based

* The last Spanish mission in California and Spain’s northernmost possession, Mission San Francisco Solano, in Sonoma Valley north of San Francisco, was founded in 1823 specifically to counter the expansion of Russia southwards. See Downey 2013.
The Eurasian Steppe

wholly on borrowing and imitation . . . And yet, situated between the two great divisions of the world, between East and West, with one elbow leaning on China and the other on Germany, we should have . . . united in our civilisation the past of the whole world.32

Such orientalising movements increased in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century among many prominent Russian intellectuals and artists: the orientalist Sergei Oldenburg, for example; the painter, mystic and activist Nikolai Roerich; the historian and orientalist V. V. Barthold; the painter Vasilii Vereshchagin; the poet Alexander Blok’s ‘Scythianism’; mystics such as Madame Blavatsky, George Gurdjieff and others. Theosophy, eastern medicine, Buddhism and Indian esoteric philosophy all formed part of the intellectual life, especially in St Petersburg.33 Vereshchagin, as well as painting India and the Far East, depicted Russian Central Asia in startling realism, although his depictions of the often brutal aspects of Russian expansion got him into trouble with the authorities, requiring him to spend much of his life in exile.34 Even Stravinsky’s ‘discovery’ of a Scythian past in the Rite of Spring, or Tolstoy’s tales of the Caucasus and his vaguely orientalist mysticism, were part of a rising swell of interest in Russia’s oriental roots. As a formal movement Eurasianism began in 1921 with the publication of a pamphlet, ‘Turn to the East’.35 It was then articulated between the two wars by Russian exiles, mainly by Prince Nikolai Trubetskoi (1890–1938), a member of a prominent noble family (a descendant of one of the Decembrists) and Pyotr Savitskii (1893–1968), a member of the pre-revolutionary foreign ministry.

Essentially, the movement was attempting to rationalise Russia’s position between East and West, in both Europe and Asia, by the idea of a ‘third continent’ that both incorporated Europe and Asia but at the same time was distinct from them and led by Russia: Eurasia. In its way, Eurasianism was not entirely dissimilar to the idea of the USSR: its incorporation of European and Asian peoples led by Russia, its rejection of the West and, under Stalin, its rejection of internationalism (‘Communism in one country’). Eurasianism in practice? In fact N. N. Alekseev in the 1920s and 1930s formulated Eurasianism as a ‘party’ but without other parties allowed: essentially totalitarian:36 Bolshevism without Communism?

Eurasianism also drew some elements from the ideas of pan-Slavism proposed in the nineteenth century and its rejection of the ‘western yoke’, to which the Eurasianists added the Turco-Mongol element to create a ‘steppic Russia’: Orthodoxy, but with Islam and Buddhism. In the words of Savitskii in 1921:

Is it possible to find in Russia people who don’t have khazar or polovtsi, tatar or bachkir, mordve or tchouve blood? Are there many Russians who are completely devoided [sic] of the oriental mind . . . this organic fraternity between the orthodox and the nomad or the Asian, Russia is eventually an orthodoxo-Moslem, orthodoxo-Buddhist country.37
Trubetskoi viewed the Mongol Empire as the true foundation of Russia, the first Eurasian state and a natural unit of which Russia is the rightful ‘heir to the great legacy of Genghis Khan’. In the heroisation of Genghis Khan, Eurasianism was drawing on the Pan-Turanianism proposed by many Turks, such as Enver Pasha, which was pan-Turk and pan-Finno-Ugrian with the idea of ‘Turan’ as a common homeland. But Trubetskoi, the Russian noble prince, viewed Eurasianism as a conscious attempt to maintain the integrity of the Russian Empire after its collapse in confrontation with pan-Turanianism.

By the end of the Second World War the person who was often regarded (rightly or wrongly) as the ‘father of Eurasianism’ was the Russia historian of Inner Asian history, Lev Gumilev (1912–92). Hence, he is commemorated on a postage stamp and by the ‘L. N. Gumilev Eurasian National University’ in Astana, Kazakhstan, as well as by a public monument in the centre of the main street in the Tatar capital of Kazan, and his apartment in St Petersburg has become a museum. Gumilev was the son of the poet Anna Akhmatova, who herself identified with Tatar roots by the adoption of the Tatar pen-name ‘Akhmatova’ rather than her maiden Gorenko or married name Gumilev. Although, like Akhmatova, Lev Gumilev fell foul of Stalin and spent many years in prison, the two became estranged and Gumilev made a point of distancing himself from his mother. He viewed the Mongol conquest not as the ‘Tatar yoke’ but as an alliance of Tatars and Russians. However, he held extreme views on ethno-genesis where ‘immigrants’ corrupt and poison the native inhabitants, and this extended to the Jews, who are excluded from his idea of Eurasia. Despite being one of Artamonov’s team who excavated the Khazar fortress of Sarkel, Gumilev viewed the Khazar period in negative terms (although he himself was accused of secret Jewish and Zionist sympathies).

Two formal Eurasianist parties were launched in Moscow in 2002, but the twenty-first century has seen the rise of a new movement, ‘Neo-Eurasianism’, which goes further. Western Europe (excluding Great Britain, viewed as ‘Atlanticist’) is to be adopted into the idea of ‘Eurasia’ (but dominated by Russia), as is the Arab and Islamic world, in opposition to ‘Atlanticism’: America, Israel and liberalism. Essentially, it has become an extreme form of nationalism. In 2009, a Kremlin academic and member of the Russian foreign ministry, Igor Panarin, predicted the birth of a powerful ‘Eurasian alliance’ led by Russia with its capital in St Petersburg within four years. It was not only to be a reconstituted Soviet Union but a reconstituted Russian Empire, to incorporate both former Soviet republics and the Iron Curtain countries of Europe, as well as Alaska.

A ‘movement’ not unlike Neo-Eurasianism (but not formalised) emerged with the discovery of Arkaim and the ‘Country of Towns’ reviewed in Chapter 2. Some similarities with ancient Iranian and Indian cultures were noted in the archaeology which, with the general recognition
of the associated Yamnaya Culture as the birthplace of the Indo-European languages (Chapter 3), led to the suggestion that the area was the homeland of the Indo-Aryans and birthplace of Zoroaster. Arkaim therefore was promoted in the late 1980s as the ‘Aryan homeland’, which has turned the area into a dubious pilgrimage centre for new age Aryan supremacists. The period coincided with the new openness – ‘glasnost’ – of the final years of the Soviet Union. Then, with the collapse of the Union shortly after, many Russians found themselves isolated in former Soviet republics as minorities, especially as the new non-Russian nationalisms asserted themselves. This exacerbated the need for such isolated Russian communities to search for a ‘homeland’, and Arkaim was seized upon as the mystical origin of the Russians/Slavs/Aryans/white race. The date of the site was even put back several thousand years to make it the oldest civilisation in the world, older than the Egyptian; the circular plan of Arkaim was viewed as a mystic universal symbol (linked to the similarly circular plan of Stonehenge, which also attracts New Age cultists) and a swastika was also discerned in its plan. It has become a major pilgrimage centre for whole range of New Age cultists and extremists, gathering in the summer equinox. The idea of the primordial homeland, the origins of Indo-European languages, Zoroaster and civilisation itself even fed into calls in the 1990s for a Urals Republic that would lead Russia. ‘Arkaim appeared like a blinding meteor in the dark sky of post-Soviet reality, lighting sparks of both doubt and hope in the minds of the inhabitants of Russia. Time will pass and the mirage will disappear’, in the words of Viktor Shnirelman. ‘One would like to believe that the extravagant ultra-nationalist versions of ancient history be a passing phenomenon and that the Museum Reserve of Arkaim will be allowed a long and peaceful life.’ In some ways the opposite of Eurasianism – the Arkaim Aryan supremacists exclude Turks, Tatars and Asians – it is at the same time its first cousin.

**The steppe, archaeology and identity in Russia**

In 1715 Peter the Great created the *Kunstkammer* or ‘Cabinet of Curiosities’, as it was the intellectual fashion of the day to collect objects for scientific investigation and amusement. Then, to commemorate the birth of his son in the same year, the Tsar was presented with a spectacular collection of Scythian gold objects from Siberia by Nikita Demidov, a tycoon industrialist from the Urals, the son of a serf who became one of the wealthiest men in Russia. The demand to house this and other discoveries of Scythian

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* This might explain why, on a long day excursion to Arkaim on 16 June 2011 from Magnitogorsk, we were explicitly denied visiting the site, but confined to the museum.
A Modern Steppe Empire

gold in an appropriate setting was one of the reasons for the eventual foundation of the Hermitage Museum. Another find of Scythian gold came from the southern steppe. This was the Litoi Kurgan discovered by Baron Melgunov and added to the Kunstkammer in 1763 (the ‘Melgunov Treasure’), causing a sensation when it was displayed in St Petersburg. Catherine the Great’s mania for collecting art works prompted her a year later to found the Hermitage Museum, eventually to become one of the greatest single repositories of art treasures in the world (Figure 13.4). The burgeoning collection of Scythian treasures and the interest it aroused was one of the reasons behind her decision, moving those still in the Kunstkammer to the new museum, although all of the gold treasures were not brought together until the construction of the New Hermitage under Nicholas I (1825–55).

Further discoveries, not to mention the massive collecting policies by Catherine the Great and her successors, prompted continued expansion of the Hermitage. Once again Scythian gold played an important part. This was the discovery of the royal Scythian burial at Kul-Oba in Crimea near Kerch in 1830, ‘possibly the largest known classical-period body of precious metal items’ and among the most spectacular items in the Hermitage. Its transfer to St Petersburg and imperial protection was instrumental in the establishment of the New Hermitage, purpose-built as a Museum in 1852. The Greco-Scythian antiquities were given pride of place in the

Figure 13.4 The Hermitage, St Petersburg, built to house the royal art treasures
most unusual gallery in the New Hermitage, the ‘Hall of the Cimmerian Bosporus’, designed deliberately in a vaguely ‘oriental’ style. Interest in the Scythian and nomadic tradition suited the Russian state’s purpose. The Graeco-Scythian antiquities and the increasing number of other accidental discoveries – mainly in the southern steppe – prompted the establishment of the Imperial Archaeological Commission by Emperor Alexander II in 1859 to supervise and impose some formal control on archaeological discoveries and sites in Russia. This was one of the first professional archaeological bodies in the world. Members of the Commission immediately began controlled archaeological investigations into the Scythian burials around Kerch in Crimea, subsequently expanding their work around the Black Sea and the Kuban steppe. It also marked the beginning of a close collaboration between the Commission and the Hermitage, with most of the finds going to the latter. Among the Commission’s first results was the excavation of the spectacular Scythian gold treasure from Chertomlyk Kurgan near the lower Dnieper. Further major discoveries of Greco-Scythian workmanship were made at the ancient Greek colonies of Panticapaeum (adjacent to the Kul-Oba burials), Phanagoria and Theodosia, as well as another Scythian gold treasure at Solokha. In 1897 the spectacular gold treasure and hitherto unsuspected fourth millennium culture at Maikop on the Kuban steppe was unearthed (Figure 2.5; all discussed in earlier chapters).

Parallel to this was a spate of Russian exploration of Inner Asia in the late nineteenth century. This was often, if not always, with archaeology as their object – but the end result was further enrichment of the Hermitage with dazzling works of art. There were a number of motives prompting this. The earlier discoveries around the Black Sea certainly provided a powerful motivation. But spectacular discoveries of lost civilisations and works of art preserved virtually intact in the dry sands of Chinese inner Asia – mainly the Taklamakan and Gobi Deserts – prompted an international ‘race’ by the great powers to get there first and enrich their museums back home. The Russians were the first to bring this to international attention in the 1870s. This, we may remember, was a period when archaeology and national collections were very much a part of great power rivalry. The acquisition by the British Museum of the Elgin Marbles, for example, meant that Germany, a latecomer to great power politics, had to acquire its own spectacular work of Classical art, the Pergamon Altar. To some extent this was also a reflection of each great power attempting to seize the Classical legacy for its own legitimacy. Whatever it was, world powers had to have world collections adorning their world capitals, and the British, the French, the Germans, the Japanese and (much later) the Americans all sent missions into Chinese Inner Asia to collect the archaeological wealth there. The Russians – with their national showpiece, the Hermitage – would not be left out.
The Russians also had an advantage over their rivals: much of Inner Asia was already theirs. Hence, its exploration had been a part of imperial policy ever since their expansion into Siberia and the first official mapping and exploration expeditions there from the eighteenth century onwards. Such expeditions soon came under the auspices of the Imperial Geographical Society, established in 1845 by Nicholas I. A pioneer of Inner Asian exploration of China and Tibet was Nikolai Przhvalsky, who carried out four expeditions under their auspices between 1876 and 1888 (Figure 13.5). Others were the Swedish explorer Sven Hedin and the Finnish explorer Carl Gustaf Mannerheim, who operated under imperial Russian sponsorship. The Tien Shan and adjacent areas were explored in 1856–7 and again in 1888 by Piotr Semyon-Tianshansky (Figure 13.6), his surname granted the honorific in recognition. The historian Vasili Barthold was a member of a team that explored the Ili and Chu Valleys in 1893, and Barthold’s studies of Central Asia are still major works of reference for historians today. The Russian consul in Kashgar, N. F. Petrovsky, was the first to send fragments of art objects back to St Petersburg in the 1880s, but the greatest discoveries were made by Piotr Kozlov. A protégé of Przhevalsky, Kozlov rediscovered the thirteenth-century Tangut city of Karakhoto in the Gobi Desert while leading an expedition to Tibet in 1907–9 (Figure 13.7). The objects preserved in the dry sands were nothing short of spectacular, and they have a whole gallery in the Hermitage.
Figure 13.6 Monument to Piotr Semyon-Tianshansky in Kyrgyzstan, facing the mountains he explored

Figure 13.7 The Kozlov house museum in St Petersburg
devoted to them. This was followed up by the mission of Sergei Oldenburg, Permanent Secretary of the Academy of Sciences, to Dunhuang in Gansu in 1909 and again in 1914–15. The Dunhuang Buddhist monastery caves was the scene of one of the greatest discoveries of ancient manuscripts by the Hungarian-British archaeologist Aurel Stein in 1904, but most of the manuscripts had been removed by him and his French rival, Paul Pelliot, by the time of Oldenburg’s arrival on the scene. Oldenburg, however, was able to retrieve some manuscripts and other sculptures and paintings, as well as make the first proper photographic and scientific record of the monastery itself.48

Activities were interrupted by the Revolution, and the work of the Archaeological Commission was taken over by the newly founded Academy of Sciences. This resumed archaeological investigations throughout the Soviet Union, which further built up the Hermitage’s collections. Indeed, after the Revolution subsequent Soviet austerity and international isolation meant that the Hermitage could no longer purchase collections abroad. Hence, apart from confiscations of private collections, archaeological excavations were almost the sole source of new acquisitions. Accordingly, the Hermitage benefited from this policy, with further excavations around the Black Sea of both Greek colonies and Scythian kurgans. There was also increased cultural diversity, ranging from ancient Near Eastern artefacts from the excavations of the former Urartian capital of Karmir Blur in Armenia, and the pre-Islamic Sogdian wall paintings from Panjikent in Tajikistan, to objects from the medieval Khazar capital of Sarkel on the Volga, to name just some. But the most spectacular was once again in the field of Scythian art, with the excavation of the frozen tombs at Pazyryk in Siberia (Figures 1.3 and 4.10–4.14).

This emphasis on archaeology meant that although the Hermitage was – and remains – primarily a museum of European art, latterly most of the directors have been archaeologists or orientalists (usually both). For much of the early twentieth century Oriental Studies in Russia was dominated by the maverick Georgian scholar and archaeologist Nikolai Marr, who excavated the medieval Armenian capital of Ani (in Turkey) and also loomed large in the Hermitage and its policies. The first archaeologist Director of the Hermitage was a student of Marr’s, Iosif Orbeli, Director from 1934 to 1951, an Armenian who, at the beginning of the twentieth century, made the first major discoveries of the Urartian civilisation in eastern Turkey. He was succeeded by Mikhail Artamonov, the Director of the excavations of Sarkel and author of the first major study of Scythian

* Oldenburg was himself of inner Asian origin, being born in Transbaikal in Siberia. He was later a friend and colleague of Alexander Ulyanov, the brother of Lenin. Oldenburg remained a Bolshevik sympathiser, becoming the first Minister of Education in the Provisional Government.
art, who was then succeeded in 1964 by the Piotrovsky father and son who have dominated the Hermitage ever since. Boris Piotrovsky was the excavator of the Urartian site of Karmir Blur in Armenia. Like Artomonov before him, Piotrovsky also published an important work on Scythian art. He was succeeded in 1992 by his son, Mikhail Piotrovsky, a specialist in South Arabian archaeology where he carried out excavations. Mikhail Piotrovsky oversaw the difficult transition of the museum after the collapse of the Soviet Union and is (at the time of writing) still the Director.

The Hermitage Museum, therefore, possibly the largest museum in the world and certainly one of the greatest showcases of Western art, has had a continual thread of steppe art and oriental archaeology from its very beginning to the present day. But steppe art and archaeology have affected Russia in other ways as well. It is significant that much of the initial archaeological interest in the steppe after Catherine the Great was in the ancient Greek colonies around the Black Sea. This led to the excavation of large numbers of these colonies: Olbia, Berezin, Chersonesus, Panticapaeum, Nymphaeum, Phanagoria, to name just a few – probably the largest number of ancient Greek sites excavated outside Greece itself. For Russians, this emphasis was important. This is because Russian Orthodoxy was founded by and identified with Byzantium – and after Patriarch Nikon’s reforms in the 1650s the religious links with the Greek Church were re-asserted. But with Russia isolated in the far northern world before Peter’s and Catherine’s southward expansions, Greece and Greek culture were very remote and indirect. The expansion southwards into the steppe brought Russia into direct contact with ancient Greek culture: the worlds of Russia and ancient Greece finally overlapped. It led directly to the foundation of new Russian cities around the Black Sea deliberately named after the Greek colonies: Odessa, Kherson, Sevastopol, Simferopol, Theodosia and others. Of course, I do not suggest their archaeological emphasis to be a conscious Russian policy or even a logically thought-out argument on the part of the early archaeologists (and ancient Greece in any case was not the same as Greek Orthodoxy), but a direct line back to the ancient Greeks themselves was nonetheless an added motivation in a Russian Orthodox world.

There is another reason for such interest in these Black Sea colonies. For as well as the Greek they represented the Classical past, and Russia after Peter the Great sought to identify with Europe’s Classical – mainly Roman – past more than any other country (and in this context most of the Black Sea colonies had Roman-period remains as well as Greek). The Russian monarchs proclaimed themselves Caesars: Tsars, a title they adopted from the Bulgarians; it was the Russians who laid claim to being the ‘Third Rome’ (on religious grounds, admittedly): it was Peter the Great’s new capital of St Petersburg that deliberately set out to identify with a Classical past by the creation of what is arguably the greatest
Neo-Classical city in the world. As a part of Peter’s Classicising movement he sought to acquire Classical art – mainly sculpture – for the imperial collections; the Tauride Venus is a notable example, but this was only one part of a consignment over a hundred Classical sculptures imported from Italy.\(^49\)

In this context, one of the people most responsible in the early nineteenth century for the creation of a Russian ‘national art style’, Aleksei Olenin, deliberately sought to present the archaeological discoveries of the Black Sea region as a direct Russian link back to ancient Greece and Rome.\(^50\) Olenin was working under the direct patronage of Nicholas I, who sought to look to Russia’s past for a national identity that was distinct from the westernising tendencies of Peter I and his successors, especially Catherine. The different threads of Russian self-identity came together in an 1836 watercolour by a pupil of Olenin’s, Fedor Solntsev, of a meeting of the Kievan Prince Svjatoslav with the Byzantine Emperor John Tzimisces. The overall theme of the painting (in the State Russian Museum in St Petersburg) is, of course, the direct link established by the first Russian to convert to Christianity with the Classical past: although Russian Orthodoxy prevails, Greek and imperial Roman elements are there – along with Scythian.\(^51\)

The Russian obsession with Classicism was revived under Stalin, who suppressed the innovative Constructivist and other styles of the early Revolution in favour of an overpowering Neo-Classical style.\(^52\) When Sevastopol – itself a Greek name – for example, had to be rebuilt after its almost total destruction in the Second World War, Stalin ordered it to be rebuilt in a Neo-Classical style. Similar requirements lay behind the reconstruction of Stalingrad (renamed Volgograd after Stalin’s death), with a particular focus on its opulent railway station. Of course, all Europe lays claim to its Roman imperial past to a greater or lesser extent, and museums in Paris, Berlin and London all vied with each other for the greatest Classical objets d’art. But Russia’s claims were the loudest – and also the weakest, it being the one great power that lay outside the Roman imperial boundaries. And here at last in these southern-steppe archaeological sites the Russian and the Roman Empires overlapped, a direct link with the Classical past.

Such threads – new cities with Classical names, Neo-Classical architecture, archaeological collections of local Classical antiquities – came together with the establishment of the Archaeological Museum in Odessa, capital of ‘New Russia’ (as the Black Sea territories were officially called), in unabashed imitation of a Greek temple, with a replica of the Laocoön and the serpents standing outside it (Figure 13.8). And as if to drive home the message – no subtleties required – a statue of the city’s founder, the Duc du Richelieu, was erected at the top of the ‘Potemkin Steps’ dressed in a Roman toga. Caspar Meyer emphasises that ‘the anticipated national
collections [in the Hermitage] were made to communicate the civilizing mission of the Russian nation in the evolving empire by associating Russian cultural products with the legacies of Greece and Rome, including northern Black Sea antiquities’. Again, this was never deliberate policy or articulated justification, but a powerful cultural imperative nonetheless.

The steppe, art and identity in Russia

Scythian art had a further influence in Russia. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the Russians ‘rediscovered’ their Scythian and other folk and oriental roots, a reaction against the Classicising and westernising by many elements of Russian society, particularly among artists. This took a variety of forms. Many of the nobility and – in particular – the wealthy merchant classes began to build their mansions in the traditional old Russian wooden styles. But rather in the manner of Marie-Antoinette dressing up as a milkmaid without the reality of getting up at 4 a.m. to milk the cows, these houses were built on far grander and more elaborate scale than the peasants’ huts on which the style is based (Figures 6.46 and 6.47). Such a ‘pseudo-Russian’ style could also assume monumental
form with several major buildings, mainly in Moscow: for example, the huge ‘neo-Byzantinesque’ Church of the Saviour begun in 1837 to commemorate the Russian victory over France, the ornate red brick Russian History Museum begun in 1874 on Red Square and the transformation of Red Square itself with the vast Trading Rows (GUM) of 1889 forming the east side of the square opposite the Kremlin (Figure 13.9). One particular group of artists, known as the ‘Wanderers’, decided that art had to be taken to the masses and took to travelling throughout Russia to bring art to the ordinary people. Artists began to look to Russian roots for inspiration rather than to movements from western Europe.54

Such movements must be viewed against the background of the enormous social upheaval that took place in Russia after the emancipation of the serfs in 1861. This affected all walks of society, and had a huge effect on all the arts. These various movements culminated in the so-called ‘Abramtsevo Circle’, a colony of artists and designers patronised by the railway tycoon and philanthropist Savva Mamontov on his estate at Abramtsevo outside Moscow in the 1870s (Figure 6.44–645, 13.10 and 13.11).55 Another notable patron was P. M. Tretyakov, who bought the

* Stalin, displaying quite possibly the only instance of good taste in his life, had it blown up in 1931; it was rebuilt after 1997.
paintings and whose collection formed the basis of the Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow. A similar centre for the neo-Russian style was the artist colony at Talashkino near Smolensk, founded by Princess Tenisheva in 1893. These movements deliberately sought to distance themselves from the St Petersburg Academy of Art with its emphasis on court patronage and Neo-Classical and Western forms (although it must be remembered that the artists were products of the Academy, despite distancing themselves from it). It attracted not only painters, but also craftsmen, designers, sculptors, musicians, performers and even historians and archaeologists. It was expressed in new interpretations of theatre and even opera, but most of all in art and design. For inspiration it looked more to Russian roots in the ordinary people and in Russia’s past: folk art, icons, distaffs (Figure 6.44), and Slavic, Finno-Ugrian, Scythian and oriental motifs generally. It included elements drawn from the Caucasus, very much the ‘romantic orient’ to the nineteenth-century Russian mind, but it was also ‘the very vastness and flatness of the steppe’ that affected so many artists of the late nineteenth-century (the landscape painter Isaak Levitan even used a wide-angle lens to photograph such scenes for his paintings).

These elements were brought together to create a more authentic Russian idiom. In 1870, for example, the painter and prominent member of this group Ilya Repin, in his ‘rediscovery’ of the Russian peasant, went to live at Shiryaevo on the Volga near Samara. He sees the face of one of
the peasants: ‘There was something eastern and ancient about it . . . the face of a Scyth.’ His work *The Barge Haulers of the Volga* is one of the best-known works of Russian art (Figure 13.12). Other prominent artists included Isaak Levitan, Vassily Surikov, Alexander Golovin, Mikhail Vrubel and Nikolai Roerich, as well as writers such as Nikolai Gogol.
and Ivan Turgenev. Roerich in particular, a member of the Talashkino circle, was to gain a huge following in later years. As well as a painter and designer, Roerich became a prominent explorer and orientalist mystic, travelling in the Altai and Himalayas. Indeed, he recognised the steppe animal style surviving among the tribes of northern Tibet.\textsuperscript{58} He still has a cult following in India and America as well as in Russia, where the ‘Urals Spiritual-Ethical Centre’, a temple in Chelyabinsk named after Roerich to study his teaching, has also been linked to the Arkaim cult (described above).\textsuperscript{59} Recent years have witnessed a rediscovery of Roerich in Russia, with a special gallery of his paintings in Novosibirsk and his house at Velikiy Uimon in the Altai rebuilt as a shrine (Figure 13.13); his paintings when they come up at auction sell for astronomical sums.\textsuperscript{*}

From this emerged the ‘World of Art’ movement under the leadership of the artistic polymath Alexander Benois and the impresario Sergei Diaghilev and their circle in the 1890s.\textsuperscript{60} It ‘believed . . . Russia should not return to the status of a provincial outpost of Western Europe, nor remain the stronghold of an isolated national tradition’.\textsuperscript{61} A dedicated magazine entitled the World of Art launched by Diaghilev began to appear

\footnote{Nicholas Roerich’s Madonna Laboris sold for an astonishing and record-breaking £7.8 million at auction at Bonhams in London in 2013. https://www.bonhams.com/auctions/20841/lot/63/}

\textbf{Figure 13.13} The Roerich house museum at Velikiy Uimon in the Altai
A Modern Steppe Empire

after 1898, proclaiming ‘art for art’s sake’. Of course, the artists were well aware of and influenced by similar movements elsewhere in Europe, such as those of William Morris and the Arts and Crafts movement in Britain, the art nouveau in France (or ‘style moderne’ as it was known in Russia; Chapter 6) and the avant-garde (of which the Russians were among the leading practitioners). But the reaction against Classicism began earlier in Russia than elsewhere in Europe: new styles of art and innovation emerged here first. It was the richness of the Russian past, not to mention the tumult of the Russian present in the first decades of the twentieth century, that set the Russians apart with the creation of the ‘Style Russe’, and it comes as no surprise that art nouveau surged in popularity throughout the former Russian Empire. As well as many of the Abramtsevo Circle, the movement attracted many of the more adventurous new artists and practitioners such as Leon Bakst and, most notably, Sergei Diaghilev, who went on to launch the Ballets Russes (many of which featured oriental-style costumes) to worldwide fame, and ultimately the career of Igor Stravinsky.

Stravinsky’s momentous Rite of Spring in 1913 – the work often regarded as having launched twentieth-century music – was one of the outcomes of this movement. The work was almost as much Nikolai Roerich’s costume and stage designs as Stravinsky’s composition (not to mention Nijinsky’s choreography on the Paris stage). Its first performance in Paris was received with shock, for among scenes of a sexual nature there was a re-enactment of an ancient Scythian sacrifice of a young maiden. While the music itself was drawn from Russian traditional music, the ballet itself was a conscious evocation of Russia’s Scythian past. This was a part of a wider movement of ‘Scythianism’ among Russian intellectuals. A parallel assertion of Scythian roots was by Russia’s ‘poet laureate of the Revolution’, Alexander Blok, in his poem The Scythian:

You’re millions, we are hosts – and hosts – and hosts!
Engage with us and prove our seed!
We’re Scythians and Asians too, from coasts
That breed squint eyes, bespeaking greed!

The illustration to accompany it, by the avant-garde artist Mikhail Larionov, depicted a caricature Russian peasant’s face as a mask ripped off to reveal a grinning Scythian face underneath (Figure 13.14). Larionov further wrote in his radical Rayonist Manifesto, ‘We are against the West, vulgarizing our Oriental forms, and rendering everything valueless.’ And in art, Larionov’s fellow avant-garde artist and lifelong companion (and eventual wife), Natalia Goncharova, wrote, ‘My path leads towards the original source of all the arts, towards the East. The art of my country is incomparably deeper than anything I know in the West’, and, ‘For me
the East means the creation of new forms, an extending and deepening of the problems of colour.\textsuperscript{68}

Of course, Orientalism was a craze in Western art at the same time,\textsuperscript{69} and Russian Orientalism drew from this. But in Russia there was a fundamental difference: the ‘Orient’ was not only an integral part of Russia but its very centre, as the Chapel of St Nicholas in Siberia cited at the beginning of this chapter demonstrates (Figure 13.1). This was expressed by another ‘Nicholas’ monument in many ways more symbolic than that chapel, the Triumphal Arch in Vladivostok built in honour of the then Crown Prince Nicholas’ visit in 1891 on a grand tour of inspection of the East he was about to rule (Figure 13.15). Hence, Russian art drew much inspiration from the East – and the East came to the Russian far west in the form of a mosque in the style of Samarkand in the centre of St Petersburg as well as a Tibetan Buddhist temple in an art nouveau style on its outskirts (Figures 13.16 and 13.17).\textsuperscript{70}

A building where many of these movements came together was the Moscow Art Theatre, opened in 1898 as a venue specifically for new experimental styles. The founders were Konstantin Stanislavsky, who gave his name to a new style of acting, and Vladimir Namirovich-Danchenko, who took on the task of administering the theatre. The building itself is one of the masterpieces in Moscow of the art nouveau style (Figure 13.18) built by Fyodor Schechtel, one of the style’s main practitioners whose buildings include the famous Ryabushinsky Mansion. Chekhov’s \textit{The Seagull} was

\begin{figure}[h]
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\caption{Mikhail Larionov’s illustration \textit{Skify}, the face of a Scythian underneath a Russian mask, to accompany Blok’s poem \textit{The Scythian}}
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\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{vladivostok}
\caption{The triumphal arch in Vladivostok to celebrate Crown Prince Nicholas’ visit in 1891 (demolished by the Bolsheviks and rebuilt in the early 2000s)}
\end{figure}
Figure 13.16 The dome of the St Petersburg Mosque copied from the Gur-i Emir in Samarkand

Figure 13.17 The St Petersburg Tibetan Buddhist Temple
one of the first performances there, the beginning of a long association which contributed to both the theatre’s and the playwright’s success.

The musical legacy of Diaghilev and Stravinsky hardly needs reasserting, with such giants of twentieth-century music as Prokofiev, Shostakovich, Schnittke, Vainberg, and other Soviet era composers drawing upon it. But it was in the Russian art movements of the early twentieth century that we see the greatest legacy of the Abramtsevo and World of Art movements: Kandinsky, Chagall, Bakst, Popova, Goncharova, Larionov, Filonov, Tatlin, Exter, Malevich, Lissitsky and many more who, in turning away from the received wisdom of convention, were able to draw inspiration from the rich world of the Eurasian forest and steppe around them and the art forms that flourished there in perhaps the most astonishing outpouring of innovative art of the early twentieth century. The landscape artist Pavel Kuznetsov painted dreamlike images of the steppe in the 1910s and 1920s, and even Vasilii Kandinsky found inspiration in Russian folk art, despite his paintings appearing completely abstract, as well as a fascination for Islamic and eastern art following a visit to Tunisia. In writing of this Russian ‘silver age’ John Bowlt sees it as much rooted in ‘the territorial enormity of Russia, which, incalculable and formless like the long, still winter, became a tabula rasa for unprecedented investigations into the contrary idioms of expression such as cryptic language, silence, abstract painting, and dissonant music’. Probably the most revolutionary work
of art from that age, Kazimir Malevich’s iconic *Black Square* of 1915, which even today still provokes controversy (Figure 13.20), might appear as alien to the steppe art reviewed in Chapter 6 as could possibly be. But at the same time might it be viewed as its logical outcome? In the 1930s Malevich returned to folk and steppe themes: the themes of peasants, of reaping and of wide flat landscapes – his 1932 canvas *Red Cavalry* could almost be depicting mounted steppe nomads at full gallop. Malevich’s work remains iconic in Russia to this day (Figure 13.20).

Although this extraordinary outburst of creativity came to an end with Soviet stultification, aspects of it continued and even expanded: in music, for example, as we have noted. But Soviet Russia also looked back to its folk and steppe roots: the emphasis on folk traditions seen in rich folk decoration of some of the Moscow Metro stations such as Byelorusskaya, for example (Figure 13.21), or the emphasis on vegetal motifs seen on so many buildings such as those depicted so flamboyantly at the All Union Exhibition Grounds (VDNKh; Figure 13.22), or many of the idealised scenes of life on the steppe (albeit with an agricultural bias) depicted in many a Soviet realist painting.

* * *

In absorbing the Crimean Tatars into Russia in 1783, Catherine issued a decree of religious tolerance of Muslims. Mosques and madrasas were
allowed to be opened. In 1788 a Muslim Spiritual Assembly was created to oversee Muslim affairs and education, both religious and secular. This was applied not only to the newly absorbed Crimean Tatars, but throughout Russia, in particular to the former khanates of Kazan and Astrakhan. Today, the descendants of the Mongol ‘hordes’ – the Tatars – are the second-largest minority in Russia after the Russians themselves, and the Republic of Tatarstan is the second-largest republic in European Russia.* Since its semi-independence from central rule in 1994 it has been viewed as a model towards market rule and multiculturalism.76 The Tatars serve as an important reminder, first, that a Muslim and originally Asiatic

* The term ‘Tatar’, however, is a fairly loose one, applied not only to the Muslim inhabitants of Tatarstan but to the Muslim populations as a whole speaking a Turk-related dialect throughout Russia, although their self-identification as ‘Tatars’ is a modern one. See Schamilou 2006.
people form a major and integral part within Europe, European tradition and European culture; and second, more importantly, that for centuries the ethnic, religious and cultural domination of eastern Europe as a whole and Russia in particular hung on a knife-edge between Muscovy and an Ottoman-Tatar supremacy: Russia – originally a Viking, not a Slavic, state – might have become either Tatar and Muslim or Slavic and Orthodox. There was no historical inevitability that it became the latter, merely historical circumstance. Perhaps it is still on that knife-edge.

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