

Kazakh military organization and arts

The Kazakhs did not have a standing army, but raised levies as required. A detachment was an independent military unit: the chief of the clan was its commander and each detachment had its own battle flag and war cry (uran). A few such autonomous units formed the host of an ulus (familial or tribal domain). The leader of the ulus was also the leader of the host, which had its main banner and its own war cry. The khan was the commander-in-chief of all the hosts; he personally stood at the head of his troops in battle and was expected to share their hardships and dangers. Sources indicate that the Kazakh rulers had, on average, 30–50,000 mounted warriors. Mobility was a feature of the light cavalry of the steppe-dwelling nomads, who were able to assemble large forces for an attack at any time and in any place.

The main weapons of the Kazakhs during the period were the sword and the bow. Other arms mentioned are war axes, bludgeons, one-handed maces, two-handed clubs, and long spears decorated with horsehair tassels and fitted with a hook for dragging an opponent from the saddle. We have a reference to a warrior sultan from the Dasht-i Qipchaq in the following terms: ‘Over his chest he wore a shirt of mail as blue as the sky, on his head there was a sparkling helmet with a helmet liner, and round his waist was a belt from which hung a sword.’ Firearms were not very common, but the Kazakhs knew how to make ‘good gunpowder’, and also how to smelt lead and copper ore.

There is much information in the sources on the military art of the Turco-Mongol nomadic tribes and peoples. If the military commanders thought it pointless to engage in a cavalry skirmish, the warriors dismounted, and having fastened the reins of their horses to their belts, rained down arrows on the enemy and sought to prevent the opponents’ advance with spear thrusts. If the enemy attacked unexpectedly, making it impossible for the defenders to form ranks, they strove to close the flanks and form a circle, wheeling round as they fought, ‘in the Mongol fashion’. In attack the nomads used a method which had its own special name – *tulgama* (*tulgamish*). Both these words come from the Turkic verb *tulgamak* – to encircle, wind round, turn, spin, whirl. As a method of warfare, *tulgama* means to turn, make a flanking movement and attack the enemy on the flank or in the rear.

Military prowess was highly esteemed and a person who ‘cut off more heads and spilled more blood’ than others enjoyed general respect. We know from fifteenth-century sources that outstanding swordsmen who were repeatedly successful on the battlefield were awarded the title or style of *tolu-batir* or *tolu-bahadur* (perfect hero) or *bogatyr* (complete hero), i.e. a person of boundless courage, steadfastness and strength.

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