From the perspective of Mongolia’s religious history, the last century has been characterised by political upheavals that led to a radical change in the way of life of lay and religious people alike. Following a decade of theocratic regime and seventy years of Soviet domination with forcibly imposed atheism, Mongolia is today experiencing democracy and its correlate: religious pluralism. Surfing on the wave of globalisation, new creeds and cults have joined Shamanism and Buddhism, the two indigenous religions that had seemed forever lost in communist quicksand. Prior to addressing the issue of Mongolian Buddhism in its new surroundings, the context of its overthrow at the time needs to be recalled.

I. BUDDHISM AND REVOLUTION: THE IMPOSSIBLE COMBINATION

Barely out of its vassalage links to the Manchu emperors ruling China (Qing Dynasty, 1644–1911), North (or Outer) Mongolia\(^1\) escaped Chinese occupation only with the support of Bolshevik Russia. Such an unlikely alliance with a state that advocated atheism was to bring

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\(^1\) I.e. Khalkha Mongolia. North Mongolia reflects the Mongolian denomination (*Ar Mongol*), Outer Mongolia the Manchu empire’s point of views.

*Note on Mongolian transliteration.* Mongolian words are usually transcribed from the Cyrillic script first used in the 1940s, except for words that have a regular English form such as Chinggis or Jebtsündamba. Cyrillic letters *x* and *u* are rendered *kh* and *ts* respectively; *y* is rendered *ii* and never *y*, used for the yod. Palatal consonants ж, ч, м are rendered č [ch], š [sh] and ž [dj]; ʒ is rendered *z* and pronounced [dz]; the name of the first Jebtsündamba, Zanabazar, is pronounced ‘Dzanabadzar’. For the Tibetan the Wylie system of transliteration has been used.
tremendous change in the deeply Buddhist country that Mongolia had become. The ‘religion of the Yellow [Hats]’ as Mongols used to call the Dge lugs school of Tibetan Buddhism, played a crucial role at both religious and political levels since the second half of the 16th century, to such an extent that it was a religious figure, the 8th Jebtsündamba khutugtu (1869–1924), the most prestigious incarnate lama (Mong. khuvilgaan, Tib. sprul sku) of Northern Mongolia, that in December 1911 Mongol nobles and Buddhist dignitaries eventually enthroned in Urga as khan of the newly independent Mongolia under the title Bogd Khan, ‘Holy King’, although he was originally Tibetan-born. Admittedly the first Mongolian incarnation of this Jebtsündamba lineage, the famous Buddhist sculptor Zanabazar (1635–1723), had been found in the family of a major Chinggisid ruler, the Tüšet khan of Khalkha and, as such, enjoyed some of the political legitimacy associated with Chinggis Khan’s heirs. In the years following the end of Manchu suzerainty, the Mongols’ one and only purpose was to maintain their independence in the face of Republican China’s claims over Mongolian territory that had once been part of the Manchu dominions. After expelling the Manchu garrisons in 1911–1912 and declaring independence, the Mongols, backed by Russia, were compelled to accept ‘autonomy’ under China’s sovereignty by the 1915 tripartite Kiakhta treaty, a lesser evil but still a frustrating thwarting situation. Soon they had to fight Chinese troops that stormed Urga in 1919 to abolish Mongolia’s autonomy. At that critical time in its history Mongolia found an ally first with the White troops of the ‘mad’ Baron Ungern, then with the Bolsheviks who were in the process of gaining control of

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2 The Jebtsündamba khutugtu (Tib. Rje btsun pa; Mong. class. Zibcündamba quturtyu, Mong. cyr. Žavzandamba khutagt), or Bogd gegeen (Class. Mong. Boyda gegen), was considered as the head of the Buddhist establishment in North Mongolia. On the successive Jebtsündamba’s biographies, see Charles Bawden (1961).

3 Ikh Khüree, ‘The Great Monastery’, renamed Niislel Khüree capital-monastery’ in 1911, was also known as Urga, the Russian form of the honorific appellation örgüö used for the felt-tent of a high-ranking person, here the Jebtsündamba khutugtu. After 1838, the monastery was separated into two: the old part or Eastern monastery (Züün Khüree) and a new development in a quieter area to the West of the bustle monastic city, the Gandan (Gandantegčilen), named after Tsong kha pa’s Dga’ ldan monastery established in Lhasa in 1409. The faculty of philosophy (Mong. canid, Tib. mtshan nyid) was moved to the Gandan. The Jebtsündamba monastic city was an economic and administrative centre as much as a religious one. In 1924, after the death of the 8th Jebtsündamba, the place became the official capital of the new republic under the name Ulaanbaatar, ‘The Red Hero’.