

Today Chechnya exists in a sort of limbo—officially it is part of the Russian Federation, but in fact it is an autonomous state ruled by Ramzan Kadyrov and his militiamen.

Brian Glyn Williams

Further Reading

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Chuvash

The Chuvash call themselves *Chavash*. Their central Russian geographical location is considered the borderline between the Turkic speaking and Finno-Ugric speaking people in Russia. The total population of Chuvash people is estimated at 2 million; most reside in the Chuvash Autonomous Republic while others live in the neighboring autonomous republics of Tatarstan and Bashkiria as well as other parts of the Russian Federation. Along with the Gagauz of Moldova, the Chuvash are the only (Russian) Orthodox Christian Turkic-speaking people.

Most historians agree that they are the direct descendants of the Volga Bulgar

(Bolgar in some sources) Khanate, a Turkic state that flourished from the middle of the 7th through the middle of the 13th centuries in the Volga-Kama basin. The region was once home to the Schyrtian and Hunnic civilizations, and the Volga Bulgars are thought to descend themselves from the Huns in this region. Volga Bulgars used the ancient Turkic runic alphabet; after the end of 10th century, with their conversion to Islam, they adopted the Arabic script. Contrary to official Turkish historiography, which considers the Central Asian Karahanids as the first Turkic state to adopt Islam as an official religion in CE 932, the Volga Bulgars adopted Islam as their state religion in 922, a decade before the Karahanids, making them the first Turkic speakers to convert to Islam en masse. Remnants of their great mosques and architecture can still be seen in the Bulgar city on the shores of Volga River. During the Middle Ages, the Bulgars gained fame for their commercial activities and highly cultured society. They accumulated great wealth thanks to their close relations with the Turkic Khazar Empire in the south, which interestingly had adopted Judaism as a state religion. One of the ruling tribes of the Volga Bulgar state was the Suvar, a name that current Chuvash nationalists prefer to use as their ethnonym as well.

With the arrival of the Mongols of Batu Khan in 1236, the Bulgar state was destroyed and its residents became subjects of the Golden Horde for the next 300 years, contributing to the Turkification of the population. Soviet/Russian historiography argues that during this period the Chuvash were forced into the forests to the northwest and west where Finno-Ugric peoples,



A Chuvash folk group meets a tourist ship on the embankment of the Volga river in Cheboksary city, the capital of Chuvashia. (Mikhail Epishin/Dreamstime)

especially the Mari, live. This line of reasoning holds that Chuvash ethnicity was born of the mixture of Turkic Bulgars and Finno-Ugric Mari. However, there is no evidence, especially linguistic, for this claim. The Chuvash in fact lived under the Golden Horde, and following its disintegration in 1437 they became subjects of the Kazan Khanate. It is known that the Chuvash aristocrats (called Tarkhans) were at the service of the armies of the Kazan Khanate. Again, Soviet/Russian historiography claims that the Chuvash people voluntarily joined the Russian state under Ivan Grozny (the Terrible) in 1551, just a year before the fall of Kazan to the Russians. This kind of “voluntary reunion with

Russia” rhetoric has been and still is a part of a Russian historiography attempting to explain the expansion of the Russian state in its early phases. Actually, the Chuvash became Russian subjects only after the fall of Kazan in 1552. From that time until the beginning of 19th century, Chuvash peasants were subject to their own *yasak* (law) in which they rendered labor to Chuvash lords in exchange for food, particularly milled grain or bread. However, most Chuvash derived a livelihood from hunting, fishing, and intervillage commerce.

The Chuvash were active participants in the peasant-Cossack rebellions of Razin (1670–1671) and Pugachev (1773–1775). With reforms to the institution of serfdom

in the 19th century, Russian landless peasants as well as some lords staked claims to land within Chuvash territory. In 1920, a Chuvash Autonomous Oblast (Region) was created within the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR). The Chuvash region fed Moscow during the 1921–1923 famine. As a result, in 1925 the area became the Chuvash Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (ChASSR) within the RSFSR. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, the Chuvash Autonomous Republic remained within the Russian Federation. The Chuvash people constitute the majority in the Chuvash Republic, one of the few regions in the Russian Federation where ethnic Russians are a clear minority. The republic is one of the important industrial centers of the Volga basin, hosting factories for farming equipment, beverages, and furniture.

Culturally they are divided into three parts: Upper (Hill), Central (Meadow), and Lower (Southern) Chuvash. They speak the ancient Ogur Turkic dialect, making them the only Turkic people having this characteristic. That is why their dialect is one of the most difficult to understand among all the surviving Turkic dialects. The Chuvash are (Russian) Orthodox Christians. However, they were not considered true believers by their Russian neighbors. Their religious practice in fact contains elements from paganism, Islam, and Tengrism. It is known that their mass conversion to Russian Orthodoxy took place in the second half of the 19th century under the Russian Empire. Before this, they practiced a mix of faiths, especially Tengrism, a pre-Islamic Turkic religion positing a number of minor deities as well as a dominant sky god. The

Chuvash still have traditional healers in the villages and in the cities, practicing using herbs and ancient rituals. One can also see holy sites all over the country where the Chuvash make sacrifices. Chuvash literature stands out in central Russia. Chuvash author/poets such as Pyotr Khuzangai and Mishshi Yukhma have been translated into several languages all over the world. Chuvash poetry is distinguished from other minority literature in the Russian Federation with its strong emphasis on the inner world of the individual rather than the classical pastoral themes.

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Cornish

The Cornish are a Celtic people whose name derives from the county of Cornwall, situated in the far southwestern corner of