

THE WOMAN WHO SAVED EUROPE

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When my wife first saw the title of this paper, she pointedly noted the irony of my preparing it for the Literary Club, an exclusively all-male group. I tried to blunt the barb with a feeble pun. Listen, I said, our members are pretty broadminded. As usual with my puns, she just groaned. But you Literarians may react differently. To your active imaginations the title may perhaps suggest a stirring act of heroism or a tender tale of bravery by an unknown woman whose deed changed the course of European history. Either would be an intriguing scenario but alas neither is the case. To be sure, the tale does involve a woman whose identity is uncertain and whose behavior did set in motion a sequence of events that had profound consequences. Unfortunately we don't know exactly who she was, although we do know the effects of what she did. That alone makes the tale worth telling.

But first a little perspective. Of the many political-military crises Europe has faced in its long history, none has been more serious than the threat of a single conqueror to dominate the entire continent. In the twentieth century this happened twice: once when Hitler tried it and again after World War II when Stalin seemed intent on continental hegemony. In the early nineteenth century Napoleon came close to subduing the whole of Europe. One hundred years earlier Louis XIV was perceived as a common threat. All of these efforts at dominance failed and they all failed for the same reason. When the Europeans concluded that their survival as independent entities was at stake, they formed coalitions of opposition to combat the common menace. In all instances the coalitions prevailed. But balances of power as a defense against the strong came into being only in the sixteenth century, with the beginnings of the modern state system. They certainly didn't exist in the thirteenth century when Europe seemed wide open to conquest by an army of ferocious nomad warriors who were the most successful horse soldiers the world had ever seen. These nomads were the Mongols who had come out of Eastern Siberia. They had fought and defeated the Russians, the Poles, the Hungarians, the peoples of the Balkans and had reached the shores of the Adriatic. Now they were poised to strike all the way to the English Channel. Nothing, it seemed, stood in their way. The Europeans were too involved in their own rivalries to offer effective resistance. As it turned out, the Mongols never did launch an attack on western Europe. To the surprise and bafflement of the Europeans, the Mongols halted their campaign of conquest and withdrew eastward to Russia. This was certainly strange behavior. Why, after successfully smashing their way to the Adriatic, did the Mongols now turn around and leave? To many of the medieval Europeans of the time the only answer that made sense was that it was a miracle: God had intervened and had saved them. Modern historians shy away from miraculous explanations for historical happenings. But that does not assure unanimity in their secular interpretations. The one thing they do agree upon is that Mongol behavior was shaped by a sequence of events that took place within a thirty-six year period of the

early thirteenth century, events about which the Europeans knew nothing. Therein lies my story.

I begin with a question: what drove the Mongols so far afield? What was their goal? The answer lies in a grand assembly, or kuriltay, of Mongol tribal leaders held in 1206 in their capital at Karakorum, just south of Lake Baikal in Siberia. They had gathered to name a supreme leader, a Great Khan. The kuriltay chose a thirty-nine-year-old tribal leader whose military prowess had transformed his tribe into an extraordinarily successful fighting force. His tribal name was Temuchin. Under his leadership his tribe had militarily defeated all the other Mongol tribes. Now he wanted formal recognition of his supremacy. That was the purpose of calling together the kuriltay. It bestowed upon him the title of Chingis Khan, All-Powerful Emperor. Chingis then set about organizing the Mongol tribes into the most powerful military machine of its time. It was designed for conquest. Chingis was driven by a firm belief that he had received a mandate from the Eternal Blue Heaven to rule the world. This central idea became the driving force behind Mongol policy. The aim was to create a world empire by conquering the entire Eurasian continent. In 1206 no people beyond Karakorum knew of these events and in their ignorance none felt threatened by them. The Chinese to the south, under the Chin dynasty, seemed secure behind the Great Wall. To the west, the Muslim peoples of Central Asia and the Middle East were preoccupied with their own internecine struggles. Much farther west, Christians fought Muslims at either end of the Mediterranean, and later, Christians of the west attacked Christians of the Middle East during the later Crusades.

Chingis at thirty-nine was illiterate but extremely shrewd and intelligent. He recognized that the empire he wanted to create could not function properly without records. So when the Mongols captured a secretary to the khan of a neighboring tribe called the Uigur, Chingis ordered him to teach writing to a select group of his associates, including, at his insistence, all four of his sons.⁽⁴⁾ The secretary taught them Uigur, an alphabetic script. This made possible the establishment of a chancery and the maintenance of written records.

Five years after becoming All-Powerful Emperor, Chingis was ready to launch his campaign of conquest. In 1211 he decided to make his first move against the Chin, the ruling dynasty of North China, because they had supported rival tribes against him. The Great Wall, which was still incomplete, was not an effective barrier and four years later, in 1215, Peking surrendered. North China as well as Manchuria were made integral parts of Chingis' expanding empire. Chingis now had at his disposal not only China's great wealth, he also gained two other enormous benefits from these conquests. One was that he had available to him a corps of Chinese army engineers who knew how to lay siege to walled cities; the other was that he could use the services of a body of experienced, highly cultured and well-trained civil servants. They were the ones who made it possible to govern the empire the Mongols were creating.

After establishing his authority in Peking, Chingis Khan entrusted the task of conquering South China to one of his generals and he himself returned to Mongolia. He

now focused his attention on Central Asia where he had a number of enemies he was determined to destroy. He did this fairly quickly and expanded the western boundary of the Mongol Empire to the region of Khorezm, in western Turkestan. Khorezm has been described as an island of settled civilization in a sea of steppes and deserts.(12) An elaborate system of irrigation supported a high level of agriculture. The region was also famous for its flourishing crafts and industries. Khorezm was the hub of an international trade network. It lay at the crossroads of the Great Silk Road that connected China and the Mediterranean world, and the overland route between India and South Russia. It was a meeting place for commercial caravans from east and west, and from north and south.(8) For Chingis Khan the great allure was to partake in this profitable trade.

The chief city in Khorezm was Bukhara. In 1219 Chingis headed straight for it, after having forced a number of smaller cities to surrender. To establish trade relations with Bukhara, Chingis sent ahead a delegation of friendly ambassadors and a caravan laden with rich gifts. But the wealthy Bukharan merchants were contemptuous of this illiterate Mongol chief. They ordered the Mongol ambassadors killed and their rich presents confiscated. When informed of what happened, Chingis was incensed. The consequences were horrendous. The Mongols launched a fierce attack and overpowered the city defenders. Chingis then ordered the entire population to evacuate the city and leave behind all their possessions. Merchants and artisans were conscripted to work for the Mongols; most of the rest of the population, men, women and children, were slaughtered. The Mongol soldiers were then free to loot the abandoned city. For nomad warriors, booty was the expected reward for victory. When they finished with the killing and plundering, they proceeded to destroy everything, including the intricate irrigation system. They then built a grisly monument of severed heads as a warning to those who would dare resist the Mongols. It was in Bukhara that Chingis supposedly proclaimed, "I am the punishment of God. If you had not committed great sins, God would not have sent a punishment like me upon you."(3)

The only thing left standing in Bukhara was a 150-foot-high minaret from which muezzins had summoned Muslims to prayer. It had been built a century earlier of fourteen different patterns of brick. Chingis was not a Muslim but he was so taken with the beauty of the tower that he ordered it be spared. The minaret is still there, remarkably well preserved. I saw it when I visited Bukhara some forty years ago. It is a striking edifice. When I expressed my admiration to the local guide for the minaret's longevity, he explained that the area had few earthquakes and the hot, dry climate helped preserve it. He also mentioned that the bricks were made of a special mixture of clay and eggs, which enhanced their durability. But bricks like that, he said sadly, are no longer made; they are too expensive.

The fate of Bukhara became the pattern for all enemy cities that failed to surrender without a fight. Even forty years later, long after Chingis Khan had died, this policy was still in place. In 1258 when the Mongols reached Baghdad, the magnificent city on the Tigris that for five hundred years had been the capital of Sunni Islam, the caliph refused to surrender. The Mongols laid siege to the city and within a week it fell. A hideous massacre followed. The caliph and his three young sons were slaughtered,

along with 200,000 of the city's residents.(5) Then the plundering began. So thorough was the devastation that Baghdad did not fully recover its status as a major metropolis until the twentieth century.

Chingis Khan died in August 1227, the result of a hunting accident. He was fifty-nine years old. Of his four principal sons, only three were still alive. They were the potential successors to their father's mantle. Before his death, Chingis had chosen the middle one of the three, whose name was Ogedei, as the son most capable of governing an empire. He was the most even-tempered of the three. Chingis Khan also saw in him shrewdness and determination, as well as a warmth and generosity that he thought would make Ogedei an effective leader. But Ogedei had a great fondness for wine, which Chingis knew but chose to overlook. In fact, no one could persuade Ogedei to moderate the habit. When his own chancellor showed Ogedei how wine had corroded the inside of an iron bottle and suggested that Ogedei cut in half the number of cups he drank each day, Ogedei agreed. But then he ordered new cups to be made that were twice the size of the old ones.(2)

Chingis Khan had also drawn up a will in which he divided the administration of the vast Mongol empire among his sons and grandsons. The will needed to be confirmed by a kuriltay. Ogedei called one together in 1235, after returning from further campaigns of conquest in China. This kuriltay formally appointed Batu, a grandson of Chingis and a nephew of Ogedei, to rule over the westernmost portion of the Mongol Empire. It came to be known as the Golden Horde. Batu's mission was to cross the Volga River and extend the empire as far to the west as he could. But Batu had only four thousand troops, too few to carry out such a mission. Ogedei recognized the problem and decreed that the rest of the empire provide Batu with a crack striking force of seasoned Mongol warriors. The rest of Batu's army was to be conscripted from among the Turko-Mongol tribes who lived east of the Volga. Ogedei also gave Batu a corps of Mongol officers to train and lead these conscripts, some of whom became Batu's most reliable soldiers.

Batu's army began to assemble in the spring of 1236. The plan was to cross over the Volga's frozen surface into Russia at the beginning of winter 1237. By then a formidable military force would be in place with several corps of Chinese and Persian engineers and about twenty thousand conscripts. Most important of all, Batu's forces would include fifty thousand of the most experienced soldiers in the Mongol army, armed with powerful composite bows, armor piercing arrows, as well as with lances and sabers. They rode small horses that were accustomed to frigid temperatures and had the ability to find stubble under snow on which to graze. These Mongolian ponies had thick necks, short legs and large heads, which made them seem ungainly, but they had great stamina and agility. Each warrior's pony was equipped with disk-shaped stirrups which served as platforms for deft maneuvers during battle. The horsemen themselves wore leather, armor and were superb with the bow, able to shoot forward and backward at full gallop. All this helps explain why the horsemanship of the Mongol cavalry is considered to have been the most effective in military history. (1) Altogether Batu's army had about 120,000 troops. Batu himself was a proven leader in battle and even more important was the fact that his chief of staff, a man named Subedei, was considered by officers and soldiers

alike to be an unrivalled genius. Morale was high when Batu's army crossed the frozen Volga in the winter of 1237 to begin the invasion of Russia.

Russia in 1237 was a land divided by rival principalities. Each prince considered himself sovereign in his own territory and was always seeking to expand his area of control at the expense of neighboring princes. There was no strong tradition of cooperation in the face of a common enemy. By the time the Russian princes recognized the seriousness of the Mongol threat, it was too late to offer effective resistance. City after city fell to the Mongols in the winter of 1237-1238: Riazan, Moscow, Vladimir. The Mongols looted and burned Moscow and did the same to Vladimir. Since Vladimir had dared to oppose the Mongols and had held out for six days, all survivors were killed, including the family of the ruling prince. The Mongols would have gone farther north, to the prosperous city of Novgorod, but spring was approaching and they were afraid the thaw would make the roads impassable. So the Mongol army headed south and on the way looted estates and villages they came upon.

Batu's army rested in the south until 1240. That summer his mounted warriors resumed their drive to the west and along the way devastated the cities of Pereiaslavl and Chernigov. As they neared the grandest city of them all, Kiev, the ancient capital of old Russia, Batu sent ahead envoys to demand that it too surrender. Instead, the ruling group made a foolish decision: they had the envoys killed. When word got back to Batu, he sent an army to besiege the city. Kiev resisted desperately and managed to hold out for a few days but the Mongols took the city by storm. Most of the survivors were massacred and the city itself destroyed. When the lesser princes in the Ukraine learned what happened to Kiev they quickly recognized Mongol authority and agreed to supply the Mongols with food and fuel.

Batu was now ready to move farther west into Hungary. That was especially important because Hungary's vast grasslands could serve as an excellent base for the Mongol cavalry. But first the Mongols needed to secure their right flank. That meant attacking Poland and Silesia. The Duke of Silesia immediately issued a call for help to his ally, the Teutonic Knights. The Knights answered the call, only to meet with disaster. In April 1241 a Mongol advance corps smashed a combined Polish-German army near Liegnitz in Silesia. A contemporary historian described how the Mongols then roamed the battlefield and cut an ear off of every corpse they found to get an idea of how many enemy they had killed. They filled nine large bags with ears. The historian gave no precise count of the number of cuttings in this eerie collection. (12)

That same month of April 1241 the main Mongol army crossed the Carpathian Mountains and defeated the Hungarians in a pitched battle. When the Holy Roman Emperor, Frederick II, received news of what happened, he sent a letter to all the West European rulers urging them to help Hungary and Poland. The Pope, Gregory IX, responded by issuing his own call for a crusade against the Mongols. He had been feuding with the Holy Roman Emperor and each was trying to undermine the prestige of the other. Frederick II warned the king of France to watch out for "papal craft and avarice." Supporters of the Pope spread rumors that the Holy Roman Emperor had

himself plotted this affliction of the Mongols. The end result was that the King of Hungary received no substantial assistance from the West.

That December of 1241 the Mongols had a stroke of good fortune. It was so cold that the Danube froze over. The Mongols and their mounts were then easily able to cross the river, invade Croatia and capture the city of Zagreb. They soon gained control over the entire Adriatic coast. While this was happening, another Mongol detachment was sent from Hungary to reconnoiter the roads leading to Vienna and western Europe. The main Mongol army remained in Hungary for a prolonged rest. After that they would be poised for a new offensive in Europe. But instead of launching that offensive, the Mongols in 1242 inexplicably withdrew their forces from East Central Europe; Western Europe was "saved."

Historians have long puzzled over this Mongol withdrawal. Those who have studied the problem agree that the Mongol attack on East Central Europe was an integral part of a grand scheme to gain global political dominance. Yet in 1242 when they were on the verge of realizing their ambition, they suddenly reversed course. How to account for this abrupt change in strategy? In seeking an answer, Greg Rogers, a specialist in this field, surveyed the scholarly literature and identified four different theories that try to explain Mongol behavior. (8)

One of the theories focuses on geography. It is based on the fact that as a nomadic people the Mongols were dependent on the horse. Their custom was for a warrior to ride one mount to exhaustion and then replace it with one from a reserve pool of three or four. The Mongols therefore had a huge number of horses to maintain. They did this by pasturing them. As a result, grass and water were essential for Mongol warfare. The most extensive grasslands were in Hungary but according to the calculations of Denis Sinor, a specialist in Altaic studies, the Hungarian steppe could support no more than 69,000 horse mounted warriors. (8) Batu, the argument goes, must have understood that if he wanted to build a nomad "superpower," he could not base it in Hungary because the land would not support the far greater number of horses his soldiers needed. That is why he withdrew from Hungary.

Historians who reject this theory do so on two grounds. One is that they find it difficult to believe that the Mongols would be concerned about adequate pasture land. This consideration didn't stop the Mongols from mounting campaigns on horseback through the rice paddies of South China where there was no such pasture land. A second point is that these historians contend that the Hungarian steppe was indeed adequate for the Mongol troops and the goals they had in mind. In fact Hungary was an ideal location for Mongol military activities. In their view, the rich Hungarian prairie could well have served as a base for the conquest of Western Europe.

A second theory proposes that the Mongols were militarily too weak to undertake a grand invasion of Western Europe. The argument here is that in their relentless campaigning through Russia and Eastern Europe, Mongol forces, despite their victories, were constantly taking casualties, And even after having conquered an area, the Mongols

frequently needed to suppress uprisings. This combination of circumstances made it impossible to hold on to any additional territory. These factors, it is argued, helped convince Batu to abandon any further penetration of Western Europe and even to withdraw from East Central Europe.

This theory of Mongol military weakness, with its implication that other peoples "saved" Western Europeans from Mongol aggression, opened the way for Polish and Russian historians to claim credit for their peoples as saviors, an obvious ploy to bolster national pride. Rogers quotes one Russian historian who boldly stated in 1970 that "the peoples of our country and the peoples of Eastern and Central Europe, while defending their homelands in the difficult time of invasion, saved from destruction Vienna and Paris, London and Rome". . . (8) Even more fanciful is the claim of Oscar Halecki, a prominent Polish historian, that the "desperate resistance of Poland contributed to make the Mongolian hordes retreat. Europe was saved."(8)

In actual fact, very few historians accept this military weakness theory as a valid explanation for the Mongol withdrawal. Many argue that the Mongols were so powerful and so well organized that they suffered no serious losses before they struck into East Central Europe. Nor did rebellion and opposition to Mongol rule in Russia and Eastern Europe weaken the Mongol armies. Charles Halperin, a leading scholar on this subject, declares unequivocally that "Russian blood did not save European civilization."(5) And earlier conflicts, he argues, did not significantly deplete Mongol strength. The Mongols retained their military superiority. Whenever Batu's mounted warriors encountered European armies of knights and infantry, the Mongols overran them. Scholars in the West simply reject the view that the peoples of Russia and East Central Europe heroically "saved" Europe.

A third theory proposes that the Mongol invasion of Hungary was merely an exploratory raid, that the Mongols had no intention of conquering the country or staying in Hungary any longer than they did. This is an argument of gradual conquest and according to Rogers is made mostly by Hungarian historians. Mongol practice, the Hungarians contend, was to terrorize the population of a country during the first invasion and then come back later for a final conquest. The Mongols followed a similar strategy in conquering Korea and the Caucasus. Hungarian historians also point to the fact that before invading Hungary, the Mongols loaded up with supplies of grain. Why would the Mongols do that if not to make sure they had adequate provisions for their return journey after a short stay?

Critics of this gradual conquest theory point out that the Mongols placed administrators in Hungarian villages after the initial conquest and that these administrators organized a tax system. The Mongols even began to mint coins in the region. (5) It is unlikely, the critics argue, that the Mongols would have done either of those things had they not intended to stay permanently.

The fourth and in my view the most persuasive explanation of the Mongol withdrawal from East Central Europe is based on political considerations. I favor this

one not only because it presents the most convincing argument but also because without it I would be deprived of a catchy title and punch line. In any case, here is the explanation. In March of 1242 a Mongol courier reached Batu's camp on the Adriatic with news that the Great Khan Ogedei had died on December 11, 1241. It had taken the courier three months on horseback to cover the nearly four thousand miles from the Mongol capital at Karakorum. Batu knew that a kuriltay would have to meet to select a new Great Khan. He also knew that as a grandson of Chingis Khan he was an eligible candidate. But to be an effective candidate he would have to be present at the kuriltay. This worried him because during the Hungarian campaign he had quarreled with two of his cousins who were serving with him. One of them, Kuyuk, was the son of Ogedei, the Great Khan who had died. The two cousins left in anger for Karakorum and could be expected to intrigue against Batu. To protect himself, Batu needed to maneuver for a strong position in Mongol politics so that if not elected himself, he would at least be able to influence the selection of the new Great Khan. These considerations seemed more important to him than continuing the conquest of Europe. Hence his decision to withdraw from East Central Europe.

However convincing this explanation may seem, it too has its critics. One of the points they make is that Batu and his forces stopped their eastward withdrawal when they reached the lower Volga River. They never returned to Karakorum and Batu never attended the kuriltay which selected the successor to Ogedei. Although the kuriltay did not actually meet until 1246, Batu probably knew as early as 1242 that his cousin Kuyuk would likely be selected as the new Great Khan. Had Batu attended the Kuriltay, it would have precipitated inter family conflicts, something Batu wanted to avoid. Furthermore, he could possibly have put himself in danger had he continued on to Mongolia.

There is also a practical matter to be considered in Batu's decision not to attend the kuriltay. His plundering of Russian and East European cities had made him immensely rich. The empire he ruled stretched from the Carpathians to the Urals. It was a huge area. Batu was now powerful enough to stand alone and be able to fend off any possible threat should his hostile cousin, Kuyuk, try to move against him. He devoted his time to ruling his own territory and as he became more deeply engrossed in that task, he simply lost interest in the succession issue, which dragged on for another four years. And even if he had wanted to resume his drive against Europe, he knew that the breach between himself and Kuyuk meant that he could never again count on the cooperation of all the Mongol princes who had originally been ordered by Chingis Khan to supply him with seasoned Mongol warriors and officers. He would have had to rely on conscripts from conquered tribes. So his policy now became to consolidate his hold on Russia. He built a capital city called Sarai on the lower Volga, sixty miles upriver from the port city of Astrakhan where the Volga empties into the Caspian Sea. From there the Mongols ruled Russia for another two and a half centuries.

On one point all scholars agree. Had Ogedei not died in December 1241, there would have been a different sequence of events. In that case Batu would not have abandoned his plan to invade Western Europe. And what then? Then, in the judgment of

one recent scholar, "if the Mongols had attempted to reach the Atlantic coast, they would have done so. No European army could have resisted the victorious Mongols." (6) If Europe's fate was thus spared by the death of Ogedei, how then did he die? The short answer is: under mysterious circumstances.

When Batu received the news in the spring of 1242 that the Great Khan Ogedei had died the previous December, he was told that Ogedei's excessive drinking had caused a sudden convulsion which killed him. He was also told that until a new Great Khan was elected, a regent would rule. That regent was Ogedei's first wife, a woman named Toregene. In the Mongol practice of polygamy, the first wife was considered the principal wife and ranked above all other wives and concubines. It just so happened that Toregene's eldest son was none other than Kuyuk and she was determined to see him become the new Great Khan. Ogedei himself had strongly disliked his son Kuyuk and while still alive he had nominated one of his grandsons to be his successor. That young man was descended not from one of Ogedei's wives but from one of his concubines. Toregene was outraged that Ogedei favored that grandson over their son Kuyuk, to say nothing of the loss of status and perquisites she would suffer if her son did not become the next Great Khan. She and her sisters tried as hard as they could to change Ogedei's mind in favor of Kuyuk but they failed. So they now resorted to a more devious strategy. They began to encourage Ogedei's unbridled drunkenness in the hope that it would hasten his death. At that point Toregene, as the principal wife, would become regent and be in a position to influence the election. So Toregene and her sisters plied Ogedei with larger and larger amounts of drink but even as he became more dissipated, he lived on. The women became increasingly exasperated until finally one of the sisters lost all patience and took it upon herself to put poison in Ogedei's drink. That finished him off. Messages now went out to all eligible candidates for the succession summoning them to a kuriltay. When Batu received the message three months later, he immediately abandoned his plans for the invasion of Europe. We don't know which of the sisters had the audacity to pour poison into Ogedei's drink but whoever it was, she has to be considered the woman who saved Europe.

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