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“Foreign Affairs... will tolerate wide differences of opinion. Its articles will not represent any consensus of beliefs. What is demanded of them is that they shall be competent and well informed, representing honest opinions seriously held and convincingly expressed... It does not accept responsibility for the views expressed in any article, signed or unsigned, which appear in its pages. What it does accept is the responsibility for giving them a chance to appear there.”

Archibald Cary Coolidge, Founding Editor
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Old World Order

The Real Origin of International Relations

VALERIE HANSEN

Before the West: The Rise and Fall of Eastern World Orders
 BY AYSE ZARAKOL. Cambridge University Press, 2022, 313 pp.

How old is the modern world? Scholars of international relations tend to date the beginning of their field of study to around 500 years ago, when a handful of states in western Europe began to establish colonies in Africa, Asia, and the Americas. In their view, the transformations unleashed by European colonialism made the world what it is today. So, too, did the 1648 Peace of Westphalia, two treaties signed by feuding European powers that ended a series of bloody wars. That was the moment international relations truly began, the argument runs. Thanks to this settlement, states for the first time formally agreed to respect their mutual sovereignty over demarcated territories, laying the groundwork for the abiding “Westphalian order” of a world divided into sovereign nation-states.

This rather Eurocentric view of the past still shapes how most international relations scholars see the world. When searching for the history relevant to today’s world events, they rarely look beyond the European world order constructed after 1500. Before then, they reason, politics did not happen on a global scale. And states outside Europe did not adhere to Westphalian principles. As a result, international relations scholars have deemed vast tracts of history largely irrelevant to the understanding of modern politics.

An exclusive focus on a world in which Europeans armed with guns and cannons dominated the various peoples they encountered misses much of what happened outside Europe and the places Europeans colonized. This focus reads history backward from the primacy of the West, as if all that happened

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before led inevitably to the hegemony of a handful of European and North American states. The rise of non-Western powers, such as China, India, and Japan in recent decades, has revealed how misguided such an approach is.

In *Before the West*, Ayse Zarakol, a professor of international relations at the University of Cambridge, proposes an ingenious way out of this intellectual impasse. Writing in clear, forceful prose, she considers the experience of earlier non-Western empires that sought to create world orders. Doing so makes it possible to present a new history of international relations beyond the Westphalian order. Her study reveals the telling ways that polities in non-Western parts of the world interacted with one another in the past, shaping how modern political leaders understand the international order today.

Zarakol challenges the view that the modern international system began in 1648 with the Peace of Westphalia. Instead, she proposes a provocative alternative, dating the beginning of the modern world order to 1206, when Genghis Khan was acclaimed ruler of all the Eurasian steppe peoples. Zarakol chooses to focus on the "Chinggisid order" he and his various successors brought into being. (Genghis Khan's name in Mongolian is Chinggis Khan, so scholars use the adjective Chinggisid to describe anything associated with him.)

She presents a stirring and original thesis but overlooks some crucial primary sources about diplomacy in the Mongol empire. Such evidence would sharpen her account of precisely how the Mongols and their successors interacted with diplomats from neighboring

states in this fledgling world order.

Zarakol is right to point out the importance of the Chinggisid order as a parallel to the Westphalian order. Starting in the thirteenth century under Genghis Khan and his successors, the Mongols created the world's largest contiguous empire, which extended across the steppe from Hungary in the east to China in the west. Genghis Khan aspired to rule the entire world, and he conducted diplomatic relations with his neighbors on that basis. None of his successors managed to control as large a territory, but taking the Mongols as their model, they would create the Ming, Mughal, Safavid, and Timurid empires respectively in present-day China, India, Iran, and Uzbekistan. Most important for modern international relations today, the peoples now living in the former Mongol empire are fully aware of this past, as exemplified by the ambitions of Russian President Vladimir Putin.

THE WORLDS GENGHIS MADE

Zarakol's decision to focus on the Mongols allows her to break with Eurocentric conventions of diplomatic and international history in refreshing ways. Interested in Asian polities, she does not assume that their interactions with European actors were more important than their relations with one another. Nor does she make the mistake of assuming that earlier Asian powers were only regional powers. Genghis Khan and his successors all aspired to rule the globe as they knew it. True, they did not succeed (nor, for that matter, did any European power), but they led sprawling armies powered by mounted

warriors and established empires that engaged in diplomacy with multiple neighbors and with states far from the Eurasian steppes—a lasting model for subsequent Asian rulers.

The Chinggisid order, as Zarakol describes it, persisted for nearly 500 years (longer than its Westphalian counterpart to date) and had three different phases. The first was from around 1200 to 1400. It comprised both the unified Mongol empire ruled initially by Genghis Khan and, after the empire broke apart in 1260, its four successor states in modern-day China, Iran, Russia and Ukraine, and Central Asia. The rulers of the three western successor states eventually converted to Islam, while Kublai Khan, the ruler of the easternmost quadrant in modern-day China and Mongolia, supported Buddhists, Daoists, and Confucians, among other religious figures.

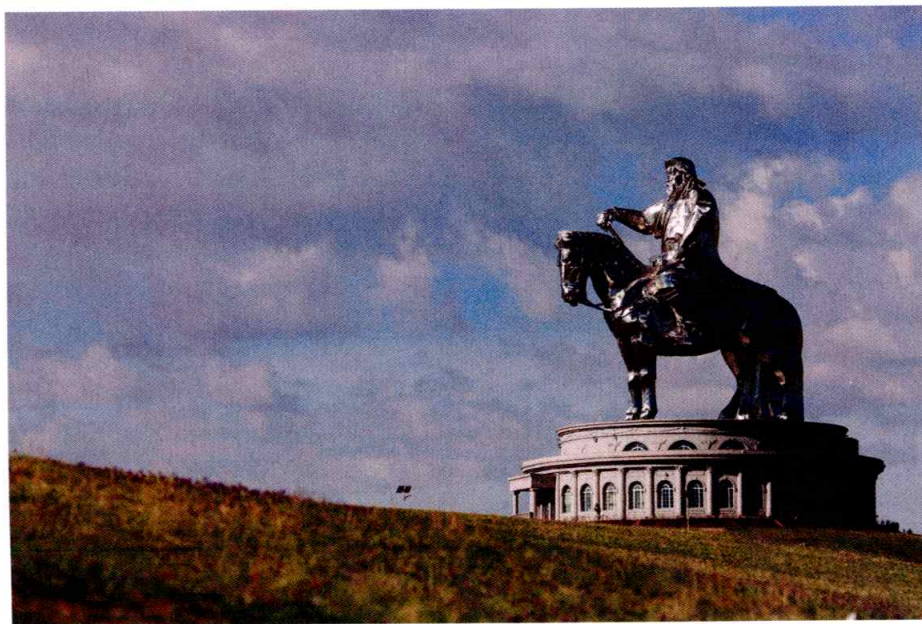
The peaceful coexistence of these quadrants in the fourteenth century marked “the beginning of modern international relations . . . when rational state interest trumped religious affiliation.” Here, Zarakol overstates her claim: religious affiliation was often interwoven with “rational state interests” in polities of that time. A ruler’s choice of which religion, or indeed religions, to patronize largely determined the choice of his political allies.

The second Chinggisid world order comprised the Timurid empire of Timur the Lame (also known as Tamerlane), who lived from 1336 to 1405, and the Ming dynasty in China, which reigned from 1368 to 1644. Timur modeled his state on that of Genghis Khan and even married one of his descendants to strengthen his

association with the great khan. In sharp contrast, the rulers of the Ming dynasty in China concentrated all their resources on defeating various Mongol and Turkic adversaries (including Timur’s warriors). Even so, the Ming emperors hoped to establish themselves as successors to the land empire of the Mongols, and they dispatched a fleet of treasure ships carrying 28,000 men as far as East Africa to display their might to the world. As different as their views of the Mongols were, Timur and the early Ming emperors all aspired to rule empires as large and as impressive as Genghis Khan’s.

The third world order Zarakol proposes encompassed the millennial sovereigns, or *sahibkiran*, of the Mughals, the Ottomans, and the Safavids. With no family ties to the Mongols, these rulers did not explicitly style themselves after Genghis Khan, but all hoped to govern the world. They succeeded in harnessing the power of mounted warriors to conquer large spans of territory in modern-day India, Turkey, and Iran respectively, and their empires all posed serious competition to the European colonial powers. Appropriately, Zarakol ends her book with the weakening of these three dynasties around 1700.

Spanning five centuries, these Chinggisid states shared certain key features. Rather than choosing their ruler by primogeniture, as many European powers did, they selected new rulers through a system of “tanistry,” a term (borrowed from the historical practices of Celtic tribes in the British Isles) that means that the best qualified individual should rule the group after the death of a leader. Although this sounds vaguely democratic, it was



Eastern emperor: a statue of Genghis Khan near Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia, September 2019

anything but. In practice, it meant that anyone seeking power had to prevail in a violent free-for-all that could last years before all the warriors gathered to acclaim a new leader. The Mongols believed that heaven, or the cosmos, selected the ultimate victor in these succession struggles, and in their efforts to understand heaven better, the Chinggisid rulers invited foreign astronomers to visit their courts and financed the construction of massive observatories.

According to Zarakol, the Chinggisid rulers over the centuries shared “a particular vision of the whole world” and created, modified, and reproduced “political, economic, and social institutions.” Historians have paid more attention to the granular reality of this political and institutional history, but Zarakol does a service by bringing it to the attention of scholars of international relations. In so doing, she moves beyond a Eurocentric vision of interna-

tional relations by studying actors, specifically those in modern-day China, India, Iran, Russia, and Uzbekistan, who aspired to create world empires as impressive as that of the Mongols. Getting past narratives that are limited to a single country, race, or religion, she explains how different rulers in Asia interacted with each other and in the process created a diplomatic system comparable to the Westphalian order.

FELT BOOTS AND METAL PASSPORTS

Five centuries is a long timespan to cover, and the first part of *Before the West* bogs down as it recounts the major events of multiple dynasties and explains why they qualify (or do not) as Chinggisid. But rather striking in her survey is the lack of much material about diplomacy, the book’s stated subject.

This omission is surprising because two detailed eyewitness accounts of

diplomatic visits to Chinggisid rulers are widely available in English translation. These narratives describe how the Chinggisid diplomatic order actually functioned—in contrast to Zarakol's often rosy-eyed claims about the efficiency of Mongol rule.

William of Rubruck, a Franciscan monk originally from Belgium, visited the court of Mongke, a grandson of Genghis Khan, near Karakorum in modern-day Mongolia between 1253 and 1255. The French crusader King Louis IX sent William as a missionary—and not an envoy—to the Mongols, but when he arrived at the port of Soldaia on the Black Sea, his Mongol hosts had already heard from local merchants that he was a diplomat. William decided to accept the privileges offered to emissaries rather than try to explain his hope to missionize. Like all Franciscan friars, he wore a brown robe and went barefoot, attire that made his trip across the freezing steppe especially difficult. (Eventually, he gave in and donned fur clothing and felt boots.)

Although much less well known than Marco Polo's travelogue, which was written some 50 years later, William of Rubruck's account runs nearly 300 pages in the 1990 translation by Peter Jackson. It offers the most perceptive and the most detailed description of the Mongol empire available today. An attentive observer, William wrote his dispassionate report for a one-person audience, his sponsor, Louis IX. As he explained of the Mongols, "When I came among them I really felt as if I were entering some other world." His account shows exactly how the Mongols treated the diplomats who entered their realm.

The Mongols granted a metal tablet of authority to all visiting envoys that entitled them to food and fresh horses at the postal stations located every 30 miles or so along the main roads traversing the empire. Those carrying such tablets could also spend the night at the postal stations. The system worked well but not flawlessly, as William discovered when he crossed the Don River and the locals refused him assistance. It took three days for him to obtain a fresh horse. Travel conditions were arduous. Once William began to travel at the pace of a Mongol warrior, he could cover 60 miles each day, changing horses two or three times. Breakfast was either broth or a light grain soup, and there was no lunch; the only solid food travelers received was at dinner.

In July 1253, when he arrived at the court of Batu, a great-grandson of Genghis Khan, William requested official permission to preach among the Mongols (some of whom already followed the teachings of the Church of the East, the branch of Christianity that spread through much of Asia after the fifth century AD.) Batu sent William to the capital at Karakorum, where his father Mongke, the great khan, presided over the Mongol empire. William does not explain Batu's decision, but presumably Batu, as a regional leader, handled all domestic matters related to his own jurisdiction but had to refer matters of international diplomacy to the great khan. Zarakol overstates the efficiency of Chinggisid rule: only the khan could make decisions on certain topics. If he was not available, no one else could decide for him.

William arrived at Mongke's winter court on the River Ongin in modern Mongolia; there, the great khan spent the season surrounded by his retinue and his own herds. William made his request to proselytize through an interpreter, but the interpreter and the khan were drunk, and William did not get a definite answer. Initially permitted to stay two months at the court, William remained there for three and spent an additional three at the Mongol capital of Karakorum. He participated in a debate over religion with Muslims, Buddhists, and other Christians—and for once he had a competent interpreter—but the debate was inconclusive, and William left without receiving permission to preach inside Mongol territory.

William's account captures the reality of Mongol governance. Mongol rulers may have aspired to create a world order, but their empire remained profoundly decentralized despite the efficient postal system that allowed messages and people such as William to cross the empire. The great khan did not administer his empire directly. Instead, he appointed local governors who ruled on their own, largely continuing the policies of whichever authorities had governed before the rise of the Mongols.

About 150 years later, a Spanish diplomat had an experience remarkably similar to William's. Ruy González de Clavijo visited Timur in Samarkand, a major trading emporium in modern-day Uzbekistan, for two months in 1404. Dispatched by Henry III of Castile, who hoped to form an alliance against the Ottomans, Clavijo and his entourage delivered a letter and gifts to Timur. The wealth of Timur's capital, where 50,000 of his supporters pitched

their tents, impressed Clavijo deeply. Timur hosted the Spaniards generously, offering them ample supplies of meat and wine and inviting them to multiple receptions.

But when Timur fell ill, three of his advisers took over. Unable to exercise any real authority, they urged the Spaniards to return home—which Clavijo resisted because his mission was to obtain a response from Timur for Henry III. Just two months after he had arrived, the unsuccessful Clavijo set off for Spain, only to be caught in the conflicts that broke out among those who aspired to take over Timur's empire. Clavijo's experience mirrored William of Rubruck's: the only person who could decide anything about foreign relations was the khan himself.

Zarakol credits Genghis Khan with "disseminating, through his own example, the norm of the political ruler as the exclusive supreme authority, legitimized by world domination." She claims that he introduced "an extremely high degree of political centralization . . . subordinating all competing forms of authority to himself." During military campaigns, the khan had the power to lead, and he rewarded his followers with plunder. But during peacetime, the ruler had much less power. Still, Zarakol's views do not square with the experience of William of Rubruck and Clavijo. The khan maintained "supreme authority" in the sense that only he could decide on certain matters, such as giving a single Franciscan friar permission to preach or sending a letter to another ruler, but he never enforced policies that integrated the different parts of his empire in a meaningful way.

OTHER CENTERS,
OTHER WORLDS

Scholars can debate whether a given interpretation of the past is accurate, but popular understandings of the past—especially among policymakers—often shape modern international relations. As Zarakol suggests, scholars need to ask of the period she covers, “What logics were operating in this era that are still operating in ours?” Her final chapter explores Eurasianism—a late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century intellectual movement that identified non-European precedents for world orders spanning both Europe and Asia—and, more specifically, how intellectuals in Japan, Russia, and Turkey understood the long-term impact of Mongol rule on their own societies.

This focus is particularly timely. Since the 1920s, Russian scholars, such as Nikolai Trubetzkoy, George Vernadsky, and Lev Gumilyov, have debated how two centuries of Mongol rule affected modern Russia. They have called for modern leaders to emulate Genghis Khan and to unify Russians so that they can build a new empire that spans Europe and Asia. Such thinking has gained enormous popularity since the collapse of communism, and Putin is regularly compared to Genghis Khan. Putin’s advisers are not concerned with historical accuracy. In making the case for Eurasianism and how it will empower Russia, they invoke traditions that have nothing to do with the Treaty of Westphalia. Zarakol’s point is well taken: the history underlying Eurasianism helps make sense of the events occurring in the territory once ruled by the Mongols.

Like any genuinely pioneering book, *Before the West* covers so much new ground that it does not get all the details straight. (In particular, it exaggerates the centralization of the Mongol empire.) Still, Zarakol has provided an important service: she has shown how the history of different parts of the world before 1500 informs the present and the future.

By starting in 1206, however, she risks overlooking the importance of even earlier events. When Prince Vladimir the Great (Putin’s namesake) converted to Eastern orthodoxy in around 988, his capital lay in Kyiv. The Russian president’s drive for a new Eurasian empire seeks to include the heartland of Russian orthodoxy, which formed in the late 900s.

That’s precisely Zarakol’s point: studying societies outside Europe that aspired to create world orders before 1500 reveals much about the modern world. The world orders that earlier rulers outside Europe established remain deeply relevant because the people who live in those regions today recall those past exploits and systems and sometimes try to recreate them. Paying attention to the diplomatic practices that earlier rulers, including the Chinggisids, developed provides a valuable counterbalance to the singular focus on the Westphalian order. In this multipolar world, U.S. leaders spend their days considering the next moves of their counterparts in Ankara, Beijing, Moscow, New Delhi, and Tokyo. And yet they rarely consider the histories of these parts of the world. The time has come for more people to follow Zarakol’s lead and study the past of the many political and economic centers outside Europe. 🌐