

PERIODS OF AUTONOMY IN EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY MONGOLIA (1911–1921)

When Mongolia arrived on the international scene in the early 1900s, the country fluctuated between being autonomous and being under Chinese control. Within a span of ten short years, the Mongols established a new autonomous theocratic government only to have it overtaken by the Chinese, attacked by the White Guard, and finally occupied by the Red Army. At the beginning of the twentieth century, nearly one seventh of the Mongolian population was ordained as lamas in the Mongolian Sangha.¹ Buddhism remained active within Mongolia during these years, but the focus of the Sangha began to lean toward Mongolian political figures who also served as religious leaders. Robert Rupen claims that at this time,

Buddhism so permeated Mongolian society, and religious leaders exercised so much political and economic power, that the most critical questions concerned the retention or elimination of the church, or to some degree of compromise with it. Mongolian nationalism was almost inseparable from Buddhism.²

In essence, to speak of the Mongol polity during this period of autonomy would be the same as speaking of Mongolian Buddhism.

For this reason, it is important to examine the intellectual figures that emerged from and around the Manchu-influenced Mongolian Sangha throughout the period of autonomy. Most of the intelligentsia came to constitute a new third group of lamas led by the Bogd Gegeen, who

along with the Sain Noyon Qaan was perhaps the most influential leader within the Sangha during the Mongol fight for independence.³

Under the auspices of the Bogd Gegeen, monasteries continued to prosper and remained unaffected by the political instability that was otherwise threatening Mongolia. The educational system underwent slight modification. According to Kaplonski, both China and Japan influenced the educational reforms that were attempted by some high-ranking lamas and nobles.⁴ By now the Sangha's pedagogical system had led to a cultural trend wherein the lamas were regarded as the intellectual representatives of Mongol society. This monopoly allowed Mongolian Buddhism to continue to increase its dominant role in medical practices.⁵ Mongolian art and craftsmanship became another venue for the Mongolian Sangha. In addition to the many Buddhist paintings and religious paraphernalia generated, the lamas were known as the best tailors, dyers, and manufacturers of *ger*, which were the common dwellings for most Mongols.⁶

The *shabinar* had not stopped growing. By 1918 the Bogd Gegeen had 8,833 *shabi* families and the Sain Noyon Qaan had almost 2,000, and their numbers became political assets for the two Buddhist leaders.⁷ The noted increase of Mongolian lamas most likely was the direct result of the Mongolian Sangha's separation from China and the subsequent increase in the political potential of the Mongolian lama. Overall, this was a period of real resurgence for Buddhists in Mongolia, as Rupen states:

The huge Buddhist sector consisted of 115,000 lamas and 750 resident monasteries (another 1,850 temples were not lived in). . . . In Urga alone, thirteen thousand lamas lived at *Da Khure* [monastery], and another seven thousand at *Gandang* [Gandan Monastery].⁸

It must be noted that there were also periodic accusations and claims of corruption involving the Bogd Gegeen, all of which were systematically censored. Considering the situation, it would have been unlikely not to find corruption within the Buddhist hierarchy. Today, however, Mongols think highly of the Bogd Gegeen's presence during the autonomous period. While they note his improprieties, they also give him credit for his role in proclaiming Mongolia's independence.⁹

On October 10, 1911, a civil war broke out in China that resulted in the ousting of the Manchus, who had ruled Mongolia for over 297 years. China was now a republic.¹⁰ The political turmoil within China resulted in a new administration that the Bogd Gegeen was disinclined to obey.¹¹ With the urging of the Sain Noyon Qaan, Rupen reports, the Bogd Gegeen and his congress sent a letter to Russia again requesting support: "This congress resolved to turn to Russia for help, and sent a small delegation (Qangda Dorji Wang, Da Lama Tseren Chimit, and Qaisan) to St. Petersburg with a letter to the Tsar, dated July 7, 1911, and signed by the four Qalkha *Qaan*, lay princes of Mongolia."¹²

In an effort to terminate Chinese political control in Mongolia, the Bogd Gegeen made a bold move in December 1911. With full recognition of the surrounding princes, the Bogd Gegeen was inaugurated as the Bogd Qaan, ruler of Mongolia.¹³ This act was accomplished through the support of the Russians, who sent an infantry battalion to the capital under the pretext of protecting Russian diplomats.¹⁴ This act of independence was not simply confined to what is now known as Outer Mongolia, but pertained to all Mongols, including those who were residing in Inner Mongolia. In effect, Mongols from northern Mongolia and those living north of the Great Wall were now emancipated from the Chinese.¹⁵

Throughout his transition from religious leader to king, the Bogd Gegeen commanded the respect of both the Mongol nomads and the Buddhist laity.¹⁶ His private affairs, however, produced strife among the lamas. According to Larry Moses:

There was an atmosphere of degeneration about the fin-de-siecle court of the eighth Khutukhtu, the first and last King of Mongolia. After the death of his consort he decided to take another wife and sent emissaries to collect suitable names: his choice fell on the wife of a wrestler. . . . The Khutukhtu himself maintained for some time a liaison with one of his attendants, a man called Legtseg: the two used to change clothes and reverse their roles and had a homosexual relationship. . . . In the end Legtseg was arrested, apparently at the Khutukhtu's instigation.¹⁷

Previous incarnations of the Bogd Gegeen had enjoyed consorts as well. Although the Mongolian Sangha tacitly condoned this custom, it was unacceptable according to Mongolian Buddhist tenets. The promiscuous actions of the Eighth Bogd Gegeen essentially pushed the boundaries of what was already a lenient Mongolian Sangha.

Aside from his personal life, the newly appointed Qaan of Mongolia had a plethora of political issues with which to concern himself. Initially the Bogd Qaan had hoped to convince the new president of the Chinese republic that Outer Mongolia's independence meant only self-preservation, and that the Chinese should not be concerned with Mongolia's alliance with the Russians. In his pleas, the Bogd Qaan used the transition to independence as a means of preserving Mongolia's economy and religion:

To President Yüan, Republic of China . . . Due to crises last winter, Outer Mongolia proclaimed its independence and I, Javzundamba Khutagt, was elevated by all as the Great Khaan of the Mongol nation, despite my utmost opposition. . . . The reason that Outer Mongolia proclaimed independence on this occasion was to strengthen our nation, defend our religion and retain our territorial integrity. . . . The position of Outer Mongolia, located in the frontier corner, is like "a solitary pile of eggs standing alone, helplessly, between powerful neighboring countries."¹⁸

The Bogd Qaan's simile of the pile of eggs was not far from the truth. Mongolia's army was neither well trained nor well armed, and a defense of its perimeters was nearly impossible. Being adjacent to two incredibly strong militaries only accentuated Mongolia's fragile state. Unfortunately, the Bogd Qaan's appeals were not heard in the way he had intended. His letters to President Yüan only made Mongolia's weak military apparent and, furthermore, failed to assuage China's fears of Russia taking control of Mongolia. One of the Bogd Qaan's generals, Damdinsüren, expressed grave concern over Mongolia's tenuous and vulnerable position:

The enemy soldiers could penetrate the capital, Khüree, from three directions. There are many Chinese and Russians whose exact origins

are not clear and are gathering everywhere in the vicinity seeking profit. Therefore I beg you to consider seriously the question of the defence of this area and I beg you to issue a decree ordering the prompt training of the soldiers of the area.¹⁹

Damdinsüren had cause for concern. The Chinese refused to recognize Mongolia's autonomy and interpreted Russian diplomacy regarding Mongolia's moves towards independence as suspiciously overactive.²⁰ Aside from the Chinese, who now saw the retaking of Mongolia as feasible, it could be safely asserted that the Russians had more to gain from an autonomous Mongolia than Mongolia itself. Mongolia's geographic location could serve as an excellent buffer for either Russia or China. Chinese withdrawal from Mongolia provided Russia with the ideal opportunity for Russia to exert its influence, which had been kept to a minimum until the twentieth century.²¹

Despite this volatile international framework, it was imperative for the Bogd Qaan to assemble a legitimate government. Once Mongolia was no longer under the political auspices of the Chinese, it was the Bogd Qaan's task to create a government that reflected both Mongol religious and political sovereignty. According to Baabar, debates arose over who would act as prime minister and oversee both religious and state affairs. If the tradition of the Mongolian Sangha was to be followed, then the head of the Sangha would oversee both, but this was an option that was stridently rejected by the nobility:

According to the Lamaist religious canon, the head of the church was to oversee both religious and state affairs, but a conflict arose between the secular nobles and lamas as to whom would oversee state affairs—a layman from the Golden Lineage or a religious figure.²²

The disagreement was finally resolved with the nomination of the Sain Noyon Qaan, who was believed to be a direct descendent of Chinggis Qaan, thereby satisfying both political and religious contenders.²³

This new government was comprised of ministries and a bilateral legislature called the Great Qural and the Lesser Qural. The majority of

the ministers and members of these Qurals were princes or landowners. According to Moses, this legislature served more as an advisory committee than as a lawmaking body. He further notes that surprisingly few high-ranking lamas were appointed to the new government.²⁴ There are several possible reasons for this. One reason may be the duplicity surrounding Chinese-placed ecclesiastical figures in the Mongolian Sangha. Another reason may be due to the fact that the Bogd Qaan was wary of any religious figure that might threaten his position. This attitude could have resulted from the Qaan's insecurity concerning his political improprieties. Soviet sources support this latter theory, claiming that the Bogd Qaan poisoned rival figures, the Sain Noyon Qaan (who had received the command of the Ministry of the Interior as well as the Office of Prime Minister) and Qangda Dorji (who had been awarded the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in order to avoid closer relations with Russia).²⁵

As a result of his high social stature and his deft, though sometimes improper, political dealings, the enormous power enjoyed by the Bogd Qaan during the autonomous period virtually went unchecked and resulted in uncontested and unequal distributions of power. Consequently, disparities between the laity and the Sangha increased at a steady rate in a fashion comparable to the Manchu period, largely due to the increased size of the *shabinar*. Under the Bogd Qaan's government it was such an economic advantage to be a *shabi* that some princes elected to become *shabi* just to avoid state taxes, which served to further centralize the economic and political power of the Mongolian Sangha.

It is significant for the changing state of Mongol society that, during the years of autonomy (1911 to 1919), the economic advantages of being subject to the jurisdiction of the Great Shabi, as the estate of the Jebtsundamba Khutukhtu, at that time the King of Mongolia, was known, rather than the secular administration, were such that whole groups of people transferred from one to the other. . . . An extreme example of such a voluntary transfer is that of the high lama known as the Mergen Bandida Khutukhtu, who in 1914, took fifty families of his own shabi with him to become shabi of the Jebtsundamba Khutukhtu's estate.²⁶

With his power clearly established, the Bogd Qaan turned his attention to expanding the boundaries of his dominion, just like his Mongol theocratic predecessors. He recognized that the Mongols of Outer Mongolia had sought to unite with those of Inner Mongolia for some time. Unfortunately, the Chinese remained in control of Inner Mongolia. Therefore, in order for the Bogd Qaan to unite Inner and Outer Mongolia, he would need the support of the Russian government.²⁷ At this time the Russians were still negotiating with the Chinese for the autonomy of Outer Mongolia. Under their new administration, the Chinese refused to recognize the separation of Mongolia. Soviet records indicate that:

Voicing the views of the trading, usurer and bureaucratic circles of China, the government of Yüan Shih-kai categorically refused to recognize the separation of Mongolia from China. An equally decisive refusal was given to tsarist Russia's proposal that Mongolia be given internal autonomy.²⁸

Thus, the possibility of a unified Inner and Outer Mongolia became out of the question. Without the presence of a religious leader, Inner Mongolia was left factious, with various princes vying for control, even though in the minds of the Inner Mongolians the Bogd Qaan's status was just as prominent as it was for the Outer Mongolians. The mere fact that the Bogd Qaan commanded a unified and autonomous front in opposition to the Chinese elevated him in the eyes of the Inner Mongols and this threatened Chinese authority.²⁹ In the end, though, it was the Russians, in tenuous diplomatic negotiations with the Chinese over Outer Mongolia's autonomy, who forced the Bogd Qaan and Outer Mongolia to accept the finality of the separation from Inner Mongolia.³⁰

The failure of the Bogd Qaan administration to unite Mongolia and his own failure to abide by Buddhist principles, interestingly, appeared to cause no significant political repercussions among the Mongol populace. However, the Sangha reacted strongly to the Bogd Gegeen's dissolute behavior. Bawden notes that during the corruptive incarnations of the Bogd Gegeen there emerged a third party of lamas.³¹ Whereas before

this time there was a two-party split (the high-ranking lamas and the low-ranking *shabinar*), a third group now came into existence made up of the lama intellectuals and the *shabinar*.³² This group found the actions of the Bogd Qaan unacceptable and strove for a more enlightened form of Buddhism:

The last Khutukhtu's [Bogd *Gegeen*] vices and excesses may not have affected his standing among the ordinary faithful, but did lower him in the estimation of the lamas of Urga, and there was a vocal, though ineffective, opposition both among the learned lamas and the lower orders, to his displays of immorality. The clergy was losing faith in its leaders, not only in the Khutukhtu, but also in other high lamas who were despised for their drunkenness and lasciviousness.³³

The presence of the intellectual lamas was de-emphasized during the socialist period in Mongolia because it detracted from the Soviet political position that the Mongolian Sangha was, in its entirety, feudalistic. In order to avoid ambiguity, it was necessary for Soviet and socialist Mongol historians to say that an economic tyranny was derived from a Mongolian Sangha whose feudal high-ranking lamas oppressed a second group of lower-ranking lamas. This was a binary system devoid of intellectual diversity. In reality, however, this was not the case. By 1915 there was only one secular school compared to a Sangha with over one hundred thousand lamas, all of whom had at least eight to ten years of education.³⁴ Although the majority of lamas were not intellectuals, any intellectual, especially those with socialist sentiments, had acquired some form of Buddhist pedagogical training. High-ranking lamas were taxed heavily before the intense purges of the 1930s in the hopes of "freeing" the low-ranking lamas and *shabi* from the feudal "clergy." This philosophy began shortly after the socialist revolution of 1921 and was expounded upon in Soviet history:

The ordinary, lower-ranking lamas formed part of the class of *arats*, constituting a special stratum in it. As Academician B. Ya. Vladimirtsov has correctly pointed out, lamas can be subdivided into two groups. "One

group comprises the re-incarnated Great lamas, all closely connected with the class of the Mongol feudal aristocracy. . . . The second group includes monks from the ordinary people, the *albatu* and *shabi*; they, of course, do belong to the class of simple, ordinary people."³⁵

At the same time, in 1927, Siklos states that in the first edition of the *Great Soviet Encyclopaedia*, it says that in the opinion of the Russians, the interactions between the Mongolian Sangha and the laity were, to some degree, egalitarian.³⁶

Both of these views, while problematic, are extreme in that the socialist view of the Mongolian Sangha categorically considered high-ranking lamas as feudal lords who oppressed the masses, although in reality some were activists who were involved in the early socialist movement. It is important to note that Buddhist nations, which have not experienced successful, strong socialist movements in comparison, view the Sangha as sacred and, to some extent, as a symbol of nationhood. In this vein, the Sangha's appropriation of land and the wealth of its members would be exempt, for the most part, from political derision, and its growth would be seen as emblematic of the nation's growth.³⁷

The other view comes from a nascent Soviet perspective that considered the Mongolian Buddhist hierarchy to be fluid and one in which any person could rise. In reality, it was extremely difficult for a *shabi* to rise to the level of a lama. Some key Buddhist intellectuals and lamas were not selected to serve in the Bogd Qaan's administration. As a result, these individuals focused their efforts on forming a new government that would, nonetheless, remain Buddhist. These figures included: Dog-somiin Boodoo, B. Puntsagdorj, and D. Losol, three of the seven elite leaders of the socialist revolution who were lamas; Qasbaatar, another lama who was a commander in the socialist revolution; and intellectual leaders such as Damba Dorji and Dja-Damba, socialist congressmen who fought for a different form of Buddhism that was more egalitarian, a concept that is present in classical Buddhist doctrine but obviously implemented during this period in Mongolia.³⁸

The last and perhaps most influential figure was a Buriat (ethnic group in Mongolia) by the name of Tsiben Jamtsarano, the initial mentor of

Choibalsan. According to Stephen Kotkin, Tsiben Jamtsarano was the most prominent Buriat intellectual of his time. As an intellectual with many social causes, Jamtsarano was also the leading voice for a new form of Buddhism that was compatible with socialism.³⁹ Aside from teaching Mongolian language and culture in St. Petersburg, he helped found the Mongol Scientific Committee in 1921 (which later became the Mongolian Academy of Sciences).⁴⁰

Later, many of these figures became influential members within the socialist government. It is conceivable that they could have been more instrumental in preventing later governmental attempts to eliminate Mongolian Buddhism; however, during the autonomous period, the political climate was never conducive for them to take this type of action. This was, in part, because the Manchu infrastructure of the Mongolian Sangha left no room for rising intellectual lamas.

Furthermore, the Bogd Qaan continued this political policy within his government by excluding many lamas from his legislature. Ironically, some of these lamas' actions directly led to the Bogd Qaan's dismissal.⁴¹ The lifestyle of the Mongols had not changed substantially for over two thousand years, and the only development Mongolia could boast about was its rising religiosity. Contemporary Mongol historians look somewhat disdainfully on this period of Mongolian Buddhism, seeing the religion as one of the reasons for Mongolia's lack of technological expertise and economic development into the early twentieth century:

When Lamaism first came to Mongolia it promoted social progress, but it developed to become superstition, outdated symbolism and stumbling block to social progress. Under the oppressive teachings of Lamaism, a form of Buddhist philosophy adopted by the backward nomads, the Mongols were prevented from enjoying the fruits of twentieth century civilization.⁴²

During this time period public opinion of the Mongolian Sangha wavered and secularism began to rise; popular secular intellectuals, such as Jamtsarano, continued to succeed in the academic community but were neglected under the Bogd Qaan's administration: "Some Outer Mongolians had come under the influence of an outstanding Buriad

Mongol intellectual, Tsyben Zhamtsarano, who ran a newspaper and a school during the period of autonomy."⁴³ Many early socialist revolutionaries found one another within this academic community, with some encounters orchestrated under the guidance of Bodoo and Jamtsarano.⁴⁴ Bodoo was a teacher at a Mongolian language school during the autonomous period. Through this job he met Qorlogiin Choibalsan, whom he brought to his home and adopted as a son.⁴⁵ Choibalsan, the most influential Mongol figure to emerge from the early seven revolutionaries of the Mongolian People's Revolutionary Party, later became Mongolia's prime minister.⁴⁶

The ending of the autonomous period is not entirely understood. Essentially, how the Chinese regained control of Mongolia is under dispute. Although the Bogd Qaan's *shabinar* were impressive in number, his military force was not. Moses writes: "At Urga itself, the rule of the Jebtsun Damba Qutugtu was not backed by a military force sufficient to counter a determined assault by any of the modern warlord armies in North China. When the challenge came in 1919, the government collapsed . . ." ⁴⁷ Some records indicate that the Bogd Qaan was persuaded to relinquish control, while others state that he and his government had no choice but to abdicate authority to the Chinese.⁴⁸

The Soviet Union was in the process of its own internal struggles during the Chinese advance, an occurrence that was more than just a coincidence. Russia had recently survived a revolution and was fighting against a renegade faction of the old government, the White Guard, led by Ungern-Sternberg. Unable to provide military assistance in sustaining its hold on Outer Mongolia, the Soviet Union issued a special proclamation directed more toward the Chinese and the White Guard than the Mongols:

On August 3, 1919, the Soviet government addressed a special appeal to the government and people of Autonomous Mongolia stating that it completely renounced the advantages and privileges which had been seized by tsarist Russia under the unequal treaties imposed by the latter. "Mongolia" the appeal said, "is a free country. All authority in the country must belong to the Mongolian people. No single foreigner has the right to interfere in the internal affairs of Mongolia."⁴⁹

A single foreigner, however, did interfere with Mongolia's internal affairs, Russian Baron Ungern-Sternberg. One of Ungern-Sternberg's chief armies, under the command of Semenov, found its way to Outer Mongolia in an attempt to capitalize on the Mongolian Sangha's large reservoir of livestock and other wealth.⁵⁰ The Chinese, who commanded a firm hold over the Mongol polity, directed the Bogd Gegeen to disperse troops to combat the White Guard. The Bogd Gegeen complied, appointing two *qotagt* to oversee and engage Russian troops in combat on the western and eastern frontiers.⁵¹

The devastation caused by the White Guard was severe. A Mongol recalled seeing old men, women, and children burned alive, their property confiscated.⁵² These occurrences were not uncommon, a direct result of the White Guard's destructive and frantic rush towards Siberia. The vast wealth that had been accumulated by the Mongolian Sangha (from the *shabinar*) was seized to fund Ungern-Sternberg's planned invasion of the Soviet Union. Murphy acknowledges Sternberg's actions were those of an insane man:

Ungern Sternberg's plans were clearly those of a disturbed man, and, in fact, his ruthless and demented activities in Urga clearly indicate his state of mind. . . . Because Sternberg planned a northward strike to destroy Bolshevism, Ungern-Sternberg planned a northward strike against Russia and the Bolsheviks he hated. No fully rational man soberly assessing his forces and the means at his disposal would have made such plans.⁵³

These coinciding invasions by the Chinese and the White Guard left much of the Mongol countryside stripped and barren. Lamas were killed, monastery structures were destroyed, and cattle were butchered or stolen.⁵⁴

Third-party lamas considered these occurrences to be a confirmation of the Bogd Gegeen's political ineptitude. They then initiated talks with Soviet Russia over a possible revolt against the Bogd Qaan's administration. The Soviets saw this as a perfect opportunity to position their military in Outer Mongolia. This last infiltration of Mongolia catalyzed what may be the most dramatic social change in Mongolian history and

propelled events that led to the demise of the Mongolian Sangha. In a letter to George G. S. Murphy on July 4, 1963, Soviet academician I. M. Maiskii wrote:

You ask me what were the considerations, and who were the chief decision-makers in the decision to commit Soviet troops to enter Mongolia in July 1921 to destroy Ungern Sternberg? My reply to this question is as follows: The chief decision-makers were the Soviet Government of the day headed by V. I. Lenin; the main consideration for taking such a decision consisted in the necessity to destroy Baron Ungern-Sternberg, an arch-enemy of the Soviet Russia.⁵⁵

As is often the case, socialist and western scholars have hotly debated the main purpose for the Red Army's invasion. Regardless of the motive, the results proved disastrous for Mongolian Buddhism.

MONGOLIAN BUDDHISM

THE RISE AND FALL OF THE SANGHA

by

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