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géopolitiques et eugéniques de la recherche médicale et anthropologique sur les
Mongols bouriates dans les années 1920*

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An outpost of socialism in the Buddhist Orient: geopolitical and eugenic implications of medical and anthropological research on Buryat-Mongols in the 1920s¹

Un avant-poste du socialisme dans l’Orient bouddhiste» : implications géopolitiques et eugéniques de la recherche médicale et anthropologique sur les Mongols bouriates dans les années 1920

Vsevolod Bashkuev

Introduction

- ¹ This paper seeks to reframe some issues concerning the scientific study of the Buryat-Mongols in the 1920s – early 1930s focusing on medical and anthropological research. In doing so, it will attempt to analyze the role and meaning of the medical and anthropological study of the Buryat-Mongols in the context of early Soviet geopolitical designs in Asia, particularly, the part of it that the Bolsheviks often referred to as “Buddhist Orient.”
- ² A brief note should be made on the terminology. First of all, the term “geopolitics” and its derivatives are used here in their contemporary meanings because in the Bolshevik discourse they were thoroughly avoided. Pro forma the Soviets castigated geopolitics as imperialist pseudoscience. Its close kinship with the Nazi *Geopolitik* turned it to a complete official taboo after World War II. However, it does not mean that the Bolsheviks did not think geopolitically and had no suchlike stratagems and designs. In their discourse the general euphemisms for “geopolitics” were “Soviet foreign policy” and

“struggle against imperialism”. Depending on the context, other synonyms could be used too.

- 3 Contrary to geopolitics, eugenics was a popular discipline and a frequently encountered term in the 1920s Soviet Russia. In comparison with the Russian Empire where eugenics was in its infancy, in the USSR it experienced a short blossoming period. Even in the early 1930s, when consolidated Stalinism pressed hard on the relatively liberal scientific community, eugenics continued to exist under the name of medical genetics. It took the bloodbaths of the Great Terror and World War II to completely discredit this discipline and cleanse it from all Soviet scientific discourse. In fact, negative connotations of eugenics as a nazified science are still very much alive in Russia.
- 4 In this paper I aim to trace the peculiarities of “socialist eugenics,” particularly as applied to the health improvement of national minorities and to the problem of creating a new Soviet man. Within the geopolitical context of the day I will consider the Soviet study of the Buryat-Mongols as the means to determine, analyze and assess the immediate threats to their existence, measure and evaluate their development potential and implement a consistent policy of socialist transformation. While medical and anthropological research on the Buryat-Mongols shapes the subject of this study, the eugenic agenda concealed in it is the pinpoint of this paper.
- 5 T1 Scientific research on the Buryat-Mongols and geopolitical factors
- 6 On 20 October 1925 Chairman of the Council of People’s Commissars of the Buryat-Mongolian ASSR M. Erbanov sent a telegram to the regional office of the Buryat republic in Moscow. In it, he allotted regional representatives a task to urgently establish contacts with the heads of the Commission for the Scientific Study of Mongolia under the auspices of the Council of People’s Commissars of the USSR. The leader of the newly established Buryat autonomy was interested in an opportunity to include Buryat-Mongolia into the scope of activity of this commission. If successful, the republic could get an opportunity to carry out large-scale and systematic scientific studies of its territory and population funded by the central government in Moscow.
- 7 An urgent necessity of a comprehensive study of the Buryat-Mongolian autonomous republic in the 1920s – 1930s was explained by several reasons. In our view, the geopolitical factor played the key role here.
- 8 The creation of the Buryat-Mongolian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic on 30 May 1923 may be viewed as a pragmatic alliance of interests of the Russian Bolsheviks, their Buryat associates, such as M. Amagaev and M. Erbanov, and Buryat national intelligentsia including Ts. Zhamtsarano, E.-D. Rinchino, B. Baradin, D. Sampilon, and others. The Bolsheviks, whose idea of exporting proletarian revolution to Europe spectacularly failed by 1920, fixed their attention on East and Central Asia instead, hoping that the establishment of frontier national autonomies would help in transmitting Communist ideology across the border. In their sight, a close linguistic and cultural affinity of the Buryat-Mongols with the Mongols of Outer and Inner Mongolia, Barga and Xinjiang, and same religion as in Tibet, made them perfect proxies of Soviet foreign policy in these regions. As M. Erbanov and M. Amagaev put it in their 1922 memorandum, “...we need to note very close ethnographic and cultural ties of Transbaikalian Buryats with linguistically and historically kindred Mongolian masses of East and Central Asia. In certain conditions, this tribal and religious kinship makes the Buryats indispensable

agents of Soviet influence particularly in the neighboring Mongolia...” (Russian State Archive of Social and Political History, f. 372, op. 1, ed. khr. 127, l. 2ob).

- 9 From the pragmatic perspective these ideas also strongly appealed to the Buryat “national democrats” who, according to Robert Rupen, were nationalists, Pan-Mongolists and agents of Russian influence in Mongolia and beyond (Rupen 1956, p. 385). Using the Bolshevik ideology as a vehicle of Europeanization they simultaneously pursued their own agenda of eventually unifying all Mongols in a single state, even at the price of being under the Soviet protection. Promoting Bolshevik policies among the Mongols they, as Rupen puts it, “tried to extract favorable treatment for the Buryats in return for their services in Outer Mongolia” (Rupen 1956, p. 388). Their Pan-Mongolism extended well beyond the borders of the Mongolian world in a form of Pan-Buddhism, which added Tibet to the Mongolian areas to be brought under unified control. This was consonant with Erbanov’s and Amagaev’s prospects which highlighted “a great role the Buryats can play now, when under certain conditions Tibet may become a sector of political struggle between English imperialism, stubbornly pressing into it from India, and the RSFSR” (Russian State Archive of Social and Political History, f. 372, op. 1, ed. khr. 127, l. 3 ob).
- 10 In such a way, the Buryat-Mongols and their newborn autonomous republic were viewed by all stakeholders as the means of spreading Communist ideology, Soviet foreign policy and Bolshevik-style Europeanization into the Mongolian areas of Inner and Central Asia. This role was essentially geopolitical, though at that period the term “geopolitics” never appeared in the Bolshevik lexicon. Instead, the Bolsheviks used euphemisms like “the best influence” and “special role” stressing the ability of the Buryat political activists and intellectuals to stir up and “awaken” the Mongolian world, and arrange its rapprochement with the USSR.
- 11 At the same time a group of Soviet officials and scholars in the neighboring regions seriously explored possibilities to create a Lena-Baikal mega-region based on economic zoning. It would include the Buryat-Mongolian ASSR, Irkutsk and Zabaikalskaya provinces. If this idea prevailed, the Buryat national autonomy would irretrievably be lost to amalgamation into a larger administrative-territorial entity.
- 12 At this moment geopolitics once again intervened in favor of Buryat-Mongolia. Influential Soviet officials voiced their concern about its future. For instance, Georgyi Chicherin, the Soviet Union’s People’s Commissar of Foreign Affairs wrote to Joseph Stalin on 25 June 1925, “...the creation of the Buryat-Mongolian statehood within the autonomous Soviet republic had, first of all, a goal of the best influence of the USSR on the peoples of the Far East, their awakening and rapprochement with the USSR in a struggle against foreign imperialism.”(Elaev 2000, p. 186)
- 13 Therefore, the geopolitical position of Buryat-Mongolia towards Mongolia and the “Buddhist Orient” was well understood and backed in Moscow. This circumstance helped to save the national autonomy in the critical period of 1924-1925 (Plekhanova 2010, pp. 147-148). At the same time this threat to Buryat-Mongolian statehood forced local officials to urgently seek additional support in a form of inclusion into a centrally organized scientific study program.
- 14 In the mid-1920s in the Soviet Union there was a rapid growth of scientific interest to Outer Mongolia. Under strong Soviet influence Mongolia chose a socialist way of development in 1924. A certain vacuum of influence that appeared in Mongolia while Russia was in a state of revolution and civil war was partially filled by dangerous

competitors, such as China, Japan and the USA. In 1922 the American Museum of Natural History transferred to Mongolia its Central Asiatic expedition headed by Roy Chapman Andrews. In response, in 1923 the USSR organized its own Mongolian-Uryankhai geological expedition headed by I. P. Rachkovskii in Western Mongolia. Also there was the Mongolian expedition under P. K. Kozlov financed by the Council of People's Commissars of the USSR, but formally under the auspices of the Russian Geographical Society.

- 15 In spring 1925 the Commission for the Scientific Study of Mongolia attached to the Council of People's Commissars of the USSR was created. Its field of responsibility was centralized organization of scientific expeditions. As Russian historian V. V. Mitin argues, the purpose of these activities was Soviet monopolization of the scientific study of Mongolia. It envisaged not only carrying out of comprehensive research on productive forces and socio-economic conditions of the country, but also removal of competitors by political means (Mitin 2008, p. 35). Not surprisingly, the American Asiatic expedition encountered numerous obstacles put on their way by the Mongolian officials backed by their Soviet counselors (Andrews 1932, pp. 233-234).
- 16 Intensive study of Mongolia and the Mongols by the Soviets was beneficial for both sides. The Mongols received assistance from qualified scientists and obtained important scientific information about their country. They also retained a good share of fieldwork materials and findings of the expeditions. In its turn, the USSR solidified its ideological and political positions in Mongolia exerting strong influence on the key Mongolian institutions, such as education, science, culture and healthcare.
- 17 Here, the most beneficial aspects for Buryat-Mongolia were the ethnocultural affinity with the Mongols and the boundary geographical position of the republic securing its stable role as a model of socialist transformation for the kin country. That is why in the correspondence with the Commission for the Scientific Study of Mongolia and the Academy of Sciences of the USSR the government of Buryat-Mongolia highlighted its geographical position of "a boundary eastern autonomous republic directly bordering on Mongolia sharing with it, besides national kinship and linguistic affinity, many other things in various fields." (State Archive of the Republic of Buryatia, f. R-250, op. 1, d. 11, l. 5) In late 1925 the Commission for the Scientific Study of Mongolia resolved to include the Buryat-Mongolian ASSR and Uryankhai into the field of its activity. Since 1926 the Commission's title changed. It became the Commission for the Scientific Study of the Mongolian and Tannu-Tuvonian People's Republics and Buryat-Mongolian ASSR (Mitin 2002, p. 115). The geopolitical significance of Buryat-Mongolia for Soviet foreign policy objectives in Mongolia used as a bargaining chip played its game.
- 18 However, success of Buryat-Mongolia as the "outpost of socialism in the Buddhist Orient" heavily depended on how quickly the newly founded national autonomy would overcome its own serious problems. If the Buryat-Mongols were to lead other Mongols to socialism, they first had to undergo urgent socio-cultural transformations themselves in order to overcome grave challenges of underdevelopment. Speaking about the role of the Buryat-Mongols as agents of Soviet-style modernization one should bear in mind that in the Bolshevik terminology of the day the Buryat-Mongols en masse were defined as "unenlightened people." Thorough work and a cultural revolution were required to turn them into a new, truly Soviet generation capable of building socialism in Russia and beyond. It was this necessity that sparked active campaigns to overcome social and epidemic diseases, teach personal and communal hygiene, develop physique of the nomads through balanced nutrition, hygienic practices and sports, and fight social ills

like alcoholism, early sex life and promiscuity in the first few years of Buryat-Mongolia's existence.

- 19 This ambitious aim was nothing short of creating a new harmonious human being free of debilitating diseases and degenerative traits; robust and capable of productive labor; uniform and steadfast in the political affiliation. A new socialist Buryat-Mongol would then become a role model for other Mongols, and the Buryat-Mongolian ASSR — a showcase of socialist transformation. In this intention the Bolshevik ideological ends amalgamated with European eugenic theories with certain local variations and peculiarities.

Eugenics in Soviet scientific and medical discourses in the 1920s

- 20 History of eugenics in imperial Russia and the USSR is not an overly researched field. While there is a number of works analyzing the development of eugenics as a science in Soviet Russia, comparing it with the experience of other countries, very few studies scrutinize Soviet eugenics as ideology and even fewer — as social policy (Krementsov 2014, p. 26). As our study is concentrated on how eugenics had underlain political decisions in the field of nationality policy with geopolitical goals in mind, it enters a new layer of *terra incognita* in this rather sparsely studied history.
- 21 In imperial Russia eugenics became topical in the early 20th century when institutionalization of eugenics began in Western Europe and North America. It was warmly received by Russian medics, especially hygienists and public health physicians. Eugenics was also popular among experimental biologists and geneticists (Krementsov 2014, p. 29). Some scholars, like E. Shepilevskii, advocated European (in his case, German) approaches to eugenics (Felder 2014, pp. 44-47). Others liberally mixed German *Rassenhygiene* and French *puériculture*, British and American *eugenics* with French *anthropologie sociale*, German *Sozialpathologie* and French *eugénétique*; in a similar way to zootechnics they proposed anthropotechnics (Krementsov 2014, p. 27).
- 22 Despite many borrowings, most Russian proponents of eugenics were unanimous in criticizing racial and class components of German racial hygiene and British-American eugenics. Instead, they accentuated the importance of social environment, education and upbringing. Russian theorists renounced such measures of negative eugenics as segregation and sterilization of the “unfit” popular in Germany, Scandinavia, and the USA. As an alternative they proposed improvement of social conditions, reformation and preventive medicine (Krementsov 2014, p. 27-28). This trend continued after the Bolsheviks seized power in October 1917.
- 23 In Soviet Russia eugenics became institutionalized thanks to several factors. One of them was active promotion of eugenics by the founders of Russian genetics Nikolai Kol'tsov and Yuri Filipchenko, who established the Russian Eugenics Society (Moscow, 1920) and the Bureau of Eugenics (Petrograd, 1921). These eugenic institutions had powerful backing in the People's Commissariat of Public Health and the Academy of Sciences respectively.
- 24 Another factor was the general consonance of the eugenic agenda with the objectives of state medicine: prophylaxis, social hygiene, social medicine, and mother and child welfare. In his efforts to institutionalize eugenics in Soviet Russia, Nikolai Kol'tsov first found support and shelter in the State Museum of Social Hygiene of the People's

Commissariat of Public Health. Many Bolshevik social hygienists, including the people's commissar of public health N. A. Semashko, sympathized with eugenists (Krementsov 2014, p. 30, 35 ; Graham 1977, p. 1149). In his turn, Yuri Filipchenko found support for his bureau at the Natural Productive Forces Research Commission (KEPS) of the Academy of Sciences in Petrograd. In the context of this paper these two affiliations are pivotal, since the problem of health improvement of national minorities belonged to the sphere of social medicine and social hygiene, and the scientific research on the Buryat-Mongols and Mongols was planned and directed by the Academy of Sciences of the USSR with the study of productive forces in mind.

- 25 Finally, there was a pragmatic interest of the Soviet leadership to the complex issues of social engineering and enhancement of the human stock. As Loren Graham argues, "To the extent that eugenics was understood, it was thought to be the science for the collective improvement of mankind, and as such it was an activity that the young Soviet government automatically found interesting" (Graham 1977, p. 1150).
- 26 Obviously the Bolsheviks were not original in their attempts to create a "new man." However, in their drive towards this goal they went farther than anyone else. As Y. Marchenko argues, the original idea was a Christian ideal of transforming the "Old Adam" into a "New Adam." Each new epoch in history posed the problem of the creation of a "new man" according to own its ideals and interests. The "new man" in the Bolshevik interpretation was to be a "creative dreamer" driven by the mission of spreading communism worldwide. In the first place, the new man was envisaged as a revolutionary : active, fit, knowledgeable, ascetic in everyday life, internationalist by nature, eager to cognize God by science and surpass him in managing the earth (Marchenko 2008, pp. 79-80).
- 27 In their pragmatic vision of the socialist new man the Bolsheviks combined several postulates of eugenics and social hygiene. Physical perfectness and force played a central role in the philosophy of eugenics. In this context, a physically healthy man was synonymous to a physically perfect man (Shul'ga 2014, p. 32). In Russia, where public health was always a big concern and where eugenists were preoccupied with problems of degeneration and extinction, attainment of this ideal, undoubtedly, was an inseparable part of the ultimate goal – the creation of a new socialist man.
- 28 Inasmuch as the Bolshevik scholars sympathized with Lamarckism, they prioritized goals of social hygiene and criticized "narrow" bourgeois understanding of eugenics as "biological improvement of the human stock by selection of procreators." For example, G. A. Batkis, a well-known Soviet hygienist and active member of Communist scientific societies, castigated "bourgeois" eugenics for exaggerating "selection of procreators" and underestimating "measures to protect progeny from hereditary venereal diseases ... alcoholism, tuberculosis," in which he saw the principal goal of social hygiene. Batkis advocated for "broad understanding of socialist eugenics," which, in his view, was similar to social hygiene (Krementsov 2014, p. 38).
- 29 A similar approach to eugenics was manifested in Soviet gynecology and mother and child welfare. Professor N. M. Kakushkin of Saratov University stated that "all issues of breastfeeding, infant hygiene, pre-school and school upbringing, marriage and sex hygiene, questions of fighting STDs and prostitution" should be within the sphere of competence of a "gynecologist-eugenist" (Krementsov 2014, pp. 34-35). In an article published in the "Irkutsk Medical Journal" Soviet gynecologist M. P. Bushmakina acknowledged that the goals of eugenics and health improvement were essentially the

same. In her view, following from the goals of eugenics most gynecological issues of the day could be narrowed down to the study of female body type and social gynecology. Social gynecology was aimed at studying impacts of everyday life and labor conditions on female organism and concentrated on prophylaxis of venereal diseases and cancer, struggle against abortion and prevention of professional diseases (Bushmakina 1927, pp. 3-9).

- 30 If we superimpose these views on the action taken by the Soviet government to improve the health of the Buryat-Mongols, we will see that the Bolshevik complex of measures constituted a policy to radically change health parameters, physique and social environment in an effort to create a new “socialist national minority” that would possess superior physical characteristics, fertility and labor productivity. In essence, these objectives expose a good deal of eugenic thinking. Below, a few examples to illustrate this assumption will be provided.

Eugenic implications of anthropological and medical research on the Buryat-Mongols

- 31 A letter of the chairman of the State Planning Committee of BMASSR (Gosplan BMASSR) to the Academy of Sciences of the USSR on 26 December 1925 reads, “In the field of human science we face an issue of colossal importance, the so-called extinction of the aboriginals, as it happens, Buryat-Mongols. Incomplete and imperfect studies show only a 3 % population growth of the latter, while the Russian population supposedly grew by 10 %” (State Archive of the Republic of Buryatia, f. R-250, op. 1, d. 11, l. 10).
- 32 The letter also stated that since P. S. Pallas and J. G. Georgi no serious studies of the human potential had been carried out in the region. Such important aspects as physique of the local population, capacity for work and predisposition to diseases or this or that kind of labor remained completely unstudied, as were regional demographic processes. The letter accentuated the fact that the development of Buryat-Mongolia’s human potential was impossible without relevant scientific studies of its population.
- 33 The term “extinction of the aboriginals” was highlighted in the original document. Actually, as was mentioned before, degeneration and extinction traditionally were issues of great concern for the Russian eugenically minded physicians and biologists (Felder 2012, pp. 54-55), as well as social philosophers and political writers, such as the Siberian “oblastniki” (Yadrintsev 1892, pp. 99-102). Also the threat of extinction from hereditary syphilis and other venereal diseases often appeared in the reports of the Buryat-Mongolian People’s Commissariat of Public Health to central authorities in Moscow (State Archive of the Republic of Buryatia, f. R-665, op. 1b, d. 1, 150-153). There definitely was a continuity of approach between these views. The main link was human heredity undermined by a debilitating disease. The objective to save and improve it through a complex of calculated medical, socioeconomic and cultural measures reveals a clearly eugenic agenda. In the context of the new nationality policy, the opposite outcome would be the most unwelcome scenario given the geopolitical role the Bolsheviks assigned the Buryat-Mongols.
- 34 Thus, urgent measures to curb the spread of social diseases were the first on the “new man” creation agenda. The archival statistical data presents the situation as rather troublesome. Tuberculosis was widespread among the Buryat-Mongols in the western

districts of the republic, while eastern districts massively suffered from syphilis. According to various sources, from 42 % to 61 % of Buryat population of the republic was infected (Bashkuev 2012, p. 175). In some places the number of syphilis cases among Buryat-Mongols exceeded that among Russians by 38 times. In addition to syphilis, many Buryat-Mongols suffered from gonorrhoea and trachoma. Taking into account a large number of untreated cases of syphilis and gonorrhoea, numerous cases of hereditary syphilis and frequent miscarriages caused by venereal diseases against the background of very low birth rates among the Buryat-Mongolia (17.6 per 1000 among the Buryat-Mongolia versus 45.5 per 1000 among the Russians in 1924) (State Archive of the Republic of Buryatia, f. R-661, op. 1b, d. 1, l. 153, 153 ob, 154) serious medical study had to be immediately undertaken to find out the causes of these problems and develop relevant solutions.

- 35 Priority of medical problems explained the urgency with which Buryat-Mongolia's People's Commissariat of Public Health developed and submitted to the Gosplan a tentative agenda of planned field work under the auspices of the Commission. The necessity to find out causes of low birth rate among the Buryats was clearly prioritized. Next important issue was the study of infant mortality and its causes. Study of endemic and social diseases formed another important block in the tentative research agenda. Finally, studies of climatic peculiarities of the region as well as geological and balneal properties of local mineral springs were planned (State Archive of the Republic of Buryatia, f. R-250, op. 1, d. 11, l. 21).
- 36 The research plan of the Academy of Sciences for the year 1927 envisaged a comprehensive study of population of the Aginskii district, the easternmost region of the Buryat-Mongolian republic. The plan included racial, medical, sanitary and ethnological studies to be carried out by three scientific detachments. The medical-anthropological detachment was assigned a task to specify the tribal composition of the population (Buryats, Mongols, Khamnigans, and Russian Cossacks) and its distribution in the territory of the district. Other tasks included studying of body type and racial characteristics of the population, morphological peculiarities of the human organism under the influence of natural environment, issues connected with miscegenation of Buryat-Mongols and Evenks as well as Buryat-Mongols and Russians, problems of maternity and infancy, hygiene and nutrition. The ethnological and historical detachments aimed at studying of traditional economy types, patterns of land use and archeological sites in the Onon valley (*Ibid*, l 101).
- 37 Apart from the Commission's research plan the Commissariats of Public Health of RSFSR and BMASSR sent a number of "venereal disease detachments" or mobile groups of venereologists to examine and the population and cure venereal diseases. They also carried out scientific research and gathered statistical data on the spread of STDs among the Buryat-Mongols, Russians and other ethnic groups in the republic. Besides pure medical data these detachments produced extremely interesting anthropological and ethnographic observations. Their ideas about everyday life of Buryat-Mongols (and later Mongols) allow deconstructing the civilizing discourse of the Soviet physicians and singling out numerous patterns, from social paternalistic to eugenic and racial, that characterized the Soviet scientific approach, deceptively uniform in ideology, as a complex and multi-faceted phenomenon.
- 38 Some patterns of nomadic lifestyle seemed specifically shocking to the eyes of the Soviet physicians whose educational background was thoroughly European by nature. This

especially concerned personal and communal hygiene and sex habits. Dr. D. A. Lapshev, head of the venereal disease detachment working in Buryat-Mongolia in 1924-1925 wrote in one of his articles, "Baths are absolutely nonexistent here and a Buryat totally repudiates bathing. There is no soap here...and almost the entire population of the settlement would flow together staring and gaping at our morning wash-ups as if it was something never seen before." (Lapshev 1929, pp. 546-547)

- 39 Out of 155 Buryat families examined by Lapshev's venereal detachment in the Aginskii district only 49 families were not afflicted by syphilis. About one half of the exposed syphilitics (42.5 %) were in the age group between 20 and 40 years old, or in the most fertile and productive age. Thirty seven and a half per cent of children of Buryat-Mongols in Aginskii district died before they were one year old and 50.6 % died before 12. Lapshev thought that syphilis and its consequences caused most of those deaths. This view was shared by other venereologists working in other districts of Buryat-Mongolia. Drs. I. G. Zaks and S. T. Il'in who worked in the venereal detachment in Khorinskii district in 1926 noted the role of syphilis in high infant mortality and degeneration of hereditary syphilitics (Zaks & Il'in 1927, p. 874).
- 40 Sex life of the Buryat-Mongols was another object of interest for the Soviet physicians. They characterized it as casual and noted its early start. For instance, Dr. A. M. Pesterev worked in Khorinskii and Eravninskii districts in 1925-1927 and noted that 55.7 % of examined men and 78.7 % of examined women began their sex life at the age of 14-16. He noted that in Buryat-Mongolian families, where a child was considered the reason of existence and infertility was viewed as a curse, in the conditions of high infant mortality both husband and wife had recourse to adultery with a view to have children. In his article he wrote, "The task of social venereology in the course of building up of the curative and preventive measures should be the urgent sanitation of the sex life and family life in general in order to paralyze infections like syphilis and gonorrhoea, whose further spread may lead to the extinction of the Buryat nationality. The ethnic perspectives of the Buryat nationality greatly depend on how early and intensively the fight against the old life and sexual habits will start." (Pesterev 1930, p. 98)
- 41 The joint Soviet-German research on syphilis in Buryat-Mongolia forms an extremely important aspect of the scientific study of the Buryat-Mongols in the 1920s and a significant stage in the Bolshevik campaign to eradicate social diseases in national minorities. In sufficient detail it is described in several publications in English and Russian, but in the context of this paper a few details should be mentioned.
- 42 The first joint Soviet-German reconnaissance team including Volf Bronner, Alfred Stümer and Karl Wilmanns arrived in Buryat-Mongolia in summer of 1926. It confirmed that the region was a highly promising destination for a larger expedition because large numbers of Buryat-Mongols were afflicted by syphilis. The second, best known, expedition arrived in summer of 1928. It comprised a well-trained team of German and Soviet doctors, including venereologists, dermatologists, X-ray specialists, nurses, engineers and anthropologists. The three-month work of the expedition revealed the most characteristic patterns of disease and suggested ways of eradicating it. It was an extremely important stage of health improvement of the Buryat-Mongols and a convincing example of successful international cooperation between ideologically heterogeneous scholars. In the wake of the Soviet-German syphilis expedition of 1928 new expeditions to study gonorrhoea, tuberculosis, trachoma, blood groups, racial

anthropology of the Buryat-Mongols and physique of Buryat children were dispatched to this region in 1929-1931. This time they were fully staffed by Soviet specialists.

- 43 The 1928 Soviet-German syphilis expedition was unique because it raised new questions about syphilis in Buryat-Mongolia. The Soviets searched for the sources of syphilis infection and after this expedition they concentrated more on sexual ways of transmission and the role of Buryat sexual behavior in the spread of the disease. In the 1928 article in "Pravda" Volf Bronner described the expedition as "a scientific venture to examine syphilis as a factor of degeneration of culturally backward peoples." (Solomon 1993, p. 228) The expedition provided excellent environment for the transfer of medical and scientific experience, from utilizing disposable medical instruments, X-raying and performing lumbar punctures to studies in bacteriology and anthropological research. At the same time it revealed stark differences in the research agendas of the German and Soviet teams. As Susan Solomon argues, while the Germans viewed the Buryat-Mongols as a population to be studied, the Soviets perceived them as a subject of concern (*Ibid.*, p. 231).
- 44 Views of the Soviet physicians reflected their deep concern about the future of the Buryat-Mongols and proposed measures which, despite being referred to as "social venereology", were to a high degree consonant with Western eugenic ideas of that period. Eugenists in Europe and America believed that hereditary diseases, such as syphilis, were degenerative factors and called for their eradication. In Soviet Russia the causes of such diseases were sought primarily in social conditions. However this did not affect considering their mid- and long-term effects through the prism of heredity and eugenics. Medical research on the Buryat-Mongols defined the most troublesome areas and centered health improvement measures on politics of the body (e.g. entrenchment of personal and communal hygiene and transformation of sex habits), pro-natalist and child-care policies and simple, but efficient ideological mobilizing frames portraying social diseases as the legacy of Tsarism. These elements suggest that in its essence the campaign against social diseases, such as the one carried out in Buryat-Mongolia, was an element of a Soviet eugenic program devised for rapid social transformation and physical enhancement of a geopolitically important national minority.
- 45 Research on blood groups of the Buryat-Mongols in the Aginskii district was conducted in 1927 by Dr. V. I. Zhinkin, Deputy People's Commissar of Public Health of Buryat-Mongolia. Studies of the isohemoagglutination properties of blood and the Hirszfeld racial-biochemical index of the Buryat-Mongols were aimed at learning more about their racial and biological characteristics. Soviet medics specifically chose the easternmost Aginskii district as the local Buryat-Mongols were considered the purest blood of the nation devoid of any miscegenation. In their studies, the Soviet scientists sought to explain the prevalence of social diseases among the Buryat-Mongols by looking for racial-biochemical proofs of any specific susceptibility to such infections. They carried out blood tests on 320 patients with tertiary syphilis filling a gap in the scientific works of that period. Even though the results displayed basically the same blood group distribution as with healthy Buryat-Mongols, Dr. V. I. Zhinkin raised a question whether a low racial-biochemical index of Buryat-Mongols was a factor of their high susceptibility to syphilis (Zhinkin 1927, pp. 4-8).
- 46 Racial anthropology was another issue on the agenda of the scientific study of the Buryat-Mongols. In the collections of the Peter the Great Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography in St. Petersburg there is a unique collection of photographic materials of

the 1931 Buryat-Mongolian anthropological expedition. It was headed by the research fellow of the Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR G. I. Petrov and worked in the village of Polkanovo in Troitskosavskii district in July-August 1931. Polkanovo was one of the largest settlements populated by the Buryat-Russian half-breeds whose history counted over two centuries of mixed marriages (Khartanovich 2011, pp. 86-87). One of the tasks of the 1931 anthropological expedition was to refute the theory about gradual degeneration of people as a result of miscegenation. In the opinion of G. I. Petrov the half-breeds were “both stronger and more beautiful than their ancestors and are characterized by enviable fertility.” (*Ibid.*, p. 91) The government of the Buryat-Mongolian ASSR intended to study the productive forces of the population for the use in industry. In this particular case, the enterprise in question was Chikoi tannery.

- 47 In this way, the agenda of scientific and medical research on the Buryat-Mongols reveals a eugenic rationale consonant with the European eugenic ideas of that period. At the same time there were important differences. In Sweden, Germany and some other European states eugenics grew out of state anthropological museums, where, as Paul Weindling puts it, “anthropological surveys shifted to such biological markers as blood group and marked a preliminary of coercive sterilization, and in the German case the sifting of populations for their racial value for a Greater Germany” (Weindling 2013, p. 36). This was a state interventionist approach, whereas in the USSR the eugenic agenda rather came from below, being voiced up by professionals in medicine and relevant sciences. Contrary to Central European, German, Scandinavian and American experience, these experts in various human sciences used the consonance of eugenics and Bolshevik ideological goals as regards the improvement of the human stock to influence at least some government policies toward national minorities. Also many of them were genuinely concerned about the future of Soviet indigenous peoples.

Conclusions

- 48 A short review of examples of medical and anthropological research on the Buryat-Mongols presented here suggests several conclusions. First, in the necessity of scientific study of the Buryat-Mongols the geopolitical agenda was rather strong. It was due to Buryat-Mongolia’s unique geographical position towards Outer Mongolia as well as linguistic and cultural affinity to the Mongols. Buryat-Mongolia performed an important geopolitical function of transmitting into Mongol-inhabited and Buddhist regions of East and Inner Asia a positive image of socialist transformations in an ethnically and culturally kindred ethnos. On the one hand understanding of this gave Buryat-Mongolia influential lobbyists, such as Georgy Chicherin or Volf Bronner. On the other hand, it suggested multiple ways in which beneficial geopolitical position could be used to secure state financial support, steady scientific interest and, for the time being, a degree of immunity from territorial revisions. All this came to an end in September 1937 when the republic was divided into three parts. However, that happened in the darkest period of Stalinism when the humanistic agenda of the 1920s was at best forgotten, at worst castigated and destroyed together with its proponents.
- 49 In the medical, hygienic and biological agendas of the 1920s eugenic implications are also easily traceable. During that period eugenics, not yet compromised by National-Socialism, was a highly respected discipline throughout the world. Some countries went so far as to

introduce eugenic policies through legislature, including such notorious things as forced sterilization or introduction of eugenic passports. Contrastingly, the Soviets continued the pre-revolutionary tradition of criticizing racial and social-Darwinist approaches and denounced negative eugenics based on segregation and sterilization as a way to improve the human stock. Instead, as the central measure they advocated amelioration of social and cultural environment. The Bolsheviks strongly sympathized with positive eugenics based on the development of talents and strong traits in humans. Therefore socially induced gradual improvement of people remained their first priority. It was fully consistent with their ideal of creating a new socialist man through ideological indoctrination, cultural revolution and Bolshevik-style social modernization.

- 50 Merely implicit in the state policy, eugenics in the USSR had enough proponents among professionals in medicine, social hygiene, biology, and social sciences. From below, via such experts eugenics manifested itself in social medicine, venereology, social hygiene and many other aspects of applied human sciences. Quite often these enthusiasts managed to secure powerful allies. When organizers of science and healthcare sympathized with eugenic ideas, eugenics was gradually entwined into actual policies, such as eradication of social diseases in Buryat-Mongolia.
- 51 In their curious Soviet form eugenic ideas were also exported to such neighboring countries as Mongolia, where experiments with socialist modernization were started about a decade later than in the USSR. The Buryat-Mongols played several roles in these processes. They acted as a geopolitically important national minority whose successful socialist transformation was to send explicit signals to kin Mongolian nations to move toward socialism. At the same time the Buryat-Mongols were objects of scientific study. They provided invaluable scientific data on specific health problems of “unenlightened” nomads in a very distinctive natural, social and cultural environment. What is specifically important, working to solve health problems of the Buryat-Mongols, the Soviets accumulated hands-on experience, developed and tested various medical and social techniques and methods to be used later in the Mongolian People’s Republic and in the sphere of Soviet geopolitical interests in Inner and Central Asia.

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ABSTRACTS

This article unveils the geopolitical and eugenic contexts of medical and anthropological research on the Buryats, whose deteriorating health became a matter of serious concern in the early 1920s, when the Buryat national autonomy was created within the RSFSR.

Cet article dévoile les contextes géopolitiques et eugéniques de la recherche médicale et anthropologique sur les Bouriates, dont l'état de santé s'est détérioré au point de devenir un sujet de grave préoccupation au début des années 1920, lorsque l'autonomie nationale bouriate fut créée au sein de la RSFSR.

INDEX

Keywords: Buryat, Mongols, Mongolia, geopolitics, eugenics, medical research, syphilis, social modernization

Mots-clés: Bouriatie, Bouriates, Mongols, Mongolie, géopolitique, eugénisme, recherche médicale, syphilis, modernisation sociale

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