

THIRTY THOUSAND BULLETS

Remembering political repression in Mongolia

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As a matter of fact I wanted to thank you for asking about [the repression] . . . this way I was able to tell it to someone and I felt so much better. This pain is carried by people for decades, nobody asks them to share their stories, and to tell it to someone who is interested in them, and as a human and as a scholar is trying to find out why this kind of thing could have happened is a big relief for them.

These words were part of the reply of a Mongolian woman who had answered a request I had posted on the Internet looking for people willing to talk about the political repression in Mongolia in the Stalinist era as a supplement to those I had interviewed in Mongolia in the fall of 1997. The woman's grandfather had been killed during the great purges of the late 1930s and as with all too many other Mongolians, his fate was not known for decades. His relatives, like so many others, continued to hope he was still alive somewhere in the Soviet Gulag.¹ The story was an all-too-common one in Mongolia. It was also a story that had not been told publicly, if at all, for decades.

In the fall of 1997 when I first began to look at the issue of political violence in Mongolia, many people seemed thankful to have an outlet for their histories. The topic of political repression was being openly discussed and debated. Although these issues had been publicly considered since the collapse of socialism in 1990, the late 1990s saw a significant shift in how and why the repression was discussed.

In 1997, many people went to the Memorial Museum for the Victims of Political Repression (which had opened in 1996) in search of information on their relatives. This public recognition of the repression was a relatively new development. It was not until 1996 that the government established an official day of commemoration for the victims. In 1997, a memorial sculpture was set up in downtown Ulaanbaatar. Sixty years of silence weighed heavily on the families of the repressed. In fact, I had gone to Mongolia to study not political repression but rather collectivisation, which had occurred in the 1950s. Most people, however, did not want to talk about collectivisation. It was not very interesting to them.

Instead they wanted to talk about the fate of their parents, grandparents and other relatives in the late 1930s. In telling these stories, people were unburdening themselves, but they were also doing more than that. They were also seeking an understanding of, and reconciliation with, the events of the past. (It can also be argued that there were more pragmatic reasons for this attention, a point I take up below.) In focusing on this search for an understanding of political repression in Mongolia and the related political issues, I do not wish to downplay the suffering the repression caused. Rather, this chapter is an attempt to work out some of the issues related to the remembrance of the purges, and is part of a larger, on-going project.

Political repression and politically motivated killings occurred throughout the socialist period. Although the killings began in the early 1920s and reportedly continued until 1985,² the period of the greatest repression was the late 1930s. In a brief span of about eighteen months, from late 1937 to early 1939, almost an entire stratum of Mongolian society was eliminated. Starting in the fall of 1937, at least 22,000 people were killed out of a population which numbered at most 800,000.³ Although the victims came from all levels of society, many of them – at least 18,000 – were Buddhist lamas. Others were political and academic figures, or nobility, although ordinary workers and herders were also included. Buriad Mongols also suffered disproportionately, partly because they were well represented in the intelligentsia and partly because many of them had previously fled from Siberia shortly after the Bolshevik victory and were, therefore, suspected of being disloyal.

With the loosening of socialist control in the late 1980s, people began to search for information on their lost relatives. It became possible to petition the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the KGB for information. One woman summarised the process:

In 1989 when the political situation started to change we submitted an application to the Dotood Yam (a most despised term) otherwise known as the Mongolian KGB, and that's when they went over [my grandfather's] case again. It was sent to the Supreme Court which in turn issued us a palm-sized paper saying that my grandfather was wrongly accused and killed and thus he was posthumously acquitted. That acquittal is the only evidence of this man's existence that remains in the possession of his family.

At the same time, books and newspaper articles on the repression were published, but not until the mid- to late-1990s did the repression become a key element in public discourse. Even the woman just quoted, actively involved in the search for information, felt that the issue was not of overwhelming concern for most of the public. This statement requires some clarification. Although articles and books were being published, and people were telling their stories, it does not seem to me

that the whole issue assumed the form of a coherent discourse until later in the decade. History was being re-evaluated and rewritten in the early 1990s, but this re-evaluation focused predominantly on the non-socialist past. Chinggis Khaan and others from the more distant past were more prominent figures for discussion than the repression.

The early publications dealing with the issue of political repression seem to reflect not only a genuine search for answers, and the revealing of previously guarded knowledge, but also political manoeuvring. These publications, and the political rehabilitations that took place at the same time, I think, were in part an attempt by the ruling Mongolian People's Revolutionary Party (MAHN)⁴ to establish a new political legitimacy by distancing itself from the excesses of socialism. It is significant in this context that the earliest biographies that I am aware of about two of the earliest and most famous victims – Bodoo and Danzan – were published by the Party History Institute attached to the MAHN Central Committee. In addition, the earliest articles in MAHN's newspaper, *Ünen (Truth)* focused on specific, symbolically important figures rather than repression in general. This attempted rehabilitation coincided with the desire of the democratic parties to distance post-socialist Mongolia from the socialist period with the result that the repression was, at this stage, a relatively uncontested historical topic. Only later, as a new, non-socialist identity began to coalesce, did people begin to look more critically at the issue of repression, a point I will expand upon later.

The political attention to a repressive past which took place in Mongolia in the mid- to late-1990s has parallels with the situations in South Africa and elsewhere. Writing on the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the South African scholar and poet, Ingrid de Kok has noted: 'It is in the multiplicity of partial versions and experiences, composed and recomposed within sight of each other, that truth "as a thing of this world," in Foucault's phrase, will emerge'.⁵ The Truth and Reconciliation Commission will not hand down some definitive account of the apartheid era. Rather it will provide one privileged voice in the debate which de Kok likens to 'the personal experience of mourning, recovery and remembrance'.⁶ There is no official equivalent to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in Mongolia. Neither have there been any purges of the old socialist officials or bureaucracy. There was a commission working on rehabilitating the falsely (*hils*) repressed,⁷ but it laboured quietly, largely out of the public eye. The public attention and discussion that has surfaced in Mongolia in the late 1990s, however, served largely the same function as the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission. It began defining, if not necessarily limiting, the relevant experiences and memories of political repression. In seeking to assess issues of culpability and blame, people in Mongolia were seeking an understanding of, and reconciliation with their own past.

Foucault, in talking of truth 'as a thing in this world', notes that we should talk of a 'regime of truth'; truth is not an 'outside power'. 'Truth is linked in a circular relation with systems of power which produce and sustain it, and to effects of power which it induces and which extend it. A "regime" of truth'.⁸ In other words,

the truth of a particular time or place cannot be divorced from the larger context in which it is situated. The 'systems of power' include of course the overtly political structures, but also encompass broader social, economic and cultural forms as well.

What we are witnessing in Mongolia today can be understood in these terms. Socialism had provided a particular regime of truth. While it may have been, and was, contested, it nonetheless structured and was structured by the systems of power. In Mongolia, opposition to the socialist agenda seems to have been often less organised and visible than elsewhere in the Soviet bloc from the 1950s onward.⁹

This structuring of the truth was particularly so with respect to the repressed and their relatives. The repressed had been enemies of the people, and their descendants were marked as children of enemies; all people had to declare on job and school applications and other official documents whether or not they had repressed-relatives within the preceding two generations.¹⁰ Significantly in the context of structuring truth, even relatives of the repressed I interviewed in 1997 said they often assumed others had been 'truly' guilty during the socialist period. They thought their relatives had been mistakenly arrested, but not others.

Under socialism, people did not talk about the repression, often not even among family members. A Mongolian college student told me:

One member of my family was a high-ranking monk in a rural monastery, and he got killed just because he was a monk. When I was a small boy, my grandma used to talk about him a little bit, but my mom always stopped her for talking 'nonsense'.

In 1962, it is true, MAHN condemned the cult of personality that had grown around Choibalsan, Mongolia's Stalin. Choibalsan was also criticised for causing the suffering of 'hundreds' of innocents, but most of his victims remained unrehabilitated.¹¹ Those who were rehabilitated at this time, however, were political figures, not lamas. It should be kept in mind that 1962 was also the year that Tömör-Ochir, a Central Committee secretary, was removed from power for his role in, what were decried as the overly nationalist planned, celebrations of the 800th anniversary of Chinggis Khaan's birth.¹²

It is not clear to me yet to what degree people were aware during the socialist period of the full extent of the purges. Their knowledge would depend, I think, in large part upon personal experience and even geographical location, as certain areas are said to have suffered considerable loss of the adult male population during the repression. Official accounts of the period of the purges under socialism carried relatively innocuous titles such as *The resolution of the Question of the Monasteries and Lamas in the Mongolian People's Republic*.¹³ Such texts, of course, did not talk explicitly of the purges either. Instead they offered such descriptions as:

In 1937–39 [the height of the repression], revolutionary measures completely destroyed the cruel power of the high lamas, who were clearly

shown to be the implacable enemies of MAHN and the governing class. ... From only January 1937 until January 1938, 18214 lamas went to the countryside [i.e. left the monasteries].¹⁴

With the collapse of socialism, new regimes of truth became both possible and necessary. The issue of political repression was only part of the reassessment of the past, and at first, as we have seen, it was not the most prominent part. The 1990s have witnessed at least two main regimes of truth that blend into each other. The first, prominent in the early 1990s, constructed a history that largely excluded the socialist past. Socialism was a foreign imposition, the handiwork of the Soviets. The key period of interest was the pre-socialist past, which was looked to for moral, spiritual and political guidance.

At this point, the Mongolian past that mattered was the past of Chinggis Khaan and Buddhism. It did not matter that Chinggis Khaan was not 'really' a Buddhist; most of the statues of him at the time showed him in the pose of a Buddha, dispensing wisdom, and more important, order. This particular reinterpretation was strengthened by numerous little books of *zarlig* or *bilig*, Chinggis Khaan's decrees and words of wisdom. These booklets were intended to provide moral exemplars for the present period of uncertainty, particularly as they tended to focus on political and moral issues. 'Everyone's work has equal rights, and you will not discriminate between rich and poor, nobles and commoners', said one decree credited to Chinggis Khaan. 'I may die, but let my state live on after me', ran another – a plaintive cry for order and calm in the chaotic period of the early 1990s.¹⁵ Chinggis Khaan was recast as a democrat who could provide wise leadership for the present democratic movement. When complaining about the perceived lack of leadership in the country, people looked to Chinggis Khaan, not the socialist leaders, as a role model. During this period the repression remained largely a personal issue, or was talked about with a fairly clear political motive. The incidents of repression that were written about tended to be about prominent politicians and other figures with obvious symbolic capital.

A second regime of discourse came into play later in the 1990s. On the larger scale, this regime involved a turning to the socialist past, and reclaiming it as a Mongolian past. Through the repeated appeals to Mongolness and tradition in the early 1990s, what it meant to be a 'true Mongol' had crystallised around the concepts of Buddhism and a still vague appeal to tradition. The fascinating dictionaries of customs and tradition (how to be a 'real' Mongolian, in other words) common in the early 1990s had largely disappeared from the bookstore shelves [RBC1].¹⁶ They were being replaced by, among other things, works on the socialist era and the repression.¹⁷ It was now both safe and necessary to turn to the socialist past and incorporate it also into Mongolian history. More specifically, although some Mongolians continued to hold the repression as the work of the Soviets, others began to see it as a purely Mongolian affair. The Soviets had a hand in it – that much was undeniable – but the second school of thought no longer considered that this external involvement excused the Mongolians.

Let me leave aside these large patterns, which I will return to later. I instead quote a passage from a recent Mongolian history book, as it serves to bring into relief some of the issues that have arisen in Mongolia in trying to deal with the issue of political repression.

If [then Prime Minister] Amar freed some prisoners to celebrate the fifteenth anniversary of the Revolution [in 1936], then Stalin commemorated the fifteenth anniversary by sending Choibalsan a present four days later. The gift included four rifles and thirty thousand bullets. Did this mean that thirty thousand Mongols out of the population of eight hundred thousand were to be destroyed? Stalin was an Oriental man. He appreciated symbolic gestures and expressions of irony and humor. As it turned out later, the number of people killed by Choibalsan was in fact about thirty thousand.¹⁸

The heart of this passage is the claim of the gift. Whether the story is true or not may be interesting, but ultimately irrelevant. It is the function of the story here that matters. The story of the gift ultimately exonerates Choibalsan from responsibility for the deaths. As almost any anthropologist will tell you, giving a gift creates an obligation in the recipient. The purges are thus not only foreshadowed by this story, but rendered almost obligatory.

The implications of this story were clear to others besides anthropologists. One former ambassador I interviewed gave Baabar much credit for writing the book. Baabar is a politician trained as a biochemist, after all. But he had no use for what he saw as Baabar's excusing of Choibalsan's actions. Although the ambassador did not mention this passage explicitly, he clearly saw Baabar as adopting the view that 'if Choibalsan hadn't done it, someone else would have', in effect laying the responsibility solely on the Soviets. The Mongolians were merely helpless puppets in this view. Mongolia was indeed an independent country during the socialist period, the former ambassador told me. They therefore bore the responsibility for their own actions, whatever role the Soviets may have had. It was a 'hard fact' but one that had to be faced.

Taken together, the passage from the history book and the ambassador's comments illustrate the key approaches to understanding the construction of the regimes of truth currently taking place. One can not ignore the repression itself and the legacy it left behind. One would be hard-pressed, I think, to find a family without any repressed-relatives. Yet the repression also has a larger significance in contemporary post-socialist Mongolia. Attitudes towards, and memories of, the repression of the socialist period are markers in the quest for an acceptable construction of truth and reconciliation. They are not only attempts to deal with loss and grief at the personal level, but the national one as well. But they are even more than this. They are also part of an attempt to construct an understanding of the socialist past more generally.

The one name most associated with the repression is H. Choibalsan, mentioned in the passage above.¹⁹ He is most often glossed as 'Mongolia's Stalin', but let me take a moment to review his biography a bit more fully. Choibalsan was born in the eastern part of Mongolia in 1895. He was originally educated in a monastery, a common enough practice at the time. In his teens, he left the monastery and went to Hūree (the capital, now Ulaanbaatar) in 1912. Mongolian independence had just been declared in 1911, following the fall of the Qing dynasty.²⁰ He received additional education in Hūree and Irkutsk in Siberia from the Russians.

Choibalsan was active during the late teens in one of the early secret revolutionary groups, and became known as one of the 'First Seven' – the seven Mongolian revolutionaries who went to the Soviet Union to seek aid in 1920. His subsequent political career was one of an almost meteoric rise, although Baabar claims that at first Choibalsan was rather unremarkable, and only became of interest to the Soviets when they realised his value as a puppet leader.²¹ He was elected a member of the provisional socialist government in 1921, and held a wide variety of posts during the early socialist years, usually concurrently. He was himself apparently a suspect in one of the earlier purges.²² In perhaps a foreshadowing of his later role, in the late 1920s and early 1930s, he was in charge of the confiscation of the property of feudal lords. This and related actions precipitated a civil war, forcing the postponement of certain measures. As a result, full-scale collectivisation was not achieved until the 1950s.

In 1935, Choibalsan was appointed first deputy prime minister. He received a gift of twenty Soviet GAZ automobiles from the Soviet Union at the time, indicative of his rising status. In 1936, the Office of Internal Security (*Dotoodyg Hamgaalah Gazar*) was upgraded to the Ministry of Internal Affairs, and Choibalsan was named minister, a post he held until 1940. In 1939 he was appointed prime minister, and ruled the country until his death from cancer in 1952.

Choibalsan was widely mourned at his passing, and suggestions flooded into the government for ways to honour him. Eleven days after his death, an official in the government reported that eight aimags (provinces), forty-one groups and 428 individuals had written to suggest his body be preserved as Lenin's was.²³ His remains, like those of Sühbaatar (founder of the People's Republic, sometimes called Mongolia's Lenin) were eventually embalmed and placed in a mausoleum in front of the main government building. The power of the Mongolian state and party apparatus was never so concentrated in a single person either before or after Choibalsan. Yet even with the collapse of socialism in 1990, there was no sudden and total backlash against him, as might have been expected. Stalin's statue, which used to stand in front of the State Library, was torn down. Choibalsan's, which stands in front of the National University (which for a time bore his name), is still there.

Attitudes towards Choibalsan varied in the 1990s. In the early 1990s, and even today, many people credited Choibalsan with keeping Mongolia independent when Stalin proposed to annex it after the Second World War. True or not, this story places Choibalsan in an ambivalent, if not positive, light. Some people in

1993 did talk about his role in the purges, but also pointed out his role as a patriot.²⁴ In a class of University students I talked to at the time, some went even further. They suggested that Choibalsan had been killed by the Soviets for his advocacy of Mongolian independence. To some then, Choibalsan was not only a patriot, but also a martyr.

Whatever the current assessment of him, Choibalsan was seen as an important figure in Mongolian history – he was listed by more than a third of the people I questioned in 1993 as one of the five most important people in Mongolian history. One cannot tell from this fact whether he was deemed important in a good or bad sense, but conversations in 1993 seemed to suggest his role was more good than bad. The vast majority of other people listed were seen in a positive light.

In 1997, the argument that the Soviets, and not the Mongolians, should bear the blame for the ills of the socialist period, was still present, and was used by some people to excuse Choibalsan's role in the political repression. Thus, rather than saying Choibalsan was evil for his role in the repression, the 1993 view, the blame was shifted elsewhere – to the Soviet Union. A single sentence in an English-language newspaper in late 1997 sums up this prevailing attitude: 'All acts of political repression were ordered by Russian KGB agents through the then leader and Soviet Puppet, H. Choibalsan'.²⁵

Even the head of the Memorial Museum for the Victims of Political Repression blamed Stalin for the repression, although her opinion of Choibalsan was still critical. Choibalsan, in her opinion, had been appointed as a result of his fondness for drink, which made him a malleable puppet. She did, however, also deny him his alleged role in keeping Mongolia independent. This, she said, was the result of the *ard tümen* (people) rather than Choibalsan. Yet others were more openly critical, such as the former ambassador mentioned earlier. He also said that there was a movement to remove Choibalsan's statue from in front of the National University, because people thought it was inappropriate to honour him.

These opinions of Choibalsan are not simply reflections on a former Mongolian ruler. They reflect people's attempts to come to terms with the repression and with the socialist past more generally. Those who would seek to absolve Choibalsan of ultimate guilt and moral responsibility are, I argue, seeking to exonerate Mongolians more generally. Those who assign guilt ultimately to the Soviets also seek to reject the negative legacy of socialism as the heritage of Mongolians. Others, however, in arguing that Choibalsan himself was ultimately responsible are also arguing that the full legacy of socialism belongs to the Mongolians.

Even if this is the case, it does not answer why the shift in talking about the repression should occur when it did. What accounted then for this shift? Why did some people's perception of Choibalsan appear to shift over the years? I link this change to the issue of de-communisation, which is important for understanding the dialogue about the repression more generally. Elsewhere in the Soviet bloc, de-communisation was carried out in the present through removal of political figures, the vetting of the judiciary, and so forth.²⁶ Even if such procedures often proved ineffective in the end, at least they were attempted. In contrast, in Mongolia,

de-communisation never really occurred in the present. Those who have not continued on in politics have retired to lead quiet lives. Rather de-communisation occurred through a re-remembering of the past.

Let me return to the larger issues I raised earlier. Immediately after the collapse of socialism, the socialist past was itself largely ignored. When it was talked about, it was seen as a foreign imposition. Socialism was not Mongolian. In this atmosphere, although publications on the purges appeared, the purges did not occupy a large place in the public consciousness. When they did appear, they assumed two roles. On the one hand, individuals began to seek after relatives. On the other hand, the purges took on a political role, one that implicated them in the process of de-communisation. MAHN published writings on the purges in an attempt to distance itself from the excesses of the socialist period, and thus maintain a degree of legitimacy.

Ts. Balhaajav, who was at the time the Secretary of the Central Committee offered a typical assessment in the *World Marxist Review* in 1989, before the collapse of the socialist regime.

Today's problems can not be viewed in isolation from the past. Most of the deformations we are talking about stem from Horloogiyn Choibalsan's personality cult. Our party's return to the question, and the present critical reappraisal of his successor, Yumjagiin Tsendenbal, are an imperative of socialist construction, not mere political expediency. ...

Choibalsan was a founder of the Mongolian People's Party and a leader of the 1921 Revolution. But we have no reason to gloss over his subsequent errors. In the 1930s, he seriously breached the revolutionary law by repressing numerous party, government and economic personnel. The party and people sustained an irrevocable loss. Stalin's cult also played a sinister role in this ruinous process: in Mongolia both leaders commanded equal worship.²⁷

This passage highlights several of the themes I wish to point out here. Not only is it clear (despite Balhaajav's protests) that the reassessment of Choibalsan was a political manoeuvre, but we can also see two other points. First is the inclusion of Stalin and by implication the Soviets, among the recipients of blame. Second is the placing of MAHN in the list of victims.

This tactic dovetailed nicely with the rejection of the socialist past as a Soviet, and hence colonial, past advocated by some of the democratic protesters in 1990. Thus, in a section entitled 'Lessons from history' in the First Party Congress of the Mongolian Social Democratic Party (held on 31 March 1990), the repression of the 1930s was attributed to Stalin.²⁸ The section paints most of the socialist past as resulting from the Soviets. The opposition parties by contrast sought to delegitimise MAHN by linking them to the Soviet Union, the very process MAHN was trying to avoid. It had wanted to portray itself as the defender of true Mongolian socialism, which had been corrupted by the Soviets.

Later in the 1990s the democratic parties would make more conscious use of the repression as a weapon against MAHN. Although articles on the repression did appear in *Ardehilar (Democracy)*, a newspaper of one of the democratic parties in the early 1990s, the democrats did not appear to hammer against MAHN as much as they would later in the decade. Part of the reason for this strategy may be the fact that democracy itself was seen as being relatively fragile. MAHN could distance itself from socialism and the democratic parties would not take issue with this, partly because they wanted to avoid endangering the process of democratisation.²⁹ In essence, then, the desire to link MAHN with the Soviets by blaming the Soviets for the evils of socialism had a double advantage for the democrats. It helped to delegitimise MAHN but also preserved a degree of necessary harmony for the rebuilding of Mongolian society and politics by providing a convenient scapegoat.

The recent shift, at least by some Mongolians, to seeing the repression as the work of the Mongolians suggests that the new Mongolia is ready to look more closely at the socialist past. Post-socialist Mongolia has a new identity, one built upon conceptions of what it means to be Mongolian through reference to the pre-socialist past. This is an identity that people can at least agree to disagree about. With this identity in place, more delicate problems of the past – such as the repression – can be and are now being broached. Only in 1996 did the government declare a day of remembrance for the victims, and only in the following year did government officials themselves take part ceremonies commemorating the repression. This caution was doubtless due in part to the fact that MAHN maintained a majority in the *Ih Hural* (parliament) until the 1996 elections, but it also overlaps with the coalescing of the new identity that offered a vantage point from which to raise these issues.

Raising the issue of the repression was perhaps most apparent in the fall of 1997. In the autumn session of the *Ih Hural*, one of the laws being debated was over the rehabilitation of and the granting of compensation to victims of political repression. This same law included passages banning the advocating of political repression, or even supporting it. It also singled out MAHN as responsible for the previous repression. MAHN, understandably, took issue with this assessment. Calling the law a ‘one-sided conclusion’, they argued that it violated other Mongolian laws and threatened the principle of free speech. They also argued that MAHN was not the same party that had carried out the repression, and even MAHN had been victims, so how could they also have been the perpetrators?³⁰

The response of the Union of the Victims of Political Purges to MAHN’s stance is typical of those that opposed MAHN’s claims:

In a letter to MAHN members of the State *Ih Hural*, the Union attacked the Party’s statement to the Justice Standing Committee calling for revisions to the law on exonerating the victims of political purges. ‘This is a cunning move to conceal MAHN’s 70 years of crimes’, said the Union’s statement. ‘MAHN has proved that it is a dangerous political

force by resisting the article prohibiting group purges and genocide or the support of such crimes. It has revealed its ambition to revive communism, appealing to the public against democracy. MAHN does not apologise for its past crimes. Rather it has been obstructing for a long time the exoneration of purge victims and has tried to prevent the forging of a law preventing future purges. It is not acting in the national interest.³¹

Although there were other points of contention concerning the law (the amount of compensation, among others), MAHN's stance generated the most controversy. Some went so far as to call for the confiscation of MAHN's property on the grounds that it had profited from the repression. Others wanted MAHN taken to an international court. In other words, although wrapped in the language of concern for the victims of the repression, the statement is much more a political swipe aimed at MAHN. It is informative in this context to realise that the issue of the newspaper *Ardechilal*, published by the democratic parties, was largely focused on hammering MAHN. The repression was a key topic, but only to underline MAHN's alleged guilt, and hence their moral forfeiture of political power.

MAHN's claim that it too was a victim brings up one more issue I wish to consider in this context. Simply put, MAHN's claim raises the issue of the status of victims in Mongolia at present. It was suggested to me more than once while I was doing fieldwork in 1997 that it was currently 'fashionable' to be a victim of the repression. 'Try to check to see if the people you talk to are really victims', one friend told me. He went on to say that it was seen as 'heroic' to have been a victim of repression since it marked you as someone who had been against the regime. He also added that it was easy to know what to say to pass as a victim because there were so many newspaper articles on political repression these days. Others echoed this sentiment.

There could well be a very pragmatic reason for such claims to victim status – victims of the repression and their relatives were being compensated, and some (at least three hundred) had received apartments.³² There were clearly material benefits to be had by being a victim. But there was, I think, another more important reason. Simply put, the status of victim confers on political views and agendas a certain moral authority. This belief is echoed in MAHN's claim that it too was a victim. If it could not defend the actions of the government and Party during the 1930s, it could at least stake a claim that it too had suffered. Although a largely unsuccessful tactic, it does point out the perceived importance of the role of victim.

The other issue in claims of victimhood is that they seem, in the current post-socialist political arena in Mongolia, to imply that others still bear the crime of repression. If one was not a victim (defined by links to the repressed), one must have been complicit in the regime. There is no room for grey areas in such categories. Thus even those who might have resisted the regime but were not repressed are grouped with the active supporters of the regime.³³

This dichotomy, of course, greatly misrepresents the actuality of socialism on several levels. First, it assumes that to fail to resist actively is to support actively. This simply was not the case. Further, it assigns to victims the status of resisters. While most victims were accused of resistance, they were not necessarily guilty of it. Many of the purged were killed for no other reason than being rich herders or Buddhist lamas. Although these social categories were seen as being in opposition to the socialist government, many individuals had done nothing at all to oppose the regime. In fact, it would be well to remember that several of the early revolutionaries were nobles and lamas themselves, and not all of them were subsequently purged.³⁴

The reverse also holds true. Without meaning to diminish their suffering, it should be understood that some of the early leaders and revolutionaries, now seen as victims, took part in factional struggles that led to purges. For example, P. Genden, the Prime Minister who was killed in 1937, is now portrayed largely as an innocent victim. Many people hold that his arrest and subsequent execution ushered in the great terror of the late 1930s. Yet Dashpurev and Soni implicate Genden in organising an early purge, the Lhümbe affair.³⁵ Baabar, on the other hand, thinks that, although Genden played an 'important role' in the affair, he did not initiate it.³⁶ In short, the actual situation in Mongolia during the socialist period was more complex than is now sometimes portrayed.

I have argued in this chapter that the current debates over the repression in Mongolia and how it is portrayed owe as much, if not more, to the current political situation and to the need to establish a uniquely Mongolian identity. It is well to remember that regimes of truth operate in both directions. Not only do the memories and experiences of the political repression shape the current political debate and discourse over the past in Mongolia, but, these dialogues also shape the memories and understandings of the repression themselves. The final outcome is still unclear.

I do not want to end with the impression that remembering and talking about political repression in Mongolia is nothing more than manoeuvring for position in the current political arena, or an attempt to rethink the past in general terms. For many of the people I met, discussing the repression was simply a chance to talk about their relatives, and their own memories of the purges. For the men and women who remember their uncles and fathers being taken away in the night, the chance to recall those events openly is a chance to ensure that their relatives exist in a way more meaningful than a palm-sized scrap of paper exonerating them. Yet, as I have tried to demonstrate in the course of this chapter, the larger issues of political necessity and the constructing of regimes of truth cannot be ignored in this context. Even if people thought they were simply telling me a story, at another level, they were being influenced by and in turn influencing larger debates on political repression and current political manoeuvrings. These are the issues that have done as much as, if not more than, the memories of the relatives of the repressed to shape the discourse about political repression in Mongolia.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank T. Undarya for her comments on a previous version of this chapter. Research for this article was supported by a grant from the International Exchange and Research Board (IREX), with funds provided by the Henry Luce Foundation. None of these organisations is responsible for the views expressed.

Notes

- 1 Although internal exile did take place in Mongolia, many of those sentenced to the Gulag were sent to the Soviet Union. Prison labour camps did exist in Mongolia as well.
- 2 D. Dashpurev and S. K. Soni, *Reign of Terror in Mongolia, 1920–1990* (New Delhi: South Asian Publishers, 1992), p. 63. It is widely rumoured that the murder of the politician Zorig in the fall of 1998 was politically motivated. Even if this is the case, it is of a different sort than the killings carried out under the direction of the government or Party.
- 3 Other sources say 30,000, and some have said the numbers could be as high as 100,000. For the latter, see Dashpurev and Soni, *Reign of Terror in Mongolia*, pp. 42–4. This higher figure, however, is based on a calculation of ‘missing’ persons and appears to include including lamas who left the monasteries, but were not killed.
- 4 MAHN, the socialist party also known as the Mongolian People’s Revolutionary Party (MPRP), ruled Mongolia for seventy years. It was in opposition in the *Ih Hural* (Parliament), from 1996 to 2000, but returned to power with an overwhelming majority in 2000.
- 5 Ingrid de Kok, ‘Cracked Heirlooms: Memory on Exhibition’, in Sarah Nuttall and Carli Coetzee, eds, *Negotiating the Past: The Making of Memory in South Africa* (Capetown: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 61.
- 6 *Ibid.*
- 7 The expression ‘unjustly repressed’ is a distinction made in official Mongolian documents, although not usually in conversation or other writings. At one level it implies that it was possible to be justly repressed, although I am not aware of most people making a point of this. One young man I talked to did assume most of the repressed must have been guilty, but he was a distinct minority voice. It may, of course, also be simply a means to intensify the condemnation (thanks to Robert Cribb for this observation).
- 8 Michel Foucault, *Power/knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972–1977* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), p. 133.
- 9 Prior to the 1950s, the socialist hold on power appears to me to have been more tenuous than is usually supposed. See Christopher Kaplonski, ‘Idly Drinking and Talking: The Sovietisation of the Mongolian Countryside’, paper presented at the American Anthropological Association Annual Meetings, Philadelphia, 1998.
- 10 The regulation originally required reporting only one generation back, but was changed when the children of the repressed began to have children. It was suggested to me that if socialism had continued much longer, yet another generation would have been added to the list.
- 11 Urgunge Onon, trans. and ed., *Mongolian Heroes of the Twentieth Century* (New York: AMS Press, 1976), p. 214.
- 12 Rather suggestively in the present context, one person suggested to me that Tömör-Ochir had been repressed in part for calling attention to the issue of political repression. For one summary of the affair, see Paul Hyer, ‘The Re-evaluation of Chinggis Khan: Its Role in the Sino-Soviet Dispute’, *Asian Survey*, 6(12) (1966), 696–705.

- 13 S. Pürevjav and D. Dashjamts, *BNMAU-d süm hiid, lam naryn asuudlyg shiidverlesen n' 1921–1940* (Ulaanbaatar: State Publishing Cooperative, 1965).
- 14 *Ibid.*, p. 238.
- 15 These particular examples are from B. Dorj, 'Huul' bol huul' *Mönkh tengeriin hüchin dor* (1992). Numerous books and pamphlets containing these and similar sayings were published in the early 1990s.
- 16 For one example, see Ch. Av'yasüren and H. Nyambuu, eds, *Mongol yos zanshlyn ih tailbar tol'* (Ulaanbaatar: 'Süülenhүү' Children's Publishing House, 1992).
- 17 Book production also apparently dropped off drastically throughout the 1990s. Thus, although there were books on the repression and socialist history more generally, numerically I do not think they matched the earlier emphasis on pre-socialist history.
- 18 Baabar, *Twentieth Century Mongolia, D. Sühjargalma, et al.*, trans., C. Kaplonski, ed. (Cambridge: White Horse Press, 1999), p. 354.
- 19 Mongolians usually use one name and an initial. The initial refers to their *ovog*, similar to a patronymic, based on their father's or sometimes mother's name. Choibalsan was Horloogiin Choibalsan, but this version of his name is almost never used.
- 20 Some sources say he went to Hüreе in 1910; see D. Hatanbaatar, *Yerönhii saidyn örgөөнд* (Ulaanbaatar: Shuvuun Saral, 1992), p. 80.
- 21 Baabar, *Twentieth Century Mongolia*, pp. 350ff.
- 22 *Ibid.*, p. 351.
- 23 Ulsyn Töv Tүүhiin Arhiv, F-1; T-5; H/N-325, pp. 11–12.
- 24 In his recent book on Mongolian nationalism, Bulag comments that 'Choibalsan is now regarded as a patriot'; see Uradyн Bulag, *Nationalism and Hybridity in Mongolia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 46, n. 14; p. 92, n. 15.
- 25 Ch. Baatarbeel, 'New Memorial a Tribute to Politically Repressed', *Mongol Messenger*, 17 December 1997, p. 12.
- 26 John Borneman, *Settling Accounts: Violence, Justice, and Accountability in Postsocialist Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997).
- 27 Ts. Balhaajav, 'The Aim is Spiritual Renewal', *World Marxist Review*, 32(7), 52.
- 28 P. Ulaanhүү (comp.), *Mongolyn sotsial-demokrat namyn anhdugaar ih hural* (Ulaanbaatar: Mongolian Social Democratic Party, 1990), pp. 10–11. It should be noted that the passage in question was written by Baabar.
- 29 I am indebted to T. Undarya for this observation.
- 30 For a fuller account of this entire issue, see Christopher Kaplonski, 'Blame, Guilt and Avoidance: The Struggle to Control the Past in Post-socialist Mongolia' *History and Memory*, 11(2) (1999), pp. 94–114.
- 31 'MPRP taken to task on purge record', *UB Post*, 2 December 1997, p. 2. In the body of the text, I have taken the liberty of changing MPRP to MAHN for the sake of consistency.
- 32 D. Narantuya, 'Locals Mark National Day of Political Repression', *The Mongol Messenger*, 17 September 1997, p. 8.
- 33 For at least the 1950s, the period of collectivisation, and currently the only one I have done archival research on, it is clear that the government and its agents saw extensive non-compliance and everyday forms of resistance in the actions of the herders and others. See James Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985).
- 34 One famous figure, Hatanbaatar Magsarjav, for example, retained his status as revolutionary hero despite having been a noble. For a socialist era biography of him, see Onon, *Mongolian Heroes of the Twentieth Century*.
- 35 Dashpurev and Soni, *Reign of Terror in Mongolia*, p. 29.
- 36 Baabar, *Twentieth Century Mongolia*, p. 332.

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Edited by
Kenneth Christie and
Robert Cribb



RoutledgeCurzon
Taylor & Francis Group

London and New York

2002