

DRAFT

False Lama

The Life and Death of Dambijantsan

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CHAPTER ONE

FERDINAND OSSENDOWSKI MEETS THE TUSHEGOUN LAMA

Even as a college student I was keen on the history of Inner Asia and of Mongolia in particular, and I often spent hours embowered in an isolated carrel deep in the bowels of my college library poring over histories and travel accounts of the area. One day while standing in the front of the stacks dealing with Mongolia I noticed an old and worn tome with a faded dark burgundy-colored cover. On the spine in barely legible black letters was the title *Beasts, Men and Gods*. Pulling the book from the shelf I discovered that it was written by a Polish geologist-adventurer named Ferdinand Ossendowski and published in 1922. Returning to my carrel I quickly became engrossed in Ossendowski's account of how in 1920 he, a partisan of the White Russian government of Admiral Kolchak, had fled from the newly installed Bolshevik authorities in Siberia and after various adventures in the wilderness of the upper Yenisei River Basin had arrived in Mongolia. From Mongolia he and the Russian refugees whom he had fallen in with hoped to travel south through Tibet and ultimately seek asylum in British-controlled India. According to Ossendowski his party was turned back somewhere on the edge of the Tibetan Plateau after a gun battle with bandits in which he himself was wounded. Forced to return to Mongolia, he eventually ended up in Uliastai, a town in the western part of the country which during the period of domination of Mongolia by China served as one of the headquarters of the Manchu, or Qing, administration. At the time Uliastai was hardly a safe haven.

In 1911, when the Qing Dynasty finally collapsed, Mongolia had declared its independence and a monarchy ruled by the Eighth Bogd Gegeen was created. The Bogd Gegeen, the incarnated leader of Buddhism in Mongolia, now took the title of Bogd Khan and assumed both spiritual and

temporal control of the country. He immediately issued orders expelling Manchu officials and troops from Uliastai and the fortress-city of Khovd farther west. The military governor of Uliastai gave up without a fight (unlike, as we shall see, the military governor of Khovd) and along with his troops was given safe passage out of the country.

In 1915, however, independent Mongolia, squeezed between the demands of its two immense neighbors, was forced to accept the so-called Tripartite Agreement adopted by Russia and China during a meeting of the three countries at Kyakhta on the Mongolian-Russian border. By the terms of this accord Mongolia would remain an autonomous power, but under the suzerainty of China. The Chinese government stationed four military governors and supporting troops in Urga, Kyakhta, Khovd and Uliastai, and Chinese traders and merchants were allowed to resume their activities, most importantly the collection of the huge debts with which they had saddled the Mongolian people prior to 1911 and on which compound interest was rapidly accruing.

Then in the autumn of 1918 more Chinese troops arrived in Mongolia, partly on the pretext of protecting it from the newly organized Bolshevik armies which had appeared to the north in Siberia after the Russian Revolution. Faced with the de facto military occupation of their country, Mongolian leaders, including the Bogd Khan, were pressured into negotiations to once again accept further Chinese authority. Then in late 1919 a still larger Chinese army, led by General Hsü Shu-teng, arrived in Urga. The dictatorial Little Hsü, as he was known, forced the Mongolian leadership to accept the revocation of Mongolian autonomy and declared that the country was once again part of China. During the ceremony to hand over power to the Chinese, which took place in February of 1920, Mongolian officials were made to kowtow to Little Hsü, and the Bogd Khan had to display obeisance to the Chinese flag. The Chinese were back with a vengeance.

These then were the unsettled conditions that Ossendowski encountered in Uliastai in 1921. "When we arrived in that town," Ossendowski wrote, "we were at once in the sea of political passions. The Mongols were protesting in great agitation against the Chinese policy in their country; [and] the Chinese raged and demanded from the Mongolians the payment of taxes for the full period since the autonomy of Mongolia had been forcibly extracted from Peking . . ." The situation was further complicated by bands of White Russian desperadoes and Russian Bolshevik

spies and provocateurs who swarmed through the countryside terrorizing the populace.²

Not long after their arrival in Uliastai, Ossendowski and a companion made a reconnaissance toward the town of Khovd in search of Red Army detachments rumored to be approaching from the west. Wrote Ossendowski:

About halfway to Kobdo we came across the yurta [in Mongolian *ger*; the round felt tent of the nomads] of a shepherd on the shore of the small lake of Baga Nor, where evening and a strong wind whirling gusts of snow in our faces easily persuaded us to stop. By the yurta stood a splendid bay horse with a saddle richly ornamented with silver and coral. As we turned in from the road, two Mongols left the yurta very hastily; one of them jumped into the saddle and quickly disappeared in the plain behind the snowy hillocks. We clearly made out the flashing folds of his yellow robe under the great outer coat and saw his large knife sheathed in a green leather scabbard and handled with horn and ivory. The other man was the host of the yurta, the shepherd of a local prince, Novontziran. He gave signs of great pleasure at seeing us and receiving us in his yurt.

“Who was the rider on the bay horse?” we asked.

He dropped his eyes and was silent.

“Tell us,” we insisted. “If you do not wish to speak his name, it means that you are dealing with a bad character.”

“No! No!” he remonstrated, flourishing his hands. “He is a good, great man; but the law does not permit me to speak his name.”³

They took refuge for the night in the *ger* and were having a dinner of boiled mutton with their host when a man suddenly entered and greeted them in “a low, hoarse voice.” Ossendowski continued:

We turned around from the brazier to the door and saw a medium height, very heavy set Mongol in deerskin overcoat and cap with side flaps and the long, wide tying strings of the same material. Under his girdle lay the same large knife in the green sheath which we had seen on the departing horseman. He quickly untied his girdle and laid aside his overcoat. He stood before us in a wonderful gown of silk, yellow as beaten gold and girt with a brilliant blue sash. His cleanly shaven face, short hair, red coral rosary on the left hand and his yellow garment proved clearly that before us stood some high Lama Priest—with a big Colt under his blue sash! I turned to my host and Tzeren and read in their faces fear and veneration. The stranger came over to the brazier and sat down.

There followed an animated discussion of the then-current political situation in Mongolia, during which their visitor found much fault with the Mongolian government’s inability to unite again against the Chinese

occupiers:

“We are without action here while the Chinese kill our people and steal from them. I think that Bogdo Khan might send us envoys. How is it the Chinese can send their envoys from Urga and Kiakhta to Kobdo, asking for assistance, and the Mongol Government cannot do it? Why?”

“Will the Chinese send help to Urga?” I asked.

Our guest laughed hoarsely and said: “I caught all the envoys, took away their letters and then sent them back . . . into the ground.”

He laughed again and glanced around peculiarly with his blazing eyes. Only then did I notice that his cheekbones and eyes had lines strange to the Mongols of Central Asia. He looked more like a Tartar or a Kirghiz.

Ossendowski then told the mysterious stranger of his thwarted attempt to reach India via Tibet. Upon hearing the tale the stranger “became attentive and very sympathetic in his bearing toward us and, with evident feeling of regret, expressed himself strongly: ‘Only I could have helped you in this enterprise . . . With my *laissez-passer* you could have gone anywhere in Tibet. I am Tushegoun Lama.’”

Ossendowski:

Tushegoun Lama! How many extraordinary tales I had heard about him. He is a Russian Kalmuck, who because of his propaganda work for the independence of the Kalmuck people made the acquaintance of many Russian prisons under the Czar and, for the same cause, added to his list under the Bolsheviki. He escaped to Mongolia and at once attained to great influence among the Mongols. It was no wonder, for he was a close friend and pupil of the Dalai Lama in Potala [Lhasa], was the most learned among the Lamites, a famous thaumaturgist and doctor. He occupied an almost independent position in his relationship with the Living Buddha and achieved to the leadership of all the old wandering tribes of Western Mongolia and Zungaria, even extending his political domination over the Mongolian tribes of Turkestan. His influence was irresistible, based as it was on his great control of mysterious science, as he expressed it; but I was also told that it has its foundation largely in the panicky fear which he could produce in the Mongols. Everyone who disobeyed his orders perished. Such a one never knew the day or the hour when, in his yurt or beside his galloping horse on the plains, the strange and powerful friend of the Dalai Lama would appear. The stroke of a knife, a bullet or strong fingers strangling the neck like a vise accomplished the justice of the plans of this miracle worker.

Ossendowski claimed that after he became aware of the identity of the visitor he began to question in his mind whether the man was capable of the so-called miracles with which he was credited. The Tushegoun Lama then, according to Ossendowski, gave an example of the mind-reading

abilities for which he was famous:

This thought had scarcely time to flash through my mind before Tushegoun Lama suddenly raised his head, looked sharply at me and said: "There is very much unknown in Nature and the skill of using the unknown produces the miracle; but the power is given to few. I want to prove it to you and you may tell me afterwards whether you have seen it before or not."

He stood up, pushed back the sleeves of his yellow garment, seized his knife and strode across to the shepherd.

"Michik, stand up!" he ordered.

When the shepherd had risen, the Lama quickly unbuttoned his coat and bared the man's chest. I could not yet understand what was his intention, when suddenly the Tushegoun with all his force struck his knife into the chest of the shepherd. The Mongol fell all covered with blood, a splash of which I noticed on the yellow silk of the Lama's coat.

"What have you done?" I exclaimed.

"Sh! Be still," he whispered turning to me his now quite blanched face.

With a few strokes of the knife he opened the chest of the Mongol and I saw the man's lungs softly breathing and the distinct palpitations of the heart. The Lama touched these organs with his fingers but no more blood appeared to flow and the face of the shepherd was quite calm. He was lying with his eyes closed and appeared to be in deep and quiet sleep. As the Lama began to open his abdomen, I shut my eyes in fear and horror; and, when I opened them a little while later, I was still more dumbfounded at seeing the shepherd with his coat still open and his breast normal, quietly sleeping on his side and Tushegoun Lama sitting peacefully by the brazier, smoking his pipe and looking into the fire in deep thought.

"It is wonderful!" I confessed. "I have never seen anything like it!"

"About what are you speaking?" asked the Kalmuck.

"About your demonstration or 'miracle,' as you call it," I answered.

"I never said anything like that," refuted the Kalmuck, with coldness in his voice.

"Did you see it?" I asked of my companion.

"What?" he queried in a dozing voice.

I realized that I had become the victim of the hypnotic power of Tushegoun Lama; but I preferred this to seeing an innocent Mongolian die, for I had not believed that Tushegoun Lama, after slashing open the bodies of his victims, could repair them again so readily.

The next day Ossendowski and his companion decided to return to Uliastai. The Tushegoun Lama was still at their camp, but he told them that it was also time for him to "move through space." Ossendowski added, "He wandered over all Mongolia, lived both in the single, simple yurt of the shepherd and hunter and in the splendid tents of the princes and tribal chiefs, surrounded by deep veneration and panic-fear, enticing and

cementing to him rich and poor alike with his miracles and prophecies.”

As was my wont when any book interested me I immediately began background investigations. *Beasts, Men and Gods*, I learned, had received rave reviews upon its publication in 1922. The *New York Times Book Review* gushed that it was “a book of astounding, breath-taking, enthralling adventure, an odyssey whose narrator encountered more perils and marvels than did Ulysses himself, an account . . . in which the traveler faced danger and death in a greater variety of ways, saw more astounding things, [and] penetrated more mysteries than has any other man who had embarked upon perilous adventure in these days.”⁴ In London the reviewer in *The Times Literary Supplement* found himself at a loss for words: “A book like this makes one regret the vulgarization of adjectives. When one epithet seems inadequate, there is nothing to do but recall some of the rushing crowd of impressions it created.”⁵

The English language version of the book went into twenty-two printings in 1922 alone, selling some 300,000 copies, and the book was eventually translated into a dozen or more languages, becoming an international best-seller. Thus it was that at least a segment of the world’s reading public became aware of the existence of a mysterious figure known as Tushgoun Lama who lived somewhere in the wilds of the then-little known country of Mongolia.

Given the book’s high profile and sensational content, however, it is not surprising that detractors soon appeared. The book reviewers may have been bowled off their feet by the book’s sensational tales and florid prose but historians, explorers, and travelers who were more familiar with Mongolia found much in the book that was incorrect or simply unbelievable. Ossendowski’s abysmal ignorance of Mongolian history and of even the most basic tenets of Buddhism were particularly striking. One of his more virulent critics even entertained “the hypothesis that there was no such person as Ferdinand Ossendowski” and that the book was a ghost-written hoax.⁶ Others, while granting his existence, doubted that he had ever been Mongolia at all and suggested that the book was a cleverly contrived fabrication. This was not true; actually Ossendowski, who had been trained as mining engineer, had been in Mongolia before the 1920s as part of a geological expedition—a detail he neglects to mention in his book—and his presence in Mongolia in 1920–21 has been confirmed by numerous accounts of others who were there.⁷

The most damning attack came from none other than Sven “the Desert Wanderer” Hedin, the Swedish explorer and cartography who at the time was probably the West’s greatest expert on the geography of Central Asia. Ossendowski was intruding on Hedin’s turf and the notoriously prickly explorer was having none of it. He soon batted off a book entitled *Ossendowski und die Wahrheit* (*Ossendowski and the Truth*) in which he heatedly refuted Ossendowski’s claim that he had reached the Tibetan Plateau in his attempt to reach India and called into question other details of the Polish adventurer’s itinerary. Even more telling was Hedin’s accusation that Part v of *Beasts, Men and Gods*, entitled “Mystery of Mysteries—The King of the World,” was nothing more than a retelling, and in places blatant plagiarism, of an occult fantasy earlier unveiled to the light of day by the French occultist Joseph-Alexandre Saint-Yves d’Alveidre in his 1886 book *Mission de l’Inde en Europe* (*Mission of India in Europe*)

In the now-notorious Part v of his book Ossendowski told of an immense network of caverns under the surface of the earth in which no less than 800,000,000 people lived. These caves were all linked together into a subterranean kingdom called Agharti which was ruled a supra-human entity known as the King of the World. By telepathy and other means of mind control this King of the World and his minions sought to influence the development of above-ground mankind. At some time in the future this King would emerge from his underground lair and create a new, supposedly enlightened world order on the surface of the earth.

In brief, this was the Aghartian myth propounded by Joseph-Alexandre Saint-Yves d’Alveidre which Ossendowski retold in his own book, claiming that everyone in Mongolia, from the Bogd Gegeen right on down to common herders, were aware of the existence of Agharti and its ruler the King of the World. According to Ossendowski’s Mongolian informants, the King, in preparation for his final return, had already made brief appearances on the surface of the earth, most notably at Erdene Zuu and Narobanchin monasteries in Mongolia. One lama in the entourage of the 8th Bogd Gegeen told him, “The King of the World will appear before all people when the time shall have arrived for him to lead all the good people against the bad, but this time has not yet come. The most evil among mankind has not yet been born.”⁸

There were numerous portals to this underground realm, many of them in Mongolia and Tibet, and apparently it was possible for select individuals to travel through them and visit Agharti. At one point Ossendowski

asked the Tushegoun Lama if he had ever heard of the King of the World in Agharti. Wrote Ossendowski:

He stared and glanced at me in amazement "Have you heard about him?" he asked, as his brows knit in thought. After a few second he raised his narrow eyes and said, "Only one man knows his holy name; only one man now living was ever in Agharti. That is I. This is the reason why the Most Holy Dalai Lama has honored me and why the Living Buddha in Urga fears me. But in vain, for I shall never sit on the Holy Throne of the highest priest in Lhasa nor reach that which has come down from Jenghiz Khan to the Head of our Yellow Faith. I am no monk. I am a warrior and avenger."⁹

The existence of Agharti beneath Mongolia was certainly an amazing assertion, and the inclusion of such sensational material no doubt helped to make *Beasts, Men and Gods* an international best seller among the hoi-polloi, but more discerning readers, especially those with some actual knowledge of Asian history, geography, religion, myths, and legends soon dismissed Ossendowski's account of the subterranean kingdom of Agharti with openings in Mongolia and Tibet as utter fantasy. Confronted in Paris by a whole posse of European Tibetologists and other scholars, he finally issued a statement admitting that "this book of mine is not a scientific work but only the romantic story of my travel across Central Asia for the large public . . . So—my book *Beasts, Men and Gods* is exclusively a literary work, based on my observations in Central Asia."¹⁰ Ossendowski seemed to be implying here that not everything he wrote should be interpreted as literally true; instead, apparently, some parts of the book may have been based on "observations" enhanced by a liberal sense of literary license. *Beasts, Men, and Gods* was henceforth dismissed as a serious book in most quarters, although curiously enough the Aghartian mythologem as propounded by Ossendowski took on a life of itself and is still with us today, as any search of occult literature on the internet or elsewhere will very quickly reveal.

After reading about the Agharti–King of World controversy I could not help but wonder about Ossendowski's account of the Tushegoun Lama. Did such a person as the Tushegoun Lama actually exist or was he just another figment of Ossendowski's notoriously fecund imagination? And if such a person did exist, had Ossendowski enhanced his account of him by concocting a sensational tale about how he had been hypnotized into

believing that the Tushegoun Lama had sliced open the abdomen of a Mongolian herdsman? And what about the Tushegoun Lama's claim, as related by Ossendowski, that he had visited the apparently non-existent realm of Agharti? Even if the Tushegoun Lama actually existed, surely Ossendowski had fabricated this tantalizing little detail. The whole account of the so-called Tushegoun Lama was highly suspect.

I probably would just forgotten the whole matter if few days later I had not picked out another book from the Mongolia section of the library entitled *Mongolia and the Mongols* by the Russian ethnologist A. M. Podzneeov. Published in 1896 by the Russian Imperial Russian Geographical Society, the two-volume set is a detailed account of Podzneeov's thirteen month-long sojourn in Mongolia and China during the years 1892-93. In the first chapter Podzneeov describes a visit to Amarbayasgalant Monastery in northern Mongolia where in the course of a conversation with a monk he heard about a man named Dambi Jantsan:

. . . for at least an hour I listened to stories of how, during Dambi Jantsan's journey over the post road, the people, with secret fear and hope, had greeted him everywhere, paid him the most heartfelt obeisance, and brought him rich offerings. Others told me that Dambi Jantsan himself had scattered gold among the poorer Mongols, and there was no end of entirely legendary tales. From certain details of this story I guessed that the Mongol was talking about a certain charlatan, a Russian Kalmyk from the Little Dörbet ulus of the Astrakhan *gouvernement*, who, upon his arrival in Urga had been arrested by the Urga consulate and after interrogation had been sent under guard back across the Russian border.¹¹

Reading this, I soon realized that Podzneeov's "Dambi Jantsan" was one and same person as Ossendowski's "Tushegoun Lama." As a source, Podzneeov was almost unimpeachable. Precise in his statements and pedantic to a fault, if Podzneeov described such a person then he must actually exist. Thus it seemed that Dambijantsan (as his name is more commonly spelled), the so-called Tushegoun Lama, was in fact an historical personage and not one of Ossendowski's literary embellishments.

I dug the out of the library archives the available maps of Mongolia—there were very few available at the time—and following Podzneeov's description of his journey tried to locate Amarbayasgalant Monastery. I could not find it on any map. Did it even still exist? I knew even then that most monasteries in Mongolia had been destroyed during the communist anti-religion campaigns of the late 1930s. No matter. As I read more of Podzneeov's account I began fantasizing about following his itinerary and

trying to find Amarbayasgalant Monastery on the ground.

Of course I was just day-dreaming. Mongolia at that time was one of the most closed and isolated countries in the world. Only a few select scholars from the West and very-upscale tourist groups were allowed to visit the country and they were kept on a very short leash, largely confined to the capital of Ulaan Baatar and a few select sites like the Terelj tourism area north of the capital and the former Erdene Zuu Monastery farther out west, which had been turned into a museum. No foreigners were allowed to wander around by themselves, and a place like Amarbayasgalant Monastery, assuming it still existed, would have been strictly off limits. Little did I realize, sitting there day-dreaming in my library carrel, that several decades later I would become a regular visitor to Amarbayasgalant Monastery.

In the mid-1980s, a decade or so after reading Ossendowski, I again encountered Dambijantsan in the unlikely setting of the great-domed Reading Room of the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C. Perusing the catalog of the library's Mongolia-related items I noticed a book entitled *The Diluv Khutagt: Memoirs and Autobiography of a Mongol Buddhist Reincarnation in Religion and Revolution*, published in 1982. I had never heard of the Diluv Khutagt but the title was intriguing. The book was retrieved from the stacks and brought to my table amidst the hushed precincts of the reading room. Cracking the book open at random I was startled to see a chapter entitled "Dambijantsan." A quick perusal revealed that it was the one and same Dambijantsan described by Ossendowski and Pozdneev.

Starting over with the "Introduction" to the book—written by Mongolist Owen Lattimore—who I would soon discover had himself made considerable contributions to the Dambijantsan mythologem—I learned that the Diluv Khutagt (1883–1964) had been the incarnate lama in charge of Narobanchin Monastery in western Mongolia (as noted above, it was this monastery that the Aghartian King of the World had allegedly visited in 1890). He certainly had a distinguished pedigree. According to tradition the first incarnation of his line had been a disciple of the Buddha himself. A later incarnation in Tibet had been the famous Milarepa (c. 1052–1135), author of the classic *Hundred Thousand Songs of Milarepa*. Still more incarnations turned up on the Ordos Desert in what is now China. The Diluv Khutagt who authored the book in my hand was the

third incarnation to be born in Mongolia proper and one of the fourteen incarnations in Mongolia officially recognized by the Qing Dynasty.¹² He eventually fell afoul of the new communist government and fled to China. After a stint in Tibet as advisor to the Dalai Lama he emigrated to the United States where he ended up in New Jersey, of all places. In collaboration with Lattimore he then wrote his “Political Memoirs” and “Autobiography,” both of which were combined in one volume. Both sections of his book contain information about Dambijantsan, but the “Autobiography” has an entire chapter devoted to him—the only individual to merit such attention. He was six years old when he first met Dambijantsan, would encounter him many times in later life, and was eventually involved in the plot to assassinate him. Of the few Mongolians who left written accounts of Dambijantsan the Diluv Khutagt probably knew him best, but even to the Diluv Khutagt he remained an enigma: “He called himself a lama, but nobody knew if he really was one,” he wrote, . . . “no one knew the real truth about him.”¹³

Inspired by the Diluv Khutagt’s tales about Dambijantsan, I delved still deeper into the stacks of the Library of Congress and soon unearthed A. V. Burdukov’s *V Staroi i Novoi Mongolii* (*In Old and New Mongolia*). Burdukov was a Russian settler who lived for almost twenty years in what is now Uvs Aimag in northwestern Mongolia. He first met Dambijantsan in 1912 and would have many encounters with him in the following years. He provided considerable background material on Dambijantsan’s life, including Dambijantsan’s own version of how he spent his earlier years, and included a detailed account of the latter’s participation in the sack of the Manchu fortress at Khovd in 1912.

Also buried in the stacks was an English translation of I. M. Maisky’s *Sovremenennaia Mongoliia* (*Contemporary Mongolia*). Ivan Maisky, who later achieved considerable renown as the Soviet ambassador to England, visited Mongolia in 1919 on a fact-finding mission for the Soviet authorities in Irkutsk, the city near Lake Baikal in Siberia just north of Mongolia. He had traveled through what are now Khovd and Uvs aimags in western Mongolia when Dambijantsan was still alive and interviewed several people who knew the elusive lama. Maisky then inserted an entire chapter about Dambijantsan into his report about the mission, which was otherwise a mundane collection of economic statistics, census reports, and brief essays on the then-current political situation. As in the Diluv Khutagt’s “Autobiography,” Dambijantsan was the only individual to mer-

it his own chapter. "The story of his man is obscure in many details so that to construct his complete biography is hardly possible at the moment, but I have managed to learn the following facts about him," he begins, and then recounts what was known or rumored about Dambijantsan's past. At the time, however, Dambijantsan was holed up in his fortress at Gongpochuan, in Gansu Province, China, and Maisky was unable to get any information about his current activities. Maisky suspected, however, that the lack of news was just the lull before the storm.

But there is hardly a doubt that this is only a temporary stage in the stormy career of the ambitious monk. No one in Mongolia believes that his inactivity will last long. But he is keeping out of sight, like a cat, waiting for the right moment to make his leap. Who knows, we may very well hear about this man again. Who knows what role he is destined yet to play in Mongolian history.¹⁴

If the Diluv Khutagt, who actually knew Dambijantsan, and Maisky, researching while he was still alive, were unable to lift the veil of mystery surrounding him, then those who came later, after his death, and tried to make an account of Dambijantsan's life had a much harder task. George Roerich, son of famous artist, mystic, and Shambhalist Nicholas Roerich, attempted to gather information about Dambijantsan during his travels through Mongolia and China in 1927, and in his book *Trails to Inmost Asia*, he, like the Diluv Khutagt and Maisky, included an entire chapter about him entitled "Ja Lama, The Militant Priest." Here he noted :

. . . no one knows exactly where he came from or what his ambitions were. It is extremely difficult to piece together all the existing information about his life, so varied were his activities and so extensive were his travels. The arena of his activity was the whole of Asia, from Astrakhan to Peking and from Urga to distant India. I succeeded in collecting information about him and his life from Mongolian and Tibetan lamas and laymen whom fate brought into contact with the dreaded warrior-priest. This singular personality for some thirty-five years hypnotized the whole of Greater Mongolia. At present, some six years after the death of the man, Mongols feel an unholy dread of him, and worship him as a militant incarnation of one of their national leaders.¹⁵

George Roerich's arguably more famous father Nicholas noted in his own book about the expedition: "Ja-Lama was no ordinary bandit . . . What thoughts and dreams fretted the gray head of Ja-Lama? . . . All through the Central Gobi, the legend of Ja-Lama will persist for a long time. What a scenario for a moving picture!"¹⁶ Indeed, a movie eventu-

ally was made about Dambijantsan, and it is still occasionally shown on Mongolian State TV.

The author and scholar Owen Lattimore, who had befriended the Diluv Khutagt and assisting him with his memoirs, also tried to gather information on Dambijantsan's life. In 1926 he journeyed on the so-called Winding Road caravan route which went past Dambijantsan's fortress at Gongpochuan in Gansu Province, China, where he finally he had been assassinated. In *The Desert Road to Turkestan*, his book about the trip, he too included an entire chapter about Dambijantsan. As in the books of Diluv Khutagt, Maisky, and George Roerich, Dambijantsan was the only individual to merit such attention. Lattimore noted:

Already the legend of the False Lama has been elaborated beside the tent fires into many versions, but from the choice of details it is possible to throw together a picture with life in it, of an adventurer who, during those years when Mongolia echoed again with the drums and trappings of its mediaeval turbulence, proved himself a valiant heir in his day to all the Asiatic soldiers of fortune from Jenghis Khan to Yakub Beg of Kashgar.¹⁷

In 1955 Lattimore, by then a famous Mongolist, included a five-page summary of Dambijantsan's life in his *Nationalism and Revolution in Mongolia*.¹⁸ He announced here that he intended to write a biography of Dambijantsan, but for reasons unclear this project never materialized.

Still others wrote about Dambijantsan. The Danish explorer and colonist Henning Haslund visited Dambijantsan's fortress in Gansu in the late 1920s and included a chapter entitled "A Robber's Stronghold" about it in his book *Men & Gods in Mongolia* (the title may well have been an attempt to cash in on the initial success of Ossendowski's *Beasts, Men and Gods*). He attempts to recap Dambijantsan's life but relies mainly on the already published accounts of Maisky and the innumerable campfire tales then making the rounds. He had little new to add to the by-then snowballing legend. The Swedish explorer Sven "The Desert Wanderer" Hedin visited Dambijantsan's fortress in Gansu in 1934 and included a chapter about it entitled "Dambin Lama's Robber Castle" in his book *The Silk Road*. He too mainly repeated what others had already wrote. For the 1971 English translation of A. M. Pozdneev's *Mongolia and the Mongols* Professor Fred Adelman devoted six pages of the thirteen page preface to Dambijantsan, even though he is only mentioned once, as noted above, in the 749 pages of the two-volume set. In the early 1990s Dambijantsan's career got additional scholar gloss in a Cambridge University doctoral

thesis by John Gaunt entitled “The Charismatic Warlord in Revolutionary Mongolia.”

Thus there was no shortage of written material about Dambijantsan. It seems almost everyone who wrote about Mongolia from the 1890s to the 1930s had something to say about him. But much of what they had to say were admissions that they actually knew very little about his life. And in any case, some in modern-day Mongolia might dismiss his story as ancient history. Did anyone in current-day Mongolia still remember his name, let alone know any details of his life?

On my first trip to Mongolia in 1996 I quickly discovered that Dambijantsan had by no means been forgotten. On a horse trip in the Khentii Mountains, in Khentii Aimag in north-central Mongolia, an area not normally associated with Dambijantsan, I mentioned his name in passing to the herdsman from whom I had hired horses and who was acting as my guide. It turned out that he had been born in Bayankhongor Aimag, in southwest Mongolia, and as a youth had lived in the small town of Shinejinst, where he claimed that several descendants of Dambijantsan’s followers lived to this day. He also mentioned places in Bayankhongor Aimag frequented by Dambijantsan, including Ekhiin Gol Oasis and Shar Khuls Oasis, and regaled me for several hours with tales about Dambijantsan’s exploits and alleged magical feats.

Two years later I traveled by jeep by Gov-Altai Aimag, just west of Bayankhongor Aimag. Passing through the town of Tsogt, on a high plateau between the folds of the Gov-Altai Mountains, my jeep driver said, “This town is famous for its beautiful woman.” I paid no particular attention to this, since every other town in Mongolia is famous for its beautiful women, but then he added, “Dambijantsan found two of his wives here.” At that time I was unaware of Dambijantsan’s connection with Gov-Altai Aimag and I had made no mention of him to the driver. “You know about Dambijantsan?” I asked. It turns out the driver knew a lot and from him I learned for the first time about Dambijantsan’s activities around the town of Bayan Tooroi and elsewhere in southern Gov-Altai Aimag. On that trip, incidentally, I also visited the ruins of Narobanchin Monastery, the former home of the Diluv Khutagt.

I soon discovered that there was hardly anyone in Mongolia over the age of sixteen who had not at least heard of Dambijantsan. This was due in large part to the movie that had been made about him back in the 1980s

and still occasionally re-shown on Mongolian State TV. Yet many older people, especially in the southwestern aimags, knew stories and legends about Dambijantsan which had been passed down over the decades, oftentimes from people who had actually known him, and they had very pronounced opinions about the enigmatic adventurer. Some maintained he was a lama, a *bagsh*, or teacher, who had tried to live by Buddhist principles, although not always with the best results, while others asserted that he was nothing more than a very shrewd and exceptionally cruel bandit. Still other maintained that he a pathological torturer and murderer and downright evil. One thing was sure; although Dambijantsan had been dead for almost eighty years he had certainly not been forgotten. Indeed, there were those who claimed that although his body may have died at Gongpochuan in 1922 his spirit still rode on the winds of the Gobi and continued to haunt his secret hangouts. I myself would experience the uncanny fear and dread which comes over those who now visit his former lairs.