Tuva—a State Reawakens

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AN AFTER-EFFECT OF WORLD WAR II was the birth of new states in Asia and Africa. States were also established during the war, but puppet formations of the type of Slovakia and Manchukuo were swept into oblivion as soon as the regimes in whose bosom they had been born were defeated. At the same time there were states that disappeared in World War II. This is a phenomenon that has not been sufficiently discussed, for the disappearance was due to actions by one of the winners of the war—Stalin's Russia. Above all it concerns the three Baltic States, members of the League of Nations—Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, whose incorporation into the Soviet Union in 1940 was not recognised by the free world. It was largely thanks to this circumstance that they managed to regain their independence in the course of reforms initiated by Gorbachev in 1990–91. Another factor that contributed was historical memory—the fate of the independent (1918–40) Baltic states has been mentioned in all reliable publications on World War II.

Actually, Stalin's empire also swallowed a fourth state during World War II—Tuva, a country the size of Greece (170,000 sq. km.)—but what happened to that country on 11 October 1944 passed unnoticed by the world. Even Soviet citizens were initially denied knowledge of a widening of their country's borders. The first news of the event in Russian was published not in Moscow but in the 1 November 1944 issue of Tuvinskaya Pravda, published in Kyzyl. The events in Tuva in the autumn of 1944 are shrouded in silence even now—a silence which it is difficult to explain. It is sad that even Western accounts of World War II fail to mention either Tuva as a participant in the war (soldiers from that independent country fought on the Soviet–German front in 1943–44), or the expansion of the Soviet Union at the expense of Tuva's territory.

Forgetting Tuva while remembering the disappearance of the Baltic states seems even more perplexing when we recall that Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania had been part of the Russian empire since the 18th century, while Tuva had been in the Russian sphere of influence only from 1912 and formed part of it from 1914 to 1921.

The period of independence of Tuva, a country squeezed in between Russia and Mongolia, was short (1921–44), and its contacts were limited to its nearest neighbours. Nevertheless, there are sufficient grounds to speak not only of an independent internal and foreign policy, but also to argue that Tuva set an example to the world by abandoning Stalinist socialism in 1932/33 and holding its own for a whole six years. In 1921–32 a state within a state, a Self-Governed Russian Labour Colony, functioned on Tuvan territory. It was a predecessor of the
territorial formations of the Russian ethnic minority set up in various parts of the USSR in 1990–92 (Moldova, the North Caucasus).

This article sets out to present a treatment of these two phenomena, as well as of the procedure by which Tuva was annexed to the USSR. Parallel to this, the reader will be given an idea of how actual historical events were falsified by the so-called official historiography of the Soviet Union. Knowledge of its methods is also important because the falsification continues even now that the name of Tuva has reappeared in the pages of the world press. Voices demanding the restoration of Tuva independence are once again heard from the heart of Asia (the geographical centre of the Asian continent lies in Tuva). It is high time more attention was paid to that mysterious country of cattle-breeders and hunters.

For decades Soviet historiography has been ‘proving’ that Russians’ rights to Tuva are of long standing; it has even been asserted that in 1914 Tuva was ‘reunified’ with Russia.² The facts, however, speak a different language—the first Russian gold-diggers arrived in Tuva, cut off from the rest of the world by mountains, in the 1830s,³ and it was not until the collapse of the Chinese empire in 1911–12 that Russia developed a colonial interest in the area. Up to that time Russia recognised Peking’s supremacy over the territory, which in 1757–1912 made up an independent administrative unit within the Chinese empire. It was ruled by an ambynnooyoon elected from among the local elite.

In November 1911 Mongolia, which had also been subjected to China, declared itself independent and elected the local spiritual leader or bogdo-gegen as head of state. This provided an impetus also to the neighbouring Tuva. On 15 February 1912 the local elite declared Tuva an independent country, expressed their desire to install the supreme spiritual leader as head of state, and addressed a plea for protection and defence to Russia. The Russian government started talks with Mongolia, but on orders from St Petersburg the Tuvan delegation was barred even from entering Russia. In November 1911 the Russian Council of Ministers had endorsed a plan for the rapid colonisation of the Uryankhai region (Tuva). The motivation was that it was ‘an extremely valuable colonisable territory with fertile soil, good pastures and rich mineral deposits, above all gold’. It was pointed out that, according to information reaching St Petersburg, Tuva was intending to unite with Mongolia.⁴

The following events are described in the third edition of the Great Soviet Encyclopaedia in these words: ‘In 1912–13 many big landowners and officials repeatedly appealed to the Russian tsar to incorporate Tuva into the Russian empire’.⁵ A more honest account of the events can be found in Granat’s Encyclopaedic Dictionary, volume 48 (published in Moscow in 1930):

Russian potentates arrived in Uryankhai and put administrative pressure on the Tuvans to send some humble and submissive telegraphmes to St. Petersburg. The local rulers were compelled to yield their tribal seals and symbols of power to the Russian authorities, and these were taken away to Russia. In 1913 Belotsarsk was founded [in 1918–26 Hem-Belder, from 1926 Kyzyl], Russian courts were brought to Uryankhai and the Minusinsk prison [in the Krasnoyarsk region] was filled with Tuvans. Thanks to these measures the Russian population in Uryankhai increased by 300% in 1912–18.
In November 1913 Russian efforts led to China recognising the autonomy of Mongolia (and the granting of Russian privileges there) and in April 1914 Russia declared Tuva its protectorate. That decision was endorsed by the Provisional Government of Russia in August 1917.

During the Civil War that swept the Russian empire soon thereafter the new colonists felt insecure in Tuva, for the land had been taken by force—even the ambyn-noyoon who nominally retained power had been entered on the list of the 'assignors'. The Russian colonists organised themselves fast, however—the 1st Congress of the Russian population took place in March 1917. The Tuvans began to organise a year later. On 18 June 1918 representatives of 45 000 Tuvans and 12 000 Russians (Bolsheviks) concluded a treaty which gave the Russians the land they already held. The Russians, in turn, recognised Tuva independence and promised to return the seals and symbols of power that had been taken out of the country. The treaty also provided for joint action in case of possible danger ‘from somebody’—this was an article which later served to justify the involvement of the Russians in the internal affairs of Tuva.7

In fact, Tuva only became independent three years later. Both in Mongolia and Tuva the course of events was influenced by the Red Army. After the crushing of the bands led by the Baltic baron von Ungern Sternberg, the power of the bogdo-gegen was restored in Mongolia and a foundation was laid for that country’s independence (not recognised by China until 1946). The decision about the independence of Tuva was made at the meeting on 26 June 1921 in Chadan, but not all khoshuns (districts) were represented there. Besides, unification with Mongolia had been hanging in the air for 10 years, and so it had been decided to settle everything at an all-Tuvan conference in August. The 12th Congress of the Russian population of Tuva assembled before that date, on 23–24 July, and decided to be guided by the directives of the Siberian Bureau of the RCP(B), ‘to establish power in accordance with the RSFSR Constitution, assuming the obligation to fulfil its decrees and to declare the Russian population of Uryankhai a Soviet colony’.8 The 63 Tuvans9 who arrived for the Constituent Khural on 13 August 1921 were thus met with a fait accompli—a state within a state had already been founded. Even the presence of the Mongolian delegation failed to change anything—no unification decision was taken. On 14 August 1921 the Tannu-Tuva People’s Republic was proclaimed (in 1926 the word Tannu, meaning taiga, was dropped from the name). The Russian delegation that was present on that occasion achieved more: the newly born state entrusted its foreign relations ‘into the care of the RSFSR’, and the Russian population remained subject to the RSFSR Constitution.10 The last ambyn-noyoon, the 13th in succession, Sodnam Baltsy, became head of state (he resigned one month later). (In Mongolia, from 1641 to 1924 the symbol of continuity and wielder of local power was the bogdo-gegen, the head of the lamaist church, of whom the eighth and last was also head of state in 1911–24).

The history of the predecessor of the Dnestr Soviet Republic proclaimed in the Moldova SSR in 1990 (it declared itself directly subject to the USSR central authorities) has been little studied, but what we know is quite instructive. On 12 February 1922 the Russian Soviet Autonomous colony became the Self-Governed
Russian Labour Colony (SFRLC) whose statutes were approved by the RSFSR government on 13 July 1922. The SGRLC had its own flag, arms and armed defence units; politically, the colony belonged to the RCP(B). The colony’s education policy stressed the need for the children of the local people to study in Russian schools. The economic power of the colony was based on gold mining.\(^\text{11}\)

The role of the SGRLC in the internal affairs of Tuva increased from 1927 when the joint Russian–Tuvan trade unions and cooperatives were formed\(^\text{12}\) and Tuva also commenced the building of Stalin-style socialism. This was pushed through by the Tuvan People’s Revolutionary Party, set up in February 1922 by a decision of the Siberian Bureau of the RCP(B). It is interesting to note that in March 1923 the Tuvan government disbanded the Central Committee of the party because it saw no need to finance it. On orders from Moscow the party was re-established four months later and in 1924 it declared that the government must act under the guidance of the Central Committee.\(^\text{13}\)

As for the first Tuvan governments, in 1922, 1924 and 1926 three successive Constitutions were drawn up (these were unique documents; for example, the seven members of the Small Khural Presidium acted as heads of state in turn, governments were appointed for a period of one year, etc.).

At a Great Khural session in 1924 union with Mongolia was again placed on the agenda. Three-sided talks between Tuva, Russia and Mongolia in July 1924 in Kyzyl ended with the de facto recognition of the country. A year later diplomatic representatives were exchanged with Russia, and in November 1925 the independence of Tuva was recognised by the Great Khural of Mongolia (diplomatic relations were established in August 1926). These were to remain the only foreign representations of the young country. It cleverly manoeuvred between its two neighbours and recognised the benefits of leaning towards Mongolia—the first paper launched in 1925 was published in Mongolian. In 1926 names were also Mongolised. In the 1920s almost as many young people were sent to study in Mongolia as in Russia. Then two independent moves were made: in 1929 the Soviet military unit stationed in Tuva (after rebellion in 1924) was withdrawn and in June 1930 a Latin-based alphabet was introduced.

The government gave its clear support to the Buddhist church—in the seven years of independence the number of monasteries had increased from 22 to 26, and a Congress of Lamas took place in March 1928.\(^\text{14}\) It seems that it was the policy towards the church that occasioned an extremist turn to the left, executed not by the party itself but by its youth organisation. After the highly radical 4th Komsomol Congress in December 1928–January 1929 the party also had to capitulate, at the cost of the expulsion of 48% of its members.\(^\text{15}\) It was this purge that marked the beginning of the rise of Salchak Toka (1901–73) who became the ideology secretary of the Central Committee in 1929 and remained the local party leader for 40 years.

In 1929 all ‘exploiters’ and lamas were stripped of the right to vote. While in 1928 there were 4813 lamas in 28 monasteries, by 1932 only one monastery with 15 lamas had escaped destruction. Collectivisation of agriculture began in 1930, and in two years there were 303 collective farms incorporating 74% of the former farms. Mass arrival of Soviet specialists began in 1930; they occupied all manner
of adviser's and counsellor's positions. Materials published in the press 60 years later reveal that Russia was ruled by corruption even then—completely unsuitable people were sent to hold high positions abroad. According to a memorandum sent to Molotov in 1929:

1. Komissarov, counsellor of the TPR Ministry of Finance—RCP(B) member, [is] politically illiterate, incompetent in financial and taxation matters, drinks. 2. Shepetov, counsellor of the Cattle Breeding Board—Communist, incurable alcoholic, ignorant of politics. 3. Shekhin... extremely presumptuous, gives the Tuvans no right to speak out...

In 1930 the 4th Constitution was adopted, proclaiming 'non-capitalist development', as recommended by the Comintern, the theoretical basis for Tuva's development.

The results of the Stalinist takeover for the rural people of Tuva were the same as they were in Russia. However, one must give credit to the Tuvan leadership for a courageous step towards a radical correction of these mistakes. What happened in Tuva in 1932–38 can safely be interpreted as resolute rejection of socialism. Tuva, a country of cattle raisers, was the first to do so. The initiator of the historic insubordination was Churmit-Dazy, head of government in 1929–38, who was executed by the NKVD in 1938 together with his companions (the second in command was probably Khemchik-oool, the chairman of the Presidium of the Small Khural in 1926–38). That period in Tuvan history, the most interesting from the point of view of world history, deserves special treatment. In this article we shall confine ourselves to an enumeration of the principal steps taken in the name of sovereignty and away from socialism:

- In May 1932 the SGRLC was dissolved on the basis of a Tuvan–Russian agreement. From that time the colonists were obliged to abide by Tuvan law, but they were not given Tuvan citizenship; in the Tuvan power system their interests were represented by Soviet citizens' committees. The Russians retained the right to have their own cultural institutions and organise instruction based on Soviet syllabuses. The dissolution of the SGRLC must obviously have been influenced by ferment among the Russians who were forced to join collective farms in 1929. Apparently Moscow hoped that with the help of the Tuvan authorities socialist ideas could also be inculcated among the Russians.

- In December 1932 the Tuvan leadership began to dissolve the collective farms. Only 11 were operating one year later. The same thing happened in the former SGRLC, where nine of the former 16 collective farms remained in operation.

- After these practical steps theory was tackled—in October 1933, at a joint plenum of the TPRP Central Committee and the Central Auditing Committee, it was declared that 'the party could only be the government's first helper' and defined Tuva as 'a new type of bourgeois-democratic republic'. The term 'non-capitalist road of development' could not be avoided, but it was stated that there would be 'decelerated progress' along that road. It is remarkable that while in 1922–29 there was a Party congress every year, the 9th Congress then took place in February–March 1932, the 10th Congress in 1936 and the 11th
Congress in 1939. The 10th Congress has been criticised in the so-called official historiography for not having corrected the mistakes made in 1933.22

- Private trade was reintroduced in 1934, and in 1935 parliament declared that the economy of the state would be based on ‘nomadic cattle raisers’ private households’.23
- 1933–34 marked the adoption of the country’s own currency unit—the aksha (Russian, Mongolian and Chinese money had circulated before 1929, and thereafter only Russian money). An independent banking system was created.24
- The defence unit of the government was increased to the size of a regiment. Border negotiations were offered to the country’s neighbours.25
- In 1935 the Soviet government transferred to Tuva the gold mines that had been operating under its control.26
- By 1935 four monasteries with 569 lamas had been re-opened.27 In the same year the national theatre was inaugurated. (In 1944 64.5% of the population aged 14 to 45 were literate, there were three secondary schools, nine seven-year schools and 110 elementary schools with 464 teachers and 9200 pupils).28

All these measures took place in a situation where Russia continued to ‘build socialism’ and Mongolia progressed along the ‘non-capitalist road of development’. Between those two the tiny Tuva moved ‘in the direction of capitalism’, if we are to believe the opinion of the so-called Profintern.29 The independent course continued for nearly six years. It is possible that at the beginning some things could be concealed from Moscow. As mentioned above, Tuvans were also supported by the Russian colonists. The durability of the independent course could of course be guaranteed only by unity of the leadership and support of the people.

Joint efforts of the RCP(B) and the NKVD, assisted by the Comintern, finally managed to fracture this unity and support. It is interesting to note that while the Mongolian People’s Revolutionary Party was admitted by the Comintern as a ‘sympathising member’ as early as 1921, the PRP of Tuva was not given the same status until 1935. Toka was invited to the 8th Comintern Congress but was not given the floor and was obliged to listen to Dimitrov’s demands to ‘grant the party the leading role in the country’ in private. Dimitrov considered it necessary to send to Tuva a special representative of the Comintern, V. Tanev, a companion of his from the days of his Reichstag trial; he was there from 1936 to 1939. So we may speak of a ‘Bulgarian contact’ in Tuva too.30

O. Polat, who was appointed Minister of the Interior in Tuva in November 1936, confessed 55 years later that he had immediately been instructed by Toka to start collecting compromising materials about the activities of Churmit-Dazy, Khemchik-ool and others.31 The trials of ‘enemies of the people’ which started immediately afterwards involved a large part of the Tuvian leadership. According to data published at the end of 1990 the repression affected 1700 persons, of whom 132 were executed. Five years later, in 1943, Toka received the highest award of the NKVD from the hands of Beria. After carrying out this ‘dirty work’, Polat became Chairman of the Small People’s Khural (1938–40), and was then replaced in the formal post of head of state by a woman activist, Kh. Anchima.
TUVA REAWAKENS

(1940–44). She was a member of the Special Court which sentenced Churmidazy and others to be shot.32 It was during her term in office that Tuva’s fate was finally decided.

In 1938–39 the Tuvan authorities again started to issue Stalinist decrees. Consequently these years must be regarded as the end of the independent course. However, open resistance to the pro-Moscow course continued up to 1941. This is a sign that the incorporation of Tuva into the USSR may have been aimed, among other things, at stifling the anti-socialist resistance for good.

Accounts of Tuva’s incorporation into the USSR usually start with a reference to the year 1939 when the Politbureau of the Tuvan PRP, having ‘received respective letters from cattle raisers in the second half of the 1930s’, addressed in the name of the people a plea of incorporation to the RCP(B) Central Committee and the Soviet government.33 A more precise date can be found in the Comintern archives, where one letter from Tuva has been entered into the records on 15 September 1939. It discusses the possibility of unification (even if it is not a plea of unification, it is nevertheless good as an argument if no better letters are to hand!). Still more interesting is the fact that precisely at the same time (September 1939) as the Soviet Union forced upon Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania treaties under which military bases were to be set up on their territories, the Comintern appointed A. Zhdanov, D. Manuilsky, B. Shmeral and others as party and government counsellors in Tuva.34 The counsellors’ main task was to work out a new Tuvan Constitution and TPRP programme (the former was adopted in June 1941, the latter a month earlier). The most conspicuous name among the group of counsellors is that of A. Zhdanov—there is no doubt he was the leader of the group. In June 1940 Zhdanov arrived in Estonia where he was unquestionably the senior of the three emissaries sent by Stalin to the Baltic states (the others were A. Vyshinsky in Latvia and V. Dekanovozov in Lithuania).

It is well known that some of the Estonian activists involved in the Soviet takeover declared in June 1940 that Estonia would receive a status analogous to that of Mongolia.35 The Mongolian Constitution, which was quite similar to the would-be Tuvan Constitution, was adopted in June 1940 and Zhdanov must have known about it. Considering the lack of any kind of literature or information about Mongolia or Tuva, the Estonians obviously received the idea of Mongolian-like status from Zhdanov himself. Considering Zhdanov’s high position, it cannot be excluded that his involvement in both Tuva and the Baltic states was not an accident—he may have been the coordinator of the policy of territorial re-acquisition.

This last presumption should be corroborated by similar elements in the Soviet actions in the West and the East. After the conclusion of the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact the parties to the pact occupied Poland, and immediately after the fall of Paris to the Germans ‘June revolutions’ were effected in the Baltic states. On 13 April 1941 a neutrality pact was concluded between the Soviet Union and Japan (in September 1940 Germany, Italy and Japan had concluded a tripartite pact), under which the latter undertook to honour the borders of Mongolia. Nothing has been heard about a secret protocol to that treaty, but what followed confirms that
the Soviet Union had been granted freedom of action in Tuva. On 25 April 1941 the Small Khural Presidium, i.e. a very narrow circle of people, gave the 16,000 Russian colonists Tuvan citizenship and all political rights. Russian instruction was introduced in Tuvan schools. On 7 May Russians were permitted to join the Tuvan People’s Revolutionary Party. On 8 June 1941 the Tuvan Latin alphabet was replaced by a Cyrillic one. Also in that period, on 25 June 1941, a new Tuvan Constitution came into force, under which all the rights given to the colonists were legitimised. The reorganisation of Soviet Citizens’ Committees into khurals took place in 1942. This enumeration of facts can be interpreted in two ways—as conscious activity directed at joining Tuva to the Soviet Union (but why, then, is there not the slightest hint at unification in the 1941 basic law and the new TPRP programme?), and as a succession of forced concessions to the colonists with the aim of avoiding unification. We can only hope that further investigations will reveal what were the aims of a part of the Tuvan leadership in 1941–44.

The other part knew what they wanted to achieve, but obviously they were not fully convinced of the success of their plan. At any rate another appeal for unification was sent to the Soviet Union on 26 April 1941. As the fact became known, Toka assured the plenum of the TPRP Central Committee on 16 August 1944 that the appeal had been supported by the TPRP Central Committee and the government. In later years the TPRP Central Committee Politbureau has been mentioned as the author of the appeal. A book published in 1985 mentions for the first time that the appeal had been sent by just ‘a group of Politbureau members’. The rest were either not trusted, or they were against the move. The fact of opposition is corroborated by the elections in May–June 1941—after the decisions about the colonists—in which an absolute majority of lower-level khural leaders and 39 out of 90 middle-level khural leaders were replaced. The so-called official history writers attributed this to the low educational level of the people and incompetence of the defeated leaders.

The logical development of events was interrupted by the start of the Great Patriotic War. The initiative of ‘a group of Tuvan comrades’ seemed to have been forgotten. It is difficult to say why it was placed on the agenda again in August 1944. It is possible that it was influenced by the progress of hostilities in China. After the Japanese offensive in April–June 1944 it was clear that China could do nothing, and in Europe the tide of the war had turned. Moscow took up the Tuva question once again and answered... the appeal that had been submitted three years earlier. The reply was: ‘if you want to join the Soviet Union, you will have to promote an official appeal and the USSR will respond to it speedily’. Thus the offer would have been a repetition of the Baltic scenario. It is not known when this information reached Kyzyl, but the response from Moscow was discussed by the TPRP Central Committee Politbureau on 7 August 1944. A Central Committee plenum on 16 August made an appeal for unification to the All-Union CP(B) Central Committee and the USSR Supreme Soviet Presidium, and a decision of its Bureau urged the Tuvan parliament to address its unification plea to the USSR Supreme Soviet.

The role of the legislature in the events of August 1944 still arouses angry feelings in Tuva. At that time Tuva had two parliaments—the Great People’s
Khural which convened every three years and the Small People's Khural that was elected by the former and held sessions once a year. The Great People's Khural had last been convened in June 1941, so it would have been quite logical to convene it. Yet on 16–17 August 1944 there was a session of the Small People's Khural. Moreover, the deputies were in a minority—beside them there were 107 party activists in the hall, as well as delegations from the USSR and Mongolia (the initial motive for their arrival was participation in the 23rd independence anniversary celebrations on 14 August). The weakness of the legal basis of the events was felt also by their protagonists, for Toka considered it necessary to assert that 'the power of decision of the Small People's Khural is even greater, because [the decision] corresponds to the basic interests of the Tuvan people and is a coveted objective'.

A three-member delegation (Toka, S. Chimba, the Prime and Foreign Minister, and O. Lopsanchap, a cattle raiser) left Kyzyl with the plea of unification on 31 August 1944 and waited for four weeks in Moscow to present it. The decision was made not in the USSR Supreme Soviet (as the Small People's Khural had expected), but by the Supreme Soviet Presidium (as the TPRP CC Polibureau had been informed). Of those present at the 11 October 1944 session the names of M. Kalinin, O. Kuusinen and S. Budennyi have gone down in the records. It was in the presence of these and other persons who did not merit a mention (less than 20 altogether) that the fate of a whole country and nation was decided.

Actually two decisions were made. On 11 October 1944 it was reported that Tuva had been admitted to the USSR, and on 13 October information was released to the effect that Tuva had been given the status of an autonomous region within the Russian Federation. Thus an independent state was turned into a fourth-level administrative unit (Union–republic–autonomous republic–autonomous region) of a superstate in a matter of 48 hours. The decisions made in Moscow were again approved by the Small People's Khural at its last session on 1 November 1944. Actually it was a mere rubber stamp, for the decision taken in Moscow on 11 October 1944 included an article on the organisation in Tuva of RSFSR Supreme Soviet elections in April 1945.

The procedures used in Tuva were in striking contradiction to elementary legal norms, but Soviet historiography has always coped with the tasks given to it. A good idea of how history has been falsified at different times can be gained from what different editions of the Great Soviet Encyclopaedia say about the fate of the country. Volume 55 of the 1st edition (1947) mentions the year of birth of the Tuvan Autonomous Region but is silent about the history of Tuva—according to the official view of those times a region was not supposed to have a history. Thus, along with their independence the Tuvans had also lost their history. Incidentally the same volume quotes the figure 200,000 sq. km as the territory of Tuva. Present-day statistics give the figure as 170,000 sq. km, and so the Tuwan Popular Front persistently raises the question of what has become of 30,000 sq. km? (The reply from Moscow is that the 1947 encyclopaedia compilers were mistaken.) The 2nd edition (Vol. 43, published in 1956) asserts that on 11 October 1944 Tuva was admitted to the Union by the USSR Supreme Soviet, that is to say it has made a parliament out of Kalinin and his gang. The 3rd edition, Vol. 26 (1977), cleverly
passes by the fact of admission, saying that the request had been addressed to the USSR Supreme Soviet and that Tuva acceded to the Russian Federation. The 1982 publication USSR. An Encyclopaedic Reference Book laconically states: ‘On 11–13 October 1944 Tuva entered the USSR.

In 1990 it was difficult to go on presenting history in such a way, for perestroika had come to Tuva too. The development of events was bloodier there than in many other parts of the USSR. Inter-ethnic relations immediately became a problem. A social and economic crisis erupted.

As in most other autonomous republics (that status had been granted to Tuva in 1961), instruction in Tuvan schools was by then overwhelmingly in Russian. However, the Tuvans had retained numerical superiority over the Russians (65% to 31%, or 206 000 to 98 000). The worst blow to the upbringing of the young generation had been the compulsory transfer of cattle-raisers’ children to boarding schools—which had produced a generation alienated from work and parents; loitering in the streets of towns and settlements they became the protagonists in the numerous inter-ethnic clashes that are still taking place in Tuva. The development of industry in Tuva has been based solely on immigrant labour, and the living and working conditions of the industrial workers are clearly above those of the indigenous population. Inter-ethnic tensions are aggravated also by the fact that for decades Tuva has been the location of all-Union prison camps and labour colonies, and those released from the camps have been permitted to settle in the neighbourhood. Like elsewhere in the Soviet Union, the shortage of consumer goods was relieved by stepping up alcohol sales; to this spreading drug abuse was added in recent years. The explosion had been brewing for a long time and when it happened in May 1990 it was presented in the all-Union press as a clash between Tuvans and Russians. That impression was deepened by the despatching of special OMON militia troops to Tuva in May and mass emigration of Russians which started in June 1990. This version was supported even by Izvestiya, which carried a report on 4 July 1990 about the killing of 88 Russians in Tuva. It was only three months later that the public of the USSR learned that among the 88 killed 60 had been Tuvans and that they had been killed by Tuvans; the number of Russians killed by Tuvans was seven.

This last fact explains what a hard time forces offering an alternative course for Tuva have been having. Soviet public opinion about Tuva has been shaped by the local partocracy in their own interests, and they have succeeded in slowing down the development of democracy in the republic, turning it into a stronghold of conservatism in the Russian Federation. Tuva refused to carry out the Russian President’s referendum but did conduct the all-Union referendum on 17 March 1991; it was also one of five areas of Russia where El’tsin was defeated in the Russian presidential elections—he collected only 15% of the votes, against 65% for Ryzhkov. At the same time El’tsin’s defeat cannot be interpreted as the victory of the local partocracy alone—a large number of Tuvans are aiming at restoring their country’s independence.

The national movement in Tuva was unleashed by attempts to turn Kyzyl
Secondary School No. 9 into a school with Tuvan as the language of instruction. The forces behind the campaign united on 25 October 1989 to form the Tuvan Social Centre, headed by a 39-year-old candidate of philology, Kaadyr-oöl Bicheldey. Bicheldey and his companions do not deny they have learned from the experience of Sajudis, the Lithuanian Popular Front (in power in Lithuania since March 1990). On the eve of the Tuvan Popular Front founding congress, scheduled for 14 February 1990, the situation in the Soviet Union changed. Accusing the Azerbaijanis of discrediting the Popular Front idea, Bicheldey declared that the Tuvan democratic organisation would adopt a different name. The congress decided it was to be called the Democratic Intermovement. Of its 295 delegates 10 were aged under 20, 101 aged 21–30 and the rest were older than 30. The number of Tuvans at the congress was 258, Russians 31 and Buryats six. The congress demanded that the republic’s leadership retire, that the buildings of party committees be handed over for cultural and other uses, etc. The prestige of the Popular Front was confirmed by the reception of the PF leaders by the republic’s leadership on 13 February, as well as detailed reports of the reception in the press.

The triumph for the Tuvan Popular Front and its leaders came in the Tuvan and RSFSR Supreme Soviet elections on 4 March 1990. The Popular Front declared in its pre-election programme that the main enemy of democratisation was the bureaucracy, the other highlights being the demand for Union Republic status for Tuva, protection of nature, revival of the national culture (in 1990 there was only one 94-year-old lama representing the country’s old religion—he alone had survived all the repression), and training of national personnel. In the Tuvan Supreme Soviet elections Bicheldey ran against the republic’s Prime Minister, V. Seryakov. Bicheldey collected 53% and Seryakov 44% of the votes. The CP leader of the republic, G. Shirshin, installed in 1973 as successor to Toka, and D. Ondar, the president, faced no opposition candidates in their electoral districts, yet they only received 68% and 65% of the votes, respectively; nine Popular Front candidates were elected to the Supreme Soviet.

Regardless of his defeat in the elections Seryakov was again nominated for the post of Prime Minister, running against Zh. Oorzhak, a Tuvan, who received 72 votes in favour and 44 against (compared to Seryakov’s 52 in favour and 64 against). Thanks to the struggle started by the Popular Front, a situation was created for the first time in the Autonomous Republic in which all three leading posts were staffed with Tuvans. The Supreme Soviet session at which the elections took place was broadcast live on television, and everybody could see how after Seryakov’s defeat the Communist Party 2nd secretary (a Russian) and most Russian deputies left the hall (this created a situation where later a local person, not a man sent from Moscow, could be elected 2nd secretary). In this situation the local party leaders acted emphatically as nationalists, securing the reelection of Shirshin on an alternative basis as the local party chief in October 1990.

At the same time the local party leaders continue reiterating to the public that the republic is a backward one and unable to cope without the Soviet Union. Even the fact that Tuva was incorporated into the Soviet Union as a region (oblast’) is
being presented as proof of the backwardness of independent Tuva—if the state had been on a higher level of development it would have been given the status of Union Republic immediately. The idea of a referendum, raised by the Popular Front in May 1990, is belittled—it is contended that it was unthinkable to hold one in 1944 (yet there was a referendum in neighbouring Mongolia in 1945, bringing the country its independence). One of the greatest undertakings of the Popular Front in exposing all manner of falsifications was a damages account compiled after the example of the Baltic republics. In order to judge fairly whether Tuva was indebted to Russia or the other way round, data on the export of gold and sable furs since the end of the past century were collected and it appeared that Tuva was well out of the red.

The demands of the radical wing of the Popular Front clearly exceeded even those of some of the Baltic states' Fronts—it proposed that the whole population of the republic should vote in the elections of the mayor and the city council of Kyzyl because the native people represented a minority in their own capital. A little later it proposed the transfer of the capital to another, more Tuvan city.

In spring 1991 the situation changed radically. On the eve of Lenin’s birthday (22 April), at nighttime, 10-metre high letters LENIN on Doha mountain—sacred to Tuvans—were destroyed, and the Russian Mayor of Kyzyl, E. Slobodchikov, refused to carry out the party leadership’s order to restore them. A little later the Tuvan branch of the Democratic Russia movement was formed with his participation—so the Tuvan nationalists gained an ally in their fight against the old leadership.

On 25 April 1991 a radical land reform was proclaimed which gave a chance to restore private property. A week later it was officially announced that on 15 August the celebration of the 70th anniversary of the independence of Tuva would take place.

The organising committee of the festivities was headed by the party leader, Shirshin. His report mentioned for the first time the names of all members of the first Tannu-Tuva government, but the events of the 1930s were skipped over with reference to a bias to the left (forced collectivisation) and repression that led to the death of Churmit-Dazy and others. Both the report and other so-called official pre-anniversary publications began with the Russian October Revolution of 1917, i.e. omitting the Tuvan independence decision of 1912 as well as the reforms of 1932–38. Unification with Russia in October 1944 was consistently presented as an expression of the will of the people.

It was also symptomatic that the only foreign—Mongolian—delegation was not represented on the state level, but by the leaders of the regions (aymaks) adjoining Tuva. This confirmed that the Tuvan leadership was not orientated to real sovereignty. This was demonstrated for the last time during the 19–21 August 1991 events in Moscow, when the Tuvan leaders stood at the putschists side. After the putsch failed, the nationalist and democratic forces gained the initiative. On 27 August a group of intellectuals and youth leaders started a (new) hunger strike demanding the resignation of the leadership of the republic. On the next day, 28 August, at an extraordinary session of the parliament, the Chairman of the Supreme Soviet, Ondar, resigned. The Communist Party’s property was taken
TUVA REAWAKENS

over by the government. On the same day Tuva was renamed the Republic of Tuva.

It was decided that the new Chairman of the Supreme Soviet should be elected with alternative candidates. Nationalist forces proposed Bicheldey. The second candidate was the Prime Minister, Oorzhak, who stepped down at the moment of the elections—2 October. So the representative of the Popular Front was elected Chairman of the Supreme Soviet.

It was an astonishing victory because the PF had only nine representatives in the 130-member parliament, yet only 28 votes were cast against Bicheldey. In fact it was a compromise because the government and other authorities remained in the hands of the nomenklatura. The deputies included 30 party and 20 soviet officials, 45 directors of enterprises and factories, only six physicians, five teachers and 15 workers; others were representatives of the army, Ministry of the Interior, KGB, trade union leaders and researchers.

The existing balance of forces also determined the course of events that followed. A law on property was speedily adopted, and preparations were made for the privatisation of trade, flats and service enterprises. On 4–5 November an official Tuva delegation headed by Bicheldey went on a visit to Mongolia, where an economic agreement, as well as agreements on cultural and scientific cooperation, were signed. In Bicheldey’s opinion the economic agreement provided Mongolia with an opportunity for the recognition of Tuvan sovereignty. Before the visit, the ‘frontier zone’ along the Mongolian border—in fact the property of the Soviet Army—was abolished and that area came under the jurisdiction of the Tuvan authorities. The leaders of Tuva and Mongolia also admitted the existence of territorial claims, but stressed that they would not be discussed.

In Ulan Bator references were made to Bicheldey’s forthcoming visit to Turkey. That visit never took place. The Tuvan press attributed this to interference from the Russian Foreign Ministry, which was displeased with the Tuvan leaders’ excessively independent actions. Indirect evidence of this is Bicheldey’s statement that the agreements concluded during his visit to Mongolia had earlier been shown to Moscow. Simultaneously with the cancellation of Bicheldey’s visit a new offensive by conservatives started in the Supreme Soviet (a number of draft laws were voted down) as well as in the press (publication of articles by Shirshin). The local branch of Democratic Russia, a non-Tuvan organisation, decided to boycott the presidential election because it saw a strong local power as a possible obstacle to El’tsin’s reform policy.

In this situation Bicheldey withdrew from the contest for the Tuvan presidency. But thanks to his initiative the Supreme Soviet decided, on 28 February 1992, to publish all the secret documents linked with ‘the voluntary entry’ of Tuva into the USSR. The most astonishing thing which was revealed was that juridically Tuva is still now at war with Hitler’s Germany!

Some 74.5% of citizens took part in the election of the President on 15 March, 89.2% voting in favour of the Prime Minister, Sh. Oorzhak. A. Melnikov, a Russian, who arrived in Tuva only in 1989 to be appointed to the post of Deputy Prime Minister, was elected Vice-President.
New parliamentary elections, which should give a picture of the real balance of forces in the country, have also been scheduled for 1992.

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8. Ibid., p. 78; Mollerov, pp. 26–28.
10. Istoriya Tuvy, Volume 2, p. 78.
11. Ibid., pp. 95–98.
15. Ocherki . . ., p. 76.
20. Ocherki . . ., p. 93.
21. Rezolyutssi II chrezvychainogo ob’edinennogo plenuma TsK i TsKK TNRKP (Kyzyl, 1933), pp. 31, 33.
22. Ocherki . . ., p. 96.
25. Tuvinskaya Pravda, 10 October 1990.
27. Serdobov, p. 122.
28. 20 let . . ., p. 58.
29. Serdobov, p. 197.
32. The figures are in Tuvinskaya Pravda, 14 October 1990. Toka was apparently the first foreign leader to receive the NKVD award. Toka, Polat and about 20 others were at the same time members of the RCP(b) and the TPRP. Tuvinskaya Pravda, 21 August 1991. Anchima attacked the policy of glasnost’ in August 1990. She was Deputy Prime Minister, 1944–61 and then head of the women’s organisation.
33. Ocherki . . ., p. 149.
34. Serdobov, p. 216.
40. Ocherki . . ., p. 124.
42. 20 let . . ., pp. 368–374.
The holding of the extraordinary session was directly influenced by my article in the Estonian Journal Politika, 11, 1991, which was reprinted complete in Russian in Molodezh' Tuvy, 24 January 1992. According to the Tuvan newspapers before the session even shops were covered with slogans condemning the unification with Russia in 1914 and the USSR in 1944 as 'historical mistakes'. After the election of the President the conservatives launched a fierce campaign against Molodezh' Tuvy (for publishing the article), Bicheldey (who delivered the main speech at the session) and the Estonian scientist T. Alatalu who 'hoped that there are none alive who remember what exactly took place in 1944. As my grandfather had told me...'. (Tuvinskaya Pravda, 23 April 1992).