

Historical Overview of Kazakhstan

A New Gospel Frontiers Background Paper

In 1991, during the dissolution of the Soviet Union, a new country named the Republic of Kazakhstan suddenly appeared on the geopolitical map of the modern world. While the country of Kazakhstan may still be new and unfamiliar to Westerners, it has a much older history that dates back to 1470.

For a thousand years after the birth of Christ, Central Asia was the scene of pendulum-like shifts of power between native nomadic hordes and the sedentary civilizations of Eurasia's periphery. During this period, horses rather than silk had the greatest influence over regional events since the vast grasslands fed millions of them and mounted archers were the most potent military force in the region. The Huns, Turks, Arabs and the Chinese all ventured into the region during this period.

From 1219, Mongol hordes under the leadership of Genghis Khan swept through most of Eurasia. The ravages inflicted on the region were so harsh that the civilization in Central Asia did not begin to recover until Russian colonization some 600 years later. Genghis was brutal, but he was also perceptive enough to realize the importance of reliable trade and communications. He proceeded to lay down networks of guard posts to protect trade routes. The resulting flurry of trade on the Silk Road was the background to Marco Polo's famous journeys.

The splits and religious divisions which followed the death of Genghis led to the fracturing of the Mongol Empire, and led in the 14th century to the emergence of the Kazakhs as a distinct people for the first time. Springing from the descendants of Mongols, Turkic and other peoples, the Kazakhs went on to form one of the world's last great nomadic empires, stretching across the steppe, and capable of bringing 200,000 horsemen into the field of battle. Early Kazakhstan statehood began in 1470 when two great sultans (Janibek and Girey) organized numerous tribes in the south-eastern region of the country and combined them into a single 'Kazakh' tribe.

The ruin of the Kazakhs came thanks to the Oyrats, a warlike, expansionist Mongolian people who subjugated eastern Kazakhstan and absorbed their lands into the Zhungarian Empire in the 1630s. The Kazakhs were savagely and repeatedly pummeled during the 17th and 18th centuries. This period, called the Great Disaster, weakened them and made them susceptible to the Russian expansion soon to come. The region was conquered by Russia in the 18th century, which set the stage for the Bolshevik entrance (from stage Left) in the early 20th century. The Central Asians were quickly liberated by the Bolsheviks from any ideas of self-determination.

During the ensuing remaking of the region, the Soviets incorporated the principle of nationalist confusion. When the republics of Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Tajik, Turkmen and Uzbek began to be created in the 1920s, each was carefully shaped to contain pockets of differing nationalities with long-standing claims to the land. The present face of Central Asia is a product of this 'divide and rule' policy and is one of the major legacies of Soviet rule.

From 1929 to 1934, during the period when Soviet leader Joseph Stalin was trying to collectivize (socialize) agriculture, Kazakhstan endured repeated famines. During that period, at least 1.5 million Kazakhs and 80 percent of their livestock died. Over the course of the Lenin and Stalin eras, the political, cultural, intellectual and religious leaders were killed in communistic purgings, the results of which are documented at the Kazakhstan National Museum, located in Almaty. Kazakhstan formally became a part of the Soviet Union in 1936, and was named the Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic.

As the Cold War came to an end, after two and a half centuries of subjugation by Russia, the Republic of Kazakhstan declared independence from the Soviet Union on December 16, 1991. The first post-independence constitution was adopted January 28, 1993, and stipulates that Kazakhstan is a secular state; thus, Kazakhstan is the only Central Asian country whose constitution does not assign a special status to Islam. As is the case for most of the Former Soviet Union nations, Kazakhstan is in a transitory stage. It is not clear whether the country will become a truly free and democratic nation or whether it will become a benign dictatorship under the guise of a democratic form of government. On paper, Kazakhstan is a republic with democratic elections (which are not sanctioned as truly free and without intimidation by the United Nations) and three branches of government to balance the power of governance among the executive, legislative and judicial branches. As of 2003, the current president is Nursultan Nazarbayev and his Prime Minister is Kasymzhomart Tokayev. Kazakhstan is divided into 19 provinces (oblasts) and the territory of the capital (Astana), each of which is headed by a provincial governor appointed by the Prime Minister. There are also city and village governments. The national currency is the Tenge, which has an exchange rate that has ranged between 120T and 145T to \$1 USD.

After the breakup of the Soviet Union, the newly reconstituted nations in the region were first called the Former Soviet Union (FSU) countries, but are now dubbed the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS).

Map of the Republic of Kazakhstan and Bordering Nations



Modern Kazakhstan is approximately one-half the size of the continental United States, with a total land mass of 1.67 million square miles. The nation's capital is Astana. They have five countries that lie along their borders: China to the East, Russia to the North, and Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan to the South. To the West, the country borders the Caspian Sea. The terrain extends from the Volga River valley to the Altai Mountains, and from the plains in western Siberia to oases and desert in Central Asia. The climate is continental, with cold winters and hot summers, and the landscape varies from arid to semiarid.