WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 2ND, 2022

THE TEXAS ORATOR
academic-ish

CULTURE

The Dangers Of Historical Revisionism

BY TAREK C AROUSE ON NOVEMBER 12, 2020 • (2 COMMENTS)

The year is 1211 and Genghis Khan has turned his focus to modern-day China to conquer the powerful Jin Empire. In three years, Khan's Mongols have made their way to the empire's capital of Zhongdu (modern-day Beijing). Instead of using brute force to take the capital, the Mongols starve the city out. By the summer of 1215, cannibalism ran rampant inside the city walls. No longer able to resist, Zhongdu surrendered, and the Mongols sacked and burned the city. A passing eyewitness (https://listverse.com/2016/08/27/10-brutal-moments-in-the-conquests-of-genghis-khan/) wrote that, "the bones of the slaughtered formed white mountains and the soil was greasy with human fat."

In contrast to the eyewitness account describing the fall of Zhongdu, here is modern Historian Jack Weatherford's telling of the event: "Genghis Khan expected the sacking [of Zhongdu] to be executed in the usual and efficient Mongol manner. In the Mongol way, soldiers treated the collection of loot as they did the harvesting of animals on the group hunt, distributing it among all the Mongols according to their rank. Down to the last brass button or final grain of silver, all of it was allocated according to a precise formula, from the 10% for the Khan to the specified share for orphans and widows."

These two accounts of the same event are clearly different. The eyewitness experiencing the event paints an image of unparalleled loss of life whereas the modern historian discusses the efficiency, and even charitableness, of the Mongol sacking of Zhongdu. Where does the discrepancy between that firsthand account and a modern historian like Weatherford come from?

Historical revisionism, or the reinterpretation of a historical account, shines new light on well-told events, providing a more nuanced understanding of a historical event or figure. But, because past historians have primarily focused on the violence and horror of a particular event, developing a different perspective requires focusing on something else. Often this means that the lived experience of the victims and the brutality they experienced become less relevant to contemporary conversations and gradually neglected as nothing more than statistics.

There seems to be a relationship between time and interpretation, in which the lives lost become less impactful while social and cultural implications that are available to us in hindsight become the dominating focus of an interpretation. Authors writing in their historical moment are only able to record what is happening around them rather than discuss the long-term implications of what they are experiencing. However, with hindsight, we're able to study the broader significance of a past event, especially with someone like Genghis Khan, who lived 800 years ago.

Today, it's easier to interpret the brutality the eyewitness experienced as a facet of the Mongols' bureaucrat-like efficiency because of our distance from the event itself. The statistics of how many lives were lost aren't as interesting or novel of a conversation as the implications of the Mongols' progressive system of allocating spoils.

The eyewitness account included in the beginning is small compared to the overall destruction Khan caused. Many historians estimate Genghis Khan killed somewhere around 40 million people (https://www.history.com/news/10-things-you-may-not-know-about-genghis-khan#:~:text=He%20was%20responsible%20for%20the,at%20somewhere%20around%2040%20million.). Reading this number makes it difficult to think about Genghis Khan without having his brutality at the center of the conversation, yet the passage of time has allowed for him to be viewed in a more favorable light, to explore his character beyond his brutality.

Jack Weatherford's *Genghis Khan and the Making of the Modern World* (2004) (https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/187628/genghis-khan-and-the-making-of-the-modern-world-by-jack-weatherford/) provides a novel approach to Genghis Khan, attributing many positive consequences to his rule. Weatherford writes that nearly everywhere the Khan's Mongols conquered, they brought an increase in communication, religious toleration, expanded trade, and various other advancements. He also discusses how the Mongols introduced the first international paper currency and postal system and developed and spread revolutionary technologies like printing, the cannon, the compass, and the abacus.

Weatherford's book is both refreshing and concerning. Although the book opens a new discussion about the impact the Mongols had on modern civilization, it has the potential to warp the historiography of Genghis Khan in a way that detaches us further from the brutality he perpetrated during his time. I'm in no way saying that Weatherford or any historian for that matter would accept long-term positive historical results at the expense of ignoring the 40 million lives lost, but I think that historians pursuing new interpretations are susceptible to a line of thinking that labels the actions of perpetrators of massive loss of life as "creative destruction" (http://economics.mit.edu/files/1785), acts of destruction that get rid of the old to make way for the new.

At the moment this process may seem harmless to us because we have no emotional attachment to what Genghis Khan may have done centuries ago. But think ahead: when will the historical figures that we abhor today be viewed in a different light? In two hundred years or so, when no living survivors of World War II or the Holocaust exist and the memory of the atrocities is further behind us, how will historians treat Adolf Hitler?

I know it's hard to imagine a historian putting a positive spin on Hitler, but if we're able to do so with Genghis Khan, a man who caused as much death, if not more, as Hitler, then it seems to me that Hitler could eventually be discussed positively. Hitler did not succeed like Genghis Khan, but that doesn't make him immune to historical revisionism.

Future historians who are fatigued with the saturation of books written about Hitler's atrocities may seek to write a book focusing on the good that resulted from his leadership. Historians could write about how Hitler banned animal testing and instituted animal rights, created the first public anti-smoking campaign, authorized extensive research on cancer and venereal diseases, or made Germany a pioneer in rocket science all while relegating his acts of genocide and brutality to the side.

Also, even though Nazi Germany had a shorter period of influence than the Mongol Empire, the horrors they committed led to the good that may have otherwise never happened. For example, the European Union was set up to prevent war from breaking out again between European nations

(https://europa.eu/european-union/about-eu/history_en). While not stopping conflict altogether, the European Union has been able to maintain peace since 1945 among the major powers. *Pax Mongolica* ("Mongol Peace") is a term historians use to describe the peace and stability that followed the Mongol Empire's wars and conquests, and although Hitler's conquest never succeeded, the *Pax Europaea* we're now experiencing could be retroactively attributed to him by future historians.

Atrocities can lead to legitimate positive effects that are valuable for discussion, and most historians like Weatherford are able to have a conversation about those effects without vindicating the perpetrator of the atrocity. However, if the narrative of Khan can be changed in a way that shifts the focus away from the evil he perpetrated to primarily focus on the positive byproducts of his actions, then why can't this happen to Hitler? The idea of that occurring is horrific, but unfortunately, I believe it is a possibility. Many of us may not live to ever see that occur, but I think the re-evaluation of Genghis Khan can serve as a cautionary tale of how easy it is for us to forget about the horrors of the past. Going forward, historians should continue to have more nuanced conversations about complicated historical figures, but they must be mindful of framing the conversation in a historical context that fully acknowledges the tragedies of that time.

Published by Tarek C Arouse

View all posts by Tarek C Arouse (https://thetexasorator.com/author/tarekarouse/)

2 replies »

Apparently, you believe the victors' propaganda about the World War Reply
It is said that history needs to be revised to bring the narrative into accord with the facts.

★ (https://thetexasorator.com/2020/11/12/the-dangers-of-historical-revisionism/?like_comment=26825&_wpnonce=798dbc9185)
Like

Thank you for your comments on Weatherford and his book. Since Ho Reply
Zinn I've been especially concerned about spending money on revisionist anything.

★ (https://thetexasorator.com/2020/11/12/the-dangers-of-historical-revisionism/?like_comment=53219&_wpnonce=5f59ae6d80)
Like