

Mongol Invasions of Europe: Battle of Liegnitz

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On April 9, 1241, Duke Henry II of Silesia, also known as Henry the Pious, marched out of his city of Liegnitz (now the Polish city of Legnica) to meet the dreaded Mongols, or Tartars, as they were then called by the Europeans. The invaders from the east had already attacked Lublin and sacked Sandomir. Henry's army was the last left to oppose the Tartars in Poland. As he rode through the city, a stone fell from the roof of St. Mary's Church and narrowly missed killing the duke. The people rightly took it for an omen of misfortune.

Henry knew that, only weeks earlier, a Tartar army had routed a combined force of Poles and Slavs under his cousin Boleslav V and burned Kraków on Palm Sunday. He now waited anxiously for the assistance of his brother-in-law, King Wenceslas I of Bohemia, who was marching to join him with 50,000 men. But Henry did not know when they would come, and he wondered if he should have waited behind the walls of Liegnitz for his Bohemian allies. Henry feared that the Tartars who ravaged his country might be reinforced if he waited too long for Wenceslas' arrival, so he and his army left the protection of Liegnitz on that April day and advanced toward the town of Jawor, where he reckoned he was most likely to meet up with the Bohemian king. His army of about 30,000 consisted of Polish knights, Teutonic Knights, French Knights Templar and a levy of foot soldiers, including German gold miners from the town of Goldberg. Opposing him was a host of about 20,000 Mongols, fresh from victories over the other Polish armies and commanded by Kaidu, a great-grandson of Genghis Khan.

Terrible as the Mongol incursion into Poland was, it was merely a diversion to keep the Europeans from uniting to resist the conquest of the Mongols' primary objective—Hungary. Since 1236, a Mongol army of 150,000 had been consolidating the rule of Ogadei, Genghis Khan's son and chosen successor as *khakan* ('great khan), over the principalities of western Russia. In overall command of the horde was Batu, a

grandson of Genghis Khan. The real mastermind of the expedition, however, was Subotai, longtime lieutenant of Genghis Khan. Subotai had commanded divisions of the great khan's army in the campaigns against the Northern Sung of China and had helped in the destruction of the Khwarazmian empire of Persia.

During the Russian campaign, the Mongols drove some 200,000 Cumans, a nomadic steppe people who had opposed them, west of the Carpathian Mountains. There, the Cumans appealed to King Béla IV of Hungary 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 40,000 warriors, experienced in the Mongols' mobile steppe warfare, to Hungary's defense. Béla 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.

After holding a council of war in Przemysl in December 1240, Batu sent an ultimatum to King Béla IV. Word has come to me, he wrote, that you have taken the Cumans, our servants, under your protection. Cease harboring them, or you will make of me an enemy because of them. They, who have no houses and dwell in tents, will find it easy to escape. But you who dwell in houses within towns—how can you escape me? Rejecting the ultimatum, Béla sent heralds throughout Hungary carrying a bloody sword, the traditional symbol for a national emergency, to rally the nobles and vassals to the kingdom's defense.

Nobles from Hungary and adjacent kingdoms responded to the call. One of the latter, Archduke Frederick of Austria, had long had chilly relations with Béla over control of territories along their borders. Once in Hungary, he noticed that the kingdom's settled subjects were not getting along well with the nomadic Cumans. Frederick stayed in the capital, Buda, but he had been ferried across the Danube River to the small merchant town of Pest when a riot broke out—some say at his instigation—in which the Cumans' khan, Khotyan, was killed and his head thrown into the street. The enraged Cumans left the country for Bulgaria, pillaging as they went, while Archduke Frederick returned to Austria to observe the coming war from the sidelines.

In February 1241, the Mongol army left its base in southern Russia and crossed the frozen rivers into central Europe. The force consisted of about 70,000 men, two-thirds of whom were light cavalry and the rest heavy cavalry, though all were equipped with bows. They were nominally commanded by Batu, but once again he was guided by Subotai. Even while campaigning in Russia, Subotai had been sending spies westward into

central Europe to determine the political, economic and social conditions, as well as the military capabilities, of the kingdoms and duchies in that adjacent region. The results rewarded his efforts.

Prior to embarking on the Hungarian campaign, the Mongols had defeated every major Russian principality that threatened their presence in that region, then spent a year resting and regrouping in what is now the Ukraine before crossing into central Europe. Although Batu and Subotai were aware of the divisive rivalries between the European kings and nobles, they also understood that the European rulers were closely related by blood and marriage, and would likely support each other if they thought an outside threat was serious enough. Therefore, the Mongol army was divided into two unequal forces. The smaller force, 20,000 men jointly commanded by Baidar and Kaidu, the grandson of Ogadei, started off first at the beginning of March 1241 and went north into Poland to draw off any support for Hungary that might be found there. The principal invasion force of about 50,000 men, commanded by Batu and Subotai, advanced a few days later and was itself broken into two contingents—the main body passed through the Carpathians into Hungary on March 12, while a small force to screen its southern flank, commanded by Kadan, son of Ogadei, passed through the Carpathians about 150 miles to the southeast and entered Transylvania.

In 1241, Poland had been divided into four states, each ruled by a different branch of the Piastow family. While King Boleslav V of Kraków was legally the pre-eminent ruler, it was in fact his cousin, Duke Henry II of Silesia, who was the most powerful of the four lords. Whatever the niceties of the Piastows' arrangement, they proved incapable of offering a unified response to an incursion.

Sweeping in a northward arc past the edge of the Carpathians and into Poland, Kaidu and Baidar sacked Sandomir, defeated an army of Poles and other Slavic forces under Boleslav at Kraków on March 3, and defeated another Polish army at Chmielnik on March 18. Turning their attention back to Kraków, the Mongols seized and burned the city on March 24, then assaulted the Silesian capital of Breslau a few days later. Breslau held out, and the Mongol commanders, knowing better than to embroil their small army in a long siege so deep in hostile territory, passed the city by and resumed their search for Duke Henry and his army.

Unlike Henry, Kaidu and Baidar knew where Wenceslas was—only two days' march away. The Mongols were already somewhat 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 Tartars already there, waiting for him.

Upon seeing the Tartars, Henry drew up his forces in four squadrons and placed one after the other on the Wahlstadt. The first group was made up of knights from various nations, supplemented by the miners from Goldberg under the command of Boleslav, son of the margrave of Moravia. Sulislav, the brother of the late palatine of Kraków, led the second group—Kraikovians and knights from Welkopole. The third group consisted of knights from Opole, led by the Opolian Duke Meshko, and Teutonic Knights from Prussia under the *Heermeister* Poppo von Ostern. Duke Henry led the fourth group, which was made up of men at arms from Silesia and Breslau, knights from Welkopole and Silesia, and French Knights Templar.

The Teutonic Knights and Knights Templar were religious military orders with origins in the Crusades. As a result of both their religious and military training, the knights submitted readily to discipline and were normally the best of the forces available to Duke Henry. Nonetheless, Baidar and Kadan expected to add another victory to their already considerable tally. The Mongols' confidence was not without foundation.

Henry's army was typical of European armies of the period—it had only the most rudimentary organization. Knights formed irregular battles of different sizes, composition, and national or local origin. A group of those battles formed the line. Command was assigned on the basis of birth, not—as in the Mongol armies—on the basis of proven competence. The Mongol army was organized into squads of 10 men, troops of 100, companies of 1,000 and divisions, or *toumans*, of 10,000. Each unit was highly disciplined and obeyed commands signaled by flags during battle.

A Mongol commander might be anywhere in his formation, directing his troops as he saw fit. In contrast, the leader of a European army often fought alongside his men in the thick of battle where he was easily identified, in danger and unable to respond to developments in the fight. Such leadership by example made a certain amount of sense where battles were seen as opportunities for the display of personal bravery, where the object of the contest was honor as well as victory. But to the Mongols, victory was all that mattered. Consequently, their approach was to kill or defeat the enemy as efficiently as possible—that is, with the least cost to themselves. That was a logical approach for the Mongols, who campaigned thousands of miles from home against opponents who outnumbered them; they could not afford to lose either men or battles. Mongol tactics resembled those of the hunter, who uses speed, finesse and deception to herd his prey where he will, then kill it with as little risk to himself as possible. In the case of their confrontation with Duke Henry's army, Baidar and Kaidu decided to try a common steppe tactic—attack, false flight and ambush.

Both the European and Mongol armies depended upon the horse, but there the similarity ended. The knight was supported by a feudal lord, or by the king, for the purpose of fighting. He was trained for close contact

with his enemy, and his chief weapons were the heavy lance and the broadsword. The lance was held with the hand and couched under the arm in order to transmit the weight and force of both horse and rider as they charged the enemy. Likewise, the heavy broadsword swung from the saddle could inflict awful cuts. To protect himself in hand-to-hand combat of this sort, the knight wore elaborate, heavy armor. A long-sleeved chain-mail coat, or hauberk, protected his body. The knight might also wear a mail coif or hood over his head, and he would certainly wear an iron helmet as well. He wore mail gloves and leggings and carried a shield on his left arm. The entire panoply might weigh 70 or more pounds, and the knight rode a horse specially bred to be strong enough to bear him and his armor. His weight was a weapon in itself—he hurtled through an enemy formation, then the foot soldiers ran up and dispatched those whom the knights had unhorsed, struck down, ridden over or brushed aside.

Mongol armies were made up entirely of cavalry, but the Mongol, in contrast to the European knight, depended primarily on his bow, and usually did not favor close-quarters combat on horseback. His protection lay in speed and maneuverability, not in armor, and he often wore no armor aside from an open metal helmet with a leather drop behind the neck and a silk shirt under his coat that followed an arrowhead into a wound and allowed it to be withdrawn without tearing the flesh. There were more heavily armored Mongols, but even those heavy cavalymen generally wore relatively light and flexible lamellar armor, consisting of a multitude of overlapping leather or iron plates. The Mongol bow was a recurved composite bow, a lamination of wood, horn and sinew that could cast an arrow more than 300 yards. The Mongols shot their arrows with great accuracy while riding at a fast pace and could even shoot accurately backward at a pursuer. Each warrior carried 60 arrows of different weights for shooting different distances and often carried more than one bow.

The Mongol rode a pony that was considerably smaller than the war charger of the Western armies. The Asiatic animal, however, had superb endurance and survived by grazing in the wild. Each Mongol soldier had two, three or even four ponies so that he could spell them on a march and save them from exhaustion. That practice allowed Mongol armies to travel 50 or even 60 miles in a day, several times the distance that a Western army of the period could travel. It also gave the Mongol the edge in speed on the battlefield. They were, then, two utterly different armies that faced each other at the Wahlstadt.

When the engagement at Wahlstadt began, the Europeans were disconcerted because the enemy moved without battle cries or trumpets; all signals were transmitted visually, by pennant and standard. Curiously, even though the Mongols' overall discipline was greater than that of the knights, their formations were looser in appearance, making it difficult for the Europeans to accurately gauge their numbers.

The first of Duke Henry's divisions, that under Boleslav, charged into the Tartar 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. Finding that they could not get any support from the other formations, Boleslav's men broke off their attack and fled back to the Polish line.

A second charge by the second and third divisions was mounted under Sulislav and Meshko of Opole. Unlike the first, this assault seemed successful—the Mongols broke into what appeared to be a disorderly retreat. Encouraged, the knights pressed on their attack, eager to meet the Tartars with lance and broadsword. Their Asiatic adversaries continued to flee before them, evidently unable to face the charge of the heavy horsemen.

Then, an odd thing happened. A single rider from the Tartar lines rushed about the Polish lines shouting *Byegaycze! Byegaycze!* or Run! Run! in Polish. The Polish chronicle is uncertain whether the man was a Tartar or one of the conquered Russians pressed into their service. Meshko did not take the outburst for a trick and began to retire from the battlefield with his knights. Seeing Meshko's retreat, Henry led his fourth battle group into the Mongol lines and once again engaged in close combat. After a fierce fight, the Mongols again began to flee. Their yak-tailed standard with the crossed shoulder blades of a sheep fixed to it was seen to pull back—its bearer had joined the retreat, and the Polish knights pressed ahead.

Things were not as they seemed to the European knights, however; they had fallen victim to one of the oldest tricks in the Mongols' book—the feigned retreat. The riders of the steppes, unlike the knights, had been taught to retreat as a tactical move, and in so doing, they drew the knights away from their infantry. Once that was accomplished, the Mongols swept to either side of the knights, who had strung out and lost their own measure of order, 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 cavalymen, who ran them down with lance or saber with little danger to themselves. The Knights Templar made a determined stand, only to be killed to a man.

The Mongols employed one further trick—smoke 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. Duke Henry tried to gallop off the field, but he was run down by Mongols who killed him, cut off his head and paraded about Liegnitz with it on top of a spear as a trophy.

In accordance with a Mongol custom used to count the dead, an ear was cut from each dead European. The Tartars filled nine sacks with ears. Contemporary records show that 25,000 of Henry's men were killed. The Grand Master of the Templars wrote to King Louis IX of France, saying of the battle, The Tartars have destroyed and taken the land of Henry Duke of Poland, ...with many barons, six of our brothers, three knights, two sergeants and five hundred of our men dead. King Louis, preparing to go to central Europe to fight the Mongols, told his mother, Queen Blanche, that either they would send the Tartars back to hell, or the Tartars would send them to Paradise. His statement was a play on the Latin term for hell, *Tartarus*, and helped fix the Mongols' nickname among the Europeans.

The Grand Master's missive to Louis also stated that no army of any significance stood between the invaders and France. That was no exaggeration. Upon learning of what had transpired at Liegnitz, Wenceslas and the Bohemians halted their approach and retreated to a defensive position. Meanwhile, to the south, Batu and Subotai had forced the passes into Hungary and come down the mountains, covering 40 miles a day in the snow.

On the very day that Henry and so many of his men had fallen, King Béla IV left Pest with an army of some 60,000 fighting men to confront the larger Mongol force. The Hungarians advanced on the Mongols, who retreated slowly until they reached the plain of Mohi, near the Sajó River. The Mongols then pulled back, past woods beyond the opposite bank, and disappeared. Béla camped on the plain of Mohi and drew his wagons around into a laager for protection.

With the aid of catapults, the Mongols occupied the only bridge over the Sajó. On April 10, however, the Hungarians charged the bridge, and the lightly armored Mongols, having little room to maneuver, took a beating. Again improvising a fortified camp on the west side of the river by lashing wagons together, Béla pushed on and established a strong bridgehead on the east side as well.

Even while the Mongols were being driven from the bridge, however, Subotai had found a fording point to the south. Just before dawn on April 11, he led 30,000 of his horsemen across. Batu then swept to the Hungarians' left flank, causing them to turn, while Subotai's men hurried northward to strike at the Hungarian rear. By 7 a.m., the Europeans, completely outmaneuvered, were falling back and took refuge in their camp. For the next several hours, the Mongols assailed Béla's camp once more with catapults, throwing stones, burning tar, naphtha and even Chinese firecrackers, whose noise and fiery flashes, hitherto unknown to the Europeans, took their toll on morale. Then another strange thing occurred. The Hungarians discovered that the Mongol army that now surrounded the camp had left a conspicuous gap to the west.

Cautiously, a few of the Hungarians tried to escape through the gap and passed through without difficulty. Others followed and soon the flight became uncontrollable. As the Hungarians retreated, however, they became strung out—at which point the Mongols reappeared in force, riding along their flanks and showering them with arrows. The Hungarian retreat degenerated into a panicky, disorderly rout—just as Subotai had calculated it would when he deliberately left them that tantalizing but deceptive escape route. Now, moving in for the kill, the Mongols rode the Hungarians down and killed them with lance and saber. Depending on the source, anywhere from 40,000 to 65,000 Hungarians and other European men-at-arms were killed.

Shortly after smashing the Hungarian army, Batu and Subotai were joined by Kadan, who also had not been idle. In the past few weeks, Kadan's little flanking force had burned and pillaged its way through Moldavia, Bukovina and Transylvania, winning three pitched battles in the process. On the very same day that Subotai annihilated King Béla's army at Mohi, Kadan had taken the heavily fortified town of Hermannstadt, in spite of the desperate courage of its defenders.

Unlike Duke Henry, King Béla managed to escape unrecognized and fled to Austria—where he was promptly imprisoned by Duke Frederick. After buying his freedom with both a monetary ransom and the cession of three western counties to Frederick, Béla continued his flight into Dalmatia, with Kadan's Mongols hard on his heels, until he finally found refuge on an island in the Adriatic Sea near Trau (now Trogier), in Croatia.

Europe was shocked at the news of two thorough defeats mere days apart. The Poles and others attributed the Mongols' success to supernatural agencies or suggested that the Mongols were not entirely human. In fact, there was nothing magical about them; the Mongols had simply exercised discipline, efficiency and order, three qualities generally lacking in European armies of the period.

Almost as astonishing as the Mongols' invasion of Europe was their sudden disappearance. After its victory at Liegnitz, the northern army left Poland and never returned. Believing that they had inflicted such extensive casualties on the Mongols that they were unable to pursue their invasion, Poles still celebrate April 9 as a day on which they saved their country, and quite possibly Germany and Western Europe as well, from the ravages of the barbarian hordes from the East.

The truth was that Kaidu and Baidar had no intention of venturing deeper into Europe—that had never been their objective. They had, in fact, carried out their assigned task brilliantly. With just two *toumans* totaling 20,000 horsemen, they had destroyed Boleslav's and Henry's armies and forced Wenceslas to withdraw his Bohemian host, thereby completely eliminating the northern threat to Batu and Subotai's army. Mission

accomplished, they turned south to join the main force in Hungary, laying the Moravian countryside to waste in the process.

As it developed, the Mongols did not remain long in Hungary, either. On December 11, 1241, Ogadei died in Asia. Upon learning of the great khan's death, Subotai reminded the three princes in his army of the law of succession as laid down by Genghis Khan: After the death of the ruler all offspring of the house of Genghis Khan, wherever they might be, must return to Mongolia to take part in the election of the new *khakan*. Recalling all their forces, the Mongols started back to their Mongolian capital of Karakorum, postponing their invasion of central Europe for another time—a time that would never come.

Terrible as the debacle at Liegnitz was, it had ultimately been pointless—a Mongol effort to support a conquest that was suddenly abandoned, leaving nothing but a wide swath of destruction and death as the Mongol legacy in eastern and central Europe.