

Prelude to violence:

Show trials and state power in 1930s Mongolia

ABSTRACT

In this article, I examine the role of show trials in 1930s socialist Mongolia as a precursor to state violence. I argue that the show trial I focus on here, held in October 1937, paved the way for imminent state violence by portraying a threat against the state from an extensive conspiracy of high-ranking Buddhist figures and former government leaders. The trial not only served to justify the violence that was to come but also sought to turn people against the Buddhist hierarchy, which posed a threat to the socialist state's sovereignty. Through an examination of the narrative of the conspiracy it presented at the trial, I highlight the ways in which the state attempted to shift allegiances and convince people to accept the coming violence as necessary. Given the contested and precarious position of the socialist government in the 1930s, this study also highlights the role of the show trial in state formation. [*state formation, violence, Mongolia, show trials, Buddhism, socialism, political theater*]

Around ten o'clock one night in the autumn of 1932, Gendün, then the prime minister of Mongolia, arrived alone at the residence of one of Mongolia's top religious figures, the Jongzin Qambu.¹ He had arrived by car, driving through the dark streets of Ulaanbaatar, socialist Mongolia's capital city. Gendün told the Jongzin Qambu, "I came to discuss something important with you" (*Ünen* 1937b: 1). A child who was present in the Jongzin Qambu's *ger* (the traditional round felt tent of the Mongols) was sent out so the men could speak privately. Then Gendün put forward his proposition. It was not good for Buddhism that Mongolia relied on Red Russia; it would be better if the country relied, instead, on Japan, he explained. Gendün was blunt: "Because of this, it is necessary that I, as a leader on the political side and you as a leader from the religious side, destroy the Mongolian government and re-establish the old imperial government and enthrone the 9th Bogda."² This was the goal of the Jongzin Qambu's own counterrevolutionary group; but at first the Jongzin Qambu was suspicious of Gendün. He soon, however, became a firm believer in Gendün's sincerity. Thus, two of the most prominent figures in Mongolia came to conspire against the revolutionary (socialist) government.

This encounter was made public through the testimony of the Jongzin Qambu himself, during a trial of "reactionary head lamas" who confessed to betraying their country and plotting to overthrow the government. It took place the first week of October 1937. Announcements had been posted, inviting men and women over the age of 18 to attend the trial, which played to packed audiences inside the theater where it was held, and crowds listened to it on loudspeakers in the main square outside. The trial was a turning point in the history of violence in Mongolia, as it laid the groundwork for the wave of repression and violence that, over a period of 18 months, was to leave upward of 36,000 people dead and over 700 Buddhist monasteries in ruins.

The trial, which led to the execution of 19 people, including the Jongzin Qambu and several other high-ranking Buddhist leaders, was a show trial, a "highly stylized [production] involving fantastic scenarios

of conspiracy and treason" (Fitzpatrick 1993:300). It was a staged and directed ceremony of guilt and a display of state power, theater in the form of legal proceedings. A legal decision was rendered and sentences carried out, but if that had been the trial's sole aim, it could easily have been accomplished without the extensive publicity. The trial forced all other news from the pages of *Ünen* (Truth), the newspaper of the ruling Mongolian People's Revolutionary Party (MPRP), for the better part of a week. No previous trial had done so. Indeed, like a libretto read beforehand, the coverage of the trial—summaries of the conspiracy and government resolutions—began filling the newspaper even before the trial began. Those who wished to could have attended the drama already knowing the outline of the story.

In this article, I examine the trial's significance and meaning through the use of contemporary newspaper accounts. The show trial helped justify the state violence that was about to be set into motion. It was through a story told with the defendants as living props that the show trial justified violence in the name of creating a new socialist world. In seeking to legitimate the coming violence, the trial of the Jongzin Qambu spoke to presentations of state power, but a power that came ultimately from admitting vulnerability. As its vulnerability was revealed through the narrative of the trial, the state demonized those to which it was vulnerable, ultimately justifying violence against them. It was the state's weakness that led to the necessity for violence. It is not a state's ability to inflict violence as a sign of strength but, rather, its need to resort to violence as a sign of vulnerability that I argue here.

The show trial served to give people an indication of what was to come, anticipating and legitimating the need for further violence. It did so by attempting to turn people against the Buddhist hierarchy that represented one of the dominant institutions in Mongolia, and ultimately against Buddhism itself. Many high-ranking Buddhists actually opposed the socialist government and outside threats to the government did exist, which made the charges against the defendants more plausible but did not guarantee their authenticity. Whether the specific charges had any concrete basis in fact is irrelevant in terms of the show trial itself. It was the spectacle, not the legal outcome, that mattered.

Most research on state violence deals with the techniques and consequences of such violence (Hinton 2002; Sluka 2000) or the construction of subjectivities in times of violence (Aretxaga 1997; Daniel 1996; Das 2007; Das et al. 2000; Feldman 1991). In contrast, I focus on what precedes a period of state violence. My concern here is with the justification of violence, the prelude to violence rather than the violence itself. My work thus joins the ongoing discourse about representations of state power and the ways in which state power is actualized. I examine ways in which people are encouraged not only to accept but also to call for state violence. By the end of the trial on which I focus, the news-

papers were reporting calls for the execution of the conspirators. At some level, the show trial had clearly achieved its goal.

The Mongolian socialist government was in a precarious position in the 1930s, as detailed below. A study of the show trial is thus an ethnography of the Mongolian state's attempt to claim and reinforce sovereignty. I follow and build on Thomas Blom Hansen and Finn Stepputat's recent approach that sees sovereignty as a "tentative and always emergent form of authority grounded in violence that is performed and designed to generate loyalty, fear, and legitimacy" (2006:297). Through an examination of the show trial as a means of generating loyalty, I underline the importance of performance–display, but I also make the point that state violence is prepared for, that people are led to expect and even request violence by the state.

I adopt a view of the state that is, in Clifford Geertz's wording, "less the imposition of sovereign monopoly, more the cultivation of the higher expediency; less the exercise of abstract will, more the pursuit of visible advantage" (2004:580). The Mongolian government claimed sovereignty and tried to impose its ideological view on people, but it often was reduced largely to reacting to existing desires and beliefs rather than imposing its own. The violence that followed the trial was not the socialist government's first attempt to destroy the old ways of life and beliefs, but, through sheer physical force and magnitude, it largely succeeded where earlier attempts had failed.

In addition to broadening understandings of state violence, I expand on a line of investigation that has so far remained the purview of historians. Sheila Fitzpatrick (1993, 1994, 1999) is perhaps the most notable scholar to shift the study of Soviet show trials from a political to a cultural-history perspective. Her studies of the regional show trials in the Soviet Union place them in a cultural and social context, and she argues that, rather than simply being cowed by the trials, people actively shaped and reacted to them (Fitzpatrick 1993). Other recent work has also shifted attention away from the main Moscow show trials of the late 1930s to examine their predecessors and origins (Wood 2005) and the explicitly theatrical links to and influences on the staging of the trials (Cassiday 2000). This work has moved the discussion of Soviet show trials beyond objectivist approaches to history that cast them as mere adjuncts to the study of Stalin, to understand them as cultural and political processes worthy of attention in their own right. In doing so, this research has worked to broaden and enrich the contexts in which show trials are understood, a process I continue here.

I set the stage for my examination of the 1937 Mongolian show trial by first highlighting the theoretical issues such a study addresses. I then sketch out the contexts in which it took place and the reception it might have been expected to receive. I follow this sketch with an

examination of the testimony given at the trial and the language employed to narrate the violence. I look next at the theatricality of the trial, revealing the script behind the theater. Finally, I examine in more detail some of the larger issues that thinking about show trials encompasses. I suggest that a comparison of such trials with the medieval Catholic Inquisition in Europe yields a better understanding of the processes of state formation that were taking place.

The people on trial were not simply representations or actors but important, specific individuals who were well known to the audience. The key figure in the trial was the Jongzin Qambu, the abbot of Ulaanbaatar's—and by extension, Mongolia's—main monastery. He had held the title of Jongzin Qambu since at least 1920 (see Bawden 1997:58).³ His deputy, the *ded* Qambu Damdin, also figured prominently. Both were arrested in September 1937 and executed soon after the trial. (They appear to have been executed on October 8, the same day the resolutions announcing their guilt were published in *Ünen*.)⁴ Two politicians, although not physically present at the trial, also command attention. One is Gendün, the former prime minister, who, by the time of the trial, was under arrest in the Soviet Union, where he was killed at the end of November. The other is Marshal Demid, who had been the minister of war and had died that August. Their connection to the trial served to highlight the extensiveness of the plot and the threat the state faced. The Buddhist establishment in Mongolia had literally hundreds of reincarnations, one of whom is relevant here.⁵ The Manzushiri Qutugtu, Tseringdorji, was head of a monastery south of Ulaanbaatar and was implicated in the case under trial. A major and apparently well-regarded figure, he had been tried in a case in 1930 but given a suspended sentence. He, too, would lose his life this time.

Not all of the people implicated in the trial were Mongolian. Indeed, to highlight the seriousness of the plot, it was important to the state that some be foreigners. The Panchen Lama, known in Mongolia as the Banchen Bogda, was a high-ranking reincarnation from Tibet (not resident in Mongolia) and rumored to have been an active anticommunist.⁶ Although he died around the time of the trial, he was portrayed as a shadowy figure, plotting and scheming offstage, in league with Japanese imperialists. Finally, the Ninth Jibjangdamba Qutugtu—the never-recognized reincarnation of the Eighth Jibjangdamba Qutugtu, Mongolia's ruler from 1911 to 1921—was, along with the Banchen Bogda, a focal point of the purported conspiracy.

Reading the trials

In seeking to understand the show trial, I offer a reading of the newspaper accounts as both a source of information (what the state claims happened) and an ethnographic document (why such claims were made). The newspapers

are among the very few sources accessible to researchers—let alone ordinary Mongolians—who seek to understand what happened in the late 1930s in Mongolia. Actual case files remain locked away in the restricted archives of the Central Intelligence Office, the former Ministry of Internal Affairs: the secret police.⁷ Mongolian researchers with sufficient connections have been able to access these documents, but they remain otherwise inaccessible. Even relatives of the repressed receive only brief summaries of the files, rather than being allowed to view the full contents. One needs special permission even to view files related to the Ministry of Justice in the main historical archives. A few traces of the show trial and related issues surface in various government archives as well as those of the MPRP, but it is the newspaper accounts that best show how the trial was presented to the public.

From numerous conversations with relatives of victims of political violence and discussions with the few historians who broach the topic and conduct research in the archives, over the years I became increasingly concerned with understanding what happened at the interface between the political forces and decisions that drove the violence and the lives of those whose personal accounts I had collected or read. Travels to the sites of ruined monasteries and interviews with lamas drove me to seek to understand the events glossed, in the title of one socialist-era book, as *The Resolution of the Question of Monasteries and Lamas in the Mongolian People's Republic* (Pürevjav and Dashjamts 1965). After a decade spent studying the issues of political violence and its aftermath in Mongolia, I knew the basic outlines of events and the statistics, perhaps better than anyone else outside the country. Yet I still had no real “feel” for what had happened. Events were either set in narratives of grand geopolitical processes or subsumed under individual accounts of arrests, disappearances, and grief. A seemingly unbridgeable gulf existed between the two.

Then, in a conversation several years ago, a historian mentioned to me that the court decisions on one case had been published in the newspapers of the time. For him to talk to me before I had read them would not be worthwhile, he went on, as I would only be wasting his time. Only in tracking down these decisions did I become aware that a show trial involving lamas had even been held. (That trial was, in fact, not the one the historian had referred me to, which took place later the same month.) Accounts of the period may mention “cases” but seldom allude to anything more specific.⁸ An examination of newspaper reports of the show trials offered a way, at last, to understand what had gone on.

Evidence and guilt in Mongolia

Mongolia affords a particularly intriguing and important chance to study show trials, a topic almost untouched in

anthropology. Unlike the main show trials in the Soviet Union, which are usually assumed to have been based on completely fabricated evidence, the trial against the lamas in Mongolia took place against a background of active resistance to the socialist state, which was in a highly precarious and contested position at the time. It is telling that the 1990 Mongolian Supreme Court decision rehabilitating the Jongzin Qambu and his coconspirators was based on lack of proof, not demonstrable innocence.⁹ The decision notes that a plot “probably did exist” (*baisan baij boloh yum*), but no evidence clearly indicated who was involved. The Jongzin Qambu, in other words, was rehabilitated because the government did not prove its case, rather than on the basis of outright innocence. Show trials in the Soviet Union may have been concerned with the consolidation of power (Khlevnyuk 2003), but in Mongolia, power was still very much contested. The show trial in Mongolia was not related to an intraparty struggle for domination, consolidation of power, or even the results of one person’s paranoia, all explanations offered for the key Soviet show trials.¹⁰ Rather, in Mongolia, the party itself was in an unstable state, its influence and control contested.

The lamas on trial were representatives of a religion that had been deeply embedded in Mongolian political and economic as well as spiritual life for hundreds of years. Over a decade and a half after the revolution that brought the socialists to power in 1921, the Buddhist establishment continued to wield great influence. In an interview in 1934 with Gendün, Josef Stalin noted, “It looks as if there is a state [*uls*] within your state. One government is Gendün’s [i.e., the socialist] government. The other is the lamas’. But the lamas’ government is strong” (Damdinsüren et al. 2005:102). At the same meeting, Gendün remarked that a lama who had been arrested had to be released after only a year because of “unrest among the people” over his incarceration (Damdinsüren et al. 2005:102). The Buddhist church was much more than a religious hierarchy.¹¹ It was a powerful and influential political force. The move against Buddhism in Mongolia was part of a larger process of secularization of society, but, as importantly, if not more so, it was also meant to eliminate a major threat to the power of the socialist government.

It was through the trial of the Jongzin Qambu that the Mongolian government hoped to make violence against Buddhism possible, and even seem necessary, and, in doing so, preempt unrest among the people. Through the trial, it offered an exemplar that would shape and legitimate future acts of violence. The trial was not the end result of an investigation launched as a result of violence, although it was presented as such. Rather, the state, in a display of theatricality and misdirection, reversed the cause and effect of violence. Producing its own truths, the state used a legal form—the trial—as the start of a trail of violence, rather than the end.¹²

Below, I expand on the contexts in which the subsequent violence was unleashed. Understanding these contexts is necessary to fully appreciate not only the destruction and terror that would follow the show trial but also the contested and contingent power of the socialist state.

The contexts of terror

The early autumn of 1937 saw the start of the great wave of terror and executions that was to sweep over Mongolia for the next 18 months. Purges and executions had occurred throughout the 1920s and 1930s but none rivaled what was about to take place. Earlier state attempts at confronting Buddhist power had been financial, legal, and propaganda based. The steps taken included the imposition of punitive taxes, the prohibition against minors becoming lamas, and various attempts at offering lower-ranking, poorer lamas secular jobs and education (Pürevjav and Dashjamts 1965). Previously, the state had been largely concerned with countering the economic power and influence of the higher-ranking lamas and the remnants of the feudal nobility, but in 1937, the focus began to shift.¹³ The lamas were no longer exploiters but enemies and counterrevolutionaries.

The Jongzin Qambu’s trial was the first public knowledge of the threat Mongolia was said to be facing. It was also the first trial held under the auspices of the Extraordinary Plenipotentiary Commission, a three-person committee consisting of Choibalsang, at the time minister of defense (often referred to as “Mongolia’s Stalin,” he had received some education at a monastery in his youth); Lubsangsharab, representing the party (a former lama, he was arrested and executed in 1939 as a counterrevolutionary); and Tseringdorji, the justice minister. It was this commission that was responsible for authorizing and legitimating much of the violence to follow.¹⁴ The Jongzin Qambu, his deputy Damdin, ex-Prime Minister Gendün, and ex-Minister of War Marshal Demid were all named as counterrevolutionaries in the top-secret resolution creating the commission (Rinchin 1993:123–124). Their trial was clearly intended as the showpiece and justification for all that was to follow.

Describing what unfolded over the year and a half following the October 1937 show trial as an orgy of violence and destruction is tempting but misses the underlying methodical nature of much of it. An undeniable degree of randomness characterized the violence. Accounts tell of herders being arrested and executed merely because someone had escaped custody, leaving the secret police short of their quota of arrests. But there was also an organized ruthlessness to much of what took place. By the end of the violence, most of Mongolia’s more than 700 monasteries lay in ruins, and countless religious and cultural artifacts were destroyed.¹⁵ The destruction was carried out by a combination of troops from the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the

Mongolian and Soviet armies. In addition to Buddhist lamas and political figures, ordinary herders, Buryats—an ethnic group living largely along the Russian border and suspected of White Russian sympathies—and other minorities were arrested, sentenced, and shot. The violence was total. D. Ölziibaatar (2004:294), one of the handful of Mongolian scholars of the repressions, notes that, of the almost 26,000 prosecuted by the Extraordinary Plenipotentiary Commission, only seven were found innocent.

The exact number of people arrested and killed will probably never be known. According to D. Dashdavaa (2004:7), in the two-year period that followed the show trial, almost 57,000 people were arrested. He also claims that three out of every four people arrested were shot, which would suggest a figure of close to 43,000 people killed.¹⁶ A June 2007 symposium suggested a figure of 36,000 repressed but noted that this number was not definitive (Möngöntsetseg 2007). Whatever the final total, a large number—perhaps even a majority—were Buddhist lamas. Ölziibaatar (2004:294), although citing a lower overall number, notes that lamas constituted over half of the people repressed in the decade from 1937 to 1947.

Buddhism and the state

Buddhism was successfully introduced into Mongolia in the 16th century and quickly became intertwined with the political structure.¹⁷ With the collapse of the Qing dynasty in China in 1911, the Mongols of what was then called “Outer Mongolia” elevated the Eighth Jibjangdamba Qutugtu to the throne as the Bogda Qagan (Holy Emperor).¹⁸ He ruled over a country that was, as noted above, largely feudal in structure. The power of high-ranking lamas equaled if not exceeded that of many of the secular nobles, and monasteries wielded most of the economic influence. They often had large herds of livestock and formed the cores of most of the permanent settlements in the largely nomadic country. In the early 20th century, by one estimate, the monasteries owned 17 percent of the livestock (Maisikii 2005:356), and this figure apparently does not include animals owned by individual monks. The Buddhist hierarchy thus embodied political and economic as well as spiritual power.¹⁹

The lamas also exerted influence in most other aspects of life, as well. Writing in 1914, two British travelers, H. G. C. Perry-Ayscough and R. B. Otter-Barry, relate difficulties that the editor of a new journal, *Shine toli* (New Mirror), encountered in his attempts at educating people: “In one article he [the editor] happened to mention that the world was round. He was therefore requested to suppress such statements, seeing that the Lamas taught the world was flat; and should he continue to contradict, on the score of science, any teachings of the Lama faith, he would assuredly set all the priesthood against education of any kind” (1914:143). Frans Larson, a long-term resident of Mongolia, wrote that

“most Mongols refer every important matter to a lamassery [*sic*] for decision. Few will set out on a journey until a lama has stated that the selected day is auspicious” (1930:95–96).

Not much had changed by the time the socialists came to power in 1921. They were well aware of the extent of the influence of the Buddhist ecclesiastical hierarchy, which guarded its power jealously, and they trod carefully. The socialists were simply too weak to face down such an entrenched power, yet, ultimately, accommodation was not feasible either. As Stalin noted, the Buddhist hierarchy was effectively a state, one that was better organized and had greater allegiance among the people than that of the socialists. From the monks’ point of view, seeking out an agreement with the socialists would mean giving up power that the socialists were in no position to demand. The Bogda Qagan was kept as titular head of state until his death, and the early socialist leadership included ministers and officials from previous governments, some of whom were lamas. The earliest party oaths of loyalty had even included defense of the faith. When the Bogda Qagan died in 1924, the socialists pointed to existing prophecies to make the case against recognizing a Ninth Jibjangdamba Qutugtu, rather than simply banning such recognition outright (see Bawden 1989:261–263). In the 1930s, posters were printed and books and journals published in an attempt to distance people from Buddhism by pointing out the greed of the high-ranking lamas. Other attempts at curtailing the power of the lamas, such as a law passed in 1934, did not ban religion outright but, rather, attempted to disestablish it, prohibiting religious practices in official contexts (Pürevjav and Dashjamts 1965:198). In other words, attempts at secularization should be read more as political strategies than as reflecting a deep ideological commitment to atheism.

The power and influence of the Buddhist monks contrasted sharply with the weakness of the socialist government. Having come to power with Soviet backing in 1921, the government’s hold was tenuous. The most serious attempt to destroy the power and influence of the existing institutions, later called the “Leftist Deviation” of 1928–32 and associated with radical factions within the ruling party, saw the confiscation of most of the property of the feudal nobility as well as moves against the power of the Buddhist establishment and the first attempt at collectivization. This, however, led to a civil war spearheaded in part by lamas, which was only put down with the aid of the Soviet military. The disastrous attempt to break the power of the church, and the rebellion that subsequently took place, led to another shift, the “New Turn Policy” of 1932, which offered fewer restrictions on private ownership of livestock and saw a resurgence in the number of Buddhist lamas. The New Turn Policy was abandoned a few years later, as the socialists, largely at the behest of the Soviets, took an increasingly hard line against the Buddhists. It was at that point that Stalin made his comment on the power of the Buddhists,

cited above. At roughly the same time, Gendün, who was increasingly seen as overly sympathetic to the lamas, was removed from positions of influence by the Soviets.

At the same time it faced the still-powerful Buddhist church, the socialist government was also balancing multiple external challenges.²⁰ A brief period of Mongolian independence after the collapse of the Manchu Qing dynasty in 1911 had been brought to an end in 1919 by the incursions of a Chinese warlord, who forced the Mongols to ask to be taken back under Chinese protection. (Mongolia's status had previously been reduced from independence to autonomy through a series of treaties involving Russia and China.) In seeking to drive out the Chinese and the "Mad Baron" Ungern-Sternberg, a White Russian adventurer who had reenthroned the Bogda Qagan in 1920, Mongolian revolutionaries turned to Soviet Russia. There is little, however, to suggest these revolutionaries were dedicated socialists. Rather, many of them were pragmatists who saw help from Soviet Russia as their best, if not only, hope of independence. Nonetheless, increasing interference by the Soviet Union and Comintern meant that Mongolia was headed down a socialist path, as the ill-advised moves of the late 1920s showed. At the same time, Japan had set up the puppet state of Manchukuo in northeastern China, installing the last Manchu emperor as a figurehead, and was active in Inner Mongolia. The Japanese hoped to influence the Mongolians through their support of nationalism and Buddhism and woo them away from the Soviets. As Robert Rupen has written, "Their opposition to Communism placed the Japanese in the position of supporting Mongolian conservatism and particularly support of the religion" (1964:227). The tensions with Japan ultimately erupted into open conflict in the summer of 1939, when a combined Soviet-Mongolian army fought the Japanese at the battle of Halhyn Gol (Nomonhon to the Japanese), with thousands of casualties on each side.

It was in the midst of this maelstrom of competing influences and counterbalances that the socialist government found itself in 1937. Although it had only a limited number of options it could pursue in the international arena, it could—and would—move against what it and the Soviets saw as the most problematic of its remaining domestic enemies: the high-ranking Buddhist lamas. There had been scattered incidents of repression and trials before the Jongzin Qambu was tried, but the tone shifted and the measures taken were much deadlier after his trial.

Audiences and stagings

It is worth asking, at this point, how was the trial performed and for whom? Much that is related to both of these questions remains unknown and probably unrecoverable. The newspaper accounts do not offer much contextualization or description, and the sparse references in the archives that

are accessible similarly do not reveal anything about how the trial was staged. Yet some things about the trial and its audience are known or can be inferred.

The trial was held in the central theater, the *Bömbüger nogugan*, or "Round green," as it was known, after the shape of its roof. The theater, situated in the heart of Ulaanbaatar, was a commanding, if low, presence, fronted by a large square and garden and recognizable from a distance. It was only a short walk away from both the prison and the headquarters of the state security apparatus.²¹ The theater, like the roof that gave the building its name, was round. The stage was at the northern end, with seats for the audience filling both the ground floor and a balcony around the edge of the circular hall. Eastern and western wings of the building held offices, meetings rooms, a canteen, and recreational rooms.²²

In a photo of the Jongzin Qambu and his deputy Damdin at the trial, one can make out rows of spectators—many appearing to be in uniform—behind guards standing to attention and holding rifles with bayonets fixed (see Figure 1). The Jongzin Qambu and Damdin are not seated on the stage but, rather, in the first row or so of the seating for the audience. A photo of an earlier trial shows a row of defendants directly behind what appear to be footlights. One infers from this that the prosecution, defendants, and other officials were seated on the stage, focusing attention on the state's narrative and presentation.

Also unclear is how the actual trial proceeded. Very little has come to light on how the defendants were brought in, whether cross-examination occurred, or any other of a number of details. Such details are lacking for most, if not all, of the Mongolian legal system at the time. The Jongzin Qambu spoke at the trial, for one person (Nyambuu, a politician) recalls that, being a Tibetan, the Jongzin Qambu did not speak Mongolian well and was hard to understand (Lhagvasüren and Konagaya 2007:189). This speech most likely was his confession, which was also printed in the newspapers. Soldiers with machine guns were stationed outside the theater and threatened to shoot the young lamas who had gathered there (Lhagvasüren and Konagaya 2007:189–190). The machine guns were probably intended to reflect the threat those on trial posed to society, but the threats to shoot also seem to reflect the government's own uncertainty and mistrust of the populace it was attempting to win over.

Whereas I must draw on newspaper accounts to reconstruct the narrative of the plot, these accounts would not have been the main source of knowledge about the trial for most of the population. The literacy rate in 1937 was reported as 8.5 percent of the population over eight years of age, with 15.5 percent of the men and only 1.1 percent of the women classed as literate (Tserendorj 1976:54). The trial, however, was broadcast through loudspeakers placed outside the theater for the crowds who gathered to listen.



Figure 1. The Jongzin Qambu (left) and the ded Qambu Damdin (right) at their trial, October 1937. Photo courtesy of the National Museum of Mongolian History.

Youth and lamas would gather around them to follow the events taking place inside the theater, although the loudspeakers would cut out from time to time.²³ Most listeners would have been herders or, as Nyambu recalls, lamas. According to Robert Rupen (1964:239), there were only 2,400 Mongolian industrial workers in 1936 and 10,100 in 1939. Intellectuals also would have been few, as the first Mongolian university did not open until 1942.

Information on what was going on in Ulaanbaatar made its way fairly rapidly to the countryside. Nyambu, whose reminiscences contain the only mention of the trial of which I am aware, recalls that in the summer of 1937 (it would have been September), reports spread that “Jongzin Qambu Luvsanhaimchig, *ded* Qambu Damdin, and the Manzushiri Qutugtu Tseringdorji have been arrested by the Ministry of the Interior!” (Lhagvasüren and Konagaya 2007:188).²⁴ The information quickly spread, but only in whispers because people were afraid of being arrested themselves. Before the end of 1937, secret reports were being filed with the Council of Ministers (presumably from the Ministry of Internal Affairs, although the reports are unsigned), monitoring sentiments in the countryside. The people of one *sum* (district) in the west of Mongolia promised to increase their production as a result of the state’s victory over the counterrevolutionaries (Mongolian National Central Archives n.d.a:14). Although one should be wary of taking such reports at complete face value without further questioning the motives and intentions of the people involved, they do indicate that the messages of the trial

were reaching the wider populace and that people understood them and provided responses, whether heartfelt or not, that would find approval with the government.

Finally, it is worth noting that religion and religious ritual had once functioned to legitimate Qing rule in Mongolia (Elverskog 2006), and contemporary accounts refer to ceremonies offered to the Bogda Qagan, among other rituals, often accompanied by festivities. Although these rituals seem to provide a precedent for the show trial and may well have encouraged people to be more receptive to its staging, I am cautious about drawing more definitive links between the two. The socialists probably would have been cautious about drawing too explicitly on practices used by the very people they now sought to destroy.

In the account of the show trial that follows, drawn from contemporary newspaper reports published as the trial proceeded, I cannot distinguish between truth and fiction. Even if they could be untangled at this distance in time and space, it is the narrative presented by the state that ultimately concerns me. It is best, therefore, to encounter it as it was first presented in 1937. After doing so, I address the constructedness of the plot.

The revelations of violence

The theater where the trial was held served double duty, also functioning as the parliamentary building. This was emblematic of what was taking place, a blurring of the boundaries between theater, law, and politics. Doubtless, few at the time saw the irony. *Ünen* (1937d: 4) reported an

over-capacity crowd of 1,323 people in attendance at the trial, in a space designed to hold 1,200.

The trial started at noon on October 4 and continued for several days, during which time a counterrevolutionary plot awe inspiring in its depth, complexity, and scope was laid before the public. A key component of the trial was the testimony of the conspirators. It was their confessions that spelled out the full extent of the conspiracy: the plot to overthrow the revolutionary government and, with the aid of Japanese imperialists, restore the old feudal government to power. More than half a dozen people gave testimony, with some, like the Jongzin Qambu himself, admitting to activities that stretched back more than two decades. "When I first arrived in the Mongolian year 4 [i.e., 1914], I accepted from the Banchen Bogda the role of spy," admitted the Jongzin Qambu (*Ünen* 1937b: 1). The plot uncovered by the state was epic in scope, implicating numerous high-ranking figures from the religious and political spheres. Foreigners as well as domestic counterrevolutionaries were named as conspirators. The number varies in the accounts, but at one point the claim was made that secret spy groups existed in 48 monasteries scattered around the country (*Ünen* 1937a: 2). In the end, 23 people were tried and sentenced. Four of them were given prison sentences ranging from three to ten years. The other 19, including the Jongzin Qambu, were shot. None were found innocent.

The trial focused on what was called the "Center" (*Töv*) counterrevolutionary group. Its overall head was the Banchen Bogda, a foreigner, but one who was known in Mongolia and who had numerous accomplices inside the country. Within Mongolia, the leader—to the extent that there was a single leader—was the Jongzin Qambu, who had begun his spying activities in 1914, almost a decade before the socialist government was established. He had continued his work for over 20 years, until roughly the time of the show trial. The Jongzin Qambu was an important man, 65 years old at the time of the trial. He was head of Gandan, the main monastery in the capital, and had over 8,000 *shabi* (disciples). At the time of his arrest, he owned almost 100 camels, 18 horses, five buildings, and six gers, among other livestock and property. If the documents are to be believed, he made a very comfortable living (with an income of 40,000 *tögrögs*, the Mongolian currency, in 1937) from monies received for prayers and as donations from the faithful (*Ünen* 1937e: 1).²⁵

After initially being charged by the Banchen Bogda to undertake his spying activities, the Jongzin Qambu stayed in contact with the Bogda over the years. Communiqués, sometimes accompanied by silver ingots or other presents, sped back and forth between the Banchen Bogda and Jongzin Qambu through intermediaries. In 1923, the Jongzin Qambu traveled to his homeland, Tibet, where he personally discussed Mongolian–Soviet relations and other matters not only with the Banchen Bogda but also with the

Dalai Lama. Some of the letters written by the Banchen Bogda and Jongzin Qambu were discovered by state investigators and presented as evidence at the trial.²⁶

Various representatives and emissaries came and went at irregular intervals over the years, and additional contacts were made. The conspirators slowly spread their influence, and the Jongzin Qambu regularly kept the Banchen Bogda apprised of the situation in Mongolia. Counterrevolutionary assignments were given out, and, eventually, a plot was hatched to exterminate (*ustgah*) the revolutionary government and reestablish the old, feudal government with the aid of Japanese imperialist troops. Other people, initially unrelated to the Banchen Bogda and the Jongzin Qambu, had the same goals. It would transpire that the conspiracy was a case of like minds meeting up, not of one or two malcontents recruiting followers to their cause. The threat to the country was immense; this particular case was just the tip of the iceberg. In the narrative put forward, participants were at pains to emphasize that "it was not me alone" and "this was not just my idea" but that other individuals—named or not—felt and acted the same way.

The conspiracy was not without its dangers. Discovery remained a possibility. During the Jongzin Qambu's testimony, he reported something his assistant, Damdin, had told him. One night in the winter of 1932, Damdin heard a cart outside, and soon there was a knocking on his door. Afraid, he wondered, "Have they come to arrest me?" This was not the case. Instead, it was Prime Minister Gendün, who brought along with him "an unknown person in a Mongolian *deel* (the traditional Mongolian gown)." After inquiring about Damdin's religious services by way of greeting, Gendün introduced his companion, who was none other than Demid, the minister of war and commander in chief of the armed forces. As Gendün had done with the Jongzin Qambu, he told Damdin they had come to discuss something important and asked if he agreed to talk. He did. "Do you love your religion?" Demid asked. Damdin replied that he did. Demid went on to explain that religion would suffer if Mongolia sought support from the Soviet Union but would prosper with the support of the Japanese. "Because of this, it is necessary to overthrow the Mongolian government and place the Ninth Bogda on the throne. This policy is not the policy of just us two alone, but many other ministers and leaders share this idea." This was to remain a secret, however, and, if captured, Damdin was not to tell about the minister's involvement.

The plotting continued, and Gendün was eventually put in contact with the Banchen Bogda. The cast of conspirators continued to expand, and soon the counterrevolutionaries had established "sections" in various monasteries throughout the country. Rumors were spread. Younger lamas were drawn into the fold. Gendün was removed from the post of prime minister in 1936 and sent to "Red Russia," where, in 1937, he was arrested and executed. Before he left,

however, he visited the Jongzin Qambu one last time to exhort him to continue his work.

Similar, if shorter, tales were told by various other conspirators. More details were filled in and more links established, expanding the web. If not as rich as the Jongzin Qambu, Tseringdorji, the Manzushiri Qutugtu, was just as prominent. A Buddhist reincarnation, he was head of a monastery outside of Ulaanbaatar and had served prominent roles in the presocialist governments of the Bogda Qagan and Baron Ungern-Sternberg. He had been tried in 1930 as part of the “Group of 38” affair and had had his property confiscated twice.²⁷ He admitted to having had counterrevolutionary ideas similar to those of the Jongzin Qambu since 1922 or 1923 and eventually crossed the path of the Jongzin Qambu’s group, joining forces with it.

Altangerel, who lived in Altanbulag, a town on the Russian border, was typical of the more minor conspirators. He was originally a member of a counterrevolutionary group headed by a man named Ivanov, who, in turn, was linked to Grigori Semenov, a famous White Russian leader who had been active against the Soviets in Siberia. Altangerel was a *donir*, a monk who had been an attendant for the Bogda Qagan, Mongolia’s theocratic emperor, and he had also previously been expelled from the MPRP for reasons unspecified.

The Jongzin Qambu’s deputy, the ded Qambu Damdin (age 70, with about 1,000 disciples), also had lived in Altanbulag. He was able to draw on contacts there, which included Altangerel, to order acts of sabotage. These acts included arson against the telegraph office, the fire brigade, a warehouse, and fodder stores for the military’s horses, among others. Another counterrevolutionary, Rinchindorj, was ordered to burn the factory complex (*aj üildveriin kombinat*) in Altanbulag in 1935, but the effort was considered unsuccessful.²⁸ He was arrested in 1937 trying to carry out further acts of arson under the direction of Damdin and was executed. These acts of sabotage stand out in the testimony as examples of the few physical acts undertaken by the counterrevolutionaries. Despite the sweep of the charges, most of the testimony involves letters sent, meetings held, and plans made, not actual rebellions or acts of sabotage. “There was a special secret meeting run by Jamyandev to the north of Gandan [monastery] and there I talked with Jamyandev and Navaangtsorj, and in particular, we made important decisions about collecting funding” for the rebellion. Thus runs part of a typical confession. Despite the threat they posed, in the newspaper accounts, the counterrevolutionaries seem to have largely been portrayed as thinkers rather than doers.

The languages of violence

It is not possible to convey here the full impact of the original Mongolian accounts of the plot. The language itself is not particularly elegant. Much is conveyed through the

structure of the accounts, intentional or otherwise. In multiple iterations, the same basic story is told over and over again: foreign imperialists, Buddhist notables, even previously respected figures, such as Minister of War Marshal Demid, turn out to all be in league with the sinister Banchen Bogda, who seeks to overthrow the revolutionary government and restore Mongolia to a theocratic state. Links are made to various other events and uprisings, such as the armed rebellions in 1932 and earlier sabotage in Altanbulag. Other people—almost invariably high-ranking lamas and reincarnations—are drawn into the plot, underlining its pervasiveness. People previously arrested and executed as counterrevolutionaries, such as the Yegüzer Qambu (shot for his role in the “Group of 38” affair in 1930), are linked to the plot.²⁹ The same story is repeated from multiple perspectives. Repeated self-denunciations accumulate to offer a crushing burden of proof.

The language used to describe the counterrevolutionaries was a fundamental part of the state’s narrative of power, intimately tied to the allegations of an extensive counterrevolutionary plot. It was through language choice that the state furthered the process of Othering Buddhism, of seeking to shift Mongolians’ identification away from the Buddhist church and toward the socialist government. The particular words used did much of the actual work of convincing the audience that even though the people on trial may have belonged to the same religion as the audience, they were a threat to the state and its power. It was to a large degree the choice of words that enabled the state to justify its violence against the monks.

Several terms occur with frequency and highlight the transgressive nature of the categories deployed against the counterrevolutionaries. These require attention, for it is through these terms that the counterrevolutionaries are situated beyond the pale. Violence against one’s own group is difficult if not impossible to justify. It transgresses categories and violates the contract between the state and its citizens. Yet, when properly directed, as Gyanendra Pandey, one of the founders of the Subaltern Studies Group observes, “state violence does not count as violence at all” (1994:191). It thus becomes vital to situate the conspirators as people who are not the same as ordinary citizens, negating the violence of the state violence.

In Mongolia, this was particularly important. The group against whom the state had turned its gaze was Buddhist. Although Prime Minister Gendün and others were named, in the trials it was the most senior lamas who were singled out, both through the actual focus and through the headlines. The first newspaper accounts offer readers an introduction to the “affair of the reactionary head lamas who betrayed their own motherland.” In moving against lamas, the state was moving against a religion that still enjoyed strong support among the population.³⁰ It was thus critical to the performance to clearly and definitively exclude the

lamas from the category of “Us,” to legitimate the state’s use of violence. In doing so, the government undertook not only to legitimate violence but also to create a new “unmarked national” (Pandey 2006:129), to denaturalize Buddhist identity and naturalize a socialist one.

One of the most common terms used is *etege*, which appears 27 times in the October 3, 1937, issue of *Ünen*, a typical four-page-long broadsheet newspaper.³¹ A person who is an *etege* is both Us and Not Us. He or she is someone who challenges power or established norms but does so from within. Criminals, for example, are usually referred to as *etege*. “*Etege* implies stubbornness, ideological difference” (Buyandelgeriyn Manduhai, personal communication, December 1, 2007). It is used most often in the newspaper accounts to refer to the less important players in the conspiracy. “Other *etege*,” “in total, 23 *etege*,” and similar phrases regularly follow the list of chief conspirators. This usage reinforces the Other status of the Jongzin Qambu and his fellow defendants and works to shift the boundaries of Us and Not Us.

An even more commonly used term is *esergüü*, which appears 69 times in the same issue of *Ünen*. *Esergüü* defies simple translation into English. It is usually translated as *counterrevolutionary* (as I have done here) or *enemy*, but more directly in Mongolian it is simply one who is against, albeit in a violent manner. A simple dissident would not be an *esergüü*. In Mongolian, the nature of the “againstness” is left undefined, yet it needs no clarification. The term occurs in descriptions not only of the people accused of the plot, “the counterrevolutionary group,” but also of their goals, work, counterrevolutionary struggles, organization, and policies. *Esergüü*, like *etege*, speaks to character and morality, not just action.³²

Character and morality are important issues here for two reasons. First, they are conflated with class in standard Marxist interpretations. Marx was a 19th-century thinker, when an evolutionary model was a moral model. For Marx, the ruling classes were not merely the rich who controlled the means of production. They were those who exploited the poor and the deserving workers. A similar distinction is made here. Although those who confessed to being counterrevolutionaries were lamas, they were, critically, *tolu-goi lama nar*: head lamas. They have other labels, such as *tomu lama* (“large,” i.e., high-ranking, lamas) and *degedü lama* (high lamas), all of which underline their class, and hence moral, situation. This is to be expected in a Marxist situation, but in the narrative being constructed, it has additional resonances. These labels are key components of the narrative, and their use was a deliberate move by the government-party to underline the class nature of the monks’ offenses.

Whatever the intents and desires of the party, although the ideas of the ruling class in Mongolia in the 1930s may have been Marxist (and even this is open to dispute), the

ruling ideas were not.³³ To paint the high-ranking lamas as counterrevolutionary set up a struggle for the heart of Buddhism. The invocation of morality worked to shift the boundaries of Us and Not Us. Buddhism became a marked identity, one highlighted as being at odds with the state and the nation, but this marking was not done explicitly. That would have risked alienating the believers in the audience too much. Rather, the move against Buddhism was presented almost as a side effect. It was the class of the high-ranking lamas that condemned them morally, not their allegiance to Buddhism.

In this context, it is significant to realize that, of the ten letters criticizing the traitors published in the October 6, 1937, issue of *Ünen*, six were from lamas. (The ten were a sample of more than 3,000 allegedly sent in to the papers.) The show trial was thus a trial against Buddhism while at the same time it was not. The counterrevolutionaries may have been the leaders of Buddhism in Mongolia, but they were not representative of Buddhism. This role fell to the “poor lamas,” the *shabi* (disciples) of the head lamas. The state was revealing its own fears of vulnerability by marshaling testimony and criticisms by poor lamas. As the apparatus of power geared up for the destruction of the monasteries, in its public portrayal in the show trial, the state was at pains to ally itself with Buddhism. The poor lamas, in critiquing the head lamas, were also suggesting another reading for the accusation of betrayal: that the “reactionary head lamas” be seen as people who not only betrayed their motherland but also Buddhism. The conspirators were rejected not only for their political actions but also for their religious ones.

The second reason character and morality matter is that they removed the need to conclusively link the plotters to specific acts. Rather, the focus of guilt was shifted to intentionality. In marking the conspirators as exemplars of opposition to the state, it was no longer necessary for them to have actually done anything. The mere fact that they could have acted—and would discuss doing so—was proof of their guilt.

The theatricality of violence

To repeat a vital point, treating a show trial as an actual trial or presentation of evidence is not justified. Whether such trials represent an existing plot does not matter in terms of their goals. Show trials exist not to prove guilt or innocence but, rather, as stages for enactments of state power. The phrase “show trial” must be read with the emphasis on the first word, not the second. Such trials are shows, open to the public, that are intended to perform a certain relationship between state and citizen. A show trial loses much if not all of its meaning without an audience. The importance of playing to an audience is reflected in Fitzpatrick’s observation that some of the earliest show trials in the

Soviet Union were so explicitly shows rather than trials that they “did not result in real sentences” (1999:21). Elizabeth Wood (2005:ch. 1) has recently shown that Soviet show trials, which were the models for the Mongolian trials, had a genealogy stretching back through Tsarist times to medieval European morality plays, theater that was intended to teach moral lessons. More generally, Wood demonstrates how show trials can be traced to various earlier socialist forms—agitation trials—that were contingent on audience participation.

The Mongolian case is complicated in comparison with the Soviet one, precisely because the show trials took place against a background of actually existing plots and tensions. Unlike the cases of “wreckers” in the Soviet Union, who were often tried and shot for failures inherent in the system or defects in the equipment they used, an actual case of sabotage and arson occurred in a textile factory in Mongolia in 1935, although whether it was part of a larger overarching conspiracy remains unknown. That the Banchen Bogda was anticommunist and working with the Chinese, Japanese, or both, was widely believed and appears to have had at least some basis in fact. The Japanese did clash with Soviet and Mongolian forces at the battle of Halhyn Gol (Nomonhan) on Mongolia’s border in 1939. One can perhaps forgive the Mongolian government for being worried about its hold on the country.

Such actual events and threats did not obviate the need for show trials. If anything, they increased their usefulness, as the state needed to reinforce the call for action and vigilance, and it had to do so while ensuring that the dangers fit the need. Disorganized, random attacks and plots were not conducive to an orchestrated response. Only through controlling the script could the state be sure of shaping the outcome, preempting opposition, and providing the necessary inducements to further violence. Recall Gendün’s statement that a monk had to be released in the early 1930s because of unrest among the populace. Such missteps could not be allowed to happen again, and so, a coherent, organized, persuasive threat was needed. Public opinion might win out in an isolated case, but not if the same case could be shown to be part of a wider conspiracy.

In this regard, it is worth noting that the few documents that can be recovered make it clear that the final presentation of the case in the show trial did not include all evidence against the defendants listed in earlier versions of the conspiracy. Whether an actual plot existed behind the charges, clearly, some information that could have been used against the Jongzin Qambu and others was left out in the end. An undated document in the Mongolian National Central Archives reveals a telling difference from the published accounts of the trial.³⁴ Both the document and a letter from Mikhail Frinovsky, of the NKVD (the Soviet secret police), to his boss, NKVD head Nikolai Yezhov, mention a link between Jongzin Qambu and English spies active in Ti-

bet (Damdinsüren et al. 2005:249). An interview Choibal-sang gave to the newspaper *Ünen* before the trial (see below) mentions Chinese soldiers as also being involved in the plot, as does the archived document. Yet these elements are missing from the published newspaper accounts. Without further evidence, one can only speculate on the reasons behind these shifts in the accounts, although they may have been related either to larger political trends or, perhaps, to a belief that such accusations would not have been sufficiently compelling. Yet the shifts themselves are important. They are the clearest indication available that the presentation was carefully managed. The state passed up a chance to claim that the counterrevolutionaries were working with two other powerful enemies—the English and the Chinese—in the final case presented in the theater. The show trial was, indeed, meant to be “theatre of the state,” and the script had been carefully edited.³⁵

In addition to countering the threat the Buddhist hierarchy was seen as posing to the still-nascent socialist government, a second purpose lay behind the show trial: to provide the public with a precursor to the coming violence. It was through the show trial that the state sought to anticipate and shape response to its own violence in a public familiar with battles, rebellion, and sabotage. Having fought a civil war only five years previously, the state was clearly aware of the need to anticipate and control reactions to what was about to happen.

The first mass arrests of what was to become Mongolia’s Great Terror took place on September 10, 1937, and involved about 100 people. This was about the same time—perhaps the same night—that the Jongzin Qambu and his coconspirators were arrested.³⁶ These arrests were carried out at night, in secret. They were not disclosed to the public and, as far as I have been able to trace, were never acknowledged to the public at large.³⁷ Even those carrying out the arrests did not know what was about to take place until the night in question (Dumburai 1997:91). It was not until after the trial of the Jongzin Qambu that 14 of those arrested on September 10 were accused publicly of being counterrevolutionaries and tried.

How seriously the “question of the lamas” was now being treated is indicated by evidence that it was taken up by the Soviet Politburo at this time. J. Arch Getty and Oleg Naumov, in their collection of Soviet documents on the Great Terror, *The Road to Terror*, note that “in September 1937 the Politburo even approved a request from Deputy Commissar of the NKVD Frinovsky to organize special troikas ‘to examine the cases of Mongolian lamas’ ” (1999:481). This reference can only be to the Extraordinary Plenipotentiary Commission. Frinovsky, present in Mongolia since August, also reported to Yezhov on the arrest and interrogation of the Jongzin Qambu, but it is not clear to what extent Frinovsky was an active participant (see Damdinsüren et al. 2005: 248–249).

Two weeks after the arrests of September 10, Choibalsang gave an interview to *Ünen*. The topic was not the arrests but, rather, the counterrevolutionary group headed by the Jongzin Qambu (1951a:472–476). Choibalsang discusses a litany of counterrevolutionary groups and plans before moving on to a description of the plot that was soon to be repeated at the trial. He does not mention the claims that counterrevolutionaries and Japanese spies are operating among the party leadership until late October, during a plenum of the MPRP Central Committee (Choibalsang 1951a:477–519). Significantly, although he gives an accounting of the actions of the counterrevolutionaries among “our leadership,” he does so in the context of the case against the Jongzin Qambu. It is “these two affairs (*kereg*)” that he talks about (Choibalsang 1951a:477). The case against the Jongzin Qambu leads to the other affair. In other words, it is clear from the chronology that the show trial was intended to be at the forefront of the justification for further violence.

Numerous commissions and offices existed in both the party and the secret police to address the issues of religion and the lamas. These commissions and offices regularly filed reports with and made recommendations to the party, government, and secret police leadership. The language of spies and counterrevolutionaries came into play, even among these restricted circles, only in the months before the trial of the Jongzin Qambu and his counterrevolutionary group. Yet even in these circles a shift occurred after the trial, one that enveloped not only language but also concrete action. In early November, less than a month after the trial, the Administrative Office of the Religion Section of the Ministry of Internal Affairs sent a report to the Central Committee’s “Lama Commission” recommending that a total of 56 monasteries in a variety of provinces be moved at least 100 kilometers from the borders because they had been harboring counterrevolutionaries and spies and stockpiling weapons (Mongolian National Central Archives 1937:32). The Central Committee resolution that followed a week later mentioned moving the monasteries but did not say why. It did, however, offer additional steps to be taken, including confiscating property and closing monasteries (MPRP Archives 1937).

In January 1938, Choibalsang gave a speech to party members in which he pointed out that, of the 350,000 males in Mongolia, over 80,000 were lamas and he noted the grave threat the high-ranking lamas posed to the country and the revolution, calling them “parasites” (1951b:13–14). This was the most vitriolic public statement to date on the need to destroy the power of the lamas as a group and a fundamental shift from the language used before the trial.³⁸ There could be no doubt now that the trial had merely been the first public step against the lamas.

The concealments of violence

People were supposed to come away from the trial convinced of the guilt of the accused and of the heinousness of their schemes. Of the defendants’ guilt there can have been little doubt because the accused themselves were the source of information about their crimes. There was no need for the state to convince the audience of the guilt of the accused. They did so themselves. I want, however, to again ask, what is one to make of the confessions? In particular, how is one to understand the pervasiveness of the secret spy groups and the vastness of the conspiracy over time and space?

This very pervasiveness is the key to unlocking the puzzle. The expanse of the plot paved the way for the violence and terror that was to come. It did this by exposing the vulnerability of the state and, at the same time, underlining the importance of increased vigilance. The more vulnerable the state was, the more people had to be on guard. Under threat from within and without, the state was locked in a struggle for its existence. Harsh measures were not only justified but also called for. The stage was thus set for further violence, which was soon to come in seemingly unceasing waves. A small plot could be contained and arrested (in both senses of the word). A conspiracy that reached across decades and across the entire country could scarcely be expected to be eradicated to the very roots on the first try. It called for continued arrests, interrogations, and executions.

Show trials can be viewed as highlighting the power and efficacy of the state and party. They seemingly demonstrate the reach of the state and its ability to penetrate into the darkest recesses of the opposition. They are an enactment of the panopticon—the all-seeing eye of the state—vigilantly illuminating and eliminating threats against order. But the show trials are also primal, almost visceral. They have much in common with what one likes to think of as episodes of a “darker time”—public executions and inquisitorial practices, which were also claims of sovereignty and authority in a contested political landscape.

Michel Foucault has noted that public executions and torture were retribution for transgressions against “the will of the sovereign” (1979:47). The public execution was the culmination of a process that began with interrogation and torture and that produced a particular model of truth (Foucault 1979:44). The entire process was an extended confession, and guilt was inscribed on the body of the accused in the process of torture and execution. The violence of the state was celebrated in the execution. “From the point of view of the law that imposes it, public torture and execution must be spectacular. . . . The very excess of the violence employed is one of the elements of its glory” (Foucault 1979:34).

Much of the logic of the public execution was found in the show trial I examine. The show trial was a confession of,

and admission and retribution for, transgressions against the purported “will of the people.” It was a cleansing of impurities. The show trial, like the public execution, was the culmination of a process that included interrogation and torture. Vitally, as with the public execution, “through the confession, the accused himself took part in the ritual of producing . . . truth” (Foucault 1979:38). Yet, in the case I examine, the show trial was the public ritual, not the subsequent executions. The violence of the state, manifested in the executions that followed the show trial, was concealed from the public rather than publicized. Attention was directed away from explicit violence. Yet the violence of the state was celebrated, with people writing into the newspapers to call for executions.

After the publicity of the show trial, the executions took place in secret, out of sight of the public. Although the public called for the death of the *esergüü*, no evidence indicates that the executions were even announced after they were carried out. The executions of those political figures tried and sentenced later in October 1937 were carried out in a valley outside of Ulaanbaatar, in the middle of the night, lit by the headlamps of cars and trucks.³⁹ (Although the site is now marked, it is located up a lonely valley with no roads leading to it.) Once the looming violence had been alluded to and justified, the actual conspirators lost much of their importance as people. They remained objects of hatred and foci of calls to action, but their actual deaths were almost an afterthought.

Other important parallels with similar public rituals draw attention to morality and character. A logic similar to that of the show trial was at work in the medieval *auto-da-fé* of the Roman Catholic Church. As Edward Peters sums it up, “The aim of the *auto de fé*, as its name suggests, is the ‘act of faith,’ that is, the liturgical demonstration of the truth of the faith and the error and evil of its enemies. . . . The execution [of heretics] was less important to the Inquisition than the assertion of truth and the penitence of its enemies” (1989:225).

As in the show trial, in the *auto-da-fé*, the emphasis was on the show, the presentation. Both served “as a means of reinforcing the faith of those who observed them” (Peters 1989:94), whether that faith was in socialism or Catholicism. Both provided exemplars at multiple levels. Both were public acknowledgments by the accused of their wrongdoing, highlighting the righteousness of the faith. (Although never made explicit in the Mongolian case, in Soviet show trials, the accused commonly claimed to have seen the error of their ways.) Both also provided models for the audience, instructing them not only in how not to behave but also in what to be vigilant for. Much like self-criticism and unmasking in the Soviet cases or Maoist self-criticism in China, Catholic inquisitions began with a period in which people were required to come forth and confess shortcomings on their own behalf or on behalf of their neighbors.

Another important parallel of the show trial with inquisitorial practices and the *auto-da-fé* is found in photographic evidence indicating that at least some counterrevolutionaries were forced to pose with placards around their necks, announcing their role as “leaders of the counterrevolutionaries,” recalling how participants in the *auto-da-fé* wore robes to indicate their particular heresies and crimes. In the case of the Spanish Inquisition, at least, the robes worn by the convicted were hung, after their death, “in the parish church, reminding . . . neighbors and descendants of [their] shame and penitence” (Peters 1989:94). Children of enemies of the people in the socialist bloc were similarly marked, being ostracized and often expelled from school. People also were required in Mongolia to write “three-generation biographies” listing their parents and grandparents, which forced them to conceal repressed relatives or risk continued discrimination. In both cases, the sins of the parents could be inherited by the children.

Show trials are usually understood as a performance of power. The enemies and their narratives may be created and the power illusionary, but that is precisely the point. The performance seeks to persuade, not to prove. As Erik Mueggler explains in *The Age of Wild Ghosts*, the socialist state in China “depended on its capacity to impose its own visions of itself on the social world” (2001:4) to wield power and influence. This is the intent of show trials—to impose visions of order and power. The more powerful the enemy uncovered and defeated, the more powerful the state must be. Show trials are a theater of the state; in this case they were claims for allegiance by the socialist state against the established Buddhist hierarchy.

The truth of the narrative is, however, more complex. Show trials in Mongolia were, to a degree, an interactive form of theater. Not only did the public attend them as performances but it also actively responded. In its October 6 edition, *Ünen* claimed that “over 700 party and League [referring to the Revolutionary Youth League] members and over 2200 ordinary people [*arad*] and more than 200 lamas” (1937c: 3) all wrote in to express themselves on the topic of the counterrevolutionary group then on trial. Almost to a man (for all those quoted are men) they called for the counterrevolutionaries to be punished in accordance with the “law’s highest measures.” Only two out of the ten people the newspaper cited did not use this exact phrase, substituting a similar one, calling instead for “severe” (*qatagu*) punishments. The letter writers’ own language mirrors that of the newspapers, calling for the conspirators to be “exterminated” (*ustgah*). Similar sentiments were reported elsewhere. Whether these letters were “real” or not is not the point. (On the basis of readings of the archives in other contexts, I presume that at least a substantial portion of them were genuine.) They were yet another performance of state power, another sleight of hand, a misattribution of the origins of the violence. The origin of the violence was shifted

from the state to the people, many of whom would soon become its victims.

The state ascribed to others what it was about to undertake (cf. Taussig 1984). The narratives it presented in the trial were of the violence of others and, as a necessary precursor to its own violence, an implicit admission of vulnerability. In presenting these narratives and, in particular, by emphasizing the scope of the threat, the state intended to present its own violence as, if not masked, at the very least well justified. The show trial thus represents an important moment in the process of state formation. Through it, one is able to trace the state's performance, its "pursuit of visible advantage" (Geertz 2004:580) in its struggle against the Buddhist establishment. Through its portrayal of a conspiracy spanning a decade or more, the state sought support for the destruction it was about to unleash. It repositioned itself as a protector of the people, rather than their persecutor. In justifying its own violence, the state also sought to reinforce its own claim to legitimacy and to move people against the Buddhist hierarchy, which represented long-held beliefs and traditions. The show trial, which filled the central theater and the newspapers for the better part of a week, was a performance designed to win people over.

Notes

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1. A *qambu* is an abbot of a Buddhist monastery. The Jongzin Qambu was the head of Gandan and Züün Hüreer monasteries. Gandan is the main monastery in Ulaanbaatar, making the Jongzin Qambu, in effect, the top religious figure in the capital if not the country. S. Pürevjav and D. Dashjamts refer to him as the "biggest [*hamgiin tom*] lama in Mongolia" (1965:178).

Because there is no standardized transcription for Mongolian, I have generally transcribed Mongolian words on the basis of the alphabet used in the source quoted. For sources in the old Mongolian vertical script, I have used a variation on the Library of

Congress transliteration system, ignoring certain diacriticals or replacing them with a few other substitutions in favor of readability. In some cases, the old script and contemporary Cyrillic versions differ significantly. *Jongzin Qambu*, for example, would be rendered *Yonzon Hamba* in Cyrillic.

2. The "9th Bogda" is a reference for the Ninth Jibjangdamba Qutugtu, a Buddhist reincarnation, who was never officially recognized in Mongolia. The Eighth Jibjangdamba Qutugtu had been the theocratic ruler of Mongolia from 1911 to 1924, spending the last three years as a figurehead after the socialist revolution of 1921.

3. The position of Jongzin Qambu was important enough that the remains of the previous Jongzin Qambu had been preserved and a temple had apparently been dedicated to them (Bawden 1997:57).

4. An unsigned article in the newspaper *Ardyn Erh* in 1991 on killing fields in Mongolia refers to 17 people being shot near Ulaanbaatar on October 8, 1937 (*Ardyn Erh* 1991). This must be a reference to the defendants in the trial, although the count is off by two. Whether this is a simple mistake or two were killed elsewhere is unclear and probably unknowable.

5. Reincarnations in Tibetan Buddhism in Mongolia are reincarnations of previous holy figures. Some of the higher-ranking reincarnations are held to be incarnations of Bodhisattvas, enlightened beings who represent Buddhist principles, such as Avalokitesvara (who often represents compassion) or Manjushri (who represents wisdom). Most larger monasteries were headed by particularly noted reincarnations, which are sometimes (if erroneously) glossed in English language sources as "Living Buddhas."

6. The Banchen Bogda was the second-highest-ranking reincarnation in the Gelugpa sect of Tibetan Buddhism, second only to the Dalai Lama himself.

7. Fitzpatrick (1993:301 n. 5) reports a similar situation in the Soviet Union.

8. Among English-language sources, Dashpurev and Soni 1992 does not mention the trials. Baabar 1999:361 does but errs in assigning a date to the first public trial. Sandag and Kendall 2000 mentions an earlier trial against lamas but completely ignores the one under discussion here. The situation is similar in the Mongolian-language literature.

9. "Yonzon Hamba Ts. Luvsanhaimchig naryn 23 хүний хэргийн тухай" (About the affair of Yonzon Hamba Ts. Luvsanhaimchig involving 23 people). Decision of the Plenum of the Supreme Court of the Mongolian People's Republic, Number 7, 25 July, 1990. Other rehabilitation decisions concerned with cases dating to the same period use similar phrasing.

10. All references to "the party" in this article are to the MPRP.

11. I use *church* to indicate not only the Buddhist hierarchy of lamas, disciples, and so forth, but also the whole apparatus—political, economic, and social—that existed around the hierarchy. To refer merely to a "hierarchy" seems too limited, whereas a term such as *religion* is too broad and vague. A parallel here in terms of influence and importance can be drawn with the Catholic Church in the European Middle Ages.

12. I am indebted to Rebecca Empson for highlighting the cause-and-effect relationship here.

13. Although the population was largely nomadic, Mongolian social structure was essentially feudal, with a hereditary class of nobles, commoners, and a class akin to serfs. Although many in the nobility were wealthy, it was not unknown for a successful commoner to be wealthier than a noble. Even so, the nobles retained rights not enjoyed by others, no matter their economic status. Nobles owed duties and taxes to both their local noble and the central government.

14. The decisions of the commission are used to establish the number of people killed in the 1930s, although the number of those formally sentenced by the commission is lower than the number actually executed.

15. To underline the extent of the violence and destruction, the figures work out to almost 40 monasteries destroyed every month in a country with a population of well under one million and a correspondingly small army.

16. Dashdavaa does not give a source for this percentage, but it is in line with figures Ölziibaatar (2004) cites, drawing on the archives of the Ministry of Internal Affairs (the secret police). The actual number of people killed is likely to be somewhat higher, as not all executions were necessarily documented. Dashdavaa also claims (again, without citing sources) that, ultimately, during the purges one in eight adult males was killed. Without reliable demographic figures for the era, not much can be done with this claim, but it would put a rough upper limit of 45,000 on the number of people killed. This is approximately 5 percent of the country's population at the time.

17. It had first been introduced during the Yuan dynasty, under Khubilai Qagan but had not achieved the same scale of penetration and success that the (re)introduction in the 16th century did.

18. The Jibjangdamba Qutugtus were the third-highest-ranking reincarnations of the Gelugpa sect of Tibetan Buddhism, which is headed by the Dalai Lama.

19. In one of the myriad ironies of Mongolian history of the period, even the newspapers reporting the show trial counted elapsed time from the establishment of the theocracy in 1911. The year of the trial, 1937, is recorded as year 27 in the papers.

20. There is not enough space here to explore the full complexities of the larger geopolitical context of the repressions, but see Buyandelger in press:ch. 3 for a concise and highly insightful discussion.

21. The prison was located on the site of the current National History Museum, halfway between the theater and the secret police headquarters. It is even said that an underground passageway connected the three (Ai Matsushima, personal communication, March 2006).

22. The theater was destroyed in a fire in the 1940s. Some have suggested that this was an act of arson, carried out because the show trials of the lamas had been held there. It was even rumored that, as the theater was burning, people exclaimed, "What a beautiful fire!" (Lhagvasüren and Konagaya 2007:189). The word for *beautiful* in Mongolian is based on the same root as the word for *good*. It carries a connotation of correctness as well as beauty.

23. Whether this was a fault in the equipment or intentional censoring of some parts of the trial is unclear.

24. I have slightly altered the spelling of Tseringdorji's name in this quote to maintain consistency throughout the article.

25. To provide a point of reference, in an oral-history interview, a woman speaking of the same general time period noted she received a salary of 40 tögrögs a month. "Forty tögrögs meant lots of money then," she commented (Oral History of Twentieth Century Mongolia n.d.).

26. These letters (if they even existed) are unavailable, and I have found no other references to them.

27. Although not specified, one of the confiscations would have been the result of the earlier trial. The "Group of 38" was another alleged counterrevolutionary plot, involving a noble, Eregdendagva, and several high-ranking lamas, as well as others. It did not receive as much publicity as the trial under discussion here, and unlike the later trial, the Group of 38 trial was apparently not stage managed. In his autobiography, the Diluv Hutagt, one of the

people involved, gives the impression that in this instance it was an actual trial without prearranged testimony or confessions (Latimore and Isono 1982). The other confiscation of Tseringdorji's property presumably was during the Leftist Deviation in the late 1920s.

28. *Unsuccessful* seems to be a relative term, as Ölziibaatar (2004:224) reports that the final damage (after repairs) was assessed at over half a million tögrögs.

29. The Yegüzer Qambu headed a monastery in eastern Mongolia.

30. Such was the level of support in some circumstances that, despite the repressions and executions, as late as the 1950s, it was still possible to find party members accused of harboring lamas and allowing them to worship (Mongolian National Central Archives n.d.c:2).

31. I am indebted to Buyandelgeriyn Manduhai for elucidating these readings of the terminology.

32. Both of the terms offer intriguing parallels with St. Augustine's approach to the problem of heterodoxy in the early Christian Church. As Edward Peters describes St. Augustine's view, "Those who oppose orthodox Christians . . . must be coerced . . . lest they pollute the entire community" (1989:24). So, too, with the show trials. The trials were as much about community under threat as they were individuals.

33. See Kaplonski 2005 on the distinct lack of Marxism in the writing and understanding of history during the period.

34. Gandan küriyen deki qubisgal esergüü bayigulalt kereg-iig shikükü tasulaqu-yin qural-aca bayitsagaltai-i yaabugulaqu tölübeleke (Investigation plan by a court committee on the counter-revolutionary organization in Gandan monastery; Mongolian National Central Archives n.d.b:68–73). The document uses a variety of tenses, which, coupled with the lack of a date, leaves ambiguity over whether it is actually a plan—a script for the trial, as it were—or a report. Some people have suggested to me that the word translated here as *plan* can, in a legal context, be more properly understood as *report*.

35. I use "theatre of the state" not in Clifford Geertz's sense, in which the "power served pomp" (1980:13), but to imply the reverse, that the pomp existed to create and reinforce power.

36. A document dated September 13 indicates that the arrest of the Jongzin Qambu was approved on September 7 and that, by September 13, the interrogation was underway (Damdinsüren et al 2005:248–249).

37. This cannot be determined with absolute certainty, as almost all issues of *Ünen* from the last part of 1937 are missing from the Mongolian National Central Archives. Ölziibaatar refers to a speech given by Choibalsang to party members and some military leaders and "political workers" (*uls töriin ajiltнууд*) at the beginning of November 1937, in which he refers to the 14 people as being from a group of "not less than 200" (2004:238) who were arrested. It does not appear that this was made public at the time, and it does not appear in Choibalsang's collected reports and speeches.

38. For a partial English translation of this speech, based on a Russian version, see Rupen 1964:229–230.

39. This information is based on a 1999 interview with a man present at the executions.

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