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GENGHIS KHAN

c. 1162 - 1227

Genghis Khan, the great Mongol conqueror, was born about 1162. His father, a petty Mongol chieftain, named the boy Temujin, after a defeated rival chieftain. When Temujin was nine, his father was killed by members of a rival tribe, and for some years the surviving members of the family lived in constant danger and privation. This was an inauspicious beginning, but Temujin's situation was to become a lot worse before it got better. When he was a young man, he was captured in a raid by a rival tribe. To prevent his escaping, a wooden collar was placed around his neck. From this extremity of helplessness, as an illiterate prisoner in a primitive, barren country, Temujin rose to become the most powerful man in the world.

His rise started when he managed to escape from his captors. He then allied himself with Toghril, a friend of his father's, and chieftain of one of the related tribes living in the area. There followed many years of internecine warfare among these various Mongol tribes, in the course of which Temujin gradually fought his way to the top.

The tribesmen of Mongolia had long been known as skilled horsemen and fierce warriors. Throughout history, they had made sporadic raids into northern China. However, before the rise of Temujin, the various tribes had always spent most of their energy in fighting each other. By a combination of military prowess, diplomacy, ruthlessness, and organizational ability, Temujin managed to weld all of these tribes together under his leadership, and in 1206 an assembly of the Mongol chieftains proclaimed him Genghis Khan, or "the universal emperor."

The formidable military machine that Genghis Khan had assembled was then turned outward upon neighboring nations. He first attacked the Hsi Hsia state in northwestern China and the Chin Empire in northern China. While these battles were going on, a dispute arose between Genghis Khan and the Khwarezm Shah Muhammad, who ruled a considerable empire in Persia and central Asia. In 1219, Genghis led his armies against the Khwarezm Shah. Central Asia and Persia were overrun, and the Khwarezm Shah's empire was completely destroyed. While other Mongol armies were attacking Russia, Genghis Khan himself led a raid into Afghanistan and northern India. He returned to Mongolia in 1225, and died there in 1227.

Shortly before his death, Genghis Khan requested that his third son, Ogadai, be named to succeed him. It was a wise choice, for Ogadai became a brilliant general in his own right. Under his leadership, the Mongol armies continued to advance in China, completely overran Russia, and advanced into Europe. In 1241, a series of Polish, German, and Hungarian armies were completely routed by the Mongols, who advanced well past Budapest. However, in that year Ogadai died, and the Mongol armies withdrew from Europe, never to return.

There was a substantial interruption while the Mongol chieftains argued about the succession. However, under the next two Khans (Genghis's grandsons, Mangu Khan and Kublai Khan) the Mongol advance in Asia was resumed. By 1279, when Kublai Khan completed the conquest of China, the Mongols ruled the largest land empire in all of history. Their domains included China, Russia, and Central Asia, in addition to Persia and most of Southwest Asia. Their armies had raided successfully from Poland to northern India, and Kublai Khan's sovereignty was recognized in Korea, Tibet, and parts of Southeast Asia.

An empire of this size, given the primitive means of transportation existing at the time, could not possibly be held together for long, and the Mongol empire soon split up. But Mongol rule lasted for a long time in several of the successor states. The Mongols were expelled from most of China in 1368. In Russia, however, their rule lasted much longer. The Golden Horde, the name ususally given to the Mongol kingdom set up in Russia by Genghis's grandson Batu, endured until the sixteenth century, and the Khanate of the Crimea survived until 1783. Other sons or grandsons of Genghis established dynasties that ruled in central Asia and in Persia. Both of these areas were conquered in the fourteenth century by Timur (Tamerlane), who was himself of Mongol blood, and who claimed descent from Genghis. Tamerlane's dynasty was finally brought to an end in the fifteenth century. However, even this was not the end of Mongol conquests and rule. Tamerlane's great-great-grandson, Baber, invaded India, there to found the Mogul (Mongol) dynasty. The Mogul rulers, who eventually conquered almost all of India, remained in power until the mid-eighteenth century.

In the course of history, there has been a succession of men—madmen, if you will—who set out to conquer the world and who achieved a considerable measure of success. The most notable of these megalomaniacs were Alexander the Great, Genghis Khan, Napoleon Bonaparte, and Adolf Hitler. Why do all four of these men rank so highly on this list? Are not ideas ultimately more important than armies? I would certainly agree

that in the long run the pen is mightier than the sword. However, the short run matters, too. Each of these four men controlled such a large territory and population, and exerted such an enormous influence on the lives of their contemporaries, that they cannot be curtly dismissed as common bandits.

The Mongol conquests.

