SUBOTAI THE VALIANT

Genghis Khan's Greatest General

Richard A. Gabriel

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In Memoriam

Steven Charles Krantz

father, husband, brother, teacher, musician
and son—a very good man indeed

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Contents

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ILLUSTRATIONS

FIGURES

MAPS

PREFACE

Subotai *bagatur*, that is to say, Subotai the Valiant, was one of the greatest generals in ancient military history. He was surely the equal of Hannibal and Scipio in tactical brilliance, and stands with Alexander and Caesar as a strategist. He commanded armies whose size, scale, and scope of operations surpassed most of those of the ancient world. Under his leadership and direction, Mongol armies moved faster and over longer distances with a greater scope of maneuver than any armies had done before. The Muslim chroniclers tell us that when he died at age seventy-three, Subotai "had conquered thirty-two nations and won sixty-five pitched battles." His fame was such that after his death both his Chinese and Muslim enemies erected monuments to him. Indeed, had there been no Subotai the Valiant, there would have been no Mongol conquest of Korea, China, Persia, and Russia—nor of Hungary, the conquest of which by Subotai's armies destroyed every remaining military force standing between the Mongol advance and Europe. Had not the Great Khan died (an event that required the Mongol armies and their princes to return to Mongolia to elect a successor), there is every likelihood that Subotai would have destroyed Europe itself!

It is surprising, therefore, that Subotai remains almost unknown in the West for the great strategist and tactical genius that he was. Although Giovanni di Plano Carpini wrote an account of the Mongol army, its equipment, and its tactics in 1248 as a result of his visit to the Mongol court, this work appears to have had no influence whatsoever on European military thought or practice. Nor did the writings of Marco Polo. Jean Pierre Abel Remusat, writing in 1829, offered a nine-page "biography" of Subotai in the form of a

translation of a Chinese record. Hans Delbruck's magnificent work, *The History of the Art of War*, fails to mention the Mongols at all. As far as I can tell, the first modern military historian to write an analysis of Mongol military practice that included some treatment of Subotai's campaigns was the Russian Lieutenant General Mikhail I. Ivanin (1801–1874). Given the Russian experience with the Mongol and Turkic tribes in Central Asia at the time, the work was immediately recognized as an important contribution to military thought. The book and the study of Mongol military methods were incorporated into the curriculum of the Imperial Military Academy and other (Soviet) military schools until after World War II. In the West proper, however, military historians and practitioners virtually ignored Mongol military history and remained ignorant of the achievements of its greatest general, Subotai. In 1927, Sir Basil H. Liddell-Hart devoted a chapter of his *Great Captains Unveiled* to Genghis Khan in which he offers a sketch of Subotai's achievements. Henry Morel, a French military historian, authored an article on the Mongols in 1922, and in 1932, a Canadian officer contributed a small monograph on the subject in which Subotai is mentioned in passing. Thus, one of the greatest generals in all history has remained almost completely unknown in the West.

Subotai the Valiant is, therefore, the first attempt at a military biography of the great general to be published in the West. In the attempt, I have relied primarily upon English translations of Arabic, Persian, Chinese, and French sources for my information. Using English translations of *The Secret History of the Mongols* as well, I have sought in one way or another to incorporate every piece of information that can reasonably be garnered from the original sources. I have also used such bits and pieces about Subotai as are to be found scattered in secondary sources to assemble as complete a portrait of this great general as the information itself will permit. Even if my effort has fallen short, there is now, at the minimum, a single source to which students of Mongol and military history may turn to learn more about one of history's superb field commanders. For Subotai is more than a historical figure; his legacy is, in fact, living history. For much of the theory and practice of modern military operations was first used by Subotai and his Mongol armies. The modern emphasis on speed, maneuver, surprise, envelopment, the rear battle, deep battle, and the battle of annihilation all first emerged as an identifiable tactical skill set in the campaigns of Subotai. In this sense, it can be said that those who would master today's battles would do well first to study the battles of the past.

1 SUBOTAI THE VALIANT

The old blacksmith and his two sons struggled through the knee-deep snow, making their way down the steep mountainside toward Temujin's camp. The three of them had come a long way from the dark forest of the *taiga* west of Lake Baikal that was their home. Up ahead, within sight, was the tree line, where the snow gave way to bare ground and rock. Another few *li* and they would reach the steppe itself, where the spring temperatures had already begun to turn the Mongolian plain green with new grass. It was spring, the time of year when the Mongol clans left their winter camps in the mountains and drove their horse herds down to the steppes, where the half-starved animals that had survived the brutal Mongolian winter could eat their fill and replenish their bodies. It would take at least a month before the horses were healthy enough to permit their use in that favorite Mongol pastime: war.

The old man's name was Jarchigudai. He was an Uriangkhai, one of the forest tribes that lived in the mountains and thick forests north of the Mongolian steppe. Twenty years ago, he had made this same journey. Then he had come with his first-born son, Jelme, now a strapping young man of eighteen summers. Jarchigudai had been a blacksmith then, as he still was, and he carried his blacksmith's bellows on his back when he came to see Yesugei, the warrior and heir to the Mongol dynasty that had once ruled all the Mongol clans. He had come then to offer Yesugei his first-born as his servant. Yesugei had been camped at Deligun Hill on the Onan River, where his wife had presented him with a son of his own.[1] Yesugei had named his first-born, Temujin, after a brave warrior that Yesugei had slain in one of the interminable battles between the clans. Jarchigudai's son had then also been an infant,

having been born in the same month as Temujin. Yesugei had welcomed Jarchigudai's gift with gratitude, but feared that his wife could not care properly for two infants. So he had sent the blacksmith away with the promise that when Jelme had grown to be a man, Yesugei would welcome him into his service. So Jarchigudai the blacksmith returned to his people in the forest where, over the years, he had plied his trade as Jelme had grown to manhood. During this time, Jarchigudai's wife had given him another son, but the effort had killed her, and Jarchigudai was alone in the world, except for his two boys.

Then word was brought to Jarchigudai that Yesugei had been killed by the Tartars, poisoned as they falsely offered him the hospitality of the Mongol tent. With Yesugei dead, the young Temujin, barely ten years old, had not been able to hold the loyalty of the warriors in the clan. He, his brothers, and his mother had been abandoned on the steppe without horses when the clan gave their loyalty to new leaders. For some years Temujin and his family had survived and rebuilt their fortunes until, only a year before Jarchigudai had learned of Yesugei's death, Temujin had formed an alliance with his father's *anda*, or blood brother, who in turn brought Temujin under his protection. With this friendship, Temujin, a prince of royal Mongol blood, had begun to attract other men and their families to him. Now, in the spring of 1187, as he camped on the banks of the Onan, Temujin was the leader of a small group of followers, families, and herds. Jarchigudai knew that Temujin was the son of a royal father and heir to the old Mongol dynasty. To a simple man like the blacksmith, a promise was a promise. As he had promised to bring his son to Yesugei when the time was right, so now he travelled a great distance to keep his promise to the son of the man to whom he had given his word.

Jarchigudai and his sons reached the camp late in the morning, when the heat of the steppe had already driven the cool morning air away. Temujin was waiting in front of his tent, having been warned of the strangers' approach by his sentries. He must have wondered who these travelers were and was on his guard, for the life of a Mongol warrior in those days was perilous indeed. As the *Secret History of the Mongols* tells the story, Jarchigudai spoke to Temujin:

> "Many years ago, I had a son, Jelme, who was born when you were born and grew up when you grew up. When your people were camped at Deligun Hill on the Onan, when you, Temujin, were born, I gave your father a sable blanket to swaddle you in."[2] The old man could see from the expression on Temujin's face that it was the first time he had heard such a tale

about his own youth. Every Mongol knew his lineage back at least five generations and could recite it at a moment's notice. But this, Jarchigudai sensed, Temujin had not known. The old blacksmith went on. "When you were an infant, I also gave my son, Jelme, to your father, but since he was just an infant then I kept him with me."[3] He paused and looked at Jelme, who, he knew, was eager to join Temujin's clan. Since boyhood, Jelme had shown neither aptitude nor interest in becoming a blacksmith. Jarchigudai turned back to Temujin. "Now," he said, "I have come to keep my promise to your father. Now Jelme is yours, to put on your saddle and open your door." Then he gave Temujin his son.[4]

The *Secret History* tells us nothing about Jelme's younger brother, then ten years old and standing behind his father watching everything that transpired. As the youngest son, he would become the *ochigin*, or "keeper of the hearth," for it was the custom of the forest tribes to place the father's estate in the trust of the youngest son. With Jelme gone, old Jarchigudai expected his youngest to become a blacksmith, for that was the way of the Uriangkhai. We do not know what the young boy thought as he watched. Perhaps he was struck by the physical presence of Temujin, a man taller than most Mongols, of powerful build, and with stone-gray eyes—like a wolf's, it was said. He had never been out of the forests, and perhaps he was impressed with the openness and beauty of the springtime steppe, with its green carpet of new grass, or with the heat of the sun that he could feel shining directly upon his body, unimpeded by the trees of the thick forests in his own land. Or perhaps he was like his brother in ways his father did not know, in that he had never wished to be a blacksmith. Now that Jelme had found another life for himself, perhaps he, too, might one day seek another way. But all this is uncertain. What is certain is that the meeting between Temujin and the sons of Jarchigudai the blacksmith in the early spring of 1187 was to have enormous consequences for the world. In less than twenty years, the young warrior-prince Temujin would come to unite and rule a new nation composed of "all the people whose tents are protected by skirts of felt."[5] Chosen in the year 1206 by a vast conclave of all the tribes of Mongolia, Temujin was given a new name, one that would make the world tremble. On that May field long ago, Temujin, once the outlaw, became Genghis Khan. The younger of Jarchigudai's boys, too, would one day make the world shake. Jarchigudai's youngest son did indeed disappoint his father. When he was fourteen years old, the time when a Mongol boy became a warrior, he left the land of the Uriangkhai to join the army of

Temujin. The boy's name was Subotai, and he became one of the greatest generals in history.

One of the more interesting paradoxes of military history is that the greatest Mongol general of them all was not, strictly speaking, a Mongol at all. The term *Mongol* refers to the group of clans that constituted the tribe from which Genghis Khan came. Once he had unified the other tribes of Mongolia—the Kerits, Merkits, Naimans, Tartars, etc.—the general confederation was given the common name of Mongols by Chinese, Muslim, and Christian chroniclers. All the tribes were nomadic steppe people who moved their horse and cattle herds with the seasons in search of pasture. All were horsemen and all shared the same type and method of warfare in that they were horse-borne bowmen. The Uriangkhai, to which Subotai belonged, was among the clans called forest tribes or, somewhat less correctly, forest Mongols. The chroniclers knew the Uriangkhai as the Reindeer People, and they lived in the forest taiga of the upper Yenisei River near the western edge of Lake Baikal.[6] They lived a vastly different life from that of the Mongol warriors of the steppe, considering themselves separate from them. Indeed, when Genghis Khan came to power, he quickly sent several military expeditions against the forest tribes to bring them under his control.

Genghis' interest in the forest tribes stemmed less from any feeling of consanguinity than from stark steppe economics. The Uriangkhai were hunters and fishermen who lived by trapping and trading Siberian furs to the steppe Mongols, who valued them highly as clothing against the harsh Mongolian winters. When hunting, the Uriangkhai wore "small, well-polished bones tied to their feet, with which they speed so swiftly over the ice that they catch animals in flight."[7] The Uriangkhai were not pastoral; that is, they did not move seasonally with the herds, but lived in clustered villages in permanent log huts covered with hides and birch bark. This stability led some of them to become metal smiths, some of whom traveled to the Mongol seasonal encampments where they practiced their trade repairing metal weapons and household implements. Jarchigudai was one of these smiths.

The climate of the Siberian taiga is much colder and snowier, and it has less daylight than the Mongolian steppe, so the Uriangkhai used animal skins for clothing more than did the steppe peoples. If we can trust the description of the Persian physician Rashid ad-Din, writing in his *Jami'at-Tavarikh* (*Great Collection of Histories*) around 1300, the forest tribes took no part in the tribal wars of the steppe Mongols. Rashid wrote that these tribes usually kept no herds, except for the Uriangkhai, who maintained domesticated

herds of reindeer that they called *reem*.[8] Their descendants, the Reindeer People, still survive in the forests of Siberia, near the Arctic Circle, living much as they did during Subotai's time. According to Rashid, the forest tribes rarely left their woodlands:

> They believe that there is no happier life than their own. Their country being very cold, they hunt much over the snow. They bind to their feet long lengths of wood that they call *chana*, using their staffs in their hands to push them along in the snow, like the pole of a boat. They shoot down mountainsides so swiftly that they catch up with animals. . . . This is something you must see, in order to believe it.[9]

As the son of a blacksmith in the Siberian taiga, Subotai was raised much differently than the son of a steppe Mongol. Unlike the boys of the steppe, Subotai was not taught to ride by his mother at age three; he was not given a bow and instruction in its use by age five. Whereas the steppe Mongol spent most of his life on horseback, it is likely that Subotai had never even ridden a horse until he joined Genghis' army at age fourteen. Nor had Subotai any experience in spending long hours in the saddle in the alternating cold and heat of the Mongolian steppe while the entire tribe moved across the open plain with few landmarks to guide it. He possessed no sense of the wide expanse of the steppe or even a sense of distance. It is doubtful that anything from his life in the thick, mountainous forests would have prepared him for the sheer nakedness of the steppe or the desert, or for the terrible sense of vulnerability that can come with it. Unlike the sons of the steppe, this son of the taiga had no experience in eating uncooked food, drinking *kumis*, or drinking the blood of his horse for nourishment to sustain him on a long march. It is unlikely that, accustomed to life in the forests, he possessed that unique Mongol ability to spot movement in the open plain miles before it was upon you, or the ability to tell the difference between a man and animal at such great distances. For anyone lacking these abilities, the steppe became a dangerous place where a surprise attack could descend quickly upon the unwary, often with deadly results. Yet this son of a blacksmith somehow became the greatest general in Mongol history. His exploits rank him with the most successful of generals in all of human history. Just how this came to be is a very interesting tale.

Writing in his *Historia Mongalorum quos nos Tartaros appellamus* in 1248, the Franciscan monk Giovanni di Plano Carpini, who had returned from his papal mission to the Mongol court in 1247, recorded that Subotai,

thought of by the Mongols as their greatest general, was still alive and well.[10] The Chinese biography of Subotai included in the *Sou Houng Kian Lou* (translated by Jean Pierre Abel Remusat in 1829) says that the great general died at the age of seventy-three.[11] Accordingly, we may place the dates of Subotai's life from 1175 to 1248. The first mention of Subotai in any source occurs in *The Secret History of the Mongols*, the great saga of the Mongol people that records the rise and life of Genghis Khan. Written in poetic form, the *Secret History* is to Mongol history and myth as the *Iliad* is to the Greek.[12] We first hear of Subotai in connection with the tale of the break between Temujin and his powerful and jealous ally, Jamuga. For more than a year, the two had been allies, and even anda (blood brothers). Their clans traveled and camped together. Eventually, however, as Jamuga became suspicious of Temujin's growing popularity, the two clans separated and no longer camped together. This signalled to all the clans and warriors of the Mongol tribe that the time had come to choose sides, and most chose Temujin: "People arrived from the Jalayir, from the Onggur and the Manghud. Ogele Cherbi, Borgorchu's kin, joined from the Arulad, and Jelme's younger brother, Subotai Bagatur, left the Uriangkhai to join them."[13]

Subotai had followed his brother's example, leaving the forests and his father's forge for a life of adventure in the service of Temujin the outlaw. Young men pretending to be old enough to join the military is a story as old as armies themselves are. By rough reckoning, Subotai was not yet fourteen, the age when a Mongol boy became a warrior.

The poem speaks of Subotai as bagatur, as if he had already possessed this title at the time he joined Temujin. The title itself means brave or valiant, thus Subotai the Valiant, as he was known to the Chinese chroniclers. The term found its way into Russian as *bogatyr*. It was the title of the Mongol knight and was acquired by Subotai as a young officer serving in Temujin's bodyguard. *The Secret History* was written sometime between 1240 and 1260, when Subotai was already well known as a talented general and had already been granted this title. Although Subotai rose to higher rank, throughout his life he used the title of bagatur most often—so much so that foreign chroniclers often mistakenly thought it to be the great general's surname!

When Subotai joined Temujin, he was but a young boy and surely no knight. He was Jelme's younger brother, however, and Jelme had become one of Temujin's closest comrades and advisors. Jelme had come to Temujin when he was at a difficult juncture. Outlawed by the chief of his own clan,

his horses stolen, and his wife kidnapped by the Merkits, Temujin had few warriors to stand by him. The esteem in which Jelme was held by Temujin is clear in the *Secret History*. In 1188, when the clans chose Temujin to be their leader in war, all the clan leaders came forward to pledge their loyalty to Temujin. The only exceptions were Jelme and Bogorchu. To stress the esteem in which these two companions were held, the poem tells of Temujin pledging his loyalty and honor to them.

> Then Temujin turned to Borgorchu [*sic*] and Jelme and said, "You two, from the time when there was no one to fight beside me but my own shadow, you were my shadow and gave my mind rest. That will always be in my thoughts. From the time when there was nothing to whip my horses with except their tails, you were their tails and gave my heart peace. That will always be in my heart. Since you were the first two who came to my side, you will be chieftains over all the rest of the people."[14]

We may reasonably assume from this that Jelme was privy to all the consultation and planning sessions that Temujin held with his officers as they sought to defeat their enemies both politically and on the battlefield. The use of the commander's conference, in which the leader gathers his trusted commanders and advisors to plan a campaign, has a very long history in the ancient West, and was commonly used by the Mongols as well.[15] It is likely that Jelme's position as a trusted comrade is what made Subotai's higher education in military matters possible.

That a young boy from the forests could adjust to Mongol life on the steppe is clear enough from Jelme's circumstances. Jelme himself was given to Temujin as a slave, "to put on your saddle and open your [tent] door," a clear indication that Jelme possessed no military skills at all at that time. A few years later, we find him fully acclimated to the life of the Mongol soldier. But Subotai was still only a boy, and not yet ready to become a soldier. What, then, were they to do with him? He could hardly be turned to common labor, or even to rough training at the hands of the troops. If what the poem tells us about Jelme applied as well to Subotai, then it is possible that Subotai was assigned to be Temujin's keeper of the tent door while he gradually learned the military skills of the Mongol soldier, perhaps under the careful tutelage of a Mongol officer. Subotai's special status is implied by the poem. Although of no military status whatsoever, Subotai was permitted to pledge his loyalty to Temujin along with the other clan leaders as if, somehow, he was already one of them. In Subotai's pledge, there is the sense of a boy