



# ASIA MAIOR

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## **Asia in 2022: The impact of the Russia-Ukraine war on local crises**

**Edited by**  
**Michelguglielmo Torri**  
**Filippo Boni**  
**Diego Maiorano**

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A large, intricate mandala pattern is positioned on the right side of the cover. It is a complex, symmetrical design with multiple layers of geometric and organic shapes, rendered in a light orange color that matches the background. The pattern extends from the middle of the page down to the bottom right corner.

CENTRO STUDI PER I POPOLI EXTRA-EUROPEI “CESARE BONACOSSA” - UNIVERSITÀ DI PAVIA

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The Journal of the Italian think tank on Asia founded by Giorgio Borsa in 1989  
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THE END OF THE GREAT GAME IN MONGOLIA

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Matteo Miele, *Mongolian Independence and the British: Geopolitics and Diplomacy in High Asia, 1911-1916*, Bristol: E-International Relations, 2022, xv+222 pp. (ISBN: 978-1-910814-64-2).

Looking at Mongolia today, we see a country squeezed between two giant neighbors. A fledgling democracy, Mongolia is dependent economically on both Russia and China, and must often tailor its foreign and trade policies to appease one or the other, for fear of being punished with a border closure. Somehow, in spite of having been a Soviet satellite and being surrounded by the world's largest autocracies, Mongolia has managed to survive as a sovereign nation, albeit with some compromises. Tibet, East Turkestan, Tuva, Buryatia, and Kalmykia were not so lucky, having been absorbed into either China or Russia. Matteo Miele's book, *Mongolian Independence and the British: Geopolitics and Diplomacy in High Asia, 1911-1916*, sheds some light on the question of how Mongolia managed to remain unincorporated, and how it wound up in its current economic and political situation.

Miele focuses on five of the most crucial, yet least studied, years in Mongolia's modern history, the period beginning with the collapse of the Qing Dynasty, followed by the founding of the Republic of China, declarations of independence by both Tibet and Mongolia, and ending just before the Bolshevik Revolution (which is a part of Mongolian history more people are familiar with). Articles and books about Mongolia, including this one, often begin with some description of the roles played by Russia and China in the country's geopolitical landscape. This book, however, is written from a British perspective, and presents a very unique but informed point of view.

It would be easy to overlook the role the British played in the formation of the republic of Mongolia, because they never had a major interest or colony in the country. However, Miele describes how Mongolia unwittingly became the chessboard where the final rounds of the Great Game between Russia and Great Britain were played out.

The author writes in a very engaging style, presenting complex concepts and an information-dense history in an easy-to-read manner, accessible to all readers. The narrative contains a distinct note of helplessness as the fate of Mongolia was repeatedly renegotiated by Britain, Russia, and China, generally without the participation of Mongolian leaders. At least negotiations with China mentioned Mongolia directly. But in much of the debate between Britain and Russia, pieces of Mongolian autonomy were traded in exchange for concessions in Tibet and to a lesser extent Persia.



Although Miele tells the reader that his narrative begins at the end of *The Great Game*, he shifts back and forth in time, explaining the historical foundation then returning to the time period in question. He writes that after the fall of the Qing Dynasty, Tibet and Mongolia both declared themselves sovereign states, and then mutually recognized each other's independence. He details the changes this brought to the balance that had been established through the 1907 Anglo-Russian agreement.

In order to contextualize the connection between Mongolia and Tibet, the author takes the reader back to Kublai Khan, who absorbed Tibet into the territorial domains of the Yuan Dynasty during the 13th century. The spread of Tibetan Buddhism throughout the Mongol Empire left the fate of Mongolia inextricably linked with the fate of Tibet.

Britain wanted to create a buffer between the Russian Empire and the British Raj. For this reason, the Crown wanted an independent Tibet. Russia, for its part, saw Mongolia as a window through which to gain access to Tibet, and then on to India. Consequently, Russian weapons flowed into Mongolia and Tibet, while Tibetan monks flowed into Mongolia. Miele does an excellent job of providing dates, so that the reader will not get lost in the time shifts.

The British had hoped to use China as a means of keeping the Russians out of Tibet. When it became apparent that this plan would not succeed, the British determined that they would have to entreat Tibet directly. For this reason, in 1904, the Crown dispatched Francis Younghusband to Lhasa, where he signed an agreement. As the Dalai Lama had fled to Mongolia, and would not return until 1906, the seal of His Holiness was affixed by the Regent along with the seals of the council of ministers of the largest monasteries, as well as those of the National Assembly. Under the agreement, Tibet officially recognized the 1890 border with China, as well as the border with the Kingdom of Sikkim. The latter subsequently became the site of military clashes between the kingdom's subjects and the Chinese.

The 1904 agreement between Tibet and Britain stated that Tibet would not cede any of its territory, no foreign power would intervene in the internal affairs of Tibet, and that no representatives of a foreign government would be admitted into Tibet. Additionally, Tibet would not pay taxes to a foreign government. Britain, in turn, would be paid an indemnity of 500,000 to 750,000 rupees, and would be permitted to continue to occupy, temporarily, the area between Bhutan and Sikkim.

The absence of the Dalai Lama from Tibet presented a threat to British interests, in that, the Mongolian capital of Urga was much closer to Moscow than to British India. The British feared that the Russians might try to reach and influence the Dalai Lama, in Mongolia, to get him to sign agreements favoring Russian interests. In 1906, the British signed an accord with China, agreeing not to annex Tibet. The agreement also said that neither Britain nor China would allow a third party to interfere in Tibet.



Spanning hundreds of years of background, this treatise explores the complex web of political events which determined Mongolia's fate. While the major players are China, Russia, and Britain, the book also recounts how the larger story was influenced by Japan, Persia, Tibet, Afghanistan, Sikkim, the Anglo-Bhutanese War, and the Taiping Rebellion. Even the Russo-Japanese War had implications for the rivalry between Britain and Russia with the renewal of the Anglo-Japanese alliance in 1905.

At the signing of the Anglo-Russian Agreement of 1907, the British and Russians met in St. Petersburg, in order to define the geopolitical role of Persia, Afghanistan, and Tibet, the three main areas where the interests of the two empires challenged one another. Consequently, Persia was divided into three regions. The northern region was designated as the Russian sphere. The southern part would remain under British influence, while the rest of the country was left open.

According to the agreement, the British would retain Afghanistan as a protectorate. The right of the Qing Dynasty to rule over Tibet was recognized by both Russia and China, who agreed to not interfere in the internal administration, nor to post representatives to Lhasa. Although Tibet was considered the third geographical bastion of the Raj, it would remain under Manchu rule. This agreement would resolve nearly 100 years of competition and military campaigns fought out between the interests of London and Moscow. It removed Russia and Russian influence from India's political discourse, until the Bolshevik Revolution, ten years later.

When the Qing Dynasty collapsed, in 1911, the conflict between the interests of Russia and Britain was rekindled, because it moved Mongolia and Tibet out of the scope of the original agreement. Chinese soldiers in Mongolia were no longer receiving their pay and thus revolted, a sign the Mongolians took to mean that the shackles connecting them to Chinese rule had been severed. Consequently, Mongolia declared independence. The new Republic of China (ROC), founded in 1912, was not, in Mongol reckoning, a continuation of the old Qing Dynasty, and thus had no authority over Mongolia, which began petitioning Western countries for recognition.

Russia recognized the autonomy of Mongolia, which the Mongols interpreted as independence. The Russians, however regarded the situation more ambiguously. The agreement between the two was written and signed in more than one language, with slightly differing terms. The German language version committed the Russians to protecting Mongolian autonomy. The British similarly recognized Mongolian autonomy, but under Chinese suzerainty.

With the Qing Dynasty gone, Britain and Russia entered discussions again, regarding Mongolia, as well as the partitioning of Persia and the creation of Azerbaijan, which Russia wanted as a buffer. Another wrinkle in the narrative was that the Bogd Khan, the theocratic ruler who sat on the throne of Urga (the Mongolian capital), was a Tibetan monk. While Mon-

golia was economically linked to Russia, religious affinity tied the country to Tibet. Mongolia and Russia signed a friendship and trade treaty in December 1912, with Moscow hoping to use its relationship with Mongolia as a gateway into Lhasa. A few weeks later, Tibet and Mongolia signed a treaty, mutually recognizing each other's independence from China.

Britain sought to exploit the relationship between Mongolia and Russia in order to get Russia to accept the Simla Convention, which was negotiated between Republic of China, Tibet and Great Britain in 1913, but, because of disputes over the agreement's terms, China pulled out. The agreement was finally signed in 1914 by Britain and Tibet, without the Republic of China. This agreement was in conflict with the agreement previously signed between Russia and Britain in 1907.

Mongolia had hoped to regain Southern Mongolia (now the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region of the People's Republic of China). However, the Republic of China opposed Southern Mongolia from joining Outer Mongolia. The Mongolians hoped that Russia would help, but under Russia's recognition of Mongolian autonomy, the Russians reserved the right to determine where the border of Mongolia lay. Russia had made a secret agreement with Japan, stipulating that Russia would limit its influence to Outer Mongolia. Consequently, they could not allow Inner Mongolia to become part of Outer Mongolia.

In 1913, the Republic of China agreed to grant Mongolia autonomy. But shortly after signing the agreement the ROC tried to reassert itself in Mongolia. At the same time, Mongolia sent letters, requesting recognition from Germany, France, and other Western powers, all of which refused. And Russia, Mongolia's closest ally apart from Tibet, refused to extend a loan to the fledgling state. It seemed that Mongolia's autonomy was barely recognized outside of Mongolia and Tibet.

When it suited Russia, however, they could be very helpful. Russians trained Mongolian soldiers in 1912 and Russian weapons were given to Tibet, to oppose Chinese invaders. The Russians armed Mongolian soldiers and supported a Mongolian invasion of Manchuria, allowing them to operate out of Russian barracks.

Miele gives a brief overview of the outcome of the events covered in this book. In 1917, the Bolshevik revolution led to the formation of the USSR. The Soviets would then help the Mongols drive China out of Mongolia forever. The ROC would lose its war with the People's Republic of China, and Chiang Kai-shek and his supporters would flee to Taiwan. Sikkim was absorbed into India in 1975 but has been a point of dispute between China and India ever since. Tibet lost its autonomy and has been ruled by the People's Republic of China since 1951.

Mongolia was a Soviet satellite until 1990. Southern Mongolia was lost to China. Buryatia and Kalmykia were taken by Russia. But Mongolia has survived and remains independent today. Unfortunately, the problems

outlined in this book still exist today. In addition to being too small to compete with its giant neighbors, Mongolia remains landlocked and dependent on Russia and China for imports and exports. Although Mongolia is theoretically free to sign international agreements and to establish an independent trade regimen, in the final analysis Russia or China can assert an effective veto by threatening to close the border and shut off the flow of products or energy.

In conclusion, *Mongolian Independence and the British: Geopolitics and Diplomacy in High Asia, 1911-1916* presents an informed insight into the power competition between great empires in the wake of the collapse of the Qing Dynasty. The book details the rise of an independent, theocratic Mongolia which served as a hapless catalyst, threatening a fragile peace between Russia and Britain. The Miele's narration grabs the reader's attention and can be read for enjoyment or for academic study. The research and detail that have been put into this book are remarkable and depict a fresh take on a nearly forgotten yet significant era. For Mongolia-enthusiasts, it fills in many gaps, thus ultimately helping to establish a basis of understanding for the current geopolitical landscape, across China, Mongolia, and Russia.

Scientifically laid out, the book contains explanations on how the translations, place names, and transliterations were handled, and which standard forms were used. For the more serious scholar, it also contains dates, archival documents, bibliographic references, a table of acronyms, annexes, references, and indexing. Additionally, comprehensive end notes follow each chapter, for confirmation of specific facts and for further reading.