



# Europe's First Buddhist Temple

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We do not usually think of Russia as a country with a long-standing and traditional Buddhist population. But it is. Strangely, we do not usually think of it as a colonial power either. But it was. There are numerous books and monographs about the encounter between various colonial powers - Britain, France, Holland, Portugal, etc. - and Buddhism and the effects that they had on Buddhism, but almost none about the fate of Buddhism in the Russian Empire and its successor the Soviet Union. Soviet propaganda from the 1920 until 1990 made it unfashionable amongst Western leftist's intellectuals to examine, highlight or criticize Russian (Soviet) colonialism. From the 17th century onwards European Russia gradually pushed its way into Siberia, then into the southern regions of Islamic Central Asia and then into the Buddhist regions of northern Central Asia. Buryatia was officially annexed in 1727. Kalmykia suffered the same fate in 1771. Mongolia and Tuva, both predominantly Buddhist nations were saved from Russian encroachment for a while but only because they were under the protection of China.

In 1921 the Bolsheviks set up a Tuvan Peoples Republic but their influence was limited to some degree. Stalin finally destroyed even a semblance of the country's independence in 1944. In the same year the Soviet backed Communist government in Mongolia was established which later proved to be even more destructive towards Buddhism than

its counterpart in the Soviet Union. The Buddhist peoples of Kalmykia on the shore of the Caspian Sea were colonized by Russia from the early 1700s so that by the end of the century there were over a million Russian settlers in the country and only 350,000 Kalmyks. But being relegated to a minority in their own land was by no means the worst of their problems. In 1943 the ever-paranoid Joseph Stalin suspected the Kalmyks of being sympathetic to the Nazis and on December 28th 1943 of that year, in one massive operation, the whole population were herded into cattle trains and deported to the wastes of Siberia. It has been estimated that 98,000 Kalmyks died during and in the first few months after the deportation. Tsarist and Soviet oppression of Buddhist and other minorities pales into insignificance besides that perpetrated by other colonial powers, but this hardly ever gets a mention.

This is a brief background to the establishment of the first Buddhist temple in Europe. In 1899 George Nathaniel Curzon became Viceroy of India. He was a strong believer of what was then called the forward policy, the idea that Britain must oppose and hinder Russia's eastward push into Asia. Curzon and his supporters feared that Russia would eventually extend its reach to the northern borders of India and



Lama Agvan Dorjev as a young man

threaten the Jewel in the Crown. British intelligence had discovered that a Buddhist lama (bhikkhu) named Agvan Dorjev had frequently met Tibet's Dalai Lama and even that he was one of his teachers. The thing that caused Curzon to really worry was that Dorjev was also a Buriyat and thus a Russian subject and that he had had several audiences with the Tsar. This could only mean one thing, that Dorjev was a Russian agent trying to influence the ruler of Tibet, India's northern neighbour. So in 1903 the British invaded Tibet and pressured the Tibetan to sign a treaty promising to have no contacts with any foreign power other than China and Britain.

Now that the Russian archives have been opened it seems highly unlikely that Lama Dorjev was a Russian agent, not consciously anyway. More likely, the Russian Secret Service was using him to give the Dalai Lama a good impression of the Russians as a first step in gaining influence in Tibet. It is said that during one of his audiences with the Tsar, his Imperial Majesty even hinted to Dorjev that he was thinking of converting to Buddhism. It is also unlikely that the lama was taken in by this charm offensive. While the Russians were trying to use him, it seems that he was actually trying to use them, trying to wring concessions for the Tuvan and Buryatia Buddhists, hoping to get the Tsar to limit Christian missionary activity amongst them and have them treated equally with Russian settlers who were taking their land.

In 1909 Lama Dorjev proposed to the Tsarist government that a Buddhist temple be set up in St. Petersburg and he received permission

to do this. The work went ahead and the temple was consecrated on 21st February 1913, a date cleverly chosen because it was the 300th anniversary of the Romanov Dynasty.



Lama Agvan Dorjev and friends in front of the temple, 1912

Although a few curious Russians visited the temple it was used mainly by Tuvans, Kalmyks and Buriyats living in the Russian capital. It could have grown into a pioneering centre for Buddhist studies as Dorjev was a very learned monk, but it was not to be. In 1919 Bolshevik mobs vandalized the temple although it managed to stay open by keeping a very low profile. Later it was shut down, reopened in 1927 to prove that “the Soviet Union respects freedom of religion” and then closed again. Up

to the 1930s at least a dozen monks lived in the temple but they were all shot during Stalin's purges in 1937. From then until 1990 the temple was used as a youth centre, a radio station and finally as a laboratory for the Zoological Institute. In 1990 it was repaired and is once again a properly functioning Buddhist temple.

And what of Lama Agvan Dorjev, the founder of Europe's first Buddhist temple? He managed to avoid the Communists until he was arrested by the dreaded NKVD on November 13<sup>th</sup> 1937. Like so many victims of Stalin's purges he was accused of trumped up charges - trying to overthrow the Soviet state and spying for the Japanese - and died in custody on January 29<sup>th</sup> 1938, probably from the strain of interrogation. He was 85 at the time. His body was dumped in an unmarked grave in the gloomy Chetutai forest where some 40,000 other victims of Stalin's terror lie. He was officially "rehabilitated" in May 1990 when it was admitted that all the charges against him were false. Today Lama Dorjev's picture hangs in a place of honour in Europe's first Buddhist temple.