

THE STEPPE REGION IN WORLD HISTORY. II

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Cradle of Unrest.

Ever since the dawn of history the Steppe-region has been a cradle of unrest and a constant source of anxiety to its sedentary neighbours. For long periods, sometimes for whole centuries, it might lie quiescent, but incalculable forces were at play under the horizon, and at any moment that horizon might be dimmed by marauding hordes or, worse still, by well organized armies, acting according to a preconceived plan. In no time the sedentary populations saw the blessings of their safeguarded existence turned into the miseries of utter destitution. Those mounted archers of the Steppe came out of nowhere, burst without warning upon the peaceful countries of Asia or Europe, and either settled down as conquerors to batten upon the country or disappeared again with their booty as quickly as they came. They retreated behind their endless expanses of featureless steppe and desert, where no army composed of peasants and town-dwellers dared follow them, because only the nomads themselves knew the art of subsisting on that kind of country. And the worst thing was that there was no effective countermeasure; in their own country the nomads were practically speaking invulnerable. No effective military campaign was ever undertaken from the European side into the heart of the steppe. The most that could be done was to do what Darius did about 514—12 when the Scythians were becoming too much of a nuisance: He took the field in force, made a great show in the empty steppe for a reasonable number of days then realized in time that the better part of valour is discretion, and finally retreated before it had come to

blows. Even the Chinese, who in the course of their history led several audacious campaigns across the Gobi, always had to fall back upon diplomatic resources, for any lasting effects. In 91 A. D. they inflicted a really crushing defeat on the northern Huns (of Outer Mongolia), but when this really for some time broke their power in Central Asia, it was only because immediately after retreating from Outer Mongolia the Chinese set a rival tribe, the Sien-pei of Manchuria upon them.

So it is no wonder that to the sedentary peoples bordering upon the steppe region from China to Eastern Europe that country appeared as an inexhaustible reservoir of brigands and bandits, a teaming for invincible warriors, a boiling and seething pot always on the point of overflowing. And to the eye of the historian, surveying in one large sweep the happenings of four millenniums, there emerges the picture of a seemingly endless stream of peoples hard on each other's heels, pushing south and west from some centre of expansion in far away Central Asia.

Let us briefly review the successive waves of invasion from the Steppe. They can be conveniently classed as the era of Indo-Europeans, the era of the Huns and Turks, and thirdly that of the Mongols.

When we first get a glimpse of the Steppe zone somewhere in the second millennium B. C. we see it as the sporting ground of horse breeding Indo-European tribes, whose interior history remains entirely unknown to us. What history actually shows us is a series of migrations, which in the course of that millennium take them as conquerers into the more fertile marginal countries of India, Persia, Asia-Minor, Greece, Italy and Central Europe, where they settle down and immerse into the limelight of history, as Aryans, Hettites, Greeks, Romans, Celts, Teutons, Slavs and others. Other Indo-European tribes remained behind in the old Steppe country; we have no idea of the reason of that extensive migration, or rather waves of migrations. We only hear of them as they lead to the occupation of the countries of Southern Europe and Asia by the Indo-Europeans. And from that we infer some kind of unrest in the Steppe, manifesting itself as an ethnic pressure.

After those migrations South Russia was about 1200 B. C.

peopled by nomad tribes of Thracian affinity known to the classical authors as the Cimmerians, east of whom lived the Scythians of Middle Asia, who were evidently closely related to the tribes that had occupied Iran; the eastern part of Middle Asia and also part of Central Asia was taken up by the Iranian Sarmartes who probably went as far north as to the Upper Yenisei, and as far east as the north western approaches to China there was an Indo-European tribe whom the Chinese call Yue-chih. The eastern part of Central Asia, however, was occupied by very different people, the Hiung-nu or the Chinese Chroniclers, the Huns as we in Europe later came to call them. It is just possible that these far eastern tribes were behind the earliest migrations of the Indo-European peoples.

But the movement westward went on. The Scythians were evidently pressed west and south by the Sarmartes, for between the years 750 and 700 B. C. they occupied South Russia, chasing the Cimmerians into Hungary and via the Pontus into Asia Minor, and for the next two centuries they continued to harrass Asia Minor and Syria. It is evident that they were being forced out of their own home, for about the same time they began to make themselves obnoxious along the northern frontier of Iran where Cyrus beat them back in 529 B. C., while about 512 Darius launched his famous expedition against them in South Russia. Shortly after 250 it was the turn of the Sarmartes to move west, and now they became the masters of South Russia with the Scythians concentrated in the Crimea and thereabout. It is evident that the Indo-European tribes were now being forced out of Central Asia. Only the Southern part of that country was by that time in their hands; the Yue-chih in Kansu, the Saka (various Iranian tribes in Chinese Turkistan) and the Wu-sun along the river Ili.

The Indo-European character of all the tribes so far mentioned seems well attested. For the Cimmerians, Scythians and Sarmartes there is linguistic evidence in the names and isolated words transmitted by classical authors and eastern sources. And from the Chinese we have reports of those age-old badges of our race: red hair, green-blue eyes, large beard of the Yue-chih, Wu-sun and the inhabitants of the Upper Yenisei. As late as

about 500 A. D. we hear about the blonde Kie-kia-ssu of the Yenisei and the fresco in the Buddhist grotto-temples of Chinese Turkistan bears evidence of the Indo-European character of the pre-Turkish inhabitants as late as the first millennium A. D. Even to-day blonde types are still said to occur sporadically in that country.

But the days of our race in Central Asia were numbered. The Hun power, which had for centuries been in the ascendant, was from about 300 B. C. onwards gradually checked by the Chinese, so that any surplus energy had to seek its outlet elsewhere. This is probably what lies behind the westward migration of the Sarmates in the third century B. C. The steady strengthening of Chinese power, which culminated in the building of the Great Wall under the Emperor Ch'in-shih (221—210) and the advent of the Han dynasty (202), resulted in the ejection by the Huns of the last Indo-Europeans of Central Asia, Yue-chih from Kansu and the eastern part of Chinese Turkistan, which about 160 B. C. sent this tribe on its historic march north of the T'ien-shan into Bactriana, where they were to continue their glorious career as the Tokhars, Indo-Scythians or Kushana of the western sources. Only on the confines of Central Asia and Middle Asia there still subsisted some Iranic tribes surrounded on three sides by the slowly advancing Huns.

It is clear from what has been said that close on the heels of the Indo-Europeans came the Huns. Where they came from is impossible to tell. The Indo-Europeans cannot be traced farther back than to the Steppe country; neither can the Huns. Only in their case we can locate them to the eastern Steppe, that is to say Mongolia, where they may well have been living as far back as at least 1000 years B. C. The Huns cannot be separated from the Turks, and there is some evidence that the latter were constantly being reinforced from Siberia. So it seems probable that the successive displacements started from some centre outside the Steppe region.

From about 160 B. C. the Huns were absolute masters of Central Asia and had their centre on the Orkhon river in northern Mongolia; they gradually expanded westwards, as can be seen from the fact that about 70 B. C. they seriously threatened the

Wu-sun in the Ili valley. All through the time of the two Han dynasties, from about 200 B. C. to 200 A. D., they were active on the frontiers of China, whose history during those centuries consists mainly in the efforts to keep open the Silk Road to the West. What with Chinese campaigns, inter-tribal wars and attacks from various tribes in Manchuria the Huns were also having a turbulent time at home. About 155 A. D. the Sien-pei from Manchuria conquered Mongolia and accentuated the pressure of the Huns upon China. From 300—400 A. D. the whole of North China was a medley of petty kingdoms under Turkish, Hunish and Sien-pei war lords, and in 402 a new competitor for steppe supremacy, the Juan-Juan, conquered the whole of Mongolia, and set up their residence on the Orkhon river.

Now we need not necessarily in every new conquering tribe see a new arrival on the Steppe. In many cases the substitution of one dominating tribe for another only meant a slight shifting of balance among tribes who were living as neighbours and who, after political incident continued as neighbours. In the daily life of the nomads the shifting of power may have meant little or nothing.

The Juan-Juan were probably old inhabitants of the Steppe and the year 402 just marks their succession to political power, but the Sien-pei were intruders, and their arrival evidently again activated Steppe expansion. For about 400 years, in fact ever since the migration of the Sarmates 250 B. C. the Steppe region had shown no signs of overflowing to the west. In South Russia it had even been able to absorb an invasion from the west at the conquest of the Teutonic Goths in the third century A. D. without repercussions elsewhere.

Now about 200 A. D. a new expansion began to take place. There were still Iranic Tribes left south of Lake Balkash, but north of them there was evidently passing a quiet stream of Huns into Middle Asia, and the coming into power of the Juan-Juan in 402 A. D. sounded the death bell on the remaining Iranic tribes in Middle Asia. About 440 this last remnant of the former lords of the Steppe appeared in Bactriana as the Hephthalites, also called the White Huns; after 565 they went the way of the Tokhars, and their ultimate fate awaited them beyond

the Hindukush. Two centuries afterwards these belated nomads were already being absorbed by the Hindu population of Punjab. And that was the end of the last of the Indo-European nomad tribes.

But long before that the storm that had evidently been brewing since the Sien-pei invaded Mongolia in 155 had burst upon Europe. About 374 the Huns of Middle Asia crossed the Volga under Balimir, and two years later the terror-stricken inhabitants of the Roman empire had their first Asiatic invasion within the memory of man. It was 600 years since the Sarmates invaded South Russia where they had now for centuries led a half-forgotten existence. There had been some little trouble in between with the Goths and Alans, but those were people of a cognate race. The newcomers presented an entirely different aspect.

The picture handed down to us by the contemporary chroniclers reminds us strikingly of those we possess of the Mongols almost 900 years later: beardless barbarians with short bodies, large round faces and flat noses, as insensible to cold and indifferent to hunger, thirst and privations as impregnable against fatigue as their small hardy horses, fearless warriors and never failing archers, shooting at an incredible range subsisting on the empty Steppe without house or home, attacking like lightning and disappearing like the wind, all that reads exactly like a description of the Mongols of Chinggis Khan.

The advent of the Huns caused great commotion among all the ill-assorted tribes in eastern Europe, and the first effect of their arrival was therefore to set the great migration going that to us forms the borderline between antiquity and the Middle Ages. Their strength was spent, however, with their campaigns under Attila across the Danube into the Balkans and afterwards into the very heart of Europe. Immediately after Attila's death in 453 their dominion west of the Danube broke down and the Huns of South Russia soon fell into discord and could be neutralised by suitable diplomatic measures on the part of the Byzantine court. It was the old story: an initial way of invaders which on the impetus of the movement overflows into the surrounding countries. But soon the troubled waters of the Steppe subside; there is some intermittent gurgling and spouting, but

no serious danger of any new overflowing, while the residue of invaders left by the first onset in border countries is being gradually absorbed.

But the Huns proper were only a first wave of what was in store for Europe. But to understand what now was going to happen we must return to Central Asia.

At the time when the Huns were finding an outlet for their energies in Europe Central Asia was dominated by the Juan-Juan, as they are called with what was originally a Chinese nickname meaning something like 'the creeping and crawling worms' ('damned vermin'). They were troublesome neighbours to the various kingdoms of North China under Hunnish or Turkish rule, but were successfully kept in check with a continual series of counter-raids into the Steppe. Their pressure was likewise felt in the south-west by the Hephthalites, whose centre of gravity was gradually shifted from the Ili valley to Trans-Oxania, and from Trans-Oxania to Bactriana. Towards the middle of the 6th century several Turkish tribes on both sides of the forest line in the Altai district revolted, and in 552 one of them, the Turks proper, crushed the Juan-Juan. The latter didn't remain in the country; part of them sought refuge on the Chinese border, while the main force fled into Middle Asia and onwards into South Russia, where we know them as the Avars. As early as 557 an emissary of theirs was received by the Byzantine emperor, who was delighted to set them upon the remaining Huns, who defeated them completely, but of course incorporated them into their own tribe and soon the Byzantines found themselves faced by a much stronger Steppe power than the unruly, but by then comparatively harmless Huns. The Avars now started upon their long career of raids and campaigns on which for 250 years they harrassed the Slav country to the north-west, Germany, Hungary, the Balkans, France, and Byzantium. They were only pacified towards 800 by Charlemagne, who finally reduced them to sedentary life and Christianity in Hungary and in the Balkans.

In Central Asia in the meantime the Turks had rapidly consolidated their power. In 565 in conjunction with the Persians

they drove the last Hephthalites out of the Steppe, and were now absolute masters of the whole of Central Asia from Manchuria in the East to the Oxus in the west. Their two centres were in the Ili valley (western Turks or the 10 tribes) and, of course, the Orkhon river district (the eastern Turks).

For 30 short years the Turks were one of the Great powers of the world. They had diplomatic relations with Byzantium and Persia alternating with raids on the same countries, especially Persia. The fights of Bahram Chubin against the northern barbarians, which play such a large part in Persian heroic tradition, belong to this time. But about 580 the family ties between the western and the eastern Turks were no longer strong enough to bridge over dynastic rivalries and political jealousies and in the course of the next 50 years the two large groups were further split up by family quarrels, and in 630 T'ai-tsung, the famous founder of the T'ang dynasty, entirely crushed the power of the eastern Turks assisted by a group of Turks from the Tarbagatai district, and that very year the western Turks were beaten by the Karluks, a Turkish tribe from above the lake Balkash.

For 50 years the Turks were reduced to a featureless conglomerate of petty tribes, many of whom directly depended on China as vassals. The western Turks never recovered so far from the blow as to become once more a political power. But in 683 the eastern Turks again rallied under a strong ruler, and for the next 250 years the Turks of Mongolia were a strong power, with which the Chinese had to find a mode of living, during the whole of that period chiefly by diplomatic means. There were, however, some interior shiftings of power: in 744 the supremacy of the ruling family of the Turks proper was replaced by that of another tribe, the Uigurs, who were living west of the residence; and in 840 the latter were routed and driven south of the desert by the Kirghiz from the valley of the Upper Yenisei. The overthrow of the Kirghiz in 920 by the K'i-tan from Manchuria ushers in a new era in the alarms and excursions of Central Asia. This time we know that the regular evacuation of the country took place, for Northern Mongolia was offered to its former masters, the Uigurs, now residing in the eastern part of Chinese Turkistan and in Kansu. The latter declined the offer, however, and

there can hardly be any doubt that somebody else availed themselves of the chance that offered to occupy the rich grazing grounds of the Selenga district. Neither can there be any doubt as to the identity of those new possessors of the ancient sporting ground of the Huns and their descendants. It was the Mongols that now quietly enter on the wider stage of history, after a cursory first mention in an old Turkish inscription from 732.

The K'i-tan were not just another formation of Turks taking over supremacy from a sister tribe. They were of an alien race, unknown which, coming from outside the Steppe as conquerors, eventually (936) they concentrated in North China, where their dominion lasted till 1122, but their short raid into Mongolia in 920 released another landslide of migrations, or rather intensified one which had already for some time been stirring.

From Chinese and Byzantine historians we hear about the two large groups of Turkish tribes, the eastern and the western Turks, but very little of what was going on on the outskirts of those two political centres. Ever since the Avars left the stage in 552 Middle Asia had been steadily filling up with Turks; the Karluks from the lake Balkash have already been mentioned. In 880 the Danube was crossed by a horde of the Finno-ugrian-magyars, who about 850 had been chased out of their own tribal grounds north of the Caucasus; they installed themselves about 900 in what is now called Hungary (from the Onogur, their Hunn predecessors in that country) and now had half a century of glorious raids into all parts of Europe before them, until at last they in their turn were crushed by the Emperor Otto in the battle of Augsburg in 955, who relegated them to Hungary where Christianity did the rest.

What forced the magyars to leave their kinsmen the Voguls of the Ural district, was an irresistible pressure from the Turks of Middle Asia. We can count three distinct ways, though of course these ways are really only wave crests on a continuous stream of nomads filtering into the plains of South Russia.

The first wave, that of the Pechenegues, was the one that began to push the Magyars into Europe about 860, but as early as about 890 the Pechenegues themselves were pushed on by the Oguz Turks behind them, and 10 years later they appeared

between the Dnieper and the Danube from where they pestered the Slavs of Kiev and raided the Byzantine empire, till at last in 1122 they were finally crushed by the Byzantines.

But long before that the second wave, that of the Oguz, who were behind the migration of the Pechenegues, had chased them out of South Russia. Oguz is the name of several confederations of Turkish tribes. We meet the name among the Huns, e. g. in the name of the On-ogur tribe ('the 10 Ogurs'), which as we have seen leant its name to Hungary; and again as the Toquz Ogurs' the 9 Ogurs', who were among the vassals of the eastern Turks.

In the 10th century there was a powerful Oguz tribe north of the Lake Balkash, from which evidently emanated the Ogurs who chased the Pechenegues all the way to the Balkans and had their share of all the raids and campaigns, on both sides of the Danube from about 1025.

These Oguz were themselves hard pressed by the third wave, the Kipchaks, who used to live on the middle Irtish or the River Ob. From 1065 on these Kipchaks were sole masters of South Russia, having forced the Oguz into the Balkans. In South Russia the Kipchaks maintained themselves till that country was conquered in 1222 by the Mongols.

The Kipchaks did not of course people South Russia all by themselves. There can be no doubt that even after their arrival the population included various other Turkish tribes. The Kipchaks themselves were evidently Turkised descendants of some Indo-European tribe, probably from the Altai or Upper Yenisei district, as we are told by all European authorities that these were blonde. The Kipchaks are the people that are called Cumans by the Byzantines and by the Italian merchants trading on the Crimea; the Russians called them Polovcy and the Germans called them 'die falwen'. The two latter names both indicate a pale colour, Isabella, "washed out". This blonde type was evidently rapidly absorbed, which would have been impossible had the Kipchaks constituted a majority of the population. Also we have a monument of the language from about 1300, the so-called Codex Cumanicus, the dialectal peculiarities of which are nowadays only preserved by a few isolated Tataric tribes in Poland or in the Caucasus.

The career of the Oguz in South Russia was only a brief one; in fact they only appeared in South Russia in 1054 [Torki], and in 1065 the pressure of the Kipchaks forced them into the Balkans, where they were soon crushed by the united Pechenegues and Bulgars. But a greater future awaited them elsewhere.

In the 10th century the northern and northeastern part of Middle Asia constituted a centre of vigorous expansion. The reason was of course that by then the Turks were being rapidly forced out of Mongolia. The pressure was partly relieved, as we have just seen, by the consecutive waves of Turkish migration into South Russia and beyond, but an equally intensive pressure was maintained towards the south. In the course of that century the western half of Chinese Turkestan was definitely taken over by the Turks under the leadership of a widespread family, called the Karakhanids, and the Samanides of Trans-Oxania were being hard pressed and were finally conquered by the Turks, while other Turks had already about 980 founded the Ghaznevide dynasty of Afghanistan and later on Punjab. The wars between these rivalling tribes for supremacy in Trans-Oxania and Khorassan, opened the way to the Oguz, who between 1040 and 1055 conquered the whole of Persia as the Seljukides. From now on there went a constant stream of Oguz tribes westwards through Persia. In 1071 they had their first clash with the Byzantines in the battle of Malazgerd in Armenia, where the Byzantine emperor was taken prisoner, and the next few centuries saw these Turkmenes, as the Oguz who had been converted to the Islam were called, slowly but surely making themselves masters of Asia Minor. Even after the Seljuks had lost Persia in 1195 the stream of Turkmen nomads going west continued and has in part continued to do so until this day, though in an ever decreasing measure.

By 1200 the Turks were in possession of approximately the same parts of the Steppe as were 1500 years earlier peopled by Indo-European nomads, while the territory of the earliest Huns was now in the hands of the Mongols. History had moved one step.

The easternmost Turkish Steppe nomads were now the tribe that is called by the Mongols the Naiman 'the eight', probably a Mongolian translation of their Turkish name which has not been

preserved, but may very well have been 'Sekiz Oguz'. It is possible also that their immediate eastern neighbour, the Kereit, were Turks. West of them Middle Asia and South Russia was peopled by a medley of Oguz and Kipchaks and older tribes that had been assimilated by them, while Karluks and branches of the old western Turks were nomadizing in the Ili valley or had settled in the western oases of Chinese Turkistan. In Asia Minor the Oguz were slowly exchanging their migratory existence for the sedentary life of the tillers of the soil. Then there were the Uigurs in the Eastern part of Chinese Turkestan and in Kansu, the ancient district of the Yue-chih. North of Sui-yuan lived the Turkish Onggut who probably came from north western Mongolia. Finally there were several Turkish tribes in the wilds of Siberia, notably the Kirghiz along the Upper Yenisei, but also in the northern parts of the Altai complex, and in other places east of there.

This was the pattern of Turkish tribes now occupying the better part of the Steppe zone when the third era in the history of the Steppe, the era of the Mongols, dawned.

Shortly after 1200 the easternmost Turks, the Naimans and the Kereits, were attacked by the Mongols and Tatars of Eastern Mongolia under the rule of a strong Mongol chief, Chinggis Khan, and the years 1203 to 1208 saw their complete defeat. The Kirghiz and most of the tribes south of Lake Baikal, apparently of Mongol origin, immediately submitted and so did the Karluks on the Ili. Chinggis Khan now launched on a long series of predatory raids on North China in the tradition and style of the Huns and Turks actively assisted by the Ongguts. In the course of these raids they even captured and pillaged Peking.

But during these raids, which brought the Mongols into contact with Chinese culture, Chinggis Khan proved himself wiser than most of his predecessors in availing himself of the superior technical and administrative skill of the Sinized Uigurs and K'itans. He readily took advisers of all nationalities into his service and when in 1218 he turned to the south-western frontier, his raid was a carefully planned military campaign, in the course of which he made a regular conquest of Chinese Turkestan. The next year he crossed the Syr-darya, and though his four

years of campaign in Persia, Afghanistan and South Russia was only a prolonged raid and was not undertaken with lasting conquest as its aim, it was conducted on broad strategic lines and supported by the most modern technique of besieging. Chinggis Khan's object was to create a Steppe empire; what lay outside the Steppe was to him welcome objectives of scientifically predatory raids. But when it became the ambition of his successors to establish themselves as permanent masters of the agricultural countries along the southern fringe of the Steppe zone, they had in Chinggis Khan's raid technique a suitable method ready at hand.

When therefore after Chinggis Khan's death the Mongols again appeared on the frontiers of the settled areas, it was no longer as plundering raiders, but as conquerers who had come to stay. In 1231 they commenced their final conquest of Persia in 1232 they tackled China, and in 1236 they began the campaign against the western countries, which in 1241 carried them as far as Liegnitz and eventually resulted in the establishment of the Golden Horde of Kipchak. Nowhere did their reign last more than a century for, in Persia they held on till 1335, in China till 1368, and the Golden Horde broke up as late as in 1502 (Kazan 1552, Astrakhan 1556, Crimea 1783).

But by then a second wave of Mongols had been set rolling. The Oirad, in Europe often called the Calmucks (from 15th century) a confederation originally for tribes, who at the time of Chinggis Khan were still living in Siberia, probably west of the Lake Baikal, later on followed their relatives into Mongolia, where about 1400 they occupied the country from about Karakorum to Kobdo. From here they raided Ili and Turfan intermittently for a century then expanded east and about 1434 took the rest of Northern Mongolia which they held till 1552. From there they raided China until they were effectually checked in 1553.

They also exercised a pressure on the Uzbeks of Middle Asia who in 1430 began a series of invasions of Trans-Oxania which continued for a century, till at last in the 16th century the Uzbeks settled in the country where they have maintained themselves partly as sedentary people, in part still as nomads.

When in 1552 the Oirads were chased out of eastern Mongolia, their pressure on Middle Asia was of course intensified. The last Turks Tarbagatai were pressed west into Middle Asia, and a renewed Khalkha pressure about 1600 let loose a whole series of Oirad migrations. In 1616 one tribe, the Torgud, went into Middle Asia which they raided far and wide, to settle finally north of the Caspian, others went to Kuku-nur and in 1642 took Lhasa, which the Oirads held till 1720. Later in the century (1680) they made raids on Chinese Turkistan, and 1688 to 90 another raid on Mongolia. After 1700 they raided Middle Asia and Trans-Oxania till their final defeat at the hands of the Chinese 1757.