

TUVA AND TUVINIANS

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The Tuva Republic in southern Siberia is one of the twenty-one nationality-based republics within the Russian Federation that was recognized in Russia's newest constitution of 1993. Previously called the Tuva Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (ASSR), the constitution recognized it as Tyva, the regional form of the name. With an area of 65,810 square miles (170,448 square miles), Tuva lies northwest of Mongolia and directly east of Gorno-Altay. Tuva's capital is Kizyl, and its other key cities are Turan, Chadan, and Shagonar. Drained by the headstreams of the Yenisey River, the western part of Tuva lies in a mountain basin walled off by the Sayan and Tannu Olga ranges rising to 10,000 feet. The eastern portion is dominated by a wooded plateau. The climate is extreme, with summer temperatures reaching 43°C (110°F) and winter temperatures dropping to -61°C (-78°F). However, the region's 300 sunny, arid days per year help the people withstand the summers and winters.

Tuva is inhabited by a majority of Tuvinians (more than 64 percent); the rest are primarily Russians (32 percent). More than 200,000 Tuvinians live in the Russian Federation, while smaller communities also live in Mongolia and China. The Tuvinians are hardy Mongol natives related to the Kirghiz ethnic branch. Because physical features common to all the Turkic peoples are hard to discern, the

common cultural feature is language. The Turkic languages strongly resemble one another, most of them being to some extent mutually intelligible. The peoples of Siberia fall into three major ethno-linguistic groups: Altaic, Uralic, and Paleo-Siberian. The Tuvinians are one of the Altaic peoples, and the Tuvian language belongs to the Uighur-Oguz group of the Altaic language family, forming - together with the ancient Uighur and Oguz languages - the subgroup of Uighur-Tüküi. Even if a special “Decree on Languages in the Tuva ASSR” had not been ratified in 1991 stipulating that all academic subjects be taught in Tuvinian, the Tuvinian language would not be forgotten. The indigenous language is most widely spoken in rural areas, where 67-70 percent of Tuvinians live. The official *lingua franca* (Russian) is spoken mainly in Tuva’s four key towns.

For roughly 150 years Tyva formed part of the Chinese Empire and later subject to Mongol rule. An independent state called Tannu Tuva was established on August 14, 1921. Tyva nevertheless voluntarily joined the USSR in 1944 as an autonomous oblast. In 1961 Tyva became an autonomous republic.

Tuvinians are mostly engaged in agricultural activities such as cattle raising and fur farming. Oats, barley, wheat, and millet are the principal crops raised. Recently, farmers from northern China have introduced the Tuvinian to vegetable farming. Many of the Tuvinian still live as nomadic shepherds, migrating seasonally with their herds. Those who inhabit the plains traditionally live in large round tents called *gers* or *yurts* made from bark. The main industrial activity in the Tuvinian Republic is mining, especially for asbestos, cobalt, coal, gold, and uranium. Other

Tuvinians are engaged in processing food, manufacturing building materials, and crafting leather and wooden items.

Most Tuvinians were illiterate until the advent of the Russians. Thus, the Tuvinian culture is noted for its rich, oral epic poetry and its music (“throat singing”). The Tuvinian use more than fifty different musical instruments, and traveling ensembles often perform outdoors. The Tuvinians in East Asia have never been affected by Islam. Today, one third of the Tuvinian are Buddhists, one third are shamanists (believing in an unseen world of gods, demons, and ancestral spirits), and the remaining one third are non-religious.

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