

Revolutionary Mongols, Lamas and Buddhism (1921-1941)

Research >
Central Asia

The history of Buddhism in Mongolia dates back to the thirteenth century when Kublai Khan established ties with the influential hierarchs of the Mahayana sect, Sakya, in Tibet. It was not until the sixteenth century when Altan Kan of the Tumet devoted himself to the then leading school, Gelug (the yellow faith), that this strand of Buddhism had been actively spreading across Mongolia. By the beginning of the twentieth century Gelug had become the official and dominant religion regulating all areas of everyday life. Yet in contemporary Outer Mongolia, Buddhism no longer plays its former great political, social, and cultural role. The Buddhist *sangha* of Outer Mongolia had been the main obstacle for the Mongolian People's Party (MPP) and the People's Government to maintain and enhance their power.¹ Therefore, the revolutionary and socialist changes in the Mongolian People's Republic (MPR) partly sought to dismantle the religious institutions causing them to vanish almost entirely. What happened to the Buddhist *sangha* and the Buddhists in Outer Mongolia in the early twentieth century? For 70 years the original sources which could provide the answer to this question were inaccessible to the West. However, the recent opening of Mongolian and Russian archives has allowed the author to reconstruct the facts and shed light on historical events.

By Irina Morozova

In the 1920s, lamas accounted for one third of the population and the Buddhist monasteries, which functioned as political, economic, educational, and cultural centres, had established a network in Mongolia as well as abroad. The clergy had its own administrative district, Shabinar, and consolidated more than 30 per cent of the national livestock. The monastic administration worked closely with the local secular authorities in matters such as taxation (involving payments in both money and in kind and even corvée labour). Thus strong monastic corporations preserved the local system of social and economic redistribution for centuries. In addition the monasteries held a monopoly on education. In short, any significant event in the life of a Mongolian always involved the presence of a lama.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Outer Mongolia was associated with the head of its Buddhist *sangha* and Shabinar, Bogdo-Gegen. The eighth Bogdo-Gegen, Jebtsundamba Khutagt, the Living Buddha, was a charismatic political leader, who was highly popular with the Mongols. As a result of the national revolution against the Qing rule in 1911 he became the first and last theocratic monarch of Mongolia.

The authority of Bogdo-Gegen, his theocratic government and influential *khutagts*, the Shabinar and monastic corporations, formed the main opposition to the Mongolian revolutionaries, the Soviet Bolsheviks and the agents of the Comintern, who had diversified their activities in East Asia during the 1920-1930s.² The Mongolian revolutionaries, instructed by their Soviet advisers, had to work out the general strategy and tactics. The aim of their policy was the elimination of Buddhist clergy as a political and social institution and the secularization of education in Mongolia. This process went through five main periods.

The anti-Chinese alliance

The period from 1921 to 1924 witnessed the tactical alliance of revolutionaries and lamas. The revolutionaries promised to liberate Mongolia from the Qing administration and Chinese colonialists and to declare Bogdo-Gegen the constitutional monarch. In return, the court of Bogdo-Gegen guaranteed the MPP full support in the 'liquidation of hereditary nobles and popularization of revolutionary ideas into the masses'.³ On 1 November 1921, the People's Government and Bogdo-Gegen signed the 'Treaty on Oath', according to which the Jebtsundamba Khutagt remained the nominal leader

of the Mongols and the symbol of the Mongolian State, but with the real power passing into the hands of the revolutionaries. Subsequently, the People's Government placed restrictions on the rights of Bogdo-Gegen and gradually implemented the administrative reforms of the Shabinar, according to the same status as other administrative districts.

During this period the MPP was weak and insignificant; its members were concentrated in the capital, Urga and large parts of the population living in distant regions were even unaware of the existence of the party. At that time, the revolutionaries could not operate without the lamas' administrative experience and their support in popular campaigns. Many lamas occupied key government positions and some even became members of the Central Committee of the MPP.

The new government was able to maintain its power in Urga thanks to the tolerant attitude of many high-ranking *khutagts* and nobles. Despite the events in Urga, the monastic lamas, continued busying themselves with local and internal affairs, as they perceived the MPP as a temporary political ally and remained fully unaware that they would soon become the victims of the revolution.

The death of Bogdo-Gegen and the declaration of the Mongolian People's Republic in 1924 seriously affected the political rights of the *sangha*, marking the end of the first period. The lamas concern became tangible and they now searched for ways to reach political consolidation, however in vain as between 1925 and 1928 the revolutionaries had politically neutralized them.

Meanwhile the MPP (since 1925 the Mongolian People's Revolutionary Party (MPRP)) had been successfully recruiting new members and raising new cadres. The new left-wing Party deviators (the Leftists) proposed drastic measures against the *sangha* and even against Buddhist religion. As their implementation could easily result in mass protests among the Mongols, the Comintern instructors recommended to the MPRP that they employ the tactics of 'social stratification of the lamas', that is instigating revolutionary agitation among the lower lamas against the high-ranking ones. The strategy failed because Buddhist ethics and the traditional respect for the elderly in nomadic society did not match with the mood of rebellion, which the Comintern agents tried to spread.

Crackdown on the lamas

At the fourth Congress, the MPRP openly declared the struggle against the



Gandan Monastery in Ulaanbaatar (founded in 1838), the central and largest monastery in Mongolia, is one of a few Buddhist temples that survived the socialist period.

high-ranking lamas and confessed to have accepted their assistance only under difficult circumstances. Soon after the law separating religion and state was passed in 1926, the Shabinar was abolished and its population was integrated into the other districts according to territorial principles.

In 1928 the revolutionaries placed a ban on seeking reincarnations, thus refusing the demands of the *sangha* for the ninth reincarnation of Bogdo-Gegen. Since that time, no other Living Buddha has been allowed to appear and perform as political and spiritual symbol of Outer Mongolia.

By refusing political authority to the *sangha*, the MPRP did not solve the 'lama question'. The majority of the population kept on worshipping Buddha's disciples and sending children to the monasteries to study and the monastic livestock and property also continued to expand. The former an eye-sore, the latter was most threatening and challenging to the power of the MPRP, which decided to confiscating the property of nobles and lamas at its Seventh Congress at the end of 1928. This event marked the beginning of a new period in revolutionary politics and proved fatal to the lamas.

From 1929-1932 the economic foundation of monasteries was eliminated. The confiscation of monastic property during the *jas* campaign formed part of forced mass collectivization between 1930 and 1932.⁴ It is interesting to note that the Comintern and Soviet advisers warned the MPRP against launching this campaign, considering it to be too risky.⁵ This time, however, the Mongolian Leftists acted on their own initiative. Local party authorities confiscated monastic livestock by force and transferred it to collective pastures. Leftist enthusiasts violently overturned the social and economic relations of the nomads that had evolved over cen-

and the Buddhist *sangha*, became more obvious than ever.

The newest (and the latest) stage of 'lama policy' started in 1936, when H. Choibalsan consolidated power and promoted repressive organizations that introduced the reign of terror in the MPR. At that time, not only high-ranking *khutagts*, but all lamas were labelled 'number one contra-revolutionary elements', 'enemies of the Mongolian nation', and 'agents of Japanese imperialism'. From 1937 to 1940 the Buddhist *sangha* of Outer Mongolia was liquidated. According to most Mongolian historians, around 35,000 lamas suffered some form of repression; ranging from mental torture to execution. Some researchers suggest the numbers of up to 90,000 (out of a total 100,000).

In 1937 many Mongols wanting to become Buddhist monks were prohibited from doing so, and those lamas who were ready to give up their religious status gained social benefits from the government. In 1938 alone, 760 monasteries out of a total 771 had been closed and the expropriation of all monastic property was completed in the next year. These events meant the end of a former socio-economic and political elite in Mongolia – the lamas.

The last assault was made on the cultural front. The Tibetan and Mongolian writing systems, which were the basic means of Buddhist teaching, were to be eliminated. As long as people continued to read and write in these languages, which, as the revolutionaries believed could not express modern concepts, they would remain deaf to the cultural achievements of the revolution. Thus, in March 1941, the Central Committee of the MPRP announced the adoption of Cyrillic as the new Mongolian alphabet. This step was crucial in the formation of a secular, Soviet-style educational system. It had taken the revolutionaries about 20 years (1921-1941) to liquidate the great and powerful Buddhist *sangha* of Outer Mongolia. <

Dr Irina Y. Morozova received her PhD in history from the Institute of Asian and African Studies of Lomonosov Moscow State University. She wrote her dissertation on the social transformation of Outer Mongolia in the twentieth century. Her research interests cover the modern and contemporary history of Central Asia. Dr Morozova is presently an IAS affiliate fellow, working on the project 'Conflict, Security and Development in the Post-Soviet Era: Towards Regional Economic Cooperation in the Central Asian Region'. imorozova@fmg.uva.nl

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- 1 The *sangha* is the community of Buddhist monks, linked together by internal structure, hierarchies and regulations. The Mongolian *sangha* is represented by different types of lamas and high-ranking lamas, called *khutagts*.
- 2 The politics of the Third Communist International in Mongolia is described in: Morozova, Irina Y., *The Comintern and Revolution in Mongolia*. Cambridge: White Horse Press (2002).
- 3 Russian State Archive of Social-Political History (RSASPH). F. 495. Sch. 152. D. 3, l.2.
- 4 *Jas* (Mong.) are monastic households.
- 5 RSASPH. F. 495. Sch. 3. D. 55, l. 16; D. 72, l. 31; Sch. 154. D. 391, l. 56; Sch. 4. D. 73, l. 8, 9.