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8-1-2006

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The Khampa Uprising:  
Tibetan Resistance against the Chinese Invasion

Yuliya Babayeva

History 499

Dr. Reagin

May 8, 2006

*To impose revolution on a functioning society is like burying a man alive. In such a case one man's conception of revolution inevitably becomes another man's destruction. --Dawa Norbu*

Dawa Norbu's remark is the perfect way of explaining the revolution that occurred in Tibet in the 1950s. It is the objective of this paper to recount the particulars of an event sparsely written about and not widely-known: The Khampa uprising in Tibet. The following is a study of the mobilization of a lower class peasant and farmer population into a tactical guerilla army, which stood up to a much more powerful nation without reservation, due to their fervent religious beliefs and intense sense of nationalism. This study also aims to identify the historical and political claims both China and Tibet presented to the region in question, as well as the foreign nations' reactions to the struggle that ensued from this heated debate.

Tibet is the land of religious devotion to Buddhism, the theocratic and spiritual leader, the Dalai Lama, and of the extreme climate and beauty of the Himalayas. However, Tibet is most well known worldwide for its decades' long struggle against its oppression by the Peoples Republic of China. If it were not for the plight of the Dalai Lama and the fight of the Tibetan people to take back their homeland's autonomy from China, it is likely the West would never acknowledge Tibet's existence.

However, very few Westerners realize that the Tibetan struggle for independence did not initiate in the capital city of Lhasa, nor was the Dalai Lama, or any of the Tibetan elite, eager to begin a national resistance. In fact, it was the guerilla

fighters from the isolated, densely populated, eastern regions of Tibet called Kham and Amdo who stood up for their homeland. Due to the proximity of their region to the Chinese border these peaceful farmers, traders, and even monks bore the brunt of the incoming Chinese People's Liberation Army during the 1950s, when Beijing sought to incorporate Tibetan territory into China proper. It was only natural that these men were the first to fight back. Eventually the movement became very well organized and the guerillas' ranks increased to tens of thousands. Ultimately China managed to politically and militarily conquer Tibet; but the Chinese goals were not reached fully since to this day resistance remains within Tibet, and the Tibetan diaspora throughout the world, due to the legacy of the brave struggle of the Tibetan freedom fighters five decades ago.

Before discussing the territorial and historical claims of either Tibetans or Chinese over Tibet during the 1950s, it is imperative to recognize that the struggle for territorial control had only been matched in intensity by the struggle to control the very representations of history.<sup>1</sup> The Tibetans and the Chinese provide varying stories regarding the independence, or lack thereof, of Tibet over its centuries long history. The main question here is which side is to be believed. The truth can be found by analyzing historical data.

According to an Asian historian, Melvyn Goldstein, political contact between Tibet and China was established in the seventh century A.D. when Tibet was unified under the rule of King Songtsen Gampo, whose strong dynasty managed to expand

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<sup>1</sup> Melvyn C. Goldstein, The Snow Lion and the Dragon: China, Tibet, and the Dalai Lama (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), ix-x.

Tibetan borders over the course of two centuries. Much of these northern and eastern territories conquered by Tibet were kingdoms subordinate to the Tang Dynasty (618-907 A.D.), and thus China was well aware of the emergence of this new dominant kingdom. Gampo married a Chinese princess and as a result a tributary relationship was established between powerful Tang China and the emerging Tibetan kingdom on the frontier. This alliance was formed because the Chinese were aware of the strategic importance of the location of Tibet at its frontier. At that point Tibet developed its own form of sophisticated language and adopted Buddhism as the official religion. “Tibet was in no way subordinate to China during the imperial era,” Goldstein comments, “[E]ach was a distinct and independent political entity.”<sup>2</sup> However, internal conflict of different religious sects during the ninth century in Tibet brought an end to its unity and autonomy and several principalities emerged. At the same time China’s Tang dynasty collapsed and, like Tibet, the country was divided and fragmented. For three centuries there were no political relations of any kind between Tibet and China, as Tibet was barely mentioned in Chinese historical records of the time.<sup>3</sup>

In the thirteenth century a new power swept through East Asia, the Mongols. In 1207 Tibet cooperated with the Mongols, and submitted to Genghis Khan without bloodshed. The contemporary Chinese considered this to be the period during which Tibet first became part of China, while Tibetans “by contrast, accepted only that they, like China, were subjugated by the Mongols and incorporated into a Mongol empire

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<sup>2</sup> Goldstein, Snow Lion, 1-2.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

centered in China.”<sup>4</sup> In fact, an interesting ideological relationship formed between the Mongols and Tibetans. The relationship was called “priest-patron” (in Tibetan *mchod yon*) and it almost equated the Tibetan lama (priest) and the Mongol khan (emperor) due to each one’s position within the religious and political hierarchy respectively. The Tibetan lama provided religious instruction, performed ceremonial rites, and bestowed titles upon the khan, such as “religious king” and “protector of religion.”<sup>5</sup> This placed the khan in the position of the student, or subordinate, while the lama was the teacher, therefore occupying a more dominant religious position. In terms of government, the khan occupied a dominant position mainly due to the protection he offered from external and internal conflicts. The Tibetans hence believed there was a balance of power as well as an ideological relationship between the two cultures, instead of hostile takeover. Also, the Mongol khan reserved the right to appoint regents from an array of Tibetan elite, understanding that Tibetans more readily obeyed their own leaders, even if said leaders had Mongol interests in mind.<sup>6</sup> Later, the Chinese used a similar strategy when they wished to occupy Tibet.

After this period, Chinese control over Tibet varied according to the status of inner stability of China. The Ming emperors (1368-1644), for example exerted no political authority over Tibet, simply sending representatives of the Ming government to the capital city of Lhasa. As the Ming was losing power and was eventually overthrown by the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911), China reestablished its jurisdiction in Tibet. In the early 1700s China conquered some Tibetan territories, mainly eastern

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 4-5.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

borderlands which were previously a part of Kham and Amdo. Large parts of Tibetan land were placed under Chinese jurisdiction due to revolts against the Qing rule.<sup>7</sup> Evidently, as history suggests, the eastern regions of Kham and Amdo were a source of rebellion and thus the Chinese Sichuan, Yunan, and Xining provinces incorporated previously Tibetan territories. The Qing Empire also sent troops to instill law and order in the disorganized country. For the most part, this action was successful, and Tibet was internally peaceful for some time. Accordingly, this set a precedent of the Chinese intervention into Tibetan affairs.

With the fall of the Qing Dynasty in 1911, and the Republican Revolution which brought about the dynastic decline, the Thirteenth Dalai Lama was looking forward to the return of his power as a “temporal and ecclesiastic rule[r].”<sup>8</sup> However this was not granted by the newly established government; instead the Dalai Lama was reinstated as “Loyal and Submissive Vice-Regent,” a title given to him towards the end of the Qing Dynasty, but with the addition of the title of the “Great Good and Self-Existent Buddha... [who would] support...and help the Republic.”<sup>9</sup> The Dalai Lama officially rejected this title, and by doing this unofficially declared Tibetan independence.

For the following forty years China was politically unstable and there was little change in the Tibetan question. Both World Wars as well as China’s Civil War diverted attention away from Tibet. However, the founding of the People’s Republic

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 14-22.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>9</sup> Eric Teichman, Travels of a Consular Officer in Eastern Tibet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1922), 18, as quoted in Goldstein, Snow Lion, 31.

of China in the 1949 and the government that was established as a result meant a much more dominating regime, armed with the notion of saving or “liberating” Tibet, as well as the goal of a united China.<sup>10</sup> At least such was the pretext of the Chinese Liberation Army’s invasion of Tibet. The Chinese claim to suzerainty over Tibet throughout the centuries became a secondary argument at this point. China had other reasons to reestablish itself in Tibet.

One of the reasons was that the Chinese believed they were doing Tibet a favor, because the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) was aiming to introduce modernization into a country held back by a traditional way of life. It all started in the early twentieth century when Great Britain showed interest in Tibet due to the proximity of its borders with British Colonial India. Seeing the disparity between Tibet and China (which was then already a substantial trading partner for Great Britain) the British wished to serve as a mediator. In 1914 representatives of Tibet, China and Great Britain met in Simla, India in order to come to an agreement regarding the status of Tibet. Alas, no agreement was reached as Tibet and China quarreled over where borders should be drawn between the two countries.<sup>11</sup> Although nothing politically useful came of the Simla Convention, Great Britain attempted to persuade Tibet to take first steps toward modernization (i.e. building an army, organizing a postal service, establishing English schools, etc.) however the Tibetan elite were reluctant to accept this innovation. The monastic elite saw this modernization as a threat to the unique religious way of life, and the aristocratic elite

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<sup>10</sup> Tsering Shakya, *The Dragon in the Land of Snows: A History of Modern Tibet Since 1947*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 6-8.

<sup>11</sup> A. Tom Grunfeld, *The Making of Modern Tibet* (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, Inc., 1996), 64-69.



did not wish to pay high taxes. Consequently, conservatives appealed to the Dalai Lama that Buddhism and the fundamental way of life, not technology, was at the core of Tibet's strength against China. In the 1920's the Dalai Lama demoted all officials in charge of reform and closed the English schools.<sup>12</sup> Goldstein points out that, “[O]vernight Tibet lost its best chance to create a modern polity capable of coordinating international support for its independent status and defending its territory.”<sup>13</sup>

Years later, Communist China saw this lack of modernity as an excellent reason to lay claim to Tibet. According to the CCP, not only was Tibet to be incorporated into China, but it was also in dire need of industrialization and modernity. This nearly inaccessible mountainous region was in desperate need of modern modes of communication and transportation. Also, the very way of life that Tibetans were used to was considered “backward” and unacceptable to the Communist Chinese.<sup>14</sup>

Pre-1950's Tibet was a feudalist state, in a sense it was very similar to medieval Europe. A small elite class of Tibetan nobility, which made up about five percent of the population, controlled most of the wealth and political power. Serfs, who were essentially attached to the land owned by their master and were required to perform labor in return for housing and food, made up nearly sixty percent of the population of Tibet.<sup>15</sup> Essentially slaves, serfs were trapped within a lower stratum of

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<sup>12</sup> Grunfeld, Modern Tibet, 51-57.

<sup>13</sup> Goldstein, Snow Lion, 35.

<sup>14</sup> Grunfeld, Modern Tibet, 8-9.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

a rigid class-based society. The rest of the population consisted of clergy, who made up fifteen percent, and herdsmen (nomads), who made up another twenty percent of the population.<sup>16</sup> Serfs, however, were the main concern for the Chinese Communists, whose main objective was to narrow the gap between the elite and the peasant class within their own society. The Tibetans nevertheless viewed the serfs as a happy and simple people who were content with their place in society. On the one hand, serf labor was seen as a form of slavery, on the other a serf was seen as a part of the family or household. Gompo Tashi Andrugtsang, one of the main leaders of the Tibetan rebellion, commented on this in his memoirs by saying,

Critics of the Tibetan agrarian and social system are apt to overlook some very relevant factors which countered its apparent faults. In spite of differences of status or material possessions, there was no great gulf between the rich and the poor. The landowner was more a patriarchal head of household than an exacting or oppressive master. The universal belief in the principles and teachings of Buddhism encouraged, on the one hand, generosity and desire to improve the lot of the less fortunate and, on the other, the absence of envy or resentment on the part of the poor.<sup>17</sup>

Of course, Andrugtsang himself grew up as a son in a relatively wealthy family, thus his vision of class division could have been slanted. Since serfs themselves left no written records of their affairs, we must assume the truth lies somewhere between the two extremes. Nevertheless, the negative aspect of serfdom was gladly used to the Chinese as a reason for their “liberation” campaigns.

It is important to note that for centuries Tibetan political matters were handled by the elite of Lhasa, including the Dalai Lama himself. Thus, Chinese political

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 14-16.

<sup>17</sup> Gompo Tashi Andrugtsang, Four Rivers, Six Ranges: A True Account of Khampa Resistance to Chinese in Tibet (Dharamsala: Information Office of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, 1973), 30.

influence over Lhasa and the central government there had little effect on the eastern border regions in question; particularly Kham and Amdo. And Tibet was a feudalist state. More importantly however, was its unusual form of theocratic feudal government. Grunfeld explains that Tibetan theocracy was

both *centralized*—in a government in Lhasa headed by...the Dalai Lama—and also *decentralized*, giving local control to the countless monastic and aristocratic estates. The central government maintained a military force, issued currency and postage stamps, negotiated with other governments and acted as a final court of appeal. The heads of the feudal estates maintained monopoly of power over all local matters; the central government normally intervened only when the flow of taxes was disrupted. All officials in Tibet, both lay and ecclesiastic, in Lhasa and on the estates, came from the same small pool of noble families.<sup>18</sup>

Evidently, this type of government allowed for much independence for the local governing bodies, especially in isolated regions like Kham and Amdo. The political decisions of either Lhasa or Beijing barely affected these eastern frontiers. The tribal and monastic networks were the only modes of government there. Land was the only real measure of wealth, and when land possession was threatened the Khampas and Amdowas were quick to fight back. Grunfeld comments on their way of life by saying,

[T]he nomads...living mostly in Kham and Amdo, were divided into rigid social classes in either tribes or principalities led by hereditary chiefs or monastic lords...They are fiercely independent, with a long-established history of rejecting rule from either Beijing or Lhasa. This independence makes them feel superior to the sedentary population, an in return the nomads are held in some awe by other Tibetans.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Grunfeld, *Modern Tibet*, 9.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

This puts the Khampas and Amdowas in a different position than the elite of Lhasa with regards to Chinese political authority and demands. While the Lhasa elite were pushing the Dalai Lama toward collaboration, due to their fear of losing their property and socioeconomic power, the peasants and nomads of the eastern frontier were not afraid to stand up to the Chinese People's Liberation Army, because the basis for their very way of life was being threatened: their land. The Khampas and Amdowas' fearlessness and toughness proved to be a dangerous combination.

In order to really understand the nature of Tibetan people, it is imperative to picture Tibet. Tibetan climate had much to do with the disparity between the residents of Lhasa and those of Kham and Amdo. These differences thus created the inconsistency in the perception of the Chinese claim to Tibet, and negativity of the residents of Tibet towards the incoming Chinese People's Liberation Army. Tibet is mainly a high plateau surrounded by mountains. The capital city of Lhasa is situated within the plateau region where it receives little snow, with temperatures ranging from 10 to 20 C (14-74 F) This was not the case in Kham and Amdo, however, since "Tibetans live between 1,200m (4,000 ft.) and 5,100m (17,000ft.) above sea level"<sup>20</sup>; the higher mountainous regions were much harsher and more extreme. Also, Kham and Amdo regions were directly on the Chinese border and were the first to come in contact with Chinese hostility. Lhasa was weeks behind on the events that occurred on the Tibetan border due to lack of modern communication and the distance between the capital city and eastern Tibet. Nor did the Khampas necessarily wish for the Tibetan authorities to know of the situation. John Knaus, a CIA operations officer in

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<sup>20</sup> Grunfeld, Modern Tibet, 7.

charge of American covert operations in Tibet, speaks from personal experience about the Khampas' feelings towards Lhasa, "[T]hey were fervently devoted to the Dalai Lama, but paid only nominal allegiance to the distant Tibetan political establishment and its lay and clerical aristocrats, whom they generally held in contempt. They were Khampas first and then Tibetans."<sup>21</sup>

Because of the differences between the Lhasa's elites, who had the political control over Tibet for centuries, and the Khampas and Amdowas the reactions to the Chinese invasion differed by region in Tibet. As mentioned previously, the elite had little concern for, or power over, the easternmost regions of Tibet all throughout Tibet's long history. According to Melvyn Goldstein,

[I]t was also the view of the Tibetan Government in 1949, which did not consider the Chinese Communist conquest of... [Amdo and Kham] as an invasion of its territory. As a result, in 1949 it neither sent its troops to defend any of these areas nor issued any protests, appeals or charges that its territory had been invaded.<sup>22</sup>

As mentioned earlier, the elites were simply afraid to lose their status, stability, and established socioeconomic power; accordingly, they pushed the Dalai Lama to cooperate with the Chinese instead of resisting their invasion. Therefore, any rebellious guerilla activity along the eastern borders was never officially supported by Lhasa authorities.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> John Kenneth Knaus, Orphans of the Cold War: America and the Tibetan Struggle for Survival (New York: Public Affairs, 1999), 70.

<sup>22</sup> Melvyn C. Goldstein, "Change Conflict and Continuity among a Community of Nomadic Pastoralists: A Case Study from Western Tibet, 1950-1990," in Resistance and Reform in Tibet, ed. Robert Barnett (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 86.

<sup>23</sup> Kenneth Conboy and James Morrison, The CIA's Secret War in Tibet (Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2002), 20.

Religious feeling was also extraordinarily strong among the people of the eastern region. Due to the distance and detachment between Lhasa and Kham and Amdo, the Dalai Lama himself was viewed more as a religious figurehead, as a god or Buddha rather than a ruler, since his jurisdiction rarely affected the everyday life of the people in this region. Buddhism and the worship of the Dalai Lama was, and still is, imperative to the residents of Kham and Amdo. Andrugtsang wrote in his memoirs,

[R]eligion deeply permeated Tibetan society and a sizable proportion of the population consisted of monks and nuns. The laymen were exceptionally scrupulous about observing the...ritual of prayers and offerings. Great importance was attached to religious studies and monasteries were the main repositories of what was deemed the profoundest scholarship and knowledge. The entire educational system had its basis in religion...<sup>24</sup>

Because religion was such a central part of everyday life, monasteries were everywhere. In addition to providing education and religious worship, monasteries later became a major source of local organization. During the Khampa Uprising monastic networks came to be used by guerilla forces to relay messages, hide rebels and guns, and organize riots.<sup>25</sup> In a way, these networks became just as important as the local tribal networks in the role of organization and mobilization of guerilla troops.

Such were the conditions and earlier history of this region when on October 7, 1950 Chinese forces invaded Tibet. The People's Liberation Army marched into Tibet through Kham and settled there. Interestingly, even though the PLA was

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<sup>24</sup> Andrugtsang, *Four Rivers, Six Ranges*, 20-21.

<sup>25</sup> Knaus, *Orphans of the Cold War*, 86.

extraordinarily more modern than the comparatively small Tibetan Government Army, they were completely unprepared for the cold and thin air of the Himalayas.<sup>26</sup> The PLA was desperately short on food and was forced to rely on the villagers for food and shelter. This caused a major burden for the native Tibetans and thus led to unrest and resentment. Shakya asserts,

[the] unprecedented number of soldiers in the area caused severe shortages of food. The Khampas attacked the exhausted [army], causing them great hardship. Passing into the Tibetan territories, the [soldiers] for the first time faced a populace united in its hostility to them, and their suffering on this part of the trek exceeded anything of the past.<sup>27</sup>

This hostility and small skirmishes did not grow into a full fledged rebellion until the signing, and then the constant violations of, The Seventeen Point Agreement.

All throughout the year of 1950, Tibetan officials attempted to negotiate with the Chinese to end the violence and allow Tibet to retain political rights over its own land and people.\* Tibetans appealed to India for help, later even involving the United Nations. Unfortunately, the United Nations postponed this matter on the pretext that Tibet was officially an “autonomous nationality region belonging to territorial China”<sup>28</sup> and on those grounds could not be considered by the United Nations.

Desperate for a resolution, the Dalai Lama sent a delegation headed by Ngabo Ngawang Jigme, a governor of the Kham region, to Beijing to negotiate an agreement to stop further violence. These discussions turned out to be more of threatening

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<sup>26</sup> Shakya, *Dragon in the Snows*, 32.

<sup>27</sup> Shakya, *Dragon in the Snows*, 33.

\* It is interesting to note here that for a while in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Tibet appealed to its neighboring India and then, on a larger scale, to the United Nations to support its *independence* as a country with full political and economic rights. However, with the increased hostility and the realization that the Chinese forces were too powerful and that China was more politically important to the U.N. than Tibet was, the Tibetans began to talk of *autonomy* instead.

<sup>28</sup> Goldstein, *Snow Lion*, 41.

ultimatum, rather than a negotiation. The Dalai Lama wrote about this troubling time in his autobiography, “[O]ur delegates were not allowed to make any alterations or suggestion. They were insulted and abused and threatened with personal violence, and with further military action against the people of Tibet...”<sup>29</sup> Thus on May 23, 1951 the Seventeen Point Agreement was signed by the delegation, without any approval by the Dalai Lama. The Agreement took away an incredible amount of rights from the people and government of Tibet, placing them instead in the hands of the CCP and the PLA. In essence, the Agreement stipulated that the Dalai Lama would retain his function and powers and the Buddhism was to be protected; however, Tibetan army, education, commerce, agriculture, industry and foreign relations with other countries were put in the hands of the CCP.<sup>30</sup>

Nonetheless, even the little freedom this agreement entailed was not respected in Tibet. The PLA army was stationed in every major city. The CCP made constant demands of change within the simple way of life of the Tibetans. The Chinese attempted to diplomatically persuade the Dalai Lama and the high officials of Lhasa that change was good for their country. A show of friendliness was maintained by the Chinese for several years, while the Dalai Lama attempted to peacefully, and unsuccessfully, renegotiate the Seventeen Point Agreement.<sup>31</sup> At this point Mao Zedong did not want to conquer Tibet, “he wanted China’s claim to Tibet legitimized by

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<sup>29</sup> Tenzin Gyatso, His Holiness the Dalai Lama, *My Land and My People* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1962), 66-67, quoted in Michael Dunham, *Buddha’s Warriors* (New York: Penguin Group, 2004), 103.

<sup>30</sup> Michael Dunham, *Buddha’s Warriors* (New York: Penguin Group, 2004), 102-107.

<sup>31</sup> Andrugtsang, *Four Rivers, Six Ranges*, 32-43.



having the Dalai Lama accept Chinese suzerainty and work with the [People's Republic of China] to gradually reform Tibet's feudal economy."<sup>32</sup>

Mao saw the Dalai Lama as a spiritual leader who would guide Tibetans to gradually accept their place in the "new Multiethnic Communist State."<sup>33</sup> However, this was impossible on the local level, due to the growing resistance to the Chinese occupation. Again, the Khampas emerged as both the first victims and the first to fight back. "Most people in Lhasa were not yet aware of the drastic changes which the Chinese were carrying out with much ruthlessness in eastern Tibet," writes Andrugtsang, "the Chinese begun experimenting with their program of so-called reforms and the 'Liberation' of the countryside, as early as 1953."<sup>34</sup> Andrugtsang further claims that the Chinese collected large sums of money for taxes, that locals were selectively arrested and publicly executed to arouse terror, monasteries were destroyed, and monks were imprisoned or executed without reason.<sup>35</sup> Therefore, Andrugtsang explained, "Tibet was invaded and the Tibetans were forced to resist the Chinese by violence. Despite the awareness that China was a big and powerful nation possessing an awesome armed might, the Tibetans struck back, fired by the patriotic conviction that theirs was a just cause."<sup>36</sup>

The Chinese army was now facing a serious problem. Dunham comments, "[T]he peasantry, the so-called downtrodden masses—the very group who were supposed to naturally embrace communism—were the Tibetans who were now most

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<sup>32</sup> Goldstein, *Snow Lion*, 45.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

<sup>34</sup> Andrugtsang, *Four Rivers, Six Ranges*, 37-38.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

willing to kill Chinese.”<sup>37</sup> In fact, leaders emerged from the ranks of merchants in Kham and Amdo, who were willing to spend their own wealth to arm the village people who were ready to stand up to the PLA. Norbu points out that out of twenty three leaders of the Khampas, a majority were merchants who made money after the “liberation.” However, “instead of making more money or running away to India safely with their silver fortunes, the Kham[pas] spent the Chinese money for the purchase of arms and ammunition for the revolt.”<sup>38</sup>

One of these unlikely leaders was a Gompo Tashi Andrugtsang, a man who, despite his acquired wealth and status, could not watch as his homeland was torn apart and the very way of life of his ancestors was being destroyed. A need for organized resistance was becoming vital to the Khampas. In December 1956, Andrugtsang decided that the various nationalist elements in Kham needed to be united as to form a stronger, more unified resistance movement. Andrugtsang sent out the following message to the various leaders in this vast and scattered area. The message read:

For some time you people have been rebelling against the Red Chinese. The time has now arrived to muster all your courage and put your bravery to the test. I know you are prepared to risk your lives and exert all your strength to defend Tibet. I also know that the tremendous task that you have undertaken is a noble cause and that you will have no regrets despite the ghastly atrocities committed by the enemy. In this hour of peril, I appeal to all people, including government servants, who value their freedom and religion, to unite in the common struggle against the Chinese. Messages are being sent to people in other parts of Tibet and the neighboring countries, such as India, to explain that the Tibetans now have to alternative but to take up arms against the Chinese.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Dunham, *Buddha's Warriors*, 133.

<sup>38</sup> Norbu, “Tibetan Rebellion”, 92.

<sup>39</sup> Andrugtsang, *Four Rivers, Six Ranges*, 42-43.

Such was the general feeling of throughout Tibet at the time, and thousands of Khampas began organizing guerilla bands in the mountains of Kham and Amdo.

In Early 1956, Chinese outposts were brazenly attacked, communications were cut off, and Chinese garrisons stationed in several provinces in Kham were completely wiped out by the Khampa guerillas.<sup>40</sup> Due to the lack of modern communication within Tibet, the people of Kham organized through a series of tribal and familial networks. With the help of the monks from the numerous monasteries they were able to move from place to place unnoticed. The average lama had a very clear picture of the enemy's strength and was in a great position to plan effective tactics, mainly due to the amazing communication network between monasteries.<sup>41</sup> The familiarity with the terrain, as well as the physical vigor that came from living at a high altitude in a harsh climate, meant that the Khampas were at a clear advantage. Their guerilla tactics were effective even though they were severely outnumbered by PLA troops.<sup>42</sup>

The Dalai Lama had only heard the stories of the Khampa resistance and the Chinese misdoings there due to his isolation in Lhasa. He was a boy of fifteen when he was instated as the Dalai Lama the year after the Communists took control of Chinese government. This young man not only had no prior knowledge of government, but he was also easily intimidated by the much older and more politically skilled Mao Ze-dong. As a supreme ruler he was also carefully protected by the government officials of Lhasa, and thus he did not possess a broad

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<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 47-59.

<sup>41</sup> Dunham, *Buddha's Warriors*, 149.

<sup>42</sup> Goldstein, "Change Conflict and Continuity," 88-89.

understanding of the situation in Tibet, especially the country's the eastern region. In the mid-1950s, the Dalai Lama traveled to Kham and this visit "was a real eye-opener...Either his Lhasan advisors hadn't known of these events, or simply hadn't cared enough about the plight of the Eastern Tibetan tribes to inform His Holiness. Now he was learning first hand."<sup>43</sup> The Dalai Lama was most shocked by the disparity between what was promised to him by Mao during his 1955 visit to Beijing, and what was really going on within Tibet. During this visit Mao introduced a new program: Preparatory Committee for the Eventual Establishment of the Autonomous Region of Tibet (PCART). The hopeful Dalai Lama was invited to the unveiling of PCART in Beijing. The program promised an avoidance of excessive reforms and an expansion of Dalai Lama's authority by increasing the number of Tibetans in the Chinese government.<sup>44</sup> This was far from the truth and upon his visit to Kham and Amdo the Dalai Lama became aware of this deception. Furthermore, he was inspired by the growing spirit of revolt and claim for independence circulating in Kham and Amdo. "There was a very strong anti-Chinese feeling...[the Khampas] spoke about the independence of Tibet," exclaimed the Dalai Lama in his interview with Michael Dunham,

At the time, my mind was going in a different direction. Because of my meetings with Mao in Beijing, I was quite hopeful [about PCART]. But then the Khampa leader mentioned independence—openly!—and his intentions of independence for Tibet—including all of Kham and Amdo—I was quite surprised! What I saw, among the Khampas, was not

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<sup>43</sup> Dunham, *Buddha's Warriors*, 143.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 130.

only their negative feelings about China, but also that they were nurturing an idea of an independent Tibet.<sup>45</sup>

Even though the Dalai Lama was now aware of the struggle in Eastern Tibet and even admired the Khampas, he could not support them openly because doing so would only give the Chinese further reason for ruthless military actions toward the Tibetan people and complete occupation of Tibet. Due to the dire situation in Tibet, the delicate nature of the Sino-Tibetan relationship, as well as the brute force of the PLA and Mao Ze-dong, the Dalai Lama had to take on not only the role of a religious leader, but as a political one as well. He had to mature fast and learn to represent his country in front of a powerful nation and a Chinese ruler who saw the Dalai Lama as a malleable teenager.

Nevertheless, the movement was definitely increasing in numbers. Andrugtsang himself bought guns for his units, and more and more people joined the fight. In 1958, a meeting was held which was attended by many supporters of the guerillas from all over Tibet. At this meeting an official flag was unfurled and the organization was named the Volunteer Freedom Fighters (VFF). The VFF leaders spoke to the masses encouraging them to fight hard against the oppression by the Chinese. The fighters were also encouraged to befriend the Tibetan villagers, so that the VFF would be provided food and shelter by the residents of the villages. This was another clear demonstration of the importance of tribal networks.<sup>46</sup> The freedom fighters were motivated, and ready, Andrugtsang commented,

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<sup>45</sup> His Holiness the Dalai Lama, interviewed by Michael Dunham, 1999, quoted in Michael Dunham, Buddha's Warriors, 159.

<sup>46</sup> Andrugtsang, Four Rivers, Six Ranges, 62.

...[S]lowly building in size and strength, as they became a howling storm; it was like a gigantic storm one could see forming on the distant horizon in the east that would gradually come closer and closer until its full fury was felt...And in the meantime, the tribal leaders were organizing and communicating.<sup>47</sup>

Overall, Andrugtsang proved to be a charismatic leader. In the beginning of the resistance, the Khampas attacked the PLA as small tribal bands but they were now becoming well-organized and numerous due to monastic and inter-tribal communication, as well as keen knowledge of the climate and terrain. However the PLA army did not lack resources or weaponry, and thus was a formidable enemy. By 1957, Eastern Tibet was in a chaotic state; persecutions of accused rebels, as well as civilians, became more and more brutal. Men and women were beat and starved, and prisoners' wives were repeatedly raped by Chinese soldiers in front of their husbands if the prisoners refused to 'confess' to the crime. Monks and nuns were made to have sex with each other and forcefully denounce the vows of celibacy. After being tortured, these men and women were often killed.<sup>48</sup>

One of the main problems Andrugtsang and the Freedom Fighters faced was an uncooperative Central Government which feared upsetting the Chinese. As mentioned above, the Lhasa elite had a lot to lose from an economic and political standpoint. They were afraid to support the VFF because they were afraid to lose their lives as the farmers and nomads of Kham and Amdo were already losing their lives upon the mere suspicion that they were part of the resistance movement. The situation in Lhasa was also calm at the time, so calm in fact, that many refugees from Kham

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<sup>47</sup> Andrugtsang, *Four Rivers, Six Ranges*, 72.

<sup>48</sup> Knaus, *Orphans of the Cold War*, 134.

and Amdo filled the city. Therefore, it was understandable that the Dalai Lama's second in command, Lord Chamberlain's answer to Andrugtsang's request for support was always the same: "[T]his is not the time. This is not the course of action that we should be taking. We need patience."<sup>49</sup> However this repeated answer did not diminish the freedom fighters' desperate need for help.

The Tibetan struggle for independence attracted the attention of several countries for different reasons. Britain, India and the United States often meandered for decades regarding their respective foreign policies toward Tibet. For Great Britain, and thus for India before its 1947 Declaration of Independence, Tibet was a strategic outpost and buffer zone on the northern border of India. As it was mentioned previously in this paper, Great Britain even attempted to rectify the situation between China and Tibet in the early twentieth century with the Simla Convention. After the loss of India as a colony in 1947, Great Britain lost interest in Tibet. India, however, attempted to help in whatever way possible, providing weapons, writing notes to the Chinese government, and even offering a safe refuge for the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan people.

In the early 1950s, Tibet appealed to the United Nations for help with the Chinese occupation; yet the claim was quickly dismissed due to the ambiguous political status of the Tibetan region.<sup>50</sup> Largely, this was due to the fact that none of the countries concerned was willing to openly discuss the issue. The British called Tibet's status ambiguous, the Soviet Union condemned U.N. intervention in a

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<sup>49</sup> Roger E. McCarthy, Tears of the Lotus: Accounts of Tibetan Resistance to the Chinese Invasion, 1950-1962 (Jefferson: McFarland, 1997), 148, quoted in Michael Dunham, Buddha's Warriors, 192.

<sup>50</sup> Conboy, Secret War, 37-45.

Chinese internal matter, India voiced their hopes for a peaceful resolution, and the Americans said it was largely an Indian concern.<sup>51</sup>

For the United States, however, it was actually World War II that sparked significant interest in Tibet for the first time. Immediately, there was a division in U.S. opinions regarding foreign policy toward Tibet. The Office of Strategic Services (OSS), a wartime spy agency, had interest in the Tibetan region due to its central strategic location in East Asia. The State Department officials, on the other hand, did not want to dismantle the good relationship with the Republican Chinese Government by questioning its jurisdiction.<sup>52</sup> During the Second World War, and for nearly a decade thereafter, both of these agencies pursued their own agendas. After the Allied Powers' victory, however, the pro-China attitude prevailed in American politics, at least until the Communist uprising in 1949. Conboy comments, "[A]lthough Washington might not have liked the idea of losing Tibet to communism, it appeared loath to do anything to stop it."<sup>53</sup>

Officially the United States knew of the unrest and Tibetan resistance to Chinese suzerainty even before the Communists came to power. A 1944 OSS Research and Analysis Report claimed, "the Tibetans are basically hostile to the Chinese...The Chinese minority is pushing the Sino-Tibetan ethnic frontier westward, and the Tibetan theocratic state is attempting to maintain independence for Tibet...On the whole...they desire strict isolation for their country."<sup>54</sup> Other official intelligence

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<sup>51</sup> Grunfeld, Modern Tibet, 108-109.

<sup>52</sup> Conboy, Secret War, 6.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>54</sup> Office of Strategic Services, Research and Analysis Bureau, China's Borderlands: Criteria for Claims, no. 2420, 7 August 1944 (Washington DC: National Archives), 7-8.



reports further documented the abuse of Tibet by the Chinese authorities. In a 1951 Office of Intelligence Research report, it was clear that the United States realized the problems with the so called “Peaceful Liberation” of Tibet and with the Seventeen Point Agreement. The report stated, “A brief analysis of the terms of the agreement, however, reveals that the intention of the Pei-‘ing [Beijing] regime is to replace China’s former nominal suzerainty over Tibet by an absolute Chinese Communist control of the government and the territory,”<sup>55</sup> The report further upholds that,

Such powers as are implicit in the terms would effectively destroy the actual autonomy that amounted to *de facto* independence enjoyed by the Tibetans in the past, despite the provision of point 3, which accords the Tibetans “the right of exercising national regional autonomy under the unified leadership of the Central People’s Government.”

Thus the U.S. State Department expressed concern, but did not officially wish to get involved. For the same reasons, India wished not to officially support Tibet: both nations desired stable foreign relations with China.

The CIA however, was another matter entirely. The Dalai Lama’s brothers Gyalo Thondup and Thubten Norbu were “talking to Americans from an early point on. Gyalo...instigated fist contact in Calcutta in either ’51 or ’52”, claimed Roger E. McCarthy, the creator of the CIA Tibetan Task Force, in an interview with Michael Dunham, “...the least America could do was to give [the Khampas] the assistance...to do as much as they...could do on their own. To simply abandon them at that point, in [President] Eisenhower’s estimation, would have been

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<sup>55</sup> Office of Intelligence Research, Division for the Far East, ‘Peaceful Liberation’ of Tibet: Blueprint for Communist Conquest, OIR 6000.7, 4 June 1951 (Washington DC: National Archives), 1.

unconscionable.”<sup>56</sup> Along with Gyalo, Andrugtsang selected the first six Khampas to be trained by the CIA Task Force. Later these six were trained in Saipan for five months by CIA operatives in warfare and communications, and then air dropped in Kham to rejoin the ranks of Andrugtsang, and to train others. In 1958, more Tibetans were flown to Camp Hale in the Colorado Rockies for training. According to Roy Starke, a communications instructor who trained the Tibetans there, “[the Tibetans] really enjoyed blowing things up during demolition class, but when they caught a fly in their mess hall, they would hold it in their cupped palms and let it loose outside.”<sup>57</sup> These were people peaceful by nature, but were pushed into warfare against their better judgment, due to the hate they felt toward their oppressors.

In 1959, the situation has become worse, but the guerilla struggles continued. Using similar networks of tribal and monastic communication, the ranks of the freedom fighters swelled to the hundreds of thousands. In March of 1959, things began to completely fall apart. According to the International Commission of Jurists, on March 11, 1959, a meeting of Governmental officials was called at the Potala Palace and a proclamation was issued in the name of the Cabinet, declaring that Tibet was independent. The next day a meeting concerning the declaration of independence was and the action necessary for its implementation was held at the Palace. On March 17 Chinese troops fired two shells at the Potala Palace, which caused the Dalai Lama to secretly flee to India. A day later, the serious bombardment of Lhasa began and the Tibetans bravely faught back. This uprising made the international news as the Lhasa

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<sup>56</sup> Roger E. McCarthy, interviewed by Michael Dunham, date not provided, quoted in Michael Dunham, Buddha's Warriors, 207.

<sup>57</sup> Conboy, Secret War in Tibet, 108.

uprising. For the Chinese this was the last straw, now it was an all out war. According to the International Committee of Jurists, on March 28, 1959 Beijing reported that the rebellion was crushed by March 22 and that some 20,000 rebels were involved. The Tibetan Local Government was then dissolved, and now only the Preparatory Committee for the proposed Tibetan Autonomous Region now exercised the functions and powers of government.<sup>58</sup>

CIA officers who worked with and trained the Tibetans wished to continue supporting their cause. However, this would not be possible due to the politics of the cold war era. According to Dunham,

[O]n May 1, 1960, an American U2 spy plane...hailed itself up over the Himalaya en route to the Soviet Union. The Soviets shot it down.... And East-West diplomatic relations took an ugly U2-like nose-dive. Eisenhower's dream of conducting an international peace conference was shattered [after]...the summit meeting between Eisenhower and Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev...was canceled.<sup>59</sup>

Such were the politics of the Cold War era, and this turn of events had serious ramifications for the Tibetan resistance. Air drops were to be cancelled, thus no weapons or supplies were dropped in Tibet by the CIA. Eisenhower was also advised to discontinue "any potentially dangerous covert action, lest they backfire and affect election results."<sup>60</sup> Thus American politics were the cause of the cessation of support for the rebellion. The Khampas and Amdowas still struggled to maintain their movement, even without American support; even after the death of their great leader, Gompo Tashi Andrugtsang, they stayed strong. Other leaders emerged, and the

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<sup>58</sup> International Committee of Jurists, The Question of Tibet and the Rule of Law (Geneva, 1960), 9.

<sup>59</sup> Dunham, Buddha's Warriors, 351.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 352.

Tibetans were unstoppable in their quest. Unfortunately, the freedom fighters' supplies were running low without the air drops and financial support from the CIA. And their ranks were dwindling due to constant battles with the PLA. The last bloody fight between the Khampas and the Chinese occurred in 1974, near the Nepalese border. The freedom fighters were severely outnumbered, and the fight was more of a massacre.<sup>61</sup> This was the final blow for the organized guerilla warfare known as the VFF. The Khampas and Amdowas were out of options.

It was interesting to view how each source examined for this paper differed slightly in the facts it chose to include and exclude, thereby making its point more poignant. For example Gompo Tashi Andrugtsang's memoirs do not provide even a hint of the CIA's or America's help, while Dunham's book clearly identifies Andrugtsang as one of those involved in cooperation with the CIA operatives. This could be because the memoir was published in 1973, when the guerillas were still active in Tibet and the relationship between the CIA and the VFF could not be disclosed. The archival primary sources were particularly helpful in showing that the U.S. was well aware of the situation in Tibet but the State Department was complacent to help politically because of its official ties to China. Melvyn Goldstein's work was particularly helpful, because of its objectivity regarding both parties' claims. It is important to remember that although many among the ranks of the Tibetan rebels were monastically educated and could read and write Tibetan, there are very few records that can be obtained from the rebels themselves. Most of the planning and negotiations were done verbally through informal tribal and monastic

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<sup>61</sup> Knaus, Orphans of the Cold War, 305.

networks and thus very few primary sources could be obtained. This definitely presented a problem with studying the rebellion from the point of view of the guerillas themselves. It was an extremely lucky and helpful that Gompo Tashi Andrugtsang's memoirs were published and translated into English. As mentioned in the introduction, this topic is not yet widely researched, although there are many books of general Sino-Tibetan history which include a few chapters on this important event. There are also several works on the Sino-American relations over the issue of Tibet, however it is this paper's aim to focus on the history of the rebellion itself.

In the end, the Tibetan Rebellion was suppressed by the Chinese, but the success or failure of this movement cannot be ascertained that simply. Again the vested interests of both governments had much to do with the conflict in the first place. The PLA invaded Tibet under the pretext of "liberation". But in the end who did they liberate, and from what? For the Chinese, pre-1950s Tibet was a hell on earth, ravaged by feudal exploitation. The communists not only believed that they have succeeded in unifying China, but that their rule in Tibet has constituted the liberation of the serfs, as well as a continuous history of development and progress toward modernity. As for the Tibetans, they believe that before the Chinese invasion their country was a land of happy and contented people. Chinese rule had not only meant the destruction of Tibetan independent political identity but (the Tibetans maintain) four decades of near-genocide against the Tibetan people and their culture. Nevertheless, the truth regarding this political myth-making is more gray, then black and white.

Even through, practically speaking, the Khampa uprising was a failure, the emergence, organization, uprising, and sheer force of the Khampas and Amdowas against such a strong army as the PLA is venerable. The rift between Lhasa and Kham regarding China resulted in a disunified front and a highly localized rebellion. Perhaps if the Lhasa elite supported the Khampas openly from the very start of the uprising, or if the U.S. continued to support the VFF, or if the Dalai Lama was a more experienced political and military leader at the time of his instatement, maybe then Tibetans would have a better chance of expelling the Chinese PLA from their homeland. However, the Khampas were undermined by these factors and the rebellion was suppressed.

Even though the Khampa rebellion lacked the ability to oust the strong Chinese PLA army from Tibet, their uprising is still remembered today with great admiration. Lhasa's elites' lack of cooperation with the Khampas at the time of the rebellion does not discourage them from using the Khampas as a part of Tibetan "mythology" used to encourage patriotism in Tibetan diaspora. In fact, these brave warriors serve today as a part of history-making myth, which inspires the feelings of nationalism and patriotism in the Tibetan diaspora worldwide.

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