

BURYATS

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The Buryats, originally a nomadic herding people of Mongolian stock, live in the South-central region of Siberia, in the territory bordering Mongolia, with Lake Baikal on its western border and Yablonovy Ridge to the east.

The Buryats are one of the nationality groups that was recognized by Soviet authorities and had an autonomous republic of its own, along with the Yakuts, the Ossetians, the Komi, Tuvinians, Kalmyks, and Karelians. Of the five republics located east of the Ural Mountains in Asian Russia, four—Buryatia, Gorno-Altay, Khakassia, and Tyva—extend along Russia's southern border with Mongolia. After the changes of the immediate post-Soviet years, the Buryat Republic or Buryatia (formerly the Buryat Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic, or ASSR), still exists in the Russian Federation and is recognized in the latest Russian constitution passed in 1993. Besides the republics, the constitution recognizes ten autonomous regions, whose status, like that of the republics, is based on the presence of one or two ethnic groups. One of these regions is Aga Buryat, in which Buryats make up 55% of the population; the rest are Russians.

One of the largest ethnic groups in Siberia, the Buryats number well over 1 million in the twenty-first century. In 1994 the population of the republic was about

1.1 million, of which more than one-third lived in the capital city, Ulan-Ude, which rests at the junction of the Uda and Selenga Rivers. Other cities in Buryatia include Babushkin, Kyakhta, and Zakamensk, situated by key rivers, including Barguzin, Upper Angara, and Vitim. Occupying 351,300 square kilometers, Buryatia has a continental climate and mountainous terrain, with near 70 percent of it covered by forests. Contrary to popular belief, Buryatia - and Siberia in general - is not a frozen wasteland year round. The Siberian winter extends from November to March. In fact, the Siberian flag contains the colors green and white in equal horizontal proportions, with the green representing the Siberian taiga (the largest forest in the world) and the white representing the snow of winter. This taiga shelters vast amounts of minerals, plants, and wildlife, some of which are quite rare and valuable. Along with huge hydroelectric reserves, Buryatia possesses rich stores of bauxite, coal, gold, iron ore, uranium, manganese, molybdenum, nickel, tungsten, lignite, graphite, shales, mercury, tin, and rare earth minerals. The main industries derive from coal extraction, timber harvesting, textiles, sugar refining (from beets), engineering (including locomotive building and boat repairs), and food processing (mostly wheat and vegetables such as potatoes).

The peoples of Siberia fall into three major ethno-linguistic groups: Altaic, Uralic, and Paleo-Siberian. The Buryats are one of the Altaic peoples--speakers of Turkic languages widely distributed in the middle Volga, the southern Ural Mountains, the North Caucasus, and above the Arctic Circle. Buryatia is the center of Buddhism in Russia; in fact it is a place where three religions coexist peacefully: Shamanism, Buddhism, and Orthodoxy. The Siberian region gave rise to the

languages from which the term "shaman" is derived. Shamanism is a belief in unseen gods, demons, and ancestral spirits responsive only to priests (shamans) with magical and healing powers.

The Buryats have not always been a part of Russia. In 1625-1627 the Russian tsar Mikhail Feodorovich (first of the Romanov dynasty) sent an expedition to explore the Bratskaya land. This first boat expedition, underestimating the ferocity of the Angara River's rapids, never completed the journey, but nevertheless word spread that Buryat farmers were eager to trade. Later that century the Russians - in search of wealth, furs and gold - annexed and colonized the area. Some Buryats, dissatisfied with the proposed tsarist rule, fled to Mongolia, only to return to their native country saying, "Mongolia's Khan beheads culprits, but the Russian Tsar just flogs them. Let us become subjects of the Russian Tsar." In 1923 the Buryat-Mongol Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic was founded, which consisted of the land on which Buryats lived. Fourteen years later, in 1937 Buryat was forced to split into three parts: the Buryat-Mongol ASSR, the Irkutsk and the Chita provinces. That population division remains in the post-Soviet era. In the 1970s Soviet authorities forbade Buryats from teaching the Buryat language in schools. Finally in 1996, the Russian Parliament passed a bill concerning legislation of the State National Policy of the Russian Federation, allowing the language and native customs to be taught and preserved.

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