

# DOLGANS

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The Dolgans (*Dolgani*) belong to the North Asiatic group of the Mongolian race. They are an Altaic people, along with the Buryats, Kalmyks, Balkars, Chuvash, Evenks, Karachay, Kumyks, Nogay, and Yakuts. This Turkic-speaking people number today about 8,500 and live far above the Arctic Circle in the Taymyr (or Taimur) autonomous region (332,857 square miles, 862,100 square kilometers), which is one of the ten autonomous regions recognized in the Russian Constitution of 1993. This region is located on the Taymyr peninsula in north central Siberia, which is actually the northernmost projection of Siberia. Cape Chelyuskin at the tip of the peninsula constitutes the northernmost point of the entire Asian mainland. Located between the estuaries of the Yenisei and Khatanga rivers, the peninsula is covered mostly with tundra and gets drained by the Taymyra River. The Taymyr autonomous region also includes the islands between the Yenisei and Khatanga gulfs, the northern parts of the Central Siberian Plateau, and the Severnaya Zemlya archipelago. The capital is Dudinka. On the Taimyr Peninsula the Dolgans are the most numerous indigenous ethnic group. A few dozen Dolgans also live in Yakutia, on the lower reaches of the River Anabar.

Generally, the languages of the indigenous peoples of the Eurasian Arctic and subarctic can be grouped into four classes: Uralic , Manchu-Tungus, Turkic, and Paleo-Siberian. The Dolgan language is part of the northeastern branch of the Turkic language family and closely resembles Yakut. Although Dolgan is particularly active among the twenty-six languages of the so-called "Peoples of the Far North" in Russia, the small number of speakers (6,000 out of the total population of 8,500) of this rare aboriginal language in Siberia prompted UNESCO to classify Dolgan as a “potentially endangered” language. The demographical and ecological problems of the Taymyr region also work against the language. As for writing, the Dolgans lack their own alphabet and rely on the Russian Cyrillic.

The name Dolgan became known outside the tribe itself only as late as the 19th century. The word derives from *dolghan* or *dulghan*, meaning “people living on the middle reaches of the river.” Some ethnologists believe the word comes from the term for wood (*toa*) or *toakihilär*, meaning people of the wood. Although originally a nomadic people preoccupied mostly by reindeer hunting and fishing, the advent of the Russians in the seventeenth century led to the near destruction of the Dolgans' traditional economy and way of life. The Taymyr, or Dolgan-Nenets National Territory, was proclaimed in 1930. The next year old tribal councils were liquidated, the process of collectivization initiated. Taymyr’s economy today depends on mining, fishing, and dairy and fur farming, as well as some reindeer breeding and trapping.

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