The reign of Alexander Nevsky

History knows two great military leaders by the name of Alexander. Both of them are known for never having lost a battle while in direct command. One of them is, of course, Alexander the Great. The other, Alexander Nevsky, never went quite as far as his namesake, but he did become a popular saint in the Russian Orthodox Church.

By Artis Aboltins & Erich Anderson

From its foundation, most likely around 862, Novgorod was little different from any other Russian principality or princedom. It was ruled by a hereditary prince, traditionally a descendant of the legendary Rjurik, one of the three brothers who is credited with the creation of the Rus’ state, according to the Primary Chronicle. In 1136, however, the inhabitants of Novgorod cast out the ruling prince and established a unique form of government that is usually referred to as the Novgorod Republic. The city and surrounding area was governed by a council called the Veche. Often made up of the wealthiest urban merchants and the aristocratic boyars (nobles) – though theoretically consisting of all free inhabitants of the area, both nobles and commoners – the veche truly ruled over Novgorod. The most important positions were those of ‘administrator’ (posadnik) and ‘military leader’ (tysyachnik).

Novgorod was unique and significantly larger than nearby states, as it also included the area of Pskov. It was mostly surrounded by the princedoms of Polotsk (to the south-east), Smolensk and Vladimir-Suzdal (to the south and south-west), and the formerly powerful Kiev (much reduced in status after having been sacked by the Mongols). Each of these states had its own agenda; one couldn’t speak of a unified Russian kingdom at this time. (This issue uses the term ‘Russian’ for general references and for later periods; in addition, the term ‘Rus’ will also be used, referring to the people of the principalities in the area formerly occupied by the Kievan Rus’.)

Alexander ‘Nevsky’

Alexander Jaroslavich was born in May 1221. He was the second son of Jaroslav Vsevolodovich, the Prince of Perjaslavl and (later) Grand Prince of Kiev and Vladimir. As early as 1236, Alexander was appointed knyaz (or Knez; ‘prince’) of Novgorod. His father chose Alexander for the position, but the decision had to be approved by the veche of the city before he was accepted. However, the veche often had no choice but to rely upon knyazes, because they could not always defend themselves when threatened and needed the personal armies (druzhina) of the princes. Thus, princes were still customarily ‘called to serve’, with responsibilities usually including military high command, tax collecting and judging important cases. Still, if a prince was unpopular amongst the majority, he could be expelled, as happened on more than one occasion.

In 1238, when his father was called away because of a Mongol invasion of north-eastern Russia, Alexander started to rule on his own. He was very young when he became the knyaz. The pro-western faction of Novgorod wished to exploit his youth by manipulating him into taking a less aggressive stance towards the Catholic states. The merchants of Novgorod greatly benefited from trade with the west; therefore, a peaceful relationship was desired, above all else. However, it quickly became clear that Alexander was not easily swayed. He continued to enforce the anti-western stance of his family, which made him rather unpopular amongst the leading members of the veche. In addition, in an effort to consolidate his power, he married Alexandra, the daughter of Bryacheslav, knyaz of Polotsk, in 1239.

The situation seemed to change in 1240, when an army of Swedes, Norwegians and several Finnish tribes invaded from the north. They may have had support from some knights of the Livonian Branche of the Teutonic Order. We have no definitive proof as to who was the leader of the expedition, since there are no surviving Swedish descriptions of the campaign.
Some historians tend to believe it would have been Ulf Fasi, the Jarl of Sweden at the time. Others lean towards Birger Magnusson (Birger Jarl), though this name is only mentioned once, in a questionable fourteenth-century Russian source. The multi-ethnic invaders made it as far as the mouth of the Izhora River, next to the southern bank of the Neva River, where they established a fortified camp.

In the face of this threat, the majority of the veche did not hesitate to call on Alexander and his *druzhina*. Novgorod relied upon grain from the west, while the Mongols controlled their northern territory. Alexander quickly led his *druzhina*, along with other forces from Novgorod and nearby Ladoga, north and attacked the unprepared crusaders just before dawn on 15 July. In the ensuing Battle of the Neva, the Swedish army was routed and retreated to their ships. Alexander and his army returned to Novgorod in celebration and from then on, the victorious knyaz was known as Alexander ‘Nevsky’ (*of Neva*), a sobriquet from which he became inseparable from this time on.

Swedish sources of the period do not describe any significant battle at this time, so we have a somewhat one-sided picture of the battle. Some historians even doubt whether the battle really took place. Regardless, it seems that Alexander distinguished himself in a battle, thus rising to fame. His victory raised opposition among the Novgorodian merchants and boyars of the veche. The situation deteriorated to such an extent that the conflict was called *kramola veila*, or ‘the great sedition’, meaning that a large number of the population opposed Alexander. Therefore, he had to depart the city and travelled back to his family’s ancestral territory of Pereyaslavl in the south, along with his wife, mother and *druzhina*.

When the Livonian Order began to increase their military pressure on the Novgorodian border, the fickle Veche recalled Alexander, who immediately took action, culminating in the Battle of Lake Peipus, during which a significant force of Livonian Knights and their Estonian vassals was destroyed. However, significant losses among his own forces prevented him from exploiting the victory and pushing further into the lands controlled by the Livonian Order.

**Alexander the diplomat**

When Alexander's father was summoned by the Mongol overlord Batu Khan, Alexander became the de facto ruler of the entire Novgorod territory. He soon had to turn his attention towards the west, as the Lithuanian Grand Prince Mindaugas was intent on asserting his power over an area claimed by Novgorod. During 1245, the Lithuanians took Toropets and several other settlements. As usual, Alexander's response was quick and decisive: after routing the Lithuanian army, he took Toropets by storming the walls, killing several prominent Lithuanian nobles along the way. After this victory, he sent the majority of his army back and defeated another Lithuanian army, thus stopping further incursions into Novgorodian territory for several years.

In 1246, Alexander's father, Yaroslav, died in Mongol territory, leaving the position of ruler of all of the Rus’ principalities (*Velikiy Knyaz*) open. First, the throne was claimed by Svyatoslav Vsevolodovich of Suzdal, but it then went to Alexander’s younger brother, Andrei, who had full support of the Mongols. Alexander seems to have dealt with the loss of his birthright peacefully while his brother ruled for the next five years. However, once Andrei turned against the Mongols and was defeated, Alexander ascended the throne of Vladimir and became the new *Velikiy Knyaz*, backed by the Golden Horde.

As the grand prince of the Rus’, the ever-practical Alexander chose a policy of closely following any instructions issued by the Golden Horde. Keeping his previous experience with the Novgorodian nobility in mind, he may have used the powerful backing of his Mongol overlords to remove some of his more outspoken opponents. That said, it is likely that Alexander, being as skilled a diplomat as a military commander, simply accepted the precarious situation of the Novgorod Republic at that time. Despite his victories, the geopolitical situation had not changed in any significant way, and the Grand Princedom had to deal with threats from many sides. It is apparent that he considered the Roman Catholic faith, represented by the Livonian Order as well as the Danes and the Swedish Kingdom, to be a far more serious threat to the lifestyle and religious beliefs of the Russians than the Mongols, who were generally interested in receiving tribute, rather than forcing the huge territories to conform to their own belief and social system. This might have led him to consider closer association with the Golden Horde than he might have wished. That said, the Mongol Empire was far too powerful to confront directly anyway, and so he had no

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*Knights spurs are not only a means of controlling the horse, but, like the classic double-edged sword, also a very strong symbol of knighthood. It is a common misconception to depict early knights with rondels; before the thirteenth century, spurs would have looked like this fish from Germany. It is likely that members of the Livonian Order facing the forces of Alexander Nevsky would have used spurs like these.*

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choice but to direct much of his energy towards placating the Khan.

This allowed him to continue a string of military victories of his own. He foiled yet another attempt by the Swedish crown to invade territories under his control in 1256, and beat back another Lithuanian incursion. He could only do so by occasionally employing the threat of Mongol power to force the Novgorodians to bend to his will. However, while he had to ensure that the agreed upon tribute was gathered and sent – he even went so far as to punish the people of Novgorod for resisting Mongol tax-collectors in 1259 – he managed, in the process, to prevent significant Russian military forces from being sent to the Mongols for their wars in other areas.

Alexander’s last political endeavour was a visit to Khan Berke, in an attempt to prevent Russian forces from serving in Berke’s conflict.
with Hulagu Khan. On 14 November 1263, on the return trip, Alexander fell ill. After taking the monastic habit, he died in the town of Gorodec, leaving the princedom to his sons.

Legacy
It seems clear that, without Alexander’s acute skills as a military leader and a diplomat, the political history of Russia would have been considerably different. He managed to partially preserve the autonomy of Russian princedoms from the Golden Horde and strengthen the defences against western aggressors, providing his successors with the opportunity to maintain the status quo in the region, at least to a certain extent. Not the least role in this was played by the idolization of Alexander Nevsky, who, after canonization, became one of the most revered saints within Russian society, greatly strengthening the position of the Orthodox Church.

Any examination of such an important historical figure would be incomplete without looking at the impact he made in later times. Aside from his sainthood, Alexander Nevsky has been considered a national hero for centuries. During the Soviet period, the propaganda value of such a figurehead was recognized early on and used to its utmost in creating a hero of truly mythical proportions. Prince Alexander was heralded as a hero of the people and the Russian nation, ignoring the inconvenient details and increasing the importance of the Battle of Lake Peipus out of all proportions. Especially significant in this regard was, of course, the 1938 motion picture Alexander Nevsky by Sergei Eisenstein. This film is still considered by many to be one of the greatest propaganda movies of all times, inciting hatred of Germany among the populace of the Soviet Union and presenting Prince Alexander as the noblest of heroes. As with many contemporary movies, this stretched historical accuracy to a breaking point, but it cannot be denied that Alexander’s accomplishments were certainly worth recalling.

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Further reading
- Janet Martin, Medieval Russia, 980-1584. Cambridge 2008 (2nd ed).