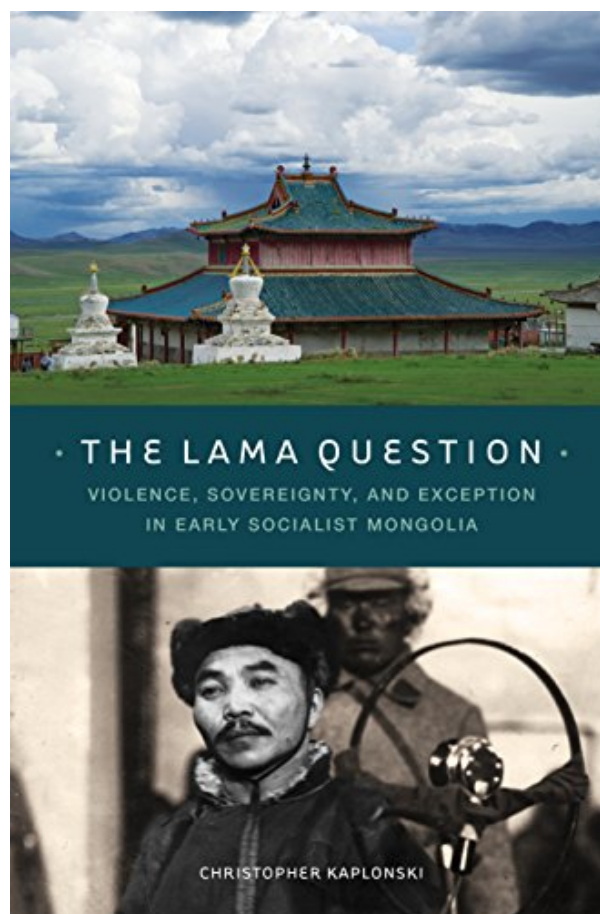
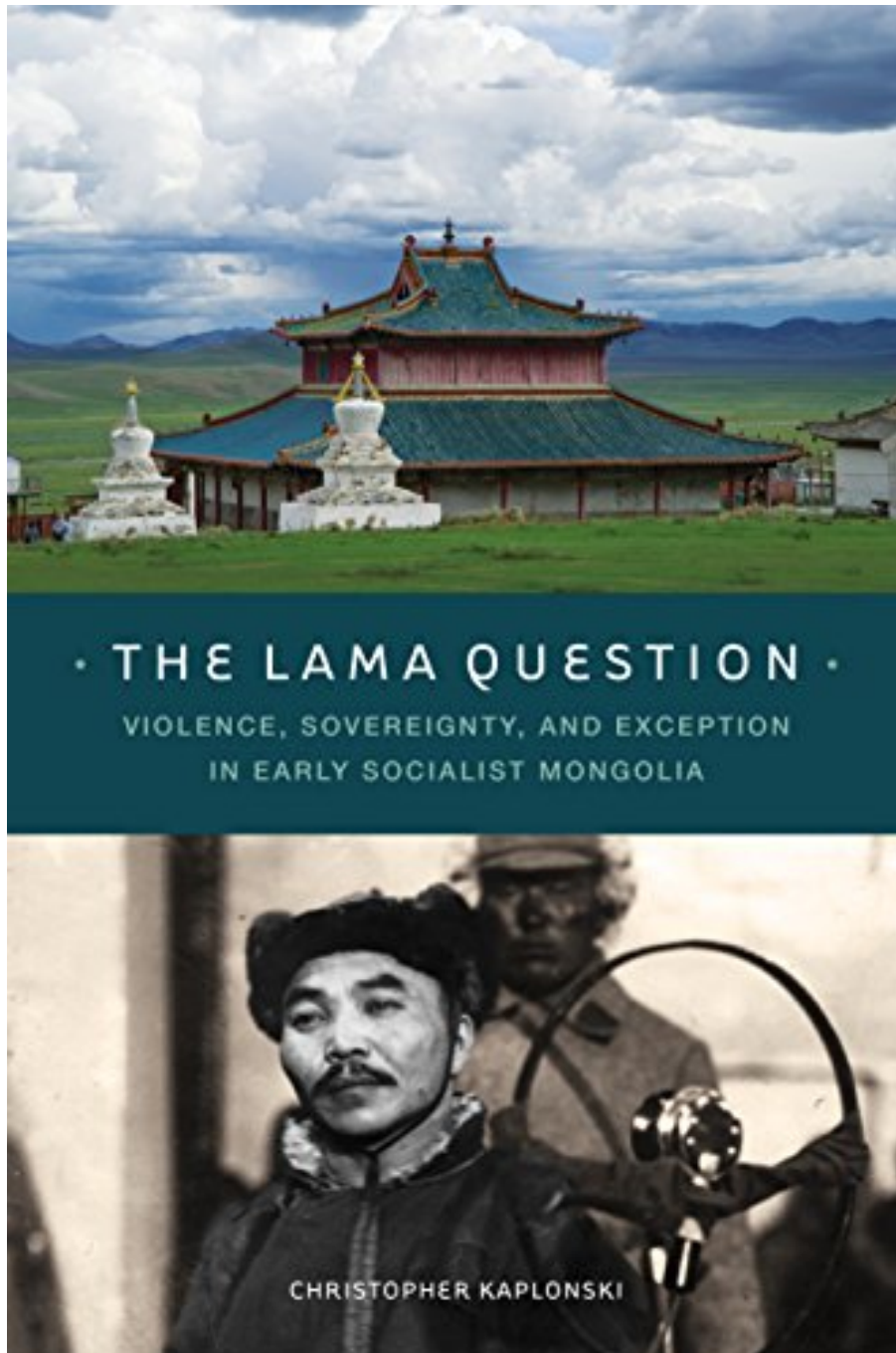


THE LAMA QUESTION: VIOLENCE, SOVEREIGNTY, AND EXCEPTION IN EARLY SOCIALIST MONGOLIA BY CHRISTOPHER KAPLONSKI



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Review

The Lama Question ranks as one of the best books I have read on Soviet-era Mongolia, a book to be urged upon all those with an interest in the early revolutionary period, in the sociohistory of religion and, of course, in the disturbing and sadly ever-pertinent issue of state violence. (International Institute of Asian Studies Newsletter)

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Before becoming the second socialist country in the world (after the Soviet Union) in 1921, Mongolia had been a Buddhist feudal theocracy. Combatting the influence of the dominant Buddhist establishment to win the hearts and minds of the Mongolian people was one of the most important challenges faced by the new socialist government. It would take almost a decade and a half to resolve the “lama question,” and it would be answered with brutality, destruction, and mass killings. Chris Kaplonski examines this critical, violent time in the development of Mongolia as a nation-state and its ongoing struggle for independence and recognition in the twentieth century.

Unlike most studies that explore violence as the primary means by which states deal with their opponents, *The Lama Question* argues that the decision to resort to violence in Mongolia was not a quick one; neither was it a long-term strategy nor an out-of control escalation of orders but the outcome of a complex series of events and attempts by the government to be viewed as legitimate by the population. Kaplonski draws on a decade of research and archival resources to investigate the problematic relationships between religion and politics and geopolitics and biopolitics in early socialist Mongolia, as well as the multitude of state actions that preceded state brutality. By examining the incidents and transformations that resulted in violence and by viewing violence as a process rather than an event, his work not only challenges existing theories of political violence, but also offers another approach to the anthropology of the state. In particular, it presents an alternative model to philosopher Giorgio Agamben’s theory of sovereignty and the state of exception.

The Lama Question will be of interest to scholars and students of violence, the state, biopolitics, Buddhism, and socialism, as well as to those interested in the history of Mongolia and Asia in general.

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Kaplonski at his best

By JPC

In *The Lama Question*, Christopher Kaplonski uses the example of political violence against Mongolian Buddhist lamas to interrogate Agamben's theory of exception. Here, exception refers to the state's ability to rely on extrajudicial means in times of crisis – 'the state' essentially being the one that can utilize extrajudicial, exceptional means when faced with crisis. Agamben roots his notion of exception in the idea of *homo sacer* – a Roman legal concept that denoted a person who was stripped of their citizenship and subject to execution. Kaplonski refines Agamben's theory of exception to make use of it in the Mongolian case. There was no *homo sacer* in Mongolia – the early Mongolian state simply did not possess enough power to simply execute them. As far as states go, the Mongolian government of this period was liminal – it lacked the traditional authority of a state to impose the rule of law, and it also lacked the exceptional authority to resort to extrajudicial means. This liminality of the early Mongolian socialist state answers Kaplonski's *problematique*, that is, 'why did it take so long for the socialist Mongolian government to purge the lamas?'. Lacking power, the Mongolian government made a concerted effort to make the political violence experienced by the lamas fit within an existing legal framework. I'm not sure if it would be fair to characterize Kaplonski's book as a revisionist history, partly because there is not much literature, at least in English, to be revised. *The Lama Question* does provide a necessary counter-balance to earlier works in English, such as Baabar's *From World Power to Soviet Satellite*. Juxtaposing the two accounts, an irreconcilable irony develops: to refocus historical agency onto the Mongols, that is, to make them more than a 'Soviet satellite,' is also to hold them accountable to the purges. Kaplonski's work also *problematizes* long-standing conceptions of the state, such as Weber's famous dictum that the state is the entity/institution that can 'make legitimate use of violence'. Kaplonski's work demonstrates that the early Mongolian socialist state was in no position to make legitimate use of violence, and that it was only after the early Mongolian state attained a decree of judicial legitimacy that it could resort to violence at all.

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