

Stalin and the Blue Elephant: Paranoia and Complicity in Postcommunist Metahistories

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This paper analyses certain contemporary narratives among Buryats of Russia and China. At issue is the nature of responsibility for the campaigns of terror, in particular the devastation of the Buddhist church in the 1930s. In these accounts political leaders appear as reincarnations, destined to unleash terrible events. Stalin, for example, is said by Buryat Mongol villagers to have been the reincarnation of a Blue Elephant which lived in ancient times in India. I examine local discussions around these stories to suggest that the narrators, themselves having been caught up in the seemingly objective and transparent, yet deeply irrational, accounts of the Party-State, do not (at any rate at present) confront actions in which they were both perpetrators and victims 'matter-of-factly'. Having been a particular target of the Stalinist all-pervasive organisation of suspicion and punishment, Buryat Buddhists today are creating 'paranoid narratives' of their own to explain the repressions – a narrative of displacement, in which the actions attributed to an other (in this case Stalin) are in some way 'about' oneself. The reincarnation stories point up the crucial moral issue erased by socialist metahistory, the ethical problem of individual accountability. They are about complicity, for they reveal an uneasy, and probably unconscious, identification with Stalin.

Why should such elliptical explanations appear, and why *today* in post-Soviet times, when one might have expected a more straightforward 'telling the truth about Stalinism' to come to the fore? I will discuss this question by contrasting the way Buryat minorities in Russia and China interpret the repressions with the far more open kinds of argument about the same fatal period now going on in the independent country of Mongolia. In both cases there is a response to the socialist era discourse about the 'objective', and thus 'transparent', nature of history. It is the configurations of contemporary political landscapes that make the difference, for in provincial Russia and China the subject positions of Buryats and Mongols are still subordinated within political structures that close off space for open public discussion.

Accounting for purges

With the publication of Arch Getty's and Oleg Nauman's excellent *The Road To Terror*, (1999), we at last have access to the ways of thinking of the architects of the purges. For most Party members, the Stalinist discourse of the victory of the proletariat was simply a self-apparent, political 'universal truth' (Getty and Nauman 1999: 19). The very term *chistka* (cleansing or purge) evokes the climate of infallible right-mindedness in which

retrograde social forms were simply to be got rid of. Yet their belief in the inevitability of success in struggle against class enemies did not convince the Stalinists that they need not be afraid: 'This was a political system in which even Politburo members carried revolvers.' Collectively, these people were frightened of their surroundings. 'Most of them were as afraid of political and social groups below them as of authorities on high' (Getty and Nauman 1999: 16). The discourse and processes of terror reached everyone, right down into the most obscure of provinces.

Buryats and other Asian peoples of Russia were as knitted into this situation as any Soviet citizens. Only in the last few years have such matters, which people call 'closed themes' (*zakrytiye temy*), begun to be spoken about. The reincarnation narratives for the first time disclose the predicament of personal accountability. They recast the great communist leaders as 'reincarnations' (*xubilgan*) of legendary figures from ancient times, according to the Buddhist discourse: it is the ethical weight of the acts (*üilin ür*, the fruits of sin, karma) of previous lives that ultimately determines actions in the present one. There is a cause (*shaltgaan*) lying in ancient times which compels the leader to act the way he does. With a quite different content, we can yet see that exactly this is also an unacknowledged quandary at the heart of the Stalinist project, as revealed in the trials of purged people. The 'properly perverse' attitude was to adopt the position of a pure instrument: 'It's not me who is effectively doing it, I am mere the instrument of the higher historical necessity' (Žizek 1999: 30–32).

The reincarnation narratives

The reincarnation story about Stalin was told to Hürelbaatar during private conversations about national history in people's homes, using the Buryat language in Buryatia in 1999.¹

In India in ancient times there was a rich patron who had a blue elephant. He decided on the meritorious act of using his elephant to build a great temple-pagoda, the Jarang Hashir. Years went by, during which the temple was slowly constructed. The Elephant spent so much energy that all his inner organs became visible through his skin. Thus, he worked off all his previous sins; he became enlightened and could understand human words and minds. At last the high lama arrived to consecrate the pagoda and he gave a blessing to all the people who contributed to its construction. The patron got the best blessing of all. The Blue Elephant was standing there listening and thinking: 'What kind of blessing will he give to me?' But the people had forgotten; the lama forgot, and he was not mentioned. The Elephant gored the earth three times with a terrible roaring sound. And died. Then the high lama realised that the elephant had made a wrong covenant and he spoke it aloud as follows: 'Because you have forgotten about me, I will destroy your Buddhism three times in my next births.' So the lama pointed to the master of the Elephant and said, 'Now you also should make a vow, and it should say, "I will kill you three times when you try to destroy Buddhism three times."' The master agreed. We do not know about the first destruction; the second rebirth of the Elephant was Langdarma, the King of Tibet who persecuted Buddhists, and the third was Stalin.

Explaining this story, people say it was pre-destined that Stalin should hate Buddhism and that he had the power to destroy it. The execution of the will of the Blue Elephant had to happen because 'even the Buddha and the deities' could not stop the working out

of results of karmic action. Interestingly, the virtuous patron's rebirth to defend Buddhism is now entirely forgotten. The entire focus is on the tragic fate of the Blue Elephant. However, Stalin's 'damaging' of Buddhism will not be repeated. Throughout the Mongol-speaking world, there is an accepted vision of the future: from now on, no power will hurt Buddhism again until the end of Buddha Shakyamuni's Kalpa (epoch).² Buddhism will continue in its present state, not so prosperous, but at least not completely annihilated, until the advent of the religious war against infidels called *Shambalyn Dain*, which will happen about 250 years from now. After twelve years of war, the religion will flourish in the whole world for five hundred years, and then it will decline for another three hundred years. People will gradually lose their faith. Thus Buddhism will disappear after eight hundred years until the new epoch of the next Buddha, Maitreya, starts.

Stalin is thus embedded in a vast, yet precisely delineated, metahistory where he acquires his own characteristics: he was one of the most powerful military and political leaders the world has ever seen, and he achieved this pinnacle of power *because* he had accumulated great merit during his previous birth when he was the Blue Elephant. It is interesting that Stalin is always referred to as *Stalin Bagshi* (Stalin Teacher), a term that simultaneously alludes to the Soviet representation of Stalin as Leader and Teacher, and to the Mongolian connotations of *bagshi* as religious teacher or guru. People say that although Stalin damaged Buddhism as a result of making a 'wrong' vow when he was distressed and offended, he also liked Buddhism because in his previous birth (as the Blue Elephant) he had respected it and spent his whole life serving it. This is why Stalin gave permission for two monasteries to be re-opened in the 1940s, and it means that Stalin, as the Blue Elephant, was satisfied with the realisation of his vow. In this whole explanation, Stalin as an 'individual', as the communist leader executing intentional policy, is generally not conceptualised at all. Instead, he appears like a phantom of destiny, fated to destroy what he 'really' loved.

Buddhist morality in general does allow for the reversal of previous negative karmic determination by means of compensating good action. But the message of the Blue Elephant story is that this *did not* happen to Stalin. In discussions around this theme we can begin to see evidence of an unconscious displacement onto Stalin of people's own feelings of religious guilt. Some people in Alhana village, for example, picked up on the fact that Stalin had briefly studied at an Orthodox seminary early in his life and claimed that this showed he was truly a religious person; his attack on Buddhism happened despite himself, because he was the reincarnation of the Blue Elephant and was subject to the karma of ancient times. The attack was successful, they continued, because our Buryat people were due for persecution, and this was because of the accumulation of bad karma that had built up *amongst them* over a long time. The Stalinist period was a 'living hell' and such times occur when the sinful action of the people in general is very heavy.

Of course such ideas would be contested by those of a sternly atheist cast of mind. But in the 1990s the ending of the communist hegemonic discourse has thrown the certainty of atheism into question. Now, taking Russia as a whole, there is a what one might call a crisis of representational over-abundance, a plethora of possible explanations of the past, some of which are borrowed from Western accounts. In the distant Inner Asian provinces, however, a persisting cautiousness and unfamiliarity limit access to boldly debunking or liberal-analytical critiques. Reincarnation idioms have been employed for centuries in this region. But I argue that the contemporary stories, emerging in the context of the heavy

omnipresence of communist dogmatic history, by reconfiguring political power as 'predestined' yet the outcome of ethically judged action, involve the element of personal responsibility. This is quite different from the way the reincarnation idiom was used in earlier periods, when it was a means of magical reinforcement of cultural types of leadership.

An analysis in the conventional terms of 'resistance' would be misplaced. For here the reincarnation idea acts precisely to affirm a kind of *identification* or *empathy* of ordinary Soviet citizen-perpetrators with Stalin and Ulaanhüü, stemming, I shall suggest, from their complicity in terrible acts. This identification is different from the 'mimicry' of an authoritative Other: rather, even if the Buryats differentiate themselves ethnically from Russians, they nevertheless see themselves as having been integrated in *the Soviet order*, that is, as fully engaged (complicit) in the practice of authority, both as subjects and objects. Their narratives reproduce in their own images the psychology of repression/silence and substitution found also in the Stalinist master-narrative. To analyse this situation I extract from psychoanalytical theory the term paranoia, in order to explore the dimension of the compulsive, enclosed quality of these narratives, both those of the communist states themselves and those of the people living in their shadow. I abstract out certain features of the paranoid complex in order to generate a concept that can work for an individual and in a shared way between people. My focus is on the features of paranoid thinking generated by subjects in particular (especially political) contexts, and I suggest that three interlinked features are most important: the displacement onto the mental life of other people of 'robbed' experience that is nevertheless unconsciously still present; the creation of a closed world of explanation of real people and events; and the sense of being tied-up in an inexorable, externally determined, process in which the future is preset.³ So the features of paranoid thought I identify here are: the displacement onto external people and events of internally generated, unconscious quandaries, the creation thereby of a 'slanted' or supernatural reality, the view that this reality is determined and does not occur by chance, and therefore that this reality can and must be interpreted. The paranoid projections and identifications are closed, i.e. resistant to unravelling, in that they rest on a sense of conviction, and this, Freud writes, is because *there is in fact a certain truth to them*. From a psychoanalytical point of view, the conviction is justified in that there is a psychological origin of the idea that nothing is done by chance, and the paranoid subject then extends this outwards to the rest of the context (Freud 1960: 256).

Subjects of repression

'It is not by chance that we have been persecuted,' as a reaction of Inner Asian people is a denial of the *actual* random quality of the purges when they reached their apogee in 1937. As Getty and Nauman document (1999: 471–80), the strictly secret NKVD operational order of 30th July prescribed the summary execution of more than 72,000 people under the blanket charge of being 'anti-Soviet elements' and gave numerical quotas for each region of the country. Buryatia was to sentence 1,850 people under this order, as well as carrying out punishments of certain categories of their families. There was a surreal dissonance between this *secret* order and the public proclamation of the new constitution, adopted a year earlier in 1936, which had proposed contested elections and the

enfranchisement of the entire population, including the very 'anti-Soviet' categories like 'former White officers' or 'kulaks' now being hastily killed. 'The same day that the press published the regulations on the upcoming contested elections, Stalin sent a telegram to all party organizations calling for mass executions' (Getty and Nauman 1999: 469).

But if in reality they were attacked on the same arbitrary basis as everyone else, the Buryats and other Inner Asian peoples could feel specially singled out, because there were threads in the public master-discourse that 'justified' special measures in their case. One such rationale concerned frontiers. This was a lateral, geographical imaginary, later elaborated during the cold war as 'spheres of interest', 'domino effects' and so forth, but its first and most intense image was that of the virtuous enclosed society, beyond which lay enemies liable to infiltrate or entice. Both the Buryats in Russia and the Mongols in China fell victim to this image, as they live in designated border zones which were subject to special and strict restrictions throughout the socialist period. These peoples were suspected of disloyal cross-border links, of having 'pan-Mongolian' sympathies, of being spies for the Japanese in the Manchukuo period, – indeed of having relations with one another.

From this we can perceive another dimension of mistrust, 'nationalism' stemming from ethnic difference from the dominant populations of Russians in the Soviet Union and Han in China. True, the ethnic dimension was slightly differently structured in the two countries: in China it was framed as a relation between a majority and 'minorities'. Government policies in the twentieth century have struggled to reconcile the principles of empire (multiplicity) and nation-state (oneness) exemplified in the phrase *minzu tuanje*, which means both unity of all nationalities and national unity. In the USSR, diverse ethnicities were recognised as equally legitimate subjects, but they were hierarchicised administratively and the explicit goal was for differences gradually to be erased with development towards the higher common plateau of the Soviet people. In both countries, governmental structures expressed ways of handling not only difference but also developmental progress, as a process of radical modernisation.

For peoples like the Buryats the onslaught of the discourses of ethnic otherness and frontier disloyalty was undergirded by yet another, that of their ignorance and superstitiousness which placed them in earlier stages of social development: only the future was 'bright', whereas the past and its primitive recesses was shadowy and 'dark' (in Russian the phrase *temnyye lyudy*, 'dark people', meant also the blemished, shady, suspicious, ignorant, benighted people). Such people *could not be* in the vanguard of the revolution.

The intersection of these 'reasons', interwoven with the irrationality of numerical quotas, impelled harsh governmental actions towards the Buryats and Mongols.⁴ The trauma of these punishments was doubly buried by the paranoid structure of the Party-State discourse, – by the harsh, public certainty of the Party-State orders people did get to hear about, and by the silence surrounding the secret orders that left victims guessing why they had been singled out. At the same time, all public information was maintained in a limited, standardised and quasi-ritualised language. Public texts could only be read 'between the lines' (Humphrey 1994). In this context the victims were robbed and disabled of speech. The obsessive focus of the investigations – on details of whom the accused had met, a word they had spoken – served to elaborate the fabrications of 'the Japanese spy' or 'the pan-Mongolian sympathiser', and yet at the same time these details pointed, like symptoms, to a hidden content in communism itself.

Thus, various socio-political dimensions combine to delineate a particular locus of regime-manufactured victimhood, a state that was denied public expression until recently. It is in the overall context of continued fear above all, but also of textual *interpretation* ('reading beyond'), common to the experience of all Soviet citizens even in recent times, that we must understand the stories of reincarnation.

The present political context of the narratives

Some readers might think that such a narrative is simply a strategic Buddhist interpretation of history. Statements by some Buryats give a certain support to such an interpretation. For example, one man in his 30s said to Caroline Humphrey:

'You might think that there are just a few people left from those times [. . .] In fact, there are thousands and thousands of police, informers and camp guards [. . .] still living next-door. They think what they did is right, I suppose. That is why no-one blames anyone. That is why no publicity is given to lists of the repressed here. People still do not talk about the "closed themes". It comes from fear of punishment. I think that is a good feeling. Why good? Because maybe nothing has changed very much.'

The pervasive social practices and institutions of Stalinism (accusations, secret denunciations, 'criticism', dossiers on individuals) lasted long after his death and well into the experience of anyone but the very young today. The very fact that 'control' waxed and waned, with periods of openness being following by renewed prosecutions, has made people constantly wary. As this man continued, 'You could say something when your guard was down and then be picked up for it years later, because someone was listening and remembering. This is in our blood.' Radically religious explanations like the reincarnation stories are the recourse of people who still cannot debate history openly.

Yet the interpretation of 'reasonable caution' in Russia and China does not do justice to the ethnography, which points to a far more complex situation. One of the people who told the Blue Elephant story was an old woman in her nineties, who also treated Hürelbaatar to a rendition of an old song lauding Stalin Teacher to the skies.⁵ At the lines:

<i>Stalin Bagshin hainaar</i>	By Stalin Teacher's goodness
<i>hanaa hetgelee haijarab</i>	Our ideas and disposition changed

her nephew became angry and would not let her finish. He then described how his uncle (the old woman's husband) had been exiled and died in great suffering. The reincarnation narrative, which exculpates Stalin Teacher of personal blame, runs in people's minds alongside another suppressed realm of knowledge and feeling. The story can thus act like a signal (of something else). When people are surrounded by the mute split meanings of histories, the reincarnation narratives should not be understood simply as naive, or as prudent alternatives to silence. They are possible interpretations in a situation where other histories could also be created (for after all the lists of victims do exist and their stories could be told privately in a matter-of-fact manner). The people who tell these stories know they are saying something others would regard as weird, but they do it,

perhaps, because this is the only language in which they can intimate that the issue is one of accountability for evil.

Transformations of power

One last feature to discuss is the conceptualization of political power. I argue that a shift has occurred with the experience of communist totalising power relations. Before the socialist revolutions, great political leaders were attributed with 'power' as might, will and super-human domination, all unified in the one person. Ordinary people were in a relation of subject-to-master with such rulers. The king-like figure exercised his super-human power in a universe pervaded by other supernatural beings, and often was held to be the stronger. Sometimes, the kingly power was aligned with religion (e.g. Buddhism, Orthodoxy) and sometimes not, but in any case the leader's will was indivisible from himself and his actions. This was true even if he was said to be a reincarnation, for that idea was treated like an extra, legitimising addition to his powers. It is with the totalising social revolution of communism that this changes, for in this new world no-one could see themselves as separate from the relation of domination. 'Fractally' repeated at each level in society, communist mastership and its 'necessity' before history was inescapable; there were almost no subject positions beyond its reach, and virtually everyone at some stage in their lives had the experience of being both a subordinate and a superior (Humphrey 1994). In this situation, I suggest, the communist subject cannot see himself as essentially different from the leader and cannot escape the quandary of responsibility. When we encounter the idea of reincarnation here it has a new import, for it now serves to introduce the notion of karmic destiny, and this cracks open the relation between action and personal will. By thinking about Stalin as a reincarnation, the Buryats empathise with the sinner, who cannot help what he does and whose existence at the same time points to some 'other' spiritual quality that can only be guessed at. Confrontation between the radically different ethics of Buddhism and Communism has made the old acknowledgement 'There is power' no longer compelling.

Conclusion

This paper has been concerned with certain political perspectives of subjects earlier classified as 'dark people' and later as backward and superstitious late-comers to the grand project of progress. Understanding this enables us to see that paranoia and its aftermath in the post-communist situation is situated first and foremost within particular structures of nationhood and statecraft. Our account therefore tried to relate discussion of 'paranoid' styles of thought (and responses to it) with accounts of how particular governmental systems produce citizens of various standings. The stories of reincarnation provide a window into this large theme, since they are being produced among peoples that have been paradigmatic targets of communist accusations.

At one level, the narrative of Stalin as the Blue Elephant might perhaps be understood as what the Russians call *inoskazaniye*, which is a kind of indirect hinting, often accusatory in tone. We could thus perhaps 'read' into the theme of the ignoring of the Elephant's

labours in building the temple a parallel feeling of aggrieved neglect on the part of Buryat communists. This would seem a logical inference from the subordinate, 'needing-to-be led' status accorded to 'backward' minorities in state politics. It is significant, however, that this interpretation is not given by Buryat people. Rather, the implication of their discussions of the Blue Elephant story is an identification with the predicament of the leader, who had to act as he did, against his better self. At the same time, there is a complete silence in this context about local participation in the repressions, which certainly took place even if the orders came from above. It is for this reason that I feel justified in using the idea of paranoia to analyse the narrative. Applying a discourse of the 'fruits of sin' to Stalin, do people not thereby create a pre-determined super-natural reality where nothing happens by accident? The notion of paranoia might still seem inappropriate here were it not that these local narratives echo in their preoccupations, as I argue, the master-account of the Stalinists themselves. That account proposed the transparent objectivity of the historical process. Yet at the same time, it presupposed the existence of conspiracies and hidden enemies.

For decades the terrible events people experienced as victims and perpetrators could not be spoken about. And even now, hidden behind literal statements such as 'They took the lamas behind the hill and shot them', lies the question of our political relation to (even our identification with) that 'they'. In such circumstances, the factual statement as a genre of speaking cannot be meaningful enough, it cannot suggest what we know. Rather, it seems that many people turn to allegory, the narrative that *demands* interpretation. These stories exemplifying the grand metaphor of fate in history, by attributing the cause of destined acts to the accumulated fruits of sin, point obliquely to the 'absent presence' at the heart of communism, to what was laughed out of court in the show trials, the unresolved issue of personal intention and its political results.

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Notes

1. The story-tellers included a Buddhist lama, an old women, and villagers from Alhana in the Aga District, Chita Oblast, Russian Federation. Several younger people from Ulan-Ude also knew this story. The conversations were in Buryat. A considerable proportion of Buryats use only Russian. It is probable that these reincarnation stories are not known among Russian-only speakers. In Inner Mongolia too, discussions of history evoked the reincarnation stories.
Buryats in general are now actively reconfirming their adherence to Buddhism. Buddhism has acquired a strong position as a quasi-national religion in the 1990s, albeit with an uneasy relation to the government, which is dominated by Russians (Namsaraeva 1998).
2. Mongols living in China share the idiom and say amongst themselves that many political leaders, including Yuan Shikai, Mao Zedong, Jiang Jieshi, Jiang Qing, Liu Shaoqi, Hua Guofeng and Hu Yaobang, were reincarnations. Ulaanhuü, the communist leader of Inner Mongolia during the 1950s–70s, was the most salient political figure for the Mongols and the architect of numerous repressions. He like Stalin is said to have been the reincarnation of the Blue Elephant (in Inner Mongolia known as the Blue Bull). At the same time there is an expectancy in the air that certain mighty historical figures like Chinggis Khan will be reborn. The reincarnation idea is not limited to Asian figures: Buryats also say that Bill Clinton, 'because he is a friend of the Dalai Lama and Buddhism', is a reincarnation of the Günchin Lama of Lhabrang Monastery in Gansu province of China, and several high Tibetan and Mongolian lamas are said to have been reborn as Russians.
3. 'A striking and generally observed feature of the behaviour of paranoids is that they attach the greatest significance to the minor details of other people's behaviour which we ordinarily neglect, interpret them and make them the basis of far-reaching conclusions'. In this kind of misrecognition, the paranoid is like the superstitious person. If the superstitious person is one who does not understand the motivation of his own actions and re-allocates it to the external world in terms of events rather than thoughts, with the paranoid this projection onto the external world amounts to the construction of a predetermined supernatural reality (Freud 1960: 255, 257–9).
4. They included the destruction of Buddhism in both countries, the relocation of communities, the purging of almost the entire Buryat Party leadership in 1937, the administrative cutting-up and isolating of Buryat and Mongol populations, the physical elimination of around a quarter of Buryat intellectuals in the 1930s–40s, and the genocidal violence against Mongolians in China during the Cultural Revolution.
5. This song may have been composed specially for people subject to exile and punishment.