Russia, the Kievan Rus, and the Mongols: Crash Course World History #20

Crash Course: World History
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Hi, I'm John Green, this is Crash Course World History, and today we're gonna talk about Russia, which means we get to talk about this guy again! We haven't talked about Russia much so far because one, it's complicated, and two, ya actually gavaryu pa ruski a little bit, because I had some Russian in college, and that makes it difficult to mispronounce things, which is my thing!

Past John: Mr. Green, Mr. Green! Why'd you take Russian?

Well, because I had this big crush on a Russian major. But, anyway, I'm sure I'll still mispronounce everything.

(Intro)

So, today we're going to talk about persistent stereotypes about Russia, and how Russia came to take its current shape, a turn of events we owe largely to the Mongols.

But before we discuss the Mongol conquest of Russia, let's discuss exactly what got conquered. So before there was a Russian empire, or even a Russian kingdom, there was the Kievan Rus. We know Kiev was a powerful city-state, but who exactly founded it is a subject of debate. Most historians now believe that the settlers of Kiev were Slavic people who migrated from around the Black Sea. But there's an older theory that the settlers of Kiev were actually, like, Vikings. That theory goes that Vikings came down to Kiev from rivers like the Dnieper and founded a trading outpost similar to ones they'd founded in Iceland and Greenland. Which is an awesome idea and everything, but Russian, the language that developed from what the Rus spoke, sounds a lot more Slavic than it sounds, you know, Swedish. To illustrate, here is a Swede fighting with a Russian over who founded Kiev.

Right, okay, so trade was hugely important to Kiev. Almost all of their wars ended with trade concession treaties, and their law codes were unusually devoted to the subject of commerce. The Rus traded raw materials like fur, wax, and also slaves — We're not gonna venture into the astonishingly intense etymological debate over whether the word "Slav" derives from the Latin word for slave because there's nothing more terrifying and verbose than an etymologist flame war. But, yeah, the Rus traded slaves. They also relied on agriculture — and your relationships to the land determined both your social status and your tax burden. And if you fell into tax debt, which a lot of peasants did, then you became bonded to the land you farmed for the rest of your life. I guess that slave-like dynamic is okay as a model for social organization, but if you step on the proletariat for too long, you might end up with a Communist revolution.

But I'm getting way ahead of myself. Couple more things about Kiev: First, the ruler of Kiev was called the Grand Prince, and he became the model for future Russian Kings. Also, the early grand princes made a fateful decision: They became Byzantine Christians. According to legend, prince Vladimir chose to convert the Rus to Byzantine Christianity in the 11th century. He purportedly chose Christianity over Islam because of Islam's prohibition on alcohol saying: "Drink is the joy of the Russian."

Anyway, the Kievan Rus eventually fell in 1240 when these guys showed up and replaced them. By that time the Rus had been at war with pastoral nomads for centuries; from the Khazars to the Pechenegs to the Cumans, and they were tired. Which made them easy targets.

The period of Mongol "rule" over Russia is also known as Appanage Russia. An Appanage is princedom, and this period basically featured a bunch of Russian princes vying for control over territory, which is not a recipe for political stability or economic growth, another theme that will re-emerge in Russian history.

By the way, I'm describing all of this as Russia even though if you did that in the 13th century, people would look at you funny. They'd be like, "What do you mean, Russia? Also, where'd you get those pants? And all those teeth?" "MMMM… YOU SMELL PRETTY." Right. So, to discuss how important the Mongols were to Russia, let's go to the Thought Bubble.

The Mongols did set up the Khanate of the Golden Horde in Russia, but it didn't leave much lasting impact on the institutions of the region, which had already been set up by the Kievans. But they did bring about a population shift — away from the South, where Kiev was, toward the Northeast. This was partly to get away from the Mongols and their massacring, but that noted, the Mongols were comparatively light rulers: They were happy to live in their yurts and collect tribute from the ever-bickering Russian princes. And all the princes had to do in exchange for their relative freedom was recognize the Mongol khans as their rulers and allow the Mongols to pick the Grand Prince from among the Russians. Perhaps most importantly, Mongol rule cut the Russians off from the Byzantines and further isolated them from Europe, leaving Russia not Byzantine, not European, and not really Mongol either, since they hated the Mongols and generally believed the Mongols were a scourge sent from God to punish them for their sinfulness and everything.

But the Mongols did help propel Moscow to prominence and in doing so, created the idea that this was Russia. And as an aside, they also did what Napoleon, Hitler, and many others couldn't: The Mongols successfully conquered Russia in the winter. Thanks, Thought Bubble.

So how did the Mongols help catapult Moscow and its princes to prominence? Well, first, they named Muscovite princes The Grand Prince on more than one occasion. More importantly, the Muscovite princes won — that is to say purchased — the right to collect tribute on behalf of the Khan from other princes. That's a good gig because it's easy to skim a little bit off the top before you send it down the line to the Mongols. Which is precisely what the Muscovites did to enrich themselves. One prince who was particularly good at this was known as Ivan Kalita. Using my Russian, I can tell you that that translates to "Johnny Moneybags." As my Russian professor would tell you, I'm a "creative" translator.

All this loot helped Moscow expand their influence and buy principalities. The Mongols also helped them more directly by attacking their enemies. Plus Moscow was at the headwaters of four rivers which made it well-positioned for trade. And because they were kind of the allies of the Mongols, the Mongols rarely attacked them – which meant that lots of people went to Moscow because it was relatively safe. Including churchy people. In fact, Moscow also became the seat of the Eastern Orthodox church in 1325, when the Metropolitan Peter moved there.

So you might think that the Muscovites would be grateful for all this help from the Mongols, but you would be wrong. As the Mongols' position weakened in Russia in the latter half of the 14th century, one of Moscow's princes Dmitry Donskoy made war on them and inflicted the first major defeat of Mongols in Russia at battle of Kulikovo Field. This showed that the Mongols weren't invincible, which is always really bad for an imperial force. Plus it made Moscow look like the hero of the Russians. And that helped strengthen the idea of a unified Russia, just as you'll remember the Persians helped unify the Greeks a long time ago. Aiding this growth was stability, which Moscow owed largely to luck: Muscovite princes usually had sons which allowed them to have successors. In fact, there was only one major succession struggle and it was between two blind guys named Basil. That's not a joke by the way. Oh, it's time for the Open Letter?

An Open Letter to Basil and Basil.

But first, let's see in the Secret Compartment. Oh, it's Grizzlor! Yeah, I guess that is kind of how the Russians saw the Mongols.

Dear Basils,
The 15th century Muscovite civil war was insanely complicated, but it culminated with you guys essentially blinding each other. First, Basil II, the eventual winner of the civil war, had Basil the cross-eyed blinded. Because being cross-eyed wasn't bad enough. And that was seen as the end of the political career of Basil the Cross-Eyed. But then Basil the Cross-Eyed's brother tracked down Basil II and he was like "Imma blind you back!" And of course, everybody thought that would end Basil II's political career, but they were wrong. It turns out you can rule Russia like a Boss even if you're blind.
Best wishes, John Green

After Basil the Blind came the real man who expanded Moscow's power, Ivan III, later known as Ivan the Great. First, he asserted Russian independence from the Mongols and stopped paying tribute to the khan-- after the khan had named him Grand Prince, of course. Then, Ivan purchased, negotiated for or conquered multiple appanages, thus expanding Muscovite power even more. Ivan later declared himself sovereign of all Russians and then married the niece of the last Byzantine emperor, thus giving him even more legitimacy. And he took titles autocrat and tsar, which means Caesar. Basically, Ivan created the first centralized Russian state and for doing that he probably deserves title "the Great."

And that would be a good place to stop, except then we won't see the type of absolute rule that characterized Russia for most of the rest of its history, even unto Putin. OH GOD. JUST KIDDING PUTIN! YOU'D NEVER RIG AN ELECTION.. N-NO… PLEASE DON'T PUT ME IN JAIL!

While Ivan III consolidated Muscovite power, the undeniable brutal streak in Russian governance comes not from the Mongols, but from Ivan IV, better known as Ivan the Terrible. Ivan IV ruled from 1533 to 1584, taking the throne at age 16, yet more evidence that adolescents should not be trusted with emerging empires. Ivan the Terrible's reign represents the end of princely power and the beginning of the autocracy that Russia is famous for. But in the beginning, he was really an innovative leader. As a young king, he worked with a group of advisers called the Chosen Council, which certainly sounds like a good thing. He also called the very first meeting of the zemsky sobor, a grand council of representatives similar to the estates general that would become so important in France two hundred years later. And also reformed the army, emphasizing the new technology of muskets.

But in the second part of his reign, Ivan earned his nickname, the Terrible — which can mean either bad or just awe-inspiring, depending on your perspective. Psychological historians will point out that things started go terribly wrong with Ivan after the death of his beloved wife, Anastasia Romanov. Or they might point to the fact that he enjoyed torturing animals when he was a kid.

Regardless, Ivan set out to break the power of the nobility-- the former princes and landowners called the boyars. They were the last link to princely rule. And after an odd episode that saw him briefly "abdicate," Ivan returned to Moscow and declared he had the right to punish all traitors and evildoers. To help him in this effort, Ivan created the oprichniki, a corps of secret police who rode around on black horses, wearing all black, whose job it was to hunt down and destroy any enemies of the tsar. See also: Nazgûl and Dementors. So this was the first of Russia's purges. And over the latter half of Ivan's reign, whole towns were destroyed. It was, in effect, a civil war, except with no resistance. One historian called it a civil massacre. In the end, Ivan IV established absolute control of the tsar over all the Russian people, but he also set the precedent of accomplishing this through terror, secret police, and the suspension of law. And that would echo through the ages of Russian history… I mean, until Vladimir Putin heroically put an end to it. His little eyes. They're scary…

So, hence the stereotype of Russian brutality and barbarism, but here's the truth; the rest of Europe also knew a lot about brutality and secret police forces. But for centuries, Russia was seen by western Europe as both European and not, an "Other" that was to be doubly feared because it was not fully Other. And when we think of all these historical stereotypes about Russia, it's worth remembering that what you see as barbaric about others is often what they see as barbaric about you. Thanks for watching, and I'll see you next week.

Crash Course is produced and directed by Stan Muller, our script supervisor is Danica Johnson. The show is written by my high school history teacher Raoul Meyer and myself. Our graphics team is Thought Bubble, Last week's Phrase of the Week was: "Nobody's business but the Turks" If you want to suggest future phrases of the week or guess at this week's you can do so in comments where you can also ask questions related to today's video that will be answered by our team of historians. Thanks for watching, and as we say in my hometown, Don't Forget To Be Awesome.