9.4: The Mongol Threat

Learning Objective

• Describe the attacks by the Mongols on the Russian principality

Key Points

• The major principalities of Kievan Rus' became increasingly fractured and independent after the death of Yaroslav the Wise in 1054.
• The first Mongol attempt to capture Kievan territories occurred in 1223 at the Battle of the Kalka River.
• The Mongol forces began a heavy military campaign on Kievan Rus' in 1237 under the rule of Batu Khan.
• Kiev was sacked and taken in 1240, starting a long era of Mongol rule in the region.

Terms

Tatar yoke
The name given to the years of Mongol rule in Kievan Rus', which meant heavy taxation and the possibility of local invasions at any time.

Golden Horde
The western section of the Mongol Empire that included Kievan Rus' and parts of Eastern Europe.
Sarai

The new capital of the Mongol Empire in the southern part of Kievan Rus’.

Mongol Invasion

The Mongol invasion of the Kievan Rus’ principalities began in 1223 at the Battle of the Kalka River. However, the Mongol armies ended up focusing their military might on other regions after this bloody meeting, only to return in 1237. For the next three years the Mongol forces took over the major princely cities of Kievan Rus’ and finally forced most principalities to submit to foreign rule and taxation. Rus’ became part of what is known as the Golden Horde, the western extension of the Mongol Empire located in the eastern Slavic region. Some of the new taxes and rules of law lasted until 1480 and had a lasting impact on the shape and character of modern Russia.

Fragmented Kievan Rus’

After the end of the unifying reign of Yaroslav the Wise, Kievan Rus’ became fragmented and power was focused on smaller polities. The great ruler’s death in 1054 brought about major power struggles between his sons and princes in outlying provinces. By the 12th century, after years of fighting amongst the princes, power was centered around smaller principalities. This unsettled trend left Kievan Rus’ much more fragmented. Power was passed down to the eldest in the local ruling dynasty and cities were responsible for their own defenses. The Byzantine Empire was also facing major upheaval, which meant a central Russian ally and trading partner was weakened, which, in turn, weakened the strength and wealth of Kievan Rus’.
The principalities of Kievan Rus’ at its height, 1054-1132. The princely regions were relatively unified into the 12th century but slowly separated and became more localized as fights over regions and power among the nobility continued.

**Mongol Invasion**

The already fragile alliances between the smaller Rus’ principalities faced further tension when the nomadic invaders, the Mongols, arrived on the scene during this fractured era. These invaders originated on the steppes of central Asia and were unified under the infamous warrior and leader Genghis Khan. The Mongols began to expand their power across the continent. The Battle of the Kalka River in 1223 initiated the first attempt of the Mongol forces to capture Kievan Rus’. It was a bloody battle that ended with the execution of Mstislav of Kiev executed the Kievan forces greatly weakened. The Mongols were superior in their military tactics and stretched the Rus’ forces considerably, however after executing the Kievian prince, the forces went back to Asia to rejoin Genghis Khan. However, the Mongol threat was far from over, and they returned in 1237.
The Sacking of Suzdal in 1238 by Batu Khan. This 16th-century depiction of the Mongol invasion highlights the bloodshed and military might of the invaders.

Over the course of the years 1237 and 1238, the Mongol leader, Batu Khan, led his 35,000 mounted archers to burn down Moscow and Kolomna. Then he split his army into smaller units that tackled the princely polities one at a time. Only Novgorod and Pskov were spared major destruction during this time. Refugees from the southern principalities, where destruction was widespread and devastating, were forced to flee to the harsh northern forests, where good soil and resources were scarce. The final victory for Batu Khan came in December 1240 when he stormed the great capital of Kiev and prevailed.

**Tatar Rule and the Golden Horde**

The Mongols, also known as the Tatars, built their new capital, Sarai, in the south along the Volga River. All the major principalities, such as Novgorod, Smolensk, and Pskov, submitted to Mongol rule. The age of this economic and cultural rule is often called the Tatar yoke, but over the course of 200 years, it was a relatively peaceful rule. The Tatars followed in the footsteps of Genghis Khan and refrained from settling the entire region or forcing local populations to adopt specific religious or cultural traditions. However, Rus’ principalities paid tribute and taxes to the Mongol rulers regularly, under the umbrella of the Golden Horde (the western portion of the Mongol Empire). Around 1259 this tribute was organized into a census that was enforced by the locals Rus’ princes on a regular schedule, collected, and taken to the capital of Sarai for the Mongol leaders.
A map of the Mongol Empire as it expanded. This illustration shows the rapid expansion of the Mongol Empire as it traveled west into what became known as the Golden Horde.

Effects of Mongol Rule

Despite the fact that the established Tatar rule was relatively peaceful, demanding taxation and the devastation from years of invasion left many major cities in disrepair for decades. It took years to rebuild Kiev and Pskov. However, Novgorod continued to flourish and the relatively new city centers of the Moscow and Tver began to prosper. Another downside to the Tatar presence was the continued threat of invasion and destruction, which happened sporadically during their presence. Each new military invasion meant heavy tolls on the local population and years of reconstruction.

Culturally, the Mongol rule brought about major shifts during the first century of their presence. Extensive postal road systems, military organization, and powerful dynasties were established by Tatar alliances. Capital punishment and torture also became more widespread during the years of Tatar rule. Some noblemen also changed their names and adopted the Tatar language, bringing about a shift in the aesthetic, linguistic, and cultural ties of Russia life. Many scholars also note that the Mongol rule was a major cause of the division of East Slavic people in Rus’ into three distinctive modern-day nations, Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus.

Sources

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