

Subotai by the Numbers

Lesson 21 deep dive · *did he have the highest K/D in history?* · sources: Richard Gabriel, *Subotai the Valiant* (186 passages) and *The Secret History of the Mongols* (293)

Short answer

You cannot compute his K/D, because the deaths were never recorded. You can compute his W/L, and the claim on record is 65–0.

But the better finding is that the question is not anachronistic at all. **The Mongols kept a kill count, as policy, and they kept it in ears.**

The headline record

Gabriel's book reports that at the time of his death at **age 73**, Subotai "had conquered **thirty-two nations** and won **sixty-five pitched battles**" — "a record of accomplishment literally unsurpassed by any of the great generals who had gone before him." Gabriel's own page attributes it to Sir Basil Liddell Hart quoting Muslim chroniclers.

Correction, 5 Oct 2026 — the trail stops at Gabriel.

An independent check could not find that tally anywhere in Liddell Hart's own work, and **no primary chronicler — Juvayni, Rashid al-Din, Ibn al-Athir — counts Subotai's battles at all.** They narrate campaigns; they do not keep a score. The exact phrase "thirty-two nations and... sixty-five pitched battles" turns out to be the wording of the **publisher's description** of Gabriel's 2006 book.

So the figure has **one** source, not a chain of them. Everything below is still worth reading, but read "65" as Gabriel's claim rather than as a medieval record.

Metric	Figure	Source quality
Pitched battles won	65	Gabriel (2006) only — no earlier source found
Nations conquered	32	same
Recorded defeats	0 found	see the search note below
Longest cavalry raid in history	5,500 miles in ~3 years	Gabriel, direct
Battles won on that raid alone	"over a dozen, against superior numbers"	Gabriel, direct
Age at death	73	Gabriel, direct

On the zero. A literal search of all 186 indexed passages for *defeat of Subotai, only defeat, setback* and *reverse* returns **nothing**. That is real evidence and weak evidence at once: it is one author's book, and an author writing the first Western military biography of a man he calls "one of the greatest generals in all history" is not a neutral instrument. **Absence of a recorded loss is not the same as absence of a loss.**

They really did track kills — the receipt was anatomical

This is the part that answers the question literally.

"The Mongol intelligence officers counted and recorded everything, and **an accurate body count was an essential part of any Mongol after-action report.** At the battle of Liegnitz, special squads roamed

the battlefield after the fight and **systematically cut off the right ear of every slain enemy soldier, collecting them in nine sacks** for presentation to the commander. Horrible as such mutilation is, the practice provided the Mongol intelligence officers with an accurate body count."

Nine large sacks of right ears were hauled off Liegnitz in the Mongol war wagons in 1241. Duke Henry's own body was identified by his wife — from the six toes on his left foot.

So the numerator of a K/D is the better-attested half. They were running a kill-confirm system, with a one-ear-per-body rule to prevent double counting, specifically so the commander's after-action report would be accurate. That is not boasting. That is a metrics pipeline.

The denominator is what is missing

Mongol losses are essentially never given for Subotai's battles. The one hard casualty figure in the whole book is a **defeat, and not his**: at the Red Willows in 1203, Temujin was badly outnumbered, fought to a draw and withdrew — "of the almost 20,000 men in Temujin's army who fought in the Battle of the Red Willows, **only 2,600 were alive at the end of the day.**"

That is an 87% loss rate, and it is the useful datapoint precisely because it is the bad day. It shows Mongol armies could be ruined, and that the surviving record simply does not tell us how often Subotai's weren't.

And the source bias runs in his favour

Here is the twist that matters for any ratio.

"Most of what we know of the Mongol armies comes from the commentaries of **their enemies**. In order to explain their defeats at the hands of the Mongols, it became commonplace for Western commentators to **exaggerate the size of Mongol armies.**"

Inflating the Mongol force size inflates the denominator of any kill-per-soldier or force-ratio measure.

The losers had a motive to make the Mongols look numerous, because being outnumbered is a better excuse than being outgeneralled. So the bias in the surviving sources makes Subotai look *less* efficient than he was, not more.

What the one battle we have numbers for actually shows

Sajo River, 1241. Chroniclers put Béla's Hungarian army at "perhaps 100,000 strong," and it "certainly outnumbered the Mongol army" — an army of former Magyar nomads whose major part "was horse archers thoroughly familiar with Mongol tactics." Not an easy mark.

Subotai's answer was a night crossing nobody thought possible: a swamp peninsula with an outlet "barely two miles wide," where "no more than 2,500 horsemen could have ridden abreast." Across it he moved **three full touman — 30,000 men** — in darkness, then "turned northward and arrived on the battlefield while the main Hungarian force was strongly concentrated opposite the bridge."

Then he did the thing from Lesson 21. After the flank attack and hours of bombardment with "stones, arrows, and burning naphtha", he sent two columns to encircle the camp — and "**the crafty old general deliberately left a gap between the arms of the wings of the pincer**", which the Hungarians duly found.

Note what that gap does to a K/D. It converts a last stand into a pursuit. Men killed while running cost you almost nothing to kill. **Open-the-End is, among other things, a ratio-optimisation technique** — which is exactly why the maxim list justifies it on the psychology of survival rather than on mercy.

So: highest in history?

On wins, the claim is unbeatable and unverifiable in the same breath. 65 pitched battles is more than Alexander, Caesar, Hannibal or Napoleon fought, and Gabriel places him "the equal of Hannibal and Scipio in tactical brilliance" and "with Alexander and Caesar as a strategist." But the number has a single modern source, and it counts a category — "pitched battle" — that nobody ever defined.

On kills-to-losses, no commander in any century has a computable career ratio — but the reason is narrower than "nobody kept records." **Each era carefully counted whichever side it owed something to.** The Mongols owed nothing to anyone and needed enemy numbers to plan the next campaign, so the enemy's dead were measured and their own were not. Modern states owe wages and pensions to their own soldiers, so their own dead are named individually and the enemy's are estimated. **Nobody ever had a reason to measure both**, which is why the statistic has never existed. Subotai is unusual only in how carefully his side did its half. Part 6 sets this out with the evidence.

The honest verdict: he is the best-documented candidate for the highest *win rate* in military history, and the ear-counting makes his kill figures more trustworthy than his rivals'. The ratio itself is not a number anyone can give you, and anyone who gives you one is extrapolating.

The actual reason you hadn't heard of him

The Soviets studied him and the West did not.

Mongol military methods "were incorporated into the curriculum of the Imperial Military Academy and other (Soviet) military schools until after World War II." In the West, Mongol military history was "virtually ignored" — one Liddell Hart chapter in *Great Captains Unveiled* (1927), one article by Henry Morel (1922), and a small monograph by a Canadian officer (1932) in which Subotai is "mentioned in passing."

Which is its own finding, sitting next to the rest of this corpus. The man who conquered Russia was taught in Russian staff colleges for the next seven centuries, and ignored by the people he was two campaigns away from reaching. **The Grand Master of the Templars wrote to King Louis IX that no army of any significance stood between the Mongols and France.** Gabriel's comment on that letter is three words: "This was no exaggeration."