What motives drove the Mongolian socialist revolution of the early decades of the 20th century? What role did external players have in the shaping of the country? To what extent can recent history be understood in light of deep historical patterns? In what ways did Soviet-backed socialism in Mongolia take a particular Mongolian form? These questions frame a detailed engagement with the revolutionary period from 1921 to 1952 in Morozova’s book Social Revolutions in Asia: The Social History of Mongolia in the Twentieth Century.

Anna Portisch


MOROZOVA’S BOOK DESCRIBES the period from the fall of the Manchu-Qing Dynasty in 1911 and the subsequent Mongolian declaration of independence, through the purges of the 1930s, collectivisation and nationalisation of the economy, the Second World War, to the building of a consolidated socialist system with a planned economy under the leadership of Choldaukhan. In the early stages of the socialist revolution, the main political motive across the ideological spectrum was a concern for negotiating a relatively independent position in relation to both China and Russia. As a result, the alliance with Russian Bolsheviks was initially perceived by the various Mongolian political players as a temporary measure to assure the country’s independence. The book describes in detail the political manoeuvring of different factions from the 1920s onward, for instance the ‘old rights’ and the ‘young leftists’, differing in terms of their political leanings and stance on the question of nationalism and the continuing role of the Buddhist community as a political force, but also importantly reflecting a generational divide. The book provides fascinating glimpses into the consciousness of the community of Buddhist lamas and revolutionary developments in its description of the gradual process by which power was taken from the Bogd Khan and the wider community of Buddhist lamas, and the eventual violent expropriation of its property and undermining of its power in the Jas campaigns of the late 1930s.

Managing the Buddhist ‘problem’

Interwoven with this process, the book describes the Soviet influence, particularly that of the Comintern (Executive Committee of the Communist International), on political developments from the 1920s onwards. In the 1930s, this is described as an often delicate negotiation process of minimising the influence of those political elements tending towards nationalism and the restoration to political power of the Buddhist community and pan-Mongolism on the one hand, and extremist revolutionary factions on the other. The Comintern sought to limit extremist tendencies because, it was perceived, their drive to radically undermine the power of the Buddhist community and its displays of submissiveness to the steppe inhabitants had been maintained by cruelty. The gradual consolidation of the power of the Mongolian People’s Revolutionary Party is understood to have been based on a terror that ‘...was not foreign to Mongolian history. Long before Chingsig qaan the submissiveness of the steppe inhabitants had been maintained by cruelty.’ (p. 84). This casts the violence and terror of the 1920s and 1930s as a distinctly Mongolian product, while the subsequent mass revolts signalled that something was lacking to force the population to obey the powerless. What could it have been? An automatic ruler, a punitive depot, qaan-father? (p. 84). Choldaukhan is understood to have come to embody the Mongolian ‘life-long’ head of state, combined with tight social control and temporary ‘inward directed’ purges might be the unique outcome of a Central Asian nomadic socio-political system.

On the other hand, it is surely possible to maintain that Mongolians themselves bear responsibility for the excesses, as well as the achievements, that characterised the period from the 1920s to the 1950s, without having to resort to a notion of an archetypal ‘nomadic imperative’. Nevertheless, such a stance does not necessarily remove the active hand the Russian Bolsheviks and the Soviet Union had in influencing the course of Mongolian history. Surely there is a role for historical continuity, as well as radical change, and ultimately historical reinvention in our understanding of the recent history of Mongolia.

Anna Portisch

School of Oriental and African Studies ap48@soas.ac.uk

References