

**Shagdariin Sandag, Harry H. Kendall.** *Poisoned Arrows: The Stalin-Choibalsan Mongolian Massacres, 1921-1941.* Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2000. xvii + 228 pp. \$65.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8133-3710-4.



**Reviewed by** Timothy May

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## A Forgotten Purge

One of the most appalling abuses of power and acts against humanity was Josef Stalin's reign of terror which sent thousands to the gulags of Siberia and death, if they were not murdered before arriving there. With the opening of archives across the Soviet Union, the full scope and extent of his cult of personality is being analyzed. Stalin's actions in the Soviet Union have been the subject of numerous books and documentaries, but his far-reaching grasp terrorized intellectuals, clergy, and political opponents in another country, Mongolia. Although Mongolia is larger than Alaska, and situated between two of the largest countries in the world, Russia and China, its history has been virtually ignored since the end of the Mongol Empire. Part of the reason for this is precisely due to the fact that this large and sparsely populated country is landlocked and trapped between Russia and China. Thus, the world is largely ignorant of the extension of Stalin's repressive policies in Mongolia, the world's second Communist country. Thus, the publication of a new volume entitled *Poisoned Arrows: the Stalin-Choibalsan Mongo-*

*lian Massacres, 1921-1944* by Shagdariin Sandag and Harry Kendall is greatly welcome.

The book's title is derived from Alexander Pushkin's poem, "Anchar, the Poison Tree":

The king, in that poison steeping, His obedient arrows, Sent with them destruction To his enemies in a distant land.

This poem aptly encapsulates the systematic destruction and imprisonment of 100,000 Mongolians, including many of the country's leading intellectuals and political figures in the first half to the twentieth century. One must consider that at the beginning of the twentieth century, Mongolia's population was slightly more than a million people. Thus almost a tenth of the population died or was imprisoned for numerous years due to the capricious machinations of Josef Stalin and his Mongolian counterpart, Khorlogiin Choibalsan.

*Poisoned Arrows* briefly covers the period in which Mongolia won its independence, but was relegated to an autonomous status to China by the tripartite treaty of Kyakhta between China, Russia, and Mongolia. The authors propose that the 1921 revolution was driven by revolutionaries

who sought a democratic government, not a socialist one. Circumstances, however, dictated otherwise. In 1920, White Russian forces under Baron Ungern-Sternberg defeated the Chinese garrison forces. After a brief but anarchic rule, the Bolsheviks defeated Ungern-Sternberg.

The authors then argue that most Mongolian revolutionaries sought an independent and eventually democratic state, but that the revolution was hijacked by the Soviets, who intended to keep it by any means necessary. As the authors reveal, this included mass purges of any potential opposition on falsified charges. With access to previously closed archives of the Mongolian government, Sandag and Kendall relate the activities and eventual demise of the of these leaders at the hands of Stalin, the KGB, and Choibalsan. After an examination of the demise of the original leaders of the Mongolian Communist revolution, the authors examine the questionable deaths of Sukhe Baatar and the Eighth Jebtsun Damba Khutugtu. The death of both of these individuals has been suspect and questioned by scholars for several years. Sandag and Kendall raise some interesting questions about possible motives for their assassination, and the elevation of Sukhe Baatar from a minor player in the revolution into a national hero to replace Chinggis Khan.

The focus of the book, however is the systematic destruction of the political and intellectual elites who strove to create an independent Mongolia with ties to other states. Stalin and the KGB, eventually found someone who would carry out their plans in Choibalsan. Considering what happened to those who disagreed, it was only natural that Choibalsan complied. The authors do not excuse Choibalsan's actions and openly criticize him for the continuation of policies, which hampered Mongolia's growth and virtually enslaved Mongolia to the Soviet Union. The majority of the volume examines what occurred in Mongolia after Choibalsan's rise to power.

With access to previously restricted Mongolian archives, the authors have utilized government transcripts of interrogations, party minutes, and a variety of other sources to analyze Choibalsan's motives and actions. It is not for naught that Choibalsan is often referred to as Mongolia's Stalin. His persecution of the political elite was similar to that of Stalin's to secure his power. After securing his power, Choibalsan cooperated with the Soviets in their attack against the Buddhist monasteries which dominated much of the countryside, in addition to the persecution of the nascent Mongolian intellectual movement. The results are horrifying, especially when Shagdariin Sandag's frustration and love of his native Mongolia is so evident in his writing. One cannot help but be appalled by Choibalsan's blind obedience to Stalin and willful ruin of 10 percent of Mongolia's population, all in the name of furthering his power.

Aside from a few editorial errors, this fine book is very readable and coherent. *Poisoned Arrows* was written for a general audience and not specifically for specialists with the intention of making the public aware of what happened and that the memories of those who died will not be forgotten. It is appropriate that the book was published for the general public as Sandag does tend to lose his objectivity. Indeed, in the introduction, he admits that although he attempted to be objective, his biases against Stalin, Choibalsan, and communism in general come through. When one considers that Shagdariin Sandag's father was among those purged, it is understandable. The final chapter of *Poisoned Arrows* is the story of his father and also details the decline of his hometown of Altan Bulag due to the purges.

Indeed, the co-author Harry Kendall, wrote that personal objectivity is impossible. As a historian, this must be one goal for which we all must strive. However, as the book was written for the general public and the authors admit that their objectivity suffered because of personal experi-

ences with the subject, it is acceptable. Furthermore, it achieves what numerous other textbook accounts and monographs have not done. Sandag and Kendall do a marvelous job of demonstrating that although 100,000 individuals were murdered or imprisoned, the entire country suffered. Decades passed before the government informed Sandag that his father had died in prison. Families were destroyed through separation, stress, and depression, not to mention the lingering fear who might disappear next. *Poisoned Arrows* is an extremely powerful and moving book for this very reason and should be read by anyone interested in Asia during the early twentieth century, Soviet history, Mongolian history, or the phenomenon of personality cults. One must also hope that Sandag and Kendall take the next step and write a complete history of the Mongolian massacres with an objective analysis of its ramifications for Mongolia and its place in the world.

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