

THE FINAL STRIKE FROM THE STEPPE

The Mongols – 1200 > 1400

Herders of Chaos

By 1200, two empires stood atop the rest the world – the Muslim Empire of Eastern Persia and the Song Dynasty of China. Europe was still figuring out how to get out of the dark, Sub-Saharan Africa and Polynesia were merely the stuff of legends, and no one even knew the Americas existed (though a few hundred indigenous American tribes might disagree).

The flowering cultures of Islam and China far surpassed any other civilization of the time, and nobody appeared anywhere close to knocking them off their perches. Nobody that is, but the latest band of warriors from the steppe.

Over the previous thousand years, anytime it appeared a civilization was settling into regional dominance, the nomadic horse people from Central Asia stormed out of the wasteland and turned the civilized world into chaos. The Huns did it to the Romans, the Turks did it to the Arabs and in the 13th century, the Mongols would do it to the Persians and Chinese, but this time, these horse people would adapt and learn how to not merely conquer, but to rule. By the end of the century, they had created the largest land empire the world would ever see, stretching all the way from Korea to Germany to the edge of Egypt.

The Mongols

Ghengis Khan

Yet in 1200, the Mongols didn't appear capable of conquering anybody. Like generations of horse people surviving the steppe, the Mongols existed in perpetual conflict with the other nomads of the region. Whether it was other Mongols or the Tatars or the Turks, these regional turf wars kept these warriors from ever being anything more than a mere border nuisance. One man changed all that and turned the warrior spirit of the steppe against the outside world, forever altering Eurasia. His name – Genghis Khan.

Genghis Khan was born Temujin – “the iron worker” – to a semi-prominent family of Mongols. His existence mirrored that of the hundreds of other clans enduring the harsh geography of the region. With temperatures sometimes hitting negative 80 degrees, with sparse water and with little to no vegetation, the Mongols were always on the move. They lived in felt tents that could be set up and taken down in less than fifteen minutes. They kept themselves warm by burning the fecal matter of their horses. They learned to ride horses and shoot arrows by the age of three. And they fought. The men were tough. The women were tough. The children were tough. If you weren't strong, you died.

In the case of Temujin's father, you died anyway. After the rival Tatars poisoned his father Yesukhei, Temujin and his mother were left alone as outcasts, fated to merely perish in isolation. But Temujin would not perish. Instead, he would make it his life's work to exact revenge on all who dared slight him or his family. By the time he was thirty years old, through his charisma and military prowess, he had reunited the clans, and he set to destroy the murderers of his father. His treatment of the rival Tatars would eventually mirror the fate of countless other peoples across Eurasia. He first beat the men in battle, he then destroyed the entire society – killing anyone taller than an axle wheel (basically anyone older than a toddler). These surviving kids were then incorporated into Mongol society, and the Tatar people vanished into history.



Key Questions

- Why were the Mongols able to conquer such a vast empire?
- Did the Mongol military strategies and government style help or hinder the advancements of humans across Europe & Asia?

In 1206, the Mongols anointed Temujin their khan, their universal leader. This man, Genghis Khan, then set his sights on the Song Dynasty of China, the largest purse in Asia. For decades China had supported the Tatars, believing that as long as the barbarians to the west fought each other, China remained safe. Genghis Khan vowed to destroy China and make it his own, and by the first decade of the new century, he had created the most formidable war machine in human history.

War & Terror

The Mongols dominated all others through a combination of psychological warfare, non-traditional battle tactics and unquestioned loyalty to Genghis Khan. The Mongols, like the Huns centuries before, were masters of terror. If they could take a town without a fight, they would. They always gave cities a choice – surrender and become a taxed province of the Mongol kingdom, or fight and face a horrific death. Usually, the first few towns would fight. As the stories of horror spread, the next few towns rarely raised arms. The Mongols did not blink at killing every man, woman and child. They slaughtered all the animals, every kitty cat and puppy dog. They used the bodies of prisoners to help them ford streams. They piled the heads of their vanquished in a pile and smoked them. They were said to move so rapidly because they had to escape the rotting odor of the carcasses they left behind. Eventually, everybody in their right minds just raised the white flag and joined the Mongol Empire.

However, there were some not in their right mind who chose to fight. They soon died. The Mongols were extremely adaptable to the weather and to their opponents, leaving any enemy unable to predict their battle tactics. They had no problem splitting their forces into smaller groups. They attacked supply lines. They fought at night. They didn't flinch from feigning a retreat, having their mounted soldiers run away in faked distress, only to be joined by a much larger force that then enveloped the enemy force. They absorbed the locals into their ranks, both as soldiers and as critical pieces of intelligence, able to reveal weak spots in their enemy as well as teach them how to utilize regional technology. In this manner, they eventually created their own gunpowder, siege engines and a navy. Their only goal was victory, and while the other civilized people remained slaves to the military strategies of their ancestors, the Mongols constantly reinvented themselves from being merely bands of adept cavalymen to forgers of the greatest war machine ever assembled.

And don't forget Genghis Khan. He was a brilliant strategist and ruthless leader. Death awaited anyone who retreated or ignored his orders. He wisely circumvented clan loyalties by completely reorganizing Mongol society. Instead of answering to your family's patriarch, you answered to Genghis Khan. He divided his military into groups of 10, 100 and 1000 – like the modern day platoon, company and battalion.

Because of his organization, his willingness to adapt and his utilization of siege warfare, Genghis Khan won victories that put him deep into China, but just as he was about to meet the Song forces, he was called back to Mongolia to fend off a potential coup.

He would have to put off his conquest of China for another day.

Conquering West & The Silk Road

After easing tensions in Mongolia, he then pushed west. After his forces pushed into Russia, he turned his forces to the Silk Road, which controlled the seemingly endless supply of trade from China through India and into Europe. He first had to deal with the eastern Persian Empire – the Khwarezmian Empire. Genghis Khan sent an ambassador requesting surrender (a strategy that was usually met with a subsequent submission to the rule of the Mongols). Yet the leader of the Khwarezmian Empire just wouldn't play by the rules and surrender. When the Mongol envoy of 1000 camels, weighted down under tons of booty, entered the border town of Otrar, the governor immediately killed the ambassador and stole the goods. Being the patient, forgiving man Genghis Khan had become, he sent another envoy, asking for an apology and a return of the pilfered goods. To this second envoy, the governor again insulted the Khan by cutting off the ambassadors' beards in public and sending back the decapitated heads to the Mongol kingdom. The governor must not have gotten the memo about who he was dealing with, because Genghis Khan didn't send a third envoy. He declared war.

He attacked from the east, from the west and even spent months marching through the previously-impenetrable mountains to attack from the north. Genghis Khan used prisoners he had captured from across Khwarezmia as human shields and once inside the walls of the capital – Samarkand – he lined up every citizen, cut off each of their heads and made a ten foot high mountain of skulls as a warning of his resolve. It's fair to say that not too many governors ignored his envoys after this display.

Now controlling the Silk Road, a large swathe of Russia and the whole of central Asia, Genghis Khan turned back east to conquer his original nemesis – the Song Dynasty in China. However, along the way, he ironically died by falling off his horse, so he never saw his dream fulfilled.

But unlike many other newly established civilizations, the Mongol Empire did not die with the passing of Genghis Khan. It was divided into three kingdoms - the Golden Horde of Russia, the Great Khanate of Northern China and the Persian Ilkhanate. In this divided state, the Mongol Empire survived, though numerous suitors continued to vie for the title of Great Khan.

Timur the Lame

Two men stood out from the rest – Timur the Lame and Kubilai Khan. Timur the Lame earned his nickname after being struck in the leg as a child while attempting to steal some livestock, leading to a limp that followed him the rest of his life. Like Genghis Khan, Timur also unleashed a lifetime of slaughter on surrounding peoples. Timur took the Mongol forces south, into India, massacring all who stood in his way. When the locals resisted him in Delhi, Timur enacted a policy that followed him through history. He chopped off the heads of all he encountered and then chucked them into a bonfire. He also got in on the skull stacking competition and made a wall of almost a hundred thousand skulls after sacking the city of Aleppo. Unlike Genghis Khan, Timur desired a magnificent capital to demonstrate his authority. Before sacking each city, he would seize all engineers and artisans and return them to his capital city of Samarkand - an oasis of gardens and engineering splendor, the pride of the Mongol kingdom. Timur the Lame, also known as “Tamerlane” to Europeans, eventually died and had himself buried in a majestic mausoleum, which he dared anyone to touch. One story has survived the ages that before his death, Timur warned that he who entered his tomb would unleash a terror on his people worse than anything Timur could imagine. Whether or not this story is true, his tomb was not opened until 1941 by Soviet soldiers. Two months later, Hitler's forces entered Russia, and in the next four years, close to 30 million Russians perished. Maybe Timur was right after all. Maybe the Soviets should have just left his remains alone.

Kubilai Khan

Then came a Mongol unlike any other – Kubilai Khan. He had the warrior ethos and willingness to employ terror like his grandfather, Genghis Khan, but he also had the enlightened wisdom of a ruler instilled in him by his mother and the Chinese tutors she hired for him. Mongol moms were tough. They rode the same horses as the men, they survived the same harsh elements as the men and they also oftentimes fought alongside the men. Genghis Khan's mom taught her little baby boy to make it his life's mission to exact revenge. Kubilai Khan's mom chose to make her little tike a more well-rounded man. Like King Phillip II who brought in Aristotle to tutor his son Alexander, Sorghaghtani (Kubilai Khan's mom) brought in Confucian scholars to tutor her son. These tutors taught Kubilai Khan the importance of order in the house, order in the government and order in the empire. He would take this enlightened mindset to China, where after a twenty-year campaign through China, he finally defeated the Southern Song Dynasty at the Battle of Yamen in 1279. In this decisive naval battle, Kubilai Khan showcased his willingness to embrace the technologies of his opponent. Years earlier he had created a navy, and at the Battle of Yamen, Kubilai Khan launched his 50 ships against the 1000 ships of the boy emperor, Huaizong. Although on water, the Mongols had not forgotten their roots and employed a bit of martial trickery. On a few of their ships, they began playing festive music, making it appear that they were about to break from the action for a bit of a dining interlude. All the while, dozens of ships moved steadily closer to the Song forces, all with soldiers hidden under huge tarps to mask their numbers. When upon the Song ships, they rained down a barrage of arrows, and within hours, the Song forced surrendered and

Emperor Huaizong jumped into the water and killed himself. The age of Chinese self-rule had ended and the age of foreign rule had begun.

In an attempt to placate the Chinese traditionalists, Kubilai Khan had years ago renamed his Chinese holdings the Yuan, and now with north and south China united, he shepherded in a new era of Mongol rule, one that would last almost a century – the Yuan Dynasty. His artisans and engineers completed the construction of the new capital city – Yuandadu (present day Beijing), and he began his reign over China, a reign that forced Kubilai Khan to continually find the balance between embracing the traditions of China while expanding the empire into a new age.

Creating Russia

Kubilai Khan's imprint on Chinese history would only mark part of the vast influence the Mongols imprinted on the world order. Their two-century romp across Eurasia not only wiped cities off the map, it also fostered wholesale political and social change across Russia, Europe and the Muslim empires. In Russia, the defenseless peasants left their lands and voluntarily entered an existence of near-slavery with any lord that could offer them protection from the invading Mongols. Like the feudal structure to the west, this landed slavery destroyed any chance for social mobility. This serfdom lasted until the communist revolutions five hundred years later. Moscow expanded its influence during the Mongol reign, as the Mongols established this previously destroyed town as the center of tax collection, unwittingly contributing to their own demise, as it would be Moscow's forces in the late 15th century that would kick out the Mongol invaders.

Pax Mongolica

For Europe, although the Mongol military machine only reached as far as Germany and the outskirts of Constantinople, the reopening of the Silk Road set the wheels of European change in motion. Though the Mongols forged their empires on campaigns of terror, they then used this same threat of terror to ensure an era of peace – the Pax Mongolica. Across the Silk Road, no one dared bother a merchant or a traveller crossing the whole of Asia, leading to the common belief that “a maiden bearing a nugget of gold on her head could wander safely throughout the realm.” Because of this ensured safety and promising trade network, traders on both sides of the Silk Road grew quite wealthy, especially in Europe. The merchant families of Venice and Genoa used their profits to fund an artistic revolution (the Renaissance) in Southern Europe. The stories of Silk Road traveller Marco Polo launched an age of exploration where every nation fought to find a shortcut to Eastern riches. These open trade lines also unintentionally spread the Black Plague across the whole of Eurasia. Whether on the backs of Mongol livestock brought into new regions or on the rats brought into Europe on merchant ships, the bubonic plague became the first global pandemic and signaled the first example of a devastating bi-product of interaction between civilizations. The other devastation wrought by the Mongol expansion was their legacy of combat. European nations embraced the Mongol use of gunpowder, but combined it with their plentiful iron reserves to create the next level of military might. This European rise, coupled with the Mongol destruction of so many critical areas of Muslim rule, signaled the end of the reign of Dar al Islam. Like the Babylonians, the Egyptians, the Greeks and the Romans, the Golden Age of Islam would too come to an end, and to this day the Muslim kingdoms have yet to recapture the glory of their past.

And as for the East, the Mongols under Kubilai Khan forever altered two civilizations that previously had seen themselves as impenetrable – China and Japan.

But that is for another chapter.