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Map of Asia and Adjacent Areas

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Mother Volga Defends Her Own

By Maynard Owen Williams

With Illustrations from Photographs by the Author

FIFTY feet below the level of the Seven Seas, one of the great battles of our time began in mid-August at Stalingrad, beside the Volga. Fall rains have gummed up the north Russian swamps, and winter has moved south to slow the sluggish brown river into a 2,300-mile strip of ice.

Most of Stalingrad's machinery has been evacuated. The Soviet army, assisted by the women workers who bring ammunition in and carry the wounded out, fights on, while the Volga flotilla pounds at the German batteries. Russians are fighting with their backs to "Matushka Volga," the largest and today the most fateful river in warring Europe.

When I first knew "Little Mother Volga," she crept peacefully past Byzantine domes which look like upturned beets. She swirled around rickety landing stages where women in spotless head-shawls sold baked fish and breadstuffs to uncouth muzhiks with matted beards.

Like our "Old Man River," the Mississippi, which she resembles in crawling length, in wide delta, shifting channels, and treacherous sandbars, Mother Volga knows what it is to "tote dat barge." The somber "Song of the Volga Boatmen" evokes a picture of peasants digging their bark sandals into the slippery mud and swaying their bodies against towlines which furrow their heaving chests.

Then came the modern steamers of the century-old Volga Steam Navigation Company and shallow-draft oil barges, bringing up fuel from the Baku refineries (pages 795-6). On broad decks, passengers sat at ease or dined on sterlet or beef Stroganov. Through wide windows they watched the sunset behind the relatively high west bank (page 800).

The lower river at times spreads wider than the English Channel between Dover and Calais. Low, dark masses, each with its cabin, seemed like islands. Then crude sweeps in motion showed them to be log rafts, ponderously floating down from dark forests toward the barren, treeless steppe, there to be broken up on the river bank at journey's end.

Peacetime Volga was becoming a power source and thirst quencher for earth and man. In 1937 an elaborate system of dams, canals, generating and pumping stations was completed between Russia's thirsty metropolis and the river. Moscow began to drink its fill of Volga water and to enjoy more baths.

Snow-white, streamlined pleasure boats moved through artificial lakes. Outboard motorboats skipped past the new port building at Khimki. To white-bloused tea drinkers and muffled skaters, reclamation was fun.

For the first time, two chief objects of Russian devotion—Little Mother Volga and the Kremlin at Moscow—were joined. When the crowded capital needed electricity, hydroelectric stations generated power. When "juice" was not in demand, electric motors pumped water over the rise between Volga and capital. That is a long way from barge-hauling by the thigh-power of Volga boatmen.

Other plans were afoot. Across the now blood-drenched, savagely contested neck of land between the Don and the Volga, another canal system was to turn Europe into an island, bounded on the east by an all-Russian waterway from the White Sea to the Black.

Around the Samara's "Horseshoe Bend"

Near the Samara Bend, the largest hydroelectric station in the world was to stretch its two-mile dam and force the mud-heavy Volga to do the quick, clean work of turbine and dynamo. It was planned to generate more power than Grand Coulee wrings from the steeper Columbia.

Then, as at Chicago, streams were to flow backward, and northbound rivers, now wasting their waters in the Arctic Ocean, would refresh the thirsty wastes around the Caspian. From rain-soaked forest swamp, Volga water flows into the Caspian Depression, where pitiless sun and parched land drink it up.

East of Moscow, where the Volga joins the Oka, Nizhni Novgorod has become Gorki and the famous Fair has been eclipsed by the Gorki Motor Works (page 808).

From Gorki's kremlin, whose walls occupy the site of a 13th-century palisade, one can look down on the low-lying fairgrounds to which tea came overland from China, iron goods from the Urals, fish from the Caspian, and furs from Siberia.

I still remember the fur-lined, fur-collared coat of heavy broadcloth which I stroked there at the Nizhni Fair. Alexander Kerensky had made his last speech in Moscow's Grand Opera, and October 25, 1917, Soviet Independence Day (November 7, New Style) was close at hand. But the afternoon sun was warm, my baggage was heavy, and so was the

coat. How often, during that bitter winter in Transcaucasia, I regretted my indecision at the Nizhni Novgorod Fair!

As I passed the stalls of accordions and icons, looked at the goldwork in Brazilian Passage, or fingered Persian carpets in the Caravanserai, the Fair was slowly dying. War had kept some dealers home. Private trading was on the decline.

Even the ornate cathedrals seemed monuments of the past. But in the little mosque, beside a canal near the back of the fairgrounds, Moslems from Asia touched their foreheads to soft-colored rugs as they bowed toward Mecca, far to the south.

Tatar Kazan Smells of Russian Leather

The Asiatic aspect of Volga life becomes even more pronounced in Kazan, which smells of Russian leather. It has many humble mosques, although church domes and steeples dominate the skyline. Their presence symbolizes the triumph of Slavic Christians over Mohammedan Turko–Mongols. But for Slavic success and Yermak's conquest of Siberian lands, the Volga, not the Urals, would be the edge of Asia.

Since Kazan's name never smacked of tsardom, it was kept as that of the capital of the Tatar Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic. This Tatar Republic is one of several such autonomous regions along the Volga. In each of them, loyalty to the Soviet Republic has developed without interference with local cultures. The Maris, Chuvashes, Tatars, Volga Germans, and Kalmyks speak their own languages and retain many of their own customs and costumes.

Although Kazan manufactures typewriters and movie film and has become a center for scientific factory production and agriculture, its Asiatic cast of countenance dates back to the Golden Horde. Led by descendants of Genghiz Khan, these Tatars swept across Europe to Hungary. They retreated to pitch their magnificent camp across the Volga from the site of Stalingrad and were crushed, after a century and a half of nomadic warfare, by Timur the Lame.

High above the little Kazanka River is a Tatar tower which bears the name of a legendary Princess Syuyumbeka, who threw herself from the 250-foot height when, after a long siege, Ivan the Terrible took Kazan in 1552.

Below Kazan the clear waters of the Kama, sweeping in from the Urals to mix with the muddy Volga, brought passengers to the rail. From here on the Volga's course is to the south, and a high bank, cut by ravines down which passengers pour to the steamer, lies to the west. The low east bank is the western edge of steppe lands where Kirghiz and Mongol roam between the Volga and China's Yellow River.

Always on Volga River trips I would visit the crowded quarters below. Men, women, and children lolled about, resting wherever they could, drinking boiled milk or kvass from upturned bottles, tearing the crinkly skin of freshly baked fish or eating the heavy black Russian bread.

In the Days of "Wall Newspapers"

All around were the "wall newspapers" which were long prominent in Soviet life. They were highly colored, and often embellished with original cartoons. Combination poster and gossip sheet, these periodicals had a high ratio of readers per issue. When I tried to get one as a souvenir of awaking Russia, I was told the demand was so great that they were distributed by lottery to become decorations of the home.

Volga steamers burn *mazut*, a by-product of oil refining, and the throb of huge filling pipes to the thrust of the pumps is always a source of wonder as the steamers wait at landing stages. These may rise or fall as much as 50 feet between high water and low, depending on seasonal swelling.

The Volga voyage in other days was as peaceful as it now is stark drama, when every available bottom is on war duty. Passengers slept late and spent long hours at table, but in one stretch paying attention to the scenery was a "must." Below Stavropol the steamer enters as much of a gorge as the landscape allows and circles the 100-mile Samara Bend to arrive at a spot only 13 miles away, across the neck.

This is to become the greatest hydroelectric center in Soviet Russia, and a vast area on the east bank, from Kuibyshev to Stalingrad ultimately is to be brought under irrigation. Since water diverted to irrigation will not reach the already shrinking Caspian, Russian scientists planned to tap a whole succession of rivers, reaching as far as the Dnieper.

By making the Crimea an island and diverting fresh water into the Sea of Azov, this might be done without killing the Don-fed fish. As in America, reclamation engineers have to consider many problems.

Samara Bend is the key to vast changes which will facilitate irrigation and river traffic and rob the Arctic of iceberg material in order to give thirsty central Asia a drink. The hydroelectric works at both ends of Samara Bend are major factors in this vast scheme.

Volga Passengers on the *Karl Marx* Enter the Caspian through a Man-made Channel

Where Russia's life line enters the Caspian, dredges continually clear a deepwater passage through encroaching silt. Up this longest river in Europe flow vital Baku oil and United States lend-lease supplies, sent to Russia through Iran. The Caspian, 85 feet below sea level and with no outlet, is ever becoming shallower.

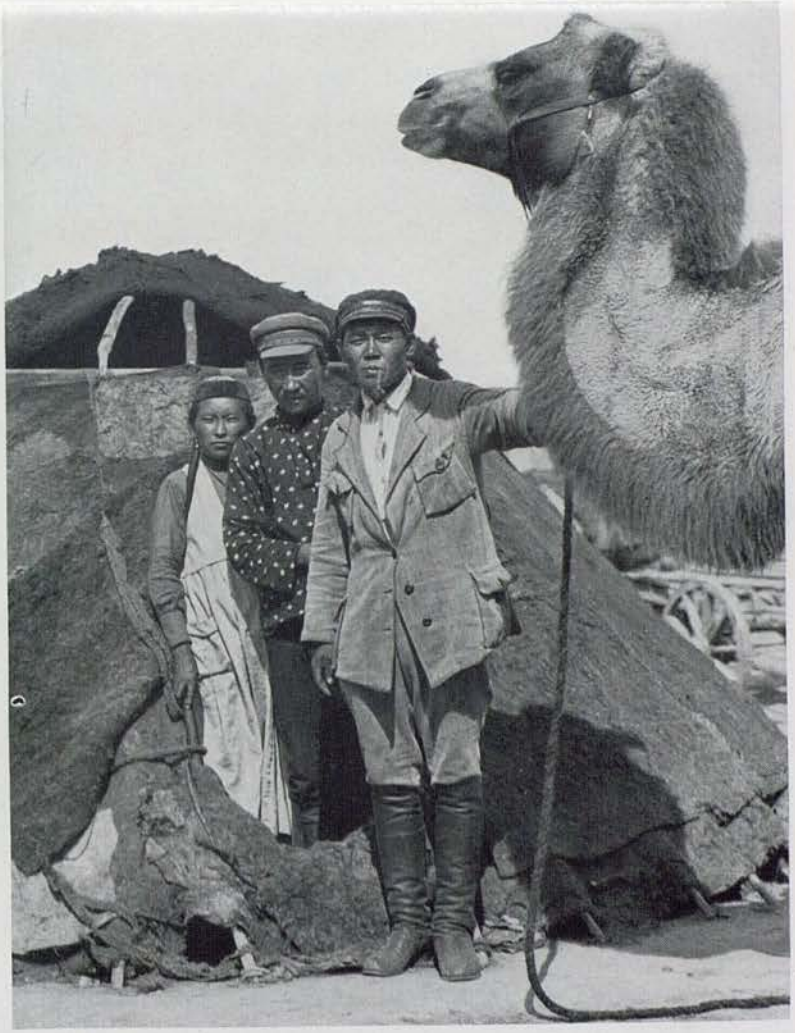
To Hungry Peasants in Peacetime, Eating or Sleeping, the Volga Voyage Means One Big Loaf

Before embarking at Nikolskoe, deck passengers buy fruit and an armful of bread. Hot water for tea is always available and many travelers carry their own teakettles wherever they go. Because the river trip was considered a rest cure, first- and second-class quarters on the upper deck were maintained in relative luxury with single cabins and excellent restaurant service.

Junius B. Wood

Assistant Captain Brietzovskaya Gives Orders by Trumpet

Women, such as this officer of the steamer *Goncharov,* have long played a part in Soviet life. Housewives and industrial workers, even children, assisted in the defense of Stalingrad.

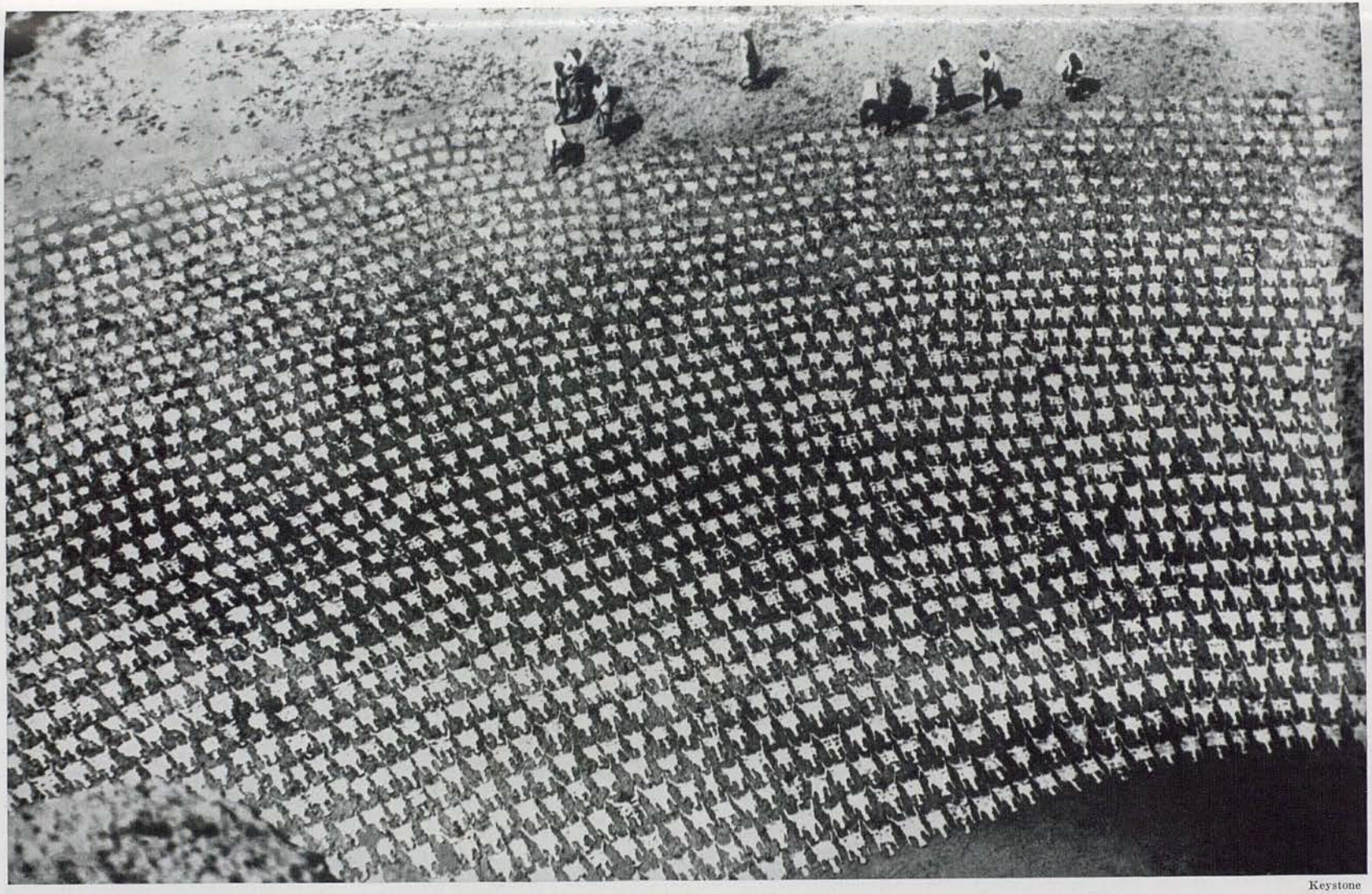


Herodotus Described Such Kalmyk Dwellings 2,400 Years Ago

Though these Mongol nomads are being encouraged to settle and farm along the lower Volga, they still cling to felt tents, their traditional homes on the Asiatic steppe (page 809).

Astrakhan Fisher Folk Gather about the Samovar, Shiny Symbol of Slavic Hospitality

When a connoisseur shows hospitality, he orders expensive caviar, served in a block of ice. In Astrakhan, near the mouth of the Volga, bread and tea are relished by the peasant who could have the choicest caviar, if he preferred it. When the sturgeon roe is prepared for export the eggs are separated from the membrane and fatty substance by whipping with twigs and sifting.



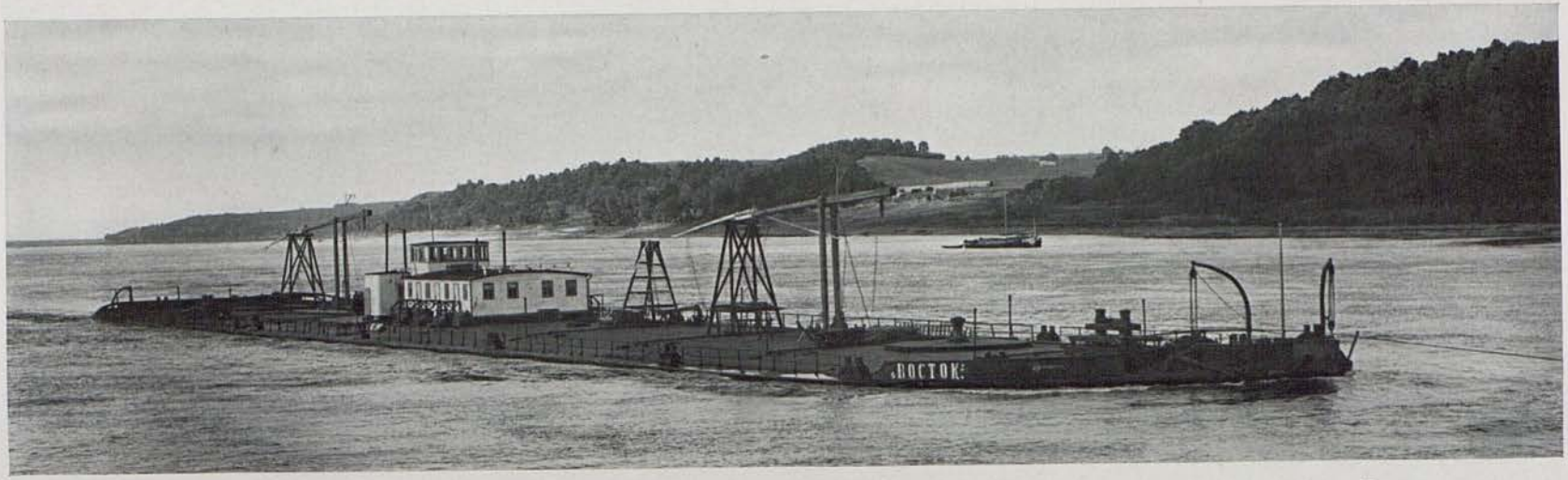
Keystone

Karakul Pelts, before Tickling Feminine Fancy and Chins, Are Regimented on Astrakhan's Sun-baked Steppe

When grandmother wore the tightly curled fur of young or stillborn lamb, she called it "Astrakhan." Now the trade name for that fine fur is Caracul Lamb, which includes the choice but perishable Broadtail, the tightly curled Persian and Krimmer Lamb. The best skins come from Afghan and Russian Turkistan.

Wartime Soviet Capital of Kuibyshev Presents an Imposing Facade to the Volga

In mid-October, 1941, when the Germans were advancing, Kuibyshev became temporary capital of the U.S.S.R., although Stalin remained at Moscow.

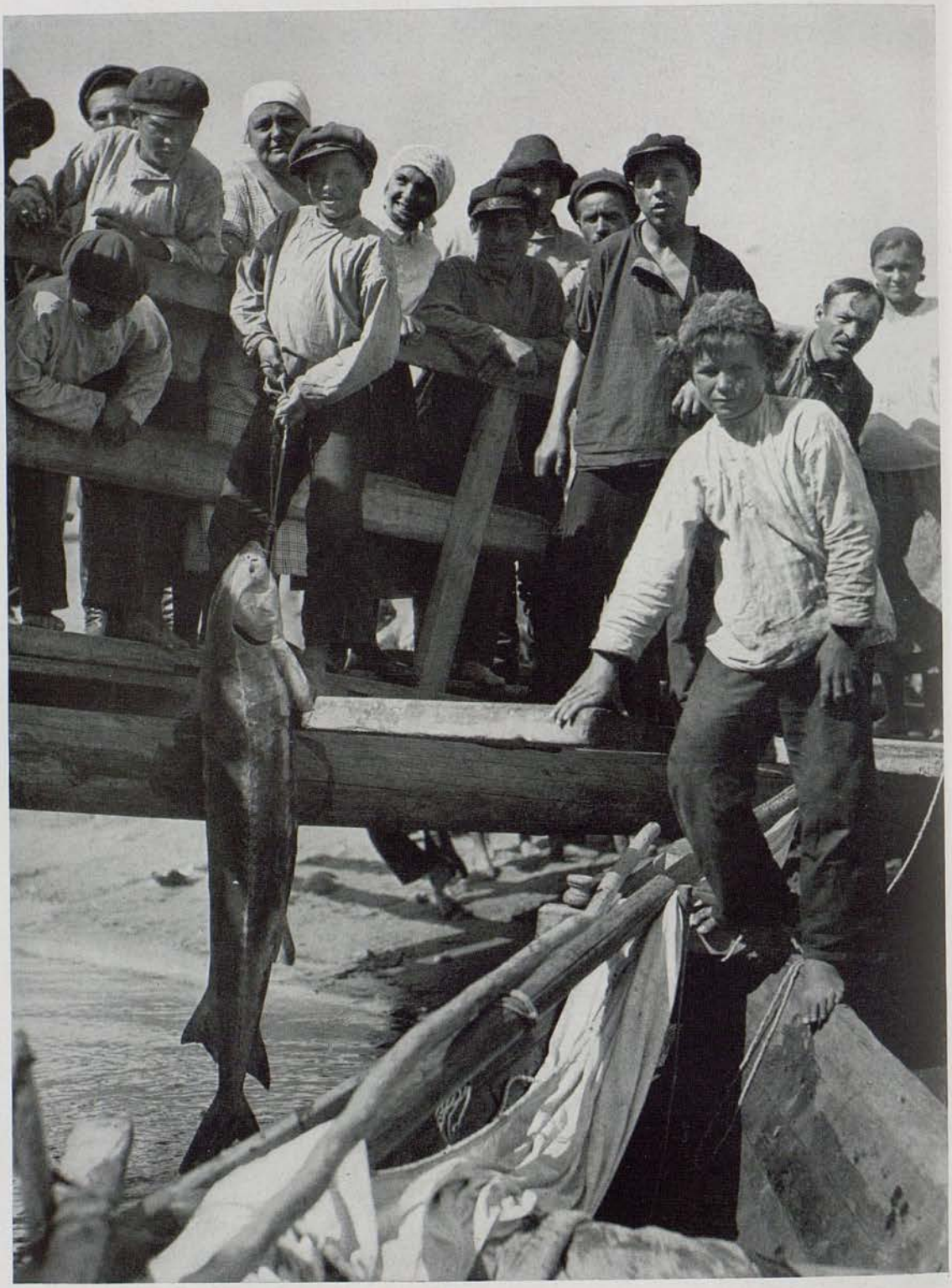


The *Vostok* Must Be Up-river Bound—She Is Chock Full of Oil and the Volga's High West Bank Is to Port

To gain the Volga and sever this vital artery for oil from Baku, the Germans launched their costly Stalingrad drive.

Such Smiling Women of Stalingrad Are Helping in Its Stubborn Defense

Behind the fruit sellers is a spur line beside the Volga, whence trains formerly ran to the Don. A year ago Stalingrad was a long, riverside industrial city of nearly half a million. Today most of the machinery is gone, the city a shambles, and its name famous for its stubborn stand against Nazi attack.



He Keeps His Live Sturgeon on a Leash until a Buyer Comes

Along the lower Volga, a lad pulls up a sturgeon for inspection even though he knows it is "no sale." In Astrakhan there are large tanks in which the live sturgeon are kept. From one large roe sturgeon may come caviar worth $480 in Washington, D. C., retail stores. Little caviar is being imported into the United States today.

Asia's Burden Bearer, Turned Draught Animal, Rests beside the Volga

In the hot Kalmyk steppe a ship of the desert grounds his bony keel close to Russia's chief highway for river boats.

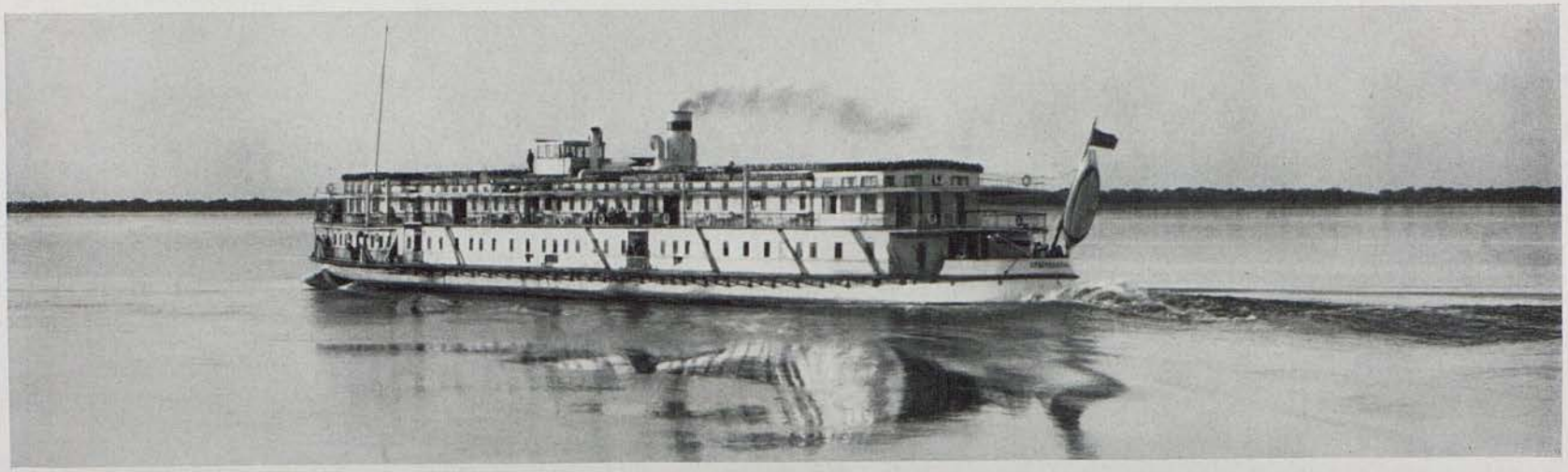
Apple Seller and Old-clothes Man Count the Cost at Stalingrad

That was in peacetime. Now the whole world counts the cost of inching forward and back through the war-torn streets, perhaps paying as many lives for an apartment house as it would hold in tenants.

From U.S.S.R. Embassy

Outboard Motors Race Past the New Port at Khimki, on the Moscow-Volga Canal

Formerly this was a neglected, narrow ravine. Now tea drinkers crowd the colonnades, and in winter the port becomes a skating rink.



With Its Tender Hung Like a Fishing Trophy, a River Steamer Shatters the Volga Mirror

Brain Food Paves a Street at Kuibyshev, Wartime Capital of One-seventh of the Earth

One corner of an outdoor market is devoted to books, some of them dating from before the revolution. Since October 25, 1917, thirst for knowledge has been a noticeable feature of Soviet life. In 1939, newspapers in the U.S.S.R. had a circulation of 37,500,000 and nearly 45,000 books were published in 99 languages.

Lenin, Standing on a Mechanistic Monument, Symbolizes the Turn toward Machines

Since the early days of Soviet Russia, emphasis has been on bolts, nuts, and mechanical processes. From this spot in Stalingrad, factories spread up and down the Volga for miles. After seven weeks of bombardment, some of these shops still repaired Soviet tanks and trucks while under fire.

A Sunday Market at Kuibyshev Spreads Its Stalls beside a Bright-domed Church

The breath of winter has already touched this outdoor market, though it is only mid-October. The women have added a petticoat and the men donned warmer coats. Anything is sold here from fruit to large-horned phonographs. Now Kuibyshev's hotels are crowded with diplomats and refugees from the war to the west.

Russ Photo from Wide World

A Massive Cathedral Dominates the Flat Site of the Annual Market at Gorki, Granddaddy of Fairs

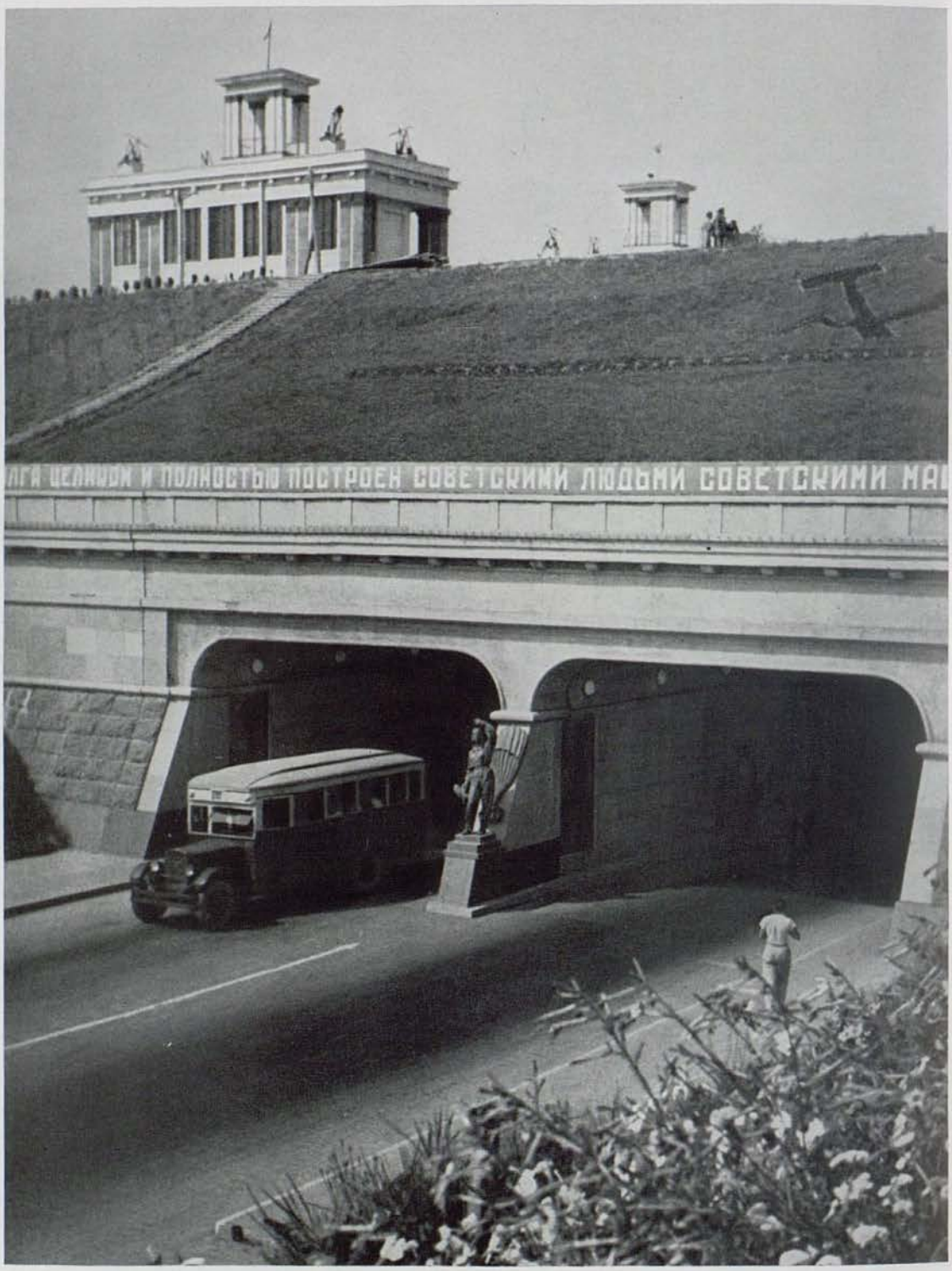
Rivers, flowing in from east and west, long since made the middle Volga region a center of barter. In 1817, this trade was fixed at Nizhni Novgorod, which now bears the pen name of Alexey Maximovich Peshkov, Maxim Gorki. Two great cathedrals bless this place of merchandise, patriarch of annual fairs. Buyers and sellers from China to Great Britain met here each summer. In 1880, goods worth $100,000,000 changed hands. World War I and state trade brought a set-back, but in 1927 more than 2,500 firms were again doing business at the old stand between the Oka, left, and the Volga, right.

In Their Dissimilar Faces Read the Story of Kazan

Hers suggests the Tatars who founded Kazan, his the Slavs who won it. Now the Tatars have their own autonomous republic of which Kazan is the capital.

Mother and Child Typify the Racial Complexity of the U.S.S.R.

Georgians, Armenians, Uzbeks, Kazaks, Kirghiz, Tatars, Germans, Chuvashes, Kalmyks, and many others are joined with Russians in the Soviet State.



Motor Bus and Drinking Water Speed toward Moscow—with the Water on Top

Against the skyline are two control towers along the Moscow-Volga Canal which crosses above the highway. It supplies the crowded capital with water and allows floating restaurants to dock outside the Kremlin walls. In four years, 1933-37, the Soviet carried out the dreams of Peter the Great to connect Russia's chief traffic artery, the Volga, with its heart, the Kremlin at Moscow.

Kuibyshev used to be Samara, where city folk drank fermented mare's milk in kumiss establishments, famous wherever indigestion was known. Kirghiz still use this combination of lactic acid, carbonic acid gas, and alcohol to get drunk. Invalids, using it to soothe, rather than inflame their stomachs, drink quarts of mare's milk wine in its milder stages.

End of Caravans' Trail

Before Kuibyshev became an auxiliary war capital, it was the gateway to the steppe, to Tashkent, Samarkand, Bukhara, and beyond (pages 800 and 807).

Here caravans of double-humped camels dumped their cargoes at the end of the sandy trail. Soon after I first passed through Samara with the Vladivostok-bound Czechoslovak legions in 1918, other trainloads of Czechs took over Samara. Meanwhile Kuibyshev, who later won Samara from the Czechs, was inspiring the "creative energy of the proletariat" or "waking the workers" and the transformed city which now bears his name is concrete evidence of his success. Kuibyshev, like Washington and New Delhi, is "enjoying" a war boom.

Opposite Saratov, whose sale of books is extraordinary, is the town of Engels, named after Friedrich Engels, who once said, "How beautiful the Russian language is: all the advantages of German without its terrible coarseness." But in Engels, German is spoken freely and has been since Catherine the Great colonized this region with German settlers about 1764.

Originally from Bavaria, Alsace-Lorraine, and Switzerland, they are now loyal Russians. The Volga German Autonomous Republic is highly advanced in agriculture, industry, and education. Below Saratov, some of whose modern buildings suggest Düsseldorf, is a new bridge across the Volga, one of Russia's largest and a much-sought prize of war.

Tsaritsyn, whose new name, Stalingrad, may live far longer than its old one, owed its importance to the fact that Volga and Don were here close neighbors, with a railway between. In World War I it made guns for Vickers. Then it turned not to plowshares and pruning hooks but to tractors to cultivate Russia's famous black earth.

Now, as Stalingrad—for Stalin's name replaced that of the tsars—it has held the eyes of the world for weeks of living hell and immortal glory. As Tsaritsyn, it held 100,000 souls. Later its factories spread high and low along the Volga front and its population reached nearly half a million in 20 years. What is population in Stalingrad today, when death falls from the sky on friend or foe? One measures Stalingrad not in souls but in soul.

Down to Stalingrad the Volga is a river, even though it flows below sea level from Saratov on. But from Stalingrad to the Caspian the Volga is an ever-changing mosaic of land and water, now lined with tiny canals, now spreading wide in one solid expanse of water or ice.

Sturgeon migrate up to Sarepta, 15 miles below Stalingrad, and on their way upstream are caught and give up their roe not to their own kind but to *bon vivants* as black caviar (page 802). Twice delayed in Astrakhan, when butter and sugar could not be had, I ate choice caviar until I no longer have the appetite to wipe out a fish colony with one swallow. The Caspian's fish are estimated to equal 400,000 cattle in food value. But the fish value lost through eating caviar has not been computed.

In the dry plain above Astrakhan, hot in summer, cold in winter, live the Kalmyks, related to the Torhuts of Dzungaria, far to the east. Their capital, Elista, is in German hands.

Tending their Bactrian camels and supporting many Buddhist priests, they are settled remnants of a nomadic Mongol horde which went back to Mongolia to escape the government of Catherine and the conquering plows of her German colonists (pages 797 and 803).

The Kalmyks, who greeted me kindly, added much to the racial medley. As I saw them riding their high-reaching camels across the floor-level steppe, the Russia of thick beards, sunflower-seed diet, and voluminous blouses seemed far away indeed.

Returning to Astrakhan after visits to Bukhara and Merv, the lower Volga seemed a mere extension of central Asia, with pagoda-like temples replacing the bulbous church domes of the Russian scene.

There she flows, Russia's Mississippi, which unites the land from snowy pine forest to hot salt desert. For centuries she was a frontier, and may be again. Mother Volga nurtured her people, helped them eastward toward the vast expanse and mineral wealth of Siberia. All this summer she has been hard at work carrying machinery away, bringing up oil, or transporting lend-lease matériel from the Caspian to the battle front.

By December the softly flowing river will be a path of ice—more highway than barrier. But for precious months she has backed up her fighters and their fearless women against the Nazi foe, a life line in war as in peace.

From summer heat to winter chill, Little Mother Volga has played her part defending her own.

ASIA

AND ADJACENT AREAS

Compiled and Drawn in the Cartographic Section of
The National Geographic Society *for*
THE NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC MAGAZINE

Gilbert Grosvenor, Editor

Scale 1:15,900,000 or 250.2 miles to the inch

STATUTE MILES
KILOMETERS

International Boundaries as of Sept. 1, 1939, the day Germany invaded Poland.

Transverse Polyconic Projection

Capitals ◎ ⊛ Canals Ruins Painted ∞ Relief

Principal Railways Oil pipe lines Important Roads Trails

Railways under construction Great Wall of China Elevations in feet ▲ in meters

Areas below sea level Deserts Glaciers

James M. Darley, Chief Cartographer
Culture by Apollo E. Holzdick and Richman Chamberlin
Relief by John J. Brehm
Washington, December 1942

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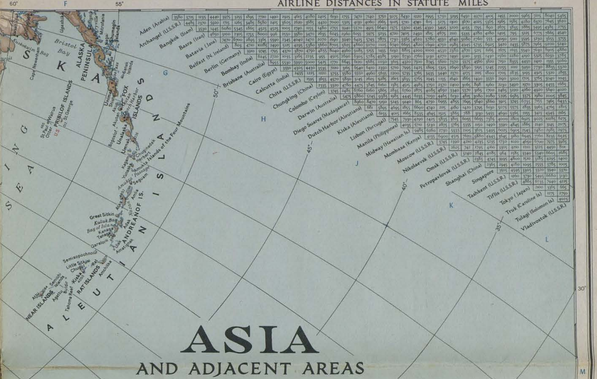
AIRLINE DISTANCES IN STATUTE MILES



GEOGRAPHICAL EQUIVALENTS

BAY, GULF, FJORD: B., Baai, Bale, Bukhta, Fjord, Golfe, Guba, Khor, Wan, Zaliv.
CAPE: Cabo, Cap, Chaa, Ghubbet, Kaap, Mis, Misaki, Pt., Pte. (pointe), Punta, Punt, Ras, Tg., Tanjung, Tanjong, Zaki.
DESERT: Dasht, Erg, Hamad, Hamada, Harrat (volcanic debris), Kum, Sevir.
ISLAND: Archipel (archipelago), Eilland, Eilanden (plural), Eylandt, Gr. (group), Gunto (archipelago), I., Ile, Iles (plural), Ilha, Ilhas (plural), Isole (plural), Jima, Koh, Ostrov, Ostrova (plural), Pulau, Pulo, Retto (archipelago), Shima, Shoto (plural), To.
LAKE: Chott, Sol, Solonchak, Tso, Shamsho, Ho, Kol, Kul, L., Lac, Lago, Lough, Mer, Mor, Ozero, Oz., Tso.
MOUNTAIN: Dagh, Dagher (plural), Dal, G., Gok, Gebel (Jebergeb, Gory, Jabel, Kangri, Khr., Khrebet, Koh, Kuh, Mir, Mt., Mte., Mti., Nan, Nanshan), Ra. (range), Shan, Sierra (range), Tagh, Tau, Tsp, Toppen (plural), Yama.
PASS: Daba, Pass.
PENINSULA: Pen., Peninsulare.
REGION: Des.
RIVER: R., Rahr, Darya, Firth (estuary), Ho, Mr, Muren, Rud, Shi.
SEA: Denizi, Mare, Nada, Zee.
STRAIT: Bab, Chan. (channel), Bukit, Kaikyo, Proliv, Str., Strait, Straten, Suido, Sund (sound).
WADI: O., Oued, S., Uadi, W.
MISCELLANEOUS: Ain (spring), Bir (well), Dzong (fortress), Ste. (Sainte), Ste. (Sainte).

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