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The Mongol War Machine and the Russian House of Straw: A Military Assessment of the Mongol Conquest of Russia

Michael W. De Nie

Russia has faced several large-scale invasions in her 1000-year history. All of these great invasions came from Europe, save one, which came from the east. Napoleon invaded Russia, as did Hitler; both failed. Only one group of invaders was ever successful in subjugating the Russian land and people. In the 13th century, the Mongol hordes swept across Russia. Seemingly invincible, they struck terror in the hearts of the population and smashed every Russian army they met. What was it that enabled the Mongol armies to conquer such an expansive country with such relative ease? Why did the Russian princes fail to protect their lands? To answer these questions, one must first examine the campaigns themselves; then both the Mongol and Russian armies must be examined in terms of organization, leadership, and strategic and tactical skill.

In 1234 the Mongol nobility and generals gathered for a great council, a *kurultai*, under the supervision of the new Great Khan, Ugedei. At this council the decision was made to invade Europe on a great scale. The nominal head of this campaign was Batu Khan. However, the real authority lay with Subudei, the chief of staff of the Mongol armies. In the spring of 1236 a great army was assembled, including several corps of Persian and Chinese engineers, roughly 50,000 experienced Mongol soldiers, and a great number of conscripts.¹ Subedei's army may have numbered more than 120,000, including Turkish allies and conscripts. However, he could never field more than 50,000 because of the huge area that had to be garrisoned to protect the Mongols' rear.² Against what one would expect, the Mongols, accustomed to the harsh weather of their homeland, chose winter as the best season to campaign against the Russians.

The Mongol campaign against Russia can be divided into two phases. The first phase, against Northeast Russia from December 1237 to the Spring of 1238, will be discussed presently. Discussion of the second phase, against southwest Russia in 1239-40, will follow.

In the early winter of 1237, the Mongols emerged from the thick forest along the Volga south of the Riazan principality. Subudei planned to drive a corridor through the center of Russia, dividing Suzdal and Novgorod from the lands of Chernigov and Kiev. Then he could turn back on the isolated Suzdal.³ The Mongols converged on Riazan, a weak point on the Russian boundary that lay between Suzdal and Chernigov. The Mongol emissaries arrived at Riazan and demanded immediate surrender and a good deal of the population's possessions. The town chose to resist. The princes of the city

then sent an embassy to Grand Prince Urii of Vladimir and gathered their own meager forces to ride out against the Mongols.

The Mongols charged this force, which quickly broke and returned to the city. The Mongols then erected a wooden palisade around Riazan, blockading it off from any outside supplies or military aid. On December 16 the siege of Riazan began with a bombardment of rocks and greek fire (burning pitch) which lasted five days. On December 21, 1237, the Mongols stormed the city, slaying the populace and burning the city to the ground. The few who escaped were those set free by the Mongols to spread the word of the terror of resisting them.⁴

The Mongols then moved on to the city of Kolomna, where they were met by the belated relief army sent by Grand Prince Urii. The Mongols swiftly dispatched this force and moved on to Moscow, which offered little resistance. When Urii learned of the loss of Moscow he set out from Vladimir to rendezvous with the forces under his various brothers and nephews, leaving his wife and sons in the belief that the garrison in Vladimir could hold out. Urii moved northwest with this army, crossing the Volga river and establishing his headquarters on the River Sit. He planned to take up a defensive position with all the Suzdalian troops he could muster, using the Volga and Mologa rivers as natural defenses to the east and north.⁵

Subudei sent a small detachment to watch Urii's army and then marched on Vladimir with his main army. The Mongols arrived outside Vladimir on February 3, 1238, and began to erect a palisade and survey the area. Subedei then sent a detachment to take Suzdalia, which fell partly because the panicked civilian population prevented the garrison from conducting an effective defense. The victorious Mongols cut back on their wholesale slaughter to take conscripts to aid in the siege of Vladimir. On February 7, 1238, the siege of Vladimir began with a day-and-night bombardment. Scaffolding was built and battering rams were brought up by conscripts from conquered towns and villages. The next day at dawn all four of Vladimir's gates were stormed at once.⁶ Vladimir had a large garrison, but its effectiveness was greatly reduced by the chaotic, panicked civilians. A last stand was made in the Cathedral of the Assumption, where Urii's family hid in the choir loft. When the Mongols could not get them to come down, they set the church afire, killing everyone in it.

After the fall of Vladimir, Subudei divided his army. Subudei himself rode north to destroy Urii's army while Batu rode northeast to keep Novgorod on the defensive and assault it when they were reunited. While Subudei rode north to meet him, Grand Prince Urii did nothing. At first, he could have gathered his army and moved out of Subudei's reach. Then he could have marched down to meet the Mongols on any road they took, choosing the time and place to do battle. However, he did nothing, and every day became more isolated as he waited for help from Novgorod that was not coming.⁷ The harsh winter and huge countryside that defeated and enveloped so many of the Russians' enemies could not stop the Mongols. Towards the end of February, Urii sent out a reconnaissance force which quickly returned to tell him that they were

hopelessly surrounded. On March 4, the Mongols attacked, destroying the Russian army and killing many princes, including Urii.

The first city Batu reached on his way to Novgorod was Torzhok, which stubbornly held out for two weeks, falling on March 5. These two weeks turned out to be absolutely crucial for Novgorod. By the time Batu set out again for Novgorod the spring thaw had begun. The Mongols' winter campaign had afforded them great mobility because the frozen rivers and lakes became, in effect, direct routes to the various cities and towns. Batu now found himself 60 miles short of Novgorod, in farm lands quickly turning to marshes. Faced with the prospect of losing his mobility in the heart of enemy territory, Batu turned back.

In the summer of 1238, the Mongols left the Russian lands to reorganize and rest in the southern steppes. In the spring of 1239 the invasion was renewed. The Mongols began with the capture of Pereiaslavl, which fell in March.⁸ Subudei knew that he would have to neutralize Chernigov before any attack could be made on Kiev; and in the Summer of 1239 he sent an army under Mongke westward across the southern half of Chernigov territory. Mongke surrounded Chernigov in the beginning of October, 1239, and began hurling great stones into the city. Mstislavich Glebovich, the senior prince in Chernigov, led an army out to defend the town. Mongke defeated him and Chernigov fell on October 18.⁹

After Chernigov, the main Mongol host withdrew again to encampments in the steppes and began to send out reconnaissance parties and envoys to survey the Kiev area. The *Ipat'evskiy Chronicle* describes how the citizens of Kiev refused to listen to the Mongol envoys and how the city's ruler, Prince Mikhail, fled to Hungary and was replaced first by Rostisla of Smolensk and then by Daniil of West Russia, who left Kiev to a general named Dmitr.¹⁰ Clearly, this rapid succession of rulers did little to instill confidence in the population of Kiev. They knew by now of the Mongols' pattern: reconnaissance, withdrawal, and attack; and they could only wait for the inevitable.

In the second half of 1240, the Mongols returned to Russian territory from the south. The Mongols encircled Kiev and began to bombard the city, concentrating on its four gates. Once the gates fell the Mongols rushed in with their heavy cavalry and after a day of heavy fighting, spent the night on the city walls. On December 6, the Mongols took Kiev street by street. The Russians made their last stand in the Church of the Virgin, which collapsed from the weight of all the citizens who had climbed on it to escape the Mongols. After the fall of Kiev, the Mongols made short work of the rest of Russia which stood between them and Hungary. The "Mongol Yoke" had begun.

The Mongol army of the 13th century was the best fighting force in the world. Well-equipped, sternly disciplined, rigorously trained from childhood to hunt and fight from the saddle, highly mobile, and endowed with great endurance, the Mongol cavalryman had no equal in Asia or Europe. The Mongol soldiers followed the age-old traditions of warfare of the old steppe nomads brought to perfection under Chingis Khan and his successors.¹¹

The Mongol army was organized on the decimal system. The army under Subudei was divided into 12 to 14 divisions of 10,000 men, each called a *tumen*. These were in turn broken down by tens all the way to units of ten men, which elected their own commanders.¹² Under Chingis Khan, a conscious effort was made to combine different clans into units to make them all loyal to the Mongol state. The captains of all the *tumens* were appointed based on merit by the Great Khan personally.

The Mongol army was based on stern discipline from top to bottom, and all officers were held accountable for the men under them. Officers were appointed for such specialized tasks as planning the disposition of troops, directing movements of armies during campaigns, and locating campsites. The entire establishment was under the Great Khan's personal supervision and inspection. Thus, the Mongols had a well defined chain of command from the individual Bowman to the Great Khan himself. Every link in this chain knew his own duty and to whom he was responsible.

Before each major Mongol campaign a *kurultai* was called to discuss and define the plans and objectives of the war. The captains of all the larger units were present and received their individual instructions. Scouts were sent and those that had returned were questioned. The staging area was also designated, as well as the grazing grounds along the intended roads.¹³ The result of this extensive planning and attention to detail was an organized, efficient, highly motivated war machine.

In battle, the main body of the Mongol army moved into battle in five single ranks. The first two ranks were heavy cavalry: soldiers armed with a saber, a lance, a battle axe, and a lasso and wearing a leather cuirass or a coat of mail.¹⁴ The last three ranks were light cavalry: less heavily armored, carrying composite bows, a few javelins, and a short sword.¹⁵ Well ahead and on the flanks of these ranks rode three detachments of light cavalry. These detachments were the first group to engage the enemy when a battle began.

The Mongols' basic objective strategy was to surround and destroy the main enemy army. To do this, they used the "great chase" device they used in peacetime to hunt game. This chase involved forming a ring and enveloping a huge area, then slowly tightening the ring. This required great skill among the commanders of the individual columns to coordinate with the others to prevent any enemy from escaping. The light cavalry would then ride across the front of the enemy forces, shooting arrows and thinning their ranks. The Mongols would then either attempt a rush and feign a retreat or feign a retreat outright. The Mongols hoped to lure the enemy into chasing them, losing its organization and spreading out their ranks by the time they reached the Mongols. When the enemy reached the Mongol lines they were met by a shower of arrows and then a silent heavy cavalry charge. The Mongols used this technique with great success against the Russians at the Battle of Kalka, for example.

The Mongols also knew the value of psychological warfare and propaganda. Before a campaign, they would dispatch secret agents to cities to try to win over religious dissenters, promising tolerance under the Mongols. The lower class would be assured help against the rich, and the upper class would be assured safe trade routes for their

goods. Above all, the Mongols assured peace and security if a city surrendered, and devastation if it did not. The Mongols often made good on the last promise, slaughtering entire populations and razing cities to make other cities think twice about resisting them.

However, they also knew the value of conscripts, using captured civilians as laborers or even infantrymen in their sieges. Persian and Chinese administrators and engineers were conscripted and absorbed into the Mongol ranks as well. The Mongols were quite skilled at learning from other cultures and assimilating their military knowledge. For example, all of their siege techniques used in Russia and Europe were originally adopted from the Chinese. Indeed, the conscription practices of the Mongols were such that a Mongol army was almost always larger at the end of the campaign than when it began.

Napoleon said that the strength of an army can be estimated by its mass multiplied by its velocity; by this formula alone the Mongol army, moving at more than twice the speed of its enemies, was a match for an army twice its size.¹⁶ Yet the Mongols defeated armies more than twice their size handily. The answer lies in the fact that many of the strategic principles developed and espoused by later military thinkers were already well known to the Mongols. The Mongols clearly exhibited such strategic principles as maintenance of a clear objective, maintaining the offensive, unity of command, concentration of forces, economy of force, surprise, security, and simplicity. These principles were not put fully into use by the professional armies of Europe until the 19th and 20th centuries. In its tactical principles, organization, and training, the Mongol army of the 13th century was undoubtedly a “modern” fighting force.

Against this modern army, the Russians fielded a force thoroughly feudal in character. The Russian cavalry did not exist, and the infantry was little better than a motley group of ill-armed peasants. Not until Peter the Great would Russia begin to see the beginnings of a professional military. The military leaders of the Russian armies achieved their position not by merit but by birth or favor. This, of course, resulted in a direction of the Russian forces that was amateurish in its strategy and tactics. The Russian commanders did not have a fraction of the lifelong military training that every Mongol soldier, from horseman to general, was provided by his membership in the “nation in arms” that was the Mongol state.

What sort of numbers did the Russian princes bring to the field? It is extremely difficult to arrive at any reliable figure because of the vagueness of the chronicles. Little mention is made of the size of armies or garrisons. Furthermore, the population of the towns in 13th-century Russia and the number of troops they could provide are unknown. John Fennell worked out a rough system to arrive at an estimate of this number. He assumed that each of the larger cities could yield three to five thousand men, for a total of 60,000 troops. Add to this another 40,000 from the smaller towns, Polovstian and Turkic allies, and the estimate of the potential Russian army strength is 100,000 men.¹⁷ However, it is unlikely that all the towns sent the maximum amount of troops, or any for that matter. Novgorod, for instance, did not even send troops to

break the siege at its outpost at Torzhok. It is most probable that the Russians never fielded more than one-half of their potential. Thus, after Kalka, it seems the Mongols had the numerical advantage at every battle fought.

The Russian losses can not be solely attributed to numbers. For instance, it is well known that a small garrison in a fortified city can hold off a much larger army. J. J. Saunders attributes the Mongol's conquest to, "the extraordinary fragmentation of political power which dissipated her [Russia's] strength and energies through a dozen mutually quarreling principalities and never permitted, even in the face of acutest danger, a concentration of military force."¹⁸

This analysis holds up to the facts. Subudei knew well and exploited the lack of unity among the Russian princes. He consistently moved his army in such a manner that the princes would not realize his objective until he had advanced far enough to divide them physically. The result of this shrewd policy was that each prince was forced to remain at his home principality or city, lest his land be the first one the Mongols invaded. This is evidenced by the many cities and army commanders that waited for reinforcements that never arrived because they were never sent.

The Russians had no central command, no central army headquarters; there was no unified central direction of their defense efforts. Liaison and communication between towns and principalities were virtually nonexistent. Furthermore, the Russians had no intelligence system, especially compared to the Mongols' extensive, well-developed information-gathering apparatus. The best information a Russian field commander could hope for was the often exaggerated tales of stragglers and survivors of the latest Mongol victory. Even when intelligence was given to them, the Russian commanders often did not appreciate it or put it to use. An example of this error is Grand Prince Urii's failure to take notice of the extremely valuable information on Mongol tactics provided him by the Volga Bulgars.

That the Russians always seemed to be taken completely by surprise is due to the Mongols' great skill as much as to the Russians' unpreparedness. The princes did not learn a thing from their defeat at Kalka. Urii took no steps to prepare his own territory for the imminent attack he must have known was coming. No steps were taken to prepare Southern Russia in the year the Mongols spent reorganizing in the southern steppes after their campaign in the northeast. The Russians were either consistently blind to the facts or incredibly thick-witted.

Above all, Russia was weakened by the lack of unity between territories in the north, the south, and the southwest. In this *appanage* period of Russian history, in which the country was divided into many small dukedoms, or *appanages*, there was no single prince with effective control over all of Russia. This fact may explain why the Russians were always caught off-guard: no one could agree on how a defense should be established. Urii, the Grand Prince of Vladimir, was the most powerful prince of the period of the Mongol conquest. However, his influence covered only the area between the Volga and Oka rivers, where his brothers and relatives ruled.¹⁹ Furthermore, a civil war began in 1235 and left a great deal of Southern Russia isolated and exhausted.

Thus, it is not surprising that the Mongols met no serious opposition in their conquest of Russia. In terms of organization, leadership, strategic and tactical skill, the Mongol war machine was the greatest army since Alexander and would remain unequaled until the 19th century. The Mongols conquered the Russian land and people with a campaign of total warfare that would be mirrored later by Sherman's March to the Sea and the bombing campaigns of the Second World War. Against this modern fighting force fully competent in every facet of warfare, the Russians fielded an unprofessional army paralyzed by its complete lack of unity and central direction. The natural result of such a conflict is echoed throughout military history: the victory of the modern, organized invaders over the inefficient, backward defenders.

NOTES

¹ John Chambers, p. 49.

² George Vernadsky, p. 49.

³ Chambers, p. 72.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

⁵ John Fennell, p. 79.

⁶ Chambers, p. 74.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 75.

⁸ Fennell, p. 82.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 82.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 82.

¹¹ Vernadsky, p. 110.

¹² Chambers, p. 54.

¹³ Vernadsky, p. 110.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 113.

¹⁵ Chambers, p. 56.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

¹⁷ Fennell, p. 85.

¹⁸ J.J. Saunders, p. 82.

¹⁹ Fennell, p. 86.

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