

## Kalmyks

### Profile

According to the 2002 national census, there are 173,996 Kalmyks in the Russian Federation. Kalmyks are primarily settled in the Kalmyk-Khalmg Tangch Republic, formerly the Kalmyk ASSR (pop. 292,410: Kalmyks 53.3 per cent, Russians 33.6 per cent, Dargins 2.5 per cent, Chechens 2.0 per cent, others 8.6 per cent), with settlements in the Astrakhan, Rostov and Volgograd oblasts and Stavropol Krai. Kalmyks practise a variety of Tibetan Buddhism strongly influenced by Shamanism and speak a Mongolic language.

### Historical context

Kalmyks lived as nomadic herders in western Mongolia until the early seventeenth century, when they migrated to the northern shores of the Caspian Sea. In 1771, most of the population decided to return to Mongolia. The majority was killed en route. One community did not undertake the trek and became part of the Don Cossacks.

In November 1920 the Kalmyk AO was created in the lower Volga region of the RF. In October 1935 the oblast was upgraded to the status of an ASSR. In the 1920s and 1930s Buddhist temples and monasteries were destroyed and almost all of the spiritual leaders were arrested. In 1938 the Kalmyk literary language was changed into the Cyrillic script. In 1943 the whole people was deported to Siberia for alleged collaboration. A fifth of the population is thought to have perished during and immediately after deportation. The Kalmyk ASSR was abolished in December 1943. Following Khrushchev's 'secret speech' in 1956, Kalmyks were allowed to return to their homelands. On 9 January 1957, the Presidium of the Soviet Union Supreme Soviet issued a decree re-establishing the Kalmyk AO, which on 29 July regained its former status as an ASSR. Population numbers did not recover to the levels that existed prior to deportation until 1970.

Perestroika led to the emergence of a variety of different political movements in the republic. The Popular Front of Kalmykia was created in 1990. In 1990 the Republic of Kalmykia adopted a Declaration of Sovereignty. There has been no serious inter-ethnic tension registered in Kalmykia. Independence has brought a revival in the study of the Kalmyk language and, with the help of Buddhist monks from abroad, of religious practices. Buddhism and Christianity have been given the status of state religions. The local Supreme Soviet decided in 1992 to change the name of the republic to Khalmg Tangch. In June 1993, the Kalmyk authorities laid claim to the 3,900 square kilometres of the Volga delta that were not returned to Kalmyks when the Kalmyk ASSR was recreated in 1957. The Kalmyk authorities claimed that under the terms of the 1991 Law on the Rehabilitation of Repressed Peoples, the lands, currently in the Astrakhan Oblast and Dagestan, would formally belong to Kalmykia with effect from 1 July 1993.

In 1993 Kirsan Ilyumzhinov, a local business tycoon, became president of Kalmykia. While encouraging a Buddhist revival on the one hand, Ilyumzhinov was also associated with the entrenchment of

authoritarian rule. He was re-elected for another seven-year term in 2002.

In November 2004 the Dalai Lama visited Kalmykia, causing a diplomatic row with China, which regards the Dalai Lama as a separatist.

### **Current issues**

In August 2005 violent clashes were reported between Kalmyks and Chechens in the village of Yandyki after the death of a young Kalmyk in a bar brawl. One person was reported killed, several injured and several houses were burnt down. The Chechens had settled in the region after the outbreak of the Second Chechen War. One Dargin and three Chechens were arrested in connection with the fighting, after which the Astrakhan Chechen community issued a statement demanding the arrest and trial of young Kalmyk men they claimed had attacked Chechen homes in the village. According to reports the original bar brawl was related to allegations that in February intoxicated Chechens had defaced the graves of Kalmyks who had fought and died for the Russian army in Chechnya.

The long-standing dispute over the delineation of Kalmykia's borders with Astrakhan oblast and Dagestan re-surfaced in 2005, but no border changes were made.