

From Tuva to Tyva: Nationalism vs Economics

Mark Galeotti

Introduction

Another of the 'hidden' states whose identity and independence have been placed on the political agenda by the Soviet collapse is Tyva (formerly Tuva), a land of lamaist Buddhist cattle-herders occupying the geographic centre of Asia. Formerly Chinese clients, the Turkified Mongolians of Siberian Tuva came under Tsarist Russian domination in 1912, the region being fully absorbed within the empire as Uryankhai Protectorate in 1914. The years 1912-18 saw a concerted effort to colonise the region, the Russian population growing three-fold. The Bolshevik revolution and ensuing civil war opened a brief window of opportunity, which the Tuvans seized as fully as geopolitical realities allowed. In 1918, a treaty between the Tuvans and the Russian colonists was signed which guaranteed the Russians their new land, in return for a recognition of Tuvan independence.

The People's Republic

In 1921, the Tannu-Tuva People's Republic was created, a notionally independent state but one already recognising its ideological and practical debt to Russia. This was given form in February 1922, when the Russian Soviet Autonomous Colony in the republic became a Self-Governed Russian Labour Colony. With its control over Tuva's gold mines and supported by a clear mandate for further Russification, the Colony became increasingly powerful (Alatalu, 1992).

The Stalinist era saw the Tuvan authorities effectively treading a middle way. For most of the 1930s, they were able to hold back the collectivisation which so ravaged most of the Soviet countryside and in 1932 the Colony was abolished, its gold mines reverting to republican control. To an extent, they benefited from Moscow's greater suspicion of pan-Mongolism: sanctioning an expression of Tuvan national identity was seen as a way of preventing them from finding common cause with Khalka Mongols, Buryats and Kalmyks (Bremmer and Taras, 1992).

Ultimately, though, the Stalinist state could accept no local compromises or exceptions. In 1938, the secret police executed the head of government, Kurmit-Dazy, and launched a purge which decapitated the Tuvan leadership. In a symbolic assertion of central cultural authority, in 1940 their Turkic language was transliterated into Cyrillic. Open resistance to the line from Moscow nonetheless continued, and in October 1944, Tuva was formally incorporated within the Russian Soviet Federal Socialist Republic as an Autonomous Region.

In 1961, Tuva was officially upgraded to an Autonomous Republic, yet efforts to turn its population into *homines sovieticus* met with only limited success. A campaign to destroy traditional ways of life by raising nomads' children in boarding schools certainly undermined social coherence, but bred not loyalty but generational disputes and anomie. A good index of this is the crime rate. In the period January to September 1990, for example, the overall Soviet crime rate grew by 12.3% - in the same period, Tuva's rose by 27.3%. The murder rate has risen from 68 per 100,000 citizens per year in that year to 338 in 1994.

Perestroika brought new opportunities to turn social dissent into political resistance, first given form in 1989 when a radical nationalist by the name of Kaadyr-ool Bicheldey established the Tuvan Popular Front. The decay of the Soviet state led to rising tensions in the region. In May 1990, Tuvans and Russians clashed and the centre was forced to dispatch OMON¹ riot police to its capital, Kyzyl. Despite considerable resistance from a conservative local Party leadership, a Tuvan, Sherig-ool Oorshak was elected President in 1991. Under Oorshak, many members of the old Party elite simply re-invented themselves as nationalists, a piece of political showmanship comparable to the formal decision to change the official spelling of the republic's name to 'Tyva'.

The country

With an area of 170,000 square kilometres and a population of a little over 300,000, Tyva is a

rugged and bleak region between the Sayan, Tannu-Ola and Altai mountain ranges. It borders Mongolia and five Russian regions: Gorno-Altai, Khakassia, Krasnoyarsk, Irkutsk and Buryatia. Its capital and only main city is Kyzyl ('Red City'), with a population of around 59,000. As of the 1989 census, the population was split between 47% in the cities and 53% in the countryside, a distinct shift away from the urban centres. To a large extent, though, this simply reflected unequal growth: over the ten years 1979-89 the Tuvan population grew by a relatively high 18%, with disproportionately high birth rates in the countryside.

Tyva does possess some natural assets. Its coal reserves have been estimated at up to 20 billion tonnes, while there are also sources of asbestos (Ak-Dovurak) and cobalt (Khopu-Aksy). The gold mines which originally attracted Russian attentions, though, are largely tapped out or beyond cost-effective exploitation. However, using and developing these resources has been difficult. Tyva's 47 hydro-electric stations are too few (and often too old) for the region's energy needs and an energy crisis and a shortage of capital has brought the extraction industries near collapse. From a peak output of over a million tonnes in 1989, the coal industry has suffered a 55% decline, while the state *Tuvasbest* and *Tuvakobalt* enterprises have been described as "on the brink of closure" (Russia Briefing, 1994). Communications are a perennial problem, the republic having no railways and but one main road, the Abakan highway. Some riverine traffic gets to Minussinsk in central Siberia along the Yenisei, while there is a small airport at Kyzyl, but these links are also underdeveloped.

In the absence of adequate federal or private capital to regenerate this admittedly narrow industrial base, the local economy has largely regressed to traditions of rearing and herding sheep, yaks, horses and cattle. The land is well-watered and with good pasture. Its lack of key resources has also ensured that it has largely escaped the environmental devastation caused by crude, plan-driven industrialisation. In the Soviet era, almost 400,000 hectares were brought under cultivation, with exports of hair, hides and wool, and although there are inevitable problems in instituting effective land reform, the government is committed to facilitating further rural development.

Prospects for the future

Unlike most other 'proto-states' in the same position, though, Tuvans have resisted the ethnic miscegenation and assimilation of the Russian regime. The 1989 state census reported a population of 308,557, of whom Tuvans represented an absolute majority (64%), with a sizeable population of Russians (32% - almost 100,000) and a relative handful of other nationalities (4%). This actually reflects a decline in the Russian presence - in 1959, they represented over 40% of the population - but since 1990, they have been leaving in greater numbers. Some 6,400 left in 1990 alone, and a further 2,400 in 1991. Although most remaining Russians regard themselves as 'local', there is scope for mass emigration as inter-ethnic tensions rise. In 1992, for example, a Russian and his 14-year-old son were murdered, generating a climate of suspicion which contributed to a clash between Russian OMON and Tuvan youths in Khopu-Aksy.

Nevertheless, Tyva's economic dependence upon Moscow remains the most powerful card in the federalists' hand. Some 90% of Tuva's - inadequate - budget comes from federal funds, while catastrophic floods early in 1994 forced the government to petition for emergency aid from the centre. As a result, for the moment, the Tyvan political elite seems prepared to see what resources and concessions it can squeeze from Moscow.

On one extreme are the nationalists, led by Kaadyr-ool Bicheldey, now the Speaker of the Tyvan parliament. He has challenged existing frontiers, making territorial claim to parts on Mongolia as well as Russia's Krasnoyarsk region. On the other extreme are the ethnic Russians and Boris Yeltsin's representatives, who are working hard to keep Tyva Russian. President Sherig-ool Oorzhak is happy to play the one against the other, secure in the knowledge both that his allies and cronies control the key government institutions and that although Bicheldey remains personally popular, his Popular Front has little electoral appeal. In the December 1993 elections, it was squeezed out by Oorzhak's People's Party of Sovereign Tuva (63% of the vote) and the Republican Party of Communists (37%). Tellingly, the ethnic Russians also strongly supported the Party of Russian Unity and Accord, reflecting their sense of isolation.

Oorzhak is typical of so many post-Soviet leaders, a pragmatic ex-communist with a great sense of survival. No zealot, he is unlikely to push for Tyvan independence, all too aware of the economic and political costs involved. When Yeltsin decided to pressurise the southern Russian republic of Chechnia, for example, Tyva was noticeably silent at a time when many local leaderships were registering their dismay.

In the longer term, though, economics may not be enough to quell nationalism. Tensions between Tuvans and Russians are bound to grow. The commercial and industrial enterprises employing such a disproportionate share of the Slavs have no future, and few colonists can hope to be able to take up traditional herding, hunting and farming in the countryside. There are also signs that, in its own understated way, Tuvan national identity will prove surprisingly resistant to the new Russification being advocated by many in Moscow. One focus will be the region's history, another may be religion: despite the repressions of the Stalinist era, a sizeable Buddhist community survives in Tyva. It may also be that Tyva will begin to cultivate economic links looking not westwards but east, towards Mongolia and, above all, China. Although Tyva is likely to remain Russian in the short-term, ultimately even economics may dictate independence.

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- 1 Otryad militsii spetsial'nogo naznacheniya, Special Purpose Militia [Police] Unit: these 'black berets' were élite riot police forces established in 1987.
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Dr Mark Galeotti is Lecturer in International History, University of Keele, UK.

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