REVIEW ARTICLE 

Golden Horde–Russian Relations During the Reign of Emir Mamay (1361–1380): Political Conflict, Historiographical Narratives, and the Transformation of Medieval Eurasian Power Structures

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Abstract

The historical relationship between the Mongols and the Russian principalities represents one of the most transformative geopolitical processes in medieval Eurasian history. Initial military encounters between the Mongol Empire and the Rus' principalities occurred during the reign of Chinggis Khan (1206–1227), particularly through the western campaigns led by the commanders Subutai Bahadur and Jebe Noyon across Iran, the Caucasus, and the Dasht-i Qipchaq between 1220 and 1224. These campaigns culminated in the Battle of the Kalka River in 1223, where the combined Rus'-Kipchak forces suffered a decisive defeat. The subsequent campaigns of Batu Khan and Subutai between 1236 and 1242 resulted in the incorporation of the Rus' principalities into the political sphere of the Golden Horde, thereby initiating nearly two and a half centuries of Mongol-Tatar political dominance over the Russian lands. Following the death of Jani Beg Khan in 1357, the Golden Horde entered a prolonged period of political fragmentation and dynastic instability commonly referred to as the "Great Troubles" (Velikaya Zamyatnya). During this era, more than twenty claimants ascended the throne, significantly weakening the central authority of the Horde. Within this unstable political environment, Emir Mamay emerged as one of the most influential military and political figures. After rebelling against Timur Khwaja in 1361, Mamay effectively seized political control over the western territories of the Golden Horde and governed through puppet khans descended from the Jochid dynasty. This study examines Golden Horde–Russian relations during the reign of Emir Mamay, focusing particularly on the political rise of the Moscow Principality under Dmitrii Ivanovich, the gradual weakening of Mongol authority over the Rus' principalities, and the military conflicts culminating in the Battles of the Vozha River (1378) and Kulikovo (1380). Methodologically, the study employs a comparative historiographical and textual-analytical approach based upon medieval Russian chronicles, Persian and Arabic historical sources, and contemporary scholarly literature. Particular attention is devoted to the political representation of Emir Mamay in Russian historical memory and to the evolving Russian perceptions of Mongol authority during the late fourteenth century. The findings demonstrate that the reign of Emir Mamay constituted a decisive transitional period in the political transformation of Eastern Europe. The weakening of centralized authority within the Golden Horde facilitated the emergence of Moscow as a regional power center, while the military and ideological conflicts of the period significantly contributed to the formation of anti-Mongol political narratives in Russian historiography. The study further argues that the Mamay–Tokhtamysh struggle and the Battle of Kulikovo should be understood not merely as military confrontations, but as critical moments in the restructuring of medieval Eurasian political legitimacy and historical consciousness.

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I. INTRODUCTION

The incorporation of the Russian principalities into the political sphere of the Golden Horde during the thirteenth century constituted one of the most transformative developments in the history of medieval Eastern Europe and the wider Eurasian world. The emergence of Mongol political authority across the western Eurasian steppe not only reshaped the geopolitical balance of the region, but also profoundly influenced the political evolution, administrative structures, military organization, and diplomatic orientation of the Rus' principalities for more than two centuries.

The first direct encounters between the Mongols and the Russian principalities occurred during the reign of Chinggis Khan (1206–1227), when Mongol armies under the command of Subutai Bahadur and Jebe Noyon launched a major western expedition between 1220 and 1224. Initially organized as part of the pursuit of the Khwarazmshah ruler 'Ala' al-Din Muhammad, the campaign rapidly evolved into a large-scale military and reconnaissance operation extending across Khurasan, northwestern Iran, the Caucasus, and the Dasht-i Qipchaq. After penetrating the territories of Iran and the South Caucasus, the Mongol forces captured several important urban centers, including Ardabil, Tabriz, Maragha, Nakhchivan, and Baylaqan, before advancing toward Arran and the North Caucasus (Ibn al-Athir, 1987, pp. 409–417; Juwaynī, 2022, pp. 162–163).

The Mongol armies subsequently crossed the Derbend Pass and entered the western Eurasian steppe, defeating regional populations such as the Alans, Kipchaks, and other North Caucasian groups. The campaign culminated in the Battle of the Kalka River in 1223, where the combined Rus'-Kipchak coalition suffered a devastating defeat against the Mongol forces. This battle represented a decisive turning point in the political history of Eastern Europe, demonstrating the strategic superiority, mobility, and military coordination of the Mongol armies while simultaneously exposing the political fragmentation and military vulnerabilities of the Rus' principalities (Gumilev, 2013, pp. 154–155).

Although the Mongol forces temporarily withdrew from the western steppe following the completion of their reconnaissance campaign, the invasion fundamentally altered the geopolitical structure of the Eurasian frontier and laid the foundations for the subsequent western conquests of Batu Khan. The second and more decisive phase of Mongol expansion into Eastern Europe began during the reign of Ögedei Khan (1229–1241). Following the kurultai convened in 1235, the Mongol imperial leadership organized a comprehensive western military expedition under the command of Batu Khan and Subutai Bahadur against the Volga Bulgars, the Kipchak steppe, the Russian principalities, and Eastern Europe more broadly (Rashid al-Din, 1941, pp. 34–36; Temir, 2016, pp. 190–195).

Between 1236 and 1242, the Mongol armies devastated numerous political and urban centers across Eastern Europe, including Ryazan, Vladimir, Kiev, and other major Rus' cities. As a consequence of these campaigns, the Russian principalities were incorporated into the tributary and political system of the Golden Horde and became subject to Mongol suzerainty. This process also completed the territorial consolidation and state-building phase of the Golden Horde, which emerged as one of the most powerful political entities of the medieval Eurasian world.

Throughout the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries, the khans of the Golden Horde exercised substantial political authority over the Russian principalities through systems of tribute collection, diplomatic oversight, military pressure, and dynastic legitimization. Russian princes were required to travel to the Horde court in order to obtain official confirmation of their political authority through the issuance of *yarliks* (charters of investiture). Consequently, the political development of the Rus' principalities became deeply intertwined with the internal political dynamics of the Golden Horde itself.

By the fourteenth century, particularly during the reigns of Özbek Khan (1313–1341) and Jani Beg Khan (1342–1357), the Golden Horde reached the height of its political and economic power. Nevertheless, following the assassination of Jani Beg Khan and the subsequent political crisis during the reign of Berdibek Khan (1357–1359), the Golden Horde entered a prolonged period of dynastic instability and internal fragmentation known in historiography as the *Bulkak* or "Great Troubles" period. During these decades, rival khan claimants, military aristocrats, and regional elites competed violently for political supremacy, severely weakening the centralized authority of the Jochid state.

It was within this context of political fragmentation and dynastic crisis that Emir Mamay emerged as one of the most influential political and military figures of the late Golden Horde period. Although Mamay did not belong to the Chinggisid dynasty and therefore lacked formal dynastic legitimacy, he nevertheless succeeded in establishing effective political control over the western territories of the Golden Horde between 1361 and 1380 by ruling through puppet khans descended from the Jochid line. During this period, Mamay pursued an active policy aimed at preserving Golden Horde political authority while simultaneously confronting rival Sarai-based khans, Lithuanian expansion, eastern Jochid challengers, and the increasingly ambitious Russian principalities led by Moscow.

At the same time, the weakening of centralized authority within the Golden Horde created favorable conditions for the political rise of the Moscow Principality under Dmitrii Ivanovich (Dmitrii Donskoi). Exploiting the fragmentation of the Horde and the rivalries among competing khans, Moscow gradually expanded its political influence over neighboring Russian principalities and increasingly challenged Mongol political supremacy. The deterioration of relations between Emir Mamay and Moscow eventually culminated in a series of major military confrontations, including the Battles of the Vozha River (1378) and Kulikovo (1380), both of which profoundly influenced the political transformation of Eastern Europe.

Simultaneously, internal struggles within the eastern sectors of the Golden Horde intensified with the rise of Tokhtamysh Khan, who—supported by Timur (Tamerlane)—eventually defeated both the eastern Jochid rivals and Emir Mamay himself. Tokhtamysh's subsequent reunification of substantial portions of the Golden Horde and his Moscow campaign of 1382 demonstrated that despite the symbolic significance later attributed to the Battle of Kulikovo, Golden Horde political authority over the Russian principalities remained far from extinguished.

Accordingly, the present study examines Golden Horde–Russian relations during the reign of Emir Mamay within the broader context of political fragmentation, dynastic legitimacy, military conflict, and historiographical memory in late medieval Eurasia. By integrating political history with historiographical and discourse-oriented analysis, the article seeks to contribute to contemporary scholarship concerning the transformation of political authority, the construction of historical memory, and the evolving balance of power between the Golden Horde and the Russian principalities during the second half of the fourteenth century.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The historiography of Golden Horde–Russian relations has developed through multiple intellectual traditions, including Russian imperial historiography, Soviet historical scholarship, Turkish and Tatar historical studies, and contemporary Western Eurasian studies. Scholarly discussions concerning the political structure of the Golden Horde, the emergence of Moscow, and the role of Emir Mamay in the political transformation of Eastern Europe have therefore been shaped by diverse methodological and ideological perspectives.

Early Russian historiography primarily interpreted Mongol-Russian relations through a religious and civilizational framework. Medieval Russian chronicles frequently portrayed the Mongol-Tatar domination of the Rus' principalities as a period of suffering, devastation, and political subordination. Within these narratives, figures such as Dmitrii Ivanovich (Dmitrii Donskoi) were represented as defenders of Orthodoxy and symbols of political liberation, whereas Emir Mamay was often depicted as a usurper and antagonist of Russian political unity (Anonymous, 1851, 1853; Bychkov, 1885). Such chronicle traditions significantly influenced later Russian national historiography and contributed to the formation of anti-Mongol historical memory.

Nineteenth-century Russian historians expanded these interpretations through the development of imperial historical narratives emphasizing the gradual political consolidation of Moscow. Antonovich (1878) and other imperial historians interpreted the decline of Golden Horde authority as a necessary historical stage in the emergence of centralized Russian statehood. Within this framework, the Battle of Kulikovo (1380) was frequently presented as a decisive moment in the liberation of Russia from Mongol political domination. However, modern scholarship has increasingly questioned these interpretations, arguing that the political dependence of the Russian principalities upon the Golden Horde continued long after the Kulikovo campaign.

Soviet historiography introduced more systematic analyses of the political and economic structures of the Golden Horde. Among the most influential contributions are the works of Grekov and Yakubovskiy (1950), who examined the administrative organization, military structure, and political decline of the Golden Horde within broader Eurasian historical processes. Soviet scholars generally interpreted Mongol domination through socio-economic and class-oriented frameworks rather than exclusively religious or nationalist narratives. Nasonov (1940), for example, emphasized the political strategies employed by the Golden Horde in governing the Russian principalities and highlighted the complex diplomatic relations between Mongol rulers and Russian princes.

At the same time, Soviet-era scholarship often remained influenced by centralized state narratives that emphasized the historical inevitability of Moscow's political rise. Consequently, Emir Mamay was frequently portrayed as a symbol of political fragmentation and internal instability within the Golden Horde rather than as an autonomous political actor operating within a broader Eurasian geopolitical system.

Turkish and Tatar historiography contributed significantly to reevaluating the political history of the Golden Horde from a more internally oriented perspective. Kafalı (1976) examined the institutional foundations and political development of the Golden Horde, emphasizing the importance of dynastic legitimacy, steppe political traditions, and administrative continuity inherited from the Mongol imperial system. Similarly, Fahreddin (2003) and Yakubovskiy (2021) explored the transformation of Turkic-Mongol political culture and its influence on the broader history of the Eurasian steppe.

Contemporary Turkish scholarship has also paid increasing attention to the role of Emir Mamay within the internal political struggles of the Golden Horde. Rather than viewing Mamay merely as an opponent of Moscow, recent studies increasingly interpret him as a

military-political leader attempting to preserve western Golden Horde authority during a period of severe dynastic fragmentation and geopolitical instability. Such approaches challenge earlier nationalist interpretations that reduced the Mamay period exclusively to the narrative of Russian liberation.

Western scholarship on the Golden Horde and medieval Eurasia has expanded considerably during recent decades. Historians such as Vernadsky (2015), Grousset (2015), and Roux (2014) approached Mongol-Russian relations within the broader context of Eurasian imperial history and transcontinental political integration. These studies emphasize that Mongol rule contributed not only to military destruction, but also to administrative transformation, diplomatic connectivity, trade integration, and political centralization across Eastern Europe and Inner Asia.

More recent historiographical approaches increasingly focus upon questions of political legitimacy, historical memory, and narrative construction. Modern scholars argue that Russian chronicles should not be treated exclusively as objective historical records, but also as ideological texts reflecting the political and religious concerns of their authors and historical contexts. Consequently, contemporary historiography increasingly employs discourse-oriented methodologies and source criticism to examine how medieval chroniclers constructed representations of Mongol authority, political legitimacy, and Russian identity.

The figure of Emir Mamay occupies a particularly contested position within this historiographical tradition. Russian chronicle narratives often portray him as a usurper lacking legitimate Chinggisid lineage, whereas modern historians emphasize that Mamay exercised substantial military and political authority over the western territories of the Golden Horde despite his non-dynastic status. Poçekayev (2017) notably reevaluates Mamay's political image by examining the development of his negative representation within Russian historical consciousness and demonstrating how later historiography transformed Mamay into an "anti-hero" symbolizing foreign domination and political fragmentation.

Persian and Arabic historical sources provide additional perspectives often absent from Russian historiography. Works such as Rashid al-Din's *Jāmi' al-Tawārīkh*, Ibn Khaldūn's historical writings, and Natanzi's chronicles contribute valuable information concerning the internal political struggles of the Golden Horde, the Tokhtamysh–Mamay conflict, and the broader geopolitical dynamics of the Eurasian steppe (Ibn Khaldūn, 1884; Rashid al-Din, 1941; Natanzi, 1941). These sources frequently present political events from a wider Eurasian perspective rather than through the exclusively Rus'-centered framework characteristic of many Russian chronicles.

Despite the substantial historiography concerning the Golden Horde and medieval Rus', significant gaps remain regarding the political and ideological dimensions of Emir Mamay's relations with the Russian principalities. Many earlier studies focused predominantly upon military events, particularly the Battle of Kulikovo, while paying comparatively limited attention to the historiographical construction of Mamay's political image and the evolving Russian perceptions of Mongol legitimacy during the late fourteenth century.

Accordingly, the present study seeks to contribute to existing scholarship by integrating political history, historiography, and discourse-oriented source analysis in order to examine Golden Horde–Russian relations during the reign of Emir Mamay within a broader Eurasian historical context.

III. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The primary objective of this study is to critically examine Golden Horde–Russian relations during the political ascendancy of Emir Mamay and the subsequent Moscow campaign of Tokhtamysh Khan through the comparative analysis of medieval Russian chronicles, Persian and Arabic historical narratives, and contemporary historiographical scholarship. The study seeks to investigate the political, ideological, and military dimensions of the relationship between the Golden Horde and the Rus' principalities during the second half of the fourteenth century, a period characterized by dynastic fragmentation, shifting political legitimacy, and the gradual rise of Moscow as a regional center of power.

More specifically, the article aims to analyze how Russian chroniclers and later historiographical traditions constructed representations of Emir Mamay, Mongol political authority, and anti-Horde resistance within the broader framework of medieval Russian historical consciousness. In doing so, the study further explores the relationship between political conflict, narrative construction, and the formation of collective historical memory in late medieval Eastern Europe.

IV. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative historical and historiographical research design grounded in comparative textual analysis, discourse-oriented historiography, and source criticism. Given the interpretative nature of medieval historical writing and the ideological dimensions embedded within chronicle traditions, the study approaches historical sources not merely as repositories of factual information, but also as discursive constructions shaped by political, religious, and cultural contexts.

The primary source base of the research consists of Russian medieval chronicles composed between the thirteenth and seventeenth centuries, including various editions of the *Polnoe sobranie russkikh letopisey* (PSRL), alongside Persian, Arabic, and Turkic historical

narratives related to the Golden Horde and the political transformation of the Eurasian steppe. These materials are comparatively examined in conjunction with modern Russian, Turkish, and Western historiographical scholarship in order to reconstruct the political and military dynamics of Golden Horde–Russian relations during the Mamay period.

Methodologically, the study employs source-critical analysis to evaluate the reliability, ideological orientation, and narrative structure of medieval chronicles. Particular attention is devoted to the ways in which Russian chroniclers represented Mongol political legitimacy, religious opposition, military conflict, and the symbolic role of Moscow within emerging narratives of political centralization and Orthodox identity. Through this framework, the article examines how chronicle traditions contributed to the construction of anti-Mongol historical memory and the retrospective idealization of the Kulikovo campaign.

The research further incorporates comparative historiographical analysis in order to identify divergences between Russian, Persian, Arabic, and modern historical interpretations concerning Emir Mamay, Tokhtamysh Khan, and the political decline of the Golden Horde. By comparing these narrative traditions, the study seeks to demonstrate how historical representation is shaped by broader ideological and civilizational perspectives.

In addition, the methodological framework draws upon selected concepts from discourse analysis and historical hermeneutics, particularly regarding narrative construction, political symbolism, and the relationship between historical writing and collective memory. This interdisciplinary approach enables the study to move beyond purely descriptive political history and to investigate the ideological functions performed by medieval historiography in shaping perceptions of authority, legitimacy, and political identity.

4.1. Significance of the Study

The present study contributes to the historiography of medieval Eurasia by providing a multidimensional analysis of Golden Horde–Russian relations during one of the most politically transformative periods in Eastern European history. By focusing specifically on the reign of Emir Mamay and the emergence of Moscow as a consolidating political center, the article offers new insight into the relationship between dynastic instability within the Golden Horde and the evolving political autonomy of the Rus' principalities.

The study further contributes to existing scholarship through its integration of political history, historiography, discourse analysis, and source criticism. Rather than interpreting the Mamay period exclusively through the framework of military confrontation, the research examines the ideological and historiographical mechanisms through which Russian chronicles constructed political legitimacy, religious identity, and anti-Horde narratives.

Moreover, the article highlights the importance of medieval chronicles as active instruments of political memory rather than neutral historical records. Through comparative analysis of Russian and non-Russian narrative traditions, the study demonstrates how differing historiographical perspectives shaped the historical image of Emir Mamay, the significance of the Kulikovo campaign, and the broader perception of Mongol authority in Eastern Europe.

By situating Golden Horde–Russian relations within wider Eurasian political and historiographical processes, the study ultimately seeks to contribute to contemporary discussions concerning medieval state formation, imperial legitimacy, historical memory, and the construction of political identity in premodern societies.

V. DISCUSSION

5.1. The Second Mongol Campaign in the Dasht-i Qipchaq (1236–1242) and the Establishment of Golden Horde Authority over the Russian Principalities

In 1236, the Mongols completed the conquest of the Volga Bulgar territories, capturing the Bulgar capital and consolidating their control over the middle Volga region (Tikhomirov, 1965, p. 87). Following the subjugation of the Volga Bulgars, the Mongol military leadership redirected its strategic focus toward the Russian principalities. Under the general command of Batu Khan and through the coordinated participation of various Mongol princes and military contingents, the Mongol armies initiated a large-scale western campaign against the Rus' lands.

The first major target of the Mongol invasion was the Principality of Ryazan, situated along the middle basin of the Oka River. After a destructive assault, the city of Ryazan fell to the Mongols on 21 December 1237 (Tikhomirov, 1965, p. 87). The campaign subsequently expanded into northeastern Rus'. On 8 February 1238, following a six-day siege, the Mongols captured the city of Vladimir, one of the principal political centers of the Vladimir-Suzdal Principality (Tikhomirov, 1965, p. 88). Contemporary sources report that the population of the city, together with members of the family of Grand Prince Yuri II Vsevolodovich who had remained in the city, were killed during the assault. As in other conquered urban centers, Vladimir was systematically devastated and burned (Tikhomirov, 1965, pp. 88–89; D'Ohsson, 2014, pp. 200–201; Grousset, 2015, p. 274).

The Mongol advance then continued toward the Sit River region, where the forces of Grand Prince Yuri II attempted to organize resistance. The Russian forces were decisively defeated, and Yuri II Vsevolodovich was killed during the battle fought on 4 March 1238

(Koshelev, 2004, p. 91; Tikhomirov, 1965, pp. 89–90; Vernadsky, 2015, pp. 70–71; Grousset, 2015, p. 274). Meanwhile, Yuri's brother Roman, who had sought refuge in the fortress of Kolomna, was also defeated and killed before the city walls. Following this victory, the Mongols captured Kolomna and advanced toward Moscow, which at that time remained a relatively small commercial settlement. The city was conquered and set on fire in February 1238 (Koshelev, 2004, p. 90; D'Ohsson, 2014, p. 200; Grousset, 2015, p. 274).

Additional Mongol detachments devastated other important urban centers, including Yaroslavl and Tver. According to D'Ohsson (2014), the campaign also affected Rostov, Gorodets, Yuryev, Pereyaslavl, Dmitriyev, Kashin, Volok, and Konstantin, all of which experienced severe destruction and plunder (p. 201). By this stage, the road toward Novgorod had effectively opened before the Mongol armies. However, approximately sixty-five miles before reaching the city, the Mongols halted their advance, most likely due to unfavorable winter conditions and logistical difficulties.

In 1239, the Mongols initiated a new phase of military operations. Möngke led campaigns in the North Caucasus, subjugating significant segments of the Alans and Circassians, while Batu Khan forced the majority of the Cumans to recognize Mongol authority. Nevertheless, approximately forty thousand Cumans under the leadership of Köten Khan migrated westward into Hungary.

The western campaign resumed on a larger scale in 1240. During the summer of that year, Mongol forces captured and devastated the cities of Pereyaslavl and Chernigov. Subsequently, Möngke dispatched envoys to Kiev demanding submission. According to the chronicles, the envoys were killed upon the orders of local authorities, an act that effectively sealed the fate of the city. Shortly thereafter, Mongol forces appeared before the walls of Kiev. After several days of resistance, the city was stormed and captured on 6 December 1240. The majority of the population was killed, and the city suffered catastrophic destruction (Koshelev, 2004, pp. 92–93; Tikhomirov, 1965, p. 90; Vernadsky, 2015, p. 73).

Following the conquest of Kiev, the Mongols overran the Galician Principality, forcing Prince Daniel to flee into Hungary (Grousset, 2015, p. 274). The Mongol armies then expanded their campaigns into Poland, Silesia, Moravia, and Hungary. Mongol cavalry devastated large parts of Poland and achieved a decisive victory over a combined German-Polish-Teutonic force at the Battle of Legnica in 1241. Shortly thereafter, they invaded Hungary and defeated King Béla IV at the Battle of Mohi, pursuing him as far as the Dalmatian coast. Mongol detachments also conducted raids into Austrian territories (Cahun, 2013, pp. 288–301; Roux, 2014, p. 302).

However, the death of Ögedei Khan on 11 December 1241 dramatically altered the political situation within the Mongol Empire (Rashid al-Din, 1995, pp. 673–674). The succession crisis that followed compelled the Mongol leadership to suspend further western expansion. Consequently, Batu Khan gradually withdrew his forces from Central Europe, returning through Bulgaria and the northern Black Sea region before reestablishing his headquarters along the lower Volga during the winter of 1242–1243 (Grousset, 2015, p. 276).

From a geopolitical perspective, the campaigns of 1237–1241 fundamentally transformed the political order of Eastern Europe. The Russian principalities—including Ryazan, Suzdal, Tver, Kiev, and Galicia—were incorporated into the tributary and political system of the Golden Horde. This dependency would continue for more than two centuries and remained institutionally significant until the late fifteenth century. The khans of the Golden Horde exercised direct authority over the appointment and removal of Russian princes, who were required to travel to the Horde's court on the lower Volga in order to receive formal confirmation of their political legitimacy (Grousset, 2015, p. 394).

One of the earliest Russian rulers to recognize Batu Khan's authority was Grand Prince Yaroslav of Vladimir, who appeared before Batu in 1243 and was acknowledged as the senior prince among the Rus' rulers. Likewise, in 1250, Prince Daniel of Galicia traveled to seek Batu's approval and confirmation of his authority (Müller, 1963, pp. 55–56; Tikhomirov, 1965, p. 90; Grousset, 2015, p. 395). These developments marked the institutional consolidation of Golden Horde supremacy over the Russian principalities and laid the foundations for the political relationship that would shape Eastern European history throughout the following centuries.

5.2. Political Conditions in the Golden Horde During the Final Years of Jani Beg Khan's Reign (1342–1357)

Although the reign of Jani Beg Khan, who succeeded Özbeğ Khan in 1342, is generally associated with the continuation of Golden Horde political strength, signs of internal decline had already begun to emerge during the later years of his rule. One of Jani Beg's major geopolitical achievements was the temporary resolution of the long-standing Ilkhanid–Golden Horde rivalry over Azerbaijan. In 1356, Jani Beg launched a major military campaign into Azerbaijan with an army reportedly numbering three hundred thousand troops (Remzi, 2017, pp. 388–389). Following the fragmentation of the Ilkhanid state, he defeated Malik Ashraf of the Chobanid dynasty near Ujan and captured the city of Tabriz, thereby establishing temporary Golden Horde authority over Azerbaijan (Kazvini, 1990, pp. 27–29).

However, this political success proved short-lived. In 1357, Jani Beg returned to the Golden Horde capital of Sarai-Berke, leaving his son Berdibek in Tabriz with a force of fifty thousand troops (Kazvini, 1990, p. 30). Upon returning to the capital, Jani Beg became entangled in political intrigues involving Emir Toğlubay of the Kangli tribe, who had gained substantial influence within the Golden Horde elite.

According to Persian and Russian historical accounts, Toğlubay secretly informed Berdibek that his father was near death and urged him to return immediately to Sarai. Although Jani Beg had indeed fallen ill, he subsequently recovered. Nevertheless, Toğlubay, fearing exposure, organized a conspiracy that culminated in the assassination of Jani Beg within his own encampment. Berdibek was immediately proclaimed khan, while those who refused to swear allegiance were executed (Natanzi, 1941, pp. 128–129).

Russian chronicles similarly describe these events as the beginning of severe political disorder within the Golden Horde. The *Nikonovskaya Letopis'* reports that Toğlubay persuaded Berdibek to seize the throne by overthrowing his father and subsequently assisted in organizing the assassination. After ascending the throne, Berdibek reportedly ordered the execution of twelve of his brothers in order to consolidate power (Bychkov, 1885, p. 229; Serbina, 1982, p. 72). These events marked the beginning of the dynastic instability and political fragmentation that would later culminate in the period known as the “Great Troubles” within the Golden Horde.

5.3. Political Conditions in the Golden Horde During the Reign of Berdibek Khan and the Emergence of the “Great Troubles” (Bulkak) Period

The assassination of Jani Beg Khan marked a decisive turning point in the political history of the Golden Horde. The accession of Berdibek Khan did not receive unanimous support among the military aristocracy and the influential emirial factions surrounding the court. As a result, the death of Jani Beg rapidly accelerated centrifugal tendencies within the Golden Horde and intensified internal political fragmentation. Competing feudal groups and military elites began to pursue their own political ambitions, contributing to the gradual destabilization of centralized authority.

The reign of Berdibek Khan was characterized by growing dissatisfaction among the military aristocracy. Eventually, Berdibek himself was overthrown and killed by one of his rivals, Kulpa Khan. According to several written sources, Berdibek ruled for approximately three years. However, numismatic evidence suggests that his reign may have lasted closer to four years, extending from 1357 to approximately 1361. Coins minted in Gulistan between 1359 and 1360 and in New Sarai during 1360–1361 indicate the continuation of Berdibek’s political authority beyond the traditionally accepted chronology (Savelyev, 1858, pp. 197–199).

The political crisis initiated during Berdibek’s reign evolved into the prolonged period commonly referred to in historiography as the “Great Troubles” (*Bulkak*), a phase of dynastic instability and political fragmentation that lasted for more than two decades and fundamentally transformed the political structure of the Golden Horde. Between 1359 and 1379, continuous succession struggles and violent conflicts among rival khan claimants severely weakened the military, administrative, and political cohesion of the state.

During this period, more than twenty-five claimants reportedly ascended the throne in various regions of the Golden Horde, each issuing coins in his own name as a symbol of sovereign legitimacy. This fragmentation significantly influenced the geopolitical environment of Eastern Europe, affecting not only the Russian principalities but also neighboring powers such as the Kingdom of Poland, the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, Wallachia, and Moldavia.

Yakubovskiy emphasizes that the fragmented political structure of this period can best be understood through the observations of the historian P. Savelyev. According to Savelyev, coins minted in 1361 simultaneously carried the names of multiple rulers—including Berdibek, Khidr, Timur Khwaja, Ordumelik, and Kildi Beg—demonstrating the existence of overlapping claims to political authority within the Golden Horde (Savelyev, 1857, pp. 199–201; Yakubovskiy, 2021, pp. 115–117). Such numismatic evidence provides important insight into the collapse of centralized rule and the regionalization of political power.

Grekov and Yakubovskiy similarly describe the period between 1360 and 1380 as one of unprecedented political chaos. According to their interpretation, the Golden Horde witnessed the emergence of more than twenty-five rival khans before the eventual rise of Tokhtamysh Khan. Although many of these rulers controlled only limited territories within the former Jochid Ulus, each attempted to assert sovereign legitimacy through the minting of coins and the establishment of local political authority (Grekov & Yakubovskiy, 1950, p. 272; Yakubovskiy, 2021, p. 116).

Interestingly, Yakubovskiy further observes that Russian chronicles often provide more detailed accounts of the internal conflicts of the Golden Horde than many contemporary Islamic historical sources. The Russian chronicles portray the rapid succession of rulers and the violent factionalism within the Horde as evidence of political disintegration and weakening imperial authority.

The political rise of Kulpa Khan remains historically ambiguous, and the identity of the factions supporting his accession is not entirely clear. Russian chronicles nevertheless confirm that Kulpa seized power after eliminating Berdibek and relied heavily upon the support of particular military factions (Bychkov, 1859, p. 10). Numismatic evidence demonstrates that coins were minted in his name in Gulistan, New Sarai, Azak, and Khwarazm between 1359 and 1360, suggesting that he exercised control over substantial territories, at least temporarily (Adrianov, 1910, pp. 188–189).

However, Kulpa's rule proved short-lived. During the same years, another claimant—identified in Russian chronicles as Navruz Khan—began minting coins in Azak, Gulistan, and Sarai-Berke, indicating the rapid territorial erosion of Kulpa's authority. Navruz himself was eventually overthrown and killed in 1361.

During the period of political fragmentation and dynastic instability known as the *Bulqaq* era in the Golden Horde, the following figures emerged as claimants to the throne of the Golden Horde: Kulna (Kulpa), Nawruz, Khidr, Timur-Khoja, Ordu-Malik (Orda-Shah), Mamai, Abdullah, Keldibek, Mir-Pulat, Murid, Bulat-Timur, Pulad-Khoja, Aziz-Shaykh, Haji-Cherkes, Hasan, Alp-Khoja, Qaghanbek, Arabshah, Muhammad Bulak, Tulunbeg, Urus, Tokta-Qiya, Timur-Malik, and Tokhtamysh. In addition to these contenders, Persian historical sources also identify Bazarçi-Oghlan, Sasi-Buqa, Tughlugh-Timur, and Qutluq-Khoja as rival claimants to the khanate (Shāmī, 1941, pp. 105–106; Yazdī, 1941, p. 146).

The *Nikonovskaya Letopis'* provides an especially vivid description of these events. According to the chronicle, Khidr Khan advanced from beyond the Ural River with military forces and secured the support of influential Volga elites, who subsequently betrayed Navruz Khan. Following secret political agreements, Navruz and his wife Taydula were executed together with several loyal nobles of the Golden Horde aristocracy (Bychkov, 1885, p. 232; Koshelev, 2000, pp. 69–70; Presnyakov, 1913, p. 100).

The prolonged instability within the Golden Horde proved highly advantageous for the Russian principalities. As rival khans increasingly depended upon external military and diplomatic support, various factions within the Horde sought alliances with Moscow, Suzdal, and Lithuania. Consequently, the Russian princes gradually expanded their political influence by exploiting the internal divisions of the Golden Horde (Yakubovskiy, 2021, p. 117).

5.4. Emir Mamay and Golden Horde–Russian Relations During the Reign of Abdullah Khan

The political fragmentation of the Golden Horde during the 1360s facilitated the emergence of powerful military aristocrats who sought to dominate the political structure of the state despite lacking direct Chinggisid lineage. Among the most influential of these figures was Emir Mamay, one of the most prominent military commanders and political actors of the late Golden Horde period.

According to Ibn Khaldun, Mamay had already attained considerable political influence during the reign of Berdibek Khan, managing many of the affairs of the state and establishing dynastic connections with the ruling family through marriage (Ibn Khaldun, 1884, p. 389). Nevertheless, Kafalı, relying upon the account of Abdülğaffar Kırımı's *Umdetü'l-Abbâr*, argues that Mamay was married not to Berdibek's daughter, but rather to his sister Sulu Haniş, the daughter of Jani Beg Khan (Kırımı, 2014, p. 88).

Eastern historical sources provide relatively limited information concerning Mamay's early political activities. Consequently, Russian chronicles remain among the principal historical sources for reconstructing the political developments of the Golden Horde during the 1360s. The *Nikonovskaya Letopis'* vividly describes Mamay's seizure of power during the reign of Timur Khwaja.

According to the chronicle tradition, Timur Khwaja's rule generated considerable hostility among influential Golden Horde emirs from the very beginning of his reign. Mamay subsequently rebelled against Timur Khwaja and proclaimed Abdullah Khan—a descendant of Özbeg Khan—as ruler, governing in his name while consolidating military authority for himself. The chronicle describes a major conflict within the Horde during this period, culminating in Timur Khwaja's flight across the Volga River and eventual death (Buganov, 1978, p. 114; Müller, 1963, p. 181; Nasonov, 1962, p. 67; Şeffe, 1910, p. 113).

Initially, Mamay even attempted to mint coins under the title “The Just Khan Mamay.” However, his claim to sovereignty failed to achieve broad political legitimacy because he did not belong to the Chinggisid dynasty, whose lineage remained essential for formal khal authority within the political traditions of the Golden Horde (Fren, 1832, p. 20). Consequently, Mamay abandoned direct claims to the khal title and instead governed through the nominal authority of Abdullah Khan, who ruled between 1362 and 1370 (Bychkov, 1885, p. 233).

As a result, Emir Mamay effectively established political control over the western territories of the Golden Horde in the western Dasht-i Qipchaq, maintaining dominance in the region between 1361 and 1381. During this period, the Russian principalities carefully monitored developments within the Horde. Numismatic evidence from the years 1360–1363 demonstrates the fragmentation of political authority throughout the Volga region and western territories of the Jochid Ulus.

Russian chroniclers vividly described this dual structure of authority. According to the chronicles, two rival khans simultaneously existed within the Golden Horde: Abdullah Khan, supported by Mamay and his military forces, and Murid Khan, backed by factions based in Sarai. The chronicles emphasize the continuous hostility and warfare between these rival political camps (Bychkov, 1885, p. 233).

Despite the scale of internal fragmentation, by the late 1360s Mamay and his protégé Abdullah Khan emerged as the dominant political force in the western Golden Horde. Their political ascendancy represented one of the most significant developments in the late history

of the Golden Horde and profoundly influenced the subsequent evolution of Golden Horde–Russian relations during the second half of the fourteenth century.

5.5. Golden Horde–Russian Relations During the Reign of Emir Mamay and Muhammad Bulak Khan

Following the death of Abdullah Khan in 1370, Emir Mamay installed another Jochid prince, known in the sources as Mamat Sultan or Muhammad Bulak Khan, upon the throne of the western Golden Horde. The *Nikonovskaya Letopis'* records that in 1370 “the Horde emir Mamay elevated a new khan named Mamat Sultan to the throne of the Horde” (Platonov, 1897, pp. 12–13). Numismatic evidence demonstrates that the ruler supported by Mamay appeared under various titulatures, including Ghiyath al-Din Muhammad Khan, Muhammad Khan, and Ghiyath al-Din Bulak Khan. Coins bearing his name were minted in Ordu, Hajji Tarkhan, New Majar, and New Crimea. Significantly, however, no coins attributed to him have been discovered in either Sarai-Berke or Gulistan (Markov, 1896, pp. 474–476).

This absence of coinage from the principal political centers of the Golden Horde strongly suggests that, despite Mamay’s military and political successes, he never succeeded in establishing secure and lasting control over Sarai-Berke, the symbolic and administrative capital of the Jochid state. Indeed, the political fragmentation of the Golden Horde during the 1360s and 1370s increasingly revealed the growing importance of the eastern Jochid territories, particularly the Blue Horde (*Gök-Orda*), in shaping the political destiny of the wider Ulus of Jochi.

As Yakubovskiy observes, many of the khans competing for authority during this period—including Khidr Khan, Timur Khwaja, Murid Khan, and Aziz Khan—originated from the Blue Horde branch of the Jochid dynasty (Yakubovskiy, 2021, p. 121). This pattern demonstrates the active political involvement of the Blue Horde aristocracy and court elites in the internal struggles of the Golden Horde during the second half of the fourteenth century. By the 1370s, eastern political intervention in western Golden Horde affairs intensified even further, fundamentally reshaping the balance of power within the steppe empire.

The political instability of the Golden Horde was carefully monitored by the Russian principalities. The most politically perceptive princes increasingly understood that the weakening of Horde authority created opportunities not necessarily for complete liberation, but at least for reducing the burden of Mongol political domination. According to Yakubovskiy, attentive examination of the Russian chronicles reveals that beneath the apparent chaos of local feudal conflicts and military struggles, a broader process of political consolidation was taking place under the leadership of the Moscow prince Dmitrii Ivanovich (1362–1389).

Yakubovskiy argues that during the 1360s and 1370s, the Russian principalities gradually united against the predatory policies of the Golden Horde, thereby inflicting increasingly severe political damage upon Mongol authority despite the continued military strength of the Horde itself (Yakubovskiy, 2021, p. 122). Within this process, Dmitrii Ivanovich—later known as Dmitrii Donskoi—played a decisive role in strengthening Moscow’s political authority and promoting the gradual unification of the Russian lands.

Nevertheless, it is important to emphasize that the strengthening of the Moscow Principality during this period resulted not solely from the internal capabilities of the Russian principalities, but also from the administrative weakness, dynastic fragmentation, and political anarchy that characterized the *Bulkak* period within the Golden Horde.

5.6. Relations Between Emir Mamay and the Moscow Principality

When Dmitrii Ivanovich ascended the Moscow throne in 1362, he was only eleven years old. Many contemporaries expected that his youth would weaken the political consolidation initiated by his father and grandfather. However, Dmitrii soon demonstrated considerable political skill and strategic foresight. Relying upon the institutional foundations established by his predecessors and supported by experienced advisers, Dmitrii pursued policies aimed not merely at strengthening Moscow itself, but at consolidating broader Russian political unity.

The Moscow court maintained close awareness of developments within the Golden Horde, carefully following the frequent changes of khans, internal rivalries, and political conflicts emerging in Sarai. Dmitrii understood that before direct confrontation with the Tatars could become possible, Moscow first needed to secure its own political position within the fragmented Russian political landscape.

During this period, Moscow pursued three principal strategic objectives. First, Dmitrii sought to acquire the Vladimir Principality, which Murid Khan had granted to Dmitrii Konstantinovich of Suzdal in an effort to weaken Moscow’s position. Control of Vladimir and the Volga trade routes was essential not only economically but also militarily in any future confrontation with the Golden Horde. Second, Moscow aimed to subordinate the Principality of Tver in order to expand its political and military resources. Third, Dmitrii attempted to establish influence over the Ryazan Principality, whose geopolitical position along the southern frontier rendered it strategically vital.

Ultimately, all three objectives served a broader political aim: the consolidation of the fragmented Russian principalities under Moscow’s leadership in preparation for resistance against Golden Horde domination.

In his relations with the Golden Horde, Dmitrii pursued a highly pragmatic and flexible policy. Whenever possible, he sought to strengthen Moscow's position through diplomatic maneuvering among rival Horde factions. During the 1370s, Mamay's sphere of effective political control extended as far as the borders of the Ryazan Principality, effectively rendering the Ryazan princes dependent upon Mamay's authority. At the same time, Mamay consolidated his own political position by securing control over Crimea and utilizing the region's considerable economic resources (Nasonov, 1940, pp. 123–124).

The political fragmentation of the Golden Horde simultaneously created favorable opportunities for Lithuania. Exploiting Horde weakness, Grand Duke Algirdas of Lithuania launched campaigns toward the Bug River region in 1362 and defeated Tatar forces at the Battle of Blue Waters (*Siniye Vody*). The Golden Horde forces were reportedly commanded by Kutlug Bey, Hacı Bey, and Dmitrii (Tolochko, 2013, p. 324; Antonovich, 1878, pp. 149–152; Grushevsky, 1955, pp. 79–80). As a result of this victory, Lithuania incorporated the strategically important Podolia region, substantially strengthening Lithuanian political influence during the second half of the fourteenth century.

Following 1365, Algirdas also succeeded in bringing Kiev under Lithuanian control, thereby transforming Lithuania into one of the most powerful political entities in Eastern Europe (Yakubovskiy, 2021, p. 123). However, despite his military successes against the Golden Horde, Algirdas remained unwilling to cooperate fully with Moscow. Fearing the growing power of Dmitrii Ivanovich, he instead sought tactical accommodation with Mamay in order to counterbalance Moscow's political expansion.

At this stage, the core Volga territories and the principal capitals of the Golden Horde—including Sarai-Berke and Sarai-Batu—remained under the control of Murid Khan, one of Mamay's principal rivals. During Murid's reign, northern Khwarazm, including the city of Urgench, effectively separated from the Golden Horde and came under the independent authority of the Sufi dynasty associated with the Qongirat tribal confederation (Safargaliev, 1960, pp. 120–121).

Given the simultaneous emergence of rival khans such as Kildi Beg, who minted coins in New Sarai between 1360 and 1362, the authority of the Sarai-based khans over Moscow was increasingly weakened. Exploiting this fragmentation, Dmitrii Ivanovich began asserting claims to the Vladimir Principality with Mamay's indirect support.

Murid Khan, seeking to undermine Moscow, formally confirmed the rights of Dmitrii Konstantinovich of Suzdal to the Vladimir throne (Tikhomirov, 1965, p. 113; Koshelev, 2000, pp. 73–74). Yet the balance of power between the two Dmitriis increasingly favored Moscow. Dmitrii Ivanovich not only compelled the Suzdal prince to recognize his authority over Vladimir, but also persuaded him to abandon Murid and temporarily acknowledge Mamay's supremacy. As compensation, Dmitrii granted Nizhnii Novgorod to the Suzdal prince, thereby securing Moscow's first major political objective (Yakubovskiy, 2021, p. 123).

According to A. N. Nasonov, the first attempts to unite the Russian lands around Moscow encountered direct resistance through Tatar military raids. When Pulat-Timur attacked the Nizhnii Novgorod Principality after capturing Bulgar, he initially met strong resistance and was forced to retreat to the Horde, although he was later killed by Aziz Khan in 1366–1367 (Nasonov, 1940, p. 126; Tikhomirov, 1965, p. 116).

Despite periods of tactical cooperation, relations between Mamay and Moscow gradually deteriorated. Both sides increasingly viewed one another with suspicion. Mamay feared the growing political influence and military strength of Moscow, while Dmitrii Ivanovich recognized Mamay as the principal obstacle preventing the liberation of the Russian principalities from Golden Horde domination.

Although political instability within the Horde continued throughout the 1370s, Mamay nevertheless remained the single most powerful political actor within the western Golden Horde. Consequently, Dmitrii's efforts to consolidate Russian political unity encountered strong resistance from Mamay, who actively supported separatist tendencies among rival Russian princes, particularly the rulers of Tver and Ryazan.

Table 1. Major Political and Military Developments in Golden Horde–Russian Relations During the Mamay Period (1361–1380)

Year	Event	Principal Actors	Historical Significance
1361	Emir Mamay rebelled against Timur Khwaja and established political control over the western Golden Horde through Abdullah Khan	Emir Mamay; Timur Khwaja; Abdullah Khan	Marked the beginning of Mamay's de facto political dominance in the western Jochid territories
1362	Battle of Blue Waters	Algirdas of Lithuania; Golden Horde forces	Demonstrated the weakening of Golden Horde authority in western regions and strengthened Lithuanian influence
1362–1370	Reign of Abdullah Khan under Mamay's political supervision	Abdullah Khan; Emir Mamay	Consolidated Mamay's influence despite his lack of Chinggisid legitimacy

1370	Installation of Muhammad Bulak Khan by Mamay	Emir Mamay; Muhammad Bulak Khan	Reinforced Mamay's strategy of ruling through puppet khans
1373–1378	Intensification of succession struggles in Sarai and Volga regions	Arabshah; Urus Khan; Hacı Çerkes; Aybek Khan	Reflected the fragmentation of centralized Golden Horde authority
1374	Temporary peace agreement between Mamay and Dmitrii Ivanovich	Emir Mamay; Dmitrii Ivanovich	Represented a tactical political accommodation amid escalating tensions
1376	Moscow-Suzdal campaign against Bulgar	Dmitrii Ivanovich; Dmitrii of Suzdal	Demonstrated Moscow's growing military initiative against Horde-controlled territories
1377	Defeat of Russian forces at the Pyana River	Arabshah; Russian principalities	Exposed military vulnerabilities among the Russian principalities
1378	Battle of the Vozha River	Mirza Begich; Dmitrii Ivanovich	First major military victory of Moscow over Golden Horde forces
1380	Battle of Kulikovo	Emir Mamay; Dmitrii Donskoi; Jogaila	Symbolized the emergence of Moscow as a major political and military center in Eastern Europe
1380	Defeat of Mamay at Kulikovo	Emir Mamay	Severely weakened Mamay's political legitimacy and military authority
1381	Rise of Tokhtamysh Khan	Tokhtamysh Khan	Initiated the temporary reunification of the Golden Horde

Table 2. Comparative Historiographical Interpretations of Emir Mamay and the Battle of Kulikovo

Historiographical Tradition	Representation of Emir Mamay	Interpretation of the Kulikovo Battle	Dominant Methodological Orientation
Medieval Russian Chronicles	Usurper, enemy of Orthodoxy, illegitimate ruler	Sacred victory of Russian unity against foreign domination	Religious-political narrative
Russian Imperial Historiography	Symbol of Horde decline and political fragmentation	Foundational stage in the rise of centralized Russian statehood	National-state historiography
Soviet Historiography	Representative of feudal fragmentation and dynastic crisis	Socio-political turning point within broader class and state transformations	Marxist and socio-economic analysis
Turkish and Tatar Scholarship	Powerful military-political leader attempting to preserve western Golden Horde authority	Conflict reflecting internal Jochid political fragmentation rather than "national liberation"	Steppe political history and dynastic analysis
Contemporary Western Scholarship	Regional power broker within a fragmented Eurasian imperial system	Complex geopolitical confrontation shaped by competing claims to legitimacy and regional power	Comparative Eurasian and transregional analysis
Modern Discourse-Oriented Historiography	Politically constructed "anti-hero" shaped by later Russian historical memory	Symbolic narrative of identity formation and political mythmaking	Discourse analysis and historical memory studies

Source: Prepared by the author based on Russian chronicles, Persian historical sources, and contemporary historiographical scholarship.

Neither Mikhail Aleksandrovich of Tver nor Oleg of Ryazan succeeded in transcending their narrow regional interests in favor of broader Russian political unification under Moscow. Supported by Mamay and occasionally by Lithuania, they repeatedly attempted to weaken Moscow's growing authority. Nevertheless, despite the anti-Moscow coalition involving Mamay, Lithuania, Tver, and Ryazan—including the Moscow-Tver conflict of 1375—these efforts ultimately failed. Moscow's political power and moral authority among the Russian principalities continued to expand steadily (Yakubovskiy, 2021, p. 124).

In 1373, forces from Ryazan attacked territories controlled by the Golden Horde emirs Tagay and Segiz in the upper Volga region. Mamay immediately responded by launching a military campaign against Ryazan. However, Moscow intervened on behalf of its Ryazan ally. In 1374, a temporary peace agreement was concluded between Mamay and Dmitrii Ivanovich.

The fragile peace soon collapsed. In the same year, Mamay's envoy Saray-Aka was captured in Nizhnii Novgorod, and in 1375 he was killed there. Mamay responded swiftly by dispatching military forces against the Nizhnii Novgorod territories. The Tatar forces devastated the Pyana and Kish regions as well as the city of Novosil (Şeffe, 1910, p. 118; Poçekayev, 2017, p. 110).

At the same time, Mamay faced simultaneous conflicts against Hacı-Cherkes, Urus Khan, and the Russian principalities. In 1376, Dmitrii of Moscow and Dmitrii of Suzdal launched an expedition against the city of Bulgar under the nominal authority of the Sarai khan Kağanbek, compelling the local ruler Hasan to recognize Sarai's supremacy. This episode clearly demonstrates Dmitrii Ivanovich's strategic attempt to oppose Mamay while outwardly maintaining loyalty to rival Horde rulers (Poçekayev, 2017, p. 111; Presnyakov, 1913, pp. 117–118; Şeffe, 1910, p. 118).

Ultimately, in order to prevent Moscow from consolidating the Russian lands, Mamay needed not only to suppress internal disorder within the Golden Horde but also to reunify the entire Jochid Ulus under his authority. Despite temporary successes—including control over Bulgar, Hajji Tarkhan, and parts of the North Caucasus—Mamay never succeeded in securing the agriculturally rich Volga basin and the principal urban centers constituting the economic core of the Golden Horde (Yakubovskiy, 2021, p. 125). This structural limitation would ultimately undermine Mamay's political ambitions and contribute to the decisive conflicts that followed during the final decades of the fourteenth century.

5.7. The Struggle of the Blue Horde Khans for the Throne of Sarai

During the period preceding the emergence of Tokhtamysh Khan as a dominant political figure in the Volga region, the political instability of the Golden Horde not only persisted but intensified significantly. A Russian chronicle entry dated to the year 6881 (1373) briefly but vividly describes the deteriorating political situation within the Horde: “During this year disturbances arose in the Horde, and many Horde princes killed one another; countless Tatars perished, and thus the wrath of God became manifest” (Platonov, 1897, p. 19). Although concise, this chronicle entry reflects the beginning of a second and more destructive phase of internal conflict, characterized by the direct intervention of the Blue Horde (*Gök-Orda*) branch of the Jochid dynasty in the political affairs of the western Golden Horde.

During the first half of the 1370s, several rival khans simultaneously competed for political supremacy in the Volga basin. Among them were Tulunbek Khanum, who minted coins in New Sarai between 1371 and 1372; Ilban Khan, who issued coinage in Saraychik between 1374 and 1375; and Alp Khoja Khan, who likewise minted coins in Saraychik. By 1375, additional political contenders—including Hacı Çerkes Khan, Urus Khan, and Aybek Khan—had begun asserting authority across various regions of the Golden Horde (Ibn Khaldun, 1884, pp. 389–390).

According to Ibn Khaldun, Hacı Çerkes succeeded in capturing Hajji Tarkhan and subsequently advanced toward Sarai itself, temporarily extending his authority over the capital region (Ibn Khaldun, 1884, p. 391). Meanwhile, until the rise of Tokhtamysh Khan in the Volga basin, Mirza Arabshah remained politically active in New Sarai between 1373 and 1378 (Markov, 1896, p. 477).

The *Nikonovskaya Letopis'* provides particularly valuable information concerning Arabshah's activities. According to the chronicle, in 1377 “a prince named Arabshah came from the Blue Horde into the Volga Horde of Mamay. Prince Arabshah was extremely cruel and a powerful warrior; despite his youth, he achieved many successes and attacked Nizhnii Novgorod” (Anonymous, 1851, p. 236; Adrianov, 1910, pp. 197–198).

In 1377, Arabshah launched a military campaign against Nizhnii Novgorod. Mordvin princes reportedly informed him that the Russian princes and their forces were engaged in festivities near the Pyana River. Exploiting this opportunity, Arabshah suddenly attacked the Russian forces while they rested along the banks of the Pyana River near its confluence with the Sura. The result was a catastrophic defeat for the Russian side, with the majority of the forces annihilated and only a small number managing to escape.

Following this victory, Arabshah advanced toward the undefended city of Nizhnii Novgorod. A substantial portion of the population fled upstream along the Volga River, while the remaining inhabitants were captured or killed. Tatar forces subsequently plundered and

burned the city before withdrawing from the region (Anonymous, 1851, pp. 236–237; Koshelev, 2000, pp. 119–122; Adrianov, 1910, p. 198).

Yakubovskiy summarizes this period by emphasizing Mamay's inability to establish comprehensive political authority over the entire Golden Horde despite sustained efforts to do so. Although Mamay temporarily secured control over Hajji Tarkhan and Bulgar, he failed to dominate the economically critical Volga basin, which largely remained under the authority of rival khans associated with the Blue Horde branch of the Jochid dynasty. Even though these rival rulers frequently occupied the throne for only brief periods, they nevertheless prevented Mamay from consolidating political control over the central territories of the Jochid Ulus (Yakubovskiy, 2021, p. 127). Consequently, Mamay never succeeded in politically reunifying the Golden Horde under his authority.

5.8. Emir Mamay's Wars Against the Moscow Principality

According to Yakubovskiy, Dmitrii Ivanovich achieved growing political success during this period not merely through military initiatives, but also through the increasing moral and symbolic authority he acquired among the Russian principalities. Moscow's prestige continued to expand steadily, and Mamay increasingly understood that direct confrontation between Moscow and the Golden Horde had become inevitable.

Mamay observed that the Russian principalities had begun reducing the tribute payments traditionally sent to the Horde. Compared with the revenues collected during the reigns of Özbek Khan and Jani Beg Khan several decades earlier, the decline in tribute income had become increasingly visible. Mamay therefore recognized that Moscow sought either complete liberation from Golden Horde domination or, at minimum, a substantial weakening of vassal obligations.

Under these circumstances, Mamay began preparing for large-scale war against Moscow. Unlike earlier Tatar raids conducted primarily for plunder, the forthcoming campaigns aimed to decisively weaken the Russian principalities and restore effective Horde authority over the region. Yakubovskiy interprets Mamay's military expedition of 1378 against Nizhnii Novgorod and Moscow as a preparatory stage for a larger confrontation. Although Mamay's forces succeeded in devastating Nizhnii Novgorod, they failed to capture Moscow itself (Yakubovskiy, 2021, p. 127).

In 1378, Mamay dispatched a military force under the command of Mirza Begich against the Moscow Principality. On 11 August 1378, Russian and Tatar forces clashed along the Vozha River. This battle resulted in a significant Russian victory (Anonymous, 1851, p. 237; Serbin, 1982, p. 34; Koshelev, 2007, p. 251). Tatar losses were substantial, and the surviving forces were compelled to retreat. Several prominent commanders—including Hacı Bey, Koverga, Karabaluk, Kostrov, and Mirza Begich himself—were killed during the battle (Koshelev, 2000, p. 134).

Mamay retaliated by launching attacks against the Ryazan Principality, capturing Pereyasavl and devastating surrounding territories before withdrawing (Müller, 1963, p. 81). The defeat at the Vozha River deeply affected Mamay psychologically and politically. Later chronicle narratives describing the Battle of Kulikovo portray Mamay lamenting the losses suffered at Vozha while his advisers attempted to encourage him to seek revenge. According to these accounts, his advisers urged him to gather new military forces by recruiting Franks (Genoese), Circassians, Alans, and other mercenary contingents in order to restore the honor of the Golden Horde and avenge the deaths of his commanders (Platonov, 1897, p. 46).

For Mamay, overcoming the humiliation of the Vozha defeat became essential to preserving political legitimacy and military prestige within the fragmented Golden Horde. Confident in eventual success, he also believed that the broader geopolitical situation favored his ambitions. The Lithuanian ruler Jogaila (Jagiello), who feared Moscow's increasing power, reportedly promised military support to Mamay, while Oleg of Ryazan likewise reaffirmed his loyalty to the Horde leader.

In 1380, Mamay assembled a large and ethnically diverse military coalition composed of Turkic-Mongol nomadic forces as well as mercenary contingents. According to the chronicles, Mamay's army included Tatars, Kipchaks, Genoese mercenaries, Armenians, Burtas, Circassians, and Alans (Platonov, 1897, p. 47; Şeffe, 1910, pp. 124–125; Koshelev, 2000, pp. 139–140; Müller, 1963, p. 81).

In August 1380, Mamay advanced westward with this newly assembled army. After crossing the Volga River, he continued his march in the expectation of joining forces with Jogaila. Meanwhile, beginning on 15 August, troops from across the Russian principalities gathered at Kolomna under the leadership of Dmitrii Ivanovich. Ultimately, however, Mamay and Jogaila failed to unite their armies before the decisive confrontation.

On 8 September 1380, the opposing forces engaged in battle on the Kulikovo Field near the Don River and the Nepryadva River region (Fahreiddin, 2003, p. 65). The battle was exceptionally violent and resulted in devastating casualties on both sides. Throughout much of the engagement, the advantage shifted repeatedly between the Russian and Tatar forces. Early in the battle, Mamay's army appeared to hold the upper hand and even obtained opportunities to push the Russian forces back toward the Don River. Nevertheless, Mamay failed to exploit these advantages effectively.

Contemporary and later sources describe the battle in highly dramatic terms. According to one chronicle account, “everywhere the dead were visible; horses could scarcely move without stepping upon corpses, and soldiers killed one another not only with weapons but also with their bare hands” (Kloss, 2000, pp. 465–466). Russian sources report that nearly twenty Russian princes died during the battle alongside massive casualties among ordinary soldiers (Kloss, 2000, pp. 466–467). Some historical accounts estimate that combined losses may have approached two hundred thousand men, although such figures are likely exaggerated in accordance with medieval literary conventions (Fahreiddin, 2003, p. 65).

Yakubovskiy interprets Dmitrii Donskoi’s victory at Kulikovo as a turning point demonstrating that the Golden Horde could indeed be militarily defeated if the Russian principalities acted collectively. Nevertheless, he cautions against viewing the battle as the immediate collapse of Golden Horde authority. Despite the scale of the Russian victory, the Golden Horde remained politically and militarily capable of temporary recovery and continued to exercise considerable influence within Eastern Europe in the years that followed (Yakubovskiy, 2021, p. 130).



Figure 1. A. P. Bubnov’s painting titled *The Morning of the Battle of Kulikovo*.

<https://museum-kam.ru/raznoe-2/kartiny-kulikovskoj-bitvy-kulikovo-pole-12-kartin-pravmir.html>

Accessed February 10, 2026.

While Urus Khan energetically pursued expansionist policies within the Volga region, he simultaneously encountered a serious rival in the eastern territories of the Blue Horde in the person of the young Tokhtamysh. Tokhtamysh was the son of Toy Khoja Oghlan, a prominent and influential prince of the Blue Horde aristocracy who had governed the Mangyshlak region during the reign of Urus Khan. According to historical accounts, when Urus Khan convened a kurultai of state elites in order to discuss intervention in the political affairs of the Golden Horde, Toy Khoja strongly opposed these ambitions. As a consequence of his resistance and perceived insubordination, he was executed on the orders of Urus Khan. His son Tokhtamysh, however, survived and emerged as a highly ambitious, capable, and politically gifted young prince (Natanzi, 1941, pp. 131–132).

Following his father’s execution, Tokhtamysh justifiably regarded his own position within the Blue Horde as increasingly dangerous. In 1375, seeking protection from Urus Khan’s political intrigues and fearing for his life, he fled to Samarkand and entered the court of Timur (Tamerlane), the young but rapidly rising ruler of Transoxiana. At the time of Tokhtamysh’s arrival, Timur was reportedly campaigning near Kochkar in the upper basin of the Chu River (Yezdi, 2019, p. 117).

For Timur, the possibility of a politically reunified and militarily strengthened Golden Horde represented a substantial geopolitical threat. Consequently, he sought to establish influence within the Blue Horde and maintain a loyal vassal ruler in the eastern Jochid territories. Recognizing Tokhtamysh's political potential, Timur ordered that the young prince be received with exceptional honor and hospitality before returning toward Samarkand via Uzkend. According to Nizām al-Dīn Shāmī, Timur bestowed extensive gifts upon Tokhtamysh, including gold, livestock, military equipment, banners, horses, camels, weapons, luxurious fabrics, and a contingent of soldiers. Timur also granted Tokhtamysh authority over Otrar and Savran, although these territories remained under the control of Urus Khan and his sons and therefore still had to be conquered militarily (Şāmī, 1937, p. 74; Şāmī, 1987, p. 89; Yezdi, 2019, p. 118).

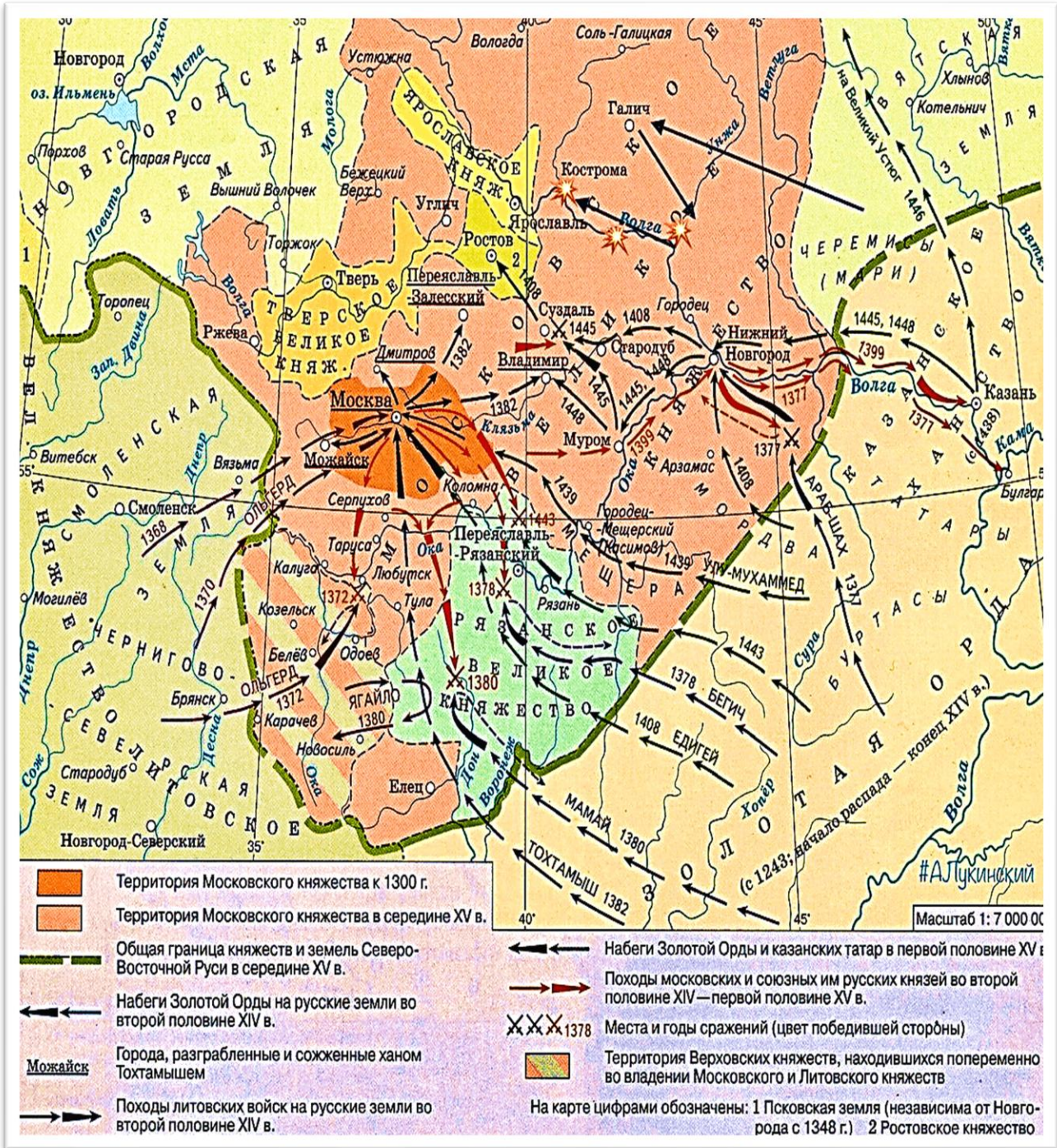


Figure 2. A map illustrating the military campaigns of Golden Horde rulers and commanders against the Russian principalities.

https://pikabu.ru/story/formirovanie_territorii_rossii_chast_17_13258134

Accessed February 11, 2026.

РОСТ МАМАЕВОЙ ОРДЫ. 1360–1380-е гг.



Figure 3. A map showing the territories of the Golden Horde controlled by Emir Mamay. https://pikabu.ru/story/velikaya_zamyatnaya_ili_igra_prestolov_poordyinski_5879684 Accessed February 8, 2026.

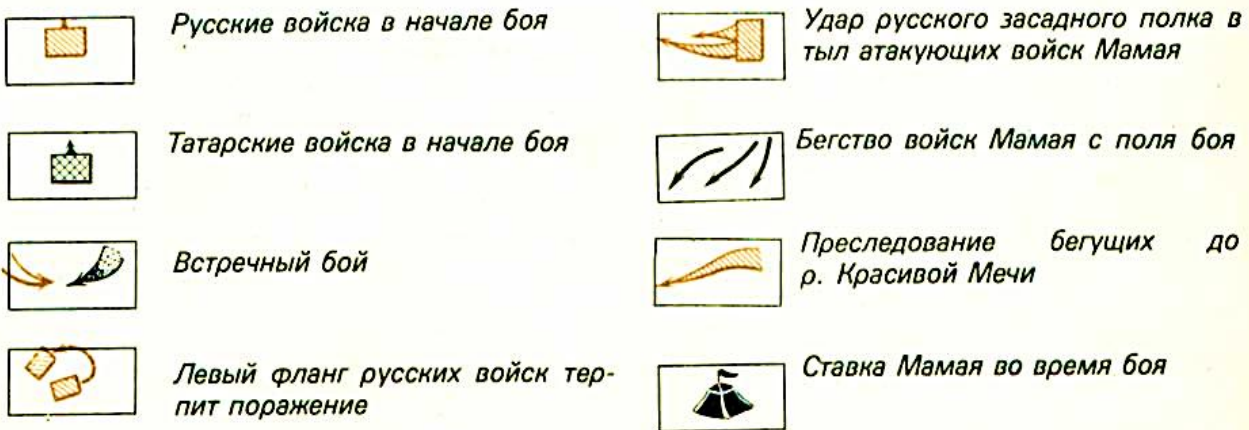
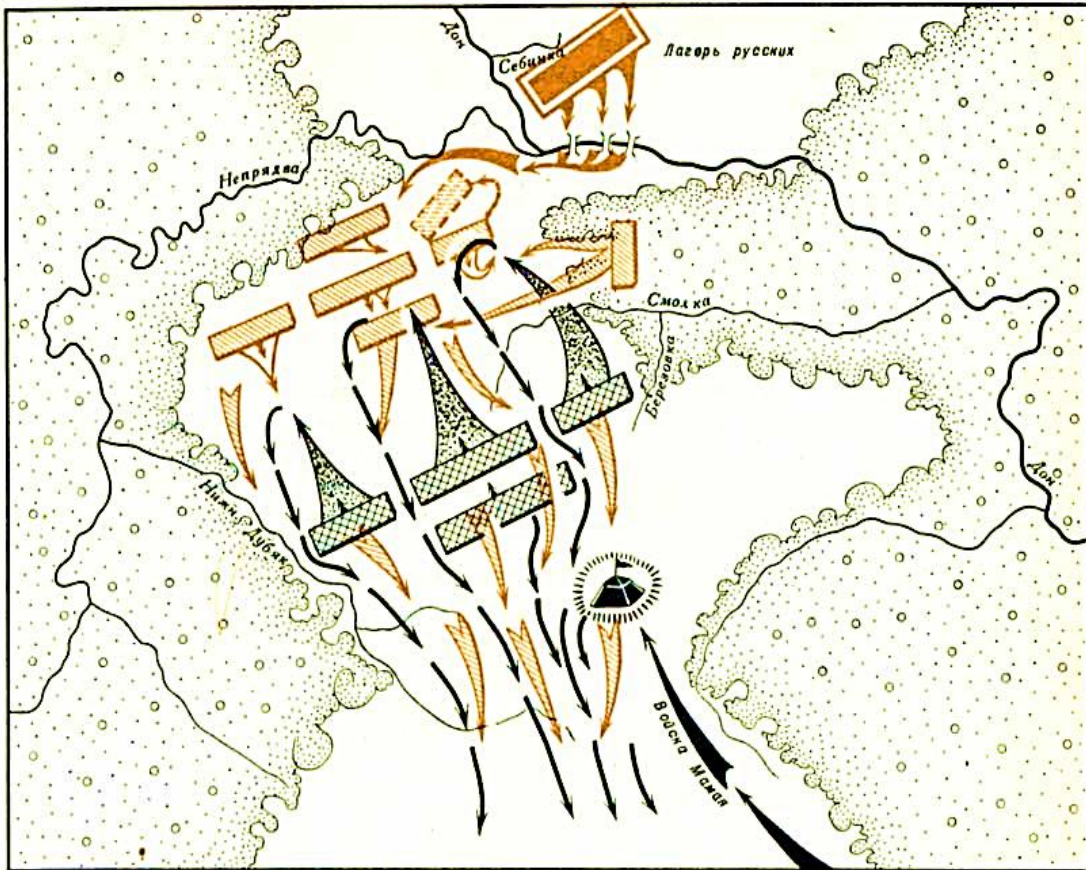


Figure 4. An illustration depicting the course of the Battle of Kulikovo (8 September 1380).

<https://www.rusempire.ru/knyazheskaya-rus/istoriya-knyazheskoj-rusi/1144-ob-edinenie-russkikh-zemel-vokrug-moskvy-nachalo-borby-za-sverzhenie-mongolo-tatarskogo-iga.html>

Accessed January 23, 2026.

The Urus Khan–Tokhtamysh Struggle for the Throne of the Blue Horde

According to several historical sources, Urus Khan ascended the throne of the Blue Horde (*Gök-Orda*) either in 1361 or, according to alternative chronologies, in 1368, subsequently proclaiming himself an independent ruler (Ötemiş-Hacı, 2014, p. 63). However, Urus Khan's ambitions extended far beyond the confines of the eastern Jochid territories. During assemblies convened among the aristocracy of the Blue Horde, he openly advocated intervention in the political affairs of the wider Golden Horde and sought to attract influential military commanders and regional feudal elites to his political faction. His broader objective was to reunify the fragmented Jochid Ulus

under his authority by politically consolidating both the eastern and western sectors of the Golden Horde into a single and powerful imperial structure.

With Timur's military assistance, Tokhtamysh launched two separate campaigns against Urus Khan and his sons between 1375 and 1377. Both expeditions, however, ended in defeat. In response, Timur himself undertook a direct military campaign against Urus Khan, with Tokhtamysh accompanying the army as guide and political ally. During the ensuing military confrontations, Urus Khan was severely wounded and died shortly thereafter in 1378 (Şāmī, 1937, pp. 76–77; Şami, 1987, pp. 90–91; Yezdi, 2019, pp. 119–120).

Urus Khan achieved considerable success in this endeavor. By approximately 1375, he had captured Hajji Tarkhan and expelled Hacı Çerkes from the region (Ibn Khaldun, 1884, p. 391). Advancing further along the Volga basin, Urus Khan moved toward Sarai, which at that time had fallen under the authority of Kari Khan, the son of Aybek. Between 1374 and 1375, Urus Khan succeeded in wresting Sarai from Kağanbek and immediately began minting coins in his own name as a visible symbol of sovereign legitimacy and political authority.

Following Urus Khan's death, the throne of the Blue Horde initially passed to his eldest son Toktakia. However, Toktakia died soon afterward and was succeeded by his brother Timur-Melik (1378–1379). Timur once again entrusted military command to Tokhtamysh, yet Tokhtamysh suffered a third defeat during the subsequent campaign. Nevertheless, Timur-Melik's increasing preoccupation with courtly pleasures and entertainment gradually weakened his political authority and military discipline.

According to Sharaf al-Din 'Ali Yezdi, Timur carefully monitored these developments and decided to exploit Timur-Melik's weakening position. In 1377, he dispatched Tokhtamysh for a fourth campaign aimed at capturing the strategic center of Sighnaq (Yezdi, 1941, p. 150; Şāmī, 1937, p. 77; Şami, 1987, p. 92). This time Tokhtamysh achieved a decisive victory at the Battle of Karatal, defeating Timur-Melik and proclaiming himself khan of the Blue Horde. Following this success, Tokhtamysh secured control over key urban centers including Sighnaq and Savran (Şami, 1987, p. 93).

Tokhtamysh spent the winter of 1377–1378 consolidating his authority within the Blue Horde. During this period, he reorganized administrative structures, established strong relations with influential military aristocrats, and assembled a large and disciplined army. By the spring of 1379, Tokhtamysh had advanced into the Volga region, where he rapidly captured several important cities along the left bank of the Volga, including Sarai-Berke. These developments demonstrate that Tokhtamysh systematically implemented and expanded the political strategy initially established by Urus Khan.

5.9. The Struggle Between Emir Mamay and Tokhtamysh Khan

Tokhtamysh Khan sought not merely to dominate the Blue Horde, but to reunify the entire Jochid Ulus under his authority, including the western Dasht-i Qipchaq territories largely controlled by Emir Mamay. Consequently, Mamay emerged as Tokhtamysh's principal political rival and most dangerous opponent.

At precisely the same moment, Mamay was preparing for a major military confrontation against Moscow Prince Dmitrii Ivanovich. Historical evidence suggests that Mamay underestimated the political significance of developments occurring in the eastern sectors of the Jochid Ulus and failed to appreciate the growing military capability and political ambition of Tokhtamysh (Yakubovskiy, 2021, p. 149). Tokhtamysh, by contrast, carefully observed the escalating conflict between Mamay and Dmitrii Ivanovich and recognized the strategic opportunities it created.

The *Nikonovskaya Letopis'* provides important information concerning Mamay's condition following his catastrophic defeat at the Battle of Kulikovo in 1380. According to the chronicle tradition, Mamay fully understood that the defeat carried immense political consequences both for himself and for the Golden Horde. After returning to his territories, he immediately attempted to assemble a new army from regions still loyal to him in preparation for another campaign against Russia (Platonov, 1897, p. 68). However, he was never granted the opportunity to pursue revenge.

Tokhtamysh dispatched envoys demanding Mamay's submission and recognition of his authority as supreme ruler of the Jochid Ulus. Mamay categorically refused to acknowledge Tokhtamysh's supremacy (Fahredden, 2003, p. 66). As a result, in 1381 the two rival Tatar armies confronted one another along the Kalka River, where an intense and bloody battle took place. Tokhtamysh ultimately achieved a decisive victory (Platonov, 1897, p. 69; Vvedinskiy, 2018, p. 56).

Following this defeat, Mamay permanently disappeared from the political stage. His army disintegrated, his authority collapsed, and many of his emirs abandoned him in favor of Tokhtamysh. Accompanied only by a small retinue and carrying considerable quantities of gold and silver, Mamay fled to the Genoese colony of Kaffa in Crimea. According to the chronicles, the Genoese initially granted him refuge but shortly afterward murdered him and confiscated his wealth and possessions (Platonov, 1897, p. 69; Vvedinskiy, 2018, p. 56).

Tokhtamysh's victory at Kalka removed the final obstacle preventing his accession to the throne of the Golden Horde. The Volga territories extending from Hajji Tarkhan to Bulgar, together with the North Caucasus, Crimea, and the western regions beyond the

Volga, now fell under his authority. Tokhtamysh distributed large portions of the captured booty among his soldiers, thereby strengthening military loyalty and consolidating his political legitimacy.

Immediately after ascending the throne of the Golden Horde, Tokhtamysh dispatched envoys to Moscow Prince Dmitrii Ivanovich and the other Russian princes announcing his accession and informing them that he had defeated their common enemy Mamay (Platonov, 1897, p. 69; Buganov, 1978, p. 128). At that moment, however, the Russian principalities remained deeply weakened by the devastating losses suffered at Kulikovo. According to the chronicles, “throughout all the Russian lands the voivodes and soldiers had diminished, and great fear spread across the entire Russian country.”

Under such circumstances, openly rejecting the envoys of the new Golden Horde ruler would have been politically reckless. Consequently, Dmitrii Donskoi reluctantly chose temporary submission and dispatched emissaries bearing gifts to Tokhtamysh’s court (Platonov, 1897, p. 69).

Tokhtamysh, however, was not satisfied with symbolic expressions of obedience. On 23 August 1382, he advanced against Moscow with a large army and placed the city under siege (Müller, 1963, pp. 83–84; Presnyakov, 1913, pp. 132–133). On 26 August, Moscow was captured and burned by Tokhtamysh’s forces (Tikhomirov, 1949, pp. 208–209; Anonymous, 1853, pp. 100–101). Additional Russian towns were likewise attacked, plundered, and devastated during the campaigns of 1382–1383.

As a consequence of Tokhtamysh’s campaign, the Russian principalities once again fell under effective Golden Horde domination, thereby extending Mongol political supremacy over the Rus’ lands for approximately another century (Müller, 1963, p. 84; Koshelev, 2000, pp. 152–155; Anonymous, 1853, p. 103). In this sense, Tokhtamysh not only avenged the defeat suffered at Kulikovo, but also temporarily restored the political prestige and military authority of the Golden Horde across Eastern Europe.

VI. CONCLUSION

Following his seizure of political authority in the western territories of the Golden Horde in 1361, Emir Mamay emerged as one of the most influential political and military actors in the late history of the Jochid Ulus. Over the subsequent two decades, Mamay pursued an active and highly interventionist political strategy aimed at preserving the territorial integrity and political authority of the Golden Horde during a period characterized by severe dynastic fragmentation and internal instability.

Throughout this period, Mamay sought to prevent the expansion of Lithuanian influence into former Golden Horde territories while simultaneously engaging in continuous political and military struggles against rival Sarai-based khans, eastern Jochid claimants, and the increasingly ambitious Russian principalities. Recognizing the political dangers created by the “Great Troubles” (*Bulkak*) period within the Golden Horde, Mamay attempted to suppress the growing autonomy movements among the Russian principalities and repeatedly launched military campaigns designed to preserve the traditional political supremacy of the Horde over the Rus’ lands.

In this respect, Mamay played a significant role in delaying the complete political disintegration of the Golden Horde and temporarily preserving the institutional continuity of the Jochid state. Nevertheless, despite his considerable military capabilities and political determination, he ultimately failed to reunify the fragmented Golden Horde under a stable centralized authority. His inability to secure lasting control over the Volga political centers, combined with the emergence of increasingly powerful rivals in both the eastern steppe and the Russian principalities, gradually weakened his position.

The defeats suffered by Mamay’s forces at the Battles of the Vozha River (1378) and Kulikovo (1380) represented critical turning points in the political balance of Eastern Europe. Although the Battle of Kulikovo later acquired immense symbolic significance within Russian historical memory as a milestone in the struggle against Mongol domination, the immediate political consequences of the battle were more complex than later nationalist historiography often suggests. The Russian principalities themselves sustained extremely heavy losses during the conflict, which significantly limited their military capacity in the years immediately following the battle.

These circumstances created favorable conditions for the rise of Tokhtamysh Khan, who successfully defeated Mamay and reunified substantial portions of the Golden Horde under his authority. Mamay’s final defeat at the Kalka River and his subsequent death in Kaffa marked the definitive end of his political career and the collapse of his western power structure.

At the same time, Tokhtamysh Khan skillfully exploited the weakened condition of the Russian principalities after Kulikovo. His Moscow campaign of 1382 not only avenged the defeat suffered by Mamay but also reestablished effective Golden Horde supremacy over the Russian principalities. The capture and destruction of Moscow demonstrated that the political and military authority of the Golden Horde remained far from extinguished despite the symbolic importance later attributed to Kulikovo.

Consequently, the present study argues that the conflicts between Emir Mamay, Tokhtamysh Khan, and the Russian principalities should not be interpreted exclusively through retrospective nationalist narratives of liberation and conquest. Rather, these events must be understood within the broader framework of medieval Eurasian political transformation, dynastic legitimacy struggles, regional power competition, and the ongoing reconfiguration of political authority across the post-Mongol world.

Ultimately, although the political prestige of the Golden Horde gradually declined during the late fourteenth century, Mongol-Tatar political dominance over the Russian principalities continued until 1480, demonstrating the enduring institutional and geopolitical influence of the Golden Horde within Eastern European history.

VII. DECLARATIONS

Author Contributions

The author solely conceived the study, conducted the historical and historiographical analysis, collected and interpreted the primary and secondary sources, and prepared the manuscript for publication.

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The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this study.

Data Availability Statement

All data analyzed during this study are derived from publicly available historical chronicles, archival materials, published primary sources, and scholarly literature cited in the reference list.

Ethical Approval

This study is based exclusively on historical documents, published chronicles, and historiographical sources. It does not involve human participants, personal data, or experimental procedures requiring institutional ethical approval.

Informed Consent

Not applicable.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) Use Statement

During the preparation of this manuscript, artificial intelligence-based language tools were utilized solely for linguistic refinement, grammatical correction, and academic stylistic improvement. The author carefully reviewed, revised, and takes full responsibility for the intellectual content, historical interpretations, arguments, and conclusions presented in this article.

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