MONGOLIA REVISITED

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MONGOLIA REVISITED*

by

Harrison E. Salisbury
The New York Times

The high plateaus and steep mountain valleys seemed to sleep under their winter blanket of snow just as in the days of Chingis Khan. From the low-flying plane I could see here and there a herd of horses or a flock of sheep, black dots against the sparkling white, grazing in the lowland pastures. From tiny clusters of yurts thin columns of blue smoke rose straight upward in the still sunshine and cloudless Mongolian sky.

Returning after an absence of two and a half years I saw few signs of change in the snow-white world of the endless countryside. True, there was a new Russian-style airport building and, even from the air, I could see that much construction had gone up in Ulaanbaatar since my last visit in the summer of 1959.

But flying south from Irkutsk in the small Russian-built, Mongol-operated Ilyushin-14 the jagged mountains, the black forests, and the broad steppe were clothed in timeless tranquility.

At the airport I was met by a tall, serious Mongol named Purevdorj. As we waited for my bags to clear customs we made casual conversation. I asked if he had ever been in China. No, he said, he had not.

"China has very many people," Purevdorj said. His English was halting and much of our conversation was in Russian. "They have almost 700 million people."

"China has almost as many people as Russia, America, and India--all together," I said. "And by 1975 they will have more than one billion."

"That is a very great number of people," Mr. Purevdorj said. "Very great."

It was curious, I thought, that my first conversation after landing in Mongolia should come right to the heart of what was probably the most significant political fact in Asia--the massive weight of China's population. Mr. Purevdorj did not attempt to draw any conclusion from this fact, but he did not seem to derive any pleasure from China's monstrous statistics.

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* In slightly different form the following will appear as part of a chapter devoted to Mongolia in Mr. Salisbury's forthcoming book A New Russia?. (Cf. CR 28, p. 27 below.) The Editor is grateful to Mr. Salisbury for permitting the inclusion of this article here; he has taken the liberty of respelling Mongolian names in accordance with the system introduced in this Newsletter I:1 pp. 14-5.

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I asked him about the man who had been my guide in 1959, an ardent advocate of Chinese Communism who hotly had insisted that China's way was the best way for Mongolia and, indeed, for all Asia. I had heard much talk of that kind in Ulaabaatar during the summer of 1959. Most of the young Mongols I talked with then had been to China. They were impressed. I was impressed too, at the great effort that China was making to woo Mongolia. It was here that I saw for the first time open competition between the Soviet and the Chinese Communisms for the favor of an Asian people. Mr. Purevdorj informed me that my former guide had now gone to China. When he might return was not known.

Ulaanbaatar in 1959 had swarmed with Chinese--members of a labor and technical force which numbered perhaps 25,000 or more, sent into Mongolia as free assistance by the Chinese. I had wondered at China's generosity until I learned that the Mongols had given the Chinese the option of becoming Mongol citizens and settling on the land--if they wished--once the aid projects were completed. It was, I suspected, a device to shoehorn into Mongolia a Chinese minority which, later, might be used as the nucleus of a fifth column when, as, and if China felt powerful enough to try to take over the country.

As we drove into town along the snowy highway I wondered which power had come out on top in the struggle--China or Russia? Two years ago there had been thousands of Chinese working along this road, putting up apartment houses, erecting factories, constructing a bridge, widening the pavement, installing sewers, watermains, electric conduits.

Today I found them vanished. Construction work was still going on but most of the projects the Chinese had worked on were completed. There were whole areas of the city which had been transformed. Crossing the Tuul River by the new steel-and-concrete bridge I could see that the "battleground" as I had called the center of town (in the summer of 1959 it was so torn up with construction that it looked like a city being prepared for street fighting) had disappeared. Gone were the great camps of Chinese workers, located a stone's throw from Suxbaatar Square. We rode over broad boulevards to an imposing, modern building: it was the Ulaanbaatar hotel, gleaming in modern decor from the sparkling plate-glass doors to the sun-lighted suites tastefully furnished in the latest Scandinavian taste.

Two years before I had stayed at a pleasant but primitive "guest house"--a refurbished barracks some 10 miles out in the country. There was no place in town that had plumbing or running water. Now I was provided with a suite and private bath with excellent plumbing--better, indeed, than in my Moscow hotel.

There'd been some changes made in Mongolia--that was obvious.

That night I watched a bunch of youngsters from Karakorum, the ancient capital of Chingis Khan, jitterbugging in the hotel restaurant to the music of "Frank's Band." Frank's band was an eight-piece jazz combo made up of four saxophones, two trumpets, a bass viol, and a

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drummer. They had glitter shields, a drum that glowed red and green from within, and a repertoire of American numbers that included "Sugar Puss, I Love You So." The repertoire was courtesy of "Music USA," the famous American short-wave all-music radio program. But the glitter shields and instruments had come with the hotel along with the new plumbing, Swedish-type furniture, beautiful porcelein, specially blown glassware, and silverware--all from Czechoslovakia. The hotel was planned, directed, and managed by Czechs (but built with Chinese labor). The Mongols were learning the hotel business under Czech guidance.

Change: I found it everywhere I went in Ulaanbaatar. But it was not merely physical. A new spirit seemed at work among the people themselves--the intellectuals, ordinary factory workers, and even the herdsmen who still warmed themselves around the iron stoves of yurts in the winter pasturelands.

Breaking out of a cocoon of long isolation, the Mongols were working hard to broaden their national horizons and to forge economic, cultural, and diplomatic ties with other countries.

One Mongol after another, bursting with shy pride, said to me: "You know we have people in New York now--at the United Nations."

Mongolia had taken her seat at the United Nations only a few weeks before my arrival, and in the minds of her citizens this event was symbolic of the new Mongolia, a proud and prestigious development.

This was only a first step. Next--or so believed the Mongols, from Acting Premier Luvsancerengiin Tsend on down--came the establishment of diplomatic relations with the United States.

"We're all learning English," a professor at Ulaanbaatar University chuckled. "Everyone I know is hoping to visit the United States."

"Do you think that America might let a group of our journalists pay a visit--even before diplomatic relations are established?" an editor inquired hopefully.

"Would it be very expensive to publish a magazine about Mongolia in the United States?" an official asked. "We're so anxious for the American people to learn about our country."

Repeatedly the Mongols expressed gratitude and appreciation for United States action in helping Mongolia at long last to enter the United Nations. Because I was an American they wanted to show their feelings to me. Some Mongols actually seemed to believe that the United States had sponsored Mongolia's admission.

I found Mr. Tsend disappointed but philosophical about America's failure to establish diplomatic relations after opening up discussion in the summer of 1961. Mr. Tsend appeared to be aware that there was strong official U.S. sentiment for this step and that it had been balked

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only because of difficulties raised by the Nationalist Chinese government.

Mr. Tsend, a strapping six-foot Mongolian with a wide smile and a strong handclasp, was the number two man in Ulaanbaatar. The Premier, Mr. Tsedenbal, was absent in Moscow at the time of my visit. Mr. Tsend was careful to emphasize that there was no obstacle from the Mongol side so far as relations were concerned. He felt the United States could play a positive role in Mongolia's future, not only in trade, artistic, and cultural exchanges, but also in providing Mongolia with technical and scientific know-how, especially in agriculture and livestock breeding.

"We know," he said, "that in your American west you have conditions which in many respects are similar to our own. We are eager to have the benefit of American techniques."

It was obvious that Mongolia was seeking to broaden her contacts with nations outside the Communist community. And while Mr. Tsend emphasized that Mongolia's relations with Communist China had not so far been affected by the broadening Soviet-Chinese conflict, I could not avoid the conclusion that Mongolia looked to the future through westward glasses. Mr. Tsend revealed that more than 75 percent of Mongolia's outside aid was now coming from Russia and only 20 percent from China. The Soviet predominance was due to rise sharply in the 1961-65 Mongolian five-year plan. Mr. Tsend said there were still 10,000 to 12,000 Chinese in Mongolia.

"Where are they?" I inquired. "I have seen hardly any."

Mr. Tsend smiled. "The weather is very cold. Perhaps they are all working indoors."

The airplane which had brought me east from Moscow had been filled with Bulgarians and Bulgarian wives and children, coming out to work in Mongolia. Mr. Tsend said there had been a marked increase in technical aid from eastern Europe and that many Bulgarians were coming to work on construction and agricultural projects. I wondered whether the Bulgarians might be coming as replacements in case the Chinese withdrew.

In fact I was not entirely convinced that the Chinese had not already left until one day we drove across the broad plain four or five miles outside Ulaanbaatar. I noticed in the distance a familiar sight. Just after Stalin's death I had made a long trip into eastern Siberia and became accustomed to the appearance of labor camps which dotted the area. What I saw across the plain looked much the same--the same high wooden fence, topped by strands of barbed wire, rows of small huts inside, and at each corner a high wooden watchtower with tommygunners. The only difference I could see was that these huts had a curious kind of thatched roof, lashed down with tarpaulins. There were three camps scattered across the open plains.

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"What are those establishments?" I asked the Mongol who was with me.

"Those are for the Chinese workers," he replied.

I never learned whether the tommygunners were Mongols watching to see that the Chinese didn't leave, or Chinese, eyeing their own people lest they make a break. But an end obviously had come to free and easy mingling of the Chinese with the Mongols. No longer did the Chinese swarm through the center of the city. No longer did they ride their bicycles along the river. I saw not a single Chinese at the theater and only a handful in the stores and markets.

One day all Ulaanbaatar turned out at the airport for the arrival of the Soviet spaceman, Major Gherman Titov, and his pretty wife. The whole town buzzed. The streets were decorated with red Soviet banners and red-blue-yellow Mongol flags. Factories closed. School children were let out. But there wasn't a Chinese at the airport--except for the Ambassador--and even along the line of march Chinese labor crews patiently went ahead digging ditches and laying sewer pipes. The only Chinese who watched the parade were four men who leaned on their long-handled shovels and looked on with curious but guilty expressions as though they knew they shouldn't be neglecting their urgent shovel work.

It was no accident, of course, that these changes had come about. I found not a single Chinese patient in the leading hospital (although there were perhaps thirty Russians, Czechs, Germans, and Bulgarians undergoing treatment). There was only one Chinese faculty member (a language teacher) at Ulaanbaatar University, and about twenty Chinese language students. At a big textile center which I had watched going up in 1959 under the guidance of Chinese engineers there were only half a dozen Chinese left. The Chief Lama of the Mongol Buddhists reported that for the third year running they had been cut off from their Buddhist co-religionists in Tibet, unable to make the customary pilgrimage because of a ban by the Chinese government. Mongol scientists told me there had been a sudden and total interruption in contact with their colleagues in Chinese-controlled Inner Mongolia.

"One Chinese told me they were unable to send us their journals because of lack of paper," a Mongol scientist told me. "But most of the paper in our stores comes from China."

In the Mongol stores I found Chinese consumer goods--Dragon Column sugar, Three Star crayons, Golden Dragon thermos bottles, Red Poppy candies, and Heavenly Blossom tea.

But the heavy weight of Mongolia's economic system had swung strongly to the Soviet side and this was what counted. Russia had clearly won the first round of the contest with China for predominant influence in Mongolia, and she had done it by pumping in hundreds of millions of rubles in loans and grants. China had literally been backed into the corner.

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The cost of this had not been small. For example, the 1961-65 plan called for a total expenditure of 4,500,000,000 tegregs. The tegreg is nominally valued at 4.55 to the dollar and 4.45 to the ruble. The rate is anomolous because in Moscow the ruble is valued at 1.11 to the dollar.

The Soviet is providing at least 14 percent of the cost of the Mongol five-year plan, China 4 percent, and other Communist countries 2 or 3 percent. Over the five years the Soviet contribution was calculated at $350,000,000 or about $350 per head on the basis of a Mongolian population estimated at below one million. China's investment would be $50 million. Total Soviet investment in Mongolia by 1965 would come to $975,000,000--if not more--compared with Chinese advances of $115,000,000.

The magnitude of the Soviet effort was brought out by comparison with, for example, United States aid to Iran. In the same period U.S. aid to Iran ran only about 25 percent more than total Communist aid to Mongolia (just under $1.5 billion), but Iran's population was twenty times that of Mongolia.

Where two years ago China seemed to be challenging Soviet influence in Mongolia successfully, now the tide ran sharply in the other direction. Mongolia's Soviet-trained, Soviet-educated leaders had come down firmly on Russia's side of the Chinese-Soviet conflict.

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MONGOLIAN PROGRAM OF THE AMERICAN COUNCIL OF LEARNED SOCIETIES

by

John Lotz
Director of Research

Mongolian studies form an integral part of the Uralic and Altaic Program of the American Council of Learned Societies /abbrev. ACLS UAP below/. This program includes--besides Mongolian--Turkic, Manchu-Tungus, Korean, and general Altaic subjects, as well as Uralic (Hungarian, Finnish, Estonian, etc.). It is carried out pursuant to a contract between the United States Office of Education and the American Council of Learned Societies, to run during the entire first phase of the National Defense Education Act, 16 June 1959 to 30 June 1963.

The program aims primarily at producing language teaching materials, but it also intends to prepare background materials--the bibliographical guides, general area handbooks, surveys of geography, anthropology, history, linguistics, etc.--necessary for an understanding of the

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