

The Kalmyks

Europe's Only Native Buddhists



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The Kalmyks: Europe's Only Native Buddhists

We usually think of Buddhism as being an Asian religion and for the most part that is true. But not entirely. To explain why this is the case it will be necessary to go back several hundred years in history. Dzungaria was a region in what is now the province of Xinxiang in the far west of China. The people who used to live there were a sub-group of Mongols and were a tough nomadic people. By the beginning of the 15th century they had all converted to Buddhism as a result of Tibetan missionary monks and they looked to the Dalai Lama as their spiritual leader. Around this time the Kalmyks were having increasing conflict with neighbouring tribes and knowing that there was good pasture for their animals further west in the vast empty spaces, in 1618 they decided to migrate there, some 200,000 of them. This migration took about a decade but eventually they all settled on the largely empty fertile plain on the western side of the Caspian Sea. There they set up what was called the Kalmyk Khanate which lasted from 1630 to 1724. They governed themselves through tribal councils and being nomadic they did not have conventional viharas but rather viharas in *yurts*, large circular tents. Continual contact with Tibet through pilgrims and lamas going there to study and Tibetan lamas coming to their land, kept Buddhism vibrant and alive. The Tibetan lama Zaya Pandita (1599-1662) created a script for writing the Kalmyk language and translated some 180 Buddhist works into it.



The main temple in Elista

But the Kalmyk's peaceful idyll was not to last. Landless Russian peasants had been slowly moving into the lands around the Caspian Sea for some time and finally the Russian Tsar decided to encourage migration to the Kalmyk Khanate. These settlers increasingly fenced their farms thus restricting the wandering herds of the Kalmyks and causing increasing hardship for them. Violence began to break out, an excuse the Russian Tsar used to put pressure on the Kalmyks. He was able to take advantage of political

divisions within the Khanate to make demands which gradually ate away at its independence. In January 1771 Catharine the Great abolished the Khanate and demanded that some 170,000 Kalmyks return to Dzungaria, a land none of them were born in or had ever seen. And of course the land they had left more than a century earlier had been taken over by others.

The returnee's fate was a miserable one. As for the Kalmyks who stayed behind things were little better. Now incorporated into the Russian Empire, they were second-class citizens, their pasture land was confiscated for agriculture, they were forced to settle, and their language was suppressed. As was often the case, Christian missionaries were only too happy to take advantage of the situation to make converts. The Russian Orthodox Church suggested to the Tsar that Kalmyks who converted should receive certain privileges, and this was done. As a consequence, at the beginning of the 18th century there were 200 Kalmyk temples but by 1895 there were only 62.

When the Russian Revolution broke out in 1917 many Kalmyks hoped for relief from the discrimination they groaned under. The promise of land and respect for all ethnic groups within Russia resonated with them. But when the Bolsheviks high jacked the government some Kalmyks continued to believe the promises while the more perceptive ones did not and they joined the anti-Bolshevik, pro-tsar Whites. The Red Army moved in and forced thousands of youths and men to join the army to prevent them joining the Whites. After emerging victorious in the civil war the Bolsheviks, i.e. communists, fell on the Kalmyks with a vengeance. Temples were closed, monks were disrobed and in some cases killed and all expressions of Buddhism was suppressed. In 1920 the so-called Kalmyk Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (KASSR) was established giving the impression that the inhabitants governed themselves, but of course all policy was made by communists in Moscow. The several years of social disruption caused a severe famine in 1922. The government of Mongolia offered to take 100,000 Kalmyks to save them (the Mongolians and the Kalmyks had strong ethnic bonds) but Moscow refused and some 70,000 of them perished from hunger. But more tribulations were to come. In 1929 Stalin ordered the collectivization of all agriculture and livestock throughout the USSR, including in the KASSR. Any herdsman owning more than 500 sheep was branded a *kulak*, a rich pheasant, and was deported with their family to Siberia or if they resisted, was shot. As it required at least 450 head of sheep to have sufficient to eat, procure other necessities and pay taxes this meant that thousands suffered this grim fate.

Anyone who could escaped into exile, many lamas making their way to Tibet, others to Yugoslavia where in 1929 they built one of the earliest Buddhist temples in the West, in Belgrade, and to the United States. One who did manage to get to America was the lama Geshe Wangyal, the first person to teach Tibetan Buddhism in the West. Some of his students went on to become prominent Buddhist academics, in particular Prof. Robert Thurman and Prof. Jeffery Hopkins.

When the Nazis invaded the Soviet Union in 1941 thousands of Kalmyks joined the Red Army to fight for their country, despite how badly it had treated them. The Nazis briefly occupied the KASSR although the Red Army eventually managed to drive them out again. But to have been under foreign occupation for even a little more than a year was enough to raise Stalin's suspicions that they were traitors and on the 28th September 1943 he ordered the entire Kalmyk population to be deported to the wastes of Siberia. It is not known how many people died but it has been estimated that it was more than half. The Kalmyk Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic was dissolved, Russians and Ukrainians made homeless by the war were moved in and the names of all cities and towns were changed to Russian ones. It looked like the Kalmyk people, Europe's only native Buddhists, were to disappear from history.

But then Stalin died and in 1957 the Khrushchev administration announced that the Kalmyks could return to their homeland. This was better than Siberian exile but only just. The returnees were given no compensation or help to resettle, and their homes and fields were occupied by Russians who looked upon them as outsiders. They had no option but to settle on waste land and try to scrape out a living there. Their

language was not taught in their schools, their distinct culture was given no support and of course Buddhism was banned. But somehow, despite these almost incredible odds they managed to hold onto their religion.

Only with the collapse of the USSR in 1991 did a light appear on the horizon for the Kalmyks for the first time in 150 years. In 1992 they formed the Republic of Kalmykia, an independent state within the Russian Federation. After initial economic problems the Republic is progressing well. Kalmyks make up 57% of the population and 37% of these call themselves Buddhists. The capital, Elista, is dominated by the impressive Golden Temple and the present head of the Sangha is Telo Tulku Rinpoche who was born in the US and educated by Tibetans in India. Under him Buddhism is undergoing something of a revival. So far he has established 27 new temples and sent numerous young men to India to study Buddhism in preparation for becoming monks. So far things are looking up for Europe's only native Buddhists.