Batu, Khan of the Golden Horde

The Mongol Khans Conquer Russia (The Silk Road Series)

By Diane Wolff

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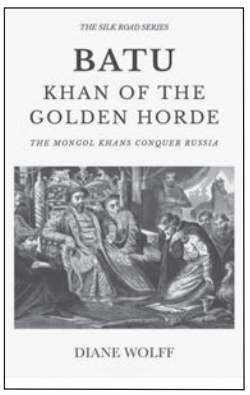
Reviewed by Christy Davis



History, as we know, is written by the victors. But what happens when the victors write nothing down? In the case of the Mongols, history was written by the vanquished, despite exceptional Mongol brutality, and carries with it all the prejudice and bitterness of defeated empires and kingdoms. Over time, and with the absence of any documents to the contrary, the conventional histories became the de facto accounts of the Mongols. This book is important for younger students of history in that the author tells the story of the Mongol conquests through the lenses of those who were supportive of the Khans. Chinggis Khan (1162–1227) is known as "The Conqueror," the father of military and psychological warfare, the founder of the largest empire in world history, and the creator of the Pax Mongolica, a time of peace that lasted for more than a century. Batu (1205–1255) was his grandson, who became the khan of all the Russias and the leader of the Golden Horde, and whose influence, some would argue, persists through modern Russia to this day.

There are various volumes dedicated to The Conqueror and his lineage, but none written with a young audience in mind. In this book, the first of several planned books about the family of Chinggis Khan designed for younger readers in Wolff's Silk Road series, the author focuses on the life of Batu, the son of Chinggis's oldest son, Jochi. Batu was born the year after The Conqueror proclaimed the Great Mongol Nation and claimed for himself the title Chinggis Khan. As the eldest son of Jochi, Batu was destined to govern the land farthest from the heart of the Great Mongol Nation, the attack wing located on the western border in Russian lands. Trained by the supreme khan himself, Batu grew to be a capable and wise leader, deserving of his title as khan of the Golden Horde. Despite the relative stability of his khanate, power struggles in the heart of the empire following the death of Ogodei, the successor to Chinggis, caused the Great Mongol Empire to falter. Were it not for his strong leadership with the guidance and support of Princess Sorghaghtani (1190–1252), Chinggis Khan's beloved daughter-in-law and mother of Khubilai, khan of China, the nation might have withered entirely.

Batu's early years were spent training with the Mongols under the capable hands of Chinggis and Jochi. He learned the Mongol strategy of flanking during hunting expeditions as the Mongols approached vast grass pastures from all sides to scare their prey toward a waiting warrior in any direction. He learned the technique of signaling using black and white flags to coordinate attacks across a vast distance. Both of these were unique to the Mongols and the secret of their unprecedented battlefield success. During the Russian campaign of 1221–1222, the author notes that the success of the Mongol forces came because the Mongols trained from childhood to move and attack as one group, while the Russian and Kipchak forces fought as individual warriors and met a sound defeat.

Religious tolerance existed in the khanate because Chinggis believed in the shamanistic concept of the "Great Blue Sky." In his view, the prophets of the religions he encountered were all "Speakers to Heaven" and were not in opposition to his belief system, which formed no small part of his *Yasak* (orders). The only solid prohibition dictated by the Great Blue Sky was against bathing in streams or rivers, lest the spirits of the water be disturbed. Dietary prohibitions in other religions—as the prohibition against pork in Islam, for example—were not in accordance with the Great Blue Sky, and Chinggis was perplexed at the notion that someone would choose not to eat wild boar, but did not feel Islam needed to be discarded in favor of the Great Blue Sky tradition. As a matter of fact, when the khan took over Muslim land in 1220, he carefully interviewed imams to determine their beliefs, then declared that Islam did not run contrary to the edicts of the "Great Blue Sky." He gave the imams orders to return to their faithful and report back that he was a "friend to Islam." He also became a "friend to Nestorian Christians" and later often welcomed emissaries from the popes in the churches of Rome and Constantinople, as well as the Russian Orthodox Christian leadership and Nestorian Christians, a fringe group who doubted the divinity of Christ or Mary but nevertheless worshiped in a Christian manner.

After the death of Chinggis in 1227, his prior failure to establish a solid line of succession or even arrange for an orderly transfer of power became a major problem. While Batu and Mongke (1209–1259), son of Chinggis's youngest son, Tolui, conquered the western Russian territories and even held land in present-day Ukraine and Hungary, the actual leadership of the khanate changed hands several times. Each time saw a *Khuriltai*, or Grand Assembly, where the new khan was elected by elder statesmen and attended by emissaries from all parts of the khanate, but the machinations of Chinggis's dishonest daughters-in-law damaged the reputation of the empire by putting weak leaders like Chinggis's feeble, asthmatic, sniveling grandson Guyug in power. Fortunately, Princess Sorghaghtani showed her true strength and respect for the imperial house by negotiating her own son, Mongke, into the role of khagan, or supreme khan.

This book is a compelling story of the history of the supreme khan and his family. Calling it a story about Batu, however, is inaccurate. The majority of the book mentions events in the life of Chinggis, his sons, and his grandsons, and Batu is mentioned as being present in each of the events. There does not seem to be a single focus on Batu, but rather a broader focus on the life of the great khans, with Batu's conquest of Russia and Eastern Europe as a central focus of only a few chapters. The book teases the lasting legacy of Batu's influence over modern Russia, but the chapters therein do not make that connection clear. The historical record shows that the Golden Horde finally fell to the first of the Romanov emperors, who ultimately fell to the Bolsheviks, but the book does not address any of Batu's legacy. Rather, it ends Batu's story after a glowing three-page eulogy to his cousin Khubilai's Chinese khanate by saying simply, "Batu died in 1255, at the age of fifty, a long life." With the thrilling promise of a link to Putin's respect of Russian history and the influence of the Mongol khanate on modern Russian society teased in the blurbs on the back of the book and in a passing sentence in the introduction, the actual end of Batu's story in this book (titled after him) is a disappointing whimper.

Reading the book requires substantial background knowledge on the part of the reader. Significant locations like Khara Khorum and Khwarezm are mentioned without much context and without any reference to their location in the modern world. Hungary is mentioned, but Kiev and Samarkand stand alone without any national affiliation that students would recognize. The book desperately needs a map of some sort to provide reference points to the reader. A glossary would also have been useful. Some words such as "khagan" and "khan" are not interchangeable, but neither is defined at any

point, relying on careful readers to use context clues to determine that "khan" is the leader of one of the divisions of Mongol territory, while "khagan" refers to the supreme khan. While the author does offer a website that links to a map, when I tried to visit the website, it was not accessible.

The book's prose is often disjointed and repetitive. *Koumiz* is defined every time it is mentioned, and very seldom is Chinggis's daughter-in-law Sorghaghtani mentioned without a repeat of the previous section's description of her. Grammatical mistakes and typographical errors are distracting. Occasionally, the same words are repeated from paragraph to paragraph ("The soldiers stumbled off to their tents. The soldiers ate themselves into a stupor then stumbled off to their tents."); grammatical errors (references to "your" journey from the Arabic lands) and typos (references to a "wvidow," "Bau," and "Tilui") make it difficult to read this as a smooth story. Resources are available upon request, according to the author, but the book needs a family tree in addition to the "principal characters" listed at the front of the book. Much is written about the children of Tolui (1191–1232), but virtually no mention is given to Batu's family. Granted, Sorghaghtani was much more of a dominant influence than Batu's mother, but to earn no mention at all (or even an explanation for the silence) is disappointing.

The tone of the book shifts from chapter to chapter. Some chapters are retellings of stories, and some are simply translations of documents written by the Chinese adviser to the khan or some of the European emissaries sent by the pope to visit. Some are very clinical in the description of events, and some are almost like a story. Occasionally, the narrative passages take freedoms with the events of the story. For instance, one passage about General Subudei's frustration with the shah of Samarkand quotes Subudei as asking, "Why the hell didn't he fight us?" This clause borders on inappropriate for a middle school classroom, but on a greater level, is even more inappropriate to the scholarship of the book. The author prides herself on presenting never-before-seen translations of Chinese and Latin texts about Chinggis and his legacy. If we are to believe those are presented with fidelity to the original translations, this anachronistic slang usage hobbles the validity and the seriousness of the work.

Students would enjoy reading about the Great Hunt and the horseback culture of the steppe warriors in the first few chapters.

That having been said, there are several ways this book could be used in a middle school classroom, especially one with a special focus on the Mongol Empire. Thanks to the repetition that precedes the introduction of main characters and significant events, each chapter could reasonably stand alone. Students could read the chapter about the Mongol warriors' training and learn how the great khan created a force that was given the well-earned epithet of "Tatar," from a Latin word for "hell." Students would enjoy reading about the Great Hunt and the horseback culture of the steppe warriors in the first few chapters. Teachers could distribute chapters for students to read and summarize to tell the story of the khans, including Batu's Golden Horde in the Russian lands. Another interesting strategy might be to have students create a map of Central Asia with old names from the book and new names of countries and locations.

Wolff's research is impeccable and far-reaching. Despite its superficial flaws, this book is a valuable contribution in increasing young people's knowledge of Chinggis Khan's legacy in Central Asia and in world history. ■

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