

DRAFT

CHAPTER III

WHO ARE THE KALYMKKS?

How the people who became known as Kalmyks, originally nomads from Inner Asia, ended up in Europe as citizens of the Russian Empire, on the steppes straddling the Volga River north of the Caspian Sea, is a fascinating tale in itself. The saga of the Kalmyks is part of the larger story of the conflict between the Eastern Mongols—Chingis Khan and his Chingisid descendants—and the Western, or Oirat, Mongols. The roots of this story go back to the thirteen century when a basic division took place between the Chingisid Mongols and the Mongols who became known as Oirats.

The Oirats were originally a forest people who dwelt in the taiga and mixed steppe-woodlands west of Lake Baikal, around Lake Khövsgöl to the south, and the basins of the upper tributaries of the Yenisei River still farther west. Their name might be based on the Mongolian word *oi*, which means “forest.” We first hear of the Oirats in the *Yüan Chi*, or History of the Yüan Dynasty, where they are called *Wei-la* or *Wa-i-la*. Other thirteenth century documents refer them as the *Oira* or *Wan Oira*.¹ The Persian historian Rashid-al-din (1247–1318) referred to the Oirats by name and said they lived in the basins of the eight rivers which combine to form the Yenisei River.² These would include the *Biy Khem* and *Ka Khem* in what is now the autonomous republic of Tuva, the *Shishigt Gol* and its tributaries west of Lake Khövsgöl in Mongolia, and others. The *Yüan Chi* and *Rashid-al-Din* both report further that in 1204 the Oirat joined with the *Naiman*, a tribe which lived in the northwest of current-day Mongolia, and fought against Chingis Khan. This venture failed and in 1208 they submitted to Chingis, under whose banner they then served as auxiliaries in the great military campaigns of the Chingisid

Mongols. Later, in 1260–64, they sided with the rebellion of Arig Boga against Chingis's grandson and founder of the Yüan Dynasty Khubilai. After the defeat of Arig Boga they remained more or less subordinate to the Chingisids until after the fall of the Yüan Dynasty and the expulsion of the Mongols from China in 1368.

The Chingisids, shorn of their Chinese empire, retreated to their old capital of Kharkhorum on the Orkhon River. In 1372 and again in 1388, huge armies mustered by the Ming, who had replaced the Mongols as rulers of the Celestial Empire, crossed the Gobi Desert into Mongolia, hoping to stamp out any chance of a Chingisid revival. The 1388 invasion, consisting of over 100,000 Chinese troops, crushed the Mongols in a decisive battle south Lake Buir in current-day Dornod Aimag, after which the reigning khan, Töqüz Temür, was assassinated by a disgruntled relative. In 1399 an Oirat commander killed one of the successors to Töqüz Temür, an event which signaled the decline of the Chingisid Mongols and the ascension of the Oirats.

Yet for the Mongols as a whole the rise of the Oirats would pose a problem. According to the unwritten laws of the steppe only a Chingisid, a descendant of Chingis Khan, could be anointed as Great Khan, ruler of all the Mongols. This stricture was so inviolate that even the great Amir Timur (Tamerlane), whose military exploits rivaled those of Chingis himself, never dared to take the title of Great Khan for himself but instead tried to legitimize his rule in the eyes of his followers by marrying the Chingisid princess Saray Mulk-khanum, the daughter of Khazan, the last ruler of the Chagatai Khanate founded by Chagatai, Chingis's second son.³ Thus the Eastern Chingisid Mongols considered themselves to be the only legitimate rulers of the Mongolian people and viewed the Oirats as upstarts and usurpers who must forever remain their subordinates. Yet the Oirats would soon throw up great leaders who created empires which rivaled and surpassed the power of the Eastern Mongols. They would attack China itself and even dreamed of restoring the Yüan Dynasty which the Eastern Mongols had allowed to crumble away in their hands.

By 1434 the Oirat chieftain Toghan, after half a century of internecine Mongol warfare, had melded the four main tribes—the Torgut, Dörböt, Khoshut, and Choros (sometimes known as the Khoit) of Western Mongols into the first Oirat Empire. At its height in the mid-fifteenth century the Oirat realm stretched from Lake Baikal west to Lake Balkash in what

is now Kazakhstan, and from Baikal south to the Great Wall of China. Included in the empire was much of current-day Mongolia and the Zungarian Basin, the slopes of the Tian Shan, and the oasis city of Hami in what is now Xinjiang, a province of China. In the early 1440s Toghan's son Esen assumed control of the Oirat Empire. Although the ruler of a huge swatch of Inner Asia, as an Oirat he could not claim to be the Great Khan of all the Mongols. In an effort to legitimize his rule Esen married off his daughter to Toghto-Bukha, a descendant of Chingis Khan, who then assumed the more-or-less ceremonial title of khan, while Esen ruled as hegemon. Soon he would challenge the Ming dynasty itself.

The immediate source of conflict was over trade relations. The Oirats wanted free and open trade with China, while the Ming Dynasty rulers tended to consider commercial relations with the so-called barbarians of the steppe as beneath them.⁴ (One Ming emperor's disdain for the nomads to the north went so far as to issue an order that the Chinese characters for "barbarian" be written as small as possible in all official records.⁵) Also, according to one source, Esen was promised a Ming princess as a wife by the Ming emperor Yingzong. When the bride was not forthcoming Esen used this as a pretext to invade China.⁶

The twenty-one year-old emperor Yingzong thirsted for military glory, and under the baleful influence of a court eunuch named Wang Zhen he unwisely decided to himself lead an army into battle and confront the Mongols before they could reach Beijing. On August 4, 1449, the Ming army with Yingzong at its head left the capital and headed west toward Datong. After sixteen days it became apparent that the badly organized and ill-equipped force was incapable of confronting the Oirats under Esen. A retreat was ordered, but on September 1 Esen's forces cornered the Ming army at a place called Tumu, sixty some miles north of Beijing and twenty-five miles or so beyond the Great Wall in what is now Hubei Province. Almost the entire army of 50,000 Chinese was annihilated, and most humiliatingly of all emperor Yingzong was taken prisoner. His advisor the eunuch Wang Zhen was cut down on the field of battle, according to one version of the story dispatched by disgruntled Chinese soldiers who realized too late they had been led like sheep to the slaughter.⁷

A month or two later Esen was camped in the suburbs of Beijing. Although a master of steppe warfare he was unable to master the siege tactics necessary to overpower the walled and fortified capital. His royal hostage was of no help either. Yingzong's younger brother Prince Cheng had

assumed the vacant throne and taken the title of Jingtai Emperor. Esen had hoped to gain great concessions in return for the person of Yingzong but now the Ming court was in no hurry to get him back. After Ming reinforcements from other cities began converging on Beijing and the Mongol horses had eaten most of the available grass around the capital Esen decided to return to the more hospitable steppes of Mongolia. Eventually Esen released Yingzong, but upon the latter's return to Beijing he was placed under virtual house arrest in an out-of-the-way palace in the southeast corner of the Forbidden City and ignored, while his younger brother continued to rule. Yingzong did eventually retake his throne, but the details of these events are outside the scope of our narrative.

For a brief moment while the Oirats were camped outside Beijing it appeared that Esen was about to retake the throne of China lost by the Chingisids in 1368 and install a new version of the Yüan Dynasty. Esen's success was short-lived however. He had not been able to take Beijing, had not received the anticipated massive ransom for Yingzong, and in fact had very little to show in the way of plunder for his great victory on the battlefield at Tumu. Yet he had become so emboldened by his military feat that in 1453 he had his Chingisid son-in-law assassinated and he himself assumed the title of Great Khan of all the Mongols. As an Oirat he had no right to make such a claim; some considered him an usurper and in 1455 he himself was assassinated by disgruntled Mongols. The Oirat Empire depended on large part on the person of Esen, and with him gone it rapidly began to disintegrate.

The Eastern Mongols, who as descendants of Chingis Khan claimed to be the only legitimate rulers of Mongolia, were still in the throes of a long period of internal strife. Mandagul Khan, the twenty-seventh successor of Chingis Khan, was killed in a struggle with his great-nephew Bolkho, and after Bolkho himself was assassinated his five year-old son Dayan was placed on the throne. Khan Mandagul's widow Mandukhai took the little boy under her wing and acting as his de-facto regent assumed command herself of the Mongol armies. Later she took the extraordinary step of marrying him, the son of the great-nephew of her deceased husband, thus making herself khatun, or queen of the Eastern Mongols. Under the leadership of Khatun Mandukhai —now a much revered and venerated figure in Mongolian history—the Eastern Mongols were able to subdue the then disorganized Oirats and by the 1490s reassert the supremacy

of the Chingisids. "It is to her that tradition gives credit for having overthrown Oirat supremacy and restored the hegemony to the eastern Mongols," proclaims historian of the steppes René Grousset.⁸

Dayan Khan's grandson Altan Khan (r. 1543–83), who ruled the Tümed Mongols on the steppe north of the Ordos Desert, in what is now Inner Mongolia, continued the struggle against the Oirats, pushing them northward and westward of his domains. Meanwhile Dayan Khan's son Geresenje had taken as his inheritance much of what is now the country of Mongolia. When he died these lands were parceled out to his descendants and eventually became the Tüsheet, Zasagt, Setsen, and the Altan khanates,

By the 1550s the combined forces of the Eastern Mongols had driven the Oirats out of central Mongolia, recapturing the ancient Mongol capital of Kharkhorum in 1552. The Oirat retreated to the west of the Khangai Mountains, but continued pressure by Altan Khan of the Khalkh (please don't confuse him with Altan Khan of the Tümed) at the beginning of the seventeenth century pushed them still farther west, beyond the Altai Mountains into the valleys of the Black Irtysh, Ili, and the Imil, in what is now Xinjiang in China, and onto the steppes of southern Siberia in what is now Russia.

But now, as if to counteract their diminishing influence, a charismatic new leader arose among the Oirat. This was Khara-Khula, who dreamed of recreating the Oirat Empire which had flourished under Esen in the fifteenth century and even retaking the throne of China which had been so improvidently squandered by the Chingisid Mongols. Khara-Khula belonged to the Choros, one of the four tribes which made up the Oirat Confederation. He began his rise to power around 1600 and by In 1606, faced with rising power of the Khalkh Altan Khan to the east, the other three confederates—the Torgut, Dörböt, and Khoshut, accepted his leadership.

By 1608–1609 he and the Oirats confronted Altan Khan and halted the westward advance of the Khalkh. Skirmishes continued for the next decade, until in 1619 all-out war broke out between Khara-Khula and Altan Khan. At first Altan Khan prevailed, but the Oirats fought back and by 1725 had driven the Eastern Mongols out of the Zungarian Basin in what is now Xinjiang. This would remain a Oirat stronghold until they were completely defeated by forces of the Qing Dynasty in the 1750s.

While the other three confederates had accepted Khara-Khula's lead-

ership against Altan Khan they were not happy with the subordinate position they had assumed in the Oirat Confederation. Faced with both the rise of Khara-Khula, who threatened their independence, and the continuing incursions into their traditional grazing lands by the Eastern Mongols, some chose to leave Inner Asia altogether. Thus began the great migration westward of the people who would become known as Kalmyks. It was among these Kalmyks that Dambijantsan allegedly would emerge.

The Torgut who lived in the upper Irtysh River in what is now Xinjiang Province of China were particularly susceptible to pressure from the Altan Khan centered just to the north in what are now the Mongolian aimags of Khovd and Bayan-Ölgii. Hearing of rich pasture land to the west the Torgut chieftain Kho-Urlük had sent out scouts west to search for new grazing lands as early as 1608. Starting in the summer of 1615 some 15,000 Torgut began moving westward toward the steppes south of the Siberian towns of Tara, Tiumen, and Tobolsk. In the early 1630s the Torgut, along with a contingent of Dörböt and a smattering of dissatisfied Choros and Khoshut, moved still farther westward to the Pontic-Caspian Steppe north of the Caspian Sea. The Torgut alone who migrated may have numbered over 200,000. These new arrivals quickly overcame the disorganized nomads already inhabiting the area and by the beginning of the 1640s occupied the entire Caspian Steppe from the Emba River in the east to the Terek River in the west, including the rich basin of the lower Volga River, the biggest tributary of the Caspian Sea.

These are the people who became known as Kalmyks, a word about which there is some dispute. It would appear that the word Kalmyk was used to describe Oirats as far back as the fourteenth century by Arab geographer abn Alvardi.⁹ This was of course long before the migration to the West of the people now known as Kalmyks. Some popular and even scholarly literature continues to refer to the Western Mongols, or Oirats, who did not migrate to the West as Kalmyks. I adapt here the usage proposed by Khodarkovskiy and “reserve the name Kalmyk only for the group of Oirats who came from Jungaria to roam the Caspian steppes in the early seventeenth century.”¹⁰

For the next hundred years or so the Kalmyks nomadized on the steppe north of the Caspian Sea while gradually acceding to the overall authority of the Russian government. In 1724 they officially accepted Russian

suzerainty. By the 1740s, however, relations between the nomads and the Russian empire began to deteriorate. One of the main bones of contention was the continuing encroachment of Russian colonists into the Kalmyk pasture lands. Cossacks from the Don River began emigrating to the lower Volga, followed by Russian and Ukrainian settlers. They built towns, established industries, and began plowing up the traditional Kalmyk pasture lands. By the mid-1740s some 10,000 Kalmyk families no longer had enough livestock to support themselves. Many were forced to work for commercial fishing operations and other Russian-owned industries. Between the years 1764 to 1768 alone more than one hundred new settlements of Russian and Ukrainian colonists were established on the lower Volga. The Kalmyks who attempted to maintain their nomadic lifestyle were shoved off onto arid, inhospitable desert-steppe far from the major rivers.

Another contentious issue was the forced recruitment of Kalmyk cavalymen into various Russian military campaigns. When they had first arrived on the Caspian steppe the Kalmyks were more than willing to help the Russians in campaigns against other nomads who were competing with them for pasture lands and from whom they could expect considerable booty, the traditional motivation for steppe warfare. As the Kalmyks became more and more impoverished they were less and less eager to fight those with whom they had no real beef and from whom no immediate treasure would be forthcoming. The matter came to a head when the Russo-Ottoman War broke out in 1768 and empress Catherine II tried to impress 20,000 Kalmyk cavalymen to fight the Ottoman Empire and its minions. The Kalmyks could only provide 10,000 men and after disputes with the Russian army commanders many of these deserted.

Then there was the dispute over religion. The Kalmyks had continued to practice the Tibetan form of Buddhism which they had brought with them from Inner Asia. They maintained close ties with Tibet and regularly sent embassies to the Dalai Lama. Kalmyk lamas went to Tibet for training and Kalmyk noblemen others who could afford it (the roundtrip often took several years) made pilgrimages to Lhasa and other religious sites in Tibet. As their political and economic situation deteriorated, however, the Kalmyks came under more and more pressure to convert to Russian Orthodox Christianity. According to Khodarkovsky:

The Russian government encouraged conversion by all possible feasible means. Those Kalmyks who chose to convert and settle down with the Don

Cossacks were put on the military payroll and for the next few years were paid a higher salary than the cossacks. On other occasions, the [converted] Kalmyks were granted tax exemptions for three to five years. The Kalmyk tayishis [noblemen] who chose to convert were rewarded with handsome salaries and could live in towns or settlements especially built for them.¹¹

When Donduk-Dashi Khan (r.1741–61) attempted to build a Buddhist temple in Astrakhan, the largest city on the lower Volga, he was told by the Russian government in St. Petersburg that “it was not appropriate to build a temple for idol worshipping in the empire of Her Majesty . . .”¹² Traditional-minded Kalmyks in general were deeply offended by these assaults on their religious beliefs. Kalmyk noblemen, infuriated by what they viewed as the subversion of their Buddhism-based society, even burned down the settlements of some Christian converts. Russo-Kalmyk relations were quickly reaching their nadir.

As early as 1747 some Kalymks, intensely disillusioned with life in Russia, had raised the possibility of leaving the country altogether and returning to their original homeland in Inner Asia. The sentiment picked up steam throughout the 1750s and 60s. In 1771, at long last, the Kalmyks had had enough, and they decided to return to Inner Asia. Thus began the tragic epic of the Kalmyk Migration, what Khodarkovsky calls “the last known exodus of a nomadic people in the history of Asia.”¹³

In late 1770 the nobleman Tsebek-Dorji had addressed the issue in a speech to the governing council of the Kalmyk Khan:

Look how your rights are being limited in all respects. Russian officials mistreat you and the government wants to make peasants out of you. The banks of the Yayik and Volga are now covered with cossack settlements, and the northern borders of your steppes are inhabited by Germans. In a little while, the Don, Terek, and Kum will also be colonized and you will be pushed to the waterless steppes and the only source of your existence, your herds, will perish. Ubashi's son has already been ordered given as a hostage, and three hundred from among the noble Kalmyks are to reside in the Russian capital. You can see your situation, and in the future you will have two options—either to carry your burden of slavery, or to leave Russia and thus end your misfortunes. Dalai Lama himself selected two years in which a migration to Jungaria could be undertaken. These two years have arrived. So your present decision will determine your future.”¹⁴

Ubashi Khan and Louzang Jalchin, the head lama of the Kalmyks, agreed that the moment had come to act. At this time the majority of

the Kalmyks, including most of the Torgut, were on the east side of the Volga. The Dörböt and Khoshut, along a few Torgut, were on the west side. Ubashi Khan himself had moved to the east side of the Volga in the autumn of 1770. The decision to leave Russia had been made, but Ubashi wanted to wait until the Volga was frozen over so the Kalmyks on the west side could cross over and join the exodus. Events forced his hand. Rumors of the planned departure of the Kalymks had leaked out and there was a chance the Russians would take military action to stop them. Then Russian authorities called up 10,000 more Kalmyk cavalryman for service with the Russian army. This was the last straw.

On the morning of January 5 all the Kalmyks on the east side of the Volga—31,000 families, some 150,000 men, women, and children, mounted up and headed eastward to Inner Asia. Various detachments of Cossacks, Russians, and Bashkirs (Moslem tribesmen) were sent to halt the escaping Kalmyks and force them to return to the Russian dominions, but they were outnumbered and eventually returned empty-handed. The Kalmyk horde reached the banks of the Emba River, where they camped while awaiting Spring and fresh grass. Yet more detachments of Russian troops were set out after the Kalmyks but they too were rebuffed. The Kalmyks moved on and by early June had reached Lake Balkash in what is now Kazakhstan. Here they encountered their hereditary enemies the Kazakhs, who were thirsting for revenge for earlier Kalmyk attacks against them. Outnumbered and surrounded, the Kalmyks only managed to escape by means of an unexpected night-time breakout and a forced march onward. Most of their sheep herds they had brought with them were lost in the fighting and soon famine set in.

By the time they reached the Ili River in what is now Xinjiang Province in China over 100,000 Kalmyks had died from fighting, famine, and lack of water. The survivors, numbering at most 50,000, were greeted by Qing officials and given emergency aid of tents, wheat, rice, sheep, and other commodities. The Qing viewed the return of the Kalmyks as a huge propaganda victory, demonstrating to other nomads the advantages of living under Chinese rather than Russian rule. The Qianlong emperor found even greater significant in the return of the Kalmyks. His mother Hsin-mao was celebrating her 80th birthday in 1771 and in her honor Qianlong had commissioned the construction of an enormous temple in the Qing summer resort of Jehol (current-day Chengde). The Putuozoneg Temple, as it was called, was supposed to be replica of the Potala

in Lhasa. Then came news of the return of the Kalmyks, coinciding with the dedication of the temple. Qianlong caused a stele to be erected at the temple with an inscription on it in Chinese, Mongolian, Tibetan, and Manchurian which read in part:

Our vassals over the border all believe in the religion of Sakyamuni. Jehol was the spot where our grandfather the Emperor K'ang-his [the Kangxi Emperor], pacified and appeased them, and there he granted them audiences . . . Now the temple is finished in time for a great national event [Hsin-mao's birthday] that is to be celebrated by all, in a unique manner . . . In addition to this, the Torgot [Kalmyks, including the Torgut], who have lived in Russia for some time, have returned for religious reasons. The whole of their tribe—which numbers many ten-thousands—arrived just at this time, after wandering about for more than six months. Here is a connection that is mystic.¹⁵

Ubashi himself was invited to Jehol and sumptuously wined and dined by Qianlong. He was told he could keep his title of Khan but in fact his people were divided into separate banners and dispersed throughout Xinjiang. They were now under Qing jurisdiction and Ubashi was their ruler in name only. Despite Qianlong's honeyed words, the Kalmyks quickly discovered that Qing rule was anything but benign. As Khodarkovsky puts it, "The Kalmyks had escaped Russian tentacles only to be ensnared in Chinese ones."¹⁶ (The immense pile of the Putuocongcheng Temple, which is actually little more than a hollow façade, looms over the city of Chengde to this day; Qianlong's stele is still prominently displayed out front.)

In the meantime, Russian Empress Catherine II was infuriated that 150,000 of her subjects had managed to escape her domains. She issued ultimatums to the Qing government demanding the return of "these rogues and traitors" but they were ignored.

This great exodus of the Kalmyks inspired Thomas de Quincey (1785-1859), the eccentric English author perhaps better known for his *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* to pen an ode entitled *Revolt of the Tartars*, which begins with an exegesis of the whole episode:

There is no great event in modern history, or, perhaps it may be said more broadly, none in all history, from its earliest records, less generally known, or more striking to the imagination, than the flight eastwards of a principal Tartar nation across the boundless steppes of Asia in the latter half of the last century. The terminus a quo of this flight and the terminus ad quem are equally magnificent—the mightiest of Christian thrones being the one,

the mightiest of pagan the other; and the grandeur of these two terminal objects is harmoniously supported by the romantic circumstances of the flight. In the abruptness of its commencement and the fierce velocity of its execution we read an expression of the wild, barbaric character of the agents. In the unity of purpose connecting this myriad of wills, and in the blind but unerring aim at a mark so remote, there is something which recalls to the mind those almighty instincts that propel the migrations of the swallow and the leeming [sic] or the life-withering marches of the locust. Then, again, in the gloomy vengeance of Russia and her vast artillery, which hung upon the rear and the skirts of the fugitive vassals, we are reminded of Miltonic images--such, for instance, as that of the solitary hand pursuing through desert spaces and through ancient chaos a rebellious host, and overtaking with volleying thunders those who believed themselves already within the security of darkness and of distance.¹⁷

As we surmise, Dambijantsan was a member of the Dörböt tribe. The Dörböt, who in the early years of the Kalmyk occupation of the Caspian steppe had roamed the westernmost stretches of the Kalmyk realm, along the River Don, a tributary of the Azov Sea, had in 1743 been moved en masse further east to the steppes bordering the west bank of the Volga River by Donduk Dashi Khan, who had been granted power over them by the Russian government.¹⁸ Residing as they did on the west bank of the Volga, most if not all of the Dörböts remained behind after the great migration of the Kalmyks back to Zungaria in 1771.

In retaliation for the exodus the Russian government on October 19 1771 stripped these remaining Kalmyks of "the last vestige of their political independence" and ordered that they all remain of the west side of the Volga River year-round.¹⁹ Thus it was on the Caspian Steppes on the west bank of the Volga that Dambijantsan, as we have posited, was born in 1860. As noted, he may have been born into the Sanaev family, but this is by no means certain. From his very earliest age he must have been aware that he was one of the "left behind people," and that the vast majority of his fellow Mongols were off somewhere to the east in Inner Asia. He would spend most of his life trying to reconnect with these people.