

# Research Reports and Briefs

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## Reports

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### Conceptions and Uses of "Victimhood" in Contemporary Mongolia

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For the past five years or so, I have been engaged in research on issues related to the legacy of political repression in Mongolia, the former Mongolian People's Republic. The project itself grew out of the circumstances surrounding my 1997 fieldwork in the capital of Mongolia, Ulaanbaatar. I had returned to Mongolia to study the effects of collectivization and related issues on the formation of a socialist Mongolian identity in the 1950s. But people were not all that interested in the topic. It turned out I had arrived in time for the 60th anniversary of the start of the repressions of the late 1930s, when at least 22,000 people were killed in a period of 18 months (other estimates put the figure as high as 30,000, or higher). This also coincided with the debate on the draft of the law to rehabilitate and compensate victims of political repression that was taking place in the *Ih Hural* (the Mongolian Parliament; see Kaplonski 1999 for this debate). These were the topics people were talking about, and so I began to study them as well.

Since that time, I have been focusing on a number of issues related to the issue of repression, but a central theme to my current research has been the concept of victimhood. I have been seeking to understand how the idea of victimhood is constructed and used in contemporary Mongolia in relation to the repressions of the socialist era (1921-1990). In other words, I want to understand how and why some people choose to identify themselves as victims, while others do not. Given the scope of the repressions throughout the socialist period, the oft-repeated Mongolian assertion that no family was left untouched may be only a slight exaggeration. The

vast majority of people, however, choose not to employ the label of victim.

Many of the issues taken up in my research would be familiar to students of identity and nationalism. Yet the majority of the literature dealing with political repression and its aftermath, and issues of accountability and reconciliation take the identity of victim to be self-evident and unproblematic (among others, see Borneman 1997; Hesse and Post 1999; Minow 1998). There is some recognition that matters in the Soviet bloc at least were more complicated — one thinks of Havel's observation that all were both victims of the regime and complicit in its maintenance (Havel 1991) — but the concept of victim itself is still relatively unexplored.

The topic is fascinatingly complex. To cite one key example, the relatives of people who were killed in the 1930s often see themselves *more* as victims than people who were actually arrested and sentenced to exile and/or labor camps later in the socialist era. Yet according to the law on rehabilitating and compensating victims (and their relatives), the latter group of people are victims, while the former are not. To make matters even more interesting, while there is a word for "victim" in Mongolian, it is not used in such discussions. My explicit attempts to use it were often met with puzzlement. Rather than the term "victim," a number of different terms based on the root "to repress" are used. Through this use of language, relatives of those who fit the legal definition of a repressed person place themselves on par with those that the law consider repressed.

These differences highlight the disjuncture between social and legal definitions of a victim of political repression. The different claims of victimhood relate to certain overlapping but competing conceptions of victims within the social sphere itself. In certain contexts, the label of victim is invested with considerable symbolic capital. It seems clear that these competing usages are linked to a struggle over symbolic capital, and who is entitled to use it. It is this tactical use of identity in post-socialist Mongolia that I am most interested in exploring.

In this context there are two aspects of victimhood as identity that I wish to outline briefly. The first point is that these competing versions of victimhood point out the fundamental, but too often overlooked, tactical aspect of identity. Identities exist for a purpose. At the most basic, this is to tell others, and ourselves, who we (think) we are. National identity, for example, identifies us with a fairly large group of people based on certain principles of who and what is thought to be important. It argues that certain markers are more important than others, and we thus are (or should be) bound to people who share these markers. People deploy different concepts of national identity based on what they feel to be important. This is not to say that such tactical uses are necessarily consciously deployed, although at times it seems clear that they are.

In looking at the case of "victim" in Mongolia, we see a similar process taking place. One relative of a victim of the 1930s repression whom I'll call "Dulmaa," once told me that "Dorj," himself arrested in the 1960s as part of an anti-party group, didn't really understand repression. The implication, of course, was that she did, and, more importantly, her voice should be given greater weight than his. Interestingly, Dulmaa claims to have a broader concept of "victim" than Dorj, although she also seems to guard her own claim more carefully. "His organization is just for 10 people [i.e., the staff] not the 30,000 [repressed]," she told me once, referring to the NGO Dorj had helped establish. And her inclusion of herself and acquaintances who suffered through the repression of parents or relatives of their parents' generation is, we have seen, a broader concept than that covered by the law. And at this level, it is similar to Dorj's use of the concept, since he also claims that relatives of the repressed were victims. Yet in her oft-repeated statements that the repressions of the 1930s were completely different from those of later periods, she is clearly

establishing a hierarchy within the category of victim.

It is also clear that various groups and individuals are using the label of "victim" in a tactical sense vis-à-vis non-victims. They have different goals — Dorj takes a more combative stance towards MAHN (the Mongolian People's Revolution Party, who held power during the socialist period), while Dulmaa seems more interested in issues of commemoration. But this should not disguise the fact that they both claim (demand) for themselves a morally superior position, and that they base this claim on their status as victims. In many contexts, identity is seen as a limited good, a zero-sum game. In other words, the benefit one person or group receives from the use of the label must be balanced by a similar loss by another person or group. This is again clear in Dulmaa's use of the concept. Underlying her distinction between the "real" repressions of the 1930s and the later ones is the belief that if all were recognized as equally deserving of the label, her own position would somehow be diluted. There is only a certain amount of "morality" to go around, as it were, and the more people share it, the less each person gets.

There are a number of other issues related to the repressions and the conception of victim that I am exploring. For example, it was only after their sweeping victory in the 2000 parliamentary elections that MAHN chose to offer what it called an apology for the repressions of the socialist era. Many people I talked to were singularly unimpressed with MAHN's acknowledgement that while people had suffered under their watch, ultimately, MAHN itself was also a victim, not a perpetrator. The long delay and reasoning behind the timing of the apology bears further examination, as does the apparent mutual exclusivity of the categories of victim and victimizer. Despite the very real messiness of what actually seems to have taken place, people have been fairly clear-cut in drawing distinctions between the victims and the victimizers. This is a topic that I have begun to explore (see Kaplonski 2000), but that also bears further investigation.

Finally, through a combination of archival work and interviews, I am trying to gather information to present a historical understanding of the Mongolian gulag, through a case study of a particular "re-education camp" in northern Mongolia. Despite having spent over two of the past five years in Mongolia working on this topic, this

remains very much a work in progress. The more work I do on the subject, the more questions I raise. As a result, I would be interested in hearing from others with similar interests.

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## Ongoing Archaeological Excavations in the Lower Don Region, Russia

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In 2000, a preliminary survey was made of the Chastiye [Chastye] Kurgany, a series of burial mounds [kurgans] located in the lower Don Region of southern Russia, between the Severskii Donets River (a tributary of the Don River) and the Bystraia River. The site, located about 65 kilometers northeast of Rostov-on-Don [Rostov-na-Donu], consists of 26 visible mounds as well as an unknown number of additional mounds that may have been razed by plowing (see map in Davis-Kimball 2001). Archaeologists from Rostov State University, Rostov-on-Don, Russia, led by Professor V. Ye. Maksimenko, conducted the 2000 excavations in collaboration with V. V. Kliuchnikov.

Kurgan 1, considered a ritual locale, was excavated in 2000. It revealed a rare burial type, dating to the early 4th century BCE. Among the artifacts recovered were a bronze cauldron, a brazier, various arrowheads, and pottery. Horse harness accoutrements in typical Scythian animal style included uniquely stylized cast-bronze images of fantastic animals. It is not clear, however, if these were created by Scythians or Sarmatians.

In 2001, the collaborative expedition continued, organized by Rostov State University; CSEN; and the journal *Donskaia arkeologiya*, published in Rostov-on-Don. Six mounds were excavated: Kurgans 2, 3, 4, 8, 9, and 11. One kurgan belonged to the 4th century BCE Early Iron Age nomadic period; three kurgans are attributed to the 8th century CE Khazar culture; and two to the Polovtsy culture from the end of the 12th century-beginning of the 13th century CE.

The earliest of the kurgans, number 4, dating to the 4th century BCE, revealed a male skeleton, aged 40-45, in supine position, oriented to the south. An iron arrowhead was found in his hip and a second was recovered near the femur. In addition, several dozen arrowheads of various types and the remains of an iron sword were recovered from the burial. Horse and sheep bones were also mortuary offerings. The orientation and artifacts indicate this to be an Early Sarmatian burial. Arrowheads found in the skeleton reveal that skirmishes or warfare took place between nomadic groups in the region, and could well have caused the death of this personage.