

Kyrgyzstan

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Subject:	Kyrgyzstan: Status of Cossacks, Russians, and Russian Orthodox
From:	INS Resource Information Center, Washington, DC
Keywords:	Central Asia, Cossacks, Discrimination, Ethnic Minorities, Kyrgyzstan, Linguistic Minorities, Religious Minorities, Russians, Russian Orthodox Church

Query:

What is the current status in Kyrgyzstan of Cossacks, of ethnic Russians, and of Russian Orthodox individuals? In particular, what level of discrimination or persecution are the above groups facing at the hands of the Kyrgyz government and/or Muslim extremists?

Response:

Historical background: Cossacks

Cossacks have been living in the steppes of Russia and Ukraine since the fifteenth century. "They were not an ethnic group but an agglomeration of brigands and soldiers for hire; a possible meaning of 'Cossack' is 'free warrior.' From a few bands of horsemen and pirates they swelled into a warrior caste that numbered nearly five million by the beginning of the 15th century." (*National Geographic* 1998) Cossacks pride themselves on their military tradition. In tsarist days "Cossacks were in the vanguard of the legions that colonized Siberia, hurled back Turkish invaders, and captured the Caucasus and Central Asia. In Russia's war with Napoleon in 1812-14, Cossacks not only helped chase the French army from Russian soil but triumphantly rode all the way to Paris." (*National Geographic* 1998) Cossacks traditionally serve as fervent protectors of all things Russian, particularly the tsar and the Russian Orthodox church.

Although they were brutally suppressed by the Communists, they have experienced a rebirth since the fall of the Soviet Union. Cossacks have served as mercenaries in Abkhazia, Chechnya, and former Yugoslavia. In the Krasnodar and Stavropol regions of southern Russia the Don Cossacks have even been authorized to bear firearms and accompany local police on passport checks. Human Rights Watch Helsinki has reported that Cossacks in these areas have been involved in harassment, beatings, and evictions of dark-skinned minorities, particularly Chechens and Meskhetian Turks (HRW 1996 and 1997; *Nationalities Papers* 1996).

In Central Asia, however, the Cossacks have generally been the *victims* of human rights violations. The literature consulted focused exclusively on Cossacks in Kazakhstan, as northern Kazakhstan was the homeland of several Cossack hosts, including the Semirechne, who settled Siberia. In 1995 and 1996 Cossack leaders in Kazakhstan were subjected to harassment and intimidation by Kazakh authorities. Nikolay Gunkin was arrested 28 October 1995 on charges of holding illegal rallies. Nina Sidorova was arrested 20 August 1996 on charges of contempt of court and resisting police authority. Both arrests were made months after the alleged offenses and coincided with attempts to exercise political rights -- Gunkin was attempting to register as a candidate for the

December 1995 elections and Sidorova was trying to register the Russian Center (a Cossack rights group) as an officially-recognized organization. Furthermore, both Gunkin and Sidorova said they were mistreated while in custody, and lawyers for both were physically attacked by unknown assailants. (HRW 1997; AI 1996). Kazakh authorities, in turn, characterize Cossack groups as "paramilitary" and suspect them of harboring secessionist tendencies (DIRB 1997). The loss of the northern areas (either to Russia or to a new independent state) would be devastating to Kazakhstan (Hunter 1996).

As noted above, none of the literature consulted mentioned the existence of Cossacks or groups with ties to the Cossacks outside of Kazakhstan.

Historical background: Kyrgyzstan

Throughout most of its history, Kyrgyzstan was populated by tribes speaking a Turkic language. The mountainous north has an especially strong nomadic tradition, which is less pronounced in the south. Because the area served as a crossroads between Europe and Asia, it was exposed to many religious and cultural influences. In the mid-eighth century, Islam became the predominant influence. However, the lack of a Kyrgyz written tradition led to a hybridization of Islam as local holy men usually combined it with traditional beliefs in the forces of nature (*Transitions* 1995). Kyrgyzstan was conquered without much resistance by Russia during the second half of the nineteenth century and was incorporated into the Soviet Union in 1926 as Kirghizia. "As Soviet discipline began to weaken in the late 1980s, Kyrgyzstan became the scene of Central Asia's worst preindependence ethnic violence, with at least 300 people being killed in Kyrgyz-Uzbek clashes in mid-1990." (*Political Handbook of the World: 1998* 1998) The Republic of Kyrgyzstan declared independence in August 1991, and President Askar Akayev has held power since then.

Human rights in Kyrgyzstan: General overview/

Kyrgyzstan's human rights record was considered the best in Central Asia through the early 1990s (INS RIC Sept. 1993). Recently, however, Kyrgyzstan has come under considerable fire for its antiquated judicial system and its treatment of journalists and opposition leaders (*Country Reports* 1997). Journalists from *Res Publica*, *Svobodnye Gory*, and *Kriminal* were prosecuted for libel, and the leader of the opposition party Free Kyrgyzstan, Topchubek Turganaliyev, was convicted of economic crimes despite a lack of evidence (Kyrgyz Committee for Human Rights 1998; *Country Reports* 1997). At the other end of the spectrum, local elders' (*aksakal*) courts have been accused by Amnesty International of subjecting people to illegal detention and even punishments such as whippings and stoning. The only case mentioned was that of Turaly Kerimkulov, who was allegedly stoned to death in 1995 by fellow villagers after the local *aksakal* court convicted him of extortion. (AI 1996). Reportedly the Kyrgyz authorities have been acting to curb excesses of these local courts, although few concrete results have been reported (*Country Reports* 1996).

The Kyrgyz Committee for Human Rights was established 20 June 1996 and has participated in the above-mentioned trials as a public defender. The committee works on 22 programs, including supporting mass media, protection from political prosecution, children's rights, and the program against corruption. It maintains contact with numerous international human rights groups, including Human Rights Watch, which reported that in 1997 there were no reported violations of the right to monitor human rights (HRW 1998).

Current situation: Russian minority

The literature consulted addressed the situation of Russians in Kyrgyzstan as a language issue rather than an ethnic one. For example, USIA commissioned a focus group study to learn what issues most worried citizens of Kyrgyzstan. The second section of a report on this study was entitled "strains in ethnic relations," yet it only briefly mentioned ethnic tensions between Uzbeks and Kyrgyz before proceeding to discuss language issues

(*Central Asia Monitor* 1995).

Throughout the 20th century, Russians have constituted a significant minority in Kyrgyzstan. They rose from 11.7% of the population in 1926 to a peak of 30.2% in 1959 and then declined to 21.5% in 1989. Under the Soviets, Slavs were brought into the area huge numbers following World War II to act as an industrial elite. Russian became the language of opportunity in urban areas (for both Russians and ethnic Kyrgyz), while Kyrgyz remained the primary language in rural areas (*Current History* 1994). The Russification of Kyrgyzstan continued until the mid-1980s, when a new Kyrgyz intelligentsia began to push for a return to Kyrgyz language and culture. In 1990 "The Law on State Language" was passed, which proclaimed Kyrgyz as the state language and Russian as "the language of interethnic communication." Many Russians were angered by Article 8, which required that all managers and professionals "learn enough Kyrgyz to communicate with their employees and clients in the state language." (*Nationalities Papers* 1995) Russian-speakers feared that their inability to speak Kyrgyz would lead to decreased educational and economic opportunities, while ethnic Kyrgyz (who were forced to learn Russian in order to gain those opportunities) demonstrated little sympathy for their plight (*Central Asia Monitor* 1995). These factors greatly contributed to an outflux of Russians, whose share of the population dropped to about 17% by 1994 (*World Directory of Minorities* 1997).

The outflux of Russians is of particular concern to the Kyrgyz government for two main reasons. First, Russians constitute a large portion of the urbanized, educated elite. Secondly, their departure increases the population share of Uzbeks, who constitute approximately 13% of the populace and are a source of far greater ethnic tension than are the Russians (Hunter, 1996). As noted above, there is a recent history of violent ethnic clashes between Kyrgyz and Uzbek nationals, whereas the most recent violent incident between Kyrgyz and Russians mentioned in the literature consulted occurred in 1916 (INS RIC Sept. 1993). In addition, Uzbekistan's large size, population, and natural resource base cause small Central Asian countries like Kyrgyzstan to fear that Uzbekistan will try to assert regional dominance; a sizable Uzbek minority within these countries makes this an even greater threat (Hunter 1996).

Therefore, the government of Kyrgyzstan has taken measures to stem the outflow of Russians. Most notably, in 1994 President Akayev issued a decree diluting the 1990 language law, stating that "Russian should be considered the official language in territories and workplaces where Russian-speakers predominate." In addition, the Kyrgyz and Russian governments co-founded the Slavonic University in 1993 to assure Russian-speakers of educational opportunities (*World Directory of Minorities* 1997). President Akayev has been criticized for his conciliatory attitude toward Russian-speakers but has defended his decisions on economic principles (*Literaturnaya Gazeta* 1998). In addition, there are still Russians in prominent positions in the Kyrgyz government and industrial sectors who exert "significant pressure" on the government. (*Current History* 1994).

None of the literature consulted mentioned any specific incidents of harassment or violence directed against any Russian individual or group because of nationality or language. The Kyrgyz Committee for Human Rights does have a program for national minorities, but the only examples of discrimination mentioned were a Korean who was followed for supporting an opposition candidate, an Azeri who was prohibited from publishing an opposition newspaper, and an Uzbek who was not allowed into a local market (Kyrgyz Committee for Human Rights 1998).

Current situation: Russian Orthodoxy

Freedom of religion is officially protected by the Kyrgyz Constitution. Since 1996 all religious organizations have been required to register with the State Commission on Religious Affairs, but it does not appear that the state is using this requirement to deprive any religious group of the right to exist (*Country Reports* 1997). Although there are growing reports of official crackdowns on religious groups, the targets are not Russian Orthodox

organizations but rather Islamic extremists. "Wahhabi missionaries" who advocate a return to "pure" Islamic faith and a jihad against Muslims who fail to adhere to those principles are seen as a threat to the stability of Central Asia and have been denounced by the leaders of Russia, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan (ITAR-TASS 1998). According to the press secretary of the president of the Kyrgyz Republic, Kanybek Imanaliyev, "We must protect Islam and cut short speeches, which discredit the basic commandments of Islam -- tolerance and indulgence. And any movement which, under the guise of an Islamic dogma, pursues other interests and ends must be uncovered in time and strict measures must be applied against it." (*Nasha Gazeta* 1998) Southern Kyrgyzstan, with its tradition of more sedentary cultures, is seen as a more likely breeding ground for Islamic fundamentalism than the historically nomadic north (*Transitions* 1995).

The general consensus among experts is that Islamic fundamentalism will not be a strong political factor in Central Asia in the foreseeable future (Nichol 1996). Lowell Bezanis (1995) lists a dozen reasons why Islamic fundamentalism is unlikely to engulf Central Asia, including the faith's traditional subordination to temporal rule in the area, the weakness disorganization of native Islamists, and the economic power of non-Muslim populations. Bruce Pannier (1995) suggests there are additional factors which would inhibit the spread of Islamic fundamentalism in Kyrgystan, such as the hybridization of Islam and the widespread drinking of alcohol (especially fermented mare's milk and vodka) which is proscribed by the Koran.

None of the literature consulted mentioned any instances of harassment of any Russian Orthodox group or individual by Muslims in Kyrgyzstan. In fact, Russian Orthodox and Muslim leaders have collaborated in efforts to get restrictions placed on Protestant Evangelical groups (*News Network International Special Report* 1995). The Kyrgyz Committee for Human Rights does not have a program for religious minorities.

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