The Mongol Invasions

In the first half of the thirteenth century, Europe faced another wave of invasions. This time the threat came from the steppes in northern China: the Mongols. Known for their skilled horsemanship and fierce battle style, the tales of which struck fear in the minds of Europeans, economic circumstances, and the need to continuously find new grasslands for their horses pushed the Mongols west. Movement west, however, did not happen before Mongol forces broke through China’s Great Wall and captured Beijing in 1215. Moving through central Asia and toward the Caspian Sea, the man who took the title Genghis Khan (c. 1162-1227), or “Universal Lord,” organized the loose confederation of fighting bands into a unified force set on expansion. Genghis Khan’s reorganization transferred loyalty from tribal units to the army as he instituted a unified command and promotion through the military. While he mostly concentrated on China, his sons set out on a massive expansion project. Fighting in two to three flanks, the heavily armed Mongol cavalry issued showers of arrows and then lulled their opponents into thinking they had retreated before attacking them again, creating an air of invincibility. In this way, they crossed the Caucasus Mountains to take on the Rus in 1223.

Although Genghis Khan died shortly after, in 1227, his death did not spell the end of Mongol expansion. He divided the conquered lands among his sons, creating four principalities. One of his sons turned his attention back to the Rus in 1238. In Russia, Mongol armies laid waste the cities of Vladimir and Moscow, pushing much of the Russian leadership north to Novgorod. The Mongols then turned to the Ukraine and captured Kiev in 1240 before moving to defeat forces in Hungary. They kept going toward Vienna but the death of the Great Khan who succeeded Genghis died, forcing the army to turn back and breaking its momentum.

Known as the Golden Horde among the Rus, most likely because of the golden color of their tents and the Mongol word for camp, Mongol rulership was based on the Volga River north of the Caspian Sea. In the regions they conquered, the Mongols left many institutions in place, including the Christian church and local governance. They required local princes to pay a tribute and conducted a census for the purposes of taxes and recruiting soldiers. Mongol tolerance of local institutions and governance in the lands they conquered spilled over into their dealings with their neighbors, near and distant. Western Europeans took advantage of Mongol rule by travelling to China, which had long been closed to foreigners, as missionaries, traders, and representatives of monarchs. One such traveler was the Venetian Marco Polo (1254-1324) who stayed in China for a total of eighteen years and whose stories of those years inspired many more travelers. The Mongols offered safe passage through the territories of their empire, referred to as the “Mongol Peace,” which opened up overland trade routes and allowed more and more information about the east flow into the west. The Mongols also inspired a shred of hope that they might be willing to unite with the Christian west against the Muslims. This never came to fruition, but Pope Innocent IV (1243-1254)
nevertheless sent a Dominican friar as a diplomat to the Great Khan in 1245, as did King Louis IV of France in 1253.

Mongol power hit its height around 1260. Shortly thereafter their air of invincibility was dispersed when their armies were defeated in Syria by Egyptian forces. This was followed by a series of succession disputes. In Russia, the leader of the Golden Horde broke away from the empire and converted to Islam. Known in Europe as the Tartars, the leadership lived off tribute. In 1380, the Rus revolted but were unsuccessful. A century later, they found success under Ivan III (r. 1462-1505), who declared himself Grand Duke of Moscow without the approval of the Golden Horde. When the Mongol Peace broke down, the overland trade routes became dangerous once again, compelling some westerners to concentrate on finding new routes—sea routes—to the wealth in the east.