I INTRODUCTION

On 27 June 1921 the Soviet Army crossed the border into Outer Mongolia, bringing the Mongolian revolution to rapid victory. This has led to the widely accepted theory that Soviet intervention was a straightforward invasion of Outer Mongolia in the course of Soviet expansionism. According to this view the request of the Mongolian People’s Party for Soviet support was made at Russian instigation, and the capture of Urga (now Ulan Bator) by Ungern-Sternberg is interpreted as a mere pretext for the Russian invasion, as Ungern posed no real or substantial threat to the Soviet regime. As George Murphy has written: the Soviet authorities ‘were at the end of a victorious struggle and both their morale and their confidence were high’, and ‘the goal of Urga, and of acquisition of influence over the vast region of Outer Mongolia, seems to have been irresistible to the Soviet government’. There is no doubt that the propagation of revolutionary ideas was a fundamental objective of the Bolsheviks, but when we look more carefully at both the internal and international situation of Soviet Russia in 1921, such a motive, even when linked to the supposed desire of Russia to secure and exploit the abundant natural resources of her neighbour, does not appear sufficient to account for an invasion of Outer Mongolia at this particular point in time.

In this paper, discussion will be focused on the reasons for the Soviet intervention of 1921, leaving the various ideological and political aspects of Soviet influence to be treated elsewhere.

II THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE MONGOLIAN REVOLUTION

In December 1911, with the ‘eighth reincarnation’ of the Urga ‘Living Buddha’ as bogd khaan (sacred emperor) of Mongolia, the territory of Outer Mongolia declared its independence of China. The Mongols reasoned that as they had at the end of the seventeenth century originally submitted to the Ch’ing (Manchu) emperor, recognizing him as their khaan, their allegiance to China naturally terminated with the fall of the imperial dynasty and the creation of a republic. A Mongol secessionist movement was, in fact, already in being, in response to the ‘new policy’ of Ch’ing China to bring Outer Mongolia under its direct control, thus depriving the Mongol princes of their rights to
rule within their own respective territories. A delegation of Mongol princes and high lamas had accordingly been sent to St. Petersburg in the summer of 1911 to seek Russian support for an independent Mongolia. In addition to this nationalist initiative there were the manifest grievances of the lower classes, who were either personally subject to the princes or the monasteries, or obliged to perform corvées for the Ch’ing dynasty. Being required to pay dues to their lords and the costs of administration, as well as their own personal expenses, they were deeply in debt to Chinese merchant-usurers. Clearly they too had ample reason to want to be free of Manchu-Chinese exploitation.

Though the Mongols thus aimed at establishing an independent Mongol state, uniting both Inner and Outer Mongolia, no other country recognized their independence; even Russia limited its support to Outer Mongolian autonomy, wishing neither to create international complications nor to take upon itself the difficult task of organizing the still underdeveloped Mongols into a state, which, as Foreign Minister Sazonov declared to the Duma, ‘would involve great financial expense and enormous labour’.

The Peking government was finally forced to compromise, and after the Russo-Chinese joint declaration of 1913, which recognized Chinese suzerainty over an autonomous Outer Mongolia, the status of Outer Mongolia was formalized by the tripartite agreement of 1915 between Russia, China and Mongolia, which effectively put an end to Mongol hopes for a united Mongol state. Nevertheless, because of internal disorder in China, Outer Mongolia did enjoy de facto independence until the end of 1919, long enough for some Mongols to realize that Manchu exploitation had simply been replaced by increased exactions by their own ruling classes. In this period the beginnings of modern education in Mongolia and the publication of newspapers in the Mongol language created a new type of secular ‘intellectual’. After the Russian Revolution of 1917 many Mongols, even in the countryside, heard that the tsar had been overthrown and that the Russian people had ‘become equal’, and in Urga itself progressive Russians explained the new ideas to their Mongol friends.

III THE EARLY SOVIET ATTITUDE TO MONGOLIA

In the summer of 1919 the Soviet government sent a message to the Mongol people and the autonomous government of (Outer) Mongolia, renouncing the Russo-Chinese joint declaration of 1913, and telling the Mongols that, ‘as an independent country’, they would be ‘free to have direct relations with any foreign countries, without consulting either Petrograd or Peking’. The message ended with an invitation to the Mongol people to send delegates to meet the Red army. A message very much along the same lines, dated 25 July 1919 and known as the Karakhan manifesto, was sent also to ‘the Chinese people and the governments of the south and the north’. The style and content of these messages suggest that they were a reflection of the optimism and idealism of the early Soviet leaders. Paragraph 6 of the text sent to China expresses the hope that the Chinese people, once liberated from foreign oppression, would give freedom to their minorities in much the same way that Soviet Russia had recognized the right of self-determination of its own minorities, even to the point of allowing their secession.

Even if the Soviet leaders had actually intended to entice the Mongols away from the Chinese, they were of course in no position to undertake any effective measures towards that end. In the summer of 1919 the Allied intervention in Siberia still posed a grave