

# **KURDS**

**Johanna Granville**

**Copyright:** Johanna Granville, "Kurds." In *The Encyclopedia of Russian History*, edited by James R. Millar. New York: Macmillan Reference USA, 2004 (pp. 798-800).

The Kurds (or *kurmandzh* as they call themselves) are a people of Indo-European origin who claim as their homeland ("Kurdistan") the region encompassing the intersection of the borders of Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria. The name "Kurd" has been officially used only in the Soviet Union; the Turks call them Turkish Highlanders, while Iranians call them Persian Highlanders. Although the Kurdish diaspora throughout the world numbers 30 million to 40 million, most Kurds live in the mountains and uplands of the abovementioned countries and number between 10 and 12 million. The Kurds have never had their own sovereign country, but for a short period in the early 1920s, a Kurdish autonomous region existed in Azerbaijan. Although most Kurds live in Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria, two types of Kurdish peoples lived in the Soviet Union before its collapse: the Balkano-Caucasian Caspian type of the European race akin to the Azerbaijanis, Tats, and Talysh (living in Transcaucasia) and the Central-Asian Kurds such as the Baluchis (living in Tajikistan). Generally most Muslims of the former Soviet Union resided in Central Asia, but some also lived on the USSR's western borders, as well as in Siberia and near the Chinese border. Ethnically Soviet Muslims included Turkic, Caucasian, and Iranian people. The Kurds – along with the Tats, Talysh, and Baluchis -- are Iranian people. In Transcaucasia the Kurds live in enclaves among the main population: in Azerbaijan (in Lyaki, Kelbadjar, Kubatly and

Zangelan); in Armenia (in Aparan, Talin and Echmiadzin); and in Georgia (scattered in eastern parts). In Central Asia, they lived in Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan (along the Iranian border, as well as in Ashkhabad). Since the Kurds of Caucasia and Central Asia were isolated for so long from their brethren in the Middle East, their development in the Soviet Union has differed. In fact, some could consider the Soviet Kurds to be a separate ethnic group. Kurdish is an Indo-European language belonging to the northwestern Iranian branch and is divided into several dialects. The Kurds of Caucasia and Central Asia speak the *kurmandzh* dialect. Younger generations of Soviet Kurds in larger cities grew up bilingual, speaking Russian as well. In the main, the Kurds are followers of Islam. The Armenian Kurds are Sunnites, while the Central-Asian and Azerbaijani, Shiite.

In the Russian Federation in the 21st century, Kurds are frequently the targets of ethnic violence. Skinheads, incited by Eduard Limonov (right-wing author and journalist) and Aleksandr Barkashov (former head of the Russian National Unity Party who openly espouses Nazi beliefs) assault Kurds, Yezids, Meskheta Turks and other non-Russians, particularly those from the Caucasus. Racism prevails even among Russian officials who state that non-Russian ethnic groups such as the Kurds can only be guests in the Krasnodar territory (in the Russian southwest), but not for long.

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