

In Defense of the Accused

This may come as a surprise, but the accused in this case is none other than the infamous Mongolian general Chingiz Khan. He has been much maligned in numerous historical accounts, but I will argue that virtually all of the bloody atrocities for which the Mongols were famous in central Asia and eastern Europe were committed by his descendants, and not by Chingiz Khan himself. I want you to pay close attention to my argument, because at the end of this paper I will ask for a vote as to whether or not I have made my case. You, of course, will be free to take into consideration anything else that you already know, or think you know, about Chingiz Khan.

Before I get into Chingiz Khan, though, I should make clear that much of the paper covers other Mongol exploits in Asia.

We don't know the exact date of Chingiz Khan's birth, but it was thought to be in the year 1167, and he died in 1227 at the age of 60 from injuries suffered when he fell from a horse while hunting. So, it was in the early part of the thirteenth century when most of his work was accomplished.

The area in which he lived was a flat, treeless, grassy steppe at the eastern end of a similar area which stretched all the way across central Asia almost as far as Hungary. To the north were mountains in what is today's Russia. To the south was desert, and beyond that the ancient civilization of China, divided between the Chin empire in the north and the Sung empire in the south.

The grassy plain was ideal for horses and sheep, the mainstays of Mongolian life, although the Mongols also had a few camels and oxen. The sheep provided skin for clothing and wool for felt tents, or yurts (as they were known in the West). The sheep also provided milk and cheese for food and dung for fuel. Horses were the main means of transport, hunting and --

above all for warfare. Hunting and warfare blended into one another, for hunting provided the skills used in combat. Men lived much of their lives on horseback. They also traded with the Chinese to the south, for grain, tea, textiles and metals for their weapons.

The society was tribal, but that is almost a misnomer. While blood descent was usually the core of a tribe, it was customary for others to attach themselves to a tribe whose leader they respected. This made it easier for Chingiz Khan to organize his army in the manner in which he did. And it was in this manner that Chingiz Khan acquired many of his best generals. But we shall come to that later.

Their religious belief was Shamanism, but it was held very lightly, because later on they easily adopted Buddhism or Islam in lands his descendants conquered. The shaman dressed in white, rode a white horse, and carried a staff and a drum as insignia of his exalted place he held in that society. They often relied on the advice of a shaman, who would go to a high place, burn the shoulder blades of a sheep and examine the cracks to divine an answer to the question he had been asked.

This was the environment in which our hero grew up. He had a difficult early life. "His father was a minor chieftain of noble descent, though not of sufficient stature to rate the title of Khan...He named the future Ghingiz Khan Timuchin, after a Tater enemy that he had defeated shortly before his son's birth...In due course...his father was killed in battle with the Tartars, while Timuchin, his eldest son, was only a small boy....Timuchin, his mother and his siblings were sometime reduced to living off berries, or anything else they could find. In addition to all of this they are said to have had a great deal of trouble with another Mongol tribe, the Tayichi'uts, who feared that if Timuchin were left to grow up in peace, he might someday make a nuisance of

himself....However, failing to have the courage of their convictions, they neglected to kill him, after they had captured him, and in due course...he was able to make his escape. [1]

When Timuchin had grown into manhood he had acquired a strong will and a magnetic personality, which over time drew to his side one after another of his future followers. His skill in leading his band in battle and growing forces made it possible to defeat one after another most of the other tribes in Mongolia. But instead of killing all of his opponent's troops, he usually incorporated most of the them into his own army.

Eventually he had to face the other significant tribe in Mongolia, and this, too he defeated, making him the absolute ruler of all of Mongolia. It was at this point that he assumed the title of Chingiz Khan. It should be noted that he acquired this title as a result of a council of senior members of the tribes, a tradition in Mongolian society. Although this was a custom in Mongolia, it was sometimes, but not always, the case that there was only one candidate put forward for the position. It should be noted that while the Khan was to be in absolute command in times of battle, the same was not the case in time of peace. There, he has only an advisory role in the settlement of disputes.

However, there was a problem. If not used in battle it was likely that the alliance among highly contentions tribesmen could fall apart. A second problem was the fact that the Chinese to the south had the habit of interfering in Mongolian affairs whenever one tribe grew too strong and therefore threatening. In the past the Chinese had tried to rebalance power in Mongolia by measures to strengthen another tribe as a counter balance.

Chingiz Khan's solution was simple: invade China. He was partially successful in attacking the northern Chinese kingdom of Chin. He was stalled, however, at a walled city. His mounted horsemen had no way to breach the walls. So he demanded that if the city would send

him 1000 cats and 10,000 birds, it would be spared. The rulers of the city complied. Chingiz Khan's troops tied material to their tails and set fire to them. When the cats and birds fled home, the city was set ablaze, and in the ensuing confusion, the city was stormed and taken. Or so the story goes. Needless to say, that subterfuge could not be attempted twice. Chingiz Khan did not complete the invasion of China, that would be left to his descendants.

At this point I need to stop and explain what appears to have been Chingiz Khan's greatest achievement: the organization of his army. It served him and his descendants well. In many ways he was a true genius. He completely reorganized the Mongols into a decimal system, breaking up many of the old tribal groups. At the lowest level there were groups of ten, these were formed into groups of one hundred; at a higher level groups of one thousand, and then ten thousand. One advantage of this system was that any order had to be passed down to only ten men--a highly efficient procedure. And he decreed a very strict discipline--or one could say harsh discipline. If one failed to report when called out for duty, or deserted, he was summarily executed. This tended to increase compliance to orders.

A further innovation was creation of an "honor guard" by drawing in many of the best soldiers and having them surround his tent whenever the horde encamped. This was considered a high honor, but it also created a system of "hostages" which helped ensure the loyalty of their original group. In addition, members of this central core were from time to time dispatched to deliver or execute commands to the rest of Chingiz-Khan's territory.

When not at war the nomads were left to their own devices. But, of course, they were often at war. Families continued to live together, and usually each family was expected to offer up one healthy male when called upon in time of impending war.

The traditional Mongolian love of hunting deer was transformed into practice for some of the tactics used in war--such as moving in a very wide semicircle and slowly closing in on their prey before pouncing in for the kill. In actual battle, their more favorite tactic was for one line of warriors to charge forward, showering the enemy with arrows, and then reversing and racing back through the next line of charging warriors, who repeated the same tactic.

They used a very strong longbow with an accuracy of up to a hundred yards. They could reach even further if they shot upward in an arch to shower their enemy from above. They could pull the huge longbow because they had practiced from their youth and had developed very strong muscles in the process. When advancing toward an enemy, each warrior came with five to eight horses, which could be traded off to avoid exhausting any one. In addition, and this is unbelievable, they sometimes lived off mare's milk from one or more of the horses. Other rations were provided by a supply train, which followed slowly behind and would catch up from time to time. In addition, of course, the men would raid the farms and villages they passed along the way. Research has concluded that they had ample calories from the rations that they are reported by Marco Polo and other Westerners to have to have consumed.

The Mongols never began a campaign without gathering ample intelligence about the enemy before attacking. This was gathered by interrogating travelers coming through potential enemy territory, and by sending what appeared to be a merchant caravan ahead. And this intelligence was relayed back by a system of fast horses, similar to our own early pony express. Their success was clearly due to highly effective organization, training, firepower and discipline.

Now we come to the one episode in Chintz Khan's lifetime for which might or might not be criticized. You can judge for yourself. "In 1218 a caravan of 450 Muslim merchants from

Mongol territory arrived at the Khwarazm-shah's frontier city of Utrar [in an area to the east of Chingiz Khan's territory]. The governor of that city, asserting...that they were...spies, which they may have been, had them all killed and their property confiscated." One man escaped and returned to tell Chingiz Khan what had happened. "Three ambassadors were sent to Khawarazm-shah to demand reparation and punishment of the governor of Utrar. The Khawarazm-shah's response was to kill one envoy and -- almost as serious an insult--to shave off the beards of the other two. In Mongol eyes the person of an ambassador, especially one of their own, was sacrosanct. No reply was possible but war." [2]

The Khawarazm-shah had established his capital in the center of what is today's central Asian republic of Usbeckistan, and Chingiz Khan launched a three pronged attack, which confused Khawrazm-shah. For reasons unknown he fled to an island which he apparently considered a safe haven in the Caspian Sea, where he died. The cause of his death is not recorded in the ancient sources. In his righteous anger, Chingiz Khan first completely destroyed the offending city of Utrar and then went on to wreck havoc on much of the rest of Khawarazm-shah's kingdom.

At this point, "feeling his age....he enquired as to whether there was any medicine [for] immortality. With this...in mind he summoned from China...a famous Taoist sage, Chang Ch'un. The sage admitted that he knew of no such medicine, though he suggested that Chingiz's life might be to some extent extended if he gave up hunting and slept alone from time to time. Whether because of or in spite of this advice, Chingiz was impressed with the old man, had long talks with him, and granted valuable privileges to the sect he headed. One of Chang Ch'un's disciples and companions on the journey wrote an account of it, which has survived" [3] to this day.

It was at this point that Chingiz Khan returned to his homeland, where -- as mentioned earlier -- he died unexpectedly after falling off a horse while hunting. He clearly did not follow the sage's advice. He was buried at a secret site on a Mongolian mountain, that himself he had chosen many years before. The rest of the Mongol rampage through eastern Asia and western Europe were carried out by his descendants. Thus, the only devastation for which Chingiz Khan could be criticized would be what he considered to be punishment of Khaqarazm-shah's dastardly act of killing and humiliating his ambassadors. Keep that in mind when we come to the end of this paper.

It has been difficult for historians to rate him as compared with other great generals, such as Alexander the Great, Caesar and Napoleon, but the highly respected Sir Basil Liddell Hart rated him very highly and included him in a book which he wrote on the great generals of history.

Owen Lattimore considered him a far better strategist than any of his Mongol predecessors, for first consolidating his control of Mongolia before adventuring deep into other territory, such as China.

After Chingiz-Khan's death a council of tribal elders, following Chingiz's declared wishes, chose his third son Ogedei as his successor as Khan. In the years that followed there was often quite a bit of disagreement regarding who should inherit the title of Khan, but that did not slack the Mongols' thirst for fighting and conquest. In fairly short order, the Mongols advanced into and ravaged most of China, Russia, Iran and Iraq, and reaching as far as Hungary, Poland, Syria and the borders of Syria.

The Mongols conquest of China is perhaps the most interesting. This will be a digression, because I found it too interesting to skip over lightly. The first victory was an extension of Chingiz Khan's original venture into the north of China, in what was at that time under the Sung Dynasty. Their success was aided a bit by the fact that a number of Chinese troops defected to join the invaders. The conquest of north China was not completed until 1233. Following the tradition of previous conquerors, the Mongols adopted the dynastic name of Yuan, and ruled from Peking, which they chose as their capital and completely rebuilt it. This was, oddly enough, accepted by the Chinese under their ancient idea that the Mandate of Heaven had passed to a new dynasty.

The next target was the south China dynasty of the Sung. The fighting there was more difficult for the Mongol horsemen because, unlike north China, this area was mostly rice fields. But conquering it they did, but not until 1279. In this case they were largely accepted by landlords, who were allowed to keep their holdings. The peasants had little opportunity to complain either under the old or the new rulers.

In this period, the Mongol religion of Shamanism, which--as I said--was lightly held, did not deter them from adopting a Chinese form of Buddhism, known as Lamistic Buddhism.

The Mongols also learned the art of seamanship, from some of their fighting along the coasts of south China. Believe it or not, they decided to try these newly learned skills of building and handling ships to try to expand their conquests to include Japan! They mounted two expeditions, in 1274 and 1281, both of which were thwarted by hugh storms. The Japanese attributed the second failure to a "divine wind" or "Kamikaze," a term which would be familiar from the Second World War.

Another achievement, which had a lasting impact, was construction of the Grand Canal, from south to north China, in order to transport much needed food from south to north. This required a prodigious amount of work both to construct and to maintain. But in modified form it remains to this day.

The Yuan dynasty ruled for some ninety years, after which it was overthrown as a result of severe flooding and peasant rebellion.

It was during the Yuan dynasty that Marco Polo visited China and wrote his famous journal that captivated Europe. Later, in 1492, when Christopher Columbus set sail, it was to find the land of the great Khan. He had in his possession during the voyage a copy of Marco Polo's journal, which some dignitaries in Europe believed to be pure fiction. This demonstrates how little was really known about the world in 1492.

Now we shift to central Asia and the rampages of Chingiz Khan's successors. One Mongol is reported to have said that "Nothing makes one happier than to defeat one's enemy in battle". The Mongols apparently shared this viewpoint because they used the highly efficient war-making machine that Chingiz Khan had created to create havoc in the areas that are now Russia, Persia, Iraq and Hungary.

The first expedition, led by one of Chingiz's sons, first defeated a Russian army in the southern part of that country, and then moved on with a two pronged advance into Europe, leaving devastation in its wake. The smaller force advanced into Poland and defeated an army made up of Poles and the Teutonic Knights. They were invincible.

A larger group entered Hungary, routing an army of Hungarians. The leader of that country fled to an island in the Adriatic. The Mongols settled down for the winter and apparently

planned to stay, since they minted coins for use in commerce. However, word reached them that the great Khan, Ogedei had died, and they retired to Mongolia, presumably to participate in choosing his successor. For whatever reason, they never returned to Hungary.

In the year after the final conquest of all of China, the great Khan, Ogedei, assembled a council, which agreed that the next move should be to the west, in the area the southern part of which was controlled by Russian princes. This appeared particularly inviting, partly because it consisted of great lush grass lands, ideal for the feeding of the Mongol horsemen, but also because it offered the possibility of considerable loot. This was the area close to the Black Sea, but the area north of it was mountainous and controlled by the same Russian princes.

In their usual well planned and murderous onslaught, the Mongol forces descended on the area north of the Black Sea and defeated the Russian forces that had the audacity to oppose them. As expected, they acquired considerable booty and ample grassland to feed their mounts. When they tried to advance northward, however, the terrain was not particularly suitable to their style of warfare or grazing. So they settled for occasional ventures north and extracted tribute from the Russian princes. The Russians finally recognized their inability of expel the invaders and submitted to this arrangement. The Mongols of this area were subsequently known as the Golden Horde, probably because of the color of the leader's tent.

Mongol control of this area lasted for a very long time, until much of their territory was captured by Ivan the Terrible in 1542 and 1544. The rest was absorbed by Catherine the Great in 1783. A remnant remained in the Crimea until Stalin expelled them and moved them east in at the end of World War II.

That was the northeastern segment of Asia, but another venture struck out across the area south of that, encompassing what is today Iran (Persia at the time) and Iraq. It began as a campaign against a small sect of Islam known as the Assassins. This was a group which had ensconced themselves in a very rough mountainous area of eastern Afghanistan. Their mode of achieving their political agenda was to assassinate an offending political enemy, using daggers, ostensibly to protect the people under his rule from some unwarranted treatment. Of course, it was their interpretation of what was unwarranted treatment. Incidentally, the group was the origin of our word "assassin" which found its way into many modern languages.

In 1253 the Great Khan, who at that time was Mongke, with his capital still in Peking, held a formal council which decided to rid the world of this evil. He commissioned his brother, Hulegu. Hulegu first sent out advance parties to position his supplies along the way, and took three years to move his army through very rough territory to reach the Assassins mountainous home.

This time his army could not use their famed horse tactics, but they proved themselves equally as capable as before, perhaps having learned new strategies from their experience in south China. After intense fighting, Hulegu's men were able to capture and kill the leader of the Assassins. They then proceeded to capture all of the remaining citadels in which they were located.

Incidentally, a remnant of this sect fled to India, where they are headed to this day by the Aga Khan. The modern version has given up their murderous ways.

That done, the reasons for what happened next are unclear. Either they had secret orders to proceed further, or Hulegu decided to make the move on his own.

[At this point, I need to inject an explanation as to why we seem to know so much about an ancient people who lived in so remote a land. The fact is that extensive accounts of portions of this story were written at the time by people in China, Mongolia, Russia and Persia. These have survived and have been studied by a host of scholars over the years. I was fortunate enough to have found a couple of books which summarized much of this material.]

To return to our narrative: For whatever reason, Hulegu decided to take his army further west. Without much difficulty he conquered much of Persia and set himself up to rule. He and most of his men, without giving up Shamanism, converted -- more or less -- to Islam.

His next target was the Calif in Baghdad. He surrounded the city, and, persuaded by a senior cleric, the Calif decided to surrender. The city was sacked. After some time, the Caliph was wrapped in a carpet and kicked to death. This was in line with a Mongol practice of not shedding the blood of nobility, but executing them by other means.

From there his army, having added many indigenous men to its ranks, proceeded to invade Syria, accompanied by groups which had now recognized the wisdom of joining with Hulegu's forces, and headed by three Nestorian Christians. What an odd combination. However, the Mongols did not remain long in Syria. They withdrew to Persia and proceeded to rule there for a number of years. They did, however, return at least once to fend off an attack by the Mamluk rulers of Egypt. The Mamluks, incidentally, were slave soldiers who had gradually risen in power over the indigenous population.

One would think that all Mongols would get along well with one another, but this was not the case. For a number of years, the northern Mongols in Russia and the southern Mongols in Persia fought one another for control of the northern portion of Persia. The distant Khan in China could do little to control the feud between cousins.

Most, if not all, of the Mongols, who held their shamanistic faith lightly, converted to Islam and gradually blended in with the Persian population. They actually ruled in Persia without the iron fist for which they were famous. When their rule finally came to an end they simply melted into the Persian population and stayed on. They were not expelled, as were the Mongols of China when their rule there came to an end. It is quite possible that some of the present-day inhabitants of Iran have Mongul ancestors. -----

Now, let's change focus for a moment and turn to the relationship over the years of the inhabitants of Europe with the Mongols. In the beginning of the Mongol surge, Europeans had never even heard of those distant peoples. About the only thing they thought they knew about that part of the world was the legend of Prestor John, believed to be a Christian king somewhere in the east who would sooner or later come the rescue of besieged Christians in the Holy Land. No one is sure how that story originated, but it was widely believed. It was also widely believed that peoples living in the far east were quite peaceful. How wrong could they have been?

In 1234 and 1235 Friar Julian of Hungary was sent as an emissary from King Bela IV of Hungary to explore the east, but his trip was interrupted by the beginning of the Mongol invasion of what is today southern Russia. When he reported back, it was believed that these people were the ten lost tribes of Israel, who now spoke a different language. Wishful thinking!

Shortly thereafter, the Mongol invasion of Hungary, of which I commented earlier, awoke Europe to the threat which it faced. But the unexpected withdrawal of the Mongols eased the sense of threat, and nothing was done to unite European forces against the threat.

In 1238 it appears that an emissary was sent from the Assassins of eastern Persia to Europe to seek help from the impending invasion from the Mongols coming from China. It is

reported that the emissary visited both France and England with no success. Peter des Roches, Bishop of Winchester, and a veteran of Emperor Frederick II's crusade of 1227-29, is reported to have said, "Let us leave these dogs to devour one another...and we, when we proceed against the enemies of Christ who remain, will slay them, and cleanse the face of the earth, so that all the world will be subject to the one Catholic church, and there will be one shepherd and one fold." Hardly what I would call a Christian outlook.

However, Pope Innocent IV, at the Council of Lyons in 1245, decided to dispatch three emissaries to these strange Mongols to assess their intentions. One of them, John of Plano Carpini, managed to reach Mongolia, and returned with the first fairly accurate report of their strength and intentions. It turns out that the Mongols viewed the entire known world as part of their territory, and any group of people who resisted them were simply rebels -- to be eventually subdued. In accord with this viewpoint, the great Khan at that time sent a letter back to the Pope demanding that he present himself forthwith to make his submission. A copy of this letter still exists in historical archives. This did not bode well for future relations.

By the 1260's the Mongol attitude toward the West had undergone significant change. The Mongols in Persia were now faced with hostility of the Golden Horde to the north and the Mamluk regime in Egypt. As a result, the Persian Mongols began to make overtures to the Pope regarding a possible alliance. They proposed a joint effort against the Egyptians, and even hinted at conversion to Christianity as an incentive. But since they had already adopted Islam, this suggestion appears to have been deceptive. On the other hand, since their faith was always held lightly it might have worked. But, after length negotiations, nothing came of this overture.

Even though joint military action was now out of the question, relations between the Mongols of Persia and Europe continued to improve. Two emissaries were sent from Persia to

Europe, and they traveled widely, returning with highly favorable reports of what they had found. Gradually, the Mongols faded into history, with a small remnant still in Mongolia, north of China.

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Now we return to the original question: Was Chingiz Khan guilty or innocent of crimes against humanity?

Now there is no question but that the Mongols, as they fought their way through China, Hungary, Russia, Persia and Iraq for glory and for plunder wrought terrible disaster on the peoples that resisted them. Hundreds and thousands of people were slaughtered, and many cities left in ruins. They deserve all of the ominous reputation that has been carried down about them through history.

But Chinghiz Khan himself--that is another question. There is no doubt that he did a phenomenal job in unifying the quarreling Mongols. And he created a highly effective fighting force and managed to keep it together during his lifetime. That was no small achievement. But that alone is hardly enough to brand him a criminal.

The only two things that might be in question were his invasion of north China to prevent the Chinese from disrupting his territory, and his attack on the warlord to the west whose citizens had murdered all of the innocent merchants that had ventured into his territory; and had killed one of his emissaries and disgraced the other two -- a dastardly act in those days. Was that enough to brand Chignons Khan guilty of a crime against humanity?

Remember that I said at the beginning that I would ask for a vote by show of hands at the end of the paper whether you would vote him guilty or innocent. And I said that you could take into consideration anything else that you know, or think you know, about Chintz Khan.

Now, will all those who would vote him as guilty, please raise your hand.

And now, will all those who believe him to be innocent, raise your hand.

This gathering has now found Chintz Khan to have been guilty/innocent of a crime against humanity.

1. David Morgan, *The Mongols*, Second Edition pps. 51 & 52

2. Morgan, p. 64 3. Morgan, p. 65

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