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Buddhism in Postsoviet Russia: Revival or Degeneration?

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Buddhism in Russia has been the subject of state control ever since its introduction into Transbaikalia (the Siberian region situated directly east of Lake Baikal) by Mongol and Tibetan lamas of the Gelug school in the early eighteenth century.[1] Since Transbaikalia still represented the wild frontier of Russia's expanding empire at that time, its new rulers reckoned upon an independent local Buddhist hierarchy preventing the Buryat–Mongol population from falling under the influence of China's Qing dynasty, which controlled neighbouring Buddhist Mongolia.[2] Despite local officials' unease at the spread of the alien faith, Empress Elizabeth's toleration decree of 1741 permitted 11 *datsan* (temples) (in fact the number then already in existence) and set the number of lamas at 150;[3] they were obliged to pledge their loyalty to the Russian state in return for the right to function legally.[4] The same decree also created the post of *shiretui*, or chief lama, which was later changed to *khambo lama* after the emergence of rival claimants to the earlier title.[5]

Subsequent attempts by the tsarist regime to control the growth of Buddhism in Transbaikalia met with limited success. An ordinance of Nicholas I in 1853 restricted the number of lamas to 251 and prohibited the construction of further datsans, which by then had increased to 34.[6] By 1913, however, a further three datsans had been built, and the lama population had grown to some 16,000.[7] Indeed, under Nicholas II the relationship between Russia's Buddhists and the ruling family became particularly warm. Buryat doctor of Tibetan medicine Petr Badmayev treated the tsar – on one occasion with a 'marvellous' mixture of henbane and hashish – and was also regularly consulted for political advice.[8] The three-hundredth anniversary of the Romanov dynasty in 1913 saw lavish celebrations by Russia's Buddhists: a triumphal arch was erected at the Atsagatsk datsan in Buryatia, while at a new datsan in St Petersburg a special ceremony of worship was conducted in front of a nine-foot statue of Buddha flanked by portraits of the tsar, the tsarina and the tsarevich.[9] To the consternation of local Orthodox, who regarded this datsan as an 'idolatrous pagoda', Nicholas II had given his consent to its construction in the Russian capital four years earlier.[10]

Moves by the Buddhist hierarchy to show their allegiance to the fledgling communist state following the 1917 Revolution were not rewarded by any such favours. During the 1920s Khambo Lama Agvan Dorzhiyev proclaimed that Buddhist doctrine was 'largely compatible with current communist thinking',[11] and Buryatia's datsans began to fly the Soviet flag.[12] However, this failed to prevent the destruction

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or closure of all 47 under Stalin; and of the 15,000 lamas who were exiled, barely 200 returned.[13] In 1948 a new datsan was built near the Buryat capital, Ulan-Ude, at Ivolginsk; the Soviet government discovered that a Buddhist community in the USSR could be useful when dealing with Asian states and created the Central Spiritual Directorate of Buddhists (*Tsentral'noye dukhovnoye upravleniye buddistov* (TsDUB)), which consistently endorsed its policies.[14] Buddhist subservience to the Soviet state became such that in 1959 Khambo Lama Eshi-Derzhi Sharapov was obliged to issue a public statement expressing anger at the 'imperialist activities' and 'behaviour of reactionaries' following communist China's invasion of Tibet,[15] thereby lending support to the initial stages of a campaign which, ironically, was to result in the destruction of all but 13 of Tibet's 6259 datsans and the deaths of over 110,000 Buddhist clergy.[16] Following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 the TsDUB continued to function and was renamed the Buddhist Traditional Sangha (*Buddiiskaya traditsionnaya sangkha*) in 1995. It is currently headed by Khambo Lama Damba Ayusheyev.

Although the khambo lama is described as the 'head of the Buddhists of Russia' in official communications from the Interreligious Council of Russia,[17] the Buddhist Traditional Sangha is today proportionally far less representative of Russia's Buddhists than was the TsDUB. Buddhists in Tuva and Kalmykia – the other traditionally Buddhist areas within the Russian Federation – now look to their own equivalents of the khambo lama in Kamby Lama Dolaan Kuulur[18] and Shadzhin Lama Telo Tulka Rinpoche[19] respectively. Even within the Buddhist heartland of Buryatia, several of the now 20 datsans have chosen to leave the Sangha. The abbot of Atsagatsk datsan, Tuvan-Darzhi Tsympilov, has adopted the title khambo lama (with the original meaning of abbot), and his datsan was registered as a local religious organisation independently of the Sangha on 26 May 1999.[20] Two datsans in the Tunkinsky *raion* and one in the Okinsky *raion* of Buryatia registered as local religious organisations in May and April 1999 respectively in order to form another Buddhist centralised religious organisation besides the Sangha, *Maidar*, which was registered in Ulan-Ude on 6 July 1999.[21] According to its head, Danzan-Khaibzun Samayev, *Maidar* was founded in order to protect the respective datsans from interference in their internal affairs by the Sangha.[22]

Dissatisfaction with the leadership of the present khambo lama appears to be the principal reason for Buddhists remaining outside or leaving the Sangha. Samayev is sharply critical of Ayusheyev's personal qualities and believes that he was elected khambo lama in 1995 solely thanks to an impressive practical ability to construct datsans.[23] He comes in for similarly personal criticism within the Sangha's lay movement in Ulan-Ude. Green Tara (*Nogoon dara ekhe*), a Gelug lay group with approximately 30 members, registered as a local religious organisation within the Buddhist Traditional Sangha on 1 July 1999 after spending a year trying to register as an entirely autonomous religious organisation without success. Members of the group – which currently meets in a private flat – complain that visits by their Tibetan spiritual teacher Bogdo-Gegen Khalkha Jetsun Dampa Huktuku are restricted by the khambo lama, whom they have to consult before issuing an invitation. (Of special importance to every Buddhist group is the patronage of a particular spiritual teacher, who makes regular visits in order to give spiritual advice. Due to the severance of the Buddhist tradition during the Soviet period the majority of such spiritual teachers currently originate from outside the Russian Federation.) To the particular chagrin of Green Tara members, Bogdo-Gegen was obliged to enter Russia on a private visa rather than in an official capacity on his visit of 17–24 September 1999, and was therefore

not received in due accord with his status as the reincarnation of the leader of Mongolia before the advent of the communist regime there in 1924.[24]

Green Tara was formed in 1998 after it broke away from *Ar'yaa baala*, the successor to the Association of Buddhist Laymen (*Ob"yedineniye buddistov-miryan*), which was founded in Ulan-Ude in the early 1990s by Dzhampa Tinlei, the dalai lama's representative in Russia.[25] By contrast with dissenters such as Samayev and Green Tara, five members of *Ar'yaa baala* at a meeting at their *dugan* (shrine) within the former Department for Political Enlightenment in Ulan-Ude pointed to the group's strong subservience to the Sangha. At first insisting that only their absent group leader Nikolai Dambayevich was qualified to speak for them, the five stressed their allegiance to the khambo lama: 'We are no one. ... We are subordinate to him. ... He is our leader in Russia and we respect him.' Unlike Green Tara, an important element in whose meeting was a discussion of ways to disseminate Buddhism through lectures, *Ar'yaa baala* members stressed that they shared their faith only with those who expressed an interest in it, possibly indicating that a lack of dynamism within Sangha structures presents a further cause for dissent.[26]

Billed as confessionally belonging to the Rime Movement, which embraces all traditions in Tibetan Buddhism, an additional direct rival to Ayusheyev's Sangha is posed by the Spiritual Directorate of Buddhists (*Dukhovnoye upravleniye buddistov* (DUB)), which is in fact predominantly Gelug. Registered as a centralised organisation on 23 September 1998, its president is Nimazhap Ilyukhinov, head of Ulan-Ude's Dharma Centre. Ilyukhinov is similarly critical of Ayusheyev, whom he accuses of trying to destroy other Buddhist communities 'using structures of power'. He believes that the main Buddhist organisation in Russia should include all Buddhists in Russia, not just followers of the Gelug school or Buryats, although he consents that the dominant role should be played by the Gelug school due to its long-established tradition in Kalmykia, Tuva and Buryatia. However, he complains that the Sangha has restricted its activity both geographically – to within Buryatia – and to those who are not well-schooled in Buddhism and so prove easy to control:

> The khambo lama is trying to make Buddhism the particularity of two or three peoples in Russia and give it a national hue, such as 'Buryat Buddhism'. This does not exist – nor does Tuvinian, nor Crimean Buddhism. The only Buddhism is that of Hinayana and Mahayana (early and late Buddhist scriptures – GF).[27]

Whereas the typical member of both Green Tara and *Ar'yaa baala* appeared to be a middle-aged Buryat female, the majority of those present at a weekly meditation session on the outskirts of Ulan-Ude of the Diamond Path Buddhist Centre were young ethnic Russian males. The group has approximately 25 constant members and was founded in 1994.

The Diamond Path Buddhist Centre (*Buddiisky tsentr Almaznogo puti shkoly karma-kag'yu*) is one of approximately 60 groups in Russia belonging to the Kagyu school of Tibetan Buddhism, spread as far afield as Vladivostok, Pyatigorsk, Kaliningrad and Arkhangel'sk. Unlike Gelug, this school had no official representation on Russian territory during the Soviet era and local groups were typically formed in the early 1990s following public lectures on contemporary Buddhism by Danish lama Øle Nydahl. Nydahl is the interim leader of the school throughout the world since its head, the seventeenth *karmapa*, Tkhaiye Dordzhe, is still a teenager. The spiritual teacher to all the groups in Russia – as well as other countries – Nydahl travels the world almost continually, spending a few days with each at a time.[28] In

Russia, the Kagyu school has its own centralised religious organisation, the Russian Association of Buddhists (School of Karma Kagyu) (*Rossiiskaya assosiatsiya buddistov shkoly karma kag'yu*), which was founded in the capital of Kalmykia, Elista, on 19 September 1993. It was reregistered in accordance with the 1997 Russian law on religion on 4 June 1998 after the Department for Religious Affairs of the Republic of Kalmykia confirmed to the Federal Ministry of Justice that the school was a 'traditional religion ... existing among the Kalmyks alongside other Buddhist traditions since the thirteenth century'.[29]

Members of the Diamond Path Buddhist Centre are not in favour of joining a single, centralised Buddhist organisation in Russia whatever its nature, as they believe that the significance of monastic life in the Gelug tradition would mean that any organisation embracing all traditions would spend a disproportionate amount of money maintaining datsans. According to group leader Lyuda Inkina, the principal difference in the school's approach is that Kagyu places more emphasis on *tantra*, or direct practical experience, rather than *sutra*, or doctrine. Whereas in Gelug the datsans traditionally offered various services to believers, such as astrology and medicine, Kagyu advocates a more direct approach, which could be seen as approximating to that of the low Protestant churches in the Christian tradition: 'We just demonstrate methods. ... You don't need to ask a lama to pray for you, you need to work on your own problems – they won't change otherwise.'[30]

Besides Gelug and Kagyu, a tradition that has its origins in Nyingma, the oldest school of Tibetan Buddhism, is represented by three groups in Ulan-Ude and appears to be becoming increasingly widespread in Russia. Dzogchen, an advanced practice according to which a person can achieve enlightenment within one lifetime, is not a school but a teaching which is practised in and penetrates all four, according to Nikolai Dudko, who heads the Ulan-Ude Dzogchen group *Kundrolling*. His group of approximately 20 permanent members includes very varied people, from shamans who mix Buddhism with their practices to Bair Ochirov, a Gelug lama who used to head the Dashichoikhorlin Institute at the Ivolginsk datsan, the main institution for training Buddhist clergy in Buryatia.[31]

Yet despite its long tradition in Tibet – it was practised by Padma Sambhava, who founded the first monastery in Tibet in the eighth century – Dzogchen has only recently had an official presence on Russian territory. Although Buryat buddhologist Bidiya Dandaron, who is particularly respected among Russian followers of Dzogchen, engaged in advanced Buddhist practices deemed to lead to fast enlightenment, he refused to categorise this, stating simply: 'I unite all schools'. (Recognised as the reincarnation of the reformist spiritual teacher Dzhayagsy Gegen, a Buryat lama who rejected monastic life as *samsara* – the world of cyclic existence and suffering – and returned to intensive spiritual practice, Dandaron died in a Soviet prison camp in 1974. He believed Buddhism would be required in the West and gained many converts in the European part of Russia.)[32]

Kundrolling began to form in the late 1980s, when two or three of the present group discovered the writings of their now spiritual teacher, Nam Khai Nurbu Rinpoche, and understood them to be a great teaching. The group was registered in 1995 after a six-month delay; according to Dudko, local officials in Buryatia did not understand what Dzogchen was since it was not under the auspices of the Buddhist Traditional Sangha: 'They asked, "How can there be two Buddhisms here? Isn't this sectarianism?", and sent all the documentation to Moscow.'[33] Valentina Alekseyeva, chairwoman of Buryatia's Committee for the Affairs of Nationalities, confirmed the authorities' apparent disregard for Dzogchen by claiming that the only form of

Buddhism in the republic was Gelug. She twice maintained that Dzogchen was not widely distributed in Buryatia before concluding 'we don't have it here'.[34]

According to Dudko, *Kundrolling* is 'keeping away from politics and trying to preserve our purity as much as possible'. He does not believe that the khambo lama feels particularly hostile towards his group: 'He probably doesn't have a view of us. Maybe as a group of intelligentsia playing with Buddhism.' However, I learnt of the khambo lama's disquiet at Dzogchen's growing public profile from Margarita Romanova, the curator of Ulan-Ude's Museum of Buryat History, who related how he had telephoned her in May 1997 to express his indignation that the museum was staging an exhibition of Buddhist *tangha* (icons) by renowned local artist Batodalai Dugarov, a follower of Dzogchen and former student of Bidiya Dandaron:

> The khambo lama asked, 'Why are you putting on a Dzogchen exhibition? Don't you know that he (Dugarov) opposes the Dalai Lama?' I answered that Dugarov's work was in the Hermitage and that I didn't know anything about his religious status, but he insisted that Dugarov was 'an enemy of Buddhism'. When I said that I didn't think that Buddhism was an aggressive religion, and surely he didn't have enemies, he replied, 'Are you trying to teach me about Buddhism?'[35]

In Nikolai Dudko's view all teaching comes from Buddha and the different schools of Buddhism are simply different methods of attaining the common goal of enlightenment: 'you can have different restaurants – French or Chinese – but the aim is still eating'. According to the current dalai lama, 'there are various schools in Buddhism, different systems of practice, and we should not consider one teaching better than another. The sectarian cast of mind and criticism of other teachings or schools is very harmful, poisonous and should be avoided.'[36] Khambo Lama Ayusheyev, however, maintains that followers of Dzogchen are 'sectarians' and believes Dzogchen to be a new phenomenon in Russia which arrived via Kaliningrad. He favours the legal principle in Latvia, according to which each confession has one central organisation: 'In the final analysis we have one president and one prime minister, although there may be many parties – that is for the well-being of the country.' However, he does not want all schools of Buddhism to join the Buddhist Traditional Sangha – 'the Sangha is Gelug' – but would simply like them to respect the Gelug tradition 'because it is the historical tradition in Russia. In Tuva, Kalmykia and Buryatia 99 per cent of Buddhists are Gelug.' He does not believe it to be particularly important for Buddhists in Russia to be afforded the opportunity to choose schools other than Gelug: 'We are in a period of instability now, when we get out we can experiment, but not while Russia is weak. Don't change your horses midstream.'

Several of the Buddhists I interviewed remarked that in their view one of Buddhism's positive aspects was that an individual could choose the method or school best suited to him or her. The khambo lama, however, views the choice of school as the decision of a whole people (*narod*): 'Every people accepts the teaching of Buddha in its own way, every people has its own *karma*.' Frequently adopting rhetoric strikingly reminiscent of Russian Orthodox hierarchs' criticism of foreign church workers on Russian territory, he condemns 'open missionary work from the West' and contrasts 'Buryat' Buddhism ('we don't engage in missionary work: a person should come to Buddhism knowingly, out of his own volition') with what he described as 'Russian' Buddhism (*rossiisky*, denoting all peoples in the Russian Federation, rather than *russky*, which refers only to ethnic Russians). The latter, according to the khambo lama, began in the early 1990s 'when many teachers came

from the West and gave lectures – some Tibetan teachers from Europe also do this in Russia – they didn't make any contact with us, the Sangha.' In Buryatia, he claims, 'our forefathers never did this, the people came to Buddhism by themselves. In Europe they see it differently – they actively promote themselves and teach people.'[37]

This picture of two forms of Buddhism at odds with one another – long-dominant Gelug among Asiatic ethnic groups versus the European, self-taught variety – is not always as clear-cut as Ayusheyev suggests. In St Petersburg some of the most active members of the Gelug community recently ousted from the city's datsan are ethnic Russian converts, and Gelug followers such as Aleksandra Dugarova are critical of their own school's attempts to monopolise Russian Buddhism by claiming to be the 'traditional' Buddhism afforded respect by the 1997 law on religion: 'The question of what is traditional is all well and good, but there should also be a sense of the present, a movement into the future.'[38] Nevertheless, this perceived dichotomy is the defining feature of Buddhism in Russia today, and it could have no more potent symbol than the St Petersburg datsan, currently at the centre of a bitter dispute between the respective factions.

Completed in 1915, Europe's oldest datsan was the achievement of Agvan Dorzhiyev, Buryat khambo lama and representative in Russia of the thirteenth dalai lama, Tubtan Gyatso. It was clearly intended as a monastic complex; on the floor above the main assembly hall there are ten cells for resident lamas, while an adjacent four-storey building was originally a hostel for novices. It was as a monastery that the datsan functioned until 1937, when those lamas who remained were accused of 'the most unbridled counterrevolutionary work' and shot, and the building was seized by the Soviet authorities.[39]

By the time its return became a possibility in the late 1980s, however, the composition of St Petersburg's Buddhist community had radically changed – it no longer consisted predominantly of representatives of the traditionally Buddhist ethnic peoples of Russia. When he travelled from Buryatia in order to claim back the datsan, according to lay Buddhist Tsyrenzhap Chimitov, 'Russians and Jews helped me, but Buryats did not'. It is a group of such believers – predominantly of European origin and followers of schools other than Gelug – which Chimitov now heads. He maintains that his mission had its origins with Agvan Dorzhiyev himself, since immediately prior to his death Dorzhiyev is said to have predicted that in ten years' time 'a lama with a terrible face' would come to help Russia's Buddhists win back the St Petersburg datsan. Ten years later, he claims, a lama with a half-disfigured face did indeed appear in the Buryat village of Kharashibu and suggested that Chimitov should eventually try to recover the St Petersburg datsan. In 1989 Chimitov was appointed the datsan's warden by Khambo Lama Zhimbal Erdyneyev; it was returned to his community the following year.[40]

In 1990 Danzan-Khaibzun Samayev arrived in St Petersburg. He was a lama from Buryatia who had trained in Ulan Bator, Mongolia. A 20 November letter from Khambo Lama M. Tsybikov confirms his appointment as abbot of the datsan. According to Chimitov, he duly transferred all official documentation to Samayev's name, but a month later the TsDUB contacted him and asked why he had handed the datsan over to Samayev, as they had not sent him. In support of this claim, a 22 October 1992 letter from Khambo Lama Zh. Shagdarov informs the consultative committee of leaders of religious organisations in St Petersburg that, as of 27 March 1991, Samayev was 'expelled from the ranks of the clergy for unfitting conduct and failure to implement the decisions of the Spiritual Directorate. ... Samayev is a private individual and may not represent the interests of Buddhist clergy.' Once this

became apparent, Chimitov ordered an expert analysis of the 20 November 1990 letter: a 25 November 1993 document signed by specialist L. Pakhomova of the Transbaikal Scientific-Investigational Laboratory of Legal Expertise in Buryatia confirms that Khambo Lama Tsybikov's signature on this document 'was not written by him but by another individual imitating his true signature'. The discovery that his letter of appointment had been forged, however, did not immediately result in Samayev's removal.

According to Chimitov's deputy Natasha Agafonova, Samayev dismissed Chimitov soon after his arrival before creating the joint post of abbot and president, which he then filled. In her view, this event marked the end of the concept of a Buddhist community in St Petersburg and the beginning of a period in which the datsan was to be run purely as a Gelug monastery, with the laity given next to no say in its affairs.[41] Signed by Khambo Lama Choi-Dorzhe Budayev and registered on 5 June 1995, a new charter for the Religious Association of Buddhists 'Gunzechoinei Datsan' (*Religioznoye ob"yedineniye buddistov 'datsan gunzechoinei'*) states that the highest organ governing the datsan is a general meeting of its clergy, which should meet at least once a year. Among other important functions, the clergy have the right to invite Buddhist monks and to discuss and decide upon the basic direction and forms of the datsan's activity. Lay members are obliged to 'observe the rules and internal order established by the abbot'.

There was strong opposition to these changes. According to Samayev, a 'mafia' of Chimitov, assistant abbot Buda Badmayev and ten others met in the datsan without his permission on 20 June 1997 and reverted the 1995 charter to that of 1991, according to which all believers had the right to choose their leader. On 22 June, maintains Samayev, he held a meeting to overturn what they had agreed, but on 23 June the group held another meeting and voted Chimitov president and Badmayev abbot, since the changes back to the 1991 charter also meant that two people could head the datsan.[42] A 25 June 1997 letter signed by Khambo Lama Damba Ayusheyev both confirms Badmayev's appointment as abbot and reinstates Samayev's title of lama.

According to the minutes of the 20 June meeting, 55 people were present. They claim that as the meeting began, members of the security services arrived having been summoned by Samayev, but were unable to prevent the meeting since Samayev could not produce valid documentation confirming that he was abbot. The meeting then reportedly proceeded as follows. It was announced that, according to the datsan's 1991 charter, 'the highest organ governing the datsan is a general meeting of clergy and believers which should meet at least once a year', and that the initiation of the 1995 charter without the agreement of this general meeting was therefore illegal. A majority of those present who chose to vote then gave their approval to a return to the 1991 charter, to the removal of Samayev as joint abbot/president (the khambo lama's 22 October 1992 letter defrocking him was read out), to the restoration of Chimitov as president, to the appointment of Badmayev as abbot and to the completion of a new charter which would bring the datsan's status into line with current legislation.

It is ironic considering Ayusheyev's support for the 1997 law that this same law should prove to be a mechanism for Chimitov's supporters to wrest the datsan away from the Traditional Buddhist Sangha, with the result that the Sangha was refused re-registration on three occasions when it attempted to include the datsan among its items of property. On 2 July 1998 Chimitov and his supporters – who are not part of the Sangha – were granted reregistration as the St Petersburg Buddhist Community

'Gunzechoinei Datsan' (*Sankt-Peterburgskaya buddiiskaya obshchina 'datsan gunzechoinei'*) with the datsan building included as their property in the group's application. According to Samayev, the Ministry of Justice subsequently agreed to reregister the Buddhist Traditional Sangha only if it dropped its claim to the St Petersburg datsan, and Ayusheyev eventually gave in, in view of the approaching reregistration deadline. As a result, the Sangha was registered only in the spring of 1999.[43]

Once registered, Chimitov's group then arrived to claim their legal property. According to press secretary to Badmayev Andrei Zotov, a group of 13 people headed by Chimitov arrived at the datsan on 23 July 1998 and produced official documentation confirming that they had been registered as its legal occupiers. Once they had been forced out by the accompanying private security firm and armed police, he maintains, the five monks (including Badmayev) and ten novices continued to hold services in a summer house on the site until 17 August, when they were again 'chased out'.[44]

Although he was appointed abbot at the same time as Chimitov was appointed chairman in June 1997, therefore, Badmayev subsequently lost joint control of the datsan. Samayev claims that Badmayev did not realise that he was not gaining any power by becoming abbot, as this lay with the chairman.[45] Agafonova, however, maintains that Badmayev knew all along that he was being appointed abbot only temporarily (Chimitov's group relieved him of the title on 28 July 1998) and that the group was applying for reregistration.[46] According to member of Badmayev's community Yelena Khar'kova, the group currently occupying the datsan suddenly appeared towards the end of 1996, and Badmayev had begun to trust them, since they said that they were trying to strengthen the community, 'but they deceived him'. When he 'naturally' refused to agree to their suggestion of leaving the Traditional Buddhist Sangha, she said, 'they cunningly did not attempt to protest but decided to seize power themselves'.[47] Badmayev also claims that the community was formed without warning: 'It all happened behind our backs – if we had known then of course we would have done something.'[48] However, a letter dated 28 October 1997 sent by Badmayev to the president of Kalmykia, Kirsan Ilyumzhinov, would appear to indicate otherwise: it requests that the Kalmyk president take the St Petersburg datsan under his 'political protection' as it unites 'traditional Buddhists – Buryats, Kalmyks, Tuvinians, Mongolians and Tibetans'.

Badmayev's community – which closely adheres to the Gelug school and has the support of Khambo Lama Ayusheyev – is currently fighting to regain control of the datsan. Yelena Khar'kova maintains that Chimitov's group had no right to reregister, as clergy have to approve all issues according to the datsan's charter of 1995. Under the pretence of reregistration, she alleges, the group had actually registered a new organisation, while the change in spelling in the word 'Gunzechoinei' shows that the group 'don't know what they're doing'. The original spelling of the word uses the letter 'ə', which frequently occurs in Buryat; the new version simply uses the more common Russian letter 'e'.[49]

According to a 7 September 1998 letter to the St Petersburg local Department of Justice from G. Rezonov, assistant to the city's public prosecutor, the documents for reregistration of the religious organisation of Buddhists 'Gunzechoinei Datsan' (the old spelling) had been submitted by representatives of the St Petersburg Buddhist community 'Gunzechoinei Datsan' (the new spelling) without the knowledge of the founders of the former religious organisation. This was thus in violation of the 1995 charter with which the organisation was originally registered, he wrote, and so the reregistration application should have been refused under Article 12 of the 1997 law on religion.

According to Agafanova, it was not true that her group had seized the datsan – they had simply produced their reregistration documents and politely asked the occupants to leave. She maintains that there is no significance in the change of spelling of the word 'Gunzechoinei', a title that had anyway been adopted by Samayev. She explains that it is an abbreviation of the Tibetan 'the source of the holy teaching of the Buddha compassionate to all sentient beings', and since this is a holy mantra, her group would actually prefer to be known as either the temple of Kalachakra, or the full mantra.[50]

One of the ousted group's principal arguments against Chimitov's supporters is that they are not proper Buddhists. According to Badmayev, the group are 'people who consider themselves Buddhists',[51] while Khar'kova comments 'they have said that they are "simply Buddhists" – but this is a very doubtful position to anyone who understands Buddhism, which quite clearly observes the handing down of different traditions. They have no teacher, and they don't observe festivals.' According to Khar'kova, after American *geshe* (holder of a degree in higher Buddhist studies) Michael Roach visited the datsan in autumn 1998 'he could barely speak. He told us that when this is all over the datsan will have to be reconsecrated.'[52] Chimitov's group has joined Ilyukhinov's DUB, which claims to represent the Rime tradition of Tibetan Buddhism. According to Zotov, however, Chimitov's group 'is no Rime group'.[53]

Although Agafonova claims that Ilyukhinov has supported them in difficult situations, her group has also been criticised from within the DUB. In July 1998 the community council of the datsan (headed by Chimitov) wrote to Ilyukhinov requesting that he 'urgently send a Buryat lama with theological education to work by agreement with the community and conduct ritual practices according to Buddhist canons'. In September 1998 Erdeni Dambayev, a Buddhist cleric of the Nyingma school from Ilyukhinov's Dharma Centre in Ulan-Ude, was sent to St Petersburg. In a 14 May 1999 statement to the St Petersburg public prosecutor, the October Federal Court of St Petersburg and the Department for the Affairs of Religious Organisations of St Petersburg and Leningrad *oblast'*, Dambayev writes that the community currently occupying the datsan 'is conducting activity not in accordance with the norms of Buddhist ethics'. He complains in particular about a 'secret altar for the performance of an unknown cult' on the third floor as well as the use of mass-produced instead of natural oil in the altar lamps.

Agafonova admits that hers is not a Rime group: 'Our teachers are from Kagyu, Sakya, Dzogchen, Nyingma – we want to see a *dharma* (teaching) centre in St Petersburg where all schools, lines and traditions would be represented.'[54] Although not registered as the legal occupiers, Nyingma, Kagyu, Zen and two Dzogchen groups currently use the datsan; photographs of recent visits by various Tibetan teachers of some of these schools, including Namkhai Norbu Rinpoche and Nenchen Palden Sherab Rinpoche, are displayed in the main hall. According to one member of Chimitov's group, the 'secret shrine' consisting of Buddhist icons and gold swastikas mounted on black silk (located in Dorzhiyev's former office, now a teaching room) is in the Nyingma tradition, the oldest school of Tibetan Buddhism.[55]

The major school of Tibetan Buddhism that Agafonova omitted from her list is that of the ousted group – Gelug. In her view, 'Gelug is an excellent branch but it has one peculiarity – it teaches that to reach the highest levels you have to become a monk.' Chimitov's group are loath to have contact with followers of Gelug in Russia, who, they claim, regard other schools with derision. Agafonova described as 'typical' the view of journalist Sayana Namsareva, who reported on 8 December 1999 in

Russian religious affairs newspaper *NG-Religii* that the datsan had become a centre for 'sectarian groups which profess Buddhism of new western schools and teachers, financed directly from abroad', which was 'inconsistent with Russian Buddhist traditions'. This view has been echoed by Khambo Lama Ayusheyev: when asked about the fate of the St Petersburg datsan in October 1999, he remarked that it had been seized by 'sectarians'. When Ayusheyev arrived at the St Petersburg datsan soon after the June 1997 meeting, according to Agafonova, he threatened them: 'We now hear that he is holding *khural* (services) praying for our destruction.' Following Ayusheyev's visit, she said, Badmayev would carry out only his instructions: 'He said the datsan could only be Gelug and called it a monastery.'[56]

The alleged poor quality of Gelug monks in Russia is another reason why they have been excluded by the group in possession of the datsan. Although he appeared unclear about the differences between schools, Chimitov was insistent that the traditional form of Buddhism in Russia (the Gelug school) had 'gone to pieces':

> Before the Revolution lamas studied for 35 or 40 years in Tibet and India – but they are all dead. The new ones study just six. There are a few good ones – who don't smoke or drink – but most of the young ones buy cars and drink vodka.

If Badmayev had had a theological education, according to Chimitov, he would never have driven him out of the datsan.[57] Agafonova also maintains that Badmayev does not have the theological training required of a lama. His 1991 application for a foreign passport (by which time he was already assistant abbot) appears to support their claims, since the entries in the section listing past study and employment detail only his technical education and position as welding instructor. Before Chimitov's group took over the datsan, according to Agafanova, it resembled a hostel: 'The police and the residents of the neighbouring building (the former hostel for novices – GF) were glad that we came – they were sick of drunk novices and fights.'[58]

The dispute is taking its toll on the building of the St Petersburg datsan itself. According to Chimitov, the main reason why no trained lamas have been sent by Ayusheyev is that 'he is afraid that they will find out about the lack of repairs and complain that nothing has been done'.[59] Agafanova claims that Samayev 'pocketed' the 350 million roubles from state funds given for restoration of the datsan: 'he put up scaffolding to make it appear as if something was being done'.[60] Indeed, when I visited the datsan I could not see that even basic repair work had been carried out – there was rising damp in an upstairs room now used for Zen meditation, Soviet fixtures had not been removed and the stained glass above the main hall designed by renowned Russian artist Nikolai Rerikh appeared to be held together with sticky tape in places.

According to Agafonova, her group had discovered that the State Inspectorate for the Preservation of Monuments, which had allocated the money, did not have juridical accountability: 'Samayev and Badmayev have signed all the documents – they are the ones who will have problems. The inspectorate cannot be touched.' When representatives of the Ministry of Internal Affairs came in 1998, she said, 'they shook their heads when they saw that nothing had been done'.[61] A 26 February 1999 letter from V. Stepanov of a local St Petersburg department of the Ministry of Internal Affairs exhorts Chimitov 'not to carry out any repair, architectural or restoration work on the Buddhist temple ... and to preserve it in the state in which you found it' while he conducted 'an investigation into the legality of the expenditure of budget funds on the restoration of the Buddhist temple'.

Zotov in turn accuses Chimitov's group of dishonesty: 'They have seized our personal property – 1160 dollars' worth in all.' He suspects that the group had paid a bribe to be reregistered: 'They registered in two days whereas it took us six months. We don't have proof of corruption – but if you have money and contacts in Russia now you can seize what you like.'[62]

According to Agafonova, local Buddhist Margarita Kozhevnikova had spoken to the present dalai lama about the St Petersburg datsan when in Dharamsala: 'He said he thought it would be good if it became a dharma centre and that the laity should look after it.' She claimed that the datsan 'was never a monastery' and gave assurances that her group had 'proceeded very democratically'. The secular concept of democracy, however, is not the prime concern of St Petersburg's adherents to the Gelug school. According to a 24 August 1998 statement by the Board of Trustees of the St Petersburg Buddhist Temple (*Popechitel'sky sovet buddiiskogo khrama Sankt-Peterburga*) 'There are currently around ten Buddhist communities of various kinds registered in St Petersburg. However, by force of historical continuity only the Gunzechoinei temple/monastery represents the Buddhist school of Gelug, which according to the new law (on religion) is one of the four traditional confessions of Russia.' Signed by prominent St Petersburg buddhologists and orientalists such as Yevgeni Torchinov and Valeri Rudoi, the statement also emphasises that in 1995 the datsan's charter was altered 'in accordance with the principles of Buddhist belief'.

Western press coverage of Buddhism over the past few years has reported 'a huge revival',[63] 'the ultimate resurrection', concentrating on the reconstruction of the datsans in Buryatia as evidence.[64] Samayev, however, points out that 'revival is not in buildings – it is a revival if you think the same way as before, there must be spiritual development the same way as before. This is not a revival (*vozrozhdeniye*) but degeneration (*vyrozhdeniye*).' For Buddhism to be in a state of degeneration in post-soviet Russia, there must have been a flourishing spiritual tradition in the country prior to Stalin's persecutions for it to degenerate from. However, it is difficult to gauge the nature of the religiosity of Russia's Buddhists at any stage in the past. The perhaps superficial expression of devotion represented by the construction of religious buildings was a prominent feature of Russian Buddhism long before the persecutions, and so, in that sense at least, the new wave of datsan construction is a return to past practices, possibly suggesting that a degree of degeneration was present in Russian Buddhism even before the communist period. On the other hand, a Buryat family of my acquaintance has apparently preserved a more spiritual approach to the faith over three generations: the grandmother salvaged tanghas from the datsans destroyed in the 1930s and prayed constantly that her three sons would return from the Second World War (they did), a daughter-in-law became a Komsomol member but in later life returned to the faith (albeit maintaining a belief in a single deity), and various grandchildren are adherents of the Gelug school, one a tangha painter.

Whether or not this personal encounter is representative – and deep religiosity is hardly detectable on anything other than a personal level – the knowledge of Buddhism gained by this third generation has come largely from literature and Tibetan, rather than Russian or Buryat, teachers. According to Samayev, the reason for the current state of degeneration in Russian Buddhism is that 'before *perestroika* all the "smart and brave" people went to secular colleges, people who couldn't do anything else went into religion, and so we don't have enough good monks.'[65] The communists' violent severance of the Gelug tradition in Russia thus appears to have resulted in the low calibre of subsequent applicants to the monasteries. The general Soviet religious policy of divide and rule within confessions appears, in the case of

Buddhism, to have resulted in the Gelug school's current aloofness from and occasional hostility towards other schools and the rest of the Buddhist world. Ultimately, therefore, the Soviet legacy to Buddhism is a growing disillusionment among Russia's Buddhists with their own clergy.

Notes and References

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2 Robert Montgomery, *Buriat Language Policy 1800–1928: A Case Study in Tsarist and Soviet Nationality Practices*, unpublished dissertation, 1994, p. 81.
3 *op. cit.*
4 Vladimir Kornev, 'Russen suchen das Nirwana', *Moskauer Deutsche Zeitung*, no. 10 (32), June 2000, p. 10.
5 'The term "khambo" is a Mongolization of the Tibetan "khenpo", meaning a Buddhist abbot or one who has attained high scholastic honours. "Lama", on the other hand, is the Tibetan equivalent of the Indian term "guru", that is a teacher, who may be but is not necessarily a monk.' Snelling, *op. cit.*, p. 6.
6 *ibid.*, p. 7.
7 *ibid.*
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[39] Andreyev, *op. cit.*, p. 117.
[40] Interview with the author, St Petersburg datsan, 22 February 2000.
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[52] *ibid.*
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