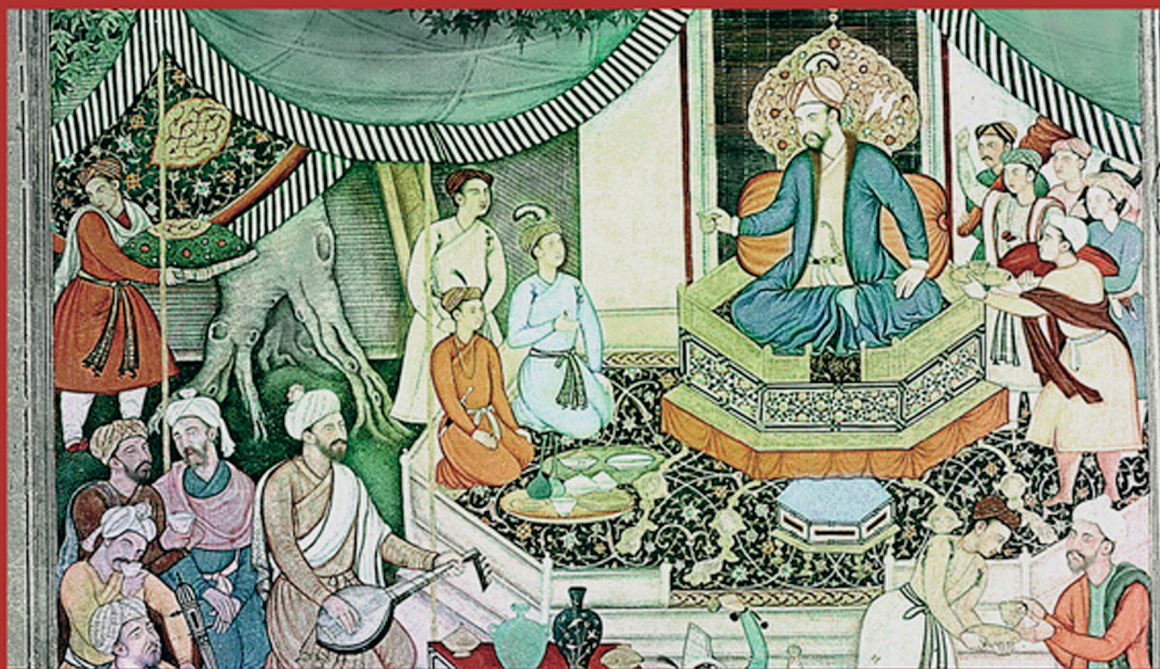


THE BLACKWELL HISTORY OF THE WORLD

A History of
RUSSIA, CENTRAL ASIA
AND MONGOLIA

VOLUME II
Inner Eurasia from the
Mongol Empire to Today, 1260-2000



David Christian

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A HISTORY OF
**RUSSIA,
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AND MONGOLIA**

*VOLUME II: INNER EURASIA FROM THE
MONGOL EMPIRE TO TODAY, 1260–2000*

DAVID CHRISTIAN

WILEY Blackwell

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SERIES EDITOR'S PREFACE

There is nothing new in the attempt to grasp history as a whole. To understand how humanity began and how it has come to its present condition is one of the oldest and most universal of human needs, expressed in the religious and philosophical systems of every civilization. But only in the last few decades has it begun to appear both necessary and possible to meet that need by means of a rational and systematic appraisal of current historical knowledge. Until the middle of the nineteenth century history itself was generally treated as a subordinate branch of other fields of thought and learning – of literature, rhetoric, law, philosophy, or religion. When historians began at that time to establish its independence as a field of scholarship in its own right, with its own subject matter and its own rules and methods, they made it in practice not the attempt to achieve a comprehensive account of the human past, but the history of western Europe and of the societies created by European expansion and colonization. In laying the scholarly foundations of their discipline they also reinforced the Enlightenment's belief in the advance of "civilization" (and, more recently, of "western civilization"), and made it in this form, with relatively minor regional variations, the basis of the teaching of history almost everywhere for most of the twentieth century. Research and teaching of the histories of other parts of the world developed mainly in the context of area studies like those of ancient Greece and Rome, rooted in philology, and conducted through the exposition of the canonical texts of their respective languages.

While those approaches prevailed world history as such remained largely the province of thinkers and writers principally interested in constructing theoretical or metaphysical systems. Only towards the end of the twentieth century did the community of academic historians begin to recognize it as a proper and even urgent field for the application of their particular knowledge and skills. The inadequacy of the traditional parameters of the discipline is now widely acknowledged, and the sense is growing that a world facing a common future of headlong and potentially catastrophic transformation needs its common history. The realization of such a history has been delayed, however, by simple ignorance on the one hand – for the history of enormous stretches of space and time has until very recently been known not at all, or so patchily and superficially as not to be worth revisiting – and on the other by the lack of a

widely acceptable basis upon which to organize and discuss what is nevertheless the enormous and enormously diverse knowledge that we have.

The first of those obstacles is now being rapidly overcome. There is almost no part of the world or period of its history that is not the object of energetic and sophisticated investigation by archaeologists and historians. The expansion of the horizons of academic history since the 1980s has been dramatic. The quality and quantity of historical research and writing have risen exponentially in each decade, and the advances have been most spectacular in some of the areas previously most neglected. The academics have not failed to share the results of their labors. Reliable and accessible, often brilliant, accounts are now readily available of regions, periods, and topics that even 20 years ago were obscure to everyone but a handful of specialists. In particular, collaborative publication, in the form of volumes or sets of volumes in which teams of authors set forth, in more or less detail, their expert and up-to-date conclusions in the field of their research, has been a natural and necessary response to the growth of knowledge. Only in that way can non-specialists, at any level, be kept even approximately in touch with the constantly accelerating accumulation of information about the past.

Yet the amelioration of one problem exacerbates the other. It is truer than it has ever been that knowledge is growing and perspectives multiplying more quickly than they can be assimilated and recorded in synthetic form. We can now describe a great many more trees in a great deal more detail than we could before. It does not always follow that we have a better view of the wood. Collaboration has many strengths, but clarity, still less originality of vision, is rarely foremost among them. History acquires shape, structure, relevance – becomes, in the fashionable catchphrase, something for thinking with – by advancing and debating new suggestions about what past societies were like, how they worked and why they changed over long periods of time, how they resembled and why they differed from other societies at other times and in other parts of the world, and how they interacted with one another. Such insights, like the sympathetic understanding without which the past is dead, are almost always born of individual creativity and imagination. That is why each volume in this series embodies the work and vision of a single author. Synthesis on such a scale demands learning, resolution, and, not least, intellectual and professional courage of no ordinary degree. We have been singularly fortunate in finding scholars of great distinction who are willing to undertake it.

There is a wealth of ways in which world history can be written. The oldest and simplest view, that it is best understood as the history of contacts between peoples previously isolated from one another, from which (as some think) all change arises, is now seen to be capable of application since the earliest times. An influential alternative focuses on the tendency of economic exchange to create self-sufficient but ever expanding “worlds” which sustain successive systems of power and culture. Another seeks to understand the differences between societies and cultures, and therefore the particular character of each, by comparing the ways in which their values, social relationships, and structures of power have developed. The rapidly developing field of ecological history returns to a very ancient tradition of seeing interaction with the

physical environment, and with other animals, at the center of the human predicament, while insisting that its understanding demands an approach which is culturally, chronologically, and geographically comprehensive. More recently still "Big History," led by a contributor to this series, has begun to show how human history can be integrated with that not only of the natural, but of the cosmic environment, and better understood in consequence.

The Blackwell History of the World seeks not to embody any single approach, but to support them all, as it will use them all, by providing a modern, comprehensive, and accessible account of the entire human past. Each volume offers a substantial overview of a portion of world history large enough to permit, and indeed demand, the reappraisal of customary boundaries of regions, periods, and topics, and in doing so reflects the idiosyncrasies of its sources and its subjects, as well as the vision and judgment of its author. The series as a whole combines the indispensable narratives of very long-term regional development with global surveys of developments across the world, and of interaction between regions and what they have experienced in common, or visited upon one another, at particular times. Together these volumes will provide a framework in which the history of every part of the world can be viewed, and a basis upon which most aspects of human activity can be compared across both time and space. A frame offers perspective. Comparison implies respect for difference. That is the beginning of what the past has to offer the future.

R. I. Moore

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I alone am responsible for remaining errors of fact, emphasis, and logic, and for not managing to cover all of the rich scholarship on the vast territory traversed by this book.

PREFACE: THE IDEA OF INNER EURASIA

THE ARGUMENT: CENTRAL THEMES

This volume covers a vast area – the central, or “Inner” half of Eurasia – and more than 750 years of that region’s history. Writing at this scale, it is easy to overlook the contingent events, the pathways not taken. So, though my central argument is about sustained ecological and geographical pressures that shaped the region’s history in enduring ways, I have tried not to ignore the alternative histories and might-have-beens – Lenin falling under a tram in September 1917, or a Lithuanian conquest of Muscovy, or a revived Mongolian Empire in the sixteenth century.

Contingencies have shaped the writing as well as the argument of this book. In April 2016, I was in London, working in the British Library on footnotes, formatting, transliterations, and the many other obsessive details involved in finishing a manuscript, when I picked up a Russian-language newspaper, *Pul’s UK*, “Pulse UK.” Its front page advertised an article on “*Yurta v Khaigaite*,” “A Yurt in Highgate.” For an English-trained historian who lives in Australia, the phrase reeked of globalization. But it also captured something of the project I have been working on for more than two decades: a history of Inner Eurasia, a huge region whose two historical poles in the last millennium have been Mongolia and Russia. Finding a free Russian-language newspaper in London also reminded me how much more globalized today’s world is than the world I grew up in, or even the world in which I began this project. (I was reminded recently that I signed a contract for this project in 1991, the year the Soviet Union broke up; that was *before* any of the events described in this book’s last two chapters.) Later that day, I had a beer in a nearby pub, “The Rocket.” That was a serendipitous reminder of a second major theme of this volume: the fossil fuels revolution (of which steam engines were a major early component) and the way it has transformed our world, including, in rather distinctive ways, the world of Inner Eurasia.

The first volume of this history appeared in 1998.¹ Taken together, the two volumes tell the story of a distinctive world region that includes all of the former Soviet Union, as well as Mongolia and Chinese Xinjiang. It includes all of the inner, more northerly, more arid half of the Eurasian land mass. Inner Eurasia’s complement is “Outer Eurasia.” Outer Eurasia includes China,



Map 0.1 Inner and Outer Eurasia. Adapted from Encarta.

South-East Asia, the Indian sub-continent, Persia, and Europe (Map 0.1). Outer Eurasia has been the subject of much more historical scholarship because it had much larger populations, more cities, and more complex societies that generated abundant historical records. To study the history of Inner Eurasia, therefore, is to study regions that have been relatively neglected by traditional synoptic historiography.

The first volume of this history began when human (or human-like creatures) first entered Inner Eurasia, over 100,000 years ago. It ended in the thirteenth century with the rise of the Mongol Empire, the first empire to dominate most of Inner Eurasia. The second volume describes Inner Eurasia in a more inter-connected era, in which its many different communities and polities were shaped by influences from all of Eurasia and eventually from the entire world.

This volume begins with the breakup of the Mongol Empire after 1260, and the creation of regional khanates. Then it tracks the decline of pastoral nomadic polities, and the rise of a second Inner Eurasian empire, based on agriculture rather than on pastoral nomadism. That empire began as Muscovy and became Russia. It arose in the forested lands north-west of the Urals. By the late nineteenth century, it ruled most of Inner Eurasia. But the world was changing around it, in an era of global competition and fossil fuels. Struggling to cope with these changes, the Russian Empire collapsed in 1917. It was speedily rebuilt in a new form, that of the Soviet command economy. By 1950, the Soviet Union not only dominated Inner Eurasia, as the Mongol and Russian empires had done before it, it had also become a global superpower. In

1991, like the Mongol Empire in 1260, the Soviet Union also collapsed while still a superpower. In its place, there emerged new, independent polities, all struggling to find a place in a globalized, capitalist world.

These volumes cover so much history that their approach has to be synoptic. They rest mainly on the work of other historians rather than on exhaustive primary research. One advantage of synoptic histories is that they will generally be more accessible to non-specialists. But, like gambits in chess, they begin with a sacrifice: they give up the expert's accumulated knowledge of particular, sharply focused topics, because this type of expertise is unattainable at very large scales. So synoptic histories may miss details or nuances that specialists will regard as important. But the point of a sacrifice is to see the game in new ways that offer new strategic perspectives and insights. (Of course, the aficionado of gambits will also argue that conventional strategies are gambits, too, because they sacrifice the possibility of unexpected insights and limit your view of the game.)

The main new insight we gain by reframing the history of this region is an appreciation of some important and distinctive features shared by all Inner Eurasian societies. In her wonderful history of the medieval world system, Janet Abu-Lughod argues that new insights often arise not just from new research and new facts, but also from "changing the distance from which 'facts' are observed and thereby changing the scale of what falls within the purview."² If a shift in the light can change what a photographer sees, so, too, a shift in the concepts we use to illuminate the past can change what we see as historians, sometimes in subtle ways, sometimes in more profound ways.

A single large question shapes the argument of both volumes: how has Inner Eurasia's distinctive ecology and geography shaped its history? In particular, how have geography and ecology shaped patterns of state building and resource gathering, or patterns of "mobilization." In exploring these patterns, the argument builds on two central ideas: the geographical concept of Inner Eurasia, and the historical concept of mobilization. Both require explanation.

INNER EURASIA

The idea of Inner Eurasia was introduced and defined in Volume 1, where I argued that there is an ecological and geographical coherence to this entire region that has shaped its political and cultural history over many millennia, and continues to do so today. This section will summarize those arguments.³

Inner Eurasia includes the inner and northern half of the Eurasian landmass. At about 27 million sq. kilometers, Inner Eurasia is similar in size to its complement, Outer Eurasia. But it is distinctive enough to deserve its own history. Of course, such claims must not be overstated. Not everything changes at the imaginary border between Inner and Outer Eurasia. Nevertheless, particularly at large scales, the differences are important and durable enough to have generated distinctive histories. Focusing on how geography and ecology shaped Inner Eurasia's history can help us move beyond nationalistic accounts

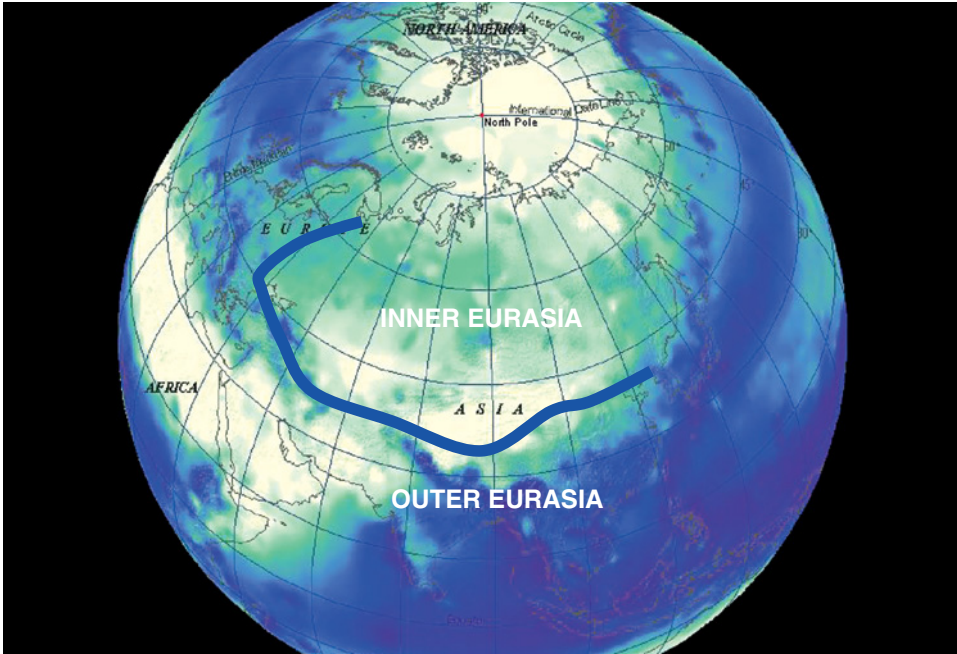
of the past that smuggle in essentially metaphysical assumptions about the distinctiveness of particular peoples, nations, or ethnicities. By making this move, nationalist historiographies often assume what needs to be explained. They also run the risk of anachronism. Was there really a distinct “Russian” people in the thirteenth century? Modern Ukrainian nationalists would certainly deny such a claim. Were the Mongols of the thirteenth century really the same “people” as today’s Mongols? Did the Uzbek and Kazakh “nations” first appear in the fifteenth century?

Focusing on geography rather than ethnicity can, of course, generate new forms of “essentialism.” The danger is apparent in modern “Eurasianist” writings, which also find an underlying coherence in the histories of all the lands once within the Russian and Soviet empires.⁴ The argument of this book overlaps at some points with Eurasianist approaches to the history of Inner Eurasia, but it also differs from them in important ways. Above all, its approach is scholarly, tentative, and exploratory. It tries to identify some ways in which durable aspects of Inner Eurasia’s geography and ecology may have shaped the histories of Inner Eurasian societies and politics, without overstating the region’s coherence or understating the role of contingency and the unexpected.

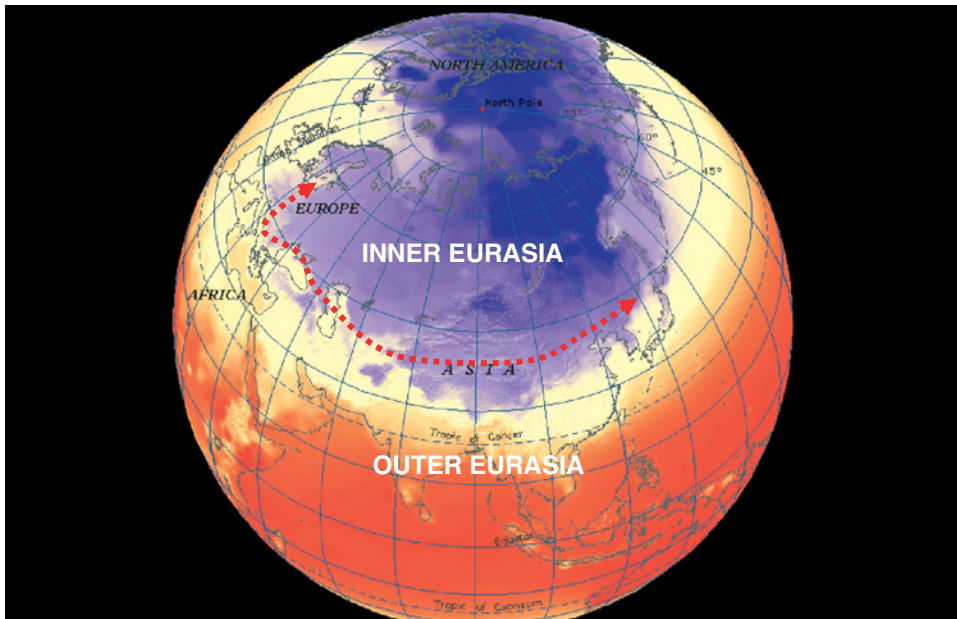
At very large scales, three large features of Inner Eurasian geography have influenced its history. Inner Eurasia differs from Outer Eurasia ecologically, demographically, and topographically.

Ecologically, Inner Eurasia is generally less productive than Outer Eurasia. Interiority means that most of it receives less rainfall because it is far from the oceans, and its long, northern Arctic shores are ice-bound for much of the year (Map 0.2). Remoteness from ice-free oceans also ensures that Inner Eurasian climates are generally more extreme, more “continental,” than those of Outer Eurasia because they are not moderated to the same extent by large bodies of open water. Inner Eurasia is also more northerly than most of Outer Eurasia, so that its climates are generally colder, and it receives less sunlight for photosynthesis (Map 0.3).

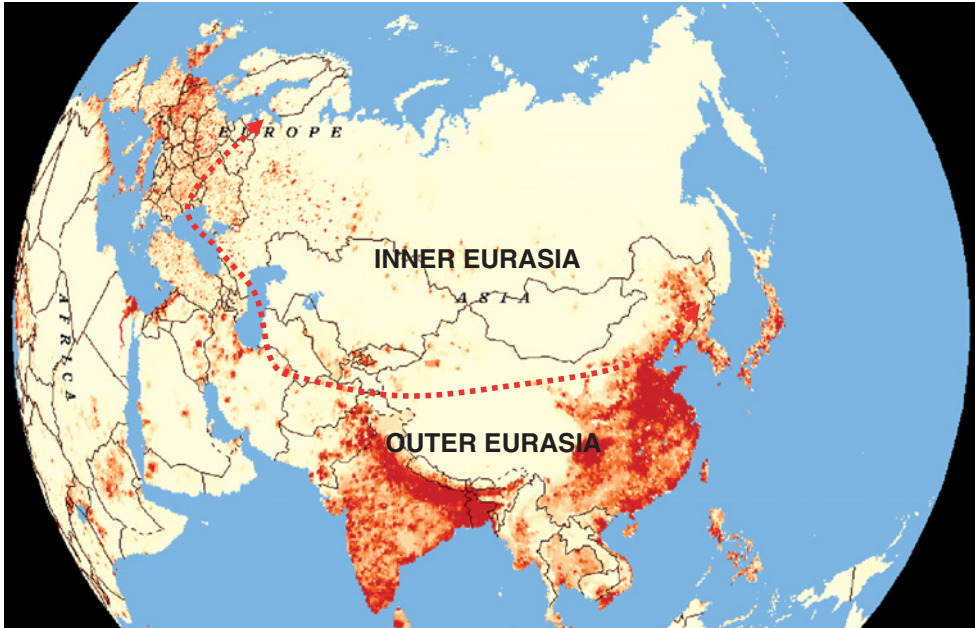
Inner Eurasia’s distinctive ecology helps explain a second distinctive feature: its demography. Aridity, lack of sunlight, and continental climates explain why it took so long for agriculture to get going in most of Inner Eurasia, while it flourished in much of Outer Eurasia. In Inner Eurasia, there were a few regions of early agriculture along China’s northern and northwestern borders, in small irrigated oases in Central Asia, and in regions of rainfall agriculture north of the Black Sea. But then it stalled, so agriculture was a late arrival in most of Inner Eurasia. That meant that, for much of the agrarian era of human history, when agriculture provided the people and resources for wealthy states and empires, Inner Eurasia remained a region of low productivity and thin populations. Only from about 1,500 years ago, when large numbers of peasants began migrating from eastern Europe into the forested lands west of the Urals, did rainfall agriculture start to spread more rapidly through Inner Eurasia. As agriculture spread, populations increased, and so did the number of villages, towns, and cities. Nevertheless, the large differences persisted. The late arrival of agriculture meant that Inner Eurasian societies had access to less energy and



Map 0.2 Interiority and low rainfall. Interiority means generally lower rainfall than in Outer Eurasia. Darker shading = higher rainfall. Adapted from Encarta.



Map 0.3 Northerliness and low agricultural productivity. Northerliness means lower temperatures, less sunlight, and generally less photosynthesis than in Outer Eurasia. Darker regions inside the dotted line have average January temperatures below 0° . Adapted from Encarta.



Map 0.4 Generally lower agricultural productivity than Outer Eurasia means low population density, even today. Darker regions have denser populations. Adapted from Encarta.

less food than most societies of Outer Eurasia, so they were (and they remain) more thinly settled than most Outer Eurasian societies (Map 0.4).

For several millennia, the dominant productive technology of Inner Eurasia was pastoral nomadism, a lifeway that depended primarily on domesticated animals rather than domesticated plants. Herding horses, sheep, and cattle worked well in the arid steppelands that cross the southern half of Inner Eurasia like a belt. But if you rely on animals rather than plants, you live higher on the food chain than farmers, and that means less energy is available because so much energy is lost as it moves from photosynthesizing plants to herbivores and up through the food chain. This is why the food chain generates a sort of ecological pyramid, with smaller populations the higher you climb. Just as you find fewer lions than zebra in a given area of savanna, so, too, you find fewer pastoral nomads than farmers for a given area of land. Indeed, ecologists often argue that so much energy is lost as it moves up the food chain that populations decline by approximately 90 percent at each step. This means there is a neat ecological logic to the fact that Inner Eurasian populations were usually between one tenth and one twentieth the size of Outer Eurasian populations, even though the two regions are about the same size (Table 0.1 and Figure 0.1).⁵ Demographic statistics highlight the fundamental contrast in productivity between the two halves of the Eurasian landmass.

Low population density shaped Inner Eurasia's political, economic, and social history. Above all, it meant that people (and the stores of energy that they represented) were scarcer and more valuable relative to land than in Outer

Table 0.1 Populations of Inner and Outer Eurasia

Date	Inner Eurasia pop. (mill.)	Outer Eurasia pop. (mill.)	Ratio (%): Inner/Outer Eurasia
–200	4	105	4
0	5	143	4
200	6	162	4
400	7	157	5
600	8	161	5
800	9	178	5
1000	10	215	4
1100	12	268	5
1200	16	301	5
1300	17	301	6
1400	17	287	6
1500	20	353	6
1600	24	466	5
1700	30	525	6
1800	49	792	6
1900	129	1,331	10
2000	340	4,050	8

Source: McEvedy and Jones, *Atlas of World Population History*, 78–82, 158–165.

Eurasia. This is why political systems in Inner Eurasia often seemed more interested in mobilizing people than in controlling land.

The third distinctive feature of Inner Eurasia is its topography. Dominating Inner Eurasia is the largest area of flatlands in the world, a feature that aided the movements of pastoralists, merchants, and armies, and deprived cities and states of natural defenses. Successful and mobile armies could advance over huge distances without facing major geographical barriers. This is one reason why Inner Eurasia was home to the largest contiguous empires that have ever existed: the Mongol, Russian, and Soviet empires (Figure 0.2). On the other hand, the ecology and sheer size of the vast Inner Eurasian flatlands posed distinctive challenges to armies unused to them. As the Persian emperor Darius discovered in the sixth century BCE, the Han emperor Wudi in the first century BCE, and Napoleon and Hitler in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, moving infantry armies through the vast, arid plains of Inner Eurasia could be a costly, dangerous, and thankless task.

MOBILIZATION

The second idea that needs some explanation is that of “mobilization.” Mobilization means gathering resources, whether in the form of labor, energy, or materials.

All complex systems mobilize energy and resources, from stars to plants to political systems. They all depend on flows of energy, and understanding how they capture and use energy can help us understand how complex systems work.⁶ The biosphere traps energy from sunlight through photosynthesis; humans tap those flows of energy to feed and support themselves; and states mobilize energy and resources from the populations and lands they rule. In

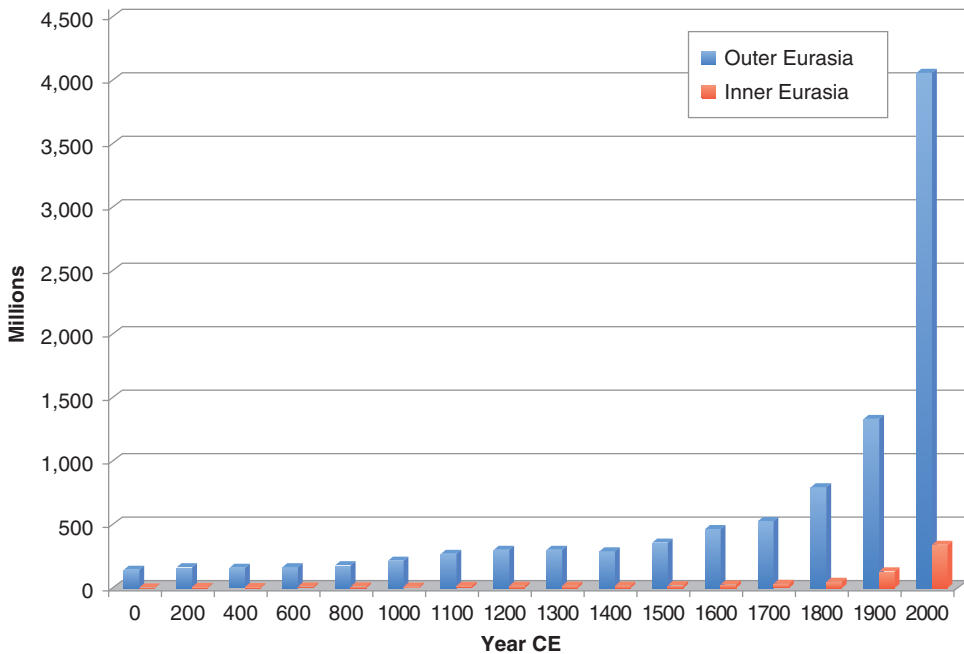


Figure 0.1 Populations of Inner and Outer Eurasia: same area, different demography. Data from McEvedy and Jones, *Atlas of World Population History*, 78–82, 158–165.

effect, the appearance of states in the last five thousand years of human history has added a new step to the food chain as elites mobilized energy from other humans who mobilized it from other organisms.

The illustration in Figure 0.3 is from the early twentieth century. In cartoon fashion, it captures the idea of mobilization nicely, as resources generated by the population are squeezed out of them, pumped to the government, and occasionally siphoned off by intermediate groups of what a modern economist might call “rent-takers.” The sixteenth-century Muscovite notion of “*kormlenie*” – literally the right of officials to “feed” off the population – captures perfectly the idea of mobilization as an extension of the food chain. In the 1990s the same word was used to describe the pillaging of state property that took place after the breakup of the Soviet Union.⁷

We can learn a lot about states by studying exactly *how* they mobilized resources. Inevitably, their methods depended on the environments in which they emerged, and the methods their subjects used to mobilize food, energy, and supplies. In Inner Eurasia, limited resources, scattered populations, and vast distances explain why mobilizing was generally harder than in Outer Eurasia, and would require different strategies. These strategies would shape the political cultures of the entire region, which is why the idea of mobilization will play a strategic role in the argument of this volume.

Mobilizing the energy, products, and military power of pastoral nomads was a very different task from that of mobilizing energy, resources, and military