

Kazakhstan



GEOGRAPHY

Covering 1,048,310 square miles, an area about one-third the size of the United States, Kazakhstan is the largest Central Asian state. It has a population of 15.5 million and is one of the most sparsely populated regions in the world. To the west, it is bordered by the Caspian Sea; to the east, by the Xinjiang-Uighur region of China; to the north, by Russia; and to the south, by Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. Kazakhstan's wide expanse is a mixture of desert, steppe, and mountainous regions, with areas of fertile black earth where crops grow well. Its climate is marked by sharp differences in seasonal temperature and little rainfall.



Kazakhstan is at the western end of the Dzhungarian (Jade) Gates mountain pass, also known as the "high road to China." Its main river is the Irtysh, which lies in the northeast. In the west, the Ural River flows into the Caspian Sea. Kazakhstan's highest elevations are found in the Tien Shan system of the Altai mountain range. In 1998, the country's capital was moved from Almaty, Kazakhstan's largest city, to the more centrally located Astana, a small town that has since grown dramatically to 700,000 people. Almaty, however, remains the nation's cultural and business center. Almaty—meaning "city of apples,"—is home to 1.4 million inhabitants, and is located on an oasis at the foot of the Altai mountains. In 2009, ethnic Kazakhs accounted for 53.5 percent of the total population; Russians, 30 percent; Ukrainians, 3.6 percent; and Germans and Uzbeks, 2 percent each. The remainder includes Tatars, Uighurs, and others.

Kazakhstan is one of the richest Central Asian countries due to its large reserves of oil. Since the 1990s, U.S. and multinational oil companies have come to Kazakhstan to participate in the development of the industry. The result has been an internationalization of Almaty and riches for many Kazakhs. The oil industry is managed by the government, and allegations are that oil companies share their profits generously with the government and its officials. The benefits of the oil industry have reached more and more Kazakhstanis, and this wealth is improving the standard of living for all Kazakhstanis.

Kazakhstan's traditional income comes from wheat and sheep farming, but, in the south, along the Syr Darya and Chu rivers, the land is also irrigated for rice, tobacco, and sugar beets. Further east, near the mountains, fruits, vegetables, and dairy products are cultivated. Horses are also raised in this area. Kazakhstan is a major supplier of power, fuel, metals, and chemicals, as well as food, to the other Eurasian countries in the region. With independence has come a significant amount of foreign investment, particularly in the oil, gas, and mineral sectors.

HISTORY

The early history of Kazakhstan remains largely unknown. The nomadic tribes that migrated into the area during the millennia before the birth of Christ left archaeological evidence of their presence, but little else. Not until the sixth century AD and the establishment of the Turkic khanate did a recognizable state appear in the area.

Between the sixth and 15th centuries, Kazakhstan was overrun by numerous invading tribal confederations: the Qarluqs, Arabs, Oghus Turks, Qipchaq, Qarakhanids, Seljuk Turks, Qarakhitai, and Mongols. Eighth-century Arab invaders introduced Islam to the Turkic peoples of Kazakhstan, but it was not until the Qarakhanid state of the 11th century that these tribes converted to Islam en masse and accepted the authority of Baghdad's Abbasid caliphate.

Kasym Khan (1511–23) was the first leader to unite the Kazakhs, and his three successor hordes absorbed members of the Mongol Nogai horde. These Kazakh khanates soon came into contact with Russian merchants and Cossack explorers sent by the tsar to expand Russian influence in Siberia and Central Asia. Events conspired to bring the Kazakhs into the Russian sphere of influence during the 17th and 18th centuries, and Russian troops began to seize lands from the Kazakh khanates in the northwest. In the far east, the Kalmyks, a Mongol people, began to expand westwards into the easternmost Kazakh territories.

Caught between two expansionist states, the Kazakhs slowly abandoned the east, withdrawing to their central and western territories. In 1730, the weakest of their three hordes, the Lesser Horde, was absorbed by Russia when its khan sought a temporary alliance against the Kalmyks. In 1798, the Middle Horde fell, and 22 years later, the Great Horde succumbed when it was forced to seek Russian protection from the Kokand khanate.

The Kazakhs were not model subjects. They staged a series of armed insurrections between 1836 and 1847, which led to an attempt by the Russians to quiet the troublesome tribesmen of central Asia, once and for all. More troops were dispatched to the area, fort construction commenced, and Russian settlers arrived to farm the land. It was the latter development more than anything else that helped to destroy the Kazakhs' traditional nomadic way of life.

During World War I, the Kazakhs rebelled once again, this time against tsarist military conscription policy. The uprising was stamped out in 1916, at the cost of thousands of lives; by the end of 1917, however, the Imperial Russian Army was in its death throes, and the Kazakhs gained their independence. Russia's new Bolshevik government was too weak at first to re-exert control over its periphery, and it was not until 1920 that the Red Army forced the Kazakhs to accept Bolshevik authority, establishing the Kazakh Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic.

Under communist rule, the Kremlin moved to integrate Kazakhstan into its empire far more thoroughly than its tsarist predecessors. Under Josef Stalin (1925–53), the collectivization drive caused widespread famine, killing two million Kazakhs. During World War II, Stalin deported ethnic Germans, Crimean Tartars, and Islamic peoples of the Caucasus to Kazakhstan for fear that they might collaborate with invading Nazi forces. In addition, he relocated a significant amount of industry to Kazakhstan during the beginning of World War II, lest it fall into the hands of the German army.

Stalin's successor, Nikita Khrushchev (1956–64), initiated his own agricultural reform campaign with the Virgin Lands Program, converting Kazakh grazing pastures into farmland. Each year during the harvest season, huge amounts of machinery and thousands of workers had to be

moved from other parts of the Soviet Union in order to bring in the crops. The program was responsible for ushering in a second wave of permanent, non-Kazakh settlers.

Under Leonid Brezhnev (1965–82), the Soviets launched an industrialization drive in Kazakhstan in an attempt to exploit the region's large reserves of fossil fuel, and it also made Kazakhstan home to its space program and nuclear testing projects, bringing large numbers of Russian scientists into the region. By the 1970s, the immigration of non-Kazakhs into the republic, coupled with the further destruction of the traditional Kazakh way of life brought about by the Virgin Lands Program, nearly left the Kazakhs a minority in their homeland.

On December 16, 1991, Kazakhstan declared its independence from the Soviet Union. In elections held shortly afterwards, Nursultan Nazarbayev, the head of the Kazakh Communist party, was elected president.

POLITICS

In 1986, in one of the first ethnically motivated rifts that would lead to the fall of the Soviet Union, riots broke out in Almaty in protest against Mikhail Gorbachev's appointment of an ethnic Russian as the leader of Kazakhstan's Communist party. Gorbachev had hoped to weaken the hold of powerful local leaders who were closely associated with the corruption of the Brezhnev era. The riots meant Kazakhstan saw some of the earliest popular actions in the soon-to-collapse Soviet Union, yet it was certainly not an active proponent of the breakup.



After the fall of the Soviet Union, a relatively free press, encouragement of foreign investment, and commitment to privatization earned Kazakhstan a reputation as one of the more democratic states in central Asia. International monitoring organizations more recently, however, have criticized the government's behavior. Following accusations that 1994's parliamentary elections were fraudulent, President Nazarbayev dissolved Parliament, called for new elections and pushed through a referendum extending his own term until 2000. In addition, he created a new Constitution with a stronger presidency. The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), which was invited to oversee the 1999 parliamentary elections, refused to recognize the results, citing widespread fraud and violations of election procedures. Recent criticism points to repression of independent media, the opposition, and public dissent. Some individuals who have expressed their dissent have been jailed. Yet most citizens view him favorably and feel that in comparison with other Central Asian countries, Kazakhstan is developing well, the standard of living is acceptable, and people are generally satisfied with their president. A result of this popularity is that Nazarbayev has been repeatedly re-elected, most recently in 2011. Changes made to the constitution of Kazakhstan allow Nazarbayev to serve as president as long as he chooses to do so.

Economically, the situation in Kazakhstan has improved significantly since independence. In 1993, production fell and inflation increased, particularly after Kazakhstan introduced its own national currency, the tenge, at the end of the year. Its poor road system, lack of adequate transportation, and outmoded communications systems prevented Kazakhstan from taking immediate advantage of its vast natural resources. After this initial drop, however, the oil and gas industries have fueled economic growth and a noticeable rise in the average standard of living. In May 2000, an oil field—estimated to be the largest find since 1979—was discovered in Kazakhstan's northern Caspian Sea territory. Subsequently additional, large oil fields have also been discovered, insuring Kazakhstan's economic future as an oil power. Many international oil

companies work in Kazakhstan. Some people express concern at the way Kazakhstan's resources are being sold, and the nation's excessive dependence on world energy prices for its economic strength.

Growth has been primarily in the natural resource sectors, such as oil, gas, and minerals. In 2012, the average yearly income was \$8,352, up from an average of \$1750 in 1999. In Almaty and Astana, the capital, there are many people who would be considered wealthy by any standard. Still, there are many who barely make a living wage. Internet penetration is approximately 35 percent, with three percent of Kazakhstanis maintaining Facebook pages.

One major concern in Kazakhstan is relations between different ethnic groups. Like its central Asian neighbors, Kazakhstan is ethnically diverse, with large populations of Kazakhs, Russians, Ukrainians, Germans, Tatars, Uighurs, Uzbeks, and Koreans. Under Soviet rule, Russians were accustomed to a privileged position and Kazakhs were discriminated against. When the USSR was dissolved, many Russians and Germans—in response to the rising influence of Kazakhs in political, educational, and business spheres—emigrated to their respective homelands. More recently, however, there has been a trend for these ethnically Russian and German Kazakhstanis to return to Kazakhstan. After living in their historic “homelands,” some have realized that although they are ethnically Russian and German, home is Kazakhstan. Their prospects for the future are better in Kazakhstan. Citizens of neighboring central Asian states such as Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have also migrated to Kazakhstan to find work.

Kazakhstan, which retained part of the Soviet nuclear arsenal at independence, committed itself to non-proliferation. Its Parliament voted in favor of ratifying the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. During a visit to the United States, President Nazarbayev received financial assistance to aid in the dismantling of its nuclear weapons, and in the spring of 1995, Kazakhstan declared itself free of nuclear weapons. Most recently, Kazakhstan was among the nations that supported the U.S. in the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, allowing the U.S. military to use Kazakhstan's airspace. Relations between the U.S. and Kazakhstan are, overall, very good. As part of the oil and gas industry, many U.S. companies have representative offices in Kazakhstan.

RELIGION

Kazakhstan is a secular state that is predominantly Muslim: about 50 percent of all Kazakhs would consider themselves Sunni Muslims, though strict religious observance is relatively uncommon. Since independence, and in part because of the increasing influence of Turkish organizations and institutions, more and more Kazakhstanis are becoming better acquainted with Islam. Nonetheless, daily prayer and adherence to the prohibition on drinking alcohol are still the exception, rather than the norm, among Muslim Kazakhstanis. Russians and Ukrainians in Kazakhstan are generally Orthodox Christians and, like their Muslim counterparts, tend not to attend religious services regularly. The number practicing their faith, however, has increased among these populations in recent years.

Kazakh tribes converted to Islam in the eighth century, but shamanist traditions—based on spiritual and mystical methods of healing the sick—are still widely practiced. The two major branches, or sects, of Islam are the Sunni, which forms the majority of Muslims, and the Shi'a. Most of the Islamic population of the former Soviet Union is Sunni Muslim. The religion's founding is conventionally dated to 610 AD, by the Prophet Muhammad, who is its central figure. He preached the word of God as revealed to him by the angel Gabriel. Islam is the Arabic word for submission; those who practice it are called Muslims, or “those who submit” (to God). The sunna, the “saying and doings” of Muhammad, serves as a guide to spiritual, ethical, and social life and

consists of the Qur'an (Koran), a compilation of the word of God spoken to Muhammad, and the hadith, the saying and teachings of the Prophet.

Traditionally, Muslims practice what are known as the Five Pillars of Islam: reciting the creed, praying daily, giving alms, fasting, and making a pilgrimage to Mecca. Prayer is practiced five times a day, facing Mecca, and Muslims are expected to make a pilgrimage, or hajj, to Mecca at least once in their lifetime. Islam accepts what its adherents are able to practice under given circumstances, which allowed Muslims to adapt to the restrictions Communists placed on religion. During the Soviet period, only a few Muslims each year made the pilgrimage.

When worshipping, men typically pray together at a mosque, while women pray at home. Women are allowed to worship in mosques, but must do so in areas separate from men. The ninth month of the Muslim lunar calendar year is Ramadan, when adherents fast during daylight hours, but may eat after the sun goes down. (Neither children nor the sick are expected to participate in this ritual.)

CULTURE

The Kazakhs are among the group of Turkic peoples that also includes Uzbeks, Kyrgyz, Uighurs, Tatars, and Turkmens. Their language belongs to the Turkic branch of the Uralo-Altaic language family. Originally written in a modified Arabic script, the alphabet was changed to Latin letters (similar to modern Turkish) in 1929 for its literary language. Then in 1938, it was changed to Cyrillic. Kazakh is spoken by about 65 percent of the population, while Russian is spoken by the majority and serves as the everyday language for many government and business functions.

Under Soviet rule, the practice of many traditional Kazakh customs was limited. Since independence Kazakhs are rediscovering their cultural heritage. In many ways, this is an exciting and, perhaps, confusing time for ethnic Kazakhs, as they work to reach consensus on what their "real" traditions are. There are variations among dialects, in ways of celebrating holidays, and in many other practices and habits and, because many Kazakhstanis are of mixed heritage, agreeing on cultural issues can be quite complex.

Nauryz is a very important holiday in Kazakhstan and all of central Asia. The name comes from the Persian word for "new year" and signifies a period of renewal and rebirth. It is celebrated March 22, roughly coinciding with the vernal equinox and the new Islamic calendar year, and is traditionally spent with friends and family.

Kazakhstanis also celebrate Victory Day, May 9, to commemorate the end of the Second World War. Even among people far too young to remember the war, veterans are held in high esteem, and on this day the streets are filled with music and parades. In the evening there are fireworks. December 16, marking Kazakhstan's independence, is also an official and popular holiday. New Year's Day is also a major holiday. As in many countries, Kazakhstan celebrates International Women's Day on March 8. Unity Day is another important holiday on May 1, marking a meeting in 1726 when leaders of different ethnic groups joined together to create a defense against invaders. Unity Day is a celebration of national, regional, and global solidarity.

Food in Kazakhstan represents the national cuisines of the nation's different ethnic groups. In keeping with their nomadic heritage, Kazakhs eat a lot of meat and dairy products, and their national dish is beshbarmak, which consists of meat boiled with onions and carrots and served with large noodles. It is served family style, with the broth ladled out separately. Horse meat is also common, especially prepared as sausage, and Kazakhs enjoy shashlik, cubes of marinated meat cooked on a skewer, and bauyrsaki, a kind of bread made by frying little dough balls.

Russian foods of various types, including borsch, beet soup, as well as a variety of spicy Korean salads, are popular, as well. As in other central Asian states, an important part of Kazakh daily life is drinking tea. This ritual, which generally also involves light snacks or sweets, is traditionally served to all guests.

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