

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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THE KHAZARS (650-1048) – Introduction

OVERVIEW

Before the Russians became the dominant power in southern Russia, there were other nations that had established their control over the regions that formed a natural gravitation with their endless grasslands and abundant rivers for the migration of nomads from Central Asia in the 7th century.

The Khazars were one of the nomads who appeared in the southern steppes in the early 7th century. The Khazarians were first mentioned by Theophanes in his *Chronographia* in 627.

Khazaria existed from the early 7th century to the end of the 10th century. It extended from the Aral Sea to the Dnieper river, and from the north Caucasus in the south to Bolgar (Spassky region) in the north on the river Volga and incorporated most of today's eastern Ukraine and the southern steppes of Russia.

The Khazar rulers had sufficient authority to claim tribute from other nomads and their subjects. The Kievan Rus' had to pay tribute to Khazaria until the 10th century even when both began to increase their wealth and military power. The river Volga was the major and most valuable passageway for Khazaria to trade and transport their goods.

The influence of Khazar customs, legal procedures, system of government, and military organization survived in the early development of the Kievan state and played a significant role in the life of Kievan society.

The Khazar Khanate acted as a buffer zone between the Byzantine Empire in the west and Muslim states in the south.

EVENTS

The Khazars were semi-nomadic, mobile herders who originated in the steppes of Central Asia or in the Ural or the north of the Caucasus Mountains in the mid - 6th century.

The origin of the Khazar khagans goes back to the western Turkic Khanate (552–630) in Mongolia, the Ashina tribe. The Khazars established an independent polity between the 630s and the 660s. By the 650s, the Khazars had become an important state in the North Caucasus and lower Volga delta.

The Khazars established the largest and the most complex state in Eastern Europe, ruled over an immense territory which extended from the Middle Volga to the North Caucasus and Crimea and from the Ukrainian steppes to the western borders of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan.

The Khazar Khanate was a multi-ethnic polity dominated by the Khazars, but at the same time incorporated different nations like the Alans, Bulgars, Burtas, Finno-Ugrian Mari, Magyars, Pechenegs and a number of East Slav tribal associations. All these nations had to pay tribute to the Khazar rulers until the end of the Khazar state in the mid-10th century.

Khazar-Volga Bulgar Relations

During the 7th century, after the Volga Bulgar tribes split apart, the Khazars took advantage of this split and began to invade Bulgar territory in north of the Black Sea. Some of the Bulgars migrated to the north, settled around the Volga and Kama rivers and fell under Khazar rule. The Khazars began to collect taxes from the Volga Bulgars that were subject to them.

By 650s, the Khazars had invaded the settlements of the Volga Bulgars in the Don–Kuban steppe. The Volga Bulgars were defeated by the Khazars around 680, and they had to recognize Khazar authority in the early 8th century. However, to maintain their autonomy and to distance themselves from the Jewish Khazars, the ruler of the Volga Bulgar, Elteber Almish converted to Islam in 921. The Volga Bulgars continued to pay tribute to the Khazars till the middle of the 10th century. The subordination of the Volga Bulgars to the Khazar Khanate was relatively mild; they were left a free hand in the conduct of their own affairs.

Khazar-Byzantine Relations

The Khazars were also important allies of the Byzantine Empire, since it was a buffer state between the Byzantine Empire and the Umayyad Caliphate, and had strategic importance by being a link between Europe, Asia, and the Middle East. Although the Khazars were allies of the Byzantines, they sometimes created tensions with the Byzantines over the contested areas between the two in the Crimea and Western Georgia, Abkhazia.

The coalition forces of the Khazars and the Byzantines fought against the Sassanids, the Umayyads and Abbasids. The Arabs responded the Byzantine–Khazar coalition forces with a strong counter-offensive and drove the Khazars back to the northern border of the Greater Caucasus, and were able to invade the Khazar land.

Khazar-Byzantine relations began in the 7th century. In the 620s, the Byzantine Empire and the Persian Empire were at war. Under the terms of the alliance, the Byzantines and Khazar joint armies fought against the Persians and established control of the south Caucasus.

The Byzantine-Khazar relations deteriorated by the middle of the 10th century due to the hostility Byzantium directed toward Khazaria after Khazaria's conversion to Judaism circa 838. Orthodox Kievan Rus' and Byzantium saw this as a threat to Orthodox Christianity and confederation forces attacked the Khazars and defeated them in 1016. The Khazar–Byzantine alliance collapsed. The Khazars' main source of revenue was trade and the collection of tribute. With the loss of their main source of income the Khazar Khanate began to decline. Kievan Rus' took advantage of this situation and conquered most of the Khazar lands.

Khazar-Arab Relations

When the Arabs began to spread their influence in the Transcaucasus and captured Armenia in 640, they came too close to the Khazars that had dominated Azerbaijan since 632. The Arabs sacked the capital of Balanjar in 642; the Khazars first moved their capital to Samandar and later to Itil (Atil) in the delta of the Volga River.

In 642, the Arabs began to occupy the lands south of Derbent and the Caspian coast. The Eastern Caliphate conquered the area of the Black Sea and Eastern Europe. In Armenia, the Arabs defeated a Byzantine force which included both Khazar and Alan allies in 645–646. Ten years of minor clashes lasted till 652.

Due to a civil war that erupted in 657, the Arab forces withdrew from the Transcaucasus. After this, a full scale Khazar invasion of the Transcaucasus began in 684.

In 717, the Khazar armies reinvaded Azerbaijan and after that they diverted their forces to Armenia. At that time Armenia was under Arab rule. The Arabs tried to establish a strong frontier zone to stop the Khazars' advance. However, a sixteen-year Arab–Khazar war broke out in 721 when the Khazars invaded Armenia and destroyed the Arab garrisons. After the reestablishment of Arab control in the region and the annexation of the lands south of Derbent's gate, the Arabs did not occupy Khazaria due to the approaching cold weather; they withdrew their troops to winter quarters in Azerbaijan. Khazaria continued to exist, and the Caucasus Mountains and the northern border of Derbent became the demarcation line between the Arabs and the Khazars.

In 730, the Khazars again invaded Azerbaijan and reached as far south as Mosul. Two rival armies met on the Mugan steppe of north-western Persia. The Arabs won the battle and they invaded the Khazar garrison.

The Umayyad Caliphate began to increase its influence in the region in the early 8th century and they were able to maintain their hold over much of Transcaucasia. In 737, to keep Khazaria independent, the Khazars had to show allegiance to the caliphate, and had to pay annual tribute. The Caliphate attempted to spread Islam in Khazaria, but it was short-lived.

The Umayyad Caliphate was facing problems at home. Marwan ibn Muhammad who was the last ruler of the Umayyad Caliphate was killed; and the war with the Khazars weakened the Umayyad military heavily. A few years later the Umayyad Caliphate fell in 750; and it was replaced by the Abbasid Caliphate, ending all conflict with the Khazars, and they seem to have returned to their traditional alliance with the Byzantines. This turmoil in the Arab heartlands allowed the Khazars to rebuild their power, and in 764, the Khazars gained control over Azerbaijan and eastern Georgia, challenging the Abbasids.

While facing the threat of the Abbasid Caliphate, the Khazar Khanate's relations with the Byzantine Empire also were strained by a rivalry over the Crimean peninsula. The Christian population was the largest in the peninsula and it was largely under the Khazar suzerainty. An uprising erupted in a Crimean Gothia, a Goth principality in 787, and the tensions increased when a local Christian bishop provoked this uprising against the Khazars, drove the Khazars from Doros (Mangup) in Crimea and gained control over the mountain passes, blocking the access to the Black Sea. However, the Khazars regained Doros and the bishop was executed. Although part of the southern coast of the Crimean peninsula was under Byzantine control, they did not want to confront the Khazars. However, at the beginning of the 9th century, taking advantage of a civil war between the Khazars and their Magyar vassals, the Byzantines invaded Crimean Gothia.



In the 9th century, the Khazaria continued to grow and to be the major passageway between northern Europe and southwestern Asia.

Khazar-Pecheneg Relations

There was constant hostility between the Khazars and Pechenegs who were nominally subject to the Khazars. The Khazars tried to stop their migration. Toward the end of the 9th century, the Pechenegs began to pose a serious threat to the Khanate's borders. They destroyed Bulgarian-Khazar settlements on the Crimean steppe. The Khazars and Oghuz made an alliance to fight against the Pechenegs. Around 889–890, the combined Khazar and Oghuz forces pushed the Pechenegs westward to vacate the area between the Volga and Ural rivers.

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The Khazars conducted a series of wars against the Alans, Rus', Pechenegs and Byzantium. There was a direct confrontation with the Byzantines. The Byzantines made alliances with Pechenegs, Bulgars, Magyars, Burtas who had disputes with the Khazars. The Alans who were the only ally of the Khazars turned against the Khazars. But, the Khazars, with the help of the Oghuz, defeated the Alans and this first major Khazar-Byzantine confrontation ended in a Khazar victory.

Khazar-Rus' Relations

The tension between the Rus' and Khazars increased after 914. When the Rus' ships arrived at the Khazar garrison at the entrance to the straits, they sent an envoy to the Khazar ruler to ask for permission to pass through his country, sail down his river, and reach their Caspian sea (Khazar sea). The Khazar ruler gave permission. When Rus' were returning to the Volga from their Caspian campaign they conducted raids and

violence against the Muslim settlers in Tabaristan and in other places on the Caspian coast. A battle broke out between the Rus' and Khazars. With the help of Orsiyya (Ors-from Iranian Khwārazm) Muslims and the Christians of Atil the Khazars defeated the Rus'. Most of the Rus' were slaughtered in the battle; the people who survived and migrated to the Volga were killed by the Burtas and the Volga Bulgars.

But, there were also joint operations. In 941, a Khazar-Rus' joint fleet attacked the Byzantine capital, Constantinople. The Byzantine navy was able to repulse the attack with the help of their 'Greek fire' weapon and defeated the Khazar – Rus' joint fleet.

In the 8th and 9th centuries, many Eastern Slavic tribes continued to pay tribute to the Khazars. The subordination of Kievan Rus' to the Khazars ended by 944, when the Rus' agreed to sign a new treaty with the Byzantine Empire which allowed free commerce and the promise of military assistance in times of war between the Byzantine Empire and Kievan Rus'.

In the 950s and 960s the Khazars attacked the Rus' to prevent them from having access to the Caspian Sea. According to the *Russian Primary Chronicle*, in 965, the Grand Duke of Kiev, Svyatoslav I defeated the Khazars with the help of the Oghuz and Pechenegs and took their Sarkel fortress. The Russians built a new city, Belaya Vezha in Sarkel and Tmutarakan (Samkarsh) in the Taman peninsula became a new trading outpost. These cities became commercial centers for trade between the Caucasus and the Near East. Svyatoslav also subjugated the Alans and the Circassians in the same year.

Svyatoslav I stopped paying tribute to the Khazars in 967, and conquered their capital Itil (Atil). The Rus' and Pecheneg attacks from the north weakened the Khazarian state. After the conquest of Itil, the Khazars escaped. Around 969, some Khazars from Itil sought a more secure place by crossing the Caspian Sea and found an island called Siyah-Kuh (Manghishlaq) that was populated by Oghuz Turks; others migrated farther south to another Caspian island and some fled to Baku.

Grand Prince Vladimir of Kievan Rus', son of Svyatoslav I, launched another campaign against what was left of Khazaria, ending the domination of the Khazars in the Caucasus around 985. The Khazars lost access to their sources of tribute due to the attacks of the Rus' and Pechenegs. Their economic viability was threatened and this made them militarily vulnerable. Some of the Khazars fell under Khwarizmian rule and they converted to Islam, but some did not. Khwarizmian armies destroyed the cities that did not convert to Islam. After the Khazar cities Sarkel and Itil fell, control of the Don trade route came under the authority of the East Slavs, and control of the Volga–Caspian trade route passed to the Volga Bulgars.

Fall of Khazarian State

There are four major factors that led to the fall of the Khazarian state: the Khazar state lacked natural defensible borders, they were not self-sufficient in most resources, and the Khazarian society was never ethnically homogenous. In addition, the Khazars did not have a navy unlike the Russians, and this prevented the Khazars from conducting their trade by sea.

The Khazar Khanate acted as a buffer zone between the Rus' and Pechenegs in the south. With the decline of the Khanate, the Pechenegs began to conquer the steppe and forest-steppe zones of the Northern Black Sea region, and the Crimean and the Taman Peninsulas. The Pechenegs also began to challenge the Rus' and Byzantines. After Svyatoslav I defeated the Khazars in the 965, the Rus' lands were exposed to the Pecheneg threat, and they launched their first attack against Kiev in 968.

The Khazars continued to exist as a small client state of Khwarezm. The other Khazar areas fell under the control of neighboring Muslim states. The *Russian Primary Chronicle* stated that during the struggle for rule over Kiev between the sons of Vladimir I (the Great), Yaroslav I took the throne in 1019. But in 1023, his brother Mstislav challenged him with the help of the Khazars and Kasogians (Circassians).

Discussions/Questions:

1. What made the Khazar state important for the Russians?
2. Why did the Khazars convert to Judaism?
3. How were the Khazars able to create such a powerful state?

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