

Buddhists Struggle for Survival in the USSR

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The official Soviet attitude to Buddhism depends largely on where the Buddhists in question are located. In the Soviet Union, they are generally treated as adherents of a reactionary cult practising traditional medicine and barbarous old customs – a relic of the past which has to be swept out of existence. But if they happen to live outside the Soviet Union, they are often accepted as potential friends or allies and encouraged to lend their support to Soviet political schemes. A Buddhist “peace” movement was set up in Ulan Bator (Mongolian People’s Republic) in 1970, and a “peace conference” held in Ulan Bator in June of that year adopted resolutions noting “the importance of increased efforts on the part of Asian believers in the struggle against aggression and imperialism” and condemning U.S. policy in Indochina. Only three non-communist countries (Malaysia, Singapore and Japan) were represented at the conference, but the atmosphere was so charged with politics that the delegates from these three countries did not participate in the final session of the conference. The conference set up a Committee for the Coordination of Asian Buddhist activities “in the struggle for peace”, with the Venerable S. Gombojab, High Lama of the Gandantekchenling Monastery in Ulan Bator as its chairman. The Committee has been meeting more or less regularly since then, organizing conferences and maintaining official relations between Buddhists in the Soviet Union and other countries. Some Asian Buddhists have suggested that there is a certain irony in the choice of Ulan Bator as an international Buddhist centre, since Buddhism in the People’s Republic of Mongolia has been almost swept out of existence as a result of official persecution: it is estimated that there are now little more than 100 monks in the whole country compared with 7,000 at the Gandantekchenling Monastery alone before 1921.

In the Soviet Union itself, most Buddhists live in the Buryat, Tuvian and Kalmyk Autonomous Republics, as well as in several other Buryat-populated areas in Siberia. Soviet Buddhists, too, have had to face a long history of persecution. Under Stalin, organized Buddhism was crushed with a severity experienced by few other religious groups in the USSR. In the Buryat Autonomous Republic the number of lamas was reduced from 16,000 in 1916 to a few dozen by 1960 (according to

reports in the Soviet atheist monthly *Science and Religion*, No. 6 1960 and No. 3, 1971). Out of 36 Buddhist monasteries only two were left. As for the Kalmyks, their autonomous republic was abolished in 1943, and the population was deported to Siberia. Those who survived the hardships of deportation and were allowed to return home in 1957, found the rebuilding of national life along traditional lines a hard task. The history of Buddhism in the Soviet Union over the past 50 years is well summed up in an *Atheist's Handbook* published in Moscow in 1971 :

As a result of the victory of the Great October Revolution, the construction of Socialism and great successes in the development of a new culture . . . the influence of Lamaism on the Buryats, Kalmyks and Tuvinians steadily declined. In the 1930's, at the workers' request, the majority of the *Datsans* (temples) in the Baikal and all *Khurals* (local councils) in Kalmykia were closed and the buildings given to the workers. Leaving the monasteries, some lamas turned to productive work, others continued their religious (and especially "healing") activities illegally . . . Buddhism perpetuates an unjust social order in the world and supports bourgeois attitudes in society . . .

A partial revival of Buddhism in the Soviet Union began after the Second World War. Soviet sources reported in the 60s that "pilgrims constantly come to the *Datsan* at Ivolginsk near the Buryat capital of Ulan-Ude – the seat of the Buddhist Central Council headed by Lama Gomboyev (Bandido Hambo Lama). These reports have been confirmed more recently by the Soviet *Teachers Gazette* (12 December, 1972. See *RCL* Vol. 1, Nos. 4-5, pp. 40-42). Having described the quaint, "other-worldly" appearance of the Ivolginsk *Datsan* with its "carved pagodas and marvellously curved steep-sided roofs, strange sculptured animals, the white structures of chapels, resembling miniature Indian temples", the *Teachers Gazette* correspondent refers to the strong religious influence exercised by the *Datsan* on the children and young people at the neighbouring Upper Ivolga village. "There are many believers in the village", says the article, "and in addition to that, at festival times, many visitors from all parts of the Republic stay there". According to the newspaper, the number of believers in the Buryat Republic as a whole decreases very slowly and their ranks are constantly being reinforced with older people, who received their education in Soviet schools. *Teachers Gazette* explains the attraction of Buddhism and its continuing influence as follows :

For many years an individual has not been religious. Then he receives a shock – the loss of a loved one, sorrow, loneliness – and there comes a revival of the religious feelings which he acquired in childhood. Sometimes it does

not even need a shock to revive feelings whose foundations were laid in the past. Buddhism instils its religious concepts by taking advantage of the impressionable and adaptable nature of a child's mind, through beauty, the spectacular, unusual effect and the national forms of its ceremonial. Who can say that there will not be a revival of these concepts at some religious festival at the temple, or in the districts during prayers and services?

Buddhism is not as harmless as it looks, warns *Teachers Gazette*:

When, at the request of the moribund Lamas, it was decided to send a party of ten youths, who had had secondary education, to the Mongolian Buddhist School for Monks, numbers of volunteers promptly appeared. The process of instilling religious feeling goes on underground; it is "latent" and very hard to detect. Besides that, the Buddhists carefully guard their inner world from outside observation.

In 1970, the Soviet *Literary Gazette* commissioned a team of experts – an orientalist, a professor of medicine, and a graduate in technical sciences – to carry out some on-the-spot research in the Buryat Autonomous Republic. Their report, which appeared in the *Literary Gazette* on 9 December, 1970, was remarkably restrained and described Buddhist philosophy and culture in terms of respect and almost admiration. The *Literary Gazette* team discovered that the Library of the Buryat Institute of Social Sciences holds one of the richest collections of Buddhist writings in the world, but that a great deal of this material is inaccessible for lack of Tibetan-language specialists. Consequently, the hundreds of volumes and manuscripts cannot even be catalogued. Buryat textologists were apparently planning to invite UNESCO to help the Buryat Institute with sorting out and translating the great mass of Buddhist documents, and to organize the participation of foreign research workers on a "competitive basis", but it is not clear what action, if any, has been taken in the matter. The *Literary Gazette* article devoted considerable space to a sympathetic account of Tibetan medicine, referring to the "sensational stories" about the operation of the "third eye", which endows the patients with unusual mental and telepathic abilities; about the fantastic methods of acquiring superhuman health, and about the achievements of parapsychology. Once there were "medical faculties" in Buddhist monasteries, said the article, but now there is hardly anyone left in the Soviet Union with even a "secondary education" in Buddhist medicine; soon there will be none at all. The *Literary Gazette* team made a strong plea that such Buddhist "specialists" should be found while there is still time to do so, in order that modern medicine might profit from their knowledge. With regard to the "sensational

stories", the team noted that they were not able either to prove or disprove "this impressive information". Coming from a Soviet source, this report was unusual, to say the least, and the researchers, probably aware of the criticism their views might provoke among the more orthodox Party members, cautiously added that "Buddhism today does not only denote a religion, that is to say something deeply alien to us like every religion . . . it is still an integral part of the 'secular' world outlook of hundreds of millions of people."

The cautiousness of the *Literary Gazette* team was understandable: as later events have demonstrated, close association with Buddhism can have dangerous consequences for Soviet citizens. During a court trial in Ulan-Ude from 18-15 December, 1972 (see *RCL* Vol. 1, Nos. 4-5, pp. 43-47) several Buddhist scholars were accused of having organized a "secret Buddhist sect". The charges involved some fantastic allegations: bloody sacrifices, ritual killings, sexual mysticism, attempts to beat up and murder former members of the sect who wanted to break off their ties with the sect, and "contacts with foreign organizations and international Zionism". One of the chief defendants was Bidiya Dandaron, a Buryat by nationality and a member of the Buryat Institute of Social Sciences. Dandaron, born in 1914, had already been imprisoned from 1937 to 1955 but was rehabilitated in 1956 under Khrushchev. One of the most outstanding Soviet experts on Tibetan language and Buddhism, he is the author of a two-volume *Description of Tibetan Manuscripts* (1960 and 1963) and of other works on Buddhism. At the trial, Dandaron was found guilty of the alleged offences and sentenced to five years imprisonment. Several Buddhist scholars who had been arrested at the same time as Dandaron were forcibly confined to mental hospitals, while some others were reprimanded and lost their jobs. A report on Dandaron's trial was published by the Soviet clandestine *Chronicle of Current Events* (No. 28, 31 December 1972).

These savage persecutions show that, whatever may be the Soviet attitude to Buddhists abroad, the Soviet authorities are not prepared to allow a revival of Buddhism in the USSR. Indeed, according to some Soviet sources, the position of Soviet Buddhists since Stalin's death has never been worse than at present.