

The brutal brilliance of Genghis Khan

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Yes, he was a ruthless killer, but the Mongol leader was also one of the most gifted military innovators of any age.



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Genghis Khan was the greatest conqueror the world has ever known. He is a legendary figure, perhaps second in fame only to Jesus Christ, and in popular imagery is the very avatar of savagery and barbarism. And what could be more damning for the modern reactionary politician than to be accused of being to the 'right of Genghis Khan'? The real Genghis, however, was a genuine phenomenon. He and his sons vanquished peoples from the Adriatic to the Pacific, reaching modern Austria, Finland, Croatia, Hungary, Poland, Vietnam, Burma, Japan and Indonesia. The Mongol empire covered 12 million contiguous square miles – an area as large as Africa. In contrast, the Roman empire was about half the size of the continental USA. By 1240, Mongol conquests covered most of the known world – since the Americas and Australasia were unknown to the 'world island' of Europe, Asia and Africa. Modern countries that formed part of the Mongol empire at its greatest extent contain 3 billion of the world's 7 billion population.

Genghis (1162–1227) and his sons waged major wars on two fronts simultaneously and conquered Russia in winter – both feats that eluded Napoleon and Hitler. How was this possible for a land of 2 million illiterate nomads? The answer was a quantum leap in military technology, which brought

mounted archery to its acme. The speed and mobility of Mongol archers, the accuracy of their long-range shooting, their uncanny horsemanship – all allied to Genghis’s ruthless ‘surrender or die’ policy and his brilliant perception that this gave him the possibility of living off tribute from the rest of the world – combined to make the Mongols unbeatable. As the military historian Basil Liddell Hart pointed out, Genghis was a military innovator in two important respects: he realised that cavalry did not need to have infantry backup, and he grasped the importance of massed artillery barrages.

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Most historians claim that this astonishing achievement was the result of massacre and bloodshed not seen again until the 20th century. It is the task of the honest historian to attempt a balanced, judicious estimate of this conventional appraisal, all the more so since modern revisionism has seen something of an ‘overswing’ of the critical pendulum. One school of thought would make the Mongols culpable for every military atrocity that has ever occurred; the opposing one would make them harbingers of world peace and security, beset by a few regrettable excesses.

Military historian Sir John Keegan made Genghis responsible for the savagery of the Spanish Reconquista against the Moors in the late 15th century and their massacre of the Aztecs and Incas. The Mongols are supposed to have imported ruthless ferocity to Islam, which in turn transmitted it to the crusaders, thence back to Spain and, after Columbus’s voyages of discovery, the New World: “The awful fate of the Incas and Aztecs... ultimately washed back to Genghis Khan himself.” The Harvard historian Donald Ostrowski replied, correctly, that “ruthless ferocity” was actually introduced to Islam by the crusaders.

In contrast to the ‘Genghis as monster’ take on events, the anthropologist Jack Weatherford, in his 2004 hagiography of Genghis, soft-pedalled the casualties caused by the Mongols and stressed instead their enlightened attitude to women, their avoidance (mostly) of torture, their transmission of culture and the arts, and even their (alleged) role as fount and origin of the Renaissance.

These divergent modern views are a projection across the centuries of diametrically opposed views of the Mongols entertained in the 13th century. For the English chronicler Matthew Paris, the Mongols were Gog and Magog aroused from their slumber; they were the demons of Tartarus, the myrmidons of Satan himself. For the great Franciscan thinker Roger Bacon, the Mongols represented the triumph of science and philosophy over ignorance.

Since one version of Genghis Khan is that of a cruel despot who raised mountains of human skulls, we should first ask: how many died as a result of his wars and conquests? The answer can only be guesswork, however sophisticated, for three main reasons. Ancient and medieval chroniclers routinely multiplied numbers, sometimes 10-fold, so we have to discount their figures. Estimates of fatalities can be made only when we have accurate population statistics, but medieval census figures are unreliable. And the assessment of war casualties is a notorious minefield, even in the modern age (scholars cannot agree on the figures for deaths in the Second World War).

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There were three great Mongol campaigns between 1206 (when the local warlord Temujin was acclaimed as Genghis Khan, emperor of Mongolia) and 1242 when the Mongols withdrew from Europe following the death of Ogodei, Genghis’s son and successor as Great Khan. The European conquest of 1237–42 probably

accounted for a million deaths while the subjugation of modern Iran and Afghanistan from 1219–22 cost 2.5 million lives.

The real problem of historical interpretation comes in the great campaign to conquer the Jin regime of northern China, which lasted from 1211–34. We can have only the haziest idea of the population of northern China at the time, but it was probably somewhere in the 60–90 million mark. Medieval and early modern demography of China is an inexact science, to put it mildly. A distinguished Sinologist has concluded that, depending on which model you use, the population of China in 1600 could have been 66 million, 150 million or 230 million. What is clear is that sustained warfare in China always generates massive casualties.

Two obvious analogies for Genghis's 23-year war against the Jin are the An-Lushan revolt against the Tang dynasty in 755–63 and the great Taiping rebellion of 1850–64. The An-Lushan convulsion caused 26 million deaths and the Taiping 30 million. We should also note that 27 million were killed in the Sino-Japanese conflict of 1937–45. Using these statistics as a lodestone, scholars argue that the likely fatalities from 1211–34 were 30 million. If we then include casualties in the 'little wars' Genghis and his sons waged against people like the Tanguts, the Bulgars, the Armenians and the Georgians, we arrive at a total of some 35–37 million deaths attributable to the Mongols.

Why was the death toll so high, and why were the Mongols so ferocious? Different reasons have been adduced: the Mongols spread terror and cruelty because they had a small-scale steppe mentality transposed onto a global stage; because, in terms of the Mongols' divine mission to conquer the world for their supreme god Tengri, resistance was blasphemy; because they feared and hated walled cities and expended their fury on them once taken; because it was the most efficient way to warn already conquered peoples not to attempt 'stab in the back' revolts as the Mongols pressed ever forwards.

The simplest explanation for the chilling policy of 'surrender or die' was that the Mongols, as a far from numerous people totalling at most 2 million souls, were obsessed with casualties. For them, the best-case scenario was a walkover surrender in which none of their troops died. This explains why nearly all the cities that surrendered without even token resistance received relatively good treatment.

There are no signs in Genghis of a mindless or psychopathic cruelty; everything was done for a purpose. It is important not to judge him by 21st-century standards but to see him in the context of general behaviour in the 13th century. He exceeded in degree but not in kind the other killers of the age. One could give any number of other instances: from the slaughter of the southern Chinese (Song) by the Jin in Tsao-Chia in 1128, through the massacre of the Albigensians by fellow Christians at Béziers and Carcassonne in 1209, to the killing of 30,000 Hindus at Chitor in 1303 by the troops of Ala-ad-din Khilji.

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It is wisest to accept the judgment of a notable historian of medieval Russia, Charles J Halperin: "(Genghis) was no more cruel, and no less, than empire builders before and since. Moral judgments are of little help in understanding his importance." Moreover, it is only fair to point out that great wartime leaders, whether Lincoln during the American Civil War or Churchill and Roosevelt in the Second World War, sent hundreds of thousands to their death for causes that a Martian observer might not necessarily see as noble. Julius Caesar is supposed to have caused a million deaths during his 10-year conquest of Gaul, but the Caesar that predominates in the public consciousness is the statesman, military genius and superb writer of prose, not the butcher. In the 21st century we may take a dim view of Genghis's projects and ambitions but we should remember, as Plato pointed out long ago in the *Protagoras*, that even the Hitlers, Stalins and Maos do not consider themselves evil, but rather driven by some quasi-divine mission (the Reich, the classless society, the New Man).

The pro-Genghis camp asserts that it was as a result of his activities that China was brought into contact with the Islamic world and thus with the west, since the west had already made its presence felt in the Muslim world during the crusades. Trade, the Mongol courier or 'pony express' system, and Genghis's law code, the yasa, were the main pillars of the Mongol peace (Pax Mongolica), a period sparked by the stabilising effects of the Mongol empire.

After 1220 the Mongol propensity for trade rather than war gradually increased, particularly when Genghis himself was won over to the idea that agriculture generated more wealth than nomadism. It was said that you could travel from Palestine to Mongolia with a gold plate on your head and not be molested, but the journey was still an arduous one because of primitive transport. Even in the halcyon days of the Pax Mongolica, it took a traveller 295 days to get from Turkey to Beijing. Yet the Mongols undoubtedly opened up the world.

Until 1250 there was in the west a narrow European viewpoint that saw the world virtually end at Jerusalem. The journeys of the Franciscans Carpini and Rubruck, and the more famous one of Marco Polo (and that of the Chinese traveller Rabban Bar Sauma in the opposite direction), cleared the way for new vistas. Learned people finally got a sense of the size of the world and its population. The globe shrank as Venetian traders appeared in Beijing, Mongolian envoys in Bordeaux and Northampton, and Genoese consuls in Tabriz. There were Arab tax officials in China, Mongolian lawyers in Egypt, French craftsmen in the Mongol capital of Karakorum. The art of Iran was influenced by Uighur and Chinese motifs.

From China to the Islamic world and Europe came the knowledge of firearms, silk cultivation, ceramics and woodblock printing. The Mongol empire served as a transmission belt for technology, science and culture – particularly, but not solely, between China and Iran. In short, the Mongol conquests were a rivet that held the 'world system' together. The southern route of the Silk Road, which had fallen into disuse in favour of the northern and middle routes, was revived and linked the Aral and Caspian Seas with Byzantium. Some writers even trace a causal line from the Pax Mongolica to the discovery of the New World by Columbus, the age of European exploration and expansion and the Renaissance itself.

There is a good deal of truth in all of this, but anti-Mongolists have made some forceful rebuttals. Some historians claim that the alleged era of peace and tranquillity ushered in by the Pax Mongolica has been overdone, that pro-Mongolists have concentrated on the untypical 20-year period from 1242 when the great peace was a reality, and have ignored its collapse when Genghis's empire shivered into four fragments. Others claim that the 'world system' view is overstated, since the intercourse between east and west was largely one-way traffic, with no real Chinese equivalents of Rubruck, Carpini or Marco Polo. They also contend that the importance of journeys across Asia from the west has been exaggerated, and that they cannot be compared with the achievements of the Age of Discovery.

A refinement of this view is that a true 'world system' is possible only if maritime trade is brought into the picture, but the Mongols feared the sea (rightly, as it turned out, from their later abortive invasion of Japan) and preferred a gruelling journey overland of possibly 18 months to the terrors of the ocean, with the Indian Ocean being the main obstacle.

Finally, there are those who say that, even if we concede the reality of a 'world system', its unintended consequences were largely baneful, since the Mongol empire served as a vector for devastating disease. Rinderpest or steppe murrain, a disease in ungulate animals similar to measles in humans, devastated cattle herds in Eurasia from the 1240s on, spread by the Mongols' conquests in Russia and eastern Europe from 1236–42. Even worse, the Mongols may have been responsible for the spread of the Black Death. Although there are many conflicting views on the origin of this pandemic, it seems clear that central Asia

was a major vector of the disease, in particular the new avenues of the Silk Route opened up by the Mongols, which had their terminus at the Crimea.

There are two final counts in the anti-Mongol indictment. One is that, although the Mongols were phenomenal warriors and outstanding conquerors, their system was always inherently unstable, since they neither traded nor produced, lived by extracting a surplus from the conquered and so depended entirely on the toil of the vanquished. And since more and more Mongol princelings arose with 'entitlement' to privilege, this meant a never-ending cycle of conquest, subjugation and exploitation. Like the shark or Lewis Carroll's Red Queen, the Mongols could not stand still and had to move constantly forward. Even if they had reached the Atlantic – and but for the death of Great Khan Ogodei (Genghis's son) in 1241, they almost certainly would have done – sooner or later the bubble would have burst, and the subsequent contraction would have been exponential.

More seriously perhaps, the Mongols were a culturally unbalanced people. They had achieved a quantum leap in military technology, putting them far ahead of western Europe, but the Europeans were meanwhile producing Robert Bacon, Anthony of Padua, Thomas Aquinas and St Louis. Although the Europeans could match the Mongols in slaughterous behaviour (especially the atrocities visited on the Albigensians), they were at least producing the Divine Comedy, the Carmina Burana, the Roman de la Rose and the amazing series of cathedrals, either completed or begun in the 13th century, at Chartres, Amiens, Reims, Beauvais, Toledo, Burgos, Cologne, York and Lichfield.

Genghis Khan, an illiterate nomad, was a genius at many levels, not least in that his achievements, as it were, came from nowhere. All other great conquerors were literate and had a huge background of tradition and knowledge to draw on – Alexander the Great from Aristotle, Julius Caesar from the whole canon of ancient Greece, Napoleon from the Enlightenment and the Romantic movement. Yet when Genghis is weighed in the balance against his contemporary Francis of Assisi, he is bound to seem a moral pygmy. Interestingly, it was Francis's followers who first made contact with the Mongols and brought back an amazing story that will endure as long as mankind itself: the career of Genghis Khan.

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