The All-Buryat Congress for the Spiritual Rebirth and Consolidation of the Nation: Siberian politics in the final year of the USSR

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Abstract
This article examines the All-Buryat Congress for the Spiritual Rebirth and Consolidation of the Nation that was held in the Buryat Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic in February 1991. The congress met to discuss the future of the Buryats, a Mongolian people who live in southeastern Siberia, and to decide on what actions should be taken for the revival, development, and maintenance of their culture. Widespread elections were carried out in the Buryat lands in advance of the congress and voters selected 592 delegates. Delegates also came from other parts of the Soviet Union, as well as from Mongolia and China. Government administrators, Communist Party officials, members of new political parties like the Buryat-Mongolian People's Party, and non-affiliated individuals shared their ideas and political agendas. Although the congress came to some agreement on the general goals of promoting Buryat traditions, language, religions, and culture, there were disagreements about several of the political and territorial questions. For example, although some delegates hoped for the creation of a larger Buryat territory that would encompass all of Siberia’s Buryats within a future Russian state, others disagreed revealing the tension between the desire to promote ethnic identity and the practical need to consider economic and political issues.

Keywords
Buryat, Buryatia, Russia, Siberia, Soviet Union

When Mikhail Gorbachev came to power in the Soviet Union in 1985, he began implementing a series of reforms that permitted people greater freedom of assembly and the right to express their grievances in ways that had not been allowed before. In the Buryat Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (Buryat ASSR), the titular homeland of the ethnic Buryat Mongols, his reforms created a space for the formation of a Buryat nationalist movement that worked together with local, government officials to bring about the first All-Buryat Congress for the Spiritual Rebirth and Consolidation of the Nation in February 1991. The congress met to discuss the future of the Buryat people and to decide on what actions should be taken for the revival, development, and promotion of Buryat culture.

The congress was a formal meeting of representatives from various regions and groups. Widespread elections were carried out in advance and voters selected 592 delegates from the Buryat ASSR and the two Buryat autonomous okrugs (small territorial units): the Ust'-Ordynskii Buryat Autonomous Okrug within the larger Irkutsk territory and the Aginskii Buryat Autonomous Okrug within the larger Chita territory. Buryat delegates also came from Mongolia and China. Government administrators, Communist Party officials, members of new political parties like the Buryat-Mongolian People’s Party, and non-affiliated individuals came together to share their ideas and political agendas.

This was not the first time that the Buryats of Siberia, a minority group within the larger Russian state, were meeting in such a quasi-parliamentary formation to discuss and make decisions about issues of identity, self-government, and nation-building. Between the February Revolution of...
1917 that brought down the tsar and the October Revolution of that year that ushered the Bolsheviks into power, the Buryats held three All-Buryat Congresses to articulate their demands for the future of the Buryat nation and for the positioning of the Buryat lands in what was to be a new entity to replace the former Russian Empire (Sablin, 2016). In this moment, as in the moment of the All-Buryat Congress of February 1991, the Buryats were on the cusp of a new era: the larger state that encompassed their lands was in flux and in the process of working out a new political, territorial, and economic structure that would significantly alter their lives. In both cases, the Buryats did not call for outright independence. Instead, they worked toward greater autonomy and liberalism in an attempt to ensure that their rights would be enhanced and protected within the framework of a larger, political entity.

The February 1991 All-Buryat Congress took place at an especially pivotal moment in time in a year that turned out to be the last for the Soviet Union. Only a few months prior to the Congress, the Buryat ASSR had made a Declaration of Sovereignty on October 8, 1990. The declaration called for economic self-management, ecological protection, the promotion of the cultural development of the people of Buryatia, and the elevation of Buryatia to the status of a union republic. Leaders believed that the change from an autonomous republic within the Russian Republic to a union republic that held the same status as Russia and the other 14 union republics such as Ukraine, Georgia, or Estonia, for example, would give Buryatia greater autonomy to run its own affairs. However, Gorbachev refused to recognize the declaration. Perhaps this was because he feared the intentions and consequences of such nationalist assertions or perhaps because he was already considering a new structure for the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR; Balzer, 1994; Elaev, 2000; Stroganova, 2001).

Gorbachev’s government had decided to appeal to the Soviet people about the future of their country with a national referendum to be held on March 17, 1991. The issue of Buryatia’s status in the Soviet Union and the holding of the All-Buryat Congress in February 1991 was therefore also critical given this upcoming event that would ask Soviet citizens, “Do you consider necessary the preservation of the USSR as a renewed federation of equal sovereign republics in which the rights and freedom of an individual of any nationality will be fully guaranteed?” (Nolan et al., 2001, p. 492). With this referendum as a start, Gorbachev’s government was putting together a plan to reframe the entire, federal structure of the state and authorities in Buryatia wanted to ensure that when this happened, there would be greater local control and full equal rights within a new federation.

Thus, the congress was also intended, in part, to allow for deliberation about what the status of the Buryat people and Buryat territories was going to be in the rapidly changing Soviet space. Although the congress came to some agreement on the general goals of promoting Buryat traditions, language, religions, and culture, there were disagreements about the political and territorial questions. For example, although some delegates hoped for the creation of a larger Buryat territory that would encompass all of Siberia’s Buryats, others disagreed. What the 1991 All-Buryat Congress and the events surrounding it reveal then, is a balancing act between meeting practical and economic concerns and fulfilling broader hopes and goals about identity. In the end, this act leaned toward the former, disappointing some who had desired greater autonomy for the Buryats.

This article utilizes sources in Russian that are available in the State Archive of the Republic of Buryatia. The archival documents include details about plans made for the Congress, copies of pre-congress publications, transcripts of speeches given at the Congress, and information about the arrangements to be made for cultural organizations and events to be developed afterward. Although these documents tell us much about the local government’s work on the Congress, they provide less information about the Buryat national movement. For the latter, the article relies on works written by scholars in Buryatia, some of whom participated in and lived through the events under discussion. In particular, works by Vladimir A. Khamutaev and Shirap B. Chimitdorzhi, who were members of the Buryat national movement, provide not only historical information, but also criticism of the local government, as well as reflections on the movement’s accomplishments and shortcomings.

The Buryat national movement and local leadership before the All-Buryat Congress

The Buryat national movement began to form in 1986 and was led by a group of Buryat scholars, who started publishing articles, as well as holding conferences, roundtables, and seminars to discuss historical and contemporary issues related to the Buryat nation. In March 1988, these people formed an organization called Geser, named after the hero of the Buryat epic poem. The Geser organization was largely composed of intellectuals such as university professors, teachers, artists, and other professionals, as well as students. Buryat intellectuals from outside of the Buryat ASSR were also involved. In May 1988, Geser held its first conference in the central public library in Ulan-Ude, the republic’s capital (Balzer, 1994; Khamutaev, 2005). Leaders at this conference outlined the main goals of the Buryat nationalist movement that would exist throughout the late 1980s and early 1990s. These were initiated by Geser, but later reiterated and elaborated on by many others.

Two of Geser’s demands were about reinstating markers of Buryat territory and identity previously granted by the Soviet government and then taken away. During Joseph
Stalin’s campaigns of terror and purges in the late 1930s, he became particularly paranoid about the loyalties of the ethnic groups that resided along the Soviet borders and imagined that they were seeking to carry out traitorous plots. In looking to uncover the supposed hidden dissenters, officials in Moscow and Buryatia invented stories that there were Buryat pan-Mongolists who sought to break away from the USSR and unite all of the Mongolian people of Inner Asia into one state. In addition, they accused some Buryats of helping the Japanese to implement a plan to conquer Siberia. These were serious allegations that threatened Soviet power in the region and those who found themselves accused of these crimes were killed, exiled, or sent to Gulag labor camps (Chakars, 2014).

During the height of this period of terror and purges, orders came from Moscow to break-up the territory of the Buryat-Mongolian ASSR and the republic was shrunk by 40%. In 1937, authorities gave some territories to neighboring regions, as well as created two smaller autonomous okrugs—the Ust’-Ordynskii Buryat Autonomous Okrug and the Aginskii Buryat Autonomous Okrug mentioned above. These changes were made without the consent of the government of the Buryat-Mongolian ASSR and despite the existence of article 15 in the republic’s constitution that specified that no territorial alterations could be made without local approval (Chichlo, 1987; Elaev, 2000).

By reducing the Buryat-Mongolian ASSR, creating two smaller autonomous regions, and leaving some Buryats outside of any specifically designated Buryat territory, Soviet authorities denied the Buryats a unified homeland. Previously, the Buryat-Mongolian ASSR had encompassed more than 90% of the country’s Buryat population and after 1937, this was reduced to a little more than 50%. In addition, the territorial changes meant that ethnic Buryat representation in the republic dropped to just more than 20% (Zateev & Kharaev, 1999). In the late 1980s, Geser and the growing Buryat national movement demanded that republican leaders re-examine the constitutionality and social consequences of the 1937 break-up of territory, as well as explore methods to reunite the Buryats into one larger territorial unit.

The other major issue concerning the reestablishment of former identity markers was the name of the republic. In 1958, “Mongolian” was dropped from the original name and the Buryat-Mongolian ASSR became simply the Buryat ASSR. The names of the two okrugs, as well as many institutions such as newspapers, publishing houses, and schools also dropped the term “Mongolian.” The official reason was that the Buryats were not Mongols, and therefore the name needed to change. However, the Buryats are one of the many Mongolian people of Inner Asia. They speak a Mongolian language and share similarities with other Mongols with regard to history, traditions, religions, and cultural and economic practices.

Unfortunately, there exists little evidence to clearly explain why the name change occurred in 1958. Some claim that it took place after a conversation was held between the Buryat leader, Andrei Modogoev, and the head of the USSR, Nikita Khrushchev. Khrushchev supposedly asked Modogoev, “Why do you call your republic Buryat-Mongolia—do Mongols live there?” When Modogoev answered, “No,” Khrushchev suggested that the name be changed. Others have argued that Khrushchev may have had concerns about the name “Mongolian” in the republic’s title because he feared Chinese claims to Mongolian lands. In 1958, the USSR was supporting Mongolia’s entrance into the United Nations and China was not in support of it. Throughout the 20th century, both the Republic of China and Taiwan have made various claims over Mongolian territories, and indeed, Khrushchev may have wanted to use the name change as a way to distinguish Soviet Buryatia from Inner and Outer Mongolia. Many also point to the on-going campaign against pan-Mongolism and argue that the name change was, at least in part, a continuation of this policy, which had begun in the 1930s (Chakars, 2014). By the 1980s, however, many intellectuals wanted to promote the Buryats’ connections to the wider culture and history of the Mongolian people. For that reason, like the issue of the 1937 territorial changes, the Buryat national movement called for republican leaders to examine the issue and to reinstate the former name (Chimitdorzhiev, 2001; Elaev, 2000).

The other concerns expressed by Geser at the conference in May of 1988 were about the decline during the Soviet period of traditional religions, holidays, customs, and the Buryat language, as well as the lack of connections with other Mongolian people. Oppressive Soviet anti-religious policies and campaigns had seriously diminished the presence of the Buryat religions of Buddhism and Shamanism in society and holidays and traditions connected to these religions had been banned. Links between Mongolian people across Inner Asia had been hindered by politics, tight borders, and individual fears over the consequences of being labeled a pan-Mongolist. In addition, Buryat language education had been completely canceled by the early 1970s and the language was steadily being replaced by Russian. These issues were ones that many intellectuals and officials in Buryatia had noted in various ways already, but Geser was the first to publicly address all of them directly and make a strong demand for a revival of them in Buryat society.

Only a few years earlier Geser’s conference at the library would have been impossible due to strict Soviet censorship policies and laws against such gatherings. However, because of Gorbachev’s implementation in 1986 of his policy of glasnost’ that was intended to allow for Soviet citizens to freely discuss problems in their country in the hopes of improving it, such a conference was permissible. Nevertheless, the local government of the Buryat ASSR was slow to respond to Geser’s concerns. This was largely connected to the republic’s leadership. In 1984, an ethnic
Russian, Anatolii M. Beliakov, was appointed to head the republic after the ethnic Buryat, Andrei Modogoev, who had been in charge since 1962, passed away. As the first non-Buryat leader of the Buryat ASSR since Stalin’s reign, many Buryat intellectuals had quietly criticized Beliakov’s appointment. Yet, it was not simply an ethnic issue. Many in the republic—Buryats and non-Buryats alike—increasingly began to complain that Beliakov was not carrying out Gorbachev’s reforms, that he had dismissed many talented people and replaced them with conservative loyalists, and that he tolerated corruption. Journalists began to publish articles expressing these concerns and documenting cases of corruption under Beliakov’s stewardship (Bolotov & Mitypov, 2003; Elaev, 2000; Humphrey, 1996).

Finally, in February 1990, several thousand people came out in Ulan-Ude to protest against Beliakov’s government and demand his resignation. Many also called for the return of two formerly prominent officials that Beliakov had transferred out of the republic: Leonid V. Potapov, an ethnic Russian, and Vladimir B. Saganov, an ethnic Buryat. Some suspected that Beliakov had sent Saganov out of the republic in 1987 because of his sympathy for some of the goals of the Buryat national movement such as reexamining Buryat history and reviving Buryat traditions. Many of the protestors now wanted these men to return and form a new government (Elaev, 2000; Khamutaev, 2005). The demonstrations were eventually successful and officials agreed to remove Beliakov. He was then replaced in May with Potapov. Although an ethnic Russian, Potapov was a man who was widely acceptable as he had worked closely with the previous leader, Modogoev. In addition, by the 1980s, the majority population in the republic was ethnic Russian and by having Potapov placed in charge, this may have assuaged some concerns about Buryat exclusivity in the political arena. Saganov was then appointed to be chair of the republic’s executive body called the Council of Ministers (Bolotov & Mitypov, 2003).

The new government immediately responded to protestors’ concerns and began to initiate Gorbachev’s reforms in Buryatia. It was this new government that also made the declaration of sovereignty on October 8, 1990. In addition, Potapov and Saganov were much more supportive of the cultural demands made by the Buryat national movement than Beliakov had been. For example, the government issued a formal decree to raise Sagarlan, the Mongolian lunar new year, to the status of an official national holiday, it approved plans for holding an international conference to take place in the summer of 1991 on the 250th anniversary of Buddhism’s official recognition by Empress Elizabeth in 1741, and it began organizing a festival to celebrate the Buryat epic poem, Geser (State Archive of the Republic of Buryatia [GARB] f. P-1, op. 1, d. 10,743, ll. 13, 24).

Potapov also worked with members of the Buryat national movement in the fall of 1990 to create the Center of Buryat National Culture in Ulan-Ude to coordinate Buryat cultural development. The leaders of the new center were scholars and several of them were people who had been involved in the Geser organization. Dashi-Nima Dugarov, a well-respected artist and the head of the Artists’ Union of Buryatia, became the center’s director. The center's mission was to promote and conduct further research on Buryat traditions, language, culture, and history. An October 1990 decree from the government establishing its official foundation stated that such an institution was necessary because the Buryats are “a geographically divided people and the formation of one nation and one uniting language has been hindered,” and that it was therefore important to promote education “on Buryat culture and national self-consciousness” (GARB, f. P-1, op. 1, d. 10,743, ll. 68–69).

In addition to this new center, a number of the Buryat intellectuals who had been in Geser formed a political party in November 1990 called the Buryat-Mongolian People’s Party (BMNP). Although previously the Communist Party was the only political party authorized to exist in the USSR, Gorbachev’s democratization reforms allowed for greater freedom of assembly that now made it legal to form new parties. The BMNP was led by Mikhail N. Ochirov, a math professor at the Buryat Pedagogical Institute. Other scholars such as the historian, Vladimir Khamutaev, who was a teacher at the time and then went on to become a professor of history, writing his dissertation and then several books on the Buryat national movement, were involved. The BMNP developed a party platform that included supporting a return to the pre-1937 borders and reinserting “Mongolian” into the republic’s name. In addition, the party called for reviving Buryat traditions, culture, and language, as well as facilitating relations with Mongolian people in Mongolia and China. To help facilitate the latter, the party demanded the demilitarization of Buryatia (Elaev, 2000; Khamutaev, 2005; Zhukovskaya, 1995). This was very controversial as the republic had a long international border with Mongolia, was close to China, and held a strategic piece of the Trans-Siberian Railway. For that reason, many Soviet troops were stationed there and a demand to remove them was a serious challenge to Soviet strength in southeastern Siberia (Lukin & Yakumin, 2018).

With the formation of a new government led by Potapov and Saganov, as well as an increasingly active and more organized Buryat national movement, the time was ripe to discuss the future of the nation. In addition, the October 1990 Declaration of Sovereignty and the upcoming March 1991 referendum on the future structure of the Soviet Union required a wider examination of the meaning of Buryat autonomy.

**Contentious issues at the All-Buryat Congress**

Although Gorbachev’s reforms had allowed for greater democratization and the legalization of independent parties
and organizations, there was no question as to who was in charge in Buryatia at the time of the congress: the local government with all of its bureaucratic institutions run by Communist Party authorities. Although many of these officials, such as Potapov and Saganov, were responsive to Gorbachev’s reforms and to many of the demands of the Buryat national movement, they were also a part of the Soviet system that had been in place for decades. Therefore, although activists in the Buryat national movement were involved in pressing the government for a larger meeting, it was the government that made the decision to hold the first All-Buryat Congress for the Spiritual Rebirth and Consolidation of the Nation in Ulan-Ude between February 22 and 24, 1991. Significantly, February 22 also marked the beginning of the Mongolian Lunar New Year, Sagaalgan, a holiday that the government had just officially adopted.

In part, the government’s decision to hold the congress was in line with the Soviet Communist Party tradition of holding national congresses every 5 years to discuss contemporary issues and determine the future of the country—this too would be a congress to discuss pressing concerns and the republic’s direction with regard to the Buryat nation. Holding a congress was also in line with Gorbachev’s reforms that demanded more interaction between state authorities and ordinary citizens. The congress was then a way for the local government to demonstrate how it was responding to Buryat national demands, show that it genuinely wanted to communicate with its constituents, and put into place new ideas and institutions that would work to fulfill the decided upon goals for reviving the Buryat nation. In addition, the idea of holding such a meeting and calling it a congress was a nod to the Buryat past and the Buryat congresses that had taken place in pre-revolutionary times.

Before the congress, elections for delegates were conducted in the republic and in the two Buryat autonomous okrugs. Invitations were also sent to Buryats living in other parts of the USSR, as well as in Mongolia and China. Although Buryat scholars, such as Khamutaev, mentioned above, and Aleksandr A. Elaev, have noted that these elections were not exactly democratic because they involved the Communist Party bureaucracy at all levels to ensure the attendance of many well-established elites, elections were conducted that did bring together a wide variety of people. In total, there were 592 delegates that attended the congress. The majority were ethnic Buryats from the republic and the two autonomous okrugs; however, there were also Buryat representatives from other Soviet cities such as Chita, Irkutsk, Leningrad, Kiev, Alma-Aty, and Kyzyl. In addition, there were 51 non-Buryat delegates, mostly from the republic, who came from other ethnic groups such as Russians, Ukrainians, and Koreans (Elaev, 2000; Khamutaev, 2005). Although the congress was nominally about the Buryat people, it was impossible to ignore the demographic reality that the Buryats were a minority in their own titular republic and even the head of the republic, Potapov, was not an ethnic Buryat. Given this situation, the decision to invite non-Buryats was likely intended to create an open, inclusive, and diverse atmosphere as opposed to appearing to be pushing a narrow, nationalist agenda.

Documents in the State Archive of the Republic of Buryatia show that the government carefully prepared materials in advance for the congress and planned a schedule of speeches to be made by appointed individuals, a process that was not unusual in the Soviet Union. Government officials did this with the help of Buryat cultural leaders and new organizations such as the Center of Buryat National Culture in Ulan-Ude. However, the government’s actions in the planning of the congress show that it was cautious and that it sought to focus on cultural issues at the meeting such as reviving religions and traditions, as well as finding ways to promote the Buryat language. The government did not make any arrangements to have a large public discussion over what to do about the 1937 break-up of Buryat territory, the 1958 name change, and the demilitarization suggestion made by the BMNP. In Khamutaev’s book on the Buryat national movement published in 2005, he complains that although BMNP members were elected as delegates to the congress, the party was not invited as an official organization to participate in the event (Khamutaev, 2005). This may have been intentional and an attempt at marginalizing the BMNP’s more radical goals. A pamphlet published by the government in advance of the congress for delegates and titled, “The Main Directions for the Revival and Development of Buryat Culture,” did not mention any of the more controversial issues (GARB, f. P-1, op. 1, d. 10,743, ll. 46–58).

The government was probably careful about officially discussing controversial topics for multiple reasons. Redrawing territorial borders, name changes, and demilitarization could have only taken place with approval from central authorities in Moscow. Given that Gorbachev’s government was already ignoring the October 1990 Declaration of Sovereignty, it was not likely that it would have considered these other demands, and, in all probability, would have seen them as dangerous, nationalistic, provocations. In addition, it was also not clear in February 1991 whether or not a large percentage of Buryats supported such demands. In August 1990, Pravda Buriatii, the leading republican newspaper, printed a letter that had been sent to authorities in Moscow and Ulan-Ude from 58 leading members of the Buryat national movement calling for a return to Buryatia’s pre-1937 borders. A later article in Pravda Buriatii explained that many residents in the two okrugs had responded negatively to the letter and argued that a merger with the Buryat republic would be a mistake (Chimitdorzhiev, 2004). It is possible that the republican government therefore also did not want to officially discuss this issue at the congress for fear of upsetting okrug delegates.

The congress opened on February 22 with introductory remarks by Potapov, the head of the Buryat ASSR, Sergei
Buldaev, the chairman of the Buryat ASSR Supreme Council, the Khambo Lama, Munko Tsybikov, the leader of the Buddhist church in Siberia, and top authorities of the Chita and Irkutsk regions. During the congress, 62 delegates—government officials and a wide variety of Buryat intellectuals and cultural leaders—gave talks throughout the 3-day period that addressed issues surrounding the history, culture, and present condition of the Buryat people. Many of these speakers concluded that contemporary Buryat culture was in a crisis and declared that measures needed to be taken for its rebirth (Elaev, 2000).

Although some in the government had been ignoring the question of the 1937 break-up and the pre-conference planning and materials did not acknowledge it, several members of the congress did raise the issue for consideration. In particular, members of the BMNP discussed the issue with other delegates and pressed for an open conversation. The issue was then raised by several delegates and forced into discussion (GARB, f. P-1, d. 10,743, ll. 78). In particular, a number of the prominent Buryat intellectuals who had signed the letter calling for the reunification of Buryat lands that was published in Pravda Buriatii in August 1990 talked openly about the issue. These included the Mongolian studies scholar, Chimitdorzhiev, mentioned at the beginning of this article, and the head of the BMNP, Ochirov, and others. In addition, the Buryat historian, Taras M. Mikhailov, gave a keynote address at the congress that included a condemnation of the 1937 act as unconstitutional. He argued that it had caused serious problems with the consolidation of the Buryat people, and that the reunification of Buryat lands should be explored. However, he also questioned the feasibility of reuniting the Buryat lands given the contemporary economic and political situation (Elaev, 2000; Khamutaev, 2005).

Several government leaders then also entered the conversation. Saganov too condemned the 1937 act as unconstitutional and stated in a speech that he hoped that the leading organs of power in the Buryat ASSR and in the Russian Republic “will take the decision to change this oppositional document” because by doing so it “would be an act of political rehabilitation of the rights of the Buryat people” (Khamutaev, 2005, p. 130). Buldaev made similar comments, claiming that the act of breaking up the Buryat-Mongolian ASSR was unconstitutional, and that it destroyed the process of consolidating the Buryats, who came from different regions and spoke different dialects, into one, united Buryat people. The break-up, he explained, had triggered an intensive decline of the Buryat language, culture, and traditions. However, he expressed concerns about reunification stating that,

We believe it is premature at the present time to pose the question about unifying the Buryat ASSR with the two autonomous okrugs. The conditions should be right for unification. At the moment, we should unite our strength for building cultural and linguistic connections and for the rebirth of our native language and traditional culture.

With this, he then assured the congress that the question of the events of 1937, as well as the 1958 name change would be discussed by government bodies in the upcoming months. He then offered more support for the name change stating that,

I think that the question about the return of the republic’s name to Buryat-Mongolia . . . is sufficiently convincing based on the work of scholars and therefore we [the government] will try and come to an agreement with the hope of giving a return to these names. (Khamutaev, 2005, p. 127)

As the discussion continued, delegates of the congress unanimously agreed that the 1937 break-up had been unconstitutional and had left long-lasting negative consequences. However, the path moving forward—to reunify the Buryat lands into a larger republic or not—was not agreed upon. Although a number of delegates from the Buryat ASSR supported reunification, this was not the case with the delegates from the two Buryat autonomous okrugs. Leonid A. Khutanov, a Party official and one of the representatives from the Ust'-Ordynskii Buryat Autonomous Okrug, argued against reunification. He stated that there were strong economic ties between the Ust'-Ordynskii Okrug and the Irkutsk region in which the okrug was located, and that a merger with the Buryat ASSR would put that in jeopardy. He also pointed out that the merger did not have widespread support among his constituents (Tarmakhanov, 2003). He explained that,

During the years of being linked to the Irkut Oblast’ [territorial unit], deep connections have been made . . . economic and cultural. How can we break these connections and how would we be able to maintain them within the republic? No one today knows the answer to this . . . It is difficult to know whether or not unity with the Buryat Republic will be successful . . . The question of uniting the Ust'-Ordynskii Okrug to the republic is premature and a decision at this time is not possible.

The leading official from the Aginskii Buryat Autonomous Okrug, Guro-Darma Tsedashiev, also criticized the possibility of reunification. He stated, “. . . it is impossible to unite the autonomous territories at this point” and argued that such border changes would create destabilization in the region (Khamutaev, 2005, 129).³

In addition to economic concerns, there were also cultural ones about a possible merger. At a Buryat conference in Irkutsk held the previous year, participants expressed fear that unification might bring about the process of a general Buryat assimilation and thus the loss of specific aspects of identity for the western Buryats—those who live west of Lake Baikal. Some of the delegates from the Aginskii
Buryat Autonomous Okrug also expressed concerns about conformity in a larger territorial unit (Khamutaev, 2005). Thus, although many of the delegates at the Congress agreed that the Buryat republican government needed to seriously consider reunification, it was, nevertheless, a complicated and contentious issue.

**Cultural direction at the All-Buryat Congress**

A significant and enduring result of the congress was the foundation of the All-Buryat Association for the Development of Culture (VARK) to coordinate cultural activities among all Buryats of the USSR—not just those in the Buryat ASSR as had been the task of the Center for Buryat National Culture that had been created in Ulan-Ude in the fall of 1990. VARK was also assigned to facilitate exchanges between Buryats and other Mongolian people abroad, and to conduct further research on Buryat traditions, language, culture, and history. In addition, the artist Dashi-Nima Dugarov, who was already running the center in Ulan-Ude, was placed in charge (GARB, f. P-1, d. 10,743, ll. 68–69). The decision for founding such an institution was made before the start of the congress in conversations between government officials such as Potapov and various Buryat intellectuals like the Mongolian studies scholar, Chimitdorzhiev.

At the congress, Saganov emphasized how important it was for Buryat intellectuals and government officials to work together in making VARK and its goals successful. He explained that,

> More than anything, scholars and figures of culture contribute to forming historical memory and national consciousness . . . for the future generations so that they may preserve and maintain national traditions and the spirituality of the people from the past. We also should emphasize the huge responsibility of our political leaders for the fate of the nation and its history. All the energy and talent of the Buryat intelligentsia should be directed for furthering the consolidation and spiritual rebirth of the Buryat people. (Khamutaev, 2005, p. 131)

Many discussions were then held at the congress about the path to reviving Buryat culture, how government officials and cultural leaders could facilitate this, and the role that VARK should play.

In particular, delegates at the congress expressed serious concerns about the decline of the Buryat language and what should be done to promote and revive it. As mentioned previously, Buryat language education in schools had been canceled in the 1970s and although there had been attempts to revive it in certain schools in Buryatia, the process had been slow. In addition, the publishing of books and newspapers and the production of broadcast media in the Buryat language had been continually decreasing since the late 1950s (Kuchmurukova, 2002). Congress delegates argued that VARK and other institutions could improve this situation by overseeing such activities as holding a seminar for Buryat language translators, changing laws concerning the Buryat language, organizing intensive Buryat language courses, creating more publications in Buryat, writing an encyclopedia of the Buryat language, and holding meetings among Buryat writers (GARB, f. P-1, d. 10,743, ll. 1–10).

In addition, delegates at the congress discussed how best to promote Buryat art, literature, music, folklore, and scholarly research. Suggestions were made for having VARK and other institutions organize a symposium on traditional Buryat art, create new exhibitions to be held across the Soviet Union, and facilitate the exchange of art exhibits between the republic and the two okrugs, as well as with Mongolian people in Mongolia and China. Delegates also proposed organizing more Buryat musical concerts, cultural festivals, folklore ensembles, and meetings of Buryat composers, artists, writers, and scholars. In promoting Buryat literature, proposals were made for celebrating the births of well-known Buryat writers and offering more help to those who were writing in Buryat. In addition, suggestions were made for aiding scholarly work by promoting it through support for academic journals and by more intensively studying Buryat history, especially topics related to the existence of Buryat autonomy (GARB, f. P-1, d. 10,743, ll. 1–10).

Along with calling upon Buryat intellectuals, political leaders, and new institutions such as VARK to lead a national revival, Saganov also spoke at the conference about the importance of securing a position for Buryatia within the Soviet Union that would protect Buryat culture. He argued that in the 1970s, the rights of Buryats had decreased, and that the Soviet constitution of 1978 did not give specific rights to the Buryats for self-determination. He explained that there were no laws that protected the Buryat language and that this needed to be changed. In addition, he pointed to the problems of the past, where leaders in the Buryat ASSR had been forced to abandon Buryat sovereignty due to absurd accusations of Buryat nationalism and pan-Mongolism. He demanded that this should never be permitted to happen again. Also, he made clear that given this tragic past, it had therefore been an extremely important move by the Buryat ASSR government to declare sovereignty on October 8, 1990. The declaration was a method, Saganov argued, to ensure better rights for the Buryats and for the republic in the future especially with the upcoming referendum and Gorbachev’s ideas about remaking the federation. The republican delegates at the congress largely agreed and many expressed complete support for the declaration of sovereignty (Khamutaev, 2005).

**Buryatia and the Buryats after the All-Buryat Congress**

One of the most positive consequences of the congress was that it brought together Buryats from all over the Soviet Union, as well as from Mongolia and China to
discuss pressing concerns of the Buryat nation and plans for a cultural revival. It allowed for the compiling of many grievances that had built up over numerous years about Soviet policies that had hindered the development of Buryat religions, traditions, and language, as well as had divided the Buryats of Siberia. It gave a public space for many Buryats to openly explore their identity as Mongolian people and as residents of a Russian state that had held power in the region since the 18th century. Buryats—Communist Party officials, intellectuals, cultural leaders, and more—came together to identify, examine, and discuss the mistakes and tragedies of the past and find practical measures for rectifying them.

An especially important result of the congress was the founding of VARK, an institution that is still in existence. Although VARK lacked effective financial resources throughout the 1990s and its influence began to decline in the 2000s, VARK was the first organization of its kind to take practical measures for reviving Buryat culture among all Buryats across the USSR and abroad (Amogolonova, 2008). VARK has worked to implement many of the goals laid out by the congress by coordinating and facilitating cultural activities such as art exhibits and promoting the Buryat language. It has also continued to hold congresses and meetings of Buryat leaders to maintain and push its agenda of cultural revival. In addition, it immediately began to work with the local government after the February 1991 All-Buryat Congress on several important events in the spring and summer of that same year such as a trip to Inner Mongolia to form connections with Buryats living there, a visit from the 14th Dalai Lama, and the holding of activities to celebrate the Buryat epic poem, Geser (GARB, P-1, op. 1, d. 10,743, ll. 85).

Less successful after the congress was the fulfilling of the goals laid out by the BMNP and members of the Buryat national movement about getting a reunification of the pre-1937 borders and returning “Mongolian” to the name of the republic. The BMNP and intellectuals such as Chimitdorzhiev continued to pressure the government on these topics, but their work yielded few results. In April 1991, Chimitdorzhiev reprinted a copy of the 1937 central order from Moscow to divide up the Buryat-Mongolian ASSR in Pravda Buriatii and added along with it his criticism of the territorial changes (Chimitdorzhiev, 2004). Although Saganov and Buldaev had promised at the congress to have government bodies explore the issue in upcoming meetings, other events in 1991 occupied more of their attention instead.

Immediately after the congress, the local government was deeply involved with carrying out the March 17 referendum over preserving the union and it sought to gain a positive vote from republican residents. Local Communist Party officials supported staying in a united state with Russia and they published numerous articles in the local press promoting their case. They also held a conference titled, “Russia Consolidates the Strength of the USSR,” where participants stressed that Buryatia’s future would be best in a union with Russia. Perhaps the Party’s work paid off as around 85%—almost 10% higher than the USSR average—of the residents of the Buryat ASSR voted to preserve the union (GARB, f. P-1, op. 1, d. 10,742, l. 28–29). Although statistical evidence does not provide an ethnic breakdown of this vote, it is clear from the numbers that many Buryats, likely hoping to maintain economic and political stability, voted to stay in the union. Nevertheless, the August coup that occurred 5 months later ultimately brought about the collapse of the USSR and Buryat leaders suddenly faced a whole new set of challenges.

With the break-up of the Soviet Union at the end of 1991, Moscow acknowledged the name change from the Buryat ASSR to the Republic of Buryatia, which local officials had announced earlier in the October 1990 Declaration of Sovereignty. The Republic of Buryatia then became one of the 89 equal territorial units within the new Russian Federation as laid out in the country’s 1993 constitution. The two autonomous okrugs continued to remain in place outside of the republic until 2008 when the Ust’-Ordinskii Buryat Autonomous Okrug was dissolved and merged into the larger Irkutsk region and the Aginskii Buryat Autonomous Okrug was eliminated and became a part of a new Zabaikal’skii Krai. This development was part of a larger policy of centralization carried out by Vladimir Putin in the early 2000s. The new policy called for merging some of the country’s 89 federal units into larger territorial districts and the result was the dissolution of two of the three ethnic, Buryat territorial units. Although some Buryats protested these events, others supported them citing possibilities for better economic opportunities in larger federal entities (Sweet & Chakars, 2010).

The post-Soviet Buryat republican government continued to be led by Potapov and Saganov throughout the 1990s and it issued an official statement in 1993 that the 1937 act that had reduced the territory of the Buryat-Mongolian ASSR had been illegal (Stroganova, 2001). In 1994, the republic wrote a new constitution, but it took no steps to reunify the Buryats of Siberia along the lines of the pre-1937 borders or return “Mongolian” to the republic’s name. Although the BMNP ran for positions in local elections, it received little support from voters and completely disbanded in 2001. Although Saganov passed away in 1999, Potapov won three elections (in 1994, 1998, and 2002) and served as president of the Republic of Buryatia until 2007. In 2004, Putin abolished the right of Russia’s regions to elect their own executive positions and went on to appoint the next two leaders of Buryatia when Potapov finished his last term. Putin first appointed the outsider and non-Buryat, Vyacheslav Nagovitsyn, in 2007. Then, in February 2017, he appointed the Buryat Alexei Tsydenov. Since then, elections have been reinstated and Tsydenov won the popular vote in September 2018, as head of the republic.

Local scholars like Khamutaev, Elaev, and E. A. Stroganova, who have written about this period in Buryat
history, argue that the BMNP and the issues of territorial reunification and the name change did not receive widespread popularity because voters were more interested in political and economic stability than what many deemed to be unreachable goals (Elaev, 2000; Khamutaev, 2005; Strogonova, 2001). Indeed, as Buryatia’s economy in the 1990s plummeted and it was forced to rely on special subsidies from Moscow, many residents turned to focus on everyday survival in the new economy. Political leaders in Buryatia then continually sought to have good relations with those at the center—first Boris Yeltsin and then Vladimir Putin—as a method for ensuring a reliable economic and political situation. Thus, although the All-Buryat Congress produced a commitment to Buryat cultural revival, it fell short in meeting some of the delegates’ solutions for achieving what they believed would bring about greater Buryat autonomy and stronger identity by reunifying all of the Buryats into one territory and reintroducing the term “Mongolian” to the republic’s name.

### Conclusion

The All-Buryat Congresses of 1917 and the All-Buryat Congress of 1991 had many similar goals and outcomes. In both cases, the major concerns of the Buryats revolved around land, language, and preserving religions, traditions, and culture. In addition, the congresses provided assessments and conclusions about past state policies. What was significantly different about these two sets of congresses was that in 1917, the Buryats were largely seeking something completely new: to establish an autonomous region where one had not existed before and to build a political structure that would create institutions and leaders to manage it. The work they carried out during the congresses included creating a sophisticated blueprint of a future government, as well as a leading political organization to carry out their goals (Sablin, 2016).

In 1991, the Buryats already had autonomous regions and a political infrastructure with an entrenched local government that had been in charge for many years. This government then took a leading role in the 1991 All-Buryat congress where it was looking to largely keep the overall political structure in place and only add new methods and institutions to revive and preserve Buryat traditions, religions, language, and culture. What was most radical at that time was the demands made by some, especially the members of the BMNP, for a return to former Soviet policies that they considered to have been positive: the unification of Siberia’s Buryats into one autonomous territory and using the name “Mongolian” along with “Buryat.” Although these proposed changes were certainly meaningful for the Buryat nation in terms of constructing national markers of identity, they were not exactly new.

Ultimately, however, none of the delegates who attended the congresses of 1917 and 1991 could have imagined what came next: a severe collapse of long-standing state economic and political systems to be replaced by others. The changes required reasessing the goals and opportunities that had been laid out in the congresses. Although some aims were still possible such as creating a Buryat territorial unit in 1923 or providing the liberties necessary for a major Buddhist religious revival in the 1990s and early 2000s, others were lost. Nevertheless, these All-Buryat congresses were unique moments of freedom where large numbers of Buryats from diverse regions came together to openly discuss—and sometimes disagree—on issues of autonomy, identity, and the future of the Buryat nation.

### Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### Notes

1. The union republics of Armenia, Georgia, Moldavia, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania abstained from the vote (Suny, 1998).
2. In his 2005 book on the Buryat national movement, Khamutaev quotes extensively from transcripts of speeches made at the Congress available in GARB. In this section, I have translated from Russian to English excerpts of several of these quotes.

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