

[PDF] Conqueror: A Novel Of Kublai Khan

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Description:

Featured Essay by Conn Iggulden

Kublai Borjigin was a grandson of Genghis Khan, but never expected to inherit the Mongol empire. He spent his formative years as a scholar in the city of Karakorum, learning languages and philosophies rather than the tactics of war.

When the other lines of succession failed, Kublai's older brother Mongke rose to lead the empire, a man who aimed to be another Genghis--traditional and utterly ruthless. Mongke began his reign with

a great slaughter and put his followers and family in positions of power. Yet what was Mongke to do with his brother Kublai, the ink-stained scholar who had never left the city? Kublai dressed like a noble and had no experience of large-scale assaults. Astonishingly, Mongke sent his academic brother to conquer the hardest military target of the era--China. He gave Kublai an army of a hundred thousand, but at that time, a single Chinese city contained more people than the entire Mongol nation. The Emperor of China was capable of putting two million trained soldiers in the field. It was an impossible task, a perfect example of "asymmetric warfare," where a much smaller side is forced to innovate to survive.

Given an impossible task, what happened was an extraordinary leap of imagination for a man of the thirteenth century. Kublai learned the tactics of cavalry archers. He learned how to use cannons and what a burden they would prove to a fast cavalry force. He had good generals and his men were the elite horsemen of the Great Khan, but that would not have been enough on its own. What Kublai discovered was the exact opposite of Genghis's chief tactic. Genghis had destroyed cities as an example, so that the next ones would surrender without a fight. Kublai spared cities, allowing them to remain untouched as his army swept by. Once his mercy was a proven fact, they surrendered by the dozen. Armies sent against him knew they could lay down weapons and live.

By the time Mongke rode out with a huge army to "save" his brother, Kublai was in strike range of the enemy capital. Perhaps Mongke would have taken the glory, but he died on the trip south and Kublai was left in sole command. He wanted to go on, but news came that his youngest brother had declared himself Khan at home. Furious, Kublai broke off his campaign and returned to fight a civil war.

His life is the story of a scholar who was forced to lead first armies and then an empire. He turned out to be better at it than his brothers or Genghis. There were tragedies and glories still to come--the death of his wife and son, the failures against Japan and the splendid court described by Marco Polo. Kublai would lose more than he gained as the Great Khan of the empire, but he founded a Chinese dynasty and is remembered there with respect and honor.

--This text refers to the edition.

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From the Hardcover edition.

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