

Introduction

The Missing Conqueror



Genghis Khan was a doer.

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IN 1937, THE SOUL of Genghis Khan disappeared from the Buddhist monastery in central Mongolia along the River of the Moon below the black Shankh Mountains where the faithful lamas had protected and venerated it for centuries. During the 1930s, Stalin's henchmen executed some thirty thousand Mongols in a series of campaigns against their culture and religion. The troops ravaged one monastery after another, shot the monks, assaulted the nuns, broke the religious objects, looted the libraries, burned the scriptures, and demolished the temples. Reportedly, someone secretly rescued the embodiment of Genghis Khan's soul from the Shankh Monastery and whisked it away for safekeeping to the capital in Ulaanbaatar, where it ultimately disappeared.

Through the centuries on the rolling, grassy steppes of inner Asia, a warrior-herder carried a Spirit Banner, called a *sulde*, constructed by tying strands of hair from his best stallions to the shaft of a spear, just below its blade. Whenever he erected his camp, the warrior planted the Spirit Banner outside the entrance to proclaim his identity and to stand as his perpetual guardian. The Spirit Banner always remained in the open air beneath the Eternal Blue Sky that the Mongols worshiped. As the strands of hair blew and tossed in the nearly constant breeze of the steppe, they captured the power of

the wind, the sky, and the sun, and the banner channeled this power from nature to the warrior. The wind in the horsehair inspired the warrior's dreams and encouraged him to pursue his own destiny. The streaming and twisting of the horsehair in the wind beckoned the owner ever onward, luring him away from this spot to seek another, to find better pasture, to explore new opportunities and adventures, to create his own fate in his life in this world. The union between the man and his Spirit Banner grew so intertwined that when he died, the warrior's spirit was said to reside forever in those tufts of horsehair. While the warrior lived, the horsehair banner carried his destiny; in death, it became his soul. The physical body was quickly abandoned to nature, but the soul lived on forever in those tufts of horsehair to inspire future generations.

Genghis Khan had one banner made from white horses to use in peacetime and one made from black horses for guidance in war. The white one disappeared early in history, but the black one survived as the repository of his soul. In the centuries after his death, the Mongol people continued to honor the banner where his soul resided. In the sixteenth century, one of his descendants, the lama Zanabazar, built the monastery with a special mission to fly and protect his banner. Through storms and blizzards, invasions and civil wars, more than a thousand monks of the Yellow Hat sect of Tibetan Buddhism guarded the great banner, but they proved no match for the totalitarian politics of the twentieth century. The monks were killed, and the Spirit Banner disappeared.

Fate did not hand Genghis Khan his destiny; he made it for himself. It seemed highly unlikely that he would ever have enough horses to create a Spirit Banner, much less that he might follow it across the world. The boy who became Genghis Khan grew up in a world of excessive tribal violence, including murder, kidnapping, and enslavement. As the son in an outcast family left to die on the steppes, he probably encountered no more than a few hundred people in his entire childhood, and he received no formal education. From this harsh setting, he learned, in dreadful detail, the full range of human emotion: desire, ambition, and cruelty. While still a child he killed his older half brother, was captured and enslaved by a rival clan, and managed to escape from his captors.

Under such horrific conditions, the boy showed an instinct for survival

and self-preservation, but he showed little promise of the achievements he would one day make. As a child, he feared dogs and he cried easily. His younger brother was stronger than he was and a better archer and wrestler; his half brother bossed him around and picked on him. Yet from these degraded circumstances of hunger, humiliation, kidnapping, and slavery, he began the long climb to power. Before reaching puberty, he had already formed the two most important relationships of his life. He swore eternal friendship and allegiance to a slightly older boy who became the closest friend of his youth but turned into the most dedicated enemy of his adulthood, and he found the girl whom he would love forever and whom he made the mother of emperors. The dual capacity for friendship and enmity forged in Genghis Khan's youth endured throughout his life and became the defining trait of his character. The tormenting questions of love and paternity that arose beneath a shared blanket or in the flickering firelight of the family hearth became projected onto the larger stage of world history. His personal goals, desires, and fears engulfed the world.

Year by year, he gradually defeated everyone more powerful than he was, until he had conquered every tribe on the Mongolian steppe. At the age of fifty, when most great conquerors had already put their fighting days behind them, Genghis Khan's Spirit Banner beckoned him out of his remote homeland to confront the armies of the civilized people who had harassed and enslaved the nomadic tribes for centuries. In the remaining years of life, he followed that Spirit Banner to repeated victory across the Gobi and the Yellow River into the kingdoms of China, through the central Asian lands of the Turks and the Persians, and across the mountains of Afghanistan to the Indus River.

In conquest after conquest, the Mongol army transformed warfare into an intercontinental affair fought on multiple fronts stretching across thousands of miles. Genghis Khan's innovative fighting techniques made the heavily armored knights of medieval Europe obsolete, replacing them with disciplined cavalry moving in coordinated units. Rather than relying on defensive fortifications, he made brilliant use of speed and surprise on the battlefield, as well as perfecting siege warfare to such a degree that he ended the era of walled cities. Genghis Khan taught his people not only to fight across incredible distances but to sustain their campaign over years, decades, and, eventually, more than three generations of constant fighting.

In twenty-five years, the Mongol army subjugated more lands and people than the Romans had conquered in four hundred years. Genghis Khan, together with his sons and grandsons, conquered the most densely populated civilizations of the thirteenth century. Whether measured by the total number of people defeated, the sum of the countries annexed, or by the total area occupied, Genghis Khan conquered more than twice as much as any other man in history. The hooves of the Mongol warriors' horses splashed in the waters of every river and lake from the Pacific Ocean to the Mediterranean Sea. At its zenith, the empire covered between 11 and 12 million contiguous square miles, an area about the size of the African continent and considerably larger than North America, including the United States, Canada, Mexico, Central America, and the islands of the Caribbean combined. It stretched from the snowy tundra of Siberia to the hot plains of India, from the rice paddies of Vietnam to the wheat fields of Hungary, and from Korea to the Balkans. The majority of people today live in countries conquered by the Mongols; on the modern map, Genghis Khan's conquests include thirty countries with well over 3 billion people. The most astonishing aspect of this achievement is that the entire Mongol tribe under him numbered around a million, smaller than the workforce of some modern corporations. From this million, he recruited his army, which was comprised of no more than one hundred thousand warriors—a group that could comfortably fit into the larger sports stadiums of the modern era.

In American terms, the accomplishment of Genghis Khan might be understood if the United States, instead of being created by a group of educated merchants or wealthy planters, had been founded by one of its illiterate slaves, who, by the sheer force of personality, charisma, and determination, liberated America from foreign rule, united the people, created an alphabet, wrote the constitution, established universal religious freedom, invented a new system of warfare, marched an army from Canada to Brazil, and opened roads of commerce in a free-trade zone that stretched across the continents. On every level and from any perspective, the scale and scope of Genghis Khan's accomplishments challenge the limits of imagination and tax the resources of scholarly explanation.

As Genghis Khan's cavalry charged across the thirteenth century, he redrew the boundaries of the world. His architecture was not in stone but in nations. Unsatisfied with the vast number of little kingdoms, Genghis Khan

consolidated smaller countries into larger ones. In eastern Europe, the Mongols united a dozen Slavic principalities and cities into one large Russian state. In eastern Asia, over a span of three generations, they created the country of China by weaving together the remnants of the Sung dynasty in the south with the lands of the Jurchen in Manchuria, Tibet in the west, the Tangut Kingdom adjacent to the Gobi, and the Uighur lands of eastern Turkistan. As the Mongols expanded their rule, they created countries such as Korea and India that have survived to modern times in approximately the same borders fashioned by their Mongol conquerors.

Genghis Khan's empire connected and amalgamated the many civilizations around him into a new world order. At the time of his birth in 1162, the Old World consisted of a series of regional civilizations each of which could claim virtually no knowledge of any civilization beyond its closest neighbor. No one in China had heard of Europe, and no one in Europe had heard of China, and, so far as is known, no person had made the journey from one to the other. By the time of his death in 1227, he had connected them with diplomatic and commercial contacts that still remain unbroken.

As he smashed the feudal system of aristocratic privilege and birth, he built a new and unique system based on individual merit, loyalty, and achievement. He took the disjointed and languorous trading towns along the Silk Route and organized them into history's largest free-trade zone. He lowered taxes for everyone, and abolished them altogether for doctors, teachers, priests, and educational institutions. He established a regular census and created the first international postal system. His was not an empire that hoarded wealth and treasure; instead, he widely distributed the goods acquired in combat so that they could make their way back into commercial circulation. He created an international law and recognized the ultimate supreme law of the Eternal Blue Sky over all people. At a time when most rulers considered themselves to be above the law, Genghis Khan insisted on laws holding rulers as equally accountable as the lowest herder. He granted religious freedom within his realms, though he demanded total loyalty from conquered subjects of all religions. He insisted on the rule of law and abolished torture, but he mounted major campaigns to seek out and kill raiding bandits and terrorist assassins. He refused to hold hostages and, instead, instituted the novel practice of granting diplomatic immunity for all ambassadors and envoys, including those from hostile nations with whom he was at war.

Genghis Khan left his empire with such a firm foundation that it continued growing for another 150 years. Then, in the centuries that followed its collapse, his descendants continued to rule a variety of smaller empires and large countries, from Russia, Turkey, and India to China and Persia. They held an eclectic assortment of titles, including khan, emperor, sultan, king, shah, emir, and the Dalai Lama. Vestiges of his empire remained under the rule of his descendants for seven centuries. As the Moghuls, some of them reigned in India until 1857, when the British drove out Emperor Bahadur Shah II and chopped off the heads of two of his sons and his grandson. Genghis Khan's last ruling descendant, Alim Khan, emir of Bukhara, remained in power in Uzbekistan until deposed in 1920 by the rising tide of Soviet revolution.

History has condemned most conquerors to miserable, untimely deaths. At age thirty-three, Alexander the Great died under mysterious circumstances in Babylon, while his followers killed off his family and carved up his lands. Julius Caesar's fellow aristocrats and former allies stabbed him to death in the chamber of the Roman Senate. After enduring the destruction and reversal of all his conquests, a lonely and embittered Napoleon faced death as a solitary prisoner on one of the most remote and inaccessible islands on the planet. The nearly seventy-year-old Genghis Khan, however, passed away in his camp bed, surrounded by a loving family, faithful friends, and loyal soldiers ready to risk their life at his command. In the summer of 1227, during a campaign against the Tangut nation along the upper reaches of the Yellow River, Genghis Khan died—or, in the words of the Mongols, who have an abhorrence of mentioning death or illness, he “ascended into heaven.” In the years after his death, the sustained secrecy about the cause of death invited speculation, and later inspired legends that with the veneer of time often appeared as historic fact. Plano di Carpini, the first European envoy to the Mongols, wrote that Genghis Khan died when he was struck by lightning. Marco Polo, who traveled extensively in the Mongol Empire during the reign of Genghis Khan's grandson Khubilai, reported that Genghis Khan succumbed from an arrow wound to the knee. Some claimed that unknown enemies had poisoned him. Another account asserted that he had been killed by a magic spell of the Tangut king against whom he was fighting. One of the stories circulated by his detractors asserted that the captured Tangut queen inserted a

contraption into her vagina so that when Genghis Khan had sex with her, it tore off his sex organs and he died in hideous pain.

Contrary to the many stories about his demise, his death in a nomad's *ger*, essentially similar to the one in which he had been born, illustrated how successful he had been in preserving the traditional way of life of his people; yet, ironically, in the process of preserving their lifestyle, he had transformed human society. Genghis Khan's soldiers escorted the body of their fallen khan back to his homeland in Mongolia for secret burial. After his death, his followers buried him anonymously in the soil of his homeland without a mausoleum, a temple, a pyramid, or so much as a small tombstone to mark the place where he lay. According to Mongol belief, the body of the dead should be left in peace and did not need a monument because the soul was no longer there; it lived on in the Spirit Banner. At burial, Genghis Khan disappeared silently back into the vast landscape of Mongolia from whence he came. The final destination remained unknown, but in the absence of reliable information, people freely invented their own history, with many dramatic flourishes to the story. An often repeated account maintains that the soldiers in his funeral cortege killed every person and animal encountered on the forty-day journey, and that after the secret burial, eight hundred horsemen trampled repeatedly over the area to obscure the location of the grave. Then, according to these imaginative accounts, the horsemen were, in turn, killed by yet another set of soldiers so that they could not report the location of the site; and then, in turn, those soldiers were slain by yet another set of warriors.

After the secret burial in his homeland, soldiers sealed off the entire area for several hundred square miles. No one could enter except members of Genghis Khan's family and a tribe of specially trained warriors who were stationed there to kill every intruder. For nearly eight hundred years, this area—the *Ikh Khorig*, the Great Taboo, deep in the heart of Asia—remained closed. All the secrets of Genghis Khan's empire seemed to have been locked up inside his mysterious homeland. Long after the Mongol Empire collapsed, and other foreign armies invaded parts of Mongolia, the Mongols prevented anyone from entering the sacred precinct of their ancestor. Despite the eventual conversion of the Mongols to Buddhism, his successors nevertheless refused to allow priests to build a shrine, a monastery, or a memorial to mark his burial.

In the twentieth century, to assure that the area of Genghis Khan's birth

and burial did not become a rallying point for nationalists, the Soviet rulers kept it securely guarded. Instead of calling it the Great Taboo or using one of the historic names that might hint at a connection to Genghis Khan, the Soviets called it by the bureaucratic designation of Highly Restricted Area. Administratively, they separated it from the surrounding province and placed it under the direct supervision of the central government that, in turn, was tightly controlled from Moscow. The Soviets further sealed it off by surrounding 1 million hectares of the Highly Restricted Area with an equally large Restricted Area. To prevent travel within the area, the government built neither roads nor bridges during the Communist era. The Soviets maintained a highly fortified MiG air base, and quite probably a storehouse of nuclear weapons, between the Restricted Area and the Mongolian capital of Ulaanbaatar. A large Soviet tank base blocked the entrance into the forbidden zone, and the Russian military used the area for artillery practice and tank maneuvers.

The Mongols made no technological breakthroughs, founded no new religions, wrote few books or dramas, and gave the world no new crops or methods of agriculture. Their own craftsmen could not weave cloth, cast metal, make pottery, or even bake bread. They manufactured neither porcelain nor pottery, painted no pictures, and built no buildings. Yet, as their army conquered culture after culture, they collected and passed all of these skills from one civilization to the next.

The only permanent structures Genghis Khan erected were bridges. Although he spurned the building of castles, forts, cities, or walls, as he moved across the landscape, he probably built more bridges than any ruler in history. He spanned hundreds of streams and rivers in order to make the movement of his armies and goods quicker. The Mongols deliberately opened the world to a new commerce not only in goods, but also in ideas and knowledge. The Mongols brought German miners to China and Chinese doctors to Persia. The transfers ranged from the monumental to the trivial. They spread the use of carpets everywhere they went and transplanted lemons and carrots from Persia to China, as well as noodles, playing cards, and tea from China to the West. They brought a metalworker from Paris to build a fountain on the dry steppes of Mongolia, recruited an English nobleman to serve as interpreter in their army, and took the practice of Chinese

fingerprinting to Persia. They financed the building of Christian churches in China, Buddhist temples and stupas in Persia, and Muslim Koranic schools in Russia. The Mongols swept across the globe as conquerors, but also as civilization's unrivaled cultural carriers.

The Mongols who inherited Genghis Khan's empire exercised a determined drive to move products and commodities around and to combine them in ways that produced entirely novel products and unprecedented invention. When their highly skilled engineers from China, Persia, and Europe combined Chinese gunpowder with Muslim flamethrowers and applied European bell-casting technology, they produced the cannon, an entirely new order of technological innovation, from which sprang the vast modern arsenal of weapons from pistols to missiles. While each item had some significance, the larger impact came in the way the Mongols selected and combined technologies to create unusual hybrids.

The Mongols displayed a devoutly and persistently internationalist zeal in their political, economic, and intellectual endeavors. They sought not merely to conquer the world but to institute a global order based on free trade, a single international law, and a universal alphabet with which to write all languages. Genghis Khan's grandson, Khubilai Khan, introduced a paper currency intended for use everywhere and attempted to create primary schools for universal basic education of all children in order to make everyone literate. The Mongols refined and combined calendars to create a ten-thousand year calendar more accurate than any previous one, and they sponsored the most extensive maps ever assembled. The Mongols encouraged merchants to set out by land to reach their empire, and they sent out explorers across land and sea as far as Africa to expand their commercial and diplomatic reach.

In nearly every country touched by the Mongols, the initial destruction and shock of conquest by an unknown and barbaric tribe yielded quickly to an unprecedented rise in cultural communication, expanded trade, and improved civilization. In Europe, the Mongols slaughtered the aristocratic knighthood of the continent, but, disappointed with the general poverty of the area compared with the Chinese and Muslim countries, turned away and did not bother to conquer the cities, loot the countries, or incorporate them into the expanding empire. In the end, Europe suffered the least yet acquired all the advantages of contact through merchants such as the Polo family of

Venice and envoys exchanged between the Mongol khans and the popes and kings of Europe. The new technology, knowledge, and commercial wealth created the Renaissance in which Europe rediscovered some of its prior culture, but more importantly, absorbed the technology for printing, firearms, the compass, and the abacus from the East. As English scientist Roger Bacon observed in the thirteenth century, the Mongols succeeded not merely from martial superiority; rather, "they have succeeded by means of science." Although the Mongols "are eager for war," they have advanced so far because they "devote their leisure to the principles of philosophy."

Seemingly every aspect of European life—technology, warfare, clothing, commerce, food, art, literature, and music—changed during the Renaissance as a result of the Mongol influence. In addition to new forms of fighting, new machines, and new foods, even the most mundane aspects of daily life changed as the Europeans switched to Mongol fabrics, wearing pants and jackets instead of tunics and robes, played their musical instruments with the steppe bow rather than plucking them with the fingers, and painted their pictures in a new style. The Europeans even picked up the Mongol exclamation *hurray* as an enthusiastic cry of bravado and mutual encouragement.

With so many accomplishments by the Mongols, it hardly seems surprising that Geoffrey Chaucer, the first author in the English language, devoted the longest story in *The Canterbury Tales* to the Asian conqueror Genghis Khan of the Mongols. He wrote in undisguised awe of him and his accomplishments. Yet, in fact, we are surprised that the learned men of the Renaissance could make such comments about the Mongols, whom the rest of the world now view as the quintessential, bloodthirsty barbarians. The portrait of the Mongols left by Chaucer or Bacon bears little resemblance to the images we know from later books or films that portray Genghis Khan and his army as savage hordes lusting after gold, women, and blood.

Despite the many images and pictures of Genghis Khan made in subsequent years, we have no portrait of him made within his lifetime. Unlike any other conqueror in history, Genghis Khan never allowed anyone to paint his portrait, sculpt his image, or engrave his name or likeness on a coin, and the only descriptions of him from contemporaries are more intriguing than informative. In the words of a modern Mongolian song about Genghis Khan, "we imagined your appearance but our minds were blank."

Without portraits of Genghis Khan or any Mongol record, the world was left to imagine him as it wished. No one dared to paint his image until half a century after his death, and then each culture projected its particular image of him. The Chinese portrayed him as an avuncular elderly man with a wispy beard and empty eyes who looked more like a distracted Chinese sage than a fierce Mongol warrior. A Persian miniaturist portrayed him as a Turkish sultan seated on a throne. The Europeans pictured him as the quintessential barbarian with a fierce visage and fixed cruel eyes, ugly in every detail.

Mongol secrecy bequeathed a daunting task to future historians who wished to write about Genghis Khan and his empire. Biographers and historians had so little on which to base an account. They knew the chronology of cities conquered and armies defeated; yet little reliable information existed regarding his origin, his character, his motivation, or his personal life. Through the centuries, unsubstantiated rumors maintained that soon after his death, information on all these aspects of Genghis Khan's life had been written in a secret document by someone close to him. Chinese and Persian scholars referred to the existence of the mysterious document, and some scholars claimed to have seen it during the apex of the Mongol Empire. Nearly a century after Genghis Khan's death, the Persian historian Rashid al-Din described the writings as an "authentic chronicle" written "in the Mongolian idiom and letters." But he warned that it was guarded in the treasury, where "it was hidden and concealed from outsiders." He stressed that "no one who might have understood and penetrated" the Mongol text "was given the opportunity." Following the collapse of Mongol rule, most traces of the secret document seemed to have disappeared, and in time, many of the best scholars came to believe that such a text never existed, that it was merely one more of the many myths about Genghis Khan.

Just as the imaginative painters of various countries portrayed him differently, the scholars did likewise. From Korea to Armenia, they composed all manner of myths and fanciful stories about Genghis Khan's life. In the absence of reliable information, they projected their own fears and phobias onto these accounts. With the passage of centuries, scholars weighed the atrocities and aggression committed by men such as Alexander, Caesar, Charlemagne, or Napoleon against their accomplishments or their special mission in history. For Genghis Khan and the Mongols, however, their achievements lay forgotten, while their alleged crimes and brutality became

magnified. Genghis Khan became the stereotype of the barbarian, the bloody savage, the ruthless conqueror who enjoyed destruction for its own sake. Genghis Khan, his Mongol horde, and to a large extent the Asian people in general became unidimensional caricatures, the symbol of all that lay beyond the civilized pale.

By the time of the Enlightenment, at the end of the eighteenth century, this menacing image appeared in Voltaire's *The Orphan of China*, a play about Genghis Khan's conquest of China: "He is called the king of kings, the fiery Genghis Khan, who lays the fertile fields of Asia waste." In contrast to Chaucer's praise for Genghis Khan, Voltaire described him as "this destructive tyrant . . . who proudly . . . treads on the necks of kings," but "is yet no more than a wild Scythian soldier bred to arms and practiced in the trade of blood" (Act I, scene I). Voltaire portrayed Genghis Khan as a man resentful of the superior virtues of the civilization around him and motivated by the basic barbarian desire to ravish civilized women and destroy what he could not understand.

The tribe of Genghis Khan acquired a variety of names—*Tartar*, *Tatar*, *Mughal*, *Moghul*, *Moal*, and *Mongol*—but the name always carried an odious curse. When nineteenth-century scientists wanted to show the inferiority of the Asian and American Indian populations, they classified them as *Mongoloid*. When doctors wanted to account for why mothers of the superior white race could give birth to retarded children, the children's facial characteristics made "obvious" that one of the child's ancestors had been raped by a Mongol warrior. Such blighted children were not white at all but members of the *Mongoloid* race. When the richest capitalists flaunted their wealth and showed antidemocratic or antiegalitarian values, they were derided as *moguls*, the Persian name for Mongols.

In due course, the Mongols became scapegoats for other nations' failures and shortcomings. When Russia could not keep up with the technology of the West or the military power of imperial Japan, it was because of the terrible Tatar Yoke put on her by Genghis Khan. When Persia fell behind its neighbors, it was because the Mongols had destroyed its irrigation system. When China lagged behind Japan and Europe, the cause was the cruel exploitation and repression by its Mongol and Manchu overlords. When India could not resist British colonization, it was because of the rapacious greed of Moghul rule. In the twentieth century, Arab politicians even assured their followers

that Muslims would have invented the atomic bomb before the Americans if only the Mongols had not burned the Arabs' magnificent libraries and leveled their cities. When American bombs and missiles drove the Taliban from power in Afghanistan in 2002, the Taliban soldiers equated the American invasion with that of the Mongols, and therefore, in angry revenge, massacred thousands of Hazara, the descendants of the Mongol army who had lived in Afghanistan for eight centuries. During the following year, in one of his final addresses to the Iraqi people, dictator Saddam Hussein made similar charges against the Mongols as the Americans moved to invade his country and remove him from power.

Amidst so much political rhetoric, pseudoscience, and scholarly imagination, the truth of Genghis Khan remained buried, seemingly lost to posterity. His homeland and the area where he rose to power remained closed to the outside world by the Communists of the twentieth century, who kept it as tightly sealed as the warriors had done during the prior centuries. The original Mongolian documents, the so-called *Secret History of the Mongols*, were not only secret but had disappeared, faded into the depths of history even more mysteriously than Genghis Khan's tomb.

In the twentieth century, two developments gave the unexpected opportunity to solve some of the mysteries and correct part of the record about Genghis Khan. The first development was the deciphering of manuscripts containing the valuable lost history of Genghis Khan. Despite the prejudice and ignorance regarding the Mongols, scholars throughout the centuries had reported occasional encounters with the fabled Mongol text on the life of Genghis Khan. Like some rare animal or precious bird thought to have been extinct, the rumored sightings provoked more skepticism than scholarship. Finally, in the nineteenth century, a copy of the document written in Chinese characters was found in Beijing. Scholars easily read the characters, but the words made no sense because they had been recorded in a code that used Chinese characters to represent Mongolian sounds of the thirteenth century. The scholars could read only a small Chinese language summary that accompanied each chapter; these offered tantalizing hints at the story in the text, but otherwise the document remained inexplicable. Because of the mystery surrounding the document, scholars referred to it as *The Secret History of the Mongols*, the name by which it has continued to be known.

Throughout most of the twentieth century, the deciphering of the *Secret History* remained mortally dangerous in Mongolia. Communist authorities kept the book beyond the hands of common people and scholars for fear that they might be improperly influenced by the antiquated, unscientific, and nonsocialist perspective of the text. But an underground scholarly movement grew around the *Secret History*. In nomadic camps across the steppe, the whispered story of the newfound history spread from person to person, from camp to camp. At last, they had a history that told their story from the Mongol perspective. The Mongols had been much more than barbarians who harassed the superior civilizations around them. For the Mongol nomads, the revelations of the *Secret History* seemed to come from Genghis Khan himself, who had returned to his people to offer them hope and inspiration. After more than seven centuries of silence, they could, at last, hear his words again.

Despite official Communist repression, the Mongol people seemed determined that they would not lose these words again. For a brief moment, the liberalization of political life following the death of Stalin in 1953 and the admission of Mongolia to the United Nations in 1961 emboldened the Mongol people, and they felt free to reexplore their history. The country prepared a small series of stamps in 1962 to commemorate the eight hundredth anniversary of the birth of Genghis Khan. Tomor-ochir, the second highest ranking member of the government, authorized the erection of a concrete monument to mark the birthplace of Genghis Khan near the Onon River, and he sponsored a conference of scholars to assess the good and the bad aspects of the Mongol Empire in history. Both the stamp and the simple line drawing on the monument portrayed the image of the missing *sulde* of Genghis Khan, the horsehair Spirit Banner with which he conquered and the resting place of his soul.

Still, after nearly eight centuries, the *sulde* carried such a deep emotional meaning to both the Mongols and to some of the people they had conquered that the Russians treated its mere display on a stamp as an act of nationalist revival and potential aggression. The Soviets reacted with irrational anger to the fear that their satellite state might pursue an independent path or, worse yet, side with Mongolia's other neighbor, China, the Soviet Union's erstwhile ally turned enemy. In Mongolia, the Communist authorities suppressed the stamps and the scholars. For his traitorous crime of showing what party officials labeled as "tendencies directed at idealizing the role of Genghis Khan," the authorities removed Tomor-ochir from office, banished him to internal

exile, and finally hacked him to death with an ax. After purging their own party, the Communists focused attention on the work of Mongolian scholars, whom the party branded as *anti-party elements*, *Chinese spies*, *saboteurs*, or *pests*. In the antinationalist campaign that followed, authorities dragged the archaeologist Perlee off to prison, where they kept him in extremely harsh conditions merely for having been Tomor-ochir's teacher and for secretly researching the history of the Mongol Empire. Teachers, historians, artists, poets, and singers stood in danger if they had any association with the history of Genghis Khan's era. The authorities secretly executed some of them. Other scholars lost their jobs, and together with their families were expelled from their homes in the harsh Mongolian climate. They were also denied medical care, and many were marched off into internal exile at various locations in the vast open expanse of Mongolia.

During this purge, the Spirit Banner of Genghis Khan disappeared completely, and was possibly destroyed by the Soviets as punishment of the Mongolian people. But despite this brutal repression, or perhaps because of it, numerous Mongol scholars independently set out to study the *Secret History*, putting their lives at risk, in search of a true understanding of their maligned and distorted past.

Outside of Mongolia, scholars in many countries, notably Russia, Germany, France, and Hungary, worked to decipher the text and translate it into modern languages. Without access to the resources within Mongolia itself, they labored under extremely difficult conditions. In the 1970s, one chapter at a time appeared in Mongolian and English under the careful supervision and analysis of Igor de Rachewiltz, a devoted Australian scholar of the ancient Mongol language. During the same time, American scholar Francis Woodman Cleaves independently prepared a separate, meticulous translation that Harvard University Press published in 1982. It would take far more than deciphering the code and translating the documents, however, to make them comprehensible. Even in translation the texts remained difficult to comprehend because they had obviously been written for a closed group within the Mongol royal family, and they assumed a deep knowledge not only of the culture of thirteenth-century Mongols but also of the geography of their land. The historical context and biographical meaning of the manuscripts remained nearly inaccessible without a detailed, on-the-ground analysis of where the events transpired.

The second major development occurred unexpectedly in 1990 when Communism collapsed and the Soviet occupation of Mongolia ended. The Soviet army retreated, the planes flew away, and the tanks withdrew. The Mongol world of Inner Asia was, at last, opened to outsiders. Gradually a few people ventured into the protected area. Mongol hunters snuck in to poach the game-filled valleys, herders came to graze their animals along the edges of the area, occasional adventurers trekked in. In the 1990s, several teams of technologically sophisticated foreigners came in search of the tombs of Genghis Khan and his family; although they made many fascinating finds, their ultimate goal eluded them.

My research began as a study of the role of tribal people in the history of world commerce and the Silk Route connecting China, the Middle East, and Europe. I traveled to archaeological sites, libraries, and meetings with scholars across the route from the Forbidden City in Beijing through central Asia to the Topkapi Palace in Istanbul. Beginning in 1990 with the first trip into Buryatia, the Mongol district of Siberia, I pursued the trail of the Mongols through Russia, China, Mongolia, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Turkmenistan. I devoted one summer to following the ancient migration path of the Turkic tribes as they spread out from their original home in Mongolia as far as Bosnia on the Mediterranean. Then I encircled the old empire by the approximate sea route of Marco Polo from South China to Vietnam, through the Strait of Malacca to India, the Arab states of the Persian Gulf, and on to Venice.

The extensive travel produced a lot of information but not as much understanding as I had hoped. Despite this lack, I thought that my research was nearly finished when I arrived in Mongolia in 1998 to finalize the project with some background on the area of Genghis Khan's youth in what, I assumed, would be a final, brief excursion. That trip turned into another five years of far more intensive research than I could have imagined. I found Mongolians to be delirious at their freedom from centuries of foreign rule, and much of the excitement centered on honoring the memory of their founding father, Genghis Khan. Despite the rapid commercialization of his name on vodka bottles, chocolate bars, and cigarettes, as well as the release of songs in his honor, as a historical person he was still missing. Not only was his soul miss-

ing from the monastery, but his true face was still missing from their history as much as from ours. Who was he?

Through no credit or skill of my own, I arrived in Mongolia at a time when it suddenly seemed possible to answer those questions. For the first time in nearly eight centuries, the forbidden zone of his childhood and burial was open at the same time that the coded text of the *Secret History* had finally been deciphered. No single scholar could complete the task, but working together with a team from different backgrounds, we could begin to find the answers.

As a cultural anthropologist, I worked closely with the archaeologist Dr. Kh. Lkhagvasuren, who had access to much of the information collected by his professor and mentor Dr. Kh. Perlee, the most prominent archaeologist of twentieth-century Mongolia. Gradually, through Lkhagvasuren, I met other researchers who had spent many years working secretly and, almost always, alone on studies they could never write down or publish. Professor O. Purev, a Communist Party member, had used his position as an official researcher of party history to study the shamanist practices of the Mongols and to use that as a guide to interpreting the hidden meanings in the *Secret History*. Colonel Kh. Shagdar of the Mongolian army took advantage of his station in Moscow to compare the military strategies and victories of Genghis Khan as described in the *Secret History* with those in Russian military archives. A Mongolian political scientist, D. Bold-Erdene, analyzed the political techniques Genghis Khan used in getting and acquiring power. The most extensive and detailed studies of all had been made by the geographer O. Sukhbaatar, who had covered over a million kilometers across Mongolia in search of the history of Genghis Khan.

Our team began working together. We compared the most important primary and secondary texts from a dozen languages with the accounts in the *Secret History*. We hunched over maps and debated the precise meaning of different documents and much older analyses. Not surprisingly, we found vast discrepancies and numerous contradictions that were difficult to reconcile. I soon saw that Sukhbaatar was a literalist, an extreme empiricist for whom every statement in the *Secret History* was true, and he had taken the job of proving it with scientific evidence. But Purev thought nothing in the history should be taken at its literal meaning. According to him, Genghis Khan was the most powerful shaman in history, and the text was a manu-

script of mysteries that chronicled, in symbolic ways, his rise to that position. If it could be unlocked, it would again provide a shaman's blueprint for conquering and controlling the world.

From the beginning of our combined work, it was apparent that we could not sift through the competing ideas and interpretations without finding the places where the events happened. The ultimate test of each text's veracity would come when it lay spread out on the ground at the place where the events allegedly happened. Books can lie, but places never do. One quick and exhausting overview of the main sites answered some questions but presented many more. We realized that not only did we have to find the right place, but to understand the events there, we had to be there in the right weather conditions. We returned repeatedly to the same places in different seasons of the year. The sites lay scattered across a landscape of thousands of square miles, but the most significant area for our research lay in the mysterious and inaccessible area that had been closed since the time of Genghis Khan's death. Because of the nomadic life of Genghis Khan, our own work became a peripatetic project, a sort of archaeology of movement rather than just place.

Satellite images showed a Mongolian landscape void of roads yet crisscrossed with thousands of trails leading in seemingly every direction over the steppe, across the Gobi, and through the mountains; yet they all stopped at the edge of the *Ikh Khorig*, the closed zone. Entry into the homeland of Genghis Khan required crossing the buffer zone that had been occupied and fortified by the Soviets to keep everyone out. When they fled Mongolia, the Soviets left behind a surreal landscape of artillery craters strewn with the metal carcasses of tanks, wrecked trucks, cannibalized airplanes, spent artillery shells, and unexploded duds. Strange vapors filled the air and peculiar fogs came and went. Twisted metal sculptures rose several stories high, strange remnants from structures of unknown purpose. Collapsed buildings, which once housed secret electronic equipment, now squatted empty among lifeless dunes of oil-drenched sand. Equipment from old weapons programs lay abandoned across the scarred steppe. Dark and mysterious ponds of unidentified chemicals shimmered eerily in the bright sun. Blackened debris of unknown origin floated in the stagnant liquid, and animal bones, dried carcasses, swatches of fur, and clumps of feathers littered the edges of the ponds. Beyond this twentieth-century graveyard of horrors lay—in the sharpest imaginable contrast—the undisturbed, closed homeland of Genghis

Khan: several hundred square miles of pristine forest, mountains, river valleys, and steppes.

Entry into the Highly Restricted Area was more than just a step backward in time; it was an opportunity to discover Genghis Khan's world almost precisely as he left it. The area had survived like a lost island surrounded, yet protected, by the worst technological horrors of the twentieth century. Clogged with fallen trees, thick underbrush, and giant boulders, much of it remained impenetrable, and the other parts had seen only occasional patrols of soldiers over the last eight centuries. This restricted region is a living monument to Genghis Khan; as we traveled through the area, it seemed that at any moment he might come galloping up the river or over the ridge to pitch his camp once again in the places he had loved, to fire his arrow at a fleeing gazelle, to chip a fishing hole in the ice covering the Onon River, or to bow down and pray on Burkhan Khaldun, the sacred mountain that continued to protect him in death, as it had in life.

Our research team approached the *Ikh Khorig* like detectives searching a fresh crime scene. With *The Secret History of the Mongols* as our primary guide, we navigated the plain and surveyed the primeval landscape from various small hills and mounds. On the open steppe away from the clear landmarks of mountains, rivers, and lakes, we relied heavily on the herders who were accustomed to navigating across the grass like sailors crossing the sea. A constantly changing cluster of Mongolian students, scholars, local herders, and horsemen accompanied us, and they intently debated among themselves the answers to the questions I was researching. Their judgments and answers were always better than mine, and they asked questions that had never occurred to me. They knew how herders thought, and although they were in unknown territory, they easily identified where their ancestors would have camped or in which direction they would have traveled. They readily identified places as having too many mosquitoes for summer camp or being too exposed for winter camp. More important, they were willing to test their ideas, such as racing a horse from one point to another to see how long it took or how the soil and grass reverberated the sound of horse hooves in this particular place versus another. They knew how thick the ice needed to be in order to cross a frozen river on horseback, when to cross on foot, and when to break the ice and wade through the cold water.

The descriptive quality of some Mongol place-names permitted us to

restore them to Mongolian and apply them to the landscape around us with ease. The text recounts that Genghis Khan first became a clan chief at Khokh Lake by Khara Jirugen Mountain, which meant a Blue Lake by Back-Heart-Shaped Mountain. The identity of that place had been preserved for centuries and was easily found by anyone. Other names associated with his birth, such as Udder Hill and Spleen Lake, proved more challenging because of uncertainty whether the name applied to a visual characteristic of the place or to an event that took place there, and because the shape of hills and lakes can vary over eight centuries in this area of wind erosion and dryness.

Gradually, we pieced together the story as best we could with the evidence we had. By finding the places of Genghis Khan's childhood and retracing the path of events across the land, some misconceptions regarding his life could be immediately corrected. Although we debated the precise identity of the hillock along the Onon River where he had been born, for example, it was obvious that the wooded river with its many marshes differed greatly from the open steppe where most nomads lived and where most historians had assumed Genghis Khan grew up. This distinction highlighted the differences between him and other nomads. It immediately became clear why the *Secret History* mentioned hunting more often than herding in Genghis Khan's childhood. The landscape itself tied the early life of Genghis Khan more firmly into the Siberian cultures, from which the *Secret History* said the Mongols originated, than into the Turkic tribes of the open plains. This information in turn greatly influenced our understanding of Genghis Khan's field methods and how he treated hostile civilians as animals to be herded but hostile soldiers as game to be hunted.

Our team went out repeatedly over a five-year period under a great variety of conditions and situations. Temperatures varied by more than 150 degrees—from highs of over 100 degrees in tracts of land without shade to a low of minus 51 degrees, not counting the chill of the fierce wind, in Khorkhonag steppe in January 2001. We experienced the usual assortment of mishaps and opportunities of travel in such areas. Our vehicles became stuck in snow in the winter, mud in spring, and sand in the summer; one even washed away in a flash flood. At different times our camps were destroyed by wind and snow or by drunken revelry. We enjoyed the wonderful bounty of endless milk and meat in the final summers of the twentieth century. But in the opening years of this century, we also experienced some of the worst years

of animal famine, called *zud*, when horses and yaks literally dropped dead around us and animals of all sizes froze standing during the night.

Yet there was never a moment of doubt or danger in our work. Compared to the difficulty of daily life for the herders and hunters living permanently in those areas, ours were only the smallest of irritations. Invariably an unplanned episode that started as an inconvenience ended by teaching me something new about the land or people. From riding nearly fifty miles in one day on a horse, I learned that the fifteen feet of silk tied tightly around the midriff actually kept the organs in place and prevented nausea. I also learned the importance of having dried yogurt in my pocket on such long treks, when there was no time to stop and cook a meal, as well as the practicality of the thick Mongol robe, called a *deel*, when riding on wooden saddles. An encounter with a wolf near the sacred mountain of Burkhan Khaldun became a blessing in the eyes of our companions rather than a threat, and countless episodes of getting lost or of breaking down brought new lessons about directions, navigation, and the patience of waiting until someone came along. Repeatedly, I learned how intimately the Mongols know their own world and how consistently and completely I could trust in their astute judgment, physical ability, and generous helpfulness.

This book presents the highlights of our findings without recounting any more of the minutia of weather, food, parasites, and ailments encountered, nor the personality quirks of the researchers and the people we met along the way. The focus remains on the mission of our work: to understand Genghis Khan and his impact on world history.

The first part of the book tells the story of Genghis Khan's rise to power on the steppe and the forces that shaped his life and personality from the time of his birth in 1162 until he unified all the tribes and founded the Mongol nation in 1206. The second part follows the Mongol entrance onto the stage of history through the Mongol World War, which lasted five decades (from 1211 to 1261), until Genghis Khan's grandsons went to war with one another. The third section examines the century of peace and the Global Awakening that laid the foundations of the political, commercial, and military institutions of our modern society.