

## **The Mongol Intelligence Apparatus**

*The Triumphs of Genghis Khan's Spy Network*

**When Moses sent them to explore Canaan, he said, ‘Go up through the Negev and on into the hill country. See what the land is like and whether the people who live there are strong or weak, few or many. What kind of land do they live in? Is it good or bad? What kind of towns do they live in? Are they unwalled or fortified? How is the soil? Is it fertile or poor? Are there trees on it or not? Do your best to bring back some of the fruit of the land.’**

**- Numbers 13:17-20**

Intelligence has played a role in most, if not all, militarized disputes in history. Long before U-2 spy planes and explosive-filled undergarments, leaders sought out information regarding their enemies' strengths, weaknesses, motivations, etc. Accurate reliable intelligence is a lethal weapon on the battlefield. Today, Western intelligence agencies sift through mountains of data and exploit an untold number of human sources in order to improve situational awareness against various asymmetric threats. Many of these threats are emanating from Asia and the Middle East. Gathering intelligence in these regions has never been easy. Xenophobia is pervasive in these areas where tribes and clans often hold more clout than religion and nationality. Those able to extract intelligence from this region can conquer enemies of monetary and numerical superiority.

In 1162, a young Mongol boy by the name of Temujin was born with a blood clot in his fist. This was said to be a sign of a great leader.<sup>1</sup> The prophecy was fulfilled in a way few could have foreseen. Temujin was to become the leader of one of the greatest empires in human history. He was a great military strategist, but his unparalleled ability to run intelligence operations was the key to his victories.

An early *anda* (blood brother) of Temujin's, named Jamuqa, would become one of his earliest rivals. Jamuqa and Temujin were both promising young Mongol leaders. Their companionship was real and the bond between them was not easily broken.<sup>2</sup> It was Jamuqa who had aided Temujin in his battle against the Merkit tribe to recover his kidnapped wife Berta. In 1206, however, a *quriltai* (a meeting of tribal and military leadership) was convened and Jamuqa was conferred as Gur Khan (Universal Ruler).<sup>3</sup> This caused some division amongst the Mongol peoples. Jamuqa and Temujin were two

strong personalities with equally strong followings.<sup>4</sup> Although Jamuqa was considered the superior military strategist, it was Temujin that had an aptitude for accessing intelligence and could enable various groups to coexist. Their friendship quickly dissolved after the *quriltai*. Neither men were fit for subordinate roles.

The practice of using spies or scouts was not new to these men. In fact, such a large number of spies were used that much intelligence had to be passed off as disinformation. By the time Gur Khan sent out his “defectors”, Temujin had already been declared Genghis Khan (Rightful Ruler) of his people. The disinformation Gur Khan’s spies delivered Genghis was irrelevant. Gur Khan was clearly readying his troops for battle. Genghis would reciprocate.<sup>5</sup>

There were numerous skirmishes between the two Mongol Khans, many of which Gur Khan would be victorious. But Genghis’ men had an unsurpassed devotion to him, a trait Gur Khan sorely lacked. With each passing scuffle, more Mongol clans would revert to Genghis. His fate sealed, Gur Khan asked his former *anda* to put him to death. In ceremonial fashion (without the spilling of blood), Genghis Khan broke Gur Khan’s back.<sup>6</sup>

Gur Khan was not the only person who felt threatened by the ascension of Genghis. Senggum, the son of Ong Khan and partner of Gur Khan, devised a plan to invite Genghis to a conciliatory meeting and assassinate him.<sup>7</sup> After Genghis failed to show, Senggum prepared his men to attack. The assault proved ineffective against Genghis’ men. News of the assassination attempt and the corresponding counterattack had all been leaked by two shepherds. *The Secret History of the Mongols* insinuates that these two men, Badai and Kishliq, were Genghis’ spies.<sup>8</sup> Others warned him of the

assassination attempt,<sup>9</sup> but it was his own well-placed verifiable sources that assuaged any doubts he may have had. If not for his crafty manipulation of sources, Genghis may have never outlasted his rivals and propelled himself into the pages of history.

### **The *Yam (Jam)* System**

During one *quriltai*, Genghis brought forth a set of laws in which the Mongols were to live by. These laws were known as the *Yasa* code, or the Great *Yasa*. Its implementation was meant to bring an atmosphere of structure and discipline to the empire's daily functions. As opposed to other empires, where heredity and tribe determined rank and duty, the Great *Yasa* was a merit-based system that did not discriminate on the basis of religion or ethnic background. This design was advantageous for productivity, morale, and diplomatic relations.<sup>10</sup> The *Yasa* could not have been more valuable. The rigidity of the code allowed one system, in particular, to flourish.

Much of Genghis' information was elicited from merchants. They were deployed to rival lands as merchants, ambassadors, representatives, etc. But, ultimately, their goal was to extract information. As stated earlier, none of these practices were unique. What enabled Genghis' informant network to flourish was the Mongol *Yam* system.<sup>11</sup> This was a communication network that allowed information to travel from 200-300 miles per day.<sup>12</sup> Way stations were created so that caravans could relay their cargo. It is likely this system was the offspring of the Abassid's *barid* system. The Mongols, however, took the concept to a different level. By clearing valleys and straightening roads, the overall efficiency of the empire improved greatly and merchants from all over sought to gain

access to the *Yam*. This system proved fruitful for Genghis' army, his merchants and those pretending to be merchants.

This was not a public system. With vital goods and information passing back and forth from these way stations, a functioning security system had to be created. Awaiting groups were not simply handed incoming cargo. All sanctioned convoys had to possess the appropriate *paiza* (tablet of authority).<sup>13</sup> Depending on the rank of the person, each *paiza* was composed of different materials with a variety of illustrations. This was a 13<sup>th</sup> century version of a security clearance. Genghis Khan was a man that valued his information.

There were many benefits to using the *Yam* system, but its main purpose was to improve the Mongol's intelligence gathering capabilities. Recently discovered evidence gives credence to this claim. Messengers emanating from military posts were given preferential treatment at way stations. Historian Thomas T. Allsen uncovered an imperial decree from 1233 that stated, "If messengers coming from military headquarters meet any trading Muslims, [the messengers], no matter what [the merchant's] business, shall confiscate their horses to ride between stations."<sup>14</sup> Considerable profit was made by merchants who had access the *Yam* system.<sup>15</sup> Profit, however, was an ancillary benefit. The primary function of the *Yam* was to expedite the transfer of intelligence communiqués. There is no question that commerce was of importance to Genghis, but commerce never alerted him to troop formations or assassination attempts.

The use of Muslim merchants was a favored practice of Genghis. Collecting information, while performing their everyday duties, was as effective as it was natural.

Some of these merchants were so good, in fact, that they gained minor notoriety. Hasan Hajji and Ja'far Khwajah are two oft-mentioned figures who Genghis grew quite fond. These men served as merchants, spies, ambassadors, and soldiers.<sup>16</sup> Ja'far led peace negotiations with the besieged city of Zhongdu (1214)<sup>17</sup> and Hasan was eventually put in charge of gathering political intelligence in the Chin Empire.<sup>18</sup> It is easy to understand Genghis' fondness for men with such versatile talents. Later we will see how Genghis' emphasis on political intelligence played a critical role in the invasion of the Khwarezm Empire.

Another notable Mongol spy was Ila Ahai. Originally part of a Kerait envoy, Ila Ahai was apparently so impressed with Genghis after their first meeting that he decided to become a double agent. Ila Ahai would go on to create a network of spies. He even allowed his brother Tuke to be taken hostage so that he could become a Mongol guard.<sup>19</sup>

Sultan Mohammed II of Khwarezm had spies of his own, but he was not able to attract a comparable level of talent. Genghis' savvy intelligence operations, the structure of the *Yasa* code, and the efficiency of the *Yam* system (coupled with the arrival of the Mongolian alphabet in the early 13<sup>th</sup> century)<sup>20</sup>, put Sultan Mohammed at a distinct disadvantage.

### **The Invasion of Khwarezm**

For all of Genghis' victories, intelligence played the greatest role during his invasion of the Khwarezm Empire. Sources disagree on the size of the Mongol army, but they are universally assumed to have been numerically inferior. This size disadvantage

required Genghis to apply a multifaceted approach to both intelligence gathering and war fighting.

Before the Khwarezm Empire and Sultan Mohammed could be dealt with, Genghis had to dispose of Kuchlug and his Qara Khitai kingdom. The Qara Khitai and Khwarezm empires were divided by the Syr Darya River, which Genghis would have to transverse in order to engage Sultan Mohammed.

Conquering Qara Khitai was considerably easier thanks to the Kuchlug's draconian policies. A large portion of the Qara Khitai population was Muslim. Therefore, they were less than enthused when Kuchlug demanded all citizens convert to Buddhism or Nestorianism.<sup>21</sup> Thanks to his trusty Muslim merchants, Genghis was well aware of the anger these people felt. Citizens were more than open to the possibility of new leadership.<sup>22</sup> It also helped that Genghis had gained moderate notoriety for the religious tolerance of his *Yasa* code.

The invasion of Qara Khitai began in 1218. Jebe, one of Genghis' most trusted generals, made quick work of Kuchlug's forces. (It should be noted that Jebe forbade his troops from plundering the cities and terrorizing the people. This was a tall task for a 13<sup>th</sup> century fighting force, but this famously disciplined army was capable.<sup>23</sup> Genghis did not want to squander the tremendous political capital he recently accumulated in Qara Khitai. Despite his reputation for being ruthless and cruel, Genghis was far more pragmatic and calculating than most people realize.) The usurped Kuchlug made a feeble attempt to flee, but had difficulty doing so. His harsh treatment of the local populace prohibited him from finding sufficient sanctuary. Jebe's men found Kuchlug near Badakshan and beheaded

him.<sup>24</sup> The head was paraded around for all to see. This was not a display of power, but a message to Sultan Mohammed.

The Mongols invaded Khwarezm sometime around 1219. However, before the conflict began there were several exchanges between Genghis and Sultan Mohammed. An initial envoy was sent from Khwarezm to ascertain Genghis' intentions. All of the men were received warmly and Genghis relayed a message that expressed his desire for a peaceful relationship. But there was one phrase in the message that was not well received by Sultan Mohammed. Genghis stated: "You are the best loved of my sons."<sup>25</sup> Genghis then sent a corresponding group of ambassadors to the city of Otrar. The envoy was attacked when they entered the city. The governor of Otrar, Inalchuq, sent word of their arrival to Sultan Mohammed and asked to execute the spies. Inalchuq received permission and put the men to death.<sup>26</sup> (When Otrar was overrun the next year, Genghis had Inalchuq killed by pouring molten silver into his eyes and ears.<sup>27</sup>) Despite the bloody outcome of the first endeavor, Genghis sent one final envoy of two Mongols and one Muslim. The Mongols had their beards shaved and the Muslim was beheaded. Clearly, Sultan Mohammed did not possess a comparable intelligence apparatus. If he had, he would have known not to enrage the "Rightful Ruler."

Similar to the peoples of Qara Khitai, much of the Khwarezm population was Muslim. Despite being Muslim himself, Sultan Mohammed had done little to endear himself to his people. A revolt in Otrar resulted in the killing of hundreds of local Muslims and in 1217 Sultan Mohammed made a feeble attempt to overthrow the Caliph of Baghdad.<sup>28</sup> This did not mean the people of Khwarezm would be similarly spared, but it did mean that Genghis' Muslim spies were able to operate with significant impunity. In

a weak attempt to mitigate their effect, Sultan Mohammed closed all eastern trade routes.<sup>29</sup>

Political intelligence was especially important for Genghis' spies in Khwarezm. The Mongol agents learned of widespread disunity among the Khwarezm army (much of which was composed of mercenaries), a quasi-shadow government set up by Turkhan Khatun (Sultan Mohammed's mother), and a heated debate over Sultan Mohammed's successor.<sup>30</sup>

Sultan Mohammed received intelligence indicating that the Mongol Army had difficulty with siege warfare during their invasion of the Chin Empire. Therefore, the Khwarezm capital of Smarkand was duly fortified.<sup>31</sup> This intelligence was accurate. The Mongols *had* difficulty with siege warfare. But Genghis had learned of Sultan Mohammed's strategy and acquired an untold number of Chinese siege engineers.<sup>32</sup> Genghis also chose to take the path of least resistance. Instead of marching straight towards Smarkand, the Mongols took an unexpected detour toward neighboring Bokhara. The city could not have been less prepared. After the last few elements of armed resistance were suppressed, Bokhara's wealthiest citizens were gathered together to hear the words of the Rightful Ruler. Genghis delivered a chilling message:

**“O people, know that you have committed great sins, and that the great ones among you have committed these sins. If you ask me what proof I have for these words, I say it is because I am the punishment of God. If you had not committed great sins, God would not have sent a punishment like me upon you.”<sup>33</sup>**

Genghis may have been more pragmatic and calculating than most realize, but certainly he had a violent reputation for good reason.

Thanks to the help of Genghis' Chinese technicians, Smarkand fell in 1220. Tensions rose and mistrust ran wild among the Khwarezm army, pitting loyalists of

Sultan Mohammed against those of his mother.<sup>34</sup> Armed with strong intelligence about this family dispute, Genghis sought to exploit the situation. The dispersal of disinformation was a favored tactic of the Mongols.<sup>35</sup> The Muslim merchants were famous for eliciting a wide range of propaganda among the populace. But Genghis was known to use even sneakier tactics of disinformation. A Mongol “defector” who was able to reach Sultan Mohammed, presented him with an intercepted message purportedly from Turkhan Khatun to Genghis. In the message was the proposal for an alliance. Fearing that his empire was collapsing faster than anticipated; Sultan Mohammed removed his forces from a strong defensive position along the Amu Darya River and fled to Persian Iraq.<sup>36</sup> Genghis Khan deposed the Khwarezm Shah not by strength and power, but by guile and deceit. The Mongols had a fully functional intelligence apparatus that was light-years ahead of its time.

### **Lessons Learned**

The key aspect of the Mongol’s intelligence strategy is that it was both offensive and defensive in nature. States cannot simply seek to acquire information; they must impede other’s ability to gain it. No intelligence apparatus should be overly focused on any one strategy. There must be a comprehensive and balanced effort to acquire information, secure information, and misdirect efforts to permeate the system. A pragmatic allocation of resources is critical. Any excess effort expended is going to adversely affect other intelligence efforts. If too much emphasis is put on securing information, fewer efforts will go towards acquiring it. Genghis Khan was cunning and

sly, but what helped bring down Sultan Mohammed was his multi-faceted holistic approach. It was not only about military intelligence, it was about political intelligence. He did not seek to simply secure information; he sought to misdirect the feeble intelligence gathering efforts of his foes. These blitzkrieg-style intelligence operations inundated those employing more linear tactics.

Genghis Khan's political acumen is also worth mentioning. His attempts to curry favor with the local populace laid the groundwork for intelligence gathering. Many of these attempts were less than genuine, but the effectiveness of garnering public support cannot be overstated. This Mongol soft power was the key to swift victory in Qara Khatai and certainly helped the pre-war intelligence reports on the Khwarezm Empire. Few people associate Genghis Khan with the concept of soft power. But his version of soft power had little to do with humility or humanity; it was about pragmatism and common sense. Why waste manpower and resources ravaging a city when its citizens are willing to submit? Genghis Khan learned that armed resistance was less likely from a cooperative populace. It is no coincidence that these are the same lessons that Coalition Forces have learned during their time in the same region. The Rightful Ruler never hesitated to exercise hard power, but his strength lay in his ability to choose the proper course of action. Spycraft is more art than science and Genghis Khan was a skilled craftsman.

## Notes

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- <sup>1</sup> Ratchnevsky, 16
  - <sup>2</sup> Lister, 89
  - <sup>3</sup> De Hartog, 20
  - <sup>4</sup> Lister, 106
  - <sup>5</sup> De Hartog, 20-21
  - <sup>6</sup> De Hartog, 30
  - <sup>7</sup> De Hartog, 24
  - <sup>8</sup> Kahn, 76
  - <sup>9</sup> De Hartog 25
  - <sup>10</sup> Lane, 35
  - <sup>11</sup> Morgan, 103
  - <sup>12</sup> Ricci, 484
  - <sup>13</sup> Morgan, 105
  - <sup>14</sup> Allsen, 97
  - <sup>15</sup> Allsen, 97
  - <sup>16</sup> Allsen, 87
  - <sup>17</sup> Ratchnevsky, 111
  - <sup>18</sup> Alexseev, 134
  - <sup>19</sup> Alexseev, 132
  - <sup>20</sup> De Hartog, 142
  - <sup>21</sup> De Hartog, 84
  - <sup>22</sup> De Hartog, 90
  - <sup>23</sup> Ibid.
  - <sup>24</sup> De Hartog, 91
  - <sup>25</sup> Ratchnevsky, 122
  - <sup>26</sup> Tanner, 87
  - <sup>27</sup> Tanner, 88
  - <sup>28</sup> De Hartog, 91
  - <sup>29</sup> De Hartog, 92
  - <sup>30</sup> Alexseev, 139-40
  - <sup>31</sup> Ratchnevsky, 173-174
  - <sup>32</sup> Ibid
  - <sup>33</sup> Tanner, 90
  - <sup>34</sup> Alexseev, 144
  - <sup>35</sup> Allsen, 96
  - <sup>36</sup> Alexseev, 145

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