

Assessing Khazaria

Research >
Central Asia

The Khazars enter history in the fifth century AD. In the thirteenth, they disappear. Why are these semi-nomads, who reigned from the Caucasus and the Urals to the Caspian and the Dnieper of interest to students of Eurasian history?

By Paul Meerts

First, because the Khazars, along with the Franks and the Byzantines, served as a dam against the tide of Islam, then threatening Europe from three sides. Second, because the Khazarian Empire had a very particular dual structure of government. Third, the Khazars had an enduring influence on their neighbours, and as allies of the Greeks, contributed to the perpetuation of Eastern Rome. Last but not least, religion draws our attention. Though many Khazars were Muslim or Christian, the leading clans, as well as the royal family, adopted the Mosaic laws.

Independent Khazaria

With the disintegration of the Western Turkish Empire in the seventh century AD, the Khazars were freed from the yoke of their Turkic brethren. Henceforth Khazar external relations were with neighbouring tribes, the Bulgars and Magyars who became their vassals, Byzantines, Arabs, Russians and to a lesser extent, Ostrogoths and Vikings.

The Khazars influenced world history through the Bulgars, Seljuks and Magyars. They split the Bulgars into two confederations, one which moved West and conquered present-day Bulgaria, the so-called proto-Bulgarians. Arpad, leading his people to present-day Hungary, was a Khazar-nominated Khan. Seljuk who took his Turks to present-day Turkey, was the son of Timuryalik, an officer in the service of the Khazars (Legg 1970: 164, 178, 184).

Until the ninth century Khazaria was an ally of Byzantium. Apart from incidents in the Crimea during the time of Justinian II, the relationship between Byzantines and Khazars were friendly. In the seventh century the Khazars sent 40,000 men to support the Byzantines against the Persians. In the eighth century a Khazar princess became Empress in Constantinople and her son, the emperor Leo, came to be called 'the Khazar'. In the tenth century the emperor (Khagan) of Khazaria was held in higher esteem than the Pope of Rome and the successor of Charlemagne, evidenced in the letters of the Byzantine chancellery to their foes and allies (Dunlop 1954: ix).

The beginning of the end

By the tenth century Khazar relations with the Byzantines had soured. The reasons for this are unclear. It might have had to do with the waning power of the Arab Empire, and thus a reduced need for Byzantium to have the Khazars as allies. It could also be that the conversion of the ruling elite of Khazaria to the Jewish faith annoyed Constantinople.

Arab-Khazar relations were more hostile. Although many more Khazars were Muslim than Christian, the history of Khazaria is riddled by wars with Arab invaders. Arab forces made deep incursions into Khazar territory, conquering the Caucasus, destroying the former Khazar capitals of Balanjar and Samandar and threatening the capital Khazaran-Itil (Atil) on the lower stretches of the Volga.

With the rise of the Kievan-Rus state in Ukraine a new enemy arose at the end of the tenth century. Initially, the Khazars worked together with Russian forces in fighting Muslims around the Caspian. But as Russian strength grew, Khazar power dwindled. In 965 Russian forces under Svyatoslav destroyed the stone fortress of Sarkel; two years later they razed the capital city, Itil. The downfall of the Khazar Empire came in 1016 as a consequence of combined Byzantine and Kievan actions. (Gilbert 1993: 25, Legg 1970: 195).

Destroying Khazaria was a tragic miscalculation on the part of both the Russians and the Greeks. The weakening of Khazaria strengthened the Pecheneg and Oghuz tribes, who became formidable enemies of both Kiev and Constantinople. As the Russians were weak, the downfall of Khazaria must have had internal reasons. Possible explanations may be found in the nature of Khazaria's political, economic and religious life.



Power dispersed

Khazaria's political system might provide the key to understanding Khazaria's downfall. Like other Turkic peoples, the Khazars had a system of tribal and clan rule. Of the many tribes that made-up the empire, one or two were dominant. Within these tribes, leading clans existed, and within the clan were leading families; the royal family came from the leading clan. This did not mean, however, that the royal family held de-facto power in the country. Real power was wielded by the Beg, comparable to the great-vizir, *shogun*, or *hofmeijer*.

The real power struggle was over the post of the Beg. Leading generals normally held the reigns of power and were not always from the 'correct' families. The Beg took the real decisions, was in charge of the treasury, led the army and was assisted by generals and local rulers. This was the 'republican' element in the state of Khazaria. But the Khagan remained the formal head of state; in a ceremonial sense the Beg was his underling, though the Khagan was excluded from decisions of state. At times the division of power between the formal and the de-facto power centre was blurred. The absence of a political focal point may be the first reason for the downfall of Khazaria; there was a de-facto double kingship in the Khazar realm.

Economic dependency

Khazaria's economy, unlike the steppe empires where cattle breeding was the dominant source of income, depended on trade and agriculture. Cattle, rice, fish and wheat were the most important products. The country was situated at a crossroads on the silk-route. The Khazars' tolerance attracted many traders, among them Greeks, Arabs and Jews. Besides the trade with Byzantium, the Caspian offered numerous possibilities for exchange with Persians and Arabs. This oriental trade was supported by raw materials found in the Caucasus, such as gold and silver. The slave trade was also important. Russians brought slaves from the North to the slave-market in Itil, who were then shipped to the Muslim lands in the South. Russians, Bulgars and Burtas brought in furs and fish. Tributes paid by vassal tribes and the Caliph added to the Khazar treasury, as did transiting merchants who paid ten percent of the value of their goods to tax collectors.

'the only visible trace of Khazaria on the world map is the name of that gigantic inland sea, the Caspian, an upcoming focal point of world politics'

But on the whole, the country's economic base was weak and dependent on external sources. As the Khazars had strong neighbours, control of these external sources was problematic. Even though Khazaria was more sedentary than other steppe empires, in the long run it could not match the institutionalised state formations that surrounded it. It was much more difficult to accumulate margins than in the cities of the Baghdad and Byzantine Empires. Internal weakness and external economic dependency may be a second factor leading up to the fall of the Khazar state.

The odd man out

The third factor undermining the power of Khazaria was its religion. The Khazar Khagan Bulan accepted the Jewish faith in the second half of the ninth century; his successor Obadi-ah established synagogues and Judaic schools. The reason for

Khazar Empire
c. AD 650

the conversion to Judaism might well have been political. Conversion to Islam would have brought Khazaria under its arch-enemy, the Caliph. Conversion to Christianity would have made the country too dependent on Constantinople, which, though Khazaria's main ally, could never be fully trusted.

Judaism was an elegant third way out. But this choice also meant isolation and the danger of being crushed between two powerful monotheist faiths, one from the South and one from the West. And so it happened. There was no brother-power to call to in the end. Religious tolerance strengthened Khazaria as the absence of religious repression created loyalty to the Khagan, and attracted an influx of Jewish, Muslim and Christian traders. On the other hand Khazaria lacked a clear religious identity and zeal; this can be seen as a factor weakening chances for survival. As we see in history, religion can be a powerful binding factor.

'Khazaria was an enigma in world history. The Khazar Empire governed a crucial region on the Eurasian crossroads for over three hundred years, with social and state structures not readily found elsewhere'

Khazaria was an enigma in world history. The Khazar Empire governed a crucial region on the Eurasian crossroads for over three hundred years, with social and state structures not readily found elsewhere. The conversion to Judaism of their leaders and tribes might not be unique in history, but remains a fascinating event that has stirred the imaginations of many.

Like many other horse riders, their state withered away, leaving traces that can be seen today. Without the Khazar Empire, present-day Bulgaria and Hungary might not exist in their present forms; this may be true for Turkey and Ukraine as well. Even after a millennium we find words pointing to Khazaria, such as the name of the largest inland sea on earth (Khazar Sea in Farsi, Turkish and Arabic). Or '... the survival in popular memory (in Ukraine) of the long struggle in the past with the Judaic Khazars' (Subtelny 1990: 52). But indeed, the only visible trace of Khazaria on the world map is the name of that gigantic inland sea, the Caspian, an upcoming focal point of world politics. <

References:

- Dunlop, D.M. (1954) *The History of the Jewish Khazars*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press
- Gilbert, M. (1993) *Atlas of Jewish History*. London: J.M. Dent, Orion Publishing Group
- Legg, S. (1970) *The Heartland*. London: Martin Secker & Warburg
- Subtelny, O. (1990) *'Ukraine' A History*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press

Paul Meerts is Deputy Director of Clingendael, the Netherlands Institute of International Relations.
pmeerts@clingendael.nl

Can the rise and fall of the Khazar Empire explain the Jewish presence in Central and Eastern Europe? Research on the subject began in the nineteenth century; in 1999 Jerusalem hosted the first symposium on Khazaria, bringing together Israeli, American and Russian scholars. Interested readers are referred to www.khazaria.com.