



# Stroke of Luck Saves Europe

## Angel of Death to thank for defeat of Mongols in 1241?

FOR CENTURIES, THE POLES HAVE CELEBRATED April 9, 1241 as a day of great victory over the Golden Horde of the Mongols (called at that time “Tartars” or “Tatars”<sup>1</sup>) near Liegnitz—a day that turned back forever the threat of Central Asian conquest. But was it really so? TBR looks at how Europeans ironically snatched “victory” from the jaws of defeat.

BY PETER STRAHL

The Mongols began invading Russia and Europe in the year 1237. In A.D. 1240, with the fall of the great Ukrainian city of Kiev,<sup>2</sup> the Mongol empire under Ogedei Khagan (*i.e.*, “Great Khan Ogedei”), son of Genghis Khan, stood near the greatest extent of its power. Its reach extended from the ancestral homelands in the east through northern China, as far as Persia and India; and the Asian armies had conquered every Russian principality that stood in their way.<sup>3</sup>

Now, in December of the same year, Ogedei's son, Batu Khan, turned his efforts to conquering the West, with the strategic aid of Subotai, one of Genghis Khan's lieutenants. Would the great Christian European countries and their mighty men of arms repulse the pagan invaders, sending the Tartars “back to hell,” as the French king, St. Louis IX, later quipped to his mother, Queen Blanche? Or would the remainder of the Old World's white race, and the religion that united most of it, be overrun in a long march to the Atlantic Ocean?

At that time, King Bela IV of Hungary was harboring



**Genghis Khan (left)**, born in Mongolia about A.D. 1162, was called Temujin in his youth. Of humble origins, he went on to unite the Mongol tribes and launch the largest empire on Earth. Although thought of as Mongoloid, the evidence is that he was actually white. He died in 1227, after leaving strict instructions that whenever a Mongol chief khan passed away, all his sons, wherever they might be, must gather in the homeland to elect a successor. Thus when Ogedei Khan (right) died on Dec. 11, 1241, the Mongol armies were forced to abandon their conquests in the west and go home, planning to return later. The return never happened. The Europeans thought they had inflicted so much damage on the Mongol horde that they could count it a victory, yet the European fighting men had lost about 90,000 lives in just a few days—almost completely wiped out by the efficient Mongol army. Facing page: a typical Mongol warrior. All were cavalry, and most wore little armor, efficiently launching deadly arrows on the move. This mode of warfare proved to be especially troublesome for European armies of the era.



BELA IV OF HUNGARY



WENCESLAUS OF BOHEMIA



LOUIS IX OF FRANCE



HENRY II OF SILESIA

about 200,000 Cumans, a nomadic steppe-people, who had been driven west of the Carpathian Mountains by the advancing conquerors. Batu Khan considered the Cumans his renegade subjects and demanded their return, which Bela naturally refused.

Using this as a pretext, Batu crossed the frozen rivers into Central Europe in February 1241, making for Hungary with up to 70,000 cavalry, nearly half of the entire Mongol army. (The Mongols used only men on horseback, all of whom were also skilled archers and highly disciplined.) Recognizing that the European rulers, often at war among themselves, might readily unite against a foreign invader into a force sufficient to crush the latter, Batu Khan determined to prevent this.

First, the Mongols sacked and destroyed Sandomir on the Weichsel, in southeastern Poland. Then they defeated two Polish armies in March. On March 24, they burned Kraków. Now the only thing standing between

the Golden Horde and Middle Germany, and consequently the rest of Europe, was the Duchy of Silesia. It was here that Batu Khan divided his army, moving with the larger portion southwards, while a smaller force of one or two tumens (divisions of 10,000 each) under Baidar, Kadan and Orda Khan, moved northwest.

The duke of Silesia, Henry II Piastow, called “the Pious,” sent for help and began to assemble his army. With Emperor Frederick II in Italy, striving with the pope, and King Béla IV of Hungary and Croatia facing attack by the main body of Tartars, Henry could not hope for much assistance. Nevertheless, King Wenceslaus I of Bohemia rushed to bring 50,000 men to Henry’s aid.

In early April, the invaders destroyed the region around Breslau, the Silesian capital. Henry collected the remnants of the Polish army, as well as perhaps 2,000 knights of Poland, small forces of Knights Templar and Knights Hospitaller, Bavarian miners (volunteers from Goldberg), and a number of conscripts and mercenaries, along with Silesians and Moravians. Modern historians infer, without clear evidence, that the total Polish force was no more than 8,000. However, the oldest sources provide a number closer to 25,000 to 35,000 (although the same 15th-century account states that all Mongol units were larger and better trained). Since there is no reason for the European accounts to have exaggerated their own numbers, the higher number remains possible.

Learning that Wenceslaus was only two days away, the Tartars moved to intercept Henry before the Europeans could unite their forces. On April 8, the Mongols stood before Liegnitz and took up their position at a place called the Wahlstatt, a small plain surrounded by low hills near the Nysa River. Due to deaths and injuries

## *Genghis Khan and the Making of the Modern World*

By Jack Weatherford. The name Genghis Khan often conjures the image of a bloodthirsty barbarian on horseback leading a ruthless band of nomadic warriors in the looting of the civilized world. But the surprising argument of the author is that Genghis Khan was a visionary leader whose conquests joined Europe with the flourishing cultures of Asia to trigger a world awakening, an unprecedented explosion of technologies, trade and ideas. Soft-cover, 352 pages, item #425, \$15 minus 10% for TBR subscribers. Order from TBR using the form on page 64 or call TBR toll free at 1-877-773-9077 to charge. See also [www.barnesreview.com](http://www.barnesreview.com).

from encounters along the way, the divisions which now presented themselves were slightly reduced in size (either about 8,000 or 18,000, according to various sources).

Seeing the danger of being besieged in Liegnitz, but with the Bohemians still a day away, Henry chose to engage the enemy, leading the attack as a holy crusade for Jesus Christ. Nearly every soldier thus fastened a cross to his clothing. It was April 9, 1241, when the two armies met. Historians differ as to the arrangement of forces, although both sides seem to have formed forces into four divisions. The Christians placed three units in the front, with Henry's own forces—the best trained—as a reserve in the rear center. The Mongols appear to have placed their left and right wings at some distance, hidden behind the hills, with one unit forward, and Orda Khan leading the reserve, again at the center rear.

The Christians are at first disconcerted. The enemy's movements are not signaled by shouts or trumpets, but silently by standards and pennants. The center moves forward to engage the Mongol vanguard: crusader knights and volunteers from many nations, including the Bavarian miners from Goldberg, under the command of Bolesław, son of the margrave of Moravia. The Polish division breaks the Tartar line but is surrounded in hand-to-hand combat by the mounted Mongols, falling "beneath the hail of arrows, like delicate heads of barley broken by hailstones, for many of them are wearing no armor, and the survivors retreat."

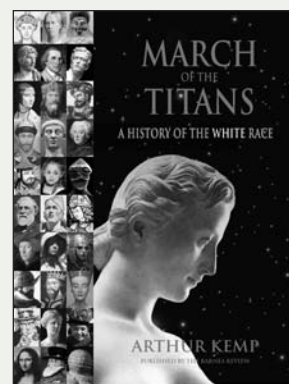
Now the two cavalry wings advance: Sulislav with his Krakóvians and knights of Welkopole from one side, and knights of Opole under Duke Mieszko from the other. Supported by Polish crossbowmen, they drive three units of the enemy (according to Jan Długosz) into what seems a disorderly retreat. But a remarkable thing occurs: Someone from the Tartar line starts running or riding back and forth, shouting in Polish to the Christians: "Run! Run!" while encouraging his Asian compatriots. Fooled by the ruse, Mieszko interprets the shouting as cries coming from his own men and begins to retreat.

Duke Henry laments aloud but orders forward his own division—"the best of his troops"—to save the situation: Silesian knights and men-at-arms, knights from Welkopole and a small contingent of French Knights Templar. Amid intense fighting, the Poles begin to prevail, their heavy horse and riders forcing the advance against lightly equipped Mongol mounted archers. But then Orda Khan brings up his largest division, providing

# MARCH OF THE TITANS

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**Christian fighters from all over Europe** display crosses prominently in their battle with the Mongols at the plain of Wahlstatt (also called Liegnitz or Legnica) on April 9, 1241. Among the Christians were Knights Templar, Knights Hospitaller and knights of the Teutonic Order. While there was great bravery on the Christian side, the Mongols had the advantage of superior discipline and tactics. The traditional European warfare method of hand-to-hand combat between knights ended in catastrophe when it was deployed against the Mongol forces who easily ran circles around the knights laden with cumbersome armor. Knightly warfare failed utterly for the Christians at Legnica and again at Mohi in 1241. Europe was saved from sharing the fate of China and Muscovy not by its tactical prowess but by the unexpected death of the Mongols' supreme ruler, Ogedei, and the subsequent eastward retreat of his armies, which was followed, thankfully, by bitter infighting among Mongol factions. Another factor was the Mongol interest in conquering Japan, at which they failed disastrously (see page 9).

a fierce defense. At last, the Tartars break again into rapid retreat. Overjoyed at their success, the Polish riders rush forward, becoming strung out and ever more distant from supporting infantry.

The Mongol steppe-people, unlike Westerners of the time, often employed retreat as a tactic. Now they spring the trap. They turn and begin galloping up and down the flanks of the Christians, raining arrows upon them. When this is ineffective against the latter's armor, the Asians shoot their mounts, making the knights easy prey to be shot with arrows, run through with lances, or simply ridden down by the Tartars' horses. At the same time, clouds of smoke are sent between the cavalry and infantry, obscuring vision and preventing the foot soldiers from coming to their countrymen's aid.

Among the Tatar standards is a huge one with a giant X painted on it. It is topped with an ugly black head with a chin covered with hair. As the Tartars withdraw some hundred paces, the bearer of this standard begins violently

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shaking the great head, from which there suddenly bursts a cloud with a foul smell that envelops the Poles and makes them all but faint, so that they are incapable of fighting. . . . Seeing that the all but victorious Poles are daunted by the cloud and its foul smell, the Tatars raise a great shout and return to the fray, scattering the Polish ranks that hitherto have held firm, and a huge slaughter ensues.

Boleslav of Moravia falls in this battle. Duke Henry, with four of his knights, attempts twice to escape from the surrounding enemy and regroup his forces, only to be recognized by his insignia and overtaken by the Mongols. As he raises his sword for a blow, a Tartar lance pierces his armpit, and he slides from his horse. Henry is dragged clear of the *melee* by his pursuers, who “cut off his head with a sword, tear off all his badges and leave his corpse naked. In this great battle, a number of the Polish nobility and gentry find honorable martyrdom in defense of their faith.”

The duke’s head is later paraded on a lance before Liegnitz, before being taken to Batu Khan. Five hundred French Knights Templar take a brave stand but are slaughtered to the last man. The Mongols count the defeated dead by cutting off an ear from each, filling nine large sacks. As many as 35,000 European Christians die this day in a valiant attempt to defend their homeland.

Hearing of the massacre, Wenceslaus retreats to a safer position in Bohemia. Two days later, Batu Khan’s forces destroy the Hungarian army at Mohi. There is no army worthy of the name standing between the Golden

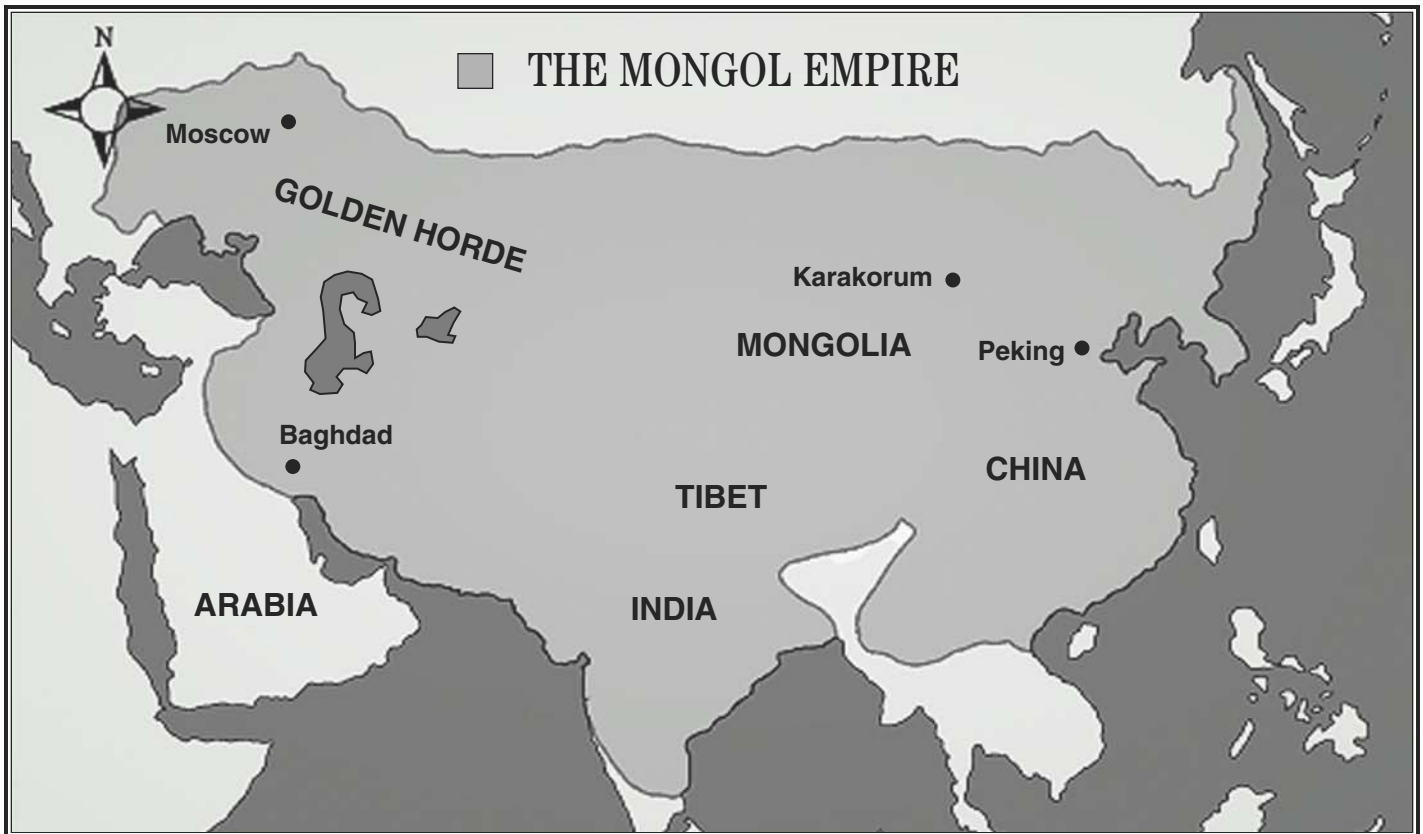
## How Mother Nature Dealt the Khans Another Capricious Defeat

**T**wice the Mongols tried to extend their empire by taking over Japan, but the intervening sea was a major problem for the land-oriented empire. The first invasion attempt was in autumn 1274; the second in August 1281. Each time a massive typhoon thwarted Kublai Khan, who already ruled China and Korea. The first invasion fleet comprised some 500-900 ships and 30,000-40,000 men, mostly Chinese and Koreans. As the ships lay at anchor at Hakata Bay, Japan, preparing to disgorge their soldiers, the hurricane struck, and about one-third of the ships were sunk, while some 13,000 men drowned. The fleet limped back home. Learning surprisingly little from that disaster, Kublai tried again seven years later. It is said he was in a rush, and failed to ensure the ships were seaworthy using too many flat riverboats which fare poorly on the open sea. Nevertheless he launched 4,400 vessels, with 140,000 soldiers and sailors. Again the Mongols went to Hakata Bay, where about 40,000 Japanese warriors had gathered. Again the Mongols were clobbered by Mother Nature; the typhoon sank most of the ships, with just a few hundred remaining, and at least half the Mongol men drowned. Most of those who did survive were hunted down and killed by the Japanese. Ever since, the Japanese people have referred to the typhoons as kamikaze—“divine wind.” Their suicide pilots in World War II were called kamikazes in honor of the historic weather.



**Left:** Part of a wrecked ship, believed to be from one of the 4,000 sent by Kublai Khan to conquer Japan in 1281, that fell victim to Japan’s original “kamikaze.” This section of wooden keel was discovered off the coast of Nagasaki. Also found were a Yuan-era Chinese hand cannon (below left) and the world’s oldest anti-personnel explosives (below right) as well as more than 2,000 other artifacts believed to be from the ill-fated Yuan invasion fleet.

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Horde and the kingdom of France.

The following winter, Batu and Subotai planned their campaign toward the Atlantic Ocean, but, hearing that Ogedei had died on Dec. 11, 1241, they followed the directives of Genghis Khan (d. 1227) and returned with their armies to their homeland, to elect a new khagan. While they continued to rule Russia for two more centuries, the Mongols—due to internecine struggles—were never again in a position to mass an army to conquer Europe. Thus it was not military might which saved the Christian countries and the white race, but the death of a single man through the providence of God, Who at last calls all men to Himself. ♦

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**ENDNOTES:**

- 1 “Tartars,” or “Tatars,” as the terms are used today, however, are quite different from Mongols, being more European in appearance, with a Caucasoid face, long beard on the men, and so on, while the Mongols are, as their name suggests, quite Mongoloid, with little or no beard. The Tartars also belong predominantly to the Islamic faith, and differ from Mongols in their language as well.—Ed.
- 2 When the besieged city of Kiev fell on December 6, 1240, most of the population was massacred, including non-combatants. Out of some 50,000 people, only about 2,000 survived.—Ed.
- 3 It is a little-known fact that Genghis Khan was white, or at least half-white. White blood shows clearly in the portraits of his children also. Most Mongols, however, were not white but Mongoloid.—Ed.
- 4 *Annals of Jan Dlugosz*, 15th century, in “Battle of Liegnitz 1241,” <http://mongolconquest.devhub.com/blog/634074-battle-of-liegnitz-1241/>.”
- 5 *Ibid.*
- 6 *Ibid.* Incidentally, this is the first recorded use of poison gas in European warfare.
- 7 *Ibid.*
- 8 A small museum commemorates the Battle of the Wahlstatt to this day in the village church. [Wikipedia says estimates of the European casualties range from 2,000 to 25,000, with another 25,000 at the Battle of Mohi; Mongol casualties were light (though of unknown number) at Legnica, but they lost about 25,000 at Mohi. Following the battle of Mohi and the simultaneous battle of Legnica in Poland, nearly every man of fighting age in Eastern Europe had been killed.—Ed.]
- 9 One could reasonably argue that it was Genghis Khan himself who, through the Laws of Succession which he instituted, also established a cause of the downfall of his own empire, since all the Mongol princes were required to return from wherever they were in the world upon the death of the khagan, in order to elect the new ruler.