

Exploring the Legacy of Mongol Warfare in Russian Military Theory:

A First Step into the Central Asian Legacy in Modern Warfare

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Military theory is always evolving; changing and progressing through the experiences of war and the traditions of the past. As explored by John Laffin in his book *Links of Leadership* no great general or military theoretician can be analyzed in isolation; instead, their theories must be put in the context of those who contributed to their development.<sup>1</sup> At times the progress in military theory occurs in intense and fast paced periods instead of gradual changes.

In the case of Russian military theory it has gone through many of these intense, sometimes bloody, periods of change. One of these periods occurred during the early Soviet and late Tsarist governments. In this instance, the Russians not only redefined their own way of warfare but cemented transformations that influenced the development of concepts that transcended national barriers, such as operational art.<sup>2</sup> The transformations of this period have been largely studied, with particular emphasis on the influence of Western warfare and its theoreticians.

But Russia has a peculiarity: its ideological geography. Its existence between Europe and Asia and its interaction with both Western and Eastern powers, necessitates an analysis of the possible contributions outside of the Western classics of war. Some of these Eastern influences are already detailed in current historiography, but others are less clear. Among these less studied contributors to Russian military theory are the 13<sup>th</sup> century Mongols.

The Mongols created the biggest contiguous land empire that the Earth has ever seen, but due to their nomadic nature most of the works detailing their enterprises originated from the

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<sup>1</sup> Laffin, J. (1966). *Links of Leadership*. London: George G. Harrap & Co.

<sup>2</sup> Phillips, M. K. (2005). *Historical Perspectives of Operational Art*. Washington D.C: United States Army-Center for Military History.

conquered and their enemies.<sup>3</sup> Through this skewed view, Western knowledge and past historians came to describe the Mongols as barbaric, knowledge-destroying savages who did not contribute to the furthering of human civilization.

These ideas spread to the world of military theory, where the serious study of the Mongols and their strategies suffered from the perception of their conquests. The attribution of their success to barbarism and savagery rather than their intellect evaporated any chance for the study of their contributions. While some historians and military theorists, such as Captain Liddell Hart, did indeed do studies of the Mongols and how their strategies could be integrated to the canon of British military theory;<sup>4</sup> these were the exception and not the rule. Further, through the efforts of many historians and academics, it's clear that the Mongols and the network their empire created have indeed contributed to the furthering of human knowledge in multiple fields including military theory.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, this paper sets out to explore the specific legacy of the 13<sup>th</sup> century Mongols in the development of military theory in Tsarist and Soviet Russia as well as their modern influence on operational art beyond Russian theory. This analysis would cement the Mongols as a contributor to the Russian way of war and give the proper attribution of credit, instead of maintaining the current overreaching status of Western contributors.

Two different analyses will be utilized to show the connections that exist between the Russian and the Mongol ways of warfare. The first part of the paper shall establish a theoretical connection between the Russian and Mongol military theory by analyzing Tsarist and Soviet written works that attribute Mongol influence on some aspects of the Russian strategy. After

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<sup>3</sup> Allsen, T. T. (2001). *Culture and conquest in Mongol Eurasia*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>4</sup> Hart, B. L. (1927). *Great Captains Unveiled*. Da Capo Press.

<sup>5</sup> Allsen (2001)p.27

establishing the theoretical connection, the Mongol military legacy will be analyzed in a more practical element of warfare: operational art. Even though this term was originally defined by the Soviet Russians, the Mongols already practiced a version of operational art, which could provide insight into their influence on modern Russian military theory. This practical analysis will involve comparing specific Mongol campaigns to the modern definitions of operational art.

Before exploring the written works, the historical interactions between the Mongols and the Russians must be understood. The first interaction between the Mongols and the Russian people occurred during the invasions of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, which resulted in what is known as the Mongol or the Tartar Yoke in Russia's history. In this time period Russian princes, particularly in the surroundings of Moscow and Kiev, adopted Mongol strategies and partook not only in their military but in their political and economic systems.<sup>6</sup> Now even though this interaction is of interest, the most important event to the modern influence of the Mongols occurred six hundred years later when the Russians decided to enter Central Asia for their conquering spree. At the beginning of their invasion, in their campaign against the Khiva Khanate in 1839 they are utterly defeated which leads to a reconsideration by Russian leaders of what is necessary to win a prolonged war in Central Asia.

In this period of reconsideration, General Mikhail Ivanin was the first military leader to recommend a study of the Central Asian art of war to solve the astounding defeats. In a manuscript in 1875 titled *"On the Military Art and Conquests of the Tartar-Mongols and Central Asian Peoples under Genghis-Khan and Tamerlane"* he detailed how the Mongols and other conquerors

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<sup>6</sup> Hartog, Leo de. *Russia And the Mongol Yoke: the History of the Russian Principalities And the Golden Horde, 1221-1502*. London: British Academic Press, 1996.

of Central Asia conducted their campaigns.<sup>7</sup> The purpose of the manuscript was to transform the Russian military knowledge being taught at the time in their military academy. Therefore, he states that the future of Russian military success in Central Asia hinges on their understanding of these ancient battle tactics and how they could be transformed to their modern battlefields with greatly improved armament, armor and communication systems. For these purposes, Ivanin makes four recommendations to Russian military leaders after his comprehensive detailing of Tamerlane's and Genghis Khan's campaigns.<sup>8</sup>

The first recommendation was that the Russians had to dispel the myth that the Mongols achieved their victories by large numbers or ferocity alone.<sup>9</sup> Ivanin hoped that his thorough analysis of their campaigns would be proof enough that this was not the case; but instead that the Mongol campaigns were prepared extensively, intellectually and physically, by their leaders. By disproving the commonly held belief, it would create the space for further studies into the Central Asian way of war.

The second change that he suggests is how to supply their armies when invading the Central Asian zone.<sup>10</sup> He established that if one was familiar with only European tactics, they were not going to be able to triumph against the people of the steppe. The first reason for this was the difficulty in acquiring water and food when traveling for long campaigns in arid central Asian regions; which was not a problem in Europe, because of pillaging and the increased population density. This is clearly seen in the First Battle of Geok-Tepe in which the Russians retreat, losing

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<sup>7</sup> Ivanin, M. I. (1875). *о военном искусстве и завоеваниях монголо-татар и среднеазиатских народов при чингисхане и тамерлане*. Saint Petersburg.

<sup>8</sup> Ivanin (1875) p. 260

<sup>9</sup> Ivanin (1875) p.262

<sup>10</sup> Ivanin (1875) p. 262

almost half of their cargo animals in the process, due to lack of water and proper food supplies.<sup>11</sup> To solve this General Ivanin suggested that the Russians had to ‘take a page out of the Mongol’s book’ and treat campaigns as a “migration”.<sup>12</sup>

This meant that to beat the nomads of the steppe, the Russian armies had to become nomads themselves. They had to guarantee that supplies were not only close at hand but readily available. Again, using the example of the Battle of Geok-tepe, the second incursion entailed a multi-tiered supply system to deal with the extreme aridness of the zone and the previous failure. The Russians decided to create a supply base much closer to the battle; bringing more cargo animals and food with them. These modifications changed the pace of conquering while at the same time creating a more stable initial stronghold in the region.

The third recommendation that General Ivanin provided was that a journal of military topics of Asia had to be established by the Russian government.<sup>13</sup> This would allow further studies into the military tradition of Asia to be conducted by Russian military intellectuals for the knowledge of the whole force. The fourth and last recommendation proposed by Ivanin was that the campaigns of Central Asian conquerors had to be taught at the military academy for the reference of future officers. In this list of conquerors, he included Genghis Khan, Tamerlane and Nadir Shah.<sup>14</sup>

Now it is hard to say how much his ideas were heeded by the Russian military leaders because, only four years after the publication of the book, they fail the First Battle of Geok Tepe

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<sup>11</sup> Morrison. “The ‘Turkestan Generals’ and Russian Military History.”

<sup>12</sup> Bellamy. “Heirs of Genghis Khan: The Influence of the Tartar-Mongols on the Imperial Russian and Soviet Armies.” 52–60.

<sup>13</sup> Ivanin (1875) p.263

<sup>14</sup> Ivanin (1875) p.264

which has already been discussed. But in the 1881 his practical ideas for supply management are clearly implemented by the Russian invasion force. In terms of education, one would need to gain access to the curriculums during that time at the Russian Imperial Academy to analyze if his recommendations were incorporated into the classroom material.

The next work to be analyzed is N.P. Mikhnevich's "History of Military Art" in which he dedicates a section, albeit a very brief one, to the Mongols.<sup>15</sup> Now this book is written in 1896 and as can be seen from the title is intended to be a history book instead of a book for military reform. The importance of this text is twofold because of who the author is within the Russian military. N.P Mikhnevich served as a general and a teacher for over 30 years in the Soviet and Imperial Military academies. Therefore, Chris Bellamy makes the observation that if Mikhnevich was familiar with Genghis Khan's conquests so would his students; the new generations of Russian officers.<sup>16</sup>

In terms of what the text actually covered, Mikhnevich believed the Mongol system to be superior to their period-specific European equivalents and that their plans and tactics were essential to understanding Central Asian warfare thereafter. Therefore, the existence of his text hints at the first evidence for widespread knowledge of Central Asian campaigns in Russian military instruction which would have to be verified with further studies into the military curriculum.

The third work is a military theory book treating a Mongol element that has not been addressed before by either author. Alexander Svechin's *Strategy* was written in 1927 and is considered one of the classics of Russian military thought. In this text he details the nature of war

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<sup>15</sup> Mikhnevich, N. P. (1896). *история военного искусства*. St.Petersburg.p. 302

<sup>16</sup> Bellamy, C (1983) p.54

from the politics that it must survive before conflict is initiated to the forms, operations, and command structures that must exist once war has started.<sup>17</sup>

He mentions the Mongols twice in his text; firstly, he uses them as an example of how mobility is one of the best assets in war.<sup>18</sup> Secondly and more importantly, he focuses on the political aspects of the Mongol campaigns. In his chapter *Political Policy during Wartime*, he explains that both Clausewitz and Jomini, considered two of the most influential Western military theoreticians of all time, believed that “the territory of a hostile state was a source of weakness for the attacker”.<sup>19</sup> Therefore, along this vein, most European thinkers coming from that tradition opposed long range invasions due that the enemy territory would sap the energy and resources from their invading forces.

But Svechin clearly points out that this theory was disproven by the Central Asian conquerors such as Genghis Khan and Tamerlane. One of the examples he suggests is that when the Mongols invaded the Kievan Rus, in what is today Modern Russia, only 1 of every 20 men were ethnic Mongols; the other ones being draftees from across the Empire.<sup>20</sup> Now this would prove that the extension and conquering of the Mongols was not a weakness but instead a strength. As cleverly phrased by Svechin: “Clausewitz’s principle is radically overturned: an army becomes stronger the more occupied territory it manages to capture”.<sup>21</sup> This passage provides a very unique view of Russian military theory and allows us to conclude that the influence of Mongol warfare is clear, if lightly detailed, through this Russian theorist’s works and their history.

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<sup>17</sup> Svechin, A. (1927). *Strategy*. Moscow: East View Publications.p. 21

<sup>18</sup> Svechin (1927) p.147

<sup>19</sup> Svechin (1927) p.147

<sup>20</sup> Svechin (1927) p.148

<sup>21</sup> Svechin (1927) p.147



Having concluded with all three of these texts, it can clearly be observed that the Mongols did indeed have a presence and an influence within the development of Russian military theory. The texts showed us that this was not a train of thought in the fringes of their intellectual circles, but instead that they were in the minds of some of the main contributors for the evolution of Russian military theory during one of their grandest periods of military knowledge production and change.

Having established these conclusions, some clarifications must be made. Firstly, the selection of the first two texts were based on the analysis by Chris Bellamy which gave an overview of how these texts affected the heritage of the Mongols into the Russian's art of war.<sup>22</sup> The third text is one of the only traditional large treatises of Russian military concepts to be translated to English. Therefore, this is not a comprehensive selection of texts within the Russian military system that have included the Mongols in their analysis alongside the Western works, but they are the ones that have been analyzed with the most scrutiny in the past and available to this author.

To continue to expand these theoretical connections, a thorough search of the Russian military literature and military academy curriculum would have to be made. Also, the sources for each individual text would have to be explored to see from where they are drawing their information and what practical effects did these have in future battles. To analyze this last point, it could also be observed which officers had more non-western inclinations in their battles in future works but this would require a very strenuous analysis of Russian military conflicts during a very tumultuous time.

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<sup>22</sup> Bellamy (1983)p. 58

Moving on into the practical similarities between the Mongols and the modern Russians, the concept of operational art must be explained before its application to the Mongol's legacy. Operational art is the level of command between the grand national-level strategy and the miniscule unit-level tactics, and its name and definition was given to it by the Soviet Russians. But the following 5 conditions as set out by General Dana Pittard of the US Army, and the US military code of FM 100-5, clarify the elements that operational art practitioners must have:

*(1) the identification of military strategic goals, (2) establishing military conditions, (3) sequential and simultaneous operations, (4) resource allocation, and (5) commanders with broad operational vision.*<sup>23</sup>

Now it is clear that the Russians, particularly those at the end of World War II and thereafter, do fit within these conditions of operational art because even the US Army definition arose from the Russian concept of operations. Therefore, if the Mongols fit this definition of operational art, it would show two important conclusions. Firstly, it would show that the origin of operational art is not as clear-cut as would seem, which traditionally attributes its beginnings to Napoleon's campaigns. This first point was the original argument which General Pittard was exploring in his work. The second point, which pertains to our previous argument, is that if the Mongols fit into the definition of operational art, then further work must be done to consider their influence in the formulation of original Russian texts of the concept. This in turn would open the avenue to merging the theoretical connections above with the similarities of practical warfare within the Russian and Mongol systems. To perform this analysis, the aforementioned work of

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<sup>23</sup> Pittard, M. D. (1994). *Thirteenth Century Mongol Warfare: Classical Military Strategy or Operational Art*. Fort Leavenworth: School of Advanced Military Studies.p. 5

General Dana Pittard will be combined with the work of Carl Sverdrup which has the most organized and extensive collection of battle accounts of the Mongols, to the author's knowledge.<sup>24</sup>

General Pittard focuses his work on matching the Mongol actions to the definition found in Field Manual 100 for the designation of operational art to be bestowed upon the Mongol campaigns. He does this by analyzing two of the most well-known and documented campaigns; firstly the conquest of the Khawrezmian empire and secondly the campaign against the Central European kingdoms of Hungary and Poland.<sup>25</sup> Then he presents a thorough analysis of how these fit within the definition set out above. Therefore, this section of the paper shall be a summary of Pittard's arguments while uniting Sverdrup's accounts for the description of the campaigns.

The Khawrezmian campaign was extremely complex as can be seen not only by the diagrams in Pittard and Sverdrup but by the pages upon pages that both dedicate to conflict.<sup>26</sup> Firstly, this attack had an extensive period of intelligence gathering in which spies were sent into the neighboring empire by the Mongols. The second interesting fact is that the campaign in itself was a three-pronged attack into the area by the south, northeast and west directions of the capital of Khwarezm: Samarkand.<sup>27</sup> The three prongs, under the command of Genghis Khan's generals (Chagatai and Jebe), all had intermediate goals which had to be seized before moving on to the final attack on Samarkand. By reading Pittard's accounts, it is clear that he puts more emphasis on Genghis Khan's surprise attack through the desert on the northwestern side but does not subtract from Jebe's and Chagatai's attempt to keep the enemy distracted.<sup>28</sup> But in Sverdrup's account, he

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<sup>24</sup> Sverdrup, C. F. (2017). *The Mongol Conquests; The Military operations of Genghis Khan and Sube'etei*. Helion & Company Limited.p.252

<sup>25</sup> Pittard(1994)p. 7

<sup>26</sup> Pittard(1994)p.10

<sup>27</sup> Pittard(1994)p.12

<sup>28</sup> Pittard(1994)p.15

specifies that these other columns are not only distraction to the Khawremian main force but made to weaken their opposition to the final onslaught after long campaigning by both sides.<sup>29</sup>

The second campaign analyzed by Pittard is the incursion and conquest of Central Europe. This campaign was completely directed under Subetei, who was a general under Genghis Khan and continued to serve after his death. The organization of this campaign is even more complex version of the Khawrezmian campaign which not only had to handle the coordination of multiple armies but also multiple end targets.. After their arrival in Galich the campaigns on Liegnitz, Buda, and Pest are all run concurrently.<sup>30</sup> The campaign to the twin cities of Buda and Pest also had three different approach columns, all which had the goal to conquer their intermediate targets at the same time. This was meant to cripple both kingdoms simultaneously to set up a grander incursion into Europe which never happened.

Therefore, knowing the basics of both campaigns the analysis section of Pittard's writing can be utilized to match the Mongol's art of war to the modern conception of operational art. The first condition is that the military goals are identified before the campaign. This is very evident in both cases; in the first campaign we observe Genghis Khan aspire to conquer the whole of the Khawrezmian empire. The second campaign uses Central Europe as a stepping stone to Ogedei Khan's final plans to conquer all of Europe.<sup>31</sup>

Having satisfied the first condition, the next one is the establishing of military conditions. This means that the Mongols must have the necessary knowledge and preparations to perform the campaign. The Mongols had a clear understanding of their own leadership structure as well as their

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<sup>29</sup>Sverdrup (2017) p. 159

<sup>30</sup> Sverdrup (2017) p. 310

<sup>31</sup> Sverdrup (2017)p. 326

enemies, in addition to their armaments and mobility capabilities.<sup>32</sup> This can clearly be observed by the existence of objectives which can be deemed as decisive or strategic points for both sides to control. In addition, all the campaigns were preceded by long periods of intelligence gathering.

The third condition is that there are simultaneous and sequential campaigns, exemplified by the Central European campaign that had intermediate goals and separate end goals. After this condition, the next criterion is resource allocation which necessitates that this is done efficiently and to the benefit of the final aim. One example of this can be found in the Central Europe campaign in which more manpower and horses are assigned to the units attacking Hungary instead of those attacking Poland because they were deemed a greater numerical threat. Here it is important to also mention the Mongol's contained logistical system which guaranteed sustenance and transport from the same source: the horse. The last condition for operational warfare is that commanders have a broad operational vision which can clearly be observed by the complexity of decisions and the distance from the front that Genghis Khan, Subetei and Batu all had during their respective campaigns.

This summary of the analysis by General Pittard, supplemented by Sverdrup's accounts clearly shows that the Mongols fit within the modern conception of operational art.<sup>33</sup> Therefore it is clear that the Mongols practiced operational art six hundred years before its portrayed origin under Napoleon. This in turn creates questions to see if the Russians knew or even thought of the Mongols in this manner; as a military body that had practiced operational warfare. But even if this was not the case, and the Russians did not perceive of the Mongols as operational practitioners, it is clear that the influence in their art of war, including operational art, is palpable.

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<sup>32</sup> Pittard(1994)p. 31

<sup>33</sup> Pittard(1994)p.30

Uniting the theoretical observations with the practical analysis there are three conclusions from this paper. Firstly, it is clear that the Russians had Central Asian influences in the development of their theories even if the main theoretical formations of their texts arose from Western theoreticians. This is clearly observed not only by Svechin's accounts but the presence of Ivanin's text as a more concrete guide for Central Asian ideas in the Russian Tsarist military. In addition, the fact that the Mongols were taught and studied as an example of warfare while the bases for operational art were being developed by the Russians cannot be considered a mere coincidence. Therefore, more studies need to be made into how the Mongol's legacy affected the totality of such an important period of change within Russian military theory, centuries after the fall of their empire.

The second conclusion is a reiteration of Ivanin's argument that the Mongol campaigns were not based on instinct or savagery, which is even hinted at in modern works such as Hart's text. Their campaigns were planned to a higher degree even if they didn't have the name or the military literature that are found in military textbooks today. The third and last point is that the Mongols practiced operational art which argues for their inclusion into the historical canon of it's practitioners and formulators. This in turn would have to adjust for their influence into the Russian art of war before the historical evolution of operational art is completely formulated.

Using all of these together it can be seen that even though a palpable influence of the Mongol way of war can be observed in the Russian military, the whole of their influence in modern war theory has not been described by modern literature or analyzed in conjunction with a practical analysis. This must be done if the lessons of Mongol warfare are to be attributed correctly to them and if the impact in Russian military theoretical evolution and modern warfare are to be understood.

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