

Chuvash

KLÁRA AGYÁGASI

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ETHNONYM: Chavash (self-designation)

Orientation

Identification. The Chuvash live in Russia, primarily in the Chuvash Republic but also in Tatarstan and Bashkirstan and in the Ulianov, Kuibyshev, and Saratov areas, where they migrated in the seventeenth to eighteenth centuries. Some have also lived in Siberia and Central Asia since the nineteenth century. In the name "Chuvash," the first vowel is pronounced like the English *u* in "but." Its etymology is unknown. All attempts to link it to the tribal names "Suvaz," "Suvar," and "Sabir," mentioned by Arabic travelers in the tenth century, are phonetic dead ends.

Location. Chuvashia is bounded on the north by the Cheremis Republic, on the east by the Tatar Republic, on the south by Ulianov County, and on the west by the Mordvinian Republic and Gorki County. It is located at approximately 54°30' to 56°30' N and 46° to 48°40' E. The capital is Cheboksary. Geographically, Chuvashia is a lowland valley of the Volga, Sura, and Civil rivers. Ninety percent of it is less than 200 meters above sea level, 10 percent is between 200 and about 400 meters, and 30.5 percent of the territory is wooded. In 1987, 50 percent of the forests consisted of pine, 40 percent were oak, and the remainder were birch and poplar. The climate is moderately continental. The mean temperature in January is —12.6° C; in July it is 19° C. With a growing season lasting 180 days, the region receives an average annual precipitation of 46 to 51 centimeters.

Demography. The population of the Chuvash then Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (ASSR) in 1987 was 1,330,000. The capital of the Chuvash Republic had, at that time, 414,000 inhabitants (up from 104,000 in 1959 and 216,000 in 1970). Since 1970 about seventy-nine ethnic groups have lived in Chuvashia. In 1979, 68.4 percent of inhabitants described themselves as ethnically Chuvash, 26 percent as Russian, 2.9 percent as Tatar, 1.6 percent as Mordvinian, and 1.1 percent as members of other groups. In the other territories of the USSR, 844,000 individuals identified themselves as ethnically Chuvash in 1970. Population density in Chuvashia in 1979 was 72 persons per square kilometer.

Linguistic Affiliation. The Chuvash people living in villages speak Chuvash, the only living language of the Bulgaro-Turkic Branch of the Turkic Group of the Altaic Family. Eighty-two percent of the Chuvash speak Chuvash as their mother tongue. The closest language is Volga-Bulgarian, which was extinct before the close of the fifteenth century. All Common Turkic languages are distant relatives of Chuvash. The majority of Chuvash people living in towns are bilingual in Chuvash and Russian; the younger generations prefer Russian. The Chuvash now use a modified variant of the Cyrillic alphabet created by I. Ya. Yakovlev in 1872. Its characteristic feature is the phonematic transcription of sounds. Chuvash texts written in Cyrillic without modifications existed 130 years before Yakovlev; the Arabic alphabet was used by Chuvash elders in the fourteenth century. Modern Chuvash has two dialects: the Virval in the north and the Anatri in the south of the republic, with Anatri the basis of the literary language. Chuvash has loanwords from ancient Samoyed, Persian, Arabic, Old and Modern Russian, Middle Mongolian, Volga Kipchak, Permian, and Volga Finnish.

History and Cultural Relations

The reconstruction of the early history of the Chuvash is incomplete. Because the "Chuvash" ethnonym does not appear in Russian historical sources until the sixteenth century, the relation of the Chuvash to the other Bulgaro-Turkic tribes is difficult to determine. The following is known about the Bulgaro-Turks.

The ancient Turkic Language Family split into Common Turkic and Bulgaro-Turkic at the beginning of our era. Bulgaro-Turkic tribes moved westward from their Inner Asian home. Byzantine sources from a.d. 465 mention the Ogur, Onogur, Saragur, Utigur, and Kutrigur tribes, and from 481 on the "Bolgar" ethnonym appears. In the fifth and sixth centuries these tribes settled on the lowland between the Dnieper and Don rivers. In 630 a group of these people moved to the lower Danube under the guidance of Asparuch. Between 670 and 680 the majority of the people were under the control of the Kazars, who founded their state on the Caspian Sea. According to recent studies, Kazars also spoke a Bulgaro-Turkic dialect. At the end of the ninth century some Bulgar tribes migrated north to the Volga, Kama, and Viatka rivers and founded the Volga Bulgar Empire. This state, named Magna Bulgaria (Great Bulgaria), existed for two and one-half centuries and was prosperous, according to Arabic sources. Its capital, Bolgari, was a major cultural and commercial center. In 1230 Mongols invaded Magna Bulgaria, gaining control in 1241. According to Volga-Bulgarian inscriptions, two groups remained from their population until the fifteenth century. Both of them spoke Bulgaro-Turkic dialects but they were not direct ancestors of the Chuvash. An inscription dated 1307 is unquestionably in the Chuvash language and can be regarded as the first written evidence of the Chuvash dialect differentiated from other Bulgaro-Turkic dialects.

In the fifteenth century the Golden Horde disintegrated. The Kazan Khanate was organized, and the Volga Bulgar population, who spoke two non-Chuvash dialects, was absorbed into the Kipchak population. The Chuvash population preserved its language but was much influenced by the Kipchaks.

In 1551 the Chuvash people joined forces with the Russians and helped them besiege Kazan. From 1552—the taking of Kazan—the Chuvash have lived in the Kazan Province of the Russian Empire. After initial prosperity, living conditions deteriorated as Russian and Chuvash feudal oppression increased, and the burden of the agricultural population was increased by the tax paid to the Russian Orthodox church. The Chuvash participated in numerous peasant uprisings led by Stepan Razin (1670-1671) and Yemelian Pugachov (1773-1775). The life of the serfs of the Volga region in the eighteenth century was especially difficult, as landowners sent non-Russian villagers to the Russian imperial public works projects as unpaid workers. Thousands of Chuvash were impressed into the shipyards at Azov, Voronezh, and Olonec. Many worked in construction, in St. Petersburg to transform it into the imperial capital and in Kazan to erect an admiralty. In different parts of the country, Chuvash peasants had to work building fortresses, and later they were forced to haul barges transporting salt from Perm to Nizhni Novgorod. At this time, entire Chuvash villages migrated to more distant territories hoping to avoid forced labor. In the nineteenth century capitalism developed in Chuvashia, and in the 1890s, 10 percent of the peasantry were kulaks, 55 percent middle class, and 2 percent poor. The kulaks opened factories; by 1913 more than 400 factories were in operation in Chuvashia. After the 1917 Revolution, local soviets formed in Chuvashia. In 1920 the Chuvash Autonomous Region was established, and in 1925 it became the Chuvash Autonomous Republic. In the post-Soviet era, it is the Chuvash Republic.

Settlements

The Chuvash traditionally lived in small villages. In village communities, farms consisted of *kilkarti* and *ankarti*. Kilkarti were quadrangles with a living house, summer house, Russian-type bathhouse, granary, toolhouse, barn for dry feed for animals, stable, cow house, and fowl house. All buildings were of wood. Behind the animal houses was the kitchen garden, and at its far end began the ankarti, the plowed field of the family. The last forty years saw a major shift of the population to urban centers. In the Chuvash Republic there are nine towns and eight cities. Today, more than one-fourth of the republic's inhabitants live in cities.

Economy

Subsistence and Commercial Activities. After the formation of the Chuvash ASSR, small factories were put under government management and the peasant properties collectivized. The development of heavy industry on a large scale began in the Middle Volga region in 1941. There are no mineral resources in the Chuvash Republic, but there are important deposits of lime, shale, and peat. On the poor-quality fields, large-scale animal husbandry developed; where the soil was fertile, mechanized agriculture was practiced. The most important agricultural products are wheat, rye, potatoes, hemp, hops, dairy products, poultry, beef, and pork. Industrial investment attracted workers from elsewhere in the the former USSR.

Industrial Arts. For the workers in the republic, employment opportunities are provided by industrial facilities producing hydroelectric and thermal energy, electric surveying instruments, industrial tractors, metalworking machine tools, cement, chemicals, wood products, textiles, tricot goods, and clothing.

Trade. The majority of the products of agriculture and industry were bought by the Soviet state and sold in state stores. Market conditions existed only for the recently developed producers' cooperatives.

Division of Labor. Today, Chuvash men and women both take part in work at home and outside the home.

Land Tenure. Under the Soviet system, land was public property of the members of kolkhozy and sovkhozy, but every family had a household as part of it.

Kinship, Marriage, and Family

Neither tradition nor early written records corroborate the existence of extended Chuvash families. Although monogamy is traditional, sororal polygyny has occurred in rare cases. Brides were selected by the groom's parents, who paid the purchase price as the redemption of the dowry. Bride-theft was a common practice. There was no ethnic endogamy among the Chuvash. Today the basic family unit is the nuclear family (*semye*), in which the parents (mother, *anne*; father, *atte*) and the children (daughter, *xer*, son *ival*) live together. The other members of the consanguinal family are the elder brother (*picce*), younger brother (*sallara*), elder sister (*appa*), younger sister (*yamak*), the grandmother (*asanne*), the grandfather (*asatte*)—their names are not different on the mother's side and the father's side—the uncle (*muci*, *tete*), and the aunt (*manakka*, *inke*). Affinal relatives are the father-in-law (*xun'*, *xun'asa*, *pavata*), mother-in-law (*xun'ama*, *pavana*), son-in-law (*y'isna*), daughter-in-law (*kin*), sister-in-law (*xer pultar*, *appa*, *xun'aka*), and brother-in-law (*pultar*, *payaxam*, *eskev*). Traditional marriage practices have disappeared; only those related to fertility have survived into the twentieth century, but these were ended by the Orthodox church and replaced by Soviet ceremonies. Divorce traditionally did not occur, but it has been allowed since the beginning of the Soviet period.

Sociopolitical Organization

The constitution of the Chuvash ASSR was passed in 1937. Under the Soviet system, the general organ of the state power was the unicameral parliament (Supreme Council of the Chuvash ASSR) under the control of the Communist party. Each deputy represented 8,000 inhabitants. Eleven deputies represented the Chuvash Republic on the Council of the USSR. Social control was exercised by the trade unions, which depended on the ruling party.

Religion and Expressive Culture

Religious Beliefs and Practices. An inscription dated from 1307 shows that some Chuvash were converted to Islam, and religious terms occur in Chuvash in the form of Tatar loanwords; sources do not, however, specify Muslim religious practice among the Chuvash. Russian sources of the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries mention the Chuvash as "people of different belief" (*inorodci*), a term known to denote worshipers of images and spirits. The Russian Orthodox Church tried to Christianize the Chuvash by force in the seventeenth century without success. In the eighteenth century it changed tactics; the Bible was translated into Chuvash and preachers began to use the Chuvash language. The Chuvash nominally

accepted the Christian faith and traditional names were changed into Russian names, but traditions of Orthodox worship did not take hold. According to reports of travelers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Chuvash peasants offered sacrifices in places deemed holy by them, believed in home spirits, and practiced idolatry. Nowadays, the traditional beliefs are disappearing and atheism is gaining ground.

Arts. In Chuvashia folk art developed from home industries. Its best-known branch is the carving of objects (drinking cups, jugs, mugs, spoons, dippers, etc.) from a single piece of wood. Important features of Chuvash culture include different forms of folklore (songs, tales, and legends), hand-embroidered articles of clothing, and goldsmiths' works. Folk ornaments also appear on modern personal belongings. In the fine arts of the Soviet era, a Socialist-Realist style prevailed.

Medicine. Medical care is now general, free, and provided by health institutions of the state. Until the beginning of the twentieth century, folk medicine was important. There was a male or female healer (*yumsa*) in each village who "healed" either with medicinal plants, witchcraft, or psychomancy.

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