
BUDDHISM IN BURYATIA (USSR): LIFE AND ACTIVITIES OF LAMA AGVAN DORZHIEV

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Abstract

Exploring the enduring legacy of Agvan-Lubzang Dorzhiev (1857-1930) and his pivotal role in the preservation and revitalization of Buddhism in Russia, particularly during the tumultuous period of the Bolshevik revolution. As a prominent Buryatia Lama, Dorzhiev dedicated his life to the resurgence of Buddhism, disseminating its ethical principles to the masses, and spearheading the cultural revival of Buryatia. Engaging in diplomacy, politics, and spiritual activities, he emerged as a leading figure in the Russian Buddhist community. Having established strong ties with Tibet, Dorzhiev later became an advisor to the 13th Dalai Lama. Notably, he played a crucial role in diplomatic negotiations with Tsarist Russia, seeking political and military support for Tibet from 1898 to 1901. His commitment to the cause extended beyond the Tsarist period into the Soviet era, where he continued his efforts to keep Buddhism alive in Russia. Dorzhiev envisioned a greater Buddhist world and tirelessly worked towards this goal throughout his life. This paper delves into Dorzhiev's life activities, focusing on the Tsarist period and the Soviet era, with special attention to his role in Tsarist-Tibet relations. Furthermore, it examines his significant contributions to safeguard Buddhism from the challenges posed by Soviet communism, showcasing his unwavering commitment to the spiritual and cultural heritage of Buryatia and Russia as a whole.

Keywords: Buryatia, Tibet, Buddhism, Tsarist Period, Agvan Dorzhiev.

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Introduction

Agvan Dorzhiev known as 'Ngawang Lobzang' was born in the year 1854 in Central Transbaikalia (Buryatia), the region to the east of Lake Baikal in Siberia¹, to Father *Dorzhi* and Mother *Drolkar*. In his early life, Dorzhiev stayed in *Verkholensk* district (present Ulan-Ude) for his education, later ordained by Lama *Gegen* who encouraged him to study Buddhism in Tibet.

In 1873, Dorzhiev, accompanied by his abbot *Chospel Pelzangpo*, embarked on a four-month journey to Lhasa. Unfortunately, despite their efforts, they were denied permission by the 13th Dalai Lama due to prevailing 'Xenophobia,' which restricted Europeans from entering Tibet (Andreyev A., 2001, p. 349). However, in 1870, diplomatic relations resumed between Tibet and Agvan Dorzhiev (1854-1938) and his teacher Penden Chompel. By the 1900s, the Russian Buddhist presence in Lhasa was modest, comprising 47 Buryats studying at Drepung, Ganden, and Sera monasteries, later 22 Kalmyk added (Andreyev A., 2001, p. 351). Between 1898 and 1901, the 13th Dalai Lama advised Dorzhiev to engage in negotiations with Tsarist Russia to secure political and military support for Tibet. Dorzhiev arrived in Russia on February 28, 1898,² and

¹ Agvan Dorzhiev - The Treasury of Lives: A Biographical Encyclopaedia of Tibet, Inner Asia, and the Himalayan Region. Retrieved on 21/07/2022, at <https://treasuryoflives.org/biographies/view/Agvan-Dorzhiev/P1KG4195>.

² Ibid.

held an audience with Nicholas II in St. Petersburg, facilitated by Prince Esper Ukhtomsky, the Tsar's adviser emphasizing Russian policies in the Far East. This diplomatic mission proved to be a success for Tibet, marking a significant achievement in Dorzhiev's efforts.

Dorzhiev's Contribution to Buryatia and Tibet

The Tibet-Russia resumption of relation reached a peak due to Agvan Dorzhiev's strategic role in the Great Game. In 1901, he approached the Tsar, while simultaneously, George Curzon, the Viceroy of India from 1899, involved British India in Tibet. The situation escalated in 1903 when an armed expedition led by F. E. Younghusband³ was dispatched to Tibet. Seeing the British as potential allies against China, the thirteenth Dalai Lama and Agvan Dorzhiev considered their support. At that time, Tibet faced challenges from China, Russia, and Britain. Notably, Russia refrained from entangling itself in Tibet's affairs. Jampa Samten's work, "Notes on the Thirteenth Dalai Lama's Confidential Letter to the Tsar of Russia," reveals historical secret proposals and conversations between the Dalai Lama and Russia, archived in the M.N Khangalov History Museum of Buryatia, Ulan Ude, Buryatia, Russian Federation (Samten, 2010, p. 357).

At the increasing Chinese pressure on Tibet and the Anglo-Russian Convention of 1907, the Dalai Lama, seeking British protection, reluctantly severed ties with Dorzhiev as his political advisor. Dorzhiev, in turn, returned to Russia with two letters from the Dalai Lama addressed to the Tsar and the Russian Government (Andreyev. Alexandre, 2003, p. 57). The British government's response to Dorzhiev's efforts resulted in Tibet achieving the 1913 treaty with Mongolia.

Russia closely looked at the British India's initiative towards Tibet, leading to clashes between Lord Curzon and Dorzhiev's activities and objectives. The Dalai Lama's letters proposed a Russia-Tibet treaty, guaranteeing a Russian protectorate over Tibet and support for Tibet's independence. These letters, conveyed by Dorzhiev, were preserved in the Archives of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Empire (Samten, 2010, p. 358).

Tsarist Nicholas presented less interest in Tibet as compared to Mongolia after the 1911 Mongolian agenda formulation, the Dalai Lama received advice to pursue a cooperative policy with the British government from the Tsar. Subsequently, Russia signed a treaty with the Mongolian leader on November 3, 1912, recognizing Outer Mongolia as an Autonomous State under Russian protection (Samten, 2010, p. 364).

On 16th December 1912, 'Sazonov', the Foreign Minister of Russia (after the above treaty), wrote a letter to the Russian ambassador in London as follows,

"We would regard as advantageous the conclusion of a direct agreement between the British and Dalai Lama provided it does not infringe on our Tibetan convention, since such a treaty would establish parallelism vis-a-vis the Chinese government between the our stand on the Mongolian question and that of the British on the

³ Agvan Dorzhiev - The Treasury of Lives: A Biographical Encyclopedia of Tibet, Inner Asia, and the Himalayan Region. Retrieved on 21/07/2022, page no 5, at <https://treasuryoflives.org/biographies/view/Agvan-Dorzhiev/P1KG4195>

question of Tibet'.

(Andreyev. Alexandre, 2003, p. 59),

In the context of the 'Great Game', Dorzhiev emphasized the strategic importance for Tibet to ally with Russia rather than falling into the grasp of the British, citing the perceived fear the British had of the Russians (Snelling, 1993, p. 30).

Lepekhov (2018, p. 194) reveals that on November 20, 1907, Dorzhiev submitted a report to the Vice-President (P.P Semyonov-Tyanshansky) of the Russian Geographic Society. The report advocated for establishing closer relations between Russia, Mongolia, and Tibet, proposing the concept of a "great Buddhist confederation". Concurrently, Dorzhiev penned a secret note to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russia, highlighting the nation's potential and opportunities to expand its influence in Asia. The Russian government's policy toward the Tibetan government unfolded within the broader 'Great Game' of the two empires in Central Asia. After the English-Russian agreement of 1907 on the division of spheres of influence in Central Asia, the Tibet issue gained further prominence. Dorzhiev's activities in St. Petersburg resulted in the formation of the first Russian Buddhist community in the capital's social elite and the construction of the 'Gunzeychoyney' temple, completed in 1916.

Snelling (1993) work, titled "*Buddhism in Russia: The Life Story of Agvan Dorzhiev, Lhasa Emissary to Tsar*" extensively explores Dorzhiev's substantial contributions as a distinguished Buddhist scholar attempting to foster diplomatic relations between Russia and Tibet. Dorzhiev obtained Tsar Nicholas II's permission to build a monastery in St. Petersburg in 1909, a project supported by the 13th Dalai Lama. Despite facing anti-Buddhist propaganda, the monastery, established as a center for oriental studies, became a global attraction for scientists, philosophers, and psychologists. Dorzhiev chose St. Petersburg to promote Buddhism as a significant field of study, debate for scholars, artists, and intellectuals. His efforts included establishing the 'Centre Council for Tibetan Medicine' at the medicinal school of Atsaga Dastan.

By the end of 1933, religious practices ceased, leading to the arrest of monks and the closure of temples. The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1990 witnessed the revival of religion through the construction of monasteries, yet a spiritual void persisted. During Stalin era, period from 1935 to 1946 witnessed the destruction of monasteries, the burning of manuscripts, and the suppression of Buddhist clergy. With the Bolsheviks in power, Dorzhiev and Buryat intellectuals endeavored to bridge the differences between Buddhism and Communism. Dorzhiev's speech at the "All-Union Assembly of Buddhists" in Moscow in January 1927 attempted to highlight ideological similarities between Buddhism and Marxism, focusing on the rejection of private property and non-believers in creator God as a shared belief to counter the Soviet Union's atheist policy. However, the Soviet Union carried out the destruction of Buddhist monasteries and organizations, arbitrary arrests, and the killing of monks and head lamas. The Lama class was targeted as "parasitical" under Stalin's policy, causing widespread suffering and death among the lamas in labor camps (Snelling, 1993, p. 243).

Last Years of Dorzhiev

Since 1930's, Dorzhiev's health deteriorated, therefore he made one last will that was necessary for the Leningrad temple. On September 1, 1936, he wrote about his duty to preserve the ties between Tibet and Great Russia after more than 40 years of his political and spiritual activities. A part of Dorzhiev's will in the form of a letter, in his own words, read:

"Now being anxious about the fate of the Buddhist Temple in Leningrad, the property and funds that need to be dispatched to Tibet, in the town of Olgino in Leningrad and there in the Buryat- Kalmyk territories, I feel obliged to appoint 'Sandzhe Dantsykovich Dylykov, who enjoys my full confidence. and to be the successor in the affairs of the Tibet-Mongolian Mission and the only heir to my property both moveable and immovable"
(Snelling, 1993, p. 246)

In 1937, Dorzhiev experienced custody, was released after twenty days, and took residence in 'Olgino' following the arrest of Buryatia intellectuals, including E. Rinchino, Samilon, and Baradin, along with numerous prominent lamas. They were accused of being Japanese spies and bourgeois nationalists, they were declared 'enemies of the people'. Agvan Dorzhiev, faced a 'counter-revolution', branded as a 'Japanese bogey', later leading to health deterioration, and passing on 29 January 1938.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the life and legacy of Agvan Dorzhiev, a prominent Buryat Lama, unfolds as a remarkable tale of dedication to Buddhism and diplomatic endeavors. His significant contributions to the revival of Buddhism in Russia, especially during the Bolshevik revolution, and his role in negotiating with Tsarist Russia for political and military support for Tibet exemplify his multifaceted impact on the historical landscape. Dorzhiev's vision extended beyond religious revival, encompassing cultural and political dimensions. The construction of the St. Petersburg temple, proposed by Dorzhiev in 1905 and completed in 1915, stands as a physical manifestation of his efforts to establish a center for oriental studies. Sponsored by the 13th Dalai Lama, Agvan Dorzhiev, and the 8th Jetsundampa Khutuktu⁴, the temple became a hub for scholars, attracting global attention. Dorzhiev's memory endures as that of a great diplomat and spiritual leader. His lasting contributions to the development of Buddhism and the ties between Russia and Tibet underscore the indomitable spirit of a man who devoted his life to a cause that transcended geopolitical challenges and ideological differences. 'Namtar' autobiography of Agvan Dorzhiev's later translated into English by S. Batchelor and Ts. J. Norbu in collaboration with D. Martin, title "An Account of My Life in Tibet" provides a valuable insight into his complex and impactful journey. In honoring his memory, we recognize not only a historical figure but also a symbol of resilience, cultural exchange, and the enduring pursuit of a shared human spirituality.

⁴ Jetsundampa Khutuktu was enthroned as Khan of Mongolia, when on January 11, 1913, Dorzhiev, as the chief signatory for Tibet, signed the Tibet-Mongol Treaty with Mongolia, which had already declared its independence from the Qing Dynasty in December 1911. Retrieved, Page 7 <https://treasuryoflives.org/biographies/view/Agvan-Dorzhiev/P1KG4195>.

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