

The Rise of Moscow

Founded in 1147, Moscow remained an insignificant town for more than a hundred years. At that time, the location lay at the crossroads of three major roads, one of which connected Moscow to Kiev. The geographic location of Moscow merits attention, as it sits on a bend of the Moscow River, which connects to the Oka and Volga River. Via the Volga River, that allows access to the Dniepr and Don Rivers, as well as the Black and Caspian Seas, huge opportunities for trade and commerce with distant lands have always existed. With the Mongol onslaught, droves of refugees began to arrive from the devastated southern portion of Rus, namely Kiev (Riasanovsky, 109). Moreover, the actions of the Muscovite princes in favor with the Mongols helped Moscow's rise as the center of power.

Leading up to the point that the Mongols granted Moscow the iarlyk, Tver and Moscow were constantly struggling for power. The major turning point surfaced in 1327 when the populace of Tver started to rise in rebellion. Seeing this as an opportunity to please the khan of his Mongol overlords, Prince Ivan I of Moscow took a huge Tatar contingent and quashed the rebellion in Tver, thereby restoring order in that city and winning the favor of the khan. For his show of loyalty, Ivan I was also granted the iarlyk and with this Moscow took yet another step towards prominence and power. Soon the princes of Moscow took over the responsibilities of collecting taxes throughout the land (and in doing so, taking part of these taxes for themselves) and eventually the Mongols gave this responsibility solely to Moscow and ended the practice of sending their own tax collectors. Yet Ivan I was more than a shrewd politician and exchequer of good judgment: he was perhaps the first prince to replace the traditional lateral line of succession with the vertical line (though this would not be fully achieved until the second Prince Vasili's reign in the mid-1400s (Hosking, 71-2)). This change brought more stability to Moscow and thus strengthened her position within the realm. As Moscow grew wealthier through being the main tax collector of the lands, its authority over several principalities became greater and more consolidated. The lands that Moscow gained equated with more taxes and more access to resources, and thus more power.

During the time that Moscow grew wealthier and more powerful, the Golden Horde was in a state of general decay, wrought with rebellions and coups. Prince Dmitrii decided to attack the Kazan khanate in 1376 and was successful. Not long after, one of the Mongol generals, Mamai, sought to create his own horde of sorts in the steppes west of the Volga River (Hosking, 79) and he decided to challenge the authority of Prince Dmitrii on the banks of the Vokha River; Dmitrii defeated Mamai, exciting his Muscovites and, naturally, angering the Mongols. However, Mamai chose to fight again and organized a contingent of 150,000 men; Dmitrii matched this number and their two armies met near the River Don at Kulikovo Pole (Kulikovo Field) in early September of 1380 (Dmytryshyn, 140). Dmitrii's army, though suffering losses of some 100,000 men, defeated Mamai; Tokhtamysh, one of Tamerlane's generals, soon captured and executed the general. Prince Dmitrii became known as Dmitrii Donskoi (of the Don). However, Moscow was soon sacked by Tokhtamysh, and once again had to pay tribute to the Mongols.

Yet the great battle of Kulikovo Pole in 1380 was a symbolic turning point. Even though Moscow suffered retribution for attacking Mongol armies, the power that Moscow wielded would continue to grow and its influence over other Russian principalities would continue to expand. Novgorod finally succumbed to future capital in 1478, and Moscow soon shed any allegiance to the Mongol and Tatar overlords thus ending over 250 years of Mongol control.