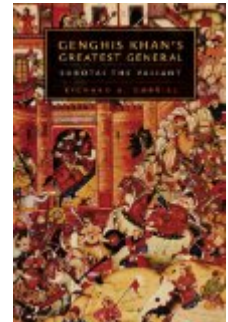


Richard A. Gabriel. *Genghis Khan's Greatest General: Subotai the Valiant*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2006. xii + 164 pp. \$14.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-8061-3734-6.



Reviewed by Timothy May

Published on H-War (January, 2007)

Without question, Subotai, one of several talented generals who served Chinggis Khan, ranks among the most gifted military leaders in history. The evidence for his tactical and strategic genius is overwhelming. Whether it was the famous *reconnaissance en force* that took a small Mongol army through the Middle East, over the Caucasus Mountains, into Russia, and then back to Central Asia, his activities in China' or the famous conquest of the Rus' principalities and the subsequent invasion of Europe, Subotai always emerged victorious. Thus one should welcome the publication of a volume focusing on Subotai's accomplishments. Unfortunately, Richard A. Gabriel's *Genghis Khan's Greatest General: Subotai the Valiant*, does not live up to merits of its subject

Gabriel, a scholar and author of forty books and a former professor at the U. S. Army War College, is well qualified to judge the merits of military genius; however, he falls victim to indulging his fascination with his topic and thus clouding his judgment of the evidence. Indeed, while the book's intent is to be a biography of Subotai, in reality it is a more of a study on Subotai and the

Mongol military. In Gabriel's view, the latter is heavily influenced by the former and thus the book is structured around this argument.

The first chapter concerns the origins of Subotai and how he came into service of Chinggis Khan, (historically and linguistically the correct spelling of Genghis Khan, a spelling that now used more by publishers than by specialists on the subject). In this, Gabriel gives his interpretation of how Subotai rose from being a servant to a general. The next chapter discusses the creation of the Mongol military and how it operated. Gabriel's inclusion of tactical and organizational diagrams, as well as illustrations, enhances the discussion of the army. While much of it is standard fare that is included in most discussions of the Mongols, military historians will value his comparisons of the Mongol military system with other systems, ranging from the Roman army to that of the German Wehrmacht.

Chapters 3 through 6 discuss the Mongol conquests of Eurasia from Chinggis Khan's invasion of the Jin Empire in northern China to the invasion of Poland and Hungary in 1241. Through the

course of all of these chapters, the narrative is well written and flows well, with special emphasis given to Subotai's role in these operations.

The final two chapters are, in this reviewer's opinion, the most significant. In chapter 7, Gabriel traces the legacy of the Mongol military and its influence on the study of war. Surprisingly, it seems to have been fairly negligible in the West until the twentieth century, when Basil Liddell-Hart and the Soviet general, Mikhail Tukhachevsky, developed separate strategies for warfare in the post-WWI era. The ultimate manifestation of this comes in the form of the *blitzkrieg* and other strategies employed by the Wehrmacht, as German generals drew lessons from Liddell-Hart's ideas as well as contacts with the Soviets in the 1920s. Chapter 8 is less a discourse of Subotai or the Mongol military, but rather reflection on Gabriel's endeavors in the classroom. As he taught at the U. S. Army War College, most of his students were lieutenant colonels and colonels, well accustomed to the art of war and commanding soldiers. Chapter 8 consists of lessons that his students learned from the study of the Mongol military campaigns. The lessons are those that his students provided; thus the reader gains a clear picture of what military leaders found useful at the strategic and tactical level.

Although these final chapters are extremely interesting, the rest of the volume, as stated earlier, does not live up to the merits of its topic. As a biography, *Subotai the Valiant* falls short. This is not due to a lack of effort on Gabriel's part; rather there is simply not enough data to compose a true book-length biography on Subotai. Naturally, in any biography one must discuss the events which surround the person, but the work is less a biography than a study of Subotai's influence on the Mongol war machine. Yet, while Gabriel is a noted military historian, his study of Subotai is undermined by Gabriel's lack of expertise on the Mongols.

The most glaring indication of this is that Gabriel falls into the trap of his own admiration for Subotai. There is no reason to question that Subotai possessed a genius for war that rivaled and perhaps even surpassed other noted military minds such as Alexander the Great and Napoleon, but Gabriel gives Subotai too much credit.

Much of his discussion of the early life of Subotai and his rise to prominence is based more on speculation than fact. Not all of it should be dismissed and it does provide food for thought as the general logic behind it is reasonable. When discussing the organization of the Mongol army, Gabriel's high regard for Subotai begins to manifest. Despite evidence to the contrary, Gabriel concludes that it was "at least likely that it was Subotai who influenced the Khan's thinking on how to reorganize the army" (p. 26) in 1206. Later, he also places Subotai ahead of Jebe, a more senior and very talented officer, as the person in charge of a couple of operations, including the famous *reconnaissance en force*. Gabriel's interpretation of events is confusing to say the least, as in all of the primary sources Jebe is clearly in charge. Jebe's death, while crossing the Caucasus Mountains in 1222-1223, placed Subotai in charge of the expedition and his genius immediately became clear.

Gabriel's bias is readily apparent in giving Subotai more credit than he justifiably earned. To be fair, the general's accomplishments are greater than those of any other single Mongol general, so it is easy to overlook the talents of Jebe or Muqali, but one must also keep in mind that Subotai's great success was partially due to a long life, since he died in his early seventies. Considering the number of wars, combats, and the general standard of health care, this feat in itself was remarkable.

The other factor undermining the value of Gabriel's study is his sources. The majority of the sources in the further reading section are woefully out of date. The most recent books or articles come from the mid-1990s. While the core readings

are still considered classics, many very good works on the Mongol military are not included, such as those by John Masson Smith, Jr. and Reuven Amitai. Most surprising is the absence of Paul D. Buell's biography of Subotai that appears in *In the Service of the Khan: Eminent Personalities of the Early Mongol-Yuan Period (1200-1300)* (1993) edited by Igor de Rachewiltz et al. Readers perusing the further reading section should be aware that it also contains several volumes published for a mass audience that are riddled with errors.

In conclusion, although *Subotai the Valiant* contains speculation and inaccuracies, the final two chapters should be read with interest. Although Gabriel's enthusiasm leads to overestimating Subotai's already considerable reputation, this negative aspect is also a positive. His enthusiasm is contagious and holds the reader's interest quite well. In his preface, Gabriel writes, "Even if my effort has fallen short, there is now, at the minimum, a single source to which students of Mongol and military history may turn to learn more about one of history's superb field commanders" (p. xii). In this, Gabriel succeeds for, if nothing else, Gabriel's work will spark the interest of others into examining the great Mongol general and the history of the Mongol Empire.

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Citation: Timothy May. Review of Gabriel, Richard A. *Genghis Khan's Greatest General: Subotai the Valiant*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. January, 2007.

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