

Conquest and Withdrawal: The Mongol Invasions of Europe. By Stephen Pow.

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The study of the Mongol invasion of Europe in 1241–1242, which saw the armies of the great khan pass through Hungary, Poland, Bohemia, Croatia and Bulgaria with great devastation, may seem like well-trodden territory in historiography—and in many regards it is—summarised with the familiar story wherein Europe’s fate, helpless and facing certain annihilation, is only saved on account of the death of the Mongolian sovereign, Ögedei (r.1229–1241) forcing their withdrawal. Yet, as Stephen Pow showcases in *Conquest and Withdrawal: The Mongol Invasions of Europe*, there is ample room for reanalysis of this topic, and that the cause of the famous retreat is far more complex than a matter of timely death of a middle-aged alcoholic in Mongolia in late 1241. By reviewing the cause of the withdrawal itself, there is an avenue to revisit the course and consequences of the invasion as a whole.

Conquest and Withdrawal is a long-awaited contribution from Pow, dramatically expanding and refining upon arguments around the Mongol invasion and retreat which he has been making since his 2012 master’s dissertation at the University of Calgary, and his subsequent doctoral dissertation at the Central European University defended in 2020, featuring as well a number of elements from his other publications. Pow’s works follow in the footsteps of Greg S. Rogers’ important 1996 article, “An Examination of Historians’ Explanations for the Mongol Withdrawal from Central Europe.” In his article, Rogers noted that for years, historians have been raising issues around the commonly-accepted linkage between Ögedei Khan’s death and the ensuing retreat.¹ Among the myriad of issues with this popular theory, perhaps the most significant is that the army that left the ruins of the Kingdom of Hungary in 1242, led by Ögedei’s nephew Batu (d. ca.1255), never actually returned to Mongolia, but departed Europe at a leisurely pace to set up in

1 Rogers, “An Examination of Historians’ Explanations,” 3–26.

the steppes along the lower Volga River. This became the core of what was known to later generations as the Golden Horde, a division of the Mongol Empire which for decades continued to threaten Europe, though markedly less effectively than the great onslaught of 1241–1242. Thus, as Pow notes, 1242 can be seen as a beginning, rather than the end, of the Mongol–European interactions.

Rogers outlined four general explanations commonly proposed for the withdrawal: the political theory (that the Great Khan's death forced a recall of the Mongol hosts); the geographical theory (as suggested by Denis Sinor, that the Carpathian Basin lacked sufficient pasturage for the Mongol armies and their herds of livestock, and was thereby unsuited as a launching point for further advances); the military weakness theory (that the Mongols were essentially defeated by the Europeans and forced to withdrawal) and the gradual conquest theory (that 1241 was only ever intended as an opening salvo of a future conquest). The chapters of Pow's *Conquest and Withdrawal* are devoted to assessing each of these theories, the evidence for and against them, in great detail, before proposing his own explanation.

After chapter one, which outlines the existing theories and his methodology, the second chapter gives a valuable overview of the entire 'Great Western Campaign,' from its organisation in Mongolia in 1235, when the Mongol elite were feeling jubilant with their great victory over the Jin Dynasty in North China in 1234, to its culmination almost ten years later with the final parting of Batu and the famed general Sübe'tei in the Volga Steppes in 1244. Pow uses this chapter to highlight an often-overlooked aspect, that being the divisions, both emotional and in areas of operation, between the lines of the four sons of Chinggis Khan (r.1206–1227) who commanded the army's contingents. The sons and grandsons of Jochi (d. ca.1225), Chaghadaï (d.1242), Ögedei (d.1241) and Tolui (d.1232) seemed to have been given their own assignments and regions to conquer, and as Pow observes, their infighting may have inadvertently stalled the campaign.

Chapter three is among the stand-out chapters of the monograph, with an insightful and fascinating discussion of how the Mongols collected information on Europe. Finding potential overlap in Zakariyyā' al-Qazwīnī's (d.1283) *Ātār al-Bilād* and the Mongols' own *Secret History of the Mongols* (1252) in their descriptions of 'the Franks' is an important revelation that yields insight into how both works were assembled. This chapter's collection of the travel times over the Eurasian steppes in this period also shows that, as far as can be ascertained, the few months between Ögedei's death in December 1241 and the start of the withdrawal in spring 1242, simply appear to have been insufficient time for messengers to have reached Batu in Hungary before the retreat began. That is, that Batu's withdrawal began *before* news even came to them of Ögedei's demise. Shocking as this may be, as Pow also rightfully points out, the great Ilkhanid vizier and historian Rashīd al-Dīn (d.1318) states exactly this as well in the *Jāmi' al-tawārīḥ*.

The fourth chapter analyses the issues with the geographic theories (or as Pow divides them, environmental and ecological factors) and the gradual conquest theories. While there may be elements of them which were taken into consideration by the Mongol leadership, Pow does not find in them convincing enough reasons to ascribe the withdrawal to. In his fifth chapter, Pow posits his alternative explanation. Dismissing the convenience of the aforementioned monocausal theories, Pow gives instead a multifaceted explanation wherein the withdrawal came from a changing of the Mongols' goals. It was an active choice, a reassessment of their progress on the campaign and the strength of their army, worn down after years of continuous campaigning across Eurasia. No singular event caused Batu to call an end to the campaign, but the friction brought on by hundreds of fiercely fought battles (identifying at least three convincing cases where the Mongols suffered defeats or even somewhat Pyrrhic victories in Europe over 1241–1242) and sieges against well-built fortifications (Pow making a persuasive case that the Mongolian leadership employed a risk-heavy 'lead from the front' approach when assaulting fortress walls), and promises of more struggles to come as they advanced deeper into Europe, meant the Mongols could not simply run rampant straight to the Atlantic Ocean. Yet, still certain of their eventual victory, the Mongols anticipated wholly to return and finalise the subjugation of Europe—only for the political fallout from the deaths of the great khans (Güyük in 1248, and Möngke in 1259) preventing such an operation with the permanent fragmentation of the Mongol Empire by the 1260s. The sixth chapter then confirms the efficacy of the fortifications in particular, with a look at how some of the regions most severely affected by the invasion yet not immediately incorporated into the Mongol Empire—Hungary, Poland, Halych-Volhynia—sought to build up and improve stone-walled hardpoints, especially in inaccessible locations. These, Pow argues, were recognised as the most effective, and in some cases only, type of structure to survive the initial passage of the Chinggisid armies.

Pow's point is a nuanced one, and much of his work carefully emphasises the battles not just between Mongols and Europeans, but of historians with topoi, nationalist mythos and late medieval/modern falsehoods. He argues that Europe put up a much more capable resistance than many writers today have presumed and that this fact was recognised even by the sources of the Mongol Empire. Yet, Pow cautions, one must be careful not to overstate this. The Mongols evidently did not think that Europe was unconquerable but left with a belief that it would require a serious commitment of resources to do so. A large army dedicated solely for that task would need to be raised, just as they had done against the Jin and Song Dynasties in China, the Khwarezmian Empire and 'Abbasid caliph in Baghdad. Such an operation could not be an idly considered afterthought but carefully planned in order to fit into the allotment of resources for the schedule of world conquest. It is a fine point, one which detractors to Pow's arguments may be likely to miss in favour of presenting

him as arguing for an overwhelming European might which broke the Mongol army when no one else could. Manifestly, he does not make such a conclusion. Indeed, as Pow suggests, the Mongols may have even overestimated the potential offensive capabilities of European powers.

That Europe went unconquered, or did not face again a concerted effort to bring it under Chinggisid dominion (and in the process suffer much resulting devastation) came about due to the fracturing of the united Mongol Empire rather than any inevitability or insufficiency of the Carpathian Basin as a staging ground. One might make a comparison to the Song Dynasty in southern China. Had the Mongols under Möngke Khan (r.1251–1259) and his brother Qubilai (r.1260–1294) failed to cross the Yangzi River, historians would feel confident saying the Yangzi was an impervious barrier to armies of northern archers on horseback, and find themselves good corroborating evidence with the Qitan Liao and Jurchen Jin Dynasties' own failures to hold land beyond it. Nevertheless, Chinggis Khan's heirs, with an abundance of resources and imagination, found the means to ford the Yangzi and adapt their forces in order to conquer the densely populated, rugged and wet terrain of southern China, territory quite unfriendly to their preferred style of warfare. Had time and resource opportunity been allowed, the Mongols might well have brought the same fearsome ingenuity to Europe and, given sufficient time, rode roughshod all the way to Normandy.

Pow's writing style is fluid and comfortable, making the work both enjoyable and persuasive reading for both specialists and newcomers to this topic alike. It is also a fine demonstration of the opportunities provided to historians of the Mongol Empire with the comparison of sources from across Eurasia giving wholly independent accounts of the same events. Pow puts this to good use here and *Conquest and Withdrawal* is undoubtedly at its strongest when European, Chinese, Persian, Syriac and Arabic sources are placed side by side describing the same ideas or incidents. Providing both an important survey of the campaigning in Europe, the years before and immediately after the invasion, as well as the historiography around it and depictions in sources from across Eurasia, *Conquest and Withdrawal: The Mongol Invasions of Europe* is a valuable contribution to the study of the Mongol Empire, its military, and worldview, and will be a heavily-used and much-appreciated resource for generations of future scholars.

Literature

Rogers, Greg S. "An Examination of Historians' Explanations for the Mongol Withdrawal from Central Europe." *East European Quarterly* 30 (1996): 3–26.

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