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A Hidden History

“Free Tibet, the Lost Crusade of Buddhist Japan”

The Olympic torch boycott by monks at Zenkō-ji Temple in Nagano (April 2008) hints at some historical connection with Tibet, which is now unfamiliar to the contemporary Buddhist community. Support for the independence of Tibetan Buddhist lands was a powerful motivating rationale for wartime Japan’s interventions against republican China. Thousands of Zen “warrior monks,” along with their co-believers from the Nichiren and Pure Land sects, volunteered as combat troops to liberate Manchuria, Mongolia and ultimately Tibet. In fierce fighting in 1942-43, the Japanese Army came close to actually taking the Dalai Lama’s Lhasa. That window of opportunity for Tibetan independence, however, was slammed shut by the American decision to support Free China instead of a Free Tibet

The mastermind behind the “*chibetto kōsaku*” (Tibet movement) was Goshima Tokushirō, chief of the Buddhism bureau of Mongkuo, or Mengjiang, now Inner Mongolia. The Japanese client state was founded by Prince De (Demchugdongorb) after fleeing a Soviet purge in Outer Mongolia. The royal Mongol bloodlines were intertwined with the family of the last emperor, Pu Yi, then ensconced in the adjoining “puppet state” of Manchukuo. Both royal houses patronized Tibetan Buddhism. The Kwantung Army sponsored Prince De, and he reciprocated by allowing Goshima to set up a military-intelligence compound in Ulanhot in eastern Mengjiang. From there, the crafty spymaster extended diplomatic feelers aimed at a secret alliance with the Dalai Lama.

Tibet under the Rising Sun

Since before the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-05 Japan was a wild card in the Great Game between Russia and Britain for control of the Asian heartland. Tokyo’s secret diplomacy relied on court intrigues and clandestine liaisons between outlandish adventurers, antiquated aristocrats and lecherous lamas. It was either a pantheon of heroes or a rogue’s gallery, depending on how one looks through the kaleidoscope.

KAWAGUCHI EKAI, a Japanese priest disguised as Chinese herbalist, trekked into Tibet in 1897. His eyewitness account of the covert arms traffic from Tsarist Russia into Tibet frightened the wits out of the British colonialists in India. Imperial

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Britain responded with the Francis Younghusband expedition into Lhasa. After thrashing the Tibetan Army, Britain established a protectorate over Tibet in 1903. The eviction of Russian schemers from Tibet affirmed the Anglo-Japanese alliance immediately prior to the hostilities at Port Arthur in Manchuria.

TERAMOTO ENGA, monk and self-appointed diplomat, met the 13th Dalai Lama in 1905, who was in self-exile at Khumbu (Taer Si) Monastery in Qinghai to evade the British occupation of Lhasa. By then, late in the Russo-Japanese War, Emperor Meiji's army had expelled Tsarist forces from Manchuria. The high monk was impressed by the unlikely triumph of a fellow Buddhist nation. Teramoto arranged for the 1913 peace talks with the British that led to the Dalai Lama's return to Lhasa, which allowed Tibet the semblance of self-rule under a protectorate.

TSARONG SHAPE, the Tibetan war minister who headed the progressive Young Tibet faction, befriended Teramoto and spoke in support of Japanese overtures in the ruling council or Kashag over the next few decades. The elder statesman reputedly made a secret visit to Tokyo, probably with the 1942 delegation that helped plan the Japanese invasion of Tibet.

AOKI BUNKYŌ was the Japanese priest who in 1902 designed the Snow Lion flag with a Rising Sun background, which is still used by the Tibetan exile movement. (See Figs. 1 and 2) He also translated Meiji Army field manuals into the Tibetan language. Aoki reemerged three decades later as chief Tibet expert in the wartime Foreign Ministry.



Fig. 1: Flag of the Tibetan Government in Exile

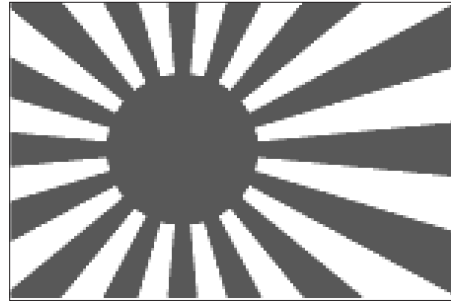


Fig. 2: Flag of the Rising Sun (*kyokujitsu-ki*)
(Japanese Navy)

YAMAJI YASUJIRŌ presented the Snow Lion flag at an audience with the 13th Dalai Lama. A Russo-Japanese War veteran, he trained Tibetan troops near the Norbu Linka summer palace. The early Japanese adventurers departed Lhasa following the 1923 Kantō Earthquake that leveled Tokyo.

LT. COL. ISHIWARA KANJI, a German-trained intelligence officer, revived Japan's quest for a Buddhist restoration across Asia by creating the client state of Manchukuo in 1931. His guide to action was a prophecy of the 13th-century Japanese monk Nichiren, who predicted a *saishū sensō* or final war. His apocalyptic mission had no room for Manchuria's petty warlord Zhang Zuolin, who was assassinated with a bomb blast in the Mukden Incident.

ANCHIN HULTUKHU, a Mongolian "living Buddha," was an eager partner of intelligence chief Goshima. The high lama in Beijing's Yonghegong Temple built a network that reached right into the Potala Palace. In 1938, Anchin and Goshima recruited an intermediary, Dilowa Hutuhku, to search for a suitable boy to replace the deceased Jetsun Damba, Mongolia's top lama. One of Prince De's sons fit the bill. Nationalist Party agents got wind of the usurpers' plot and abducted Dilowa from a plane landing in the British colony of Hong Kong, an episode that presaged the recent intrigues over high lama successions.

NOMOTO JINZŌ, a Japanese lieutenant, was trained in Tibetan language at Goshima's spy school. Posing as a Tibetan lama, he slipped through Calcutta and Sikkim, into Lhasa in 1939. His arrival, in the long lapse following the death of the 13th Dalai Lama, sparked a dispute between the Regent Reting and Tsarong Shape over whether to remain neutral or acknowledge ties with Tokyo's client state of Manchukuo. Like Kawaguchi before him, Nomoto was shocked by the pederasty involving boy monks in the ruling Gelugpa order. Two generations earlier in Japan, the Meiji reformers had suppressed esoteric monasticism for its *chigo* or beautiful youth cult, much to the relief of scandalized parents.

KARL HAUSHOFER, Nazi Germany's chief geopolitical theorist, developed a strong interest in Tibetan-style esoteric Buddhism while on assignment as an artillery officer in Japan prior to World War I. With Hitler's rise, his grand strategy was for a German and Japanese military pincers offensive into the heartland of the Eurasian Continent. At the center, Tibet was the key to world domination. Under his influence, Heinrich Himmler sent a 1938 SS expedition to Tibet to form a Berlin-Lhasa Axis. The visitors conducted anatomical studies for the *Ahnenerbe*, or racial ancestry organization, which provided the theoretical rationale for the Holocaust.

THE REGENT RETING, protector of the young 14th Dalai Lama, was cordial to the Nazis and Japanese militarists, but rightfully wary of the British representative in Lhasa. In 1940, a pro-British faction slaughtered 80 of Reting's monks, arrested him and in the postwar period killed the imprisoned regent by bashing his genitals with an iron bar. The pretext was Reting's heterosexual dalliances, which broke the unspoken code of monastic pedophilia. With the fall of Reting, Tsarong Shape was ready to welcome liberating Japanese troops. With the unexpected Allied victory, however, the young 14th Dalai Lama missed his only chance for a Free Tibet and therefore ended up in Dharamsala in former British India instead of a Japanese-liberated Lhasa.

Uphill Battle for Utopia

Militant Buddhism was thus a powerful motivating force behind Japan's pendulum swing from an anti-Tsarist alliance with Britain towards total war against the British Empire. The struggle for Buddhist supremacy reached a flash point when a high-ranking Tibetan delegation journeyed to Tokyo in 1942. Goshima and Aoki had ostensibly arranged a religious exchange with the Shingon sect. The actual purpose was to finalize the General Staff's plans for the march on Lhasa and independent Tibet's admission into the Greater Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere.

On the battlefronts of Europe and Asia, followers of the Dalai Lama's Gelugpa or Yellow Hat sect were fighting on the frontlines. A cavalry corps of Kalmyks protected the German Army supply lines and suppressed pro-Soviet partisans. Mongol militiamen allied with the Kwantung Army kept pressure against the Chinese forces in areas near Inner Mongolia.

For the high command, the opening of a Tibetan theater of operations would enable the Japanese Army to attack at will along the northern perimeter of British India. This flanking movement would spread its Thin Red Line to a breaking point, providing relief for the Japanese-backed Indian National Army on the malaria-infested Burma-Manipur border. The seizure of Tibet, in short, would crush British resistance and bring a victorious end to World War II.

The main obstacle was the US-supported Nationalist force holed up in Chongqing (Chungking) in Sichuan Province, the gateway to Tibet. In classic military array, Operation 5 was launched as a three-pronged "pinning attack" against the Allied headquarters. From airbases inside central China, Japanese bombing missions softened up Nationalist positions in Chongqing. The memories of civilian casualties still provoke anti-Japanese anger among Sichuan residents.

To the south, in Japanese-occupied Burma, the 15th Army readied the main invasion force for a push up the Salween-Nujiang river valley through Yunnan and onto Lhasa. The elaborate preparations included the minting of new paper money for soon-to-be-freed Tibet.

Disappointment in Lhasa

Austrian mountaineer Heinrich Harrer, the Dalai Lama's tutor in Lhasa, recounted in the autobiographical *Seven Years in Tibet* his high hopes for the Japanese thrust toward Tibet so that he could go home to Germany. A member of Hitler's Brownshirt paramilitary group, Harrer had escaped a POW camp in British-controlled India where he was detained on his way to climb Mount Nanga Parbat in Kashmir. Unfortunately for the stranded Nazi refugee and the young Dalai Lama, their rescuers never arrived.

On the high-altitude approaches to Tibet, the Japanese were defeated as much by the mountainous terrain, extreme temperatures, lack of supplies and epidemic diseases as by gunfire from Wingate's Chindits, Merrill's Marauders, the famed Flying Tigers volunteer corps and Chinese Nationalists rearmed by American planes flying "over the Hump" of the Himalayas. Assault collapsed into retreat and then rout.

The historical irony is that the abortive Japanese invasion ended up legitimizing China's control over Tibet. In 1942, the State Department approved Chiang Kai-shek's deployment of Nationalist troops to western Yunnan to block the Japanese push toward Lhasa. The Roosevelt decision in effect nixed Britain's claims to a protectorate and affirmed China's sovereignty over Tibet. At the end of a long day, both elitist Japan and Britain lost out to American notions of mass democracy.

The last *banzai* for Tibetan independence came from Shōkō Asahara, guru of the Aum Shinrikyō sect, who met with the Dalai Lama on five occasions in the 1980

and '90s. A covert team of Aum cadre were sent to Dharamsala to translate a manual on Buddhist-sanctioned assassination but were arrested after the Tokyo subway gassing. Asahara's dream of conquest to liberate Tibet was a twisted parody of an earlier tragic and sometimes heroic battle for utopia. Today's Free Tibet protests are but faint echoes of Buddhist war drums from a lost crusade.

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