



The Year of the Horsetails

R.F. Tapsell

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Eastern Europe: early Middle Ages.

Bardiya is a soldier in the armies of the Kagan (warleader) of the brutal Mongol-like Central Asian nomad people of the Tugars- but he is from a minority people, the Saka. He is forced to flee from the land of Tugars. When a village is threatened with destruction his loyalties change and helps teach his new people how to defend themselves against a vastly superior enemy.

The Year of the Horsetails Details

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Author : R.F. Tapsell

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From Reader Review The Year of the Horsetails for online ebook

AIA Reviewers says

The Year of the Horsetails is a traditional adventure story in the old-school style. It follows the flight of a fugitive across the Steppes of what much later became a part of Russia. Set in the Carpathian region, sometime during the Middle ages, its hero, Bardiya, escapes the barbaric but militarily superior nomadic, Mongol-like Tugars into a region as yet unconquered by them. Beyond formidable mountains in the west, the agrarian Slavic Drevich people are largely unaware of the ruthless and overwhelming might soon set to descend upon their lands.

Using clean, crisp and uncluttered language, although of a style that may take a while for modern readers to get used to, a gripping tale of clashing cultures and military conflict unfolds. Keenly researched, the author brings to life a time, its various disparate cultures and the outlooks and attitudes of its people, during a brutal period in European history.

Although the action is excellently handled; the flight across the Steppes, the clash of cultures and the inevitable and bloody conflict that ensues, what is lacking is much in the way of depth to the characters, in particular the protagonist, Bardiya. This does not overly spoil the enjoyment of the book, but I found it hard to invest much empathy with the plight of its characters. It left me a little removed, as though reading an historical account, more so than a work of fiction. There are personal interactions, and even a love affair, but they come across very much in the one dimension.

Having said that, the dialogue is realistic and believable, and the characters are truly of their time - not just modern sensibilities in period costume. It makes for an authentic story, albeit one principally concentrating on adventure and action.

The plot cannot be faulted, nor the pace of the narrative, both excellently pitched, although I found the ending employed a few convenient coincidences and the conclusion felt slightly confused, making the climax feel somewhat flat. A minor detraction, though, from what is otherwise a well-crafted build-up to a momentous ending.

If adventure, action and early military history is your thing, then this tale from R. F. Tapsell will be just your cup of tea. A solid piece of work that is well worth the read.

I received an advance copy of this book in return for an honest review.

Lucinda says

An undiscovered novel that deserves to be back on bookshelves, as a masterful classic of outstanding magnitude!

“The year of the Horsetails” was first published in 1967 by Hutchinson Co. and has sadly been out of print until now, with this recently re-published edition (by CNPosner books). As an avid reader of historical fiction and someone who enjoys work by Michael Jecks, Elizabeth Chadwick (r.e. Middle Ages), Robin

Young (r.e. Templars) and Conn Iggulden, I was delighted upon discovering that this timeless classic was back in print. It is such a great shame when well-written works of fiction are pushed aside to make way for modern writers, as R. F Tapsell's novel is a greatly significant, noteworthy piece.

Set within Eastern Europe in the early Middle Ages, 'the year of the horsetails' follows the story of the Nomad warrior Bardiya as he flees from the Mongol-like Turgars and their ruthless Kagan. He finds safety with the Slavic Drevich people, but fears remain as there is a possibility that the Slavic Drevich may yield to the domineering might of the Turgar Empire. Bardiya soon becomes not only their leader but the Slavic Drevich's only hope against these mighty warriors, whose desire for supremacy over all is as formidable and corrupt as any poison...

Indisputably exceptional and highly readable, I am so pleased that this fantastic historical work is now back in print once more. It may have a slight Victorian language and prose 'feel' to it, for unlike more recent works where historical accuracy, detailed research and complexity of plot is key – this does lack in that sense. The culture and society of the early Dark Ages is captured perfectly, but compared to modern historical fiction you could state that R. F Tapsell's novel is simplistic in form and in content. If you are looking for something with that distinctive old-style flair, realism and depth then I would highly recommend this story as something not to be overlooked but to be commended and re-read in the twenty-first century.

I am all for older works of fiction and writing like this is something to be cherished and treasured, as you will not normally come across something as uniquely singular as this again. Seeing that 'The Year of the Horsetails' is back in print, I would greatly urge readers and lovers of historical works to take a look at this gem and delight in well-written, compelling and outstanding literature which shall never be forgotten.

I was sent a paperback copy of "the year of the horsetails by R.F Tapsell" to read and review, through a Goodreads 'first-read' giveaway

LadyCalico says

Wow, what a thoroughly great book; I am so thankful for this re-printing. Think Seven Samurai or Magnificent Seven with all seven rolled into one really angry, determined, and very capable military hero. Throughout the book I kept thinking that the evil arrogant Kagan is starting to get an inkling that just maybe allowing one of his Tarkhans to get away with raping the wife of an underling without punishment wasn't such a great idea--as the simple story built into an increasingly complex and deadly avalanche, the outgrowth of this one ripple in events reminded me of "for want of a nail..." Great characters, well-developed story, lots of action and nail-biting suspense, and it made me read up on a period and peoples in history that I knew little about. It quickly became apparent that the author's authoritative knowledge of both Eastern European history and Dark Ages military equipment and tactics is phenomenal. I was saddened to read that he died much too soon and deprived the reading world of what undoubtedly would have been an impressive array of works.

Bob says

Although I read the Kindle edition, I suspect the paperback is quite similar if not identical. I found the book fast-paced with plenty of action scenes and a story line of movement. The cultures described (pre-Mongol

plains nomads and rolling hill country clans were very interesting -- the author apparently did a lot of research. His voice in describing them was authentic as far as I could discern. For me, the downsides were only two: first, that the hero was a bit larger than life. He was highly skilled in practically every aspect of life or picked it up quickly. And he lived to tell the story in some circumstances that made this seem unlikely on a consistent basis. You can be lucky some of the time, but all of the time? Um. Second, the book offers a love interest, but she is painted in pale colors. Overall, however, I enjoyed the book enough to give it four stars. It needs a sequel, but I didn't see one.

Steven says

Solid. Believable. Satisfying.

Good military historical fiction set in a time and place that has received little attention here in the States. The churn of the Central Asian steppes has sent dozens of waves of horse archers both east and west. This book deals with one of the lesser waves in between the more well known incursions of the Huns and the Mongols.

Billy Buttons says

This book was recently entered and was awarded a RED RIBBON in The Wishing Shelf Book awards. This is what our readers thought:

FEEDBACK

Author: R F Tapsell

Title: The Year of the Horsetails

COVER: 8/10

Generally, the readers liked the cover. They liked the strong, central image of the two men fighting and they thought the lettering was very clear and genre-appropriate.

CONTENT 8/10

The readers thought this was a very interesting and well-written historical novel. They enjoyed the swashbuckling edge to the writing and the superb knowledge the author has of Eastern Europe and war tactics. They felt that the hero of the story, Bardiya, was charismatic and interesting to follow and they felt the problem presented to him i.e. unite the farmers to fight the evil Horde, was exciting and interesting. One reader (man, aged 45) out in his feedback, 'I understand this story was written in the 60s but this is my first time reading it. I must say I thought it was very enjoyable. The writing which is very well researched, has a classic feel to it, sort of like watching a swashbuckling Robin Hood film in black and white. Very exciting and lots of fun.'

Another reader (man, aged 36) put in his feedback, 'The fight between the Kagan and Bardiya was excellently written. I won't say what happened but it was thrilling to read.'

EDITING 7/10

The readers discovered no problems with grammar, spelling or punctuation. One reader (woman, aged 36) put in her feedback, The author has a very descriptive pen particularly when describing setting and the tactics

of war. I felt it slowed the pace a little.'

A few of the readers noted the excessive use of the 'dash'. One reader put, 'Often in the speech, there is a dash '-'. I don't know why. Was it common in the 1960s to put a dash and not a comma or an apostrophe? Anyway, they probably need to be removed or altered.'

STYLE 7/10

The readers felt this book was well written with a good balance of speech and setting/character work. They felt the author worked well with speech, the characters speaking very naturally throughout the story. One reader put in his feedback, 'There is a sort of Tolkien feel to this story. Often very detailed and with a sort of 'epic' feel to it.' However, a few of the readers felt the pacing suffered from a little too much description.

TO SUM UP 30/40

STATS

Of the 16 readers:

14 thought the cover was good or very good.

9 felt the best part of the book was way the central character developed in the story.

6 felt the best part of the book was the way the author handled the action..

1 felt the best part of the story was the historical setting.

15 would like to read another book by this author.

'A gripping adventure. Perfect for any fan of a swashbuckling hero taking on an evil oppressor. Highly recommended.' The Wishing Shelf Awards

Larry says

The war between the nomads and the settled peoples began before Sumer (see Sam Barone's novel, "Rise of an Empire") and continued through the arrival of the Mongol Horde (See Cecelia Holland's novel, "Until the Sun Falls"). This historical novel takes place on the edge of the steppes at some indeterminate time between the fifth and thirteenth centuries. The riders from the steppes (the Tugars, a Mongol-like people) arrive in force (40,000-strong) after having chased one of their subordinate cavalry commanders across the steppes (a man named Bardiya, who was the equivalent of a colonel in the Mongol army) for having killed a Mongol overlord who had seized Bardiya's wife. Bardiya, an experienced warrior, encounters the Dreveck, a people of the boundary land between the forest and the steppes, and finds refuge with them. His new hosts underestimate the impact of a Tugar army on their mainly infantry masses, and the impact of a highly organized enemy force on their very individualistic military ways. The Dreveck, though brave, find out the hard way, and much of the novel deals with their recovery from defeat and their repulse of the invaders. Bardiya is an interesting character, and provides leadership for the routed Dreveck.

I think that Tapsell only wrote one other historical novel, and that one set in seventeenth-century France. "The Year of the Horsetails" takes a prominent place in the handful of novels that deal with the long war between the nomads and the settled peoples. It is one of the better historical novels that describe more-or-less medieval-style warfare. It is intelligently written, but it is not as emotionally complex as Cecelia Holland's books.

Alan says

I have read this book twice, once as a teenager through the influence of my father who was a librarian in later life, and again in 2006. I loved this book and its story. It is superbly researched and very well written in terse prose. It is fast paced with wonderfully vivid characters and a great description of what it must have been like to serve in the Mongol or Turkic armies and having to face them in battle. I would recommend this novel to anyone who loves history and I think it is one of the very best I have ever read, actually in my top five, and I have read hundreds.

Linda says

I agree with all the reviewers (Amazon) who gave this book four and five stars. The book was published in the 1960's which were very good years for readers. Reading this book was like deja vu in reverse due to the number of books written about this subject in the last two decades. The warring steppe nomads crossed the Carpathian Mountains to plunder and kill but were, instead, defeated by the agrarian natives. The author used imaginary names, but the reader knows of whom Mr. Tapsell wrote. His mechanics of good writing were excellent, and his characters had weaknesses and strengths just like the rest of us.

The author died in the 1980's.

Pat says

Short, and not badly written, but definitely mislabeled as historical fiction. It really is just a non-stop battle between stereotypical good guys and bad guys set in medieval times. Almost no character depth, and very little description of the life and times of the period and area save for battle related topics. The love interest was superfluous. The battle scenes, however, were quite well done, which was a good thing since that encompasses 90% of this short novel. Other than that, one other minor annoyance: the writer doesn't seem to know the difference in meaning between the words 'flammable' and 'inflammable'!

John Caviglia says

As a recent fan of literature of the steppes, I acquired this book when it was offered free on BookBub, having checked out the reviews on Goodreads ... and (despite what some reviewers say), *The Year of the Horsetails* is definitely not a historical novel. Rather, it is fantasy loosely based on history. Neither of the two major cultures depicted in it—the Tugar, the Drevich—ever existed, as such. The Tugar are people of the steppes, their culture clearly based on historical research. The Drevich are Slavs of some sort, apparently living in the east of what is now Europe. And God only knows when precisely the saga of Tapsell's invention putatively took place, although the period is without question medieval.

What we have here, then, is something akin to Robert E. Howard's "sword and sorcery" pulp fiction, minus the sorcery—that is, a fantastic past given flesh and substance by the inclusion of detail derived from history. And—as in Howard's creation, Conan the Barbarian—we are presented with an invented world in which the peoples of the world are stereotyped. The Drevich are tall and blond ... Slavic, in short, whereas the Tugar

are short and dark. Moreover, the Drevich are individualistic, whereas the Tugar simply swarm like mounted ants, mindless minions of their evil leader. Etc....

I have no idea of whether Tapsell read Robert E. Howard, and, if so, imitated him in any way. But I am deeply bothered by the fact that in this novel he—like Howard—echoes a mythos most widely recognized in the Nazi vision, which uses geographic origin and physical type to create a hierarchy of peoples.

To me *The Year of the Horsetails* reads something like a Conan short story (minus sorcery) expanded to novelistic length. Forget depth of character. Forget plot. Forefront sword ... but don't forget to include a forgettable "love" interest. And the prose, while workmanlike, is unremarkable at best.

In sum ... this is not history but pulp—a rousing yarn built on cultural insensitivity.

Ron says

I read this short historical fiction novel in high school in the midst of a binge of Conan the Barbarian and such sword & sorcery tales and it fit right in and is still with me decades later. Historical, yes, but set in the obscure Steps of south central Asia and it read just like a swashbuckling fantasy adventure. I've owned three paperback copies of this and managed to track down a used hardcover via ABE.

Branchsuper says

This book is an old friend, which I borrow from the library every few years and re-read. No matter how many times I read it, it still keeps me enthralled from start to finish. And I've long realized why the Rohirrim are my favourite Tolkien warriors: I've always been able to envision them sweeping down into battle thanks to the wonderful description of horse nomad warfare Tapsell so ably provides here.

Chris says

From the title you might be expecting a western, but this is a tale of a vicious nomadic tribe from the Eurasian plains that meets its match when trying to defeat an agrarian "nation". If you like military stories from the era of Ghengis Khan and plotting strategy with catapults, then this one is for you.

Gregory House says

A Brilliant piece of Historical Fiction

I remember reading my first stunning piece of Steppe nomad based historical fiction as if it were yesterday; RF Tapsell's *The Year of the Horsetails* , I must have borrowed it from the library and read it a dozen times when in my early teens. Eventually in the 1980's I found a much battered copy in a second hand book shop in Adelaide, though broken dog eared and missing a few pages it still sits in in library

amongst my treasures of historical fiction. Though recently, due to its fragile condition I haven't dared to read it.

So why did it make such an impression and helped shape my love of historical fiction? To give you an idea here is the prologue from this promo site .

At a period in historical fiction writing ,when the best craftsmen/women were struggling to convince editors that Victorian style language and prose was definitely in the past and their readers were intelligent enough to understand complex plots and 'real historical accuracy' was being presented not Hollywood fantasy RF Tapsell launched his deceptively simple take on the impact of the Steppe cultures on the sedentary societies of the early Dark Ages.

What was completely new in this style of story was his depth of historical research and its casual presentation in the tale of one man, Bardiya a refugee Saka noble fleeing the vengeful Tugars, lords of the wide Steppes. What's more the two opposing societies in this tale the Tugars and the Vedich are presented without the usual stupid bare chested fur clad grunting barbarian stereotypes. While the Tugars of the Steppe are similar to the Avars of history, they lack the usual evil slaving Mongol horde Scourge of God portrayal. They are what they are, the environment of the Steppe and the wars of the Kagan have moulded them into superb warriors not mindless savages. Thankfully we are completely without the Christian/Pagan clash or the Defence of Civilisation so frequently trotted out by writers of the time, though Byzantium the bastion of the Eastern Roman Empire is alluded to in the story, it is as only a passing mention. Without giving away the plot I can say that it is a very good story and well written. I also suspect that contemporary history fiction writers such as Harry Sidebottom and Christian Cameron have had a copy of this fine work tucked away on their shelves at some time. If you're into Dark Age period fiction or any good stories about the Steppes similar to those two fine writers then I cannot recommend this highly enough. My fondest hope is that mine own Steppe series The Tears of the Goddess when it comes out later this year will be considered worthy of comparison with this gem of historical fiction.

Regards Greg

Release date is 10th February 2013

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