

Judging the Mongols

The impact of the Mongol conquest on the conquered peoples included:

Death – Destruction - Extortion of wealth – Disease - Displacement

It also included:

- ✓ the intensification of activity on the **trade** routes connecting East Asia with the Mediterranean lands and Europe
- ✓ the further **spread of Islam** in Asia
- ✓ the **advancement of Tibetan Buddhism** in China

Death: The Mongols inflicted it on a large scale. In battle, their powerful bows caused heavy enemy casualties. Moreover, mass slaughter of defeated enemy soldiers and civilians was used as a **deliberate policy of terror** in order to:

- ✓ decrease the enemy's will to fight.
- ✓ induce cities to surrender without fighting, thus avoiding long sieges, which the Mongol army could not afford because it needed to keep moving to find grazing land for its horses.
- ✓ avoid the risk of leaving enemies behind that might be capable of renewing resistance.
- ✓ reduce the size of the occupying detachments needing to be left behind.

But:

- ✓ More urban populations were spared than were massacred. Often spared were artisans, clerics of all religions, scribes, scholars, merchants, young women, and often officers, nobles, and administrators.
- ✓ Mass slaughter was not a Mongol monopoly either in their own time or later.

Destruction:

- ✓ The Mongols often destroyed the towns they attacked, usually as a by-product of the battle, sometimes deliberately after their conquest. Mongols traditionally had no use for towns. Destroying them was a practical measure to prevent their use for resistance.
- ✓ Destruction was a by-product of the Mongols' conquests, rather than policy. They were unaware of or uninterested in the damage.

But:

- ✓ There was a great deal of construction initiated and supported by the Mongols. Many of the towns the Mongols destroyed rose again a few years later with Mongol help.
- ✓ Courier services were expanded and many additional way stations were built along trade routes, where both troops and civilian travelers could get food, drink, lodging, and a change of horses.
- ✓ Roads and bridges built originally to service the Mongol military became trade and travel routes.

Extortion of wealth:

- ✓ After first plundering the conquered, the conquerors were for a while satisfied with tribute in the form of demand of silk, grain, precious metals, and sophisticated war machinery.
- ✓ Unpredictable and capricious demands were gradually replaced with regular though intermittently extortionate taxes.

But:

- ✓ Some of the wealth that flowed to the Mongols was redistributed. Only part made its way to Mongolia. Much went back to those conquered areas where Mongols settled as occupying troops, administrators, and governors.
- ✓ The lot of some segments of the conquered population actually improved, owing to profits from the trade promoted and supported by the Mongols, to their enforcement of

law and order within their territories, and to their opening of careers to merit, not only birth or wealth. The poorest classes received something like government welfare assistance: food, clothes, and money.

Disease: The association of disease and warfare is commonplace.

- ✓ Troops live under more unsanitary conditions than is normal.
- ✓ Unburied corpses often contaminated water supplies.
- ✓ Among the overcrowded and underfed in besieged cities and in close quartered armies, an infectious illness could spread quickly.
- ✓ The existing food supply must be stretched to feed the invading army, leaving little for the local population and thereby reducing its immune system.
- ✓ The frequent long-distance travel of military personnel, merchants, and others promoted the wider spread of diseases.
- ✓ Of these the Black Death (bubonic plague) was the best known and most severe. This disease may have been carried by soldiers from Inner Eurasia to the Black Sea, and from there to West Asia, North Africa, and Europe. This infection killed about one third of the total population of Europe.

Displacement: During the Mongol campaigns of conquest and later, there was large-scale enslavement and forced movement of populations.

- ✓ Many fled in terror when news reached them of an approaching Mongol army.
- ✓ In conquered territories, the Mongols usually rounded up the craftspeople, and assigned them to Mongol princes and commanders. These captives, who could number tens of thousands in a single city, were carried off to Mongolia or other parts of the growing empire.
- ✓ This gave rise to considerable population exchanges between Russia, Central Asia, Persia/Afghanistan, Mongolia, and China.

But:

- ✓ Although captive artisans and young women (destined to be slaves, concubines, prostitutes, and entertainers) often remained in their masters' hands for the rest of their lives, some gained their freedom and married locally, some eventually returned to their homelands.
- ✓ The movement of peoples resulted in exchanges of goods, ideas and styles and in frequent and widespread contact between peoples of widely different cultural, ethnic, religious, and language backgrounds.
- ✓ Thousands of people traveled from western and central parts of Eurasia to serve the Mongol regime in China. Marco Polo was just one of these foreigners seeking opportunity in Mongol administration.
- ✓ **Islam's spread** among the peoples of the Mongol empire was also helped by the movement of peoples. Persian became one of the official languages of the Mongol empire, used even in China. And Persian culture, along with Islam, spread into Central and Eastern Asia. Starting in the thirteenth century, the Mongol khans of the Golden Horde and of Persia converted to Islam and threw their governments' power behind the Muslim faith.
- ✓ **Buddhism** advanced in China owing partly to direct support from the Great Khans, starting with Khubilai.
- ✓ **Christianity** lost out in the long run in Asia, though not through any action of the Mongols. European leaders had hopes of allying with Mongol leaders against the Muslim powers that challenged European political and commercial interests in the eastern Mediterranean. Christianity suffered partly because it did not speak with a single voice: believers in Latin Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Nestorian, and other Christian doctrines engaged in heated disputes with one another and competed for converts.