The Rise of Muscovy in the Late Middle Ages: Interpreting Russia’s State-Building through the Lens of a Field Theory

The bloody mire of Mongolian slavery, not the rude glory of the Norman epoch, forms the cradle of Muscovy, and modern Russia is but a metamorphosis of Muscovy.

Karl Marx

ABSTRACT

How did the modern empires come about? Numerous narratives of the early-modern colonial expansion depict how the Europeans travelled overseas and encountered new, unchartered cultural worlds. The relations of the colonizers and the colonized, the metropole and the colony, the masters and the subalterns, portrayed in these narratives, provide vivid examples of subjugation, exploitation, and racial divide. A look at Russia’s incipient stage of empire-building problematizes these conventional binaries (Morrison 2015). In case of medieval Russia, empire-building represented not a venture in the unknown world but rather repolarization of power within an existing sociopolitical universe, the Mongol-dominated Eurasia. Until the end of the fifteenth century, Muscovy was one of the peripheral tributary states of the Golden Horde, the westernmost subdivision of the Mongol Empire. The early stage of Russia’s state-building was associated with Muscovy’s quest for hegemony among the Russian principalities, repolarization of power vis-à-vis the disintegrating Golden Horde, and subjugation of the Golden Horde’s successor khanates.
INTRODUCTION

In this paper, I shed a light on tenacity of Russia’s imperial imagination by examining its peculiar pattern of empire-building that has had a lasting effect on its governing practices and mentality. This pattern is unusual indeed. In the early modern age, the Europeans (Spaniards, Portuguese, Dutch, French, and English) travelled to the new worlds of the Americas and the South-East Asia determined to spread their domination to the newly discovered lands and their inhabitants. The relations of the colonizers and the colonized, the metropole and the colony, the masters and the subalterns revealed a clear pattern of separation, subjugation, exploitation, and antagonism (e.g., Elliott 2006, Parsons 2010, Steinmetz 2008).

In a curious way, Russia’s experience of empire-building problematizes these conventional binaries. In the case of Russia, the state-making represented not a venture in the unknown world but rather a reconfiguration of power within a familiar sociopolitical universe, the Mongol-dominated Eurasia. As I detail below, the turning point of Russia’s state-building was associated with repolarization of power of Muscovy vis-à-vis the Golden Horde, the westernmost ulus of the Mongol Empire. In a timespan of a century, former masters and subalterns, principals and agents switched their roles, contributing to formation of a unique sociocultural milieu of the Russian-dominated northern Eurasia.

Theoretically, this study builds on blending two theoretical perspectives. The first perspective, that provides a primary conceptual framework for this research, is a theory of fields (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992; Fligstein and McAdam 2012; Go 2008; Hilgers & Mangez 2015; Martin 2003; Steinmetz 2008, 2016). According to Fligstein and McAdam’s (2012) recent elaboration of this theory, human action takes place within nested strategic action fields, populated by incumbents and challengers, endowed with various stocks of resources, symbolic capital, and social skills allowing them to improve their respective positions in the fields. Such incremental adjustments may be essential but most serious changes in the fields happen due to major exogenous shocks followed by episode(s) of contention and new settlements reflecting transformed configuration of forces.
In this study, the Golden Horde is considered a strategic field of action and a Great Khan represents an incumbent sovereign within it. In the fifteenth century, the Princedom of Muscovy, a dependent tributary of the Horde, became a major political actor, and, subsequently, a challenger of the Horde’s power. In the end of the fourteenth century, a Tamerlane’s invasion to the Golden Horde created a “seismic” external shock that undermined the incumbent’s power capacity and triggered episodes of contention between the Muscovy and the Golden Horde, that resulted in the ultimate victory of the former and beginning of the eastward expansion of the Russian state towards Volga region, Urals, and Siberia.

The second perspective is agency theory (e.g., Coleman 1990; Kiser 1999, 2005), which was successfully applied to examining colonial policies by Adams and her colleagues (Adams 1996, Adams and Shughrue 2015, Norton 2015). In this theory, a principal is an actor which transfers a certain activity to another actor, an agent. Such delegation may be either contractual or coercive. Most studies in social sciences, with few exceptions (e.g. Kiser 1994, Kiser & Schneider 1994), researched contractual principal-agent relationships.

In this essay, I examine a coercive principal-agent relationship (a suzerain and a vassal), which is consistent with Fligstein and McAdam’s (2012: 14) point that some fields are organized in a hierarchical manner. I suggest that certain endogenous processes in a hierarchically-structured field combined with an exogenous shock may produce repolarization of power, or switching of statuses between a principal and an agent, as it happened in a relation between the Golden Horde and the Muscovy.

The rest of the paper is structured in the following way. To highlight specificity of Russia’s empire-building, I digress to a brief discussion of colonization of Americas by the Spaniards and the English. Next, I move to a description of a strategic action field (the Golden Horde) at the turn of the fourteenth century. Then, I will examine Muscovy’s rise to regional hegemony and its challenge to the Mongol domination. The next part will describe Moscow struggle against Golden Horde successors, the Kazan khanate and the Crimean khanate. Finally, I will recapitulate major findings of this research.
EUROPEAN COLONIZATION OF AMERICAS: A CONTRASTING CASE

Russia began its empire-building roughly at the same time when Europeans embarked on colonization of Americas. To have a better grasp of Russia's continental empire-building, it is may be worthwhile to highlight briefly main features of European overseas colonization using Spanish conquest of Central and South America and English colonization of North America as two pertinent cases in hand.

As stated by J.H. Parry (1966: 65), “Columbus did not discover a new world; he established contact between two worlds, both already old.” While this observation is undeniably correct, it is also true the Spaniards and the English confronted a cultural universe, which was absolutely unknown to them. Likewise, the natives had no prior knowledge of the newcomers and their habits. In some places the Europeans were viewed as gods descended from the sky or other supernatural creatures.

Despite complex social organization and a sophisticated culture, kingdoms and chiefdoms of the New World were at lower level of technological development than the Europeans. Their military technology was also inferior. Soldiers using weapons made of obsidian, wood, or bronze did not have much chance against Europeans protected by steel armor and armed with steel swords, pikes, and canons. Horses and wheeled vehicles were unknown to Americans. Because Indian warriors had to carry their provision themselves, they could not wage military campaigns far from home. The dominant pattern of warfare was inflexible and ritualistic. Aztecs, for example, always announced war and the reasons for war before it started. Because war was a sacred endeavor, it was unthinkable to engage in treachery and fraud (Stannard 1992: 76, 110).

Europeans were determined to establish direct control over conquered territories and local population. Thousands of Spaniards, French and English settled in Americas and hastened to appropriate local resources, would it be precious metals or agricultural land. Colonization involved destruction of indigenous hierarchies and social structures. Former chiefs lost their power and priests could no longer
provide spiritual services. With thousands of men mobilized to work on mines and plantations, indigenous communities were devastated and family lives were disrupted.

The route from conquest to exploitation of the native population was short. In reward for their services Spaniards were granted Indians who had to perform agricultural work and domestic services, a practice known as *encomienda*. With discovery of silver deposits in Cusco and Potosí thousands of Indians were forced to work in mines. Expansion of plantation economy increased demand for labor force. Due to their high mortality rate, the Indian laborers were in short supply. To compensate shortage of the working hands, Europeans began bringing in slaves from West Africa. First large-scale slave economy was established on the sugar plantations in the Caribbean region; later slaves were brought to tobacco plantations in Virginia and other North American settlements.

Colonizers did everything possible to bring natives to Christianity. Intensity of religious sentiment at that era was extraordinary and commitment to conversion was paramount. In the South, Catholic orders led a campaign for conversion: Franciscans, Dominicans, and Augustinians. In North America both Catholic priests and Protestant pastors competed for souls of the “barbarians”. Once natives converted to Christianity they had to change their lifestyle. Mexican men, for example, had to abandon loincloth and wear trousers. In New England, Puritans made great efforts to persuade the Indians to abandon their custom of wearing long hair (Elliott 2006).

Although Spanish expeditions invariably left devastated communities and trails of dead bodies, most Americans died of deadly diseases brought from the Old World (smallpox, measles, influenza, diphtheria, typhus, plague) to which the natives lacked immunity. Hard labor, forced migration to other areas, and demoralization increased their susceptibility to infections. Epidemics spread very fast throughout the continent. In some areas of North America, English colonists arrived to the areas that had already been depopulated due to disease. About 95 percent of population of pre-Columbian population died in the first century of colonization (Diamond 1997, Parry 1966).
To sum up, the Europeans have arrived to the new world, which was absolutely unfamiliar to them. They have had considerable technological and military superiority over the native population which allowed them to conquer vast territories in a relatively short time. The invaders have settled in the newly discovered lands and soon began transforming natural and social landscapes, so they would fit their own economic designs. The native population has become a subject of ruthless exploitation as well as religious conversion. The European colonization has undermined or destroyed the indigenous institutions and social structures. It also has resulted in rapid depopulation of the colonized areas.

RUSSIA’S EMPIRE-BUILDING: A DIFFERENT PATH

Examining the onset of Russia’s empire building, one is struck by dissimilarity of the Russia’ experience when compared to other European states. One recent assessment of the imperial state claims: “Russia as a great, land-based empire, with its roots in the early-modern period, whose titular nationality was ill-defined and enjoyed no particular privileges, whose ruling elite was cosmopolitan, with a disproportionate role played by non-Russians, in particular Poles, Baltic Germans and Georgians… Above all, where was that vital distinction between metropole and colony, that barrier between the political, cultural and territorial ‘nation’ at the heart of the empire, and the colonies at the periphery, so characteristic of ‘Western’ colonialism?” (Morrison 2015: 159).

All that does not necessarily suggest that Russia was a particularly benevolent empire. In brutal treatment of its subjects, particularly those who dared to resist its policies of colonization (such as tribes of mountaineers in the Northern Caucasus, for instance), the Czar’s government did not differ much from other European empires. However, it would be wrong to neglect some important nuances that distinguished Russian imperial rule from the colonial policies of other European powers.

First, particularly harsh treatment of some non-Russian ethnic groups began in the mid nineteenth century, with the onset of Russia’s critical phase of modernization, whereas before that time a relatively flexible and pragmatic approach of cooptation, cooperation, and tolerance with was clearly prevalent.
Russia was a multi-ethnic empire legitimized in dynastic and estate terms. The acceptance of the supreme authority of the Czar was frequently the only major change associated with integration of new subjects into the empire. The native aristocracy was typically coopted into the Russian hereditary nobility and the peasant population - unlike Russian serfs - retained its free status. The traditional economic activities, local administration, and cultural order of the ethnic groups were not destroyed (Kappeler 2001).

Second, in contrast to the colonial policies of the European empires, Russia’s approach towards traditional beliefs of the native people showed a great deal of restraint and toleration (Lieven 2000). Of course, Christian Orthodox church, as the dominant religion, enjoyed important advantages. The Czar and the royal family always were Orthodox. Membership in the church was often a precondition to social mobility and tax privileges (Garaci and Khodarkovsky 2001). However, activities of the Christian Orthodox missionaries and forced religious conversions were limited in scope. A large number of new subjects were already Christians. Numerous efforts to convert other religious groups were either unsuccessful (e.g., with respect to most Muslims) or partially successful (e.g., in case of animists in the Volga region and the lamaists and shamanists of Siberia and the Far North) (Kappeler 2001).

Third, such phenomena as racialization and dehumanization of the colonial subjects, typical for the attitudes of the Europeans, were largely absent in the Russian empire. Svensson (1978: 87) claims: “In the years of Russian imperial expansion, a clear sense of Russian cultural, economic, and social superiority, backed of course by military superiority, was not generally accompanied by claim of racial superiority. This is quite different situation from that in the Anglo-Saxon world, where racial prejudice loomed as a major factor governing attitudes towards other people.” In many Russia’s borderlands, at the lower ranks of the society the ethnic divide was hardly noticeable or socially consequential. Russian peasants eagerly borrowed from the native skills and local knowledge that were valuable and in some areas superior to anything that the Europeans could offer at that time (Ibid).

Why did such dissimilarities in the policies of colonization emerge? In this essay, I will argue that such contrasts were due to a particular pattern of Russia’s continental state-building which began when
the Muscovy was still a small principality within the Golden Horde, and the Golden Horde was a part of a vast Mongol-dominated continental field. In other words, Russians have had a long tradition of coexistence and cooperation with their neighbors in the Eurasian continent (Lieven 2000)

A FIELD OF STRATEGIC ACTION: THE GOLDEN HORDE

In the early thirteenth century, a Mongol warrior, Temujin, succeeded in uniting the Mongol tribes under his rule. After being enthroned as Genghis Khan, he launched a series of conquests that ended up in creating the largest empire in the history of the world that controlled most of the territory of Eurasia. In the mid thirteenth century, after losing much of its initial thrust, the empire fragmented in four parts. The descendants of the Genghis Khan’s eldest son, Jochi, established control over the western part of the former empire that included the Russian principalities, the Volga region, and the West Siberia. It was a Jochi’s domain that later became known as the Golden Horde. Second son, Chagatai, became a ruler of the Middle Asia. A Genghis Khans grandson, Hulegu founded the Ilkhanate in the Middle East. Another grandson, Khubilai Khan, established a Mongol-dominated Yuan empire in China.

MAP 1 AROUND HERE

The field of strategic action examined in this study, the Golden Horde, emerged as one of successor states of the Genghis Khan’s empire. This westernmost ulus of Mongols became politically independent from the rest of Genghisids under Mongke Temur (reign 1266-1281). The Mongols represented a small ruling elite in the state, which absorbed various Turkish people who lived in the region: the Volga Bulgars, the Kipchaks, and the Cumans. Only a descendant of Genghis Khan could be elected a Great Khan by the Mongol nobles. Most of the population of the steppe empire were nomads. A Great Khan himself would usually spend summer months in the middle Volga and Kama or in the Northern Caucasus but in the fall return to the capital, Sarai, built in the mouth of Volga. In the early fourteenth century the capital was moved about 110 miles up the river, to new Sarai. Located at the intersection of important trade routes a new capital provided a home to a large multiethnic population,
which included Mongols, Alans, Kipchaks, Circassians, Russians, and Greeks, that occupied separate quarters of the city. Commerce and crafts thrived in the city, which soon became quite wealthy. Mongols were indifferent to local beliefs and left religious institutions functions as they used to do before (Burbank and Cooper 2010, De Hartog 1996).

The Golden Horde was embedded in a larger political environment of the Mongolosphere (a handy term popularized by Khara-Davan 2002). Like other Genghisid empires, the Golden Horde has had tenuous relations with its neighbors. For a long time, the khans of the Golden Horde were involved in struggle against its southern neighbor, the Ilkhanate. The conflict came to fore in 1258, when the Ilkhanate ruler, Khan Hulegu, captured and destroyed Bagdad, the capital of Abbasid Caliphate, and killed the Calif, who was wrapped in the carpet and trampled to death. Berke, a Muslim Khan of the Golden Horde, was enraged when he learned this news. The ruler promptly sent his lieutenants to raid the Hulegu’s lands and made a strategic anti-Ilkhanate alliance with the Mamelukes based in Egypt. The Golden Horde reached a peak of its power under Khan Uz Beg (reign 1313-1341), who converted to Islam and made it a state religion (Morgan 2013, Vernadsky 1953).

The Russian principalities located in the northwest were viewed as the Golden Horde’s backwater. A relationship between the Horde and the Russian princes and can be conceptualized as hierarchical principal-agent relationship. Russian princes were allowed to govern their lands insofar as they recognized sovereignty of the Horde and paid tribute to the Great Khan. In the thirteenth century, the conquerors exercised direct fiscal control over Russian dependencies; the Mongol tribute collectors (baskaki) traveled to Russia to collect tribute. In the fourteenth century, a system of indirect control became prevalent; the Russian princes collected tribute and sent it to Sarai. From time to time, one prince or another was summoned to Sarai on various businesses: to take an oath to the Khan, to obtain patent for rule (yarlyk), or to get an approval of his will. To keep the Russians under control, the Mongols encouraged competition among the vassals by supporting weaker princes and putting down (sometimes executing) stronger rulers. Their rule was a classic example of the “divide and conquer” principle.
In the second half of the fourteenth century, the Golden Horde began showing signs of a decline. One of the key causes of decline was a problem that plagued numerous empires from the time immemorial. In contemporary social science, it is known as agency dilemma. A transfer of prerogatives from a principal to an agent is a cost-efficient solution, but it also makes a principal vulnerable to informational asymmetry and opportunistic behavior on the part of an agent. Moving from direct rule to indirect rule (i.e. allowing Russian princes to collect taxes themselves) benefitted local rulers who not only began appropriating an increasing share of collected taxes but also gained political influence at the expense of Sarai. Mongol rulers found it increasingly difficult to keep their vassals in submission.

In 1360, a civil war, which lasted for twenty years began in the Golden Horde. In this period, at least fourteen rulers followed one another in fast succession. A time of troubles opened opportunities for the Horde’s adversaries. The first challenge to their rule came unexpectedly in 1363 when a Lithuanian prince Olgerd defeated the Mongol troops and captured Kiev, a center of the pre-Mongolian Kievan Rus. A “mother of all Russian cities,” which was controlled by the Mongols since 1240, went into possession of Lithuania. A Moscow Prince Dmitry, who began portraying himself as a protector of national Russian interests, turned out to be another problem. In 1380 Dmitry defeated a large army of Khan Mamai in a battle on Kulikovo field (De Hartog 1996).

By that time, the Golden Horde was in a serious disarray. Historically, the Jochi domain was loosely divided into two parts: a Right wing (the Blue Horde, or Kok-Horde) and a Left wing (also known as the White Horde, or Ak-Horde). The Blue Horde included lands west of Volga whereas the White Horde comprised vast territories of what is now Kazakhstan, Urals, and West Siberia. In the time when Mamai was busy fighting Dmitry in the west, a powerful White Horde overlord Tokhtamysh attacked the Blue Horde from the east. In 1380, he defeated Mamai and united the Golden Horde under his control. Two years later, to punish a defiant Dmitry, Tokhtamysh raided Russian lands, seized Moscow, and slaughtered a large part of its population. Dmitry was forced to pay an extraordinarily large tribute to the
Mongols (Crummey 1987: 58). It seemed that the Holden Horde was about to regain its former glory. However, a period of its recovery turned out to be brief.

A RISING CHALLENGER: THE MUSCOVY

Initially, nothing foreshadowed Moscow’s rise to preeminence among the Russians lands (Crummey 1987). Founded in 1147, for years Moscow was a small, relatively insignificant town in Vladimir-Suzdal principality in the North-East of Russia. Like other Russian lands, the Vladimir principality was ravaged by Batu Khan’s army during the Mongol invasion (1237-1242), but suffered smaller damage and recovered stability and prosperity soon after the invasion. While influence of Kiev and other princedoms has irreversibly declined, Vladimir-Suzdal’s position among Russian lands has improved. Due to migration of people from the South, the population of the principality increased substantially. In 1260s, a Prince of Vladimir, Yaroslav, obtained from the Mongols the yarlyk (a mandate) for the title of Grand Prince thus formally establishing Vladimir a primus inter pares among the Russian lands. Its growing significance was underscored by the fact that Metropolitan Maxim moved his residence from Kiev to Vladimir (De Hartog 1996: 64).

However, being the center of influence among the Russian lands also involved liabilities. Initially, the Mongols made sure not to allow any regional power rise to the point of preeminence. Vladimir and Suzdal were repeatedly invaded and destroyed by the Mongols. Moscow, located in a less-developed forest area, suffered less of their depredations. Step-by-step, it began to gather momentum at the time when influence of Vladimir declined. To be sure, Moscow was not the only candidate for regional hegemony. Novgorod in the north, untouched by the Mongol invasion, remained the largest and most prosperous Russian city. Tver, a town northwest of Moscow was another ambitious upstart. Moscow princes had to wage a long struggle against Tver (and later against Novgorod) before their hegemony was established. Each party appeal to the Mongols and did not find it objectionable to bring the Mongol troops to raze the lands of an opponent.
Such opportunistic manipulation of the nomadic masters was turned into the state of art by a Moscow Prince Ivan I Kalita (the Handbag) (reign 1325-1340). Ivan spent a considerable time in Sarai pledging allegiance to Mongols and intriguing against his princely competitors. When people of Tver rioted against Mongol tribute-collectors and killed them, Ivan proceeded to Sarai and returned with a Mongol army of 50,000 strong to punish the city. In 1331, Khan Uzbek declared Ivan the Great Prince of Vladimir and appointed him a primary tax-collector throughout all Russian lands. This position allowed the ruler to accumulate a considerable amount of wealth which was used to bribe Mongol officials and annex contiguous Russian lands. Since mid-fourteenth century it became a custom that the title of Great Prince of Vladimir (i.e. the ruler of all Russian lands) belonged to a Moscow ruler (De Hartog 1996).

It is not difficult to see that this transposition is consistent with the argument of agency theory (e.g., Kiser 1999). A principal (a Great Khan) transfers his prerogative (tribute-collecting) to an agent (a Prince of Moscow). Using principal’s low monitoring capacity and his own informational advantage, an agent manipulates the principal and appropriates a share of assets (tribute) collected for the principal. Using assets accrued from the transactions, an agent employs these resources for building alliances with or subordinating other agents (Russian appanages). As Marx contemptuously put it, “His whole system may be expressed in a few words: the Machiavellism of the usurping slave.” In such way, a process of repolarization of power between Moscow and the Golden Horde has begun.

A shift in a balance of power led to the first major episode of contention. Ivan’s grandson, Dmitry began showing signs of defiance of Sarai. By that time the Golden Horde became seriously weakened due to a prolonged civil war (1360-80). On September 8, 1380, Dmitry defeated Khan Mamai in Battle on Kulikovo Field (near the river Don), which is viewed by Russian historians as a critical turning point in relations between Russia and the Mongols. However, such an assessment may be contested because two years later the army of Khan Tokhtamysh seized Moscow and ravaged it. Tokhtamysh reunited the Golden Horde and reestablished it as a key player in the region.
At any rate, it was not Moscow that has inflicted the mortal blow to Sarai. A powerful external shock has brought about a demise of the Golden Horde. Following his far-reaching plans, Tokhtamysh invaded Persia. This action put him against his former suzerain Tamerlane who has built a powerful centralized state on the ruins of Chagatai Khanate in the Middle Asia. In 1390s he entered Persia and after conquering it, led his troops to the Golden Horde. Tamerlane has captured main Horde’s cities, Sarai and Astrakhan, killed thousands people, deported most skilled craftsmen to Samarkand, and disrupted the traditional trade routes, including the Silk Road. The Golden Horde’s power structure has weakened irreversibly.

This, however, did not have an immediate effect on relations between Moscow and Sarai. Formally, Russian princes continued to be vassals of the Great Khan and pay tribute to him. However, due to a diminished capacity of the Khans to impact the Russian affairs, Muscovy was able to strengthen its position and expand its territory. Most of the credit for this expansion goes to Ivan III (the Great) (1462-1505).

Until Ivan’s ascendance to power, Muscovy remained one of many Russian principalities, although the pivotal one. Territorially, the largest Russian land was the Novgorod republic, northwest of Moscow. Differently from other Russian land, Novgorod was ruled by a city assembly (veche) which appointed a city head and a military commander. To keep its autonomy from Moscow, the Novgorod oligarchy tried to balance its weight by an alliance with Lithuania. The ruling elite was split into a pro-Lithuania and pro-Moscow parties. Using his supporters in the city, Ivan invaded Novgorod, confiscated property of his opponents, annexed Novgorod possessions, and ended the Novgorod democracy. A similar fate befell on a longtime Moscow’s rival, Tver, and other lands. After subjugation of Novgorod and Tver, the territory of Russia almost tripled. The formerly semi-autonomous appanages were subordinated to Moscow and became its provinces whereas former princes became Ivan’s subordinates.

In 1480, the Khan Ahmed of the Great Horde undertook one more attempt to reestablish control over increasingly assertive Muscovy. In the fall of 1480, Ahmet led a large army to Russia. Ivan’s troops
met him halfway on Ugra river. For three months two armies confronted each other but never staged a battle. It appeared that Ahmed awaited troops of his Polish ally, Casimir IV, but the latter, distracted by the raid of Crimean Tatars (Moscow allies), failed to arrive to the location. When it became colder and the Tatars began suffering shortage of provision and forage for horses, Ahmet turned his army around and headed back East. Most Russian historians view “a standing on Ugra” an event symbolizing the end of the Mongol yoke, although some researchers push this event to earlier dates (e.g., Crummey 1987).

REPOLARIZATION OF POWER: MOSCOW VS. KAZAN

In the first third of the fifteenth century, the fragmented Great Horde suffered a series of internecine wars. Taking advantage of the weakened suzerain, the regional khanates began asserting their power and independence. In the mid fifteenth century, several autonomous states emerged on the territory formerly controlled by Sarai: the Kazan Khanate, the Khanate of Crimea, the Nogai Horde, the Kazakh Khanate, the Khanate of Astrakhan, and the Tyumen Khanate (which turned later into the Khanate of Siberia). In 1502, the Great Horde was invaded by its former vassal, the Crimean Khan, and ceased to exist as a separate entity.

A demise of the Great Horde has not necessarily reversed a power relationship between Muscovy and the Tatars. The successors of Sarai still viewed Moscow as their dependency. In the 1430s-1440s, the Kazan Khanate, located in the Middle Volga, forced the rulers of Moscow to resume paying tribute. It has taken another half a century for Russians to reverse a fealty relationship and more than a century to conclusively defeat and annex the Kazan Khanate. As late as 1531, Grand Prince Vasili III still had to collect tribute to be paid to the assorted Tatar principalities (Khodarkovsky 2002: 65).

Why did Russia continue paying tribute to the Tatars? One needs to keep in mind that the Tatars still represented a formidable military force. In 1438, the Tatars defeated Muscovites under Belev, in spite of their numerical superiority. Next year, a Tatar Khan Ulugh Muhammad attacked Moscow itself. Although the Tatars were not able to capture it, they devastated the surrounding areas and burnt the
neighboring city Kolomna. In 1445, Muscovy troops were routed in the Battle of Suzdal and the Great Prince Vasili II, who commanded the troops, was captured by the enemy. He was released from captivity only after Moscow had to pay a huge ransom. The year of 1445 marks the high point of the Kazan’s military and political superiority over Moscow (Pelenski 1974).

In conflict-ridden relations of the nomadic Tatars and the sedentary Russians, the former had a strategic advantage of mobility and elusiveness. As Gat (2006: 379) noted, “the steppe light horsemen were able to keep up that mode of warfare and eschew direct confrontation if they so wished, because there was nothing that they were forced to stand up and defend. There was no target against which the forces of sedentary societies could counterattack effectively, either to annihilate their tormentors or to deter them. The horse pastoralists’ families and herds were beyond the reach and almost as mobile and elusive as the nomad warriors themselves.”

In the sixteenth century, this strategic advantage began to fade away. On the one hand, a large and diversified economy of Muscovy could support a centralized state bureaucracy (which the Tatars still lacked) and a larger military force furnished with firearms. The brick walls of newly built city fortifications protected the populace from the raids of the nomads. The Tatars were still able to devastate the countryside but unable to take the fortified strongholds. The horsemen had to dismount and fight on feet, which led to losing their mobility advantage (Davies 2007).

On the other hand, the Tatars themselves began a transition to agriculture and a sedentary lifestyle. Now they became attached to certain places, which they had to protect and fight for. However, a centralized and bureaucratized authority still did not exist in the khanate. As Pelenski (1974: 61) has put it: “The Kazanian political system, resembling, at least on the surface, the classic nomadic model, did not satisfactorily adjust to the existing socioeconomic conditions and, for this reason, became more and more outmoded… At the same time, it neglected to preserve the old military virtues of the nomadic empires. A similar situation had occurred in the Golden Horde in the later part of the fourteenth century when the old
nomadic practices yielded to an agricultural way of life and the new Mongol-Turkic peasants had no time for military training.”

The process of bringing in the Tatars under the Muscovy power began under Ivan III, who skillfully exploited internal conflicts within the Kazan elite. In 1487, the Great Prince seized Kazan and captured Khan Ilhan with all his family. A Moscow puppet khan was installed in the Khanate. The new khan had to ask approval of the Russian rulers for his children’ marriage plans, submit all diplomatic correspondence to Moscow for a review, and send troops to support the Russians in their military expeditions. In the subsequent period, the Tatars rebelled against the invaders and several times succeeded in regaining their independence. For the entire first half of the sixteenth century, Russians ceaselessly tried to consolidate their power over the Eastern neighbor whereas the Tatars desperately fought to preserve their independence. The struggle ended in 1552, when Czar Ivan IV the Terrible conquered and annexed Kazan, slaughtering thousands of the Tatars in the process.

Conquest of Kazan and (two years later) Astrakhan opened the way for Russian colonization of the vast territory east of Volga river. In the next century, most of Siberia, an enormous expanse of land, sparsely populated by nomadic and semi-nomadic Turkish and Mongolic tribes, fell into the Russian hands. For the first time in its history, Russia expanded far beyond the territory of the Russian ethnicity. As Pelenski (1974: 8) summed it up, “This conquest signaled the transformation of Muscovite Russia from a centralized national state into a multinational empire, a development of crucial importance for the subsequent course of Russian history.”

REPOLARIZATION OF POWER: MOSCOW VS. CRIMEA

Another major competitor of Muscovy was the Crimean Khanate. As an autonomous entity, this state was established in 1440s by Haci Giray, an expatriate khan, born and raised in Lithuania. For several decades, the Crimean nobility had to fight Sarai to disentangle from its Eastern suzerain. Because Muscovy was engaged in a parallel struggle against the Great Horde, the Crimean Khanate maintained friendly relations
with the Russian rulers. In the fall of 1480, a diversionary raid of the Crimean Tatars prevented Polish King Casimir IV to help the Great Khan Ahmet in fighting Russian army standing on Urga. In 1991, Ivan III sent his cavalry to help the Crimean Khan Mengli Giray, (a son of Haci Khan), to fight the Great Horde. A strategic alliance between the Muscovy and the Crimea was founded on their struggle against the common enemies – the Golden Horde and Poland-Lithuania\(^1\)- and lasted for almost forty years (1470-1509).

In the early sixteenth century, a configuration of power within a political field began to change (Davies 2007: 14). Despite a growing military strength of Muscovy, the principality was still ensconced within the political system of the Mongolosphere, and the Crimeans, emboldened by their triumph over Sarai, considered Moscow to be a subservient tributary state. Mengli Giray expected Moscow to pay a generous tribute and join him in a raid against Astrakhan. However, a new Great Prince Vasili III (reign 1505-1533), who was enthroned in Moscow after death of his father, Ivan III, assumed a more uncompromising position with respects to Crimean demands. Without challenging Mengli Khan’s superiority, he declined to make any concessions to the Khan.

When the repeated requests for tribute were declined, the Crimeans reverted to a time-tested weapon, the military raids against Russia. Such expeditions were led by Crimean nobles and were conducted annually, sometimes twice a year (during a harvest time and, occasionally, in winter). The Tatars horsemen moved very fast (each warrior took two or three mounts), avoided waging pitched battles and storming well-fortified cities, preferring to ravage rural areas and capture prisoners and movable property. In 1521, a Great Khan Muhammad Giray himself led an army of 50,000 strong on Moscow to punish a disobedient vassal. Although he was not able to capture the city, he ravaged the surrounding areas, while Grand Prince Vasili III had to flee to Volokolamsk.

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\(^1\) Poland and Lithuania formed a dynastic union in 1386.
The purpose of the Crimean raids went beyond reestablishing a contested patron-client relation. Such expeditions represented a primary source of wealth and political stability for Crimea. Back home, the authority of Khan was not absolute but rested on a consent of hereditary nobility which supported an incumbent ruler as long as he ensured a constant influx of wealth. Because of dry climate, Crimea’s agriculture was not able to support the population of peninsula. Only a southern part of Crimea was good enough for raising crops. Most of trade was traditionally monopolized by Genoese, Karaim Jews, and Armenians. In such conditions, the well-being of the Crimean nobility became increasingly dependent on capturing and selling slaves from Muscovy, Lithuania, Poland, and Ukraine.

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, slaveraiding and slave-trade became a well-established and lucrative business in Crimea. The Tatars captured from 150,000 to 200,000 Muscovites in the period 1600-1650 only (Davies 2007: 25). The prisoners were counted and distributed at the crossing places in the entrance to the Crimean peninsula (Ivanics 2007). A fifth of all prisoners were usually turned over to the Ottoman sultan (an official suzerain of the Khanate), a portion of captives was distributed among the Tatar khans, officials, and nobility, whereas the rest was sold on slave markets. Some slaves would work as rowers on the galleys, others were used as construction workers, farmers, and domestic servants. A certain number of noble or well-to-do captives would be held for ransom and sold back for a large sum of money, up to several hundred rubles. Of course, the Tatar depredations had a serious negative effect on Russian economy and society. Such attacks deprived economy of workforce, destroyed property, drained state resources to ransom payments and confined Russian colonization to the forest and forest-steppe areas (Davies 2007: 23).

Obviously, the Muscovy authorities had to take measures against the Tatar raids. Construction of defense lines south of Moscow was a first step in fighting off the invaders. In the early sixteenth century, the government created the Bank (Bereg), a 250-kilometer defense line along Oka and Ugra rivers between towns of Kolomna and Kaluga. Every spring Grand Prince Vasili III would dispatch several thousand troops to guard Moscow from the Tatar raids. In 1522, the monarch centralized operations by
making Kolomna a headquarters for defense operations. The government introduced biannual appointments of commanders, listed cities contributing troops, and worked out mobilization plans and routes of deployment. In 1550-60s, another chain of fortifications, the Abatis Line, was constructed 100 kilometers south of the Bank. The line consisted of earthworks, palisades, ditches, and the wide abatis barriers made of fell trees. The main part of the Abatis line stretched about 600 kilometers from the Zhizdra river on the west to Ryazan in the east (Ibid).

A military reform was another measure intended to resist foreign invasions. The Decree on Service issued by Czar Ivan IV in 1556 linked the land-holding entitlements and military service obligations for members of the upper and middle classes. All members of these classes fit for the military duty had to report for service. Men assignment to military service (except for those who were drafted for local duty) received cash payments. Those members of nobility who failed to show up for service faced punishment by confiscation of land. New detachments of the musketeers (strel’tsy) were formed. The troops became equipped with field artillery. To keep records and assignments, the Czar established a Military Chancellery (Davies 2007).

Most of these innovations had proven to be effective; in the last third of the sixteenth century the Tatar raids became less frequent and less damaging. The last successful Tatar expedition against Muscovy occurred in 1571 when Great Khan Devlet Giray captured and burnt Moscow. However, the next year expedition turned out disastrous for him. Russians defeated the Tatars in Battle of Molodi, after which Tatars stopped sending regular expeditions against Moscow. Russia still had to pay 7,000-12,000 rubles annually in tribute to Crimean khans (the payments lasted until 1683) but a threat of a large-scale invasion and subjugation to Tatars was largely neutralized.

Although the entanglements with Crimea have complicated and delayed Russia’s empire-building policies in the South, they did not stop Russia’s eastward expansion. In last third of the sixteenth century, after Ivan IV annexed the Khanates of Kazan and Astrakhan, Muscovy began extensive colonization of
the vast areas of Urals and Siberia. By the mid seventeenth century Cossack expeditions reached the Pacific Ocean. In the end of the sixteenth century Russia’s empire-building was full speed underway.

CONCLUSION

Most contemporary studies in sociology of empire rely on historical experience of the European colonial domination over the non-European people. Correspondingly, explorations in this field build on well-established binaries of the metropole and the colony, the colonizers and the colonized, the masters and the subalerns. Using an example of late medieval Russia, this paper explores an alternative, continental pathway of the empire-building, which blurs and problematizes these conventional binaries.

Drawing on a theory of fields (Fligstein and MacAdam 2012), first I identify a field of strategic action, the Golden Horde, the westernmost ulus of the Mongol empire, which became independent from the rest of the empire around 1260s. In 1230-40s, the Mongols conquered a host of Russian principalities that for years vied for preeminence among themselves. The Asian nomads established full political domination over the conquered lands. However, in contrast to later Europeans in Americas, the Mongols chose not to settle in Russian-populated forest and semi-forest zones preferring to reside in steppe areas south and east of Russian lands. They did not destroy pre-existing social hierarchies of the Eastern Slavs and left intact a traditional religion of Russia, the Orthodox Christianity.

Initially, the Golden Horde exercised direct control over the Russia. The Mongol governors (baskaki) ruled over Russian territories. However, in the early fourteenth century the conquerors moved to the indirect rule. They have allowed the local princes to conduct everyday administrative business and collect tribute, under condition that they fully accepted the sovereignty of the Great Khan. Russian princes had to travel to the Horde’s capitol, Sarai, to pledge their allegiance to the Khan, obtain the mandate for rule (yarlyk), and bring the tribute.

Such association fits perfectly into a model of a hierarchical principal-agent relationship, in which the Great Khan represented a principal (a sovereign) and the Russian princes were his agents (vassals). In
the fourteenth century the Khan moved from dealing with a multiplicity of agents to interactions with one agent, the Great Prince of Moscow, who was entrusted with collecting tribute from other Russian lands. Being a more efficient form of control, this system of rule was characterized by low monitoring capacity due to great distances and perennial communication problems. That also provided an agent - a Great Prince of Moscow - with an opportunity of exploiting his preeminent status to his own benefit.

It was not predetermined that Moscow would become such an agent (in fact, one can easily imagine that some other Russian princedom, say Tver, would obtain such status). Here is a point where a notion of social skill comes into play. According to Fligstein and MacAdam (2012: 46), “social skill can be defined as the ability to induce cooperation by appealing to and helping to create shared meanings and collective identities.” Great Prince of Moscow Ivan I Kalita was exceptionally skilled in building a trusting relationship with Khan Uzbek, which allowed him to become a primary tax-collector in the Russian land. Ivan has demonstrated an excellent ability of opportunistic adaptation: siding with a principal, turning into his quasi-proxy, and becoming indispensable to a principal.

The Muscovite rulers were skilled in another respect: cultivating a political alliance with the Christian Orthodox church. It would be a stretch to claim that such alliance was driven by a goal to preserve a collective identity vis-a-vis the Mongols. Instead and more pragmatically, Moscow princes sought an ally in the internecine struggle with other Russian rulers and the church indeed helped Moscow to win this fight. However, it is true that the church became a cementing force of the Russian society and a driving force its struggle against the Tatars at the later stage. Had the Tatars chosen to convert Russians to their own religion, Islam, Russia’s state building would have a very different trajectory.

It is true that political repolarization between the Muscovy and the Golden Horde was affected by a long-term economic change, as Marxists would argue. In the fifteenth century and the first half of the sixteenth century Russian lands experienced a sustained economic growth. The Golden Horde, on the contrary, entered the period of economic stagnation and political instability. A transition from nomadic lifestyle to sedentary economy had an adverse effect of traditional military power of the Mongols. No
longer the Tatars were the elusive horsemen who had no place to call home and defend. By the sixteenth century many of them settled in the cities and villages. The townsmen and farmers were losing their fighting skills and were unavailable for prolonged military expeditions.

Nonetheless, were the changes in the external environment insignificant, Golden Horde’s domination over Russia could have lasted for a long time. Russian tribute-paying to Crimean Khan which lasted until the end of eighteenth century (around 1683) attests that once established principal-agent relationship could be durable. Consistently with the field theory, it was a powerful external shock that created an opportunity for Russia’s disengagement from the Tatars’ control. In the late fourteenth century, a large army of Khan Timur (Tamerlane) defeated the Golden Horde’s forces and devastated the Tatars’ domain. The Golden Horde began to disintegrate into several autonomous states.

Some of the successor states, such as Kazan Khanate and Crimean Khanate, were still powerful. Considering themselves the descendants of Genghis Khan, their rulers insisted on continued payments from their Russian vassals. Whenever such requests were rejected, they launched devastating military raids on Russia. Only creation of a centralized semi-bureaucratized state with a powerful military under Ivan IV allowed Muscovy to defeat the Kazan khanate and build defenses against the Crimean raids. Annexation of Kazan khanate, a first territory outside the core Russian lands, came to symbolize the inauguration of Russia’s imperial enterprise. Subjugation of Crimea and colonization in the South had to wait for two more centuries.

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MAP 1. MONGOL EMPIRE, 1294

MAP 2. THE GOLDEN HORDE, 1390s