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The People of the Oiroi Khan

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The People of the Oirot Khan

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The ethnic history of the Altaians' ancestors is inextricably linked with the history of Central Asia and Siberia. Modern Altaians retain the names of tribes and peoples known throughout the past two millennia—Naiman, Merkit, Kipchak, and many others. Altaians call the period of their history associated with the Junggars Khanate the “Oirot-kaan tuzhunda,” or the “times of the Oirot Khan.” Today, “Oirot Khan” is a common noun denoting the “glorious past” of their fathers and grandfathers. In the census of 2002 Oirot, the Altaians were called by the name of Oirot himself and appeared as one nation not as subgroups.

Key words: Altaians, Oirot, Junggar, Burkhanism, ethnic history

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1. Introduction

Historically, the Oirats (or “Oirot”) were understood to be the Mongolian-speaking peoples whose descendants now live in Russia, China, and Mongolia. For 26 years under the Soviet Union, however, “the Oirot” referred to a national territorial formation of the Turkic-speaking indigenous population of Altai.

My main assertions are as follows:

- 1) The Oirot as a national-territorial entity appeared on the map of the USSR as a result of their desire for Altaian statehood. After the elimination of the Junggar Khanate in 1756, the Altaians adopted Russian citizenship, and for a half century, the indigenous population of Altai consolidated. As different clans combined and their national, ethnic, and cultural identities developed, a new nation emerged: the Altaians. Their choice of name, Oirotia, was deliberate and informed by history.

Oirotia, which included the clans in the south of modern Altai, was Jungaria. The khans of Jungaria, according to the mythologized historical memory of the Altaians, were the khans of the house of Oiroi. Thus the Altai people considered themselves Oiroi Khan. Key figures in their recent history have been Shunu-Baatyr, Galdan Khan, and Amyr-Sanaa; their mythological stories have merged with those of the Oiroi Khan. The returning Altaians of Amyr-Sanaa and Shunu-Baatyr and the Teleuts and western Mongols had all been waiting for this moment.

- 2) The ethnic history of the Altaians' ancestors is inextricably linked with the history of Central Asia and Siberia. Modern Altaians retain the names of tribes and peoples known throughout the past two millennia—Naiman, Merkit, Kipchak, and many others. Their smallest social unit is the clan, the *seok* (literally “bone”; see Appendix 1, “List of Altaian *seoks*”). The *seok* is patrilineal, exogamous, and extraterritorial. It is believed to have originated from a common ancestor, man, and stored representations of its patron's ancestors: deities, animals, birds, trees, and mountains. It has always been portrayed through the territory it occupies, or even the birth *seok*, the small homeland. These ideas are expressed in the concept “own land and water,” reflecting the local character of the modern Altaian ethnic identity. Ancient and Medieval ethnonyms known throughout the history of Central Asia and Siberia continue to dominate the names of Altaian clans. In the summer of 2010, a new *seok*, *kuu*, emerged in the Altai when a son was born to an Altai mother and a Russian father. Thus, the social traditions of the Central Asian nomads—breaking up and uniting, incorporating members of other ethnicities, yet maintaining historical ethnonyms—remain unchanged.
- 3) Altaians call the period of their ancestors' history associated with the Junggar Khanate the “Oiroi-kaan tuzhunda,” or the “times of the Oiroi Khan.” Today, “Oiroi Khan” is a common noun denoting the “glorious past” of their fathers and grandfathers. An analysis of events in modern Altaian history shows what the anonymous “Oiroi” Altaians did in critical situations. The “Oiroi” discourse appears in moments of intraethnic or ethno-political crisis, three or so of which occurred during the 20th and 21st centuries. The first was in 1904, when the Altai were actively preparing for the arrival of the Oiroi Khan and reforming their culture. This crisis is known in the ethnographic literature as “Burkhanism,” a religious, reformist, and national liberation movement. The second crisis occurred in 1917, with the idea of forming the Oiroi Republic; at that time, the Karakoram-Altai district was created. The third occurred during the preparation and implementation of the 2002 census (see Appendix 2, “The number of Altaic Oiroi = Population Census from 1897 to 2002”). Thus, I wish to focus on the following issues:
 - 1) From where in the Soviet Union came the national-territorial entity known as the “Oiroi autonomous region”?
 - 2) Who in this region identifies themselves with the Oiroi?
 - 3) Why did the Oiroi re-emerge in the 2002 census?

2. The 20th-century idea of an “Oirat state”

On June 1, 1922, the Soviet Union created Oirat, later called the “Oirat Autonomous Region” (see Appendix 3, “Chronology and history of the development of the Altai Republic”). The idea of creating an administrative-territorial unit among the Altaians was first promulgated at the beginning of the 1900s by Burkhanists. The wording was folk-mythological and quite appropriate to the nature of the Burkhanist movement: in 1904, Altaians expected the “arrival” of Oirat Khan and created an “Oirat state” (Danilin 1993; Movement ak jan 2004; Burkhanism-Ak jan 2004).

The Burkhanist movement began in the 19th century. As G. N. Potanin said in 1893, “This is an exceptional event, when the nation renounces himself, their nationality, from a national cult” (Burkhanism-Ak jan 2004: 60). In the early days of Burkhanism, researchers were already isolating one of the most important aspects of this complicated movement—religious reform.

Organizers of and participants in the Burkhanist movement set out to reform shamanism, but the movement’s leaders began to follow the “white” belief, or “milk”. The “White Faith” requires praying to the god Burkhan, reading the god as the Spirit-Master of the Altai, and sacrificing using only milk and milk products to purify the use of juniper sprigs.

In 1904, a mass Burkhanist prayer was held. Orthodox missionaries of the Altai Spiritual Mission urged Russian peasants to suppress this movement, and some participants were killed and arrested. During the Russo-Japanese War, missionaries cleverly exploited the



Photo 1 The traditional Oirat yurta as it looks today

situation by accusing the movement's leaders of "pro-Japanese" activities. In 1906, the court acquitted defendants Chet Chelpanov and his 12-year-old daughter Chugul of such charges thanks to the intervention of G. N. Potanin, D. A. Klements, and other Russian scientists.

The well-known modern Burkhanist scholar L. I. Sherstova says this about the movement: "The first open Burkhanist prayers—in 1904—at Christmas, constitute a reference point for all subsequent events, a specific boundary for the life of the Altaians" (Sherstova 1997: 184).

Even in the first third of the 20th century, Lev Mamet was suggesting that the religious movement was political (Mamet 1994: 6). Two works by L. P. Mamet, *Oirot: Sketch of the national liberation movement* and *The civil war in the Altai Mountains*, were published in Moscow in 1930 and immediately removed from the library, their author arrested (Burkhanism Ak jan 2004: 68–70). Mamet first studied Burkhanism in the late 1920s and praised it as a national liberation movement (Mamet 1994). Mamet saw in its ethnic and religious form a political movement, saying, "in the backward East, even political movements take religious forms. And the national-liberation movement on the eastern outskirts of the Russian Empire often takes religious form, being essentially a political movement" (Mamet 1994: 6). Agreeing with him, L. I. Sherstova adds, "the emerging national identity could not take a religious form ... it is establishing a new national-religious ideology—Burkhanism" (Sherstova 1997: 186).

Burkhanism was not only a religious reform movement; it was an attempt to resist the Land Reforms occurring in the Altai. After becoming a part of Russia and until the end of the 19th century, these lands were considered the property of the Altai of the Romanovs, and all tribute and taxes went to them. The Altaians enjoyed a particular situation that legitimized their right to the land. After the peasant colonization of land began, the land shortage worsened. The result was Burkhanism, whose members expected the early arrival of the Messiah, Oirot Khan, who would "take his people" and give them a better life in a just state.

Thirteen years later, the idea of statehood was implemented by another generation of Altaians. In 1917, the Karakorum-Altai board was founded (Maydurova 2002: 15–104). This time, the wording regarding autonomy was very clear and based on European law: the right of peoples to self-determination (see Appendix 4, "Self-Determination autonomy: geography and word").

The evolution of a nascent national ideology and ethnicity—Altai Kizhi—and a relationship among Burkhanism, the creation of the Karakorum-Altai district (Oirotia), and the Gorno-Altai Autonomous Region and the Republic of Altai are evident, according to L. I. Sherstova. In her words, a "high level of political activity soon emerged among the national intelligentsia at this time—the first initiative, the creation of the Altai Mountain, and then the Karakorum Duma were not caused by a combination of circumstances" (Sherstova 1997: 202–203). She continues, "educated Altaians intuitively grasped the law-governed trend that objectively should have been designed to move the ideological ethnos to further the political form of its existence" (Sherstova 1997: 202–203). The author concludes that the relevance of the above series of events was the exploration of ethnic processes in southern Altai.

I agree with Sherstova that the chain of events that launched the February revolution and united the people under a single national ideology, giving the Altaians the right to



Photo 2 An Oirat *ova*, the altar of the area's "owner," as it looks today

self-determination and statehood, should include the land question. The worsening of the land issue led to the emergence of Altaian social movements, which in turn raised levels of ethno-political identity and ethnicity among the people. Thus, writes Mamet, Burkhanism was engendered by the influx of peasant colonization and the seizure of land (Mamet 1994: 31–33). The activities of Altai intellectuals such as Gregory Choros-Gurkin, Stephan Borisov, David Tobokov, Nikolai Nikiforov, George Tokmashov, and others with regard to allocating the Gorno-Altai district and pursuing Biysk helped resolve the land issue in favor of the natives (Maydurova 2002: 61–67).

This is the answer to the first question posed by my research. On the map of the new USSR, autonomous Oirot emerged due to the formation of a new ethnic group, Altaians, from the existing population of the Altai, which had been part of the Junggar Khanate.

3. Oirot and Altai, Oirats and Kalmyks: Politics and Identity

This is the answer to question 2. The Oirot identity is inherent in the people of central and southwest Altai. On a modern map of the Altai Republic, these people appear primarily in the Ongudai and Ust-Kan areas as well as in parts of the Shebalinskiy, Ust-Koksinsky, and Kosh-Agach areas (see Appendix 5, "Map of the Republic of Altai").

In the early twentieth century, these areas lay within the sphere of influence of the White Faith, Burkhanism. Following 16th- and 18th-century Russian authors, L. I. Sherstova calls this area on the Kan and Karakol river basins the "land of Kan-Karakol."

The new Oirot national-territorial unit was so called because the "national chauvinists"



Photo 3 Oirat women beside an *ova*

headed by the artist G. Choros-Gurkin wanted to emphasize that it was an autonomous “state Oiroi” in 1918. Choros-Gurkin and his associates attempted to realize the inalienable right of the Altai, Shor, Teleut, Khakas, and Tuva peoples to self-determination in order to save those peoples and their territories from degradation and depopulation.

The idea of creating an autonomous administrative region emerged in the troubled period between the two revolutions and the civil war. It is understandable that, at that difficult time, when the foundations of the empire were crumbling, a great people turned out to defend themselves when other nations were doing the same. Their fate depended on them alone. Gurkin and his followers chose to use the slogan of the time—self-determination. As stated in the minutes of the founding session of the Gorno-Altai Regional Congress of Autochthons’ and Peasants’ Deputies, held on February 21, 1918, “In view of peoples’ right to self-creation given by the great Russian Revolution, Congress recognized the benefit of an independent republic to unite the land once belonging to the state of Oirat, namely the Russian Altai, the Minusinsk natives of Uryanhay, the Mongolian Altai, and the Dzungaria in the all-Russian federation” (Edokov 1993: 8–103).

The authority, diplomacy, and knowledge of Gurkin and his associates allowed them to lay the foundation for the future autonomy of the Altaians. Their actions were based on sober



Photo 4 A young married Oirat couple

calculations; they were choosing the lesser of two evils, as was stated clearly and unambiguously in a letter from Biisk prison: “Yes, now it is easy to talk and accuse us of anything, but there was a time, terrible and hopeless, when we Altaians were forgotten by all, like a drowning man clutching at straws, but being wiped out or expelled from the mother is not for the Altai; we just do not share the views of the Biysk Council, which called for the requisition of Altaian property and livestock, which is all their happiness and all their existence. ‘Take away the cattle, and the Altaians drive into Mongolia and populate it through Soviet power’; such statements and opinions are often heard from Soviet Russian sympathizers” (Edokov 1993: 46).

Gurkin was accused of “separatism,” “nationalism,” “spying for Japan,” and other “sins.” Was secession from Russia being sought by the gornodumts? In a letter, Gurkin writes, “At the same time, the Altai are thinking a little bit to establish their own internal economic and business life. By the word ‘autonomy,’ they understand not only this but also, along with all other citizens of the Russian state, being free to develop their spiritual, economic, and domestic life; protecting themselves from tyranny and violence and all that is evil and harmful to the state; and being literate and strong for the state and the entire nation. For wanting such self-determination and autonomy, I think this government should not persecute them but see them as a branch of the Russian state” (Edokov 1993: 46). In 1919, Gurkin represented autonomy exactly how it is conceived of today: as the right of people to self-determination through international instruments.

As stated by the President of Liechtenstein, Prince Hans-Adams II, to the 48th UN General Assembly on October 5, 1993: “Self-determination is a preventive mechanism. Not the presence but the absence of the right to self-determination is the cause of conflicts within states

and of social, political, and economic inequality. This inequality is not only unfair; it is dangerous ... The principle of self-determination, reasonably applied to potential conflict situations within a state and allowing different groups different levels of autonomy (depending on the particular circumstances of each particular group), can be a factor in reducing tensions ... We cannot understand the ‘self’ as an indispensable branch of the State” (Egorov 1997: 72–73).

In the modern world, the right of peoples to self-determination is a very complex academic and practical problem. After the long global process of decolonization, a growing number of international lawyers are inclined to think that we should generally focus on “internal” self-determination, a concept not included in any international legal instrument but understood and usually practiced as the possibility of free development and the right to participate in the governance and management of resources.

The conceptual basis for the creation of a republic on the territory of the Turkish-speaking peoples of Southern Siberia was the cultural concept of resettlement for Siberian regionalists. Education, the mutual understanding of cultures through initiation to their arts, the social and economic equality of the territories, and the autonomous development of the indigenous peoples of Siberia—these were the ideas forming the basis for cooperation between those two exceptional people, the Potanin and the Gurkin. G. N. Potanin’s Gurkin met in St. Petersburg, during training at the Academy of Fine Arts, and their collaboration continued in Siberia. G. N. Potanin organized the first exhibition of Gurkin in Tomsk, Novosibirsk, and other Siberian cities. Gurkin knew A. V. Anokhin, who led him to the St. Petersburg Academy of Arts, along with Sapozhnikov, Adrianov, and other regionalists and oblastniki (Edokov 1994: 107–108).

P. Gordienko wrote that “strongly associated with a group of regionalists was the well-known artist Altai Choros-Gurkin. With the assistance he provided in completing their artistic education, he became their pet, disciple, and faithful follower” (Gordienko 1994: 11; 58–59). Having thus indicated the close relationship among Gurkin, Potanin, and the other regionalists, I want to emphasize that the activities of Choros-Gurkin and his associates were directed to their “dark, resentful, [and] humiliated” fellow countrymen.

The flowering of Choros-Gurkin’s political legacy in 1989 coincided with and ran parallel to the establishment of the Republic of Altai (1991) as an element of the Russian Federation. I see a direct relationship between the emergence of a new kind of ethnic and cultural reality—the republic as a “sovereign state” for Altaians—and the implementation of their ancestors’ agreement with the “White Queen” Elizabeth in 1756 for voluntary entry into the Russian State as Altaian Zaisans with people and land. In short, historical justice was restored and the right of peoples to self-determination realized.

In 1989, the newspapers *Enchi*, *Altaydyn Cholmony*, and *Zvezda Altaia* began publishing materials from KGB archives regarding the Altaisky Territory and the Gorno-Altai Autonomous Region. From these, the general public was able to learn about the ideas of Choros-Gurkin, his associates, and their ideological backers, the regionalists. Thus, in their public consciousness, inhabitants of the Republic of Altai believe that the Altai Republic resulted from a struggle by the first generation of Altai intelligentsia for the right to exist as an independent administrative entity and to maintain and develop their ethnic culture in the land of their fathers and grandfathers.

The Oirot Autonomous Region was renamed the “Gorno-Altai,” apparently in connection

with the deportation of the Kalmyk. More than 20,000 Kalmyk were resettled in the Altai steppe region (including the Altai Mountains), with its predominantly Russian population. The renaming was probably an attempt to prevent the possible resettlement of Kalmyks among the Altaians or of Oirat among the Oirot. A renaming decree was signed on January 7, 1948, and a decree on the “criminal responsibility for running away from places of compulsory and permanent settlement of persons evicted in remote areas of the Soviet Union during World War II” was signed on November 26, 1948. The renaming of the autonomous region and its population therefore served an ideological purpose: to distinguish Altai from Oirot and Oirats from Kalmyks, confirming with different ethnonyms the existence of two independent nations.



Map of the Republic of Altai

4. Oiroi identity: a self-determination “crisis”

The answer to question 3 is that the Oiroi identity for the southern part of the Altai Peoples and Telengits is a “sleeping” identity that “wakes up” during intra-relationship complications. An ethno-political crisis arising from the inclusion of Telengits, Tubalars, and Chelkans with the indigenous peoples of Siberia in 2000 emerged in the run-up to the 2002 census. The key slogan of the campaign was “Sign up Altaians, or we lose our Republic.” As a result, Telengits numbered more than 2,000. Along with the Altaians and Telengits, the census accounted for 80 Oiroi. It seems to me that this was an alternative ethnic response to the crisis, a choice dictated by the Oiroi desire for the unity of their people, who had been the people of the Oiroi Khan.

Appendix 1
Clans of Altaians

almat	merkit
ara	meret
baylagas	mogol/mool
boguskan	modor
burut	mundus
jabak	mýrkýt
jabyr	ölüp
jaryk	ölük
jetisary	orgonchy
jiber	oochy
jüs	sagal
jetitas	soyon
irkit	tandy
köbök	töölös
köözhö	töböt
kaal	togus
kegil	todosh
komdosh	tongzhan
kooboly	tumat
küsen	chapy
kipchak	chagat
maiman (nayman)	chagandyk
ulup	choros

Appendix 2
 Number and Ethnonym
 Russian Census from 1897 to 2002
 Oyrat = Oirot = Altaians

Census of 1926. National composition of population in the republics of the USSR
http://demoscope.ru/weekly/ssp/ussr_nac_26.php

Ethnic nationality	Number								
	Total population			Urban settlements			Rural Population		
	Male	Female	Both sexes	Male	Female	Both sexes	Male	Female	Both sexes
Chernevye Tatory	3	9	12	0	0	0	3	9	12
Altaians	19,041	20,021	39,062	85	33	118	18,956	19,988	38,944
Telengety	1,756	1,659	3,415	0	0	0	1,756	1,659	3,415
Teleuty	944	954	1,898	4	3	7	940	951	1,891
Oiraty	884	654	1,538	506	465	971	378	189	567
TOTAL	45,925								

Census of 1939. National composition of population in the republics of the USSR
http://demoscope.ru/weekly/ssp/sng_nac_39.php?reg=0

Oirot	47,867
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OIROT. Options: Oirot-Kizhi, Oirat-Kizhi, Oirats, Altai, Altaiskie Kalmyky, Telengety, Teleuts, Lebedintsy, Chelkantsy, Maymintsy, Kumandintsy, Kumanda. Code -940. http://demoscope.ru/weekly/knigi/alfavit/nacionaln_1939.html # 15 Dictionary of National All-Union population census 1939. All-Union census of 1939 Dictionary of Nationalities. RGAE. F.1562. Op.336.D.205 (Materials for the Dictionary of National Census 1939), L.25–34.

Census of 1959. National composition of population in the republics of the USSR
http://demoscope.ru/weekly/ssp/sng_nac_59.php

Altaians	45,270
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Census of 1970. National composition of population in the republics of the USSR
http://demoscope.ru/weekly/ssp/sng_nac_70.php

Altaians	55,812
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Census of 1979. National composition of population in the republics of the USSR
http://demoscope.ru/weekly/ssp/sng_nac_79.php

Altaians	60,015
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Census of 1989. National composition of population in the republics of the USSR
http://demoscope.ru/weekly/ssp/sng_nac_89.php

Altaians	70,777
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National Census of 2002. National composition of population in Russian regions
http://demoscope.ru/weekly/ssp/rus_nac_02.php

Altaians	67,239
Telengits	2,399
Teleuts	2,650
Tubalars	1,565

National identity in the Census-2002 question about self-awareness related to
 “Your national identity”
<http://www.perepis2002.ru/index.html?id=17>

Altai-Kizhi	10
Altaians	67,220
Oirats	80
Telengits	2,398
Telesy	1
Teleuty	2,650
Tuba	105
Tubalary	1,460

Volume 4. Part 3. POPULATION BY NATIONALITY AND RUSSIAN LANGUAGE ABILITY OF RUSSIAN
 FEDERATION SUBJECTS, Census 2002

Nationality	Number	Among them speak Russian
The Republic of Altai	202,947	195,815
Altaians	62,192	57,466
Kumandins	931	927
Telengits	2,368	1,999
Teleuts	32	32
Tubalars	1,533	1,530
Chelkans	830	817

Appendix 3
CHRONOLOGY AND HISTORY OF THE FORMATION
OF THE MODERN REPUBLIC OF ALTAI

- July 1 to 6, 1917 Congress was held for indigenous Altai population counties Biysk and Kuznetsk districts of the Tomsk province. It was created by the local government Altai—Altai Mountain Duma.
- January 13, 1918 without prior arrangement from the county stood out Biysk Karakorum-Altai district.
- January 18, 1919 A decision of the Provisional Russian Government’s Land Department Ministry of the Interior announced the formation of the county as part of the Karakorum Altai province.
- April 30, 1920 Altai Gubrevkom made Karakorum county independent and renamed the Gorno-Altai district.
- June 1, 1922 The Central Executive Committee of Altai province allocated the Oirat AO centered at Ulala. The Board has the rights of an Oirat provincial executive committee, but the budget and county executive committee of a state.
- May, 1925 The Siberian region with its center in Novo-Nikolaevsk was renamed Novosibirsk. The region included Oirat Autonomous Oblast.
- July 30, 1930 The Siberian region was divided into Western Siberia, with a center at Novosibirsk, and Eastern Siberia, with its center at Irkutsk. Oirat AO was incorporated into Western Siberia.
- March 2, 1932 Oirat AO was renamed Oyrotskaya AO.
- 1937 Oyrotskaya AO was included in the Altaiskiy kray.
- January 7, 1948 By decree of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR, Oyrotskaya AO was transformed into the Gorno-Altai Autonomous Oblast.
- August 22, 1990 The Supreme Soviet of the RSFSR were addressed regarding the proposal at the conclusion of the Federal Treaty and the improvement of the state-legal status of the Gorno-Altai Autonomous Oblast.
- July 3, 1991 The President of the Supreme Soviet of the RSFSR, B. N. Yeltsin, signed the Law of the RSFSR № 1536-1 GAAO transforming the Gorno-Altayskaya SSR within the RSFSR.
- February 8, 1992 GASSR was renamed the Republic of Gorny Altai.
- May 7, 1992 The Republic of Gorny Altai was renamed the Republic of Altai.

(From the Uesd to Republic. Collection of archive documents 1917–2001.
 Gorno-Altaysk. 2001. 275 p.).

Appendix 4
SELF-DETERMINATION: GEOGRAPHY AND FORMULATION OF AUTONOMY

International formulation	Choros-Gurkin formulation
<p>“Autonomy”—a certain degree of independence of any state entity from the state, has the right to issue compulsory education laws and assign it its own officers. Autonomy has its internal problems more or less freedom of action in which it does not depend on the state standing over her.</p> <p>“Self-determination”—the right of a people or nation to freely determine its political status; freely pursue its economic, social, and cultural development; and freely dispose of its natural wealth and resources.</p>	<p>“Autonomy” by them (Altai people—S.T.) is not understood differently ... like all other citizens of the Russian state—to be free and free to develop their spiritual, economic, and domestic life; to protect themselves from tyranny and violence; to exploit their evil and harmful State the elements; and to be literate and strong for the State and the nation. For such autonomy and self-determination, I think this government should not pursue them, and see in this branch of the Russian state.”</p> <p>Altaians have the right to self-determination and to maintain their cultural and economic lives.</p>

From the transcript of the founding session of the Gorno-Altai Krai Congress of Indigenous and Peasants’ Deputies, held on February 21, 1918: “In view of the right to self-determination of peoples that was created by the great Russian Revolution, Congress recognized the benefit of establishing an independent republic uniting the land formerly belonging to the State of Oirat, namely the Russian Altai, Minusinsk Natives Uryanhay, Mongolian Altai, and Dzungaria” as part of the All-Russian Federation” (Edokov 1993: 8–103).

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