
Nomadic Turk Migrations and Impacts

World History I

July 15, 2018

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In central Asia, the land was inhospitable. The region was semiarid and had difficult winters. The people of Central Asia were mainly pastoral nomads. They set up small settlements to allow their herds to graze and when they had depleted the food source, they packed up and moved on to find better grazing and hunting lands. Their camps were easy to relocate because they lived in large tents called yurts. They survived on mostly meat, milk, cheese, and butter from their herds and made clothing from their hides. While there were some cattle being raised, sheep were better suited to life the steppe.

Horses were helpful in migration, but especially important in warfare. Their well-trained horses were bred for endurance and had shaggy coats to protect them from the frigid wind and cold. They often clashed with other nomadic tribes and settled communities. They were skilled warriors and boys were taught from a young age how to not only ride a horse, but do everything from sleep, to eat, to fight on horseback. Even when outnumbered by the armies of settled societies, they often prevailed due to their adept fighting tactics.

Life in these nomadic camps revolved around gender roles. Men were often away hunting or fighting, while women stayed at the camp to care for their families, households, and animals. They made clothing and yurts as well as products from the milk of their herds. Women were also familiar with riding horses and could pack up their family and belongings to flee with little notice. They sometimes went into battle with men to help with feeding everybody.

Marriage was typically arranged and used for political or social gains. The greatest and bravest warriors were celebrated and enjoyed a higher social status – some even taking multiple wives, with each having their own yurt. Their religion originally focused on shamanism with elaborate rituals. Leaders valued the guidance of shamans in major decisions and for healing. Later, through connections with settled societies, some would adopt other religions, such as Islam, Christianity, or Judaism (Judge ch.15).

Around the tenth century, climate changes in Central Asia forced many tribes to migrate further in search of more favorable grazing lands. As they migrated and clashed with others, tribes were forced further south until they were extending into Islamic southwestern Asia and attacking settled societies there. The Seljuk Turks took over Persia and Anatolia in the 11th century. By this time, they had taken up Sunni Islam and wanted to rid the world of Shiites and unite Muslims as Sunnis. They adored Persian culture and adopted their Farsi language as well as other customs. This was a time of art and literature and architecture when the European world was suffering in the dark ages (Judge ch.12).

The Seljuk Turks, led by Sultan Alp Arslan, battled Byzantine armies at the Battle of Manzikert

in Armenia. The Seljuk Turks were victorious and through that gained control of much of the Byzantine Empire (Judge p.198). This battle is one of the root causes of the Crusades that took place a couple of decades later. Pope Urban II declared holy war against Islam and the “barbaric” Seljuk Turks. The pope called for European knights to stop fighting amongst themselves as they had been and instead, work together to “exterminate this vile race from [their] lands.” This fight was alluring to men of all social statuses. Many left their homes and families. Some sold everything they had to engage in what was not only a war, but a religious pilgrimage. They were traveling to the holy lands where Christianity was born to fight against Islam invaders (Armstrong 3-4). The Seljuk Turks’ empire split and fighting between tribes caused further division and the Ottoman Empire was on the rise in that region.

Early in the 13th century, Genghis Khan and his Mongol armies set out for world domination. His reign spread through parts of northern China and western Asia. Genghis Khan was a brilliant military strategist and leader. He made his generals cut ties with their tribes and swear fealty to him alone. His armies were comprised of extremely skilled warriors who did their research before attacking. Through contact with traveling merchants, spies, or torturing prisoners, they gained the information they needed to plan an attack. They learned tactics from other societies, such as building and using catapults and bombs. They were ruthless against those who showed defiance, but spared some of those who did not resist and those who had useful skills. Those who were spared told the tales and Genghis Khan’s reputation often preceded him.

The Mongols influenced society in many ways including extensive trade routes and an information highway – where messages could travel up to 200 miles a day via a relay of horse riders. They even had an early form of “passports” for those traveling throughout the lands to prove they were conducting official business. The Mongols were also converted to Islam during this time. By 1279, Genghis Khan’s grandson, Kublai Khan, overthrew the Song dynasty in China and moved the Mongols’ capital to Beijing. After his death 15 years later, the Mongol empire began its decline (Ludlam).

Timur Lenk, a Muslim Turk who claimed lineage to Genghis Khan, served in the Mongol cavalry. Timur played both sides of an internal Mongolian rivalry by making alliances with each faction. By 1360, as the Mongolian empire was falling apart, Timur seized control of an area of land and continued vying for control of more Mongol territory. Timur loved battling and conquering new land, but left governance to his sons and grandsons. He controlled much of the land formerly under Mongol rule, except for China. His nomadic upbringing granted him flexibility and determination, but his lack of leadership did not help with unifying his empire.

In 1398, Timur invaded India as he felt the Muslim sultans there were too tolerant of Hinduism. He waged holy war against them and in the process, plundered the wealth of Delhi. Aside from the mass casualties of the people in Delhi, disease and famine followed. Their trade and commerce was impacted and had devastating results on the region. It took nearly a century for Delhi to recover from this (“Timur Invades India”).

In 1402, Timur interrupted the Ottomans’ plans to launch a major attack on Constantinople. In the Ottomans’ strategic attempts, they invaded land under the protection of Timur Lenk and faced retaliation. The Ottoman sultan was kidnapped by Timur and brutally mistreated. While thankful to have avoided an attack from the Ottomans, the Christian world was now worried about Timur Lenk, however, Timur had his ambitions set on China. Timur died a few years later,

and his son established the Timurid dynasty in India, but due to lack of organization, it was weak and generally ignored.

Presently, the lands these nomads conquered and spread Islam throughout still have predominantly Muslim populations. There are still disputes over the land and who it belongs to. In some areas, some Muslims would prefer traditional Islamic law over secular law and Islam continues to spread. It is the fastest growing of all religions with over 1.2 billion followers. Sometimes, religious ideals are intermingled in politics, which has the potential to be problematic with corrupt or radical governments and individuals (Fisher).

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