

KALMYKS

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The Kalmyks, who call themselves the Khalmg, are descendants of Oyrats originating from West Mongolia (Jungaria). These were nomadic tribes kindred to Mongols in material culture, language and religion. Today most Kalmyks live in Kalmykia or the Republic of Kalmykia, which is one of the twenty-one nationality-based republics of the Russian Federation recognized in the 1993 Russian Constitution. Kalmykia (about 29,400 square miles or 76,150 square kilometers), is located in southeastern Russia on the northwestern shore of the Caspian Sea. Its capital, Elista, has more than 90,000 residents. While salt lakes abound, Kalmykia lacks permanent waterways. Lying in the vast depression of the North Caspian lowland, the territory consists largely of steppe and desert areas.

In 2000 roughly 314, 300 people lived in Kalmykia. Its population is 45 percent Kalmyk, 38 percent Russian, 6 percent Dagestani, 3 percent Chechen, 2 percent Kazak, and 2 percent German. Representatives of Torgut, Dorbet and Buzawa tribes also inhabit the republic.

In contrast to some of the other non-Russian languages spoken in the Russian Federation, the Kalmyk language (Kalmukian) has been classified as an "endangered language" by UNESCO due to the declining number of active

speakers. Very few children learn the language, and those who do are not likely to become active users.

Another characteristic that distinguishes the Kalmyks from many non-Russian nationalities is their long and tortuous past. Due to the deficit of pasture lands and feudal internecine dissension, the Oyrat tribes migrated westward from Chinese Turkistan to the steppe west of the mouth of the Volga River in the late 16th and early 17th centuries. In 1608-9 the Oyrats pledged their allegiance to the Russian tsar. As Russian allies, they guarded the Russian Empire's eastern frontier during the reign of Peter I (the Great), from 1682-1725. Under Catherine II, however, the Kalmyks' fortune changed and they became vassals. Unhappy, about 300,000 Kalmyks living east of the Volga began to return to China, but were attacked en route by Russian, Kazakh, and Kyrgyz warriors. Another group of Kalmyks residing west of the Volga had remained in Russia, adopting a semi-nomadic lifestyle and practicing Lamaist Buddhism. They became known as the *Kalmyk*, which in Turkish means "remnant," referring to those who stayed behind.

Eventually, in 1920 the Kalmyk autonomous oblast was established, which later became the Kalmyk Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (ASSR) in 1934. However, the Kalmyks' fortunes shifted radically again when, in 1943, Joseph Stalin dissolved the republic and deported some 170,000 Kalmyks to Siberia. He sought to punish the Kalmyk units who had fought the Russians in collaboration with the Germans. Stalin forcibly resettled a total of over 1.5 million people, including the Volga Germans and six other nationalities of the Crimea and northern Caucasus: the Crimean Tatars, Chechens, Ingush, Balkars, Karachai, and Meskhetians. Other

minorities evicted from the Black Sea coastal region included Bulgarians, Greeks, and Armenians.

The Kalmyks' fortunes changed again, for the better, when in 1956 Stalin's successor Nikita Khrushchev denounced the deportation as criminal, and permitted about 6,000 Kalmyks to return the following year. The Kalmyk ASSR was officially reestablished in 1958. Thirty-five years later, the Russian Constitution of 1993 officially recognized the Republic of Kalmykia -- Khalmg Tangch (chapter three, article 65). That year Kirsan Ilyumzhinov won the first presidential elections in the new republic. His program focused on socio-economic improvements and the revival of Kalmyk language.

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