

The Socio-Economic Transformation of Central Asian Cities During Mongol Rule

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1. Introduction

The period of the Mongol domination and incorporation into the Mongol Empire played a vital role in the socio-economic transformation of the Central Asian population despite the widespread contempt and overall negative connotation on the part of the invaded peoples and their prospective historiographies. The extent of the impact of the Mongol domination could be easily traced throughout medieval and modern times and it played a decisive role in the cultural and political consolidation of certain groups, many of which turned into the backbone of modern Central Asian nations.

Based on the accounts of those who had suffered in Central Asia and the Middle East, and later refined by European authors, the Mongol invasion was often depicted as the final catastrophe that fell upon the fate of the great Muslim civilization upon the destruction of the Caliphate. As Bernard Lewis noted, the Mongols started being depicted as barbarians that “could neither learn from others nor themselves create anything new.”¹ Accordingly, whether in China, Central Asia, the Middle East, or Eastern Europe, the Mongol invasion was often perceived as the cause of major disruption that led to profound demographic, economic and political changes in these areas, and became a vital and long-lasting element of the tragic collective memory to shape the modern historical discourse of the prospective nations.²

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1 Bernard Lewis, “The Mongols, the Turks and the Muslim Polity,” *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, no.18 (1968): 49.

2 Joseph Laszlovszky et al., “Contextualizing the Mongol Invasion of Hungary in 1241–42. Short- and Long-Term Perspectives,” *Hungarian Historical Review* 7, No. 3 (2018): 419.

The “barbaric” and “uncivilized” nature of the Mongols compared to the conquered states and societies also became a common denomination in later Central Asian historiography, as the Mongol invaders were often depicted as a society with “a lower level of socio-economic development compared to the population of the conquered regions of Kazakhstan,”³ as a Kazakh author noted, or as “semi-civilized people driven by belligerent lifestyle”⁴ in the words of a Tajik author.

On the one hand, invaded and controlled by the mightiest military system of the time, the region encountered destruction, massive dislocation of population, and disruption of existing political systems and elites. On the other hand, as incorporated into the greatest land empire stretching from East Asia into Eastern Europe and Near East, the Central Asian cities found themselves at the crossroad of economic and cultural exchange without being distracted by the regional threats from abroad. In light of these considerations, the paper intends to evaluate the effects of the Mongol domination on Central Asian cities examining their demographic, economic, political, and cultural transformation appealing to a broader perspective and sources from within and outside the region. The following section overviews the impact of the Mongol invasion on Central Asian cities from the perspective of demographics and population movements, economic activities, religious life and legal affairs as well as administrative changes. The concluding section highlights a few long-lasting effects of the period on the region, some of which were positive.

2. Impact of the Mongol invasion on Central Asia

First, while analyzing the tremendous impact of the Mongol invasion and consequent rule over the urban population of Central Asia, the horrific massacres of the population come out as the most noticeable outcome associated with the Mongols. The horrific instances of the so-called “general massacre” (*qatl-i ‘amm*), when the entire population of the cities that stubbornly resisted the Mongol overtaking were slain, are vividly depicted in Persian and Arabic

³ K. A. Pishchulina, *Yugo-Vostochny Kazakhstan v seredine XIV - nachale XVI vv.* (Alma-Ata: 1977), 36.

⁴ B. G. Gafurov, *Tadzhiki. Drevneishaya, drevnyaya i srednevekovaya istoriya*, (Dushanbe: 1989), 178.

chronicles on more than thirty instances, including Otrar, Sygnak, Termez, Balkh, Merv, Nishapur, and Gurganj.⁵

The general massacre of the entire population of Merv, for instance, brought in scenes of horrific cruelty and bloodshed. As the Persian chronicler 'Ata-Malik Juvaini depicts, apart from 400 artisans and a few children selected for captivity, the Mongols slaughtered the entire population of the city including women and children, so that each soldier "was allotted the execution of three or four hundred persons."⁶ Referring to the death toll count ordered by Tolui, the son of Chinggis khan, Ibn al-Athir estimates the slain population of Merv alone as 700,000,⁷ while according to Juvaini, more than 1,300,000 people were killed at Merv and it took thirteen days to count the corpses.⁸ The general massacre of the adult male population, however, was not a Mongol invention and the Muslim princes in the region had practiced it, as, for instance, the Khwarazmshah Muhammad bin Tekish carried out an extensive massacre of the people of Samarkand in 1212-1213 upon their revolt, sparing only foreign merchants.⁹

Despite the fact that the death tolls of 1.3 million at Merv and almost 1.8 million at Nishapur are found overly exaggerated by modern historical demographers, whose research estimates the populations of both Merv and Nishapur to be slightly above 70,000 at the time of the Mongol invasion,¹⁰ there is no doubt that the Mongol campaign and punitive policies had a devastating effect on Central Asian urban population. In any case, the drastic decline of the population in Central Asia in the decades following the Mongol invasion was witnessed by Chinese, Arabic, and Persian travelers,¹¹ followed by massive refugee flows from the cities of the region.¹²

⁵ I. P. Petrushevsky, "Pokhod mongol'skikh voisk v Sredniyu Azii v 1219-1224 gg. i ego posledstviya," in *Tataro-mongoly v Azii i Evrope* (Moscow: 1977), 122.

⁶ 'Ala-ad-Din 'Ata-Malik Juvaini, *Genghis Khan. The History of the World Conqueror* (Manchester: 1997), 162.

⁷ Ibn al-Athir, *Al-Kamil fi-t-ta'rikh. Polnyi svod istorii* (Tashkent: 2006), 363.

⁸ Juvaini, *Genghis Khan. The History of the World Conqueror*, 163-164.

⁹ Peter Jackson, *The Mongols and the Islamic World. From Conquest to Conversion* (Llandysul: Yale University Press, 2017), 163.

¹⁰ Tertius Chandler and Gerald Fox, *3000 Years of Urban Growth* (London: 1974), 232.

¹¹ Petrushevsky, "Pokhod mongol'skikh voisk v Sredniyu Azii v 1219-1224 gg. i ego posledstviya," 131.

¹² Thomas T. Allsen, "Population Movements in Mongol Eurasia" in *Nomads as Agents of Cultural Change. The Mongols and Their Eurasian Predecessors*, ed. Reuven Amitai and Michal Biran (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press, 2015), 124.

Apart from the population slaughtered at the cities, as villages were rarely massacred by the Mongol army,¹³ a great number of people were scattered into rural areas, taken into captivity to be forcefully enrolled in military or labor campaigns in different parts of the empire or people simply took refuge in distant countries, with small or no chance to return to their native cities. So, the Mongol invasion pushed forward a great number of Central Asians toward the Middle East, Eastern Europe, and South Asia, changing their histories for the centuries to come.

Second, the Mongol practice of selecting artisans and craftsmen at massive scale and sparing them to be taken all the way to Mongolia¹⁴ was noticed by numerous contemporary travelers and chroniclers, namely Plano Carpini.¹⁵ The permanent and massive decline of the artisan and craftsmen population of the conquered cities, most of whom were spared, but deported or sold into slavery, was noted as the most devastating effect of the Mongol invasion on urban life,¹⁶ and in some areas, it took almost a century for artisan crafts to recover, while some crafts were lost forever.¹⁷ As Juvaini recalls, following the conquest, the Mongols selected 30,000 craftsmen¹⁸ in Samarkand alone to be distributed by Chinggis Khan among his sons and be taken away, while the total population of the city prior to the invasion was later estimated to be around 80,000.¹⁹

Many prominent figures in the Mongol empire – princes, princesses, and khans – were known for owning from 5,000 to 8,000 artisans and craftsmen in their personal possession in Bukhara alone.²⁰ As the capture and forced deployment of the local artisans were severely damaging industries in Central Asian cities, the Mongols tried later

¹³ Petrushevsky, "Pokhod mongol'skikh voisk v Sredniyu Azii v 1219-1224 gg. i ego posledstviya," 122.

¹⁴ S. L. Tikhvinsky, "Tataro-mongol'skie zavoevaniya v Azii i Evrope" in *Tataro-mongoly v Azii i Evrope* (Moscow: 1977), 6-7.

¹⁵ Giovanni del Plano Carpini, "Istoriya mongalov," in *Puteshestviya v vostochnye strany Plano Karpini i Rubruka* (Moscow: 1957), 54.

¹⁶ Jackson, *The Mongols and the Islamic World*, 76.

¹⁷ Charles Halperin, "Russia in the Mongol Empire in Comparative Perspective," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 43, No. 1 (1983), 244.

¹⁸ Juvaini, *Genghis Khan. The History of the World Conqueror*, 122.

¹⁹ Chandler and Fox, 232.

²⁰ Petrushevsky, "Pokhod mongol'skikh voisk v Sredniyu Azii v 1219-1224 gg. i ego posledstviya," 131.

to compensate their loss by bringing in new populations – Chinese artisans and scholars, Tangut farmers, Khitan administrators, and even German miners²¹ – to repair the damage of the conquests, and in an exceptional case, even sent the artisans back from Central Asia.²²

The artisans and the craftsmen were not the only groups of the conquered cities to pay a dear price in the making of a new Mongol rule in Central Asia. The wealthiest inhabitants, most of whom were merchants and manufacturers, were exclusively selected to be deprived of their wealth. Upon the conquest of Bukhara, as Juvaini and Rashid al-Din recall, Chinggis Khan inquired the city notables to make a list of the 280 richest men of the city, both natives and foreigners, to confiscate their wealth.²³ They also contain numerous accounts of the conquered population of Central Asian cities to be spared in return for a tremendous ransom, as it happened in Nur,²⁴ while the wealthy residents of Samarkand had to pay a ransom of 200,000 dinars for their lives.²⁵

Third, despite the overall disruption of the economic activities and deterioration of the economic conditions of the city folks and peasants, some social groups, on the contrary, seemed to profit from the existing turmoil and advanced their material and social conditions.²⁶ As Barthold suggests, before the conflict with Khwarazmshah Muhammad that would eventually lead to the Mongol invasion of Khwarazm, Chinggis Khan was keen on establishing peaceful relations with the Khwarazmian Empire, as the interruption of trade was not in the interests of prosperous Muslim merchants that controlled the Chinese transit trade through Mongolia, most of whom had close personal links with Chinggis Khan and advised him during the war with China.²⁷ Some authors directly linked the contribution of the Central Asian merchants

²¹ Michal Biran, "Rulers and City Life in Mongol Central Asia (1220-1370)," in *Turko-Mongol Rulers, Cities and City Life*, ed. David Durand-Guédy (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 262-263.

²² Michal Biran, "Rulers and City Life in Mongol Central Asia (1220-1370)", 364-365.

²³ Juvaini, *Genghis Khan. The History of the World Conqueror*, 104-105; and Rashid-ad-Din, *Sbornik letopisei*, Volume 1, Book 2 (Leningrad: 1952), 206.

²⁴ Juvaini, *Genghis Khan. The History of the World Conqueror*, 102.

²⁵ Rashid-ad-Din, *Sbornik letopisei*, 208.

²⁶ Halperin, "Russia in the Mongol Empire in Comparative Perspective," 244.

²⁷ V. V. Barthold, *Turkestan v epokhu mongol'skogo nashestviya* (Moscow: 1963), 462-463.

prior and throughout the Mongol campaign in Central Asia as informants, envoys, spies, and guides with their expectation to increase their trade revenues as soon the Mongol rule would extend from the Pacific to the Urals.²⁸ Besides, in China and Central Asia, the tax-farming was often entitled to Muslim merchants and created opportunities for their personal enrichment.²⁹

Along with an exclusive group of interest-driven merchants, the local religious elite would become another urban class to benefit, to some extent, from the Mongol invasion. Since the Mongols, and Chinggis Khan himself, was well aware of the usefulness of the religious leaders in securing the submission of the conquered populations, they retained a policy of granting the religious notables exclusive privileges, including exemption from taxes and labor services.³⁰ In this light, Juvaini poetically describes Chinggis Khan as someone who “honored and respected the learned and pious of every sect, recognizing such conduct as the way to the Court of God,” adding that he issued a *yasa* to “consider all sects as one and not to distinguish them from one another.”³¹ This attitude would later be formalized in the Mongol Empire in the institution of *tarkhan*, which would grant judicial and fiscal immunity to a religious leader or a church,³² making the religious elite a dominant actor in the cultural and political life of the region for the centuries to come.

This collaboration seemed to bear fruits from the earliest period of the Mongol invasion since both Rashid al-Din and Juvaini noted the active role of local *shaikh-al-islams*, *qadis*, and *imams* in the surrender of both Bukhara and Samarkand. In Bukhara, they convinced the people to open the gate and ran forward to greet Chinggis Khan, while in Samarkand they themselves opened the city gates for the Mongol troops to enter the city under siege.³³ As a reward, Chinggis

²⁸ Petrushevsky, “Pokhod mongol’skikh voisk v Sredniuyu Aziyu v 1219-1224 gg. i ego posledstviya,” 120.

²⁹ M. Kutlukov, “Mongol’skoe gospodstvo v Vostochnom Turkestane,” in *Tataro-mongoly v Azii i Evrope* (Moscow: 1977), 92.

³⁰ Peter Jackson, “The Mongols and the Faith of the Conquered,” in *Mongols, Turks, and Others. Eurasian Nomads and the Sedentary World*, eds. Reuven Amitai and Michal Biran (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 263-264.

³¹ Juvaini, *Genghis Khan. The History of the World Conqueror*, 26.

³² H. F. Schurmann, “Mongolian Tributary Practices of the Thirteenth Century,” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 19, No. 3/4 (1956), 353.

³³ Rashid-ad-Din, *Sbornik letopisei*, Volume 1, Book 2 (Leningrad: 1952), 205, 207.

Khan granted protection and spared not only the *shaikh-al-islams* and *qadis*, but more than 50,000 people who were related to them.³⁴

Lastly, as is often mentioned, at the initial stage of the conquests, due to peculiarities of their state system the Mongols contemplated the conquered territories not in terms of territories, but in terms of the population so that the Mongol elite was allotted the possession, not over the land but over people as their personal appanages, which somehow created the rational basis behind the idea of massive dislocation of population.³⁵ Thus, the population of the conquered lands suffered from a more acute system of exploitation and dependence, including the revival of slavery, and in many places, the nomadic cattle-breeding economy expanded due to the decline of agriculture upon the destruction of irrigation systems.³⁶ In many areas like Semirech'e suitable both for agriculture and nomadic pastoralism, the Mongol rule instigated re-nomadization by turning agricultural lands necessary for sustaining urban life into pastureland.³⁷ The swift and massive arrival of the nomadic population facilitated the rapid transformation of the previously cultivated agricultural lands and settlements into pastures, witnessed by Guillaume de Rubrouck in a span of just a few years.³⁸ Thus, within a few decades following the Mongol invasion, Semirech'e almost entirely turned into an area of nomadic or semi-nomadic pastoralism.³⁹ In the meantime, despite avoiding destruction, some of the previously prosperous cities declined and ceased to exist due to the diversion of trade routes upon the establishment of the Mongol rule over a vast territory.⁴⁰

So, in spite of stretching over extensive sedentary territories in the early years of its expansions, the Mongol Empire was administered as a huge nomadic state, with the seat of the government resembling the encampment of the ruler out of thousands of tents.⁴¹ The Mongol

³⁴ Juvaini, *Genghis Khan. The History of the World Conqueror*, 120.

³⁵ H. F. Schurmann, "Mongolian Tributary Practices of the Thirteenth Century," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 19, No. 3/4 (1956), 305.

³⁶ Tikhvinsky, "Tataro-mongol'skie zavoevaniya v Azii i Evrope" 7.

³⁷ Biran, "Rulers and City Life in Mongol Central Asia (1220-1370)," 264.

³⁸ Guillaume de Rubrouck, "Puteshestviya v vostochnye strany," in *Puteshestviya v vostochnye strany Plano Karpini i Rubruka* (Moscow: 1957), 126.

³⁹ Pishchulina, *Yugo-Vostochny Kazakhstan v seredine XIV - nachale XVI vv.*, 37.

⁴⁰ Halperin, "Russia in the Mongol Empire in Comparative Perspective," 243.

⁴¹ Jackson, *The Mongols and the Islamic World*, 69.

khans and princes did not permanently live in their capitals and did not associate themselves with the sedentary urban culture they ruled over, spending their time in seasonal migrations and hunt.⁴² Moreover, although ruling over huge sedentary populations, the Mongol empire was often administered by traditional nomadic practices that were imposed on sedentary regions as well. Some new laws introduced in the newly conquered Central Asia were originally designed for a military-based empire with pastoral society, ignoring the needs and interests of agricultural or artisan societies.⁴³

The imposition of the Mongol customary law and taboos at the early period of the Mongol domination in Central Asia would severely disturb the overall population, of which Muslims were particularly affected. For instance, the ban to wash in running water in spring and summer or to slaughter animals by Islamic rules would strictly halt the observation of their faith and duties,⁴⁴ as did the punishment for slaughtering the animal by Islamic rules⁴⁵ or the circumcision ban in the early period of the Mongol rule.⁴⁶

Therefore, one of the most significant impacts of the Mongol expansion with immediate but also long-lasting effects became the tremendous long-distance dislocations of large groups of the population, including huge nomadic military deployments comprised of administrators, soldiers, their families, servants, and slaves, as well as forcibly relocated defeated peoples.⁴⁷ Thus, at the onset of the Mongol campaign of 1219-1224 to conquer Central Asia, 150,000 soldiers alone – probably the size of the populations of Samarkand and Bukhara combined – were deployed under the command of Chinggis Khan against the Khwarazmian state.⁴⁸ The Mongol invasion of Central Asia triggered a massive inflow of nomadic tribes of the Mongol stock, like the Jalairs and Barlas, as well as an even greater number of Turkic tribes from the East so that

⁴² John W. Dardess, "From Mongol Empire to Yüan Dynasty. Changing Forms of Imperial Rule in Mongolia and Central Asia," *Monumenta Serica* 30 (1972-1973): 120.

⁴³ Mansura Haider, "The Mongol traditions and their survival in Central Asia (XIV-XV centuries)," *Central Asiatic Journal* 28, No. 1/2 (1984): 78.

⁴⁴ Jackson, "The Mongols and the Faith of the Conquered," 260.

⁴⁵ Kutlukov, "Mongol'skoe gosподstvo v Vostochnom Turkestane" 94.

⁴⁶ Kutlukov, "Mongol'skoe gosподstvo v Vostochnom Turkestane".

⁴⁷ Allsen, 119.

⁴⁸ Tikhvinsky, *Tataro-mongol'skie zavoevaniya v Azii i Evrope*" 5.

up until the Tsarist invasion, the ruling dynasties in Central Asia were in some way the descendants of Turkic or Turkified Mongolic nomadic tribes.⁴⁹ As was often noted, the Mongols in China were neither eager to learn Chinese or assimilate into their culture, while assimilating into the Turkic-speaking pastoral nomadic realm they still could retain their tribal or clan structure, and Turkicization or even adoption of Islam would not disrupt their pastoral nomadic lifestyle.⁵⁰

On the other hand, the Mongols deliberately enrolled in the administration of the newly conquered lands non-indigenous personnel, as was the case with the involvement of numerous Central Asian Muslims in the administration of China, as the Mongols lacked experience in administering sedentary populations.⁵¹ The process, however, instigated displacement and migration of large groups of people from East to West, North to South, and the other way around, most of which would not be able to return to their native regions. They were collectively referred to as *Semuren* (meaning people of various categories) and belonged to the second class in Yuan China, the highest class being the Mongols, while the two lowest strata belonged to the Northern and Southern Chinese.⁵² In many parts of the empire when administrative duties were entrusted to the local notables, a Mongol or Turkic official – *darughachi* or *basqaq* – would be assigned to supervise them,⁵³ some being Central Asians.

As the Mongol Empire expanded, the imperial fiscal machine maintained massive financial and population flows from the newly conquered sedentary territories to the steppe regions. The flows were to such an extent that newly accumulated wealth facilitated the birth of cities and revitalized manufacturing in the steppe region, the capital city of the Karakorum being a vivid example.⁵⁴

⁴⁹ Petrushevsky, "Pokhod mongol'skikh voisk v Sredniuyu Aziyu v 1219-1224 gg. i ego posledstviya," 132-133.

⁵⁰ Halperin, "Russia in the Mongol Empire in Comparative Perspective," 253-255.

⁵¹ Kutlukov, "Mongol'skoe gosподstvo v Vostochnom Turkestane," 90.

⁵² Michael C. Brose, "Central Asians in Mongol China: Experiencing the 'Other' from Two Perspectives," *The Medieval History Journal* 5, No. 2 (2002): 273.

⁵³ Kutlukov, "Mongol'skoe gosподstvo v Vostochnom Turkestane," 90.

⁵⁴ Dardess, "From Mongol Empire to Yüan Dynasty. Changing Forms of Imperial Rule in Mongolia and Central Asia," 118.

3. Conclusion

This paper dwelled on a few narrow aspects of the Mongol impact on Central Asian urban societies while analyzing the socio-economic transformation of the Central Asian states under Mongol rule. These are the drastic demographic changes, including the population decline and change in its composition; the impact of the invasion on certain urban industries and classes; the transformation of the elites under Mongol rule; and the new patterns of urbanization and de-urbanization.

Since the topic is too extensive, the paper limited itself to the earliest period of the Mongol conquest of Central Asia and avoided technical and physical aspects of destruction or production. However, a few long-lasting effects of the period on the region can be highlighted. Upon the finalization of the Mongol expansion and establishment of the Mongol Empire, the Central Asian cities returned to the path of recovery, with the Mongols often being mentioned as the instigators of reconstruction. The recovery and reconstruction of the devastated and destroyed cities, as well as building and founding of new ones throughout the Mongol Central Asia, was noted by many contemporary chroniclers and travellers, including Ibn al-Athir, Yaqut,⁵⁵ and Juvaini⁵⁶ These testimonies went hand in hand with others about the recovery and expansion of the trade routes under the Mongols,⁵⁷ the safety of which would, in its turn, facilitate cultural exchange and scientific activities along the trade routes.⁵⁸ Interestingly, as Barthold noted, those cities that were destroyed and whose population was put to death would soon recover and extend their lives for centuries, while the cities that voluntarily submitted to the Mongol armies and thus spared from destruction would soon decline and disappear.⁵⁹

Amid widespread disdain and generally negative connotations on the part of the invaded peoples and their prospective historiographies, Mongolian domination and assimilation into

⁵⁵ Jackson, *The Mongols and the Islamic World*, 176-177.

⁵⁶ Juvaini, *Genghis Khan. The History of the World Conqueror*, 96.

⁵⁷ Halperin, "Russia in the Mongol Empire in Comparative Perspective," 242-243.

⁵⁸ Nicola Di Cosmo, "Black Sea Emporia and the Mongol Empire: A Reassessment of the Pax Mongolica," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 53, No. 1/2 (2010): 91-92.

⁵⁹ V. V. Barthold, *Istoriya kul'turnoi zhizni Turkestana* (Leningrad: 1927), 85-86.

the Mongolian Empire played a critical role in the socio-economic restructuring of the Central Asian people, particularly an exclusive group of interest-driven merchants, the local religious elite, and Muslim administrative elite.

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