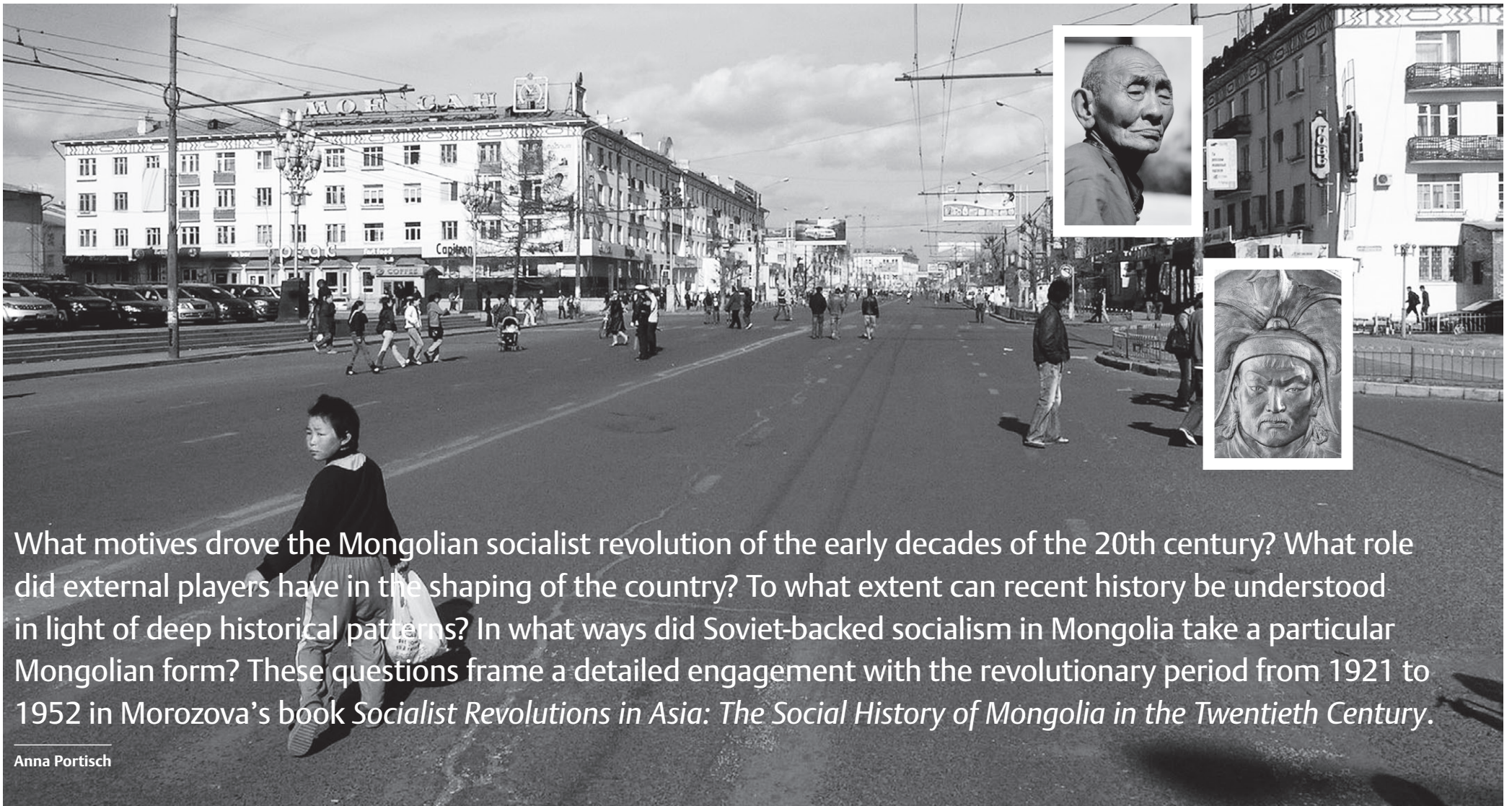


# The socialist revolution in Mongolia



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 *Socialist Revolutions in Asia: The Social History of Mongolia in the Twentieth Century*.

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**Morozova, Irina Y. 2009.**

*Socialist Revolutions in Asia: The Social History of Mongolia in the Twentieth Century.*  
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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 Choibalsan. 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 rightists' 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 coexistence 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 campaign 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 disrespect for elders and tradition might have resulted in opposition and counter-revolutionary activity. The final organised purges of the Buddhist community which took place in the late 1930s are thus presented as a result, not of the influence of the Comintern or pressure exerted by the Soviet Union, but instead as a measure by the Mongolian authorities to solve its own economic difficulties: '...by the beginning of the 1930s, the new authorities in Ulaanbaatar

**Above:**  
Present day  
Ulaanbaatar,  
Peace Avenue.

**Inset top:**  
A Mongolian lama.

**Inset below:**  
Chinggis Khan.

*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 Chinggis qan 'the submissiveness of the steppe inhabitants had been maintained by cruelty...'*

started to notice that their social and political problems had become especially sharp given their economic difficulties – they lacked the means for revolution. To solve the problem, the new political elite began using 'old' repressive methods inside the country.' (p. 64).

This perspective on the purges of the 1930s is indicative of an underlying assumption which informs the book as a whole. In this context, the violence turned upon the Buddhist community is interpreted as an expression of an inherent tendency of Central Asian nomads towards economic expansion through forced expropriation of resources of neighbouring, often sedentary, cultures. In this case, the '...military expansionism of Central Asian nomads ... turned inward and targeted the homeland', i.e. the community of lamas (p. 64). This 'imperative' for Eurasian nomadic societies to periodically explore and conquer neighbouring lands has emerged in response to a vulnerable and unstable ecology, it is argued. Moreover, this imperative has given rise to a model of government based on kinship and clan structures, but also the need for a cohesive and stabilising force, that of a powerful ruler, an autocratic power, and tight social control of subjects: these are two 'key features of Eurasian nomadic empires... and of the Mongol Empire of the thirteenth century in particular' (p. 4). Morozova's argument has a further twist. She suggests that the Central Asian latent tendency for military expansionism has profoundly influenced Muscovy under the Golden Horde; that this tendency was repressed during Manchu-Qing rule in Outer Mongolia itself; and that it was 're-taught' to the Mongolians by the Bolshevik Russians. She draws parallels between 'key features' of Mongolian society of the 13th century and the 20th century and suggests an historical continuity.

## 'Deep historic roots'

In a similar vein, 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 Chinggis qan '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 '[s]omething was lacking to force the population to obey the power-holders. What could it have been? An autocratic ruler, a punitive despot, qan-father?' (p. 84). Choibalsan is understood to have come to embody this qan-father role, necessary for national unity. Morozova thus seeks to '...debunk the myth that confiscation [of the Buddhist community's property] and collectivisation [of the economy] were entirely imposed upon the Mongols by Soviet advisers as something alien to their society and culture' (p. 84). Instead, she argues, the Mongolian socialist revolution had deep historic roots in the Mongol Empire of the 13th century.

While such a hypothesis of historical continuity contributes interesting perspectives to the existing literature, I should like to raise a few reservations in this context. First of all, the idea of military expansionism coupled with autocratic rule and tight social control in the 13th century Mongol Empire has been critically scrutinised, for instance by Kaplonski (2000). A more inclusive and critical discussion of these historical processes might have been useful, since this is posited as one of the 'key elements' influencing 20th century Mongolian history. Moreover, the author's suggestion entails a type of 'politico-historical product' that might be 'exported' across cultures and historical periods, and subsequently 're-imported'. Such a view significantly downplays historical and cultural specificity. It also entails a notion that such a 'nomadic imperative' might have 'lain dormant' for over two centuries of Manchu-Qing rule in Outer Mongolia, only to be 're-ignited' under Soviet influence. This presents a strangely static view of political models, and ignores the influence of the Manchu-Qing rule and the substantial Chinese population in Mongolia. Ultimately, it also paints Mongolians with one brush, as though unanimously being driven by such a 'nomadic imperative'. Yet what is described throughout the book, in the historical detail, is ideological, political, religious and generational difference and contestation.

Finally, the notion begs comparison with the other cultural and historical contexts, for instance the period of the Cultural Revolution in China. From a comparative perspective, the notion clearly cannot be sustained that a political system dominated by a single party and a '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.

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