The Mongol Empire
WH030

Activity Introduction

The Mongols: they might have been a primitive, nomadic people, but they had a huge effect on world history. Huge! If you’ve been following along, you might remember how they affected regional empires in Asia, Europe, and Africa.

Now they weren’t the only game in town—during the time of their rise, there were a number of nomadic groups throughout Asia, and every so often, a leader of a tribe would unite wandering tribes, sometimes forming confederations as big as the modern U-S!

But most of the time, if that leader died, the tribes disbanded. The same thing might have happened to the Mongols if not for a man named Genghis Khan. He extended Mongol rule throughout Eurasia, shaping the future of a whole lot of the eastern hemisphere.

Video 1

Hey there, sport! How’s my favorite grandkid? What, not talking to your own grandpa? Ah, kids these days. Well, I’m here, like it or not, and I think it’s about time I read you a very important story: the story of Genghis Khan. Alright, here we go.

Long, long, ago, in a land far, far…well…alright—in the early twelfth century, Kabul Khan, a Mongolian nomad, led a Mongol alliance that was able to defeat an army sent against them by the Qin kingdom of north China. Not too bad. But, shortly after this conflict, Kabul Khan got sick and died. Not too great. After his death, his successors were unable to defeat their nomadic enemies, which led to a division between Mongol
alliances. In the midst of all this—around eleven-sixty-two C-E—a boy named Temuchin was born into the noble Mongolian clan once led by his grandfather Kabul Khan. And unlike some people, he grew up to take after his grandfather—he would be none other than Genghis Khan!

Now, Temuchin’s father became an able leader and hoped to reunify some of the alliances that Kabul Khan had created. He built up a following and hoped to secure a marriage alliance between his oldest son and the daughter of a stronger Mongol chief. But then— He was poisoned by the agents of a rival nomadic group. Temuchin, a teenager then, was thrust into a position of leadership.

A lot of Mongol tribes thought twice about following a teenager, so the allegiances dwindled. A few months later, Temuchin’s camp was attacked. In eleven eighty-two, he was taken prisoner, locked in a wooden collar and humiliated by his captors. But one night he escaped and rejoined his remaining followers. Together, they joined up with the camp of a more powerful Mongol chief. And with all of this support, Temuchin and his followers attacked the clan who had enslaved him. So fiercely did he fight in this attack, that he became known thereafter as a fierce warrior.

This reputation won him more and more and more allies and followers. For a decade afterward, he defeated many of his rivals and in twelve-oh-six, at a meeting of all the Mongol chiefs, he was named Genghis Khan, or supreme ruler of all the Mongol tribes. So, at forty years old, Genghis Khan was ruler of almost one-point-five million Mongols and overlord to one to two million more defeated nomads who were now part of his growing kingdom. Finally, under a strong leader, the Mongols could prepare for more attacks. But Genghis Khan had bigger plans. He came to see himself as destined to rule the world.
Alright, now I’m sure you need a little break—you kids always need your breaks. But your old grandpa will be right here, ready to keep going, just resting his eyes.

**Video 1 – Recap**

**Video 2 - Introduction**

**Video 2**

Wha? Oh—ready for more? Okay then. Here we go… where were we…Ah, yes. In twelve-oh-seven, Genghis Khan led a campaign against the Tangut kingdom of Xi Xia, in northwest China. Next, he attacked the Jin Empire in northern China. Early on, he and his armies had little regard for towns they attacked or the people living in them. He's even believed to have said: "The greatest joy a man can know is to conquer his enemies and drive them before him. To ride their horses and take away their possessions. To see the faces of those who were dear to them bedewed with tears, and to clasp their wives and daughters in his arms."

If people resisted, their town would be sacked—homes, mosques, temples, and palaces were reduced to rubble—and the people were slaughtered or sold into slavery. Sometimes, people were spared—famous scholars or talented artisans. Either way, they were used as advisors or for other skills. But if a town surrendered, it would simply pay tribute to the Mongols.

Genghis Khan was a sharp guy—he set standards for how to rule his growing kingdom. He was open to new ideas and wanted this kingdom of diverse peoples to live in peace—only after they were conquered, of course.
But he didn’t want to live in his conquered cities—no! Instead, he set up a new capital at Karakorum on the steppes, summoning the wise and clever from all over the land to his palace, where he lived with his wives and advisors.

Though he was illiterate, he took an interest in the arts, consulted with Confucian scholars, Muslim engineers, and Taoist teachers. He even hoped to find an elixir that could make him immortal! And even though he followed a religion based on nature spirits, he was tolerant of other religions under his empire. His means of conquering were brutal, but his methods of ruling were somewhat peaceful.

In twelve-twenty-six, having won his campaigns in the west, Genghis Khan turned back to finish his campaigns in China. But in twelve-twenty-seven, he fell ill from a prior injury and died in August. By then, the Mongols ruled an empire that stretched from eastern Persia to the north China Sea.

When he died, the Mongols carried his body back to Mongolia in a funeral procession, hunting and killing everybody in their path. After this, the empire was divided among his sons and one grandson. But it was his third son, Ogodei, who was elected grand khan. The end.

But one more thing—we’re descendants of Ghengis Khan! That’s right! Scientists have identified a Y chromosome lineage in eight percent of the men living in the former Mongol empire—where our ancestors are from! So we’re part of his sixteen million descendants living today! Ha! Alright— Now—where was I?

Reading Passage Introduction
Now, if you think it’s kind of a stretch that a group of nomadic tribes from northwestern China under the leadership of one person almost conquered an entire continent, think again.

The Mongols got a reputation of being totally ferocious warriors, wrecking shop wherever they went—killing, pillaging, and torturing.

I shouldn’t have to tell you that a lot of people throughout Eurasia were pretty intimidated. Here—why don’t you read a little more about the Mongol warriors and their methods?

**Video 3**

Hello American student. I am Dr. Nadia Rusakova of M-I-T—the Moscow Institute of Teaching—and I am here today to speak to you of the time of the Mongol empire’s control over Russia. It is a bit of a dark time in our history, but out of it came the very beginnings of a powerful Russia. And so I begin.

The invasion started as an ambition of the Golden Horde—they desired to bring Russia under their control. So in twelve-thirty-six, Batu, grandson of Genghis Khan, led the Mongol invasion of Russia. To the Mongols, this invasion was also a way to practice their battle techniques before they continued on to the rest of Western Europe.

At this time, my Russia was not one powerful nation, but was many separate small kingdoms, loosely centered around the trading cities of Novgorod and Kiev. There was no central power to unite these kingdoms against the invasion. So when a Mongol force of more than one hundred twenty thousand warriors arrived in twelve-thirty-six, each Russian prince fought alone against this army, instead of as a united force with the other Russian kingdoms.
The Mongols invaded in winter—when they preferred to fight—and they continuously defeated brave Russian forces, destroyed entire cities, and slaughtered or enslaved the inhabitants. They might have completely conquered the Russian states at this time, but Batu’s army retreated, most likely due to the spring thaw, which made it difficult to move through the Russian terrain. This retreat spared Kiev and Novgorod, the two largest Russian cities. But the Mongols were not finished with Russia. They returned in twelve-forty with a campaign that conquered Kiev, which they then looted and reduced to rubble.

The Russian states had been mostly defeated by the Mongol forces at this point, and for the following two-hundred-fifty years, the Mongols controlled our region. The Russian princes became vassals of the Golden Horde, paying tribute to the Mongols. And Russian peasants had to serve as serfs not only to their regional princes but also to their new Mongol overlords.

However, some Russian cities saw a bit of benefit from Mongol control. During this time, trade increased, bringing wealth to cities like Moscow, which was able to rebuild over time. Moscow even became the main city that collected the tribute payments for the Mongols. This role allowed the city to grow in wealth and in power.

And as Moscow slowly grew, the Golden Horde began to decline. In thirteen-eighty, Moscow princes allied with a few other Russian princes, raising an army and actually defeating Mongol forces from the Golden Horde at the Battle of Kulikova. And in
conjunction with attacks on the Mongols by Tamerlane, this victory ultimately ended the control of the Mongols over the Russian states.

And now it is time, American student, for you to pause and confirm your learning before I continue teaching about the Mongols in Russia. I will see you again shortly.

Video 4

Greetings again, American student. I assume you are ready for more of my teaching, yes? Allow me to continue.

Although I refer to it as a dark time in Russian history, the Mongol rule over Russia did have both positive and negative effects. For one, the Mongol’s religious tolerance benefitted the Orthodox Church. This was certainly a positive. Also, cities like Moscow were able to flourish and grow with the increased trade.

The Mongol military likewise influenced the Russian military for the better, as did the Mongol political organization techniques—the example of the Mongols motivated the Russian states to seek more centralized power. And ultimately, the ruling Mongols protected the Russian states from possible attacks by the Polish, Hungarian, and Lithuanian states.

However, these were indeed dark times. All the Russian states were cut off from advancements that were happening in Western Europe, such as the Renaissance and the Reformation. And the methods of Mongol rule and subjugation over Russia were particularly brutal and humiliating. The Russians actually called the Mongols Tartars—or people from hell—because of the vicious battle tactics of the Mongols. In some ways, this period instilled in Russians a sense of tragedy that can still be seen in our culture and art.
After Mongol Rule, Russia gradually transitioned into a more modernized region. Princes began to gather land and acquire more territory, strengthening their power. In fourteen-eighty, Grand Prince Ivan the third—or Ivan the Great—stopped paying tribute to the Mongol Khan, an act that ultimately declared Russia independent from Mongol Rule.

Ivan the Great then made Moscow the center of the emerging Russia, and ruled from Muscovy, which was the principality of Moscow. In addition, he annexed more territory for Russia, almost tripling the size of Moscow and bringing more Russian-speaking peoples under his control. He even acquired Novgorod, bringing Moscow and Novgorod under the same central authority—the Muscovite state. More and more, Ivan continued to mold Russian states into an increasingly powerful centralized state. He even called himself Tsar, which is a Russianized form of the name Caesar.

The lack of unity of the many Russian states on the eve of Mongol invasions was not soon forgotten by my people. The invasions first brought terrible violence, destruction, and chaos to the emerging states. But—the influence of the Mongols and other centralized powers like the Byzantine Empire inspired these separate Russian kingdoms to unite and form their own growing centralized power. So it is that Mongol rule had both positive and negative effects, creating a Russia that, once free from the Mongols, began to grow as a more powerful force in Europe.

There. I will now bid you do svidaniya, American student. But please do not hesitate to ask me to recall this information for you.