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CULTURAL DEVELOPMENT IN KALMYKIA DURING SOVIET
TIMES (1917–1943)

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Abstract

The Oirats, the ancestors of the Kalmyks, who migrated from Central Asia to the Russian state in the 17th century had voluntarily accepted Russian citizenship and launched the beginning of the Kalmyk people development. Since that time, the Kalmyk people has forever twisted their fortune with the peoples of multinational Russia. After the collapse of the Russian Empire and capturing of power by Bolsheviks, Revolution of 1917, profound changes took place in the Kalmyk steppe, which affected all spheres of life of the nomadic people. In 1920, the Kalmyk Autonomous Region was established, which included a number of settlements with different ethnic population in addition to the territories populated by Kalmyks. During the Civil War, Kalmykia suffered great demographic losses. More than 3 thousand Kalmyks ended up in emigration as a result of the military defeat of the White Guards. In the post-revolutionary period, Kalmykia was one of the regions with the lowest social and economic indicators in the European part of Russia. The newly-formed Soviet state understood that in order to develop a new identity of its citizens, it was necessary to raise the level of indicators important for the region. The radical changes that took place during that period had affected education, science, culture, art, health care, everyday life, and infrastructure, which gives reason to speak of this as a process of modernization.

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Keywords: Cultural development, history, kalmykia, modernization, tradition



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1. Introduction

One of the ethnic groups inhabiting the South of Russia for more than four centuries are the Kalmyks – part of the Mongolian language group and historical and cultural community. The territory of Kalmykia is part of the Lower Volga Region, which has long been formed as a multinational one. This was largely facilitated by the geographical position of the Lower Volga Region, located at the crossroads of civilizations, i.e. Europe and Asia. The Oirats, the Kalmyk ancestors and immigrants from Central Asia in the 17th century had voluntarily become part of the Russian state and launched the beginning of the Kalmyk ethnos having twisted their fortune with the peoples of multinational Russia.

After the October events of 1917 in Russia, radical changes in the life of the state as well as radical transformations took place in all areas of social and cultural fields of Kalmykia. Before the Soviet period, the number of illiterate mature citizens amounted to 93 % in the steppe region. The situation was changed for better and a sufficiently broad material base was created to introduce Kalmyk nomads to culture and education. As a result of the modernization processes, there was a gradual transition from the traditional society to a new type, i.e. the Soviet one. By the end of the 1930s, a fairly high level of integration of the Kalmyk people into Soviet society was achieved. The relevance of the study of the process of cultural development in Kalmykia in 1917–1943 is determined, first of all, by its practical significance. The study of the unique experience of social and cultural modernization of peoples in the Soviet period will make it possible to reveal and evaluate the essence, course and historical results of these unprecedented events that influenced the entire life of society in all its fields. Without analyzing this experience, it is impossible to find out the historical roots of many crisis phenomena in the spiritual development of Russian society, including current stage. The study of radical transformations in one of the national Russian regions is a result of the need to replenish the concepts of the history of cultural development already existing in science in the framework of reinterpretation of the Soviet period of national history. Undoubtedly, this would contribute to the development of the most correct strategy of national policy in the modern conditions of globalization. In this regard, the phenomenon of historical and cultural development, social evolution of Kalmyk nomads in the social and cultural domain of modern Russia requires reflection and further research.

2. Problem Statement

The most important stage in the history of the Russian state is the historical experience of cultural development in the first decade of the Soviet power, 1917–1940. Due to this fact, today in the era of radical changes in Russia and in the conditions of globalization, the current state of scientific development of the problem of Soviet cultural development is of undoubted relevance, which requires reinterpretation. To do so it is necessary to take into account the historical background, in order to successfully overcome modern cultural crisis in Russia and ensure the continuity in matters of further spiritual development of the Russian peoples and preservation of country's cultural heritage. In recent decades, the scientists have been developing a wide range of issues of cultural development during the years of Soviet power. Various aspects of these problems are reflected in the works of Russian scientists (Kim, 1985; Kradin, 2015; Klimov, 2011; Tishkov, 2003; Trepavlov, 2015; Zamyatin, 2010). Among the

works devoted to the history of cultural development in the national Republics and other Russian regions, the studies of (Bazarov, 2006; Krasavchenko, 2006; Kiseleva et al., 1998; Maksimov, 2013; Nomogoeva, 2011; Ochirova et al., 2020) and others. The works of these authors differ from previous stereotypes by using new approaches to the study of the post-October experience of cultural transformations in our country.

The issues of historical and cultural heritage, national state structure are considered in a number of works of foreign researchers: (Axle, 2012; Bell & Paterson, 2009; Bormanzhinov, 1980; Cameron & Kenderdine, 2007; Hoffman, 2006; Kalai et al., 2007; Kasten, 2002; Miyawaki, 1997) and others. At the same time, the analysis of available publications makes it possible to conclude that in the scientific literature there are practically no works devoted to a comprehensive study of cultural development from the standpoint of modern methodology of history.

3. Research Questions

The subject of this research is the Soviet cultural development in Kalmykia for the period of 1917–1943. In the process of preparing the article, a comprehensive analysis of the process of cultural development in Kalmykia was carried out and, on the basis of various sources, the issues of social and cultural development in the national region at a turning point in the history of the Soviet state were highlighted. The main goal of the national program of cultural education in Kalmykia during that period was not so much the preservation and development of traditional ethnic culture, but the task of integrating the Kalmyk ethnos into the system of the Soviet cultural space. The solution of this problem was put at the forefront in the policy of radical transformations of the new Soviet regime. The study of various aspects of social and cultural development and its features within the borders of the Republic reflects the processes of modernization that took place in various national regions of Russia, where there were both achievements and contradictions. Therefore, without studying and taking into account these processes, it is impossible to form a modern concept of national history.

4. Purpose of the Study

The aim of the study is to generalize and identify the features of the historical experience of Soviet cultural development in Kalmykia (1917–1943) in the context of modernization processes.

5. Research Methods

The methodological basis of the study is the principles of historicism and determinism, which are reduced to scientific objectivity. The work uses historical and comparative, historical and situational, system-based, problem-based and chronological as well as civilizational methods. The systematic approach allows us to consider the process of cultural construction in Kalmykia during the Soviet period in its entirety, to determine the line of succession and development, as well as to correlate historical events with the semantic context of the object of the study.

6. Findings

The study showed that from the first days of the transformations in Soviet Russia, the new bodies of state power carried out a number of important events and began to implement a program of cultural development. The beginning of the development of Soviet educational model was initiated by the Decrees of the Council of People's Commissars of the RSFSR. The content of these Decrees included the mobilization of literate people to eliminate illiteracy among the population, the organization of propaganda of the Soviet system, the basic principles of unified labor school, etc. The Kalmyk steppe was one of the territories with the lowest social and economic indicators in the European part of Russia. Therefore, after the final establishment of Soviet power in Kalmykia and the creation of the Kalmyk Autonomous Region (KAO) in 1920, which was transformed into the Kalmyk ASSR in 1935, the revolutionary committees and other local authorities began a radical reorganization of the entire system of life in the region. They were entrusted with the implementation of the policy of the Soviet state, which became the starting point in the implementation of a new cultural policy. The elimination of illiteracy was one of the most important conditions for preparing the population for a new way of life, which influenced culture raise of the population. The campaign to eradicate illiteracy in Kalmykia was carried out as part of the Cultural Revolution. The main difficulties during this period were the threefold reform of the Kalmyk language, the territorial dispersion of the population due to the semi-nomadic lifestyle, and the lack of personnel and material resources.

The elimination of illiteracy has become an important factor in the creation of a secular culture of the population of Kalmykia. This was largely determined by the tasks of cultural policy, which boiled down to the Europeanization of all areas of everyday life in the Soviet society. The campaign activities affected the entire adult population of the Republic. As a result, in a short historical period of time, mass illiteracy was eliminated in Kalmykia. In 1930, compulsory universal primary education was introduced, and then the transition to seven-year education was carried out. The first post-October decades were an important stage in the development of regional higher education, during which the goals, content and area of education and research had changed. During the years of Soviet transformations in the 30s and 40s of the last century, secondary specialized educational institutions, the Kalmyk Pedagogical Institute, the Kalmyk Research Institute of Language, Literature and History were established in Kalmykia. Scientists carried out a lot of research work on the study of folklore, language, literature, history of the Kalmyk people, the creation of textbooks, teaching aids for the national school. The establishment of public education system had played an important role in the subsequent global social and cultural transformations in the steppe region. Along with the training of professional personnel, strengthening the material and technical base of educational institutions, the issue of social education of young people and students, focused on the values of communist development was resolved. An analysis of the period under review shows that the power structures of the Republic, fulfilling the directives of higher authorities, accelerated the pace of social and cultural modernization of Kalmyk society. The main task of the work on the elimination of illiteracy among the population was the preparation of the Kalmyk people for the perception of the general Soviet culture. In this regard, the party's intensified ideological work was

carried out, which had a noticeably pronounced political content, which caused significant damage to traditional culture, customs, and Buddhist religious beliefs.

Kalmyk literature was formed on the basis of the general Mongolian artistic tradition (XIII–XVIII centuries) and is one of the literatures with a developed centuries-old history. National Soviet literature of Kalmykia began to develop during the Civil War. The first works of young authors were published in the army newspapers, and then on the pages of the party-Soviet press, such as *Ulan khalmg* (The Red Kalmyk), *Oirat Izvestia*, *The Red Steppe*, etc. They published poems and stories of the Red Army men, party and Soviet workers, teachers. In 1920, the first literary collection *Songs of the Revolution* was published, which included songs popular among young people on military topics. In the 1920s–1940s, the first Soviet professional writers appeared. Among them were the following: Amur-Sanan, Mandzhiev, Basangov, poets Kalyaev, Erendzhenov, Syan-Belgin, Kugultinov and others. In the artistic works, in addition to glorifying a new life, difficult conditions in pre-revolutionary Russia and in the Kalmyk steppe were reflected, in particular, the disenfranchised position of a Kalmyk woman in the family and society, etc. In literature, under the influence of socialist changes, the leading place was taken by the political dominants of the outside world. However, despite the dependence on ideological dogmas, Kalmyk literature and art, relying on a rich historical and cultural heritage, managed to preserve national identity and originality. An important event in the history of national literature was the participation of Kalmyk writers in the I Congress of Russian proletarian writers (1928) and the I Congress of Soviet writers (1934) After their return from Moscow in May 1935, the I Congress of Kalmyk writers was held, which consolidated literary forces of the Republic. Along with the development of Soviet literature in Kalmykia, in the process of cultural development, the emergence of professional Kalmyk art took place. The development of professional dramatic art was served by amateur drama clubs created in the 1920s on the basis of higher and secondary educational institutions of Saratov and Astrakhan where Kalmyk students studied. In 1929, a mobile national theater was created at the Astrakhan drama school. Thus, the pre-war period was marked by the emergence of professional Soviet literature and art in Kalmykia.

In 1920s–1940s, country's cultural development was carried out with the main goals, which were to overcome the illiteracy of the population and to develop a new type of person, i.e. the Soviet person. He was to become the bearer of a communist worldview based on the ideas of class solidarity and proletarian internationalism. The establishment of a new culture was proclaimed – national in form and socialist in content. Of the national cultures, only those that could contribute to the creation of Soviet culture were chosen, while the religion, which was the core of the culture of the people was rejected. In Kalmykia, as well as throughout the country, within the framework of the cultural revolution, a policy of secularization of the consciousness of population was carried out, which took the form of an irreconcilable struggle with religion. It resulted in the closure of all Buddhist khuruls (temples), Orthodox churches, mosques in the Republic and liquidation of religious organizations. According to the official data, by the end of 1938, out of 62 khuruls, 19 churches, and 2 mosques that operated in the first months of the Soviet power, none of them functioned, and all religious organizations were closed. In the course of cultural and educational development, Buddhist art and literature were declared feudal-clerical, contrary to the interests of the working people and socialist development. At the same time, despite the massive atheistic propaganda among the population and repressions against clergymen, a significant part of the

population of Kalmykia, mainly of older age remained to adhere to the religion on the eve of the War. Atheistic and communist ideas resonated more among young people, therefore, among them, the break with national traditions and adherence to the modernization processes taking place in the cultural field was much more pronounced. Cultural development in Kalmykia became an integral part of cultural policy in Soviet Russia. 1917–1943 became an important stage of cultural development in Kalmykia, the time of the final establishment of the culture of the Soviet type, marked by a high level of integration of the Kalmyk people into Soviet society.

7. Conclusion

In the course of the study, it was revealed that as a result of the modernization processes of the first Soviet decades, radical transformations took place in the social and cultural fields of Kalmykia, covering the education system, science, culture, art, health care, and everyday life. Besides, it was found out that among the mechanisms that regulate the national program of social and cultural modernization, the elimination of illiteracy, language development, cultural and educational activities, and the development of new values and stereotypes of behavior were especially important. At the same time, the main goal of the national program of cultural education in Kalmykia in the period under review was the preservation and development of traditional ethnic culture, but integration of the Kalmyk ethnos into the system of the Soviet cultural domain. The significant changes that have taken place are characterized by clearly expressed ideological philosophy. The Cultural Revolution in Kalmykia became an integral part of cultural development in Soviet Russia.

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