

Steppe Nomads and Russian Identity: The (In)Visibility of Scythians, Mongols and
Cossacks in Russian History and Memory

by

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BA, from the University of Victoria, 2006

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in the Department of History

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University of Victoria

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Abstract

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The Russian people and the steppe nomads have maintained a symbiotic relationship for 2600 years that was undeniably fluid; however, for the most part mental and sometimes physical barriers have been erected in Russian society and historiography in an attempt to deny or suppress many aspects of Russia's "Asian" features or historical past. This thesis aims to bring to light the fluidity and cross-cultural exchanges of this relationship, the substantial influences of steppe societies on Russian society and history, as well as to examine the motives and ideologies behind Russia's anti-nomadic sentiments that ultimately shaped and censored Russian national history. The invaluable benefits of nomadic and steppe customs in Russian society and on Russian identity have previously been ignored, dismissed or downplayed in Russian historiography, and revisionist historians hope to reverse this and introduce the concept that the rise of the Russian nation would not have been possible without the influence of steppe nomadic societies.

Table of Contents

Supervisory Committee.....	ii
Abstract.....	iii
Table of Contents.....	iv
Acknowledgements.....	v
Dedication.....	vi
Introduction.....	1
Chapter 1.....	18
Chapter 2.....	43
Chapter 3.....	78
Epilogue.....	108
Bibliography.....	110

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I would like to express my immense gratitude to Dr. Serhy Yekelchuk, whose insightful knowledge, patience and encouragement enabled me to see the light at the end of the long, dark tunnel that is thesis work. As I prepare to move forward in my scholastic life, it has become quite clear to me that Serhy has been the most influential figure in my academic career during my long enrolment at the University of Victoria. I would also like to thank the other members of my committee, Dr. Rob Alexander, Dr. Megan Swift and Dr. Nick Galichenko for their invaluable assistance, advice and companionship over the years.

A substantial thank-you is owed to Dr. Elizabeth Vibert for not only her assistance with financial applications and research proposals, but also for her belief that I could aim higher than I thought possible and truly hit the mark. I also must acknowledge our graduate secretary Heather Waterlander for her priceless advice and the tireless work that she does every day to make graduate life operate as efficiently as possible.

Thank you to both the History and Germanic and Slavic Studies departments at UVic for their academic and financial support. I would also like to recognize that the successful and early completion of my thesis would not have been possible without the significant financial assistance from the University of Victoria.

Finally, I must thank my friends and family for supporting me throughout the years.

This thesis is dedicated to my parents.
Thank you for believing in me.

Introduction

Since the first mention of Slavs in the historical record, nomadic peoples have interacted with them, on good terms or bad, up to the present day. The “Scythian plowmen” described by Herodotus in the fifth century BCE are now widely accepted by historians to portray a group of proto-Slavs living in the borderlands of the steppes. Those who ruled and possibly lived amongst these Slavs and sold them as slaves to the Persians were the Scythians, one of the most successful nomadic warring peoples to terrorize the ancient world. According to the Russian historian B.A. Rybakov, it was during this period that the first oral heroic epics appeared, describing mighty defenders of the Slavic land against steppe invaders like the Scythians and later Sarmatians.¹

For the next 2000 years, Slavs would encounter many other nomadic groups roaming the steppe as well as the many problems that came with them; the steppe, a Eurasian highway, brought with it raiders, diseases, terrifying armies, enslavers and the invaluable silk route. However negative the portrayals of these nomads have been in Russian chronicles, literature and historical records, the nomads ironically contributed greatly to the Slavic, Muscovite and Russian societies – most significantly to the Russian identity. By ‘othering’ nomads, as well as other minorities in their empire, Russians were able to define themselves by defining their own culture against those who were *not* Russian. The Mongols would not only shape Muscovite autocracy, governmental institutions and military organization, but they would ultimately strengthen the relationship between Russians and their faith, which resulted in the inseparable link between Russian identity and the Orthodox Church. Much later, another group of semi-nomadic people

¹ Nicholas V. Riasanovsky, Russian Identities: A Historical Survey, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 15.

would play the most crucial role in Russian self-identity. The image of the Cossack would somehow transcend the terrible experience of the Soviet regime to become the leading symbolic figure of the Russian people, as well as their history, in post-Soviet times.

For as long as the Eurasian steppe has been in existence, groups of nomads have wandered its endless grassy expanses in search of sufficient pasture to sustain their herds and, simultaneously, settled peoples have lived on its edges, protected by the forests but taking advantage of the rich soil it offered them in their agricultural pursuits. The image of the solitary, pensive nomad mounted on a shaggy horse comes to mind, but this compassionate, objective image would hardly be recognizable (or, even, correct) to a person living on the edges of the steppe. To them, the nomad represents usually one of two things. The first is something alien, backwards and unpredictable, something that has terrorized the bordering forestland of the steppe for 2600 years. The second is that courageous free spirit galloping across the open steppes without the mundane concerns of the urban, material life weighing down his thoughts. It is understandable that these images of the nomad have developed along the steppe frontier, as well as beyond it, as a result of the destruction brought about by Scythians, Sarmatians, Huns, Mongols and Cossacks. Later, romantic sentiments were aroused by the independent and natural lifestyle lived by them.

The relationship between the sedentary and the pastoral environments is symbiotic, as is that between the settled and the nomadic peoples who live within those environments.² This relationship can be advantageous and destructive for both civilizations and, like most long-term relationships, experiences periods of peace and tension. Despite the complexity of all relationships, historians have been unchallenged in their unbearable bias and antagonism towards

² Rene Grousset, The Empire of the Steppes: A History of Central Asia, trans. by Naomi Walford (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1970), ix.

nomadic peoples and their relationship with 'civilized' peoples until very recently in modern historiography in regards to their relationship with 'civilized peoples.' Whether they were Scythians, Huns, Mongols, Tatars or even North American Indigenous peoples, the nomads were painted with the same brush – as uncivilized, barbaric (but sometimes noble) savages on the edges of civilization, waiting to swoop in and terrorize the settled peoples and do unspeakable things to them. There were rarely any positive attributes or constructive influences of these people recorded in Russian historiography up until the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries when the work of intellectual groups such as Slavophiles and Eurasianists began to penetrate the literary and academic world. With the introduction and spread of Christianity the nomads became the 'scourge of God' in many ways: as punishment for the Christian's sins, as heathens or infidels and later, as targets for missionaries and their civilizing efforts. In Russia, as will be examined below, the impact of Orthodox Christianity on the nomads and vice-versa was very intriguing and in some cases the two even benefitted one another, for instance, in the Mongol's tolerance of religious practice and the Cossacks' social glorification as Russia's defenders of Orthodoxy.

Throughout Russian history the nomads have failed to fit in to what is accepted or what is outright excluded in Russian society because of their proximity to and history with Russia. They live in a paradox. On the one hand, the nomads are victims of racial prejudices and crude stereotypes, but on the other, their life on the steppe has been a case of both jealousy and admiration among Russians even today. In a paradox familiar to students of European Orientalism; the nomad is either a barbaric, savage thief or a courageous and free warrior. Existing side by side with repulsion of the nomad and the conception of a backward life was admiration and yearning for the freedom with which they were attributed on the open steppe.

Settled people have been dedicating literary odes to great nomads from the sixth century BCE, the time when Homer and Herodotus wrote about the Scythians, to poems on Mongols by Lord Byron and Victor Hugo, to literature on Cossacks by Pushkin and Leo Tolstoy. As abundant as this hero worship is in classical literature, the subjects of such works were usually great individuals rather than the group of people, like Anacharsis the Scythian, Genghis Khan and Mazeppa. The general reception of nomads by the public was rather negative and, considering the raids, wars and destruction brought unto settled peoples by these nomads, such an opinion should not come as a surprise to anyone.

This thesis aims to examine the general acceptance, influence and integration of three groups of nomads in Russian history and society: the Scythians, the Mongols or Tatars, and the Cossacks. In the case of all three, anti-nomadism has generally hindered their acceptance into Russian society, save for the Cossacks who, rather recently, have found an undeniably significant and positive position in post-Soviet Russia. Anti-nomadism is a crucial element of this thesis because it has shaped the attitudes of the Russian people to their nomadic neighbours, more often than not leading to the outright dismissal and illegitimacy of any outside influences despite the fluidity of Eurasian borders and cultures.³ Throughout Russia's long history with nomads, the former's attitude towards the latter has been almost uniformly negative despite often peaceful interactions based on mutual trade, alliances and, at times, shared statehood. This unjust outlook on the nomad in Russian collective memory, as Moshe Gammer puts it, is probably due to the fact that most societies erect barriers between them and another in order to boost one group's sense of pride and sense of superiority.⁴ "The idea of developing inferior, uncivilized peoples,"

³ Donald Ostrowski, Muscovy and the Mongols: Cross-Cultural Influences on the Steppe Frontier, 1304-1589 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 14.

⁴ Moshe Gammer, "Russia and the Eurasian Steppe Nomads: An Overview," In Mongols, Turks, and Others: Eurasian Nomads and the Sedentary World, ed. by Reuvan Amitai and Michal Biran (London: Brill, 2005), 488.

Ronald Grigor Suny states, “became a dominant source of imperial legitimation and continued well into the twentieth century.”⁵ Seeing as many people believed pastoralism was the existence of primitive and underdeveloped civilizations, that the Slavs or Russians considered themselves and their agricultural or urban lifestyles as superior to that of the nomads is explicable.

A large player in Russia’s anti-nomadic attitude is the power of the long, if not constantly reconstructed and reinforced, collective memory of the Russian people. Much of Russia’s history is ridden with foreign conquests, defeats or invasions – by the Scythians, Varangians, Swedes, Mongols, Poles, Lithuanians, Japanese and Germans. As Karl E. Meyer states, a fixation with foreign foes permeates the Russian collective memory.⁶ A sentiment shared by many frontier nations of a “nagging apprehension of spatial vulnerability, fixation on security and fear of the Other” is cause for Russia’s expansionist policies to the south and east following their “liberation” from the Mongol Yoke.⁷ It can be said that Russia’s conquest of the lands to the east was exacting retribution for their suffering under the yoke of their Mongol subjugator as well as affirming their European identity and imperial glory by conquering Asia.⁸ As such, anti-nomadic sentiment influenced their imperialistic state policies, including missionary schools and churches meant to force the nomads to settle. Even by 1914, Russians had not abandoned their need to reconquer former Mongol lands. This was expressed by Tsar Nicholas II when they conquered Turkestan, the home of the cruel Tamerlane’s tomb.⁹ Because the Mongols were blamed for all of Russia’s developmental shortcomings, the nomads that would be absorbed by Russia’s

⁵ Ronald Grigor Suny, “The Empire Strikes Out: Imperial Russia, ‘National’ Identity, and Theories of Empire,” In A State of Nations in the Age of Lenin and Stalin, ed. By Ronald Grigor Suny and Terry Martin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 31.

⁶ Karl E. Meyer, The Dust of Empire: The Race for Mastery in the Asian Heartland (New York: Century Foundation, 2003), 36.

⁷ Meyer, The Dust of Empire, 38.

⁸ Robert D. Crews, For Prophet and Tsar: Islam and Empire in Russia and Central Asia (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006), 12.

⁹ Bertold Spuler, The Mongols in History, trans. Geoffrey Wheeler (London: Pall Mall Press, 1971), 146.

imperial expansion would unfortunately be the victims of Russia's wrath and revenge, despite the fact that many of these nomads were not Mongols, nor did they have anything to do with the Mongol invasion. For the 800 years following the Mongol invasion of Russia, that long, collective memory of the Russians (invented and maintained by the Orthodox Church, which had its own stake in blackening the nomads) would deny the significant contributions that the nomadic peoples of the steppes had made to the formation of the Russian nation. The following chapters will attempt to examine the circumstances of each nomadic group that led to their othering or acceptance, as well as the significant influences each group had on the developing Russian nation.

It was not until the tenth century, when Rus' formally became an Orthodox nation, that the diverse Rus' people were brought together under one binding commonality; afterwards, what separated the Rus' from their neighbours was Orthodox Christianity, leading to the formation of a distinct Russian identity formulated by "othering" non-Orthodox peoples on the peripheries, such as the Poles, Lithuanians and nomads. Christianity, or more precisely Russian Orthodoxy, was a direct contributor to, if not main cause of, the heightened anti-nomadic and anti-Tatar sentiments of the Russian people immediately following the demise of the Golden Horde and Mongol Empire in the mid-to-late fifteenth century. Many historians believe that Slavic-nomadic relations were rather peaceful up until the Mongol invasion which, due to its destruction of Kievan Rus' altered popular opinion and governmental policy towards nomads thereafter; however, other historians, such as Charles Halperin, insist that it was the nomadic conversion to Islam in the fourteenth-century that was the turning-point for Slavic-nomadic relations. Any imperial conquests of Muslim lands by the Russian Empire were thereafter regarded as the victory of the Russian Orthodox state over its Muslim neighbours, while the peoples that were

conquered were considered infidels and “steppe beasts”.¹⁰ The Orthodox Church defined who was considered Russian by separating the sedentary, controllable Christians from the unsettled, nomadic pagans and Muslims.¹¹ They were others, or strange, predatory and often hostile peoples living outside of what they considered to be civilization.

Upon the Mongols’ conversion to Islam (which would resonate across much of Eurasia) their image as “pagans” shifted quite radically to “infidels”. The ancient tensions between Christians and Muslims would now be felt between the Orthodox Church and their Tatar overlords and subsequent nomadic neighbours and, with that, the Church and its influence over the unifying Russian people would tremendously disintegrate the country’s perception of its Mongol past and its relationship with Tatars and nomads on the peripheries. The Tatars became “cruel and evil infidels”, henchmen of the devil whose only purpose was to sow discord among the Christians,¹² and since many other nomadic groups also adopted the worship of Islam, they and even non-Islamic nomads would carry the same burdens of the stereotypes created by the Orthodox Church and Russia’s later civilizing missions. Because education became completely managed by the Church by the seventeenth century, lessons in Russian history and its Mongol past were dictated according to the bias and inventiveness of the Orthodox clerics. Ultimately, anti-nomadic and anti-Tatar sentiments remained in the Orthodox Church teachings well into the nineteenth century. The fact that most nomads were Muslim meant that their integration into Russian (or Orthodox) society was barred by strict, religious prejudices unless they were willing to convert to Orthodoxy. Unlike Tatars, Turks and other nomadic peoples, the Cossacks were

¹⁰ Michael Khodarkovsky, “Ignoble Savages and Unfaithful Subjects’: Constructing Non-Christian Identities in Early Modern Russia” In *Russia’s Orient: Imperial Borderlands and Peoples, 1700-1917*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 11.

¹¹ Gammer, 488.

¹² Charles Halperin, “The Ideology of Silence: Prejudice and Pragmatism on the Medieval Religious Frontier,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 26.3 (Jul., 1984), 460.

able to become a positive element in Russian history as well as an active part of society due to their Orthodox religion and their mythological role as the defenders of Russian Orthodoxy. The Cossacks' mythological role as protectors of Orthodoxy from the Catholic Poles and Muslim Tatars, as well as their services in the expansion of the Russian Empire's borders, guaranteed them a place in national history. Yet the relatively unknown legacy of ancient Scythians or that of the despised conquerors of Kievan Rus', the Mongols, had to wait for later revisionist historians.

In order to understand the various ideological perspectives of Russia's attitude towards nomads, three significant movements or schools should be discussed here. The first is a Western ideology while the other two are schools contained within Russian intellectual movements. Orientalism as a Western ideology has perhaps played the biggest role in the world's treatment or outlook on Asians, nomads and their kin. As discussed above, Russian identity was originally formulated by pitting themselves against others; although this had been a common experience in Russia since at least the tenth century, a similar form of othering, termed Orientalism, emerged in the West following the "discovery" of various parts of exotic Asia. Like Russia, the West defined itself by contrasting its image and culture to that of the Orient in order to identify what it was to be European. The concept of Denys Hay's "idea of Europe" is also closely associated with Orientalism, in that it is "a collective notion identifying 'us' Europeans as against all 'those' non-Europeans."¹³ This, also, can be associated with Russians, specifically during and following the reign of Peter the Great when Russia began seeing itself as a European nation. Although Edward Said does not address forms of Orientalism in Central or Eastern Europe, many of his general analyses are applicable to the Russian psyche during its Westernization and imperial

¹³ Edward W. Said, Orientalism (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 7.

expansion; where the ideology of Orientalism does not apply, intellectual trends specific to Russia do, such as the movements of Slavophiles and Eurasianists, to be discussed below.

Romanticisation of the Orient is very apparent in Russian literature, although the “Orient” in Russia did not simply exist in the Near and Far East as it did in the Western world. As Bharat Bhusan Mohanty (along with many others) points out in his critique of Edward Said, Said’s geographical boundaries of both the Occident and the Orient are limited and are “a major problem so far as the geo-political notions of Orientalism are concerned”; they also have “a tendentious dimension which blocks the diverse and heterogeneous areas of Orientalist representation.”¹⁴ To Russians, the Orient meant not only the lands to the east, but to the south. The steppes, the open plains that had been inhabited by nomadic peoples of eastern origins, as well as the beautiful area of the Caucasus, were as exotic and attractive as the Far East was to Europeans. In the middle of the eighteenth century, Russian officials began referring to the nomadic peoples of the southern and eastern frontiers as ‘wild animals,’ ‘wild untamed horses,’ and disloyal peoples who practiced savage customs. As the Russian Empire expanded, non-Christian nomads began to represent “the savage, the brutish, the unreliable, and the unruly while Russia stood for civilization, morality and a stately order” untouched by the ferocity of the steppe.¹⁵ They became further ‘othered’ and even labelled as *inorodtsy*, a generic term used to describe all non-Christians and non-Russians of the empire.

Between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries Russian writers looked to the south and its inhabitants as their literary muses rather than the unruly savages depicted by tsarist officials, as is quite apparent when surveying the abundance of literature produced during this period. Despite what may appear to be honest and objective descriptions of their exotic peripheries, the

¹⁴ Bharat Bhusan Mohanty, *Edward W. Said’s Orientalism: A Critique* (Jaipur: Rawat Publications, 2005), 44-45.

¹⁵ Khodarkovsky, “‘Ignoble Savages and Unfaithful Subjects,’” 10.

taint of Orientalism is still quite obvious in works by great Russian writers such as Pushkin, Lermontov and Tolstoy. The Cossack, the Turk, the Tatar, and the Chechen became Russian noble savages rather than ignoble savages and, thus, central characters or antagonists in Russian poetry, art and prose.

If Said describes the Western idea of the Orient as “a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, [and] remarkable experiences,” this literature set in the Caucasus, Russian steppes and Siberia immediately comes to mind to any person familiar with pre-Soviet Russian literature.¹⁶ Tolstoy goes so far as to address the imperialist and Orientalist imaginings of the Russian Orient by his hero, Dmitri Andreich Olenin, in *The Cossacks*:

His imagination was now turned to the future: the Caucasus. All his dreams of the future were mingled with pictures of Amalat-Beks, Circassian women, mountains, precipices, terrible torrents, and perils. All these things were vague and dim, but the love of fame and the danger of death furnished the interest of that future. Now, with unprecedented courage and a strength that amazed everyone, he slew and subdued an innumerable host of hillsmen; now he was himself a hillsmen and with them was maintaining their independence against the Russian.¹⁷

Olenin would later discover while living amongst the Terek Cossacks that much of what he imagined about the Caucasus and the Cossacks was inaccurate and immature. The Cossack woman were intelligent and far from the “Oriental ones of submission”¹⁸ that he had dreamt about and the peril that he wished to participate in was less heroic and glorious than he had hoped for. As it turned out, Olenin was a victim of Russian Orientalism and discovered the reality of the Caucasus soon enough. Despite the rather positive imagery of admiration that the Romantic writers used to describe steppe peoples, the portrayal is still inaccurate and shrouded in the bias of Orientalism; however, I do not imply that Orientalism in the Russian perspective of the Orient was solely Romantic.

¹⁶ Said, *Orientalism*, 1.

¹⁷ Leo Tolstoy, *The Cossacks* (New York: Cosmo Classics, 2006), 8.

¹⁸ Tolstoy, *The Cossacks*, 11.

With the influx of sciences such as anthropology, biology, philology and other systems of classifications, these branches of knowledge reinforced the legitimacy of Western representation of the Orient and the “others” on the basis that scientificity, rationality and intellect were objective and truthful.¹⁹ Therefore, absurd notions of racist scientific classifications and origins were regarded as factual in the Western world and the victims of such notions were primarily Asian:

The emergence of the culture of Enlightenment in eighteenth-century Europe, and its emphasis upon reason, rationality, logic, and scientificity, divided mankind basically into two clear-cut, and well-defined areas of human reality. Europe naturally appropriated and claimed to have possessed all those virtues of Enlightenment; and the ‘others’, on the contrary, was forced to stand in direct opposition epistemologically, ontologically, and culturally to Europe.²⁰

As such, the credibility of knowledge about the Orient is at stake from this biased viewpoint of Orientalism. When the Enlightenment reached a ‘westernizing’ Russia, such notions of Orientalism naturally took hold as well. As will be examined further in this thesis, the reputation of Mongols and other nomads suffered from these classifications of scientific Orientalism; for example, in 1866 John Langdon Down was successful in immortalizing the Mongol people as the cause of mental retardation in the Western world, later termed as “Down Syndrome” or the condition of being a “Mongoloid”. Pastoralism, the practice of nomads, was also regarded as primitive in comparison to farming and, as such, civilizing methods of the Russian state in the nineteenth century focused on the forced settling of the Empire’s nomadic peoples. The following chapters will examine these issues more closely.

However, far from fully embracing these Western stereotypes, Russian intellectual movements sprung up either to support or repulse these European perspectives. In the nineteenth

¹⁹ Mohanty, *Edward W. Said’s Orientalism*, 47.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 48.

century a rift in the Russian cultural movement took place among intellectuals revolving around two groups: Westernizers and Slavophiles. The Westernizers regarded all things ‘Russian’ as backward and undeveloped in comparison to Europe, and sought (much like Peter the Great) to redraw Russia on a European grid.²¹ As such, any Asiatic or Oriental influences on Russian culture were considered primitive and having nothing in common with the values of the enlightened Russian nation. Peter Chaadaev, a renowned Westernizer expressed this movement’s opinions on Russia’s position in Europe during the nineteenth century as follows: “I love my country in the way that Peter the Great taught me to love it... I believe that if we have come after the others, it is so that we can do better than the others; it is so that we may not fall into their faults, their errors, and their superstitions.”²² Slavophiles, on the other hand, considered ancient Muscovy as the “truly ‘Russian’ way of life which they idealized and set out to promote as an alternative to the European culture adopted by the educated elites since the eighteenth century.”²³ They considered European practices unsuitable to Russia and, as an example, Ivan Aksakov wrote (immediately following the assassination of Alexander II) that: “The reforms of Peter the Great weakened our memory and disabled us from understanding our own history – so very different from that of the West.”²⁴ Especially in regards to autocracy, an institution supposedly inherited from the Mongol Empire, the Slavophiles looked to Russia’s pre-Petrine era as an ideal standard for the Russian people to live by. In this way, the Slavophiles introduced the concept that Russia’s Asiatic inheritance was a positive and unique feature of Russian society.

²¹ Orlando Figes, *Natasha’s Dance: A Cultural History of Russia* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2002), xxx.

²² Peter Chaadaev, “Apology of a Madman,” in *Readings in Russian Civilization: Imperial Russia, 1700-1917, Volume II* ed. by Thomas Riha (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), 314.

²³ Figes, *Natasha’s Dance*, xxx.

²⁴ Ivan Aksakov, “A Slavophile Statement,” in *Readings in Russian Civilization: Imperial Russia, 1700-1917, Volume II* ed. by Thomas Riha (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), 380.

As Susan Layton points out, Said's notion of Orientalism and strict 'othering' is impossible to fully apply to Russia because of its geopolitical position as a Euro-Asian or Eurasian empire. Whereas Orientalism is usually applied to Western countries that are geographically separated from Asia, there is no firm border between Russians and Asians; indeed, the borderlines and ethnicities are blurred across Eurasia. Because of this unique geopolitical position, Slavophiles and Eurasianists realized the impossibility of completely separating Russian from Asian and, instead, chose to embrace and encourage Russia's unique culture and history, as well as its Asian features or influences. Although Slavophiles were more concerned with authentic Muscovite culture, they recognized Russia's exceptional position between Europe and Asia and the distinctiveness that it supplied them with in comparison to Europe. As Fyodor Dostoevsky stated: "In Europe we were Tatars, but in Asia we too are Europeans."²⁵

The group of intellectuals to publically embrace Russia's Asiatic past following the Slavophiles was known as the "Scythians." Because this group will be discussed in more detail in chapter 1, I will only briefly describe them here. The Scythians were a group of writers formed in 1917 who regarded the ancient Scythians as the ideal Russian ancestors mainly because of their alleged relationship with the natural environment and the fact that the powerful warlike Scythians were not European.²⁶ In that way, the "Scythians" sympathised with the Slavophiles' anti-European sentiments, but they also respected the initial Bolshevik revolution, believing that it represented a revolt of the peasantry against their ancient oppressors as well as

²⁵ Marlene Laruelle, Russian Eurasianism: An Ideology of Empire (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Press, 2008), 3.

²⁶ Dmitri N. Shalin, Russian Culture at the Crossroads: Paradoxes of Postcommunist Consciousness (Oxford: Westview Press, 1996), 18.

the ultimate triumph of natural man over flaccid, civilized humanity.²⁷ The “Scythians” contributed to the rise of Eurasianism by recognizing Russia’s role as a mediator or buffer between Europe and Asia, which is famously boasted about in Alexander Blok’s poem called “The Scythians.”

Like both the Slavophiles and “Scythians,” the Eurasianists believed that European civilization was originally alien to Russia and that Russia had its own ethnic development that had been unfortunately concealed for the 200 years following Peter the Great’s damaging westernization policies. Russia was neither Europe nor Asia, but a continent of its own with a distinct history, culture and society. They believed that “Russians shared their mentality and political sensibilities not with other [Western] Slavs but with the Turkic peoples inhabiting the Eurasian steppes” due to Russia’s inheritance of Mongol customs and its ancient proximity to the steppes.²⁸ Eurasianists thought that “history has indissolubly linked Russia with the peoples of the steppe” because of Russia’s geopolitical role as a historically Eurasian nation.²⁹ Thus, Russia’s position as a median between Europe and Asia meant that its customs and culture are a fusion of Slavic, Central Asian and nomadic peoples which created an indigenous Russian civilization. Such views meant that Eurasianists embraced Russia’s Mongol history and steppe influences, regarding them as remarkable characteristics unique to Russia and Russia only. Like the Slavophiles, Eurasianists detested the Europeanization of Russia and insisted that Russia must return to the nomadic ideals of the Mongols.³⁰ This movement developed among Russian émigrés in the 1920s and was both short-lived and limited to this small group of intellectuals; however, neo-Eurasianism has become very important in post-Soviet Russia, as it is being used

²⁷ Shalin, Russian Culture, 18-19.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 20.

²⁹ D.S. Mirsky, “The Eurasianist Movement,” The Slavonic Review 6.17 (Dec., 1927), 314.

³⁰ Laruelle, Russian Eurasianism, 37.

to explain the collapse of the Soviet Union as well as to help restore a sense of continuity by recasting Russia spatially rather than temporally, in a manner similar to the role that the myth of the Cossacks plays in post-Soviet Russia. As post-Soviet Russia finds itself searching for its identity, the consoling thought of Russia as a unique, Eurasian nation with a distinct past and society helps the Russian people overcome the failure of the disruptive Soviet experience and to embrace a proud past that ascends that failure. Although the initial Eurasianist movement was a limited one, the research and historical contributions made by great Eurasianist scholars such as Nikolai Trubetskoi, George Vernadsky and Lev Gumilev, have immeasurably opened up the history of the Mongols in Russia and other nomadic peoples, and made significant advances in the studies of Eurasia that are being pursued by modern historians, anthropologists and archaeologists.

As modern historians recognize, steppe nomads are “people whose misfortune it is to be known mainly at second hand, through the prism of alien prejudice.”³¹ Because the Scythians and Mongols were illiterate (save for the recent discovery and translation of *The Secret History of the Mongols*), historians face the challenge of interpreting fact from these second-hand accounts, but fortunately, high numbers of archaeological digs are helping piece together a more accurate history of nomadic peoples. Still, it is quite difficult to find archaeological remains of nomadic camps across the steppes to verify the information provided in second-hand accounts. Most famously, many of Herodotus’ unusual descriptions of the Scythians have been confirmed via these archaeological digs which shall be discussed in chapter one. Tombs found preserved in ice have revealed intricate and interesting details of ancient nomadic life. Unfortunately, as of now, the discoveries being made are not widespread enough to alter general Russian opinion about the nomads.

³¹ Meyer, *Dust of Empire*, 40.

Each group of people discussed in this thesis holds a distinct place in Russian history; however, how willing the Russian people were (and are) to accept their significance varies from group to group for reasons that will be examined in the respective chapters. A theme that will tie these chapters together is that of Russian identity and the steppe nomad. As mentioned above, the Russian people have struggled to establish a national identity ever since entering the historical record (and most likely before any written records). Early notions of what it is to be 'Russian' had been founded on two factors: the first is Russian Orthodoxy and the second is determining who was *not* Russian or, those on the peripheries. Although Orthodox Christianity was not a determinant of being 'Russian' until the tenth century, its binding power behind the unification of the Russian people as a nation (considering there had been no distinct feature of Russian collective identity) is undeniably the most significant feature of 'Russianness' to date. The second factor in determining Russian identity is perhaps much older but is just as significant in defining 'Russian' as is Orthodoxy. This psyche influenced which foreign customs the Russians would adopt as their own, as well as the Russians' treatment of those regarded as unworthy neighbours or influences while defining their culture against them. A key characteristic in Russian identity following the seventeenth century was what might be considered an inferiority complex vis-a-vis Europe; by attempting to find cultural similarities with, as well as become as developed as Europe, Russians were constantly being let down by such comparisons, or being rejected as Europeans by the rest of the world. This resulted in a popular embitterment which either caused Russians to despise Asian elements of their empire, or turn against European culture and embrace their own, as is represented in the schools of thought discussed above.

What this thesis hopes to bring to light is the significance and influences that steppe nomads had on the development and rise of the Russian nation. The steppe nomad is a very crucial element of Eurasian history and the rise of the Russian nation, its culture and its people. Despite attempts by Russian officials and academics to deemphasize or suppress their importance, the role of the nomads in shaping modern Russia is becoming increasingly accepted by modern historians.

Chapter 1: The Scythians

The Scythians, that ancient group of nomads “most just” in their ways, have eluded historians’ search for facts for thousands of years.³² Distorted by accounts of ancient ‘authorities’, early-modern Christian chroniclers, racially motivated scientists of the Enlightenment, and tsarist officials, any accurate or impartial historical information about the Scythians has been difficult for modern historians to decipher. The fact that the Scythians had no written language and that they have not existed for two thousand years also produces many problems; however, with the help of modern archaeological research and excavations, we now know more about who the Scythians were and how they lived. As with most nomads in Russian history, the Scythians were pulled between scientific biases and the Romantic notions of the Noble Savage.

Out of the three groups of nomads discussed in this thesis, the Scythians are the least known and talked about in historiography. Their popularity as cultural figures was short lived and sporadic through the ages; however, they managed to leave enough of an impact to appeal to many groups of intellectuals and become a desired ancestor of Britons, Russians and Celts alike. They conquered the hearts and imaginations of Romantic poets and were regarded as fierce warriors even by Napoleon. Who were the Scythians, how were they represented over the past 2600 years and why over time have Russians felt the impulse to either deny the Scythians any place in Slavic history or claim this ‘barbaric’ tribe as their great ancestors? This chapter will attempt to answer these questions using the most recent sources available. Because the disappearance of the Scythians took place long before the rise of any ‘Russian’ state or written

³² Strabo, Geography, trans. Horace Leonard Jones (London: Harvard University Press, 1954), Vol. III, 199.

records, their presence in and influence on Russian history has been unfortunately minimal, despite the fact that many originally ‘Scythian’ influences can be found in characteristics of what is now considered to be ‘Russian’. The Scythians, however, came back as a power myth. This chapter, then, will mostly examine literary sources and approximately two thousand years of historiography in an attempt to establish why modern historians still think back to the people who had occupied their land all these millennia ago.

Scythians: What We Know

What [the Scythians] wanted was the best of both worlds: the comfort and luxury that settled ways yielded but also the freedom of the horseman’s life, of the tented camp, of the hunt and of the seasonal shift of quarters.³³

- John Keegan, *A History of Warfare*

The Scythians first emerged in ancient literature around the seventh century BCE; however, they had already burst into the ancient *world* between the eighth and seventh century BCE, most likely pursuing other nomadic tribes, such as the Cimmerians, westward and quite possibly seeking to attack the Assyrians. It is agreed upon by historians that the Scythians pursued the Cimmerians from Central Asia, eventually pushing their enemy into southern Russia, where they conquered and then assimilated them, meanwhile establishing their new empire on the Pontic, or Black Sea, steppes.³⁴ The general area that the Scythians conquered and eventually ruled over was of considerable size, stretching from Romania and Hungary to Afghanistan, while the original inhabitants fell under the yoke of the outnumbered, but virtually undefeatable, Scythians. Herodotus refers to this ruling group as the “Royal Scythians” but also

³³ John Keegan, *A History of Warfare* (Toronto: Key Porter Books Ltd., 1993), 181.

³⁴ Grousset, *The Empire of the Steppes*, 7.

applied the term “Scythian” to the people whom they ruled, causing much confusion since *Histories* was written in the mid-fifth century BCE.³⁵ The Scythians were an Iranian-speaking tribe of nomads who depended on the vast expanse of the steppes to sustain their nomadic way of life, more importantly, they needed the “kind of territory to raise and feed up horses for their cavalry, including remounts on which their power depended.”³⁶ This way of life shaped the entire history, temperament, and barbaric reputation of the Scythians over the next 2600 years. As Gerard Chaliand explains, “harsh conditions determine behaviour based on exaltation of physical courage, endurance and pitilessness.”³⁷ This was applicable to most steppe nomads, including the Mongols and the Cossacks. Undoubtedly, the Scythians would display all three characteristics described by Chaliand and many others during the 600 years of their existence on the fringes of Greek civilization north of the Black Sea.

Perhaps what the Scythians are most renowned for is the terror that they brought to the ‘civilized’ world via unexpected raids and warring on horseback. Being one of the first groups to successfully use the horse in warfare in the ancient world, Scythians were practically undefeatable in battle and impossible to oppose during their height of power. How they shook the world would echo throughout literature for thousands of years, creating myths and legends of inaccuracy and absurdity that will be discussed in section two of this chapter. Herodotus, who was considered the authority on Scythians up until the twentieth century, wrote in great detail about the Scythians’ battle techniques and related customs, many which have been proven accurate by recent archaeological evidence. It had been assumed that Scythians avoided man-to-man combat, instead preferring to fire arrows from a safe distance with a composite bow and

³⁵ Mykhailo Hrushevsky, *History of Ukraine-Rus’ Volume 1: From Prehistory to the Eleventh Century* (Edmonton: Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies Press, 1997) 83-84.

³⁶ E.D. Phillips, “The Scythian Domination in Western Asia: Its Record in History, Scripture and Archaeology,” *World Archaeology* 4.2 (Oct. 1972): 132.

³⁷ Gerard Chaliand, *Nomadic Empires: From Mongolia to the Danube* (London: Transaction Publishers, 2004), 18.

fleeing, which forced their enemy to give chase deep into the steppes (an advantage for the Scythians). This has now been challenged due to finds of heavy armour, which would be needed for hand-to-hand combat and would be too bulky and heavy for light artillery that required easy mobility to take flight.³⁸ Thus, the accusation of the Scythians' battle techniques as being cowardly has been deconstructed by archaeology. Recent finds of various weapons have also disproved this myth; many were weapons that would be used in close quarters, such as the axe, long and short sword, chain flail and whip (which would be adopted by Cossacks fifteen hundred years later).³⁹ Whether or not the Scythians used stirrups is still heatedly debated, but if they did, this gave them an even greater advantage in battle. The Scythians, when necessary, practised a "scorched-earth" policy against their enemies (most famously reported by Herodotus in their campaign against Darius), and would employ the element of surprise by attacking the pursuers' camp while they either ate or slept.⁴⁰ By using their knowledge of the steppes, the Scythians inherited an advantage over any invading army. Enemies would also soon discover the impossibility of siege warfare against nomadic peoples:

In defence, the strength of the nomads lies in the fact that there is nothing for the invader to destroy and no source from which he can get supplies, and he is helpless in the face of the superior mobility of his opponent... for the offensive the nomads are powerful because their whole population can take part in battle; no one is left on the land as with settled peoples, for there is nothing to defend in detail, also the host carries its own provision with it and is very mobile.⁴¹

The Scythians were ruthless. Accounts from ancient China and Persia corroborate Herodotus' description of the Scythians as head-hunters who scalped their enemies and wore the scalps as trophies, similar to many North American indigenous peoples; these traits were also practised by

³⁸ Renalte Rolle, The World of the Scythians (London: B.T. Batsford Ltd., 1989), 67.

³⁹ Rolle, World of the Scythians, 66.

⁴⁰ Herodotus, "On the Scythians," 147.

⁴¹ Ellis Minns, Scythians and Greeks (New York: Biblo and Tannen, 1965), 83.

the nomadic Hsiung-nu of China.⁴² Gold-plated skulls have been found in tombs which were makeshift drinking chalices, another gruesome statement made by Herodotus that has become historical fact rather than what was considered to be a figment of mythical fiction.⁴³ Such characteristics of Scythian battle techniques undoubtedly spread terror throughout the ‘civilized’ world on the periphery of the steppes; much like the Mongols, the immense success of the Scythians would damage their reputation for hundreds of years. They fought to win and were generally undefeated in war until the demise of their power around the fourth or third centuries BCE, when another nomadic people began pushing west into Scythia, the Sarmatians.

Despite constant references to the Scythians as primitive and barbaric, their way of life has been proven to be far more complex, cultured and sophisticated than was ever considered and was, according to multiple scholars, even more sophisticated in some degrees than their so-called ‘civilized’ contemporaries, the Greeks and Persians. Pastoralism, often perceived as more primitive than agrarian cultures, is actually considered “a more recent development in human history, and is in fact a complex adaptation to an environment of extreme climatic variation.”⁴⁴ Limited by geographical space, resources, territorial advances, weather patterns and climate, nomads were forced to adopt appropriate technology and social relations in order to survive.⁴⁵ Life on the steppes was, and still is, difficult for nomadic cultures. In order to maintain their massive herds of cattle and horses, the Scythians were constantly searching for, and temporarily settling on, sufficient grazing lands of rich, well-watered country. This often involved migrating from the open steppes in the summer to sheltered river valleys or to the north coast of the Black Sea during harsh winters, which is referred to by John Keegan as a “cycle of famine on the sea of

⁴² Grousset, *Empire of the Steppes*, 21.

⁴³ Minns, *Scythians and Greeks*, 81.

⁴⁴ Antony Karasulas, *Mounted Archers of the Steppe 600BC-AD1300* (Oxford: Osprey Publishers, 2004), 11.

⁴⁵ Roger Cribb, *Nomads in Archaeology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 66.

grass.”⁴⁶ Cattle were used to pull their great wagons on which they carried their tents, supplies and families, and horses were as vital to their survival as the buffalo were to the plains Indians of North America, if not more so. Horses, it is now known, supplied the Scythians with sources of protein, dairy, leather, alcohol, transportation, weapons of warfare, income and companionship in the afterlife.⁴⁷ Because of this tremendous, if not dangerous, reliance on horses, Scythians had no choice but to ensure that at all costs they consistently had mass expanses of grassland to sustain their numbers.

The Scythian people were self-indulgent, lavish and meticulous in their outward appearances despite the harshness of the steppe and the generally assumed simple nomadic lifestyle. Tamara Talbot Rice’s groundbreaking work, *The Scythians*, corroborates archaeological finds and ancient accounts to provide great detail about the pleasure-seeking and culturally advanced side of the Scythians. They were polygamous and famous for drinking undiluted wine, dancing, singing, playing musical instruments and dressing themselves (as well as their horses) in bright, jewel-laden garments and jewellery.⁴⁸ “Yet for all their savagery in warfare,” Rice writes, “for all their dislike of rhetoric and foreign customs, the Scythians were not boors.”⁴⁹ The delicate appliqué on their clothing, their leatherwork, tapestries, jewellery and metalwork, with which they were overwhelmingly obsessed, are undisputedly some of the finest of the ancient world.

Physically it is extremely difficult to determine what the Scythians looked like. Up until the twentieth-century it was assumed that Scythians were a Mongol-like people.⁵⁰ However, there are numerous accounts and representations of Scythians with varying racial features such

⁴⁶ Keegan, *A History of Warfare*, 181.

⁴⁷ Ellis Minns, *Scythians and Greeks*, 49.

⁴⁸ Tamara Talbot Rice, *The Scythians* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1957), 63.

⁴⁹ Rice, *The Scythians*, 84.

⁵⁰ Rolle, 9.

as Aryan, Central Asian and Persian, which forces historians to assume that the Scythians were a very multi-racial group often intermarrying with their slaves or indigenous peoples of the areas they conquered. Interestingly enough, recent anthropological data shows that the majority of Scythians living in the western steppes were Europids.⁵¹ The average height of archaeological remains found in common Scythian graves is five-foot-four inches (1.64m), but Renalte Rolle points out that the height of celebrated warriors, royalty and chiefs was remarkably taller, ranging from five-foot-eight to six-foot-six, an astounding height in the ancient world.⁵² This substantial difference in height leads Rolle (as well as Rice) to assume that height must have been a considerable determinate of social status or the election of chiefs among the Scythians. Here I would like to propose that height may have been a determinate of rank, but that it is also possible that because Scythians of higher status had more wealth, they could afford to have more horses and own slaves whose sole purpose was to process mare's milk. Thus, higher-ranking Scythians were exposed to a surplus of the nutritional benefits of calcium and would naturally be taller than common Scythians. The belief up until the twentieth century that the Scythians were "small, bow-legged, fat creatures of an extreme Mongol type" was a direct result of scientific Orientalism combined with a lack of attention to skeletal remains of Scythian kurgans (burial mounds).⁵³

Artefacts of Scythian artwork, found in numerous burial mounds across the Pontic and Eurasian steppes, are so numerous, well-preserved and beautifully detailed that they have been showcased in numerous museums and books around the world for over four hundred years. Modern scientists have been relying on these artefacts to determine the emergence of this rich, Scythian culture, which radiocarbon dating has determined emerged between the eighth and

⁵¹ Ibid., 56.

⁵² Ibid., 56.

⁵³ Ibid., 9.

ninth centuries BCE, earlier than first believed.⁵⁴ Orders from Peter the Great to arrest grave robbers in Siberia and the subsequent confiscation of the gold treasure found on their persons is what sparked the original interest in the Scythians and eventually led to their reintroduction to the historical record in the seventeenth century.⁵⁵ Since then, hundreds of excavation projects have been completed of both burial mounds (kurgans) and what are thought to be Scythian “settlements” or towns. The result is hundreds of thousands of artefacts. It is agreed by most scholars that the Scythians relied on Greek artisans to produce their jewellery and other gold trinkets; however, Tamara Talbot Rice has suggested that the vast amount of Scythian art produced in such precise fashion indicates that the nomads created them as part of their daily lives. She states firmly that the Scythians created a “people’s art” practised by the entire community.⁵⁶ Although an enticing suggestion, more research will have to be conducted to prove or disprove Rice’s notion. Regardless, the metalwork associated with the Scythians is breathtaking in its details and has been immensely helpful in depicting many aspects of Scythian life.

Until rather recently, Scythian relations with sedentary or “civilized” groups have been considered far from peaceful. The age-old assumption that the Scythians simply took by force what they needed from settled peoples, combined with Herodotus’ claims that Scythians hated all things foreign (or non-Scythian), implied that whatever relationship the Scythians had with outsiders (if any) was like that of a bully demanding lunch-money from a smaller child. Recent breakthroughs in Scythian historiography have deconstructed this myth. It has not been denied that the Scythians’ need for agrarian and Hellenistic products often led to clashes with both other

⁵⁴ A.Yu. Alekseev et. al., “Some Problems in the Study of the Chronology of the Ancient Nomadic Cultures in Eurasia (9th-3rd Centuries BC),” *Journal on Methods and Applications of Absolute Chronology* 21 (2002): 148.

⁵⁵ Rice, *The Scythians*, 26.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 176.

nomadic and sedentary peoples, but the relationship between the two fluctuated often and was far more complex than previously thought. “The attitudes of the sedentary man and the nomad toward each other recall the feelings of a capitalist society and a proletariat enclosed within a modern city,” Grousset explains.⁵⁷ The “bully” theory cannot be applied when two interdependent groups such as the Greeks and Scythians neighbour each other, similar to relations between the Rus’ and Mongols as will be expanded in Chapter 2. Simply put, the Greeks relied on the Scythians as much as the Scythians relied on the Greeks, and as such, cordial (if not friendly) relations were necessary for the development of trade. Exactly what was traded is still questionable (some suggest that the Scythians might have offered minerals to the Greeks⁵⁸), especially in regards to grain produced in Scythia and how this grain was delivered to Greek centres. From what historians have gathered the Scythians offered the finest horses in the ancient world; known for their endurance and superiority in warfare, Scythian horses were highly demanded by rulers, such as Philip II of Macedonia, who imported 20,000 Scythian mares to improve his stocks.⁵⁹ There are also reports on the trade of slaves and livestock while the Greeks supplied the Scythians with wine, gold, and pottery.⁶⁰

There were, of course, confrontations and conflicts, but “the fact that the two societies were interested in stable economic links and that virtually all strata of the local Greek and Scythian population were drawn into this economic activity tended to cause stability, peaceable relations and intensive cultural and demographic exchange.”⁶¹ As will be examined below, it was during times of conflict that rulers would take advantage of building tensions and exaggerate the

⁵⁷ Grousset, *Empire of the Steppes*, ix.

⁵⁸ S.D. Kryzhitskiy, “Olbia and the Scythians in the Fifth Century BC: The Scythian ‘Protectorate’,” in *Scythians and Greeks*, ed. by David Braund (London: University of Exeter Press, 2005), 127.

⁵⁹ Ann Hyland, *The Horse in the Ancient World* (Westport: Praeger, 2003), 149.

⁶⁰ A.A. Maslennikov, “The Development of Graeco-Barbarian Contacts in the Chora of the European Bosphorus (Sixth-First Centuries),” in *Scythians and Greeks* ed. David Braund (London: University of Exeter Press, 2005), 163.

⁶¹ Maslennikov, “The Development of Graeco-Barbarian Contacts,” 165.

barbaric qualities of the Scythians in order to sustain the role of legitimate protector. Aside from trade, geographical location alone brought the two cultures together often enough. During winter when the Scythians used the north coast of the Black Sea to pasture their cattle, there were many casual encounters with the settled Greek population that gradually developed into regular, seasonal contacts from which, no doubt, both cultures mutually benefitted through trade.⁶² Because the Greeks had a written language and the Slavs did not, documentation on the relations between Slavs and Scythians is relatively unknown, although archaeological finds such as Scythian fortifications in Slavic villages are being uncovered, proving that the two had a rather complex relationship. Although it is well-known that the Scythians sold Slavic peoples as slaves to Black Sea Greeks, very recent archaeological digs are reconstructing Scythian-Slavic cohabitation and presenting historians with a very different perspective on this relationship. Until these recent excavations come to light, however, this chapter will have to rely upon other finds and literature to examine Scythian-Slavic relations.

The reality of who the Scythians were and how they lived held little sway in past representations. Because the Scythians were a mysterious people from distant lands where few had travelled, fear, ignorance and mythological stories dictated how the Scythians would be perceived in literature, historiography and society. Although modern historians know better, it is helpful to study past representations of this group to examine the cultures and the eras in which they were created. With the demise of the Scythians by the end of the 3rd century CE, the Scythians' existence was limited to literature and racial histories, but not memory. Later, the reputation of the Scythians would be marred by the general anti-nomadic sentiment that rocked Russia after the invasion of the Mongols in the thirteenth century. In the thirteenth century CE,

⁶² Sergey L. Solovyov, "Ancient Greek Pioneering in the Northern Black Sea Coastal Area in the Seventh Century B.C.," in *The Black Sea: Past, Present and Future* ed. Gulden Erkut and Stephen Mitchell (London: British Institute at Ankara, 2007), 41.

Edward Gibbon summarized these beliefs via the Mongol raids of Eastern Europe: “The Latin world was darkened by this cloud of savage hostility... it might be apprehended that the shepherds of Scythia would extinguish her cities, her arts, and all the institutions of civil society.”⁶³ Acceptance levels dropped and the Scythians were lumped together with general nomadic societies in Russian collective memory.

Scythians in Russian Society

The Barbarians of the west and of the north are ravenous wolves who cannot be satiated.
- Tso-Chuan, 3rd Century BCE.

Because the Scythians have been extinct for over two thousand years, their integration into Russian society has been mostly literary, whether that is in the form of poetry or historical texts. Unlike in the case of the Mongols and Cossacks where the notorious long, collective memory of the Russian people determines popular opinion, the Russians have absolutely no memory of the Scythians or their relationship with Slavic peoples. Aside from the massive burial mounds of the steppes and occasional figures of pagan worship strewn among the grasses, Russians have very few reminders that these remarkable warriors once lived alongside their ancestors. This makes the acceptance of Scythian influences into Russian society rather tricky, although increasingly complex archaeological finds are peaking the interest of Russians, especially in post-Soviet times when Russian identity has been somewhat lost and the people are looking to their past to find some meaning. Neo-Eurasianism has been reconnecting the Russian people with their steppe roots and, as such, the study of the Scythians and their role in Slavic history should be expanded.

⁶³ E.D. Phillips, The Royal Hordes: Nomad Peoples of the Steppe (London: Thames and Hudson, 1965), 6.

The image of the Scythians in history fluctuates between admiration, dread and disgust over the last 2600 years, enduring into the historical record long after they disappeared from the Russian steppes between the first and third centuries CE. Documentation of the Scythians in the ‘civilized’ world is comparable to that of the North American indigenous peoples for many reasons that shall be examined below. This being said, the Scythians can be referred to as the first Noble Savages as well as the first victims of early notions of Orientalism. With this comes hate, racism, curiosity about the ‘exotic’, admiration, sympathy and ignorance. With ignorance comes a fear of what is unknown, ignited by rumours and myths of dreadful tales leading to assumptions of mythical qualities that would continue into the twentieth-century. Ideologies such as democracy, Christianity, scientific racism and Socialism would reflect the metamorphosis of the Scythians throughout time. By exploring what the ‘civilized’ said about the Scythians, this section will result in the examination of the eras in which such documents were written, the individuals that wrote their history and the social or historical circumstances that led to these misrepresentations (positive or negative) of the Scythians. Because of their early extinction, literature is also unfortunately the only sphere of Russian history where the Scythians continue to exist, and their only means of influence on society.

The fear of the outsider is both eternal and pervasive in history. Creating an antithesis to a civilized centre, according to Denis Sinor, was a common habit of rulers to demonstrate their bravery by fighting these enemies and ultimately convincing their subjects of their ability to rule and protect them.⁶⁴ The nomad, that unsettled, savage, warmongering horseman, would become the convenient enemy for rulers ranging from Greece to China. Ever present among their people was the fear of the Barbarians, those uncivilized hordes lurking on the edges of civilization,

⁶⁴ Denis Sinor, “Introduction: The Concept of Inner Asia”, *The Cambridge History of Early Inner Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 12.

constantly plotting to violently ambush and terrorize their towns, murdering and carrying off slaves and products of their sedentary labour into the wild steppes. Considering the slave raids conducted by the Scythians, such sentiment must be assumed to have gripped the proto-Slavic peoples as well.

This constant fear among citizens and the awareness of the need to protect the “fruits of sedentary toil” was a “favourite *topos* of statesmen and historians, whether Chinese or Roman,” and an early tool of propaganda to enhance the power of individual rulers.⁶⁵ In order to maintain their role as protector, rulers would purposely amplify this fear of the Scythians amongst their subjects, over-exaggerating or inventing stories of murderous raids and savage customs. Strabo wrote fondly of the Scythians in his works and rationalized the aforesaid ignorance of his contemporaries by stating that they “tell only about [the Scythians’] savagery, because they know that the terrible and the marvellous are startling.”⁶⁶ By writing only about the Scythians’ brutality and failing to describe other aspects of their life to which people could relate, ancient writers moulded the Scythians into even stranger, hostile aliens, seeing as people feared what they did not understand. This would run parallel with the thirteenth-century chronicles depicting the Mongol invasion.

In addition to governmental propaganda, the exotic, far-off whereabouts of the Scythians added to the “civilized” world’s ignorance. The steppes were in the netherworld, beyond civilization, and the lack of information on the peoples that roamed there resulted in myths, assumptions and half-truths of the barbarians who “reproduced to threaten civilization.”⁶⁷

Although Herodotus claimed to have spent time in Olbia, he never ventured north into Scythia,

⁶⁵ Sinor, 4.

⁶⁶ Strabo, *Geography*, 205.

⁶⁷ Bohdan S. Kordan, *Black Sea, Golden Steppes: Antiquarian Maps of the Black Sea Coast and the Steppes of Old Ukraine* (Saskatoon: Heritage Press, 2001), 8.

and admits to the sorry state of things stating “with regard to the regions which lie above the country whereof this portion of my history treats, there is no one who possesses any exact knowledge.”⁶⁸ Obviously, seeing as there were few facts about the area (and few reliable ones on the Scythians), most representations given in ancient accounts would be ridden with errors and rendered quite unreliable. Hippocrates, a doctor whose chief concern was the medical conditions of the Scythians caused by the nomadic way of life, did travel to Scythia, and described the physicality of the Scythians in precise details; however, these were completely flawed details which have been disproven due to finds of artistic representations as well as skeletal remains. Ellis Minns states that Hippocrates, in an attempt to prove a theory of environmental effects on a race, twisted the facts to meet this theory.⁶⁹ Like Minns, Renalte Rolle finds Hippocrates’ account bogus and believes that Hippocrates had a miserable time during his visit to the steppes, visiting a people with a “way of life diametrically opposed to his” in a terribly cold climate which ultimately damaged his perspective on the Scythians, whom he found “absolutely repellent.”⁷⁰ Hippocrates’ writing was professional, apparently objective and medically informative, which caused many of his contemporaries to, unfortunately, take this representation of the Scythians at face value; thus, the Scythian would be thought of as fat, lazy, sweaty, bow-legged, short, impotent and ridden with sexually transmitted diseases.⁷¹ As was explained above, none of these descriptions as accurate.

Ancient writers with good intentions (such as Herodotus, Ephorus or Strabo) and admiration for the nomads generalized and often depicted them as inaccurately as those who disliked or feared them. Once again, this was due to a general lack of information available on

⁶⁸ Herodotus, 132.

⁶⁹ Minns, 45.

⁷⁰ Rolle, 55-56.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 55.

the Scythians. Even accounts intending to be objective are unreliable in their representation. In his *Geography*, Strabo criticizes Ephorus for his obvious bias in that he “does not tell the whole truth about everything” on the Scythians, but Strabo himself states that there was a “common report” that the Scythians were “most just” and that “we regard the Scythians the most straightforward of men and the least prone to mischief, as also far more frugal and independent of others than we are.”⁷² What the ancients considered “most just” has not been explained in this context, but no doubt it is as inaccurate and biased as other accounts mentioned. Perhaps the Scythians were “most just” amongst each other, but it is highly likely that the villages being raided for their grain and slaves did not believe such actions to be just at all. Because it was thought that the Scythians were a democratic people (by choosing chiefs by election), many Greeks over-emphasized this characteristic of the Scythians. It is common knowledge that many nomadic peoples practised a form of democracy (most famously Chingis Khan), but Greek democracy was much different from what could be attributed as democratic among nomads. Regardless, ancient Greeks would over-emphasize this notion of democracy in these ‘inferior’ peoples and create the image of the first Noble Savage.

Aside from signs of democracy lurking in the processes of Scythian politics, ancient writers glorified the simple aspects of nomadic lifestyle in comparison to the corrupt, money-getting ways of civilized centres. “Since they are frugal in their ways of living and are not money-getters,” stated Strabo “they not only are orderly towards one another... but also remain invincible and unconquered, because they have nothing to be enslaved for.”⁷³ This notion of the Noble Savage engulfed ancient literature, spreading stories of Scythian greatness, such as Anacharsis, a Scythian king who was listed as one of the Seven Sages and even became an

⁷² Strabo, 199, 207.

⁷³ Ibid., 207.

honorary Greek due to his adoption of Hellenistic culture.⁷⁴ Plato, Aristotle, Herodotus and Ephorus raved about him in their works, stating that he was an inventor of “ingenious technical and practical devices”, a philosopher, and a man of perfect temperance and understanding.⁷⁵ Anacharsis reflects ancient Greek ideals in that he obtained that “perfect temperance” unachievable by the Greeks in their politics, and lived close to nature, which to the Greeks meant living free and just.⁷⁶ With the moral decay of Greece, ancient philosophers and writers “admired savages as approximately most closely to the life in accordance with nature” in a manner similar to how Rousseau regarded the North American indigenous peoples.⁷⁷ It is argued by historians whether or not Anacharsis actually existed (Herodotus states that the Scythians had never heard of him) and it is most likely that, just as Toxaris was a Scythian invented by Lucian, Anacharsis was a Greek invention with the purpose of setting an example of living a moral lifestyle among fellow Greeks. Whether or not the image of Anacharsis was an accurate representation is still unknown; however, the way of life of the Scythians must have held a degree of respect by the Greek intellectuals in order for one of their kind to be elevated so highly in Greek society, symbolically or otherwise.

Most ancient representations of the Scythians between the fourth-century BCE and the rise of Christianity revolve around the notion of the Scythians as Noble Savages. They were considered the apotheosis of human society, hospitable, righteous and morally superior to the supposedly more civilized Greeks.⁷⁸ This would change, as would the Scythians’ status in society, with the rise of Christianity. Whereas many Greeks found the Scythians to be their moral superiors, Christians regarded the *pagan* Scythians with open hostility and unforgiving criticism.

⁷⁴ A. Armstrong, “Anacharsis the Scythian,” *Greece & Rome* 17.49 (Jan., 1948), 19.

⁷⁵ Armstrong, 21.

⁷⁶ James William Johnson, “The Scythian: His Rise and Fall,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 20.2 (1959), 253.

⁷⁷ Armstrong, 21.

⁷⁸ Johnson, 252.

According to a variety of Christian writers, they were “little better than wild beasts” or murderers, tribes of cannibalistic barbarians who were promiscuous drunks.⁷⁹ Compared to Horace and the other ancient philosophers who admired the Scythians for their chaste lifestyles, Scythian imagery in history had taken an abrupt turn for the worse with the spread of Christianity. The slaughter of Catholic missionaries near the Caspian by Scythians created a deeper contempt for the “heathen”, causing Christians to believe that the Scythians took sick pleasure in murdering people.⁸⁰ Thus began the literary tear-down of the false idol. By murdering Christian missionaries, Scythians forever lost whatever positive reputation they may have had in Christian society. They became (as later Huns and Mongols would be referred to) the “scourge of God.”⁸¹

With Christianity spreading at a quick pace, the Noble Savage became the Ignoble Savage, a reputation that would endure long after the disappearance of the Scythians from the Russian steppes. By the end of the fourth century CE the Scythians had faded from historical memory save for references to nomads who were inaccurately labelled “Scythians” by writers such as Emperor Maurice of the Byzantine Empire. References to them would be few and far between, but those representations that did exist between the fourth century CE and the seventeenth century would echo the negative Christian (and most remembered) sentiments from earlier times. In his military handbook called *Strategikon*, Maurice echoes the fear and sentiment of the Christian era towards this scourge of God (nomads in general) when he generalizes the entire population of steppe nomads as follows: “They are very superstitious, treacherous, foul,

⁷⁹ Johnson, “The Scythian: His Rise and Fall,” 254.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 254.

⁸¹ E.D. Phillips, “The Scythian Domination in Western Asia,” 134.

faithless, possessed by an insatiable desire for riches.”⁸² Despite this religious-based attempt to wipe Scythians off the historical record, Scythians ironically climbed back into the limelight (long after their disappearance) due to the biblical claim that Scythians were sons of Magog. This genealogical emphasis on Scythians created an increased interest in their ethnic and cultural development because they became the “parent of virtually every nation in Western Europe.”⁸³ As a result, Scythians avoided the historical demise that early Christians anticipated, but the biblical interpretations of the Scythians as savage and barbaric continued up to the eighteenth century. Shakespeare even referred to them as cannibals who ate their own children in *King Lear*:

...The barbarous Scythian,
Or he that makes his generation messes
To gorge his appetite, shall to my bosom
Be as well neighbored, pitied, and relieved,
As thou my sometime daughter.⁸⁴

Such Shakespearean sentiments were short-lived. The reconstruction of the Scythian as the Noble Savage, this time in Europe, took place during the Renaissance; the fact that they were an extinct race by this period made the Scythians more legendary and appealing.⁸⁵ Like the Noble Savage representations in classical Greece, the Scythians played a similar role in Europe, capturing the imagination of many writers and artists.

Because the seventeenth-century concept of the Noble Savage is similar to representations of the Scythians in classical times, a full re-examination here is not necessary; however, it is important to discuss the impact of scientific racism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries on the image of the mighty Scythians. With the “westernization” campaign

⁸² George T. Dennis, *Maurice’s Strategikon: Handbook of Byzantine Military Strategy* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1984), 115-116.

⁸³ Johnson, 256.

⁸⁴ William Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of King Lear: The New Cambridge Shakespeare* ed. by Jay L. Halio (Cambridge University Press, 2005), lines 110-114.

⁸⁵ Johnson, 257.

of Peter the Great, the Russian elite adopted the western theories of Orientalism, science, evolution and progress. Seen as ethnically inferior, the Scythian became the “subject of a number of chauvinistic racial histories” including Paul Pezron’s *The Antiquities of Nations*.⁸⁶ The nineteenth century’s obsession with origins, science, exploration and history also encouraged English publications where Scythians were figured as the ancestors of the Scottish and Irish, explaining these nations’ barbaric and ‘savage’ qualities.⁸⁷ The Scythian’s revival in literature was short-lived with the exciting ‘discovery’ and subsequent introduction of the New World Indian to the imagination of Europe. Scythians were ousted from the limelight of archetypal aristocracy by the end of the nineteenth century and would not find a place in the spotlight of literature again until after the Bolshevik Revolution, confined to the writings of Soviet ex-patriots living throughout Europe.

Although some Russians had claimed the Scythians to be their ancestors before the Revolution, this is hardly considered a mainstream notion. The Scythians momentarily shone in the intellectual spotlight when a group of young, Slavophile poets adopted the name “The Scythians” in 1917. These poets, although not Bolsheviks, supported the Revolution, and because the Scythians “were men who were guided by their primeval instincts and yearnings for justice” they were considered the ideal ancestors of Russian revolutionaries. This group of poets decided to dedicate a few poems to these ancient protectors of righteousness.⁸⁸ The most well-known poem to come out of this group is “The Scythians” by Aleksander Blok. Written during World War I, the Scythians symbolise Russia which, according to Blok, was a shield protecting Europe from the fierce hordes of Asia. Blok warns Europe that Russia will no longer protect

⁸⁶ Ibid., 257.

⁸⁷ Mary Floyd-Wilson, *English Ethnicity and Race in Early-Modern Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 58.

⁸⁸ Shalin, *Russian Culture at the Crossroads*, 18.

them during the war and asks them to be “done with war and all its horrors” or else be ravaged by “raging Huns” who would “turn churches into stables, burn the towns, / and roast their white-flesh comrades’ bodies.”⁸⁹ In this impressive poem, the Scythians are represented as the pride of Russia and the ancient protectors of Europe (or what would seem to be civilization). Blok hints that, as Scythians, the Russians “have innate, oriental massiveness, formlessness, and genius that are capable of swallowing the West almost without noticing.”⁹⁰ The Scythians (or Russians) are cultured and wise but can also be savage if tempted.

Perhaps because by 1917 the Cossacks had developed a reputation as the strong arm of the oppressive Tsarist government, intellectuals turned to the Scythians as their muses. Blok’s contemporary, Vyacheslav Ivanov, also idealized Russian native values as Scythian in his poem “The Scythian Dances”:

Give us, the disorganized, our will!
 We’ll set up camp! We need expanses!
 No fences here! Grant us our wish!
 Limits are for you, the disputes of limits!⁹¹

After the Socialist Revolutionaries failed to take power from the Bolsheviks, the poet’s group “The Scythians” disbanded and with them went popular interest in their namesakes. The Scythians have remained an interest to archaeologists, but have yet to return to the cultural limelight they experienced in the past.

Scythian Influences in Russian Society

Mere millions – you. We – teem, and teem, and teem.

⁸⁹ Aleksander Blok, “The Scythians,” ed. By Robin Kemball, Russian Review 14.2 (Apr., 1955), 118/119.

⁹⁰ Russell Bova, Russia and Western Civilization (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2003), 135.

⁹¹ Bova, Russia and Western Civilization, 157.

You want to fight? Come on, then – try it!
 We’re – Scythians – yes! With Asiatic mien
 We watch you, gloating, through our slit-squint eyelids.⁹²
 - Aleksander Blok, “The Scythians”, 1918.

Because the Scythians were extinct centuries before the rise of Kievan Rus’ and Russia, their exclusion or inclusion in Russian society and history is not as pronounced as that of the Mongols or Cossacks. However minor their influence on Russian society is, the Scythians hold a rather positive reputation in Russia because of their prowess in battle and their similar pastoral customs and appearance to the peasantry and Cossacks, and Circassians. The intimidating burial mounds across the steppe are reminders to the Russian people of those brave horsemen who roamed the Russian land thousands of years before them. There can be no wonder as to why Russians would want the unique, fierce and brave Scythians to be their forefathers. Until the nineteenth century Slavic ancestry was murky and, seeing as the Scythians inhabited southern Russia and Ukraine for seven hundred years, the most logical assumption would have been that the Scythians were ancestors of the Slavic nations. Because it is unclear as to how the Scythian population dispersed after their defeat, the Slavs initially appeared to be their most obvious descendants. Some insist that they simply dissolved into the multitude of tribes of the steppes or were assimilated by those who conquered them.⁹³ Others believe that they possibly maintained themselves under different names in Eastern Europe.⁹⁴ Some historians stated that Cossacks, Ossetians and Kazhars were the descendants of Scythians and many other steppe nomads.⁹⁵ Herodotus’ over-use of the term “Scythian” in his writing also contributed to this confusion

⁹² Blok, “The Scythians,” 118.

⁹³ A.I. Melyukova, “The Scythians and Sarmatians,” in The Cambridge History of Early Inner Asia, ed. Denis Sinor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 108.

⁹⁴ Alfred Rambaud, History of Russia from the Earliest Times to 1880, trans. L.B. Lang (Boston: C.F. Jewett Publishing Co., 1879), 35.

⁹⁵ Albert Seaton, The Horsemen of the Steppes: The Story of the Cossacks (London: The Bodley Head, 1985), xiii-xiv.

because he applied it both to the principal nomadic horde and those they ruled.⁹⁶ It was, and still is, assumed that the “Scythian plowmen” or Scythian farmers to which he often referred were actually Slavs, but the application of the label “Scythian” makes for easy misunderstanding.⁹⁷ Such ambiguity made it possible for eager descendents to believe or imply what they wanted.

Of course the general anti-nomadic sentiments applied to the legend of the Scythians as well, especially in the nineteenth century; however, the debate among historians and intellectuals up to that time (and in some cases beyond) was heated as to whether or not the Russian people were in some way descendants of the elusive Scythians. Once it became accepted among academics that the Slavs were a completely different race than the Iranian-based Scythians, many Russians still clung to the possibility of a genetic relationship and, where that failed, insisted that the Russians were at least Scythian in spirit and thus this was the main contributor to the notorious Russian Soul. Those who fostered such theories were intellectuals linked with either the Orientalist or Eurasian schools.

Slavic chroniclers pushed the ancestry of Russia as far back as possible in order to legitimize Russia as a great, ancient land; this meant stating that the history of Russia began with the existence of the Scythians, and this was generally accepted by Slavic historiographers up to the mid-nineteenth century.⁹⁸ At the same time, the emergence of nationalism kept such notions of Scythian ancestry alive, even during the introduction of dissidents in Slavic historiography. Claiming that the Russian empire was as historically established as (if not more than) other European nations was important in regards to establishing legitimate geopolitical borders; by extending Russian history back to the seventh century BCE the Russians would be one of the most ancient races of the western world. To validate these claims of antiquity, Russians in the

⁹⁶ Hrushevsky, *History of Ukraine-Rus'*, 83.

⁹⁷ Mrija Gimbutas, *The Slavs* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1971), 41.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 98.

nineteenth (and some cases, twentieth) century would rely upon the archaeological remains of the Scythians, such as the discovery of the Kul Oba that revealed the resemblance between Scythian and *muzhik* or peasant. “The relationship between archaeology and the construction of identity in modern communities is of considerable importance in Europe today,” states Michael Dietler.⁹⁹

Apart from geographical location, another link between Scythians and Russians was their appearance. The depiction of Scythians on ancient bowls and vases, such as the Kul Oba and other artefacts, is strikingly similar to the common Russian peasant, or *muzhik*, causing many to believe that the Scythians must have been somehow related; however, as Ellis Minns points out, this resemblance was quite superficial, based solely on beards and likeness of clothing.¹⁰⁰ The resemblance between *muzhik* and Scythian would be a main component of the pro-Scythian argument even though the peasants’ garments were actually borrowed from the Cossacks (the outfits are general nomadic wear), not Scythians. Even nomadic Kazakhs in the nineteenth century were accused of “resembling Russians in ancient times”; even though Slavs were not nomadic, this implies that even by the nineteenth century, the Russians either believed or wanted their great ancestors to be of nomadic origins.¹⁰¹

Increasing archaeological excavations in southern Russia and the Ukraine were used to “establish and validate cultural borders and ancestry, often in the service of dangerous racist and nationalist mythologies.”¹⁰² Archaeology, Michael Dietler argues, anchors national ethnic mythology in a sense of place; thus, despite mounting evidence against the Scythians as biological Slavic ancestors, the importance of nationalism and identity overrode scientific or

⁹⁹ Dietler, 584.

¹⁰⁰ Minns, 46.

¹⁰¹ Crews, *For Prophet and Tsar*, 214.

¹⁰² Michael Dietler, “Our Ancestors the Gauls: Archaeology, Ethnic Nationalism, and the Manipulation of Celtic Identity in Modern Europe,” *American Anthropologist* 96.3 (1994), 585.

etymologic facts whenever a sense of identity was lacking.¹⁰³ What was generally accepted by academics could hardly be considered popular sentiment in an age of empire and nationhood. Along with similarities of appearance, archaeological digs also revealed similarities between Scythian and modern Slavic cultures, especially Cossacks and other nomads of the Caucasus and Central Asia. Scythian customs carried over well into modern day Russia; both Kievan and Muscovite princes were buried with their favourite horses, even after their conversion to Orthodoxy in 988, a practise that is still being used by post-Soviet Cossacks.¹⁰⁴ Scythian art, such as animal motifs, was visible in the Russian arts up until the Westernization efforts of Peter the Great, although Tamara Talbot Rice argues that Scythian imagery is still found in peasant art today.¹⁰⁵ Despite what may be considered as an ancestral disappointment, the idea that the Scythians were the *spiritual* ancestors of the infamous Russian Soul is more than sufficient historical influence for post-Soviet Eurasianists.

In post-Soviet Russia, many understand that the Scythians were not the ancestors of the Russian people; however, the rise of Neo-Eurasianism has convinced many Russians that the ancient influence of and relationship with the nomads is significant in shaping Russian history and the rise of the Slavic people. Ancient Russian history is seen as “a depiction of the dominance of the nomads and their acculturation of the early Slavs,” a perspective that re-evaluates European/Eurocentric Russian history and historiography.¹⁰⁶ Interest in the Scythians is also on the rise in Russia. With the increase in excavations across the steppes, many elaborate finds are being put on display at the Hermitage museum, such as bright Scythian clothing found intact and, the most popular, Scythian mummies, many with blond hair and tattoos. The

¹⁰³ Dietler, “Our Ancestors the Gauls,” 593.

¹⁰⁴ Edgar Knobloch, Russia and Asia: Nomadic and Oriental Traditions in Russian History (Hong Kong: Odyssey Books, 2007), 47.

¹⁰⁵ Rice, 184.

¹⁰⁶ Laruelle, 41.

significance of the Scythians in Russian history is the impact that their presence had on the early Slavic people, and their legacy as the first great nomadic civilization which would influence subsequent nomadic groups, such as the Mongols and Cossacks, that would ultimately shape Russian society further. As the first nomadic group to establish relations with ancient Russian peoples, the Scythians may be considered the first outside invader to influence and bring together the Slavic people under a foreign “yoke”, long before the Varangians. Details about this intriguing relationship are yet to be fully uncovered by archaeologists working around the forested borderlands of the steppes; however, progress is being made and the results are eagerly anticipated by historians in this field.

Chapter 2: The Mongol Empire as Muscovy's Ancestor

A common theme that will be seen running through this thesis is that of Russia's 'othering' of neighbouring nomadic societies, whether they be Scythian, Mongolian or Cossack. Societies and nations erect imaginary barriers between themselves and other groups in order to boost their sense of superiority and distinctiveness.¹⁰⁷ Among the consequences of such actions is misrepresentation of the other group as well as a purposeful denial of that group's impact on (in this case, Russian) history. In specific terms, Russian chroniclers, Orthodox churchmen and historians have mostly denied any positive influence of nomadic groups on Russian society, yet the element of fascination with the 'other' was present as well, as is the case with Orientalism. Unlike what we have seen with the Scythians and what will be seen with the Cossacks, however, Russians have had immense difficulty accepting the Mongols as being related to them in any way or having any positive contribution to their nation's history. Even though the Mongols clearly had a major influence on Russian society, they are the least wanted and most rejected of them all. Why? How can a nomadic group so similar to both the Scythians and the Cossacks be repulsed so blatantly as historical predecessors to the Russian nation? Is it simply because the Mongols are remembered as brutal conquerors of Russian principalities, or does the outright refusal to embrace their Asian features bar the way?

In this chapter I will examine the history of the Mongol invasion of Russia (referred to in history as the Mongol or Tatar "yoke") and the impact of contemporary chroniclers' denial of Mongol influence and significance in Russian history, which the historian Charles Haleprin has aptly called the ideology of silence. Today historians have accepted the positive (as well as negative) influences of the Mongols on Russian society, but the "ideology of silence" and the

¹⁰⁷ Gammer, "Russia and the Eurasian Steppe Nomads," 488.

stigma of the Mongols as barbaric monsters have remained strong in popular sentiment. It is still difficult for Russians to appreciate their Mongol past and accept the fact that the rise of Muscovy as a European power was a direct result of Mongol domination; however, as with both Scythians and Cossacks, a paradox emerges beginning with the chronicles written during the Mongol conquest, a paradox that can still be seen today. On the one hand, a feeling of repulsion to the oppressors runs rampant in the literature, but on the other, so do undercurrents of awe and attraction to steppe life. From the fifteenth century to Soviet times, it has been implied by state and Church that Mongols and anything nomadic represents immorality, backwardness and a detriment to Russian progress. Such an attitude unfortunately resulted in the government's oppression of many nomadic groups that have entered Russian history after the fifteenth century. Given the longstanding image of the Mongol rule as one of destruction and terror, it can be no wonder that other nomadic groups have had such difficulty overcoming the nomad stigmas in Russian history. The nomad can only exist in this paradox of disgust and awe in Russian history, never outside of it.

The Mongols and the "Tatar Yoke"

Avenging
The avengement,
Requiting
The requital.¹⁰⁸

– *The Secret History of the Mongols*, 13th century, CE.

In the year 1223 the principalities of Rus' heard word about a war between their eastern nomadic neighbours, the Polovtsy (meaning "the pale ones"), and another nomadic people that had

¹⁰⁸ Francis Woodman Cleaves, trans., *The Secret History of the Mongols*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1982), vo. 1, 82.

invaded from the Far East.¹⁰⁹ When approached by the Eastern strangers about denying support to the Polovtsy, the Rus' quickly executed the ambassadors, expecting these strangers to be similar to the typical steppe nomads they had encountered before. They were wrong, and by killing the ambassadors, had declared war against the invaders whose war machine would far surpass anything the Russians had ever seen before. As Jack Weatherford explains, "The Russians haughtily executed [the Mongol envoys] without any awareness of what a high price their princes, and all Russians, would soon pay for their crime."¹¹⁰ After a short, but bloody, battle the Mongols disappeared eastwards again – the Russian princes, figuring that they were gone for good, simply shrugged off the raid and continued their bickering, not knowing that fifteen years later this host from the east would return full force. As many others who had faced the armies of Chingis Khan had discovered, the execution of Mongol ambassadors brought upon them war and subjugation, which in the case of the Russian people lasted until roughly the year 1480.¹¹¹ As undeniably terrible and destructive as the Tatar Yoke was, its lengthy reign actually turned a land of disorganized and constantly warring principalities into an organized (and much more unified) state with a working bureaucracy and developed government.

Understanding the Mongols and their past is crucial to comprehending not only their ability to conquer half of the world, but also their reputation in Russian history. It will not be necessary to describe their social and cultural customs as I did with the Scythians, mostly because most nomadic societies were virtually unchanged (save for technological advancements and burial rites) throughout history even up until the present day. Most of the details explained in Chapter 1, then, are carried over to the history of the Mongols. Temporally speaking, this chapter will

¹⁰⁹ Charles J. Halperin, Russia and the Golden Horde: The Mongol Impact on Medieval Russian History (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 20.

¹¹⁰ Jack Weatherford, Genghis Khan and the Making of the Modern World, (New York: Crown Publishers, 2004), 139.

¹¹¹ Halperin, Russia and the Golden Horde, 46.

begin with a background of the Mongol people around the 13th century during the rise of Chingis (or Genghis) Khan and finish with the emergence of Muscovite Russia. Who were the Mongols? Were they similar to the Scythians whom we have examined in Chapter 1? Yes. As result of their nomadic lifestyle and steppe surroundings most nomadic cultures are quite similar in terms of clothing, lifestyle and warring methods. It should be no surprise that the Mongols would be more advanced than their nomadic forefathers, the Scythians, in such areas as weaponry and technology. However, the key to the Mongols' success was, according to Charles Halperin, their ability to integrate feudal, clan tribal, bureaucratic and imperial social structures and formulate new laws to cover new situations and cultures.¹¹² The result of these advancements was the ability to conquer more peoples and maintain a larger empire.

The Mongol tribe was, at first, only a minor tribe surrounded by many other nomadic peoples, including the Tatars, the Merkits, Naimans and Keraites north of China. They were a Central Asian tribe that, like many other nomadic peoples, had experienced expansion and reduction of their empire of hundreds of years to the point where the Mongols were not necessarily 'Mongolian' but were quite ethnically diverse, just like the Scythians and later Cossacks. Like most nomadic tribes across Central Asia and the steppes these tribes were believed to be Uralo-Altai and Turkic, even containing members of the Caucasian race.¹¹³ These tribes, like the Russian principalities, were also completely lacking unity or any administrative structure until around 1197 when Chingis Khan became leader of the Mongols and united the tribal confederations of nomads under the generalized group of "Mongols".¹¹⁴ He is credited with establishing the Great Yasa, or the system of customary Mongol laws. Although

¹¹² Halperin, 25.

¹¹³ George Vernadsky, The Mongols and Russia, Volume III of A History of Russia (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953), 12.

¹¹⁴ Chaliand, Nomadic Empires, 59-60.

few fragments of the codex exist, scholars have pieced together the laws that Mongols lived by from Persian, Latin and Chinese sources. They included to embrace and respect various religions of other peoples and to have no preference in such matters, to respect innocent, righteous and wise people, that envoys are to have diplomatic immunity, the democratic election of a great khan following the death of the ruler, that women were “to do the work and perform the duties of men, while the latter were absent fighting” and the punishment of those who do not abide by the Great Yasa.¹¹⁵ During the lengthy conquest of Rus’, the laws of the Great Yasa can be seen governing the Golden Horde’s behaviour towards their Russian subjects.

Chingis Khan established his authority by favouring the promotion of humble war chiefs from various tribes. In a relatively short period of time, Chingis applied strict administrative and military organization to the Mongols and thus created one of the most efficient war machines in the history of the early modern world.¹¹⁶ Like the Scythians and all major nomadic groups, the Mongols required sufficient pasture lands in order to support their nomadic existence and breed enough horses to mount their army. Expansion was both necessary economically and ideologically. Whenever the Mongols took a region or city, they significantly added to their number of soldiers and, thus, their number of horses rose substantially considering the number of mounts needed per warrior. In order to sustain their mounts, they were in continuous need of vast amounts of pasture. Another drive for conquest was that the Mongols under Chingis Khan believed in a concept similar to America’s Manifest Destiny: that by the will of their deity, the Eternal Sky, the Mongol Empire was preordained to establish order on earth.¹¹⁷ As David Morgan explains, “in their opinion any ruler who had not submitted to them, whether or not he had ever heard of the Mongols, had the status of a rebel against the divinely ordained

¹¹⁵ Vernadsky, *The Mongols and Russia*, 102-107.

¹¹⁶ Chaliand, 61.

¹¹⁷ Vernadsky, 95.

government of the world.”¹¹⁸ Like many pagan steppe nomads, the Scythians included, the Mongols believed that they were of divine origin and, therefore, had the authority to rule over others.¹¹⁹ Motivated by both territorial and ideological demands, the Mongols and their immense army managed to conquer the land stretching from China to the steppes of Hungary within thirty years.

The sheer rapidity and success of the Mongol conquests were due mostly to their military structure and tactics. Universal conscription, harsh discipline and egalitarianism shaped Mongol organization in such a way that their loyalty to both commander and cause was unyielding. Their conquests of various cultures and lands allowed the Mongols to adapt many useful techniques to their already successful military, such as wearing Chinese silk under their armour for easier removal of arrowheads from their flesh.¹²⁰ Mongol soldiers had the ability to ride for days on end, aided by the infamous steppe ponies discussed in Chapter 1, and their endurance only increased the effectiveness of swift movement and surprise attacks.¹²¹ The steppe horse was an integral part of the Mongols’ success and without the unique build and endurance of these shaggy horses the Mongol Empire perhaps would have been much smaller or conquered much more slowly. In 1241 it was reported that Mongol armies moved through the Carpathian Mountains in the depths of winter covering 60 miles a day while later records show that Kazakh horses could cover 66 miles in four and a half hours.¹²² Another important factor to their success was their nomadic lifestyle and use of the Eurasian steppe. The steppe was the Mongol’s highway, comparable to the modern railway enabling strategic, swift movement of supplies and

¹¹⁸ David Morgan, *The Mongols* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, Ltd., 1986), 136.

¹¹⁹ Vernadsky, *The Mongols in Russia*, 98.

¹²⁰ Donald Ostrowski, *Muscovy and the Mongols: Cross-Cultural Influences on the Steppe Frontier, 1304-1589* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 52.

¹²¹ Vernadsky, 111.

¹²² Ann Hyland, *The Horse in the Ancient World* (London: Praeger Publishers, 2003), 37.

troops across their vast empire at spectacular speed for their time. From their temporary camps in the plains “no Russian city was out of reach of easily mobilized nomadic punitive expeditions.”¹²³ This factor, combined with the Mongols’ sheer dominance in military matters, made the unprepared and disunited Rus’ principalities easy to conquer.

At the height of their power, the Mongols had at their disposal an estimated 800,000 troops armed with up to five remounts per soldier and newly developed composite bows.¹²⁴ This, of course, would be an estimate of total troops across the Eurasian continent, while the number of troops invading Europe is thought to be around 120,000.¹²⁵ Their tactics were brutal but effective. Once reaching a city the Mongols would send envoys to demand its surrender. If the city surrendered, it was allowed to maintain its ruling family and religion and in return for the Mongol’s military protection pay tribute of ten percent of all the city’s wealth and goods.¹²⁶ If the city refused (which it did usually by killing the Mongol envoys) the Mongols would retaliate with a vengeance. The Mongols considered the murder of their envoys a heinous crime committed against the steppe custom of diplomatic immunity; by committing such an act, a city was dooming itself.¹²⁷

Tactics used to incite terror were very effective weapons of the Mongol war machine. They anticipated that both survivors and refugees would spread word of the nomads’ conquests to parts of the world that would eventually be taken over, which was often the case. Rumours spread across Europe that Mongols ate dead bodies after battles, enjoyed eating elderly women,

¹²³ Charles J. Halperin, “Russia in the Mongol Empire in Comparative Perspective,” Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies, 43.1 (jun., 1983): 250.

¹²⁴ M.A. Groushko, Cossacks: Warrior Riders of the Steppes (New York: Sterling Publishing Company, Inc., 1992) 21.

¹²⁵ Vernadsky, 126.

¹²⁶ Jack Weatherford, Genghis Khan, 146.

¹²⁷ Halperin, Russia and the Golden Horde: The Mongol Impact on Medieval Russian History, 46.

gang-raped Christian virgins to death and then ate their breasts as delicacies at banquets.¹²⁸ The news of the Mongol atrocities in Rus' reached England and France, and even though Europe braced for a blow, the Mongol army stopped on the cusp of Central Europe and turned around. Although the Russians took pleasure in believing that it was their resistance that sent the Mongols running East, it was actually the death of the Great Khan Ugedei that caused Batu, a candidate to the throne, to head to the Mongol capital. There are rumours that Ugedei was poisoned by a distant sister-in-law – “This woman, whoever she was,” points out Vernadsky, “must be considered the savior of Western Europe.”¹²⁹ As a result, the Mongols reached as far as Hungary, and Russia succumbed to their rule for over two hundred years.

When the Mongols returned fifteen years after their initial contact with Russia in 1223, it took less than a year, between 1237 and 1238, for the Mongol army to take the cities of Riazan, Moscow and Vladimir.¹³⁰ The absurd rivalries between Russian princes and the resulting lack of unity of Russian principalities made Eastern Russia an easy target and an easier victory. Princes would not help one another against the Mongol invaders; instead, they would fortify their own cities, which ironically made it easier for the Mongols and their siege machines to conquer one city at a time and take an entire region.¹³¹ An account of the fall of Riazan reveals the overwhelming effectiveness of the Mongol's use of terror and siege warfare. The city was already walled and the Mongol army built another around the existing fortifications, trapping the people within their own city and ensuring that Riazan's army could not even face the Mongols in

¹²⁸ Weatherford, 155.

¹²⁹ Vernadsky, 58.

¹³⁰ Paul Harrison Silfen, The Influence of The Mongols on Russia: A Dimensional History (New York: Exposition Press, 1974), 13/14.

¹³¹ Silfen, The Influence of the Mongols on Russia, 13.

battle.¹³² An excerpt from *The Chronicle of Novgorod* describes a similar situation in the town of Torzhok:

And thence the lawless ones came and invested Torzhok on the festival of the first Sunday in Lent. They fenced it all round with a fence as they had taken other towns, and here the accursed ones fought with battering rams for two weeks. And the people in the town were exhausted and from Novgorod there was no help for them; but already every man began to be in perplexity and terror. And so the pagans took the town, and slew all from the male sex even to the female, all the priests and monks, and all stripped and reviled gave up their souls to the Lord in a bitter and wretched death.¹³³

By 1240 Kiev had fallen and was (for reasons unknown) almost completely destroyed compared to other Russian towns. A Franciscan monk, Plano Carpini, traveled through Kiev two years after the Mongol raid and recorded the alarming devastation that was still evident. Only 200 homes remained standing and bones were still strewn everywhere, the result of the slaughter of an estimated 200,000 people.¹³⁴

Northwestern Russian towns such as Novgorod were left untouched. Usually it is the harsh winter that helps Russian cities from attacks such as during the invasions of Napoleon and Hitler; however, it was the spring thaw that halted the Mongol army in their tracks. After all, the Mongols launched their campaigns against Russia only in winter in order to take advantage of crossing the frozen lakes and rivers, and they were quite used to the severity of the steppe and Siberian winters. “Winter,” Gerard Chaliand notes, “cost so many invaders of Russia dearly, but it proved for the Mongols to be highly favourable.”¹³⁵ An unexpectedly long siege in the south delayed the Mongols until the mud produced during the spring thaw was enough to halt the hundreds of thousands of mounted soldiers and their wagon trains. Novgorod, however, did not remain free of the Mongol Yoke but only from its physical destruction. By 1257 the city

¹³² Weatherford, *Genghis Khan*, 147.

¹³³ *The Chronicle of Novgorod*, 1238, p. 83.

¹³⁴ Silfen, 14-15.

¹³⁵ Chaliand, 6.

surrendered to Mongol demands and allowed them into the city's gates to perform a census. Prince Alexander Nevsky was "well aware what disaster armed resistance would bring on them" and therefore let the Mongols in, even suppressing an attack on the Mongols carried out by his own people.¹³⁶ By cooperating with the enemy, Nevsky saved the city of Novgorod from destruction and perhaps even saved all of Russia from further severe exactions. Nevsky "incorporated the Mongol factor into [Novgorod's] complex strategies to promote its independence by propitiating and manipulating greater powers."¹³⁷ This, as well as his brave wars against the Teutonic Knights and Swedes, immortalized Alexander Nevsky as a great Russian hero to be discussed later.

Following the death of Chingis Khan, the Mongol Empire was divided between his eldest sons by his first wife; the most western section was known as the Qipchaq Khanate, or more commonly, the Golden Horde initially inherited by Khan Batu.¹³⁸ The Mongol capital called Sarai was established in the steppes near the Volga basin and it was here upon Russia's submission where Russian princes were forced to travel to either plead their rights to the throne or renew their patents to rule. This capital was far from Russia, but because of Russia's proximity to the steppe, the Mongols had the ability to reach any rebelling Russian city in a short period of time with a vast army.

The Mongols did not rule over Russia directly as they did in China and most other parts of their empire, allowing the established Rurikid princes to reign in their principalities. This was a strange case in Mongol history and historians have only recently come to an agreement as to why Russia was left to itself compared to the rest of the Mongol Empire. Charles Halperin suggests that Russia remained relatively free from direct rule because it offered very little to the Mongol

¹³⁶ Vernadsky, 151.

¹³⁷ Halperin, Russia and the Golden Horde, 51.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 25.

Empire and was therefore not worth the energy or manpower. It was far from the Asian trade routes, was not located on the steppes and was no threat to Mongol hegemony.¹³⁹ The Mongols' aim was to extract as much from Russia as possible (via conscripts and tribute) with a minimum effort. Because the Mongols were vastly outnumbered by their subjects there were not enough of them to control the Russian population; thus it made sense to save their manpower and allow the established princes to rule in their place.¹⁴⁰ This gave the Russians the impression that, for whatever reason, they were unique and that their "Russian spirit" kept the Mongols at bay. They did not realize that Russia was simply not valuable enough for the Mongols to care.

Despite the appearance of a lengthy domination of Russia by the Mongols, the '200' year reign was similar to that of a farm with an absentee landowner. Due to growing internal instability within the Mongol Empire and the Golden Horde, the Mongols (later known as Tatars) were forced to pull more and more of their men from Russia and allow increased sovereignty to the Russian princes. Originally the Mongols sent Tatar tax-collectors to individual Russian towns to gather tribute, but further complications within the Golden Horde eventually forced the Mongols to grant a Russian prince with the title of Grand Prince of Vladimir to be in charge of tax collection and its deliverance to Sarai.¹⁴¹ The Qipchaq (or Golden Horde) khan appointed the title of Grand Prince, which led to deepened rivalries and disunity of Russia. The Mongols understood the danger of a unified Rus', and they purposely enhanced these rivalries to maintain instability and to safeguard their rule.¹⁴²

Undeniably, the aftermath of the Mongol conquest of Russia was catastrophic; however, no one would have predicted that Russia would emerge from the ashes of her razed cities a unified

¹³⁹ Halperin, 30.

¹⁴⁰ Silfen, 21.

¹⁴¹ Morgan, The Mongols, 143.

¹⁴² Silfen, 19.

nation and an ascending Eurasian great power. Contemporary accounts by foreign ambassadors even recorded the newly-liberated Russians as emerging better-off, to the point of being haughty and arrogant by the second half of the fifteenth century.¹⁴³ Overall it took Russia about a century to lift itself from the physical and economic depression left by the invasion.¹⁴⁴ Most of their craftsmen and artisans were rounded-up and transported to various parts of the empire, mostly China, for Mongol use; thus the hardest-hit areas of Russian culture were stone-work, pottery and cloisonné enamelling.¹⁴⁵ An unknown, but estimated immensely high, number of Russians were slaughtered or enslaved, crops were destroyed, livestock run off and many churches burnt.¹⁴⁶ Some towns that resisted were completely razed to the ground and their populations wholly annihilated either by death or enslavement, but, as mentioned above, many were also left standing without a scratch or person removed. Fortunately, the Russians recovered from the devastation of the Mongol attack relatively quickly considering the damage brought upon them. Perhaps it can be said that the reputation of the Russians for being a resilient and sturdy people, an image promoted by the Orthodox Church, began with their endurance and survival of the ‘Mongol Yoke’. George Vernadsky, an authority on the Mongols in Russia, stated that under Mongol rule “the spirit of the people was never broken,” a statement enhancing the image of the mythical Russian Soul.¹⁴⁷

Ironically, the simple fact that the Russian chroniclers were permitted to record the actions of their cruel, pagan Mongol overlords demonstrates the Mongols’ tolerance of the chosen religion of their Russian subjects. Ultimately the Mongols’ *laissez-faire* perspective on religion enabled the Russians to develop their identity as devoted Orthodox Christians and eventually

¹⁴³ Vernadsky, 382.

¹⁴⁴ Vernadsky, 340.

¹⁴⁵ Halperin, Russia and the Golden Horde, 76.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 76.

¹⁴⁷ Vernadsky, v.

inherit the title of ‘the Third Rome’ in the Christian world. The religious tolerance of the Mongols has been noted by historians since Chingis Khan established the Great Yasa, which encouraged all Mongols to respect the religions of others and not to give any religious preference to others.¹⁴⁸ Even after the Golden Horde converted to Islam in 1312, the Great Yasa continued to govern the Mongols’ policies toward the conquered.¹⁴⁹ Although many churches were destroyed during the initial invasion of Russia, many were eventually rebuilt and attributes of Orthodox art such as frescoes and icons, as well as Church singing, blossomed due to the prosperity of Mongol trade routes and religious toleration.¹⁵⁰ Churches and clerics were even exempted from taxation, allowing them to prosper and recover even more quickly than other Russian institutions.¹⁵¹ As Peter Jackson points out, the Mongol tolerance was strictly diplomatic and strategic in its purpose; they often banned certain religious practices that conflicted with steppe custom, such as the Muslim slaughter of animals or bathing in running water, but were still considerably tolerant of various religions in comparison to contemporary European and Islamic powers.¹⁵² The religious tolerance of the Mongols is another example of their hands-off approach to ruling Russia. Considering that the Mongols rarely personally collected tribute, allowed their subjects to worship freely, and left most principalities to govern themselves, the image of the strict and oppressive Tatar Yoke seems to dissipate.

In historiography there has been a general consensus that the Mongols were responsible for the subsequent five-hundred years of Russia’s ‘backwardness’ in comparison to Western Europe as well as Russia’s rise as an autocratic regime. It was thought that the devastation to Russian

¹⁴⁸ Vernadsky, 102.

¹⁴⁹ Laruelle, Russian Eurasianism: An Ideology of Empire, 72.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 380.

¹⁵¹ Halperin, Russia and the Golden Horde, 113.

¹⁵² Peter Jackson, “The Mongols and the Faith of the Conquered,” in Mongols, Turks, and Others: Eurasian Nomads and the Sedentary World (London: Brill, 2005): 260.

culture and its isolation from Europe during the Yoke resulted in a retardation of Russian technology, social progress and culture.¹⁵³ These claims have been re-examined in recent historiography; many historians have come to the conclusion that such allegations are false and that any positive attributes of the Mongols' influence were unacknowledged or vehemently denied in Russian history.¹⁵⁴ Reasons behind this shall be discussed below. Returning to the cultural impact of the Mongols, it cannot be denied that many authentic arts and artefacts of Kievan Rus were lost to the invasion; however, the introduction of Eastern cultural innovations tended to substitute whatever culture was destroyed. Modern archaeology has proven that Muscovy's art, for example, adopted Eastern techniques in ceramics, ornamentation, jewellery, and architecture.¹⁵⁵ It is also known that the Grand Princes of Vladimir would embezzle the surplus after collecting taxes in order to enrich themselves and their principalities, as well as rebuild infrastructures. Thus, because the Mongols became less and less involved in Russia's affairs, principalities (especially Moscow) were able to gain immense wealth and strength which would enable them eventually to liberate themselves from the rule of the Golden Horde.¹⁵⁶ Whether or not Muscovite Russia's emergence as an autocratic regime is to be blamed on the Mongols is still a topic of debate amongst historians.

After the Golden Horde's conversion to Islam in the fourteenth century, the Mongols were more commonly referred to as Tatars by the Russian population and the Western world (originally Tartars, from Tartarus, or hell). This also was due to the fact that the small number of Mongols had been assimilated by the steppe population of Turks and other nomadic tribes. This assimilation of the Mongols by their Muslim subjects contributed to the already increasing gap

¹⁵³ Ostrowsky, Muscovy and the Mongols, 3.

¹⁵⁴ Gammer, "Russia and the Eurasian Steppe Nomads: An Overview," 486.

¹⁵⁵ Leonid A. Beliaev, "The Eastern Contribution to Medieval Russian Culture", Mugarnas 16 (1999): 101.

¹⁵⁶ Halperin, Russia and the Golden Horde, 90.

between the Golden Horde and the original Mongol Khanate to the east. Tensions rose between the two khanates, even resulting in civil wars and internal instabilities within each khanate. This conversion to Islam also left Muscovite Russia as the only allegedly legitimate heir to the empire of the steppes, according to later Eurasian ideologists. In any case, the remaining nomads in the course of time became increasingly connected to ascending Muscovite Russia rather than the Muslim khanates.¹⁵⁷ The power of the Horde began to decline as early as 1270, and it is said that the Russians were already strong enough to free themselves from the Tatar Yoke by the end of the fourteenth century if they so wished – however, for reasons still debated today, the Russian princes continued to cooperate and send tribute to the Qipchaq khanate until the fifteenth century.¹⁵⁸

A very significant contributor to the Mongol Empire's decline (including that of the Golden Horde) was the plague: "The Plague had devastated the country, demoralized the living, and, by cutting off trade and tribute, deprived the Mongol Golden Family of its primary source of support."¹⁵⁹ This, along with a period of numerous wars, assassinations and overthrows of the throne known as "The Great Trouble", led quickly to the collapse of the centre and the steady demise of the entire empire. The Chronicle of Novgorod recorded in 1360 a "great tumult in the Horde" where several "tsars" and their families were killed.¹⁶⁰ Halperin explains that one of the reasons that the Mongols were able to control Russia for longer than it should have been was the Mongol's sovereignty on the steppe. They may have been weakening at the core, but the one area in which the Mongols could continue to control Russia was militarily; whenever there was a revolt, the Tatar army's proximity to Russia's cities made for swift suppression. The Mongols

¹⁵⁷ Laruelle, Russian Eurasianism, 72.

¹⁵⁸ Silfen, 35.

¹⁵⁹ Weatherford, 247.

¹⁶⁰ The Chronicle of Novgorod, 1360, 142.

were able to continue this only while the conditions on the steppe were favourable for their horses and their political centre was stable.¹⁶¹ It was during this time that Moscow developed as a future leader of Eastern Russia.

Most historians agree that the Tatar Yoke was responsible for the rise of Moscow as the strongest and most influential principality in Eastern Russia in the fifteenth century. This, in turn, was the first stage in the creation of a powerful Russian state. Thus, the Mongols played a major and positive role in Russian history. During the Tatar Yoke, Moscow became the traditional collaborator with its overlords and, as such, won the patent of Grand Prince of Vladimir most often out of the rivalling principalities.¹⁶² By cooperating with the Tatars, Moscow was patiently waiting to seize upon a more opportune moment of Mongol weakness both to free itself from draining taxation and expand its principality. According to Paul Silfen, there are four major causes of Moscow's rise:

- 1) It was located in an area of high commercial activity on the Moscow River.
- 2) Muscovite princes divided lands differently from other principalities in the sense that the eldest son received the largest allotment of land, allowing him to overcome all rivals and ensure stability.
- 3) The Mongols' influence in terms of commerce and administration increased the city's prosperity.
- 4) Moscow princes were most subservient to the Tatars, who would in turn favour and protect the princes by executing other princes who threatened Moscow.¹⁶³

A treaty signed between Moscow and Tver (its erstwhile rival) in 1375 recognized Grand Prince Dmitri of Moscow as suzerain of all East Russia except Riazan, and proved that Tatars no longer controlled political happenings between principalities and that they were losing control over their Russian subjects.¹⁶⁴ This led to the Battle of Kulikovo Field on 8 September 1380, a

¹⁶¹ Halperin, 31.

¹⁶² Halperin, Russia and the Golden Horde, 56.

¹⁶³ Silfen, 37-40.

¹⁶⁴ Vernadsky, 255.

victorious battle that would become immortalized as a great victory in Russian history. This did not free the Russians, however, and Moscow ended up being burnt down for its resistance by Khan Tokhtamysh in 1382, but a great civil war in the Golden Horde resulted in the breakup of the Horde and Russia's final rejection of Tatar rule shortly thereafter.¹⁶⁵ Russia, however, continued to pay tribute to the Great Horde until 1480 when Moscow fought for control of the Volga trade route (although both armies retreated without a battle) and won its liberty.¹⁶⁶

Moscow emerged as the undoubted dominant principality in Russia by the fifteenth century. By keeping their friends close but their enemies closer, the Muscovites were able to convince the weakening Horde to expand the Grand Duchy of Vladimir to the north and east. Once the Horde had fallen, this became Muscovite Russia.¹⁶⁷ The Mongols had mistaken the Muscovite princes' cooperation for loyalty and granted them too much power that eventually turned against the weakening Horde.¹⁶⁸ During the breaking up of the Golden Horde into the Great Horde, Moscow allied itself with different khanates of the steppe to strengthen its position among the Russian principalities as well as to secure its hold as a military power of the region.¹⁶⁹ As much as Russian chroniclers and patriotic historians like to insist that Moscow defeated Mongol power by use of military might, Silfen reminds us that Moscow's rise was a mixture of coincidence, patience and timing: "The Golden Horde simply disintegrated internally, leaving Russia high, dry, and defenceless before the one remaining strong power in their midst, the power residing in the former deputies of the Mongols, the grand dukes of Moscow."¹⁷⁰ Because Moscow was the richest and most powerful principality at the time of the Horde's decline, it was

¹⁶⁵ Halperin, Russia and the Golden Horde, 56.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 59.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 206.

¹⁶⁸ Silfen, 52-53.

¹⁶⁹ Halperin, Russia and the Golden Horde, 59.

¹⁷⁰ Silfen, 88.

predictable that the Grand Prince of Moscow would claim succession to the Golden Horde and snatch up its subjects when it could no longer defend them. Perhaps by witnessing the success of the Mongol centralized system of rule, Russian princes realized quite early that one principality could rule the rest politically. Once the Tatars were removed it was Moscow that had the allies, treaties and military strength to take control of Russia and rule over what was once an infamously fragmented realm.

Upon its succession, Moscow diplomatically claimed that it was the successor to the downfallen Qipchaq Khanate and Ivan III was the first to call himself 'tsar', a term the Russians used to address the khans. It is believed that the Russian prince's initial adoption of the term 'tsar' was to keep possible usurpers at bay by claiming to be both a legitimate Chingisid ruler as well as to establish a possible relation to Augustus Caesar to appease the Orthodox Church.¹⁷¹ Thus the title Tsar placated both religious and secular subjects of the newly established Muscovite Russia and the multi-ethnic people within it. It also enabled Moscow to continue collecting tribute from Central Asian tribes under the former Horde's control.¹⁷² Moscow inherited many features of its Mongol overlords during the Tatar Yoke and continued to practise many of them until the reign of the Westernizing tsar Peter the Great in the late seventeenth century, a tsar whose absolute monarchy had the features of Oriental despotism. The most obvious influences were in administration and the military. The Boyar council and the dual-circuit administration process were borrowed; as well the *mestnichestvo* system (a feudal hierarchy system based on ancestry and origins) was one of the most important Mongol influences that determined the order of the ruling class until 1682.¹⁷³ Militarily the Muscovites adapted Mongol tactics such as their formations, the use of a large cavalry as well as use of the

¹⁷¹ Ostrowski, 182-183.

¹⁷² Halperin, Russia and the Golden Horde, 100.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, 47.

short stirrup and the composite bow; Grand Prince Dmitri even defeated Khan Mamai at Kulikovo by using Mongol attack strategies.¹⁷⁴

Economically the Russian townships flourished during the Mongol conquest. Because the Mongols altered the trade routes around the steppes, many cities and towns prospered from commerce and newly established trade, making it possible to rebuild bigger and better than before.¹⁷⁵ Not only did Moscow benefit from access to both Oriental and Western trade, but the Mongols also protected the Baltic and Volga river routes, bolstering Novgorod's trade immensely and enriching the city.¹⁷⁶ Other major areas of Mongol influence were linguistic, commercial and social interaction (such as trade, ceremonial and methods of diplomacy), methods of taxation, criminal punishment and the postal service.¹⁷⁷ Rejected were the census (because it insulted the aristocracy by not discriminating between them and the peasantry) and most practices of nomadic egalitarianism that were inconsistent with either the privileges of the aristocracy or the beliefs of the Church. A Russian sense of identity emerged when the Russians were forced to determine which Mongol institutions could be applied to serve their needs or religion and which could not.¹⁷⁸ By mixing Kievan, Byzantine and Mongolian practises a unique 'Muscovite' regime was formed and it would continue to blend these influences until the seventeenth century.

Mongol Acceptance in Russian History and Society

“Scratch a Russian and you will find a Tatar.”

¹⁷⁴ Ostrowski, 51.

¹⁷⁵ Donald Otrowski, Muscovy and the Mongols, 132.

¹⁷⁶ Halperin, Russia and the Golden Horde, 81.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 90/91.

¹⁷⁸ Halperin, Russia and the Golden Horde, 95.

- Napoleon Bonaparte.¹⁷⁹

Recently, academics have come to a general consensus that history has been unfortunately dismissive of the Mongols' influence and impact on Russian society and the rise of Muscovite Russia. There are many theories as to why. The period of Mongol rule in Russia has been treated by past Russian historians and scholars alike as either completely irrelevant to the rise of Muscovy, or as a period of time with only negative impacts on Russian society. Richard Pipes states that "the subject of Mongol influence is a very sensitive one for Russians, who are quick to take offence at the suggestion that their cultural heritage has been shaped in any way by the orient, and especially by the oriental power best remembered for its appalling atrocities and the destruction of great centres of civilization."¹⁸⁰ This sentiment is strong in collective Russian memory and still holds true across the world when one thinks of the word 'Mongols'. Both Western and Russian literature have expressed anti-nomadic and Noble Savage sentiments towards the nomads under the influence of Orientalism, as will be seen in a few excerpts examined below. Religion also plays an immense part in the perception of Mongols, Tatars and subsequent nomadic tribes that roamed the Russian steppes.

The period of the Mongol Yoke up to the ascendance of Peter the Great was actually very tolerant, if not accepting, of Tatars in secular Russian society. For a time, all things Mongol or Tatar (especially ancestors) became attractive to the Russians; as such, the Tatars were also held in high esteem to the point that Tatar princes and Chingisids were only second in ranking to the tsar himself.¹⁸¹ During the reign of Peter the Great, however, the Tatars lost their status due to the fact that they were far from anything resembling Europeanness or Western notions of

¹⁷⁹ Figes, *Natasha's Dance*, 361.

¹⁸⁰ Otrowski, *Muscovy and the Mongols*, 11.

¹⁸¹ Isvan Vasary, "Clans of Tatar Descent in the Muscovite Leite of the 14th-16th Centuries," in *Turks, Tatars and Russians in the 13th-16th Centuries* (Hampshire: Ashgate, 2007), 110.

progress. The Orthodox Church had been allied against the ‘heathens’ and infidels from the beginning, but it was not until Peter’s reign that the Church had the freedom to promote its anti-Tatar sentiments to the Russian people via such things as education. Peter’s plan to transform Russia into the Window to the West did not include Mongols and Tatars. The result would be the loss of prestige and respect for the Tatars and other nomads, and the rise of blatant anti-Tatarism in Russia.

Recent research has led to the re-examination of relations between sedentary and nomadic peoples in history and it has been widely agreed upon by historians that, like all relationships, cohabitation between nomads and settled people was complex and quite accommodating. It is ridiculous to assume that societies would not be shaped by those around them in some ways, yet Russian history has denied Mongol influence.¹⁸² Pre-invasion relations between Slavs and nomads were cooperative and co-dependent until the Mongol invasion, when relations between the two groups disintegrated and popular opinion of steppe nomads crumbled.¹⁸³ During the actual Mongol/Tatar ‘yoke’, there were wavering levels of reception for the Mongols in Russian society. There were two main representative bodies that held prominent disagreeing opinions of Mongols: The Orthodox Church and the secular state. In simple terms, there are basically two histories of the Mongols in Russian history recorded by two different authors. Due to the fact that secular sentiment would be much more short-lived than the Church’s impact, first I shall examine the acceptance of Mongols by the secular state (or Russian princes and principalities).

Because Russian princes were dependent on Sarai for their thrones, income and protection, their cooperation and incorporation with their Mongol overlords was strategic and

¹⁸² Ostrowski, Muscovy and the Mongols, 14.

¹⁸³ Halperin, Russia and the Golden Horde, vii.

expected. There are, of course, examples of resistance to their oppressors, but for the most part, Russian princes were preoccupied with competing with *each other* for the title of Grand Prince of Vladimir and other privileges granted by the khans. To increase their favour at Sarai, Russian princes “sought to identify themselves with Mongol interests in a variety of ways” such as marrying Mongol or Tatar princesses, joining Mongol military expeditions and assisting the Mongols in suppressing Russian uprisings.¹⁸⁴ These activities highly incorporated Mongols and their customs into Russian aristocratic society.

Records show that during the later years of the Tatar Yoke and the Muscovite period, being Tatar or of Chingisid descent was an honourable status and it became a short-lived fad amongst Russian nobility that would never again be revived. As result, a high number of Tatar aristocracy and Chingisids entered into Russian services.¹⁸⁵ Tolerance, or even acquaintance, of Tatars amongst the Russian nobility must have been widespread. Secular Muscovy saw itself as a successor to the Golden Horde and its lands, not as the successor of the Byzantine Empire or Kievan-Rus, as the Orthodox Church did.¹⁸⁶ This belief, combined with the increased numbers of Tatars entering the Russian service, altered the components of the aristocracy and the people surrounding the Russian “tsar.” Russian men began competing with the influx of Chingisids and Tatar princes for the highest social positions in the service; as a result, many Russian families began to invent or alter their ethnic backgrounds in order to appeal to the tsar, who used a Genealogical Directory to appoint his officials.¹⁸⁷ Tsar Boris Godunov’s family claimed Tatar descent; some believe this ethnic background was invented during the time when Boris became

¹⁸⁴ Silfen, 29-30.

¹⁸⁵ Vasary, “Clans of Tatar Descent ,” 107.

¹⁸⁶ Ostrowski, Muscovy and the Mongols, 187.

¹⁸⁷ Vernadsky, 369.

tsar in order to give him legitimacy as a ruler over his subjects.¹⁸⁸ Tatars benefitted immensely upon entering the Russian service by gaining land grand privileges and arranging beneficial marriages to Russian noble women.¹⁸⁹ This competition for social standing resulted in the adjustment of hundreds of family names and ethnic backgrounds. As Ostrowski points out, “Descent from Russia’s bitterest political and religious enemies was considered honourable and even desirable.”¹⁹⁰ It is even believed that Muscovite nobility would lose their status if they attempted to deny their authentic (non-Western) Russian ancestry.¹⁹¹ As Isvan Vasary points out, having a high-ranking ancestor (i.e. being a Chingisid) was more important during the sixteenth century than your race or ethnicity.¹⁹² Strangely enough, being Russian became unfashionable among the nobility during this period, while having Lithuanian, German and Tatar roots was highly acceptable, leading to fabricated family histories of migration.¹⁹³

While Russians were flocking to become more Tatar, the Tatars were busy adopting Russian names and obscuring their heritage. Like many immigrants (even today), the Tatars changed their names in order to fit into Russian society, despite the popularity of Tatar surnames and ethnic background.¹⁹⁴ Usually following a conversion to Orthodoxy, “once a Tatar prince entered into Russian service his pagan past was forgiven him.”¹⁹⁵ Historians agree that this concealment of Tatar or Mongol heritage on behalf of the actual Tatar and Mongol people indicates that their numbers in society were actually higher than paper records show, thus proving that Tatars were even more included in society than previously thought. Some estimate

¹⁸⁸ Vasary, “Clans of Tatar Descent,” 105.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 100.

¹⁹⁰ Ostrowski, Muscovy and the Mongols, 112.

¹⁹¹ Ostrowski, 57.

¹⁹² Isvan Vasary, “Russian and Tatar Genealogical Sources on the Origin of the Iusupov Family,” in Turks, Tatars, and Russians in the 13th-16th Centuries (Hampshire: Ashgate Publishing Ltd., 2007), 745.

¹⁹³ Vasary, “Russian and Tatar Genealogical Sources,” 744.

¹⁹⁴ Ostrowski, Muscovy and the Mongols, 58.

¹⁹⁵ Vasary, “Russian and Tatar Genealogical Sources,” 745.

as high as twenty percent of the Russian aristocracy were of Tatar blood in the sixteenth century.¹⁹⁶ Although the anti-Tatar sentiments of the Church began to have a stronger influence on the Russian public, Chingisids and Tatar princes would hold prestigious status in court well into the eighteenth century, with some cases of noble status granted to Chingisid descendants in the 1800s.¹⁹⁷

Running parallel to the secular popularity of Tatars in Russian society was the Orthodox Church's anti-Tatar sentiments. Mainly due to the pagan and subsequent Muslim religions of the Mongols and Tatars, the Church's level of tolerance towards them was low, if not outright non-existent from the time of the Mongol invasion to the twentieth century. Modern concepts of anti-Tatarism and of Tatar oppression were founded by Orthodox churchmen following the demise of the Golden Horde. Although secular sources recorded Ivan III's adoption of the term tsar, implying Muscovy as the successor to the Golden Horde, Church records left it out, suggesting Russia's tsars were the descendants Augustus Caesar, an ancestor much more suitable to the Church's beliefs than that of an infidel state.¹⁹⁸ In the sixteenth century, the Church purposely inflated the memory of the oppressive and destructive parts of the Tatar Yoke in order to rewrite history and destroy the links between Russia and its infidel past. To do this, the Church "construct[ed] concepts of the terrible 'Tatar Yoke', Muscovite resistance and the effort to reunite and liberate Russia."¹⁹⁹ As examined above, examples of intrinsic fabrication and purposeful neglect are the Chronicle of Novgorod and the Nikonian Chronicle. Events portrayed in these ancient Russian chronicles were all recorded by churchmen; thus it can be safely

¹⁹⁶ Halperin, 111.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., 101.

¹⁹⁸ Ostrowski, Muscovy and the Mongols, 183.

¹⁹⁹ Gammer, 489.

assumed that the opinions held in them were based on the above-mentioned sentiments as well as the “ideology of silence” suggested by Charles Halperin.

Halperin insists that because “the very existence of pragmatic relations with infidels violated the fundamental and immutable thrust of the exclusivist religions of Christians and Islam,” Russian chroniclers preferred to stay mute about Tatar influence on Russian society or any cooperation between the Russians and Tatars in their documentation.²⁰⁰ He also puts forth the notion that the “ideology of silence” had existed between Christians and Muslims for centuries across Europe and the Middle East and that “in neither Christianity nor Islam did any theory, no matter how sophistic, ever legitimize the borrowing of institutions from adherents of an infidel faith.”²⁰¹ Rather than attempt to rationalize the conquest of their lands, Russian chroniclers presented the Mongol rule as a simple continuation of Russo-nomad steppe relations, throwing a veil over intellectual implications of Mongol hegemony.²⁰² The earliest representations of the Mongols in Russian history came from contemporary chronicles recording annual events from different principalities, including the Chronicle of Novgorod and the Nikonian Chronicle. Russian bookmen were particular about what was entered in these chronicles mostly due to their religion. By ignoring peaceful cooperation with heathen or pagan Mongols they safeguarded the Christian ideological foundations of early Russian society and depicted their own Russian princes as the defenders of Christianity.²⁰³ As a result, the only entries depicting Mongol or Tatar actions were negative and undeniably biased: “The Kievan

²⁰⁰ Halperin, “The Ideology of Silence”, 465.

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 465.

²⁰² Halperin, Russia and the Golden Horde, 8.

²⁰³ *Ibid.*, 62.

bookmen treated the nomads with unequivocal hostility and carefully recorded raids and atrocities while ignoring equally significant peaceful cooperation.”²⁰⁴

The result of the silence in contemporary sources is that only the negative events, such as raids, wars and murders, were documented. Also, credit is taken from the Mongols in that the chroniclers suggest that Mongol withdrawal or the escape of Novgorod were gifts from God rather than the historical facts. The “ideology of silence” combined with the alliance between the Byzantine Church and the Golden Horde meant that the Orthodox Church was restricted in its ability properly to record events between Mongols and Russians; unfortunately for later historians, the major primary sources of the time period were these biased accounts, some of which were edited, censored and arranged by churchmen and tsarist officials.²⁰⁵ How much the Mongol or Tatar actually impacted Russian history and society was therefore diminished, hidden or denied in contemporary accounts, which would later affect Russian popular sentiment towards them. Moshe Gammer states that “No matter how disastrous the Mongol conquest and how oppressive the Tatar rule was, it is clear that their memory was purposely inflated and prompted into a central place in Russian collective memory.”²⁰⁶ Gammer believes that there were two purposes behind the negative constructs of the Mongols’ image in Russian history. The first was to erase the memory of any collaboration between the Russians and their Mongol-Tatar rulers, and the second was to delegitimize the lure of freedom of the nomadic way of life in order to deter the flight of runaway outlaws, serfs and debtors to the steppes.²⁰⁷

One of Russia’s most ancient poems, *The Zadonshchina*, was written in approximately 1393 and is attributed to Sofronii of Riyazan. The poem is a contemporary example of the

²⁰⁴ Halperin, *Russia and the Golden Horde*, 19.

²⁰⁵ Silfen, 68.

²⁰⁶ Gammer, 488/489.

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 489/490.

rewriting of the Mongol reign that glorifies Grand Prince Dmitri Donskoi and the Battle of Kulikovo and patriotically rallies the “sons of Russia” to continue to fight against their Tatar overlords. Repeatedly, the Tatars are referred to as grey wolves and the Russian soldiers as birds: “Grey wolves howl: they wish at the river Mecha to invade the Russian land. Those are not grey wolves: the infidel Tatars have come...”²⁰⁸ Like a defeated predator, Khan Mamai is described as howling like a grey wolf upon his retreat. Once again upon victory, the Russian prince is depicted as the upholder of Christianity; Grand Prince Dmitri “by his own bravery and with his *druzhina* retinue vanquished pagan Mamay for the sake of the Russian land and the Christian faith.”²⁰⁹ The poem also claims that Russia was united against the reign of the Tatars; however, we now know that this is not true, for many principalities (mainly Moscow) had previously allied themselves with the Golden Horde and even fought wars for the Tatars. We also know that both the Lithuanians and the army of Tver failed to arrive and support Moscow’s army.²¹⁰

After 1480, Muscovite Russia expanded its territory to the south and absorbed even more Tatars and nomads into their midst, either through conquest or Tatars voluntarily migrating into Russian territory. Many Russians that lived near the steppe had Tatar blood in their veins due to intermarriage as settlement in the Volga region increased.²¹¹ As mentioned above, the Tatars held relatively high status in the Russian service for centuries after the fall of the Golden Horde; however, Russia still faced problems concerning the steppe nomads. Slave raids continued to terrorize unprotected Russian towns near the steppe, while simultaneously criminal and runaway serfs were fleeing to the steppe to join the ranks of some of these nomadic tribes or, eventually,

²⁰⁸ Sofroniy of Ryazan, *The Zadonshchina*, in *Anthology of Russian Literature From the Earliest Period to the Present Time*, ed. and trans. Leo Wiener, Pt. 1 (New York, 1902), pp. 58-6. < http://www.shsu.edu/~his_ncp/Zadon.html > (January 11, 2009).

²⁰⁹ Ibid.

²¹⁰ Halperin, *Russia and the Golden Horde*, 56.

²¹¹ Bertold Spuler, *The Mongols in History*, trans. Geoffrey Wheeler (London: Pall Mall Press, 1971), 131.

the Cossacks.²¹² In an attempt to deal with the Crimean khanate, Kazhans and other nomadic people, the tsarist government played on their title as successor to the Golden Horde to settle tensions diplomatically. It was profitable to play on the image as the successor state and to remain sensitive to steppe traditions of rule,²¹³ and the fact that many Turkish and Mongol tribes saw the Russian tsars as successors of the Mongol khans was favourable psychologically for Russia's imperial expansion.²¹⁴ Tsars would act as khan, "laying claim to being the successor of the Mongol khan who ruled by divine right and therefore did not need to enter into agreements with the leaders of implicitly subject societies."²¹⁵ The idea that Muscovy was the successor state to the Golden Horde was strong in secular Russia, but denied by the Church, which chose to associate Russia with the Byzantine Empire, especially after the Byzantine Empire collapsed, causing Russia to become the 'Third Rome', the only remaining core of Orthodox Christianity. Thus, once again, the secular and religious sectors of Russian society were at odds regarding the influence (or in this case, ancestry) of the Mongols and Tatars.

By the end of the 1500s anti-Tatarism was operating in full-force and both the Mongols and their nomadic descendents were viewed as an evil that needed to be resisted – Tatars became the cause of grief and destruction in Russia and would hold such responsibility until the end of the twentieth century. In fact, the term "Tatar Yoke" did not enter Russian vocabulary until the 1660s.²¹⁶ When Russia became the motherland of the Orthodox Church following the collapse of the Byzantine Empire, opposition and tensions between the settled Christians and the nomadic Muslims rose severely.²¹⁷ Once they no longer ruled, the Mongols' reign was recorded and

²¹² Vernadsky, 389.

²¹³ Halperin, Russia and the Golden Horde, 100.

²¹⁴ Vernadsky, 389.

²¹⁵ Ostrowski, Muscovy and the Mongols, 97.

²¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 244.

²¹⁷ Gammer, 490.

regarded as illegitimate because only a Christian could rule the Russians. The sixteenth century represented a “reinvention of Russian liberation,” admitting to Mongol rule but over-emphasizing Russia’s “liberation” and the heroic battles fought by martyrs to set them free.²¹⁸ Remembering the horror that their forefathers lived through incited in the Russians “a fiery devotion to the national ideal... as a reaction against the depressing awareness of national humiliation.”²¹⁹ The past began to be idealized and in order to do so Russia needed to rid itself of what was foreign and hostile and, instead, more closely associate itself with Orthodoxy. At the end of the sixteenth century, Russian chronicles and histories of the Mongol reign became “myth[s] of pious, holy and Christian liberation from the perfidious, cruel, and godless Tatars.”²²⁰ These scribes and chroniclers were taken at their word by Russians and later historians, believing that the Tatars were aliens “whose ways the Russians neither understood nor wished to understand.”²²¹ By the seventeenth century education within Russia was completely church-based; therefore, Church ideology forever determined subsequent historical representation and understanding of Muscovy and the Mongols, dictating that the Tatars and Mongols were pagan barbarians and the glorious Muscovite princes had liberated the Russians from their oppressive yoke.²²²

Peter the Great’s westernization policies, as well as the expansion of Russia to the East and South, signified the diminished need for the Russian government to concern itself with steppe traditions and principles. Thus, Tatars and Chingisids lost large parts of their prestigious status in society (although some Chingisids were respected and held noble status until the

²¹⁸ Halperin, *Russia and the Golden Horde*, 72.

²¹⁹ Nikolai Sergeevich Trubetzkoy, “The Legacy of Genghis Khan: A Perspective on Russian History Not from the West but from the East,” in *The Legacy of Genghis Khan and Other Essays on Russia’s Identity* (Ann Arbor: Michigan Slavic Publications, 1991), 177.

²²⁰ Ostrowski, 248.

²²¹ Halperin, *Russia and the Golden Horde*, 104.

²²² Ostrowski, 248.

nineteenth century). Once Russia's military superiority developed and re-conquered the steppes from those who had terrorized the Russian people, the government no longer needed to concern itself with steppe diplomacy.²²³ Russian tsars threw off the khanate mantle in place of a European one. The Russian elite began regarding itself as a part of Europe and, as such, adopted the Western notions of science and progress and, according to Robert Crews, Russian elites saw eastern expansion "as an affirmation of Russia's imperial glory and European Identity."²²⁴ The nomads became "asiatics" and "fanatics", and in a plight similar to that of the North American aboriginal people, faced devastating losses due to modern weaponry and the ruthlessness of Russian armies as the empire extended east.²²⁵

Europe, for the most part, did not regard the newly-established Muscovite empire favourably and rejected Russia as a backward society which "only multiplied Russian resolve to be part of Europe and intensified its rejection of everything non-European," especially anything Tatar.²²⁶ Like a sulking child, Russia blamed its backwardness on the cultural retardation caused by the Mongol Yoke, reinforcing the negative attitude towards the past and to nomads in general. As Fyodor Dostoevsky reiterated in the nineteenth century, "In Europe we are Tatars, but in Asia we too are Europeans."²²⁷ Russia's place as a Eurasian nation left the Russians in an ethnic and cultural limbo. Peter I's loathing for everything Russian took its toll on Russian culture and society during his drive for westernization. Peter "despise [d]everything that had been Russian from time immemorial, and scorn[ed] the Russian people as half-civilized dolts who had to be taught to be Europeans with a club."²²⁸ By adopting this westernizing concept, Peter completely

²²³ Halperin, Russia and the Golden Horde, 102.

²²⁴ Crews, 12.

²²⁵ Gammer, 494.

²²⁶ *Ibid.*, 493.

²²⁷ Laruelle, 3.

²²⁸ Trubetskoy, 202.

abandoned whatever Mongol institutions remained and replaced them with Western ones. As a result of Ivan IV's successful conquests of Kazan and Astrakhan, Russia's need for diplomatic relations with steppe nomads diminished and Peter turned his back on diplomatic relations with the steppes.²²⁹ Unfortunately for steppe nomads, Chingisids and descendents of the Golden Horde, such as the Kazan Tatars, and anything Oriental were perceived as opposed to progress and civilization; as such, images of the nomad and Russia's Mongol past descended even lower.

With the Enlightenment came anti-Asian sentiment that often focused on Mongols and was reflected in literature. Montesquieu condemned the people of Asia as the creators of despotism and repressive slavery,²³⁰ while Voltaire shared the common perception that anyone Eastern was uncivilized, barbaric and backwards. In his play *The Orphan of China* written in 1759, Genghis Khan and his Mongols are portrayed as bloodthirsty murderers that ravaged the civilized world. In Act I scene I, a conversation between two characters is as follows:

Asseli: He is called
 The king of kings, the fiery Genghis Khan,
 Who lays the fertile fields of Asia waste
 And makes it but a monument of ruin...

Idame: Knowest thou, my friend, that this destructive tyrant,
 Whom now we tremble at, who proudly thus
 Treads on the necks of kings, is yet no more
 Than a wild Scythian soldier, bred to arms
 And practised in the trade of blood; who long
 Had wandered o'er in the neighboring deserts, there
 Formed a rude band of lawless rioters...²³¹

Such perceptions from this period are not surprising nor in short supply. When Imperialism and Orientalism spread across the globe, the peoples subjugated by world powers were increasingly exploited in World Fairs, Expos, and other exotic displays that demonstrated the working of

²²⁹ Halperin, *The Ideology of Silence*, 463.

²³⁰ Weatherford, 254/255.

²³¹ Voltaire, "The Orphan of China" from *The Works of Voltaire, a Contemporary Edition* in 21 vols.

http://oll.libertyfund.org/?option=com_staticxt&staticfile=show.php%3Ftitle=2187&chapter=201391&layout=html&Itemid=27.

racial hierarchies and progress. However, there were literary odes to the nomads to contradict such negative academic perspectives. Samuel Coleridge, at the height of literary Romanticism, wrote a poem in 1798 dedicated to Kublai Khan (the grandson of Chingis) titled “Xanadu”. Romanticism, a movement championing independence, freedom and the love of nature, embraced figures such as Chingis Khan and the nomad. In “Xanadu”, Coleridge describes the exotic scenery of Kublai Khan’s summer home more so than he does the man, but a sense of awe and admiration is detected. There is, however, a hint that inhabiting this exotic land is a somewhat barbaric people – “A savage place! As holy and enchanted/ as e’er beneath the waning moon was haunted/ by woman wailing for her demon lover!”²³² Lord Byron, Coleridge’s contemporary and colleague, also referred fleetingly to Chingis Khan and the Tatars in *Don Juan*, remarking on their ability as a soldiers.

As with the Scythians, the introduction of (or infatuation with) Western notions of science dramatically altered Europe’s perception of race, conquest and civilizing missions, especially in the nineteenth century. With the categorization of races, the ‘Asian’ Mongols and Tatars were further detached from the Russians and increasingly viewed as alien, uncivilized ethnic groups. In terms of new scientific terminology emerging from Europe, civilizations based on pastoralism were considered elementary and a waste of resources.²³³ David Das discusses the impact of these newly introduced European notions on Russian historians and writers in his article “History Writing and the Quest for Fame in Late Muscovy.” In this paper, Das examines the book *The History of the Scythians* by Russian historian Andrei Lyzlov in 1692. In an attempt to convince the Russian government to wage war against the Crimean Khanate, Lyzlov, published the ‘history’ of nomads (Scythians, Mongols and Tatars) using extremely biased and

²³² Samuel Coleridge, “Kubla Khan”, 14-16 <http://rpo.library.utoronto.ca/poem/524.html>.

²³³ Gammer, 493.

generalizing accounts of cruelty with racist moralizing tales.²³⁴ Lyzlov urges the Russian government to invade the Crimean Khanate and civilize the Tatars; basically, Lyzlov gives the impression that by conquering this region, Russia would be doing the Tatars a favour by introducing them to progress and positive elements of Westernization.

Undoubtedly eastern expansion to Siberia, where distant successors of the Golden Horde still existed, and the many wars between Russia and the Ottoman Empire in the nineteenth century incited further discrimination towards both Turks and Tatars, especially when many Crimean Tatars fled to fight with the Turks. Scientific racism reached its peak in the nineteenth century and Asians found themselves the target of grotesquely inaccurate and racist descriptions. It was believed that all Asians originated in Mongolia and that, as the original race, Mongolians were behind developmentally and were even compared to Orangutans.²³⁵ The term ‘Mongoloid’ became a category of race, originally designated to describe Mongols, Inuit, Tibetans, Chinese, Turks and Japanese; however, when a medical doctor by the name of Downs saw a similarity between the facial features of Mongol people and Caucasian children born mentally handicapped, he assumed that the child’s parents were too closely related, producing a ‘Mongoloid’ child, whose maturity would forever be like a child, which scientists thought was a characteristic of the underdeveloped people of Mongolia.²³⁶ Thus the term Mongoloid was linked to mental retardation. “Atavistic Mongolism” blamed the Mongols for mental retardation and most crime and feeble-mindedness of the Western World, believed to be planted in Europeans via the rape of white women during the reign of the Mongol Empire.²³⁷ Once again, the Mongols

²³⁴ David Das, “History Writing and the Quest for Fame in Late Muscovy: Andrei Lyzlov’s History of the Scythians,” *Russian Review* 51.4 (Oct., 1992), 506.

²³⁵ Weatherford, 257.

²³⁶ *Ibid.*, 258.

²³⁷ *Ibid.*

found themselves to blame for the developmental progress of Western society, as they were with Russia's backwardness.

Against this scientific backlash, Slavophiles and Eurasianists perceived the Mongols' role in Russian history as both invaluable and a proud segment in their country's history. To the Eurasianist school, Mongols were a people who, like the Scythians, attempted to form a Eurasian state.²³⁸ George Vernadsky, the leading Russian Eurasianist, quotes the Mongol period as "one of the most significant epochs in the whole course of Russian history."²³⁹ Others accredit the Mongols with saving Muscovy from the "aggressive" designs of Western culture and Gumilev argues that, as Vernadsky suggests, the Mongol period should be seen as a positive, natural part of Russian history.²⁴⁰ Because Eurasianism seeks to define Russia as a distinctive, non-European civilization, the Mongol period of Russian history is especially attractive to them, and legitimizes their nation as having an Asian background. As heir to the Mongols, Russia established its identity, power and control over its present-day territory and distinctiveness. The Mongol period should be seen as a "founding moment of an autonomous Russian culture, the expression of an almost divine will that announced the uniqueness of Russia's fate."²⁴¹ The motto of the Eurasianist school ("in every Russian there is a drop of yellow blood") reveals their belief in the Muscovite empire as the successor to the Mongol one.²⁴² Because of the devotion of these two intellectual schools, an alternative theory on Muscovy's relationship with the Mongols was able to survive amongst the biased, church-based historical theories and the general concept of

²³⁸ Igor Torbakov, "Rethinking the Nation: Imperial Collapse, Eurasianism, and George Vernadsky's Historical Scholarship," 14.

²³⁹ Vernadsky, v.

²⁴⁰ Christer Pursiainen, "Eurasianism and Neo-Eurasianism: The Past, Present, and Postmodernity of a Russian Integration Ideology," *UPI Working Papers* 5 (1998), 9.

²⁴¹ Laruelle, *Russian Eurasianism*, 43.

²⁴² *Ibid.*, 38.

Eurasianism would be reintroduced to post-Soviet Russians to give meaning to their questionable past and unique national identity.

I will finish off this chapter with one sombre note of reality that shall summarize the acceptance of Mongols during Soviet times. As Jack Weatherford laments, during Stalin's anti-Mongolian campaign in the 1930s, 30,000 Mongolians were executed, most thought to be the descendants of Chingis Khan.²⁴³ Stalin, who perceived Mongolia to be a potential hot-bed of nationalism, regarded the image and glorification of Chingis Khan as a threat to the stability of his reign. As a result, entire families were shot, thousands were exiled to gulags (prison camps) and monks were murdered, while religious objects were destroyed and ancient libraries torched.²⁴⁴ The Soviet purges in Mongolia destroyed an entire generation of Chingisids, linguists, historians and archaeologists that could have contributed greatly to the study of Mongols and the history of the Mongol Empire. It is an unfortunate void that is only now beginning to be filled.

The invaluable research conducted by Eurasianists, as well as the groundbreaking archaeological motivations of the Orientalists, have allowed revisionists and modern historians to explore multiple aspects of Muscovite history under the Mongols, such as the complex and cooperative economic, social and political relationships between the two groups. Today historians agree that the stereotypical perspective of the Mongol 'yoke' as a barbaric, oppressive and brutal reign is incorrect, and that the Muscovites were the freest subjects in the Mongol Empire, allowed to govern, collect their own taxes and war amongst themselves. As with all relationships, that between the Mongols/Tatars and the Muscovite people was far more complex than a contemporary chronicle or nineteenth-century poem can convey. Not long after they

²⁴³ Weatherford, 264.

²⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, xvii.

severed their relationship with their Tatar overlords, the Muscovites found themselves establishing a new one with another group of Tatar-like nomads. The recently established administration of the Muscovite tsars was faced with slave raids and attacks from the remnants of the Golden Horde that existed in the Crimean Khanate and on the steppes as marauding bands. As it turned out, the only way to fight the Tatars was to hire Tatars of their own: the Cossacks.

Chapter 3: The Cossacks in Russian History and Society

The final chapter of this thesis examines a group of semi-pastoral people that have eluded social taming as well as historical clarity and have escaped concrete definition since their mysterious entrance into the historical record. The Cossacks, those mischievous, rag-tag horsemen, are bigger mythical heroes to Russians than historical ones. Where they came from and who their ancestors were are questions that historians are still attempting to answer. The reality is that the Cossacks cannot be specifically defined or traced back to one certain ancestor – they are, in fact (even today), a group of miscellaneous cowboys who volunteer to live the Cossack way of life. They are neither an ethnic group nor a nationality - they are members of a rough, unofficial trade of armed forces with a unique lifestyle, so to speak. Cossackdom could simply be described as a specific nomadic existence, possibly signifying that Cossackdom as a way of living is actually thousands of years old; yet only within the last five centuries has Cossackdom become inseparable from a specific stereotype of uniquely Slavic steppe banditry.

Unlike the Scythians and the Mongols, the Cossacks could never completely be disengaged from Russia due to their traditional loyalty to the Orthodox Church (among other binding features). Whereas Tatars and Scythians were seen as infidels, pagans, and heathens, the Cossacks could be regarded as the defenders of not only the Russian empire, but of Orthodox Christianity. Even if they (as they often) wanted to, the Cossacks could not detach themselves from either Russia or Ukraine. The Cossacks, who became renowned for their fierce loyalty to the tsar, became so enveloped in myth and stereotypes in modern times that their past sins have been forgiven, purposely forgotten or avoided in collective memory. Compared to the unfortunate reverse reputation of the Mongols in contemporary Russia, the Cossacks have been

over-glorified in order to assist in the rebuilding of a nation that is longing to return to its pre-revolutionary ideals. When Russia emerged from the post-Soviet era the sudden void in a state ideology left the Russian people without any certain identity. What is a Russian in post-Soviet times? With the resurgence of folklore emerging around the 1960s, Cossack dance and music began to re-emerge more strongly than ever, and with the fall of Communism, Cossackry was exuberantly re-established and the Russians (Cossack or not) found something ‘Russian’ to claim as their own and define them in the world. Cossacks in the post-Soviet era became the perfect ancestor and more importantly, the perfect Russian.

This chapter will attempt, at least, to loosely define the Cossacks and describe their history in Russia and the role that the Cossacks play(ed) in forming and defining the Russian people. Unlike our previous two subjects of study, the Cossacks are not denied their considerable role in Russian society and are a shining, admirable ancestor for millions of people. Regardless of how misleading the Cossack myth may have become, its binding power is considerable in regards to nation-building in Ukraine and in post-Soviet Russia, although this chapter will be examining mainly the Don and Kuban Cossacks, not the Zaporozhian Cossacks of the Ukraine. In a country scrambling to find an identity, the steadfast, unique culture of the Cossacks has attracted descendents of all backgrounds and filled the identity void that the Soviet regime left behind.

The Cossacks

The Cossack demands our attention, so that even his murderous force is compelling.

- Judith Deutch Kornblatt, 1992.²⁴⁵

²⁴⁵ Judith Deutch Kornblatt, The Cossack Hero in Russian Literature: A Study in Cultural Mythology (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), 19.

As mentioned above, who the Cossacks were and how they originated is still the subject of a major argument among today's historians. It is believed that the Cossacks emerged as a noticeably separate group from Turks, Mongols and Tatars around the fifteenth century; they were most likely ethnically diverse bands of 'free warriors' who lived under the power of neither Tatar, Polish, nor Muscovite authorities.²⁴⁶ According to historical tradition, Cossacks were originally refugee fugitives and peasants fleeing from the restraints of the law and the chains of serfdom to establish lawless bands on the steppes; however, modern historians have deconstructed this myth and established quite strongly that the Cossacks existed before this peasant exodus to the steppes and were, rather, already an established protective base for such refugees to flee to.²⁴⁷ W.G. Glaskow argues that the fugitive myth was created under Nicholas I in order to "destroy the idea of the independent origin...thus strengthening the basis for Russifying the Cossacks" and "depriving them of all remnants of their former sovereignty."²⁴⁸ Under the Turkic terms *kazaq* or *qazaq*, Cossacks have been mentioned in the historical record as early as the Mongol invasions, mainly because they were already an established frontier element at the time. The first report of Cossacks in Russian history took place in the winter of 1444 when a militia (including so-called Cossacks) were sent by the Muscovite Grand Prince Vasily Vasilievich to repel Tatar raids near Riazan – as Shane O'Rourke amusingly points out, the Cossacks were introduced to Russian history on skis.²⁴⁹ Here, it can be seen that the Cossacks were already being hired for their military prowess by Russian princes to defend their borderland settlements.

²⁴⁶ Philip Longworth, *The Cossacks* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969), 13.

²⁴⁷ W.G. Glaskow, *History of the Cossacks* (New York: Robert Speller & Sons, Publishers, Inc., 1972), 5.

²⁴⁸ Glaskow, *History of the Cossacks*, 17.

²⁴⁹ Shane O'Rourke, *The Cossacks* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), 27.

Assuming that the Cossack way of life had existed on the steppes for thousands of years, what made the ‘Russian’ Cossacks a distinct people from the other nomads roaming the area at the time? In truth, similar to the Scythians and Mongols, it was that they (unlike many nomadic groups at the time) had no ethnic, national or cultural allegiance. That they were virtually created from a mixture of ethnicities, religions and backgrounds over a relatively short period of time in a concentrated region makes them rather unique. It is exactly this diversity and how they came together that becomes a significant element in later Russian history because it becomes practically impossible for any nation to claim the ‘Cossacks’ as their own or as their ancestor or founder, even though ‘descendants’ would try anyway. It can be said that their one binding feature eventually became their devout loyalty to Orthodox Christianity; however, it would be difficult to put forward that the early Cossacks of the fifteenth century had any religious cohesion. There were, most likely, Muslim Turks in their midst, along with any number of religious variances. Together, Tatars, Turks *and* Russians formed defensive (as well as looting) bands on the expanding borders. The scarcity of fifteenth century documents on these early *kazaks*, as well as the lack of description in early accounts, ensures that historians never knew who made up these bands, but the fact that their *raison d’être* was a trade rather than an ethnic fraternity was an affirmation of their mixed camp. As Shane O’Rourke explains, “the profession of *qazaq* was open to all who were able to follow it and ethnicity was no barrier to membership. *Qazaq* was not an ethnic label but a trade reminiscent of the original meaning of *viking*.”²⁵⁰ They lived the life of the steppe nomad but were used as border guards and guides to help envoys and merchants cross the steppes in safety, protected from Turkish and Tatar raiders.²⁵¹

²⁵⁰ O’Rourke, *The Cossacks*, 29.

²⁵¹ Longworth, *The Cossacks*, 14.

In the fifteenth century, the steppe became known as *dikoe pole*, or the “wild field”. Following the demise of the Golden Horde, banditry on the steppes went unchecked and its ranks of criminals swelled with remnants of the Horde. These horrifying slave raids that fed southern slave markets rapidly caused the depopulation of the steppes as Eastern Slavic settlers fled back to the cities under closer protection of their princes and tsars. The separation of families, public raping of women and forced circumcision of young boys, combined with the fact that hundreds of thousands of Slavs were kidnapped for the Ottoman slave markets within two centuries (Guilamme Le Vasseur recorded 50,000 within two weeks), became too much for any ruler to endure and action became necessary.²⁵² The Cossack became the most useful border guard of the Russian people; his knowledge of the steppe, ferocity in battle and the lack of value he placed on his own life all made the Cossack a formidable enemy of the Turkish slave raider. As Albert Seaton puts it, “Tatars could be soundly defeated only by Tatars,” and, as such, Muscovites, Lithuanians and Poles began to bid for the services of the Cossacks to reinforce their defences, and strengthen their cavalry in battles against the Crimean khanate.²⁵³ Border colonies were established on the south-eastern borders, providing a stepping-stone for the resettlement of the steppes and a base-camp for those wishing to flee to the service of the Cossacks. Block houses were built to be used as strong points or permanent military and trading posts, which provided protection and shelter for companies passing through. The Cossacks relied upon these strongholds to protect their stockpiles of arms and ammunition from Tatars and strict border arms regulation.²⁵⁴ Cossacks’ loyalty to their employers was unpredictable, of course, but

²⁵² O’Rourke, 30.

²⁵³ Seaton, The Horsemen of the Steppes: The Story of the Cossacks, 20 & 29.

²⁵⁴ Mykhailo Hrushevsky, History of Ukraine-Rus’: Volume 9, Book 1, The Cossack Age, 1650-1653. Translated by Bohdan Struminski (Edmonton: Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies Press, 1997), 107.

“provided that they were well rewarded, they remained faithful to their paymasters.”²⁵⁵ These early Cossack bands had no loyalty to one master, country or religion. They were a ragtag group of bandits, selling their services to the highest bidder; however crude their lifestyle may have been, their adventurous lifestyle and fighting abilities were already being hailed in Moscow, a factor that would hold true for the next five-hundred years.

Russians and their experiences with the wild steppes have many parallels to the Americans and their western frontier, as (usually American) historians have excitedly pointed out. Following behind the trail of the Cossacks, many frontier families slowly emerged in an attempt to settle around the Cossack colonies. Like the American frontier, the steppe offered many opportunities to any enterprising Slavic settler: fertile earth for agriculture, plenty of game, stocked rivers and (more importantly) freedom from burdensome taxation, laws or the chains of serfdom. O’Rourke believes that, “Among the restless spirits attracted to the frontier, there must have been many who felt the pull of the open steppe and the lure of the perilous, but free life it dangled before them.”²⁵⁶ In contrast to popular belief, fugitives were most likely the latest addition to the Cossacks’ ranks fleeing from increasing Muscovite regulations restricting movement that had not existed before-- they were not the actual originators of the group as many believe.

By the late sixteenth century, settlers began to trickle south into the steppes again. Turkic and Tatar slave raids became less common as the Cossacks became increasingly organized and successful in their counterattacks. However, as the Cossacks took control of the steppes, their unchecked (and quickly growing) ranks of bandits often angered neighbouring rulers with disruptive raids on trade caravans, traveling merchants, and sometimes borderland villages. The

²⁵⁵ Seaton, Horsemen of the Steppes, 30.

²⁵⁶ O’Rourke, 33.

rulers of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth wrote to the Muscovite tsars, complaining of these Cossack raids on their towns and requesting that the tsars control the Cossacks in their region. Replies to such requests were understandably amused since the Cossacks were subject to no one, under no single ruler's jurisdiction and, as such, they were impossible to punish or take responsibility for.²⁵⁷ These early riffraff and outcasts present a far cry from the glamorous image that would be later attached to them; in fact, the term "Cossack" was often used in a dishonourable sense and as a condescending term for a long time. Because of their usefulness against the Tatars (perhaps the Slavs' only shield against the raiders), the Cossacks were begrudgingly tolerated by the neighbouring states. By the 1550s the Pontic steppe fell under complete control of the Cossacks and their reputation grew as accounts of their military capabilities spread throughout the region.²⁵⁸ Muscovy and the Polish- Lithuanian Commonwealth began supplying Cossacks with provisions for attacks against the Tatars²⁵⁹; the result was the Cossacks' settlement of the Dnieper and Don regions by the late sixteenth century. It is well-known that the Zaporozhian Sich was established before any large organization on the Don; however, evidence suggests that not long after in the mid-sixteenth century Cossacks inhabited several bases on the lower Don and were committing raids on the Nogai from them.²⁶⁰

Like the Mongols (and most likely the Scythians), the Cossacks practised a semi-democratic lifestyle; they elected their atamans or hetmans (leaders), accepted communal guilt and divided booty from raids equally among themselves except for with prisoners, married men

²⁵⁷ Hrushevsky, *The Cossack Age*, 62.

²⁵⁸ Hrushevsky, 77.

²⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 133.

²⁶⁰ O'Rourke, 39.

“and those who braved public opinion so far as to content themselves with one woman.”²⁶¹ Early on, women were forbidden from entering the Cossack Sich (Zaporozhian) or Cossack camps by penalty of death, but once a Cossack was married and settled elsewhere, the vows were considered sacred and adultery was sometimes punishable by death.²⁶² However, only a few generations later when Cossackry lost most of its nomadic elements, women were the heads of households with far more social and political freedoms, similar to those discussed among Scythians. Judith Deutsch Kornblatt and Shane O’Rourke add a unique (and recent) element to Cossack historiography with their re-examination of women and Cossackdom. Kornblatt examines the “maleness” myth of the Cossacks and how “women do not make Cossacks” despite the blatant facts that Cossacks were often married, held women captive from raids, took lovers, and started families in settled areas.²⁶³ The significance of this myth in the post-Soviet Cossack revival shall be discussed near the end of this chapter.

In *The Cossacks*, O’Rourke dedicates an entire chapter to Cossack women and their importance to the survival of Cossackdom. He explains that “women were the most prized booty of the steppe whose intrinsic value was immeasurably heightened by the devastating humiliation their abduction inflicted on one’s opponent.”²⁶⁴ O’Rourke credits steppe (or Cossack) women with creating the unique, multiethnic culture of the Cossacks due to the integration of various steppe women, as well as with the responsibility for the Cossacks’ domestic economies and passing Cossackry onto future generations of Cossack children.²⁶⁵ The first few generations of Cossacks rarely took women (seeing as 200-500 men often lived together at one time); however,

²⁶¹ Pierce Balthasar Freiherr Von Campenhausen, Travels through several provinces of the Russian empire with an Historical Account of the Zaporog Cossacks, and of Bessarabia, Moldavia, Wallachia, and the Crimea, (London: J.G. Barnard, 1808), 35.

²⁶² Von Campenhausen, 36.

²⁶³ Kornblatt, “Cossacks and Women: Creation without Reproduction in Gogol’s Cossack Myth,” 180.

²⁶⁴ O’Rourke, 160.

²⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 161.

common-law relationships began to spring up by the seventeenth century. Marriage ceremonies did not become widespread until the eighteenth century and divorce was easy to obtain and considered a basic right of both parties until the Orthodox Church took a firmer hold on Cossack affairs.²⁶⁶ ‘Settled’ Cossacks lived in the villages and had to pay tribute to the Sich or regional Cossack camps, while the ‘true’ Cossacks lived the nomadic way of life in the open steppe, raiding nearby towns and caravans.²⁶⁷ With the encroachment of Russian settlers and the Church, marriage and other domesticating (or ‘settling’) institutions, like education, finally found a place amongst the wild Cossacks by the end of the eighteenth century, and initiated the process of taming the steppe cowboys.

When the Cossacks established themselves as an organized force in the seventeenth century the result was a series of Cossack wars and rebellions. Up until this point, the Muscovite state had taken advantage of the Cossacks and their independence by hiring them to commit raids and then, if need be, later deny having any control over their actions. One of the Cossack rebellions, led by Stenka Razin in 1670-71, was the turning point in the rather *laissez-faire* relationship between the Cossacks and Muscovy; Razin’s raids in the Volga region led to an economic blockade of the Don region and a boundary regime that enforced customs, travel documents and close monitoring of border crossings.²⁶⁸ In addition to increased economic control, Tsar Aleksei Mikhailovich demanded an oath of allegiance be given to the throne by the Don, an oath that was renewed at every tsar’s coronation thereafter.²⁶⁹ As agriculture began to encroach to the south, Cossacks found it advantageous to convert their land allotments into vast

²⁶⁶ Ibid., 169.

²⁶⁷ Von Campenhausen, 36.

²⁶⁸ Brian J. Boeck, “Containments vs. Colonizations: Muscovite Approaches to Settling the Steppe,” in Peopling the Russian Periphery: Borderland Colonization in Eurasian History, ed. Nicholas Breyfogle et al (London: Routledge, 2007), 52.

²⁶⁹ Seaton, 106.

estates of agricultural production. Like absentee landowners, Cossacks allowed peasants and hired hands to run their estates and gained massive profits from them; in a way, the Cossacks began to emerge as an exclusive and somewhat privileged class, higher than the peasants and separated from other Russians due to their military role on the borders.²⁷⁰ The ruling elite of the Cossacks began to cooperate more with the Russian state, sacrificing steppe freedom for noble status and the endowments that came with it and with this came increased Russification of the Cossacks.²⁷¹ Shane O'Rourke describes the decrease of true Cossackdom already evident by the eighteenth century as follows: "So the Cossack story in this period becomes not only heroic resistance to external force, but an internal war in which the poor and rank and file defended the original ethos of the Cossack hosts against elites that aspired ultimately to incorporation into the Polish and Russian nobility."²⁷² As the prizes of the Russian tsars became larger, the Cossack elite drew their company further under the control of the Russian empire. Peter the Great, suspicious of the Cossacks' loyalty, sent Russian forces to the Don, where many Cossacks were murdered; this led to a number of uprisings across the Cossack hosts and resulted in even further military suppression by Peter's army. As thousands were executed and many more fled to the Crimea, 1709 marked the end of the Don Cossacks' independence from Russia.²⁷³

The taming of the Cossacks continued under Catherine the Great via 'psychological harnessing'; by bestowing highly valued imperial favours upon chosen Cossacks, their behaviour towards and duty to the Russian throne was increasingly reined in.²⁷⁴ Furthermore, the failure of the Pugachev rebellion of 1773-74 caused Catherine to divide up the Don territories, appoint her

²⁷⁰ Seaton, 110.

²⁷¹ O'Rourke, 113.

²⁷² *Ibid.*, 61.

²⁷³ Seaton, 112.

²⁷⁴ Longworth, 233.

chosen atamans and even strip the Cossacks of their right to choose their clergy members.²⁷⁵ The Zaporozhian Sich was destroyed, the Volga Cossacks transported to the Caucasus and the Don Cossacks placed under direct imperial rule.²⁷⁶ As Philip Longworth suggests, the only reason the Don Cossacks were allowed to exist was due to their value as a separate warrior class to be used in a period when Russia was at war more often than not.²⁷⁷ They were ideal settlers who paved the way for Russia's increasing peasantry, expanding Russia's borders further south and east, even reaching the Pacific by the mid-seventeenth century – the 'conquest' of Siberia and the Cossacks' role in expansion remain two of the major contributors to Russian Cossack mythology today.²⁷⁸ As Russia developed into a stronger power, the Cossacks (divided internally) faced increasing pressure from an encroaching Russian population to the north and an advanced Russian army modernized since Peter the Great. Seeing as rebelling only led to failure and destruction, the Cossacks finally bowed their head to the Russian tsars and took their place as the mythological protector of the Tsar and his nation.

By the nineteenth century, the Cossacks were servants of the tsar's will, ordered to leave their farms to fight when called, protect the borders and be loyal to their ruler at all times. The myth of the Cossacks and their unwavering loyalty to the Russian throne was developed during this period. Laurence Oliphant, a South African renowned for his traveling books, visited the Don Cossacks in the mid-nineteenth century. His 1852 account notes the obvious assimilation and loss of independence of the Cossacks: "With the manners and customs by which they were once distinguished, the Cossacks are losing all the traces of their former independence, and as they become gradually absorbed into the Russian empire, their identity as a race must soon

²⁷⁵ Seaton, 114/115.

²⁷⁶ Longworth, 224.

²⁷⁷ Longworth, 225.

²⁷⁸ Christoph Witzernath, Cossacks and the Russian Empire, 1598-1725: Manipulations, Rebellion and Expansion into Siberia (London: Routledge, 2007), 7.

cease.” He also noted that he “saw none of those striking costumes described by earlier travellers.”²⁷⁹ Already by the nineteenth century, the role of the Cossack had become mostly symbolic. Oliphant also commented on the Cossacks’ myth already in existence:

...that the valour of the Don Cossacks was one of those popular delusions which the government is most anxious to encourage; for it answers the double purpose of flattering the vanity of a discontented race, who are thereby rendered more easily subservient to their designs, and of inspiring a wholesome dread into other nations, who have hitherto been accustomed to regard them with a mysterious awe, and to conjure up monsters of appalling ferocity and of a terrific aspect, as representative of the high-sounding title by which they are distinguished.²⁸⁰

Susan Layton also points out that often “When real Cossacks failed to live up to the legends, they shrank in negative proportion in [society’s] eyes, to become a motley peasant crew more adept with hoes than with weapons.”²⁸¹ Although they had helped in routing Napoleon’s troops out of Russia and their raids on the retreating army were instrumental in “a highly successful operation that contributed significantly to the eventual allied victory in the 1813 campaign”²⁸², remnants of the original, free, steppe-roaming Cossack were barely visible by this point in Russian history. As elder Cossacks passed away, the remaining true Cossackdom passed with them, leaving behind a new generation born into Cossack acceptance of autocracy and service to the tsar; this was only strengthened and further ingrained in their psyche with the rapidly-growing Russian education system.²⁸³ What the original Cossacks had valued became lost to the newly-established stereotype of the Cossack, and as their attachment to the tsar increased over the century, the Cossack became renowned for repressing his own countrymen in the name of autocracy rather than as defenders of their freedom. Any trace of their infamous, nomadic lifestyle was long gone.

²⁷⁹ Laurence Oliphant, *The Russian Shores of the Black Sea in the Autumn of 1852* (Edinburgh: William Blackwood and Sons, 1853), 149.

²⁸⁰ Oliphant, *The Russian Shores of the Black Sea*, 151-152.

²⁸¹ Susan Layton, “Nineteenth Century Russian Mythologies of Caucasian Savagery,” in *Russia’s Orient: Imperial Borderlands and Peoples, 1700-1917* ed. by Daniel R. Brower and Edward J. Lazzerini (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 91.

²⁸² G.F. Navziger and Donald D. Howard, “Cossack Operations in Western Germany, Spring 1813,” *Consortium on Revolutionary Europe 1750-1850*, Proceedings 22 (1991), 382.

²⁸³ Longworth, 249.

The 1905 Revolution is still remembered as one that was violently put down by the Cossacks, who were given the reputation of being repressors by “burning, shooting, and flogging their way through the towns and villages.”²⁸⁴ By 1917 the Cossacks and their participation in crushing anti-tsarist factions resulted in their condemnation from all sections of Russian society.²⁸⁵

Discussing the persecution of the Cossacks under the Bolshevik regime would be somewhat extending the imperial timeline of this thesis; however, it is important to discuss general events that would have a role in the myth-making process of the post-Soviet Cossack revival that would exploit the victimization of the Cossacks under the Soviet regime to gain support and popular sympathy. Because the Cossacks were loyal to Tsar Nicholas II during the war and revolution, and later sided with the Provisional Government in 1917, the Bolsheviks once in power began the process of “decossackization” in 1919. The Civil War, in which the Cossacks mainly fought for the White Army against the Bolsheviks, saw the death of many Cossacks as well as the destruction of any hopes for a loose Cossack confederation which was briefly established as the South-Eastern Alliance (Don, Kuban’ and Terek Cossacks).²⁸⁶ The defeat of the White Army by the end of 1920 meant the death, exile or immigration of thousands of Cossacks. Even before the devastation of Stalin’s purges, many historians believe that this marked the end of Cossackdom, including Albert Seaton, who concluded that “true Cossackdom died in 1920 and its legitimate heirs, or what was left of them, were the aging remnants that were spread over the globe...”²⁸⁷ Afterwards, the Cossacks continued to face oppression, death and exile under the label of *kulak*, or ‘rich peasant’, sent to gulags and executed by the thousands. Although the Cossacks’ image was temporarily restored to Russia’s good graces by their bravery

²⁸⁴ Shane O’Rourke, “The Don Cossacks during the 1905 Revolution: The Revolt of Ust-Medveditskaia Stanitsa,” *Russian Review* 57.4 (Oct., 1998), 583.

²⁸⁵ Arthur E. Janke, “The Don Cossacks in 1917,” *East European Quarterly* 20 (1971), 25.

²⁸⁶ Janke, 29.

²⁸⁷ Seaton, 237.

in World War II, many Cossacks (and Cossack émigrés) actually fought against Russia on the German side and were returned to the Soviets following the end of the war to face repercussions.²⁸⁸

From the end of the war until the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, the Don and Kuban Cossacks were no longer persecuted, but their culture remained either underground or tolerated in highly censored doses. As will be discussed below, the post-Soviet revival of Cossackdom was not necessarily a revival as much as it was a re-construction. Post-Soviet Russians, suddenly facing the dismantling of the USSR and their identity as Communists, looked to pre-revolutionary folk culture to refashion their identity apart from an ideology and once again become *Russians*. It would turn out that the cultural figure Russians would relate to the most would be that of the once “othered” great Cossack.

Cossack Acceptance and the post-Soviet Revival of “Cossackdom”

And, if not a Cossack by birth, one can become a Cossack! That is, with a life worthy of the ideal, one can earn the right to enter Cossackdom.

- Ataman Boris Almazov, 1992.²⁸⁹

What, or more importantly, who is a Cossack, who can be a Cossack and, as many historians now lament, does Cossackdom even exist anymore? “Cossack” is a blurred definition that, over time, has been recast to signify many things, both positive and negative, that yet even today, has no clear designation. In the sixteenth century the Cossacks were a dishonourable band of vagabonds, roaming the steppes and attacking caravans. In Imperial Russia they became the

²⁸⁸ O’Rourke, 278.

²⁸⁹ Kornblatt, The Cossack Hero in Russian literature, 17.

tsar's Orthodox and loyal border guards with a distinct livelihood, and in Soviet times, became a kulak. These stereotypes and the myths that went with them have, unfortunately, shrouded historical fact in a romantic fog even today, when Russians and Ukrainians alike are grasping at their Cossack roots in an attempt to make sense of their past and their present.

Unlike the other two groups examined in this thesis, claims of Cossack heritage and descendants are both numerous and popular in Russian society, especially in recent times. The reasons for the Cossacks' overall acceptance in both Russian history and society are very complex, but I shall attempt to discuss and examine them below. What makes the Cossacks unique is their ability to be simultaneously included *and* 'othered' in Russian society. As Judith Kornblatt explains, the Cossacks were definitely exotic and different from the Russians, but they *were* Russian in that they were mostly Slavic, the upholders of Russian Orthodoxy, protectors of the borderlands and preservers of the purity of ancient Rus'; as such they evoked the soul of Rus' "and thus represent continuity through the disruptive period of [Mongol] domination."²⁹⁰ This direct comparison to the Mongols portrays their conquest of Russia as a disruptive element in the flow of Russian history, whereas the Cossacks and their way-of-life offered some sort of continuation in Russia's idealized past. The Cossack is treated like a timeless image, an ideal component that binds all of Russian history together, representing a time before the arrival of the destructive hordes from the East, the "dilution of the Russian people by the corrupt and corrupting West" and the murderous purges of Communism.²⁹¹ "The more radical the changes," Nurit Schleifman writes, "the greater the popular need to consult the past in order to make sense of the present."²⁹² Because the Cossacks (or at least their way of life) existed throughout all of

²⁹⁰ Kornblatt, 16.

²⁹¹ Ibid.

²⁹² Nurit Schleifman, "Introduction," In Russia at a Crossroads: History, Memory and Political Practise (London: Frank Cass, 1998), 2.

Russia's most turbulent times, they have become the binding figure of both Russian history and Russian identity in modern times.

Some may find Russia's eager acceptance of the Cossacks hypocritical compared to the Mongol's case considering that the former also had Tatar and Turkic roots; however, it was not until the Cossacks became stoutly Orthodox and had proved their military prowess in the borderlands that the Russians began to see them as a part of Russia. Turkic peoples and Tatars both inhabited the Russian empire for centuries along with the Cossacks, but their Muslim faith (unless they converted) guaranteed an immovable barrier between themselves and the Russians, whereas the Cossacks and their borderland skirmishes would be seen as defending all things Russian from heathens and infidels. Even if the Cossacks were at times shunned by Russian society, the fact that their image has outlived the Mongols, the tsars and the Soviets signifies their strength as a Russian cultural phenomenon and a unifying force. The Cossacks' role in shaping and expanding the Russian Empire has ensured that the nation-making myth of the Cossacks has endured well into the twentieth century, especially in post-Soviet times when the Russian people began to view the Golden Age of Russian history as the ideal era of their past. Their symbolic role as part of the now mythologized tsarist Golden Age gave the Russians the sense that their Cossacks transcended the entire Communist regime. As such, Cossacks would continue to play a significant role in nation-making in Russia after the fall of Communism.²⁹³

Since the beginning of their existence on the Russian steppes, Cossacks have drawn a considerable amount of attention and envy from the general population. As seen in abundant amounts of Russian (and Western literature), their adventurous way-of-life, raids, wars, kidnappings, even with all their coarseness and brutality, were undoubtedly thrilling for those

²⁹³ Mark Galeotti, "The Cossacks: A Cross-Border Complication to Post-Soviet Eurasia," IBRU Boundary and Security Bulletin (Summer, 1995), 59.

living the mundane urban or farm life. They were robbers, cowboys, raiders, and even pirates, living lifestyles often romanticized in popular movies and novels today, where the villains become heroes and the audience finds itself helplessly attracted to and envious of such a life. The fact that thousands of people fled to the steppes to live amongst these Cossacks and the government's attempts to suppress such sentiments for hundreds of years reveals the attraction of Cossackry amongst ordinary Russians. "Cossackophilia" (as this admiration would later be termed in Russian literature) began quite early in Cossack history. In the sixteenth century, Russian noblemen would fly to the steppe to assist in Cossack raids against Tatars, often living amongst them for periods of time but, like the Muscovite princes with the Mongols, would deny "any participation in Cossack exploits when there was a threat of royal disfavour or the prospect of paying from one's own purse for damages caused by the Cossacks."²⁹⁴ Indications of the lure of the steppes was the fact that young noblemen would risk their reputation for a thrill and how hard tsars worked to prevent the flight to the south.

Russian literature is the mirror that reflects and enhances the allure and popularity of Cossacks and their way of life. In poems and novels any reader could detect high levels of admiration and envy, regardless of any negative description of the Cossacks' characteristics or contemporary political dislike against them. "The [Cossack] phenomenon was still so extraordinary and glamorous against the background of the immobile, routine life of our [Slavic] mandates that it must attract the attention of any student of life in those times," wrote Hrushevsky.²⁹⁵ The role of Cossacks in literature was perhaps the biggest contributing factor to their acceptance in Russian society; writers found in both their culture and their steppe artistic inspiration, and their biased descriptions resulted in the expansion of the Cossack myth. Russian

²⁹⁴ Hrushevsky, 77.

²⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 88.

writers used the representations of Cossacks for their own personal pursuit of freedom in their restricted world, living vicariously through the liberated Cossacks of the steppe.²⁹⁶

Beginning in the Romantic period, Russian literature played the principal role in integrating the Cossack into Russian historical imagination. Writers such as Pushkin, Lermontov, Gogol and Tolstoy depicted the Cossacks as heroic, courageous and free horsemen of the steppes, allowing Orientalism to shape their imaginations as they created in the Caucasus an Orient of their own, “a wild and dangerous place of exotic charm and beauty.”²⁹⁷ Their Romantic descriptions of the Cossacks created many of the stereotypes still in existence today. Writers had the ability to manipulate, dismantle or embellish the Cossack myth and this myth has become a greater service to the Russian people than either their military or historical contributions (except, perhaps, their conquest of Siberia). Romantic stories set in beautiful, exotic settings “provided the Russians with an aggressive and colourful portrait of part of their past and of themselves,” especially during the Romantic Age.²⁹⁸ Writers could even describe bloody battle scenes or violent actions taken by the Cossacks, which were accepted by the Russian audience because ordinary social restrictions did not apply to them and were actually viewed as a mark of Cossack energy and passion. Gogol’s *Taras Bul’ba* is a fitting example of this:

“...Our sabres are still sharp! Cossack strength is yet not wearied! The Cossacks do not give way!”

And once more they charged forward, as though they had suffered no loss. Already only three *kuren* atamans remained alive. Crimson streams of blood flowed everywhere; the bodies of the Cossacks and their foemen, heaped together, were like tall bridges above them.²⁹⁹

Byron also romanticized the Cossacks in his famous work *Mazeppa*, as did Victor Hugo in a poem of the same name. The image of the Cossacks, the semi-Asian noble savages, took the

²⁹⁶ Kornblatt, *The Cossack in Russian Literature*, 17.

²⁹⁷ Figes, 384.

²⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 13.

²⁹⁹ Nikolai Gogol, *Tara Bulba* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1952) 112.

Romantic world by storm; they were the perfect example of rugged individualism and an organic relationship with nature so loved by Romantic writers. In the nineteenth century, realism only enhanced the attraction of the Cossacks because of the descriptive narrative of the beautiful steppes and Caucasus. It would be a lengthy endeavour to examine the various important contributions to Cossack literature here, but an excellent analysis may be found in Judith Deutch Kornblatt's *The Cossack in Russian Literature: A Study in Cultural Mythology*. What should be kept in mind is the significant role that Cossack representation played in myth-making and cultural integration of the Cossacks in Russian society.

By the end of the nineteenth century the mythical image of the Cossack was so concrete in both popular culture and memory that writers no longer needed to describe their subjects; the Cossacks had finally emerged as THE COSSACK with no explanation needed.³⁰⁰ The biggest names in Russian literature, from Pushkin, to Gogol, to Lermontov and Tolstoy, had, by that time, published volumes upon volumes dedicated to the Russian heroes of the steppes. These writers undoubtedly created THE COSSACK in Russian collective memory, regardless of the myth's accuracy via their romantic or biased patriotic descriptions. The abundance of Russian literature on the Cossacks ensured a widespread and immortal lifespan for the Cossack in Russian society that will endure long past Cossackry itself.

During Soviet times, the Cossack was regarded as one of two paradoxical figures. The first was an enemy of the people, as a *kulak*, a White army soldier, a tsarist supporter and a hired goon of the tsars to suppress riots and rebellions of their own people. The second figure was that of the Soviet "new man", Cossack by name but Bolshevik by character (as with all Soviet heroes) in that they had the revolutionary spirit and (a continuous theme) were protectors of the

³⁰⁰ Kornblatt, 106.

Russian people when needed, as in World War II.³⁰¹ The performances of the 4th Kuban' Guards and the 5th Don Guards Cossack division in the war became the official account of Cossack loyalty; less well known was the fact that many émigré Cossacks fought with Germany against the Russians.³⁰² Seeing as their ancient military prowess based on horse and sabre became outdated in a technological age led by tanks and bomber planes, the state's reliance upon or need for Cossack support became moot. Unfortunately for the Cossacks, their role as a kulak was the most popular image amongst the Soviets, leading to executions, deportations, purges and repression. Both the physical and cultural removal of the Cossacks under the Soviets led to an extensive, historical amnesia in collective memory. Despite a limited tolerance of Cossack culture under the Soviets, "the Cossack past largely slipped from memory, or its history became unintelligible to or incompatible with the new, Soviet-formed and largely urbanised generations."³⁰³ Soviet culture reigned supreme, altering and editing Russian history to suit its ideological agenda; thus when the regime collapsed, seventy five years of cultural Sovietization and de-Russification left Russia with few remnants of its traditional folk-culture. To regain their identity, Russians would return to pre-Soviet cultural and historical ideals—thus, Russian folklore became the perfect building block for rediscovering Russian identity.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the cultural void left by the demise of Communist ideology deeply affected Russian identity; the Russians, no longer considered comrades or Communists, attempted to (re)establish who they were as a people. What was left of the pieces? Many Russians looked to the past, specifically to the time of Kievan-Rus and

³⁰¹ Kornblatt, *The Cossack in Russian Literature*, 103.

³⁰² Peter Holquist, "From Estate to Ethnos: The Changing Nature of Cossack Identity in the Twentieth Century," In *Russia at a Crossroads: History, Memory and Political Practise*, ed. By Nurit Shleifman (London: Frank Cass, 1998): 108.

³⁰³ Georgi M. Derluguian, "The Politics of Identity in a Russian Borderland Province: The Neo-Cossack Movement, 1989-1996," *Europe Asia-Studies*, 49.8 (Dec., 1997): 1488/1489.

Russia's Golden Age (from Catherine the Great to Alexander II), to serve as a model for self-renewal in a period of lost identity.³⁰⁴ During the Golden Age the Russian soul was stirred by the belief in Russia's unique historical destiny, encouraged by flowery national histories and literature riddled with "concepts of national identity" that "were coalescing around notions of a unique history shaped by and engraved on the people's spirit or national character."³⁰⁵ History became the supplier of post-Soviet Russian identity and the Cossacks who had earned their role in Russian history as courageous frontiersmen and defenders of the Russian people once again were able to reclaim their prestigious position in society.³⁰⁶ Their symbolic role in a part of the now mythological tsarist Golden Age gave the Cossacks a voice in Moscow and among the masses as Russia welcomed the Cossack back into its national identity as the epitome of Russian culture; however, the 'new' Cossacks were as mythological (if not more so) than their ancestors.

The revival of Russian folk culture beginning in the 1960s eventually reintroduced the Cossack into Russian identity. Their songs and dances could not be ignored by any folk revival and, as such, the dying remnants of the Soviet state were forced to accept fragments of Cossackry into their regime-- this would serve as the catalyst to the post-Soviet neo-Cossack revival. The apparent instability of the government in the late 1980s made for braver intellectuals keen on establishing Cossack groups and organizations.³⁰⁷ Under Gorbachev's *glasnost* and *perestroika* low-key commemorations and organizations began to spring up across the country, testing the waters at first by claiming only cultural interest in the Cossacks, then by the early 1990s converting to more political agendas.³⁰⁸ In August of 1991 a decree was issued *On the*

³⁰⁴ Monika Greenleaf and Stephen Mueller, eds., Russian Subjects: Empire, Nation, and the Culture of the Golden Age (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1998), 1.

³⁰⁵ Greenleaf, 10-11.

³⁰⁶ Schlieffman, "Introduction," 5.

³⁰⁷ O'Rourke, 282.

³⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 282.

Rehabilitation of the Cossacks, which proclaimed all repressive measures taken against the Cossacks since 1919 illegal, allowed Cossacks in the Don and Kuban' regions to re-establish their forms of self-government and restored old forms of land ownership and usage (although how exactly this would be carried out was never explained).³⁰⁹ Cossack unions emerged and Russian politicians began publically to court the Cossacks for the ways their symbolical strength and military glory could contribute to a revival of national spirit.³¹⁰

As the popularity of Cossackry exploded in post-Soviet Russia, politicians and businesses attempted to strengthen their platforms and bank accounts by publically denouncing the Soviet's oppression of the Cossacks and announcing them as their allies in rebuilding a new Russia. In order to emphasize the rupture with the Soviet regime, the new state allied itself with symbols of Russian national identity, such as the Church and the Cossacks; these alliances would demonstrate the new state's continuity with pre-Soviet Russian values and identities,³¹¹ which would include imperialistic pressure in Russia's lands. According to Serhii Plokyh, the Cossack revival is supported by the government in order to "use Cossacks to counter the growing political activity of non-Slavic people in the Northern Caucasus."³¹² Despite open condemnation of the neo-Cossacks' anti-Turkish outlooks, there is obviously some political gain in the suppression of minority nationalistic tendencies. As Laura Olson points out, the government's attachment to the Cossacks is mostly symbolic and cultural due to the negative stigmas attached to the neo-Cossack movement such as anti-Semitism and ethnocentric nationalism: "Politicians rely on Russian and Cossack folk song, dance, and costume to evoke national sentiment in their constituents, but do not generally use them to advocate a particular nationalist political

³⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 283.

³¹⁰ Laura J. Olson, *Performing Russia: Folk Revival and Russian Identity* (New York: Routledge Curzon, 2004), 141.

³¹¹ O'Rourke, 284.

³¹² Serhii M. Plokyh, "Cossack Mythology in the Russia-Ukrainian Border Dispute," in *The Legacy of History in Russia and the New States of Eurasia* ed. S. Frederick Starr (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1994), 163.

position.”³¹³ However symbolic political support of the Cossacks may be, the level of exposure and public acceptance has been invaluable to the Cossack revival. Cossack ceremonies, promoted by politicians and businesses, “at least made the sight of Cossack uniform more commonplace and acceptable”; seeing a young cadet or older man in Cossack dress no longer draws attention.³¹⁴ It would appear that post-Soviet Russia has completely accepted the once exotic and alienated Cossack back into its society. A deeper analysis into why will be made below.

Characteristics that had been mythically associated with the Cossacks in the past were found lacking in post-Soviet Russia; Russians began turning to Cossack culture to re-establish notions of masculinity, strength, patriotism, pride, heroism, independence and a visible, concrete heritage.³¹⁵ Both Laura Olson and Judith Kornblatt agree that the association of Cossacks and masculinity continues to play a significant role in the identity of Russian men: “Male Russians, lacking models of what it would mean to perform Russian masculinity, borrow symbolic masculine behaviour from Cossack culture.”³¹⁶ To learn the skills of sword-tossing, horsemanship and dances, many young Russian boys are enlisting in Cossack cadet schools to establish themselves as young Cossacks and live by the moral code of the Cossacks. Because young boys associate folklore with femininity and old women (i.e. villages and peasants), Cossackry and its masculinity have become the only way to get boys to participate in authentic Russian cultural activities.³¹⁷ A 2003 newspaper article reporting about the Cossack revival in Novocherkassk interviewed young boys attending the Cossack Cadet School in that region, which was originally established in 1883 by Alexander III. Thirteen-year-old Misha told the

³¹³ Olson, *Performing Russia*, 146.

³¹⁴ Derluguian, “The Politics of Identity,” 1497.

³¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 160.

³¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 168.

³¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 166.

reporter: “Being a Cossack is my life... I’m studying here because it is prestigious to be a Cossack and I have big plans for my future.”³¹⁸ Whether or not Misha is the descendent of a Cossack is not mentioned, most likely because the revival is now considered a *Russian* phenomenon, not a Cossack one. Membership is open to all willing to live by Cossack law, as quoted at the beginning of this section.

Whereas old Cossackdom’s centre was in the Don and Kuban regions of Russia, the post-Soviet revival is also establishing itself in urban centres such as Moscow and St. Petersburg. Cossackry, it would appear, has become a fad among non-Cossacks and Cossacks alike. This revival, especially in urban centres, is partly a reaction to the post-Soviet explosion of Western culture in Russia. Cossackophilia, last seen in nineteenth-century literature, has re-emerged in modern Russian popular culture. Even the immensely popular and famous Cossack dancing being showcased on television and at political events, according to Lauara Olson, is a cultural invention. She states that the new Cossack dance is a nineteenth-century invention influenced by the Russian ballet and Cossack costumes, whereas original Cossack dancing was a clumsy, improvised dance of boot-scraping and stamping.³¹⁹ By embracing Cossackdom and its exotic customs, Russians reinforce ties to their unique history and cultural past while emphasizing their identity as a distinct people apart from Western Europe.³²⁰ During this period, neo-Eurasianism was becoming immensely popular under the guidance of Lev Gumilev. Neo-Eurasianism differs from its predecessor in that, like the Cossack myth, it helps restore a sense of continuity by recasting Russia spatially rather than temporally, emphasizing that Russia could only re-establish itself as a great power again if it “becomes aware of the naturalness of its Eurasian

³¹⁸ Sarah Rainsford, “Cossacks Back to Fight Again” *BBC News*, 29 August, 2003.

³¹⁹ Olson, 162.

³²⁰ Barbara Skinner, “Identity Formation in the Russian Cossack Revival,” *Europe-Asia Studies*, 46.6 (1994), 1019-1020.

expansion.”³²¹ Neo-Eurasianists found in Cossacks the image of their ideology; a timeless, continuous figure that had roamed the steppe for hundreds of years. Because Eurasianism requests that Russians accept their unique, non-European past as a positive thing, post-Soviet Russians are accepting neo-Eurasianism enthusiastically.

As we have seen with sixteenth-century Muscovite families, Russians were (and are) once again boasting of descendance from an exotic, fashionable group of ancestors, even if false. As thirteen-year-old cadet Misha said, being a Cossack is once again prestigious and having Cossack ancestry confers special status on a Russian.³²² The fact that becoming a post-Soviet Cossack demands no actual ancestral link means that Russians can consider themselves an integral part of Cossack history, which in post-Soviet Russia, is tied directly to Russian history: “Cossacks are Russians, only better,” as Tolstoy stated.³²³ Cossacks are proudly displaying very expensive traditional dress, including a sabre and short-whip, while mastering their forefathers’ equestrian skills regardless of economic turmoil in Russia.³²⁴ Despite the fact that modern Cossacks can be traced to their ancestors through family trees, many self-proclaimed “Cossacks” are as much descendants of actual Cossacks as the intellectual group the “Scythians” were of the Scythians. In their desperation to revive Cossackdom, atamans and other leaders have publically decreed that to be a Cossack does not require genealogical links to a predecessor, but simply living the lifestyle and keeping Cossack values in one’s heart.³²⁵ That being said, perhaps Shane O’Rourke’s bold declaration that “Cossackdom is dead” could be valid. If it is a frame of mind rather than an ethnicity, the lines of definition become further blurred. Perhaps, then, it is just as possible to revive ancient Scythia? On the other hand, when one goes back to the true roots of

³²¹ Laruelle, 193.

³²² Olson, 163.

³²³ Derluguian, 1490.

³²⁴ Skinner, “Identity Formation,” 1020.

³²⁵ *Ibid.*, 1027.

the Cossacks, the original Cossacks were not an ethnic group, but a rag-tag, multi-ethnic company who were constantly swelling their ranks with newcomers, bound only by a common set of values: the laws of the steppe. If this is all that is required to become a modern Cossack, how, then, are they straying from original Cossackry? They are not and, thus, the argument among historians concerning the existence of Cossackdom remains heated.

The establishment of cadet schools encourages the indoctrination of old Cossack myths while simultaneously inventing new ones and encouraging a growing Cossack culture. Rather than embrace their past for what it is, modern Cossacks are glorifying and idealizing pre-revolutionary Cossacks and their customs; thus ironically, modern Cossacks are reconstructing new stereotypes and inventing new mythologies about Cossacks and their history. Negative, historical stereotypes are aggressively contradicted by neo-Cossacks and other bad traits are being ignored in order to present Cossack history as positive and heroic.³²⁶ Although the revival of Cossackdom is attempting to reintroduce Cossack history, the history being presented in Cossack publications is as false and misrepresentative as the anti-nomadic, biased literature that was being produced in Imperial and Soviet Russia. What it is to be a Cossack, it would appear, is ironically as censored as the positive traits once were under both the Imperial and Soviet regimes. While deemphasizing their shady past, modern-day Cossacks are also over-emphasizing their significance to present-day Russian society by presenting themselves as the protectors of both the Russian people and the Orthodox Church, and more importantly as the force that will restore Russia to its former glory and heal the wounds caused by the Soviet regime: “The Cossacks today are the vanguard of our people. Our souls ache for Russia and her fate. We must be united as Cossacks to stop our country being torn apart,” said Ataman Nikolai

³²⁶ *Ibid.*, 1023/1024.

Gankin in 2003.³²⁷ In 1992 President Yeltsin called for Cossack forces to once again protect Russia's borders.³²⁸ Such government promotion of the Cossacks as Russia's eternal protectors has unfortunately led to anti-Semitic and anti-Turkish acts of brutality in the Caucasus³²⁹; however, more importantly, the government has helped engrain another mythological aspect of Cossack history. The recreation of Cossack myths leaves historians like James Billington wondering "can Russians banish old myths without creating new ones?"³³⁰

Another Cossack myth that has emerged from the post-Soviet era is that of the Cossack as a victim of Soviet terror. Although it can be argued that most people living through Communist times were victims, Cossacks have been attempting to plead a special case to Russian society. Undoubtedly the Cossacks suffered under the Soviet regime, especially during and immediately following the Civil War, but many other groups suffered as much, if not more. Using terms such as "genocide" for the 1919 decree of decossackisation, "the Cossacks have used this myth as a basis for their rehabilitation demands."³³¹ By emulating Cossacks as both courageous defenders *and* woeful victims, the symbol of the Cossack becomes more authoritative and accepted into Russian society due to the emotional involvement and sympathy attached to victimization.³³² These newly-established myths of the Cossacks as national rejuvenators and victims are appealing to a spiritually damaged country such as Russia. As such, the nation is far more willing to promote the revival of the Cossacks in hopes that this culturally-vibrant group can help restore Russia's spirit and culture to a time before the Revolution.

³²⁷ Rainsford, "Cossacks Back to Fight Again" *BBC News*, 29 August, 2003.

³²⁸ James B. Minahan, *One Europe, Many Nations: A Historical Dictionary of European National Groups* (London: Greenwood Press, 2000), 220.

³²⁹ Galeotti, "The Cossacks", 56.

³³⁰ James H. Billington, *Russia in Search of Itself* (Washington: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2004), 81.

³³¹ Skinner, "Identity Formation in the Russian Cossack Revival," 1032.

³³² Olson, 169.

Like Cossacks of old, Cossacks of today are troublesome and are neither whole-heartedly received by, nor impressive to, many critics. Barbara Skinner bemoans the fact that modern Cossacks are constantly violating their own value codes and social ideals by beating up those who criticize Cossacks, ousting minorities from certain regions, bribing authorities, excessive drinking and stealing. “Their Robin Hood-type behaviour,” Skinner reports “including actions against other minorities, is carried out in fact in the name of defending the Russian population... In the name of loyalty, the Cossacks are making their own rules.”³³³ As hypocritical as Skinner attempts to make the Cossacks sound, she is, in fact, promoting what it is to be a Cossack. The behaviour she is criticizing could be a literary excerpt from the eighteenth century. So, even in ignorance, while attempting to idealise their Cossack heritage with only positively chosen historical events, modern Cossacks are indeed carrying on the tradition (and the public’s reaction to them) of what it is to truly be a Cossack: a renegade, troublesome, multi-ethnic band of people fiercely devoted to their Tsar (now, to their nation). Unintentionally, modern Cossacks have granted their own wish and have reintroduced Russia to the Cossacks of the Golden Age.

The strength of the Cossack movement lies in the Russian people’s want for something consistent in an inconsistent and turbulent history. Like subjects who adore a lengthy ruler, Russians are trying to find in the Cossacks something concrete and continuous about their past that makes sense and defines them as a nation. Perhaps, as Peter Holquist suggests, what is taking place in Russia is not the *rebirth* of Cossackry; rather, it is “a reworking of a Cossack identity that has been very much in evidence throughout the entire twentieth century” and

³³³ Skinner, 1031.

Russia's post-Mongol past.³³⁴ The infamous Russian Soul has simply been attached to the character of the fiery Cossack, a figure that never truly left Russian society, even in Soviet times.

Disagreeing with this notion in a fashion similar to those who accuse the Mongols of 'disrupting' Russian culture, Shane O'Rourke argued in 2008 that the reconstruction of Cossackry that had been devastated by the Soviets is most likely an irreversible, if not an impossible, task. He ends his book as follows:

The Cossacks have now joined the succession of peoples who mastered the steppe for a time before being replaced by new peoples. Like the Scythian burial mounds, the Cossacks have become part of the history of the steppe. That history is moving on, but the Cossacks are no longer part of the story.³³⁵

What O'Rourke fails to acknowledge here is that the Cossack has recently become the history of *Russia*, not just the steppe. As such, the disappearance of the Cossack from the colourful story of Russia's past is highly unlikely, and their mythical tie to Russian history ensures that neither Russian nor steppe history can move forward without the Cossacks riding at their sides. Whereas the Scythian physically disappeared long before the establishment of Russia's collective memory, the Cossack can still be seen at state celebrations, commemorations, folk festivals and even patrolling streets of southern Russian towns. The integration and acceptance of the Cossack into Russian society and history has been complete after almost six-hundred years of both physical and cultural segregation. Despite the fact that the Mongols could be credited for passing-on vital administrative, military and governmental models to modern Russia, the Cossack has somehow clearly emerged as the celebrated victor in Russia's affections. How long the Cossack will continue to reign supreme as the symbolic figure that binds steppe to city, nomad to settler, and past to present is unknown-- that these ties have been finally established in modern day Russia is nothing short of amazing.

³³⁴ Holquist, 115.

³³⁵ O'Rourke, 286.

Finally, the article from 2003 on the Cossack Cadet School ends with the line: “It will be up to these boys to prove the Cossacks’ relevance and their role in modern-day Russia.” In reality, the Cossack has transcended the need to demonstrate physical utility or significance. Because of the importance of his symbolic, nation-(re)building abilities, the Cossack will continue to find support from politicians, businessmen and Russian people who can relate to stories of victimization and suffering under the Soviet regime. Perhaps the most important role that the Cossack has recently taken on far surpasses (yet is related to) that of the defender of the Russian people. Today, the Cossack is being looked to with an even larger responsibility: to resurrect an ailing nation. Whether or not the symbolic power of the Cossack is strong enough to perform such an enormous task is yet to be seen.

Epilogue

The wild white mustangs
Across the golden steppes
Of a far off land.

Their wild calls beckon
Me to that amber field
Where I can be reborn again and again.

-Jake Zeroth, 2007.³³⁶

After a 2600-year long coexistence, the histories of the steppe and of the Russian people cannot be separated, nor can one exist without the other. This symbiotic relationship faced turbulent times for both the sedentary and nomadic peoples involved; however, the result of such an acquaintance is a unique and vibrant history of Russia and Eurasia. Rejected by nineteenth-century notions of Western ‘progress’ and facing the failure of German Marxism in their country, many post-Soviet Russians are coming to terms with their unique Eurasianness rather than trying to conform to forms of Europeanness. ‘Asian’ elements of Russian society are being promoted amongst growing anti-Western sentiments. Still, an atmosphere of confusion and disarray is noticeable in regards to Russian identity. As Nicholas Riasanovsky points out, while celebrating the collapse of Communism, “even individual journals and newspapers offered prizes for the best definition of Russianness. As the saying goes, all that would be funny, if it were not so sad.”³³⁷

In an attempt to categorize post-Soviet popular sentiment, Alexander Lukin has divided post-Soviet Russians into three camps of “patriotic”, balanced policy, and Westernizing. The third is self-explanatory (as it has already been described in this thesis), but the first two offer

³³⁶ Jake Zeroth, “The Cossack Tide”, Poetry With Meaning.
<<http://poetrywithmeaning.com/authors/Fauxhemian/2937>>.

³³⁷ Nicholas Riasanovsky, Russian Identities: A Historical Survey, 231.

interesting cases. “Patriots” consist of those who see Russia as a non-Western country, and who believe that its fundamentals are unique and opposed to Western individualism and materialism. Neo-Eurasianists (with their anti-American sentiments) would be categorized under this group, seeing as “Patriots” also consider Russia to be an Asian country, and thus demand that the government promote diplomatic and economic relations with its Central Asian, Indian and Asian allies.³³⁸ The balanced policy camp believes that “whilst Russia is a part of the West, it has different needs and interests given the peculiarities of its history, its size and geographical position.”³³⁹ According to public opinion polls taken in 2003, Russians generally think of the West in negative terms, especially the United States, and are looking positively towards Asia.³⁴⁰

Despite what may appear to be a state of confusion or an identity crisis, as we have discovered, the nomads and steppe history have had (for the most part) the ability to reunite Russians with a vibrant past and cultural history that cannot be shared with the West, nor can it ever be taken away from Russian identity, as many Western concepts have been under the Soviets. Russia’s steppe history, and the culture that has penetrated Russia from the grassy plains, is undeniably Russian. As this pro-Eurasian sentiment rises among the masses, historians can only hope that whatever negative constructs of nomadic imagery that remain in Russian collective memory are deconstructed. When Russians are willing to fully accept *all* elements of their indigenous and distinctive, non-Western nomadic past (especially their Mongol one), concepts of Russianness and post-Soviet Russian identity will be further solidified. With this in mind, the Cossack will no longer be burdened with the immense weight of Russian identity on his shoulders alone. Hopefully in the future, the Scythian and Mongol can help bear the load.

³³⁸ Alexander Lukin, “Russia Between East and West: Perceptions and Reality,” paper presented at the Joint Session of the European Consortium for Political Research (Edinburgh, 28 March- 2 April 2003), 9.

³³⁹ Lukin, 11.

³⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 12.

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