

Shishkov's Window into Russo-Kalmuk Relations

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Introduction

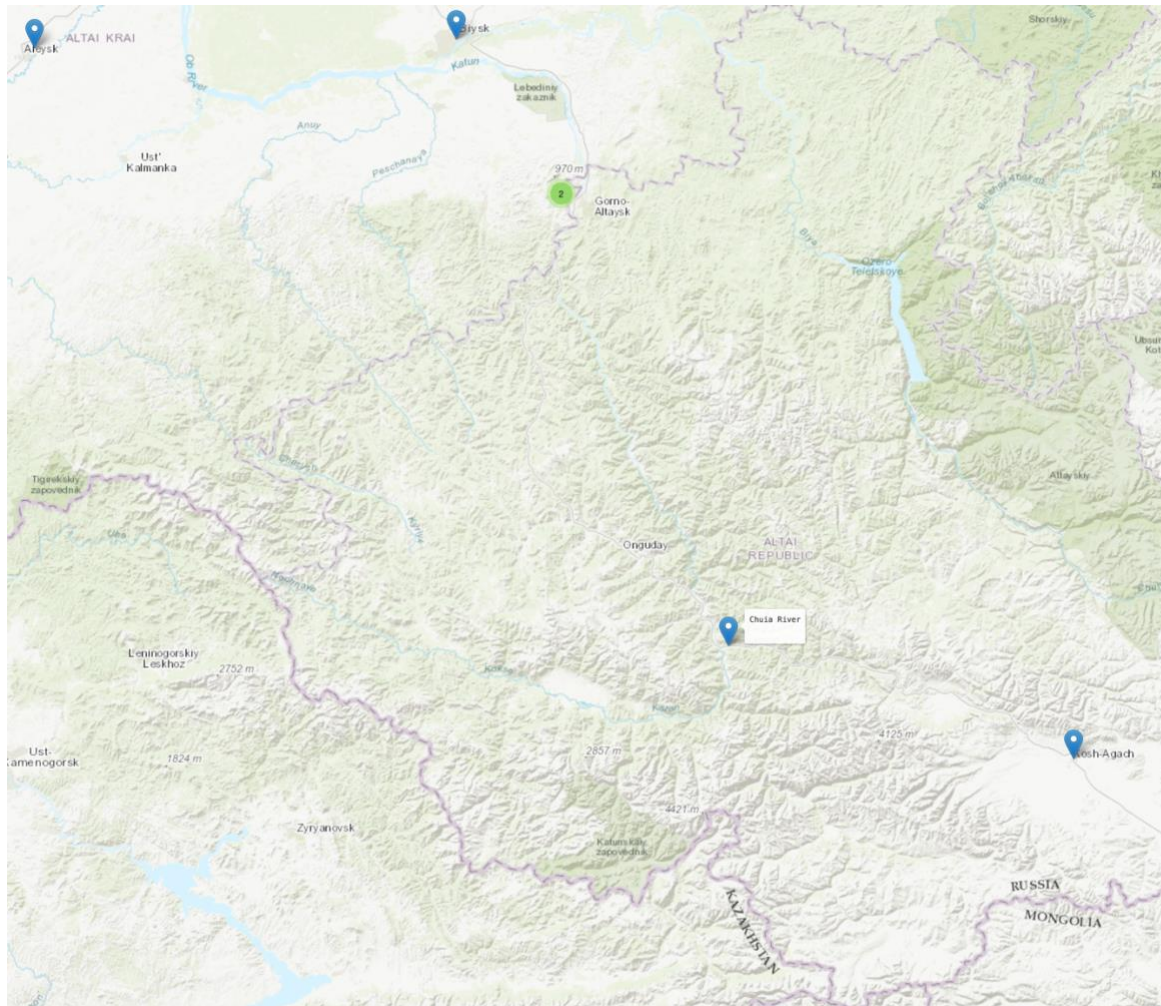
In his pair of works in the story collection entitled “Chuiskie byli,” early twentieth-century writer Viacheslav Shishkov grapples with the multiethnic nature of Russia and its social implications within the country.¹ His short story “Zerkaltse” (“The Pocket Mirror”) focuses on the relationship between a typical Russian merchant and a native Kalmuk farmer, in particular.² Reading this piece as an American, I missed several nuances in the piece’s commentary due to my lack of context in my first read-through. To sum up this cycle of work, Shishkov’s portrayal of the ethnic relations between Russians and Kalmuks are particularly insightful commentary for the time, and primarily deal with themes of injustice between the groups. Shishkov draws on many important threads in the foundation of Eastern Russian culture, as well as including strong commentary on the economic realities of the early 20th century. This overall discussion in “Zerkaltse” proves to be poignant and more relevant than he realizes at the time of composition. The story’s Siberian setting, the groups’ shared history, and Shishkov’s background all provide much needed context to understand the story’s implications.

¹ The introduction to the cycle can be found here: <http://maprr.iath.virginia.edu/works/415>.

² <http://maprr.iath.virginia.edu/works/416>. The word “Калмык” is transliterated as “Kalmuk” in this paper for consistency with older academic research. The more usual spelling “Kalmyk” also appears in several works cited here and refers to the same group.

Siberia

Shishkov's story takes place deep in southern Siberia, by the Chuya River and the Altai Mountains, near the borders of modern day China, Mongolia, and Kazakhstan.



Location of the Chuya River in southern Siberia, near borders with Kazakhstan and Mongolia.³

The location's existence at this intersection makes it an important piece of the stage for much historic interaction between different groups of people. What is important to

³ <http://maprr.iath.virginia.edu/locations/293>.

understand for Shishkov's story is that this setting is at a crossroads between Western Russians and native Kalmuk Mongols. While the westerners came from another part of the country, different both in terrain and climate, the Kalmuks were used to living on this land. This part of southern Russia is mostly steppe, which is subarctic and tends to have drier winters. The Kalmuk Mongols adapted to this environment by living as pastoral nomads who participated in some farming.⁴ This group was then the predominant inhabitant of this particular region, and their way of life would clash against the industrializing Russia which was expanding in the early 20th century.

It is no secret that the Russian heartland, closer to Central Asia, has many precious natural resources. This factor, along with others, drove western Russians to expand further east. In the late 19th century, just before Shishkov became an active writer, western Russians would attain greater technologies which it acquired from other European countries. These advantages would allow them to usurp land that was inhabited by Kalmuks to establish work extracting the land's resources. In his account of Siberia and Central Asia, John Bookwalter writes about eastern development in 1899, "in the foothills of the Altai Mountains, which the road approaches near Irkutsk, quartz mining is being developed... being largely the property of the government."⁵ What is important about his observation is that western Russians are presumably moving east to carry out these government plans. The implications here are that more interactions will take place between culturally different groups of people, and that one group is in a greater position to exploit the other.

⁴ Aberle 1953, 6.

⁵ Bookwalter 1899, 187.

Kalmuks

The Kalmuks are a group of typically nomadic people who reside in Central Russia. They descended from Mongols, and their name literally means “remainder” in Turkish, referring to the fact that they stayed in Russia and broke from the other faction of Asiatic Mongols who returned to become vassals of the Manchu Emperor.⁶ Living in Russia, they developed their own culture, traditions, and customs, unique to any existing group in Asia. In terms of religion, the Kalmuks all practice Lamaist Buddhism, which informs the rest of their lives and decisions.⁷ They were also pastoral nomads who engaged in some farming. From just this simple description of some of their features, it is already clear that this group is starkly different from the industrializing European Russians, some of whom were moving east at the onset of the 20th century. With different clothing, technology, and overall lifestyle, these factors alone would serve to incite fear and skepticism as the Russians were moving onto eastern land. However, the end of the 20th century is not the first encounter these two groups have had, and the Kalmuk's background as part of the Mongol ethnic group also complicates their shared history.

In examining how Shishkov portrays the cultural differences between his Russian merchant character and his Kalmuk farmer character in his story “Zerkaltse”, this context is incredibly helpful. From the very beginning of the story, the merchant is eager to look down upon the Kalmuk and exploit him, even though every interaction between the two is brotherly and kind on the surface. The story makes it apparent that the Russian merchant has certain advantages to being acquainted with the West, one of which is a knowledge of modern technology and the true value of trinkets. The Kalmuk,

⁶ Aberle, 1953, 6.

⁷ Ibid., 7.

being of a nomadic group, is somewhat reliant on the merchant to give him accurate information about the other world. Perhaps his Buddhist background even predisposes him to be more altruistic, as the religion spreads teachings in this tradition⁸. Either way, the Kalmuk's cultural background contrasts the merchant's urban background, and elevates the merchant to a greater position of power, which he uses to exploit the Kalmuk.

Shishkov does not explicitly discuss the Kalmuk's history as part of the Mongol ethnic group in his short story, though this context is incredibly important in portraying the full history between the Russians and Kalmuk Mongols. For about 250 years, the Mongols ruled over the Russian lands of the Russian Empire and over its subjects after a brutal conquest. Before the year 1240, the Mongols had already begun their invasion and taken the region up to the "Altay Mountains to the plains of Central Asia."⁹ As one example of the type of cruelty the Mongols showed to Slavic people, the historian Benson Bobrick records one observer's words from Ryazan, that, "The prince with his mother, wife, sons, the boyars and the inhabitants, without regard to age or sex, were slaughtered with savage cruelty... no eye remained open to weep for the dead" (ibid., p.34)¹⁰. While the Kalmuk in Shishkov's story did not personally harm anyone, and the merchant never appeared vengeful, I can't help but think that this explosive shared history must have influenced the merchant's actions in some respect, despite a lack of explicit depiction.

⁸ Sangharakshita, 34; This is seen as the Kalmuk welcomes the merchant into his home and shares his food, and trusts the merchant to be truthful.

⁹ Bobrick 1992, 34.

¹⁰ Ibid., 34.

However, Mongol rule ended when Grand Prince Ivan III refused to pay tribute and began to regain control of Russia. The next major interaction between these two groups comes when the Kalmuks pledge their allegiance to the Russian tsar in 1609. For about 150 years the groups lived symbiotically, as the Kalmuks settled Russian land and defended the eastern frontier. However, their peaceful relations regressed when under Catherine II, the Kalmuks unwillingly became vassals of the Russian empire. According to James Millar, “unhappy with this situation, about 300,000 Kalmyks living east of the Volga began to return to China, but were attacked en route by Russian, Kazakh, and Kyrgyz warriors.”¹¹ Those who remained in the west Volga compose the group of Kalmuks about whom Shishkov writes in “Zerkaltse”, and most recently inform the characters in his story. Each era of relations between the two groups, from the invasion, to the peace, to the imperial attack, inform the version of Russia in Shishkov’s story, published in 1918.

While there are ethnic tensions in Shishkov’s story, they mostly stem from the merchant’s prejudices and greed, and don’t explicitly reflect this contentious history. Nevertheless, I found the background to be an incredibly fascinating context which enriches Shishkov’s story for an unfamiliar audience. The more relevant history which is reflected in “Zerkaltse” occurs at the turn of the 20th century. As Russia is industrializing, western Russians move east to extract the region’s natural resources. The Russian merchant in Shishkov’s story is coming from a culture where capital has become more important and has bred greed. The Kalmuk farmer, on the other hand, comes from a long tradition of pastoral nomadism, where the satisfaction of basic needs

¹¹ Millar 2004, 719.

appears to be sufficient for a comfortable lifestyle. These clashing interests meet in Shishkov's story, and the merchant mistakes the Kalmuk's simplicity in lifestyle for simplicity of the mind. His prejudices prompt him to deceive the Kalmuk farmer and steal away bulls of much greater value.

In the century since the publication of "Zerkaltse" we can see that the ethnic tension on which Shishkov was commenting only produced greater issues later on. Two years after the publication of the story, the Kalmuk Autonomous Oblast was founded in 1920. Twenty years later, perhaps due to Russian prejudices, imperial and Soviet history, or any other reasons, the Kalmuks fought against Russia with the Germans in World War II. As punishment, Stalin deported almost 200,000 Kalmuks after the war and dissolved their region (oblast).¹² While Khrushchev's Thaw represented an improvement in treatment of this minority, Shishkov's short story comments on a very real ethnic issue that was relevant in Central Russia at the time of composition. His story and characters could be said to be symbolic of the greater issues of the time and could have been heeded as a warning to either group that more tension may lie ahead.

Viacheslav Shishkov

To encapsulate the author's feelings of his story's setting, the biographer Bakhmetev says of Shishkov that Siberia was his second homeland. Shishkov was born in Bezhetsk in the northwest of Russia, just north of Moscow. His grandfather was the mayor of the Bezhetsk district, so his family was fairly well-off. He was well educated, and was able to study civil engineering in college and gain a technical job which allowed

¹² Millar 2004, 719.

him to travel extensively. This, by all accounts, seems to be the origin of Shishkov's acquaintance with and interest in Siberia.¹³ In all, he spent 20 years there and the environment inspired much of his writing. Though he was originally from European Russia, Siberia became a larger part of his life and influenced him greatly. He was even an active participant in the Society for the Study of Siberia. It seems that Shishkov had a unique perspective as an initial outsider to Siberia, though he became well acquainted with its political peculiarities and its vast natural scenery.

Shishkov's infatuation with the land is better seen in the introduction to the cycle "Chuiskie byli", where his imagery of the formation of the steppe is incredibly vivid. His sympathies for the native peoples are also plainly on display. While this cycle was published in 1918, Shishkov felt great anger towards exploitative Russian merchants who seemed to extract the wealth of a place with little regard for native peoples. At the end of the introduction to his cycle of Chuya stories, I translate his sentiment to read, "The whole of this path can be paved with silver, but it is for gold that the Russian merchants ransacked the Altai and Mongols."¹⁴ This commentary makes me wonder, perhaps Shishkov's perspective as an outsider to Siberian culture allows him to criticize the relations between Russians and natives more sharply. Regardless, his love for the natural land is evident and prominent in his work, as is his criticism for those who harm it.

¹³ Bakhmetev 1947, 28.

¹⁴ <http://maprr.iath.virginia.edu/works/415>.

Conclusion

Shishkov's writing is distinct from other Russian authors from this time who tended to be concerned with grand Russian issues of state power and utopia.¹⁵ Instead, he tackles smaller social and ethnic questions that seem miniscule in the vast context of the country of Russia but encapsulates the entire experience of an important Siberian minority. In fact, the characterization of Shishkov's stories on the MAPRR website, which contains geographically oriented literature written between 1914 and 1922, shows that he was virtually the only Russian writer of that time to reject Russian colonialism (http://maprr.iath.virginia.edu/place_based_concepts/226). The ethnic tensions between the groups, as Shishkov points out, are a real issue and in writing this, he criticizes the state's policy of expansion to some degree. I think, more than criticizing the state in his work, he criticizes the prejudices of Russian people and scorns their lack of empathy and increasing greed. His appreciation of Siberia also serves as a hook to draw in readers with flowery depictions of natural scenery and elicit empathy from those who are not as familiar with the region. I enjoyed Shishkov's work and appreciated the pieces even more when I learned about the two group's vast and contentious history and the context which Siberia and Shishkov's background provide.

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¹⁵ Zoshchenko, Mayakovsky, Babel, etc.

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Chuiskii Legends

(Chuiskie Byli)

(Introduction)

Oh, how the sacred river Chuia lashed at the Altai. The mountains stand white against the horizon, all covered in eternal snow. The Chuiskii Alps are the tombstones of the earth. It is there where the sacred river Chuia will be born.

First, it flows through the steppe, the high, mountainous Chuiskii steppe, in a lifeless way: There is neither forest here, nor luscious grasses. For all that, this land is closer to the sky, the stars, the air is purer, more transparent.

The whole steppe, in earlier times, to the very mountain tops, was flooded with water: For centuries, the lake splashed here like a blue wave. The Chuiskii Alps guarded this lake like stone knights joining hands, the bogatyrs of the Altai, who stood shoulder to shoulder like a stone wall.

The mountains did not patrol carefully, they did not perceive: the lake deceived them, as they were lulled fast asleep by the shifting waves. And the water deviated from its course and pierced the mountains, then gushed forth.

The roar echoed through the Altai, the earth shook, and the mountains fell. The wave lashes over vast ground, it topples rocks, tears at cliffs, rumbles and groans, and rushes away in a furious stream.

This is how the Chuia, born in the snows, captured by the mountains, broke free and rushed between the Altai Mountains, which stepped apart in fear.

And the lake dried up, and its bottom turned into a sandy Chuiskii steppe.

So the ancient story goes.

On the Chuiskii steppe there is a small Russian village of Kosh-Agach. It is so small that you might miss it, if you look from the mountains that encircle the steppe like a stone ring.

The Chuiskii highway goes through Kosh-Agach. Over a narrow path, it connected the Siberian city of Biisk with the Mongolian city of Kobdo.

If only the whole of this path could be paved with silver, although it is for gold that the Russian merchants ransacked the peoples of the Altai and the Mongols.

If only the whole path could be filled with tears, Altaian and Mongol, that trickled from the narrow eyes of the semi-barbarian, but pure-hearted nomads: such was a great offense and grief visited on them by the greedy Russian predators.

This is what a recent story says about merchants.

The Altai curses them, the spirit of the Altai—the terrible Kurmysh—curses them, and will curse them from generation to generation for the great lie, like an unclean mark fell upon the white crown of Altai.

The river resounds now, like a storm, now like rustling silk..., Hey, wait, Chuaia, the water is cold! Where are you running to, where are you racing over the rocks? Stop, Chuaia, stop! Tell us the stories from yesterday and today.

The Little Mirror (Zerkaltse)

It was a little mirror like any little mirror. Small, round, and worth a five-kopeck piece. The merchant brought a dozen of them to the steppe.

The merchant thinks:

--“We need to sell them to the Kalmyks, we need to swindle the Kalmyks. There’s no sin here: A Kalmyk is not a man, but a beast, and his soul is like a dog’s, it’s nothing but steam. A beast and a beast.”

The merchant goes to visit his friend, the Kalmyk Argamai, whom he has repeatedly cheated. In the evening he arrived, and approached the light. Argamai is sitting in the yurt, fat and strong. He is sitting alone by the fire, gnawing on a mutton bone and humming a song about how tomorrow at dawn, he will move to the snow, where there are such delicious and juicy grasses, which taste sweet to the cattle.

-Ezen! --The merchant greeted him.

-Ezen, ezen! -- Argamai responded, peering at the approaching man.

--A-a-a... That’s who it is! Friend!... --- He joyfully exclaimed and gave his guest his seat.

He fussed about the fire, which flared brighter. He put half a ram in the pot, and started to make tea in the Kalmyk style: With milk, fried barley, and salt.

--The women are gone... One is sick, and the other went to visit her father.

-- Do you have arachka¹⁶?

--Bar, bar... -- And he served a homemade vodka made from milk in a pot. The two sit and chat. The fire burns happily. The arachka is delicious, warm, flowed through the veins, affected the brain, and loosened the tongue.

The Kalmyk laughs and the merchant laughs, and the merchant pats Argamai on the shoulder, and says flattering words:

¹⁶ Rice Liquor

-No one else has horses as good as yours. You have the best bulls. You have the fattest sheep. You are rich. You have a beautiful wife. He says, and drinks arachka and eats mutton.

Argamai is flattered, listens, laughs, and so as not to remain in his debt, says to the guest:

-You are the best there is... The most loyal... Friend...

The merchant remembers the little mirrors. He thinks:

-- I need to give them away. The loss is small-- only a nickel.

He takes one out and shows it:

--Look at this!

Argamai stares intently. He is riveted by the mirror.

--Who is this?

--It's you, of course...

--How is it me?! This is an evil spirit!

--Well, it's you...

He is silent, looking even more intently, incredulously looking at the merchant, and tells him:

--Why are you lying?! No!.. That fur coat is mine, but I have never seen the face, I don't know!..

The merchant smiles blissfully, and the Kalmyk fidgets from impatience on the felt, his hands trembling, tightly clinging to the magic glass.

--Put on your hat... see? It's you!

The Kalmyk looks, his hat in the mirror, looks at the braid--his braid, with a ribbon, a wart on his nose, he pinches it...

--Ha ha ha! Sell it, do me a favor, sell it!

The merchant goes completely limp, wanting to bring joy to his friend, he says:

--I'll give it to you

--Do me a favor, sell it... However much you want, take it!

And suddenly the merchant's soul rolled into the ditch...

--I can't --said the merchant, his voice trembling.

--Take the bull... the women will see!... ha ha ha... Let them look at their faces!

-- No, I can't... --the merchant said firmly and gently reaches out for the mirror
Argamai doesn't give it back:

--Two bulls, three bulls! Good ones!

The soul of the merchant falls into the ditch and splashes in the black mud.

--No, I paid more myself... I got it in Moscow... you know, you've heard?

Argamai almost starts crying, the big baby:

--Take four bulls... Please take them, my friend!

--Let's go catch some bulls, --said the merchant greedily.

Argamai laughs slyly, hides the mirror away, and looks at the merchant fearfully,
wondering if it was sold too cheaply, and the merchant wouldn't just take it back.

Gently, he speaks to him in a thin voice:

--You are the best there is... The most loyal...Friend

Late at night, the drunken merchant returned to his camp. And as he wrote out
his thoughts in the saddle with his drunken body, he thought merrily aloud:

--Well, he's a Kalmyk, what can we teach him... That's why he's just Tater
muscle.

