



THIRTEENTH CENTURY MONGOL MILITARY SUCCESSES AGAINST EUROPEAN ARMIES; A SOCIOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

At the fateful *kuriltai* or council of war in the year 1235 A.D., the Mongol warlord Ogdei Khan surrounded by his sons and senior generals mapped out strategic plans to invade Eastern Europe. By 1240, adhering to plan, the Mongols had overrun Russia's strategic cities. In 1241, having overcome initial pockets of resistance, they simultaneously destroyed the cream of the Polish and Hungarian armies at Liegnitz and Mohi respectively. By 1242, the Mongols would have attacked Vienna had not fate intervened. How did an army, considered an uncivilised nomadic folk a mere one hundred years earlier, crush mighty European armies, including the legendary Teutonic knights? How were the Mongols able to initially inflict substantial damage on European armies and achieve similar results during every battle thereafter in Europe? This essay examines the characteristics of the European and Mongol social and military structures and explains how the stunning Mongol military succeeded against the Europeans during the thirteenth century.

Thirteenth century Europe was primarily an agrarian society with countries being ruled by decree of religion and monarch. Armies were expensive to maintain¹ and monarchs depended on their key supporters, the knights and the lances, in defending their domains from the enemy. The knights' rewards were lands, presented by the monarch. Based on this evidence, it is obvious that the amount of land presented, and thereby the peasants inhabiting the land, were proportional to the strength and ability of the knight in question. Due to this unequal distribution it is also evident that rivalry was rife amongst the knights and even among their lances; jostling among themselves to be portrayed in relative limelight. The loyalty of the lance and the knights towards their respective leaders might therefore be questionable in battle. In stark contrast, the invading Mongols' loyalty was always to the supreme warlord, the Khan himself². Punishment for contravening loyalties was swift and harsh³. The Mongols therefore had unity of command and unswerving loyalty even before a single arrow was fired. The same loyalty and unity of command enabled the Mongol warlord and his generals to delegate command and duties down the line⁴ confidently, a characteristic, sadly found wanting within most European armies due to social hierarchy.

The Mongol *kuriltai* consisted of the most experienced generals in addition to the supreme warlord. Noble birth did not guarantee an automatic elevation to seniority⁵. Unlike European military commanders, the Mongols had no obligation towards appeasing religious heads and other civilian politicians when mapping out strategies. Mongol strategies were therefore mapped with efficiency being the sole criterion towards achieving goals. They also placed great emphasis on gathering intelligence prior to and during any campaign⁶. No campaign was initiated prior to knowing the enemy's strengths and weaknesses. Seeking out advance information on the weather and even grazing grounds for the Mongol horses depict the depth of detailed planning, the *kuriltai* undertook.

¹ Massey University, An introduction to the history of Warfare, Warfare in the Medieval world, Study guide, New Zealand: University Press, 2003, p.2-3.

² Stephen Turnbull, The Mongols, Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2001, p.23.

³ *ibid*, p. 23.

⁴ *ibid*, p. 5.

⁵ *ibid*, p.22

⁶ Martin Windrow & Francis K. Mason, The World's Greatest Military Leaders, New York: Compendium Publishing, 2000, p.83.



Due to the landowner – agrarian worker relationship, thirteenth century Europe had a societal class system⁷. In battle, this society was defined as knights on horseback and their lances consisting of their followers on foot. A knight's fall in battle was invariably a cause for his entire entourage to flee the battlefield⁸. The Mongols in comparison had a rigid military structure where every man had his place assigned. (Refer Appendix A). It was therefore a fact that psychological cohesive bonding within the invading Mongol armies was far superior to the European armies. Every Mongol soldier contributed to the overall mission whereas the lances at most often looked up to their fief for leadership. This was a crucial factor in the Mongol victories over the Europeans.

Unlike in the case of their European counterparts, the achievements of the Mongols in the battlefield were carefully practiced manoeuvres during their perpetual training sessions⁹. From the smallest 10 – man *arban* to the 10,000 - strong *tumen* or division, everybody took part in regular manoeuvres where battlefield conditions were faithfully simulated. Fire arrows and whistling arrows were used in addition to smoke screens and signals. Constant training as entire divisions helped the Mongols streamline their tactics on the battlefield such as the *tulughma* (Refer Appendix B). Mongol training sessions were bloodless battles. Battles were thereafter mere extensions of the training sessions. In comparison the European armies' practice sessions were limited to the knights' training throughout the year¹⁰.

The Mongol leaders placed great importance on the well being of their warriors by adhering to well planned logistics. Staple food and essential utensils were carried on additional mounts of up to five mounts per warrior¹¹. Prior to any battle, Mongol officers would make it a habit of inspecting each soldier's rations and equipment¹². Troops were therefore well fed and the horses constantly rested even during the heat of battle. Yurts, the Mongol tents were erected well in advance for troops to rest. Additionally, the carrying of supplies by each warrior enabled them to operate as entirely independent units during scouting, gathering of intelligence and relaying messages¹³. Such independent individual warriors operated hundreds of miles ahead of the main Mongol thrust gathering intelligence on the European armies to be relayed back to the *tumen* commanders¹⁴. Proper logistic supplies therefore enhanced the Mongols' ability to keep the warriors satisfied as well as increase the area of operations during the European campaign.

If there was one characteristic the Mongols possessed that was lacking in the European armies, it was mobility itself. The European armies consisted of knights and other high-ranking officers on horseback, whereas the various lances were foot soldiers. The Mongol armies regardless of ranks were mobile armies, carrying out campaigns on horseback. Speed was the absolute result of mobility. Thus Mongol scouts were able to relay intelligence reports faster, enabling their commanders to take quicker decisions. This in turn led to faster Mongol movements on the battlefields. The European armies' troop concentrations were therefore no match for Mongol mobility. A complex form of signals using smoke, flags, *naccara* drumbeats and lanterns further augmented Mongol mobility¹⁵. Practised to perfection, these forms of message transmission enabled the Mongols to communicate over vast distances resulting in

⁷ Massey University, p.4.

⁸ *ibid*, p. 2.

⁹ Windrow & Mason, p. 83.

¹⁰ Massey University, p.4.

¹¹ Anthony Livesey, *Great Commanders and their Battles*, London: Marshall Editions Ltd., 1987, p.31

¹² Turnbull, p. 25.

¹³ Windrow & Mason, p. 83.

¹⁴ *ibid*, p. 83.

¹⁵ *ibid*, p. 83.



quicker and greater troop coordination compared to the Europeans.

The Mongol mastery at psychological warfare; namely, deception and surprise was perhaps the final nail driven in the European coffin. Whereas European armies might have managed to mislead their enemy through sheer accident, the Mongols made it a point to deliberately mislead the enemy¹⁶. Mongol spies used to spread rumours to destabilize the local folk prior to the campaign¹⁷. Dummies were tied to horses to 'increase' the number of warriors in the eyes of the enemy. Smoke screens were used on battlefields to hide troop movements¹⁸. Thus Mongol deception and surprise combined with mobility resulted in 'the unexpected' being confronted by European armies in battle.

Mongol exploits on the battlefield and cruelty towards the vanquished were in the superlative during the campaigns in the East¹⁹. This infamous ethos had already reached Western ears prior to the Mongols' invasion of the West. Many small towns and cities capitulated even before the start of a confrontation due to the snowballing Mongol ethos²⁰. The Mongols exploited this situation to the fullest on their march in Europe ensuring the European armies facing them were psychologically unstable prior to battle. The overall results were therefore European armies battling with a built-in fear factor to be completely out-flanked and out-maneuvred by a well-trained enemy who had left nothing to chance.

The armies of medieval Europe in the thirteenth century had more or less similar characteristics considering the economic situation being experienced by the respective monarchs. No army had a decisive advantage over the other. The Mongols on the other hand brought in their own streamlined manner of warfare that contrasted drastically with the prevailing situation in Europe. The Europeans practiced the art of static warfare whereas the Mongols were in a constant state of fluid warfare. This combined with a strict military hierarchy together with rigid discipline, proper planning and attention to detail enabled the Mongols to inflict heavy losses on the Europeans leading to stunning victories in Europe during the thirteenth century.

¹⁶ Windrow & Mason, p. 83.

¹⁷ Turnbull, p. 25.

¹⁸ *ibid*, p. 25.

¹⁹ *ibid*, p. 25.

²⁰ Windrow & Mason, p. 83.

Appendix A

The Mongol military hierarchy (Stephen Turnbull, *The Mongols*, Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2001, p.22).

A Mongol army consisted of two to three *tumen*

tumen – 10,000 men (10 *minghans*) - approximately a modern division

minghan – 1000 men (10 *jaguns*) – a battalion

jagun – 100 men (10 *arbans*) – a squadron

arban – 10 men

➤ This system was considered an advanced for its time.

➤ No commander (officer) had to issue his command to more than ten officers or men at any given time.



Appendix B

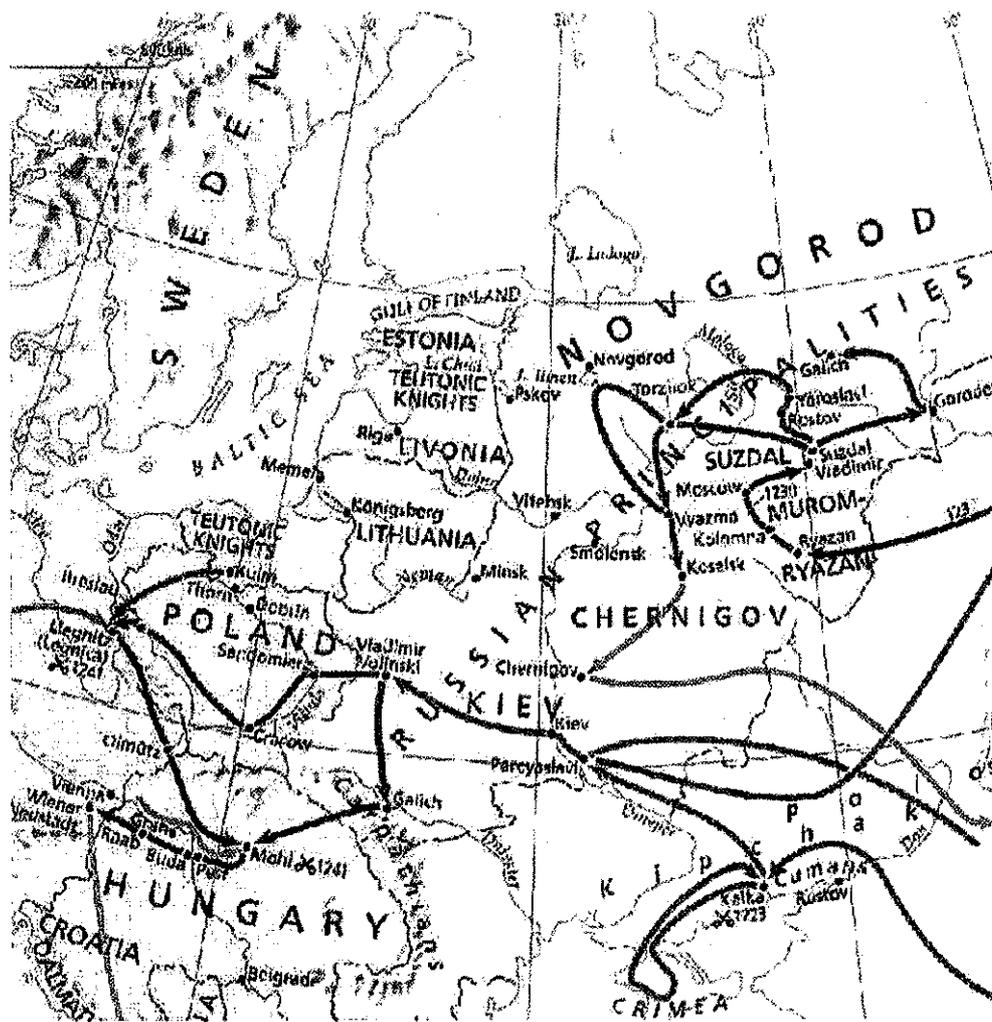
The Mongol *tulughma* manoeuvre (Stephen Turnbull, *The Mongols*, Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2001, p.23).

The *tulughma* consisted of heavy and light cavalry (heavy and light *jaguns*) attacking the enemy in progressive steps. Whereas the heavy *jaguns* confronted the enemy, the light *jaguns* would initially approach gaps between the heavy *jaguns* and fire their deadly volley of arrows.

Later when the heavy *jaguns* were engaging the enemy, the light *jaguns* would encircle the enemy while the enemy centre was engaged.

Appendix C

THE MONGOL CAMPAIGNS IN THE WEST



The movements of the Teutonic knights

The feigned Mongol retreat to Mohi

The Mongol main thrust

Mongol withdrawal from Vienna

The Mongol advances in the West

The Mongol advances into Poland and Hungary

The Mongols' Russian campaign

Mongol withdrawal after Russian campaign



Bibliography

Drury, Ian, *The Times history of war*, London: Harper Collins Publishers, (2000), 50-57.

Hanson, Victor Davis, *Why the West has won*, London: Clays Ltd., St. Ives Plc., (2002), 275.

Holmes, Richard, *The Oxford companion to military history*, New York: Oxford University Press Inc., (2001), 596-597.

Livesey, Anthony, *Great Commanders and their battles*, London: Marshall Editions Ltd., (1987), 28-35.

Lucas, James, *Command, A historical dictionary of military leaders*, New York: Military Press, (1988), 42-43.

Massey University, *An introduction to the history of warfare*, New Zealand: University Press, (2003).

Turnbull Stephen, *The Mongols*, Oxford: Osprey Publishing Ltd., (2001).

Windrow Martin & Mason Francis K., *The world's greatest military commanders*, Hong Kong: Printworks Int. Ltd., (2000), 82-84.

Senarath Jayasekara