Kalmykia, Decolonization, and the Study of Russia's Republics: Introducing the Special Issue

Edward C. Holland | ORCID: 0000-0003-3914-0505
Assistant Professor, Department of Geosciences, University of Arkansas
340 N. Campus Drive, 216 Gearhart Hall, Fayetteville, AR 72701
Corresponding author
echollan@uark.edu

Elvira Churyumova | ORCID: 0000-0002-4245-3337
Affiliated Researcher, Mongolia and Inner Asia Studies Unit
el.churyumova@gmail.com

Baasanjav Terbish
Mongolia and Inner Asia Studies Unit, University of Cambridge
bt280@cam.ac.uk

1 Kalmykia, Decolonization, and the Study of Russia’s Republics: Introducing the Special Issue

Kalmykia is located in southwest Russia, a few hundred kilometers to the north of the Caucasus mountains. It is arid and flat. In the wintertime, the wind is cutting as it blows across the steppe; in the summer, the sun is scorching and the temperatures hot. Small settlements – towns, villages, and tochkas (sheepherding stations) – dot the endlessly flat landscape as you drive south from Volgograd to the border with Dagestan and from east to west across the region from the Volga River to the Don Steppe. These monotonous roads are frequently potholed and almost always uncrowded; at intervals, unpaved tracts branch off to reach settlements even more remote. In the larger towns there is often a Buddhist temple, or khurul, although the lama may be away on his rounds visiting the countryside if you stop to pray.

These impressions from traveling through the republic belie a more complex reality in Kalmykia, defined by the challenges it faces as one of Russia’s national republics: of minority identity; of the tension between history and
memory resulting from the deportation of the Kalmyk people during the Soviet period; of renascent religious institutions and belief; and of economic marginality in a free-market system. Additional issues specific to Kalmykia in the post-Soviet period have been manifold, and include environmental degradation and desertification, the further erosion of traditional culture and language due to Russification, the loss of significant populations of saiga, or steppe antelope, and economic stagnation and the outmigration of working-age residents (Dedova et al 2020, Milner-Gulland 1994).

In this special issue, we feature the themes of history, identity, religion, language, migration, and economy because much of the existing scholarship on Kalmykia by scholars in Russia and the west has foregrounded these same topics. Our aim is to enhance this engagement both in the Anglophone academic literature and in the pages of *Caucasus Survey*; although it is part of the journal’s scope, in the first ten volumes no articles appeared that focused on Kalmykia. In Kalmykia, Kalmyk studies and scholarship on the republic has emphasized historical topics and Buddhism as the Kalmyks’ religion of practice and cornerstone of their identity. Major historical works by Kalmyk scholars include macroscale historical treatises on the history of Kalmykia up to and including the Soviet period (Erdniev 1985, Batmaev 1993, Maksimov 2000), studies of the relationship between the nomadic Kalmyks and Cossack settlers on the southern margins of the Russian empire (Shovunov 1992), and histories of the Oirat origins of the Kalmyk people (Mitirov 1998; see also Terbish, this issue). On Buddhism, among the most important monographs are Dordzhiева’s (2014) historical study of the fate of lamas during the persecution of Buddhists during the 1930s and the role of Buddhism as an element of Kalmyk identity (Ulanov 2009). Among other notable Russian-language scholarship, Elza-Bair Guchinova’s *Ulitsa “Kalmuk Road”* reverses the predominant academic gaze as a Russian language monograph that details the history of the Kalmyk diaspora in the United States (Guchniya 2004).

In the west, Kalmykia’s status as the only Buddhist-practicing region in Europe is a point of emphasis, as are the historical legacies of Stalinist deportation and work on politics in the republic, the last a sensitive topic that has provoked some hesitance from Russia-based scholars during the tenure of Vladimir Putin (for an example from a western scholar, see Holland 2019). Since 1991, Kalmykia has experienced a blossoming of Buddhist practice and belief. The republic lacked a single Buddhist temple prior to 1988, the product of the state-mandated atheism of the Soviet period and the Kalmyks’ deportation during World War II and only partial rehabilitation under Nikita Khrushchev. Today, more than 30 temples – known in the Kalmyk language as
khuruls – have been built across the republic. Yet Buddhism’s revival is arguably viewed as institutional rather than authentic; the construction of temples belies a shallowness of understanding of Buddhist ritual and practice among the population (Sinclair 2008, Holland 2015). This tension is relevant to Kalmyk society; as Tara Sinclair (2008, 256) writes, “the sense of being a historically Buddhist people is juxtaposed with a sense of having lost Buddhism and the necessity for its authentic rediscovery.”

The deportation of the Kalmyks on 28 December 1943 – occurring after that of the Karachai but before the Chechens, Ingush, Balkars, and Crimean Tatars – resulted in the forcible displacement of the entire Kalmyk nation to Siberia and Central Asia for a period of 13 years (see also Guchinova, this issue). Grin (2001) argues that deportation adversely affected knowledge of the Kalmyk language; the policies of Soviet leaders Khrushchev and Leonid Brezhnev, which promoted the Russification of non-Russian groups (particularly in the linguistic sphere), further eroded the language’s position. Kalmykia’s 1999 language act endorsed a commitment to multilingualism, though was careful to not pit Kalmyk against Russian (Grin 2001). The revival of the Kalmyk language has been only marginally successful; Russian remains the language of interethnic communication and is nearly universally spoken in the public and professional spheres, particularly in republic’s capital of Elista (Remilev 2003–2004). The Kalmyks have, however, cultivated their national identity in other ways, with the continued celebration of their literary epic, the Jangar, as an example (Richardson 2002).

Politics in Kalmykia has been defined by the leadership of Kirsan Ilyumzhinov, the republic’s long-tenured president (1993–2010), who survived significant protests in the fall of 2004 to maintain his hold on power (Terbish 2022). Vera Tolz (1993, 38), writing near the beginning of Ilyumzhinov’s tenure, described his plans for the republic as “a controversial program for introducing a market economy through the adoption of politically authoritarian measures.” These authoritarian tendencies were evidenced by the disbanding of the republic’s parliament – known as the Khural – and the proscription of activity by political parties (Tolz 1993). The reality of Ilyumzhinov’s tenure as Kalmykia’s leader was one of unmet promise and patrimonialism (Moses 2002); he authored an array of books, secured the presidency of the international chess federation, FIDE, and hosted the 2006 World Chess Championship at the specially constructed Chess City in Elista. Ilyumzhinov’s successor, Alexey Orlov, was undistinguished; initially reliant on Ilyumzhinov’s political patronage, Orlov was unable to effectively address the social and economic problems he inherited (Churyumova 2015). After falling out with Ilyumzhinov, the latter attempted
to create an alternate power structure in Kalmykia intended to rival Orlov and his leadership. Kalmykia’s current head, Batu Khasikov, is an ex-kickboxer with populist appeal; his tenure started off strong but was later engulfed in controversy following the appointment of an ethnically Russian outsider and former leader of the Donetsk People’s Republic, Dmitry Trapeznikov, to the post of Elista’s city manager (Holland 2019).

Despite the scholarship summarized above, Kalmykia is marginalized within many of the humanistic and social scientific fields that intersect with the study of Russia and its peoples. Baasanjav Terbish’s recent monograph has performed the essential task of attempting to situate Kalmykia in broader intellectual contexts with its consideration of how Eurasianism as political ideology was adapted to the republic in the years since communism (Terbish 2022). Synthetic projects such as the Kalmyk Cultural Heritage Documentation Project, notable for their depth of engagement, attempt to document and preserve Kalmyk culture through oral interviews and ethnographic work (Bulag et al 2022; see citations to relevant videos in the articles by Guchinova and Ulanov et al in this issue, as well as https://www.kalmykheritage.socanth.cam.ac.uk/en/index.php).

Acknowledging the extant work on Kalmykia and the republic’s relative marginalization, this special issue has two aims. First, the papers that comprise the special issue extend engagement in the English language scholarship with the key themes already developed in scholarly work on Kalmykia. These papers were first presented at a workshop entitled “Contemporary Kalmykia: Religion and Identity in a Russian Republic” held at the Mongolia and Inner Asia Studies Unit of the University of Cambridge on 1 November 2019. The intent of the workshop was to bring together scholars in the west and in Russia for conversations about Kalmykia, its uniqueness, and its similarity to other national republics in the Russian Federation. In the interim between the public event and publication, to quote the American musician Tom Petty, “everything changed, then changed again.” The coronavirus pandemic led to lockdowns globally and had a significant impact in Kalmykia and Russia more broadly. The initiation of Russia’s war in Ukraine in February 2022 led, among many other things, to a reconsideration of Russia’s centrality in those academic fields that engage with Russia, its history, culture, language, and politics.

Baasanjav Terbish’s paper on Kalmyk identity presents the group’s history in the Russian polity over the longue durée, beginning with settlement on either side of the Volga River around 1630. This paper provides valuable depth of detail on key historical events, including the exodus of the Kalmyks from the lower Volga in 1771 and subsequent annexation of Kalmyk lands by Catherine the Great, the social structure and geographical extent of various Kalmyk groups.
that remained behind and were incorporated into the Russian Empire, and the role of Soviet nationalities policy in consolidating the heretofore inchoate idea of Kalmyk identity through techniques ranging from cultural clubs to propaganda to deportation. The key conclusion of Terbish’s paper is that Kalmyks as such did not exist as an ethnic group – or ethnos, to borrow the term of the late Soviet ethnographers Lev Gumilev and Yuri Bromley – until the Soviet period. The reevaluation of this ethnic category during the post-Soviet period has been only partial.

Elza Guchinova’s paper draws from field work, interviews, and published memoirs to argue that key elements of Kalmyk ethnicity – language and religion, specifically – were rendered invisible due to the group’s deportation during World War II. Though deportation was a key driver in this process, it should also be situated in the broader historical context of the Soviet regime, which created opportunities for some and foreclosed those same opportunities for others across generations, depending on geography, education, and social and cultural networks, among other conditions. The paper ends on an optimistic note by suggesting that the ethnonym Kalmyk is no longer stigmatized; rather, a cultural renaissance is occurring organized primarily around the Buddhist religion but also resulting in reascent practices related to dress, language, and cuisine.

Religion, and the practice of pilgrimage as engaged in historically and today by Kalmyks, is the focus of the paper by Mergen Ulanov, Elvira Churyumova, and Valeriy Badmaev. The authors detail the history of pilgrimage as practiced by Kalmyks, noting the long historical ties that have existed between the region and Tibet and the Dalai Lama. These ties, however, were severed in 1771 only to be reinvigorated in the second half of the nineteenth century. The foreclosure of pilgrimage abroad in the first years of the Soviet period presaged the repression of religion during and after deportation. Only since the perestroika period has religious practice again been allowed in Kalmykia proper. Today, pilgrimage from Kalmykia still privileges the centrality of the Dalai Lama, although the destinations for such journeys include India and lectures by His Holiness in proximate countries of Europe.

The fourth paper, by Elvira Churyumova and Edward Holland, brings the challenges of Kalmykia’s economic trajectory into the contemporary moment by engaging with a set of interviews conducted by the paper’s first author among Kalmyk migrants to Moscow just before the start of the coronavirus pandemic. Internal migration from republics like Kalmykia is an important if understudied aspect of the migration regime in Russia, with signal importance for the economies of peripheral, migrant-sending regions. Kalmykia’s relative proximity to Moscow – the capital can be reached by a 20-hour bus
ride – means migrants can make the trip easily, moving for work then returning home for holidays around the start of the new year or making frequent trips home after completing work shifts. The experiences of Kalmyk migrants illustrate that the reception Kalmyks receive in Moscow varies across gender and class lines; highly educated females tend to report less overt discrimination than males employed in blue-collar jobs, particularly in the workplace.

The second aim of the special issue is to speak to the question of decolonizing Russian studies that is emergent in response to Russia’s war in Ukraine (Prince 2023). As a practice, the decolonization of scholarship aims to question and unsettle the hierarchies and power structures that come to define ways of knowing and studying both places and processes. Calls for decolonizing Russian and post-Soviet studies seek to center academic work on the region away from a focus on Russia, an emphasis on the Russian language, and the privileging of perspectives from the imperial metropoles – that is, Moscow and St. Petersburg. This privileging is linguistic, geographic, and also discursive; as Yusupova (2023: 102) writes, “Russian studies have echoed the discourse of Russia’s political elites, which has systematically suppressed ethnic minority voices and concerns” (see also Lankina 2023; Gel’man 2023). Rather, the decolonizing perspective calls “for a greater inclusion of voices from those nations and regions in the curriculum of Russian, Soviet, and Eurasian history, literature, culture, political science, and economics,” an aim that is relevant to pedagogy but also research (Prince 2023). Decolonization has been endorsed by a range of writers and professional organizations; the Association for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies (ASEEES), the leading U.S.-based professional organization for scholars of the region, has identified decolonization as the theme for its 2023 conference (see also Mogilner 2021). Less certain is what decolonizing Russian studies will look like in practice.

This special issue aims to contribute to such agenda-setting in two specific ways. First, we give voice to Kalmyk scholars working on and originating from the perceived geographical margins of the Russian state, whose work has been only infrequently published in English (Churyumova, Guchinova, Ulanov, and Badmaev). The inclusion of these authors speaks directly to the need for greater inclusivity of non-ethnically Russian voices from Russia in the academic literature. Second, this introduction advocates for increased focus on the constituent units of the Russian Federation, particularly the ethnically

---

1 The idea of decolonizing a field of study has been generative in the discipline of geography (e.g., Shaw et al 2006), itself with origins as a profoundly colonial field, with particular emphasis on indigenous epistemologies.
defined republics like Kalmykia, which is our focus here. The trauma caused by a range of top-down processes – forced sedentarization, collectivization, deportation, state-mandated atheism, economic underdevelopment, authoritarianism in its multiple instantiations – is engaged with and responded to in Kalmykia today through resurgent religious practice, cultural revival, a diverse set of economic livelihood strategies, and nascent forms of protest (on the last, see Holland In press). Other potential themes of relevance to the decolonizing agenda are diverse and include Russia's regional geography, the importance of national republics and their titular groups both historically and today, the study of Russia's linguistic diversity, and the interrogation of overarching labels such as post-Soviet (on the last, see Holland and Derrick 2016). We intend for this special issue to serve as template for the enhanced and in-depth study of a region of Russia and Russia's regions, in conversation with scholars based in or originating from these regions as well as others who study them.

References


