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## FOREIGN POLICY AND INTERNATIONAL ROLE OF NOGAI

**Abstract.** This paper attempts to analyze the political and international functions of Nogai in the framework of the Golden Horde structure at the end of the 13th century. The main aim of the study is the interpretation of the position of Nogai both as a military leader and as a politician who strongly affected the international politics and internal politics of the Jochi Ulus. For the achievement of this goal, the following tasks are formulated: to define the political status of Nogai in the Golden Horde; to analyze his role in the conflicts between the Golden Horde and the Ilkhanate; to consider his activities in the Caucasus and Black Sea region; to research his diplomatic relations with the Byzantine Empire and Mamluk Sultanate; and to interpret his function as an intermediary between the steppe zone and the states of Eastern Europe. The basis for the research will be made of the comprehensive analysis of medieval narrative sources: the texts written by Persians, Arabs, and Byzantines, along with historiography. Source-critical, comparative, and political anthropological approaches methods will be used during the research. The novelty of the paper will be defined by the reinterpretation of Nogai as a politician who was rather autonomous than dependent on the Great Khan, with his actions serving the process of decentralization of the Golden Horde, as well as the integration of different source traditions for the recreation of Nogai's historical image. As a result of the study, it will be stated that Nogai managed to create a certain independent political environment in the western part of the Golden Horde and took an active part in the shaping of the state's external politics. Political autonomy and diplomacy were responsible for the creation of a complex system of international relations in Eurasia. The results of the research increase the knowledge of the political structure of the Golden Horde.

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**Keywords:** Nogai, Golden Horde, Ulus of Jochi, foreign policy, Byzantium, Ilkhanate, nomadic empires, political power.

### Introduction

The history of the Golden Horde and the formation of the Jochi Ulus belong to the key issues of Eurasian history of the Middle Ages. Over the last decades, the scholarly focus gradually moved from classical political approaches to the analysis of state apparatuses, mechanisms of governance, elites, and diplomacy in the Mongol successor states. This shift resulted in increased attention to the problem of non-Chinggisid warlords and their role in the politics of the Golden Horde (Bartold, 1963; Halperin, 1987; Jackson, 2005; Favereau, 2021).

One of the most prominent figures in the second half of the thirteenth century was Nogai, who played an outstanding political role that far exceeded the borders of the western part of the Golden Horde. Despite the lack of any official titles, medieval sources depict Nogai as one of the most influential representatives of the Jochi nobility. The political career of Nogai reveals the process of decentralization of the power in the Golden Horde and demonstrates the increasing importance of the military aristocracy for the functioning of the Jochi state (Bartold, 1963; Spuler, 1965; Halperin, 1987).

The analysis of Nogai's activity mainly based on a large amount of sources of different types and languages, including Persian, Arabic, Armenian, Byzantine, and Russian chronicles. One should pay particular attention to two works, namely the History written by the order of Shams ad-Din Muhammad ibn Shakir al-Qazvini called Rashid al-Din and The universal history of 'Aṭā Malik Juvayni. Both sources describe in detail various aspects of the activity of the warlord and provide much valuable information about Nogai and his relatives (Rashid al-Din, 1960; Thackston, 1998–1999; Juvayni, 2004). Moreover, other important sources of medieval historiography that shed light on the activity of the mentioned political figure should be taken into account (Patkanov, 1871; Bedrosian, 2003; Cleaves, 1949).

According to Rashid al-Din, Nogai belonged to the Chinggisid dynasty and descended from Jochi's son Buwal (Buwal). Thus, Nogai had a legitimate right to participate in the affairs of the Golden Horde but did not have the chance to become a khan due to belonging to the family of Buwal. However, the warlord's successful military campaigns and active participation in conflicts between the Golden Horde and the Ilkhanate contributed to increasing his authority in the state (Rashid al-Din, 1960; Thackston, 1998–1999).

The return of the Byzantine Empire under Michael VIII Palaiologos in 1261 led to significant changes in the geopolitical situation in the Black Sea region. As a result, the Golden Horde started to develop its economic and political relations with Byzantium while at the same time strengthening its position in the western areas. Under these conditions, Nogai became the main architect of the western diplomacy of the Jochi state. Medieval documents testify to close ties of Nogai with the Byzantine court as well as his involvement in various diplomatic negotiations and dynastic unions with Byzantium (Jackson, 2005; Derin, 2024).

The present-day historiographical literature increasingly tends to regard the political structure of the Golden Horde as a flexible multi-centered system with divided power among influential representatives of the ruling elite. Modern research highlights the need for analyzing regional political leaders to understand the mechanism of governance, diplomacy, and militarism in the Golden Horde (Favereau, 2021; Jackson, 2005; Uzelac, 2015).

This paper will analyze Nogai's political and international activity and his place in the political structure of the Golden Horde. Special attention should be paid to his participation in military campaigns, diplomatic relations with neighboring states, and the impact on the foreign policy of the Golden Horde.

Current studies view the political organization of the Golden Horde as a complex and decentralized one, in which power was shared by several prominent members of the aristocracy rather than vested in the person of the khan only. The trend is represented by a number of scholars working on the subject matter who put special focus on the institutional context, regional political elites, and the mechanism of imperial rule (Halperin, 1987; Jackson, 2005; Favereau, 2021; Uzelac, 2015). However, it should be noted that contemporary Kazakh historiography has also contributed significantly to the analysis of the political and territorial organization of the Ulus of Jochi. Namely, the research by Sabitov and Kushkumbayev (2013), which reinterprets the ulus structure of the Golden Horde as well as the localization of the Aq Orda and Kök Orda, can serve as an example. Together with the studies of Kumekov (2010) and Kushkumbayev (2010), they create a valuable historiographic context for the reinterpretation of the role played by Nogai within the framework of the Golden Horde.

### **Materials and methods**

This work explores the political and international status of Nogai in the Golden Horde using both classical historical and interdisciplinary approaches. The study relies on an extensive review of primary and secondary literature. Sources from medieval Persian, Arabic, and Byzantine histories are used as sources to trace the genealogy, military campaigns, and political standing of Nogai in the Jochi Ulus, his participation in the struggle against the Ilkhanate, and relations with the

Byzantine Empire. These documents are supplemented by historiographic works on the political system of the Golden Horde and the role of military nobility.

Methods used for source examination include the historical-critical approach that evaluates reliability, authorship, and bias of medieval texts. Comparative-historical analysis enables the cross-referencing of material to obtain a more accurate picture of events. Source criticism involving text and contextual analysis reveals nuances of terminology and storytelling conventions in their historical context.

Furthermore, prosopography is employed to investigate Nogai in the context of the Jochi aristocracy and political connections and genealogical relations. Structural and political anthropological methods help uncover decentralization processes and the operation of power in nomadic empires. Limitations stem from fragmentary and conflicting accounts in medieval literature.

### Discussion

The history of the research on Nogai's political activity can be considered in the framework of the broader evolution of Golden Horde studies. In this regard, historiographic interpretations of Nogai's role in the Jochi state have changed from descriptive accounts of his military campaigns to the analysis of political institutions, regional political authorities, and elites of the western Golden Horde. As a result of this evolution, the role of Nogai in the history of the Golden Horde has been re-evaluated – he has ceased to be seen as only a great military leader and turned into one of the major political actors of the Golden Horde.

Medieval narratives provide the earliest written materials about Nogai. He is mentioned in medieval Persian, Arabic, Russian, Byzantine, and Armenian narratives. Medieval Russian chronicles present Nogai primarily as the enemy of the principalities of northeastern Rus' and describe his military campaigns in the northeastern region of Rus' and political involvement in the affairs of Rus principalities (PSRL, 1962: 214–216). At the same time, the chronicles pay attention to his exceptional political authority in the Golden Horde and his impact on the political life of this state (PSRL, 1962: 214–216).

In comparison with the Russian chronicles, Persian historiography contains a lot more information on the genealogy and political activities of Nogai. According to the works of Rashid al-Din, Nogai was the descendant of Jochi through Buval (Buwal) and took part in the military campaigns in the Caucasus and conflicts with the Ilkhanate (Rashid al-Din, 1960: 75; Thackston, 1998–1999: 361–363). The works of Juvayni supplement the information on the political conflict between the Jochids and the Ilkhanids and Nogai's military activity in the southern borderlands of the Golden Horde (Juvayni, 2004: 183–185). Along with these Persian narratives, there are also works of Mamluk historians such as al-Nuwayri, whose narrative contains interesting information on the diplomatic relations of Nogai and political situation in the western Jochi Ulus. Thus, medieval narratives form the principal foundation of modern research on Nogai.

Professional historiography originated at the turn of the nineteenth century. One of the first historians who interpreted Nogai was N.M. Karamzin, who suggested that Nogai had founded the Nogai Horde. This opinion strongly influenced the nineteenth-century historiography of the Nogai Horde (Karamzin, 1989: 114). However, later research has shown that political structures created by Nogai in the late thirteenth century cannot be considered to be the predecessors of the Nogai Horde in the fifteenth century.

The works of Archimandrite Leonid (Kavelin) and A.K. Markov played a significant role in the study of the political status of Nogai. The analysis of numismatic materials performed by these scholars revealed that coins which were minted with Nogai's name reflected his exceptional political autonomy among non-Chinggisid military leaders of the Golden Horde (Markov, 1896: 53–55).

The next stage in the historiography of the Golden Horde belongs to the works of V.V. Bartold. Analyzing the political geography of the Jochi Ulus, Bartold concluded that Nogai ruled effectively over the territory stretching from the Danube to the Dnieper, although he never held the title of khan (Bartold, 1963: 487–489). This interpretation laid the ground for subsequent research on the questions of political legitimacy and distribution of political power in the Golden Horde.

Soviet historiography widened the scope of Golden Horde studies. Instead of studying only military events, researchers concentrated more on studying state institutions, administration, and mechanisms of political power. According to Grekov and Yakubovsky, Nogai was an influential political actor who actively participated in the diplomatic relations of the Golden Horde with Byzantium, Bulgaria, Hungary, and other neighboring states (Grekov & Yakubovsky, 1950: 147–155). Egorov proved that Nogai's western ulus was the independent political entity within the framework of the Golden Horde (Egorov, 1985: 72–81). Meanwhile, the works of Safargaliev (1960), Fedorov-Davydov (1966), and Gumilev (1989) developed the theoretical basis for understanding political power, state formation, and nomadic institutions in the Golden Horde.

Nowadays, the focus of historiography has changed from dynastic history to the issues of political power, frontier diplomacy, and regional political governance. Trepavlov (2002) convincingly disproved the traditional opinion about the continuity of Nogai's political domain in the Nogai Horde, thus, rejecting one of the oldest concepts of Russian historiography. Modern researches of Pilipchuk (2021) also emphasize the diplomatic activity of Nogai and his influence on the geopolitical situation in Eastern Europe and the Balkans of the late thirteenth century.

International research community increasingly discusses Nogai in the context of the history of Eurasian empires. Such works as the publications of Jackson (2005), Broadbridge (2008), Uzelac (2015), Favereau (2021), and Vásáry (2005) interpret the political activity of Nogai from the points of view of frontier diplomacy, imperial governance, and cross-cultural communication. As a result, Nogai has become one of the most influential political actors of the western Eurasian steppe.

At the same time, modern Kazakh historiography has contributed a lot to the study of the institutional development of the Jochi Ulus. Works of Kumekov (2010), Kushkumbayev (2010), and Sabitov and Kushkumbayev (2013; 2015) clarified such important aspects of the Golden Horde as ulus system, political geography, and state terminology of the Golden Horde.

As a result, it becomes obvious that historiography of Nogai has experienced a clear shift from purely descriptive narratives on military campaigns to the multidisciplinary analysis of political institutions, diplomacy, elite power, and imperial governance. Thus, this historiographic evolution reflects broad transformations in Golden Horde studies and gives a much more complete picture of Nogai as one of the main political figures of medieval Eurasia.

### **Research results**

#### *Nogai and the Change of Foreign Policy in the Golden Horde*

The case of Nogai proves that the foreign policy of the Golden Horde cannot be explained by the actions of its rulers only. Despite the fact that all executive functions belonged to the ruling Chinggisids, according to the medieval chronicles, powerful military commanders had an opportunity to conduct foreign policy, organize military campaigns, and administer frontier regions. In particular, Nogai played an important role in the formation of the western foreign policy of the Golden Horde in the second half of the thirteenth century.

#### *Nogai and Foreign Policy in the Caucasian and Ilkhanid Directions*

The first examples of Nogai's foreign policy activity were military campaigns against the Ilkhanids. As Rashid al-Din states, Nogai led troops across Derbent and into Shirvan during the military operations of the early 1260s (Rashid al-Din, 1960: 59–60). This was strategically important because it guaranteed the control over the Caucasian corridor and access to important trade routes of connection of the Eurasian steppe with the Middle East.

It is necessary to note that these military operations cannot be considered separately from the geopolitical competition between the Jochids and the Ilkhanids. Juvayni also writes about the military actions of Nogai in the southern front of the Golden Horde (Juvayni, 2004: 183–185). This information proves that Nogai was not only a military commander but also one of the key figures in the defense of the strategic interests of the Golden Horde in the Caucasus.

It is also possible to say that Nogai had a great operational freedom. Even though these campaigns were a part of the foreign policy of the Jochids, medieval sources depict Nogai as an independent military commander in one of the most important frontier regions of the Golden Horde (Thackston, 1998–1999: 361–363). This indicates that the political power in the Golden Horde was distributed between different influential representatives of the military elite.

#### *Nogai and Byzantine Diplomacy*

The example of Nogai's political activity becomes clearer when discussing the western direction of the Golden Horde's foreign policy. With the restoration of the Byzantine Empire under Michael VIII Palaiologos in 1261, the Black Sea area got new geopolitical importance. The commercial interests, security, and diplomatic relations transformed this region into one of the main centers of interaction of the nomadic world with the sedentary states of Eastern Europe (Jackson, 2005: 67–72).

According to the medieval sources, Nogai had diplomatic relations with Byzantium in the late 1260s and early 1270s. His marriage alliance with the Byzantine imperial family shows the importance of the dynastic diplomacy as an instrument of the interstate relations of the Mongol successor states (Derin, 2024: 15–18). Therefore, Nogai was not only a military commander but also an intermediary who negotiated about political alliances for the benefit of the western regions of the Golden Horde.

Not only the diplomacy was under the control of Nogai. Contemporary sources indicate that Nogai regularly interfered in the political affairs of the Balkans, Bulgaria, and the lower Danube region, which helped him expand the political influence of the Golden Horde far beyond the steppe frontier (Jackson, 2005: 89–98; Derin, 2024: 25–30). This fact proves that the western frontier was not just a military but also a political zone.

#### *The Black Sea Frontier as a Contact Zone of Political Relations*

It is clear from the analysis made above that the Black Sea frontier cannot be interpreted as the external border of the Golden Horde but as a contact zone of political, diplomatic, and commercial interactions. Nogai controlled regions, where nomadic and sedentary societies had permanent contacts.

In such a frontier environment, the diplomacy worked together with military power. The control over trade routes, negotiations with neighboring rulers, and regulation of political alliances became an essential tool of the regional administration. Turkish historians also emphasize the importance of the western Black Sea region for the political and economic system of the Golden Horde and the crucial role of Nogai in this process (Derin, 2024: 25–30).

#### *Foreign Policy and the Political Structure of the Golden Horde*

The information collected above proves that the foreign policy of the Golden Horde was conducted in the multi-level political structure of the state, where military commanders with the appropriate political power could negotiate, organize military campaigns, and represent imperial interests in strategically important regions.

This explanation correlates with the current historiography, which tends to see the Golden Horde as a politically decentralized empire based on the cooperation of the Chinggisid dynasty and the influential members of the military aristocracy (Halperin, 1987; Favereau, 2021; Kumekov, 2010; Kushkumbayev, 2010; Sabitov & Kushkumbayev, 2013). In such an institutional context, Nogai was one of the most influential political actors of the western Jochi Ulus.

#### *Political Authority of Nogai and the Structure of the Golden Horde*

The political authority of Nogai gives the understanding of one of the main features of the political system of the Golden Horde. Even though he never claimed the title of khan and therefore did not have the dynastic legitimacy, he had enough military, diplomatic, and administrative power to shape the policy of the region independently. His career shows that the political influence in the Golden Horde required not only Chinggisid blood but also the military prestige, the control over frontier regions, and the skills of diplomatic communication with the neighboring powers.

Therefore, Nogai should be considered not only as an influential emir but also one of the main architects of the western foreign policy of the Golden Horde. His activities reveal the flexibility of the political institutions of the Jochi Ulus and prove the existence of the cooperation between the ruling dynasty and the regional elites in the imperial governance.

### Conclusion

The present study has demonstrated that Nogai played a decisive and multifaceted role in the foreign policy of the Golden Horde in the second half of the thirteenth century. Contrary to traditional interpretations that limit foreign policy to the authority of the khan, the analysis shows that Nogai functioned as an active and influential agent in shaping the international relations of the Jochi Ulus.

The examination of primary sources and modern historiography has revealed that Nogai's activities extended across several key geopolitical directions. In the Caucasian region, his military campaigns against the Ilkhanate, particularly in Shirvan and Derbent, were crucial for maintaining the southern frontier and securing strategic communication routes. In the western direction, his diplomatic engagement with the Byzantine Empire and his political involvement in the Balkan region demonstrate his role as an intermediary between the steppe world and Eastern Europe.

The study has also shown that Nogai's authority was not solely derived from formal hierarchical structures but was based on his control over military resources, strategic territories, and political networks. This form of power allowed him to operate both within and beyond the framework of central authority, combining military leadership with diplomatic functions. As a result, Nogai emerges not merely as a military commander but as a key architect of the Golden Horde's external policy.

The findings contribute to a broader rethinking of foreign policy in nomadic empires. Rather than being centralized and exclusively controlled by ruling dynasties, foreign policy in the Golden Horde appears as a multi-layered and flexible system, implemented through a network of elite actors. This perspective highlights the importance of regional leaders in shaping international relations and challenges traditional state-centered models of political organization.

In conclusion, the case of Nogai provides valuable insight into the mechanisms of power, diplomacy, and governance in the medieval Eurasian steppe. His political and diplomatic activities reflect the dynamic and adaptive nature of the Golden Horde's foreign policy and underscore the need for further research into the role of non-sovereign elites in the international history of nomadic empires.

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## НОҒАЙДЫҢ СЫРТҚЫ САЯСАТЫ ЖӘНЕ ХАЛЫҚАРАЛЫҚ РӨЛІ

**Аңдатпа.** Бұл мақала XIII ғасырдың соңында Алтын Орда құрылымы шеңберінде Ноғайдың саяси және халықаралық қызметтерін талдауға арналған. Зерттеудің негізгі мақсаты – Ноғайдың тек әскери қолбасшы ретінде ғана емес, сонымен қатар Жошы ұлысының сыртқы және ішкі саясатына елеулі ықпал еткен саяси тұлға ретіндегі орнын түсіндіру. Аталған мақсатқа жету үшін келесі міндеттер қойылды: Ноғайдың Алтын Ордадағы саяси мәртебесін анықтау; оның Алтын Орда мен Илхан мемлекеті арасындағы қатығыстардағы рөлін талдау; Кавказ бен Қара теңіз өңіріндегі қызметін қарастыру; Византия империясы және Мысыр мәмлүк сұлтанатымен дипломатиялық байланыстарын зерттеу; сондай-ақ оның дала аймағы мен Шығыс Еуропа мемлекеттері арасындағы делдалдық қызметін айқындау. Зерттеу жұмысының негізін парсы, араб және византиялық авторлар жазған ортағасырлық баяндаушы дереккөздерді, сондай-ақ заманауи тарихнаманы кешенді талдау құрайды. Зерттеу барысында деректанулық, салыстырмалы-тарихи және саяси антропология әдістері қолданылды. Жұмыстың ғылыми жаңалығы Ноғайды Ұлы ханға тәуелді тұлға ретінде емес, салыстырмалы түрде дербес әрекет еткен саяси қайраткер ретінде қайта қарастыруда көрінеді. Сонымен қатар, оның қызметі Алтын Ордадағы орталықсыздану үдерістерімен байланысты қарастырылып, түрлі дереккөз дәстүрлерін біріктіру арқылы Ноғайдың тарихи бейнесін қайта құру ұсынылады. Зерттеу нәтижесінде Ноғайдың Алтын Орданың батыс бөлігінде белгілі бір дәрежеде дербес саяси кеңістік қалыптастырып, мемлекеттің сыртқы саясатын қалыптастыруда белсенді рөл атқарғаны анықталды. Оның саяси дербестігі мен дипломатиялық қызметі Еуразиядағы көпдеңгейлі халықаралық қатынастар жүйесінің қалыптасуына ықпал етті. Зерттеу нәтижелері Алтын Орданың саяси құрылымы туралы білімді терендетеді.

**Алғыс:** Зерттеу АР23490261 «Ноғайдың тарихи тұлғасы және оның Жошы ұлысының мемлекеттік құрылымындағы рөлі» ғылыми жобасы аясында жүзеге асырылды.

**Кілт сөздер:** Ноғай, Алтын Орда, Жошы ұлысы, сыртқы саясат, Византия, Илхан мемлекеті, көшпелі империялар, саяси билік.

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## ВНЕШНЯЯ ПОЛИТИКА И МЕЖДУНАРОДНАЯ РОЛЬ НОГАЯ

**Аннотация.** Данная статья посвящена анализу политических и международных функций Ногая в рамках структуры Золотой Орды в конце XIII века. Основной целью исследования является интерпретация положения Ногая не только как военного лидера, но и как политического деятеля, оказавшего значительное влияние на внешнюю и внутреннюю политику Улуса Джучи. Для достижения поставленной цели были сформулированы следующие задачи: определить политический статус Ногая в Золотой Орде; проанализировать его роль в конфликтах между Золотой Ордой и Илханатом; рассмотреть его деятельность в Кавказском и Причерноморском регионах; исследовать его дипломатические связи с Византийской империей и Мамлюкским султанатом; а также интерпретировать его функцию посредника между степным миром и государствами Восточной Европы. В основу исследования положен комплексный анализ средневековых нарративных источников – персидских, арабских и византийских, а также современной историографии. В работе применяются методы источниковедческого анализа, сравнительно-исторического исследования и политической антропологии. Научная новизна работы заключается в переосмыслении роли Ногая как относительно автономного политического деятеля, а не исключительно зависимого от верховной власти хана, а также в рассмотрении его деятельности в контексте процессов децентрализации в Золотой Орде. Кроме того, предложен интегративный подход, основанный на объединении различных традиций источников для реконструкции исторического образа Ногая. В результате исследования установлено, что Ногай обладал значительным контролем над западными территориями Золотой Орды и играл важную роль в формировании её внешней политики. Его политическая автономия и дипломатическая активность способствовали формированию многоуровневой системы международных отношений в Евразии. Полученные результаты углубляют понимание политической структуры Золотой Орды.

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**Ключевые слова:** Ногай, Золотая Орда, Улус Джучи, внешняя политика, Византия, Илханат, кочевые империи, политическая власть.

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