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Could there be a grain of truth in the Ukrainian propaganda?

The Saker

7-9 minutes

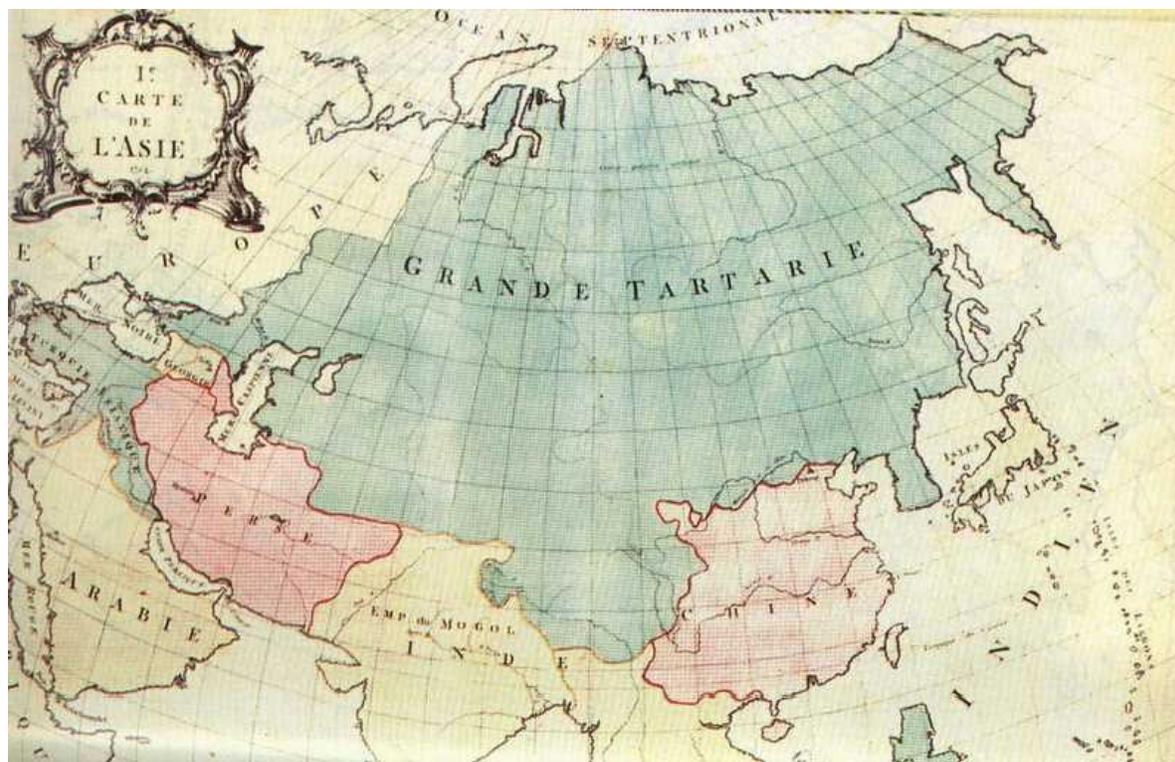
We have all heard the Ukrainian nationalist line: they are the true Slavs inheritors of the Kievan Rus while the modern Russians are really either Tatars or Ugro-Finns or God knows what else. And then there the famous quote by, I think, Napoleon, who said “scratch the Russian and you will find the Tatar”.

The interesting thing here is that there might well be some truth to that, and more than a grain only.

But first, what is a “Tatar”? Well, in modern times, a Tatar is a well defined category, both in historical terms and in modern terms (see Wikipedia entry for “Tatar” [here](#)). The problem with this is that what is missing from these definitions is the ancient usage of this word. Even nowadays, the various people referred to as “Tatars” have very little in common. They have even less in common with modern Mongols. So why do Russian books speak of a “Tatar-Mongol Yoke”? Who were these “Tatar-Mongols” in reality?

Official Russian (and western) historiography more or less agrees that the “Tatar-Mongols” were a mix of nomadic tribes from Asia (modern Mongolia) who swept across Siberia and the steppes and

invaded Russia and many other countries (as far as Poland and Austria). In fact, these Tatar-Mongols built the biggest empire of all times and they did so just in a few decades. The following French map shows the huge size of this empire:



But there is a problem with this official narrative. Tatars are not Mongols. Worse, the term "Tatar" was applied to various totally different ethnic groups who had very little in common. There is even very strong evidence that the word "Tatar" was even applied to Russian populations!

Check out this detail of an icon of the famous Russian Orthodox saint Serge of Radonezh which shows a famous battle between Russians and Tatars and see whether you can tell these two groups apart:



click on image for higher resolution

and now let's take a closer look at a detail of this (very large) icon:



Can you tell the combatants apart? If not, don't feel bad. Neither can the historians. Not only are the two sides equipped exactly the same way, but both sides have icons of Christ as their banners!

This is just one example amongst many, and I will not bore you with the multitude of many others out there. What I will simply say is this: there is very strong evidence that the "Russian" forces were full of "Tatars" and there is also very strong evidence that "Tatar" forces were full of "Russians". Some Russian historians go as far as saying that Russians are Tatars (in the 13th-15th century usage of these words, not in our modern ones!) and that what 18th and 19th century historians describe as a "Tatar Yoke" was in reality a Russian civil war. Now, before you throw up your hands in disgust, please remember that "Russian" is not (and never was!!) an ethnic category. In fact, the confusion here comes from the fact that

neither Russian nor Tatar are ethnic categories. Mongol is, but the Mongols were never sophisticated enough and numerous enough to conquer such a huge landmass by themselves. Still dubious? Okay – try finding out who the modern descendants of the “Tatar-Mongols” are? Candidates to that title include Mongols, Turkmens, Slavs and many other ethnic groups from all over the former Empire of Genghis Khan. The amazing bottom line is this: we don’t know who the 12th-14th century “Tatar-Mongols” really were, but there is very strong evidence that “Russians” (speaking in a purely cultural, not ethnic sense) were very much part of that. Another way to put that would be to say that Orthodox Slavs were a key component of the civilization which later historians have labeled “Tatar-Mongol” empire. Some of these Orthodox Slavs were clearly subjects to the invading hordes from the East, but others were official of these hordes. What evidence is there for that? Plenty – including the fact that the invaders used almost exclusively Russian in their administration, that a lot of Russians had Tatar names and vice-versa, or that if you look at the genetic stock in the regions supposedly colonized for 300 years by Mongols from Asia you will find an overwhelming preponderance of Slavic and European genetic markers even though history records that a lot of Russian families were founded by Tatars (including, by the way, my own).

Confused?

Good, that is exactly how it should be. I am confused too. And so are many historians. The evidence for the simple narrative offered by 18th-19th century historians simply does not add up. But what the true story is has yet to be discovered.

What about the Ukraine in all that?

First, remember that the “Ukrainian nation” is a 20th century invention. But what is true is that the Orthodox Slavs who lived in what is today the Ukraine have some very salient differences with the Orthodox Slavs who live in what is today the Russian Federation. Let’s call the first group South Orthodox Slavs and the second group North Orthodox Slavs. These are some of the important differences:

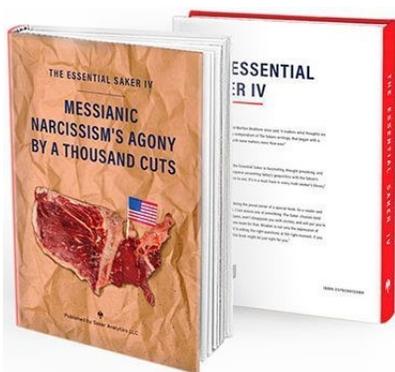
1. The South Orthodox Slavs were much further away from the Tatar-Mongol centers of power than the North Orthodox Slavs.
2. The South Orthodox Slavs spent many centuries invaded by the Polish and Lithuanian armies.
3. The South Orthodox Slavs did not live through the Old Rite Schism (see [here](#) for details).
4. The North Orthodox Slavs did not suffer Papist persecutions.
5. The South Orthodox Slavs did live a long time under the Greek Orthodox Church (while the North Orthodox Slavs had their own, independent local Orthodox Church)

There are, of course, other elements, but these few do already point a possible and real differences in *ethos*. Of course, acting powerfully to nullify these differences is the truly massive and centuries long mixing of North and South Slavs. To claim, like the Ukrainian nationalists today, that Russians and Ukrainians are totally different people is absolutely ridiculous and to say that the Ukrainians are descendants of ancient “Ukrs” who are, I kid you not, the ancestors of the Aryans, who built the pyramids in Egypt and were the first to settle the Black Sea coast is plain crazy, of course. But it is undeniable that South and North Slavs *have* had historically very different experiences and that the North Slavs’

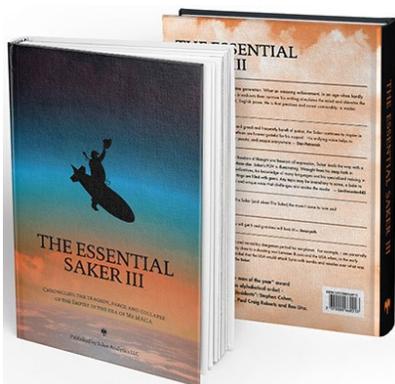
integration in, and acculturation to, to the civilization we now erroneously called “Tatar-Mongol” was very deep, possibly much deeper than suspected until now.

In conclusion, please don't flame me for what I wrote. As I said, I am not a historian and there are enough thoroughly confused historians out there to make even a very ignorant person like myself feel bold enough to raise interesting questions without providing any answers at all. I just wanted to share with you that the history of the people living in modern Ukraine and, even more so, modern Russia is very complex and in many ways very mysterious and obscure and that those nationalists (on both sides!) who have it all figured out and reduced to once-sentence slogans are almost inevitably wrong.

The Saker



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