

THE VOLGA BULGARS – Introduction

OVERVIEW

The Volga Bulgar state from the middle Volga region appears in the historical sources at the end of the 9th and the beginning of the 10th centuries. The Volga Bulgars formed a separate state, became subordinate to Khazaria and paid tribute to them until the destruction of Khazars' capital Itil by the Rus' in the late 10th century.

The Volga Bulgaria was a multiethnic state composed of Huns, Sarmatians and East Slavs with different languages, and different social structures or cultures. It was between the 11th and 12th centuries that the Volga Bulgar state began to expand its territory.

The Volga Bulgars lived under the sovereignty of the Khazars. Until the 10th century, the dominant power in the region was the Khazars, and the Volga Bulgars had to pay tribute to Khazaria even when they began to accumulate their own wealth and military power.

The first Russian-Volga Bulgar confrontation was recorded in the Primary Chronicle in 985, a year when the Russian prince Vladimir I attacked the Volga Bulgaria and ravaged their capital Bolgar.

The Russian and Volga Bulgar conflict continued until the Mongols reached the Bulgar lands. With the Mongol conquest of the Bulgar territory, there was a massive migration of the population to the north. Several more attacks conducted by the Mongols brought the Volga Bulgars to an end and it was replaced by the new Khanate of Kazan which existed until it was annexed by the first Russian tsar Ivan IV (Terrible) in 1552.

EVENTS

There are no records that have survived from the Volga Bulgars themselves; most of the information comes from Arabic, Persian, or Russian sources.

The Volga Bulgars were a sub-tribe of the ancient Oghur nation who lived in western Siberian and the Kazakh steppes. The date of the arrival of the Bulgar tribes to the Middle Volga has not been firmly established.



It has been argued that the Volga Bulgarian territory had been the land of Finno-Ugric and Mari peoples. Around 660 the Volga Bulgars migrated to the north from the Azov region, united various other tribes such as the Huns, Finno-Ugric people, East Slavs and an ancient nomadic people, the Wusun from western China and formed a tribal confederation. Therefore the ethnonym Bulgar meaning “mixed ones” (from the Turkic word *bulgha* ‘to mix’) was adopted.

The early Bulgars were closely related to the Turkic Utigurs and the Kutrigurs. These two groups were in bitter conflict during 550s. The Utigurs became an ally of the Byzantines and conducted campaigns against the Kutrigurs. The Kutrigurs were attacked and defeated by the Pannonian Avars around 560, and the Utigurs who survived the Avar invasion fell under the rule of the Turks.

In the early 7th century, the Western Turkish Khanate (split from the Göktürks) took control over the Volga Bulgar territory. The Volga Bulgars were defeated, however, they were able to establish their independence from the Western Turkish Khanate later in the 7th century.

In 635, the Khan Kubrat put an end to the Avar domination over the Volga Bulgars with the help of the Byzantines and became the ruler of Great Bulgaria. Kubrat united all the Bulgar and Hunnic tribes from the North Caucasus and tribes from the Sea of Azov region. When he died in 638, he left his empire to his five sons.

Volga Bulgar-Khazar Relations

After Kubrat's death, the Volga Bulgar tribes split. Some who remained in the Don–Kuban steppe became Khazar subjects in the 10th century and were called the Black Bulgars; some led by Kubrat's son Asparukh migrated westward in 679 and settled in the Balkans; some led by Kotrag migrated to the north and settled near the Volga and Kama rivers giving rise to the Volga Bulgar Khaganate.

In 650 the Khazars conquered Great Bulgaria which dominated the Don-Kuban steppe. The Volga Bulgars had to recognize Khazar authority in the early 8th century, but to maintain their autonomy, distance themselves from the Jewish Khazars, unify the split tribes and win independence from the Khazars, the ruler of the Volga Bulgars, Elteber Almish, sought official recognition from the Abbasid Caliphate in exchange for converting Islam. The Caliph accepted, he converted to Islam in 921 and adopted the Muslim name of Ja'far Ibn 'Abdullah.

The subordination of the Volga Bulgars to the Khazar Khanate was not particularly harsh since they were allowed to conduct their affairs independently. Around 680, the Bulgars were defeated and until 721 the Khazaria maintained its independence and continued its expansion. The Volga Bulgars would continue to pay tribute to the Khazars till the middle of the 10th century.

Two Political Centers - Bilär - Bulgar and Suvar

During the 10th century, the Suvars and the Bulgars became serious contenders for supremacy, and this led to the emergence of two political centers: Bilär - Bulgar and Suvar. Each had its own ruler, court, and coins. Once the sovereignty of Suvar was liquidated, the Bulgar lands gathered around Bilär – Bulgar.

The state of the Volga Bulgars had no naturally defined borders. The sources from the 12th centuries claimed that the Volga Bulgar state had expanded its territory: in the east, it reached the river Zai, and in the south - the Samara.

The Volga Bulgars were composed of five tribes: the Bulgars proper, the Suwāz (Suvar, Savir), the Esegels (Äsägel, Ishkils), the Bersula, and the Barandzhar. All were assimilated into the Volga Bulgars.

Volga Bulgar-Rus' Relations

In 985, the Grand prince Vladimir I (the Great) of Kiev made an alliance with the Oghuz, attacked the Volga Bulgaria and ravaged their capital Bolgar. Despite the Russian raids, Volga Bulgaria continued to develop. In 1006, Vladimir I and the Volga Bulgars signed their first treaty which gave the Volga Bulgars permission to trade in the Rus' Oka and Volga regions. The treaty granted Volga Bulgar and Rus' merchants trading rights with some restrictions in each other's territories.

According to the *Russian Primary Chronicle*, the Volga Bulgars attempted to convert the pagan Rus' Prince Vladimir I to Islam to prevent further raids. They sent an embassy to persuade him, however, Vladimir I selected Christianity as the future faith of the Rus', leading to an alliance with the mighty Byzantine Empire.

In 1107, the relations of the Volga Bulgars with the Rus' became tense due to the mistreatment of their merchants, and the Volga Bulgars launched an attack on the Suzdal principedom, but it failed.

In 1117, another threat came from the Cuman khan Ayepa, the father-in-law of Yury Dolgoruky. He conducted a campaign against the Volga Bulgars, and the Volga Bulgars responded by poisoning Ayepa.

Meanwhile, the Russians and Volga Bulgars continued to launch retaliatory attacks on each other. The Russians attacked on the Bulgars In 1120, and the Volga Bulgars launched an attack on Murom and Ryazan' in 1155.

The Russian Grand Prince Andrey Bogolyubsky of Vladimir-Suzdal launched a series of campaigns against the Volga Bulgars to defend his own eastern borders and pillaged their city Bryakhimov, but they were not successful. His murder by the boyars in 1174 ended hostilities for nearly a decade, but the Volga Bulgars had to move their capital from Bulgar to Bilär.

In 1183-1184, a new Suzdal-Bulgar conflict was born due to the Russians' plundering Volga Bulgar merchants along the Volga and ravaging their villages. The Volga Bulgars were allowed to trade in Suzdal and in the cities along the Volga and Oka where they sold grain, valuable objects or cloth, and other goods. The Volga Bulgars twice asked Grand Prince Vsevolod of Suzdal to prevent these attacks. When Vsevolod was unable to stop the perpetrators, the Volga Bulgars attacked Russian lands along the Volga and Oka and the Russians retaliated by ravaging the Volga Bulgar lands. The Volga Bulgars suffered some setbacks in this campaign and in another Russian attack in 1186.

The Volga Bulgars maintained their control over the northern commercial route to Beloozero and they also had good link with the Baltic trade through the Volga and Kiev, via the Oka, Ugra and Desna rivers.

In the east, the principality of Rostov-Suzdal was growing. They gained control over the upper Volga trade that prevented the Volga Bulgar merchants from conducting trade with the North. Therefore, the Volga Bulgars created a new route to the North along the Unzha river. However, to stop the Volga Bulgars' trade through this route, the Russians constructed a fortress between the Unzha and Oka rivers. In 1205, the Russian fleet assaulted the Bulgars. In 1219, the Volga Bulgars attacked Ustyug and Unzha to capture the northern trade route. In 1220, Yuri II of Vladimir regained Ustyug and sent his army to seize Oshel on the west bank of Volga river, a strategic town that allowed the Russians to control the northern fur trade. The Volga Bulgars had lost territories that were important for their trade.

Mongol Conquest

The Mongols, after defeating the Rus' and Cuman joint armies on the Kalka river, diverted their forces to the Volga Bulgar lands. Having learned the Mongols' intention, the Volga Bulgars met the Mongol army in 1223, attacked them from the rear and defeated the Mongols at the Battle of Samara Bend, killing more than 4,000 men.

The Mongols conducted a campaign in 1229, defeated the Volga Bulgars at the Ural river and began to gain control over the upper valleys in the southern Ural Mountains.

In 1232, the Mongols began to invade the southern areas of Volga Bulgaria. However, the Mongols failed to seize the Volga Bulgars' main towns and cities.

In 1236, Batu khan conducted another campaign against the Volga Bulgars; the cities of Bilär, Bolgar, and Suvar were destroyed, and their people either killed or sold into slavery. Mongol destruction of Volga Bulgaria went on for five years, and they killed 80% of the population. Volga Bulgaria fell under the control of the Mongols. It was divided into several principalities and turned into a vassal state of the Golden Horde with some degree of local autonomy.

The immediate impact of the Mongol conquest of the Volga Bulgar land was a massive migration of the population. Some of the survivors of the attack travelled to the northern areas of the Khanate. Not all the inhabitants of the Volga Bulgaria migrated to the north after the destruction of their land. Many stayed and fought against their occupiers.

Batu Khan sent his commander, Subotai and Jebe to suppress a revolt led by Jiku and Baian in 1238 and 1239, and there was another revolt put down in the Middle Volga in 1261.

The Volga Bulgars enjoyed their autonomy and began to rebuild their fragmented society. The Emir could not rule without receiving a *yarlyk* (authorization) from the khan in Saray. The Volga Bulgars recovered gradually from the destruction of their economic life after the migration of the population to the north.

The remaining settled population began to rebuild their economy by finding arable land to cultivate outside the steppe regions of the Khanate. Agriculture, cattle breeding, crafts, and trade were still the backbone of the Volga Bulgars' economy.

The migration of some of the population to the north affected agriculture and husbandry and destroyed urban life. Cities lacked skilled artisans, who were taken prisoner and sent to the south to build cities for the Golden Horde. Some cities, such as Bilär, never recovered from the destruction of the Mongols. Being a trade center, the city Bolgar only began to recover in the 14th century attracting merchants from Russia as well as the Muslim East.

Their trade was conducted along the river Volga which was the major trade route from south to north and from east to west. They transported the goods via the river and transported honey, wine, skin, furs, spices, slaves, weapons and silver coins. Taxes were imposed on traders and it was an important source of income for both Khazaria and the Volga Bulgar. In addition, booty was taken during military campaigns.

In the Volga-Kama region there were plentiful harvests (barley, wheat, and millet) and plenty of fruits that enabled Bulgars to meet their own needs and to trade the excess.

Khanate of Kazan

The Mongols conducted several more attacks in 1360, 1362 and 1407. In 1431, Volga Bulgaria came to an end; when the Golden Horde itself fell apart in the 15th century, it was replaced by the new Khanate of Kazan.

Russian chronicles, the *Rogozhsky Chronicle* and *Kazan Chronicle*, provide information about the Khanate of Kazan. The Kazan Khanate, like the Volga Bulgars, was composed of an ethnically diverse population. It was established by Ulugh Muhammad in 1438 as a separate political entity after the collapse of the Golden Horde. The town of Kazan was the capital of the Kazan khanate.

The Kazan khanate continued the policy of the Golden Horde and forced the Rus' princes to pay tribute. The leader of the Khanate, Ulugh Muhammad conducted a campaign against the Rus', occupied Nizhniy Novgorod and attacked the principality of Moscow in 1439. In another campaign in 1445, Grand Prince Vasily II of Moscow was captured by the Kazan Tatars and barely survived. Muscovites had to pay a large ransom to liberate Vasily II, and they signed a treaty advantageous for Kazan.

In 1469, during the reign of Ivan III (the Great), Muscovite troops entered the territory of the Kazan khanate, but were driven back. By the 1470s, the Kazan khanate continued to decay due to internal struggles among the members of the khan's family. The Kazan forces reattacked towns in the Muscovite principality. In 1480, the armies of the khan and of the grand prince of Moscow confronted each other on the Ugra river. The Kazan khans gave up their claim to Muscovite territory and retreated. Moscow also stopped paying tribute to the Kazan khanate. In 1487, Ivan III invaded Kazan, installed his own puppet khan Mahmet-Amin on the Kazan throne and reduced Kazan to a vassal state.

Vasilii III also exercised extensive control over the Kazan khanate, but after his death in 1533, Moscow's influence in the region was diminished. In 1535, the Kazanians replaced the pro-Russian khan and restored the previous khan, Safa-Girei.

The final battle was conducted in 1552 and Ivan IV conquered the Khanate and brought an end to the Kazan Khanate. Kazan was vital to Moscow's eastern trade. Kazan was also an outpost to challenge British interests in Central Asia and the Persian trade in fur.

Discussions/Questions:

1. What was the role of the Volga Bulgars in the rise of the Kievan Rus'?
2. How did the Volga Bulgars recover from the destruction of the Mongols?
3. Why were the Russians interested in the territory of the Khanate of Kazan?

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