

Blame, Guilt and Avoidance

*The Struggle to Control the Past in Post-Socialist Mongolia**

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It is senseless to blame past history's mistakes on us. Today is not the [19]30s and 40s. Everything has its own time. We didn't choose this party to repress people. Even MAHN itself was repressed.¹

So ran part of an interview with three young members of MAHN (the Mongolian acronym for the Mongolian People's Revolutionary Party) in the party newspaper *Ünen* (Truth) at the end of November 1997. It was a short comment, tucked in among various other questions about life and politics in post-socialist Mongolia. I had almost missed it when I first flipped through the paper one afternoon. The comment was not followed up, but this was not surprising. Youth defending MAHN on this issue was enough. The interview itself merited front-page coverage, headlined with an excerpt of this quote, and was part of MAHN's attempt to argue for its own relevance in the current political atmosphere.

Once I found this passage, I was not surprised to see it there. The interview was published at a critical time in Mongolian politics for MAHN. Earlier that fall, the ruling coalition government had survived a vote of no confidence demanded by the minority MAHN faction in the *Ih Hural* (Parliament). Moreover, a law that MAHN objected to, dealing with compensation for victims of political repression, had recently had its

first reading in the *Ih Hural*. The autumn of 1997 marked sixty years since the beginning of the wave of repressions that had swept across Mongolia, leaving at least 22,000 people dead out of a population of about 750,000 in a period of eighteen months. That autumn, for the first time, government representatives officially visited a memorial to the victims which had been erected at the site where high-ranking government officials had been executed in 1937. A new memorial statue was being built in Ulaanbaatar in front of the history museum, which is next to the main government building. It would be dedicated on 10 December, the official anniversary of the 1990 democratic revolution in Mongolia, as well as the anniversary of the signing of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The president and other officials would be in attendance. Just a year before, the tenth of September, the date when the first mass arrests had taken place in 1937, had been declared a day of remembrance for the victims. In short, the issue of political repression was attracting unprecedented public attention.

It was in this climate that MAHN adopted what struck many people as a rather quixotic position. N. Enhbayar, the newly elected head of the MAHN faction in the *Ih Hural*, saw no reason for MAHN to apologize for the repressions that had occurred under its one-party rule.² In fact, the party launched an offensive against those who suggested MAHN bore responsibility for what had happened sixty years previous. In response, the Democratic Coalition which held a majority of seats in the *Ih Hural* hammered MAHN for its stance.³ The banner headline in the Coalition's newspaper *Ardchilal* (Democracy) in November called for MAHN to halt all its activities and to be taken to the world court. The main photograph on the front page was of MAHN headquarters with a large "X" across it. Other groups quickly joined the fray, urging MAHN to accept responsibility, which it refused to do.

In this article, I want to examine the larger context of this debate as well as the debate itself. Why was MAHN so insistent that it was blameless? Why should this debate occur at this time, seven years after the collapse of socialism? Who indeed bears responsibility for past events? And why should the past matter so much? In the post-Soviet, post-apartheid world, such questions are of more than historical interest. In examining the Mongolian case, I hope to shed light on the larger issues such a debate implicates. In particular, they point to the continuing

debate over the role of the past in the construction of contemporary identity. As shall become clear in the course of this article, one of the questions that was to emerge was the role of the Soviet Union in the repressions. Although no one denied that the Soviet Union had played a key role in instigating the repressions, what this meant for the role of the Mongolians involved *was* debated. This in turn was linked to broader discussions of Mongolia's relation to the former Soviet Union, which was and is a key issue in contemporary Mongolia.

When the past is glorious, consensus of one kind or another can often be reached. When the past contains dark periods, as in Mongolia and elsewhere in the world, consensus can be difficult if not impossible to attain. One South African scholar recently noted that in "South Africa, the past, it sometimes seems, is being 'remade' for the purposes of current reconciliation. The wounds of the past are being opened for scrutiny...."⁴ The same is true for Mongolia, with the added caveat that with whom reconciliation is being sought is not always agreed upon.

THE REPRESSIONS

Although political purges had been carried out in socialist Mongolia since at least 1922, the greatest single wave took place in approximately eighteen months from autumn 1937 to spring 1939. This period of repressions is now seen as having started with the mass arrest of sixty-six "innocent citizens" that took place on the night of 10 September 1937.⁵ People who had worked in the Ministry of Internal Affairs and other security posts at the time now report that the arrested were accused of being Japanese spies.⁶ The people arrested included members of the MAHN Central Committee, the *Baga Hural*, and the Council of Ministers, among others.⁷ The heads of the alleged spy ring were said to be the former prime minister, P. Genden, as well as Mend, Namsrai and Ayush, all high-ranking officials.⁸ Between 18 and 21 October a show trial of fourteen key figures was held in the State Central Theater.⁹

On 21 October the execution of twelve of the defendants, all prominent government officials, took place on the far side of Songino-hairhan Mountain, just outside of Ulaanbaatar, although this was not publicized at the time. In the following eighteen months, over 22,000

people were killed, more than half of whom were Buddhist lamas.¹⁰ Several thousand more were arrested. Most of these were said to be linked to anti-party or espionage groups. One recent source names seventeen of these groups between 1924 and 1937 and notes that there were said to be over thirty others in the same period.¹¹

The families of those arrested almost invariably never heard from them again, often not finding out officially until decades later that they had been killed. Genden's wife is said to have died in 1981 still hoping he would one day return.¹² The reasons for the arrests and executions were also kept a mystery. "They showed my father a paper saying he was an enemy of the people, and was to be arrested." "It wasn't necessary [to explain]. He was an enemy." That was sufficient reason to be arrested. These were typical recollections of arrests by the relatives I interviewed in the fall of 1997.

The Ministry of Internal Affairs operated according to a set pattern. The ministry's men arrived most often at night, usually in a group of two or three. If household items were not confiscated on the spot, chests were sealed and the most valuable items were removed. In due course, everything was confiscated from the families, including in at least one instance the child's teddy bear, duly catalogued, counted and valued.¹³ One old man broke down in tears during our conversation as he described how his family had had to borrow cups from the neighbor simply to have their morning tea. Repeat confiscations were not unheard of if a family managed to acquire animals or property from friends or relatives after the initial arrest and confiscation.

After the spring of 1939, the arrests and executions slowed. Political repression continued, but those I interviewed in the fall of 1997 with direct links to the events of the late 1930s were reluctant to see later periods as counting as "true" repression. For the survivors of the 1930s and their relatives, true repression was when people were killed. Those who were exiled, lost their jobs and/or were jailed were, from a certain point of view, fortunate. This difference was to become a sticking point in the debates over compensation, as the children and grandchildren of the victims of the 1930s were incensed that no distinctions were to be made between forms of political repression for purposes of compensation. One woman also claimed that many of the victims of the later period had had items returned to them or their families, but not the victims of the

1930s, and this was seen as a further injustice. Throughout the socialist period, first the children, and later the grandchildren, of the repressed were discriminated against in education, employment and elsewhere.¹⁴

THE GOVERNMENT, COMPENSATION AND THE LAW

In early September 1997, government representatives laid wreaths and flowers at the Songinohairhan memorial, the scene of the execution of government officials in October 1937.¹⁵ This was one of the first official public acts of reconciliation, although a national memorial day had been declared in 1996 and observed unofficially since 1992. This commemoration took place in a larger atmosphere of awareness of the issues of political repression. Articles concerning repression and other unsavory elements of socialist-era history were common in the newspapers. Books dealing with the repressions, both historical and fictionalized accounts, were available in the bookstores. Although newspaper articles and even a few books on the repressions had appeared earlier in the 1990s, by and large the topic had still seemed too sensitive to talk about critically and these writings had mainly served to bring it to light after decades of silence. At that time, when Mongolians had turned to their past, it had been other periods and figures that had attracted the bulk of their attention.¹⁶ (I shall return to this point later.)

In addition to the Memorial Museum to the Victims of Political Persecutions (run by G. Tserendulam, the daughter of Prime Minister Genden), there is a Political Repression Research Center which publishes books to be distributed to schools and *aimags* (districts).¹⁷ On a larger scale, a “White Book” listing the victims of the repressions is also being compiled and published. The Research Center has also conducted archaeological excavations, uncovering a mass grave said to contain the remains of over one thousand lamas in Hövsgöl *aimag* in western Mongolia.¹⁸

This was the charged atmosphere when the fall session of the *Ih Hural* opened in October 1997. Two related issues, both involving MAHN, quickly came to the fore. One was the debate over control of the MAHN archives. The government claimed them as government property, while MAHN refused to relinquish control, arguing that they

dealt with party, not government, issues and history. This was a signal of what was to be MAHN's combativeness over the next few months.¹⁹ This debate deserves to be mentioned briefly because control of the MAHN archives was, both symbolically and literally, control of the past. It was thus linked at several levels to the larger debate which was to follow. Although most of the archives relating to the repressions most likely reside in the archives of the State Security Office (successor to the Ministry of Internal Affairs), much information doubtless is still in the MAHN archives. Such documents, if they exist, could undermine the very argument MAHN would shortly put forward. To lose control over the archives would be to lose control over the past, the very thing MAHN was fighting to maintain. (Interestingly, one of the workers at the Memorial Museum to the Victims of Political Persecutions told me she had spent over a year unsuccessfully trying to get MAHN to allow the museum access to party archives dealing with the repressions.)

The larger issue, and the one that was to spark off debates in both the *Ih Hural* and the press, was the law providing compensation for victims of political repression and their relatives, as well as dealing with other matters related to the purges. Values ranging from half a million to one million *tögrög* (\$625 to \$1,250 at the time) were discussed as compensation. Other aspects of the law dealt with measures to prevent such acts from recurring and to prevent advocating the use of political repression.²⁰ These issues, which were to reemerge in mid-November, were originally brought up in the discussions at the beginning of October, right at the beginning of the autumn *Ih Hural* session. At the time, however, they did not seem to arouse much response. Conversations I had on the law at about this time revolved largely around the issue of compensation—generally viewed as nothing more than a token amount. (The average family income at this time was about \$75 a month.) Some people had apparently been compensated, but it was not clear how the decision was made, and the amount was minuscule—15,000 *tögrög* (about \$19). As a friend wryly noted, it would cost more than that to hire someone to kill a person today.

Another concern among people I interviewed early in the autumn centered on the already mentioned issue that a distinction was not to be made between different forms of political repression. The fact that some people had been killed and others not should be reflected in the law, it

was argued. In fact, the Democratic Coalition had made such a suggestion during the *Ih Hural* debates on 3 October, calling for one million *tögrög* for the wife/husband, children and grandchildren of people killed, and half a million *tögrög* for the relatives of those otherwise repressed.²¹ This was apparently the final decision as well.

The public airing of the debate gained momentum in mid-November when a brief article appeared on page two of the largest-circulation newspaper, *Ardyn Erh* (People's right). It was a copy of a letter from Enhbayar to the head of the *Ih Hural* Standing Committee on Legal Affairs, Ch. Otgonbayar, which had been sent some days earlier.²² In it, Enhbayar complained of what he felt was the unfair treatment MAHN had received in the draft of the law being discussed. This elicited a response in the form of a statement from the Standing Committee's Subcommittee on Human Rights, which was published in *Ardyn Erh* the next day.²³ Although this was the start of the public airing of the debate over the law, these statements seem to have gone largely unnoticed. Enhbayar's letter was reprinted on the front page of *Ardyn Erh* on 21 November, along with a statement from the Mongolian Democratic Coalition. The next day, the Union of Victims of Political Repression weighed in with a statement of their own. It was at this point, perhaps fueled by the proximity of the anniversary of Genden's execution (on 26 November 1937), which was marked by a small conference attended by schoolchildren and a documentary aired on television, that the debate took on larger proportions.²⁴

Ardchilal, the Democratic Coalition's newspaper, devoted most of its late November edition to attacking MAHN. MAHN itself, on the other hand, chose to largely ignore the debate in the issue of its own paper, *Ünen*, that also came out at this time. The brief reference made in the front-page interview quoted at the beginning of this article was the only indication that the editors were aware of the controversy. These few days were to be the high point of the debate, at least in print, although the topic continued to crop up in newspapers over the next couple of weeks.

THE POLITICS OF BLAME

What exactly did MAHN claim, and how was this claim received? In the original *Ih Hural* debates, Enhbayar himself was silent.²⁵ However, Nyamdorj, another MAHN member, took the floor to talk about some of these issues. He claimed that the larger geopolitical context of these events had to be considered, pointing out: “It is a fact that out of nine leaders of the Central Committee [at the time of the purges], only one survived.”²⁶ In other words, MAHN implied, it too had been a victim and could not therefore be blamed as the victimizer.

Enhbayar was to take a similar tack in the public exchange that followed, but only as part of a multipronged attack. He first argued that the draft law gave “a one-sided conclusion that the main culprit of the political repressions was MAHN.”²⁷ His justification for this complaint, however, was that such a statement violated various resolutions and laws affording political parties equal rights, not that it was historically false (a question he neatly sidestepped). The laws referred to called for political parties to respect each other’s reputations and internal affairs, which was not being done in this case. The letter did not make any moral appeal but rather duly referenced sections and subsections of the various laws. In this same letter Enhbayar also took issue with a provision in the draft law prohibiting people from praising the political repressions. This, he argued, violated democratic principles such as guarantees of freedom of speech and the upholding of the constitution.

The second angle of attack, as it emerged through conversations with various people, was MAHN’s claim that it had “reformed” itself and should not be confused with the pre-1990 party. The party may have kept the old name, but that was the only thing that had not changed, MAHN argued.

In effect, the party was lashing back on several, ultimately conflicting levels. First, it denied that MAHN had been responsible for the repressions, for they had been ordered by Stalin (Nyamdorj’s claim). Second, even if MAHN had been responsible, it had changed its ways. This was the new MAHN, and guilt was not inheritable. Third, even if people thought MAHN had been responsible, they were not allowed to say so because such a statement violated certain legal principles, some of which (such as freedom of speech) spoke to underlying democratic

beliefs. In this last claim, MAHN was attempting to position itself as a protector of democracy and the rule of law. The implication was that it was the democratic parties (the MSDN and MÜAN) who were threatening people's liberties by dictating what they could talk about, and how.

The officials of MAHN, it must be noted, did not speak alone. Some apparently followed the party line, as did the young party members quoted at the beginning of this article. Although the majority of people condemned the purges, not all did.²⁸ While MAHN's earlier call for the resignation of the government (on charges that it was mishandling privatization and failing to adequately address problems of health and education, among others) had the support of many of the city's elderly population, who were concerned about pensions and health services, it is not clear this support carried over into the repression issue. One older man, himself a relative of one of the repressed, did agree with MAHN's argument that it was specific individuals, not the party, that had been responsible for the purges. (MAHN, and Enhbayar in particular, however, were also singled out by this man for help he said they were giving him in investigating his complaints of corruption in the countryside.)

One incident in particular serves as an indicator of the range of opinions to be found on the issue of the purges. As he was giving me a ride to the market one day, the son of a former ambassador to the Soviet Union suddenly asked: "So, what do you think about the repressions?" I was taken aback. "What do you mean?" I asked. "Were they good or bad for Mongolia?" "Why, bad of course," was my somewhat shocked reply. "Oh, so then you really think all those people were innocent?" While he conceded that some innocent people may have been arrested, he did not think that there had been so many of these. Did the people I talked to tell me, he went on, what crimes they had been accused of? I told him one story, that of a man I had interviewed. He had managed to see the Ministry of Internal Affairs files on his father, who had been arrested for saying Japan was a strong country. This had been classified as pro-Japanese propaganda, for which the father was never seen again. The ambassador's son laughed in disbelief.

In general, however, public opinion seemed strongly against MAHN and its stance. As already noted, the Human Rights Subcommittee in the *Ih Hural* responded in print the day after Enhbayar's letter

was made public. It pointed out that Mongolia was party to various international pacts and conventions on human rights and accused MAHN of delaying passage of the law. The subcommittee's response also claimed that the laws MAHN cited as being contradictory to the proposed legislation were in fact not so. In short, although the subcommittee's reasoning was not spelled out, it implicitly seemed to be accusing MAHN of a willful misreading of the laws and a threat to undermine the rule of law, the very thing MAHN claimed to be protecting.²⁹

B. Delgermaa, a member of the Mongolian National Democratic Party and head of the Human Rights Subcommittee, offered some additional thoughts. She noted that the constitution did indeed guarantee free speech, but argued that MAHN was trying to distort the basic intention of the constitution and that to support political repression went against greater democratic principles.

Other groups also criticized MAHN. As noted above, *Ardchilal* devoted most of its issue that came out at this time to dealing with MAHN. It even ran a (slightly different) version of Enhbayar's letter, with editorial comments: "MAHN is not the main culprit? The Mongolian people and honest MAHN members know this [MAHN's guilt] well."³⁰ The newspaper also carried the Human Rights Subcommittee's statement, Delgermaa's additional comments and the statement from the Union of Victims of Political Repression. The first appeared under the provocative title "The Revolutionary Party Was Not Exterminated as a Class, but Exterminated Classes," an apparent reference to Nyamdorj's claim in the *Ih Hural* debates. The title of the second was equally inflammatory: "There Is No Principle about the Use of Violence in the Constitution." The Union's statement in contrast was referred to simply as a "Statement," seeming to imply that it was a balanced, nonpartisan pronouncement.³¹

In addition to expressing outrage in the name of general principles, the Democratic Coalition, through its use of such headlines, was clearly trying to play up the incident for further political leverage. MAHN held the presidency and approximately one-third of the *Ih Hural* seats.³² Yet one *Ih Hural* member of the Coalition I talked to felt that MAHN's influence was disproportionate to its numbers as it had seventy years of political practice behind it. Having recently weathered the resignation

call, the Democratic Coalition was still looking for weapons to use against MAHN, and the issue of political repression seemed like a convenient and opportune means by which to take aim at MAHN.

Like the Democratic Coalition, most of the people I talked to were also set against MAHN's stance. Describing herself as a hard-liner on the topic, one *Ih Hural* member insisted that

we should never come to a compromise on [political repression]. We should never accept their pressure and allow them to go away. [If we do so they will] generalize this topic, and say "Nobody was guilty," and just foreigners come to oppress the Mongolian people, and it's past.... We should learn from this history, and that is why I think there should be no compromise on this thing.

If MAHN would not accept blame and allow passage of the law, she added, what were the guarantees that such an event would not recur? MAHN may have been interested in protecting its past, but many people saw this as a possible threat to the future. In their eyes, MAHN was not merely refusing to accept blame but was leaving the door open to the possibility of future purges.

Although the day-to-day political intrigues of Mongolia are not the main foci here, it is worth noting that they played a key element in shaping many people's understanding of the issue. The parties, it was claimed, were more interested in furthering their own ends than in actually helping the public. Some Mongolians saw the episode as largely a ploy on Enhbayar's part to advance his own political career, with the ultimate goal of becoming prime minister. He was not a popular figure among my friends. One young woman commented: "Enhbayar used to be the culture minister. Now Mongolia has no culture." Another woman told me she used to follow the goings-on of the *Ih Hural* with interest, but had ceased to do so since they had become too personal. She also said that Bat-Üül, a member of the Democratic Coalition who had become involved in the MAHN/repression debate, was a man feared by members of his own party. Significantly, she was not sure at first whether the argument between Bat-Üül and Enhbayar was linked to the repression issue or not. She knew they were arguing, but not about what.

Yet other people expanded the debate in other directions, arguing not only that MAHN was guilty but that it should forfeit its property in recompense. MAHN had built itself up on the backs of the repressed, they pointed out, and the time had come for it to make whatever amends it could. During interviews with relatives of repression victims, several brought this topic up, asking where all the wealth confiscated by the Ministry of Internal Affairs had gone. Most would probably agree with the claims of one recent history book that it had gone to line the pockets of Choibalsan and others.³³

By the time I left Mongolia in late December 1997, the debate had lost its prominence but still appeared from time to time in the press. *Ardyn Erh* continued to run related articles throughout this period, including a piece by a member of the UN Committee on Human Rights, and, in one issue, a regular “pro and con” column tackled the subject.³⁴ *Ardchilal* also refused to let the debate die, devoting several articles in its December issue to the controversy surrounding the law on compensation. The commemoration of the signing of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights on 10 December, marked by the dedication of the new memorial statue to the victims of the repressions, attended by members of the government and receiving wide media attention, also helped keep the debate in the public consciousness.³⁵

HISTORY AND IDENTITY

Despite surface appearances, this debate was about much more than a single law, and its larger implications seemed clear to the parties involved. There was first, and perhaps least interestingly in the present context, the ways in which discussion of the law was exploited in the ongoing power struggle between the political parties. This point cannot be ignored, for both sides clearly saw the potential in gaining the moral high ground on this sensitive topic. This use of the debate, however, presumed (on the part of all involved) that the questions raised resonated at other levels to the general public. These other levels included, however tangentially, conceptions of democracy. Finally, the episode called into question interpretations of, and attitudes toward, the past.

It is significant that one of the approaches MAHN took was to fall back on the constitution and legal system. Well aware perhaps that a sizable portion of the public associated the party with the ills of socialism, MAHN sought to portray itself as a defender of democratic principles. If democracy means the rule of law and free speech, then MAHN was only relying on the principles espoused by the democratic revolution seven years earlier. It might not be popular, the implicit argument went, but MAHN had a right to say what it wanted, a right guaranteed by the laws promulgated after the collapse of socialism. The protesters had stood up to the old MAHN precisely to gain the very freedoms they wanted to deny the new MAHN. In response, the groups arrayed against MAHN argued that this was a simplistic understanding of democracy. Freedom of speech may be a democratic principle, they held, but there were certain events so evil that condemning and preventing their recurrence overrode any other, more abstract concerns.

Overall, MAHN's line of reasoning did not seem to convince many Mongolians. Nor did its claim that it was no longer the same party that had carried out the repressions, or, in the other version, that it had been individuals, not the party, that had been responsible. Although not uniform, the general consensus seemed to be that once again MAHN was merely trying to avoid taking responsibility. People did indeed see a continuity between the old and new MAHN. It may have been specific individuals who had carried out the repressions, but they had done so under the guidance and power of MAHN.

Key to this entire episode is how the debate relates to the past. It recently had become permissible in Mongolia to probe deeply into the socialist past. Even discounting the debate on the proposed law, articles on political repression and similar issues of the socialist period were common in the papers. However, the particular emphasis given to the socialist period was a relatively new development, coming to the fore only in the past year or two.³⁶ As mentioned before, in the early 1990s articles and books about certain topics of Mongolian socialist history such as the repressions had begun to appear in print. People had also begun the search for information on their own relatives. Yet, as also noted earlier, the repressions did not become a major topic of critical, searching public discourse until later in the 1990s. The earlier publications had been in part political tools, designed either to help MAHN distance itself

from certain aspects of the socialist past or to implicate the Soviets further in the evils of the period, depending on whether they were produced by publishers linked with MAHN or with the democratic parties. Yet these issues had been overwhelmed by discussions of Chinggis Khaan and other aspects of presocialist history—in newspapers, books, on television, in private conversations—which had helped to crystallize a sense of what it meant to be Mongolian and served as a basis for rejecting the socialist-era teachings. But in the late 1990s, people were beginning to try to come to terms with the relatively recent socialist past, and it was this sensitive spot that MAHN touched on.

In seeking to exonerate itself from responsibility for the purges, MAHN (apparently unwittingly) called into question the entire validity of Mongolia's socialist past. By doing so, it also raised certain questions on a broader scale about Mongolian identity. Prior to the recent shift toward a reexamination of the socialist past, that period had been largely elided in discussion of Mongolian history. The socialist void had been viewed as a period of "white noise."³⁷ For most Mongolians in the early 1990s, history stopped in the early twentieth century (just prior to the People's Revolution of 1921) and only resumed with the protests of 1989–1990. Moreover, to be Mongolian was seen to be linked to "tradition," which was presented as having been repressed but "kept inside of us" during the socialist period. A key component of this identity as it was being re-remembered and reconstructed was the point that to be Mongolian and traditional was to be *not* Russian, and *not* socialist.³⁸ Socialism was seen as a foreign imposition.

With the advent of the protests that brought down the one-party system in the spring of 1990, historical imagery was quickly harnessed by the democratic opposition. (MAHN had tried to do so as well, but was far less successful in its efforts.) Linking themselves to images of Chinggis Khaan and Buddhism, the protesters firmly established themselves as the protectors of "traditional" Mongolia.³⁹ This linkage of "traditional" culture (defined as whatever it needed to be) and "true" Mongolian identity being asserted in the face of socialism is perhaps best summed up in a warning that is found at the beginning of *The Great Dictionary of Mongolian Customs*: "If you lose your customs, this gives rise to bad people. If you forget your rituals, you will lose your Mongolness."⁴⁰ In this context, the one thing that was clearly *not* Mongolian was socialism.

It had been forced upon Mongolia by the Soviets. With the collapse of socialism, Mongolians sought a new way of thinking about themselves. This was to be found in the presocialist history. In constructing this new yet old history-*cum*-identity, images and themes from different times were collapsed together. Chinggis Khaan, for example, was often portrayed in Buddhist terms. Statues of him frequently depicted him as a lawgiver, rather than in his better-known (to Westerners) role of warrior.

Strict adherence to historical truth was not the point of this search through history for most Mongolians.⁴¹ Rather than historical accuracy most people were searching for a new heritage, and as David Lowenthal has noted, “heritage lumps together all the past, commingling epochs without regard to continuity or context.”⁴² Equally as important as what was included in this new heritage was what was not included: socialism. By its very exclusion from the past it was denied a Mongolian heritage, and Mongolians in turn denied themselves a socialist heritage.

The recent shift to reopening and cleansing the wounds of socialism indicates that the newer, post-socialist identity was now relatively well established. Mongolians and the media no longer concentrated so much on Chinggis Khaan and other figures from the distant past as they had in the early 1990s (although such figures were by no means ignored). A consensus had been established for the presocialist period, and the details could be relegated to the historians. A new heritage was in place. It was now possible, and even necessary, to turn to the socialist period and acknowledge Mongolia’s own at times dark role in it. Having put aside the socialist aspect of their past for seven years, Mongolians could now turn to it and safely, if gingerly, reincorporate it into their sense of who they were. Mongolians had clearly played a role in the purges, and this point was becoming accepted and examined in the fall of 1997. Mongolians, it was increasingly recognized, had been both the oppressed and the oppressors. MAHN’s stance, however, threw this entire project into doubt.

By arguing that it had not been the ultimate cause of the political repressions, MAHN was reestablishing a link to the Russians, whether intentionally or not. This was the very link that people had spent years dismantling. If it was not Mongolians who were to accept ultimate responsibility for the purges, then Mongolia’s independent identity was

being called into question. It must be noted that those opposed to MAHN's stance did not deny the role of the Soviet Union and Stalin in particular. It was not doubted by anyone that the Soviet Union and the Comintern had been key players in the previous seventy years of Mongolian socialism. Prime Minister Genden was seen as having been killed for his resistance to Stalin and socialism.⁴³ Choibalsan, the man who had carried out the purges, was seen by some as having been chosen to lead Mongolia because of his fondness for drink and the ease with which he could be manipulated. He would prove a better Soviet puppet than his predecessors, the reasoning went. Yet this was not taken by most people as leaving Mongolians in the role of passive victims, or ultimately absolving them of responsibility.

The reaction of a former diplomat to Baabar's book *Twentieth Century Mongolia* is illuminating in this respect.⁴⁴ The diplomat praised Baabar's achievement in writing this history book, particularly as the author is not a professional historian. Yet he felt that Baabar, like the Western sources he drew upon, overplayed the importance of the Treaty of Yalta for Mongolia. Although China may have finally been forced to recognize Mongolia's independence in 1946 as the result of the plebiscite that was in turn the result of the Treaty of Yalta, Mongolia had actually been independent since 1921. It was then that Mongolia had declared independence and established a government. This was the period that mattered to the diplomat. He also took Baabar to task on another issue. He accused him of arguing, in effect, that if Choibalsan had not carried out the purges another Mongolian would have been chosen to do so. It was Choibalsan, the diplomat thought, who must be held responsible. Although he did not state it in these terms, the argument is clear—it is the Mongolians who must bear the blame for the purges. The question of who is to blame and the date of Mongolia's true independence are different sides of the same coin. Choibalsan must bear the blame because Mongolia was an independent country at the time of the purges. To claim otherwise is to deny Mongolia's historical and political independence, and by extension, its independent identity.

Where difference of opinion lay between the two camps was whether or not the role of the Soviet Union was sufficient cause to exonerate MAHN from all guilt. MAHN insisted that this was the case, whereas its opponents vehemently disagreed, thereby reasserting the

uniqueness of Mongolian identity. The purged, and not the purgers, were the real victims, and even the heroes.⁴⁵ Mongolian history, dark periods and all, must belong solely to the Mongolians, for only if they claimed its history as their own would Mongolia itself belong solely to the Mongolians. MAHN's balking at the law on political repression threw this project into doubt. In attempting to avoid blame, it was questioning an entire vision of Mongolian history. This went even further in some respects by bringing into question whether or not the past was really and finally past. This concern with the connection between denial and repeating the past is not unique to Mongolia. The same argument is to be found in the battle over the denial of the Holocaust—to deny that the Holocaust happened is to leave open the possibility that it will happen again. History must be remembered not only for some abstract value it may have, but to ensure it is not repeated.

Ultimately, then, the debate on the repression law was a debate on whose version of the past would be accepted as the legitimate one. This in turn would affect which version of Mongolian identity would be accepted as the legitimate one. Were Mongolians to be seen as passive victims of a neighboring superpower, or would they argue for a more active role in the shaping of their own history? The latter was by no means an entirely pleasant thought, but it did function to help establish a distinct sense of Mongolian identity, and that was more important than the unease it caused.

I noted at the beginning that this issue bore larger relevance. The debate on who is responsible for the past involves far more than the question of blame. In the process of assigning or refusing blame for the political repressions, constructions of identity are drawn into the debate as well. In seeking to assign blame for this period of history, Mongolians are looking not only for a culprit but also for closure. Once the use of the debate as a tool by political parties jockeying for position is stripped away, a basic core remains. In taking a long, hard look at these events, Mongolians—like other people confronted with episodes of political repression and similar forms of violence in their past—are taking a long, hard look at themselves. It is important in this regard that not everyone wants MAHN punished in a material sense. Simply for MAHN to accept blame would seem to suffice for many people. It is not a case of the sins of the fathers being visited upon their children, but rather one of coming

to terms with the past. And in so doing, Mongolians on both sides of the debate are seeking to come to terms with themselves.

NOTES

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1. "We Didn't Choose This Party to Repress People," *Ünen*, 22–25 Nov. 1997, 1.

2. N. Enhbayar had won a by-election in late August to fill the seat vacated by the president, N. Bagabandi, also a MAHN member, who was elected in June. (Mongolians traditionally use only one name. The initial refers to a person's *ovog*, similar in contemporary Mongolia to the Russian patronymic. It is based on the father's or, less often, the mother's name. In everyday speech, however, the *ovog* is not used.)

3. The Coalition is comprised of the MSDN (Mongolian Social Democratic Party) and MÜAN (Mongolian National Democratic Party).

4. Sarah Nuttall, "Telling 'Free' Stories? Memory and Democracy in South African Autobiography since 1994," in Sarah Nuttall and Carli Coetzee, eds., *Negotiating the Past: The Making of Memory in South Africa* (Cape Town, 1998), 75.

5. See the online version of *Ardyn Erh* (People's right) (www.mol.mn.argamag/ae4/ard1.html) for 11 Sept. 1998. Two days earlier a different article in *Ardyn Erh* gave 69 as the number arrested (www.mol.mn.argamag/ae2/ard1.html). Some historians give 115 as the number arrested.

6. A. Dumburai, *Zalhaan Tseerlüülelt* (Repression) (Ulaanbaatar, 1997), 81, 91. The Ministry of Internal Affairs was the Mongolian secret police.

7. The *Baga* (Little) *Hural* was responsible for the formation of the Council of Ministers and the Presidium. It was effectively the governing unit when the *Ih Hural* was not in session.

8. Sh. Agvaan, *H. Choibalsan ba dotood yavdlyn yam* (H. Choibalsan and the Ministry of Internal Affairs) (Ulaanbaatar, 1991), 50. Namsrai had been the head of the Office of Internal Security (*dotoodyg hamgaalah gazar*), the precursor of the Ministry of Internal Affairs.

9. *Ibid.*, 56. This theater has since been demolished.

10. The exact number is not agreed upon. Even in the Memorial Museum to the Victims of Political Persecutions, several displays give conflicting totals. Some people have suggested that the figures could be as high as 100,000, if not higher.

11. P. Ochirbat, *Tengeriin Tsag* (The heavenly hour) (Ulaanbaatar, 1996), 191–92.

12. Interview with G. Tserendulam (Genden's daughter), 25 Sept. 1997.

13. From a list of items confiscated from an official of the Committee of Science in 1928. This list was kindly provided by O. Nasanjargal of the Memorial Museum to the Victims of Political Persecutions.

14. Ironically, one of them suggested to me that this policy ultimately backfired. Knowing they started with a handicap, they often worked harder and turned out to be the best students. As a result, the government had little choice but to offer them positions of responsibility.

15. The September date marked the original mass arrests.

16. See Christopher Kaplonski, "For the Memory of the Hero is His Second Life": Truth, History and Politics in Late Twentieth-Century Mongolia" (Ph.D. diss., Rutgers University, 1996).

17. The books are relatively short "political biographies" of various purged individuals. These books, of which there are apparently 25, are not available in bookshops. Their publication is funded by the Soros Open Society Institute.

18. Baabar, *XX зууны Монгол* (Twentieth-century Mongolia) (Ulaanbaatar, 1996), 459. English translation: *Twentieth Century Mongolia*, ed. Christopher Kaplonski (Cambridge, 1999). Baabar is the pseudonym of B. Batbayar, under which he published clandestinely in the late 1980s and early 1990s. He is still better known as Baabar.

19. A similar debate was to erupt later in the autumn over the ownership of the old Lenin Museum, now home to bars, restaurants and shops. MAHN claimed ownership, while the government wished to move the fine arts museum to the building.

20. I have been unable to obtain a copy of the law itself. My understanding of it is based on interviews, as well as various newspaper articles and transcripts of the *Ih Hural* debates. In the latter, however, sections are often referred to without mentioning explicitly their content.

21. "The Record of the Fourth Meeting of the Second Elected State *Ih Hural*, vol. 3," 3 Oct. 1997, 70 (in Mongolian).

22. "A One-Sided Conclusion Has Been Reached," *Ardyn Erh*, 12 Nov. 1997, 2.

23. "MAHN's Group Must Accept Responsibility," *ibid.*, 13 Nov. 1997, 2.

24. 26 November is also the anniversary of the ratification of the first socialist constitution, in 1924, and is a holiday.

25. Indeed, I do not know whether he was even present at the initial discussion on 3 October. He was reported as expected late, but it is not clear if he ever arrived

26. "The Record of the Fourth Meeting of the Second Elected State *Ih Hural*, vol. 3," 3 Oct. 1997, 87.

27. "A One-Sided Conclusion Has Been Reached."

28. The director of the Political Repression Research Center has claimed that two members of the *Ih Hural* thought the purges had been a good thing. I was unable to completely confirm this, but one of the people he mentioned did tell me that while the repressions had been bad because of the destruction of the Buddhist lamas, at least they had served to keep foreign religions out of Mongolia. For this particular individual, as well as many others, Buddhism has come to represent "traditional" Mongolian values and ways and thus is to be respected and protected.

29. "MAHN's Group Must Accept Responsibility." Although I do not know the composition of this subcommittee, it is worth noting that the parent committee, the Standing Committee on Legal Affairs (*huul' züin*), had only one MAHN member among its 13 members.

30. "'A One-Sided Conclusion Has Been Reached,' He Said," *Ardchilal*, Nov. 1997, 1. The changes were of a minor, grammatical sort and did not affect the meaning.

31. Yet another article in the same issue dealing with MAHN was entitled "The Party with the Bloody Road" (i.e. past). See *ibid*.

32. MAHN held 25 of the 76 seats. The Democratic Coalition held another 50, and the last was held by the leader of the Mongolian Traditional United Party, a prominent nationalist who often sided with MAHN.

33. Baabar, *XX zuuny Mongol*, 461.

34. The same issue, on the same page, included an interview with M. Rinchin, director of the Political Repression Research Center, and D. Baasanjav, head of the Union of Victims of Political Repression. It also included a document labeled "Top Secret" related to the case of Tömör-Ochir, a member of the MAHN Politburo who had been repressed in 1962. See *Ardyn Erh*, 13 Dec. 1997, 3.

35. The whole issue, however, was largely ignored by the English-language press in Mongolia. Only one article, dealing with the statement of the Union of Victims of Political Repression, appeared: "MPRP Taken to Task on Purge Record," *UB Post*, 2 Dec. 1997, 2.

36. This point—the previous relative unimportance of political repression as a public issue—was confirmed by several Mongolians whom I have explicitly asked about this subject.

37. Caroline Humphrey, "The Moral Authority of the Past in Post-Socialist Mongolia," *Religion, State and Society* 20, nos. 3 and 4 (1992): 375–89.

38. A few people had argued to me in 1993 that socialism was by definition a Mongolian tradition, but they were in a distinct minority.

39. For a fuller examination of this issue, see Kaplonski, "'For the Memory of the Hero is His Second Life'," chap. 3.

40. Ch. Av'yasüren and H. Nyambuu, *Mongol yos zanshlyn ih tailbar tol'* (The great dictionary of Mongolian customs) (Ulaanbaatar, 1992), 3.

41. It should be noted that Chinggis Khaan's role as lawgiver is indeed attested to in the early chronicles, if not to the extent later claimed.

42. David Lowenthal, *The Heritage Crusade and the Spoils of History* (London, 1997), 137.

43. Indeed, many of the early socialist leaders and activists are now touted as proto-capitalists who fell victim to the Soviet Union for precisely their capitalist leanings.

44. See n. 18 above. Baabar was an early leader of the democratic movement, and a founder of the Mongolian Social Democratic Party.

45. Several people warned me during my research to be sure that the people I interviewed really had been repressed. To have a connection to the purged, I was told, was now in fashion.