The history of Buddhism in Mongolia dates back to the thirteenth century when Kubilai Khan established ties with the influential hierarchies of the Mahayana sect, Saky, in Tibet. It was not until the sixteenth century when Altan Kan of the Tümed devoted himself to the then leading heterodox religion (the yellow scarf Buddhism) that Buddhism had been successful in spreading across Mongolia. By the beginning of the twentieth century Celek had become the official and dominant religion regulating all aspects 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 expand its territorial changes. Therefore, MPRP, the 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, educational, and cultural institutions, were networked in Mongolia as well as abroad. The clergy had its own administrative district, Shabinar, and consolidated more than 30,000 out of 771 monastic livestock. The monastic administration worked closely with the local secular authorities in matters such as taxation (involving payments in both money and kind in even and koyr 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 the sangha. 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 government and influential theocratic government head of Outer Mongolia.

The authority of Bogdo-Gegen, his theocratic government and influential khutagts, the Shabinar and monastic corporations, formed the main opposition to the Mongolian government, the Soviet Bolsheviks and the agents of the Comintern, who had diversified their activities in East Asia during the 1920-1930s. 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 1922 to 1924 witnessed the tactical alliance of revolutionaries and lamas. The revolutionaries promised to liberate Mongolia from the Qing administration and warned the colonialists and to declare Bogdo-Gegen the constitutional monarch. In return, the court of Bogdo-Gegen guaranteed the MPP full control in the Mongolian state, renounced liquidation of hereditary nobles and popularization of revolutionary ideas into the masses. On 1 November 1921, the People’s Government and the 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 and repressive reforms of the Shabinar, according it the same status as other administrative districts.

During this period the MPP was weak and insignificant; its members were concentrated in the capital, Ulaanbaatar, 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. So did the two systems coexisting, the MPRP sought to strengthen its power passing into the hands of the revolutionaries. 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 1932, 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 (1921-1940) to liquidate the great and powerful Buddhist sangha of Outer Mongolia.

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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.
4. Jas (Mong.) = monastic households.