

Review

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István Vásáry. *Cumans and Tatars: Oriental Military in the Pre-Ottoman Balkans 1185–1365*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005. xvi, 230 pp. Maps. Bibliography. Index. \$80.00, cloth.

István Vásáry's solid book is a detailed political history of the Balkan region (or south-eastern Europe in general) from the rise of the second Bulgarian empire in the late twelfth century to the fading of Mongol rule in the region in the second half of the fourteenth century. It deals with the western edge of the Eurasian steppe, and stresses the importance of the nomadic element in the history of this frontier region.

Vásáry, a well-known authority on the history of the Golden Horde (the Mongol state that ruled Russia from 1260 to 1502), draws upon a highly impressive array of primary sources. Apart from the Greek and Latin sources that make the bulk of the source material, he also used Russian, Hungarian, Romanian, Turkic, Persian and Arabic sources, as well as a huge body of secondary literature in most of the European languages (though the lack of the works of certain Mongolists, such as Peter Jackson or Tom Allsen is somewhat surprising). Through a careful and meticulous reading of his sources Vásáry is able to reconstruct the complex narrative of the region's history in an understudied—but highly important—period, and to shed light on the often ignored part of the Inner Asian nomads in its history. Vásáry convincingly demonstrates that the Inner Asian people, the Cumans (or Qipchaqs) and the Mongols (referred to as Tatars throughout the book), were an integral and often decisive element in the political life of the region long before the Ottoman conquest, and that Cumans—immigrants escaping from the Mongols or mercenaries—constituted an important part of the elite in both the Bulgarian empire and the principalities of Wallachia and Moldavia, which later become Romania, mainly due to the political norms of the period in which political marriages played a major role. Such a conclusion has not always been easy to digest to the European mind: indeed the book opened a scholarly debate on the role of the nomads and Turks in south-eastern Europe (in which Vásáry was accused—unjustly in the opinion of this reviewer—of an anti-Romanian bias).

Despite its title, the book does not deal extensively with warfare or military aspects (apart from the general assertion that the nomads were essential in the contemporary battlefield due to their superiority in light cavalry tactics), but mainly with the dense political events of the time. However, throughout the narrative, and especially through the compelling citations of rarely-used sources, one can find many interesting insights into the social and even economic history of the region in general and of the Cumans and Tatars in particular (for example, the information on women warriors on p.94; the family and gender relations discussed on p. 133; or the adventures of the fugitive Seljuk Sultan on pp. 73–76). Moreover, the description of the *ulus* of Nogai, a Chinggisid prince who in the last decades of the thirteenth century ruled over the Mongol-held Balkan territories, becoming practically independent from the ruling Golden Horde khan (chapters 4–5), is by far the best and most detailed available in English.

The book does not make easy reading: it is marred with names, place names and details that are often unfamiliar even to the average educated reader. The appendices—maps, list of geographical names and dynastic chronologies—are of some help, though better maps, with clearer chronological specification, could have made the book more user friendly. Nevertheless, *Cumans and Tatars* is a significant contribution to Balkan and Eurasian studies. It considerably augments our knowledge of an understudied period and region. It opens avenues for new research and serves as a fruitful comparative example of the role of nomads in the western fringes of the Eurasian steppe, as opposed to their much better studied role along the Chinese frontier. The book will be of great value to any

historian of the Mongol empire, especially of the Golden Horde; to scholars dealing with Inner Asian or East European history in general; and to world historians dealing with frontier or migration history.

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Andrew Wilson. *Virtual Politics: Faking Democracy in the Post-Soviet World*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005. xviii, 332 p. Illustrations. Figures. Notes. Index. \$40.00, cloth.

Andrew Wilson's *Virtual Politics: Faking Democracy in the Post Soviet World* presents an exhaustive overview of various forms of chicanery and deceit that characterize politics throughout much of the post-Soviet region. Aside from meticulously exploring the "virtuality" of political developments in this part of the world, the author also challenges the basic foundations of extant post-Soviet research which applies a more traditional approach of treating political conflict as the reflection of competing societal interests. Critiquing this literature, Wilson argues that much of the public political manoeuvring in countries such as Russia, Ukraine and Belarus is mere theatre designed to confuse and deceive the electorate rather than to represent the interests and political preferences of real social actors. Throughout the book, Wilson presents a remarkably thorough effort to document the various schemes, tactics, technologies and projects that marked the past fifteen years of political developments in the region. While many of the political subterfuges detailed in the book are known to specialists in the region, Wilson's book is the first to systematically document these tactics and to elevate political technologists and other charlatans to a leading role in the region's political theatre.

Wilson's often dense analysis is presented in eleven well-organized and carefully linked parts. Following a brief introduction which presents his main thesis, Wilson begins his exploration of virtual politics by demonstrating how factors specific to the Soviet experience provided fertile soil for the growth of modern virtual politics in the region. In Chapters Two and Three, Wilson details the bases of contemporary virtual politics and introduces political technologists as the primary playwrights in his virtual theatre. The bulk of the remaining text provides a tour of various strategies and tactics designed to distract the public, revamp the ruling elite's image, and neutralize real sources of resistance through nefarious tactics designed to discredit, divide and even (re)invent the opposition. Wilson concludes with a brief discussion of the limits of virtuality and the implications of virtuality for democratization efforts in the region.

If Wilson's dire assessments are indeed valid, the study raises a number of important challenges for researchers and policy makers working with the region. First, how might one determine the scope of the virtual political world? Within his expansive discussion, which details the carefully scripted schemes of the region's political actors, Wilson includes a smattering of caveats indicating that not everything in the post-Soviet world is indeed "virtual." However, the absence of a serious examination of voting behaviour (an admittedly tall order given the author's main goals for the work) detracts from the ability to effectively determine the borders and scope of the virtual world. Having given pride of place to the virtual world and redirected attention to the extent and depth of political manipulation, scholars must now reintroduce the voter into this equation to help determine when virtuality rules the day and when social interests and actors can navigate through fog and achieve real political outcomes. The existing literature features many convincing