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# THE IMAGE OF THE GOLDEN HORDE IN (POST)SOVIET HISTORICAL MEMORY: BETWEEN THE LANGUAGE OF HOSTILITY AND A SHARED SITE OF MEMORY

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**Abstract.** The purpose of this article is to analyze the modern image of the Golden Horde in Russian-language media and journalism in the Russian-speaking post-Soviet space, to identify key discursive frames and their influence on the construction of identities and cultural processes. In Russia today, many actors are challenge this narrative, highlighting cultural hybridity and the Horde's administrative sophistication. In Central Asian republics like Kazakhstan, the Golden Horde is increasingly reclaimed as a source of pride and state legitimacy.

**Research materials:** The research materials are articles, books and films about the Golden Horde, which were produced in the post-Soviet space (primarily in Russia and Kazakhstan). The article traces representations of the Horde in contemporary media, literature, and the performing arts, revealing a spectrum from exoticized enemy to civilizational partner.

**Results and scientific novelty:** Through discourse analysis, the study highlights how the memory of the Golden Horde functions as a contested space for negotiating historical trauma, cultural legacy, and aspirations for pluralistic identity. Ultimately, the paper demonstrates that the Golden Horde remains a powerful cultural metaphor – serving simultaneously as a mirror of modern anxieties and a resource for alternative historical imaginaries.

The novelty of the study is that in this article we show for the first time how the image of the Horde is reflected in modern culture not only as a space of competition, but also as a space of interaction and positive rethinking. The relevance of this study lies in the enduring role of historical memory and representations of the past in shaping contemporary cultural processes, as well as in the need for a nuanced understanding of identity formation within the multiethnic and multireligious landscape of post-Soviet Eurasia.

**Keywords:** Golden Horde, post-Soviet memory, identity, cultural politics, historiography, popular culture, Kazakhstan, Russia, Tatarstan, historical narrative

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The image of the Golden Horde – one of the most significant political and cultural formations in the history of Eurasia – continues to play a vital role in contemporary discourses across the Russian-speaking post-Soviet space. The perception and interpretation of the Golden Horde’s legacy today constitute a site for the construction of identities, political narratives, and cultural practices that not only reflect historical memory but also actively shape present-day processes of statehood, interethnic relations, and religious self-identification.

In the post-Soviet context, where questions of national identity and historical memory remain highly sensitive and often contested, the image of the Golden Horde occupies a unique and multifaceted position. For some, it serves as a symbol of historical power, national unity, and cultural richness—particularly within Kazakh, Bashkir, and Tatar discourses. For others, it functions as a source of critical reflection and reinterpretation, posing a challenge to traditional state-centered and religious narratives, as evidenced in Russian liberal intellectual circles.

Equally significant is the role of the contemporary creative industries – film, literature, music, and visual arts – in shaping and popularizing the image of the Golden Horde, thereby adding an additional layer to the understanding and reception of this historical phenomenon.

The aim of this article is to comprehensively analyze the contemporary image of the Golden Horde in the Russian-speaking post-Soviet space, identify key discursive frameworks and their influence on the construction of identities and cultural processes. The article touches on a number of points of view – from Russian liberals to the voices of cultural actors in Kazakhstan and Tatarstan; from the narratives of Russian historians to the positions of representatives of the creative industries.

The relevance of this study lies in the enduring role of historical memory and representations of the past in shaping contemporary cultural conflicts and processes, as well as in the need for a nuanced understanding of identity formation within the multiethnic and multireligious landscape of post-Soviet Eurasia.

#### *Research Methodology and Key Concepts: Historical and Cultural Memory*

Historical memory is a socially constructed and collectively shared mode of perceiving, interpreting, and transmitting the past, which plays a crucial role in shaping group and national identities [1]. Jan Assmann distinguishes between two types of memory: communicative memory – a living memory transmitted across three to four generations – and cultural memory – an institutionalized form of memory preserved through symbols, rituals, and monuments, capable of enduring for centuries.

Cultural memory refers to the ways in which societies construct their historical identities through specific images and symbols of the past [17]. *Lieux de mémoire* (memory space) – sites and symbols around which collective memory is formed – often become subjects of contestation and transformation.

Postcolonial discourses examine the legacy of colonialism and imperialism, including processes of marginalization, resistance, and the reinterpretation of history

[18; 2]. In the context of the post-Soviet space, such discourses take on specific characteristics related to the transformation of imperial legacies, the construction of new national identities, and the reactivation of historical narratives [19; 11]. A crucial element is the understanding of memory as a contested space, where various political and cultural forces engage in struggles over the past. [17; 4].

This article employs the method of discourse analysis, which enables the examination of how various actors construct and mobilize the image of the Golden Horde in their texts, public statements, and cultural productions [7; 26]. The use of an interdisciplinary approach—combining history, cultural studies, and sociology—enables a comprehensive understanding of contemporary memory and identity practices in the post-Soviet space.

*Reimagining the Golden Horde: Post-Soviet Russian Historiography, Public Discourse, Ideology, and the Arts*

The Soviet interpretation of the Golden Horde was shaped within the framework of Marxist-Leninist methodology, which sought to integrate the history of medieval Eurasia into a narrative of class struggle, historical progress, and the “objective laws of societal development.” In the works of historians such as B.D. Grekov and L.V. Cherepnin, the Horde was primarily interpreted as a feudal state exhibiting features of Eastern despotism [9]. The Mongol conquest was portrayed as an external force that disrupted feudal relations in Rus’, but also stimulated the consolidation of the principalities around Moscow. In this sense, the Horde played a “dialectical” role—functioning simultaneously as an obstacle and a catalyst in the historical process [5].

The Marxist interpretation asserted that the Golden Horde, as an “Eastern feudal empire,” was doomed to collapse because it contradicted the objective laws of historical development. Emphasis was placed on the economic and class-based nature of Horde rule, while its religious, cultural, and political specificities were largely ignored.

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the image of the Golden Horde in Russian historical consciousness underwent significant transformations. The once-stable negative interpretation of the Horde as a “yoke” gave way to a more diverse and contradictory discourse. Post-Soviet Russia became a site of historical revision, in which the Horde was portrayed variously as a symbol of subjugation, a factor in state formation, a civilizational reference point, and a source of threat. This evolving discourse emerged simultaneously in academic historiography, journalism and popular culture.

At the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries, numerous studies emerged that reevaluated the role of the Golden Horde and moved beyond rigid ideological constraints. In the post-Soviet period, especially among Tatar and Kazakh intellectuals, there has been a return to more balanced and nuanced interpretations.

Western historians Charles Halperin and Adeeb Khalid have also made significant contributions to the deconstruction of the myths surrounding the “Tatar-Mongol yoke.” In his book *Russia and the Golden Horde: The Mongol Impact on Medieval Russian History* (1985), Halperin convincingly demonstrated that Mongol influence was not uniformly negative, as traditionally portrayed in older Russian and Soviet historiography [10]. He characterized the notion of a 250-year-long “yoke” as a historiographical myth, arguing that Rus’ during the period of Mongol

domination was neither entirely isolated nor destroyed. On the contrary, many institutions—including the postal service, tax collection systems, and others—were preserved and developed under the overarching authority of the khans, and Muscovy was able to strengthen itself through cooperation with the Horde.

Khalid, in his study of Soviet Orientalism, notes that Soviet historical narratives often depicted the East—including Mongol rule—through Eurocentric stereotypes, portraying it as a realm of Asian backwardness and despotism [12; 13]. According to Khalid, this framing served to legitimize the Russian-Soviet “modernization project” and reinforced the idea that only integration under Moscow’s leadership could bring the peoples of the former Horde onto the path of progress.

Contemporary historians increasingly emphasize that the Golden Horde was a multi-ethnic state with a complex administrative apparatus, active participation in international trade and a rich cultural life, that is, an integral player in medieval world history, and not an anomalous deviation. As M. Favereau notes, recent scholarship is shifting the image of the Mongols from “barbaric destroyers obsessed with massacre and plunder” to proactive builders of trans-Eurasian connections and facilitators of cross-cultural exchange [8]. However, as the researchers note, within the framework of liberal discourse, Orda still criticized as a symbol of “external” domination or even as a marker of historical trauma—an attitude that aligns with broader debates on multiculturalism and post-imperial narratives [14; 15].

### **The Horde in Popular Culture and the Arts: Between Epic and Exoticism**

In post-Soviet cinema, the image of the Golden Horde is interpreted along a spectrum ranging from a mystical threat to an archaic civilization with its own logic of power and culture. A central example is the film *The Horde* (dir. Andrei Proshkin, 2012) [6], which centers on the journey of Saint Alexius to the court of Khan Janibek in an attempt to heal the Khan’s mother, Taidula. The film constructs a distinctive visual and sonic atmosphere, emphasizing the cultural and ontological otherness of the Horde: The Horde’s characters speak a fictional language, the environment is shrouded in twilight, and the music is dark and ritualistic.

The depiction of the Horde is deliberately grotesque and “Martian” in character – the city appears as an alien, surreal world in which Asian, Middle Eastern, and even African elements are interwoven [6]. The actor who portrayed Alexius remarked that the film metaphorically represents “the Horde that exists in every human being in one way or another,” suggesting that base instincts are ultimately powerless against spiritual values [6]. In this way, *The Horde* (2012) offers an intriguing case in which the Golden Horde is not merely a historical backdrop, but serves as an allegory for internal human and societal struggles [6].

Notably, *The Horde* presents a complex depiction of the Horde’s power structure: on the one hand, it is depicted as despotic, but at the same time as a structured system governed by rules based on tradition. Taidula is not depicted as a caricatured tyrant, but rather as the guardian of a certain sacred order. The image of a woman in power in the Horde contrasts with the patriarchal canon of Muscovite rule, creating a tension between gender and cultural archetypes.

Television and documentary projects also merit attention, as the Horde is often employed as a backdrop for reinforcing the idea of Russia’s “historical mission.” For instance, in the television series *The Rurikids* (Russia-1 Channel) [22], the depiction of the vassalage of the Russian principalities presents the Golden Horde

as an inevitable yet alien stage on the path toward “true statehood.” Such projects continue the narrative of the *yoke* as a historical trauma, whereas the feature film *The Horde* offers a more self-contained, aesthetically autonomous representation that invites interpretation.

In rare cases, contemporary authors attempt to move beyond the binary of “self” and “other.” For example, in the independent Kazakh film *Nomad* (2005, dir. Sergei Bodrov Sr. and Ivan Passer), although the narrative does not directly concern the Golden Horde, the theme of nomadic civilization is used to represent the East not as an enemy, but as a force possessing its own subjectivity [3]. Elements of the Horde’s legacy are integrated into a national narrative of the formation of the Kazakh people. Another important film in this context, also directed by Sergei Bodrov Sr., is *Mongol*, released in 2007. This production, created in collaboration with Kazakhstan and nominated for an Academy Award, presents a biographical account of Genghis Khan (Temujin) with a sympathetic focus on his personal journey. In contrast to earlier, exclusively negative portrayals, *Mongol* depicts the future conqueror as an epic hero – from a difficult childhood in the vast Mongolian steppe to his rise to global renown under the name of Genghis Khan.

Interestingly, alongside big-screen cinema, television has also engaged with this theme, albeit with somewhat different emphases. In 2018, Russia’s Channel One released a 16-episode historical television series titled *The Golden Horde*. This ambitious project blended elements of period drama, melodrama, and court intrigue, set against the backdrop of relations between Rus’ and the Horde in the second half of the 13th century [25]. The plot is fictional: Khan Berke’s diplomatic envoy, the temnik Mengu-Timur, arrives in the capital Vladimir to demand another *yasyr* (human tax). But instead, a story of love, jealousy, and political struggle unfolds at the court of Grand Duke Yaroslav, involving, among other things, the khan’s fictional concubine Nargiz and a young Russian prince. Visually, *The Golden Horde* (2018) tries to convey the exoticism of the khan’s court: luxurious costumes, nomadic tents, and scenes with shamans. Some characters from the Horde, such as the khan himself or his entourage, are endowed with traits of “nobility” or charisma.

Of course, Kazakhstan makes a special contribution to the formation of the modern image of the Golden Horde. In particular, in 2019, the 750th anniversary of the symbolic “founding” of the Golden Horde – dated from the Talas Kurultai of 1269 – was widely commemorated, with especially prominent celebrations taking place in Kazakhstan.

During the 2020s, the Kazakh government launched several large-scale initiatives to promote this historical heritage. These included a documentary series titled *The Golden Horde: History of the Khan’s Throne* broadcast on the Mir TV channel, as well as the animation festival *Altyn Orda* [21]. Between 2023 and 2025, Kazakhstan, with the participation of international partners, produced a high-budget television series titled *The Golden Empire*, dedicated to Khan Jochi (the eldest son of Chinggis Khan) and the formation of the Golden Horde [24]. Filmed in picturesque locations across Kazakhstan and involving hundreds of actors and stunt performers, the project was hailed by State Advisor Erlan Karin as a moment when “the time has come to present the grandeur of the nomadic civilization to the world.” [24] The series is expected to be released on global streaming platforms in

2026 and is poised to serve as a kind of Eurasian response to Western epic dramas, offering an Eastern perspective on the history of the Mongol Empire.

This shift marks a significant cultural and ideological turn: whereas in the 19th and 20th centuries the image of the Golden Horde was largely shaped by Russian historiography, today we witness the emergence of an “internal” perspective on the legacy of the Horde-articulated through contemporary media such as film, theater, and popular culture. Thus, post-Soviet cinema reveals two key vectors in the representation of the Horde: (1) exoticization and mythologization; and (2) the search for alternative interpretations.

### **Literature: From Exoticization to Heroization**

In post-Soviet fiction, the image of the Golden Horde is employed as a means of political and cultural reflection. Novelists and playwrights engage with this theme either to rehabilitate the Horde as part of their own historical legacy or to use it as a space for fantasy and myth-making.

At the same time, in the Russian science fiction genre, the Horde often appears as an archetype of a dystopian state. The image of the Golden Horde is being revitalized in genres such as historical fiction and fantasy. Increasingly, works are emerging that seek to depict life within the Horde itself-in its capitals and among its diverse populations-rather than viewing it solely through the lens of the Russo-Mongol conflict.

A notable example is the contemporary historical adventure novel *The Empty Cage* (2024) by Sergey Zatsarinnii [27]. The narrative unfolds in 1333 in Sarai, the capital of the Golden Horde, during the reign of Khan Özbeg-one of the most powerful rulers of the Horde. The author skillfully immerses the reader in the cosmopolitan atmosphere of Sarai, portraying the Volga city as a crossroads of civilizations where Genoese and Venetian merchants, papal legates, Sufi mystics and dervishes, Turkic and Rus’ courtiers intersect. In this depiction, the Horde is not a realm of savagery but a complex state with its own laws and courtly intrigues. *The Empty Cage* is particularly compelling in that it presents the Horde’s capital through the eyes of its own inhabitants, challenging reductive myths.

Going even further in this reimagining is the Tatarstan-based writer Olga Ivanova. In 2022, she published the historical epic *The Great Horde*, a novel covering a wide span from the 14th to the first half of the 15th century [20]. The central figure is Khan Ulugh Muhammad, a key actor in the late Horde and later the founder of the Kazan khanate dynasty [20]. Ivanova offers a detailed portrayal of dynastic conflicts and wars in the Golden Horde, beginning with the power struggle following the death of Khan Tokhtamysh and concluding with the disintegration of the Ulus of Jochi and the rise of the Kazan Khanate [20]. The narrative features historical figures such as Tokhtamysh, his adversary Tamerlane (Amir Timur), the legendary emir Edigu, and the Muscovite prince Vasily II-whose fates intertwine during the period of the “Great Troubles.” [20]. Importantly, Ivanova deliberately centers the narrative on Horde rulers and warriors, tracing a genealogical connection from them to Kazan. The Horde is portrayed not simply as an oppressive force, but as the cradle of a new state.

A major cultural event in Tatarstan was the creation of the original ballet *The Golden Horde*. This two-act ballet, composed by Rezeda Akhiyarova with a libretto by the People’s Poet Renat Kharis, premiered at the Musa Jalil Tatar State Aca-

demic Opera and Ballet Theatre in Kazan in 2013 [16]. Ballet critics praised *The Golden Horde* as a brilliant neoclassical ballet, “sparkling with every facet like a stunning diamond on the map of Russian ballet.” [16]

The plot of the ballet is based on real historical events from the late 14th to early 15th centuries. The libretto introduces a transcendent figure—the spirit of Khan Batu—who serves as a mystical narrative thread connecting different parts of the story [23]. Thematically, the performance emphasizes the tragedy of a great empire's demise: a period of radiant flourishing gives way to decline, yet memory—embodied in the spirit of the founder, Batu—endures.

Significantly, the ballet's creation was no coincidence; the theatre leadership had deliberately commissioned a work with strong national relevance [16]. In this way, the stage was employed as a medium for shaping a positive epic about the Golden Horde for the Tatar people. Over time, *The Golden Horde* has become a symbolic cultural brand of Kazan, demonstrating that the image of the Horde can be presented to the public in a heroic, and romanticized mode.

**Conclusion.** An examination of the various representations of the Golden Horde in post-Soviet popular culture reveals several important conclusions. First and foremost, the image of the Golden Horde has proven to be highly flexible and multifaceted: each era, as well as each cultural or national context, has imbued it with its own meanings. In the 1990s and early 2000s, there was a gradual departure from the exclusively negative stereotype of the “yoke.” New works emerged that sought to view the Horde from within or from an Eastern perspective—such as the film *Mongol* or novels set in Sarai. At the same time, however, the “traditional” line persisted, presenting the Horde as an embodiment of evil.

Secondly, the image of the Golden Horde has become a site of ideological contestation. Within the shared cultural space of the former USSR, different nations and groups are engaged in a struggle for interpretive authority over this past. This has led to a renewed emphasis on the positive dimensions of the Horde's civilization—its religious tolerance, cultural synthesis, administrative sophistication, and role in ethnogenesis.

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## ОБРАЗ ЗОЛОТОЙ ОРДЫ В (ПОСТ)СОВЕТСКОЙ ИСТОРИЧЕСКОЙ ПАМЯТИ: МЕЖДУ ЯЗЫКОМ ВРАЖДЕБНОСТИ И ОБЩИМ МЕСТОМ ПАМЯТИ

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**Резюме.** Цель статьи: проанализировать современный образ Золотой Орды в русскоязычных СМИ и журналистике на русскоязычном постсоветском пространстве, выявить ключевые дискурсивные фреймы и их влияние на формирование идентичностей и культурные процессы.

В современной России многие авторы подвергают сомнению этот нарратив, подчеркивая культурную гибридность и сложную административную систему Золотой Орды. В республиках Центральной Азии, таких как Казахстан, Золотая Орда все чаще воспринимается как источник гордости и государственной легитимности.

Материалы исследования: для исследования использованы статьи, книги и фильмы о Золотой Орде, созданные на постсоветском пространстве (преимущественно в России и Казахстане). В статье прослеживается репрезентация Золотой Орды в современных СМИ, литературе и исполнительском искусстве, раскрывая спектр её образов – от экзотического врага до цивилизационного партнёра.

Результаты и научная новизна: В исследовании посредством дискурсивного анализа показано, как память о Золотой Орде функционирует как спорное пространство для обсуждения исторической травмы, имперского наследия и стремления к плюралистической идентичности. В конечном счёте, в статье показано, что Золотая Орда остаётся мощной культурной метафорой, одновременно отражая современные тревоги и являясь ресурсом для альтернативного исторического воображения.

Новизна исследования заключается в том, что в данной статье мы впервые показываем, как образ Золотой Орды отражается в современной культуре не только как пространство соперничества, но и как пространство взаимодействия и позитивного переосмысления. Актуальность данного исследования заключается в важности исторической памяти и представлений о прошлом в формировании современных культурных процессов, а также в необходимости детального понимания формирования идентичности в многоэтническом и многоконфессиональном ландшафте постсоветской Евразии.

**Ключевые слова:** Золотая Орда, постсоветская память, идентичность, культурная политика, историография, массовая культура, Казахстан, Россия, Татарстан, исторический нарратив

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