

# **The Mongols: Early Practitioners of Maneuver Warfare**

**A Monograph  
by  
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## **Abstract**

THE MONGOLS: EARLY PRACTITIONERS OF MANEUVER WARFARE by LtCol Darrel C. Benfield, United States Marine Corps, 41 pages.

The majority of the literature on maneuver warfare begins with an examination of German “stormtrooper” tactics of World War One or the German blitzkrieg campaigns of World War Two. Soviet deep maneuver campaigns and Israeli campaigns of the last half century are also frequently referenced. This monograph explores the utility of considering Mongol campaigns in the Thirteenth Century in the corpus of maneuver warfare examples. In particular, this monograph explores a number of aspects of maneuver warfare stressed by Marine Corps Doctrinal Publication 1 (MCDP-1, originally published as Fleet Marine Force Manual 1 {FMFM-1}) in the context of Genghis Khan’s campaign against the Khwarazm Empire in the early Thirteenth Century.

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## Introduction

The year was 1206. It had been nearly a millennia since Rome was at its height of power. Europe was mired in the Dark Ages; the Crusades to reclaim the Holy Land lay defeated as Jerusalem fell to Saladin some twenty years prior. It would be ten more years before the signing of the Magna Carta and some two and a half centuries before the start of the Renaissance. Meanwhile, China was divided under the rule of three large empires, the Jin, the Song, and the Xi Xia. These empires had endured in one form or another under various dynastic successions for nearly a thousand years, but their fate would soon be decided by events far beyond their borders. Even in Persia, the Khwarazm Empire was expanding to annex new territories. However, this territorial ambition would prove its undoing as it was soon brought into contact with one of the greatest military forces the world would ever know. Even as these three cultures contemplated their next move, a man named Temujin had unified the nomadic tribes of eastern Eurasia collectively referred to as the Mongols. These tribes soon began an eighty year period of unprecedented expansion and conquest. The world would come to know this man by his title of Genghis Khan.

The Mongol campaigns during this period of expansion are seldom studied in most western military schools, and as a result, the keys to their incredible success are often poorly understood, if at all. Often dismissed even by modern military students as achieving success due to vast numerical superiority due to the fact that accounts from their bewildered opponents often inaccurately attributed Mongol success to numerical superiority instead of technical and tactical skill, the Mongol “hordes” often fought outnumbered and made up for their numbers through highly advanced tactics and operational concepts that would be instantly recognizable to the modern military professional. This paper argues that the Mongols were early practitioners of what today would be called “Maneuver Warfare.”

The key works that informed this paper can be broken down into two broad categories: histories that seek to chronicle the Mongol's battles, campaigns, tactics, and organization; and literature that address maneuver warfare theory. *The Secret History of the Mongols*, translated by Urgunge Onon is one of the few primary sources that exists although its usefulness is limited by the fact it is told in the form of an epic poem, much like *The Iliad*, leaving open for debate which elements can be taken literally and which should be interpreted from an allegorical point of view. Rashid al-Din Ata-Malik Juvaini's *Jami' al-tawarikh* (*Compendium of Chronicles* or *Universal History*) translated into English by J.A. Boyle is the most relevant primary source for study of Mongol operations within the Islamic world. Juvaini had detailed knowledge of the events as well as personal relationships with many of the key actors on either side of the ledger and his account forms the backbone of literally every contemporary study of this topic<sup>1</sup>. Unfortunately, few scholars have attempted to analyze the Mongol campaigns through the lens of contemporary military doctrine and theory. However, several works form the core of literature on the subject and collectively do an adequate job of providing the chronology of events even if the authors sometimes disagree as to specific dates and numbers. J.J. Saunders' *The History of the Mongol Conquests*, P. Brent's *The Mongol Empire*, Robert Marshall's *Storm from the East*, and Douglass Benson's dual works *Six Emperors: Rise of the Mongolian Empire* and *Mongol Campaigns in Asia* are all valuable, relatively contemporary works that provide an insight on the Mongols and their battle tactics<sup>2</sup>. Unfortunately, each one covers the entirety of the primary Mongol period of expansion (roughly 1200-1280) and thus do not focus on any single campaign or provide analysis

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<sup>1</sup> Ala al-Din Malik Muhammad Juvaini, *The History of the World Conqueror*, translated by J.A. Boyle (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1958); Urgunge Onon, *The Secret History of the Mongols* (Richmond: Curzon Press, 2001).

<sup>2</sup> J.J. Saunders, *The History of the Mongol Conquests* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971); Peter Brent, *Genghis Khan* (London: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1976); Robert Marshall, *Storm From the East: from Genghis Khan to Khubilai Khan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); Douglas Benson, *Mongol Campaigns in Asia* (Mansfield: Book Masters, 2006).

of why the Mongols were so successful. David Morgan's *The Mongols* provides an exhaustive literary review that includes Chinese, Persians, European, and modern sources. Finally, Richard Gabriel's *Subotai the Valliant* is an invaluable source as it synthesizes both Mongol and Persian accounts, is recently written (2004) by a retired US Army officer who speaks in terms that resonate with contemporary military officers, and attempts to analyze some of the underlying reasons for the Mongol battlefield triumphs<sup>3</sup>.

There is a considerable volume of literature on the subject of maneuver warfare but this paper more narrowly bounds the subject by focusing on the works that influenced the writing of Marine Corps Doctrinal Publication 1 (MCDP-1, also formerly known as Fleet Marine Force Manual 1 {FMFM 1}). This relatively narrow focus was chosen due to two primary factors. First, MCDP-1 is the capstone doctrinal publication for one of the four services within the United States Department of Defense and is widely read by both joint and international audiences. Secondly, much of this publication is a distillation of some of the more prominent and widely accepted theorists on the subject, namely: Carl von Clausewitz, Sir Basil Henry Liddell Hart, William Lind, and John Boyd.

Of these works, William Lind's *Maneuver Warfare Handbook* was a pivotal work that shaped Marine Corps thinking soon after its publication. Timothy Luper's superb *Dynamics of Doctrine: The Change in German Tactical Doctrine during World War One* and Bruce Gudmundsson's *Stormtroop Tactics: Innovation in the German Army 1914-1918* argues that German innovation late in World War One was the doctrinal forerunner of much of the modern maneuver warfare theory<sup>4</sup>. Richard Hooker's *Maneuver Warfare: An Anthology* contains a fine

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<sup>3</sup> David Morgan, *The Mongols* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986); Richard A. Gabriel, *Subotai the Valiant: Genghis Khan's Greatest General* (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 2004).

<sup>4</sup> Timothy Luper, *The Dynamics of Doctrine: The Change in German Tactical Doctrine During the First World War* (Fort Leavenworth: Combat Studies Institute, 1981); William Lind, *Maneuver Warfare Handbook* Boulder: Westview Press, 1985; Bruce I. Gudmundsson,



collection of articles, many of them highly influential during the development of Marine Corps Maneuver Warfare doctrine. Richard Simpkins' *Race to the Swift* written at the height of the Cold War in 1985 makes a strong argument for rapid maneuver by light forces to achieve a decision instead of relying on firepower and attrition. Additionally, works such as Frans Osinga's *Science, Strategy, and War: The Strategic Theory of John Boyd* and Robert Leonard's *Art of Maneuver: Maneuver Warfare Theory and Air-Land Battle* did not directly contribute to the development of the original draft of FMFM-1 but are highly relevant for any serious student of this topic<sup>5</sup>.

Before analyzing the Mongol campaign against the Khwarazm Empire in terms of the Mongol's use of maneuver warfare, it is first necessary to define what the term "maneuver warfare" will mean during this analysis. There are many different opinions on the doctrinal origins of maneuver warfare, maneuver theory, and deep shock operations that emanate from American, German, Russian/Soviet, British, and Israeli theorists to name but a few. As previously discussed, maneuver warfare as it will be discussed in this paper, will be roughly bounded by the description contained within Marine Corps Doctrinal Publication 1 (MCDP 1). As defined in MCDP 1, maneuver warfare has several key characteristics. First and foremost is that maneuver warfare seeks to "shatter the enemy's cohesion" instead of simply seeking the cumulative effect of attrition<sup>6</sup>. To use a simple example from the game of chess, a player using maneuver warfare doctrine would seek to kill his opponent's king through the use of the fewest number of moves

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*Stormtroop Tactics, Innovation in the German Army, 1914-1918* (Westport: Greenwood Publishing Group, 1989).

<sup>5</sup> Richard Simpkins, *Race to the Swift: Thoughts on 21<sup>st</sup> Century Warfare* (London: Brassey's Defence, 1985); Richard Hooker, *Maneuver Warfare: An Anthology* (New York: Random House, 1993); Robert Leonard, *The Art of Maneuver: Maneuver Warfare and Air-Land Battle* (Novato: Presidio Press, 1994); Frans Osinga, *Science, Strategy and War: The Strategic Theory of John Boyd* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007).

<sup>6</sup> United States Marine Corps, *Marine Corps Doctrinal Publication 1: Warfighting* (Quantico, Marine Corps University, 1997), 73.

possible rather than attempting to first destroy all his other pieces. This is not to say that practitioners of maneuver warfare shy away from the attrition of the enemy's force, but that the attrition is not an end in and of itself and must lead to a more meaningful objective. Additionally, this attempt to shatter the enemy's cohesion is focused on the morale, the mental well being, and the confidence of one's opponent. Most importantly, the mind of the enemy's commander is under attack and "the ultimate goal is panic and paralysis, an enemy who has lost the will to resist."<sup>7</sup>

Second, maneuver warfare theory recognizes and emphasizes that warfare is a time-competitive process. Colonel John Boyd's famous "OODA loop" (observe, orient, decide, act) is an excellent example of this.<sup>8</sup> If a combatant is able to generate greater tempo, speed relative to the enemy, then he will hold a decisive advantage over his opponent. As MCDP 1 states, "Especially important is maneuver *in time*—we generate a faster operating tempo than the enemy to gain a temporal advantage."<sup>9</sup> To use another example from the game of chess, a force that achieves a temporal advantage over its enemy would be like being able to make multiple moves on the chess board to the opponent's single move.

In order to take full advantage of this temporal element, the use of decentralized command and control is critical. The use of decentralized command and control dramatically speeds up the decision making cycle because subordinate commanders do not have to wait on explicit instructions from their superiors. Instead, they act in accordance with their commander's *intent* instead of relying on detailed orders that cover every imaginable circumstance. This

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 74.

<sup>8</sup> John Boyd. *Patterns of Conflict* [http://www.dnipogo.org/boyd/patterns\\_ppt.pdf](http://www.dnipogo.org/boyd/patterns_ppt.pdf) (accessed on 10 Jan 2012)

<sup>9</sup> United States Marine Corps, *Marine Corps Doctrinal Publication 1: Warfighting* (Quantico, Marine Corps University, 1997), 72.

process generates tremendous tempo when fighting a more rigid and centralized opponent as the enemy is forced to await instructions while fleeting opportunities slip by.

The final characteristic of maneuver warfare is the desire to avoid enemy strengths, known as surfaces, and instead seek to find or create weakness, known as gaps. Once these gaps are located, then one can exploit them by pushing forces through to gain access to the enemy's rear area. This causes panic and disorder which is often out of proportion with the physical destruction caused by the exploitation force. The German blitzkrieg tactics of World War II are perhaps the most widely known example of this technique. However, it was a British Captain named B.H. Liddell Hart who described it so famously in a series of lectures during the interwar years. Often referred to as the "expanding torrent," Hart states:

If we watch a torrent bearing down on each successive bank or earthen dam in its path, we see that it first beats against the obstacle, feeling and testing it at all points. Eventually it finds a small crack at some point. Through this crack pour the first dribblets of water and rush straight on. The pent-up water on each side is drawn towards the breach. It swirls through and around the flanks of the breach, wearing away the earth on each side and so widening the gap. Simultaneously the water behind pours straight through the breach between the side eddies which are wearing away the flanks. Directly it has passed through it expands to widen once more the onrush of the torrent. Thus as the water pours through in ever-increasing volume the onrush of the torrent swells to its original proportions, leaving in turn each crumbling obstacle behind it.<sup>10</sup>

The current state of maneuver warfare theory is open for debate. Much of maneuver warfare theory was adopted by the United States Army in Air-Land Battle doctrine and by the United States Marine Corps in the original publication of FMFM-1. Proponents of maneuver warfare would point to OPERATION IRAQI FREEDOM in 2003 as an example of how this doctrine was validated in a high tempo offensive operation that quickly routed and destroyed Saddam Hussein's Iraqi Army. However, ten years of conducting largely static counterinsurgency

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<sup>10</sup> Basil H. Liddell-Hart, *The "Man-in-the-Dark" Theory of Infantry Tactics and the "Expanding Torrent" System of Attack* [http://regimentalrogue.com/misc/liddell-hart\\_man\\_in\\_the\\_dark.html](http://regimentalrogue.com/misc/liddell-hart_man_in_the_dark.html) (accessed on 10 Jan 2012)

operations has potentially dulled this edge. This, coupled with the ever increasing technological capability and temptation to centrally control operations will force the United States military to reconcile whether the Army and Marine Corps desire to readopt the tenets of maneuver warfare theory.

## Strategic Setting

At the turn of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, East Asia was dominated by several large empires and many smaller tribes that had carved out a semiautonomous existence from the larger empires. Three historical Mongol enemies bordered the Mongol homeland: the Xi Xia to the south, populated by the ethnically Chinese Tangut tribe (depicted in dark brown in figure 1); the Kara Khitai, made up of various nomadic steppe tribes (depicted in blue in figure 1); and to their south and southeast, the great Chin (also referred to as the Jin) Empire which was centered on the modern day city of Beijing (depicted in yellow in figure 1).<sup>11</sup>



(Figure 1: political map of Asia, Europe, and Africa showing the core Mongol tribes in blue and the Khwarazm Empire in dark green)<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Douglas Benson, *Mongol Campaigns in Asia*, (Mansfield: Book Masters, 1984), 42-46. The Chin Empire is often referred to as the Jin Dynasty, the Song Empire is sometimes referred to as the Han Dynasty.

<sup>12</sup> [http://mapas.owje.com/maps/11417\\_eurasia-in-1200.html](http://mapas.owje.com/maps/11417_eurasia-in-1200.html) (accessed on 5 Jan 2012)

As Genghis consolidated his power over the Mongol tribes in 1206 he immediately set off to expand his kingdom at the expense of the Xi Xia and Chin Kingdoms. For over a decade he waged a highly successful series of campaigns against these two nations, with the Xi Xia suing for peace and the Chin capital seized by Genghis' army. These successes brought the Mongols into contact with a large and powerful neighbor to their west: the Khwarazm Empire.<sup>13</sup> The Khwarazm Empire was a vast territory ruled by Khwarazm Shah Ala al-Din Muhammad.<sup>14</sup> The heart of this territory was in Persia but also included the recently acquired region known as Transoxania which lay to the east of Persia and consisted of modern-day Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Afghanistan.

War between the Mongols and the Khwarazm Empire was not a foregone conclusion, destined to happen. In fact, both Genghis Khan and the Khwarazm Shah had ample motivation to ensure war did not occur, at least he had time to consolidate his gains. However, events quickly unfolded that took these two great empires into a war of national survival, with tragic consequences for the Islamic world. Three distinct periods characterize relations between the two empires and each are briefly discussed in turn.

The two empires first came into contact with each other shortly after the Shah was able to annex Transoxania in 1215 which roughly doubled the size of his span of control. As he was consolidating his gains, the Shah sent an emissary to his new neighbor to the east, Genghis Khan.<sup>15</sup> No record exists of what specific instructions were given to this delegation but one could

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<sup>13</sup> Richard N. Frye, *The Golden Age of Persia: the Arabs in the East* (London: Phoenix, 2000), 95-100.

<sup>14</sup> Will be referred to as "Khwarazm Shah," "Muhammad," or simply "the Shah" for the remainder of this monograph.

<sup>15</sup> James Chambers, *The Devil's Horsemen, The Mongol Invasion of Europe* (London: Cassell Publishers Ltd, 1979), 2-3.

surmise their job was to ascertain the nature of their neighbor and assess their capabilities and intentions. As this Khwarazami emissary was traveling through Mongol-occupied areas of China they came upon the former Chin capital of Chung Tu which had been captured and brutally sacked by the Mongols in 1215. Upon nearing the city, the Khwarizami emissary observed the following scene of devastation and death:

Despite the city's submission, the besieging soldiers got out of hand, and unable to resist the lure of so gigantic a prize, sacked a great part of the capital and slew many thousands of the inhabitants. A Khorezmian embassy to the Mongol Khan, which passed by Chung Tu a few months later reports that the bones of the slaughtered formed whole mountains, that the soil was greasy with human fat and that the rotting bodies brought on an illness from which many of the embassy died.<sup>16</sup>

The reaction of the Shah to this account is lost to history; however it would seem that he should have taken at least three lessons from their report. First, the Mongols were capable of an extremely high threshold of violence and destruction upon their chosen enemy. Although scenes like the one reported by the Khwarazami emissary were not altogether uncommon during this timeframe, the Shah had inherited much of his kingdom and was able to conduct a relatively bloodless annexation of his recent acquisitions. Also, during his attempt to subjugate the Abbasid Caliphate of Bagdad and force the Sultan to acknowledge him as the ruler of all of Islam, the Shah's army was turned back by the harsh conditions and did not even participate in a pitched battle.<sup>17</sup> Thus, the Shah's rule had passed largely without engaging in anything resembling the total war that his delegates had witnessed in China.

The second lesson should have been that the Mongols were no mere cavalry force, capable only of swooping down on defenseless caravans and towns. In fact, the Mongol army had rapidly evolved into an all-arms force which was equally at ease fighting battles of maneuver

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<sup>16</sup> Desmond Martin, *The Rise of Chingis Khan and His Conquest of North China* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1950), 178.

<sup>17</sup> James Chambers, *The Devil's Horsemen, The Mongol Invasion of Europe* (London: Cassell Publishers Ltd, 1979), 3-4.

upon the open steppe or conducting siege warfare of large, walled cities. This account describes Chung Tu's physical defenses and provides some idea of the scale and sophistication of Mongol siege craft required to breach and overthrow these types of defenses:

Even in China, a land of great cities, the Chin capital was considered very large and its defenses exceptional. The walls, which were constructed of stamped clay and crowned with crenellated brick battlements, measured 54 li (approximately 18 miles) in circumference and attained a height of 40 feet. Their width is unrecorded, but judging from existing remains it must have been considerable. Those of present Peking, which are undoubtedly rather bigger, are 40 feet across the top and at least 50 feet at the base. Piercing the walls of the city were twelve gates, some say thirteen, and in addition to the fortifications protecting them, 900 towers and a triple line of moats.<sup>18</sup>

The third lesson is arguably more easily overlooked given the distances the Mongols were operating from their home territory. However, the Shah was soon to discover that the Mongols' unique brand of warfare provided them with a degree of mobility that is perhaps unparalleled in the history of warfare. This mobility was not simply tactical mobility that allowed them to attack and flee quickly, but operational and strategic reach that allowed the Mongols to cover vast distances and project considerable combat power in a relatively short period of time. In this instance, the Mongols pulled the majority of their forces out of China, moved them to Mongolia, and then moved against the Khwarazm Empire all within a two year period.<sup>19</sup> The sheer distances involved were vast with a total distance of roughly 2400 miles between the northern Chinese battlefields and the edge of the Shah's empire.<sup>20</sup> In the end, it was the Shah's inability to process these potential lessons learned gathered by his emissary that caused him to grossly underestimate Mongol capabilities.

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<sup>18</sup> Desmond Martin, *The Rise of Chingis Khan and His Conquest of North China* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1950), 168.

<sup>19</sup> Richard A. Gabriel, *Subotai the Valiant: Genghis Khan's Greatest General* (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 2004), 72-75.

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/> (accessed on 20 February 2012)

The second period of contact between the two empires is an interesting one to consider. In the year 1218 Genghis Khan launched a punitive campaign against the Naiman tribes who had resisted him during previous campaigns. He dispatched two forces with roughly 20,000 troops each. The first was the main effort under the command of his son Jebe whose mission was to subjugate the Naimans and specifically ensure the death of their renegade leader, Kuchlug. The second column's mission was to serve as a covering force in case the Khwarazm army attempted to intercede on the Naiman's behalf as the Naiman's had previously paid a tribute to the Shah for protection. This force, commanded by another of Genghis' sons Jochi, penetrated across the Tien Shan and the Pamir Mountains into the Fergana valley, which was part of the Shah's recently acquired territory.<sup>21</sup> During this incursion into the Shah's territory, Jochi's force clashed with elements of the Shah's army. Although the Mongols were eventually driven off, they inflicted heavy casualties on the Shah's army. Apparently this clash convinced the Shah that his army would be at a disadvantage if they fought the Mongols in open warfare and helped shape some of his strategic and operational decisions that would have great consequences for the upcoming campaign.<sup>22</sup>

Despite the fact that the Mongols and the Khwarazami army had met on the open battlefield, this incident did not provoke immediate war. In fact, the engagement heralded the third and final chapter of pre-war negotiations between the two empires. After the campaign against the Naiman tribesmen had concluded in the annexation of what is modern-day northwestern China, the great Khan dispatched his own emissaries to the Shah seeking to

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<sup>21</sup> Richard A. Gabriel, *Subotai the Valiant: Genghis Khan's Greatest General* (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 2004), 70-72.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.



formalize trade relations.<sup>23</sup> The great Silk Road, which in reality was not a road in the contemporary fashion but a web of routes, cities, and water sources that spread from Europe into Asia, ran for thousands of miles inside both these empire's borders. Control of this road had long been a financial boon for those cities and territories and both nations stood to benefit from this trade.<sup>24</sup>

The Shah made no formal acceptance or declination of these political and economic gambits, although it does appear that he suspected Genghis' true intentions. Whatever the Mongol's true intent was, in the same year a large trading caravan arrived at the border city of Otrar. The governor of Otrar accused the Mongols traders of being spies, sent to sow panic and fear in his city. Although it is possible, even probable that Genghis would have sought to gain intelligence on his potential enemies by debriefing the traders, it is doubtful they were spies in the strict sense of the word. In any case, with the blessings of the Shah, the governor of Otrar had the merchants slaughtered. One survivor made it back to tell the tale of the massacre.<sup>25</sup>

In a move that highlighted Genghis' predisposition to not wage a war against the Khwarazm Empire, at least not yet, he dispatched three emissaries to see the Shah. Genghis asked for retribution and for the governor of Otrar to be punished, which likely meant execution. However, the Shah had apparently made up his mind that war with the Mongols was inevitable. He killed one of the ambassadors and burned the beards of the other two who returned to tell the Khan that the Shah had chosen war. This series of events placed these two great empires on a

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<sup>23</sup> James Chambers, *The Devil's Horsemen, The Mongol Invasion of Europe* (London: Cassell Publishers, 1979), 5.

<sup>24</sup> German Fedorov-Davydov, *The Silk Road and the Cities of the Golden Horde* (Berkley: Zinat Press, 2001), 8.

<sup>25</sup> James Chambers, *The Devil's Horsemen, The Mongol Invasion of Europe* (London: Cassell Publishers Ltd, 1979), 5.

collision course that resulted in the destruction of the Khwarazm Empire and rule of this region by the descendants of the Mongols for centuries thereafter.

## **Mongol Considerations**

Despite the affront committed by the Shah, the strategic timing was far from ripe as Genghis Khan pondered the decision to war in 1218. First and foremost, the Mongols were involved in a protracted war with the Chinese. In fact they were at war with two distinct Chinese states at the time of the war with the Khwarazm Empire. The Xi Xia Empire, which was situated along the northwestern border between China and Mongolia, had been at war with the Mongols for ten years. Although the Mongols clearly held the upper hand in 1218, the Xi Xia still had to be considered a threat and in fact were not completely subjugated by the Mongols until 1226.<sup>26</sup>

The second of these Chinese states was the Chin Empire, which lay further to the south of Mongolia. It was far larger and held significantly more military potential than the Xi Xia. The Mongols had been campaigning against the Chin since 1211 with literally dozens of large-scale battles and sieges and hundreds of smaller engagements. The Mongols had repeatedly achieved success on the battlefield only to have the Chinese raise yet another army from the seemingly inexhaustible reserve of manpower to oppose them. As previously mentioned, the Mongols successfully besieged and captured the Chin capital of Chung Tu in 1215. The Chin however simply relocated their capital further south and continued to fight. The Chin were not completely defeated until 1234.<sup>27</sup>

Another Mongol consideration was the fact that they had been continuously at war since the turn of the century, either pacifying other local nomadic tribes or in conflict with the large

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<sup>26</sup> Douglas Benson, *Mongol Campaigns in Asia* (Mansfield: Book Masters, 1984), 183.

<sup>27</sup> Stephen Turnbull, *Genghis Khan and the Mongol Conquests 1190-1400* (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2003), 11.

Chinese empires. Thus, as Genghis considered his options he faced the specter of a two-front war with two enormous kingdoms that possessed vast resources. Most scholars agree that Genghis did have some idea of the relative strengths and weaknesses of the Khwarazm Empire. In some cases this information was gleaned through the small diplomatic and military engagements between the two peoples, but notably Genghis also received detailed information on the fractures within the Shah's political system from highly placed yet disaffected subjects of the Shah.<sup>28</sup> In the end, perhaps the prize was too alluring or the affront to Genghis' honor too great to avoid war. The die had been cast, and the Mongols would now give their full attention to their neighbor to the west.

### **Khwarazami Considerations**

To be sure, if the Mongols ever doubted if war with the Shah was the best strategic choice, the Shah had a multitude of reasons to avoid war. To understand some of these reasons, one must first seek to understand the political and demographic restraints that the Shah operated under. The Khwarazm Empire was not at all a homogeneous one, but instead contained two very distinct entities. The heart of the original empire was in Persia and correspondingly the majority of the people from this region were ethnically Persian. These people generally lived a sedentary lifestyle in cities or in small villages where they tended their crops. However, the recently annexed region of Transoxania was largely made up of nomadic Turkish peoples. These two distinct ethnicities did not share common lifestyles or political systems and thus their cooperation could only be compelled by the point of the sword. This, coupled with the fact that the Turkish leaders in Transoxania had been deposed and imprisoned, did not make for a harmonious relationship between the two halves of the empire.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> David Morgan, *The Mongols* (New York: Basil Blackwood, 1986), 53.

<sup>29</sup> Leo De Hartog, *Genghis Khan: Conqueror of the World* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1999), 125-126.

To further exacerbate these fractures, the Shah himself was of Turkish decent as his mother was a descendant of the ethnically Turkish Qipchaq tribe. Furthermore, his mother apparently wielded considerable if not dominant political power as she held the loyalty of the Turkish mercenaries which made up the most capable elements of the army. Finally, the Shah's army had not been forced to campaign against a foe that rivaled it in size and capability, having only needed to use its imposing bulk to force weaker states to come under the Shah's dominion.

As Morgan summarizes:

The state's weaknesses were speedily revealed under such a strain... taken together with the acute tensions that existed between the Turkish and Persian elements in the army, seems to have made Muhammad reluctant to concentrate his forces against the Mongols, lest his army's first act should be his own deposition.<sup>30</sup>

The one potentially unifying force that the Shah might have utilized was religion. Although distinctly different by ethnicity and culture, the Turks and Persians did share their Islamic beliefs. Unfortunately for the Shah, he had already attempted a campaign against the Abbasid Caliphate in Bagdad in an attempt to install his own spiritual ruler of Islam but was turned back by fierce storms in the high mountain passes in the winter of 1216.<sup>31</sup> As a result, not only was he unpopular with many of his subjects due to secular politics, but because the Caliph of Bagdad was the leader of the Islamic community and was using his influence to undermine the Shah's authority to rule based on a religious basis.

Despite the many sound reasons that could have led the Shah to conclude that the time was not ripe to wage war against the Mongols, he instead convinced himself that he could, at a minimum, withstand a Mongol invasion, and could likely defeat the Mongols decisively. This

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<sup>30</sup> David Morgan, *The Mongols* (New York: Basil Blackwood, 1986), 53.

<sup>31</sup> James Chambers, *The Devil's Horsemen, The Mongol Invasion of Europe* (London: Cassell Publishers, 1979), 4.

victory would then put him into position to further his influence and annex yet more territories. This decision would have tragic consequences for his people and for him personally.

### **Khwarazmi Pre-invasion planning**

As the Shah contemplated the inevitable Mongol invasion, it is likely he considered the primary Mongol avenue of approach into his kingdom to be the one that skirted the northern edge of the Tien Shan range and entered into Khwarazm from the northeast. This approach allowed any invader to move his army from water source to water source and precluded the necessity to cross any large deserts or high mountains. However, he made no preparations against the use of the old Silk Road route that Jochi had recently used to penetrate into the Fergana Valley. Another assumption the Shah appeared to have made is that the Mongols were launching a punitive campaign against the governor of Otrar, who had precipitated this crisis by slaughtering the Mongol caravan. This would allow the brunt of the Mongol attack to be dissipated on the periphery of the Shah's kingdom and would protect his political and economic seat of Samarkand. Finally, the Shah's inability to trust his army's loyalty and capability in open warfare proved to decisively influence his decision on the disposition of his army. As De Hartog states:

The reason Sultan Ala'adin made no attempt to mobilize a Turkestani national army probably has to do with the nature of those forces, for they were politically feudal in character, and therefore militarily decentralized and unaccustomed to coordinated operations in field warfare. Since Ala'adin was not only uncertain of his enemy's troop strengths but also the reliability of his own feudal army, he was understandably reluctant to risk everything on one decisive battle at the border.<sup>32</sup>

Although the Shah has been roundly criticized in both modern and ancient accounts of this campaign, the disposition of his army seems entirely sensibly given the circumstances.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Leo De Hartog, *Genghis Khan: Conqueror of the World* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1999), 127.

<sup>33</sup> Ala al-Din Ata Malik ibn Muhammad Juvaini, *The History of the World Conqueror*, translated by J.A. Boyle (Cambridge: Harvard Press, 1958), 116.

However, he did make two fatal assumptions that would prove to be incorrect and would lead to his empire's sudden and total destruction. First, he completely underestimated the Mongol's operational mobility and their ability to operate in climates and accept privations that would destroy most armies. As the discussion of the campaign will reveal, the Shah had a very specific expectation of how the campaign would unfold and was entirely unprepared for the Mongol's ability to coordinate large formations separated by hundreds of miles.

Secondly, the Shah felt he could deploy his army and protect his population in large fortified towns and force the Mongols to lay siege to them. He clearly hoped this would tie down large Mongol forces as they invested the various towns and that the Mongol siege craft was not advanced enough to breach the large and modern stone walled defenses. However, as previously discussed, Mongol siege technology had greatly improved during their campaigns in China and this highly organized and capable siege train would have little difficulty in breaching the walls of dozens of cities inside Khwarazm.<sup>34</sup> Ultimately, the Shah's decision to fight defensively provided the Mongols with the operational time and space which they used to great effect as they planned their concept of operations for the upcoming campaign.

## **Mongol Pre-invasion planning**

As Genghis Khan and his chief military planner Subotai began developing their concept for the invasion of Khwarazm, their first order of business was to ensure that this campaign did not result in a complete loss of momentum or reversal of fortune in China. Thus, they left Mukhali, a trusted subordinate, in charge of the campaign against the Chin Empire. His mission was simple in concept yet potentially challenging in execution. Most importantly, he was to ensure the Chin were unable to counterattack and recoup the losses they had suffered in the

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<sup>34</sup> Richard A. Gabriel, *Subotai the Valiant: Genghis Khan's Greatest General* (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 2004), 76.

previous ten years of war. Secondly, if the Chin did not attempt to retake lost ground, he would harry the Chin and provide them with limited breathing space needed to rebuild their armies. He had to achieve these operational objectives while ensuring he assumed minimal risk of his force becoming decisively engaged and defeated.<sup>35</sup>

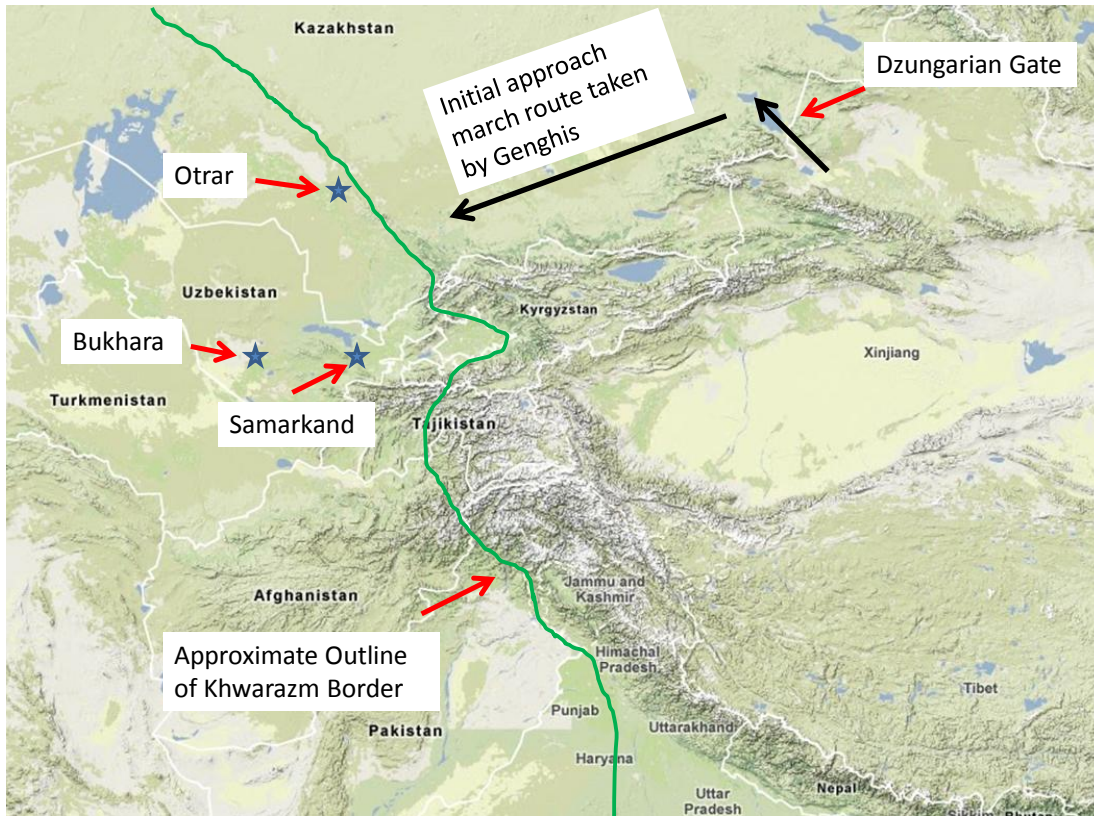
The strategic risk the Mongols were assuming in doing this was not insignificant. Mukhali's force would be quite isolated from the Mongol main body operating against the Shah with little hope of reinforcement if it came to grief in northern China. Mukhali was obviously a highly trusted general as he would, for all practical purposes, be out of contact with Genghis for the duration of his campaign due to the fact that the airline distance from Chung Tu, China to Samarkand in Khwarazm is approximately 2500 miles or roughly the same distance as New York City to Los Angeles.<sup>36</sup> Although Mukhali's operations against the Chin do not directly impact the operations against Khwarazm, it is brought up here only to illuminate the point that the Mongols placed great confidence in their subordinate commanders and expected them to be able to operate within the framework of their commander's intent, even at the operational and strategic levels. After securing their strategic rear area, the next challenge the Mongols faced was to be the method and timing of an extremely long approach march they would have to make to reach the borders of the Shah's land. Operational surprise regarding the initial route of the invasion would be difficult if not impossible to achieve as the main body would be forced to travel through the Dzungarian Gate in modern-day eastern Kazakhstan and follow the northern Silk Road route which would lead into the northern border of Khwarazm along the Syr Darya River.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Paul Ratchnevsky, *Genghis Khan: His Life and Legacy* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1991), 121.

<sup>36</sup> Distances based on Google map.

<sup>37</sup> Richard Gabriel, *Subotai the Valiant: Genghis Khan's Greatest General* (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 2004), 77.



**(Figure 2: Map of Mongol route to Khwarazm Empire with modern borders superimposed for ease of reference. Map background exported from Google Earth with additions by the author.)**

This route was approximately 2000 miles in length and would take months to traverse. Furthermore, the Mongol army had to be ready to fight a campaign at the end of this epic journey. Genghis and Subotai thus made three critical decisions that would have dramatic impact on the upcoming campaign. The first was to make the approach march from Mongolia across the vast steppes to Khwarazm during the winter. Although, this caused significant privation during the long march, it allowed the Mongols to arrive on the Shah's borders just as the spring grasses were beginning to grow. The presence of plentiful fodder allowed their mounts to gain health prior to the outset of actual combat operations while simultaneously obviating the need for the Mongols to feed their horses from a centralized logistics system. The fact they could simply graze as the campaign developed provided the Mongols with unmatched tactical and operational mobility.



The second key decision undertaken by Genghis and Subotai was the dispatch of another of the Khan's sons, Jagatai, as an advance party along the intended route of movement.<sup>38</sup> Although this northern Silk Road route was heavily traveled by caravans and such, Jagatai's force ensured that the route was completely secure and that bridges were built over the more demanding river crossing sites. It is said that Jagatai's men built over 48 bridges which allowed horses, camels, and even the rare wheeled wagons to cross while expending a minimal amount of energy. In today's military vernacular, it could be said that these shaping actions allowed Genghis' main body to conduct a simple administrative move instead of being forced to conduct a lengthy movement to contact.

The final decision made by Genghis and Subotai is that they would seek to exploit the immobility of the Shah's army by not only attacking along the most likely avenue of approach but along four distinct axis of advance. By spreading his already outnumbered force, Genghis was assuming considerable risk. However, he felt he had gauged the Shah's intentions to fight a relatively static campaign correctly. The relative immobility of the Shah's army mitigated the risk to the Mongol's force and allowed Genghis to execute one of the more breathtaking campaigns in the history of warfare in terms of its scale and complexity.

## **Campaign against the Khwarazm Shah**

### **Area of Operations and Topography**

Before delving into the details of the campaign, a brief description of the area of operations is in order. The nature of this area is first and foremost defined by its vast size. Stretching from the deserts west of the Aral Sea in the west, the high mountain passes over the Tien Shan range and the Pamir Mountains in the east, the Amu Darya River in the south and the

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 75.

grass steppes beyond the Syr Darya River in the north, it is a region that encompasses over four hundred thousand square miles. By comparison, this is roughly the same size of modern-day France, Germany, Belgium and the Netherlands combined. Genghis' forces were stretched along the north and eastern arch of this area and deprived him the benefit of interior lines. To continue the comparison to the European land mass, it would be as if Genghis' western flank was in Brest, France and his eastern flank was in Berlin, Germany.<sup>39</sup>

The second topographic characteristic of this area is that it is a land of climatic extremes. In the east, where the Mongols moved against the Shah's right flank in the Fergana Valley, the mountain passes along the southern Silk Road Route top out at an astonishing height of over 11,500 feet. These passes are typically choked with heavy snowfall during the winter months and deep into the spring.<sup>40</sup> In west, along the shores of the Aral Sea sits the Kyzyl Kum desert, a highly inhospitable area to mount a military operation with little to no grassland or water until one reaches the banks of the Amu Darya or Syr Darya Rivers.

The cities that dot this vast landscape are found in three areas: the Amu Darya River valley, the Syr Darya River valley, and along the western flanks of the Tien Shan where water is more plentiful due to mountain runoff and the climate more temperate. Of these cities, chief among them were Bukhara, once the seat of the Samanid Empire and the intellectual center of the Islamic world, and Samarkand which was the principal trading center in the region. Samarkand had grown fabulously wealthy due to its central location along the Silk Road:

By some accounts it was a magnificent city of some 500,000 inhabitants, a community of craftsman, merchants, Chinese artisans, leather workers, goldsmiths and silversmiths. In the fields beyond the city walls aubergines and melons were grown, to be packed in snow inside lead-lined boxes for export. The streets were lined with shady trees, cooled by

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<sup>39</sup> <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/> (accessed on 20 Feb 2012)

<sup>40</sup> Elevations derived from Google map

fountains and decorated with gardens, and under the Khwarazm Shah Samarkand became one of the most magnificent cities in Asia.<sup>41</sup>

In addition to its economic importance, the Shah had recently chosen to make Samarkand his capital city, making it not only the economic hub but the political center of gravity as well.

## Opening Moves

As discussed earlier, the Shah had chosen to deploy his troops in various garrison cities throughout the region. As the Mongols neared his frontier in early 1220, the Shah finished his preparations and awaited the attack. There were 50,000 men stationed in Otrar along the northeast border, ready to absorb the initial blows of the Mongol advance. 20,000 soldiers remained in Bukhara to help secure his rear area. The largest contingent was an impressive garrison of 110,000 men in Samarkand of which 50,000<sup>42</sup> were elite Turkish mercenaries with the Shah himself personally in command.<sup>43</sup> It also appears that the Shah sensibly maintained a robust mobile reserve of some 50,000 loyal Turkish mercenaries.<sup>44</sup> Their exact location as the campaign began is lost to history but one can logically assume that they would have been under the command of a trusted subordinate and deployed perhaps near the mouth of the Fergana Valley. There it would have been within striking distance of the northern border cities, the Fergana Valley where the Shah's men had battle Jochi two years prior, and within easy reach to reinforce the capital of Samarkand as required. Finally, the remaining elements of the Shah's 400,000 man

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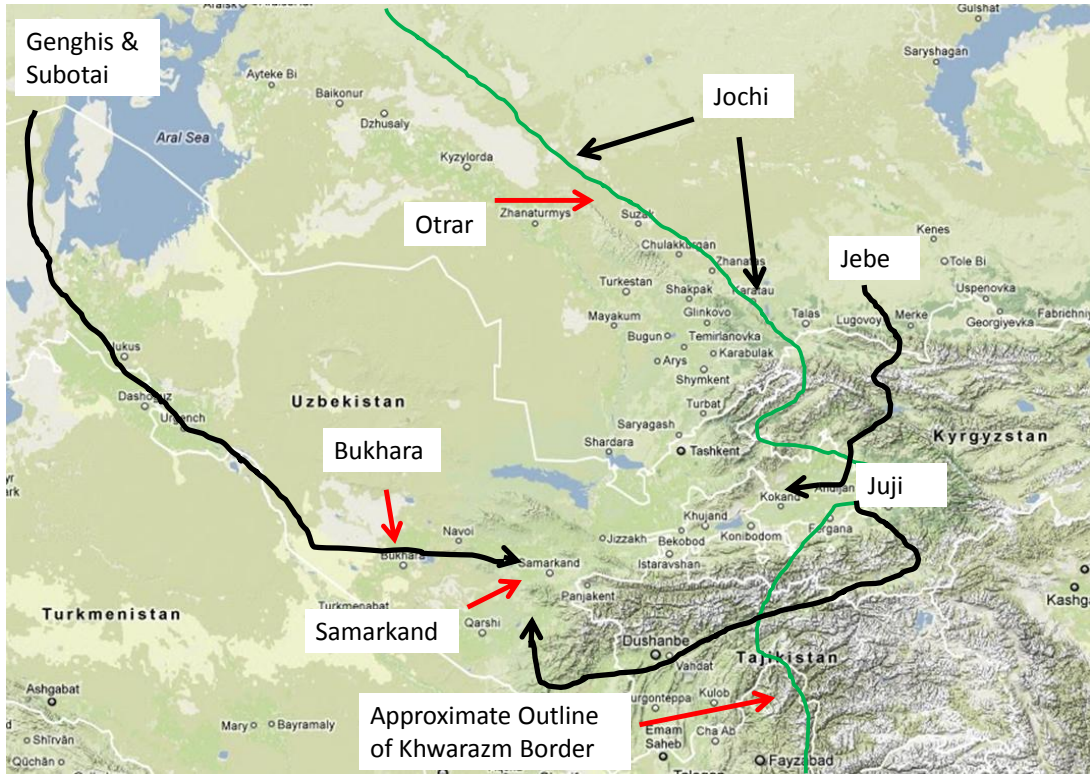
<sup>41</sup> Robert Marshall, *Storm from the East: from Genghis Khan to Khubilai Khan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 49.

<sup>42</sup> All troops strengths are approximate.

<sup>43</sup> Paul Ratchnevsky, *Genghis Khan: His Life and Legacy* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1991), 132-33.

<sup>44</sup> Richard A. Gabriel, *Subotai the Valiant: Genghis Khan's Greatest General* (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 2004), 78.

army were dispersed in small garrisons in the lesser cities throughout the kingdom such as Herat, Balkh, Merv, and Nishapur.



(Figure 3: Map of Mongol columns as they advanced into Khwarazm Empire with modern borders superimposed for ease of reference. Map background exported from Google Earth with additions by the author.)

As the Mongols completed their lengthy approach march, they began to divide their already outnumbered command of 150,000 men into various elements, each with their own distinct and important mission. The first element to detach comprised of some 10,000 men under the command of Jebe, one of Genghis' oldest and most trusted subordinates. Jebe was instructed to penetrate into the Shah's territory in the vicinity of the Fergana Valley.<sup>45</sup> There he was to draw

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 78.

out as many of the Shah's forces as possible and keep them fixed to the east where they would be out of position to reinforce to the north or to the west, where the main attack would eventually originate.

Scholars are mute on the exact route that Jebe took but two seem plausible. The first would involve him detaching from the Mongol main body even before they reached the Dzungarian Gates and moving along the southern Silk Road towards Kashgar, then crossing into the Fergana Valley from the south. Another more plausible route would see Jebe detaching from the main body somewhere in the vicinity of the modern city of Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan and moving south through the Tien Shan range. This northern route would have required Jebe to brave high mountain passes that approached 10,000 feet and do so during the winter when they were sure to be choked with snow. However, the Mongols showed they could navigate this terrain as these passes were not quite as high as the pass they would eventually cross to reach the Fergana Valley.<sup>46</sup> The northern route also provided the obvious advantage of keeping Jebe in close contact with Genghis until the last possible moment, thus easing command and control issues although the Mongols certainly show in this campaign their willingness to have independent elements operating well beyond what most other armies would be comfortable with.

Interestingly, once Jebe had reported back that he had found his way through the passes, Genghis and Subotai quickly made the decision to heavily reinforce this supporting effort with an additional 20,000 men under the command of Genghis' son Juji.<sup>47</sup> This provided Jebe with the additional combat power to engage a much larger Khwarazm force, and also gave him operational flexibility to further subdivide his force and wreak havoc and create the illusion that this was a much larger and more decisive element of Genghis' army.

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<sup>46</sup> Elevations derived from Google map

<sup>47</sup> Richard A. Gabriel, *Subotai the Valiant: Genghis Khan's Greatest General* (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 2004), 79.

The second prong and second largest contingent of Genghis' army was assigned the critical task of fixing the Shah's attention on the most obvious and likely avenue of approach along his northeastern border. Again, the chroniclers fail to reveal its exact size and composition but it is known that Jochi was in overall command. Jochi's mission was to attack the Shah's frontline defenses along the Syr Darya River, fix his attention here, and most importantly convince the Shah that this was the Mongol's main effort. This mission required the full repertoire of generalship as Jochi had to simultaneously lay siege to Otrar and its garrison of 50,000 men while actively demonstrating along a several hundred mile front to make it appear he was probing for a weak spot to exploit. Additionally, the mission required a gambler's courage and to face down the majority of the Shah's army while Genghis' main effort moved around the Shah's western flank.<sup>48</sup> Finally, the exquisite timing between this fixing attack and Genghis' main body despite the hundreds of miles of physical separation is truly impressive and gives account to Jochi's skill as a operational level commander.

As mentioned, the exact force size is unknown but it had to have been a considerable force. Assuming that the Mongol army had roughly 150,000 troops available and the combination of Jebe and Juji totaled 30,000 troops, one could estimate that Jochi would have had between 50,000 and 70,000 men under his command. It is likely his force would have been closer to the former number as Genghis would have wanted to retain the preponderance of his force for the decisive blow. Once he shut the 50,000 defenders of Otrar inside the Mongol siege lines, it would have provided him the opportunity to pull some of his troops to conduct reconnaissance, security, and offensive operations throughout the remainder of his area of operations. Furthermore, it is plausible that Jochi had direct control of the preponderance of the Mongol siege equipment as

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<sup>48</sup> James Chambers, *The Devil's Horsemen, The Mongol Invasion of Europe* (London: Cassell Publishers, 1979), 12.

Jebe could not have transported this equipment through the high mountain passes. However, it seems likely that Genghis did bring some siege equipment with his column as he did conduct two short siege operations against Bukhara and Samarkand although he would not have wanted to encumber his force with excessive amounts of heavy equipment. These factors, coupled with the Shah's preconceived notion that this would be the axis of advance for Genghis' main effort and the tactical and operational mobility, allowed Jochi to keep the Shah's attention fixated to his north.

The third element of Genghis' army was under his personal command and would strike the decisive blow in this campaign. It is likely this force approached 70,000 men which gave it the combat power needed to quickly overcome any resistance found in the open field and still have the strength to quickly besiege and breach any city fortresses it might encounter along the way. Mongol spies and disaffected Khwarzami citizens had informed Genghis and Subotai of another route into the heart of the Shah's kingdom: an unguarded and an entirely unexpected route. As Jochi began his fixing attack along the Shah's northern border, Genghis swung his main body far to the west, around the northern and western shores of the Aral Sea to emerge near the terminus of the Amu Darya River as it divides up into a delta before flowing into the southern end of the Aral Sea.<sup>49</sup> Once here, Genghis was directly in the Shah's rear area, operating in a lush river valley that provided water and fodder for his mounts, with no force of any significance between him and the Shah's capital of Samarkand.

## **Next Steps**

One of the most remarkable aspects of this campaign is the Mongol's ability to coordinate greatly dispersed maneuver elements and achieve near perfect timing. Nowhere was this talent more in evidence than with the eastern maneuver elements commanded by Jebe and

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<sup>49</sup>Ibid., 13.

Juji. As the campaign began in earnest, these forces completed their epic march over the Tien Shan Range and into the Fergana Valley, they were the first element of the Mongol army to penetrate into the Shah's territory. Their arrival must have surprised the Shah somewhat, not because the direction was entirely unexpected since this was basically the same route used by Jochi two years prior, but the Shah had seldom seen anyone capable of crossing the high mountain passes during the winter. Additionally, it must be assumed he expected the main Mongol thrust to enter his kingdom from the northeast as this was the most likely avenue of approach.

In any case, the sudden appearance of 30,000 Mongol horsemen at an unexpected place and time must have been unsettling to the Shah. He quickly made the fateful decision to dispatch his entire mobile reserve, some 50,000 highly trained and loyal Turkic mercenaries, to deal with this incursion.<sup>50</sup> The decision to dispatch a force of some kind to address this threat to his eastern flank is a logical one given what the Shah likely knew at the time. However, the fact he deployed his entire reserve to deal with the first Mongol gambit was, in hindsight, an unmitigated disaster. This move robbed the Shah of the one force capable of meeting a large Mongol contingent on the open battlefield and holding their own. Furthermore, the operational significance of the Fergana Valley is dubious. A glance at the topography shows that the Mongols could have been bottled up at the valley's western mouth and all other routes simply lead back over the mountains. Although Fergana was, and still is, one of the most agricultural rich areas in the region, any damage done by the Mongols could likely have been quickly rebuilt after the campaign. One is reminded of Admiral Halsey's decision to attempt to engage the Japanese carriers while leaving the landing

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<sup>50</sup> Richard A. Gabriel, *Subotai the Valiant: Genghis Khan's Greatest General* (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 2004), 78.



force uncovered during the Battle of the Leyte Gulf during World War II.<sup>51</sup> In any case, the Shah's decision to deploy the entire mobile reserve to deal with a small force that is operating in an area that was not operationally critical proved to be one of the decisive moments of the entire campaign.

Of course, this development is exactly what Genghis and Subotai had hoped to accomplish as now the balance of operational mobility swung even more into the Mongol's favor. With the Shah's attention fixed to the east, Jebe and Juji would have to keep it there. The first decision they undertook was to give battle to the Shah's elite reserve in the Fergana Valley. Although their force had been greatly weakened by their trek through the mountains, these commanders correctly deduced that they needed to risk a pitched battle in order to accomplish their mission of fixing a large contingent of the Shah's army inside the Fergana Valley.<sup>52</sup> Details of this battle are sparse, but the Shah's troops came close to decisively defeating the Mongols although both sides suffered heavy casualties. This defeat forced Jebe and Juji to withdraw, however the Shah once again made a critical error. Instead of following up his victory with pursuit, he allowed the Mongols to reconstitute and regain the initiative by leaving one force under Jebe in the Fergana Valley who dispatched Juji further south to menace the Shah's rear area and sow confusion to the south of the capital. The boldness and risk associated with this decision cannot be understated as it required to Jebe's force to actively operate yet avoid decisive

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<sup>51</sup> The Battle of Leyte Gulf was a naval battle fought in 1944 between the United State Navy and the Imperial Japanese Fleet. Admiral Halsey was in overall command of a large amphibious landing on the Philippine island of Leyte as well as the covering force whose mission was to protect the landings. Halsey, feeling he had an opportunity to engage and decisively destroy the Japanese Navy, left the landing uncovered and chased a Japanese decoy fleet. This decision nearly led to the destruction of the landing force and has been widely criticized by scholars who have written on this subject.

<sup>52</sup> Richard A. Gabriel, *Subotai the Valiant: Genghis Khan's Greatest General* (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 2004), 78-79.

engagement in order to fix the Shah's reserves inside the Fergana Valley. However, apparently Jebe sensed the timidity of the Shah and correctly deduced that he could further divide his force.

At this point, the Shah erroneously must have thought that the campaign was proceeding much as he expected. Although the first Mongol thrust was from an unexpected timing and direction, he had turned it aside and secured his flank. Unfortunately, much like General Hooker at the Battle of Chancellorsville when General Lee divided his forces twice in the face of a numerically superior enemy, he was blind to Genghis' true designs.<sup>53</sup> The next Mongol attack fell in an expected direction as Otrar and the other smaller cities along the Syr Darya River came under attack from Jochi's columns. This did not greatly concern the Shah as he felt secure in his assumption that Otrar was sufficiently provisioned and its garrison could hold out in its strong citadel until relieved later. Thus, the Shah did nothing, not realizing that the attack to the north was not the main effort and not appreciating that his reserves were completely out of position to the east.

Probably the first indication to the Shah that things were amiss was Juji's reappearance far to the south along the Amu Darya River. As mentioned earlier, Jebe and Juji split their forces after the battle against the Shah's elite Turkish mercenaries in the Fergana Valley. Jebe remained there to continue to fix the Shah's reserves in place. Juji was able to slip away, cross the mountains and work his way to the southwest from the headwaters of the Amu Darya River, past the modern-day site of the city of Dushanbe and the current border between Afghanistan and

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<sup>53</sup> The Battle of Chancellorsville was a battle in northern Virginia during the U.S. Civil War between General Lee's Confederate Army of Northern Virginia and General Hooker's Union Army of the Potomac. Although Lee was outnumbered over two to one, he twice divided his force in the face of Hooker's army and launched a daring attack that smashed Hooker's flank which eventually compelled Hooker to withdraw north of the Rappahannock River, thus ending the campaign. Chancellorsville is widely viewed by scholars as an example of the dangers of surrendering the initiative to an opponent, even one that is numerically inferior.

Uzbekistan.<sup>54</sup> When he emerged north of the city of Balkh and began destroying the undefended towns along the Amu Darya River, the shock to the Shah had to be considerable.

Juji's force was relatively small, only 20,000 men, but he was able to wreak great havoc in the Shah's rear area. The Shah had no way of knowing the exact size of Juji's force, only that his rear area was completely exposed and that the Mongols were not playing according to the script that he had written prior to the campaign. At this moment of crisis, the Shah did nothing. His reserves remained inactive in the Fergana Valley, he made no attempt to transfer from his garrison at Samarkand, reconstitute his reserve force and attempt to restore the security of his rear area. One could make the logical conclusion that it is at this moment that the great Khwarazm-Shah, the "Second Alexander," the "chosen prince of Allah" began to lose his nerve.

Just at the moment that things apparently could not get any worse that is exactly what happened. Like a thunderclap, Genghis' main force completed its march through the Kyzyl Kum desert and reappeared along the Amu Darya River some 300 west of Samarkand.<sup>55</sup> It is clear based on the disposition of the Shah's army prior to the start of the campaign and his action soon after Genghis' appearance on his western flank, that the Shah never contemplated this type of envelopment in his murkiest dreams. It was now obvious that this was not a punitive campaign solely against the governor of Otrar to avenge the murdered merchants and diplomats. This was a war of national survival and Genghis meant to destroy not only the Shah's kingdom, but the Shah as well.

Genghis moved quickly up the Amu Darya valley while his horses and men regained their strength from the lengthy march through the desert. Within a few days he was within 30 or

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<sup>54</sup> Richard A. Gabriel, *Subotai the Valiant: Genghis Khan's Greatest General* (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 2004), 80.

<sup>55</sup> James Chambers, *The Devil's Horsemen, The Mongol Invasion of Europe* (London: Cassell Publishers, 1979), 13.

so miles from Bukhara and he turned east away from the river to reach the city's outskirts. After a short siege, the city fell and its garrison were slaughtered, its walls pulled down, most of the city's dwelling burned, and its citizens forced to pay heavy tributes to avoid certain death. It is said Genghis himself mounted the pulpit in the largest mosque and told the citizens "It is your leaders who have committed these crimes, and I am the punishment of God."<sup>56</sup>

At this point things had gone from bad to worse for the Shah. Just as Genghis was descending on Bukhara, word reached his ears that Otrar had fallen, an event which would free up a Jochi's force of 50,000 men to move across the Syr Darya River and reinforce Genghis' main column as it began to near Samarkand. The Shah realized at this moment that he must flee or die, and he chose flight rather than certain death in the inevitable siege and sack of Samarkand. From this moment until his eventual death less than a year later, he was hounded by Genghis' men as he fled from city to city until he finally died of pleurisy on a small island in the southern Caspian Sea, dressed in rags taken from one of his servants. As Robert Marshal stated, "it was a most unregal performance."<sup>57</sup>

Shortly after, Genghis arrived at the gates of Samarkand to complete the encirclement of the Shah's last remaining army that was any threat to his forces. Due to the unwise decision by the garrison commander to march out and face Genghis in open battle beyond the city's walls, the large army was quickly cut down to half of its original 120,000 man size. After a sizable contingent of 30,000 nomadic tribesmen unilaterally surrendered to the Mongols in the hopes they would be viewed as kinsman and spared, the citizens of Samarkand had no choice but to throw their gates open and surrender in an attempt to win the Great Khan's leniency. Ultimately,

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<sup>56</sup> Ala al-Din Ata Malik ibn Muhammad Juvaini. *The History of the World Conqueror*, translated by J.A. Boyle (Cambridge: Harvard Press, 1958), 105.

<sup>57</sup> Robert Marshall, *Storm from the East: from Genghis Khan to Khubilai Khan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 53.

the nomadic tribesmen were killed because Genghis viewed their actions as treacherous to their liege.<sup>58</sup> Tens of thousands skilled craftsmen and laborers were marched away into captivity while the remainder of the citizens were permitted to buy their freedom for the sum of 200,000 dinars.<sup>59</sup>

At this point the campaign was, fall all intents and purposes, over. Genghis dispatched a special corps of troops commanded by Subotai to pursue and kill or capture the Shah. Subotai pursued the Shah with great vigor, only pausing to destroy the occasional town foolish enough not to surrender. Subotai's men nearly captured the Shah on multiple occasions and last sighted him as he fled aboard a small skiff as he fled towards his final resting place of the island of Abeskum on the Caspian Sea.<sup>60</sup> While conducting this pursuit it became obvious to Subotai that the western half of the Shah's empire posed little threat for the creation of a new army or any significant insurrection against Genghis' forces. As in other territories he had already occupied, Genghis kept his policy of religious tolerance and administration by the indigenous people. This, coupled with the fact that the Shah was an immensely unpopular ruler, made the subjugation of what is modern-day Iran straightforward and relatively bloodless. In the south and east, however, it would turn out to be a different matter.

As Subotai conducted his pursuit to the west, part of Genghis' army fanned out to the south as Genghis' main body remainder in the vicinity of Samarkand. They were in search of the Shah's charismatic son Jelal-ad Din, who had begun to raise a new army amongst the warlike tribes in modern-day Afghanistan and Pakistan. Jelal-ad Din was able to defeat a small Mongol contingent but Genghis, buoyed by the news from Subotai that his western flank was secure,

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<sup>58</sup> James Chambers, *The Devil's Horsemen, The Mongol Invasion of Europe* (London: Cassell Publishers Ltd, 1979), 17.

<sup>59</sup>Ibid., 17.

<sup>60</sup> Richard Gabriel, *Subotai the Valiant: Genghis Khan's Greatest General* (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 2004), 85.

moved against him with the bulk of his army. What followed was perhaps one of the most destructive campaigns waged against the citizenry of a region as has been recorded in history. City after city was destroyed and their inhabitants put to the sword in an effort to ensure that no one in this region would dare challenge the Mongols' authority to rule. Saunders estimates that the death toll reached into the millions, "More lives were lost, probably, than in any similar conflict of such duration, a mere three years... The cold and deliberate genocide practiced by the Mongols... has no parallel save that of the ancient Assyrians and modern Nazis."<sup>61</sup> Jelal-ad Din was eventually defeated by Genghis along the banks of the Indus River, and although he escaped for a short time before being killed, all resistance to the Mongols in what used to be the Khwarazmi Empire was over.<sup>62</sup>

## Campaign Analysis

One of the most remarkable characteristics that defined Mongol military operations, particularly during the campaign against the Khwarazm Shah, was their use of decentralized command and control. Use of such a decentralized command and control system gave the Mongols an enormous advantage over their enemies in terms of generating faster tempo and taking advantage of fleeting opportunities. Few campaigns prior to the advent of modern command and control equipment like the radio operated over such vast distances while requiring split second timing between the far flung maneuver elements. One is left to wonder how they were able to accomplish this seemingly impossible feat.

First, distances to the Mongol army were not as daunting as to other armies due to their impressive operational mobility. Obviously they were a horse-borne force, but there is more to it

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<sup>61</sup> J.J. Saunders, *The History of the Mongol Conquests* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971), 55-56.

<sup>62</sup> Paul Ratchnevsky, *Genghis Khan: His Life and Legacy* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1991), 135.

than simply attributing their success to superior horse flesh. Each Mongol soldier had multiple mounts that moved behind the main force to account for fatigue, injury, and battlefield losses. This allowed the Mongols to make lengthy approach marches with relative ease and, most importantly, be fresh enough to fight a pitched battle despite the distances traveled. Genghis' campaign against the Khwarazm Empire contains many excellent examples of this to include Jebe and Juji's engagement with the Shah's reserves in the Fergana Valley after the Mongols had crossed one of the most daunting mountain ranges in the world during the wintertime. Equally importantly the Mongols were well adapted to this type of warfare and practiced it extensively. As Marshall vividly describes, the Mongols would:

string an entire division of the army along what might be described as a starting line, sometimes 130 km (80 miles) long. On a signal the entire complement, fully armed as if for battle, and would ride forward at a walk towards a finish line hundreds of kilometers away... Over the following days the massed cavalry would march forward, sweeping or herding before them all the game they encountered along the way... During the hunt, as the riders approached the finish line the flanks would begin to ride ahead of the centre, and so slowly describe a massive arc. Still further on, the flanks would turn and ride towards each other, thus trapping all the game that had been herded over the hundreds of kilometers of countryside... Throughout the exercise officers rode behind their men, shouting orders and directing their movements... The Mongols also employed an extremely effective and reliable system of signals, through flags, torches and riders who carried messages over great distances. This eventually provided them with one of the greatest advantages they ever took to the field: reliable and effective communications. It enabled all the Mongol units to remain in constant contact with each other and, through their remarkable corps couriers, under the control of a single commander... With exercises like this the Mongols developed a regime that enabled them to train and maintain an extremely professional army – something of a novelty for the thirteenth century.<sup>63</sup>

Although it would be easy to read this passage and assume that this in fact meant that the Mongols were operating under centralized command and control, this was not the case and should not be confused with a highly disciplined force. The Mongols were skillful at using commander's intent, a mechanism by which a commander can at once generate tempo through decentralized

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<sup>63</sup> Robert Marshall, *Storm from the East: from Genghis Khan to Khubilai Khan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 40-41.

operations yet achieve unity of action.<sup>64</sup> This intent provided the coherence that allowed them to act in consonance with the overall operational design when they were out of direct communication with their commander.

The Khwarazm campaign is replete with excellent examples of this type of command and control style. No less than four major maneuver elements, five if one counts the large force left in China, were required to operate for extended periods of time out of direct contact with Genghis and Subotai. To add to the level of complexity, Jochi, Jebe, and Juji each had very nuanced missions that could have ended disastrously for the Mongols. Even the arguably simplest of these missions, Jochi's task to lay siege to Otrar and fix the Shah's attention along the most likely avenue of approach could have become a victim of its own success and subsequently thrown off the timing of whole campaign. One is reminded of the United States Marine Corps' attack into Kuwait during OPERATION DESERT STORM that drove the Iraqi Army completely out of Kuwait instead of achieving its desired purpose of fixing the Iraqis and allowing the coalition's main effort to encircle and destroy the Iraqi Army.<sup>65</sup>

Another maneuver warfare characteristic that appears during this campaign is the Mongol's deliberate targeting, and ultimately shattering, the cohesion of the Shah's army. As previously discussed, the Shah's army had the potential to come unhinged due to its demographic composition, competing loyalties, and uneven quality. Even so, it is apparent that Genghis and Subotai went to lengths to accentuate these rifts and fight the campaign in such a manner that it maximized these disadvantages. Furthermore, the use of surprise at the operational level was the

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<sup>64</sup> United States Marine Corps, *Marine Corps Doctrinal Publication 1: Warfighting* (Quantico, Marine Corps University, 1997), 77-78.

<sup>65</sup> James. G Burton, "Pushing Them Out the Back Door," U.S. Naval Institute *Proceedings* (June 1993): 37-42.



decisive cause of the Shah's army's unraveling. As stated in MCDP-1, surprise is "a state of disorientation resulting from an unexpected event that degrades the enemy's ability to resist."<sup>66</sup> By first allowing the Shah to observe a large force operating along an expected avenue of approach and then deceiving him as to the true location of his main effort, Genghis greatly enhanced the shock value of surprise. Juji's appearance to the south of Samarkand was the first indication that the campaign was not going according to the Shah's preconceived notions. Soon thereafter, in what B.H. Liddell-Hart described as "one of the most dramatic surprises in the whole history of war,"<sup>67</sup> Genghis appeared with his main effort force 300 miles behind the Shah's front lines and began to ravage his rear area. If the Shah retained any aspirations of still winning this campaign, they completely evaporated at this moment. Additionally, although none of the chroniclers makes specific mention of it, the effect on the morale of the common soldier in the Shah's army had to be devastating. It is easy to argue that the coincidental capitulation of Otrar to the north and the brief siege of Samarkand, despite its garrison that numbered over 100,000, can be attributed to the Shah's army learning of the appearance of the Mongols in their rear area which led to their demoralization and ultimately to their defeat.

The final maneuver warfare characteristic that stands out about the Mongol campaign against the Khwarazm Empire is their use of the concept of surfaces and gaps. Had the campaign been conducted in the manner the Shah reasonably expected, Genghis would have moved his army through the Dzungarian Gate, along the north edge of the Tien Shan Range and into Khwarezm from the northeast. There he would have encountered the formidable defenses of the various cities along the Syr Darya River. Instead Genghis chose to divide his already

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<sup>66</sup> United States Marine Corps, *Marine Corps Doctrinal Publication 1: Warfighting* (Quantico, Marine Corps University, 1997), 42.

<sup>67</sup> Basil H. Liddell-Hart, *Great Captains Unveiled* (London: William Blackwood and Sons, 1927), 56.

outnumbered army so as to probe for the gaps in the Shah's defense instead of attacking into a prepared defensive position.

Needless to say, the decision to do this did not come without considerable risk. Each of Genghis' small maneuver elements were forced to spend extensive time operating outside the mutual support of another element and thus could have been brought to decisive engagement and destroyed piecemeal. Furthermore, Genghis' plan required exquisite timing and therefore ran the risk of exposing his elements to the overwhelming combat power that the Shah could potentially bring to bear by operating on interior lines. Often such plans come to grief when faced with Clausewitz's "fog and friction" and one can think back to the Japanese battle plan at the battle of Midway as a classic example of a plan that was too reliant on the enemy doing exactly what was expected of him<sup>6869</sup>. In this case, history shows that Genghis took the measure of his man and felt the rewards justified the risks.

Beyond simply moving his forces into gaps that already existed, Genghis did a masterful job of creating what Leonard would refer to as "positional dislocation."<sup>70</sup> By first moving Jebe into the Fergana Valley he achieved the purpose of pulling the Shah's elite reserves away from the decisive area where the campaign would be decided. After engaging Jebe in an inconclusive engagement, they remained fixed in the Fergana Valley and did not participate in any meaningful

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<sup>68</sup>Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, translated by Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 119-121.

<sup>69</sup> The Battle of Midway was a naval battle during World War Two between the United States Navy and the Imperial Japanese Navy. Despite having an overwhelming advantage in every class of ship, the Japanese spread their force over the entire Pacific Ocean in an attempt to deceive the Americans as to the true location of their aim, which was to seize Midway Island. The Americans correctly deduced the true aim of the Japanese attack and were able to inflict a crippling defeat on them. This battle is often cited by scholars as an example of an overly complex plan that was too reliant on the enemy doing exactly what he was expected to do.

<sup>70</sup> Robert Leonhard, *The Art of Maneuver: Maneuver Warfare Theory and Air-Land Battle* (Novato: Presidio Press, 1994), 67.

way in the remainder of the campaign. It was as if they had ridden off the map. Additionally, Jochi's ability to deceive the Shah as to the direction of the Mongol's main effort attack played a crucial role in allowing Genghis to penetrate unseen deep into the Shah's rear area.

## **Conclusion**

In the final analysis, the Mongols skillfully executed a bold and imaginative campaign plan that brought them decisive victory against an army nearly three times their size in just a few months of fighting. In addition to their martial skill at the tactical level, the Mongols accomplished this through the use of operational level techniques that are recognizable to today's modern military practitioner as maneuver warfare. Instead of attacking where the Shah was strongest, they assumed great risk and divided their army in order to penetrate into the physical gaps left by their enemy. Additionally, their movements tied down the only forces the Shah might have used to regain the initiative once the full scope of the Mongol plan was revealed. Their operational tempo, accentuated through the use of decentralized command and control, gave the Shah little time to think and redeploy his forces when the situation turned from bad to worse. Finally, their use of surprise helped shock and demoralize the Shah as well as his army, thus ending the campaign before the considerable weight of numbers could be brought to bear.

The study of the Mongol period of expansion from 1206-1281 is one that is sadly neglected in the American military's study of warfare. Although the sheer carnage and destruction wrought by the Mongol conquests of China, Persia, and Eastern Europe could cause some to shy away from celebrating their military prowess, the Mongols' treatment of their enemies was consistent with the mores of the era and should not distract from the overall value of their contributions to the study of warfare. A study of this period in general, and the campaign against the Khwarazm Shah in particular, would greatly enrich the professional education of any officer seeking to understand the operational level of war. As the volume of books on this subject that are published increase, the United States military would be well served to expand beyond it

current comfort level of the American Civil War, World War Two, and the Napoleonic campaigns and add a study of 13<sup>th</sup> Century Mongol warfare into the curriculum. The result would be the addition of another “Great Captain” to the Western lexicon: Genghis Khan. More importantly, it would provide another excellent example of a highly successful military enterprise that incorporated so many of the characteristics that modern armies seek to possess.

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