

Indian Pundits and the Russian Exploration of Tibet: An Unknown Story of the Great Game Era

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As is well-known, the beginning of the Russian exploration of Tibet is inseparably linked with the name of Nikolai Mikhailovich Przhevalsky (1839–1888). However, it should be noted that long before Przhevalsky, from 1840 (or even earlier) onwards, the Russian “Old Believers”¹ from Altai had ascended the heaven-high Tibetan plateau, in search of the promised land of the “White Waters” (Belovodie), the Russian equivalent of Shambhala. This is testified by the geographic toponyms that one comes across in the travel notes some of these people left, such as Bogogorshe and Kokushi, which clearly refer to the Burhan-Budda and Kokushili ranges.² As for Przhevalsky, he talked about a journey to Tibet for the first time in January 1867 while meeting in St. Petersburg with P. P. Semionov, the celebrated explorer of Tian-Shan, who then headed the section of physical geography in the Imperial Russian Geographical Society (hereafter RGS). Przhevalsky unfolded before him a grandiose project of exploration in Central Asia, including Tibet. However, the Council of the Society was unwilling to support the initiative of the young officer, who then had no name in geographic science. As a result, Przhevalsky, on Semionov’s advice, set off in the direction of the Far East in-

1 Old Believers is a sect of strictly Orthodox Russians. It emerged in the 17th C. as a community of believers, who strongly opposed the church reforms launched by Patriarch Nikon. To escape persecution, thousands of Old Believers fled to the outlying territories beyond the control of Muscovy, to the northern forests, the southern steppes, the Altai area and Siberia.

2 See N. K. Rerikh, *Serdtshe Azii* (The Heart of Asia), in: N. K. Rerikh, *Izbrannoe* (Selected works), (Moscow, 1979), p. 176–177.

stead – where he was posted by his military superiors – to the little known Ussuri Region, which had been recently annexed by the Russian Empire.

This journey was a serious test of Przhevsky's abilities, but one which he passed easily. Having returned to St. Petersburg after two years, the traveller again began to press for an expedition to Central Asia. This time the RGS turned out to be more benevolent to his designs, mainly owing to the support of the Russian minister to Peking, A. E. Vlangali. In the same year, 1870, Przhevsky set out on his first big journey into the heart of the vast continent, a journey which in 1873 ultimately ended on the "Roof of the World", Tibet.

These facts are well-known to Przhevsky's biographers, however, none of them hitherto have mentioned that approximately a year prior to that pioneering expedition, the RGS jointly with the Main Staff of the War Ministry,³ had planned to secretly dispatch an agent to Lhasa for intelligence-gathering. The person was to be disguised as a Buddhist pilgrim, following the example of British-Indian agents, so-called pundits. This remarkable event, apparently unknown to scholars, is of great interest for the history of the Russian exploration in Tibet, but also as an illustration of the Anglo-Russian rivalry in Central Asia, the Great Game. The discussion of these two aspects is the focus of the present article.

The years 1860–1880s were the period of Imperial Russia's most vigorous advance into Central Asia. The switch to a "Forward Policy", by a country which has not yet fully recovered from the debacle of the Crimean war, came in 1863, when the war minister D. A. Millutin, after long deliberation, resolved to begin military operations in the region. His prime goal was to connect the Siberian and Orenburg defensive lines in order to secure Russia's southern frontiers, but he also believed that by demonstrating its strength in Central Asia, Russia would be able to prevent England

3 The Main Staff (*Glavnyi Shtab*) is one of the supreme bodies of military administration in tsarist Russia. It was originally established in 1816, under the name of the Main Staff of His Imperial Majesty, abolished in 1832, and re-established in 1866. Among its special functions in time of peace was collecting information on the armies of foreign nations and potential war theatres. The Main Staff was also involved in the scientific exploration of the areas of strategic interest to the Russian empire. It should not be confused with the General Staff, another military administrative body.

from giving assistance to Poland, where an uprising had erupted earlier that year. The Russian expansion, however, went far beyond those lines and led ultimately to a number of territorial acquisitions. Three Muslim khanates – Bukhara, Khiva, and Kokand – had fallen into the Russian hands one by one by mid-1875 and this naturally created considerable commotion in British ruling circles, due to the well-established Anglo-Russian competition in Asia.

Further to the East, in Chinese Turkestan, the situation was also becoming tense as Russia and England, advancing from the two different directions, were concurrently seeking to spread their political, economic and military influence. The interests of the both superpowers especially clashed in Kashgaria, where a strong Muslim state of Yettishar ("Seven Cities") emerged in 1865 as an outcome of the Dungan rebellion directed against the Manchu Qing administration of the area. In 1871, Russian troops occupied the Ili Region in Jungaria, lying to the north of Kashgaria, with a view to restoring order in the adjacent territory, but also, no less importantly, to thwart the British plans to win over the ruler of Yettishar, Yakub Beg, as the latter was openly siding with the British. However, these two opposing waves of expansion were largely kept in check by the fact that much of the territory between the Mongolian steppes and the Himalayas was hardly explored at all, particularly the wide expanses of Tibet, the country which was virtually *terra incognita* for Western geographers. It was to this "Land of Lamas", which had deliberately isolated itself from the rest of the world, that both Britain and Russia turned their gaze, almost simultaneously, in the 1860s. By this time Britain had established its control over a number of minor states – the Tibetan Buddhist cultural areas – along the Himalayan foothills, such as Darjeeling, Lahul and Spiti, and Ladakh, to which Bhutan would be added in 1865, and thus drawn the borders of British India into contact with Tibet.

In 1863 the Great Trigonometric Survey of India began the reconnaissance of the countries lying to the north of the Mustak and Karakorum ranges and to the east of Ladak, i. e. Eastern (Chinese) Turkestan. This task, of considerable military and strategic importance, was assigned by the British to the natives of India, as it has been noticed that their trade caravans passed freely be-

tween Ladakh (or Minor Tibet), which since 1846 had been in the British sphere, and Yarkand, one of the major oases in Kashgaria.

The idea of employing the "indigene cadre" for carrying out the route survey and collecting various information received the support of the Bengal Asiatic Society as well as the Government of India. The success of the first reconnaissance expedition to Yarkand in 1863 inspired those in charge of the Great Trigonometrical Bureau to extend their activities beyond the Himalayas, into the "Forbidden Land" of Tibet. In 1865, having undergone two years of specialized training under Colonel J. Walker and Captain T. G. Montgomerie of the Trigonometrical Survey, two Indian pundits ("learned men" in Sanscrit) were selected to explore Tibet. The two men chosen were cousins from the Bhotia tribes of Kumaon, Nain and Mani Singh. They left from Kathmandu in the direction of Lhasa, disguised as pious pilgrims. The pundits were instructed to survey the road leading from Lake Manasarovar in South-West Tibet to Lhasa using special surveying instruments – sextants, compasses, thermometers, chronometers etc. All of these devices were carefully hidden in their clothes and in the few pilgrims' "travel accessories" they carried with them, such as staffs and prayer wheels. However, contrary to the expectations of the British, only one of the cousins, Nain Singh, succeeded in reaching Lhasa (at considerable risk to his life), and returned safely to India. Subsequently, the pundits, for nearly two decades, were secretly infiltrated in Tibet, the most outstanding achievements from the point of geography being attained by Nain Singh, Kishen Singh, Lalu and Kintup.⁴

In 1868 – two years after Nain Singh's return to Dehra Dun, Capt. Montgomerie somewhat unexpectedly published the report of his work, along with all the results of the survey and other observations, in the *Journal of the Royal Geographical Society*.⁵ Thus, the cunning strategy which the British had used was re-

4 I. P. Magidovich, V. I. Magidovich, *Ocherki po istorii geograficheskikh otkrytii* (Essays on the history of geographical discoveries), vol. 4, (Moscow, 1965), p. 187–189. On the history of Indian pundits and their exploration work in Tibet and Central Asia see also Derek Waller, *Pundits: British Exploration of Tibet and Central Asia* (University Press of Kentucky, 1990).

5 Capt. T. G. Montgomerie, "Report of a Route-Survey by Pundit-, from Nepal to Lhasa, and thence through the Upper Valley of the Brahmaputra to

vealed, even if the name of the actual scout was omitted from the publication. (This, incidentally, did not prevent the Trigonometrical Bureau from carrying on their reconnaissance in Tibet for many years more). The Tibetan "adventure" of Nain Singh naturally came to the notice of the RGS and the Main Staff in St. Petersburg. (From the same journal the Russians have also learned about the British survey in Yarkand in 1866).⁶

Calcutta's initiative must have stirred up mixed feelings of admiration and jealousy in the Russians, but St. Petersburg soon had a chance to answer the British challenge. In late March 1869 the Consul General in Urga, Y. P. Shishmariov, notified the Asiatic Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Russian Geographical Society (of which he was a member) of the decease of the 7th Bogdo-gegen, Jebtsundamba Khutuktu, the head of the mongolian Buddhist church, as well as of the plans of the Mongolian princes and lamas for sending an embassy to Tibet to look for the Bogdo's next incarnation. (Reborn in 1870, the 8th Jebtsundamba, the incarnation of Taranatha, would be the last one in his spiritual lineage. After his death in 1924 the revolutionary government of Autonomous Mongolia would put an end to the theocratic system and proclaim the country a "People's Republic"). Shishmariov's information was brought to the notice of the members of the RGS at a general meeting, held on April 2,⁷ and the following day an acting member of the Society, a Lieutenant-colonel of the General Staff, P. A. Gelmersen,⁸ submitted a memo-

its Source" in *The Journal of the Royal Geographical Society*, vol. 38, (1868), p. 129-219.

- 6 Capt. T. G. Montgomerie, "On the Geographical position of Yarkend and some other places in Central Asia" in *The Journal of the Royal Geographical Society*, vol. 36 (1866).

- 7 *Izvestiia* (Transactions) of the Russian Geographical Society, vol. V, (St Petersburg, 1869). The Secretary of the Society, Baron F. R. Osten-Saken, apparently using Shishmariov's information, told his colleagues at the meeting that the Grand Lama of Urga had died in December of 1868. However, A. M. Pozdneev, who would later become an eminent Mongol scholar, claimed that the Bogdo-gegen died in the spring of 1869, at the age of 19. See A. M. Pozdneev, *O smerti Uryinskogo Chjabdzun Dambu Kutuktu* ("On the decease of the Urga Khutuktu"), Russian National Library, Manuscript sec., (St. Petersburg), f. 590, d. 156, 11.1-4.

- 8 P. A. Gelmersen (died in 1877) would later become the member of the Council of the RGS (1872-1876, and from March 2, 1877, to his death) and Deputy Chairman of the Section of Physical Geography.

randum to the Vice-President of the RGS, Count F. P. Litke, proposing the dispatch of an agent with a Mongolian embassy, to collect information on Tibet. In his memorandum Gelmersen wrote rather emphatically:

"This Embassy provides a valuable and unique occasion of penetration in Tibet, an occasion that may not, considering the current troubled state of Western China, present itself in the near future.

The route of the embassy from Urga to Huhu-hoto (today Huhhot – lit. "The Blue City" – the administrative centre of the Inner Mongolian Autonomous Region – A.A.) is totally unexplored, and (the stretch of road) from there to Lhasa was traversed by only two Europeans, the missionaries, Huc and Gabe.⁹ However, their account of the journey, as is known, despite the liveliness of description, lacks some basic qualities of a scholarly work and is not reliable. Therefore sending someone of European education with the embassy, who is acquainted with the East, might provide valuable geographical data.

Eastern embassies usually consist of many people and are often joined by trade caravans. It will not be difficult for a person of Mongolian appearance to join the latter, particularly if the traveller is disguised as a trading lama-pilgrim. Few risks are involved even if the traveller's ethnic identity is discovered, as the Buryat lamas from Transbaikalia frequently travel to Tibet".¹⁰

Gelmersen, however, was in error, as the traditional links between the Buryat and Kalmyk Buddhists and Lhasa were cut short in the late 18th C., owing to the seclusion policy of the Tibetan rulers. Lhasa was accessible from the north only to Khalka Mongols, since they were subjects of the Chinese Emperor, who until 1913 was also the suzerain of the Tibetan state. The Buryats and Kalmyks, being subjects of the Russian Tsar, were associated by the Tibetans (who were not very knowledgeable in world geogra-

9 E. Huc, *Souvenirs d'un voyage dans la Tartarie, le Thibet et la Chine pendant les années 1844, 1845 et 1846*, t. 1–2, Paris, 1860). The Russian translation: Giuk, *Puteshestvie cherez Mongoliu v Tibet k stolitse Tale-Lamy*, (St. Petersburg), 1866.

10 Archive of the Russian Geographical Society (hereafter ARGS), f. 1 (1869), op. 1, d. 10 ("O Sborn svedenii o Tibete"), l. 1. (Memorandum of P. A. Gelmersen, 3 April 1869).

phy) with the "Westerners" and thus barred from Lhasa, despite the fact that they were ethnically akin to the Mongols and, besides, professed the same Buddhist creed with them.

To confirm his thesis that a Buryat, if sent to Lhasa, will be capable of collecting necessary information on Tibet, Gelmersen referred to the recent British experience:

"A possibility of carrying out accurate geographical work in Tibet was brilliantly proved by the journey of the Indians in 1866, which serves a perfect example for future travellers, esp. in terms of instruments, which were skilfully adapted to the Buddhist prayer devices."¹¹

The Russian officer further proposed a candidate for the job, a Buryat, Naidan Gomboev, the Manchurian language translator at the office of the Governor of the Amur Region. Gomboev was characterized as "having a perfect command of the Mongolian and Manchurian languages, with some knowledge of Chinese and written Tibetan", and also as an "experienced traveller."¹² This must be the same Gomboev, who had served for over three decades as the Postmaster-general at the Russian mission in Peking¹³ and who was a good friend of Urga Consul Shishmariov. (According to the Russo-Chinese agreement of 1881, all diplomatic correspondence between the two countries went by land, via Urga in Outer Mongolia.) He is better known in the Russian literary sources as Nikolai Gomboev, which suggests that he was baptized before entering the Russian service.

The travelling expenses of such a mission, Gelmersen believed, would not be great "as compared to the importance of the undertaking" and they could be easily covered from the funds of the Siberian administration and the RGS.¹⁴ In conclusion, he stated that he would submit his plan for consideration to the Governor-General of Eastern Siberia.

11 Ibid., 1.2.

12 Ibid.

13 See Yu. Yu. Soloviov, *Vospominaniia diplomata, 1883-1922*, (Moscow, 1969), p. 68. G. S. Mitypova in her short book: *Atsagatskii Datsan, 1825-1937*, (Ulan-Ude, 1995), p. 32, speaks of "a Russian envoy in Peking, a Buryat Naidan Gomboev", who remained in China's capital during the suppression of the Boxer Rebellion (summer of 1900).

14 ARGS, *ibid.*, 1.2ob.

The proposal of the officer of the General Staff (who was actually on the payroll of the military-academic committee of the Main Staff, a unit engaged in the intelligence-gathering) was received sympathetically by Litke and other members of the Council of the RGS, including the head of the Main Staff, Count F. L. Geiden. On 13 July 1869 Litke sent a letter to the M. S. Korsakov, the Governor-General of Eastern Siberia, urging him to support Gelmersen's project.¹⁵

Just six months later, in early 1870, the Vice-President of the Geographical Society received a reply from Korsakov along with a note with information "concerning the dispatch from Urga to Tibet of an expedition for Gegen-Khutuktu".¹⁶ (This note was partly published in the same year in the Transactions (*Izvestiia*) of the RGS).¹⁷ From this document Litke learned that in November 1869 the Urga authorities had actually sent a preliminary delegation to Tibet, consisting of 7 lamas, under the Da Lama – one of the Mongolian highest dignitaries (actually an official attached to Shanzudba, the person in charge of the Khutuktu's treasury) "for making inquiry about the reincarnation of the Khutuktu". However, due to the Dungan uprising, the Mongols had to travel by a circuitous route, via Peking, Nanking and further westwards, in the direction of Szechuan province, instead of travelling directly to Tibet, via Kansu, as normally the Mongolian caravans do. News of this delegation was expected in Urga by the beginning of the fall. After that, the Mongols intended to dispatch another embassy to Tibet, which was to bring the new-born Khutuktu to Urga, but this was to depart not until 1871. At the same time the author of the Note made it clear that even in the case that the new Khutuktu was found he could not be brought to Urga immediately. Two or three years wait would be needed before the baby incarnation would be strong enough to endure the long and diffi-

15 Ibid., 1.3–3ob.

16 Ibid., 1.5–5ob. Letter from M. S. Karsakov to F. P. Litke, 22 January 1870. The first page of it has an inscription made in red pencil: A Special Case concerning the dispatch of an agent to Tibet. The Note appended to the letter is entitled: "Vypiska iz Svedenii, sobrannykh v Urge o posolstve, otpravliaemom v Tibet za Gygen-Khutuktoi", (3 pages).

17 *Izvestiia RGO* (Transactions of the RGS), vol. IV, (1870), otd. II, p. 82.

cult journey, across the high mountains and deserts of Inner Asia.¹⁸

The Note continued with the discussion of the possibility of sending an agent with this caravan:

"As to the joining of that Embassy, it can be easily arranged. There is one Buryat lama in Urga, proficient in both the Tibetan spoken and written languages. He is well acquainted with the Tibetans, he used to stay with them in Urga before, and, besides, he has recently visited via Huhu-hoto the Buddhist holy mountains of Wutai shan (meaning in Chinese "A Mountain of Five Peaks"), which are some two or three hundred versts to the south-east of Peking. From there he travelled back via Peking and Kalgan. A lot of Tibetans live in the Utai mountains, whom he used to meet with quite often. Thus he had a good chance of acquainting himself with the Tibetan language and customs. This lama managed presently to talk to some Tibetans and other persons in Urga who intend to go to Tibet with the embassy about *joining it with one disciple* (italics mine – A. A.). The Tibetans approved of his wish and promised to take him along. If necessary, the lama can obtain a permit for a free travel to Tibet from the Shabin office (Khutuktu's court-house), as he did before his journey to Utai. The permit, of course, will be issued in the name of some Mongolian lama; it will be much safer to travel with this kind of document.

Of the persons known in Urga, the chief tutor of Khutuktu, Yondzon Khambo Nomon Khan (Yongs 'dzin mkhen po no mon han – A. A.), is making preparations to go to his motherland and he too would not mind taking the said *lama with one person* (italics mine – A. A.) with him. It would be good (if they) could travel in his company, however, the Peking court, for some reason, is unwilling to let him go to Tibet. Of late he has been granted an honorary title of Nomon Khan (spiritual king) by Peking and advised to remain in Urga, until the new Khutuktu arrived, but Khambo, despite the good graces of the Peking court, does not want to stay in Urga and is soliciting now about departure through his lama-acquaintance in Peking".¹⁹

18 ARGES, f. 1 (1869), op. 1, d. 10, l. 6.

19 Ibid., l. 6ob, 7, 7ob.

St. Petersburg seems to have taken a special interest in this second Mongolian embassy, apart from its Tibetan designs, as the Urga Khutuktus have always had a strong influence over the Buryat Buddhist community in Transbaikalia. As to the 7th Jebtsundamba, he is said to have expressed, some time before his death, a wish to be reborn not in his native Tibet, but in Khalka or even in Russia, of which the Consulate in Urga informed the Asiatic Department of the Foreign Ministry in Petersburg.²⁰

One should keep in mind at this point that the Russian diplomatic agency in Outer Mongolia, since it was established in 1861 in accordance with the Peking treaty, had not only played the role of a center for the accumulation of information on Mongolian affairs, but that it had also served as the starting-point for various expeditions in the country. It is well known that under the auspices of the Consulate-General in Urga an extensive exploration of the territory of Khalka was launched by the Russians in 1860s. Thus in 1864 the Consul himself, Y. P. Shishmariov, made a trip to the water-head of the Onon River, and four years later he travelled to Uliasutai, the capital city in Western Mongolia, which had not been visited hitherto by any European. Shishmariov's report of his journey was the first account of Uliasutai and the surrounding land. From Uliasutai the Russian diplomat sent one of his assistants to Minusinsk, lying in Russian territory, whose work allowed the Russians to chart a new route through an absolutely unexplored tract of Mongolia. Somewhat earlier, with Shishmariov's assistance, a Russian merchant Golovkin visited Dolon-nor (1862), and the aforementioned P. A. Gelmersen made "an excursion" to the Lake Kosogol (1863). And now, in 1873, there opened up a brilliant opportunity to expand Russia's knowledge not only of Outer Mongolia, but also of Western China, beyond the Great Wall, and even of the distant Tibet, by making use of the Mongolian embassy, an opportunity which was too tempting to be rejected by St. Petersburg. In the same manner the Russian government attached their agents to the Kalmyk religious missions to

20 The Russian State Historical Archive (RGIA), f. 797, op. 41, d. 103. Memorandum (*Zapiska*) by A. Karmazov "Ob Urginskoi Khutukte", dt. January 1871.

Lhasa in the 18th C., though none of them, in point of fact, ever made it to Tibet.

The Dungan uprising, however, which engulfed several provinces in Western China including Kansu delayed the departure of the Mongolian embassy. It was only in early 1873, after the Manchu troops had suppressed the Dungans and established their control over the greater part of Kansu province, that the Mongols were able to send off their embassy to Tibet. The caravan departed from Urga on March 24. According to Shishunariov, the Mongolian delegation consisted of one Van (the Prince of the highest rank), four other princes of lower standing, representing the main Khalka principedoms, one Da-Lama from the Shabin Office, the Erdeni-Khambo (representative of the Banchen-Erdeni or Panchen Lama in Urga) and several Chinese officials. Over 1000 camels carried the foodstuffs, required for the journey, as well as the "camp palace" (*pokhodny dvorets*) of the Bogdogegen.²¹ Interestingly, N. Przhevsky, who was returning to Russia from his first expedition in Central Asia, met with this embassy in the Alashan desert in June of the same year. He described this encounter as follows:

"During one of the marches across southern Alashan we met with a caravan of the Mongolian pilgrims, going from Urga to Lhasa. Since the beginning of the Dungan uprising, for a period of 11 years, the pilgrims never dared to travel to the Dalai Lama's capital, but now, when the central part of Kansu has been occupied by the Chinese troops, a large caravan was mounted in Urga (which, acc. to the Mongols, consisted of up to 1000 tents) for bringing Khutuktu who died a few years ago in Bogdo-Kuren (Urga - A.A.) and is now reborn in Tibet. The pilgrims were divided into several parties which followed one after another and were all to assemble at (Lake) Kokonor. Having encountered us, the front party of the Mongols exclaimed simple-mindedly: "Look, where our brave lads ("molodtsy") have got to!" and at first they did not want to believe that the four of us had penetrated in Tibet".²²

21 Ya. P. Shishunariov, "Marshrut iz Urgi v Lhasu" (The Urga-Lhasa Route), *Izvestiia RGO*, vol. IX, (1873), #6, p. 186.

22 N. M. Przhevsky, *Mongolia i Strana Tangutov, Triokhletnee putesthestvie v Vostochnoi nagornoi Azii*, t. I, (St. Petersburg, 1875), p. 362.

Another interesting fact deserves mention here. In his short article about the Mongolian Embassy, published in the *Transactions (Izvestiia)* of the RGS towards the end of 1873, Shishmariov gave a detailed description of the entire Urga-Lhasa route. This route, in his words, was established by the Chinese authorities in olden days and was not to be altered by the Mongol travellers. It consisted of three main legs – from Urga to the camp (residence) of the Alasha Prince, from this camp to Lake Kokonor (which had been only recently explored by Przhevsky), and from Kokonor to Lhasa. Shishmariov enumerated all the major caravan's halting places for the night along the entire road. "Already from Xining Fu the present route coincides with that given by Huc, who describes some of the sites under practically the same names, such as, for example, Burhan-bogdo, Shuheï etc. This attaches special importance to the route, and together with the names of some places in Mongolia, the location of which is already known (such as Tsanchira), allows us to chart the entire "ambassadorial" road on the map".²³ This statement gives one the impression that reconnaissance of this road was to make one of the main tasks for the lama-scout, since it was the most accessible and convenient road connecting Russia with Tibet. Its entire length between Urga and Lhasa was estimated by Shishmariov at 3250 versts (2145 miles), and he specially indicated that the caravans usually make up to 40 versts a day by land, and no more than 30 versts in the mountains.²⁴ Thus the journey from Urga to Lhasa would take about 4 months, including the halting time at Kokonor for giving rest and additional forage to camels and other pack animals.

Naidan Gomboev, as far we know, did not join the Mongol pilgrims on the Lhasa journey. Still there were two other Buryats from Russia (at least) going with the caravan – a lama-teacher with a disciple. The name of the latter, Agvan Dorjiev, is well known today to the students of Tibetan history as well as to the Buddhists in Mongolia and Russia. In his Tibetan autobiography Dorjiev (1853–1938) wrote that at the age of 19 he went to Tibet in the company of his tutor, lama Penden Chomphel (dPal ldan

²³ Shishmariov, *op. cit.*, p. 189 (footnote).

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 191.

chos 'phel) or Chopel Pelzangpo (Chos 'phel dpal bzang po).²⁵ There is no mention in the Tibetan text that they travelled with the Mongolian embassy, but this important fact is provided by Dorjiev's anonymous Russian biography (which could well be his autobiography), recently discovered in the archives of the Russian Academy.²⁶ If so, a question immediately comes to mind – could Dorjiev and his tutor be that Buryat couple, mentioned in Korsakov's note, whom the Russian authorities intended to employ for their Tibetan scheme? We will now briefly discuss this intriguing possibility by using the available sources.

We will begin with Dorjiev, as his life story is better known to us. There is some evidence that he received his primary religious education at the Atsagat Datsang (monastery) in Buryatia, then studied in Urga and served for some time as a clerk in the office of the Khori Steppe Duma in Verkhneudinsk (today's Ulan-Ude, capital of the Buryat Republic, within the Russian Federation).²⁷ This suggests that the youth was quite literate – he must have had a fairly good command of the Mongolian and Tibetan languages and also spoke some Russian. Equally important is the fact that Dorjiev intended to travel to Tibet in the company of his tutor, who was thus to provide a cover for him. These two considerations ultimately make him an excellent candidate for the role of scout.

As to Dorjiev's companion, he seems to be none other than the famous incarnate lama from the Aga Datsang, Namnanai-Gegen, whose real name was Janchub Tsultim Pelzangpo (Byang chub

25 The name of Dorjiev's tutor is spelled differently in the two English translations of his Tibetan Autobiography – as Penden Chomphel by Th. J. Norbu in "Dorjiev: Memoirs of a Tibetan Diplomat", (Hokke Bunka Kenkyu #17, March 1991), p. 11 and as Chopel Pelzangpo by S. Batchelor in "Autobiography of Agvan Dorjiev", (unpublished manuscript), which suggests that the translators probably used two different versions of the text.

26 Archive of the Russian Academy of Sciences (St Petersburg), f. 208, op. 1, d. 146: "Biografia st. Tsanit-khambo, sostoiastchego pri Dalai Lame, Lharambo Agvana Dorjieva" (Biography of the senior Tsanit-Khambo, attached to the person of the Dalai Lama, Lharambo Agvan Dorjiev), undated manuscript, written in pencil.

27 J. Snelling, *Buddhism in Russia. The Story of Agvan Dorzhiev, Lhasa's Emissary to the Tsar*, (Shaftesbury, Dorset, 1993), pp. 13, 14, 20. See also: R. E. Pubaev, "A. Dorzhiev" in: *Natsionalno-osvoboditel'noe dvizhenie buryatskogo naroda* (Ulan-Ude, 1989), p. 4.

tshul khrims dpal bzang po). To Buryats he was known mainly for his great retreat on the holy mountain Alkhanai, which lasted for nearly two decades and brought him the name of "Buryat Milarepa". (It is not clear though, whether this happened before or after his journey to Tibet.) The Buryat tulku was certainly a prominent figure in the lamaist world and he apparently had good contacts with the Mongolian and Tibetan lamas in Urga, which helped him join, together with his pupil, the Lhasa-bound caravan. Theoretically, Namnanai-gegen, too, could have been employed by St. Petersburg, if only as cover for Dorjiev, a possibility, which should not be neglected as the Buryat datsang lamahood had readily collaborated with the Russian authorities in Eastern Siberia throughout the 19 C.

Dorjiev and his tutor stayed in Lhasa for a short time only and they returned to Urga, with the same Mongolian caravan, bringing the 8th Khutuktu to Khalka, in 1874. Thence Agvan proceeded to his parents' home in Transbaikalia. The Buryats did not risk staying longer in the holy city as a special order against foreign visitors had been issued by the Tibetan government at that time. It was primarily the fear of severe punishment, if their Buryat identity was revealed, that made the couple turn back.²⁸ (And this despite the fact that Dorjiev had already enrolled in the prestigious monastic school, the Gomang Datsang [mGo mang grva tshang], at Drepung).

Dorjiev's explanation of his decision to return, given in both his Tibetan and Mongolian autobiographies, seems quite plausible and it would probably satisfy us, unless we knew of the plans of the RGS and the Main Staff. The Buryat's subsequent biography, however, only strengthens our suspicions regarding his possible involvement in the realization of that plan.

Around 1880, Dorjiev travelled to Lhasa again, this time as an attendant of a venerable lama, Dzasak Rinpoche, from the Wu tai shan monastery (Shan Xi province). He re-enrolled in the Gomang school and in 1888, having completed the full course of studies, received the highest scholarly degree, that of the "Pharma-Lhar-

28 Th. J. Norbu, op. cit., p. 11. C. Humphrey, "Collection of Legends and interesting stories, written during the tour of the Ocean", Mongolian Version of Autobiography by A. Dorjiev (Vagindra), tr. by C. Humphrey, (unpublished manuscript).

ampa". Dorjiev then remained in Tibet where in just a few years he established a brilliant and absolutely unprecedented (for a Buryat scholar-monk) career at the Lhasan court. First, he was appointed as one of the religious assistants ("tsan-shab") of the youthful 13th Dalai Lama and then began to perform the functions of the Lama's "soibun" (Tib. "söpon" – *gsol-dpon*) – the steward in charge of his tea and food, acting at the same time as HH close adviser. It was on Dorjiev's prompting that Tibet's Ruler began to seek, from the end of 1890s, a political rapprochement with Russia, to prevent the capture of his country by the British. For this purpose, he dispatched Dorjiev on a diplomatic mission to St. Petersburg in 1898. A few years prior to this (in 1895), still in Lhasa, Dorjiev was secretly visited by two Buryats, Ochir Jigjitov and Dugar Vanchinov, the "trade agents" of P. A. Badmaev (a Tibetan doctor and entrepreneur, whose grand project for a peaceful annexation of Mongolia, China and Tibet to Russia was supported by the Russian government). These agents presumably were sent to collect information about the political and economic situation in Tibet. Dorjiev must have rendered them some important assistance as the following year Tsar Nicolas II ordered that "lama Agvan" be presented with a gold watch, enscribed with his monogram, which was undoubtedly an award for the lama's services in Lhasa.²⁹

In 1900 and 1901 Dorjiev travelled two more times to St. Petersburg as the Dalai Lama's personal envoy and he eventually succeeded in generating some genuine interest in Tibet among the Russian policy makers, including the war minister A. Kuropatkin and the Tsar himself. Having finally settled down in the Russian capital in 1905, on the instructions of the Lama, he continued his mediation work toward a Russo-Tibetan political alliance, until 1914. After the Bolshevik revolution Dorjiev resumed his activities as a Tibetan diplomat and he helped the Soviet government to reestablish contacts with Lhasa, which started a new round of Anglo-Russian competition for Tibet. He was also at the head of the religious reform movement in both Buryatia and Kalmykia between 1922–1929. Dorjiev was arrested in the fall of 1937, al-

²⁹ RGIA, f.560, op.28, d.64, l.1 (Anonymous note from the collection of documents belonging to the Ministry of Finance, dt. 14 June 1896).

legedly as a Japanese spy, and he died in the early 1938 in the prison hospital in Ulan-Ude. By that time the Tibeto-Mongolian mission, which he had set up on the premises of the Buddhist Datsang in Leningrad, was closed and all of its personnel, consisting mainly of the Buryat lamas, persecuted.

These curious facts give enough room for speculation, however, one will find no documents in the available Russian archives testifying to Dorjiev's secret liaison with Petersburg that would allow us to speak of him as a "Russian agent" in Tibet, as was asserted by some Russian and Western authors.³⁰ Hence my assumption that young Agvan Dorjiev could have coupled his pilgrimage to Tibet in 1873 with a reconnaissance mission remains a mere conjecture.

Still the cited documents provide ample evidence that the top Russian geographers and the military, as early as the end of the 1860s, had already cherished an idea of sending a Russian scout to Tibet, in the guise of a Buddhist pilgrim, as a response to the activities of the Indian pundits. These plans were realized only in 1899 when the Buryat Gombodjab Tsybikov volunteered to undertake a "scholarly pilgrimage" to Lhasa, with the support of the RGS. On the other hand, the remarkable work of the pundits undoubtedly gave a strong impulse to Przhevsky's own exploration of Tibet, which lasted a decade and half and concentrated mainly on the reconnaissance on the northern fringes of the highlands. The Russian explorer was well aware of the surveys done by Nain Singh and other Indians. In his book describing his Tibetan expedition of 1879–1880 he mentioned en passant the pundits' earlier visits to Lhasa in 1866, 1871 and 1873.³¹ Moreover, Przhevsky even used the results of their work to his own ends.

30 W. Filchner, for example, claimed that A. Dorjiev had entered in close contact with the Russian Foreign Ministry and the information section of the General Staff in 1886 (W. Filchner, *Sturm über Asien. Erlebnisse eines diplomatischen Geheimgagenten*, Berlin, 1924, p. 6), and a modern Russian journalist Oleg Shishkin asserts, much along the same lines, that the Buryat was the most important agent of the General Staff and that he was known there under the nickname «Shambala» see: O. Shishkin, "Ischeznuvshaya Laboratoriya", *Ogoniok*, #34, (August 1965), p. 71. Neither Filchner, nor Shishkin, however, supported their allegations by any references to official documents.

31 Przhevsky's source was most likely publications of the Great Trigonometrical Bureau in the Journal of the Royal Geographical Society in London

In his travel journals of 1879, while detailing his encounter with the Dalai Lama's emissaries, who halted him near Lhasa, the traveller wrote that he "took out the maps of Tibet and the surveys, made here by the Pundits", so as "to incite the Tibetans a bit more against the English". After that he addressed them with the following words: "Here are the maps of your country, drawn by the English spies, whereas you believe that your country is unknown". (To produce more effect, he then read out the names of some places and distances between them.) "I wanted to show this to your king but you did not let me in (to your capital), so now you have only yourself to blame." "One should see," continued Przevalsky, "the reaction of the Tibetans who did not expect such a surprise. Their faces expressed sheer amazement and horror." Having recovered from this shock, the chief Tibetan emissary then asked Przevalsky how long ago these surveys were made and he was even more surprized when the Russian told him: "No more than 4 or 5 years".³² (This whole story, for reasons easy to understand, was omitted from Przevalsky's book).

That the Russians had keenly monitored the work of the pundits over a long period of time is evidenced by the fact that the RGS possessed all the publications of the Trigonometrical Bureau, with the data obtained by the Indian agents. These included not only general reports of their explorations, but also the most valuable cartographic materials, such as sketch maps and even the plan of Lhasa. As long as the survey work of the pundits in Great Tibet and other parts of Central Asia continued, the Russian interest in these areas also grew, until Tibet, by the beginning of the 20th C., had ultimately turned into the "apple of discord" for the both competing empires. Whether the Russians made other attempts during this time (between 1873 and 1899) to dispatch any of their own Buryat or Kalmyk pundits to Lhasa, is hard to say as the extant records of the RGO and the Main Staff are silent on that matter.

As for Przevalsky, he, being a Russian patriot and a staunch Anglophobe, anxiously watched the developments on the Indo-

and in the Reports on the operations of the Great Trigonometrical Survey of India, Dehra Dun.

³² Archive of the RGS, f.13, op. 1, d. 68, 1.89ob.,90 (Entry for 3 December 1879).

Tibetan border as the British gradually advanced toward Tibet. The border clash between the English and Tibetans at the checkpoint Lungthur in March 1888 did not escape his attention. In the same year, while expounding the plan of his next (the 5th) expedition to Central Asia in a letter to the new War Minister P. S. Vannovsky, he wrote, apparently hinting at this incident: "Aside from the scientific results, it will be possible to collect information concerning the current activities of the English toward Tibet via Sikkim and the sentiments of the Tibetans".³³

The traveller, as is known, died on the road to Tibet, having just started his new journey, and two years later (in 1890) the British finally placed Sikkim under their sway.

33 Archive of the RGS, f.13, op.3, d.5, 1.7ob. Draft of a letter from N. M. Przevalsky to P. S. Vannovsky (undated). On the Anglo-Tibetan border clash in 1888 see: Th. W. D. Shakabpa, *Tibet. A Political History*, (N. Y., 1964), p. 199–200.