

Mongol Readings

The Mongols and Europe

Following the conquest of Persia, Genghis turned his attention to some not-yet-conquered lands closer to home, and to the final subjugation of Kin China. When Genghis died in 1227 his son Ogadai was chosen Khan. The Mongols invaded Russia in 1236, eventually conquering all but the northern forest fringes. In the process, a tribe called the Kumans fled west into Hungary. The Hungarians allowed them to stay if they accepted baptism, a requirement the desperate Kumans willingly accepted. The Mongols considered all nomadic peoples their rightful subjects and demanded that King Bela return the Kumans to Mongol control. When he refused, the Mongols attacked in 1241.

Bela prepared as well as any European ruler could, but he was no match for the Mongols. He blocked the mountain passes in the Carpathians with his best troops and hurried back to Buda (In those days Budapest was two cities, Buda west of the Danube and Pest to the east) to convene parliament. He was hardly there when a messenger arrived with the news that the mountain passes had been overrun; three days later Mongol raiders were outside Buda, having covered 300 miles through hostile territory in three days. In a few months the Mongols had smashed all military opposition in Poland and the Balkans and were regrouping to push west. Given this pace and their performance in Persia, they could probably have overrun Europe in a year. But just as they were regrouping, a messenger came with the news of the death of the Khan. Genghis Khan had made a law, to ensure the permanence of his dynasty, that all his descendants, wherever they may be, must return to Karakoram to elect a new Khan. The Mongols broke off the invasion, never to return. This is surely one of the most important but least-known turning points in history.

The Balkans: The geopolitical instability in Bulgaria and Persia coupled with the aftermath of the Battle of Pelagonia (1259) and the recovery of Constantinople by the forces of the Empire of Nicaea (1261), as well as the civil conflict between Berke and Hülegü, contributed to a political climate that precipitated the involvement of the Mongols in the southern Balkans. But let us consider each geopolitical theatre separately.

In 1256, Bulgaria was led into a civil war between Mitso Asen (1256-1257), a relative of Ivan Assen II, and the boyar of Skopje Constantine Tikh (1257-1277). Mitso Assen established himself in the coastal town of Mesembria in south-eastern Bulgaria, while Tikh married the daughter of Theodore II Laskaris, Irene, one year after his proclamation as Tsar by the aristocracy in Tarnovo. At that time a third contender of the royal title of Bulgaria appeared. He was a Hungarian nobleman of Russian descent, Rostislav Mikhailovich who served as the duke of Macsó in central Serbia (1248-1262). Mikhailovich had captured Vidin, a riverside port city on the Danube. Having married the daughter of King Bela IV of Hungary, from the outset Mikhailovich was the Hungarian preference to become Tsar.

Constantine Tikh i portrait from the National Historical Museum, Sofia, Bulgaria

In 1260, having made peace with the Empire of Nicaea, Tikh attacked his most important adversary in Bulgaria: Mikhailovich in the northwest. Although he initially managed to repel him north of the Danube, next year Mikhailovich succeeded in regaining control over his territory with the support of Hungarian troops. At this stage of the Bulgarian Civil War, Tikh's army suffered considerable losses. And on top of that, Tikh's

diplomatic relations with the Empire of Nicaea worsened when Michael VIII Palaeologus blinded Ioannes IV Laskaris, the brother of Tikh's wife, shortly after the recovery of Constantinople by the Byzantines in 1261. At the beginning of 1262, Tikh occupied strategic territories of Byzantine Thrace, which were recovered in the following year by the Imperial Army – among them cities such as Mesembria and Anchialos. In order to stop the advance of the Byzantines towards the Hungarian protectorate of Vidin, the intervention of the Hungarian armies was deemed necessary.

Due to the increasing pressure by the Byzantines and the Hungarians, Tikh was forced to ask for the help of the Mongols of the Golden Horde, who were the suzerains of the Bulgarians since 1241-42. The Mongols, of course, had another reason to engage in geopolitical developments in the southern Balkans in 1263: the good relations of Michael Palaeologus with the Ilkhanate of Persia-Syria. One year after the bloody battle of the Terek River in northern Georgia, and while the conflict between Kublai-Ariq Böke and Berke-Hülegü was still in full swing, the involvement of the Golden Horde in the Balkans seemed inevitable.

After the restoration of the Byzantine Empire in Constantinople, in 1261, we notice that the balance of power in the southern Balkans shifted. Contacts between the newly established state of the Golden Horde and the Egyptian Mamluks were only possible through the Black Sea, the Aegean and the Mediterranean, so only with the consent of Byzantium. After Berke's conversion to Islam in the 1250s, the contacts of the Golden Horde with Egypt multiplied, while in 1263 the Mamluk Sultan Baybars sent his envoys to Berke, who were arrested and detained by the Byzantines, probably because the Emperor did not wish to disrupt his good relations with Hülegü of the Ilkhanate, whom he used as a political-military counterweight against the Seljuks in Anatolia.

In *What If?*, a collection of essays on alternative military history, Cecilia Holland pictures the likely result of a Mongol thrust into Western Europe. She pictures a massive raid rather than a complete occupation; nevertheless, the picture she paints is chilling. Driving across the North German plain, the same route Cold War planners pictured for a Soviet invasion, the Mongols would have made use of expert reconnaissance to target plunder and grazing land. They would have sacked Belgium and Holland, destroying the embryonic financial centers of Europe. They would have turned south into France, destroying Paris and with it the revival of ancient philosophy that it would have hosted a few decades later. Perhaps they would have crossed the Alps and ravaged Italy, destroying the other birthplaces of the Renaissance. In his foreword to the piece, editor Robert Cowley says "The Dark Ages were pure light compared to what could have happened..."

Mongols and the Middle East

By about 1250 the Mongol empire had split into three semi-independent realms: China and Mongolia, Persia and Russia (the Khanate of the Golden Horde). Although in theory they were subject to the Khan in Mongolia, in practice they were fully independent. In 1255 the Mongol rulers of Persia went to war against the Caliph, invading Syria and Palestine. In 1258 they captured Baghdad, destroyed the city and killed the Caliph.

Iraq in 1258 was very different from present day Iraq. Its agriculture was supported by a canal network thousands of years old. Baghdad was one of the most brilliant intellectual centers in the world. The Mongol destruction of Baghdad was a psychological blow from which Islam never recovered. Already Islam was turning inward, becoming more suspicious of conflicts between faith and reason and more conservative. With the sack of Baghdad, the intellectual flowering of Islam was snuffed out. Imagining the Athens of Pericles and Aristotle obliterated by a nuclear weapon begins to suggest the enormity of the blow. The Mongols filled in the irrigation canals and left Iraq too depopulated to restore them.

The westward advance of the Mongols was halted at one of the decisive battlefields of history, Ayn Jalut, near

Nazareth in Israel, in 1260. Here Turkish and Egyptian forces routed the Mongols, preventing an attack on Egypt and North Africa. Significantly, the Golden Horde Mongols of Russia, allied with the Turks, supported the Egyptians as well. For the first time since Genghis Khan, one Mongol group opposed another in war.

The Mongols and the Plague

The pastoral-nomadic Mongols, also known as the Tatars, were the most powerful military force in pre-modern times. Though they originated in northern Mongolia, near Lake Baikal, they eventually expanded to create the largest land-based empire in world history stretching from Korea to Hungary to Egypt. The Mongol empire originated with Chinggis Khan who began building the state around 1206. Chinggis Khan was born as Temujin in the Kentei province around the year 1165. He grew up in Mongolia, which at that time was grouped into loose tribal confederations. The events of Temujin's childhood gave him a harsh political and military apprenticeship, which prepared him for the events of his later life when he would become Chinggis Khan or "Universal Ruler."

The Rise of the Great Khan

In 1206, a great kuriltia, assembly of steppe tribes, met and declared Chinggis Khan ruler of all the Mongol tribes, which he had worked hard to unite. Chinggis Khan undertook many military campaigns including his conquest of North China and Tibet, which concluded in 1215 when he took Beijing. In fact, he was able to take control of all of central Asia during a two year period from 1218 to 1220. Chinggis Khan's last campaign took place in 1226. It was aimed at the subjection of the region of Hsia-hsia. Unfortunately, this conflict would come to an abrupt end with Chinggis Khan's death in 1227. After his death, Chinggis Khan's son Ogodei took power over Mongol lands and continued the process of expansion. By 1270, the Mongols had conquered Korea, southern China, and established the largest, continuous land empire in history.

One of the main reasons for Chinggis Khan's success in forming his empire was the extensive fighting ability of Mongol warriors; particularly Mongol horsemen. Like all pastoral-nomadic peoples, the Mongol's way of life gave them an added advantage in warfare. Their experience controlling large herds taught them necessary military organization skills. Furthermore, experience herding and traveling upon horses led to the implementation of the Mongols' powerful cavalry. As pastoral-nomads, they learned to ride on horseback at a very young age, and by the time they were old enough for battle could fire compound bows while mounted. Other Mongol weapons used by the cavalry included the saber, which they used to decapitate enemies.

Chinggis Khan had a great impact in reorganizing the already powerful Mongol military. He changed the system of tribal allegiances into a vast national army whose purpose was the expansion and protection of Mongol territory as a whole. Furthermore, he instituted the decimal system of military organization. Under this system, units were organized into groups of base ten. If one-ninth of a unit did not show up for battle, the entire unit would be put to death. This encouraged loyalty and obedience within the Mongol army, which was a major factor in the Empire's success. The Origins of the Plague: The Mongols had vast control over the area of China, and it is here that the dreaded Bubonic Plague, or Black Death, originated. The plague soon spread over trade routes, which were, at that time, under Mongol control. Unfortunately for the Mongols, the spread of the plague would also lead to a decline of this trade during the 1350s and 1360s. This had a dire impact on the Mongol Empire, particularly in the regions under the control of the Golden Horde. A vast portion of Mongol income came from commercial endeavors, and the decline of trade meant a decline in revenue which supported Mongol cities and their immense, cavalry-based army. In addition to this loss of commercial foundation, Mongol cities

also experienced vast population losses as both common citizens and military leaders succumbed to the fatal disease. The effects of the Black Death combined with other factors, such as civil wars including a large rebellion led by Timurlane, to weaken the Mongol Empire and bring about its decline and eventual collapse.

Impact of the Black Death

While the Black Death was bringing about the decline of the Mongol Empire in the East, its destruction in western Europe had led to a new era of learning and discovery; the Renaissance. Western Europe had previously been spared attack by the Mongols because it had nothing of value that the Mongols could not receive from Eastern Europe. Furthermore, the geography west of Hungary lacked prairie lands and was unsuitable for the pastoral-nomadic Mongols. Thus, during the period following the spread of the Black Death, Western Europe was able to expand in power and influence. This would eventually lead to a permanent shift of world power from Eastern to Western Eurasia.

In analyzing the events of the Mongol Empire and their relation to the Black Death, it becomes clear that the Mongols were in part responsible for the spread of this deadly epidemic. However, the Mongols themselves were not exempt from the adverse effects of this disease. In fact, this disease would play a significant role in the downfall of the greatest land empire in history. Furthermore, Black Death was a leading cause in the rise of Western Europe as a world power; a rise that would not have taken place if the Mongols had not spared this region of Eurasia. Thus, it is clear to the historian that during this era of world history the Mongols of the east intertwined with the events of the West to shape the world into what we know today.