

# The Birth of the Captive Autocracy: Moscow, 1432

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## Abstract

Relying on Russian chronicle sources of the fifteenth century, this paper argues that beginning with Vasiliï II in 1432, the grand principality of Moscow mirrored the political structure of its overlords, the Golden Horde. The most recent work by Mongolists and Turkologists on ruling traditions and state structures of the Mongol khanates show that the successor states to the Chingisid empire were ruled not by an autocratic khan but by a council of four qarachi beys, heads of the four leading clans. The selection of the teenager, Vasiliï II, as grand prince of Moscow in 1432 was a decision made by a coalition of three of the four qarachi beys in order to weaken a rival bey, and simultaneously also weakened the rulership of the grand prince of Moscow by increasing the power of the boyar and princely clans surrounding him. However, the political model the princely clans-plus-grand prince was effective and flexible and later facilitated the rise of Moscow over its former rivals and overlords.

## Keywords

Russia, fifteenth century, empire, grand prince, Moscow, khan, state building, autocracy

## Introduction

Between the death of Vasiliï I, Grand Prince of Moscow in 1425, and the ascent of his grandson Ivan III in 1462 (dubbed by later observers “Ivan the Great”), the principality of Moscow experienced repeated and particularly brutal wars between branches of the Muscovite ruling family. Although the son of Vasiliï I, Vasiliï “The Blind,” eventually outlasted his uncles and cousins to rule as grand prince, historians agree that the dynastic wars were a watershed period. In the book that was the culmination of his career, A.A. Zimin, the Russian author of a most thorough and stolid study of these decades, surrendered to dramatic impulse and triumphantly called these decades the time when “the Russian Hero, standing at the crossroads,

must choose his Fate.”<sup>1</sup> Curiously—and a fact historians have paid inadequate attention to—the wars of succession did not begin in 1425, with the death of Vasilii senior, but in 1432, after the installation of his teenage son, Vasilii II, on the grand princely seat in Moscow. Heroes in this era are not easy to find; the conflict was brutal and alliances were made without clear political motive (at least by the criteria applied by modern historians). At least two, and probably three, participants were blinded in cold-blooded political retribution.<sup>2</sup> Although Vasilii II is remembered most vividly for his being blinded by his cousin, Prince Dmitrii Shemiaka in 1445, the circumstances of his ascent to the throne as a teenager in 1432 already marked him as a unique, even pivotal individual in the evolution of the Muscovite state. Historians have argued consistently that the dynastic wars of 1425-1455 were key to “the rise of Moscow” because they were critically formative in national, dynastic, and institutional state building, and in the struggle of pro-Mongol vs. pro-Russia factions.<sup>3</sup> The traditional evaluation is right—these were indeed critical and formative decades for the Russian state—but the reasons given heretofore are wrong.

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<sup>1</sup> A.A. Zimin, *Vitiaz' na raspu'e. Feodal'naia voina v Rossii XV veka* [*Hero at the Crossroads. The Feudal war in Russia in the 15th c.*] (Moscow, 1991), 4 (capitals in original). Zimin died in 1980. This book, the last of his life's work in a series of six books covering the history of fifteenth and sixteenth century Russia, offered a radical reinterpretation, which allowed that the Grand Prince cooperated with the Khan as his overlord. The book was published only posthumously, as Zimin's books did not meet the approval of Soviet academic establishment for political reasons. The title of Zimin's book quotes the Romantic painting by Viktor Vasnetsov, “Hero [or Warrior] at the Crossroads” (1878), in which a lone warrior on a white horse solemnly considers an inscription offering him the choice of two paths, each with bad outcomes.

<sup>2</sup> They were Grand Prince Vasilii (blinded in 1445), the boyar Vsevolozh (a major figure in the episode recounted below, blinded in late 1432 or early 1433), and Vasilii “the Squint-Eye” (brother of Dmitrii Shemiaka), who was blinded later by Vasilii II. Blinding was not common in Russian politics, but it was a Byzantine practice to remove political rivals from the eighth to the fourteenth centuries, including the rebellious usurper Artabasdos, the emperors Constantine VI, Michael V, Romanos IV Diogenes, and the patriarch John IV. The Russian accounts do not specify which method of blinding was used; in Byzantium, blinding was accomplished with boiling vinegar, a red-hot iron, or gouging out the eyes. The last incident of political blinding in Byzantium took place in 1373. Alexander Kazhdan “Blinding,” *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium* (on-line reference edition), (Oxford and New York, 1991 [print] and 2005 [digital reference collection]).

<sup>3</sup> Ia. S. Lur'e gives a basic overview of Russian interpretations in his chapter on the textual sources of the blinding of Vasilii in *Dve istorii Rossii XIV-ogo veka* (Petersburg, 1994), Chapter 2, although he does not focus attention on Vasilii's trip to the Horde in 1432.

This era of Russian history has remained stubbornly resistant to illumination and interpretation by historians because they have seen it as *Russian* history. Despite what institutional-minded and dynastic historians have reasonably argued when their focus was on Moscow itself, Vasiliï II became grand prince not due to legal precedents (even within the admittedly vague limits of fifteenth century legality), nor as a policy decision to establish primogeniture. Vasiliï II did not become grand prince because his father, Vasiliï I, designated him as heir in his last will and testament, as has been traditionally argued by state-minded Russian historians.<sup>4</sup> Neither Vasiliï I nor his predecessors as grand princes of Moscow had the prerogative of bestowing the title or selecting their successors; Russian custom dictated that inheritance passed to the next youngest brother of the ruling prince. The young Vasiliï II became grand prince in violation of Russian custom and precedent due to the decree of the Khan, as will be explained below. The choice of Vasiliï II as grand prince was intended to weaken, not strengthen, the Muscovite principality and the power of the grand prince. The plan to weaken the Moscow grand prince succeeded. However, within a few decades, the Muscovite principality became stronger—strong enough to become the overlord to the fragmented khanates—not in spite of the Khan's maneuvering in 1432, but because of it. Both of these apparent contradictions can be explained by looking back to the chronicles' explanations of the accession of Vasiliï II to the grand princely seat in 1432, which is more properly, and profitably, understood within the context that the chronicles gave it: the regional geopolitics of the major powers on the western steppe (the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and the Golden Horde) and the political arena of Moscow's overlords, the steppe khans. Re-reading the accession of Vasiliï II, giving due attention both to the sources and to the most recent research on steppe politics, leads to quite a different explanation of how the succession was accomplished, and how the grand prince of Moscow was able to secure power not only among the Russian princes but also eventually relative to the khanates heir to the fractured Golden Horde. At the Khan's court, Vasiliï and his supporters learned a model of governance based not on a single imperial leader but on councilar rule and, over the next century, implemented this model more effectively than their overlords themselves had done.

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<sup>4</sup> The German historian Peter Nitsche already effectively disproved this explanation three decades ago in his much-neglected book, *Grossfürst und Thronfolger; die Nachfolgepolitik der Moskauer Herrscher bis zum Ende des Rjurikidenhauses* (Köln, 1972).

During this, the late “appanage” period of Russia, the Chingisid Khan as leader of the Golden Horde was nominally the apex of the hierarchy among the east Russian princes. (“Horde,” which for us has come to connote a savage swarm, came to us [and to Russian] from Mongolian *ordu*, and meant palace and by extension, royal house.) Beginning in the last quarter of the fourteenth century, tax collection was shifted from direct representatives of the khan (*baskaki*) to designated locals—the Russian princes.<sup>5</sup> “Grand prince” was a title taken from the pre-Mongol Kievan political system and meant the senior prince in the family hierarchy; in the last quarter of the fourteenth century it designated the khan’s chosen tax collector for all the Russian lands under his suzerainty. As scholars have long acknowledged, the Muscovite princes put themselves in a unique position as clients of the Khans and bore the title grand prince with their sponsorship and approval. In the fourteenth century the continent-spanning dominions of the unified Mongol Horde had broken up into regional khanates, and by the fifteenth century the vast khanate of the western steppe (the *ulus Juchi*) was itself breaking into smaller spheres of control under competing claims of authority.<sup>6</sup> Only descendants of Chingis Khan—the “Golden Kin”—still carried the imperial mandate. Able and

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<sup>5</sup> Charles Halperin, *Russia and the Golden Horde* (Bloomington, 1985), 38. Halperin clarifies the relationship of the Russian lands within the Horde after the Russian princes were nominally given control: “When the Mongols removed the *baskaki* [their direct representatives as tax collectors and supervisors] from the Russian principalities and replaced them with *darugi* [administrators and advisors] operating from Sarai [the Horde capital], they were not relaxing their control of the East Slavs. During the *baskak* period it was the nearby presence on the steppe of the formidable nomad army that ensured that Mongol wishes were obeyed, and that presence had not changed.” (Halperin 39)

<sup>6</sup> Halperin 29. By the middle of the fifteenth century, the Golden Horde split into the khanates of Kazan, Astrakhan, Crimea, and others further east on the steppe, but at the time of Moscow’s interregnum and succession crisis (1425-1433), this breakup was still just beyond the horizon. The institution of the qarachi beys, which will be discussed further below, was common to all four of these khanates. Beatrice Forbes Manz, “The Clans of the Crimean Khanate, 1466-1532,” *Harvard Ukrainian Studies*, 2:3 (Sept. 1978), 282.

For relations of the Moscow princes to the khans in the first half of the fifteenth century, see, among others, George Vernadsky, *The Mongols and Russia* (New Haven, 1953); Edward L. Keenan, “Muscovy and Kazan, 1445-1552: Some Introductory Remarks on the Patterns of Steppe Diplomacy,” *Slavic Review*, 26 (1967) 548-558; Jaroslaw Pelenski, *Russia and Kazan* (The Hague, 1974); Donald Ostrowsky, *Muscovy and the Mongols* (Cambridge, 1998); and Janet Martin, “The Emergence of Moscow, (1359-1462),” *Cambridge History of Russia*, vol. 1. *From early Rus’ to 1689* (Cambridge, 2006). Further bibliography can be found in Ostrowsky (1998).

ambitious military commanders, like Tamerlane, who seized power in the Chagadai khanate in 1370 and ruled imperiously until his death in 1405, and his protégé and heir, Edigei, who de facto ruled the Golden Horde until 1411, never claimed the title Khan because they were not of the Golden Kin. Despite these disruptions in the *ulus Juchi* in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, the usurpers and their clients (such as the Moscow princes) still recognized that only a khan himself could play the role of “kingmaker,” designator of the grand prince among the Russian princes.<sup>7</sup>

By the fourteenth century there was no shortage of blood descendants of Chingis Khan, but as there was not one among them with a decisive lust for leadership, a competing tradition in Mongol-Tatar steppe politics reasserted itself: rule by a coalition of aristocratic clans, and more specifically, by the select council of the four beys.<sup>8</sup> Although the idea of the single imperial ruler has appealed to historians seeking khans in the model of Chingis himself, such autocratic power was in fact the exception.<sup>9</sup> In later centuries councilar rule became specifically defined in practice and political culture as the khan in conjunction with the four beys (or begs, the heads of the four major clans), and became standard in the successor khanates. Thus, it was Khan Ulug Mehmet (Ulu-Mukhammed) of the Golden Horde, not Grand Prince Vasilii I of Moscow, who nominally had the power by custom and perhaps by “law” to grant the patent for the grand princely throne to Vasilii II, but it was the four beys behind the throne who in fact determined the next grand prince. A coalition among three of the four beys and Moscow’s most powerful boyar engineered the choice of the young Vasilii and installed him in Moscow in a political system mirroring their own: the “autocrat” surrounded by and dependent upon a coalition of ruling clans and their clan leaders.

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<sup>7</sup> See Halperin 98-100: “Moscow’s bookmen were thoroughly familiar with the ramifications of Mongol succession” (99) and “in Russia the status of the Golden Kin remained high for centuries after the end of Tatar rule” (101).

<sup>8</sup> Recent publications by Mongol specialists Christopher Atwood and David Sneath, who have investigated the evolution of the governing power of the khan and the tribes independent of entanglements with Muscovite Russia (and modern Russian historiography), are very useful here. See Atwood, “*Ulus Emirs, Keshig Elders, Signatures, and Marriage Partners: The Evolution of a Classic Mongol Institution*,” in *Imperial Statecraft: Political Forms and Techniques of Governance in Inner Asia, Sixth-Twentieth Centuries*, ed. David Sneath, (Bellingham, Washington, 2006), 141-173.

<sup>9</sup> Sneath’s wide-ranging and compellingly argued study stresses coalition rule as the basic political structure. David Sneath, *The Headless State. Aristocratic Orders, Kinship Society, and Misrepresentations of Nomadic Inner Asia* (New York, 2007).

## The Problem of Succession in 1425

At the death in 1425 of Grand Prince Vasiliï I (son of the famous Dmitriï Donskoi) there was a genuine question who was to succeed him, for his oldest surviving son, Vasiliï, was then only ten years old. Contrary to the accounts of history books (and chronicles, beginning with the dynastic revisions of the sixteenth century), Vasiliï II did not inherit the title of grand prince in 1425. Since the younger Vasiliï was still a child, the dowager grand princess, not surprisingly, was a central player, not only in her traditional role as guardian for her son but also through her own political connections and ambitions. The widow Sophia was the only daughter of Vitovt, Grand Prince of Lithuania and the most powerful ruler on the north-western steppe, and because of her early marriage (in 1390), at the death of her husband she had already been grand princess of Moscow for thirty-five years.

The succession of Vasiliï I after the death his father, Dmitriï Donskoi, in 1389, was apparently, smooth. Dmitriï Donskoi had no surviving brothers, and his son Vasiliï Dmitrievich had just reached adulthood. (He married Sofia Vitovtovna the year after his accession as grand prince.) It was from the accident of this easy succession, and similar ones in the preceding generations (facilitated by unusually high mortality among princes—these were plague years), that Russian historians have drawn the picture of the establishment of primogeniture. Vasiliï I reigned for thirty-six years, but at *his* death he had four surviving brothers: Iurii, Andrei, Petr, and Konstantin, all of proven military skill. The Russian princes had, since Kievan times, observed collateral succession, that is, succession of the senior male in the clan, which was a tradition and productive practice at the death of the grand prince that provided an able, experienced heir. Their Mongol-Tatar overlords had usually confirmed traditions of Russian succession, which were similar to their own. Among the Russian princes, this tradition had ensured succession for five centuries, since Kievan times right through the Mongol conquest and all the subsequent intra-family wars. In 1425, that senior male and heir was Prince Iurii Dmitrievich.

Why did the Russian princes rely on collateral inheritance? Among the professional warrior class, not only did many children die before reaching maturity (as with Vasiliï I's own sons), but mortality was also high among adult males as long as near-constant fighting was the norm. Primogeniture, or selecting one son as heir, was thus very risky.<sup>10</sup> Collateral inheritance

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<sup>10</sup> Medieval French noble and royal families transitioned to primogeniture at the same

was not the *cause* of constant war, as historians have sometimes claimed or implied (through the catch-phrase “internecine strife,” struggles between competing brothers), but a result and successful adaptation to widespread violence and frequent death among a warrior class who fought each other and outsiders such as the Teutonic knights.<sup>11</sup>

If the Russian princes had predicted that primogeniture would be a bad policy, they would have been right. Despite the best efforts of the Moscow dynasty, in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, lineal succession failed about every other generation. It worked for Vasilii II “the Blind” (the subject of this essay); on his the death in 1462, his son Ivan III inherited. But Ivan III’s eldest son and would-be heir (the first son by Ivan’s first wife) reached adulthood only to predecease his father. Ivan III then apparently took steps to ensure the succession of his oldest grandson, but was eventually thwarted by an alliance of clans at court who, on Ivan’s death, maneuvered to have the second son, through Ivan’s late marriage to Zoe Paleologue, made grand prince.<sup>12</sup> This was Vasilii III, father to Ivan IV (the Terrible). Primogeniture failed again at the death of Vasilii III, who died while his heir was still a child. This child, later to be known as Ivan the Terrible, was crowned grand prince only when he reached the age of sixteen. Succession by primogeniture appeared assured when Ivan the Terrible’s oldest son successfully reached adulthood, only to be thrown off track once again when Ivan apparently killed his son in fit of fury (or madness), leaving his feeble-minded second son Fedor as heir as the dynasty reached a tragic and bloody end. The Rurikovich princes had maintained a succession for five hundred years; within a century after the Moscow princes began practicing primogeniture, the dynasty was dead. After the Romanovs were established as the new ruling dynasty, father to son succession lasted less than a century, and was again significantly disrupted at the accession of Peter I, who shared the throne as a child with his feeble half-brother. Although according to nineteenth-century Russian political thinkers primogeniture was the

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time the Catholic Church took increasingly active measures to impose internal peace and also regulate aristocratic marriages; one result of these actions was to severely prune the number of descendents in the family tree, a step antithetical to the political culture of the Russian princes. Georges Duby, *The Chivalrous Society* (Berkeley, 1977).

<sup>11</sup> The connection in western Europe (primarily France) between the establishment of basic internal peace, the transition to primogeniture, and the “export” of excess (i.e., non-inheriting) sons is explored in Robert Bartlett, *The Making of Europe* (Princeton, 1993).

<sup>12</sup> Gustaf Alef, “Was Grand Prince Dmitrii Ivanovich Ivan III’s ‘King of the Romans?’” in *Essays in Honor of A. A. Zimin* (Columbus, 1985).

accepted principle of the Russian monarchy, in practice it was the exception rather than the rule through the remaining life of the Romanov dynasty.<sup>13</sup>

On the other hand, collateral inheritance had a record proven over centuries. Despite this long tradition and demonstrated success, when Vasiliï I died in 1425, his widow Sophia Vitovtovna informed all the boyars and officials that they were to support her son as child heir and grand prince.<sup>14</sup> Prince Iurii, who by the custom of collateral inheritance would be the expected heir, removed from Moscow and established himself in Galich. Two of Iurii's three sons, Dmitriï "the Red" and Dmitriï Shemiaka, stayed in Moscow with their young cousin, Vasiliï, and did not join the camp in Galich.

Did Iurii "challenge" the child Vasiliï for the grand princely seat, or did he patiently defend his traditional right? The traditional view, of course, has been the former. Historians, following the later, polemical chronicles, have depicted Iurii as an aggressor. But Iurii was the first to send a messenger to his young nephew with an offer of truce, and he did so twice, reiterating his offer a third time to Vasiliï's emissary Metropolitan Photius. Iurii told Metropolitan Photius that he would agree to a truce, but not to a peace (*peremir* vs. *mir*)—that is, to a succession of hostilities but not to a renunciation of his claim.<sup>15</sup> The truce allowed the two sides time to nego-

<sup>13</sup> While all primogeniture systems face the challenge of producing a competent heir, the Russian grand princes' implementation of inheritance after Vasiliï II seemed to err too much in the direction of reducing possible contestants for the throne; the failure of the line resulted from the fact that they limited collateral branches—and thus, potential fall-back candidates—too aggressively. Russian princely families not in the grand princely line (and they were many) did not attempt to trade collateral inheritance for primogeniture.

<sup>14</sup> "His mother . . . Sophia . . . informed all the boyars and officials and functionaries and bureaucrats, that they were to be loyal to her son." "*Mati bo ego, . . . Sofia, . . . uveshcha vsekh boliar i sanovnikov i riadnikov i vsekh chinovnikov, ezhe byti im neotstupnym ot syna eia.*" This passage is taken from the later (and polemical) *Stepennaia kniga, Polnoe sobranie russkikh letopisei* [*Complete Collection of Russian Chronicles*, hereafter PSRL] t. 21, 458. Although it is of dubious provenance, it fits with other reports of Sophia's actions during this period and her central role. This description is anachronistic, at least in its wording if not in its report of the events, as shown in the terms "officials and functionaries and bureaucrats"—virtually impossible to translate accurately for an early fifteenth-century context, when such positions scarcely existed. Sophia's action does correspond with evidence in the Testaments of the grand princes, although this evidence is problematic.

<sup>15</sup> A "peremir" or truce is very clearly provisional and temporary, both in medieval and in modern Russian. For example, the "peremirnaia gramota" or truce charter of 1371 between the Grand Prince of Lithuania, Ol'gerd, and the Grand Prince of Moscow, Dmitriï



tiate a more permanent agreement, sealed with an oath. In this oath, Iurii promised not to seek the grand princely throne directly, but to follow the khan of the Horde who would “entrust the seniority” to one of the claimants, and thus confirm who had the legitimate title.<sup>16</sup> Iurii did not give up his claim to the throne, but agreed jointly with Vasilii that “whomever the tsar [i.e. the khan] chose, he would be the grand prince . . . and they both kissed the cross [i.e., swore an oath] to this.”<sup>17</sup>

This peace held for seven years. It was not a quiet time, when a child could drift along as nominal ruler. Moscow’s rivals were roiling with military activity. During these years Grand Prince Vitovt of Lithuania marched against Pskov (in 1426/27) and against Novgorod with troops from Tver (in 1427/28).<sup>18</sup> More directly threatening to Moscow, the Tatars attacked

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Ivanovich Donskoi, stipulates a cessation of war for a specific time and an exchange of ambassadors. See *Dukhovnye i dogovornye gramoty* (Moscow-Leningrad, 1950; hereafter DDG), no. 6.

<sup>16</sup> Iurii “*obeshchasia ne iskati soboiu velikago kniazheniia, no emu zhe ot nikh poruchit stareishinstvo Ordinskii tsar.*” Iurii “promised not to seek the grand principedom for himself, but the Tsar of the Horde would entrust the seniority among them upon him [Iurii].” PSRL t. 21, 458. Again from the polemical *Stepennaia kniga*, but here (despite the patently pro-Vasilii narrative), in contrast to the passage above, the anachronism runs in the opposite direction. Although composed in the 1560s, the chronicler cannot escape phrasing the dispute in terms of seniority (i.e., clan—the old system) rather than dynasty and legitimacy (the conceptual framework the new *Stepennaia kniga* is creating).

<sup>17</sup> “*Dokoncha mir n tom, chto kniaz’ zhe Iurii ne iskati kniazheniia soboiu velikogo, no tsarem, kotorogo tsar’ pozhaluet, toi budet kniaz’ velikii . . . krest na tom tselovasha*”—this from the somewhat earlier and more reliable group of chronicles deriving from the Moscow redaction of the late fifteenth century. PSRL t. 28, 96; t. 28, 262; t. 8, 92-93; t. 26, 183; t. 25, 246. Here the account says “mir”—a peace agreement that bound both sides equally. It appears that neither this peace agreement nor the previous truce, if they were ever written down, survived in the records.

<sup>18</sup> These military campaigns are reported in the earliest chronicle accounts (in keeping with their general tenor as annalistic and concerned with each year’s actions of one prince against another). PSRL t. 16 (*Letopis’ Avraamki*, a chronicle with additional reports of Novgorod and Pskov) says that Vitovt took ransom of a thousand rubles from Pskov and that he accused Novgorod of traitorous intent. PSRL t. 15 (*Tverskoi sbornik*) says that Vitovt used Tver troops against Novgorod. PSRL t. 27 (*Moscow svod of 1479*) gives details of the Pskov and Novgorod campaigns. PSRL t. 39 (*Sophia 1—Tsarskii*) also reports both campaigns. Vitovt’s military maneuverings among Novgorod, Pskov, and Tver may not have been a military threat to Moscow, since there was no assumed alliance or common interest among the Russian cities as opposed to the Lithuanian grand prince, and in fact Moscow was under the protection of Vitovt, as it was the seat of Vitovt’s daughter and grandson, who hoped to attain the throne. But military action of grand princes (of Lithuania and

Galich, defended by Prince Iurii, and Kostroma, defended by Iurii's younger brothers, Andrei and Konstantin.<sup>19</sup> In these seven years the boy prince Vasiliï Vasil'evich reached the age of adulthood, seventeen.<sup>20</sup> Prince Iurii Dmitrievich (an active commander of troops) could have challenged for the throne in these years and did not, yet somebody was in power in the interim. The chronicle alludes to a council of collective leadership, comprised of the boy prince's spiritual "father" Metropolitan Photius, his mother, the dowager Grand Princess Sophia, his uncles (Iurii's younger brothers), Andrei, Petr, and Konstantin Dmitrievich, his grandfather Grand Prince Vitovt, and the princes and boyars of the land.<sup>21</sup> Rule by a council of senior advisors, headed by the kin closest to the deceased grand prince, is not an empty cliché; it was a real and effective way to ensure stability through a coalition of powerful and experienced leaders.

### The Problem of Succession in 1432: Rivalry among the Qarachi Beys

In the autumn of 1431, when Vasiliï reached his majority (and not until then), the young prince followed the custom of the Moscow princes and went to the Horde at the imperial capital Sarai to seek the grand princely title, as did his uncle Iurii.<sup>22</sup> Their stay lasted through the winter and into

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Tver) against other cities did complicate the diplomatic-military scene, and reinforce the point that the grand prince of Moscow had better gain the support of Vitovt, or be prepared for military action against him.

<sup>19</sup> PSRL t. 25 reports on Kostroma. PSRL t. 39 reports on Galich. Both are part of the Moscow grand principedom. Galich was Iurii's personal patrimony.

<sup>20</sup> Princes and boyars were counted as adults between the ages of fifteen and seventeen. Of twelve heirs apparent among the Moscow princes from the fourteenth through the sixteenth centuries, the largest cohort (five) married at age seventeen. Only two married younger, and three married between the age of eighteen and twenty-one. Sons of the grand princes began to be seen in public at age fifteen, and sons of boyars entered military service at age fifteen. Nancy Kollmann, *Kinship and Politics, The Making of the Muscovite Political System, 1345-1547*, (Stanford, 1987), 191.

<sup>21</sup> Iurii, as the contestatory claimant to the throne, is not listed among the ruling council. The presence of his younger brothers is ambiguous and can be interpreted in three ways—that they did not support Iurii's claim and supported Vasiliï (and Sophia), that their allegiance was ambivalent or opportunistic, or, as I think most likely, that they were a link between both camps and could act as Iurii's agents within Moscow. Throughout these events, the actions of Iurii's younger brothers, the junior uncles of Vasiliï the Blind, are difficult to interpret or to fit into any simplistic explanation.

<sup>22</sup> Zimin, too, gives attention to the visit to the Horde, but concludes that a boyar

the spring of 1432. They went to lay their claim before the khan, as Iurii and Vasilii had agreed in their truce of 1425. The chronicles make it clear from the beginning that the beys surrounding the khan played a central political role. Vasilii was accepted as a client of Minbulat, one of the princes (beys) of the Horde and the khan's *daruga*, or special overseer and advisor, for Russia.<sup>23</sup> Minbulat held Prince Iurii in low esteem.<sup>24</sup> By contrasting Vasilii's ties to Minbulat with Iurii's apparent disfavor, the chronicle suggests that becoming Minbulat's client—being taken into his *ulus*, in the terms of the chronicler, who uses the Tatar word in his account without comment—was an honor. An honor it may have been, but it was also a sign of subjugation, for the *ulus* (which David Sneath translates as domain, appanage, or patrimony) was the term used for the territories under direct Tatar rule—territories where Tatar officials replaced the local princes.<sup>25</sup>

A different Tatar "prince," Shirin-Teginia, whose power base was in the Crimea, supported Iurii. Minbulat and Shirin-Teginia were two of the four

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aristocracy formed in Moscow at this time, though not on the model of Horde politics. More importantly, he did not, and could not, know the political structure of the Horde that proved so important to understanding the accession of the young Vasilii (see Atwood and Sneath, discussed further below).

<sup>23</sup> Administration of the khan's empire by *darugi* had replaced direct administration of the *baskaki*. See note 5, above.

<sup>24</sup> "And when they had come to the Horde, Minbulat took them to himself into the ulus and tax list of Moscow. From him [Minbulat] to the Grand Prince was great honor, but to Prince Iurii there was dishonor and great oppression." "*I iako zhe im preshedshim vo Ordy, i vziat ikh k sobe vo ulus doroga moskovskoi Minbulat. Kniaziu zhe velikomu chest' be velika ot nego, a kniaziu Iuriiu beschestie i istoma velika.*" From the group of chronicles deriving from the Moscow redaction of the late fifteenth century Leto 6940/ 1432, PSRL t. 25, t. 26, t. 28, and t. 8.

<sup>25</sup> Sneath, *The Headless State*, 31. Also Tatyana D. Skrynnikova, "Relations of Dominion and Submission: Political Practice in the Mongol Empire of Chinggis Khan," *Imperial Statecraft*. Christopher Atwood defines *ulus* during the time of Chinggis Khan as "polity, people under a single rule," which would seem to support Moscow's dominions as a single unit, were it not for the fact that the chronicle specifies that it is a part of *Minbulat's* ulus. Atwood, "Titles, Appanages, Marriages, and Officials: A Comparison of Political Forms in the Zunghar and Thirteenth-Century Mongol Empires," *Imperial Statecraft*, 217. The latest work of the Mongolists only underlines the point made more than two decades ago by Charles Halperin that for Russia, *ulus* was a position of subordination. Halperin, *Russia and the Golden Horde*, 30 and 137, note 27. Being taken into the *ulus* of Minbulat may actually have been a step toward increasing subordination both for the young Vasilii and for his potential heirs. Up to that time the Russian principalities had not been officially part of the *ulus*—not directly part of the Chingisid political inheritance. Halperin, "Tsarev ulus: Russia in the Golden Horde," *Cahiers du monde russe*, 23: 2 (April-June, 1982), 257-263.

family chiefs (the *qarachu begs* or *qarachi beys*) who, as clan leaders, selected the khan and confirmed his power. The Shirin clan was the leader among the four: "The Shirin family was known as the bash-qarachu or 'head of the qarachu begs,' and it was he to whom the Crimean khan granted his daughters in marriage."<sup>26</sup> The Shirin clan were also the most involved in the regional military-political balance. They were specifically requested to be ambassadors by the grand prince of Lithuania.<sup>27</sup> Since Iurii had the support of the Shirin bey, the preeminent clan, and Vasilii the support of the lesser Minbulat, and since Iurii also had competence and custom on his side, surely Iurii expected to win the contest. Apparently, however, the first audience before the khan (in 1432) resulted in a draw. Neither Vasilii nor Iurii was granted the patent. The disappointed princes returned to Russia. Later that year, the beys deposed the khan and installed a new one through a fragile consensus. The following year, the young Vasilii went to the Horde again, this time with the boyar Ivan Vsevolozh to speak on his behalf. Prince Iurii went too, to make his case directly before the new khan.

Politics at the Horde was in upheaval. The young khan, Ulug Mehmet, was newly and tenuously reigning with the unsteady support of the beys. Thus it was that the succession for Moscow was finally decided not by imperial fiat, but after a public presentation of the arguments for each candidate, and after maneuvering among the qarachi beys, whom the chronicle unambiguously calls the "princes" of the Horde. In an account exceptional in the usually reticent chronicles, the eloquent speech of boyar Ivan Vsevolozh on behalf of the young Prince Vasilii is reported as if *verbatim*. Vsevolozh laid out all his legal arguments copiously:

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<sup>26</sup> Christopher Atwood, "Ulus Emirs, Keshig Elders, Signatures, and Marriage Partners," 141-142. See also the earlier studies, U. Schamiloglu, "The Qaraci Beys of the Later Golden Horde. Notes on the Organization of the Mongol World Empire," in *Archivum Eurasiae Medii Aevi*, vol. IV (1984), 283-297 and Beatrice Manz, "The Clans of the Crimean Khanate, 1466-1532," *Harvard Ukrainian Studies* 2:3 (1978). Zimin did not know of the importance of the Shirin clan.

<sup>27</sup> Manz, 286. Furthermore, in the diplomatic correspondence between Moscow and the Crimean Khanate dating from 1476 (which is the earliest diplomatic record preserved in Moscow), the Muscovite princes send missives to the Shirin clan leader specifically when they address the khan, and the Shirin bey was present at the reception of foreign ambassadors. The Shirin clan and, thus, their bey was by far the strongest. Manz, 287.

Lord, free tsar [that is, the khan], grant me, a servant of the grand prince,<sup>28</sup> freedom to speak a word. Our lord Grand Prince Vasilii seeks his grand princely throne, your *ulus*, according to your wish as tsar and by your *dever* [record] and *iarlyk* [patent, or written order] and this is your wish before you. But our lord Prince Iurii Dmitrievich wants to take the grand principedom . . . not according to your wish as free tsar. But you are free [i.e., sovereign] in your own *ulus*, and whomever you wish to grant according to your wish.<sup>29</sup>

According to this account and those of Vsevolozh's further speeches, the boyar Vsevolozh argued along two lines. First, to name Iurii as grand prince would be bad for the khan in the political balance between Lithuania, the (mostly) subordinate Russian princes, and the steppe. It would be to the khan's disadvantage to have Iurii as grand prince in Moscow because the grand prince of Lithuania had changed; Vitovt (grandfather and political protector of the young Vasilii) had died in 1430 and the younger, ambitious, and more warlike Svidrigailo was grand prince of Lithuania.<sup>30</sup> As was true of all the grand princes of Lithuania, Svidrigailo was not subordinate to or a client of the khans. More proximately, Svidrigailo was a threat to Tatar sway over Moscow because Svidrigailo and Iurii were married to sisters, the princesses of Smolensk, a strategically located grand princely seat.<sup>31</sup> In addition, both men had proven their skill as military commanders against Tatar raiders or enforcement armies (as well as against other Russian princes), and Svidrigailo's military ties to Moscow included a brief tour as a military commander in Moscow (1408-1409) under the senior Grand Prince Vasilii, when he and Iurii were both young men.

<sup>28</sup> He may be referring here to his service to the first Vasilii, not to his young son, who did not yet have the title "grand prince."

<sup>29</sup> "*Gosudar', volnyi tsar', oslobodi molviti slovo mne, kholopu velikago kniazia, nash gosudar' velikii kniaz' Vasilei ishchet stola svoego velikogo kniazheniia, tvoego ulusa, po tvoemu tsarevu zhalovaniuu, i po tvoim deverem i iarlykom, a se tvoe zhalovie pred toboiu, A gospodin nash' kniaz' Iurii Dmitreevich khochet vziati velikoe kniazhenie a ne po tvoemu zhalovaniuu volnago tsaria, i ty volen vo svoem uluse, kogo khoshchesh zhalovati na tvoei volia.*" Leto 6940/ 1432, PSRL t. 25, t. 26, t. 28, and t. 8.

<sup>30</sup> "Prince Iurii will be grand prince in Moscow, and in Lithuania Grand Prince Svidrigailo would be his brother." "*Kniaz' Iurii kniaz' velikii na Moskve budet, a v Litve kniaz' velikii pobratim ego Shvitrigailo...*" Leto 6940/ 1432, PSRL t. 25, t. 26, t. 28, and t. 8. Svidrigailo had succeeded after the death of Vitovt in 1430.

<sup>31</sup> Zimin, *Vitiaz' na raspu'e*, 228, note 91. Nitsche also noted that Svidrigailo and Iurii were brothers by marriage. In this political system based on kinship, brothers-in-law often acted as political and military allies (conversely, marriages were arranged so as to create alliances).

Svidrigailo and Iurii were of the same generation, and as “brothers,” equal in a hierarchy of kin relations. For all these reasons, they were likely allies and a plausible threat to Tatar authority over Russia.

The second line pursued by the boyar Vsevolozh was an argument about internal politics of the Horde. It is in this argument that Vsevolozh displays not only his rhetorical skill, but also his detailed knowledge of where the khan’s power actually lay. First, Vsevolozh argued, if the khan chose Iurii as grand prince, the khan would be following Shirin-Teginia’s counsel and ignoring the other Tatar princes, thus augmenting Shirin-Teginia’s power so that he would be sovereign over the other beys; but, it is critical to note, Vsevolozh says that although Shirin-Teginia supports Iurii, the khan *cannot* make such a decision without the counsel of the other princes.<sup>32</sup> Finally, boyar Vsevolozh also addressed one of the main objections to Vasilii’s effective rule: “Though our sovereign, Grand Prince Vasilii is young, yet he has in Moscow his father the metropolitan and his mother, our sovereign Grand Princess Sophia, and the princes and boyars”<sup>33</sup>—in other words, the princes and boyars (such as himself) can fill the same role for Vasilii as the qarachi beys do for the khan.

Vasilii’s claim to the title rested on inheritance “of his father and grandfather”—a claim which was anachronistic and weaker than historians have

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<sup>32</sup> “To give the grand princely seat to Prince Iurii according to his word—if the Tsar does thusly, what will then happen with [all of] you?” “... *No po ego slovu dati velikoe kniazhenie kniaziu Iuriiu, i koli tsar’ bo ego slovu tako uchinit, a v vas togdy chto budet?*” “Teginia [would be] a free [i.e., sovereign] in the Horde and free [of] the tsar [Khan].” “*A Teginia vo Orde i v tsare volen, ne molvii vas.*” But “the Tsar cannot act on Teginia’s word leaving aside all of you...” “*Ne mozhet tsar’ is Teginina slova vystupiti mimo vsekh vas...*” Leto 6940/ 1432, PSRL t. 25, t. 26, t. 28, and t. 8. An account of the history of the khanate, written by Abdulgaffar Kirimi, a leading Crimean aristocrat, corroborates this view, even though it was written two centuries later: “Let it be known that it is not legal for a glorious order (emr-i azim) to be executed without it first passing to the able hands of and being voted upon by the four principal beys, who are the firm pillars of the organization of the divan and other affairs of the Crimean xans. The first of the four pillars is the Sirin, the second Mansuroglu, the third Barin, and the fourth Sicivut, they being called in the Tatar language the four karacis.” It is these four clan leaders who vote on matters of state and “govern foreign affairs.” Abridged translation from the Ottoman Turkish by U. Schamiloglu, found in his article “The Qaraci Beys of the Golden Horde,” 284-285.

<sup>33</sup> “*Ashche i gosudar’ nash’, kniaz’ velikii Vasilii, mlad, no u nego est’ na Moskve otets’ mitropolit i mati ego, nasha gosudaryni velikaa kniaginii Sofia i kniazi i boliare.*” Cited from the manuscript in Ia. S. Lur’e, “*Rasskaz o boiarine I.D. Vsevolozhskom v Medovartevskom letopiste.*” *Pamiatniki kul’tury. Nove otkrytiia. Ezhegodnik, 1977* (Moscow, 1977), 10. The dowager wife of the khan also traditionally played a role in Horde politics, as did the local mullah after their conversion to Islam.

assumed.<sup>34</sup> On the other hand, Iurii's claim was surprisingly strong, given how dismissive later historians have been of it. Iurii's claim rested "on the chronicles and old records and on the testament of his father Grand Prince Dmitrii."<sup>35</sup> Even boyar Vsevolzh acknowledged that there was some ambiguity, and clearly stated (contrary to what historians have argued, and contrary to the extant "Testament" of Grand Prince Vasilii Dmiteevich) that Iurii's claim was corroborated not only by custom but also by documents: "Our lord Prince Iurii wants to take the grand princely seat *according to the dead [or death] charter of his father*" [emphasis mine].<sup>36</sup> Vsevolzh referred again to the testament of Dmitrii Donskoi in order to discount this claim with an appeal to the khan's wish for control: "Our sovereign lord Prince Iurii Dmitrievich wants to take the grand princely

<sup>34</sup> For example, historians report that Dmitrii Donskoi inherited the title of grand prince directly from his father, even though he was still a child (nine years old) when his father died in 1359. Dmitrii Donskoi had no older male relatives on the paternal (princely) side, only on the maternal (boyar) side. Khan Navruz granted the grand princely patent to Prince Dmitrii of Suzdal' in 1360. After Dmitrii Donskoi reached adulthood, he challenged Prince Dmitrii Suzdal'skii. The two reconciled, and in 1366 Dmitrii Suzdal'skii married his daughter to Donskoi and the khan granted the patent of grand prince to Dmitrii Donskoi, though Dmitrii of Suzdal' was, pointedly, not made his subordinate and continued as a powerful figure even after the patent was formally passed to his young son-in-law. Janet Martin, "The Emergence of Moscow," *Cambridge History of Russia*, vol. 1, 165-166.

<sup>35</sup> The chronicle account reads, "*Kniaz' velikii po otch'stvu i po dedstvu iskashe stola svoego. Kniaz' zhe Iurii letopistsy i s starymi spiski i dukhovnuuiu otsa svoego velikao kniazia Dmitriia.*" "The grand prince [i.e., Vasilii] seeks his own throne according to the patrimony of his father and grandfather," though "otch'stvo" ([inheritance] of his father) and "dedstvo" ([inheritance] of his grandfather) are particularly difficult to translate. "But Prince Iurii [seeks the throne] through chronicles and old records and the last will and testament of his father, Grand Prince Dmitrii [Donskoi]." Leto 6940/ 1432, PSRL t. 25, t. 26, t. 28, and t. 8. The evidence of the testament of Grand Prince Dmitrii, Iurii's father and Vasilii's grandfather, is problematic.

<sup>36</sup> "*Gospodin nash kniaz' Iurii Dmitreevich' khochet vziati velikoe kniazehnie po mertvoi gramote otsa svoego*, Leto 6940/ 1432, PSRL t. 25, t. 26, t. 28, and t. 8. The will (or "testament") of Dmitrii Donskoi named Iurii, the second son, heir after Vasilii, the first son. Iurii argues that this testament supercedes that made later by Vasilii I. The will of Grand Prince Vasilii Dmitreevich is found in *Dukhovnye i dogovornye gramoty* (Moscow-Leningrad, 1950; hereafter DDG), no. XX. However, the reference to the grand prince's "*mertvaia gramota*" is not without problems. It is not clear why he calls it a "*mertvaia gramota*" (dead charter or death charter)—as opposed to the "*dukhovnaia gramota*" (spiritual charter), usually translated as last will and testament. Zimin takes "*mertvaia*" to mean that the charter is no longer valid, it is "dead," though the adjectival form does not dictate that interpretation (a past participle would be expected in that case).

seat according to the charter of his father, and not according to your wish, sovereign Tsar.”

Vsevolozh's speech was effective: “like an arrow it went straight into their hearts and wounded them”<sup>37</sup>—clearly, Vsevolozh was not speaking solely to the khan if his words wounded *their* hearts. Indeed, the three other qarachi beys then took the side of Vasilii against Iurii. Shirin-Teginia was warned by a kinsman that the other princes had united against him and planned to have him killed if he spoke on behalf of Iurii. The khan turned the decision of confirming the title over to the Tatar beys, “to judge [between] the Russian princes.”<sup>38</sup> Thus the choice between Iurii and Vasilii was dictated by the new and still-fluid international power balance with Svidrigailo of Lithuania, but even more by intra-Horde politics. Vasilii was chosen because he was weaker than Svidrigailo of Lithuania, weaker than Iurii, and had allied with the weaker of two rival beys, Minbulat, under a weak and unsteady khan. Even by the account of the tendentiously pro-Moscow chronicles, Iurii's claim was better founded. In 1425, when Iurii Dmitrievich promised the child Vasilii's protectors that the Tatar khan would decide between the two claimants to the grand princely title, it is unlikely that he expected the decision to go against him. Despite the unexpected denial of his claim in 1432, Iurii did not immediately contest his formal exclusion from power. He returned to Dmitrov, which the khan had granted him as a separate patrimony after persuasive last-ditch arguments by Shirin-Teginia.<sup>39</sup>

### The Problem of Succession Resolved: The Captive Vasilii Returns

Boyar Ivan Vsevolozh had argued against Iurii's claim by saying that Iurii was subverting the authority of the khan. Given this record it is difficult to see how later Russian historians could interpret the confirmation of Vasilii's title as a victory for the Russian state, for the Russian dynasty, or for legal precedent. The junior Vasilii was chosen to serve the interests of the

<sup>37</sup> “*I tem slovom, iako zhe streloiu, uiazvi serdtsa ikh.*” Leto 6940/ 1432, PSRL t. 25, t. 26, t. 28, and t. 8 (for the entire speech of Ivan Dmitrievich).

<sup>38</sup> “*Tsar' zhe povele svoim kniazem suditi kniazei russkikh.*” Leto 6940/ 1432, PSRL t. 25, t. 26, t. 28, and t. 8.

<sup>39</sup> This is reported in t. 8, 25, 28, and 26, but not in t. 39 or the heavily partisan Stepenaia kniga. Iurii's patrimony at Dmitrov shortly became a symbolic focus for Vasilii's moves against his uncle Iurii.



Tatar princes, to make the Moscow grand prince subservient to the Horde, and in defiance of legal precedent embodied in tradition, in records, and in the testament of the grand prince. Though he was not formally held captive at Sarai (unlike several Russian princes and heirs before him), the young prince was, more than his predecessors for generations, beholden to the beys and captive to their interests, and those of their chosen khan. The young Vasiliï returned from Sarai accompanied by the khan's ambassador, the tsarevich (that is, a descendant of Chingis Khan) Mansyr-Ulan who, on October 5th, 1432, "set him [Vasiliï II] on the grand princely seat."<sup>40</sup> Three months afterward, Vasiliï sealed his entry into adulthood, and his alliance with the foremost clan in Moscow, with his marriage to the Princess Borovskaia.<sup>41</sup>

Was this, then—the direct investiture of the Grand Prince of Moscow by the tsarevich—the "captive autocracy" alluded to at the beginning of this argument? No, for the accession of Vasiliï II to the grand princely seat of Moscow was not substantially different from that of his forefathers: he was named grand prince by the khan, granted the patent, and installed by the authority of the khan. It is not the Moscow grand prince's "captivity" to the khan that is remarkably illustrated in this episode, but rather the captivity of the khan to the senior clans (the "princes of the Horde") surrounding him. In this era especially, a longstanding Mongol-Tatar tradition of governance by collaboration with the four most powerful clan leaders was dominant.<sup>42</sup> Russian historians, looking at Horde politics from

<sup>40</sup> Leto 6940/ 1432, PSRL t. 25, t. 26, t. 28, and t. 8.

<sup>41</sup> The Borovskii princes thus, temporarily, took over the role parallel to the Shirin clan, in providing the wife for the grand prince. Their special position, unlike that of the Shirins, did not last beyond this generation, nor did any boyar or princely clan in Moscow succeed in claiming this special position for more than a generation. On the complex politics surrounding the young Vasiliï's marriage, see Cherie Woodworth, "Sophia and the Golden Belt: What Caused Moscow's 'Civil Wars' of 1425-1450," *Russian Review*, 68: 2 (April, 2009), 187-198.

<sup>42</sup> The Muscovite court did not have or develop a term that corresponded to the "qarachi beys"—the leaders of the top clans, who were called "kniiaz'ia ordynskie," "princes of the Horde." The Russian terms "boyar" (a term predating the Mongol overlordship which could be translated as "warlord") and even "*blizhnaia дума*" (literally, "near council") are much broader and do not include leading advisors who were princes and not boyars; nor did the Muscovites, apparently, settle on the number four (the number of preeminent clan heads ranged, over the next century, between two and five). Furthermore, we need not argue that the Muscovite princes adopted wholesale the Mongol-Turkic model of the power of the four beys to place significant limits on the actions and decisions of the khan; rather,

the viewpoint of Moscow, saw the power of the Shirin clan and other beys as a breakdown of the khan's authority, a symptom of decay and disintegration that plagued the khanates in the fifteenth century and opened the way for Moscow's increasing power, because the Moscow princes did not succumb to similar disorder. However, the view from Moscow is not accurate.

While historians have long known that the khans in the later, successor Hordes (from the fourteenth century) were sometimes dependent on, selected by, and even unseated by, advisors behind the throne, the most recent studies have established that this power was institutional, traditional, orderly, and successful. It was wielded by four beys representing the four leading clans, and these four leading clans remained in power across centuries. The power of the four qarachi beys was not chaotic, nor was it the cause or result of weak khans and a power vacuum at the pinnacle. It was not a symptom of imperial senescence and disintegration, but the expression of a tradition of governance and political organization that dated back to Chingiz Khan, and probably before.<sup>43</sup> The question of the origin of the qarachi beys has been investigated by both a leading Mongolist and a Turkologist. Was collaborative rule by the four leading beys a characteristic of the late (confused, weak, and fragmented) successor petty khanates, and limited to certain locations, or did it arise out of a central and deep-seated tradition of governance? The conclusion reached independently by both scholars is that it had deep roots in Mongol tradition, and was widespread in both the eastern reaches of the empire (China) and western (the Crimean, Chagatay, and Il khanates).<sup>44</sup> Rule by the qarachi

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it is reasonable to expect that, since the model was familiar to leading boyars such as Vsevolzh, to the grand prince's family, and to any of the other Russian princes who had visited the Horde (and they were many), the practice was promoted and expected by those whose interests it served (Vsevolzh, Vasilii II in his minority), and resisted and undermined by those whose interests it damaged (such as the claimant Iurii, as senior prince, and Vasilii II, in his adulthood) in favor of either the Russian model of the sovereign prince or the Mongol-Turkic example of the strong khan. Such conflicting expectations may have alternated by turns, but may also have been simultaneously present. The important conclusion from this incident is that both the princes and the boyars of Moscow had rich and deep experience with both models. For this reason, these traditions of governance—informal and tacit—belong not to institutional or legal history (for they were neither formal institutions nor delineated by written laws) but to the sphere of political culture.

<sup>43</sup> Sneath, *Headless State*.

<sup>44</sup> Christopher Atwood, "Ulus Emirs, Keshig Elders, Signatures, and Marriage Partners," and U. Schamiloglu, "The Qaraci Beys of the Later Golden Horde. Notes on the Organization of the Mongol World Empire." The latest of work of Sneath and Atwood corroborate, update,

beys was thus a core strategy of the successful, expansive, world-dominating Mongol-Tatar governance system and not just a degenerate development in response to (or causing) their decline.

The political model that boyar Vsevolozh, Vasilii, and Iurii observed and manipulated during their visits to the Horde in 1431 and 1432 was a widespread and successful form of rule across the successor states through Central Asia. This model was more than just one of “prince plus advisors,” as has been argued for the past two decades by the revisionist stream of Russian historians.<sup>45</sup> With the decision in favor of the teenager Vasilii II and his enthronement by the khan’s ambassador, this Mongol-Tatar political model of clan-heads-plus-ruler became mirrored in the political structure at Moscow’s court.<sup>46</sup> Ironically, historians have blamed the Mongols for introducing the practice of political blinding later used on the hapless Vasilii II; there is no evidence of such practice among the Mongols and Turks, and if the Muscovites did not think it up on their own, their closest model was in Constantinople. But for two centuries historians of Russia have searched in vain for a text describing a Russian political philosophy deriving from Byzantium. The Muscovites had no such political texts, nor philosophies, nor a Byzantine political model. They had for centuries made

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and refine the historiography of the qaraci beys discussed, *inter alia*, by Ostrowski, “Muscovite Adaptation of Steppe Political Institutions,” *Kritika* 1:2 (2000), 267-304 especially 283-289. This recent work updates (and corrects) the assertion of Beatrice Forbes Manz (in “Clans of the Crimean Khanate,” [1978], 282) that the qarachi beys were first instituted under Uzbek Khan of the Golden Horde.

<sup>45</sup> Kollmann, *Kinship and Politics*; Ostrowski, *Muscovy and the Mongols*. (Several articles that preceded that book and became enfolded into it are listed in his bibliography).

<sup>46</sup> Ostrowski argued for two waves of Mongol influence on political customs in Moscow, in the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries, to reach a similar conclusion: “this correspondence in functions of the Boyar Council and the divan of the qarachi beys is more than mere coincidence, and can best be explained by a conscious adaptation by the Muscovite ruling elite of the steppe institution.” “Muscovite Adaptation of Steppe Political Institutions,” *Kritika* 1:2 (2000), 289; his table of “First Tartar Influence (14th century)” and “Second Tatar Influence (late 15th and 16th centuries)” is found on page 295, with discussion following. Interestingly, Ostrowski did not discuss the investiture of Vasilii II, or pinpoint it as a specific instance, with known agents and motives of political manipulation, as I do here. Because of the work of Sneath and Atwood to establish specific details of Mongol-Turkic political traditions and practices, I am arguing, in contrast to Ostrowsky, that Muscovite princes were influenced in these decades not only generally by Mongol-Tatar political culture and the tradition of the khan ruling collaboratively with his counselors (the *quriltai*), but borrowed the particular practice of the khan reliant on and limited by the princely beys.

repeated visits at the Horde, sometimes of long duration; they had not only seen with their own eyes how the khan's court operated but mastered that system enough to effectively manipulate it. The Russian princes made not a single trip to Constantinople, nor expressed any interest in doing so.<sup>47</sup>

Boyar Vsevolozh set himself up (unsuccessfully, as it turned out) as the counterpart for Minbulat and the other beys around the khan's throne. The power of a handful of preeminent clans (princes and boyars) around the throne of Moscow was borne out repeatedly in the ensuing century and a half.<sup>48</sup> By installing Vasilii II as grand prince, the beys united against Shirin-Tegenia succeeded in their aim of undermining the Shirin clan and in hobbling the grand principedom of Moscow: Vasilii II was not only a weak grand prince personally (first because of his minority, later because of his blinding, and possibly also because of his own character) but also institutionally, just when historians have seen the "rise of Moscow." The role and office of the grand princely seat at Moscow was weakened, first in favor of the petty khans of the Horde remnants and, closer to home, in favor of the leading princely and boyar clans of Moscow. When Vasilii II assumed the grand princely seat of Moscow, he began a new era in Muscovite (and Russian) politics characterized by rulers who created a united empire as nominally all-powerful autocrats at the same time that they were themselves captive to the interests of a handful of the most powerful clans at court. Vasilii the Blind's son and successor, the able Ivan III, took power

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<sup>47</sup> This argument thus pushes further that made by Michael Cherniavsky—itsself shocking enough in its time, but in fact quite restrained—in his essay "Khan or Basileus: an aspect of Russian medieval political theory," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 20:4 (1959), 459-476.

<sup>48</sup> Because the Moscow grand princes did not settle on the formal and symbolic number of four beys, which lent stability to the Mongol-Tatar system, the flexibility (and instability) at the Moscow court among the princely clans allowed for the extraordinarily successful co-optation of border princes into the centralizing and expanding state at the core of the early empire. Halperin, in his conclusion written more than two decades ago, was tending in this direction: "The Muscovite autocracy that arose in the sixteenth century was greatly indebted to its former Tatar overlords, both for Moscow's rise to preeminence and for much of the governmental apparatus that made the autocracy strong" (102-103). The latest research on the Horde's political structure, surprisingly but persuasively, now suggests that we replace "autocracy" with "aristocracy" in Halperin's assessment. The argument for the centrality of the boyar clans in the state structure was made by Nancy Kollmann in her book, *Kinship and Politics*, though she does not make a distinction between the status and political roles of boyars vs. princes. Further discussion of the role of the princely clans specifically is found in my dissertation, *The Tsar's Descent from Caesar* (New Haven, 2001).

in 1462 and ruled for almost four decades; he accomplished bold political and military gambits, adopted the imperial eagle as his seal, married the last daughter of the Paleologue dynasty, threw off the nominal suzerainty of the Khan (though still sending him tribute), and was the first who may plausibly be said to have filled the role of the Russian *samoderzhets*, autocrat. Even under Ivan III however, the structure of clan politics remained. It was a persistent undercurrent throughout his reign, it dictated whom he chose as heir, and resurfaced immediately at his death in 1505.

Since Vasiliï II was, as he was intended to be, an institutionally feeble ruler, how could the installation of this teenager on the throne have led to the unequivocal “rise of Moscow” in the succeeding century? The successful Muscovite grand princes, and their tutors such as the boyar Vsevolozh, modeled their practices for state building and kingship on the Mongol-Tatar khans—not on the imperial (and exceptional) autocrat (viz. Chingis Khan) of the thirteenth century but on their own contemporaries, the khans who themselves depended on an institutionalized council of state in the four beys, or princes.

Much as Russian historians (such as N.M. Karamzin, considered the founder of native historiography) working under the patronage of the eighteenth-century autocrat (Catherine II) or nineteenth-century tsars wished to ignore the fact (and the tradition they set is still strong), a ruler like Ivan III was the exception. Before 1700, the Russian “autocrat” captive to court clans was more common. The chroniclers of the 15th-16th century Muscovy had no such illusions; they reported the rivalries between Minbulat, Shirin Tegenia and the other beys as central to the story because they were. The chroniclers also had no difficulty understanding why the beys (and boyar Vsevolozh) played the central role in the story, nor did their audience. Their role required no further explanation in the chronicles throughout the fifteenth century and almost to the end of the sixteenth century. The chroniclers describing Horde politics in 1432 were describing a political environment familiar to Muscovites. Vasiliï’s “victory” at the Horde in 1432 in attaining the grand princely patent, just before Moscow began its rapid ascent to power, was no victory for primogeniture, law, autocracy, or Russia, but was orchestrated by, beholden to, and in the interest of his captors behind the throne. But it was a victory in another sense, for it installed a system of governance that worked.