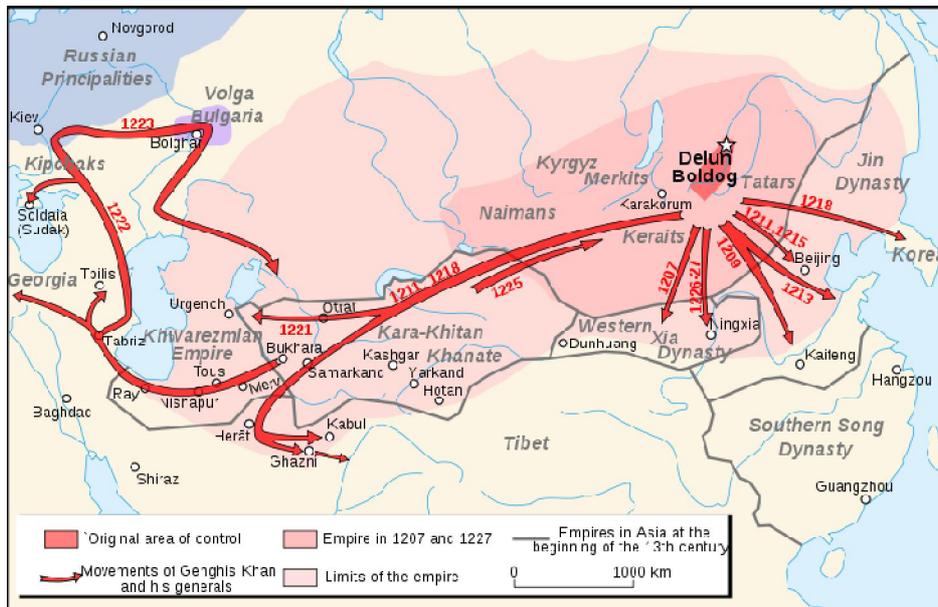


The Mongol Invasion of Europe

By *Timotheus*, 27 March 2007; Revised

Category: [Medieval Europe: Military History](#)



Prelude

In general, Europeans have had a fairly good record in wars, nearly always winning out over Asia, Africa, and America with only a few exceptions. There was the great Hannibal, and the Moslems in Spain. There

were the Persians who fought the Greeks, and the grandchildren in the United States who defied England and got away with it. But only once in the whole history of this continent has there been danger of the complete extinction of Western Civilization as we know it.

The Mongol terror swept in from the east, spreading death and destruction in their path. Whole cities – whole nations even – disappeared from the face of the earth. They completely outclassed, outfought, and utterly defeated the best that the world had to offer. When they conquered, they did not annex provinces to their empire, but merely killed everybody they could not add to their army. Such was fate that hung at Europe’s doorstep in 1242, and which was avoided by a hairsbreadth – not by any feat of military valour, but by the unexpected death of the Great Khan Ogedei in Karakorum, five thousand miles away.

Historical Background

By 1235, the year when the Mongols decided to invade Europe, the Mongols had already stretched an empire from Persia to China. Genghis Khan’s battlefield might and the genius of his general Subotai had swept all kingdoms before them. Their cavalry was unrivaled; their discipline was matched by none; their tactics and strategies and siege weapons had been adapted from the China which they conquered. Their bows were the most powerful of their day, and the soldiers shunned heavy armor for maximum maneuverability.^[i] Genghis had died in 1228 amidst plans to invade the Russian states and the as yet unconquered areas of southern China. Indeed, Subotai had already defeated a Russian force four times his strength at Kalka in a preparatory move. Genghis’s death had delayed plans while the next Great Khan was selected. Ogedei was less warlike than Genghis and did not lead armies personally, but he kept the Mongol empire together while his generals plotted their next moves. Subotai would join Batu Khan, a grandson of Genghis, in invading Europe.

When considered against the vast and unified Mongol Empire of the time, Europe looked pitifully vulnerable. Their tactics were nowhere near as advanced as the Mongols’ Chinese-inspired encirclements, covers of smoke, feigned retreats, ambushes, and incessant arrow fire from their most deadly of bows. Europe was fragmented into a number of small kingdoms; furthermore, the one man who could have successfully led a unified army against the Mongols, the brilliant Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II, was locked in a deadly power struggle with Pope Gregory IX, and did not pay attention to the invasion on his doorstep.^[ii] As the Mongols obliterated one kingdom after another, both Emperor and Pope studiously averted their attention and focused on destroying one another. Only one European power recognized the

Mongol threat: a few Venetian traders had met Subotai while he was putting down a revolt of the Cumans in modern Bulgaria and signed a secret treaty between the two empires. In return for financial support and complete access to all the intelligence the Venetians had about the various European countries, the Mongols would place a first priority upon destroying whatever trade rivals the Venetians had.[\[iii\]](#)

Beginnings: Volga Bulgaria and the Rus

To get to Europe from Mongolia it is necessary to conquer a few places first. VolgaBulgaria was the first to fall. The city of Bulgar, not in modern Bulgaria but some six hundred miles north of the Caspian Sea, was utterly decimated. Moving rapidly westward, they demanded the submission of the Russian principalities, who foolishly defied them. The Mongols divided their army; while Subotai sacked Ryazan, Suzdal, and Vladimir in short order, Batu moved up to Novgorod. However, the resistance of a few cities in the way delayed him, so that he could not reach this great Russian city before the spring thaws turned the highway of ice leading to the city into impenetrable marshes. Frustrated in this attempt, the two armies dropped south and reunited in the fertile DonRiver basin, where they regrouped and expanded their armies until 1240.

That year Crimea was subjugated, and Chernigov and Perjaslavl were destroyed. In the winter, the army struck hard at Kiev. This was the most dominant and prosperous city in Russia at the time, though its power had been waning; it was a hub of trade and fierce rival of Venice. The Mongols, unlike most of the other steppe peoples, had mastered the art of the siege and assault, and they gave their best to this city. The Duke of Kiev fled to Hungary, leaving the defense of the city to a soldier named Dmitri. He resisted bravely, but on the 6th of December the gates were breached and the city leveled. The economic and political focus of Russia would never again be here in the south, based on the principles of freedom and liberty set down by Yaroslav the Wise. It would instead be for the austere regions of the north, culturally developing under the autocratic yoke of the Mongols, to become the dominant power in Russia. The country has never been the same since.[\[iv\]](#) And the former Byzantine trading network, now controlled since the Fourth Crusade by Venice, never again had serious competition from the north.

Europe on the Brink

Having now established their supply lines, secured their flanks, expanded their pool of conscripts, and eliminated all potential enemies to the rear, Subotai and Batu moved into Eastern Europe. The year was 1241. Europe hung in the balance, on the edge of total destruction – and few of them even realized it.

Subotai came up with a masterful invasion plan. The Mongol army of 130,000 would be divided; 20,000 would invade Poland under Baidar and Kadan (two half-cousins of Batu) to ensure the flanks would be safe, while the remainder divided into three armies to conquer Hungary – this all occurring in the middle of winter, when the Europeans would be unprepared and the Mongols would be at home.

Poland was taken completely by surprise. The Teutonic Knights and the Polish barons threw aside their extreme dislike for one another to unite against this strange and sudden foe. The Mongols crossed the frozen river Vistula and divided their forces in two, Kadan raiding through Mazovia, and Baidar striking at Krakow. Baidar came near enough to the city walls for Vladimir, commander of the Polish army, to see them, and then began retreating. Sensing victory, the Poles came out from behind the walls and chased after the Mongols until they reached a village called Chmielnik, where nearly the entire army was obliterated by a Mongol ambush. He burned Krakow and besieged Breslau, but abandoned the siege when he heard from the omni-present Mongol/Venetian intelligence that Duke Henry of Silesia had brought an army of thirty thousand together at Liegnitz (Legnica) only forty miles away, and that King Vaclav of Bohemia was marching to join him. The Mongols rode with all speed to Liegnitz, and got there a day before King Vaclav; immediately they engaged in battle.

The Helplessness of Europe

Liegnitz, April 9th, 1241. The battle found the best fighters of Europe facing a small wing of the Mongol army. The Teutonic Knights from Northern Germany, the Templars and Hospitallers from France, and the flower of the south German chivalry, as well as many mercenaries and peasants to fill the ranks, outnumbered Baidar's two columns by three to two. In retrospect, the odds were unfair, because the Europeans never had a chance. The Mongols executed a perfect performance of their classic maneuver. A body of horsemen, which was in fact only a small portion of the Mongol army, rode to within range of the Germans, fired one volley, and began retreating. Sensing victory, the cavalry began charging after the fleeing enemy, leaving the infantry behind, leaderless.

The Germans spur their horses on, but are suddenly enveloped by a cloud of smoke. The Mongols have set off smoke bombs and the fleeing foe is nowhere to be found. The Mongols begin filling the sky with clouds of arrows, which fall upon the Europeans and completely disorganize them. Then the Mongol heavy cavalry is sent in, and utterly annihilates the best of Europe with minimal loss. In the meantime a detachment is sent over to the infantry, which, cut off from its leaders by the smoke screen, has been unsure what to do. They have little more time to wonder, for the Mongols easily surround them and kill them with their arrows. There

are practically no survivors of Europe's finest. To count the enemy's dead, the Mongols cut an ear off of each man who was lying on the field. They filled nine large sacks of ears and sent them to Batu as tribute.

Only one day's march away, with an army more than twice the size of Baidar's, King Vaclav hesitated at the news. Then he marched back to Bohemia to recruit more troops. Since Baidar did not want trouble for Batu from the Czechs while in Hungary, he harried Vaclav for a while, then 'retreated' to the northwest, drawing Vaclav after him. There were now no armies that could possibly help Hungary on Batu's flank. After drawing Vaclav far enough, Baidar and Kadan split their army into small groups and burned their way back to Hungary, where Batu and Subotai had also won a great victory, only one day after Liegnitz.

The Annihilation of Hungary

A general sort of *casus belli* had been found in that Bela IV, the King of Hungary, had allowed to settle in his country several large groups of Cumans who had fled westward from Bulgaria when the Mongols had conquered it. Not only did this allow Batu to demand the return of his subjects, but it created divisions within the Hungarian ranks, for many were afraid of the barbaric Cumans who looked very much like Mongols. Batu and Subotai advanced to within a half-day's march from Pest, then withdrew and drew Bela's army after them. There were a series of small skirmishes, some which the Mongols won, and some which they lost. King Bela eventually made his way to a village called Mohi, where he set up camp in a shamefully disorganized fashion, enclosing the whole mess in a circle of wagons which severely restricted his mobility.^[v] Batu received word from the incredibly coordinated Mongol scout system that his flank was utterly secure^[vi], and began preparing for a surprise attack.

Subotai led thirty thousand men by night around the Hungarian position and to its rear. Though the Hungarians neither saw nor heard nothing, a bridge had been destroyed that Subotai had been relying on, so he was temporarily delayed in rebuilding it. This would nearly prove fatal for the other half of the Mongol army. Batu attacked frontally at dawn on the 10th of April. He had forty thousand troops; the Hungarians, who at that time were renowned to have the best knighthood in Europe, possessed a hundred thousand.^[vii] Thus, though achieving near-total surprise, the battle began to turn against him. After two hours of agonized waiting for Subotai to show up, Batu in last resort set out his men in single rank, in a vast semi-circle around the Hungarians, knowing that one charge by the Europeans could spell the end for his army. There were perhaps three minutes of opportunity for King Bela which he failed to take – and then Subotai's division, in precise mirror image of Batu's semi-circle, completed the surrounding of the Hungarians.

The slaughter was great. More than sixty thousand Hungarians died that day. A small group broke out and made it to Pest, which the Mongols subsequently conquered and burnt. Bela IV escaped to the Duke of Austria, who failed to realize that he would likely be the next victim of Mongol aggression and instead took advantage of the news to order the annexation of three provinces of Hungary that he had had his eyes on for a while.^[viii] Meanwhile, Batu Khan used Bela's seal to forge a letter to the Hungarian people 'warning' them of the Mongols and telling them to stay in their homes. As the Mongol armies pillaged Hungary, very few of these people who did not flee would keep their lives.

A Bavarian chronicler succinctly described the situation: "This year the kingdom of Hungary, which has existed for the past 350 years, was destroyed by the Tartars."^[ix]

And What Then of the Remnant?

That winter was one of the coldest in memory. The Danube River froze over, as it had not done for years, despite the best efforts of certain Hungarians who would try to break up the ice each day. Cunningly, the Mongols did not cross until they knew the strength of the ice: they set a large number of horses loose on the banks of the river; when the Hungarians saw that they had been 'abandoned', they captured them and rode them back over. Satisfied with winter's bridge's safety, the Mongols poured like a flood over the Danube and began to wreak havoc in Western Hungary, preparing for their next move.^[x]

Kadan (the same Kadan who had helped destroy Poland) led a contingent of Mongols into Croatia, securing the Balkans and pursuing Bela of Hungary. More Mongols were carrying out reconnaissance raids into Austria, where Duke Frederick suddenly realized his danger and began pleading with the rest of Europe for help. But where was the rest of Europe? Pope Gregory, the inveterate enemy of the Holy Roman Empire, had suddenly died, and Germany and Italy were too busy wrangling over who would become the next Pope, and, to their limited minds, decide the future of Europe. The Teutonic Knights had turned their attention to greener pastures and were attempting their ill-fated invasion of Russia which would be halted at Lake Peipus. The kingdoms of France, Spain, and England, a few hundred miles away, knew less of Central Europe than the courtiers in Karakorum thousands of miles away. Nobody listened – nobody paid attention. Europe faced utter destruction, and nobody realized it until it was on their very doorstep.

Then, as suddenly as they had come, the Mongols were gone. The armies pulled backwards out of Hungary, systematically destroying everything they could not take with them. Some areas were devastated more in the Mongol retreat than in its advance. Prisoners were released, told to go to their homes, and then murdered as they left.^[xi] A frightened Bulgaria (not to be confused with Volga Bulgaria) paid tribute to the Mongols to

be left alone. Batu Khan eventually halted his withdrawal at the south Russian city of Astrakhan, where he began consolidating his conquests and establishing a kingdom for himself separate from the rest of the Mongols; this became known as the Golden Horde and was a continual pest to Russia and Eastern Europe for a century. After this there was great civil war among the Horde; it split into nine different khanates in the 1440s and was absorbed in degrees by Muscovite Russia, with the final successor state, the Khanate of Crimea, being annexed in 1783.[\[xii\]](#)

What Then Caused the Mongol Withdrawal?

The sudden departure of the Mongols left Western Europe surreally unaware of the danger they had been in. Empire and Papacy continued to struggle for power. In those areas of Germany affected by the Mongols, and in Poland and Hungary, the idea took hold that the battles of Liegnitz and Mohi had in fact been Pyrrhic victories for the barbarian hordes, and that the utter crushing the Europeans had received on the battlefield had in some way been reciprocated upon the invader. These ideas were reproduced in nationalist histories of these countries until the early 20th century. Among historians and scholars, two main theories prevail about the Mongol withdrawal.

The first argues that the Mongols were tactically unable to effect a conquest of the rest of Europe, and that they halted just beyond the Danube because this was the furthest extent of the Eurasian steppe.[\[xiii\]](#) They point to some difficulties that the Mongols had in prosecuting their conflict in the Balkans, and make various calculations on the number of horses the Mongols had and the amount of grazing ground available in Hungary and in the rest of Europe. Others, in similar vein, posit[\[xiv\]](#) that Batu in fact had designs on nothing more than the chastisement of Hungary, and that they turned back because they had accomplished their goal – nothing more and nothing less.

The second maintains that Batu Khan withdrew from Europe in connection with the death of the Great Khan Ogedei[\[xv\]](#); it is suggested alternatively that Batu wished to compete for the Supreme Khanate[\[xvi\]](#), that he was bound by tradition to appear at the kuriltai to elect the next Supreme Khan[\[xvii\]](#), or that he wanted to support Mongke ahead of Guyuk[\[xviii\]](#). More plausibly, it is proposed that Subotai and the Mongol armies were recalled to Karakorum upon Ogedei's death, and that Batu knew it would be more or less impossible to accomplish a successful invasion with his army's future uncertain several thousand miles away[\[xix\]](#). It must be recalled that Batu never went to attend the kuriltai, nor seemingly had any intent to, but stopped at Astrakhan, which was a huge insult to Guyuk.

I will run very quickly through the train of subsequent Mongol politics: Ogedei Khan, second son of Genghis, died at the end of 1241. Toregene, his widow, became regent until the kuriltai could select the next Great Khan. Her driving ambition was to have her son Guyuk appointed Supreme Khan; it is possible that she even poisoned Ogedei to speed this process. Guyuk, however, was hated, by other branches of the family, as he was weak-hearted and ineffectual; furthermore, Batu (the son of Genghis's eldest son Jochi) had quarreled with him in the early stages of the invasion of Europe. Mongke, the son of Tolui, the youngest son of Genghis, was the chief opposition to Guyuk, but due to Toregene's machinations Guyuk was elected. He spoiled all plans, however, by dying shortly thereafter, and after some more significant politicking Mongke was elected Supreme Khan. In the meantime, Subotai, the great architect of the European campaign, had died of old age. Batu received new soldiers and support from Karakorum, and began preparing for new actions against Europe, but died before he could get any significant plans off the ground. Mongke (and his more famous brother and successor, Kublai) occupied himself with the conquest of China, and was unable to attend to Europe; at the Golden Horde, the title of Khan settled on Batu's brother Berke. Unlike Batu, Berke was a Muslim, who hated Mongke's brother Hulegu for his obliteration of the Baghdad Caliphate and establishment in Persia of the Il-Khanate. Thus, his actions against Europe were limited to fund-raising raids, and his main efforts concentrated in Mongol infighting. The homogenous Mongol war machine established by Genghis Khan had come to an end.

How then do we interpret the Mongol withdrawal from Europe? Doubtless the logistical concerns brought up were significant; however, it is the opinion of this author that they did not play a role in the decision. The genius of Subotai and the superiority of Mongol technology could have created campaigns rapid and small enough to subdue kingdoms without overgrazing. The co-incidence of the death of Ogedei and the withdrawal from Europe cannot be explained away, however. Even if the Mongols had withdrawn for another purpose, they would have certainly withdrawn upon the death of the Supreme Khan, for it was customary for the armies to be recalled when a new Supreme Khan was being selected. An eerie mirror of this situation can be found when Hulegu Khan was preparing the final conquest of the Middle East and North Africa in 1259 – at the last moment, just as before, the Supreme Khan (Mongke this time) died, and the armies were recalled, saving Islam from obliteration.

One must also bear in mind the Mongol mindset. Culturally amorphous, absorbing other customs rather than stamping their own on other people, the traditionally shamanist Mongols had received the idea of one supreme god from the Nestorian Christians, chased out of Byzantium centuries earlier. By degrees on the general Mongolian culture, and very strikingly upon Temujin, the idea grew that as there was one god in heaven there should be one empire on earth, until Temujin, who became Genghis Khan, came to believe that

it was his god-given duty to conquer the world. This fervent belief, impressed on his sons and his generals, was the ambition behind the Mongol conquests, and is well recorded in the diplomatic letters that the Mongols would send to people they were about to attack.^[xx] Indeed, Batu Khan's orders were to conquer "as far as the farthest sea."^[xxi]

It is therefore not implausible to think that the Mongols both could and wanted to conquer Europe in 1241 and 1242. The finest armies of Europe had been unable to stand in the face of the Mongol terror, even with numerical superiority. It is quite possible that apart from Constantinople, Scandinavia, and the British Isles, there might have been nothing of Europe not under the Mongol yoke by 1250. The exact reason for the Mongol invasion and withdrawal will never be pinned down, being lost in the sands of time. Nevertheless, I am inclined to side with the majority of historians in concluding that the death of Ogedei Khan saved civilization from extinction.

^[i] Marshall, p. 91-96.

^[ii] Chambers, p. 88.

^[iii] Ronay, p. 95-97.

^[iv] Chambers, p. 80.

^[v] Kosztolnyik, <http://www.deremilitari.org/resources/pdfs/kosztolnyik2.pdf>

^[vi] Chambers, p. 101.

^[vii] Marshall, p. 116.

^[viii] Sinor, <http://www.deremilitari.org/resources/articles/sinor1.htm>

^[ix] Ronay, p. 196.

^[x] Sinor, <http://www.deremilitari.org/resources/articles/sinor1.htm>

^[xi] Chambers, p. 113.

^[xii] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Golden_Horde

^[xiii] Suggested by Sinor: <http://www.deremilitari.org/resources/articles/sinor1.htm>

^[xiv] Chiefly Jackson, p. 73-4.

[xv] It is mentioned by both Sinor and Jackson that this idea originated with Carpini, but I have found nothing substantiating this in his *Historia Mongalorum*.

[xvi] Ronay, p. 203.

[xvii] Chambers, p. 112.

[xviii] Marshall, p. 140.

[xix] Marshall, p. 141.

[xx] Ronay, p. 133-39.

[xxi] Marshall.