

Scott Jones
Reading in Early Russian History

Silfen, Paul Harrison. The Influence of the Mongols on Russia: A Dimensional History. (Hicksville: Exposition Press, 1974). 120 pages.

Although there are many reasons to study history, one of the more attractive reasons is to study the past so that we can make sense of the present. The complex cause-and-effect nature of the past lead us down a path that could, at any moment, have changed the course of human history. Many engaging discussion have centered around a "What if...?" question about a turning point in history. According to Paul Harrison Silfen in *The Influence of the Mongols on Russia: A Dimensional History*, each nation has events in its past that helps it develop the character of the people living in the nation. The thesis of Silfen's work is that the arrival of the Mongols into Russia in 1223 was one of those events that helped develop the character of the Russian state. Specifically, Silfen believes the Mongols helped create the Russian dependence on a central authority and the growth in size and power of the city of Moscow.

Silfen begins his book with the development of his first argument in support of the importance of the Mongol influence on Russia. According to the author, the Russian people prior to the Mongols lived under the rule of various local princes spread throughout the territory. This lead to many power plays by princes who hoped to see their wealth and power increased. Originally centered in Kiev, this state was very loosely organized as princes from the Ruriki line competed in rival cities. Because of this loose organization, the author argues that when the Mongols arrived in the Russian lands, they found the area easy to take into their empire. Silfen writes that the Mongol leaders began

forcing the Russian princes to abide by the Mongol rulers with force. Many Russian princes were executed at the whim of the Mongol leaders. Thus, according to the book, the Russian princes began to consistently look to the Mongol leaders for permission to do anything, which began the tradition of central authority for the Russian people.

The second of Silfen's main influences the Mongols had on Russia was the development of Moscow as a major city. When the Mongols arrived in Russia, Moscow was a very small city with little or no political or cultural influence. By the end of the Mongol reign in Russia, Moscow had emerged as the dominant power in the Russian lands. According to Silfen, the Mongols were the reason for this. The author writes that it was the job of the ruling prince of the city to collect taxes for the Mongol empire and then take the tax money directly to the leader of the Mongol territorial government, the Golden Horde. As time developed, the Moscow princes stopped sending the money to the Golden Horde, despite the fact the princes were still collecting the tax money from the citizens of Moscow. While princes from other cities were executed for much less, the Golden Horde never punished the princes of Moscow for their actions. According to the author, the reasons were that the city of Moscow was instrumental in helping the Mongols quiet rebellions in the city of Tvar and among the Lithuanian people, and through marriage of Ivan I to the daughter of the Golden Horde. As the Mongol empire started to weaken in the fourteenth century, the author writes that Moscow was the only city in Russia that was in a financial situation, due to the collection of taxes and the lack of payment to the Mongols, to maintain a position of political and cultural power.

As the battle between Moscow and Lithuania began to come to an end, the city of Moscow emerged as the leader of the Russian people. Silfen spends significant portions

of his book using various Russian interpretations of the influence of the Mongols. However, he states that the Mongols were the reason for the rise of Moscow and the other cities acceptance of Moscow's supremacy, especially after the city became the protector of eastern Christianity and the Byzantine tradition through the marriage of Muscovite prince Ivan III to Zoe, a Byzantine princess, following the fall of Constantinople. Using the path of logic Silfen takes the reader down, had it not been for the Mongols, Ivan III would not have been in any position to become the protector of the great Byzantine tradition. Even though Silfen's book ends with the rise of Moscow, students of Russia know the influence the city has had throughout the rest of Russian history, which may have not been possible if the Mongols would not have rendered the Kievan Russian state inadequate and replaced with a firm central government accepted by the Russian princes.

Silfen's book is a strong read that lays down the foundation to any study of the Russian people. While comprising only 120 pages, the author makes use of each word and event. The result is a book full of information crucial to the development of the modern Russian government and culture.