



INTERNATIONAL  
STANDARD  
SERIAL  
NUMBER  
THAILAND



NOBLE  
EDUCATION  
PUBLISHER

PKP

PUBLIC  
KNOWLEDGE  
PROJECT

OJS

OPEN  
JOURNAL  
SYSTEMS



**Buddho Journal**

<https://so13.tci-thaijo.org/index.php/Buddho>

ISSN: 3057-1200 (ONLINE)

## Russian Buddhism: History, Development, and Contemporary Challenges

**Author & Corresponding Author\***

1. Shang Chi Fang\*

**Affiliation:**

1. Northwest University, China

Email: fang\_shangchi@gmail.com

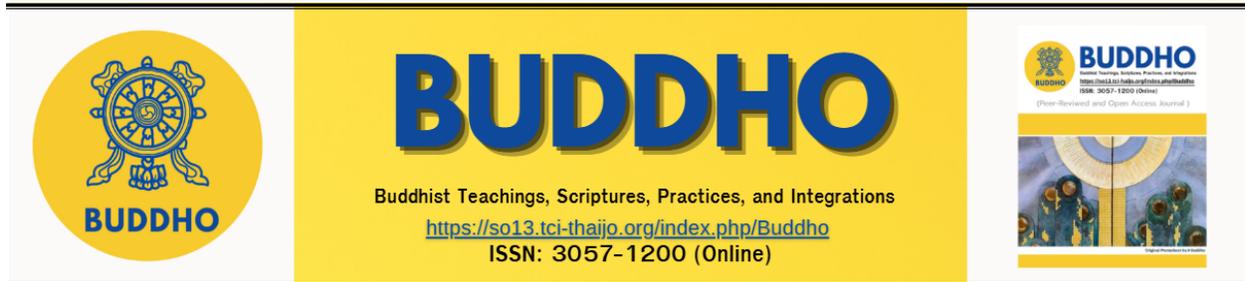
**Article history:**

Received: 05/02/2022, Revised: 28/02/2022,

Accepted: 20/03/2022, Available online: 01/04/2022

**How to Cite:**

Chi, W. C. (2023). Russian Buddhism. *Buddho Journal*, 1(1), 1-7.



Academic Review Articles

# Russian Buddhism: History, Development, and Contemporary Challenges

## Shang Chi Fang\*

### Abstract

Buddhism in Russia represents a unique synthesis of Tibetan, Mongolic, and indigenous traditions, shaped by historical, political, and cultural influences. This review article examines the historical development of Buddhism in Russia, from its early presence among the Buryats, Kalmyks, and Tuvans to its official recognition in the Russian Empire. The Soviet era brought severe repression, leading to the destruction of monasteries and the persecution of Buddhist leaders. However, the post-Soviet period witnessed a revival, with the reconstruction of temples, renewed monastic practices, and increasing interest among ethnic Russians. The article also explores the geopolitical dimensions of Russian Buddhism, particularly its relationship with Tibet, China, and the Russian state. Additionally, the growing appeal of Buddhist philosophy and meditation among non-traditional practitioners in Russia is analyzed. By reviewing historical texts, governmental policies, and contemporary scholarly works, this study provides an overview of the resilience and transformation of Buddhism in Russia, positioning it within both national and global religious landscapes.

**Keywords:** Russian Buddhism

### Introduction

Buddhism in Russia is a complex and historically significant religious tradition that has evolved through centuries of cultural exchange, political transformations, and religious revival. Although Russia is predominantly associated with Orthodox Christianity, Buddhism has long been recognized as one of its traditional religions, primarily practiced among the Buryat, Kalmyk, and Tuvan ethnic groups (Snelling, 1993). The introduction of Buddhism to Russian territory can be traced to the 17th century, when the Kalmyks, a Mongolic people, migrated westward and brought Tibetan Buddhist traditions with them. By the 18th century, the Russian Empire officially

recognized Buddhism as a state-sanctioned religion, marking the beginning of its institutional development (Bernstein, 2013).

Despite this recognition, Russian Buddhism has experienced both periods of state support and severe repression. The Soviet era was particularly devastating, as Buddhist monasteries (datsans) were destroyed, and Buddhist leaders were subjected to persecution under Stalin's anti-religious campaigns (Wanner, 2007). However, with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Buddhism in Russia experienced a significant revival. Monastic institutions were reestablished, new temples were constructed, and interest in Buddhist philosophy and meditation expanded beyond traditional ethnic groups to include ethnic Russians (Kormina & Luehrmann, 2018).

Today, Russian Buddhism operates at the intersection of religion, politics, and international relations. The Russian state continues to recognize Buddhism as an important part of the country's cultural and religious landscape, yet geopolitical considerations, particularly regarding Tibet and China, influence Buddhist activities in Russia (Tsyrempilov, 2019). Additionally, the rise of Buddhist modernism and globalization has facilitated the spread of Buddhist ideas among urban intellectuals and practitioners seeking alternative spiritual paths. This article examines the historical trajectory of Buddhism in Russia, its resilience in the face of state repression, and its contemporary challenges and transformations. By analyzing historical records, governmental policies, and modern religious trends, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the role of Buddhism in Russia's religious and socio-political framework.

### **Early Buddhism in Russia**

Russian Buddhism is a unique and fascinating aspect of religious life in Russia, with deep historical roots and modern developments. Here are some key points about Buddhism in Russia

1. **Historical Background** Buddhism first took root in Russia through its indigenous peoples in Siberia and Central Asia. The Kalmyks, Buryats, and Tuvans are the main ethnic Buddhist groups in Russia today. The Kalmyk people, of Mongolic origin, migrated to the lower Volga region in the 17th century and are the only European ethnic group that follows Tibetan Buddhism. Living near Lake Baikal, the Buryats have a long history of Buddhism, influenced by Mongolian and Tibetan traditions. In Tuva, Tibetan Buddhism is deeply intertwined with traditional shamanistic practices.

2. **Russian Imperial and Soviet Eras** In the 18th century, Buddhism was officially recognized by the Russian Empire. In 1741, Empress Elizabeth declared Buddhism one of the official religions of Russia. Under Stalin, Buddhist monasteries were destroyed, and lamas were persecuted. However, during World War II, Stalin allowed some Buddhist revival to gain support from Buryats and Kalmyks in the war effort. Since the 1990s, Buddhism in Russia has experienced a resurgence, with the rebuilding of temples and the return of monastic traditions.

3. **Modern Russian Buddhism** Tibetan Influence: The Dalai Lama remains an important spiritual figure for Russian Buddhists, although political tensions prevent him from visiting Russia. Growing Popularity: While Buddhism remains primarily among indigenous groups, interest in Buddhism among ethnic Russians has been growing, with some turning to meditation and Buddhist philosophy. Key Buddhist Centers:

1) Ivolginsky Datsan (Buryatia) – The main Buddhist monastery and spiritual center in Russia.

2) Datsan Gunzechoinei (St. Petersburg) – The first Buddhist temple in European Russia, established in the early 20th century.

3) Elista (Kalmykia) – Home to Russia's largest Buddhist temple, the Golden Abode of the Buddha Shakyamuni.

4. Russian Buddhism and Politics the Russian government recognizes Buddhism as one of the country's "traditional religions," alongside Christianity, Islam, and Judaism. Relations with China and Tibet impact the position of Buddhism in Russia, as the government maintains a delicate balance between Buddhist religious interests and diplomatic ties with Beijing.

5. Russian Buddhists Today Russian Buddhists are estimated to number around 1 to 2 million, mostly among the Kalmyks, Buryats, and Tuvans, with a small but growing number of ethnic Russian converts. There is also an increasing interest in Buddhist teachings among intellectuals and practitioners of meditation.

### **The Development of Russian Buddhism**

Buddhism in Russia has a long and complex history, deeply intertwined with the cultural and political landscape of the region. The emergence and evolution of Buddhism in Russia can be traced through its historical development, state policies, and contemporary revival. The introduction of Buddhism into Russian territories dates back to the 17th century, primarily through contact with Mongol and Tibetan traditions. The Kalmyks, Buryats, and Tuvans three major ethnic groups practicing Buddhism played a crucial role in establishing the religion within the Russian Empire. The Kalmyks, a Mongolic people who migrated to the Volga region in the early 1600s, adopted Tibetan Buddhism, aligning themselves with the Gelug school (Snelling, 1993). Similarly, the Buryats and Tuvans, influenced by Tibetan and Mongolian Buddhist traditions, contributed to the expansion of Buddhist teachings and monastic institutions in Siberia (Bernstein, 2006).

1. Imperial Patronage and Regulation During the 18th and 19th centuries, the Russian imperial government sought to regulate Buddhism while simultaneously using it as a tool for managing the diverse ethnic groups in its vast empire. Catherine the Great officially recognized Buddhism in 1771, granting legal status to Buddhist institutions and monastic leaders (Tsyrempilov, 2013). However, state control over Buddhist affairs intensified, particularly under Tsarist rule, as authorities sought to limit foreign influence from Tibet and Mongolia.

2. Soviet Suppression and Persecution With the rise of the Soviet Union, state policies toward Buddhism shifted dramatically. The Bolsheviks viewed religion as antithetical to communist ideology, leading to widespread persecution of Buddhist clergy and destruction of monastic institutions. Between the 1920s and 1930s, many Buddhist temples and monasteries were dismantled, and Buddhist leaders were arrested or executed (Andreyev, 2014). The Stalinist purges further decimated the Buddhist population, with thousands of monks and religious scholars facing repression (Kaplonski, 2008).

3. **Post-Soviet Revival** The dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 marked a resurgence of Buddhist practices and institutions in Russia. Religious freedom laws enabled the reconstruction of monasteries, the return of religious texts, and the reestablishment of traditional ceremonies. In Buryatia, Kalmykia, and Tuva, Buddhist communities regained state recognition, and prominent figures such as the Dalai Lama played a role in revitalizing Buddhist education and practices (Humphrey & Balzhanova, 2015). Additionally, new Buddhist centers have emerged in major Russian cities, attracting a growing number of followers from diverse backgrounds.

The history of Buddhism in Russia is marked by phases of growth, regulation, repression, and revival. From its early adoption among Mongolic and Siberian ethnic groups to its suppression under Soviet rule and eventual resurgence in the post-Soviet era, Russian Buddhism reflects both resilience and adaptation. Today, Buddhism continues to thrive in Russia, contributing to the country's religious and cultural diversity.

### **Contemporary Challenges**

Buddhism in Russia has undergone significant transformations, especially following the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Historically concentrated in regions like Buryatia, Kalmykia, and Tuva, Russian Buddhism faces contemporary challenges that are both multifaceted and deeply rooted in the nation's socio-political landscape. The presence of Buddhism in Russia dates back to the 8th century, with early evidence linked to the state of Balhae in regions now known as Primorye and Amur. Over centuries, Buddhism became integral to the cultural and spiritual fabric of areas such as Buryatia, Kalmykia, and Tuva. However, the Soviet era marked a period of severe repression, with Buddhist institutions dismantled and practitioners persecuted. The late 20th century witnessed a resurgence, as communities endeavored to revive their religious heritage amidst the remnants of past suppressions.

1. **State Relations and Religious Autonomy in Post-Soviet Russia**, the relationship between the state and Buddhist institutions has been complex. While the 1990 law on "the Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations" ostensibly guarantees religious freedom, in practice, Buddhist communities often navigate a landscape where state interests can influence religious expression. For instance, the government's selective support and recognition of certain Buddhist leaders over others can lead to internal divisions and questions about the authenticity and autonomy of religious leadership.

2. **Leadership and Institutional Integrity** The appointment of religious leaders has sometimes been a contentious issue. In Kalmykia, the election of Telo Tulku Rinpoche as Šajin Lama introduced debates about the role of monasticism and the definition of "pure" Buddhism. His emphasis on celibate monasticism contrasted with local traditions, leading to discussions about the adaptability of Buddhist practices in contemporary contexts. Such debates highlight the tension between preserving traditional practices and evolving to meet modern societal norms.

3. **Cultural Identity and Modernization** Buddhist communities in Russia grapple with the challenge of maintaining cultural identity amidst rapid modernization and globalization. The influx of global media and the internet have introduced new interpretations and practices of

Buddhism, sometimes leading to a dilution of traditional customs. Balancing the preservation of indigenous practices with the integration of contemporary influences requires a nuanced approach that respects historical legacies while embracing beneficial modern innovations.

4. **Political Pressures and Nationalism** The intersection of religion and politics presents another layer of complexity. In 2022, Khambo Lama Damba Ayusheev, head of the Buddhist Traditional Sangha of Russia, publicly supported the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This stance intertwines religious authority with nationalistic agendas, potentially alienating segments of the Buddhist community that may hold differing views. Such political entanglements can compromise the perceived spiritual neutrality of Buddhist institutions and lead to internal fractures.

The contemporary challenges facing Russian Buddhism are emblematic of a broader struggle to reconcile historical traditions with modern realities. Navigating state relations, defining authentic leadership, preserving cultural identity amidst globalization, and maintaining spiritual integrity in politically charged environments are critical issues that require thoughtful and context-sensitive approaches. The resilience of Russian Buddhism will depend on its ability to adapt to these challenges while staying true to its core principles.

## **Conclusion**

Buddhism in Russia represents a dynamic religious tradition shaped by centuries of cultural exchange, state policies, and socio-political transformations. From its early introduction through Mongolic and Tibetan influences to its recognition as a state-sanctioned religion under the Russian Empire, Buddhism has played a significant role in the country's religious landscape. Despite facing severe repression during the Soviet era, its post-Soviet revival has been marked by institutional restoration, growing public interest, and the increasing involvement of ethnic Russians. However, contemporary challenges—including state relations, leadership disputes, cultural modernization, and political pressures—continue to shape the trajectory of Buddhism in Russia. As the tradition navigates these complexities, its resilience and adaptability will determine its future role within Russian society.

## **Suggestions**

1. **Strengthening Religious Education and Institutions:** To ensure the continuity of authentic Buddhist teachings, Russian Buddhist communities should invest in religious education, monastic training, and the preservation of traditional texts. Collaboration with international Buddhist centers can enhance scholarly exchanges and improve doctrinal clarity.

2. **Promoting Interfaith Dialogue:** Encouraging discussions between Buddhist, Orthodox Christian, Muslim, and other religious groups in Russia can foster mutual understanding and peaceful coexistence in a multi-religious society.

3. **Enhancing Cultural Awareness and Public Engagement:** Increasing public awareness about Buddhism through academic research, cultural events, and media representation can help dispel misconceptions and encourage a broader acceptance of Buddhist philosophy.

---

### **Body of Knowledge**

The study of Buddhism in Russia encompasses a multifaceted exploration of its historical development, state interactions, and contemporary transformations. As a recognized traditional religion, Russian Buddhism has evolved through interactions with Mongolic and Tibetan traditions, facing both imperial patronage and state suppression. Academic discourse on Russian Buddhism integrates perspectives from history, religious studies, anthropology, and political science, offering insights into the resilience of the tradition amid changing socio-political landscapes. This body of knowledge not only contributes to a deeper understanding of religious pluralism in Russia but also informs broader discussions on the adaptation and survival of minority religions in diverse geopolitical contexts. By examining historical records, governmental policies, and modern religious trends, this study provides a comprehensive framework for analyzing the past, present, and future of Buddhism in Russia.

### **References**

- Andreyev, A. (2014). *Soviet Russia and Tibet: The Debacle of Secret Diplomacy, 1918-1930s*. Brill.
- Bernstein, A. (2006). *Religious Bodies Politic: Rituals of Sovereignty in Buryat Buddhism*. University of Chicago Press.
- Bernstein, A. (2013). *Religious Bodies Politic: Rituals of Sovereignty in Buryat Buddhism*. University of Chicago Press.
- Humphrey, C., & Balzhanova, O. (2015). *Sacred Knowledge, Secular Times: Religious and Scientific Culture in Late Modernity*. Berghahn Books.
- Kaplonski, C. (2008). *The Lama Question: Violence, Sovereignty, and Exception in Early Socialist Mongolia*. University of Hawaii Press.
- Kormina, J., & Luehrmann, S. (2018). "The Social Lives of Buddhist Objects in Post-Soviet Russia." *Material Religion*, 14(1), 1-22.
- Snelling, J. (1993). *Buddhism in Russia: The Story of Agvan Dorzhiev and Khambo Lamaateya*. Element Books.
- Snelling, J. (1993). *Buddhism in Russia: The Story of Agvan Dorzhiev, Lhasa's Emissary to the Tsar*. Element Books.
- Tsyrempilov, N. (2013). "The Buddhist Community of the Russian Empire: Transnational Networks and Identity in the Early Twentieth Century." *Central Eurasian Studies Review*, 12(1), 45-62.
- Tsyrempilov, N. (2019). "Buddhism and Nationalism in Russia: The Buryat Experience of the Twentieth Century." *Inner Asia*, 21(2), 175-198.
- Wanner, C. (2007). *Communities of the Converted: Ukrainians and Global Evangelism*. Cornell University Press.