

# The Golden Horde

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The Golden Horde of Batu had more time and more room for expansion of its territories than any other Mongol khanate. The Mongols maintained sovereignty over eastern Russia from 1240 to 1480, and they controlled the upper Volga area, the territories of the former Volga Bulghar state, Siberia, the northern Caucasus, Bulgaria (for a time), the Crimea, and Khwarizm. By applying the principle of indirect rule, the Golden Horde Mongols were able to preserve the Mongol ruling class and the local dynasties for more than 200 years. The influence that the Golden Horde Mongols came to have over medieval Russia and other areas was immense and lasting. They played a role in unifying the future Russian state, provided new political institutions, influenced imperial visions, and, through indirect rule, facilitated the appearance of a Muscovite autocracy.

The Golden Horde capital at Sarai became a prosperous center of commerce. Here, as in China, Mongol rule meant free trade, the exchange of goods between the East and the West, and also broad religious toleration.

In the mid-thirteenth century, the Golden Horde was administratively and militarily an integral part of the Mongol empire with its capital at Karakorum. By the early fourteenth century, however, this allegiance had become largely symbolic and ceremonial. Although certain Mongol administrative forms--such as census and postal systems--were maintained, other customs were not. The Golden Horde embraced Islam as its state religion and, with it, adopted new and more complex administrative forms to replace those of the old regime that had been devised for conquest. Even though most Mongols remained steppe nomads, new cities were founded, and a permanent urbanized bureaucracy and social structure took shape at Sarai. The Golden Horde allied itself with the Mamluks and negotiated with the Byzantines to combat the Ilkhans in a struggle to control Azerbaijan. Rather than isolating Russia, the Mongol presence and extensive diplomatic system brought envoys to Sarai from central and southern Europe, the Pope, Southwest Asia, Egypt, Iran, Inner Asia, China, and Mongolia.

The Mongols' vast contacts opened Russia to new influences, both Eastern and Western. The reason the Mongols did not occupy Russia itself, but left its administration to local princes, was not inability to administer a society that was both urban and agrarian, or Russian resistance. Rather, some historians believe that Russia had little to offer the Mongols in terms of produce or trade routes, and even tax revenues were insignificant compared with the wealth of the southern realms under their control. The inability of cavalry to operate in forests and swamps--a factor that limited the northward advance of the Mongols and largely determined the northern frontier of their empire--was undoubtedly a distinct disincentive as well.

In time the Golden Horde Mongols and the Mongol Tatars, although still nomads, lost their original identities and--as happened to Mongols in China and Iran--became largely synonymous with the local Turkic peoples, the Kipchak. Arabic and Tatar replaced Mongol as the official language of the Golden Horde, and increasing political fragmentation occurred. The power of the Golden Horde khans slowly declined, particularly as a powerful new state rose in central Russia.