Kalmyk Identity in Historical Perspective

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Abstract

The Kalmyks have lived in southwest Russia for about four centuries. Whilst cultural assimilation with neighbouring peoples has been an ongoing process since the Kalmyks first settled in the lower Volga from 1630, the twentieth century, which saw the rise and fall of several political regimes in Russia, was the most dramatic period in the group's history in that it had a deep impact not only on their social structure, religion, and way of life but also on their identity. Subjected to various political ideologies, not to mention punitive mass deportation to Siberia and Central Asia from 1943 to 1956, the Kalmyks had to constantly negotiate their identity not only with the Tsarist/Soviet/Russian state but also among themselves. Whilst today's self-narratives of Kalmyk ethnic identity are inextricably linked to the discourse of post-Soviet cultural revival, in order to explain the fluidity and dynamics of Kalmyk identity this paper takes a comprehensive approach to the history of the Kalmyk people since their first settlement on the lower Volga. Ethnic identity and its development are narrated chronologically, taking into account social structure, religion, historiography, and popular concepts to which the Kalmyks have been subjected, and which they have embraced, in the course of their history.

Keywords


1 Kalmyk Identity in Historical Perspective

This article concerns the construction of Kalmyk national identity in Russia. This process was closely connected with the unification of hitherto dispersed
Kalmyk groups and lands under state socialism. Nation-building, ushered in by Soviet ethno-engineers and abetted by the Kalmyks themselves, saw the replacement of Tsarist-era identities and loyalties with a new national identity. Such nation-building as occurred during the Soviet Union was hardly unique to the Kalmyks (Hirsch 1997, Martin 2001); however, the Kalmyk experience is particularly interesting because of the group’s nomadic Mongol origins, long history of informal and formal incorporation into the Russian and Soviet empires, and experience of deportation and rehabilitation during World War II and afterwards.

The Kalmyks are a people of Oirat-Mongol origin and the titular population of the Republic of Kalmykia, located in southwest Russia near the right bank of the Volga River and north of the Caucasus Mountains. According to the latest Russian census (2010), the overall Kalmyk population in Russia was 183,372, of which 162,740 (89%) resided in Kalmykia, comprising 57.4% of the Republic’s population. The rest live in Russia’s major cities such as Moscow and St. Petersburg, as well as in the Russian Far East.

The Kalmyks settled on the lower Volga from 1630, having migrated west from an area that today corresponds to western Mongolia and the northern half of China’s Xinjiang province. From 1630 to 1771 they comprised a khanate (a state ruled by a khan). Following the exodus of the majority of the population in 1771 back to Xinjiang, the Kalmyk Khanate was abolished and its territory annexed to Russia. It was not until the advent of socialism that the Kalmyks began to see themselves as belonging to the same “nation” (Russ. natsiya) or “people” (Russ. narod), terms used in Russian interchangeably. Before that, divided across multiple administrative-territorial units by the Tsarist government, Kalmyk groups had distinct identities, some territorially informed and others traditionally maintained according to tribal/clan affiliations. However, only a few decades after the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 Kalmyks had already developed a radically different view of themselves and believed that they shared a common national identity.

The question of the formation of the Kalmyk people was first studied by scholars in the Soviet period. Guided by principles of Marxist-Leninist historiography that exaggerated the role of the masses in historical processes, Soviet historians argued that various Kalmyk groups, as a historical necessity, had developed a shared self-consciousness long before the Bolshevik Revolution, which presumably only helped Kalmyks accelerate their development into a Soviet people under the guidance of the Communist Party (K Istorii 1960, Ocherki 1970, Ivanov 1973, Erdniev 1980). It was in this period that the history of the Kalmyks was ideologically formulated as a Russia-oriented experience consisting of several phases of development, the common feature or theme of
which was the prevailing loyalty of the Kalmyk people towards Russia. Soviet curricula taught that the Kalmyks’ ancestors joined the Russian state voluntarily in 1609, two decades before they first settled on the lower Volga.

Despite the repudiation of Marxist-Leninist historiography, as well as the Soviet ethno-engineering project, following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the current official interpretation of the development of Kalmyk groups into a people is essentially a continuation of the Soviet tradition. The majority of Kalmyk scholars link the emergence of the Kalmyk people to the establishment of a Kalmyk state in the form of the Kalmyk Khanate. Leading Kalmyk historians, including Sanchirov (1990), Avlyaev (1994), and Batmaev (2002), contend that this process began in 1609 and was concluded in the first half of the eighteenth century. Whilst agreeing with the main tenets of this historical tradition, the Kalmyk ethnographer Sharaeva (2017, 12) extends this timeline by arguing that the post-1771 period, marked by the Kalmyks’ isolation from related Mongol groups, constituted a new stage in the consolidation and formation of Kalmyk identity because Kalmyk lords were banned by the Tsarist government from dividing their territories and subjects among their sons, and thus from further splitting the people. But while Kalmyk lords on the steppe may have been banned from dividing their territories, this did not consolidate diverse Kalmyk groups into a single people. Far from it, each group was firmly put under the jurisdiction of different Russian territories and subjected to different sets of laws, which only perpetuated their disunity.

The main argument of this article is that national consolidation and nation-building among the Kalmyks occurred primarily in the twentieth century during the Soviet period. Tracing the change in the identity of Kalmyk groups from 1630 through the present day, the paper encompasses three historical periods – the Khanate period, the annexation period, and the Soviet era – and concludes with a discussion of attempts by the Kalmyk republic’s government to bring about “genuine Kalmyks” in the post-Soviet period.

1.1 The Kalmyk Khanate (from 1630 to 1771)
The Kalmyks are descendants of several Oirat groups that settled in the lower Volga beginning from 1630. According to historical documents, the first contact between the Oirats and the Russians took place in 1606 in the border town of Tara, Siberia, when some Oirats were moving north-westward and the Russians expanding eastward (Ochirov 2010). In 1608 Tsar Vasilii Shuiskiy received Oirat envoys, an event that marked the beginning of Oirat-Russian relations. According to a dispatch sent in 1616 by Russian envoys to Muscovy, the Oirats consisted of four large groups, including the Torghuts (led by Kho Urlyuk), the Derbets (led by Dalai Taiji), the Khoshuds (led by Baibagas), and the Jungars
(led by Khara Khula). In terms of composition, these large groups were not monolithic entities but each was a conglomerate of sub-groups, referred to as *ulus*, *aimag*, and *otok*. Among them, the Torghuts were the first to arrive in the lower Volga to establish a khanate (1630–1771), which would be led by a Torghut dynasty of khans founded by Kho Uryuk. Other groups followed in succession, the last arriving in the territory of the Kalmyk Khanate as late as 1760.

In the seventeenth century the composition of the Kalmyk Khanate was as follows: around 250,000 Torghuts, 20,000 Derbets and Khoshuds, and 10,000 Jungars (Bakaeva 2014). These groups were organized into *uluses* (‘fiefdoms’), each led by hereditary noblemen. In the first half of the eighteenth century, for example, the following 11 *uluses* existed: Derbet *ulus*, Khoshud *ulus*, Jungar *ulus*, as well as several *uluses* of Torghut affiliation, such as Kereit, Tsatan, Erketen, Tsokhur, Bagut, Khabuchin, and Abun-otok *ulus*. Apart from these, there was also an ecclesiastical *ulus* that belonged to the Buddhist establishment (*shabiner*) (Bakaeva 2014). These *uluses* consisted of units called *otok* or *aimag*. The term *otok/otog* is of Sogdian origin, meaning “place, region,” and first appeared in Mongolian in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Among the Oirats, *otoks* were led by commoner officials called *jaisang*, and divided internally into units of 40 yurts, led by *demchis*. The smallest units were groups of 20 yurts led by *siulengges*. Units comparable to *otoks* but led by noblemen were called *aimag* (Atwood 2012). Every person was assigned either to an *otok* or an *aimag* on a hereditary basis.1 Whilst *otoks* and *aimags* were not descent groups, they were used to identify individuals; that is, people used the names of their respective *otoks* or *aimags*, as well as their *ulus*, to designate identity. *Aimagas* also served as units of inheritance by rulers in that various noblemen divided their *ulus* into *aimags* among their sons regardless of birth order, which naturally led to an increase in their numbers. *Otoks* and *aimags* were not only mobile units but in some cases fairly autonomous in a political sense.

Composed of semi-independent *uluses* and *otoks/aimags*, the Kalmyk Khanate was nomadic in structure and resembled more a political confederation than a hierarchical union with a single leader. In times of internal disagreement and strife, entire *uluses* and *aimags/otoks* not infrequently left larger alliances and fled across the steppe, often to the Russian side. The personal charisma of individual Torghut khans was key to its unity; during the

1 Whilst the names, histories, and composition of individual *otoks* and *aimags* are not well studied, a common consensus among Kalmyk scholars is that many *otoks* and *aimags* derived their names from the personal names of their respective lords (Avlyaev 2002, 158; Sharaeva 2017, 94).
reign of Ayuka Khan (1669–1724), the most famous of all Torghut khans, the Kalmyk Khanate reached its zenith (Trepavlov 2009).

There is no evidence suggesting that the Oirats of the lower Volga saw themselves at that time as constituting a separate and unique “people.” Not all of the Volga Oirats immediately accepted the ethnonym “Kalmyk,” which was initially used by Turkic groups and later adopted by the Russians. According to a widely accepted view, the ethnonym Kalmyk derives from the Turkic word kalmak, meaning “to remain, to stay behind.” Eighteenth-century scholars such as Vassiliy Bakunin (1761) and Peter Simon Pallas (1773) popularized the view that Kalmyk means “those who stayed behind (on the Volga).” This explanation is still popular among Kalmyk scholars today. The term kalmak was first mentioned in Tarikh-i-Rashidi (History of Rashid), a mid-sixteenth century work written by Mirza Muhammad Haidar Dughlat (born around 1500), in which “Moghuls” (i.e. Mongols populating the eastern part of the Chingisid Chagatai state of Central Asia) and their land are described as “Kalmak.” The writer mentions that “kalmak” is a kind of name that was “probably applied to the Moghuls by their more cultivated neighbors, on account of their barbarous manner, lawless character, and unsettled habits generally” (Mirza Muhammad 2008, 75). Following this pejorative reading, the term kalmak implies a lack of civilized behavior and cultural development. In Russian documents the ethnonym kalmak/kalmyk was first used in Tsar Ivan IV’s edict of 30 May 1574 ordering that taxes be collected from trade with several peoples, including the “Kalmyks/Kalmaks” (Bakaeva 2014, 32), which probably referred to the same group of “Moghuls” as in Tarikh-i-Rashidi.

Russian use of this ethnonym to designate specifically the Volga Oirats dates back to the seventeenth century, following their settlement in the lower Volga from 1630. In time, the original pejorative meaning of the term must have been forgotten so that the Volga Oirats gradually accepted this ethnonym for themselves beginning in the seventeenth century. The more the Volga Oirats interacted with the Russians, the more they used this ethnonym. The first group to use the ethnonym were the Torghuts, who by 1761, as reported by Bakunin ([1761] 1995, 22), used it for all Volga groups, whereas Khoshuds and Jungars still called themselves, as well as Torghuts, “Oirats.” That said, even those who accepted this ethnonym continued to use their old names and saw themselves as part of a wider and much older Oirat world centered in their homeland of Jungaria.

Jungaria underwent a religious and cultural renaissance in the first half of the seventeenth century, which served as an important development to bind together in terms of culture and identity various Oirat groups scattered over a large territory. In 1640 the ruler of the Jungar Khanate, Batur Khong-taiji,
organized a great assembly of the Khalkha Mongol and Oirat nobility (which included Kho Urlyuk, founder of the Kalmyk Khanate) and ecclesiastical luminaries at which the customary laws of the participant groups were codified and a new system of law was developed known as “The Great Law Record” (yeke chagaja-yin bichig). Aimed at regulating every aspect of nomadic life and social organization, the law included 121 articles divided into several sections which were instrumental in the standardization of legal practices in various Oirat and Khalkha Mongol lands across Eurasia. These sections included: laws concerning political affairs between the aimag/otog and the ulus; laws concerning religion; laws pertaining to social conditions, family, and marriage; laws regarding hunting, herding, and war; and laws concerning property (Jagchid and Hyer 1979). The Great Law also codified the unassailability of uluses by other uluses, thus legalizing the political autonomy of ulus polities, and with it that of aristocratic families in charge of uluses. Hence the relative independence of uluses in the Kalmyk Khanate, which trickled down to the aimag/otok level. Another historical implication of this assembly for Oirat cultural union was the declaration stating that Tibetan Buddhism was the state religion. This move reinforced Oirat unity under a Buddhist banner, in the process turning Tibet into a spiritual and cultural center for all Oirats, not to mention Mongols. Not only did hierarchs of Buddhist establishments from all Oirat lands receive their education in Tibetan monasteries but the ashes of secular rulers were also sent to Tibet for final interment. Upon Ayuka Khan’s death in 1724, his ashes were accordingly transported to Lhasa (Bakaeva 2002).

The role of tod bichig (the Clear Script), created in 1648 by the Khoshud monk Zaya Pandita (one of the participants in the 1640 assembly) in Jungaria, underpinned the Oirat Renaissance, gave birth to Oirat literature and poetry, and accelerated Buddhist studies and translation work. Given their spiritual, cultural, and scholarly connections with Jungaria, it is unsurprising that Kalmyk rulers and nobles were often educated in the art of statecraft in their historical homeland. Ayuka Khan, for example, spent his childhood in the palace of his maternal grandfather Batur Khong-taiji, ruler of the Jungar Khanate. In other words, throughout the history of the Kalmyk Khanate, via cultural exchanges, ruling family relations, common law, and the Buddhist religion, the various Kalmyk groups saw themselves as part of the Oirat world, and not as a separate and unique people in the lower Volga region. Moreover, both the Kalmyk and Jungar Khanates were composed of the same groups – Derbets, Torghuts, Khoshuds, and Jungars – albeit in different ratios.

Whilst united at one level, diverse Kalmyk groups began to differentiate between themselves as soon as they arrived in the Volga. After crossing the
river and settling on the steppe on its western bank (which came to be known as the “Kalmyk steppe”), some groups ventured further west, reaching the Don region, which had been previously settled by Cossacks. The first Kalmyks to settle in the Don had, for various reasons, fled larger groupings of which they had been part. For example, in 1670, fleeing from his political rivals, a Derbet noble named Bok took his subjects to the Don where he found refuge by becoming part of the Cossack army. Other Derbet nobles followed Bok and during the next 130 years various Derbet groups moved back and forth between the Don and the Kalmyk steppe at least eight times. Some stayed in the Don region permanently, while others returned to the steppe (Ochirov 2004). Members of other uluses also settled among the Don Cossacks. By suppressing their Derbet, Torghut, Khoshud, or Jungar identities these groups gradually came to be known collectively as “Buzava.” According to a popular explanation, the ethnonym “Buzava” derives from two words, *bu* meaning “rifle” and *zava* meaning “showed” (i.e. “those who showed rifles”), alluding to this groups’ military origin and occupation. Having acquired a new hereditary military occupation within the Cossack regiments, the Buzavas were the first among the Kalmyks to pursue a semi-sedentary lifestyle and become bilingual (Shovunov 1992).

Not all fleeing nomads became hereditary Cossack soldiers. However, those who submitted themselves to Russian authority were invariably encouraged to accept Christianity and settle on Russian land under the jurisdiction of Russian law and pay Russian taxes. This prompted heads of various uluses on the Kalmyk steppe to send petitions to the Russians requesting the return of their subjects. Whilst there is no evidence that all petitions elicited a prompt and positive reply, there are cases when it did. For example, in 1736 the Tsarist government passed a law concerning Kalmyks in the Don territory allowing the Kalmyks who had arrived there before 1736 to stay, although all future fugitives were to be returned to their Kalmyk lords (Dordzhieva 1977). Other Russian territories where Kalmyk refugees found shelter were Astrakhan Guberniya (governorate), Stavropol Guberniya, and Orenburg Guberniya, respectively.

Following the death of Ayuka Khan in 1724, the Khanate began to lose its prestige, which coincided with the growing power of Russia, now transformed from a tsardom into an empire by Ayuka’s contemporary, Peter the Great (1672–1725). Whilst Russia’s approach to the Kalmyk Khanate historically alternated between carefully applying sticks and appeasing with carrots, beginning in the second half of the eighteenth century the Russian Empire, empowered by a modernized army and booming economy, came to increasingly rely upon the stick alone. In response, on 5 January 1771 Ubashi Khan did what nomads do when they wish to avoid unwinnable entanglements or confrontation. Taking
the majority of the Kalmyk population with him – about 212,000 people² – the Khan set out on a journey back to Jungaria. The exodus not only proved to be a disastrous undertaking – an estimated 100,000 migrants perished on the way³ – but it also prompted Empress Catherine to abolish the Kalmyk Khanate and annex its territory along with the remaining Kalmyks (Khodarkovsky 1992). Under the new administration, Kalmyk ties were cut with Jungaria, Mongolia, and Tibet (all of which had by then been either conquered or incorporated by the Manchu Qing).

1.2 The Annexation Period (1771 to 1917)

Despite what some Kalmyk scholars argue, there is no evidence to suggest that during this period the Volga groups consolidated into a unified Kalmyk people. On the contrary, Russia’s annexation deepened their fragmentation and various Kalmyk groups were tied to certain territories from the Don to the Urals. The majority of the remaining Kalmyks were attached to Astrakhan Guberniya where they were organized into eight uluses.⁴ As in the previous period, the uluses were divided into aimags and the aimags were sub-divided into angi (“division, class”). The smallest units were khotons (“nomadic encampment”), consisting of at least 15 yurts each (Deev 2006). Each ulus was assigned precise territorial boundaries by the Russian government, as were aimags. After reshuffling groups and sub-groups following the 1771 exodus, membership in the new aimags and uluses was also made hereditary (Sharaeva 2017).

Arguably, the designation of Kalmyk groups to specific territories by the Russian government was nothing new for the Kalmyks and reflected an institution which already existed. But what was different now was that the strict territorial segregation created new territorial-administrative identities.

Apart from the Astrakhan Kalmyks, there was a large number of Kalmyks, previously settled as Cossacks, who continued to live on the Don. These military people were organized into 13 stanitsa units, sub-divided into khotons (Shovunov 1992).⁵ Seeing themselves as hereditary soldiers, the Don Kalmyks

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² According to Kolesnik, the total Kalmyk population before the exodus stood at 317,844. Following the exodus, the Kalmyk steppe had 23,544 yurts comprising 105,947 people (Kolesnik 2003, 241).

³ Upon their arrival in Xinjiang (i.e. what was formerly the territory of Jungaria), the Kalmyks were split up by the Manchu government and dispersed across the Empire. These groups never established relations with their kinsmen and kinswomen who had remained on the Volga. Today their descendants live in Xinjiang, Inner Mongolia, Hebei, and Outer Mongolia.

⁴ The names of these uluses are Bagatsokhurovskiy, Erketenevskiy, Kosheutovskiy, Maloderbetovskiy, Bolshoderbetovskiy, Yandykovskiy, Ikitsokhurovskiy, and Kharakhutoskovskiy.

⁵ Stanitsa is a Russian word for a Cossack military settlement. Kalmyk Cossacks themselves called it zun, meaning “hundred,” which was the Kalmyk word for a military unit (Rubel 1967). For more information on the 13 stanitases, see Adelman (1965).
identified more with Cossacks, which was a separate and privileged social class, rather than with their nomadic brethren in Astrakhan Guberniya. Kalmyks also served as hereditary soldiers in Cossack regiments in other places, including with the Terek Cossacks in the North Caucasus, Ural, Orenburg, and Astrakhan groups (Astrakhan Kalmyk Cossacks constituted a different social class from lay Kalmyks).

Not only were these diverse groups geographically dispersed, but they also could not venture freely beyond their respective territories. As a result, Kalmyk groups did not marry outside their territories, nor were they involved much with each other in terms of cultural exchange. Their fragmentation was exacerbated by various laws and regulations that differed in each host territory. For example, the Kalmyk steppe, under the jurisdiction of Astrakhan Guberniya, underwent a series of administrative reforms in 1801, 1825, 1836, and 1847 aimed at integrating the Kalmyks into Russian imperial structures. Economic change within certain territories, which shaped lifestyles and rituals, was another factor that distinguished diverse Kalmyk groups. For example, pastoralism began to decline on the Kalmyk steppe from the mid-nineteenth century owing to the influx of Russian peasants who pushed the herders out of their traditional pasturelands. As a result, many impoverished Kalmyks had to seek employment in fisheries on the Volga and the Caspian Sea or work at the salt quarries in Astrakhan Guberniya. According to the 1875 internal report of the Ministry of State, only 10% of Astrakhan Kalmyks were engaged in cattle breeding on a permanent basis, whereas the remaining 90% supplemented their income by selling their labour to Russians (Batyrov 2005). As fishing became an important part of the local economy, Astrakhan Kalmyks who were engaged in this occupation enriched their diets with their catch, composed songs and legends about fishing, and developed unique rituals to appease the aquatic gods, for example by reading mantras before fishing; such practices were unknown among the Don Kalmyks or the groups that lived in the middle of the Kalmyk steppe.6

During this period, in Astrakhan Guberniya historical otoks appear to have ceased to function as territorial-administrative identities in the way they did under the Kalmyk Khanate. Rather, various otoks came to be used as “clan” names, probably due to the fact that they had previously designated hereditary groupings. Hence Russians registered otoks as “clans” (Russ. rod). Since

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6 This information was collected during the Kalmyk Cultural Heritage Documentation Project (KCHDP), 2014–2019. See the ‘Fishing’ and ‘Buddhist Rituals, Holidays and Pilgrimage’ video collections:

https://www.repository.cam.ac.uk/handle/1810/253945

https://www.repository.cam.ac.uk/handle/1810/253952
sometimes (old) *otoks* overlapped with (new) *aimags*, and some *aimags* were home to a single *otok*, this led some Russian administrators to use the Kalmyk terms *aimag*, *otok*, and the Russian term *rod* as synonyms, thus creating terminological confusion. That said, in 1847 in Astrakhan *Guberniya* there were 86 officially registered *otoks* as opposed to 236 *aimags* (Deev 2006, Sharaeva 2017).

In 1860 one of the Astrakhan *uluses* (Bolshebetovskiy) was annexed to Stavropol *Guberniya*, and overseen by a different governor, thus further contributing to fragmentation. Subjected to intensive Russification through education, “Stavropol Kalmyks,” as they came to be known, soon differentiated themselves as the most educated of all Kalmyk groups. They, along with the Buzava (who as a group already spoke Russian), comprised the first Kalmyk intelligentsia.7

Broadly speaking, under Tsarist rule, disparate groups had a hierarchy of identities that were both territorially informed and retained old names. In the case of Astrakhan *Guberniya*, people had *guberniya-ulus-aimag* as well as *otok* identities. In other words, a person from this region was first of all identified as an “Astrakhan Kalmyk,” then identified with the *ulus*, *aimag*, and *otok* to which they belonged.8 In the case of Don Cossacks, or Buzavas, individuals identified with the name of their respective *stanitsa*.9 In this period, identities were also complicated by traditional names such as Derbet, Torgnut, and Khoshud (i.e. old *ulus* names), as well as Buzava, which referred to both groups and territories. Thus Derbet, Torgnut, Khoshud, and Buzava were each referred to in Kalmyk as *nutag*, meaning “place.”10

Reflecting this separation among the groups, there was no single Buddhist authority to unite Kalmyk believers. The Kalmyks of Astrakhan *Guberniya*

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7 In Stavropol *Guberniya*, the first school for Kalmyk children was opened in 1865 by the Stavropol Andreevskiy Christian Brotherhood, where 45 out of 50 students were boys. The first state-run school opened its doors in 1866, followed by four more schools built in rapid succession. Besides these schools that operated in Kalmyk settlements, Kalmyk children also studied in gymnasiums in the *guberniya*’s capital city of Stavropol (Sartikova 2002).

8 The smallest units of identity among the Derbets were called *arvn* (trans. “ten”) and among the Torgnuts *tórl* (trans. “relatives”). Both terms referred to patrilineages that could trace to a common ancestor. The corresponding units among the Buzavas were called *yasun* (trans. “bone”) (Sharaeva 2017). According to Avlyaev (2002), *arvn*, *tórl*, and *yasun* groups lived in the same *khoton* (encampment) or *stanitsa* (in the case of the Buzavas), meaning that these settlements were named after various *arvn*, *tórl*, and *yasun* patrilineal groups.

9 Although the 13 Buzava *stanitsas* were divided among three larger Buzava *uluses* – Verkhniy (Russ. ‘Upper’), Sredniy (Russ. ‘Middle’), and Nizhniy (Russ. ‘Lower’) – as their names suggest, these *uluses* were not perceived as part of one’s identity.

10 According to the popular description, Torgnut *nutag* was further divided into six *nutags*, coinciding with the number of *uluses* of Torgnut affiliation (Aberle 1952; Rubel 1967).
were under the spiritual guidance of the Shajin Lama (“Religion Lama”), whilst the Don Cossacks were led by the Cossack Bagshi Lama (“Teacher Lama”). Both the Shajin Lama and the Bagshi Lama were equals whose jurisdictions did not overlap.\textsuperscript{11} Kalmyk Cossacks in Orenburg, by contrast, were forced to accept Christianity (Ochirov 2006). Cossack regiments in Orenburg Guberniya, the Ural Region, and Terek oblast’ had Buddhist temples (Dordzhieva 1977), though they were aligned neither with the Bagshi Lama nor the Shajin Lama; this gave local clergy enough latitude to engage in religious syncretism.

At the end of the nineteenth century, there were eight Kalmyk groups scattered in the following territories: Astrakhan Guberniya (with about 146,500 Kalmyks); the Don territories (about 31,500); Stavropol Guberniya (8,500); and Terek oblast’ (4,100) (Sharaeva 2017). Kalmyk Cossack populations in the Kubansk Army, the Terek Army,\textsuperscript{12} the Ural region, and Orenburg Guberniya were small (Ochirov 2006).

Although disparate and dispersed, these groups experienced their first inkling of ethnic consciousness at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century during Russia’s “Silver Age.” It was a time of deep soul-searching when a generation of Russian intellectuals, poets, and artists began to question a European identity that had been imposed on their country from the time of Peter the Great, and increasingly looked to the East for inspiration. This search did not escape the attention of indigenous elites. Kalmyk elites (consisting of nobles and clergy) and the nascent intelligentsia set out on a similar search for identity. Both Kalmyk elites and intellectuals offered a range of approaches to revive the Kalmyk groups from what they perceived as cultural and economic stagnation that resulted from the colonial relationship with Russia.

The secular elites were predominantly concerned with the economic situation, which they viewed as the root of other problems, and advocated for the idea that Kalmyk groups be more closely integrated with the Tsarist social-political system to improve their respective local economies (Ochirov 2006). The intelligentsia, by contrast, attempted to initiate a cultural revival movement and wanted formal equality between Buddhism and Christianity, as well as reforms conducive to the development of Kalmyk culture and language (Sartikova 2002). Some representatives of the Buddhist hierarchy, who

\begin{itemize}
\item The first mention of the Bagshi Lama was in 1806. The office of the Shajin Lama was established later, and the first holder of this title was Jamba Gabung Namkhaev (in office 1836–47). The Bagshi Lama was under the control of Russia’s War Ministry, whereas the Shajin Lama served under the jurisdiction of the Interior Ministry.
\item Kalmyks in Terek oblast’ were divided into two groups: nomads who lived in Kumsk aimag and Cossacks who were part of the Terek Army (Ochirov 2010).
\end{itemize}
began to travel to Tibet and Mongolia for education and pilgrimage, advocated for a religious reformation. Buddhism was not regarded by any Kalmyk group in that period as constituting an element of group identity, although historically the religion served to unite the Oirats. The question of religion was raised in the context of the cultural revival movement as a political and doctrinal issue. Whilst secular elites tied the question of improving the legal status of Buddhism in Kalmyk territories to that of Kalmyks themselves, monks had more ecclesiastic concerns, arguing for a reformation of the Buddhist institution itself. The ranks of reformist monks included such venerated names as Baaza Menkedzhuev (from Astrakhan Guberniya), Dambo Ulyanov (from the Don region), and Boovan Badma (from Astrakhan Guberniya), all of whom, after spending time in Tibet or Mongolia, found that Buddhism in their native territories had “deteriorated.” These monks introduced new curricula in their temples, criticized Kalmyk ecclesiastical institutions, and published books.13

In sum, in the late imperial period group-level grievances and anxieties were related to economic and cultural discontent; Kalmyk national identity had not formed in any coherent sense. At the outset of Russia’s Silver Age, Kalmyk groups from different regions and of different classes were not ready to unite in pursuit of a higher political goal (Ochirov 2006). But by pursuing various goals – some overlapping, some not – various Kalmyk groups came to the realization that their communities had an ethnic commonality and shared interests. Soon, Kalmyk elites advocated for administrative autonomy for Kalmyk lands (Adelman 1960).

1.3 The Soviet Period (1917 to 1991)
The October Revolution of 1917 and the ensuing Civil War put a halt to the Kalmyks’ revivalist movement. Seeing the Bolshevik power grab as a threat to their plans, the leaders of the Astrakhan Kalmyks, who had all their uluses annexed to the Astrakhan Cossack Army in September 1917, chose confrontation with the Bolsheviks as a way forward. In January 1918, a counter-revolutionary uprising broke out in Astrakhan, led by Cossacks whose ranks included Kalmyks. The Don Kalmyks also actively participated in the White

13 Besides Kalmyk monks, the Buryat monk Agvan Dorzhiev, the Dalai Lama’s envoy in Russia, played an important role in introducing the Tibetan curriculum in Kalmyk temples and monasteries. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Agvan Dorzhiev, accompanied by Buryat lamas, arrived to establish an academic monastery of higher learning called Chorya Khurul, the first of its kind on the Kalmyk steppe, where students received higher monastic degrees hitherto obtainable only in Tibet. Agvan Dorzhiev himself was educated in a monastery in Tibet where he became a close associate of the 13th Dalai Lama.
movement. That said, many Kalmyks also fought on the side of the Reds against the White Army (Ochirov 2006). But the overwhelming majority of herders took no sides, and simply sought to survive the war.

Towards the end of 1920, when the White movement was suppressed in western Russia, the remnants of the White Army, including soldiers and their family members, were cornered in the Crimean Peninsula from where a group – including about 2,000 Kalmyks (Adelman 1960) – managed to flee on boats to Constantinople. From there, these Kalmyks settled in Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, and France. The Kalmyk communities opened small prayer houses in their respective localities and in 1929 established the first Buddhist temple in Europe in Belgrade, Yugoslavia, which became a center for Kalmyk religious and cultural life in emigration. Known in today’s Kalmykia as the “first wave of emigrants” and carrying with them the last flame of the cultural revivalist movement, these individuals taught their children the Clear Script and published magazines both in Kalmyk and Russian.

In Russia, following the end of military conflict on the Kalmyk steppe, the Bolsheviks gathered all major groups – the Don Kalmyks, Astrakhan Kalmyks, Stavropol Kalmyks, and Terek Kalmyks – into one territory, which in 1920 was designated the Kalmyk Autonomous Oblast’ and elevated in 1935 to the Kalmyk Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (ASSR) (Maksimov 2013). This territorial unification served as the foundation for the ethnic unification of the various Kalmyk groups.

The nascent Soviet government regarded the nationalities question as key to securing control over the lands of the Russian Empire. A civilizing mission, the Soviet ethno-engineering project was inspired by the Leninist position that it was possible to speed up not only revolutions but social evolution as well, through the transformation of tribes and clans into two main categories – natsional’nosti (“nationalities”) and narodnosti (“peoples”) – before they were supposed to merge into a single Soviet nation under Communism. If initially these two categories were used synonymously, by the mid-1930s they acquired a hierarchical character. Natsional’nosti were defined as “developed” groups whereas narodnosti were seen as “still developing.” The 1939 census provided additional detail on these definitions: natsional’nosti were formulated as “peoples making up the main population of union and autonomous republics,” and narodnosti were imagined as “peoples making up the main population of autonomous oblasts and national regions” (Hirsch 1997, 272). According to this evolutionary-territorial definition, the Soviet Union had many natsional’nosti constituting the titular populations of the Soviet Socialist republics and their constituent autonomous republics, whereas various narodnosti were confined to oblasts and regions nested within these larger territorial
units. This classification afforded all “developed” groups the right to promote their national languages and cultures. The state thus funded native language programs, opened publishing houses, and actively supported national literature and cultural organizations. By contrast, the “still developing” groups were denied such support. The status of the Kalmyks in this evolutionary scheme changed as changes were made to the territory’s status, and following the proclamation of the Kalmyk ASSR the Kalmyks were redefined as a natsional’nost’.14

On the Kalmyk steppe, the first propaganda organizations to disseminate new, albeit rapidly evolving, revolutionary knowledge were opened as early as October 1919, including cultural clubs, propaganda stations (agitpunkt), reading houses (chital’nye doma), and libraries where propagandists gave lectures, organized discussion evenings, celebrated holidays, and staged concerts. By 1925, in the Kalmyk Autonomous Oblast’ there were already 79 stations to eradicate illiteracy (likpunkt), 21 reading houses, 11 libraries, ten clubs, and ten schools, not to mention mobile cinemas and theatres (Sartikova 2003). The task of Soviet ethno-engineers was to construct a national narrative, which they proceeded to do not only by introducing new national heroes and dates of historical importance but also by uprooting diverse groups and uniting them within a single territory.

The construction of a centralized history and identity was achieved at the expense of a myriad of Tsarist-era territorially informed identities created along the hierarchy of guberniya-ulus-aimag/stanitsa-arvn/törl/yasun, which were deeply historicized identities in the sense that each of these units had an underlying history. Activities such as the promotion of the Kalmyk language and literature, the introduction of universal education, propagandizing, and the establishment of the Kalmyk State Museum in 1921 to showcase the achievements of the Kalmyk people, or nation – all carried out more or less simultaneously in the 1920s–led to the emergence of a unified ethnic consciousness.15 The beginning of World War Two served as a powerful catalyst to instill widespread patriotism among the Kalmyks, reinforcing the idea of a united Kalmyk people as a coherent nation and part of a wider Soviet

\[14\] The Soviet political-ethnographic lexicon was riddled with confusion, inherited from pre-revolutionary Russian scholarship (Tolz 2019), whereby various terms were used interchangeably, including such pairs as national’nost’ (“nationality”) and natsiya (“nation”) as well as narodnost’ (“ethnicity”) and narod (“people”). All these terms were often used as synonyms. Notwithstanding this terminological confusion, what all these concepts created in the case of Soviet Kalmykia was a real sense among the Kalmyks that they were a somewhat united people.

\[15\] Established in 1921, the State Museum opened its doors to the public in 1931.
citizenry. Under patriotic slogans, 43,000 men from Kalmykia were sent to the front between 1941 and 1943.

In December 1943, the entire Kalmyk population of Kalmykia – 93,130 people in total – were exiled to Siberia, accused of collaboration with the Nazis during the brief German occupation of Kalmykia in 1942. No Kalmyk family was spared, even those whose men fought in the Red Army. In August 1942, a regiment of the Wehrmacht had invaded Kalmykia, which resulted in the establishment in Elista of the Kalmyk Cavalry Corps composed of Kalmyk volunteers, prisoners of war who were released from German captivity, and teenagers who were recruited by force. The Cavalry Corps was put under the command of a German officer, Dr. Rudolf Otto Doll. By December, when Kalmykia was retaken by the Red Army, members of the Cavalry Corps, including 3,000 cavalrymen and their family members of about 2,000 civilians, fearing of Soviet reprisals, followed the retreating German Army to Europe\(^\text{16}\) (Munoz 2001, Guchinova 2005, Churyumova and Holland 2021). In December 1943, the Kalmyk ASSR was abolished by the Soviet government and its territory annexed to the surrounding regions. Small numbers of Kalmyks who lived in the neighboring Rostov and Stalingrad oblasts were deported in March 1944 and June 1944 respectively. The entire Kalmyk contingent of the Red Army was also demobilized and sent to a work camp. Those who survived the ordeal joined their families later in the places of exile.

Scattered in small numbers across a vast territory,\(^\text{17}\) the Kalmyks were not allowed to return to Kalmykia until 1956 following Stalin’s death. By depriving the deportees of their citizenship rights and forcing them into submission, the exile left a deep psychological scar – referred to by Kalmyks as “Siberian syndrome” (Sibirskiïy sindrom) – and was a defining experience that shaped the post-war identity of the Kalmyk population. Hard-learned obedience, a fear of the state, and a sense of guilt mixed with an enduring obsession with restoring their ethnic pride, all became the defining self-characteristics of many Kalmyks of the post-war generation.\(^\text{18}\) Nevertheless, from a Soviet perspective,

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16 After the war the majority of the surviving members of the Cavalry Corps, both military personnel and civilians, were repatriated to the Soviet Union.

17 Once in Siberia, many individuals were later deported further onwards. By 1948, Kalmyks were scattered across Siberia, the Far East, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan (Bakaev 2003).

18 For oral histories recounted by Kalmyks about exile and its effects on the national psyche see the ‘Oral Histories’ and ‘Autobiographies’ video collections: https://www.repository.cam.ac.uk/handle/1810/253890 https://www.repository.cam.ac.uk/handle/1810/253917
the reintegration of the Kalmyks into Soviet society in the post-exile period was a success.

Whilst Kalmyks never forgot the traumatic experience of mass exile, on their return to Kalmykia people tried to conform to and support various state-sponsored projects. Guided by their willingness to prove to the Communist Party that their “nation” was and had always been loyal to Russia, Kalmyks actively supported the rewriting of Kalmykia’s official history. In 1959, after the majority of the Kalmyks had returned home and the ASSR had been reestablished, the republic celebrated the 350th anniversary of Kalmykia’s joining Russia voluntarily. Whilst this new historiography included elements from older oral histories (such as accounts of historical leaders, events, and their interpretations) that could evoke readings alternative to the official account, the Soviet view of history was uncritically accepted by the majority of the population, which also implies that private views rarely deviated strongly from the official line.

At the national level, the Soviet state was simultaneously constructing a new Kalmyk person with a distinctive national identity while encouraging this person to give up their identity and evolve into a homogenous Soviet people. Despite being considered a Soviet nation loyal to the state, the Kalmyks were also believed by Soviet ethnographers to accommodate backward feudal-era structures in the form of “tribes.” Thus the Kalmyk nation was defined as consisting of four “tribes”: the Derbet, the Torghut, the Koshud, and the Buzava. These tribal identities were expected to disappear in the future. In Kalmykia, as elsewhere in the Soviet Union, this evolutionary vision was embodied, as an example, in the arrangement of exhibits in the Kalmyk State Museum. Destroyed during World War Two, the museum was restored in 1960 to exhibit both local and all-Soviet achievements. The museum was divided into two main sections, one dedicated to Kalmykia and its traditional culture and “tribes,” while the other was a generic space used to illustrate the emergence of “common Soviet characteristics” among all peoples of the Soviet Union. Both sections were permeated with an “enlightenment/backwardness” contrast. The Kalmyk section displayed artefacts and illustrations of nomadic life framed in the context of backwardness and pre-modernity. By contrast, the Soviet section not only boasted objects and photos promoting the accomplishments of

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19 While the Kalmyks had been away in exile, their houses were occupied by local Russians. Upon their return, Kalmyks had to live in dug-outs due to housing shortages, and many families settled in new places away from their native villages where they had lived before exile.
Soviet industry, science, and culture but also suggested a triumphant culmina-
tion of all national stories into a Soviet metanarrative.20

The next decade under Brezhnev, however, proved the Party’s predictions
to have been overly optimistic, as the Soviet people showed no sign that they
were merging into a single society in the short term.21 The concept of ethnos
(етнос) was a step forward in that it acknowledged the complexity of social
processes involved in the formation of new groups and identities (though
arguably constituting a step backward from a Marxist-Leninist perspective).
By offering a more nuanced approach to the issue, this concept encouraged the
study of ethnic differences in the Soviet Union. First used in Russia in the early
twentieth century by the Russian anthropologist Sergey Shirokogoroff, ethnos
was reintroduced in the Soviet ethnographic lexicon by the dissident histo-
rian Lev Gumilev. Yulian Bromley, Chair of the Institute of Ethnography of the
Soviet Academy of Sciences, further popularized the term. Both Gumilev and
Bromley saw ethnoses as similar to nations and agreed that these were sta-
ble units. Yet this is where agreement ended (Clover 2017). Seeing ethnoses
as “ethno-social units” consisting of “a collection of characteristics,” Bromley
argued in the spirit of Marxism-Leninism that ethnoses change their charac-
teristics and could be assimilated over time along with the disappearance of
social classes and class antagonism. This insight implied that the Soviet state
had to wait longer for the total homogenization of its population to occur.

Gumilev, by contrast, saw each ethnos as endowed with a “particular
essence,” which did not change with social progress. On the contrary, ethno-
ses are born and then die, like organisms, according to their inner life cycles.
Gumilev theorized that ethnoses have another important attribute: they are
human groupings each with a common purpose or goal for which its members
are willing to sacrifice themselves (Gumilev 1993, 2005). Despite its patriotic
zeal, Gumilev’s theory of ethno-genesis was anti-Marxist-Leninist, which ren-
dered his works unpublishable in major academic journals. An underdog hero,
Gumilev’s name and ideas proliferated among the intelligentsia, catapulting
him to intellectual stardom during Gorbachev’s perestroika (Bassin 2016).

The implication of the term ethnos for Kalmyks was that the former “tribes” –
the Derbets, the Buzavas, the Torghuts, and the Khoshuds – were accordingly
reformulated as “sub-ethnic groups” (субетнические группы), whose merger

20 Personal communication with museum workers in Elista in July 2014.
21 In the post-exile decades, Kalmyk marriages outside their national group were resented
by the older generation, particularly in rural areas, whereas in the capital Elista young
Kalmyks of both genders increasingly married Russians, with or without the approval of
their elders. Such marriages gradually became more acceptable across Kalmykia towards
late socialism. This dynamic continues to this day.
with each other was now expected to take longer than anticipated. This situation, involving imaginary social evolution and the trick of a linguistic game, still underpins official dogma in post-Soviet Kalmykia. Following the Kalmyk historian Konstantin Maksimov, during the 400 years of their time on the Volga the Kalmyks developed from a tribal society into a people and finally into a nation (Maksimov 2000). In other words, Maksimov traces Kalmyk “national identity” back to the “people’s identity,” which has its origin in the tribe/clan. On the eve of the collapse of state socialism, the idealized Soviet Kalmyk person was understood to have had the following – to use Gumilev’s and Bromley’s definition – set of characteristics: mastery of Russian and knowledge of Russia’s history; patriotism (synonymous with loyalty to the Soviet state and its projects); atheistic views; and a secular education. By contrast, knowledge of the Kalmyk language (which was spoken by many elderly people) and religiosity (which characterized many people of middle-age and older generations) were seen as “feudal-era” characteristics expected to disappear as the society progressed towards Communism. Apart from reinforcing the concepts of unified national history, common ancestry, and a sense of common destiny, what Soviet ideology instilled in the minds of the Kalmyks was the idea that they were somewhat distinct from related Oirat and Mongol groups both inside the Soviet Union (e.g. in Buryatia and Kyrgyzstan) and beyond in Mongolia and China.

1.4 **The Post-Soviet Period (since 1991)**

The Estonian scholar Martin Ehala coined the terms “cold” and “hot” ethnicities with regard to peoples in post-Soviet countries (Ehala 2011, Ehala and Zabrodskaja 2014). “Cold” ethnicity refers to an ethnicity whose members do not feel any significant emotional attachment to their group, seeing themselves primarily as individuals and not representatives of a particular ethnicity. Devoid of a strong feeling of ethnic identity, “cold” groups either do not see group membership as something that could be rewarding or are organizationally weak, being without leadership, so they have little sense of shared history. Rather than an emotional attachment, the ethnic vitality of such groups is sustained by purely social institutions that coordinate collective actions and behavior. It is also the case that “cold” ethnicities are prone to go through language and identity shifts quicker. A “hot” ethnicity, by contrast, is characterized by members’ high emotional attachment to their group, which is reinforced and reproduced by the alignment of collective emotions (during socialization or educational and cultural activities). Not only are its members willing to contribute to their group’s wholeness but closed inter-ethnic boundaries prevent them from leaving the group. The hot-cold metaphor as applied to ethnicities, Ehala contends, has explanatory value in that it can describe factors
that may influence changes in ethnic “temperature.” Ehala’s idea proved to be useful in the description of some post-Soviet peoples in Central Asia, Belarus, Ukraine, and the Baltic states that have had comparable historical experiences (Zabrodskaja and Ehala 2014).

This notion can also be used in the analysis of the Kalmyk case, not least because the Kalmyks were also part of the Soviet Union and today many Kalmyks say that they feel passionate about and proud of their ethnicity (an ethnographic term) or nation (a political term). As discussed above, this pride, however, was not always there. Up until the first decades of the Bolshevik Revolution, there was no united Kalmyk “ethnic body” to emanate a temperature that could be measured – it was not just cold, it was nonexistent. Rather, dispersed among the Russian provinces, myriad Kalmyk groups had strong territorial identities that were connected with the localities where they lived. Following territorial unification of the Kalmyk groups, no sooner had the ethnic temperature emerged than it plummeted during the mass exile of the Kalmyks to Siberia. Geographically dispersed and living among other peoples, Kalmyk families were compelled to hide their nascent ethnic identity. As a result, parents en masse gave their children Russian names and stopped teaching them their native language. Other identity markers such as traditional holidays, customs, and Buddhist rituals were simplified, forgotten, or relegated to the domestic sphere, hidden away from the prying eyes of outsiders. It was not until 1956 when the Kalmyks were pardoned and allowed to return to Kalmykia that the ethnic temperature warmed. Pardoned, reunited, and elated, the Kalmyks were eager to reestablish and celebrate their ethnic pride under the ideological hegemony of socialism.

That said, the old tribal/territorial identities of Buzava, Derbet, Torghut, and Khoshud never disappeared for they were elevated into sub-ethnic identities, which was enough to keep them officially acknowledged as units constituting the Kalmyk ethnos but apparently not enough to shelter from jokes and humorous stories. In Soviet-era jokes, Derbet, Torghut, and Khoshud sub-ethnic identities invariably served as symbols of backwardness vis-à-vis Buzava identity, which was promoted as exemplary based on the understanding that the Buzavas as a group were seen as the most Russified – and hence most progressive – among the Kalmyks.

The collapse of the Soviet Union, however, prompted the Kalmyks to reevaluate their ethnic identity, not least because constructing the “Soviet person” ceased to be the official aim. Despite the republic’s trumpeting of the launch of a post-Soviet project aimed at educating “genuine Kalmyks,” this endeavor

22 On ethnic pride among the Kalmyks see Holland (2015).
offered no new solutions but sufficed with recycling old Soviet ideas and ideals. This was mainly due to the success of the Soviet interpretation of Kalmykia’s history and ethnic origin. Whilst many values implanted during the previous period remained intact (such as the notion of a distinct Kalmyk ethnos, Russia’s association with culture, the notion of a “cultured person,” value given to education, and importance accorded to the Russian language), what was being reemphasized were hitherto discouraged or downplayed issues, including knowledge of the Kalmyk language, traditions, and religiosity, that are today included in the “characteristics” of the ideal Kalmyk. In a bid to revive pre-Revolutionary culture, in the 1990s the Kalmyk government also set out to document Kalmyk “clans” by issuing “passports” to various “clans” certifying their names, albeit with limited success. Whilst today the term etnos remains in the official vocabulary, it is no longer used in the Bromleyan sense as something that progresses through evolutionary stages and changes its characteristics. Rather, it is understood by the Kalmyks as a static grouping that came about at a certain time in the past and like living organisms has a designated lifespan, which is a Gumilevian interpretation. In the popular understanding, today the “genuine” Kalmyk has the following characteristics: he/she is a Buddhist; tolerant (because of Buddhism); respectful (both towards elders and the state); patriotic; imbued with love for (secular) education; and knowledgeable of Kalmyk customs and rituals. In terms of ethnicity, the “genuine” Kalmyk is generally perceived to be a person who is different from the rest of the Mongol community, albeit historically and evolutionary related to the latter.

In 2001 the Kalmyk branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences carried out a survey involving 404 Kalmyks who were asked to rate characteristics that in their view constitute Kalmyk identity and reinforce Kalmyk unity (Namrueva 2005). Respondents were asked to rate eight characteristics listed in a questionnaire according to their importance. In the responses, religion (Buddhism) was ranked by the majority of respondents as the most important characteristic of Kalmyk identity. Other characteristics ranked in descending order of importance are as follows:

1) Religion (Buddhism)
2) Living among people of the same nationality
3) National self-consciousness and psychology

Since there is no clear definition of what constitutes a “clan” (Russ. rod), it may mean either former aimags/otoks or today’s arvn/törl/yasun groups or both.

Whilst there are Kalmyks who say that they are part of the Oirat or the wider Mongol ethnic community, this view is not universally popular in Kalmykia.
4) Common language
5) Knowledge of folk songs and dances
6) Knowledge of traditions and customs
7) Knowledge of the national literature and art
8) Material culture, traditional script, costumes, and dwelling.

There are several interesting observations to be made about this survey. Whilst there is no evidence suggesting that Buddhism (rated by respondents as the most important “national characteristic” in the questionnaire answers) may have traditionally served as an identity marker, in the Soviet period religion acquired an explicitly political significance and atheism was included as a characteristic that defined the exemplary Soviet Kalmyk person. The high prestige accorded to religion today is not only a reaction to and a result of the Soviet treatment of religion, but is also indicative of the growing power of the Buddhist establishment in post-Soviet Kalmykia. Other aspects of cultural revival having failed mainly due to lack of funds, Buddhism is the only aspect that has been successfully reinstated.25 No wonder the majority of Kalmyks, even those who are not religious, identify as Buddhists (Holland 2015).

Historically speaking, territoriality, or living with members of one’s group in a particular area (ranked second in terms of importance in the questionnaire answers), defined various Kalmyk groups. The idea of territorial belonging was further reinforced by the Soviet state, which gathered disparate Kalmyk groups inside an allocated territory and united them under the label of a “nation.” Hence the prominence in the questionnaire answers given to Kalmyk identity as tied to the territoriality of the republic.

The idea of “national self-consciousness and psychology” (ranked third in the questionnaire answers), which many Kalmyks see as an important element in their identity, is a construct introduced by the Soviet ethno-engineering

25 In Kalmykia Buddhism was revived with the help of Buryatia and Mongolia. In 1989 a group consisting of seven Kalmyk men wishing to study Buddhism was sent to the Ivolinsky Datsan in Buryatia, and in 1990 another five men to the Gandan Monastery in Mongolia. When in 1991 it was decided to revive the office of the Shajin Lama of Kalmykia, a Buryat monk named Tuvan Dorzhi was elected to this post only to be voted out soon afterwards. In 1992 the post was offered to Telo Tulku Rinpoche, a Kalmyk American monk educated in a Tibetan monastery in India. After his appointment, Telo Tulku Rinpoche invited Tibetan monks to Kalmykia and sent Kalmyks to Tibetan monasteries in India, establishing a direct link between Kalmykia and Tibetan monasteries. Today, Kalmykia and Buryatia’s Buddhist establishments, however, do not have cordial relations with each other due to a difference in political-ecclesiastical views of their respective leaders, the Shajin Lama and the Khambu Lama. That said, ordinary Kalmyks travel to Buryatia to see and worship Dashi-Dorzho Itigelov’s (1852–1927) incorruptible body, which is one of the biggest attractions for Kalmyk pilgrims.
project. Tied to the Soviet concepts of nation/ethnos and imbued with a sense of collectivism and common history, today the idea of a homogenizing “national self-consciousness” is as popular as it was in the previous period.

Hitherto discouraged knowledge of the Kalmyk language today enjoys prestige to be ranked as the fourth most important “national characteristic.” In the survey, the ranking of “material culture, traditional script, costumes, and dwelling” at the bottom is not coincidental. Forced adoption of the Cyrillic alphabet eroded the place of the Clear Script, while collectivization and widespread sedentarization in the Soviet period led to the disappearance of many facets of the nomadic lifestyle and material culture, including the yurt, household objects, and clothing, which lost their usefulness and functionality in daily life. Either relegated to museum shelves or partially revived in the context of ethno-tourism, these items of material culture today serve only as symbols or markers of tradition.

2 Conclusion

Kalmyks today report high levels of ethnic pride. This popular feeling has been recorded by the Kalmyk Cultural Heritage Documentation Project (KCHDP), a visual anthropological project aimed primarily at video-documenting the Kalmyks in Russia hosted at the Mongolia and Inner Asia Studies Unit at the University of Cambridge from 2014 to 2019.26 Whilst the interview topics did not specifically include national or ethnic identity, many respondents discussed related issues in their narratives concerning rituals, language, folklore, autobiographies, national history, and beliefs. Despite a gap of more than 13 years between the two projects, the KCHDP confirmed the spirit of the above-mentioned 2001 survey, showing that not much changed in the intervening years in terms of how Kalmyks in general understand their identity. What was nevertheless new is a growing self-reported ethnic pride. The modern genealogy of this pride can be accounted for by a shift in post-Soviet Kalmyk historiography, which valorizes Kalmyks as “loyal and glorious defenders of Russia.” This idea, in turn, can be traced back to the post-exile Soviet historiography when the Kalmyks characterized themselves as “loyal subjects of Russia,” a move which aimed to counter the narrative around the mass deportation of the Kalmyks and instead emphasize their willingness to prove to the Soviet state that they had always been loyal to Russia. Whilst the post-Soviet shift

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26 The digital video archive with interviews can be accessed at: www.repository.cam.ac.uk/handle/1810/253889.
from “loyal subjects” to “loyal and glorious defenders” may seem subtle, it is important in that this particular reading of history solicits ethnic pride.

Today’s official interpretation of the emergence of the Kalmyk ethnos is a continuation of the Soviet doctrine, which contends that the Kalmyks evolved under the benign influence of Russian culture into a separate and unique people long before the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917. This ideologically informed explanation, however, runs contrary to historical fact. Not only did various Volga groups not universally accept the ethnonym Kalmyk during the Khanate period but they saw themselves as part of a powerful Oirat world and not a separate people on the Volga with different identity. Following Russia’s annexation of Kalmykia in 1771, diverse Kalmyk groups were isolated both from each other and the larger Oirat-Mongol world. During this period (1771–1917), scattered among Russian provinces from the Don to the Urals, diverse groups instead developed a host of local identities – some new, others a mix of old and new – that were tied to their respective territories. Contrary to official historiography, the imagination among the groups of their ethnic commonality did not occur organically over the centuries but was ideologically imposed by Soviet ethnographers and accepted by the Kalmyk population during the first decades of Soviet rule in the context of a nation-building project.

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