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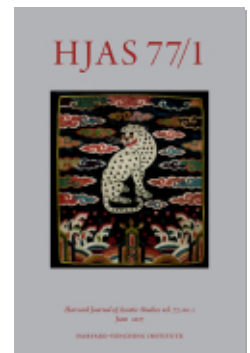
*The Lama Question: Violence, Sovereignty, and Exception in
Early Socialist Mongolia* by Christopher Kaplonski (review)

Christopher P. Atwood

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between specific decades. Besides, the colonial state's dynamic connection to the metropole is mostly absent in the book.

Rationalizing Korea is an ambitious overview of government administrations from the late nineteenth century to the colonial period. The overview involves original research in some chapters and presents a sophisticated synthesis of secondary sources in other chapters. The book enlightens us about the current stage of studies on the rise of a modern state in Korea and raises important questions for further research. Despite some archival and conceptual limitations, the book will be an indispensable introduction to the history of the colonial state in Korea.

The Lama Question: Violence, Sovereignty, and Exception in Early Socialist Mongolia BY Christopher Kaplonski.

Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2014. Pp. xvii + 259.
\$54.00.

Christopher P. Atwood, University of Pennsylvania

In *The Lama Question*, Christopher Kaplonski tackles one of most pivotal and sensitive questions in the modern history of independent Mongolia: how the government of one of the world's most Buddhist countries wiped out the sangha, or Buddhist monastic community, as an institution. As Kaplonski notes, in September 1937 Mongolia had 83,203 monks resident in monasteries out of a total population of roughly 745,000. Less than a year later, only 562 were left in the monasteries. Over 40,000 had fled and laicized; 17,000 still considered themselves monks but lived in the countryside; and 5,000 joined various fledgling collective enterprises. Of the rest, almost 20,000 had been convicted of crimes and about 18,000 were executed.

This crescendo of violence and the fifteen-year campaign of government pressure and intimidation that led up to it could be approached in many ways. In writing the first archivally based book on the topic in English, Kaplonski could have easily confined himself to what journalists call the "tick-tock"—who did what and when during this campaign that wiped clean the slate of Mongolia's society and made it ready for socialism. Indeed, the archival work on which this book is based is

careful and accurate, and it is often enlivened by vivid vignettes and details. More so than any other offering in the still-slim bookshelf of English-language books on the revolutionary era in Mongolia, *The Lama Question* offers a satisfying picture of how the machinery of control, discrimination, and ultimately legal and extralegal repression actually worked from 1924 to 1938.¹ In addition to providing fairly full coverage of the abundant Mongolian published literature,² he accessed extensive archival material from the National Central Archives, the Supreme Court Archives, Party Archives, and the Foreign Ministry Archives. The contrast with Larry Moses's *Political Role of Mongol Buddhism* is stark.³ Writing at the height of the Sino-Soviet Cold War and Yumjaagin Tsedenbal's enforcement of a regime of Brezhnev-style philistinism and conformity, Moses was unable even to do research in Mongolia and had to base his work entirely on secondary published work.⁴ Unfortunately, however, the archives of the Mongolian Central Intelligence Agency, the successor of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, which actually carried out the purges, are still not open to researchers, a point to which I will return.

But instead of just "telling the story," Kaplonski aims to use this story to describe what he, following Giorgio Agamben, calls the "exception"—a suspension of normative and juridical powers by meta-judicial authority that in fact establishes the sovereign's power in the very act of "instituting a threshold of undecideability between the authority to suspend the law and the power to implement it" (p. 31). Ultimately, Kaplonski finds that Agamben's conceptualization needs to be nuanced, and he offers instead of just "exception" a concept of multiple "technologies of exception" (p. 30). These technologies consist

¹ See, for example, Baabar (Bat-Erdene Batbayar), *Twentieth Century Mongolia*, trans. and ed. Christopher Kaplonski (Cambridge: White Horse Press, 1999); D. Dashpurev and S. K. Soni, *Reign of Terror in Mongolia, 1920–1990* (New Delhi: South Asia Publishers, 1992); and Shagdariin Sandag and Harry H. Kendall, *Poisoned Arrows: The Stalin-Choibalsang Mongolian Massacres, 1921–1941* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2000).

² One of the few relevant sources he misses is D. Tsogt-Ochir, *Khelmeqdsen Yegüzer Khutagt J. Galsandash* (Ulaanbaatar: Archives of the Agency for the Assurance of State Security, 1992).

³ Larry Moses, *The Political Role of Mongol Buddhism* (Bloomington: Asian Studies Research Institute, Indiana University, 1977).

⁴ Kaplonski does not even include Moses's book in the bibliography, which is unfortunate—although not a major contribution under the circumstances, the work does, I think, deserve to be mentioned.

of three different broadly chronological, but also overlapping, ensembles of laws and exception to laws that played out from the mid-1920s to the final denouement in 1938. The first technology, salient from 1926 to 1934, was one of nonphysical violence and accommodation. The second technology of exception, salient from 1934 to 1937, introduced class-based discriminatory and confiscatory taxation regimes. Finally, in 1937 began the third technology of exception—show trials, an extraordinary plenipotentiary commission, dehumanizing rhetoric, and mass executions. Yet, alongside it, the two earlier technologies continued, separating lamas by class and putting on regular trial lamas convicted, for example, of poisoning the people through Tibetan medicine. Through all of his story, Kaplonski underlines the fragility of the Mongolian state—the great difficulty it faced in making its normative and juridical powers seem convincing—which led paradoxically, he argues, to a sustained effort to delay as long as possible the turn to the raw exercise of sovereign authority.

Kaplonski's treatment thus raises many uncomfortable issues that Mongolian citizens and historians of Mongolia have often preferred to avoid. As he points out in the introduction, Mongolian political folklore celebrates how Genden, the Mongolian maximum leader from 1932 to 1936, went so far as to smash Stalin's pipe during one of their meetings. If Mongolian leaders were so vigorous in resisting, the folklore implies, then surely the eventual annihilation of the lamas must have been forced on the Mongolian people by the Soviet Union and must not have been something Mongolians did to themselves. But Kaplonski has chosen to focus not on the geopolitical angle but rather on how the Mongolian state itself organized and implemented the campaigns that culminated in the annihilation of the lamas, a campaign that resulted in what Kaplonski acknowledges as genocide. To that extent, he is therefore investigating a kind of auto-genocide, in a country of only three million today, where descendants of the perpetrators and victims live side by side.

At least as disturbing for Kaplonski, though, is the degree to which he found himself "seeing like a state"—more specifically, seeing like a state that felt itself genuinely threatened by the continued existence of the "state within a state" that Stalin accused the Buddhist sangha of being. As he writes, "I can still recall a moment in writing this book when I first began to get an idea of how threatened the socialists must

have felt. . . . It was akin to understanding how the Nazis could have thought the Holocaust a viable solution” (p. 230, compare p. 15). And despite his emphasis on the “exception” as being instrumental to sovereignty, Kaplonski remains in the end “struck by the lengths to which the socialists went to pay at least lip service, and often much more, to the questions of legality and order” (p. 230). Here, Kaplonski’s conundrum can be expressed in less theoretical terms by asking, how could government officials have such an apparently good conscience about such a single-minded campaign of destruction? And how did the government that had done such deeds retain its legitimacy?

And indeed the legitimacy of the Mongolian state is certainly not in question. This fact emerges very clearly from Kaplonski’s discussion of the archives and the rehabilitation process. The archives of the security organs remain closed, despite Mongolia’s multiparty democratic system, with little or no popular pressure to open them to researchers. And the rehabilitation process presupposes the legitimacy and continuity of the Mongolian state. Even today, rehabilitation proceeds under a basic assumption of the legitimacy of the Mongolian party-state. The heirs of a person executed or imprisoned during the various purges may ask to have the charge reinvestigated. If documentation exists, and if that documentation indicates that, under the legal standards of the time, the charge was not adequately proven, then a decree of rehabilitation may be issued. But, as Kaplonski points out, such a decree does not declare the charge groundless, only that it was not proven. And a number of the figures dealt with in his pages have not been rehabilitated. In many instances, this failure is because the commission reexamining the case concluded that the charges (usually of counter-revolutionary conspiracy) were still well-founded enough to merit conviction. Thus, the rehabilitation decrees reject neither the normative and juridical power of the revolutionary state—where opponents of the state decided to strike back before the state struck them and were duly caught and convicted of counterrevolution—nor the pure exception, the metajudicial authority where the state simply executed its enemies without pretense of trial or procedure. In the first case, the sentences are upheld, and in the second, there is no documentation to issue a decree of rehabilitation. Only on the “threshold of undecidability” (p. 31) between these two does the contemporary democratic state dare rectify the actions of the revolutionary party-state.

Nor is this presumption of fundamental continuity between the Mongolian party-state of the 1930s and the pluralistic Mongolian state of today challenged by public opinion. Lenin's and Stalin's statues have gone down, but that of Marshal Choibalsan still stands in front of National University of Mongolia—the Choibalsan who ruled Mongolia from 1936 to 1952 and, as part of the extraordinary commission from 1937 to 1939, personally put his signature to 20,099 orders of execution and 5,739 orders of imprisonment. And reading the histories of the era, even ones written today, what stands out is the absence of truly oppositional voices—voices speaking from a position of radical opposition to the state that came to power in 1921. No significant body of literature speaking from the position of dissidence survives from Mongolia during the 1930s, either inside or outside the country. Although there were émigré figures like the Diluv Khutagt who wrote memoirs, these memoirs surprisingly sum up the 1930 counterrevolutionary trials as “fair enough” (p. 119). In this context, the discussion in which Kaplonski surveys what informants had to say to the authorities about how the public, lay and lama, viewed the trials is both particularly valuable and frustrating—valuable because of the rare window into unofficial sentiment and frustrating due to the necessity of these voices being preserved only through citation by their opponents. Kaplonski stresses the “contingency” of the state (pp. 28–29, 223–28), by which term he designates the degree to which it dared to exercise sovereignty only intermittently and cautiously; in hindsight, however, this political-power contingency seems yoked with an impressive air of teleological inevitability that silenced even its enemies. Accused counterrevolutionaries, such as the Manzshir Hutagt, counseled their followers to nonresistance, since the destruction of Buddhism was inevitable and prophesied. Thus, the confidence of the revolutionaries, stemming from their Marxist-inflected version of the secularization thesis, dovetailed neatly with Buddhist ideas of the decline of the dharma (what in East Asian contexts was referred to as *mofa* (Ch.) or *mappō* (J.) 末法, the final age of Buddhist degeneration).

But such specifically Buddhological or religious issues rarely appear in *The Lama Question*, which is very much a work at the intersection of archival history and political anthropology. More or less missing from the theoretical and comparative underpinnings of the book is any grounding in the disciplines of religious studies and the

history of secularization. This absence is a pity, as such grounding would have enriched the account. Far more so than the Argentinian Dirty War or the Holocaust, *The Lama Question* presents much more specific analogies to campaigns of violent secularization as conducted in—to take an almost contemporary case—the anti-Catholic campaigns during the Mexican Revolution. What is striking in such cases of “secularization from above”⁵ is how the pressure against the institutions of the church or sangha are accompanied by a form of “religion-making” in which institutional-ideological complexes that previously placed their heart in socially rooted praxis and authority are reshaped as entities focused on purely individual and internalized belief—that is, a “religion” in the sense that it is understood in contemporary jurisprudence of secular states.⁶

The marks of this unwilling transformation appear periodically throughout Kaplonski’s work, particularly in the repeated assertions by representatives of the state that they have no interest in infringing on the right of Mongolians to believe or not to believe and that “pure” Buddhism was thoroughly consistent with socialist order (pp. 162–63). Indeed, the revolutionary state engaged in repeated efforts to reform and purify Buddhism and so make it conform to the modern category of religion—eliminating practices such as exorcisms and spirit possession, which by nature challenged the foundational liberal concept of an autonomous subjectivity, or Buddhist medicine, which likewise challenged the relegation of Buddhism as a “religion” to a purely non-physical sphere. In short, far from simply assuming a uniform unacceptability of Buddhism and proceeding to eliminate it, the religious laws in the first and second technologies of exception explicitly undertook to remake Buddhism, rejecting only a vaguely defined but nonetheless real category of “wrong” (*buruu*) beliefs. In so doing, they implicitly asserted the existence of a Buddhism compatible with the revolutionary order. And in all these activities of classifying and reforming the *shashin* (conventionally translated as [Buddhist] “religion”) into Shakyamuni’s religion,⁷ the Buddhist clergy were themselves made complicit through

⁵ See the essays in *Secularism and Religion-Making*, ed. Markus Dressler and Arvind-Pal S. Mandair (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011). I thank Jolyon Thomas for bringing this work to my attention.

⁶ See Donald S. Lopez Jr., “Belief,” in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, ed. Mark C. Taylor (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), pp. 21–35.

⁷ But see Alicia Turner, “Religion-Making and Its Failures: Turning Monasteries into

cooptation as staff in the religious administration. But lamas stubbornly insisted that their *shashin* could not be divorced from its institutionally and socially incarnate body; an informant reported one lama official as saying, “If there is no money [*jas*] or teachers, there will be no religion” (p. 196).⁸

Throughout his book, Kaplonski asks “why it took so long to kill the lamas” (p. 13) and argues that the third technology of exception was not something planned from the beginning or merely tactically postponed but a “last resort” (p. 33), even a sign of resignation and defeat—the revolutionary state’s, not the lamas’. But he never quite defines what the project of the state was that came to defeat in 1937. Following from what I have noted above, what defeated the revolutionary state was not simply the persistent scale of the material power of the Buddhist sangha—its *jas* (treasury) and network of teachers that defined its existence—but its inability or unwillingness to even conceive of, let alone effectively play, the role of a modern “religion,” one purely spiritual and divorced entirely from material life. The evidence Kaplonski assembles suggests that, although Mongolia had its “militant atheists,” it was not their puerile attacks but the enraged frustration of sincere believers in such a “purified” Buddhism that powered the final solution in 1937–1938. And it is the acceptance by Mongolians today, Buddhist and atheist (*burkhangüi*, lit. Buddha-less) alike, of the state’s right as a secular power to define what constitutes a well-behaved “religion” that constitutes the fundamental ground for the absolution that the Mongolian public has granted to the state’s actions during its revolutionary adolescence. In this sense, although both what died in 1939 and what then reappeared in 1944 with the reopening of Mongolia’s Gandan monastery are called *shashin*, in reality they constituted fundamentally different social categories—the first an autonomous social institution defining itself, the second a religious department of the state.

Schools and Buddhism into a Religion in Colonial Burma,” in *Secularism and Religion-Making*, pp. 226–42, esp. pp. 231–32. The Pali term *sāsana* has a common origin with Sanskrit *śāsana*, whence came Mongolian *shashin*. In modern usage, however, the semantic field of Mongolian *shashin* has been thoroughly reshaped to match that of “religion” and its European cognates.

⁸ Kaplonski does not give the Mongolian here, but I think it may be assumed to be *shashin* or *nom* (the usual translation of Sanskrit *dharma* and Tibetan *chos*). In any case, “religion” in the privatized and differentiated sense used by modern, secular regimes is not implied.