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Deportation of the Kalmyks (1943–1956): Stigmatized Ethnicity

The Kalmyks were among the fourteen ethnic groups punished by Stalin through deportation, beginning in 1943. Some of these deportations were timed to coincide with state festivals: the Balkar people were exiled on March 8 (International Women's Day) and the Chechen and Ingush on February 23 (the Day of the Soviet Army and Navy). Why was deportation of peoples linked to major festivals? It had become a tradition in the USSR that "the Party and the Working People" would try their best to have some important accomplishment to report by every major festivity, and punishment of so-called enemies of the people was one of the central tasks of many state establishments. The Kalmyks' exile was a present to Stalin, "the father of the peoples," for the 1944 New Year's celebration. In this article, I will show how the social status of the Kalmyks was reflected by its ethnic culture, and how such ethnic markers as food, language, holidays, choice of marriage partner and personal names were changing during this period.

Deportation

The operation of expelling Kalmyks was termed *Uluses*. *Uluses* are defined as "large regions," being main units of administrative division of the Kalmyk khanate in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, later

also of the Kalmyk Steppe in the Russian Empire. The Kalmyk Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (KASSR) was also divided in *Uluses*. On the other hand in the Kalmyk language *Uluses* may also mean *peoples*. Removing Kalmyks to Siberia, the Soviet administration, by use of this symbolic name, stated its strategy: expel whole groups of people as punishment for disloyalty.

Not all operations of expelling peoples bore such expressive names. Similar to the operation of expelling Kalmyks, another portentous name was given to the expulsion of the Chechens and Ingush. This too had evident meaning, reflecting an openly cynical attitude of state repressive structures. In Russian, the term is *Chechevitsa* (lentil). Besides the obvious phonetic association with the word Chechen, another meaning is also evident: the administration regarded peoples as groats. Groats are a cheap foodstuff, which must be properly prepared before being consumed. Likewise, in the view of the colonial administration, Kalmyks and Chechens were not civilized enough and great effort was required on the part of the *elder brother*¹ in order for them to enter the shining palaces of socialism.

On December 27, 1943, M. I. Kalinin signed Decree No. 115/144 of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR entitled "On the liquidation of the Kalmyk ASSR and the formation of the Astrakhan oblast within the composition of the USSR." The decree formulates the basis of the punishment:

In the period of occupation of the territory of the Kalmyk ASSR by German-Fascist invaders, many Kalmyks betrayed their Motherland, joined military detachments organized by the Germans for fighting against the Red Army, handed over to the Germans honest Soviet citizens, seized and handed over to the Germans livestock evacuated from collective farms in the Rostov oblast and the Ukraine, and, after the expulsion of the invaders by the Red Army, organized bands and actively opposed organs of Soviet power in the restoration of the economy destroyed by the Germans, perpetrated bandit raids on collective farms and terrorized the surrounding population.²

1 This traditionally denoted the Russian people.

2 V. B. Ubushaev, *Vyselenie i vozvrashchenie, 1943–1957* (Elista, 1991), p. 21.

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The decree ordained that all Kalmyks residing on the territory of the Kalmyk ASSR were to be moved to other regions of the USSR and the Kalmyk ASSR was to be liquidated. Other points in the edict indicated a decision to divide the territory of the Kalmyk ASSR between the only recently created Astrakhan oblast, the Stalingrad oblast and the Stravrapol krai. This edict was not published, and neither was Resolution No. 1432-1425 of the Soviet of People's Commissars adopted on December 28, 1943 and signed by V. M. Molotov, in which the fate of the deported nation was determined. In accordance with the decree, all Kalmyks living in the Kalmyk ASSR were relocated to the Altai and Krasnoyarsk krai and the Omsk and Novosibirsk oblasts. Among them 25,000 went to the Altai krai, 25,000 to the Krasnoyarsk krai, 25,000 to the Omsk oblast and 20,000 to the Novosibirsk oblast. Moreover, many Kalmyks found themselves in different regions of the USSR: the Far East, Taimyr, Central Asia and Kazakhstan. For the most part the resettlement of the Kalmyks was carried out in villages where the economy was based on animal husbandry or fishing.³

Overall, nearly 120,000 Kalmyks were deported. On December 28, 1943, all residents of the republic who were Kalmyks by nationality were put into storage wagons heading east. A short time later, Kalmyks who lived in the Rostov and Stalingrad oblasts were deported. The Kalmyk district in the Rostov oblast was eliminated. In the spring of 1944, Kalmyks living in the Ordzhonikidze krai and Kizlyar district were also subjected to deportation.⁴ As early as 1944, Lavrentii Beriia was in person reporting in the State Defense Committee to "comrade Stalin I. V. and comrade Molotov V. M.": "Altogether 26,359 families, or 93,139 people were loaded onto 46 railway trains."⁵

For the *Uluses* operation NKVD (People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs) and NKGB (People's Commissariat for State Security) had directed 2,975 officers to the Kalmyk ASSR. For transportation, 1,255 vehicles had been provided by the transportation department of NKVD. The operation was carried out by the third motorized rifle regiment of the

³ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

⁴ N. F. Bugai and A. M. Gonov, *Kavkaz: Narody v eshelonakh (20-60-e gody)* (Moscow, 1998), p. 182.

⁵ N. F. Bugai, *Operatsiia Ullusy* (Elista, 1991), p. 25.

internal troops of NKVD. These troops already had experience repressing the Karachai people.⁶ The military had flooded the republic about two weeks before the scheduled operation. However, this had caused little alarm among the residents, and the majority, as one Kalmyk resident recalled, “believed the legend that soldiers had arrived for rest. How could we associate anything evil with the Red Army soldiers? After all our relatives, too, were serving in the Red Army.”⁷

In ethnically mixed families, non-Kalmyk wives were offered a chance to divorce their husbands, and avoid sharing the fate of the Kalmyk people. Those who declined this opportunity were regarded as Kalmyks and expelled. They might also have been used in unqualified labor, getting fired from comparatively easy office work, when the fact of their marriage to a Kalmyk became known. Most being ethnically Russian, they were obliged to report to the commandant’s office every month along with the Kalmyks.

Modern reminiscences reveal different troubles faced by different social and gender and age groups. Rural residents, often not knowing Russian, were scarcely aware of the extremity of the situation and did not take appropriate warm clothing with them. Urban residents often proved more adaptable, but the elderly from villages were most vulnerable. Adaptation was easiest for the children, who had someone to take care of them.

Kalmyks traditionally measured their wealth by the number of cattle in their possession. Those owning cattle also had food and other vital necessities. To be deprived of cattle, which was impossible to take into exile, meant losing one’s livelihood, analogous today to one losing all of his or her financial savings. Of course, people had difficulties adjusting to these new, deprived conditions. Moreover, domestic animals were not just considered capital, but also live souls to be fed, cleaned, sheared, assisted when they give birth, pastured and loved. “Mournfully and sickly moored cows, bleated sheep, whimpered camels—this cacophony drove dread into hearts, chill into blood, made hair stand on end.”⁸

6 Ibid., p. 24.

7 G. S. Vasil’eva, “Nas okruzhali khoroshie liudi,” in *My – iz vyslannykh navechno* (Elista, 2004), p. 329.

8 S. I. Shevenova and E.-B. Guchinova, eds., *Pamiat’ v nasledstvo: Deportatsiia kalmykov v*

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People were picked from their homes by trucks that took them to the nearest railway station. There, everybody was loaded onto cars normally used for transporting cattle. Witnesses recall that those trucks had been painted red. Leaving a lasting impression, folk songs today reference these red cars. The color red has many connotations and symbolic meanings. In this case, it represented Soviet power and the Communist Party, as well as blood. The red wagons carried people by the rule of the red power.

Normal seating capacity for these cars was 40 people. During the expulsions, however, sometimes they would carry 60 to 80 persons. Each car had one small stove, which often provided little protection from the cold, because of the cracks and holes in the walls and floors. One could prepare food on the stoves, but many had no kitchen utensils "even to melt snow in," and procured "tin cans served as cups, mugs and cooking pots." Cooking on this oven people had to hold the pots in the hands. "You couldn't let it go while moving, otherwise it would fall over."⁹

Corporality was an important parameter through which person perceived oneself among others. Oral narratives containing reference to corporal experiences usually associated them with ordeals, overcoming shame, and moving beyond old experiences. In the extreme situation of exile, prolonged in time, traditional corporal practices could not prevail. They had to adjust to new climatic and social conditions. Issues of personal hygiene were no longer confined to the private sphere and were dealt with by joint efforts.

Cattle cars provided no facilities. There were no lavatories; people had to urinate next to the wagon while the train was at a station. Many women, uncomfortable about urinating in the presence of men, would do so on the opposite side of the train, where they could be unseen. In order to move to the other side, however, it was necessary for them to crawl under the train. There were a number of fatalities as trains departing the station began to move, while the women were still underneath. The cold in the car was not just symbolic. It largely resulted because people did not know the method of lighting the stoves, knowledge

shkol'nykh sochineniiakh (St. Petersburg, 2005), p. 106.

9 E. Shamakov, "Shel tret'ii god voiny . . . : Rasskaz staroi kalmychki," in S. U. Alieva, ed., *Tak eto bylo: Natsional'nye representii v SSSR*, tom 2 (Moscow, 1993), p. 47.

which was taken for granted by the organizers. People had been using pressed dung as fuel for their entire lives, and did not know how to put coal in the fire, which was furthermore often wet.

The *road* had been one of the central categories of Kalmyk culture, symbolizing nomadic mobility. For a long time it had been a metaphor of fate and life itself. But the railroad along which Kalmyks were being carried in 1943 was a different matter. This was a road symbolizing loss of liberty, the cattle trucks bearing a symbolic meaning. People were deprived of rights as if they were nothing more than cattle. According to their reminiscences, the hardest road was the one to Siberia. The railroad had changed all positive connotations a nomad associates with mobility. No one any longer expected anything good from the road. "What was going on in the wagon was terrible. This putrid smell surrounded us all the way." Later, people would call the years of deportation a road thirteen years long.

One characteristic of any ethnic group is its level of mobility. Even in Siberia, any movement looked like a return to a safe place for the former nomads, and the road was perceived as a means of escape, or rather, escape could be associated only with the road. I will mention later cases of escapes to the front from *Shiroklag*. However, there were cases of movement into even more difficult circumstances, for example, to Taimyr and Shpitsbergen, where Kalmyks were sent from Siberia. Sometimes the administration would direct one family into northern regions, and other Kalmyk families expressed a desire to go with them, believing that nothing could be worse than their current state, and the road might somehow lead them home. However, life in the polar regions proved even harsher and Kalmyks called this a second exile. For these people, waterways replaced the railroad, as they were carried along the Yenisey and Irtysh rivers and then the Arctic Ocean.

Early in 1944, by the decree of the People's Commissariat of Defense, Kalmyks were removed from all fronts and military districts. During 1944, more than fifteen thousand Kalmyks taking part in military action were demobilized.¹⁰ Those serving in the army were recalled allegedly to take part in the creation of a Kalmyk national detachment in the Urals.

10 A. Pan'kin and V. Papuev, *Poezd pamiati* (Elista, 1994), p. 4.

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All sergeants and soldiers, as well as students of military schools were enrolled in the sixth depot rifle regiment of the seventh depot rifle brigade, stationed at Kungur railway station of the Perm railroad, and sent to build the Shirokovskaia hydro-electric power station (GES). They totaled about seven thousand – those who had taken part in action, as well as students who had never been at the front.¹¹

In the spring of 1944, commanders and political counselors of Kalmyk origin were assembled in Tashkent and Novosibirsk, where they were demobilized and sent to reunite with their families.

Soldiers and sergeants brought back from the fronts never had a chance to see their families; they were immediately targeted for penal servitude. Though officially named *Shirokstroï* (construction of the Shirokovskaia GES), actually this construction site was a concentration camp (*Shiroklag*) that comprised a part of the system of GULAG (Chief Directorate of Corrective Labour Camps and Colonies).

Protest against repression of the former front-line soldiers took the form of letters to Kremlin and attempted escapes to the front. "So great had been faith in the sacred task of defending Motherland, that Kalmyk soldiers fled to the front from *Shiroklag*, but were captured on the railway, recognized simply by their physical appearance."¹² There are numerous stories about former soldiers who got on trains going to the front and called themselves Kazakhs or Buryats. They fought until the end of war and came back to Siberia to reunite with their families, or were obliged to hide and escape again to the front for fear of punishment at labor camps.

Not everyone had been recalled from the front. Kalmyks were known as good soldiers in the Red Army. When in 1944 the order of recalling soldiers of Kalmyk nationality came, some commanders promptly changed the nationality of their soldiers and officers and in this way kept them at the front.¹³ According to Kalmyk historian M. L. Kichikov, four thousand Kalmyks were still serving in the Red Army by the end of World War II.¹⁴

11 Bugai, *Operatsiia Ulusy*, p. 39.

12 A. Badmaev, "Sud'by moei . . ." *Izvestiia Kalmykii*, December 27, 1991.

13 A. M. Nekrich, *Nakazannnye narody* (New York: Khronika, 1978), p. 78.

14 M. L. Kichikov, "Sovetskaia Kalmykii v Velikoi Otechestvennoi voine 1941–1945"

Adaptation Difficulties

Arriving Kalmyks were visibly distinct in their new locations. They were different not only by appearance. Many could not speak Russian, which impeded communication. The new arrivals were different culturally, often not possessing basic skills, even something as simple as lighting a stove. The difference were obvious for the Siberians from the beginning, as seen in the following two recollections:

This was mid-winter, which as is well known never comes without severe frost. Now almost all the strangers were wearing light clothes, as if it had been early autumn. Some were dressed quite peculiarly. Much later I learned that they were wearing light clothes traditional in their culture. Their feet were covered lightly too, their boots were made of leather. Some were in high heels, others in simpler boots. This made a shocking contrast with the dress of locals, attracting attention. People were obviously fatigued by the journey they had made and hungry. They could barely stand upright.¹⁵

In the winter of 1944, fifty to sixty Kalmyk families were brought into our village Kornilovo, Krasnoyarsk krai. Entire families perished due to the cold and famine. The frozen soil was so hard to dig, the dead bodies were often just left under snow hills. In the spring winds scattered dark black braids of hair around our village and corpses remained lying where they had been left. After some time [two or three months – E. G.] only one Kalmyk family had survived. . . .¹⁶

The first contacts the local population had with Kalmyks were at best cautious, and more often the newcomers were met with feelings of repulsion and even enmity.

Arriving Kalmyks were accompanied by rumors that they were cannibals. This scared the local inhabitants to such a degree that they felt drastic means were needed in order to protect themselves. One way to

(Dissertatsiia na soiskanie uchenoi stepeni doktora istoricheskikh nauk, Leningrad, 1972), p. 58, quoted in Nekrich, *Nakazannyye narody*, p. 78.

15 B. S. Dobriakov, "My ne ponimali glubiny tragedii kalmytskogo naroda," in *My - iz vyslannykh*, p. 360.

16 "Ia slyshal stony i plach," *Izvestiia Kalmykii*, December 28, 1993.

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do so was by nailing shut the door to the barrack where newcomers lived and set fire to the house, burning the inhabitant alive, justified by the perceived need to save themselves from the cannibals. In other villages, older men stayed on alert in turns the first nights after the arrival of the newcomers, armed with axes and rifles.

These terrifying rumors were probably circulated deliberately. Indeed they arrived before the Kalmyks themselves, reaching the most secluded places. This means they could not have been created spontaneously. Neither could they have been the product of twisted consciousness of the local population, as too frequently they emerged in numerous areas and villages of Siberia.

This accusation was not just a metaphor. This is a classical instance of colonial attitudes toward “barbarians,” which are known to have once been instrumental in providing the early European settlers with the right to treat the local population in whatever manner they liked. Indeed, according to Freud, persons who have broken any of the three inhibitions—on murder, incest or cannibalism—are excluded from the human society as presenting a direct threat to it.

Deliberately or not, this same measure must have been used by the institutions, whose task was formulating ideological background of the *Uluses* operation. Treason against the Motherland—an accusation essential for the Party and governmental documents—might have failed to arouse enmity toward Kalmyks among Siberian population, who had been used to welcoming prisoners and exiles of different kinds unwanted in St. Petersburg and Moscow. Siberia abounded in political exiles, who were not easily convinced by official propaganda, and had opinions of their own about the government’s politics, which they kept to themselves. These people might on the contrary have entertained warm feelings toward Kalmyks, and support them in their tribulations. The victims of deportation were helpless elderly people, innocent babies and weak females; finding ways to discriminate against them was a daunting project. The accusations against them had to be simple and address directly everyone’s feelings, and at the same time extremely grave as to defy any association with human sympathy. However, the myth of Kalmyks as narrow-eyed cannibals dissolved over time, as seen in this recollection:

When they arrived, everyone in the village knew that cannibals were coming. There was one girl one class below me named Masha Ritter, a German girl. As soon as I went out into the street, she would make a great loop so as to avoid contact with me. Having grown a bit older, I asked her what had scared her. She answered that everyone had been told cannibals had arrived. One might consider Germans had been deported here in a similar manner in 1941, yet even they believed these stories.¹⁷

At the time we arrived a lot of people were standing by the central office of the kolkhoz. I heard a woman utter, look they're just like us, only [non-Russian] nationals. And they told us, there would be one-eyed cannibals. My reaction was prompt, asking who had said we were one-eyed cannibals? The answer was: look! He can speak in our language!

In connection with our arrival, the seven-year school was not functioning for almost a week. Parents had been reluctant to let kids out, because of rumors that Kalmyks were cannibals, which had caused people to dread our arrival. The deputy from the District department of people's education and local school director requested that I accompany them from home to home in the village telling people about us Kalmyks, that our fathers and brothers were fighting at the front, that we were normal people. The next day school classes resumed.¹⁸

When we were brought to Aral'sk, a rumor had been spread that Kalmyks were cannibals. Talk was that a Kalmyk had been captured at the market trying to sell human flesh. How painful it was to hear this said of a people we belonged to. Besides I did not yet know Russian by that time. Iasha would call me a cannibal, to which I replied, not comprehending the meaning.¹⁹

However frantic, the accusation of cannibalism proved too absurd to continue for long. Moreover, although Siberians at first had been wary of direct contact, this obviously could not have been altogether avoided. Just as unavoidable was the eventual collapse of the cannibal myth. The local population soon abandoned its suspicions.

17 Interview with P. O. Godaev, Elista, 2004.

18 M. N. Natyrov, "Pravlenie kolkhoza mne doverialo," in *My - iz vyslannykh*, p. 214.

19 V. P. Dordzhiev, "Vernost' interesam naroda," in *My - iz vyslannykh*, p. 335.

Housing and Food During Times of Crisis

One of the important characteristics of an ethnic or social group is its type of dwelling. What kind of rooms, underground dwellings, houses or flats did Kalmyks use for their new homes? One's dwelling always reflects the social and economic status of the owner. For the exiles as well, it reflected status and degree of adaptation into the local society. The narratives cited below clearly outline shifts of the status of Kalmyks over the thirteen years of deportation, showing the progression from a corner they occupied in a stranger's house, to a tent on the ice, later to an underground dwelling, and then wooden houses, occupied by several families, they built for themselves.

Nevertheless, the memories of deportation are traumatic, and the most vivid images are those linked with stress, which is why the clearest recollections are of dwelling, clothes and food in extreme conditions. Everything associated with corporal conditions also remained in the memory for a long time: humidity, cold and poor lighting. A retrospective glance at the period of deportation brings to light everything that showed the difference between Kalmyks and local population, accentuating status of the exile. Regular food and regular dwelling, like those enjoyed by the local population, are mentioned in the narratives in case others possessed them, but Kalmyks did not. As soon as Kalmyks had the means to possess such things, regular food and dwelling were regarded as normal and are hardly mentioned by the recollectors.

As seen from the narratives, the easiest way for the administration proved to be the forced settlement of the deported into local Siberian families. Hence, first recollections were about corners in a stranger's house.

We were to share dwelling with the main accountant of the kolkhoz named Ivan Sherstiuk. His family consisted of four persons. We stayed with them till spring. Me, my brother and my mother, granny, uncle Kyotyarya with his wife, aunt Halga and their son—seven in all. We occupied one room with not a single bed in it, we all slept on the floor, and I slept on a Siberian-type bench. Siberians instead of chairs used benches 30 cm wide, running along a

wall. I somehow managed to sleep on it not falling down.²⁰

After several months passed (and for some of us immediately upon arrival) we had to see about accommodation on our own, making use of unoccupied houses, or digging dwellings in the ground after it had melted up after winter frost. Areas where Kalmyks' poorly arranged dwellings were concentrated must have been so strikingly different from the surroundings by their exotic poverty, that it earned them funny names marked with irony used both by local population and Kalmyks themselves, for instance *Khoton* (meaning small settlement of relatives in Kalmyk), *Dig-town* or *Kalmyk ASSR*.

After spending some time in the school building we were resettled into a deserted cellar, which had been used as a storage for vegetables. It was a wet, dark room, forty or fifty meters long. We had to stay there until almost autumn of 1944. Conditions were hardly suitable for even animals. One could only gaze with tears. I feel like weeping even now as I'm remembering. Many failed to carry on till spring. . . . In the summer adult men were organized into a group, which was dubbed *Dig-town*, to dig pits in the ground for dwelling about two meters deep, about 4–6 meters long and wide. Walls had been covered with clay from the inside, bottom of the pit being for the floor. They cut out steps to go in and out, as they do in a cellar, and made a small window in one side, constructed an oven in a corner. This all failed to bring about much light or warmth, but it always was wet there. These types of dwellings accommodated two or three families in each dwelling. Conditions were totally lacking in hygiene. When compared with the first half a year, there had hardly been any improvement in living conditions for us. People were often ill, cold and famine further aggravating the situation. Over that winter of 1944–1945 death took its toll. In our dwelling alone six people died: my sister Zoia, brother Volodia; out of the three members of the other family (wife, husband and husband's brother) death claimed all; there was also one soldier who had come from *Shiroklag*, never having a chance to find his family. It took three or four years before some were able to erect adobe houses and leave the underground dwellings. Still many others remained underground for as long as 7–8 years, and some until they were able to return to their homeland. That place was given the ironic name *Kalmyk ASSR*.²¹

20 Interview with P. O. Godaev, Elista, 2004.

21 A. S. Chenkaleeva, "Kopai-gorod," in *My - iz vyslannykh*, p. 41.

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Even state officials, who had witnessed much suffering during their careers, wrote about the harsh conditions in which Kalmyks had to live. Ten months after arrival to the Tomsk oblast it was revealed that:

Deported persons handed over to be used as working force at Tomsk wharf are housed in broken down buildings unsuitable for living in winter conditions, with walls and doors not equipped to protect from the cold, windows lacking glass panes, and ovens out of working order. Rooms are dirty, and extensively overcrowded. Through lack of furniture the deported have to eat and sleep on the floor.²²

As stated in one report from the Novosibirsk oblast, the barrack of the Timiriazevsk mechanic station had only thirty-four square meters of living room, in which 148 people had to reside. This allocated less than 0.3 square meters per person, and people slept in two or three story plank beds. Another room of twenty-eight square meters was occupied by 131 people.²³

What did Kalmyks eat? Fifty years later, survivors of those inhuman conditions remember eating potato peelings and corpses of animals killed by murrain.²⁴ NKVD reports registered “many cases of Kalmyks using corpses of dead horses and other animals for food, often in raw condition.”²⁵

Subsistence anthropology uses a notion of “crisis food,” which becomes the main sustenance in extreme conditions. Normally, Kalmyks in times of crisis, such as lack of meat due to mass death of cattle, natural calamities and epidemics would adhere to the so-called Kalmyk tea as such “crisis food.” In extreme conditions of deportation, they ate carrion as super-crisis food, having tried to somehow process it for eating. Many different things were eaten, even if it resembled food only remotely, the only objective being to somehow subdue constant feeling of hunger. See, for example, the following two recollections (the first rendered in the

22 “Soobshchenie zamestitelia narkoma vnutrennikh del SSSR Chernyshova narkomu rechnogo flota SSSR Z. Shashkovu...,” in *Kniga pamiati: Ssylka kalmykov*, tom 1, kniga 1 (Elista, 1994), p. 176.

23 *Ibid.*, p. 61.

24 “Eti gody – v pamiati nashei,” *Izvestiia Kalmykii*, December 27, 1991.

25 “Dokladnaia zapiska komissara vnutrennikh del gosbezopasnosti SSSR 1-go ranga Merkulova,” *Kniga pamiati*, tom 1, kniga 1, p. 150.

form of a poem):

I will always remember that evening:
Bucket amply filled with meat.
Let it be dead animals' flesh
Yet this was meat!
Much better than nothing!
These sheep corpses through all the winter
We had been flaying together with Nadia Basan.
Famine was killing animals in dozens
But thanks to it Kalmyks survived!²⁶

The town we had been brought to was called Aral'sk. We lived by the sea shore. . . . The sea gave us fish. We used also fish intestines dumped beyond the fish processing plant for food. Our compatriots lived under similar circumstances.²⁷

The living conditions and subsistence of Kalmyks in the new places of settlement were a disaster. The deputy chief of NKVD Department in the Omsk oblast wrote the following, addressing L. Berii: "As a result of the exceptionally poor foodstuffs supply, the cases of bodies swelling from starvation have reached great numbers among Kalmyks."²⁸ During the first winter people often ate potato peelings, having separated it from dirt, fried it on an oven. Many would stick to pomace cakes. Daily meal in Siberia was potato, in fishing settlements—fish, or rather fish heads, tails and giblets.

Afterwards, Kalmyk tea, which had been a traditional crisis food for Kalmyks, replaced dead animal flesh, the crisis food of the first months in exile. Easy to prepare, this tea had different variations, sometimes resembling tea, and sometimes soup. Kalmyk tea is usually made from special brick tea. During these extreme conditions, people used regular black tea or, in the absence of this, black currant leaves, apple tree leaves and different herbs. During war and the immediate post-war, Kalmyk tea was used as bait in markets by the NKVD, which was trying to capture Kalmyks who may have abandoned their residence area without

26 E. Budzhalov, *Dveri nastezh', kalmyki!* (Elista, 1997), p. 229.

27 V. Tserenov, "Bol' moia, Aral," *Izvestiia Kalmykii*, December 27, 1991.

28 Bugai, *Operatsiia Ulusy*, p. 57.

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permission.²⁹

The new life changed the types of subsistence of the Kalmyks, which could no longer be based on meat and milk products. They had to use those foodstuffs available in the new environment. Potatoes were the most common food available. N. Ubushiev recalled in 2001: "Now I can tell the taste of a potato by its appearance."³⁰ Yet elder people never appreciated the taste of local food—berries or mushrooms. "Us kids, we never cared what kind of meat we ate, but to old people it always had a wrong taste; they disliked everything."³¹ This was similar to troubles experienced by interned Americans of Japanese origin during WWII, who were offered hominy and cheese, which they had never tested before. It seems that the experience of taste remains in one's memory for a long time. Thus many Japanese-Americans who had been interned still recall with feelings of humiliation going to eat by the bell, standing in a queue to get food which was always the same. Kalmyks were compelled to live on carrion in certain cases, while Japanese-Americans were depressed by lack of choice: canned sausages for breakfast, dinner and supper. Besides unlike Kalmyks, who were Soviet citizens, Japanese-Americans were hurt by the very fact of "free food," which they felt put them at the same level as beggars.³²

Kalmyks were not offended by free food. Their wretched state in those years rendered impossible rejection of any kind of food, regardless of dubious quality, or even if it was stolen. Food meant life, survival for the next twenty-four hours. Potatoes were the main foodstuff, but many Kalmyks became used to eating fish, borsch, *shchi*, porridges, mushrooms, cedar nut, berries, and the eggs of wild ducks. Sour cabbage, salted cucumbers, and Siberian *pel'meni* have since become staple foods for Kalmyk families. But as soon as the famine was over, and life was returning to normal track, people attempted to return to traditional Kalmyk foodstuffs and drinks. According to reminiscences, some even went as far as distilling milk vodka at home, which required an exces-

29 Tserenov, "Bol' moia, Aral."

30 Interview with N. Ubushaev, Elista, 2001.

31 Interview with B. M. Kornusov, Elista, 2001.

32 TAKEZAWA Yasuko I., *Breaking the Silence: Redress and Japanese American Ethnicity* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), p. 87.

sive supply of milk. Of course, this was only possible in a compact Kalmyk settlement.

Occupations

During that period, Kalmyks had to acquire unusual skills, since new conditions made traditional occupations impossible. Out of the entire number of exiles, 45,985 Kalmyks were occupied in different spheres of the economy, such as agriculture (28,107 people), mining and gold mining (1,632), coal industry (784), paper production and wood processing (259), and other new occupations (8,608).³³

Apart from hard toil from dawn to dark, where the person was employed was also important. The same job in a kolkhoz and a sovkhos paid considerably differently. Those with previous experience as managers, knowing that, asked to work in state enterprises. Wood industry had been practically the only branch of economy of the USSR that yielded hard currency. For this reason, most exiles fit for the job were directed to wood cutting and processing. Women, who had never before been employed, had to do what the local administrations commanded, which was usually to fell wood. Many of the women who had taken their sewing machines with them into exile earned their living by sewing for local residents. An acquaintance of mine told me of her grandmother who, while in Siberia, would go into a village with the sewing machine, where for a week she sewed clothes for its residents, and then came back with a sack of food for the whole family. Sewing for local people as a means of providing for the family was not uncommon among Kalmyk women; they used to do the same in the White emigration after the October Revolution. Almost all the women who managed to take a sewing machine with them earned their living by sewing, and their families did not starve.

Of all the traditional skills for men and women, the most useful in the new circumstances proved to be experience with fishing and animal husbandry. More than three thousand families experienced in fishing were settled in areas with fishing industries, mostly in Krasnoyarsk and

³³ Bugai, *Operatsiia Ulusy*, p. 83.

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Taimyr. Other fishing kolkhozes employed Kalmyks as well. Their existing experience was completed by skills acquired in new economic and ecological conditions.

The Kalmyks' attitude to labor, often forced, differed from that of Chechens and Ingush, who were more defiant, expressing this in the form of not coming to work, or not working the way administration expected. For instance, in the small towns of Dzheksy and Esil', up to a quarter of Chechen adult men refused to work anywhere.³⁴ Kalmyks in Siberia, on the other hand, strove by diligent labor to prove their loyalty to the state. Their reminiscences always include mention of the standings they obtained in the various socialist labor contests, labor certificates they were awarded, and other awards for efficient labor they received. In answer to a question of how they spent their spare time, many would answer that they had none. Hard toil was the only way to make both ends meet. Kalmyks brought up in the steppe acquired in Siberia their first experience of growing vegetables for private households. Times of famine did not leave much choice, and Kalmyks picked up necessary agricultural skills and knowledge from their neighbors. This process was also backed up by the decision of the state, in an attempt to support the starving people, to launch among Kalmyks a "campaign of cultivating private orchards on the specially allocated pieces of ground. Thus, in the Novosibirsk oblast alone, 575 ha of private orchards were tilled in 1945, with 777 ha already in 1946."³⁵

Shifts in socio-professional structure were already evident among Kalmyks even in those years. D. Purveev wrote in 1952: "Modern-day Kalmyks are different from those that you knew 10–15 years ago. They labor at large plants and factories, they use the railway, they work in highly mechanized sovkhozes, with machinery and tractors, and communicate with many Soviet nationalities. As a result they have become more widely educated, and their consciousness has grown. . . ."³⁶

Among Kalmyk exiles were professionals with high education. Often they were the only professionals with the necessary qualification for cer-

34 M. Pol', " 'Neuzheli eti zemli nashei mogiloi stanut?': Chechentsy i ingushi v Kazakhstane (1944–1957 gg.)," *Diaspory* 2 (2002), p. 173.

35 Bugai, *Operatsiia Ullusy*, p. 50.

36 *Kniga pamiati*, tom 1, kniga 1, p. 205

tain tasks, and, for want of other specialists, they were trusted with responsible jobs. In secluded areas of Siberia many Kalmyks occupied positions of teachers in intermediate and eight-year education schools. One Kalmyk woman, who was a teacher in Ust'-Abakan school, recalls: "My students were mainly children of exiles: German, Baltic, Western Ukrainians and Belorussians."³⁷

Unlike many of the deported Chechens and Ingush, who tried to avoid integration in the Soviet society by not registering their newly born, later not sending them to school, and the inclination of the young to not become Komsomol members,³⁸ practically all Kalmyks were doing their best not "to lag behind" the rest of the Soviet people. They maintained friendly relationships with their new neighbors, fellow-workers, and classmates, celebrated holidays and took part in amateur concerts and other social activities. In this strategy of integration through over-effort they resembled Japanese-Americans who strove to prove their loyalty to the mainstream society through over-diligence and responsibility.

Modes of Restriction

According to many reminiscences, the required monthly check ups with the local commandant's office was the most difficult task for adult Kalmyks. To prove that a Kalmyk person from age sixteen had not left his or her place of registration, they had to turn up each month at the same day and hour to the commandant's office to resume registration. This procedure was regarded as most humiliating; every month it served as a reminder of one's low social status of a punished person, of belonging to the exiled people. One might observe, there was nothing but a symbolic humiliation in it—you only have to sign up, confirming that you were still there and had not fled. However, during this procedure they also had meetings with the commandant, who in order to demonstrate his own efficiency, might often find fault with their ideological status, accusing them of "anti-Soviet" ideas, which could possibly lead to criminal

37 "Sud'ba moia shchastlivaia," *Komsomolets Kalmykii*, April 6, 1989.

38 Pol', " 'Neuzheli eti zemli nashei mogiloi stanut?', " p. 175.

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prosecution. According to one woman, who had to endure the humiliating interviews, "the commandant was very severe. We used to call him God among ourselves, because everything he said was to be strictly followed."³⁹ Along with humiliation came fear, because often they were questioned about ideological feeling among fellow-Kalmyks. Any careless answer would lead to arrest and incrimination of innocent people.

Conditions of living in the settlement for exiles prohibited leaving the area without obtaining proper leave. Those who left on their own accord could face punishment of a long prison confinement, up to twenty years of penalty labor, which in practice in 1948 was equal to a death verdict.

New socialization was occurring at work for adults and at school for children. Not all the children could study at school, especially during the first years of the relocation. Many of the elder children from families with large households had to help provide a means of living for their families and so were not able to finish the seven-year school course. Additionally, upon entering the eighth grade, yearly fees were 300 rubles for education.⁴⁰ However, when the opportunity arose, for example when there were relatives who considered school education a high priority in order to succeed, children made the most of their chances. To be the best student in one's class meant for many "not to be worse than others." Obtaining the highest grades became a protective certificate among schoolmates and an opportunity for success. Initial school experience was often traumatic.

I entered the first grade in 1955. I'll never be able to forget this time. Our teacher was Taisiia Timofeevna Brodina. I did something wrong, and she punished me. I wept. She said, why are you crying, Oleg? When you betray your Motherland as your parents did, then you'll have a reason to cry, now you don't have to cry. So did a teacher in the first grade. I was the only Kalmyk in the class. I was allowed to join the ranks of pioneers, but only after a discussion, whether it was possible at all. This became the subject of discussion! And why not? Because I was a Kalmyk.⁴¹

In order to be able to feel equal among other students, they had to

39 Interview with V. Meiaev, Elista, 2004.

40 U. E. Bembeev, " 'Spetspereselenets' - učit'sia v vuze zapreshcheno," in *My - iz vylannykh*, p. 121.

41 Interview with O. Mandzhiev, Moscow, 2004.

study with diligence, be active in sports and amateur arts, and carry out social work. Such kind of strategies often brought them into leading positions in the group. Yet despite their high academic grades and social activities, Kalmyk graduates were never awarded golden or silver medals. There was but one exception to this: V. P. Dordzhiev graduated from school in Aral'sk with a silver medal, but managed to finally get it only in 1960 with the help of the chief editor of the *Komsomol'skaia pravda* newspaper A. Adzhubei.⁴²

The discrimination continued beyond secondary education. For thirteen years, exiles were not allowed to receive higher education. In order to enter a college, one had to have the highest grades from his or her secondary school. Even those Kalmyks who belonged to the military or Party elite had restrictions—for instance general B. B. Gorodovikov, later First secretary of Kalmyk CPSU (Communist Party of the Soviet Union) Committee. His family was not repressed, and he still occupied high posts, but three of his children were not allowed to study at the best high education establishment in the country—Moscow State University.

Entering a higher education establishment was a cherished dream for many Kalmyks, who had finished school in Siberia. But it was not easy for many reasons. One reason was economic: students were given small scholarships and it was not possible to make a living by them alone. Most families could not afford to support a student, and those who did graduate high school had to work and support their families. To work at night and study in the daytime was not an easy task, and their studies usually suffered due to exhaustion and lost its meaning.

For Kalmyks though, the main problem lay in their status. Exiles were not allowed to abandon their settlements without a special leave from the commandant, who was not eager to comply to the wishes of his subordinates, who were, after all, "*enemies of the people*." High school education was available for residents of major cities but Kalmyks were usually settled in rural areas. After Stalin's death, free movement within the area of the oblast where one lived was allowed, but the ban on going to other oblasts remained, and the authorities could easily discover violations by checking their passports (identity documents). However, the main im-

42 V. P. Dordzhiev, "Vernost' interesam naroda," in *My - iz vyslannykh*, p. 337.

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pediment was an unofficial ban on accepting applications from exiles for admission to schools of higher education.

Survival Strategies

As many women who came to Siberia at a fertile age recall, first babies born there had a high mortality rate. This is clear from the following two accounts of the time:

Soon, after a year, my two-month old brother died of pneumonia. As my mother told me, babies often died because of lack of food; mothers did not have enough milk, and children who were on artificial mixes were weak and very soon fell ill.⁴³

There were almost no children born in 1945–1950. Babies brought into Far North were dying. And no one was born in that period. Only later did the birthrate begin to increase. Many died young, because the health of young women had been affected by severe conditions and extremely hard labor.⁴⁴

Woman would often give birth to up to three babies who died, before children started to survive. In 1948, 3,193 babies were born to Kalmyk families and 2,766 of which died. In 1949, 2,058 people were born, but 1,903 died shortly after.⁴⁵ Abrupt changes of climate and sharp stress brought about such reaction in females as amenorrhea. Consequently, people found what was hardest in the first years was “adaptation to local climate and communicating with the local population.”⁴⁶

People, who were put to the brink of life and death, deprived of a possibility to earn their food and clothes, who worked hard but were paid nothing, revised moral norms. They had to steal in order to survive. Actions of people, mentioned in narratives and letters as stealing, hardly should be qualified as serious crimes. Extreme conditions inevitably shifted the normal ethics of comfortable life. The situation was similar to

43 Shevenova et al., *Pamiat' v nasledstvo*, p. 60.

44 S. M. Vasliaev “My byli pokhozhi na podrankov,” in P. O. Godaev, *Bol' pamiati* (Elista, 1999), p. 163.

45 Bugai, *Operatsiia Ulusy*, p. 78.

46 Interview with M. S. Mukhlynova Elista, 2004.

that of the front, where special military language shifted the meanings of words, while the immediate meanings of many words became a taboo. One of the first to be tabooed was the word *to steal*; soldiers of both the Red Army and Wehrmacht used euphemisms such as *to swoop*, or *to organize*.⁴⁷ Whereas soldiers at the front would deliberately separate themselves from peaceful life, Kalmyks, on the other hand, whose “peaceful” life had been full of daily threats, created no special language. That is why even sixty years later they would simple-heartedly call these “survival tricks” theft.

Hardships of arriving Kalmyks went on, jobs were hard to procure, people somehow had to provide food for their families, or else everyone would have fallen victim to hungry death. Stealing cattle was often the only chance to have something to eat. To ensure survival, somehow starving people managed to steal cattle with the help of their inherited nomadic skills. Experienced shepherds had little trouble calling an animal, killing it, quickly cutting it up and just as swiftly concealing any trace that might indicate a theft had taken place. Yet the criminal was invariably discovered. Often children were asked what they had eaten yesterday. They would answer honestly, which led to inevitable arrest. Later, Kalmyks learned that the militia arrested only one person even if several people had participated in a theft. The following way out was found. The most weak, most unhealthy people were willing to accept the blame and bear the consequences, after deciding who of the survivors would take care and bring up their children and grandchildren. Here is one reason why in the years of exile close and faraway relatives often lived together, and members of one family could have different family names.

Their status as exiles and dispersed settlements made marriage problematic for many Kalmyks at that time. Post-war demographic disproportion and a lack of local men in Siberia led to interethnic marriages between Kalmyk males and Siberian females. These marriages were often not officially registered because of difference in civil status. Such heterogeneous couples sometimes existed for years unregistered. For example, I had a neighbor in Elista, a seventy year old Siberian-born female.

47 Iu. M. Lotman, “Ne-memuari,” in his *Vospitanie dushi* (St. Petersburg, 2003), pp. 18-19.

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One day in 1989 it occurred to her she had lived her entire life with her husband without an appropriate mark in passport. Despite her age, she began asking her husband to register their civil status officially. Her argument was that she wanted "like Eva Braun, to officially register her status of a wife before she died."

At the same time many Kalmyk women, whose youth corresponded with the years of tribulation, were never married. Men had an easier time finding mates in post-war years. Creating a family, preferably a Kalmyk one, was part of the survival strategy.

On March 10, 1955, the Ministry of Interior (MVD) of the USSR allowed exiles to have passports like other citizens. Before this ruling, Kalmyks had no passports. In March 1956, the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR adopted a decree lifting restrictions on judicial status imposed on deported Kalmyks and members of their families. However, the decree's language was far from democratic, as was the attitude of the authorities to the Kalmyk people. Among other things, it ordered:

1. Kalmyks and members of their families, removed to exile settlements in the years of the Great Patriotic war, are to cease their registration in the settlement, and administrative surveillance over them by MVD structures is to be lifted;

2. It should be understood that lifting restriction does not lead to return of confiscated property, and that they cannot return to places where they had been expelled from.⁴⁸

Lifting restrictions meant just a partial mollifying of the political regime. These incomplete politics were further carried on by the CPSU Central Committee, which ordered: "Central Committees of the Communist Parties of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kirgizia, Altai and Krasnoyarsk regional Committees of the CPSU, Sakhalin, Kemerovo, Sverdlovsk, Novosibirsk, Tomsk, Omsk and Tyumen oblast Committees of the CPSU should take necessary measures to ensure that Kalmyks remain in the places of their current residence, preventing their mass leaving the areas of settlement."⁴⁹

In accordance with the decision of the twentieth CPSU Congress, the

48 Bugai, *Operatsiia Ulusy*, p. 85.

49 *Ibid.*, p. 86.

sixth session of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR adopted the Decree of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR of 9 January 1957 "about formation of the Kalmyk autonomous oblast as part of the RSFSR [Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic] based on the territory of the former republic within borders of the Stavropol krai." Later there were proposals to call this day Liberation Day or Resurrection Day. Already on January 25, 1957, Kalmyks were allowed to live and register in the places from which they had been expelled. On July 29, 1958, the Kalmyk autonomous district was reformed into the Kalmyk Autonomous SSR. During the latter half of the 1950s, the majority of Kalmyks returned to the newly organized Kalmyk republic. For many of them, not to return from Siberia was completely out of the question. To remain meant an admission of guilt and justification of Stalin's punishment. Still, the question of why some of the repressed nations were allowed to return and others were not, remains. Administrative institutions prefer not to express their opinions publicly. Nevertheless, the mention of Kalmyks, Chechens and Ingush in Khrushchev's report inspired the Kalmyk elite to try to return.⁵⁰

Nowadays some believe that Russian Germans and Crimean Tatars had to stay because the local administration needed them as efficient workers, while Chechens, Ingush and Kalmyks had been allowed to leave, since they were considered "half barbarian" and were expected to cause more trouble than good.⁵¹

Certain roles in the restoration of the Kalmyk autonomy were played by the leaders of the Kalmyk community in the United States, who wrote and sent letters-memorandums to high ranking executives in the State Department, as well as important international organizations such as the United Nations. Information concerning the persecution of minorities became a good reason for the American politicians to criticize the USSR in the time of Cold War, as well as in the subsequent ideological controversy of the two countries. Speeches by members of the Kalmyk delegation from the U.S. at the Conference of the leaders of the twenty-nine

50 KHAN'IA Siro [HANYA Shiro], "Sekretnyi doklad N. S. Krushcheva i vosstanovlenie avtonomnykh territorii v 1957 g.," *Acta Slavica Iaponica* 22 (2005), pp. 144-145.

51 Cf. Roy A. Medvedev and Zhores A. Medvedev, *Khrushchev: The Years in Power* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1978), p. 122.

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states of Asia and Africa in Bandung in 1955 brought about a wide international response.⁵²

Stigma of Ethnicity

People repressed on ethnic grounds began to feel ashamed of their ethnic affiliation. “The word *Kalmyk* became obscene.”⁵³ This humiliating feeling of exclusion from the ranks of the Soviet people was further aggravated visually: Kalmyks were settled not in those regions of Siberia populated heavily by Buryats, who were similar in culture, religion and appearance, but rather where a mostly Slavic population resided. In rare cases, their neighbors included not only Russians, but also Altai, Khakas, Khanty or Mansi people, as seen in the following recollections:

We managed to make the fortune of my niece, and only because we had registered her as Buryat, supposedly born in Altai region. Through that she was freed from exile registration.⁵⁴

You had to show up to the commandant’s office weekly at the appointed hour; you could not be late. Once I was late, and I had to call myself Khakas in order to avoid going to jail.⁵⁵

In the first years kids would tease us, the word *Kalmyk* being believed offensive. Someone made up a derisive rhyme “just like Russians, only eyes are narrow, nose is flat, and the head is like a potato.” The hardest thing to endure in those years was not physical suffering, due to lack of food or clothes (although at age sixteen or seventeen, one felt like dressing beautifully), but rather moral deficiency. You might have been good in education, with no one openly humiliating you, yet you were always conscious of being different in appearance, of being an exile, always expecting to be underestimated.

52 Djab Naminov-Burhinov, “The Struggle for Civil Rights of the Kalmyk People,” in KONAGAYA Yuki, ed., *The Changing Paradigm of Mongolian Studies: Between Documents and the Field* (Cologne: International Society for the Study of the Culture and Economy of the Ordos Mongols, 2001), p. 165.

53 Interview with D. D. Kukeev, Elista, 2004.

54 U. E. Erdniev, “Ssyl’nyi kalmyk vo glave fakul’ teta,” in *My – iz vyslannykh*, p. 43.

55 Interview with N. Ch. Unkova, Elista, 2004.

This transcendental feeling of being second-hand was always there!⁵⁶

My mother was just five, but she clearly remembered one day being derided by a group of small kids from kindergarten passing their house, calling her “Kalmyk.” Only then did she realize her nationality.⁵⁷

Kalmyks were sometimes derided exactly like the Chinese had been during the New Economic Policy in Soviet Russia: *Hodia, soli nado?*⁵⁸ (This contains the Russian verb *to walk* and a question *Need salt?*) This derisive phrase reflected the colonial attitudes toward “barbarians,” who were considered to occupy a lower step of evolution. It reflected Russians’ reactions to what they believed to be the funny mincing gait of Chinese, walking in wooden shoes, and buying salt in large quantities.⁵⁹ Thus again, through visual resemblance, Kalmyks qualified as “barbarians,” and strangers, even further as political enemies of the state.

At the railway station Kalmyks were watched especially closely: as potential runaways, alleged enemies of the people, and possible terrorists. The eldest ethnologist of Kalmykia, professor U. E. Erdniev recalled going to meet his daughter arriving home from a pioneer camp, where by a good fortune she had been sent for recreation. At the station he was arrested, and spent several days and nights in confinement. Former members of the Kalmyk ruling elite, who wrote letters in defense of their people to Moscow, eventually concluded that the local postal service had been under particularly close control by the commandant. They began asking passengers from trains passing through to deposit their protest letters into mailboxes in Moscow. The only person, though, who could be trusted with the task of delivering letters to the railway station was the Russian wife of one of the Kalmyks by the name of Vera Korsunkieva, who drew no suspicion from the militia guarding the station.

Due to its warmer climate, Central Asia was more attractive to the Kalmyks, where although they still had to check in with the commandants, they were not as different from the local population in appearance,

56 Interview with K. E. Kardonova, Elista, 2004.

57 Shevenova et al., *Pamiat' v nasledstvo*, p. 67.

58 Interview with R. E. Ochirova, Elista, 2004.

59 N. Pozdniakova’s website [<http://poznatali.narod.ru/EK20.HTM> (valid as of January 29, 2007)].

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and sometimes were able to blend in with the crowd. This not only provided a better moral climate, but also helped to obtain better jobs:

After Siberia, Central Asia seemed heaven on Earth. It was warm, plenty of food, almost freedom, us being among Asian population, much like us in appearance. All this made it easier for us. Still we had to register at the commandant's office every month.

So far as I know, in Kirgizia many lads and lasses, finally got out of Siberia, received higher and intermediate education, while their parents had good jobs in colleges, technical schools, newspaper publishing houses, scientific institutes, heading industrial enterprises, and as experts in ministries.⁶⁰

Many recounted that their repressed status, due to differences in appearance, resulted in feeling dejected, and a certainty that the many rules and laws guaranteeing rights of all Soviet citizens did not apply to them.

I remember being offended by one grown-up, perhaps, who poured water over me or something. I seized a brick, hitting him on the head. People used to be afraid of me, considering me crazy. I was afraid to complain to father, because I knew he would come to my protection, and then there would be one grown-up against twenty. He'd simply get killed. Nowadays one might say it was scary, but then. . . it was just daily life. Anyone could kill a Kalmyk; laws did not apply to Kalmyks. "Who got killed?—Just a Kalmyk." Or: "you really might have left him alive." It was fear, not to stick out, not to remind of one's existence. Chekhov squeezed the slave out of himself drop by drop, while we had to do it lump by lump . . . Always being on alert. Expect to be offended anywhere, in the street, at school, in a store. Or you were treated like "Kalmyk—poke him with a stick" [or called] "narrow-eyed."⁶¹

Old Zodbav lived with his old lady and a disabled daughter. Locals would call him *Sto dva* [hundred and two, in Russian, for phonetic resemblance], and Kalmyks *Zodva*. He was guarding the local store, where only goods had been salt and bread, which were being given out for coupons. One day Zodbav disappeared. Several days we looked for him. On the third day we found him. He had been buried in deep snow by local kids. When we un-

60 A. N. Maglinov, "Strashno vspominat' etot period zhizni," in *My - iz vyslannykh*, p. 235.

61 Interview with O. Mandzhiev, Moscow, 2004.

covered him, he was still alive. He did not live long after that.⁶²

Granny remembers a case, when the chairman of the kolkhoz beat up an old Kalmyk woman for a petty misdoing. He was beating her severely for a long time with a stick, then kicked in the legs. There was no one and nowhere to complain about one's hard life.⁶³

Both in criminal cases and in normal life, being Kalmyk meant to always be ready to experience practices of exclusion.

In the fourth grade at school I remember someone said my father was a Hero of the Soviet Union. The teacher said this was impossible, suggesting that perhaps he was just a Hero of Socialist Labor. "No, Hero of the Soviet Union." – "Impossible." When they found out it was true, it was a shock for many. They wondered how a Kalmyk could be a Hero of the Soviet Union.⁶⁴

I took part in building a dam across the Ob river and a hydro-electric power station. Once we'd been shot on movie-camera, but they cut it out because I was a Kalmyk.⁶⁵

Both adults and kids felt like outcasts wherever they went. Kalmyks were hiding their folk dress, customs, utensils in the farthest closets, even adults didn't often use their native language. . . . As a kid I made friends with kids of different nationalities – Russian and German, Letts and Estonians. Kids would call each other names, but there was no real enmity, only Russian kids always felt their superiority.⁶⁶

For doing good work such as collecting ample crops, I was awarded the Lenin Order, but I never received it because I was Kalmyk.⁶⁷

In 1953, I was finishing tenth grade. My results had been worthy of a silver medal. The last exam was German – I was doing well, providing comprehensive answers even to extra questions. Seemed like I was through. Then the executive from the District Department for People's Education suggested that we speak German, which was not in the exam program. Naturally I felt

62 V. M. Dzhambaev, "Cherez veka v Kalmytskikh mysakh," in *My – iz vyslanmykh*, p. 36.

63 Shevenova et al., *Pamiat' v nasledstvo*, p. 104.

64 Interview with O. Mandzhiev, Moscow, 2004.

65 Shevenova et al., *Pamiat' v nasledstvo*, p. 206.

66 Interview with V. D. Mamonova, Elista, 2004.

67 Interview with B. G. Badmaev, Elista, 2004.

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a bit shy, getting a lower mark (“4”) and no longer qualified for the silver medal. It was later that I learned that the District executive was complying with the commandant’s order not to let exiles get medals. My wonderful teachers could do nothing against it.⁶⁸

At the first post-War amateur arts show in the local palace of culture, we performed in front of an over-crowded house. Our program was one hundred percent ethnic with songs and rhymes in the Kalmyk language. Almost every piece was followed by encores. And although this was not normal practice, dancers had to perform two or three times. . . . We were to represent our region at a district show in the town of Dudinka. At that point there was some stirring in administration. They were not particularly willing to allow exiles to demonstrate their gifts and display the adaptability of Kalmyks to the district audience. Their talent, however, was not to be subdued by any bans. In subsequent years the group excelled at local shows.⁶⁹

Kalmyks considered themselves outcasts and tried to “atone for their guilt,” as was mentioned above, by over diligence. Additionally, they attempted to conceal those elements of their culture that might have been distinctly ethnically marked. Kalmyk names were changed to Russian, although it was important to preserve initial letter of one’s name. 99 percent of Siberian-born babies received Russian names. The Russian name was usually transcribed in official documents but the mother would still give a secret Kalmyk name. Nowadays, *Siberian children*, as Kalmyks, who were born or spent their childhood in deportation, attribute their Russian names in various ways. For example, they may claim they were named in gratitude after a Russian neighbor, who had saved them from starving, or a midwife who delivered them.

There might also have been another reason, connected with the tradition of giving “someone else’s names” to a child, especially if there had been a threat to the child’s life. People usually did that in times past to lead evil spirits away, so if they were ever to come for the baby they would decide that it was from another family. The death rate among children, especially in the first years of deportation, was high, so this reason seems relevant.

68 Bembeev, “‘Spetspereselenets’,” p. 122.

69 B. E. Erdni-Goriaev, “Ne vsem suzhdeno bylo vernut’sia,” in Godaev, *Bol’ pamiati*, pp. 151-152.

No less relevant was parents' desire to ease the future life of the newborn, who was doomed to live forever outside the motherland, and would constantly have to explain the semantics of his or her name, due to its difficult pronunciation and spelling. Moreover, the non-Russian name would lead to the question of the person's nationality. Being Kalmyk meant belonging to a persecuted group; therefore one had to be prepared to answer the question: why had Kalmyks been exiled? To this question there was no satisfactory and truthful answer that a Kalmyk could accept. For this reason, it was simplest to give child a name that would not be considered unusual in mainstream society. Despite this, however, using a Russian name was neither automatic, nor an absolutely forced act. According to oral recollections, these names had been chosen not without a creative attitude, but based on ideology and history of the dominating society.

We chose names of Russian princes Petr and Oleg and simply a traditional name Tonia.⁷⁰

My brother died, but then a sister and a brother were born. They were given the names Natasha and Sasha. I picked the names for them, which were those of the Heroes of the Soviet Union Natasha Kochuevskaia and Aleksandr Matrosov.⁷¹

I had a Kalmyk name Googa Elta, known in our village and nearby villages. That I had been also Pavel, was known only at school. And in Siberia everyone knew me as Pavel or Pasha. Uncle Kyotyarya became Kostia.⁷²

The word *Kalmyk* might have been banned in official discourse, as everything associated with Kalmyks, but it could not be excluded from life. In 1948, U. A. Alekseev cautiously inquired in a Moscow tea shop, whether they had "brick tea." In response, the saleswoman shouted into the other room: "Do you have Kalmyk tea?" So, the people were in oblivion, while Kalmyk tea was produced and retailed.⁷³

Deprivation on ethnic grounds strengthened the tendency to get married to one's kin among Kalmyks in exile. In the Stalin years, to have an

70 Interview with G. U. Darbakova, Elista, 2004.

71 Interview with B. E. Badanov, Elista, 2004.

72 Interview with P. O. Godaev, Elista, 2004.

73 Interview with P. E. Alekseeva, Elista, 2001.

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"enemy of the people" as a marriage partner automatically meant to be prepared any minute to follow such *"enemy"* to exile. Members of the family of a *"traitor to the Motherland"* could be punished by the law only for the fact that their relative was a person undesired by the NKVD. For this reason, Kalmyks were usually not wanted as fiancés by the local population, especially while Stalin lived. In this situation of forced exogamy, as was stated above, it was easier for a Kalmyk to marry another Kalmyk, if in his settlement there were girls of appropriate age.

For young men and girls exogamy had a different scale. In situations where there was a lack of men in times immediately following war, educated Kalmyk men, especially former front officers, could attract the attention of young Siberian women. Gender asymmetry was another factor: both Kalmyk and Siberian girls were more restricted by the prevalent norms of sexual behavior than men. The imposed asexuality of Soviet times prohibited any corporal practices in sexual sphere for women without special permission—a registration of marriage. At the same time, abortions were prohibited and giving birth out of wedlock was looked upon with strict disapproval. Therefore, a shortage of local fiancés made a Kalmyk a possible candidate, in that any marriage was better than bitter female loneliness.

For Kalmyk women, the situation was different. If no single Kalmyk young man was available, a Kalmyk girl would probably remain an *"old maid,"* and it was practically impossible to find a Siberian husband. Unmarried men were much scarcer than their female counterparts, with the repressed status of possible bride scaring grooms away. Appearance mattered too. A Mongoloid appearance was not seen as aesthetically attractive among the prevalent Europeoid population, particularly during the first years of deportation.

Apart from language and name other social markers of ethnicity were Kalmyk traditional festivities. In areas where more than ten Kalmyk families resided, they still observed Kalmyk calendar festivals such as Zul (New Year), when each Kalmyk became a year older, and the Tsagan Sar Spring festival. As seen in recollections, these were unpretentious parties: *"We ate potatoes, drank tea of apple-tree leaves, then sang and danced."* Many others, however, claimed they were celebrating *"only Soviet holidays.* Kalmyk festivals were observed formally with no sing-

ing or dancing,"⁷⁴ because "marking Kalmyk festivals was not socially approved, and only after Stalin's death did attitudes toward our songs, dances and festivals change."⁷⁵

Kalmyk holidays were marked rarely; sometimes we just burned icon-lamps and said a prayer in secret. There were no special meals, nor celebrating.⁷⁶

We celebrated Zul and Tsagan Sar in our small group, secretly.⁷⁷

The longer Kalmyks lived and the further they adapted to local conditions, the easier it became to mark traditional festivals. For those brought up within Soviet/Russian culture it was not easy to ignore a holiday. When after the war "life became better, life became more merry" (words belong to Stalin, and are often quoted with ironic connotation), the more so after Stalin's death, temptation to celebrate was even harder for local people as well:

In the last years we received a day off at work for Tsagan Sar. Local people went with us from home to home, and even the administration took part. Each host (Kalmyk) cooked meat and procured strong homemade alcohol. The youth would arrange dances, sing songs, both Kalmyk and Russian.⁷⁸

Kalmyks were notably distinct among surrounding population in the Volga area by virtue of their religion, which was Tibetan Buddhism. However, cultural revolution and persecution against religion, which had been dubbed "opium for the people" in 1920s and 1930s resulted in the destruction of churches and the disappearance of Buddhist culture from public life. Even before deportation, Kalmyks struggled to keep their faith to themselves. Regardless, everyone who had packed with the expectation of a long-term exile took with them a Buddhist rug and paper icons, figures of gods, and icon-lamps. While in exile, these items were carefully hidden. Still, people prayed, believing that prayer helped in complicated situations, provided hope for a brighter future, and reconciled grief. The most vivid marker of ethnic culture, the religious as-

74 Interview with R. A. Ulashkina, Elista, 2004.

75 Interview with S. G. Mandzhieva, Elista, 2004.

76 Interview with V. D. Mamonova, Elista, 2004.

77 Interview with E. P. Kenzeeva, Elista, 2004.

78 Interview with B. O. Derteev, Elista, 2004.

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pect, was strictly confined to private sphere.

In those thirteen years many found their fortune, and numerous weddings took place. The traditional Kalmyk wedding—with a bilocal feast first in the home of bride, then the groom's, extensive exchange of presents, a complicated preliminary system of match-making, post-wedding visits of relatives and matchmakers, the changing of the bride from a maiden dress into a woman's, change of hairdo, and many other traditions—was replaced by a party with dancing. Often people did not even care to do that, and the wedding procedure was reduced to a visit to a photographer's studio, who secured the creation of a new family by a flash of the camera and a snapshot.

As remarked above, many Kalmyks avoided using their language in public, and this was especially true with children and young people. Many Siberian children recall that Russian was the main language used at home, although parents would use Kalmyk when talking to each other. Cultural activist Klara Selvina recalls that she did not know a word in Kalmyk before entering Theatrical college in 1958.⁷⁹ Many Kalmyks who grew up in Siberia could not speak Kalmyk as easily as their parents, and certainly used Russian more intensively. One such Kalmyk remembers that "I could speak Khanty, Mansi languages and Russian well; my Kalmyk was much worse. I remember even taking part in the Olympic games for the peoples of the North in Leningrad in 1956."⁸⁰

People were ashamed to use Kalmyk, and it was unsafe to pray in public. It was not sensible to celebrate Kalmyk holidays too openly. Overall, it was shameful to be a Kalmyk. All ethnic markers retreated into the private sphere. Kalmyk ethnicity was initially stained by repression on ethnic grounds. The stigma was further aggravated by differences in appearance, religion, and language. Considering this temporary, but seemingly, eternal, stigmatized ethnicity, a unique phenomenon was a Kalmyk dance which remained in the program of a well-known Soviet Union folk dance group headed by Igor Moiseev. The male dance *ishkimdyk* was staged by choreographer Eva Margolis, wife of the late Kalmyk poet Sanji Kalyaev, who had returned to Moscow after the arrest of her husband in 1937 and worked with Moiseev. The Kalmyk dance re-

⁷⁹ Interview with K. E. Sel'vina, Elista, 2004.

⁸⁰ G. M. Borlikov, "Znaki raniashchikh mgnovenii," in *My - iz vyslannykh*, p. 247.

mained in the concert program, in the same form as it was staged in 1930s, until recently. This seemed so incredible that popular consciousness attempted to interpret the courageous deed of Moiseev by creating a myth. According to the legend,

one time Stalin came to see the performance and saw the Kalmyk dance. During the break he asked Moiseev: "Why do you keep this dance? Don't you know, Kalmyks were exiled and the word "Kalmyk" is banned?" – "What can I do, Iosif Vissarionovich, the dance is good?" – "Now, look. Kalmyks are divided into Torguts and Derbets. Rename this dance, call it Torgut dance or Derbet dance."⁸¹

Despite all the unfortunate circumstances, it is possible to observe positive processes of acquiring new experiences beyond the dramatic circumstances of the forced migration of Kalmyks. For instance, ethnic consolidation was one of the consequences of deportation. Prior to December 1943, the administrative division of the Republic was based on the Ulus structure. Having multiple identities based on kin or ethno-territorial parameters (kin, bone, *khoton*, *aimak*, *ulus* as well as *stanitsa*), until the abolition of the Republic, Kalmyks lived according to a pre-Revolutionary regional division, based on this classification. Stigmatized ethnicity and common extreme experience led to the situation in which general ethnic identity prevailed over local forms of consciousness. The primary level of identity was now indicated by the word *Kalmyk*. The monstrous act of violent deportation consolidated the ethnic identity of Kalmyks, although in a negative form. This same phenomenon has been marked in ethnographic literature about the deportation of the Chechens, whose identity also strengthened during the years of repression.⁸²

81 Interview with T. Badmaeva, Elista, 1995.

82 V. A. Tishkov, *Obshchestvo v vooruzhennom konflikte: Etnografiia chechenskoï voiny* (Moscow, 2001), p. 83.