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Religions A wondrous tradition is resurrected in an economically depressed region

Buddhist Revival in Kalmykia

One third of the population of Kalmykia was deported during Stalin's terror. As the region struggles, it returns to its roots for answers.

ANNA NEMTSOVA
SPECIAL TO RN

"Let all our wishes come true! Let all living creatures be free of suffering, of danger, of diseases and sadness! Let peace and happiness govern on Earth!"

More than 2,000 Buddhists chanted the mantra, kneeling on mats before the Golden Abode of Buddha temple in Elista, the capital of the republic of Kalmykia, one of three traditional Buddhist regions in Russia. They repeated words of prayer after the Kalmyk Buddhist leader, Telo Tulku Rinpoche. Finally, the square grew quiet as the group went into deep meditation.

As night fell, thousands of candles were lit. Buddhist monks visiting from Tibet, Thailand, and the United States, as well as Russian Buddhist regions of Buriyaya and Tuva, blessed those who gathered from all over Kalmykia and the neighboring southern regions of Russia. They sent candles flying skyward in hot air balloons, illuminating the dark night sky.

The ceremony, an offering of light to Buddha, was introduced to Russian Buddhists for the first time as a symbolic event celebrating the beginning of the international forum, "Buddhism:



The first Ceremony of Light offering to Buddha was held last month in Elista, the capital of Kalmykia.

Philosophy of Non-Violence and Compassion," held in Elista last month.

Despite objections from China, a group of 30 Tibetan monks from the Gyudmed Monastery, assigned by the Dalai Lama, arrived to bless the republic's main temple and 17

sculptures of Tibetan Buddhist scientists inside.

At the ceremony, the candle kites formed a path of light in the pitch-black sky. "That is our white road," somebody whispered in the crowd.

"Have a white road" is the most sincere greeting people

traditionally give each other in Kalmykia.

It's a fittingly modest wish for people in this poor region, stuck in sandy steppe as flat as a pancake. The republic of Kalmykia, with its population of more than 300,000 people, chose to re-

live the traditional philosophy

and culture of Tibetan Buddhism. The religion was adopted by their predecessors, the Oirat tribes in Mongolia, in the 13th century and imported to the Russian empire when Oirats migrated there in 1609.

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Ecology Nikolai Aladin's research often went ignored

Russian Scientist Never Gave Up on Aral Sea

Nikolai Aladin was an underground researcher no one would fund. Yet his results aided the sea's partial resurgence.

CHRISTOPHER PALA
SPECIAL TO RN

Nikolai Aladin approached the rusting hulk of a small, rusty ship on which the words Otto Schmidt were still readable on the bow. All around, the former bottom of the Aral Sea was walkable, stretching to the horizon and blending seamlessly into the surrounding desert.

This research vessel was named after a famed Russian scientist and explorer of, ironically, the Arctic. When it ended its last cruise in 1996, funded

by a Japanese grant, it was the last ship afloat on the sea.

"I went on 25 expeditions on this ship," Aladin remarked in his stentorian voice on a recent expedition to the sea.

Aladin, a professor at the Zoological Institute of the Russian Academy of Sciences in St. Petersburg, has studied the Aral Sea longer than anyone. He can take indirect credit for the recent rescue of the northern, Kazakh part that has turned the Aral from a symbol of catastrophic environmental mismanagement to one of model rehabilitation.

And yet his career has been anything but easy: except during the brief Glasnost years of the late 1980s, Aladin — port-



The Kazakh part of the Aral Sea is thriving again.

ly, pony-tailed, erudite and strongly opinionated — has seen his research and generously dispensed advice often ignored.

He first saw, or rather did not see, the Aral Sea in 1978. In need of a vacation after defending his doctoral thesis at the zoological institute, he went to Aralsk, the northern port, to go diving.

The Aral, the world's fourth-largest inland lake, is located in the desert east of the Caspian Sea (Aral means island in Kazakh). It is fed by Central Asia's two great west-flowing rivers, the Syr and Amu Darya, which bring it glacier water from the Pamir Mountains.

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NEWS IN BRIEF

Putin Proposes post-Soviet "Eurasian Union"

In his first article since announcing that he will run for another term as president, Prime Minister Vladimir Putin proposed in the daily Izvestia a "supra-national union capable of becoming a pole in the modern world, and at the same time an effective connection between Europe and the dynamic Asia-Pacific Region." Putin's article mostly covered the economic aspects of developing the new body out of existing structures such as the Customs Union (which currently unites Belarus, Kazakhstan and Russia) to cover more of the entire post-Soviet space.

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Russia and U.S. Team Up to Prevent Armageddon

In a gesture reminiscent of Hollywood's "Armageddon," Russia and the U.S. are joining forces to keep the asteroids at bay and the earth safe — using missile shield technology. One of the clinchers is that control of the project is put in the hands not of nations but of the United Nations.

At first glance the brave new step switches the focus of Russia-U.S. security talks from squabbles over missile defense shields in Europe to saving the world together.

But not everyone sees big changes coming. "This positioning has a right to exist but it does not affect the missile defense shield, which the Americans are building in Europe," Fyodor Lyukanov, editor of Russia in Global Affairs, told Kommersant.

Tom Washington, THE MOSCOW NEWS

Russian Documentary Films Come to D.C.

The Alexander Solzhenitsyn House of Russians Abroad, Russian-American Historical and Culture Center and Russian Way Film Studio will present the 2nd annual Festival of Russian Documentary Films November 23-30 in Washington, D.C. This year's Festival will be accompanied by award-winning Russian directors like Igor Maiboroda, Sergei Zaitsev and Boris Sheinin, who will have the opportunity to present their films to an American audience. More details at <http://www.cinema-rp.com>

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Russian Scientist Never Gave Up on Aral Sea

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Until the 1960s, it produced 50,000 tons of fish a year. But in the 1960s, the Soviet authorities began to divert water from the two rivers to produce cotton for uniforms and gunpowder, knowing the sea would die.

"When I got to Aralsk, the port was dry and the sea was more than 30 kilometers away," Aladin recalled. When he reached it, he found that its salinity had doubled to 2 percent in less than two decades, possibly the fastest rise in history. So he took samples and measurements and decided he would make his life work the study of how the fauna adapted to the changes.

But back in St. Petersburg, his proposals were met with evasive replies. While the decision to sacrifice fish for cotton was not secret, the authorities discouraged any examination of its appalling consequences on the ecology and the life of the local population.

Philip Micklin, a professor of geography at Western Michigan University who would become the leading Western expert on the Aral, remembers scrutinizing the Soviet scientific literature for details in the early 1980s. "You'd find an occasional reference to the fact the sea level had fallen by so much, or the salinity had increased, but you never saw a whole article devoted to the desiccation," he recalled during the expedition.

In Russia, Aladin was forced to study other subjects and to ask for his father, a naval physician, for money to fund his research on the Aral. At scientific conferences, he was sometimes allowed to read papers on his research, but not to publish them. "It was a form of samizdat," he said, speaking of dissident self-publishing under communism.

Sherpa to a Sea's Rebirth



Nikolai Aladin cared about the Aral before it was popular.

Nikolai Aladin was born in 1954 in Leningrad, now St. Petersburg. Since 1989, he has been the head of the Laboratory of Brackish Water Hydrobiology at the Zoological Institute of the Russian Academy of Sciences in St. Petersburg. Aladin has been studying the Aral sea since 1978, when he first came to Aralsk for vacation after defending his doctoral thesis — to go diving.

Aladin has been studying the Aral sea since 1978, when he first came to Aralsk for vacation after defending his doctoral thesis — to go diving.

"When I got to Aralsk, the port was dry and the sea was more than 30 kilometers [18 miles] away," recalled Aladin. When he reached the sea, he found that its salinity had doubled in less than two decades, possibly the fastest rise in history. So he took samples and measurements; he decided he would make his life work the study of how the fish and wildlife adapted to the changes. Since then, Aladin has become an expert for a variety of international environmental programs devoted to the Caspian and Aral Seas, including UNESCO and the United Nations. He has contributed to more than 200 articles in scientific publications and gone on 41 expeditions to the Aral Sea.

All that changed with Mikhail Gorbachev's Glasnost policy of openness. Aladin's research was published and the consequences of the cotton-first policy on the health of the Kazakhs on the north shore and the Uzbeks on the south shore were widely described. The Academy of Sciences gave him his own research center, the Laboratory of Brackish Water Hydrobiology.

But while Moscow was still studying ways to reverse the disaster, the Soviet Union dissolved and what was left of the Aral Sea was bisected by the Uzbek-Kazakh border. The Russian scientific authorities became reluctant to fund expeditions, in part in deference to national sensitivities there and in part because they were strapped for cash.

Meanwhile, Western donors questioned why they should

give money to Russians instead of to Western scientists or to Kazakhs and Uzbeks.

So officially, Aladin went back to studying the Caspian. His father passed away and he finally

"We wanted to prove that disasters made by ... man could be repaired by the hand of man," Aladin said.

nanced his Aral research by taking paying tourists on expeditions and trying to turn a profit, with mixed results.

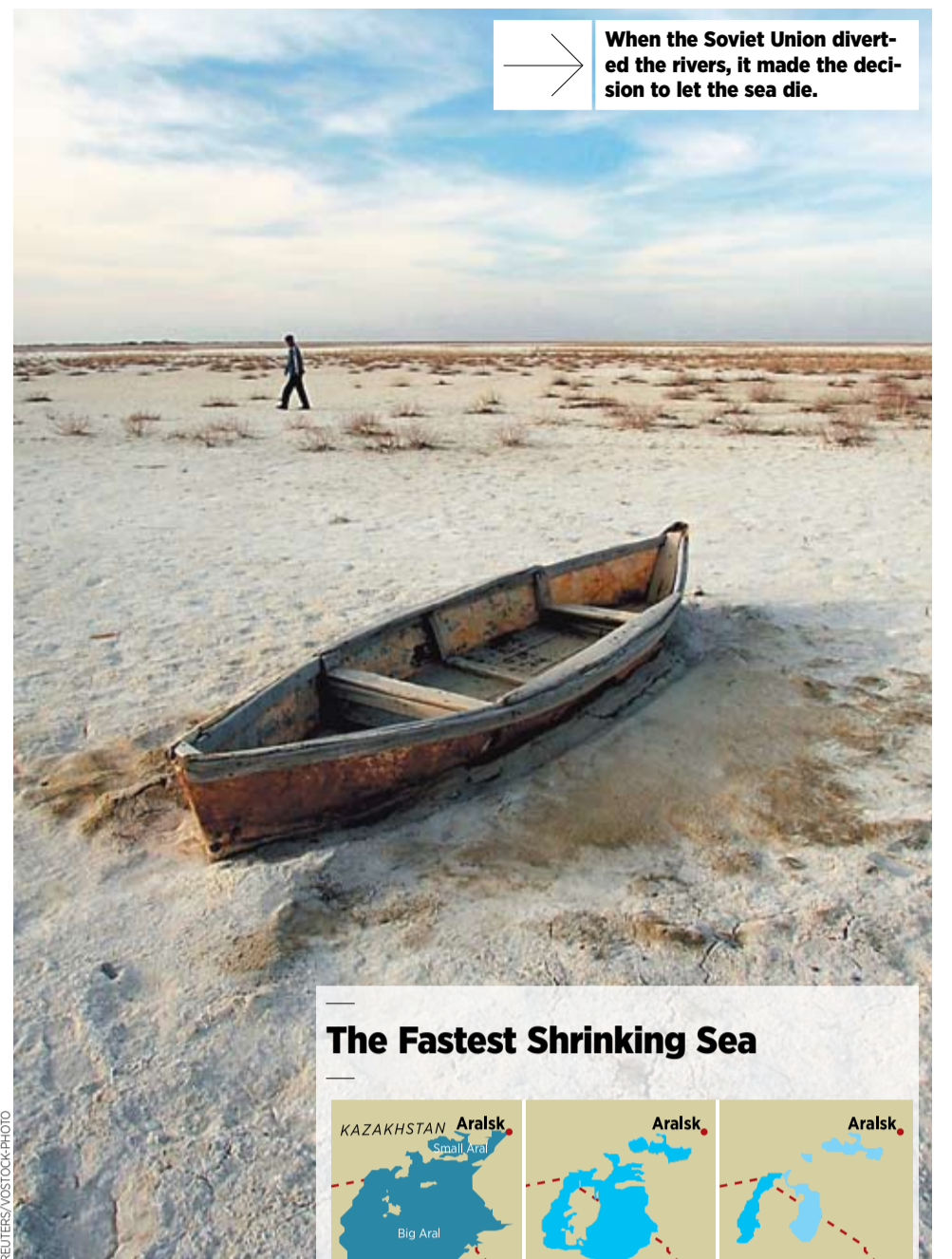
In 1993, he encouraged a local Kazakh governor to build, with a handful of bulldozers and little expertise, a crude dike that kept the water from the Syr Darya in the northern part of the Aral. Salinity dropped and some fish returned, but

the dike breached repeatedly.

The World Bank eventually funded the construction of a proper, 8-mile earthen dike and concrete sluice — all work was done without consultations with Aladin. By 2005, the Bank had completed the dike, which allowed for the accumulation of water into the sea and the restoration of wetland ecosystems.

Six years later, the fish biomass in the Kazakh part of the sea jumped from 3,500 tons to 18,000 tons, said local fisheries director Zaualkhan Yermakhanov. Fishermen are hauling in 6,000 tons a year using crude nets. Villages in the area boast new houses, schools and satellite antennas while a fish-processing plant in Aralsk has created 41 jobs.

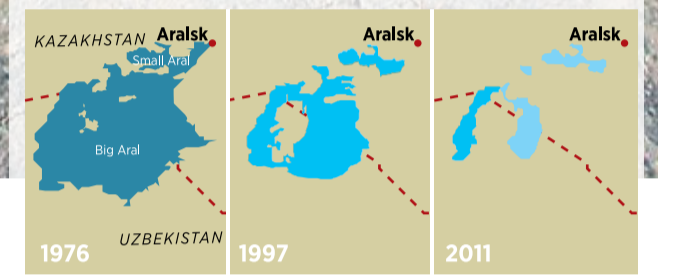
"The first dam was experimental," Aladin said. "We want



When the Soviet Union diverted the rivers, it made the decision to let the sea die.

REUTERS/ISTOCKPHOTO

The Fastest Shrinking Sea



Where Did the Water Go?

Until 1960: The Aral Sea is 26,000 square miles with a salinity of 10g/liter. It produces 50,000 tons of freshwater fish a year, and the fishery employs 60,000 people. Upstream, in the two rivers, there are 12 million acres under cultivation. Aralsk is a significant port.

1960: The Aral Sea belongs to the Soviet Union. The authorities in Moscow decide to expand irrigation for its cotton industry and turn the sea into a brine lake, calculating that the cotton is worth 100 times the fishery.

1987: The sea has contracted to a third of its previous size, leaving a cracked, salty desert. The irrigated surface has doubled into north Small Aral and south Great Aral. Salinity has tripled and the fishery has disappeared. The number of birds and animals decrease twofold over 30 years.

2011: The northern Aral, now 1,300 square miles, is revived with a dike, which was built with the help of the World Bank in 2005. It allowed salinity to drop and all two dozen fish species to return to the waters.

Buddhist Revival boosts depressed region

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It was violently destroyed, together with all Buddhist prayer houses, temples and holy relics, during Stalin's repressions of the 1930s. The entire indigenous Kalmyk population spent 17 years in exile in Siberia.

Today, Kalmykia is the second poorest region in Russia, after Ingushetia. Visiting Kalmykia last March, President Dmitry Medvedev called the situation "difficult," as the 15 percent unemployment rate in Kalmykia was twice as high as the national average.

Buddhism teaches tolerance and loving-kindness, so Kalmyks have learned to cope with their harsh realities. "We have seen it much worse," Yevdokiya Kutsayeva, 84, said. She had tears in her eyes as she recalled Stalin's deportations. "One October night in 1943, they packed the entire population of the republic into dirty train wagons and sent us to Siberia. Thousands died on the way. I remember the stacks of dead bodies along the platforms," she recalled.

Until the late 1980s, it was dangerous for Kutsayeva and her family to light a candle for Buddha, much less send one into the sky in a hot air balloon. To Kutsayeva's joy, Kalmykia has built 55 new Buddhist prayer homes and 30 temples in the past decade.

"That is all we have left to make people happy and peaceful today," Alexander Nemeyev, a local businessman, said. Nemeyev pointed at the golden statue of Buddha in the temple that

A Phoenix From the Ashes

Kalmyk Buddhists were first widely repressed in the 1930s during Stalin's Terror. Every religion was persecuted under Soviet policies, but Buddhism experienced almost total destruction. By 1941, all Buddhist monasteries and temples had been closed or destroyed; the most outstanding members of the Buddhist elite (monks of a high rank, experts on Buddhist doctrine) were executed or disappeared in concentration camps. A second wave of repressions took place in 1943 when about one third of Kalmyks were taken from their homes and sent to Siberia.



he had built for his village, Ulduchiny, two years ago. He spent about \$41,000, or 1,230 rubles. On a recent weekend, about 100 Buddhists came to pray together with Tibetan monks visiting the republic.

Not everybody in the village participated in the religious ceremony. "The temple is not giv-



Tibetan monks came to Kalmykia despite China's objections.

ing me food for my two children," said Khondor, a 47-year-old widower and an electrician who did not want to give his last name, showing his modest two-room house that he shares with his two teenage children. Khondor said he was proud to be one of two people who had full-time jobs in Ulduchiny.

"Kalmyk people historically tolerated troubles," he said, adding what could be said about a good number of different people in Russia, "to cope with difficulties is our tradition."

Khondor's children, Aveyash, 14, and Nagaila, 13, said their dream was to leave Kalmykia,

3 FACTS ABOUT BUDDHISM

1 Traditionally, Buddhism is the main religion in Republics of Buryatia, Kalmykia, The Tyva, Altai Republic, Zabaykalsky Krai and Irkutsk Oblast (all of them in Siberia except Kalmykia). Buddhism came to Russia in the 17th century; in 1764 it was officially accepted as one of the state religions.

2 Today, there are approximately 1.4 million Buddhists in Russia, according to the most recent census, and Buddhists comprise 1 percent of the population.

3 In 1979, the Dalai Lama made his first visit to the Soviet Union. After 1994, the Dalai Lama was received enthusiastically when he visited Russia's three Buddhist republics. But as Moscow's trade with China became increasingly important after 2004, Russia stopped giving visas to the Dalai Lama.

perhaps by going to study in Moscow or St. Petersburg. Their father did not mind this goal, as he saw no future for them in the republic, he said.

Kalmyk Buddhist leaders say that today, their efforts are not about just rebuilding the temples, something supported by the government, but about the

revival of Kalmyk Buddhist mentality and culture, along with basic secular human ethics like compassion, love, kindness and forgiveness.

Exhausted after two decades of economic and social crises, Kalmyks often come to the republic's main temple, or Central Hurul, saying, "my soul is damaged, please help me," the Buddhist leader, Telo Tulku Rinpoche, said. "In a way we are a spiritual, psychological center giving people hope, moral support and spiritual guidance."

According to Yulia Zhironkina, director of the Moscow-based Save Tibet Foundation, Telo Tulku Rinpoche has become Russia's major spiritual leader for Buddhists. "He goes to India to consult with the Dalai Lama about most of his important decisions for Kalmykia education and cultural programs," Zhironkina said. Kalmykia is one of the 19 Russian regions introducing experimental programs on basics ethics for the 4th and 5th grades at Russian state schools. "The Dalai Lama consulted Telo Tulku Rinpoche about the concept for the school history and basics of Buddhism in Kalmykia," Zhironkina said.

But there are areas where neither the Dalai Lama nor his followers have power to help. On one of his visits in Kalmykia, Barry Kerzin, a Buddhist doctor from Philadelphia, said he was shocked by the problems local doctors faced. "The entire hospital, including the surgery rooms, had no running water that day," he said. This year,

local activists criticized the authorities for not finishing the construction of the republic's only children's hospital. This month, about 300 successful Kalmyks, calling themselves "a partisan Internet movement," wrote a letter to President Barack Obama asking him to restore the hospital, currently in disrepair. The letter was also designed to shame the Russian federal government and at the same time call attention to their plight.

Doctors at Kalmykia's only children's hospital had trouble listing the most needed medicine and equipment. "We need everything," Tomara Nemchirova, the administrator of the hospital said. "We have kids on a waiting list until next spring."

Kalmykia has not seen any bounty, nor promises of any infrastructure from deals that Royal Dutch Shell signed this year for the exploration of oil fields on the steppe. Major discoveries have been made in nearby Kazakhstan, also on the Caspian Sea.

The former Kalmyk president, Kirsan Ilyumzhinov, was on hand for the recent ceremonies. He stepped down in 2010. The controversial former leader said that the teachings of Buddhism he supported during his rule saved Kalmykia from getting involved in the terrorist wars in the neighboring North Caucasus republics.

"The peaceful and kind philosophy of Buddhism is a solution for Kalmyk people in the chaos and hard reality they live in," Zhironkina said.



Real Estate: A New Bubble in the Making? Russians buying homes at pre-crisis levels

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