The Lost Empire of Tartaria

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You have heard of the ancient lost civilizations of Atlantis. Perhaps you’ve also heard about the lost continents of Lemuria and Mu. You’ve heard me talk about beliefs in the lost cradles of civilization Hyperborea and Ultima Thule. But have you heard about the lost empire of Tartaria? Depending on your interests and thus the calibration of your YouTube recommendation and search algorithms and the pages you find promoted to you on Facebook, you may have learned a great deal about this globe-spanning mega-civilization in recent years. For example, you may have been surprised to find out that this ancient civilization, which originated in central Eurasia as a vast kingdom encompassing most of Siberia, was so successful that it spread around the world, even into the Americas, and that even today we can see the remnants of the civilization’s grand architecture. Your surprise may have turned to wonder and dismay as you learned of a great worldwide catastrophe, a flood akin to Noah’s but composed of mud that destroyed most evidence of this magnificent civilization. Your wonder and dismay likely further turned to shock and outrage as you learned of a global conspiracy to suppress the history of the Tartarian Empire, to cover up the existence of this mud flood, and to claim the impressive accomplishments of their advanced culture as our own. So throw out everything you know about the history of the world, disregard everything you think you understand about ethnology, geography, architecture, and geology, and prepare to be awakened from the sleep of ignorance, liberated from the herd of the sheeple, and initiated into the mystery of Tartaria!

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If you’re still reading, I’ll come clean. I don’t actually believe this claptrap. But there is something very satisfying to me about the idea that some proponent of the Tartarian Empire conspiracy mythos might stumble upon or seek out this blog post and think at first that I’m promoting this nonsense, when actually this is perhaps the most absurd pseudohistorical conspiracy delusion I’ve ever heard. It cannot be taken seriously, making it a perfect topic for my April Fools episode. However, there are other reasons I feel compelled to address this somewhat obscure claim now. First, it is new and growing. Some have likened it to Qanon because of its agglomeration of other conspiracy claims, and while it is still in its infancy, it seems important to make the public aware of it and its rather surprising implications. According to Brian Dunning, whose Skeptoid blog and podcast covered it briefly about a year ago, the Tartarian Empire claims exist solely online, having first appeared on Youtube conspiracist channels around 2016 and gaining traction in 2017 and beyond on Reddit, Facebook, and elsewhere. He confirmed this using Google Trends (though when I tried to reproduce his findings, I was seeing it spike more in 2018). A quick search of word frequency in publications using Google Ngram corroborates that the topic became more common in the mid- to late 2010s but also suggests that it was not a purely online phenomenon, although any early conspiracist publications could very well have been inspired from online content, rather than vice-versa. However, the reliability of these tools in determining the origin of such pseudohistories and conspiracy claims is decidedly questionable. For example, it is entirely possible that these conspiracy claims crossed over into the English-speaking world from foreign language publications that aren’t mined in an Ngram search, or from online content in another language that, if I understand the tool correctly, wouldn’t show up in a Google Trends search, even if it were set to conduct a worldwide search, because the keyword used is in in English. This appears to be the case with the claims about a global Tartarian Empire, as there is good reason to believe this pseudohistory originated in Russia and may have spread to the West as online propaganda or disinformation. So, surprisingly, this ridiculous topic is actually very relevant to current events, particularly the ongoing war and humanitarian crisis in the Ukraine. But I will get to that. Let us start with a simple refutation of the Tartaria mythos.

Historical map designating most of Inner Eurasia and Siberia as “La Grande Tartarie”

It has been suggested that the entirety of the Tartaria conspiracy myth can be blamed on conspiracists looking at historical maps and getting confused because of their ignorance of certain aspects of history. In truth, there appears to be something far more insidious behind this conspiracy myth than simple misunderstanding and well-meant speculation, but let’s have a look at this explanation just the same, as we will have to address the name Tartaria anyway. So the idea goes that the whole thing is due to the fact that many old maps label massive swathes of inner Eurasia as Tartaria, or Tartary. It is claimed that, lacking the knowledge of what this term referred to, conspiracists jumped to the conclusion that there must have been a huge kingdom or nation-state called Tartaria that has since disappeared. From there, the theory goes, they let their speculation about this presumably lost civilization run wild. It is certainly true that these old maps using the label of Tartary or Tartaria are frequently raised as evidence for these outlandish conspiracy claims, and their proponents do indeed reject the simple and historically accurate explanation for why these regions were called Tartary. Prior to the 18th century, the West lacked much knowledge about the peoples and societies within Siberia and Central and Inner Asia and simply called all of them “Tatars”, which then became “Tartars,” and their lands “Tartary.” It was a blanket term, similar to the way ancient Greeks called all the lands northeast of Europe Scythia, and any nomadic people from that vague area came to be called Scythians. Some scholars suggest the initial name “Tatar” derived from a Chinese word, dada, which dated to the 9th century C.E. and was used to refer to any nomads north of China. Indeed, it was the bellicose northern peoples of the Eurasian Steppe that the Chinese had built the Great Wall to keep out who would eventually come to be called “Tatars” by the West, such as the Manchu and Mongol peoples, as well as Turkic tribes. As mentioned in my episode on Prester John, a legend that somewhat coincides with Tartaria claims since it talks of a magical kingdom in the same region, the term “Tatar” appears to have become “Tartar” because of a racist pun. According to Matthew Paris, King Louis IX of France, hearing news about the hellish ravages of Mongol forces invading Europe, said of the so-called Tatars, “Well, may they be called Tartars, for their deeds are those of fiends from Tartarus,” which of course was the Latin name for Hades. Thus the corruption “Tartars” was supposedly coined, basically calling the Mongol hordes demons from hell. As the West did not have much concrete knowledge of the political geography of the region from whence these hordes had come, European cartographers indiscriminately slapped the name Tartary, or Tartaria, onto vast tracts of land. In subsequent centuries, the label was persistently applied to a wide range of distinct peoples and regions, such that later maps might distinguish Lesser from Greater Tartary, or Eastern from Western Tartary. Eventually, as ethnological knowledge of the region’s peoples grew, further distinctions had to be made, such that those in Manchuria were called Manchu Tartars, and those in the eastern reaches of the Russian Tsardom were called Muscovite Tartars. Gradually, the term was dropped altogether, with only the occasional remnant to be found. As will be seen, the origin of the Tartarian Empire conspiracy claims found online today are not the result of simple ignorance of the story behind some old cartographic labels, but this ignorance is clearly exploited by or feeds into the conspiracy claim, providing plenty of fodder for supposed primary source evidence that may seem convincing to a lay person who encounters these conspiracy claims online.

It is because of such out of date and inaccurate maps, along with a heaping portion of racial stereotyping, that the belief in a Tartarian Empire in the Americas can be found. That’s right, we are not only talking about an inner Eurasian lost civilization. As I indicated in the beginning, believers claim the remnants of a lost Tartarian Empire can be found all over the United States as well. As evidence, they will cite maps from the 17th century that happen to have the word “Tartorum” near the Bering Strait and visually group North America with Eastern Asia according to the same color. With a simple translation of the Latin, they would be able to tell that the blurb with the word “Tartorum” is describing the Mongol tribes on the other side of the strait, not in North America, and describes a simple rural life that is very different from the technologically advanced civilization they imagine Tartaria was. Likewise, they will bring up a 19th century map of the “Distribution of Races in the World” that, again, color codes sections of Eurasia and much of North America to indicate the presence of the same culture. This racist 19th century map chooses the color yellow for Asia and these portions of North America, and tellingly, it labels these areas Mongolian, not Tartarian. The cartographer appears to have mistakenly conflated Mongolian and Inuit cultures, as the portions of North America identified as Mongolian are predominately north of the Arctic Circle. Of course, in the distant past, Native American peoples likely did migrate across the strait and were distantly related to Eurasian nomads. Specifically, ethnologists recognize that the Yupik aboriginal peoples dwell in both Alaska and Siberia. But again, we are talking about rural nomads, not an advanced civilization that, according to believers, is responsible for the construction of architecturally magnificent edifices. Nevertheless, to the proponents of the Tartarian Empire fiction, these cherry-picked maps are evidence that Grand Tartary, the mythical civilization that they have built up in their minds to Atlantean proportions, was present in the Americas, and though their own false evidence would suggest it could only be found above the Arctic Circle, they claim it was present everywhere. As proof, they point to almost any ornate building constructed in any architectural style other than modern, and they say that must have been a Tartarian structure, because we don’t build things like that in our culture. This may sound like hyperbole, but it’s not. They really do point to any pre-modern structure that is especially impressive and elaborately decorative, and they claim it was not built, could not have been built, by builders of our culture.

Racist 19th century map asserting Mongolian cultures are present in North America.

In some ways the conspiracist proponents of a global Tartarian Empire are traditionalists, or nostalgists. They seem to value only an old-fashioned or ancient style of building and reject all modernist architecture as ugly, nondescript, and thus inferior. One Norwegian Youtuber focused on Tartaria, Joachim Skaar, lumps all of modernist, and therefore non-Tartarian, architecture together under the label of Brutalism, although that is a very specific offshoot of Modernist architecture that emerged in the 1950s and declined in the 1970s. However, the name and the aesthetics provide a striking counterpoint to what he and others call Tartarian architecture, which again lumps together many known styles, from Classical, Baroque, Gothic and Renaissance to Beaux Arts, Neoclassical, Second Empire and Greek Revival. Again, any sufficiently ornate building, with columns supporting entablatures with carved friezes and cornices with scrollwork, or any building with an especially elaborate roof like a mansard or a cupola or a large dome, seems, in their fevered imaginations, to be a relic of this lost civilization. As evidence, they hold up old photos from 19th century America, in which can be seen such grand edifices, usually municipal buildings like city halls or state capitols, rising above simple wood frame houses and shacks, or on otherwise empty stretches of dirt fields. To them, these are evidence that 19th century Americans were living among the ruins of this vanished civilization, when in fact the photos depict nation building. With a basic grasp of the fact that the construction of such government buildings was well funded, and that architects were specifically sought out and well paid to design impressive architectural structures, it’s quite clear why such projects were initially surrounded by empty space and simple A-frame clapboard hovels. But like most conspiracists, the Tartarian Empire proponents believe there are secrets to uncover in almost any old book or photo they pore over, no matter how widely available they might be. They find beautiful old buildings that no longer exist, and they decide they have uncovered another clue about the destruction of Tartarian structures. For example, the Chicago Federal Building, whose dome was larger than the U.S. Capitol’s dome, but which was demolished after about 60 years, or the slender, 27-story Singer Building in New York City, which for a time was the tallest building in the world but was leveled in the 1960s. Their speculation about the ancient and mysterious origins of such buildings simply disregard their known history. To wit, the head of the Singer Manufacturing Company, makers of the famous sewing machines, commissioned the Singer building as their New York Headquarters and hired architect Ernest Flagg to design it. Such historical details, to the Tartaria conspiracists, are just more lies covering up the truth.

Perhaps the most absurd claim they’ve made is that the impressive temporary complex of ornate facades built out of straw and plaster of Paris for the 1893 World’s Fair in Chicago—the so-called White City—was actually a grand Tartarian metropolis that “they” have pretended was not real. Much of their idiotic claims boil down to not just ignorance of history, but amateurish misunderstandings about architecture that I imagine would really gall any actual architects. They point to the fact that grand buildings of certain distinct styles can be found all over the world, but of course that is because architectural trends spread internationally. They claim that the shift away from these ornate buildings that are so aesthetically pleasing to them, and the movement toward the concrete and steel architecture of modernism, is a clear sign of the disappearance of the Tartarian culture, when in fact, there are plenty of books written by Modernist architects and city planners like Le Corbusier that expound on their reasoning and argument for moving away from more classical styles. And finally, they claim that our culture simply couldn’t have produced such beautiful structures, and yet plenty of New Classical architects design such buildings even today. Take for example, the neo-Gothic Whitman College at Princeton, built in 2002, or the Classical Greek architecture of the Schermerhorn Symphony Center built in Nashville, the so-called Athens of the South, in 2006. Simply put, one gets the impression that these Tartarian Empire Youtubers and Reddit posters are just basement dwellers in boring towns who have only recently discovered the beauty of fancy buildings and simply cannot believe such structures are American. Instead, they envision a massive mega-culture of advanced builders. Joachim Skaar, the aforementioned Youtuber, has been quoted as claiming, “The same people that built the Capitol in Washington built the pyramids in Egypt,” and that gives us a sense of the great depths of ignorance displayed by these conspiracists.

An image of the State Capitol of Iowa, with less impressive buildings surrounding it. Just the sort of image that looks like proof to a Tartarian Empire believer.

Equally absurd are their explanations for why there does not exist ample archaeological evidence of this widespread culture, aside, from, oh, say, all the surviving buildings they claim are artifacts of the culture and all the photographs of their buildings that are no longer standing. Well, they say there was a worldwide catastrophe that destroyed much of their culture. It was much like the Flood of Genesis, in that it swept into every Tartarian city across the globe, destroying the inhabitants and their records and monuments. They call it the “great reset.” Unlike the biblical flood, though, this was a “mud flood,” and in its wake, entire grand Tartarian cities were left entirely or partially buried. Just what would cause such a global flow of mud is not typically clarified. Some have suggested that it was the result of a worldwide volcanic event, caused by mud volcanos. Mud volcanos are real, and instead of producing magma flows they produce slurries of warm mud. However, even some cursory research into mud volcanos would reveal that they are typically small and don’t cause mass destruction. In fact, they are often identified more as hot springs, and can be enjoyed as natural mud baths. It’s pretty clear some Tartaria “researcher” went looking for a feasible reason for the “mud flood” they invented, found mention of a mud volcano, and said “Bingo!” not bothering to read much more into the topic. But of course, anyone who would believe in a global mud flood isn’t thinking too hard about the science of geology or the analysis of strata performed at any dig site that could handily disprove their “theory.” But they still find supposed evidence for their mud flood, once again in old photos. They bring up black and white photos from the 19th century that show people digging, whether employing hand shovels, mule teams, or steam shovels, especially if there is a fancy building around them. Of course, civic engineering requires a lot of digging like this, even today. Hills must be flattened and depressions filled in order to make streets flat. It’s no great mystery. But Tartarian Empire conspiracists go further, pointing to photos of Gilded Age buildings with windows at ground level and saying that they all appear to be sunken into the ground. Again, these “theorists” seem woefully unfamiliar with buildings generally, but maybe they aren’t basement dwellers after all, since if they were, they would easily recognize these as basement windows. But perhaps the most ridiculous thing about this mud flood aspect of their claims is that, since they’re using photos from the 1800s as evidence, they played themselves and had to place their supposed worldwide mud flood catastrophe in the 19th century. That’s right. These geniuses claim that a global catastrophe happened sometime between the Industrial Revolution and the Gilded Age, and there is no record of it anywhere, and they don’t even bother explaining how it only seemed to affect the Tartarians and us lousy non-Tartarians escaped it just fine.

But hold on! The other element of the so-called “great reset,” besides the global destruction caused by the mud flood, was the purposeful erasure of Tartarian history. Or at least, that’s what they claim. In fact, believers in Tartaria claim that most major armed conflicts of the 19th and 20th centuries were actually about Tartaria. They say Napoleon’s 1812 invasion of Russia was really a war against Tartaria, and that after the mud flood, the World Wars of the 20th century were all actually just excuses to destroy all remaining traces of Tartaria. What is their evidence of such a cover-up? Well, they too use Google Ngram, and they find it suspicious that use of the words “Tartaria” and “Tartary” plummet to nonexistent following the 19th century. But of course, we know why that is. It’s because we stopped using an inaccurate blanket term that was actually a pun suggesting they were from hell and instead started calling them Mongols or some other more accurate name. However, never let it be said that conspiracy speculators aren’t ingenious, for they managed in their blindly focused keyword searches to turn up an obscure declassified CIA report on “National Cultural Development under Communism.” In it, there exists a paragraph that is presented as smoking gun evidence of a cover-up of Tartaria’s history. It reads as follows:

…let us take the matter of history, which, along with religion, language and literature, constitute the core of a people’s cultural heritage. Here again the Communists have interfered in a shameless manner. For example, on 9 August 1944, the Central Committee of the Communist Party, sitting in Moscow, issues a directive ordering the party’s Tartar Provincial Committee “to proceed to a scientific revision of the history of Tartaria, to liquidate serious shortcomings and mistakes of a nationalistic character committed by individual writers and historians in dealing with Tartar history.” In other words, Tartar history was to be rewritten—let us be frank, was to be falsified…

The obvious problem here, of course, is that the CIA appear to be condemning Communist revision of “Tartar” history, which simply isn’t in keeping with the idea that the erasure of Tartarian history was a global conspiracy, which likely would have to involve the CIA. But the real issue is that this oft-used quote is taken entirely out of context. Only this paragraph in the entire report mentions “Tartaria,” and this is only because they are quoting a Communist committee that uses the term. The rest of the report makes it clear that the CIA is talking about Communist attacks on Islam and the Muslim peoples within their authority. Furthermore, if they even gave enough context to quote the entirety of the last sentence, it would be revealed that the history of these Muslim people was being rewritten, or falsified, “in order to eliminate references to Great Russian aggressions…so that the Russians always appear in a good light.” And this, the fact that Russians have long been engaged in a revision of history, producing a pseudohistory intended to serve their political purposes and falsely burnish their image, leads us to what may be the true origin and sinister purpose of this batshit crazy conspiracy claim.

Mud Volcanoes at Gobustan State Reserve. Not exactly a global threat. Image credit: Nick Taylor, licensed under Creative Commons (CC BY 2.0)

The way that the Tartaria conspiracy claims blithely do away with massive parts of world history somewhat reminds me of the claims of chronological revisionists that I previously discussed at great length in a three part series. Indeed, searching Google Trends for Tartaria, one sees Phantom Time, the chronological revision theory of Herbert Illig that I spoke about in my series, listed as a related query. Furthermore, it has been suggested that the origins of the Tartaria claims can actually be traced to the chronological revisionist writings of Russian mathematician Anatoly Fomenko. I encourage listeners to go back to my Chronological Revision Chronicles series, specifically Part One, The Fomenko Timeline, to hear more about this figure and his theories. In brief, Fomenko claims to use statistical analysis and astronomical data to prove that entire eras of accepted history didn’t actually occur. Instead, he argues that much of accepted history is actually duplicated from medieval history. He has been nicknamed The Terminator due to his penchant for finding reasons to delete vast swathes of history, and his rewriting of biblical history has drawn the ire of the Russian Orthodox church. But Fomenko found popularity and success in writing about history, with his “New Chronology” book series, History: Fiction or Science, bringing him far more fame than he had ever earned as a mathematician. He claims to be politically impartial, but historians and critics of his work, especially Konstantin Sheiko, who wrote extensively about the implications of Fomenko’s claims in his PhD thesis, point out that Fomenko’s work fits clearly into an ethno-nationalist tradition of producing pseudohistory and alternative history that presents the Russian people and their history in certain favorable ways. As the CIA report I referenced indicates, this historical negation, denialism, and revisionism had been perpetrated by the Soviets, but as Sheiko describes, it continued, in a somewhat different vein, after the fall of the Soviet Union, as Russia sought out some post-Soviet identity. Among these pseudo-historians, Russian identity, its greatness, is in its power and control of space on the world map, thus they find reason to suggest that a great Russian Empire existed long before the Soviet Union or the Tsardom of Rus. Others in this category see Russian identity wrapped up in racial heritage, and they trot out the old myth of an Aryan people. Though he feigns academic impartiality, Fomenko’s work is at the forefront of this movement to forge a false ethno-nationalist historical identity for Russia. When he eliminates entire periods of history, he typically claims that they are duplications of Russian ancient history. The Holy Roman Empire? Well that is just the appropriated history of a great Russian Empire. His alternate history is at its heart, one in which the accomplishments of Russia are far greater, and its greatness has been stolen from it and attributed to other regions and historical periods. According to Fomenko, the Mongols, formerly known as Tatars or Tartars, did not exist, as such. Instead, he claims that there existed a vast Slav-Turk Empire, not a Mongol Horde but rather a Russian Horde. In this way, he and other Russians can deny that they ever came under the Mongol Yoke. The Mongol invasion, he claims, was a myth invented by the Romanov Dynasty and the Church. In fact, Genghis Khan was a Russian, complete with European features. So under it all, all the mathematical reasoning, the elaborate statistical and astronomical proofs, behind Anatoly Fomenko’s New Chronology, we see the ugly head of Aryan mythology, of white supremacy, rearing.

Is the Tartaria nonsense actually the New Chronology repackaged? In turn, is it just Russian ethno-nationalist propaganda as the work of Fomenko is revealing itself to be? Well, you could describe both as the myth of a vast Siberian / Inner Asian empire whose history has been stolen and erased. Tartarian conspiracy nuts also scrutinize old portraits of Genghis Khan and speculate that he may have been more European-looking, more white, than he is otherwise portrayed. In their reaction against the historical distortions of Tsarist and Church propaganda, Communists initiated their own revision and falsification of history, as the CIA observed in the aforementioned report, and after the fall of Communism, a new false history has emerged, still intent on painting Russia in the best light, and justifying its geopolitical powerplays. Just as Vladimir Putin today justifies his invasion of the Ukraine with falsehoods, claiming that it has always been a part of Russia and has no historical right to independence, his nationalist rhetoric is validated by, or perhaps inspired by, the pseudo-historian Anatoly Fomenko, who claims that Ukraine has no identity apart from Russia, for its people were always only part of his “Russian Horde.” This pseudo-history tacitly justifies war crimes. So what am I arguing? I suppose I am arguing what others before me have argued: that the Tartarian Empire conspiracy myth originates from Russian disinformation, spread online to the Western world by professional Russian propagandists, and transforming along the way, through a weird digital version of the telephone game, to something almost unrecognizable. This may itself sound like conspiracy speculation, but the fact that Russian propaganda programs are active in spreading disinformation through bots and puppet accounts run out of troll farms is well known. We also know that they are involved with the encouragement of the growth of conspiracy claims. Hell, that goes back a long time before Qanon and COVID-19 conspiracies on social media. Back in the 1980s, the KGB ran a disinformation campaign aimed at encouraging the baseless conspiracy claim that the U.S. government was responsible for the creation and spread of HIV/AIDS. Now, there is a fast-spreading conspiracy theory about the existence of an ancient, suppressed mega-empire that originated in their region, and it is remarkably similar to the ethno-national propaganda Russia’s president spouts as a pretext for expansion, asserting the Russians are just reclaiming what has always been theirs. Tell me that doesn’t sound like there is a connection. What’s really scary is if Putin starts to assert that the ancestral claim of the Russian people extends all the way to America, where the Tartarian Empire is said to have formerly reigned.

Anatoly Fomenko, mathematician and ethnonationalist propagandist masquerading as a legitimate historian. Don’t @ me.

As with that other conspiracy mythos, Qanon, that has likely been encouraged every step of the way by Russian disinformation campaigns online, the Tartarian Empire hoax has grown to become a mega-theory as its proponents take a buffet-style approach, incorporating into the myth complex any pet theory or crazy notion they fancy. One can imagine that it’s especially hard to control a conspiracy narrative once it has been fed to the conspiracy nut community. Thus we see claims about the Illuminati come in to explain the worldwide cover-up, or of the Jewish World Conspiracy, which isn’t that surprising considering its connection to Russian claims of Aryan supremacy. To further explain why the existence of Tartaria had to be covered up, conspiracists have incorporated elements of the fantastical claims about Atlantis or hollow earth civilizations: namely that the Tartarians had advanced technology, free wireless energy technology to be more specific, and that the powers that be conspired to hide this from the energy dependent masses. And then, there is the doozy—that Tartaria was actually peopled by giants. Never mind that all the buildings they identify as Tartarian are made for regular size people. They found a few photos of grand, oversized doors, and of course they found statuary and paintings depicting, you guessed it, giants. They link the existence of giants in the lands of Tartary through the tales of Gog and Magog, which have historically been associated with Mongolians, as I discussed in my episode on Prester John. And from there, it just devolved into photoshopped hoaxes of gigantic bones. But the argument against the historical existence of giants deserves to have its own episode and would be too much of a digression here at the end of this one. To conclude, let’s just hope that the fringe nutcases who have taken up the Tartarian standard and run with it online continue to take the idea in such ridiculous and fantastical directions that it becomes ever more laughable, and thus, if we’re lucky, useless as Russian propaganda.

Further Reading

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