

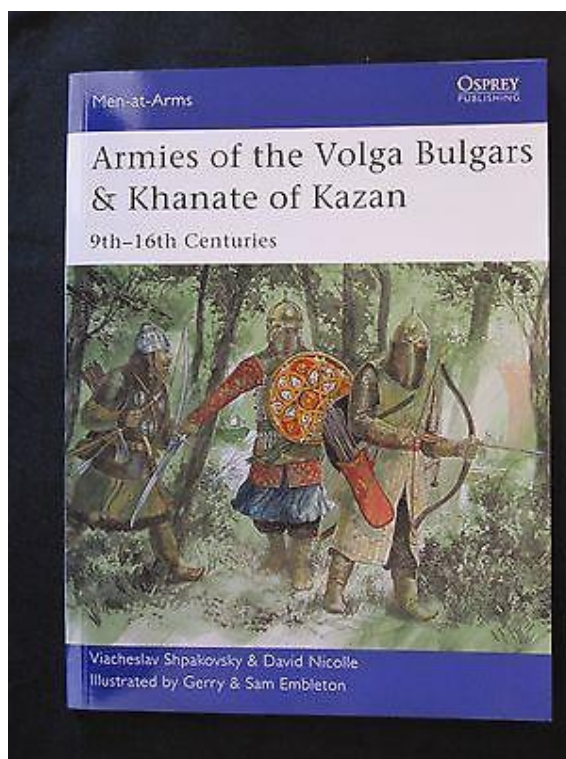
Armies of the Volga Bulgars & Khanate of Kazan

Osprey Men-at-Arms series No. 491 (2013)

By Viacheslav Shpakovsky & David Nicolle; illustrated by Gerry and Sam Embleton

Review by Rob Morgan

The medieval world didn't end at Constantinople or Jerusalem. Its complexities, its transient states and nations ran far away into Asia and Africa, and between the 9th and 16th centuries, barely tipping into what some historians call the 'Early Modern' era, a rich trading warrior state existed around the banks of the Volga. A major hub of trade between Europe and China, this volume actually covers two named states. After the Bulgars were devastated in the Russo-Mongol Wars in the 1300s, the remnants recreated themselves and survived as an Islamic Khanate, only to be eventually crushed and eliminated by Ivan the Terrible in the 1550s.



The writers open by dealing with the complex movements of loose groups of tribes which eventually 'settled' around the Volga. The following Chronology is lengthy and equally complex, covering over seven centuries of conflict which provided the Bulgars a host of enemies from the Kievan Rus to Mongol Horde, not forgetting Tamerlaine the Great, of course! The text moves on to deal with the changes which conversion to Islam brought to the Volga Bulgars, with the onslaught of the Mongols in the 1200s, which saw one of the most astounding defeats of a Mongol army by the Bulgars and sundry allies at the Samara River in 1223. The next section of the book, that dealing with the river-borne Novgorod raiders in 'Ushkuy' vessels has been dealt with in an earlier note for *Lone Warrior*, and the text moves on to the 1390s when Kazan survived war and became the capital of a new state into which the remnants of the

Bulgars were subsumed. Muscovy was *the* enemy, and the Khanate struggled to survive against its awesome neighbour, until the final war and bitter siege in 1552.

'Armies, Organisation and Tactics' are dealt with, though the tactics seem to be the 'standard steppe' type, used by Magyars, Seljuk Turks and Hungarians alike. With ample supply of auxiliaries from tribal allies, these were still not huge armies. The question of weapons, of swords, spears, javelins and other hand weapons comes next, and the importance of the bow to this style of war is recognised, before the text moves on to considering helmets, shields and armour. The notes on fortifications and sieges are short, though the former was typical of the defensive systems put in place from the Baltic to the Urals, wherever there was ample timber to build but little stone. Sadly, the 'siege warfare' comments are short, given that the 1552

siege of Kazan was one of the major encounters in that century. The note on gunpowder weapons deserves more detail, as the Khanate clearly owned such guns, and used them in sieges and in battles. The conclusion is brief, and does consider some of the interesting differences between Bulgars and other steppe states in war; urban militias are a good example of this. The question of emblems, banners and *ḥunchuks* (the traditional horse-tails) is not even attempted, apart from the suggestion that a commander's banner flew at the centre of the Bulgar army!

Of the 30 references for further reading, more than half are published in Moscow or Kazan and in Russian, others are Arabic and French and German. Only two are English, and so further reading may be difficult!

As far as the plates are concerned, Gerry and Sam Embleton are without any doubt outstanding artists. The plate quality is magnificent, though the problem of dealing with seven centuries of military dress and weaponry is obvious. Thankfully, a few plates are extremely useful indeed: Plate C, with a Siberian archer and Bulgar warriors, for instance, and unusual types, such as the handgunner at plate G1; while plate B3, a Mari tribal auxiliary is very *ḥSaxon* in appearance! Ten out of ten here. The illustrations in the text are useful, and the maps vital!

As for wargames figures, well it's another case of 15mm provides the best options. A good starting place is Mick Yarrow's Siberian Range, excellent for auxiliaries and tribesmen (see my *ḥKISLEV* article in *Lone Warrior*) and is good for heavy horsemen too, while there are some useful figures to be found in ERM's Eastern European range, and one or two possibilities among their Persians, Afghans and Moghuls. Sadly Peter Pig's new Saxons have nothing I can find suitable for conversion purposes.

However, Irregular Miniatures' *ḥArabs & Turks* and *ḥAsians and Medievals* have plenty of useful figures, with small conversions necessary in some cases. Their Dark Ages figures, Slavs and Rus provide quite a few more. For example, V15 is an excellent lancer figure with only some detail required to become Kazan armoured horse of the later period. Though it may seem well out of period at first sight, the 15mm Irregular Caucasus range has CAU7 a musketeer for a late handgunner, and the company's SR9, a Cossack halberdier, can also have his halberd easily trimmed to create a c.1500 handgunner.

It is a pity that so few manufacturers seem interested in the less mainstream wars and empires of the Medieval period, but this kind of Osprey publication does open up a new world of possibilities. Incidentally, I am not aware of any American companies producing suitable 15mm ranges, which could be used for these warriors, but would be very pleased to learn of any which do exist.