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GENGHIS KHAN AND MANEUVER WARFARE

BY

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Genghis Khan and Maneuver Warfare

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ABSTRACT

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Genghis Khan was one of the most feared and admired leaders of his time. He created a Mongol military might that was superior to any other he faced. The Mongols, under the leadership of Genghis Khan and his successors, overran most of Asia and Eastern Europe, and defeated virtually every army thrown against them. His armies were so well trained and led that they were incomparably superior to their opponents in China, Russia, Persia, and Eastern Europe. Genghis Khan developed a military system that focused on rapid, decisive maneuver, utilizing the skill and endurance of the Mongol horsemen. His principles of operational maneuver, command and control, deception, and precise battlefield tactics were substantially superior to those of his enemies. His campaigns were brilliant, and showcased his military genius and established standards for maneuver warfare, brutality, and human endurance never before seen. No other army since then has achieved the remarkable results that Genghis Khan and his armies did. This study identifies and analyzes the Mongol army's organization and training, its tactics and strategy, and its brilliant execution of maneuver warfare during its campaign in Eastern Europe. The superior leadership, discipline, and mobility of the Mongol Army offer several valuable lessons on maneuver warfare from the 12th and 13th centuries.

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GENGHIS KHAN AND MANEUVER WARFARE

"Heaven has appointed me to rule all the nations, for hitherto there has been no order upon the steppes."

Genghis Khan

Genghis Khan is often overlooked in history as one of the greatest military leaders the world has ever seen. During the 12th and 13th centuries, he and his sons and grandsons commanded one of the greatest armies the world had seen, and amassed the largest empire ever brought together under one rule. In western schools, particularly, students are taught of the great empires of Alexander the Great, the Romans, and even the British. Very little is usually taught about the empire that once encompassed about half the world's land. Its territories once included China, Persia, Russia, and parts of Eastern Europe. The Mongol Empire is known as the empire that once had the world trembling with fear at the mention of their coming. Their military might was the greatest of its time, and there was virtually no army that could defeat it. Genghis Khan was the man who built the Mongol Empire into the world power that it was, centered on the most powerful army in the world. That a nomadic tribe of peoples could establish such a powerful army and amass such a huge empire is remarkable indeed. But Genghis Khan was a remarkable man who had vision, understood the principles of grand strategy, and understood how to capitalize on the strengths of the Mongol people. Even more importantly, he was a military genius who formed an army that set the standard for maneuver warfare and especially for fighting when considerably outnumbered. B.H. Liddell Hart said of Genghis Khan and of his great general, Subatai, that the "strategical ability of these two leaders is matched in history only by that of Napoleon; that the tactical methods of the Mongol Army hold the lessons of importance for present-day students; and finally, it may convince us that we do wrong to dismiss lightly the military potentialities of the orient."¹

A detailed analysis of Genghis Khan and the development of the Mongol Army and his use of maneuver warfare must begin with an examination of the life of Genghis Khan and his development into a military and world leader. It must then examine the organization of the Mongol Army, its soldiers and their weapons, and its tactics and strategy. Finally, I intend to analyze the Mongol campaign in Eastern Europe and how the Mongols demonstrated that exceptional operational maneuverability enabled them to fight and win, despite being consistently outnumbered. A study of the Mongol methods and the secrets to their success may at least serve to clear our minds of long-inherited prejudices, and reveal the unsoundness of conventional objections to a new and mobile arm which are based on its minor limitations for movement in certain localities and over specific types of ground. The deduction from the above-mentioned Mongol campaign is that superior general mobility when allied with hitting power is both a more powerful and a more secure tool than the defensive power of an army founded on infantry.²

GENGHIS KHAN

"Henceforward, then, my simple word shall be my sword."

Genghis Khan

Genghis Khan was born sometime between 1155 and 1167 (some sources place 1162 as the date, but there is no confirmation) into the Borjigin clan on the bank of the Onon River, east of Lake Baikal. He was born with the name Temujin (or Temuchin, based on which source you use), which means "iron worker" in his native language.³ As a youth he learned of the harsh existence of the Mongol people, and of the need to be a skilled hunter and fighter. His father was killed when Temujin was only 13, and he quickly rose to power among several of the Mongol tribes. By the time he was nineteen years old, Temujin had 13,000 followers in his camp.⁴

At about the age of twenty the young leader adopted a regular battle formation and organization for his warriors – one that was apparently new among the Mongols. Ten men made up a squad, ten squads made up a company, and ten companies made a group, or guran, of one thousand men. All of the warriors were mounted on small, sturdy horses known as Mongol ponies.⁵ Temujin set out to train his warriors to ride, turn, and attack as units until they became extremely skillful at riding and fighting together. Through rigorous exercises and wargames, he quickly turned his gurans into highly disciplined and skilled fighting units. Because they trained and practiced as units, Temujin's men could move without delay in response to his orders. Never before had Mongols observed such discipline.⁶ Thus, at an early age, Genghis (Temujin) began to demonstrate the military genius that would later help him conquer half the world.

He quickly abandoned the usual methods of defense favored by the Mongol tribes at that time and adopted a more mobile defense centered on heavy cavalry. During a battle against Targutai, his father's cousin, for leadership of his father's tribe, Temujin used light cavalry as a screen, backed up by the heavy cavalry placed in front of a thick forest. When Targutai's horsemen attacked, Temujin's light cavalry fired a volley of arrows, then moved to the rear, behind Temujin's main line of heavily armed cavalry. The solid units of heavy cavalry then charged against Targutai's infantry, quickly overwhelming them. Targutai's warriors had never before experienced the powerful shock of a massed cavalry charge and 6,000 were killed. Targutai was one of the many enemy prisoners and he was executed by order of Temujin.⁷ Temujin soon became the undisputed leader of his tribe, and his astounding success attracted more and more Mongols who wished to join such a great and powerful leader.

In the year 1190, Temujin was chosen Khan of the Borjigin Mongols by a *Kuriltai*, or council of the chiefs. While the tribal chiefs of the clan saw their new Khan as a leader only in time of war and in great hunts, Temujin had other ideas: he had begun to see the possibility of a Mongol nation and of a permanent, well-trained army.⁸ It is very clear that Temujin, at an early age, wanted to unite all the Mongol tribes under his rule and then expand that rule outward from

the Mongolian steppes. He had clearly defined expectations of a large, well-trained, mobile army that could maneuver great distances and conquer any other army it encountered. But first he had to defeat his rivals within the Mongol tribes before he could unite his people and begin his expansion of the Mongol Empire.

In 1204, at the Battle of Chakirmont, Temujin defeated the Naimans, a comparatively civilized people who had a written language and were the only Mongolian tribe that had not recognized him as Khan. After defeating the Naimans, he invited the Naiman warriors to join his army, and began efforts to assimilate the Naiman people with his own tribes by intermarriage. Temujin recognized that the Naiman culture, with its written Uighur language, was far more advanced than that of the more primitive tribes of eastern and central Mongolia. So he adopted this culture and moved his own capital to the chief Naiman city of Karakorum. Temujin was now the unchallenged ruler of the land from Siberia to China with 400,000 tents and a population of more than 2,000,000 people.⁹

With the submission of the Naimans, Temujin became the effective ruler of all Mongolia. In 1206 he assembled a great Kuriltai near the source of the Onon River. Here he was proclaimed Khakan, supreme Khan of all Turkish and Mongol tribes "who lived in felt tents" in eastern Asia. He was also given the name Genghis Khan, "Oceanic Ruler," signifying that he wielded great power throughout the known world. A famous shaman named Kokchu declared that Genghis was Khan "by the strength of the Eternal Heaven."¹⁰ Genghis Khan was now the ruler of all the Mongol tribes, and he quickly set out to unify the people and to bring order and discipline to the land. He quickly established a Code of Laws, or Yasak, which he would use to establish discipline and a sense of equality throughout his empire. Even more importantly, he set about building and training his army based on the lessons he had learned during his rise to power. This was where his strength lay, and he sought to build and train an army that could help him expand his Mongol Empire. Genghis now energetically devoted his efforts to establishing his military organization throughout all of Mongolia, and in training and equipping all Mongol warriors to fight in accordance with his now well-established methods of warfare.¹¹ Genghis Khan had under his hand a new force in warfare, a disciplined mass of heavy cavalry capable of swift movement in all kinds of country. Before his time the ancient Persians and the Parthians had perhaps as numerous bodies of cavalry, yet they lacked the Mongols' destructive skill with the bow as well as their savage courage. In the Mongol horde he had a weapon capable of vast destruction if rightly handled.¹² It was this weapon - trained, skilled, and well-led - which Genghis Khan used with ruthless effectiveness to rapidly expand his empire like no other leader before or since.

MONGOL MILITARY ORGANIZATION AND TRAINING

"Be of one mind and one faith, that you may conquer your enemies and lead long and happy lives."

Genghis Khan

In the thirteenth century the Mongol army was the best army in the world. Its organization and training, its tactical principles and its structure of command would not have been unfamiliar to a soldier of the twentieth century. By contrast the feudal armies of Russia and Europe were raised and run on the same lines as they had been for several hundred years and their tactics would have been unimaginative to the soldiers of the Roman Empire.¹³ After becoming Khakan, Genghis Khan retained the system he had developed earlier for organizing his army, with squads of ten men called arban, squadrons of one hundred called jaghun, and regiments or gurans, of one thousand men. Ten of these gurans were combined into a touman, or division, of ten thousand horsemen. Two or three, or sometimes more, toumans were combined into a horde, or army corps.¹⁴ The commander of each Mongol unit was selected on the basis of individual ability and valor on the field of battle. He exercised absolute authority over his unit, subject to equally strict control and supervision from his superior. Instant obedience to orders was demanded and received; not since the time of the Romans had discipline been so strictly enforced. Yet mutual trust and loyalty existed between all ranks.¹⁵

Every Mongol soldier was a horseman, and all were expert in the use of the bow, the curved sword known as the scimitar and the battleaxe. The recurved bow was by far the most famous of the Mongol weapons. Each warrior normally carried two bows: a light bow which could be fired easily from horseback, and a heavier bow which was designed for long range use from a ground position. This heavy bow had an average draw weight of 166 pounds, much more than the strongest contemporary European bow, the British longbow. As could be expected, the troops carried several quivers each. Some were filled with arrows suitable for use against warriors and horses at closer ranges, while another quiver held arrows for penetration of armor or for long range shots.¹⁶ Genghis Khan divided his horsemen into heavy and light cavalry, the former relying largely on their lances, the latter, who were perhaps twice as numerous, on their mobility and their skill with the bow. These last carried a bundle of javelins, the Mongolian lasso and a sword or axe, with a shield and helmet for protection. The heavy cavalry, however, wore complete body armor of leather reinforced with metal and carried a heavier sword or axe. Sometimes they, too, used their skill as archers – the Mongols were always fearsome with the bow, even when shooting from horseback.¹⁷

Every soldier had two or three ponies. During a march the extra mounts would be herded along behind the touman. When speed was required, the troops would change ponies two or three times a day, to keep the ponies from getting too tired. If possible, the troops always

changed to fresh ponies before a battle. This system of extra mounts was one of the reasons why the Mongols could march for days at a time at rates of speed that were incredible to their enemies.¹⁸ With a strong neck, thick legs, dense coat, immense endurance, steadiness, and sureness of foot, the Mongol pony was ideally suited not only to its environment but also to the Mongol style of warfare.¹⁹

The precision with which the Mongol army performed their intricate maneuvers on the battlefield was only attained after months of initial drilling which was reinforced by continuous training. For the bulk of the Mongol army, military training revolved around hunting. The most important hunt was the annual *nerge*, a massive expedition in search of game to provide meat for the long Mongolian winter. An expansion of the Mongols' favorite sport, the great hunt (*nerge*) was conducted like a campaign and designed to generate a "team spirit" throughout the army, temper its discipline, and enhance its morale. For the Mongols no other sport or military exercise could have been more effective. It was held at the beginning of each winter in peacetime, lasted for three months and involved every soldier. At a signal from the Khan, the entire army, fully armed and dressed for battle, would ride forward in one line, driving all the game before it. As the weeks went by and the game began to build up, the wings of the army would advance ahead of the center, and when they had passed the finishing point, would begin to ride in to meet each other, totally encircling the game. Once the wings had met, the circle would begin to contract with the line deepening, until, on the last day of the drive, the Mongol army would become a huge human amphitheater with thousands of terrified animals crowded into its arena. On the final day the Khan rode first into the arena to take his pick of the game, and when he had finished and returned to a hill overlooking the army, it was the turn of the soldiers.²⁰ The tactics of the *nerge* were applied to Mongol warfare, utilizing the skill, discipline, and command and control demonstrated during the hunt in battles against their enemies. The *nerge* served as a vital way for Genghis Khan to hone the skills of his soldiers and their leaders which would lead to success on the battlefield over and over again.

MONGOL MILITARY TACTICS AND TECHNIQUES FOR MANEUVER WARFARE

"In the countries that have not yet been overrun by them, everyone spends the night afraid that they may appear there too."

Ibn Al-Athir

The mobility of Genghis Khan's troops has never been matched by other ground soldiery. He seems to have had an instinctive understanding that force is the product of mass and velocity. No other commander in history has been more aware of the fundamental importance of seizing and maintaining the initiative – of always attacking, even when the strategic mission was defensive.²¹

At the outset of a campaign, the Mongol *toumans* usually advanced rapidly on an extremely broad front, maintaining only courier contact between major elements. When an enemy force was found, it became the objective of all nearby Mongol units. Complete information concerning enemy location, strength and direction of movement was immediately transmitted to central headquarters, and in turn disseminated to all field units. If the enemy force was too small, it was dealt with promptly by the local commanders. If it was too large to be disposed of so readily, the main Mongol Army would rapidly concentrate behind an active cavalry screen. Frequently a rapid advance would overwhelm separate detachments of an enemy army before its concentration was complete.

Genghis and his able subordinates avoided stereotyped patterns of moving to combat. If the enemy's location was definitely determined, they might lead the bulk of their forces to strike him in the rear or to turn his flank. Sometimes they would feign a retreat, only to return at the charge on fresh ponies.²² The Russian army found itself quickly defeated when following a retreating Mongol force of lightly armed archers, only to find themselves enveloped in smoke from thousands of dung fires and set upon by heavy cavalry.²³

Most frequently, however, the Mongols would advance behind their screen of light horsemen in several roughly parallel columns, spreading across a wide front. This permitted flexibility, particularly if the enemy was formidable, or if his exact location was not firmly determined. The column encountering the enemy's main force would then hold or retire, depending upon the situation. Meanwhile the others would continue to advance, occupying the territory to the enemy's flank and rear. This would usually cause him to fall back to protect his lines of communication. The Mongols would then close in to take advantage of any confusion or disorder in the enemy's retirement. This was usually followed by eventual encirclement and destruction.

The cavalry squadrons, because of their precision, their concerted action, and their amazing mobility, were easily superior to all troops they encountered, even when these were more heavily armed or more numerous. The rapidity of the Mongol movements invariably gave them superiority of force at the decisive point, the ultimate aim of all battle tactics. By seizing the initiative and exploiting their mobility to the utmost, the Mongol commanders operated inside their opponents' decision cycle.

The battle formation was composed of five lines of horsemen, each in a single rank, with large intervals between each line. Heavy cavalry made up the first two lines, the other three being lighter horsemen. Reconnaissance and screening were carried out in front of these lines by other light cavalry units. As the opposing forces drew nearer to each other, the three rear ranks of light cavalry advanced through intervals in the two heavy lines to shower the enemy with a withering fire of well-aimed javelins and deadly arrows from their powerful longbows.²⁴

The intensive firepower preparation would shake even the staunchest of foes. Sometimes this harassment would scatter the enemy without need for shock action. When the touman commander felt that the enemy had been sufficiently confused by the preparation, the light horsemen would be ordered to retire, and synchronized signals would start the heavy cavalry on its charge.

In addition to combining fire and movement – missile attack and shock action – the Mongols also emphasized diversions in all phases of combat. During the main engagement, a portion of the force usually held the enemy's attention by frontal attack. While the enemy commander was thus diverted, the main body would maneuver to deliver a decisive blow on the flank or rear.²⁵

To their enemies, the inexplicable coordination with which Mongol armies achieved their separate and common objectives was often astounding. Each carefully designed campaign was a masterpiece of original and imaginative strategy, and Mongol commanders could not have planned with as much breadth and daring as they did without absolute confidence in their communications. Through their simple signaling system, units could remain in immediate contact with each other along a wide front and through their unparalleled corps of couriers, armies hundreds of miles apart could remain under the tight control of one commander.²⁶ Tactical movements were controlled by black and white signal flags under the direction of squadron and regimental commanders. Thus there were no delays caused by poorly written orders or messages. The signal flags were particularly useful for coordinating the movements of units beyond the range of voice control. When signal flags could not be seen, either because of darkness or intervening terrain features, the Mongols used flaming arrows.²⁷

In 1207, Genghis Khan and his army began an astonishing extension of Mongol military skill. Faced with the problem of laying siege to fortified garrisons in China, these wild cavalrymen of the plains, their competence as warriors honed in hunting and inter-tribal skirmishes, in wars full of movement, now settled to learn the long-drawn skills of siegecraft.²⁸ The resulting system for assaulting fortifications soon became virtually irresistible. An important element of this system was a large, but mobile, siege train with missile engines and other equipment carried in wagons and on pack animals. Genghis conscripted the best Chinese engineers to comprise the manpower of the siege train, and he adopted Chinese weapons, equipment, and techniques. Combining generous terms of service with threats of force, Genghis created an engineer corps at least as efficient as those of Alexander the Great and Caesar.²⁹

Important cities and fortifications would usually be invested by one touman – supported by all or part of the engineer train – while the main force marched onward. Sometimes by strategy, ruse, or bold assault, the town would be stormed quickly. If this proved impossible, the besieging touman and the engineers began regular siege operations, while the main army sought out the enemy's principal field forces. Once a Mongol victory had been achieved in the field,

besieged towns and cities often surrendered without further resistance. In such cases, the inhabitants were treated with only moderate severity. But if the defenders of a city or fort were foolish enough to attempt to defy the besiegers, Genghis' amazingly efficient engineers would soon create a breach in the walls, or prepare other methods for a successful assault by the dismounted *toumans*. Then the conquered city, its garrison, and its inhabitants would be subjected to the pillaging and destruction which have made the name of Genghis Khan one of the most feared in history.³⁰ Henceforth, every tribe of the Mongol army was required to assemble a siege train and practice how to employ it.

Genghis Khan's genius as an organizer and as a strategical and tactical leader has probably never been excelled, and has been matched by few other generals in history. He utilized surprise, mobility, offensive action, concentrated force, and diversionary tactics to overwhelm armies which were usually more numerous, and frequently better armed.³¹ His army's terrifyingly swift and audacious use of mobility, coupled with diversionary tactics and surprise, made the Mongol army the greatest and most terrifying force the world had ever seen. Their superb application of the principles of maneuver warfare would conquer most of Asia, and would eventually threaten the European continent.

THE MONGOL INVASION OF EUROPE

"The greatest happiness is to vanquish your enemies, to chase them before you, to rob them of their wealth, to see those dear to them bathed in tears, to clasp to your bosom their wives and daughters."

Genghis Khan

In 1227, Genghis Khan died at the age of sixty five. Before dying, he appointed his son, Ogatai, to be his successor as Khakan, the supreme ruler of the vast territories conquered by Genghis. By this time, the Mongol Empire stretched from the borders of Korea in the east to the Black and Caspian Seas in the west. Genghis Khan's legacy was an army that had conquered every military force it had faced to that time, and it had developed a reputation for tactical brilliance, swift and violent maneuver, as well as brutality. They had defeated the Chin Empire and their imperial city of Zhongdu (Peking) in 1215, and the Khwarizmian Persian Empire and their key cities of Bukhara and Samarkand in 1220. They had also defeated several Russian armies in Georgia, Azerbaijan, and the Crimea, including a numerically superior force of over 80,000 at the Battle of the Kalka River in 1223. As Michael Prawdin describes it, "For forty years Genghis Khan had been compacting the nomadic races, forging them into a mighty weapon, and then leading them across the vast spaces of Asia in a campaign of victory unexampled in history, trampling mighty realms under the feet of his horses, and upon their ruins making the Mongols supreme over the world."³²

Now Ogatai was ruler of the Mongol Empire, and he set about to expand the empire as his father had done before him. In 1235 Ogatai decided to extend Mongol power still further by

undertaking four simultaneous wars: in South China against the Sung Dynasty; in Korea; in southwest Asia; and in Europe. It is amazing that the leaders of this small central Asian nation should have the audacity to plan to carry out even one of these ambitious operations, each several thousand miles from their homeland. It is incredible – and unmatched in history – that they could plan to do all four at once. Yet they were successful in all of them.³³

The conquest of Europe was considered the most important of these undertakings. While the expedition was put under the nominal leadership of Genghis' grandson, Batu, the real planner and leader of the campaign was Genghis Khan's most famous commander, Subatai (also spelled Subedei in various other sources). It was Subatai who had led the conquests of northern Manchuria and Korea, and who had pursued the Shah of the Khwarizmian Empire across Afghanistan and Persia. Even more importantly, however, it was Subatai who had led the amazing reconnaissance in force around the Caspian Sea and across the Caucasus Mountains into Russia from 1221 – 1224. It was during this expedition that Subatai and Jebei, another of Genghis' generals, first encountered western Europeans when they took Sudak, a Genoese trading post in the Crimea. It was also during this expedition that Subatai and Jebei led the first successful winter invasion of Russia, culminating at the battle of the Kalka River. After this successful exploit, Subatai returned to join Genghis Khan and gave him a full report on the European expedition. It was at this time that he proposed a further conquest in the west.³⁴ The plan of campaign he drew up in the heart of Asia contemplated a war of eighteen years for the conquest of Europe.³⁵ It would be more than a decade, however, before that conquest would be attempted.

As early as 1236-1237, when the Mongol army was assembling, Subatai sent his warriors to subjugate all the peoples eastward of the Volga between the Kama and the Caspian, destroying their towns, slaying their men or taking them prisoner. Throughout the summer, the prisoners were drilled, taught to fight in Mongol fashion, and in December, 1237, the Mongol army, swollen by these new recruits to twice its previous strength, crossed the Volga on the ice.³⁶ Subatai drove his men in a rapid march first to the north, then west completely across Russia. They quickly took Ryazan, Moscow (then a relatively unimportant city), and Vladimir, the most important principality of the north. By March, 1238, most of the northern Russian lands were in Mongol hands and the Russian armies utterly destroyed.³⁷

In November, 1240, after a 2 year rest on the Russian steppes, Sabatai, Batu and their army set forth again on what was to be one of the most momentous campaigns of history. The principal objective of the operations for the year was Hungary, then a well-established and rich kingdom under Bela IV. Here the Mongols apparently planned to make a permanent headquarters from which to conquer and administer the rest of Europe.³⁸

The campaign began with a whirlwind sweep across the Ukraine. They crossed the Dnieper River on the ice and attacked Kiev, then the most important town in southern Russia, on

December 6. Within twenty-four hours the Mongols had fought their way into the city. A few hours later Kiev was a smoking ruin. Contemporary accounts describe the actions of the army that surrounded Kiev:

The Mongols were like dense clouds. The rattling of wagons, the bellowing of camels and cattle, the sound of the trumpets, the neighing of the horses, and the cries of a vast multitude made it impossible for people to hear one another inside the city... Batu ordered that rams be placed near the Polish Gate, because that part of the wall was wooden. Many rams hammered the walls ceaselessly, day and night; the inhabitants were frightened and many were killed, the blood flowing like water... And thus, with the aid of many rams, they broke through the city walls and entered the city, and inhabitants ran to meet them. One could see and hear a great clash of lances and clatter of shields; the arrows obscured the light, so that it became impossible to see the sky; there was darkness because of the multitude of Tartar arrows, and there were dead everywhere... During the night the people built new fortifications around the Church of the Virgin Mary. When the morning came, the Tartars attacked them and there was bitter slaughter... The Tartars took the city of Kiev on St. Nicholas Day, 6 December. They brought the wounded leader, Dmitri, before Batu and Batu ordered that he should be spared because of his bravery.³⁹

The Europeans knew nothing of the Mongols, or their origins, or their methods of making war. But word of the sack of Kiev spread quickly across eastern Europe, and suddenly it was apparent that a new and unknown force was threatening Christendom. The princes of eastern Europe began to call up their forces to meet the Mongols. Boleslaw, the King of Poland, organized his people, and Prince Henry the Pious of Silesia hastily assembled an army of 30,000 – Silesians, Bavarians, Teutonic Knights, and Templars from France. King Wenceslaus of Bohemia raised a force of 50,000 Bohemians, Austrians, Saxons, and others. Meanwhile, in Hungary, King Bela began to assemble an army of about 100,000 Magyars, Croats, Germans, and French Templars in his capital city of Buda.

As the Mongols marched west from Kiev, Subatai divided the army into three separate hordes. Prince Kaidu with two toumans - 20,000 men – was to march northwest into Poland, then west and south through Bohemia to join the main body in Hungary. The main body of 80,000 men, under Batu and Sabatai, was to strike due west across the Carpathians into the plains of Hungary. A small force of about 10,000 men, under the command of Prince Kadan, Ogatai's son, was sent to the south to screen the main forces' southern flank. Subatai left about 30,000 men to hold the conquered regions in Russia.⁴⁰

During the Russian campaign, the Mongols had driven some 200,000 Cumans, a nomadic steppe people who had opposed them, west of the Carpathian Mountains. There, the Cumans appealed to King Bela for protection, in return for which they offered to convert to Western Christianity. A mass conversion would enhance Hungary's prestige with the Pope. Moreover, the Cumans pledged over 40,000 warriors, experienced in the Mongols' mobile steppe warfare, to Hungary's defense. Bela gladly accepted the offer, but many of his nobles distrusted the Cumans. His decision gave the Mongols an official excuse to make Hungary their next object for conquest.⁴¹

King Bela felt he was ready for the Mongol attack. He had done everything orthodoxy demanded – he had blocked the Carpathian passes, he had sent reinforcements to their commander and he had summoned a parliament to discuss what should be done. Had he been facing the kind of army he was used to, he might have saved his kingdom. The Mongols, however, were something quite new. They brushed aside the frontier forces, smashed their way through the passes into the spreading plains beyond, advancing forty, fifty, even sixty miles a day. Their advance was far too swift to allow the Hungarians to properly react and was too swift for parliamentary discussion. It took only two days to cross the mountains and another three to reach the capital – events had already outpaced the speed of Bela's reactions.⁴²

While the Mongols ravaged the countryside, Bela moved his army of 100,000 across the river to Pest. Subatai then pretended to retreat to the northeast, for about 100 miles. Bela and his army followed to the Mohi Plain, reaching the Sajo River on April 10. The Mongols pretended to continue their retreat, crossing the river and leaving Bela in command of the plain and of the only bridge across the river. He camped for the night beside the bridge, forming his wagons into a wall around his camp. He sent a small force to hold the far end of the bridge.

Just before dawn the next morning the Hungarian bridgehead defenders found themselves under a hail of stones and arrows, "to the accompaniment of thunderous noise and flashes of fire." Most likely, this was the usual Mongol employment of catapults and ballistae, using Chinese firecrackers to increase terror. In any event, this was a thirteenth century version of a modern artillery preparation. It was followed closely, as in modern warfare, by fierce assault.⁴³

The defenders of the bridge, stunned by the noise, death, and destruction, were quickly overwhelmed and the Mongols streamed across. Bela's main army, aroused by the commotion, hastily sallied out of the fortified camp. A bitter battle ensued. Suddenly it became apparent, however, that this was only a Mongol holding attack. The main effort was made by three toumans, some 30,000 men, under the personal command of Subatai. In the predawn darkness he had led his troops through the cold waters of the Sajo River, south of the bridgehead, then turned northward to strike the Hungarians' right flank and rear. Unable to resist this devastating charge, the Europeans hastily fell back into their camp. By 7:00 that morning the laager was completely surrounded by the Mongols. For several hours they bombarded it with stones, arrows, and burning naphtha.⁴⁴

At last the Mongols used the tactic they had perfected far to the east. They simulated a weak point in their encirclement which offered the entrapped forces an illusory escape route. Bela's desperate men streamed through the gap, their line of flight marked by discarded helmets, shields and swords. Suddenly the escaping soldiers discovered that they had fallen into a Mongol trap. Mounted on swift, fresh ponies, the Mongols appeared on all sides, cutting down the exhausted men, hunting them in the marshes, and storming the villages in which some of

them attempted to take refuge. In a few hours of butchery the Hungarian army was completely destroyed with between 40,000 and 70,000 dead. Not more than 20,000 Europeans survived the battle and the pursuit.⁴⁵

While Subatai's army was advancing into Hungary, Kaidu's army swept into Poland on a broad front. In February 1241, they entered the territory of Lublin, burning the cities of Lublin and Zawochist and laying waste to the countryside. They were moving slowly and after crossing the frozen Vistula on the ice they were able to sack Sandomir and plunder its Cistercian monastery without being threatened by a relieving army. The Poles had obviously been taken by complete surprise. With no apparent opposition, the conditions seemed ideal for a quick conquest. Kaidu's objective was to draw the northern European armies away from Hungary, and it did not yet look as though these armies had even been mobilized. Although his army was already dangerously small, he decided to divide it and spread alarm over as wide an area as possible; in the last resort the Mongols could retreat faster than any European army could advance.⁴⁶ While one of his *toumans* rode northwest to attack Mazovia, Kaidu took a calculated risk and continued his advance southwest, directly toward the Polish capital at Cracow.

Raiding and burning and drawing attention to itself, Kaidu's vanguard advanced to within a few miles of Cracow and then slowly turned back as though returning to its camp with its plunder and prisoners. Vladimir, the Palatine of Sandomir and Cracow, rode out of the city in considerable strength and attacked.⁴⁷ The Mongols broke and fled under the initial attack by Vladimir's army, but once again a numerically superior European force had been lured into an old Mongol death trap. When the Mongols did not reappear the soldiers of Vladimir's army began to advance. On 18 March, at Chmielnik, only eleven miles from Cracow, Kaidu ambushed them. Vladimir and most of his soldiers died in a hail of Mongol arrows.

Breslau, the capital of Silesia, was the next target for Kaidu's army. But shortly after beginning his siege of the city he learned that Duke Henry of Silesia had assembled an army of the northern princes at Liegnitz and that King Wenceslas of Bohemia was marching to join him. Kaidu abandoned the siege, alerted Batu and Subatai, and set out at full speed to reach Liegnitz before Wenceslas.⁴⁸

On April 9, 1241, Duke Henry marched out of his city of Liegnitz (now the Polish city of Legnica) to meet the dreaded Mongols. Henry's army was the last left to oppose the Mongols in Poland. Unaware of exactly where King Wenceslas was and fearing that the Mongols might be reinforced if he waited too long for the Bohemian King, Henry left the protection of Liegnitz and advanced toward the town of Jawor. Duke Henry's army of about 30,000 consisted of Polish Knights, Teutonic Knights, French Templars, and a levy of foot soldiers. Indeed, the very core of northern European chivalry had assembled under his banner.⁴⁹

Unlike Henry, Kaidu knew where Wenceslas was – only two days' march away. The Mongols were already outnumbered and could not risk allowing Henry and Wenceslas to join

forces. Therefore, when Henry reached a plain surrounded by low hills not far from Liegnitz, called the Wahlstadt, or "chosen place," he found the Mongols there waiting for him. The Mongol army did not look very large. It was not for some time that the European knights learned how the Mongols attacked in such close order that a formation of 1,000 horsemen seemed no bulkier than 500 knights.⁵⁰ Henry drew his forces up in four squadrons and placed one after the other on the Wahlstadt.

When the engagement began, the Europeans were disconcerted because the enemy moved without battle cries or trumpets; all signals were transmitted visually, by pennant and standard. The first of Henry's divisions charged into the Mongol ranks to begin the usual hand-to-hand combat, but the more lightly armed Mongols on their agile ponies easily surrounded them and showered them with arrows, sending them into headlong flight. The second and third divisions of heavily armed and mailed knights attacked next, and this attack seemed successful – the Mongols broke into what appeared to be an orderly retreat. Encouraged, the knights pressed on their attack, eager to meet the Mongols with lance and broadsword. Henry then led his fourth battle group into the Mongol lines to engage in close combat. Things were not as they seemed for the knights, however. Once again the Europeans had fallen victim to the Mongol trick of feigned retreat. As the knights continued their pursuit and extended their lines, they drew further away from their infantry. Suddenly the Mongols swept to either side of the knights and showered them with arrows. Other Mongols had lain in ambush, prepared to meet the knights as they fell into the trap. Whenever the Mongols found that the knights' armor afforded effective protection against their arrows, they simply shot their horses. The dismounted knights were then easy prey for the Mongol heavy cavalrymen, who ran them down with lance or heavy saber with little danger to themselves.

The Mongols also employed one further trick. Smoke from dung fires drifted across the battlefield between the infantry and the knights who had charged ahead, so the foot soldiers and horsemen could not see each other as the Mongols fell upon the knights and virtually annihilated them.⁵¹

Duke Henry, most of the knights and noblemen, and the greater part of the infantry, were left dead on the field of Wahlstadt. The chroniclers record the losses as between 30,000 and 40,000.⁵² In accordance with a Mongol custom used to count the dead, an ear was cut from each dead European. The Mongols filled nine sacks with ears.⁵³ Duke Henry's head was cut off and carried as a trophy on spear-point outside the walls of Liegnitz.

The double catastrophe of the Sajo River and Liegnitz, fought within days of each other, stunned Europe. Europeans were shocked at the news of the two thorough defeats of some of the finest soldiers they had at the time. Even more astonishing was the discipline, order, and swiftness with which the Mongols had achieved their victories. Europeans had never before seen such military skill in the ability of large forces to maneuver rapidly on the battlefield to defeat

larger, well-equipped armies. The Poles and others attributed the Mongols' success to supernatural agencies or suggested that the Mongols were not entirely human. The very name given to the Mongols by the Europeans, "Tartars," derived from the word "Tartarus," the ancient world's Hell. Mongols, then, were more devils than humans. They had risen from the Pit itself to overthrow Christendom.⁵⁴

After the Battle of Liegnitz, Kaidu began to march against Wenceslas, who had a cumbersome army of 50,000 about 50 miles to the west. Shortly after beginning his movement, however, Kaidu received word from Batu of the victory over Bela at Sajo River, and instead swept south to join Subatai and Batu in Hungary.

To the far south the Mongol horsemen under Prince Kadan took Bisritz, Klausenburg, and Grosswardein as they moved across Transylvania. Two days after the Battle of Liegnitz they defeated a Magyar army outside the fortress of Hermannstadt, which they then assaulted and captured. After that Kadan moved north to meet Subatai, Batu and Kaidu in Hungary.

In little more than a month the entire countryside from the Baltic to the Danube had been occupied and ravaged by the Mongols; Poland, Lithuania, Silesia, and Moravia had been laid waste no less than Bukovina, Moldavia, Wallachia, and Transylvania. The towns were heaps of ruins, the land was depopulated, armies had been dispersed, and fortresses taken by storm. Hungary was a rich land, offering abundant scope for plunder; but what would happen after that? Which country would be the next victim?⁵⁵

After resting for the summer and fall months in Hungary, the Mongol invasion of central Europe began as Subatai's soldiers crossed the frozen Danube on Christmas Day 1241. They soon took Buda, Gran, and other western Hungarian towns. While a reconnaissance in force crossed the Austrian border, Kadan took one touman and turned south toward Zagreb to pursue Bela. Kadan passed along the shores of Lake Balaton and followed his quarry through Croatia; he did not venture to attack Spalato or Trau, but destroyed Cattaro and penetrated Albania to within a few miles of Scutari, the most southerly limit of the Mongol operations in Europe.⁵⁶

While Kadan in the south and Batu in the west were completing the conquest of Hungary, the Mongol advance guard had already crossed the frontier of the kingdom. The savage horsemen reached Korneuburg, to the northwest of Vienna, and Wiener Neustadt in the south. "Without having sustained any harm, they seized a number of persons and cattle, and then returned to Hungary," reports one chronicler. They had reconnoitered the united forces of the Dukes of Austria, Carinthia, and many principalities, and in adjoining Bohemia was the army of King Wenceslas – while Subatai and Batu were making ready for a new campaign.⁵⁷

But early in 1242, Subatai and Batu received a message which had come 6,000 miles from Karakorum to Austria. Ogatai was dead. Batu wanted to remain in Europe and continue the conquest. But Subatai reminded him that the Law of the Yasak and the decree of Genghis Khan required all princes and chiefs to return to Karakorum for a Kuriltai and the election of a new

Khakan. Hungary was abandoned. The Mongol army rode back across the Danube destroying everything in its path. The populations of villages and towns were slaughtered without mercy, all the barns and warehouses were systematically burned, and the already devastated departments of southern Hungary and Transylvania became a wilderness. Proclamations were posted in the Mongol camps declaring that all prisoners might return to their homes, but those who left were pursued and slaughtered.⁵⁸ Just as quickly as the Mongols had come to Europe they vanished. Although the Mongols returned to Karakorum with the intent of postponing the invasion of central Europe for another time, that time would never come. Europe was saved.

Not until after the Mongols had departed did the full measure of the devastation wrought in Hungary, Silesia, and Poland become plain. It surpassed the worst expectations. From 60,000 to 80,000 men had been slain on Mohi heath; in Pest alone, 100,000 persons were killed; and in other towns and fortresses all the inhabitants had been slaughtered except for a few refugees and prisoners the Mongols had taken with them.⁵⁹

The campaign into Europe, so meticulously planned and so brilliantly executed, was a marvel of the military art and the masterful hand of Subatai, a genius for war not inferior to Genghis Khan himself. Since the Mongol soldiers were natives of a cold climate and were well equipped to fight in snow, Subatai preferred a winter campaign, when communication was facilitated by frozen rivers. In the absence of maps and charts which guide a modern commander, the Mongols utilized the careful collection of information from spies and deserters who revealed the state of the roads, the distances to the next towns, the presence of enemy detachments, and the level of morale in enemy camps. The armies Subatai led into Europe were not numerically overwhelming, but their discipline and organization were far superior to that of the feudal military forces of the west. That the Mongols were able to achieve such dazzling success in lands so far from their home base and whose geography and resources were entirely unfamiliar to them is amazing indeed. The geographical scope of the fighting alone encompassed the greater part of eastern Europe. The Mongols' planning and coordination of movement coupled with their clockwork precision enabled them to surround, defeat and pursue the largest and finest western armies of the time. They brilliantly overcame difficult problems of supply and skillfully maneuvered large formations on unfamiliar European terrain. In every aspect of the Mongols' conquest of eastern Europe, it is apparent that the Mongol leaders were masters of the art of war.⁶⁰

THE LEGACY OF GENGHIS KHAN AND THE MONGOLS

"With Heaven's aid I have conquered for you a huge empire. But my life was too short to achieve the conquest of the world. That is left for you. My sons will live to desire such lands and cities as these, but I cannot."

Genghis Khan

The Mongol conquests, which shook the globe, were of a scope and range never equaled. The Mongols were invading Java and Japan thirty years after their armies stood on the frontiers of Germany and the shores of the Adriatic. After we have allowed for the military genius of Genghis Khan, the world's greatest "organizer of victory," the geographical advantage of campaigns launched from the steppe, and the weakness and confusion of the states that were attacked and demolished, the result is awe-inspiring.⁶¹

One cannot dismiss the great military lessons learned from studying the campaigns of Genghis Khan and his superb generals, especially Subatai. The military techniques of the Mongols were comparable to those of the ancient Huns or Scythians, but they were employed with greater strategic vision and more proficient leadership, and the results were commensurably more startling.⁶² They revolutionized maneuver warfare of their time, combining speed with coordinated shock action to completely overwhelm their enemies. They developed military systems of command and control and communications that simplified large scale maneuver operations and bewildered their enemies. Their use of deception at every echelon enabled them to systematically destroy numerically superior forces with ease. Their combined arms approach to warfare, including the use of artillery-like preparations followed by massive cavalry and infantry attacks, was a brilliant example of their military genius and still has application in today's style of maneuver warfare. In every aspect the Mongols had the greatest army of its time, with the best discipline, organization, leadership, and cavalry.

While nobody can deny the impact that Genghis Khan had on history, assessments of his achievements have varied. He is either viewed as "the greatest gangster of all time" or as "the noble savage who...took the Mongols from primitive obscurity to the pinnacle of world power."⁶³ One thing cannot be disputed, however. Genghis Khan was one of the most successful empire builders because, unlike the states established by many renowned conquerors, that of the Mongols did not fall apart upon the death of its founder. In this Genghis Khan was more effective than both Alexander the Great and Charlemagne. He left not only an empire and a splendid army but the foundations of an administration and the basis of a legal code, the Yasak. He also left a family whose respect for the memory of Genghis Khan was such that, instead of quarreling over his inheritance, they generally managed to agree upon the succession.⁶⁴

The creation of the Mongol Empire was the last great nomad expansion in European and Asian history. There were to be steppe empires in the future, but subsequent to the decline of the Mongols the nomads were on the defensive against settled civilizations that, for a variety of reasons, gradually and inexorably tipped the balance of power in their own favor.⁶⁵ The new inventions of gunpowder and firearms were soon applied to the art of war. The battles in the future would no longer be decided by the skillful aim of the archer and the swiftness of the horseman. The gun was a monopoly of civilization, and a few rounds of artillery could neutralize sizeable numbers of bowmen and cavalry. Militant nomadism was soon superannuated, its military power was broken, and its horsemen rode out to conquest no more.⁶⁶

Word Count = 8,382

ENDNOTES

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- ³ J. Lehnhof, "Genghis Khan," 1998; available from <http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Forum/2532/page2.html>; Internet; accessed 23 Feb 2000.
- ⁴ Trevor Nevitt Dupuy, The Military Life of Genghis: Khan of Khans (New York: Franklin Watts, Inc., 1969), 6.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, 7.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, 8.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, 9.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, 16.
- ¹⁰ David Nicolle, The Mongol Warlords (New York: Sterling Publishing Co., 1990), 20.
- ¹¹ Dupuy, 18.
- ¹² Harold Lamb, Genghis Khan, The Emperor of All Men (New York: Garden City Publishing, Inc., 1927), 76.
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- ¹⁵ Dupuy, 20.
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- ¹⁷ Peter Brent, The Mongol Empire (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1976), 31.
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- ²⁰ Chambers, 60.
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- ²² Dupuy and Dupuy, 369.
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²⁴ Dupuy and Dupuy, 370.

²⁵ Ibid., 370.

²⁶ Chambers, 61.

²⁷ Dupuy and Dupuy, 372.

²⁸ Brent, 48-51.

²⁹ Dupuy, 40.

³⁰ Ibid., 40-41.

³¹ Ibid., 26.

³² Michael Prawdin, The Mongol Empire, Its Rise and Legacy (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd, 1961), 233.

³³ Dupuy, 98.

³⁴ Ibid., 90.

³⁵ Prawdin, 246.

³⁶ Ibid., 249-250.

³⁷ Dupuy, 99.

³⁸ Ibid., 100.

³⁹ Brent, 118.

⁴⁰ Dupuy, 101.

⁴¹ Erik Hildinger, "Mongol Invasion of Europe," June 97; available from http://www.thehistorynet.com/MilitaryHistory/articles/1997/06972_text.htm; Internet; accessed 23 Feb 2000.

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⁴⁴ Ibid., 106.

⁴⁵ Brent, 125.

⁴⁶ Chambers, 96.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 96-97.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 97.

⁴⁹ Hildinger.

⁵⁰ Prawdin, 257.

⁵¹ Hildinger.

⁵² Prawdin, 259.

⁵³ Hildinger.

⁵⁴ Brent, 127.

⁵⁵ Prawdin, 265.

⁵⁶ J.J. Saunders, The History of the Mongol Conquests (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971), 87.

⁵⁷ Prawdin, 269.

⁵⁸ Chambers, 113.

⁵⁹ Prawdin, 271.

⁶⁰ Saunders, 84 & 88.

⁶¹ Ibid., 175.

⁶² Ibid., 191.

⁶³ Nicolle, 45-46.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 46.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 46-47.

⁶⁶ Saunders, 191.

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