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In Search of Shambhala?: Nicholas Roerich's 1934-5 Inner Mongolian Expedition

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Abstract

During the 1920s and 1930s Western visitors to Inner Mongolia came for a variety of reasons. Some came for the purpose of scholarship, others passed through on their way to visit the new 'independent' nation of Manchukuo, often at the invitation of the Japanese authorities. Among these visitors was Nicholas Roerich, the purpose of whose visit is still the subject of debate. Roerich's journey through Inner Mongolia has attracted some scholarly attention, but there are still many unanswered questions about what it was that Roerich actually did while he was there or hoped to achieve. This article draws on earlier studies, but analyses the available reports from US State Department in China together with contemporary news reports, to place Roerich's journey within the geopolitical context of the time.

Key Words

Nicholas Roerich, Shambhala, Inner Mongolia

Introduction

In the 1920s and 1930s a steady stream of Western visitors made their way to the Far East and crisscrossed Inner Mongolia, before returning home to write about the weird and wonderful sights and smells that they encountered in the 'East', or to pontificate for

a Western audience on the events unfolding in the region. Among those travellers who visited Inner Mongolia were scholars, world travellers and journalists, almost all of who wrote of their 'adventures' in 'mysterious' Mongolia on their return home. The American explorer Roy Chapman Andrews, for example, made several visits to the Gobi Desert during the 1920s in search of dinosaur fossils, subsequently penning at least one book aimed at a general readership documenting his adventures (Andrews 1921). Other visitors to the region included the English journalist Peter Fleming, the younger brother of the creator of James Bond, Ian Fleming, who travelled through the region in late 1934. Fleming later commented on the complex nature of the Japanese-Mongolian relationship at this time, and noted that the Japanese regarded the Inner Mongols as a potential focus for Pan-Mongolian unity, as well as speculating on whether the Japanese were again seeking to revive the earlier Japanese-backed Pan-Mongol movement which elements of the Japanese military had supported at the time of the 1918-22 Siberian Intervention (Fleming 1952: 129).

Fleming was not alone in commenting on the nature of Japanese-Mongolian relations and what the future might hold in regard to this politically sensitive topic. In 1933 the Danish journalist A. R. Lindt noted the racial and religious ties between the two peoples (Lindt 1933: 268-9), while the following year the American Mongolist Owen Lattimore observed that the Mongols of Manchuria were responsive to Japan's wooing and that if they were won over by Japanese policies they could be 'both an effective possible screen between the Japanese and Russian spheres of influence, as well as a way to extend the prestige of Japan and Manchukuo far out on the frontier between China and Inner Mongolia, thus cutting off the Chinese to terra irredenta (Lattimore 1934: 138-9).' Indeed, time and time again throughout the period, Western visitors to the region noted the complex nature of Japanese-Mongolian relations.

Among those who visited Inner Mongolia during the 1930s was Nicholas Roerich, the renowned artist, the purpose of whose visit is still the subject of debate. Moreover, Roerich apparently chose not to write about what he had done while he was in Inner Mongolia, or more accurately, later chose to gloss over what he had done. Indeed, the Roerich Museum's biography makes no mention whatsoever of Nicholas Roerich's 1934-5 Manchurian and Inner Mongolian visit (Roerich Museum), while a biography produced with the help of the museum makes only brief mention of the visit (Decter 1989: 133-4). Roerich's journey through Inner Mongolia has attracted some scholarly attention, but there are still many unanswered questions about what it was that Roerich actually did while he was there or even hoped to achieve. This article re-examines what earlier researchers have said about Nicholas Roerich's 1934-5 journey to Manchuria and Inner Mongolia, but places Roerich's activities within the geopolitical context of the time. To do this it draws on a number of the reports lodged by officials of the US State Department stationed in the region at the time, together with contemporary newspaper stories and previously overlooked writings, to present a more complete picture of what it was that Roerich did.

Nicholas Roerich – Artist, Visionary, Mystic

Born in St Petersburg in 1874, Nicholas Roerich (1873-1947)¹ studied at the Imperial Academy of Arts in St Petersburg, and by the beginning of the twentieth century was highly respected as a painter in pre-revolutionary Russia (Decter 1989). Moreover, Roerich was also active in a number of other fields including archeology and history, eventually finding a wealth of inspiration in the cultural heritage of the East. Married in 1899 to Helena Shaposhnikova (1879-1955), the couple subsequently travelled widely through Russia seeking out those things that they considered were reflective of Russia's

ancient culture, with Roerich deriving inspiration from the old Russian icon painting and architecture that the pair encountered. In addition to his artistic output, Roerich was also heavily involved in theatre design for some of the greats of the Russian theatre and ballet, among them Sergei Diaghilev and Igor Stravinsky (Lifar 1940: 278). Even at this stage, however, some regarded Roerich as unusual, and it is noteworthy that Stravinsky later commented that he ‘was not surprised to hear of his [Roerich’s] secret activities ... He looked as though he ought to have been either a mystic or a spy (Stravinsky & Craft 1959: 95).’

Along with Roerich’s involvement with the arts, both Nicholas and Helena began to study Eastern philosophies, eventually becoming immersed in a mix of contradictory beliefs that were subsequently tied up in the idea of a mystical kingdom in Central Asia known as Shambhala. In addition to his fascination with Buddhism, which saw Roerich connected with plans prior to the First World War to build a Buddhist temple in St Petersburg, Roerich was also a member of the Russian branch of the Theosophical society (White & Maze 1995: 58). Theosophy, founded in 1875 by the eccentric Russian expatriate Elena Blavatsky (1832-91), attracted numerous adherents in pre-revolutionary Russia, with its claim to offer an alternative to the rationalism of the nineteenth century. One of the attractions for the Roerichs was presumably Theosophy’s mixture of Buddhist thought and vocabulary with claims of a ‘universal mother doctrine (Carlson 1997: 139-140).’

Although living in St Petersburg at the outbreak of the First World War, by March 1916 Nicholas and Helena had moved to Finland, at the time still part of the Russian empire, and were there when the March and October 1917 Revolutions occurred. The pair returned briefly to St Petersburg in January 1918, before travelling on to Helsinki and Stockholm for an exhibition. By 1920, the couple had moved to London, before

¹ With the transliteration of the names of Roerich and his wife I have followed that

eventually deciding to settle in the United States. It was at some point after his arrival in New York in September 1920, that Nicholas Roerich began dressing in Tibetan prayer robes and claiming to have been, in an ancient former incarnation, a Chinese emperor, with his followers addressing him as ‘Guru,’ ‘Master’ and ‘Father’ (White & Maze 1995: 58).

Whether Roerich actually believed this is not known, but his claims impressed those wealthy New Yorkers including those who subsequently introduced Roerich to Henry Wallace, the US Secretary of Agriculture for the Roosevelt administration. Wallace is an important figure in the story as it was Wallace who was chiefly responsible for appointing Roerich as the head of a US Department of Agriculture expedition to Manchuria and Inner Mongolia in 1934-5. At least one writer, John Krueger, has described Wallace as ‘off-beat’, qualifying this description by noting that Wallace’s interest in Oriental religions was an interest ‘curiously presaging the guru cults of the 1970s (Krueger 1982: 139).’ Moreover, Wallace played a significant part in convincing President Roosevelt to support the signing of the Roerich Peace Pact in April 1935, a pact that afforded culture fixtures, such as historic monuments, museums, artistic and educational institutions the same degree of protection that the Geneva Convention afforded hospitals (Osterrieder 2007).

Roerich’s 1934-5 journey to the Far East was not his first to the region, as with the support of his wealthy American benefactors, Roerich had been able to make an earlier journey to Central Asia in the late 1920s, traversing much of the region, starting from India and eventually finishing up in Outer Mongolia, at that time firmly under Soviet control (McCannon 2002: 181). The stated purpose of this journey was to ‘promote cultural unity and allow Roerich ... to conduct archaeological and ethnographic research,’ as well as to locate the legendary kingdom of Shambhala (McCannon 2001:

52). The legendary kingdom of Shambhala had a complex political potency for North and Inner Asian Buddhist-influenced cultures, something that both the Russians and Japanese sought to exploit throughout the 1920s and 1930s. Shambhala and Roerich's use of the legend during his 1934-5 visit to the region will be discussed more fully later in the article.

Exactly how Roerich and his party were able to move so freely throughout the region is something of a mystery, although McCannon suggests that Roerich achieved this by convincing the Soviets that he could be instrumental in assembling a group of lamas who were keen to form a Buddhist commonwealth that would be anti-British and friendly to the Soviet Union (McCannon 2002: 181-2). More recently, Znamenski has claimed that Roerich had actually contacted the Soviet embassy in Berlin, and in exchange for Soviet support, offered to monitor British activities in the Tibetan-Indian border region and to 'trumpet the Bolshevik agenda by highlighting the similarities between Buddhism and Communism (Znamenski 2011: 95-6)'. Presumably, Roerich used the same flair that he used to persuade wealthy New Yorkers that he had once been a Chinese emperor to convince the more worldly Soviet commissars of his ability to woo the lamas, along with the promise of acting as a spy. While Roerich's first sortie in search of Shambhala was unsuccessful, Roerich had plans to undertake another attempt, but by the time he did the geopolitical situation in the region had changed considerably.

The Geopolitical Situation at the Time of Roerich's 1934-5 Visit

In the wake of the Manchurian Incident of September 1931, the Japanese Kwantung Army with its plans for the subjugation of the northeastern part of the Chinese Republic advanced steadily northward, bringing the three provinces of Manchuria firmly under Japanese control. Then, in March 1932, the Kwantung Army engineered the creation of the new 'state' of Manchukuo, installing Pu-yi, the last Ch'ing Emperor, as nominal

head of the 'state,' before, in January 1933, expanding the borders of the new 'nation' with the seizure of Jehol province (Ogata 1964: 90-117). The Kwantung Army subsequently elevated Pu-yi to the position of 'emperor' of Manchukuo in 1934, a move that had important ramifications, because, as noted by both Japanese and Western writers at the time, it increased Pu-yi's capacity to serve as a rallying-point for those living outside of Manchukuo, both Mongol and Chinese, who desired independence from Republican China because of what the Republican government represented (Kawakami 1933: 205-10; Cutlack 1934: 19-20; Jagchid 1999: 47).

Part of the appeal of this 'independent' nation of Manchukuo was the fact that in the western part of Manchukuo, that area abutting the region still nominally under Republican Chinese-control, the Japanese established the supposedly autonomous Mongol-governed Hsingan province where the Japanese trumpeted a 'policy of rule of the Mongols by the Mongols' (*Mōjin Mō-ji seisaku*), even installing a Mongolian prince, Prince Sai, as head of the Hsingan regional administration (Zenrin kyōkai 1936: 248-9; Nakajima 2000: 149). The willingness of the architects of Manchukuo to grant even a limited degree of autonomy to its Mongol inhabitants was a powerful draw card to the Mongols in Chahar and Suiyuan provinces, living outside Manchukuo, who sought greater autonomy from the Chinese Republic. Moreover, the Japanese policy constituted a challenge to the Chinese authorities. Owen Lattimore, writing shortly after the creation of Manchukuo, declared that:

in Manchuria they [the Chinese] are confronted with an autonomous Mongol province [Hsingan] in which Chinese are forbidden to settle and in which the development and improvement of the pastoral economy is to the interest of Japan. It is not too much to say that the Mongols are once more an

ascendant people, so far as the Chinese are concerned (Lattimore 1934: 94)

The Japanese decision to grant the Mongols of Manchukuo some autonomy was not made for idealistic reasons; there were clear political and strategic motives. Principally, it allowed the Japanese authorities to present themselves to the populations of Soviet-controlled Outer Mongolia and Chinese-controlled Inner Mongolia as potential liberators. This image was further exploited by the Japanese military in the following years (Lattimore 1962: 131-2; Diluv Khutagt 1982: 238).

From 1933 to 1935, in tandem with its push into North China, the Japanese military sought to remove any potential Chinese opposition to Japanese control of Inner Mongolia. First, in May 1933, the Tangku Truce was signed, officially ending hostilities in Manchuria and providing for the ‘demilitarization’ of an area of some 13,000 square kilometres lying between the Great Wall and a line running just north of Peking and Tientsin (Coble 1991: 111). The term ‘demilitarized,’ however, is misleading: while the Chinese Republican military was largely excluded from the zone, the Kwantung Army had complete freedom. The Tangku Truce was important for Japanese-Mongolian relations because the removal of the Chinese authorities from the region gave the Kwantung Army more opportunities to encourage an ‘ongoing Mongol revival,’ which worked against the Nanking regime (Li 1975: 27). Such a revival could then be exploited to further strengthen the military’s hold over the region through the infiltration of Japanese military officers serving as ‘advisors.’ Fleming’s observation in 1934 that the Japanese military were seeking to revive their earlier Pan-Mongol movement would seem to be supported by these developments.

Two years later, in June 1935, two additional instruments, the Ho-Umezu and the Chin-Doihara Agreements, enlarged the ‘demilitarized’ area in North China, setting the

stage for the Kwantung Army-backed North China Autonomy Movement (see Kahn 1978: 177-207; Dryburgh 2000: 207-8). With the Chinese Republican forces thus banished from most of North China, the Kwantung Army now attempted, using the threat of military intervention, to separate the five provinces of North China — Hopei, Chahar, Suiyuan, Shansi and Shantung — from Chinese control entirely and to make them a ‘compact autonomous bloc, independent of Nanking, and deriving its inspiration, its politics – and its goods – from Tokyo (Tiltman 1937: 194).’

The US assistant military attaché in Peiping, Major S. V. Constant, kept Washington abreast of the ongoing attempts by the Japanese military to exert a ‘cultural and economic’ influence on the region, as well as the fact that the military appeared to favor a series of buffer states between the Jehol boundary and that of Outer Mongolia rather than outright occupation. To facilitate the creation of these buffer states a number of Japanese cultural missions had been established at the palaces of the most important Mongol princes in the region, including that of Prince Teh (Demchugdongrob) (Constant 1935: 239-47), the leader of a group known as the ‘Young Mongols’ that sought a degree of autonomy from the Chinese Republican government and were at the time being fiercely wooed by the Japanese military (Boyd 2011a: 152-3, 175-6). The desire among Teh and his followers for Mongol autonomy was yet another powerful strand in the complex politics at the time and one which the Japanese military would later co-opt. At this point, however, the Japanese Army high command in Tokyo had reservations about further incursions into North China at this time, in part because of the heavy-handed manner in which the attempt was made, and scotched the attempt to detach the five provinces (Kahn 1978: 198-9).

Along with reducing Chinese control in North China, the Kwantung Army also sought to strengthen its position by insinuating itself into the predominantly Mongol provinces of Chahar and Suiyuan. First, the Kwantung Army formed a number of

Japanese-backed Manchurian and Mongolian irregular forces, using these in March 1933 to seize control of Dolonnor, a town near the Chahar-Jehol border, which gave the Japanese military control of the eastern strip of Chahar province from this date onwards (Nakajima 2000: 149-50). The Kwantung Army then established a number of Special Intelligence Agency offices close to Dolonnor, to prepare for further encroachments into Chahar province and to gather intelligence on Outer Mongolia (Nakajima 2000: 149-50; Matsui 1966: 157). Despite the fact that this region had, in November 1924, with Soviet backing declared itself the Mongolian People's Republic, the Japanese military continued to gather intelligence on the region, alert to any change that might signal an opportunity to increase Japanese influence there. With a presence established in Northeastern Chahar, the Japanese military now moved to sponsor meetings of Mongol representatives from the various leagues and banners throughout Chahar and Suiyuan at Pailingmiao, a Mongol settlement in the centre of Suiyuan province, between July and October 1933 (Funaki 1982: 146-7; Tighe 2005: 229). This was the political situation when Nicholas Roerich ventured into Inner Mongolia early in 1935.

What Nicholas Roerich did ... or did not do?

In a December 1933 letter to the US President, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, then US Secretary of Agriculture Henry A. Wallace reminded the president of his interest in exploring the Gobi Desert of Mongolia to find drought-resistant grass strains that might be transplanted successfully to the American Great Plains. Moreover, in the same letter, Wallace, already enamored of Roerich, recommended one 'Professor Nicholas Roerich' as the appropriate expert to lead such an expedition (Williams 1980: 137). Roosevelt's response is not known, but as the president apparently had a deep fascination for the geography and history, cultures and religions of Inner Asia from Tibet to the Siberian

border (Osterrieder 2007: 24), it seems likely that Wallace received the go ahead for such an undertaking.

The following month the Department of Agriculture's plan was ready, with Wallace receiving a concept paper titled, 'Proposed Erosion Plant Studies in Central Asia.' This paper outlined two possible destinations in the region where teams could be dispatched; the first was Russian Turkestan and western Siberia, while the second was northern China and Inner Mongolia. Wallace favoured the second option (Isern 1985: 184-5). After some discussion, in March 1934, Wallace invited Roerich to 'lead and protect' the US Department of Agriculture expedition to the central Asian region, an invitation that Roerich accepted with some alacrity (White & Maze 1995: 83-4).

In early May, Nicholas Roerich, described by Isern as 'an expatriate White Russian ... naturalist, painter, archeologist [*sic*] [and] self-proclaimed cultural leader,' together with his son George (1902-60), a 'former Czarist officer,' sailed from Seattle for Japan (Isern 1985: 188). Roerich's departure for Japan was reported by the Japanese media, who ran several stories about his forthcoming visit to Japan, with one story appearing the day before his arrival on May 11 in Yokohama, in which it was noted that a reception to welcome Nicholas Roerich, described as the head of the Roerich Museum in New York, was to be held at the Imperial Hotel on May 15 and attended by a number of important individuals from the Japanese art world (*Asahi shinbun* 1934a: 11; *Asahi shinbun* 1934b: 2). From the tone of these reports it seems likely that Roerich's visit to Japan was viewed as an opportunity for the furthering of cultural ties.

The Roerichs' departure some months ahead of the remainder of the expedition was surprising, however, because at this point Nicholas Roerich had not received any form of official accreditation for the expedition (White & Maze 1995: 85). Regardless of his lack of any documentation attesting to his official position as the head of the planned US Department of Agriculture expedition, on his arrival in Tokyo Roerich

senior apparently presented himself at the Cultural Works Bureau of the Japanese Foreign Office and requested that the Japanese government act as intermediary for him to secure from the government of Manchukuo facilities for the expedition. To bolster his claim to having official backing from the US government, Roerich presented to the Japanese Foreign Office a letter he had received from Henry Wallace, presumably Wallace's March 1934 letter inviting Roerich to lead the expedition, and on the basis of this letter the Japanese Foreign Office gave him letters of accreditation addressed to the Manchukuo authorities (White & Maze 1995: 88). Roerich apparently found Wallace's letter to be extremely useful, as he would use it again in August 1934 to convince the Japanese military in Manchukuo to allow him to travel to Hailar, a town located near the Manchukuo-Soviet border (White & Maze 1995: 90).

Having acquired the permissions needed for the expedition to proceed, albeit with a fair degree of misrepresentation of his actual authority, Roerich senior then paid a number of visits to government offices in Tokyo and to various academic institutions on his way through Japan to Manchukuo. Among the places where Roerich found time to call while he was in Tokyo was the Army Ministry, although his exact purpose during this visit is not known. It was presumably, however, to gain approval from the Japanese military to allow Roerich and his son to enter Manchukuo, given that the Japanese Kwantung Army effectively ruled the country, as well as to get approval to enter Inner Mongolia, an area that the Japanese regarded as falling within their sphere of influence.

Roerich's meeting with Army Minister Hayashi Senjūrō (1876-1943), on May 23, warranted a lengthy report in the Tokyo *Asahi shinbun* the following day, accompanied by a photo of the pair taken at the meeting. From the tone of the report it was clear that Roerich was regarded as being sympathetic to what Japan was doing in Manchuria, with the headline declaring that Roerich was a 'pro-Japanese American' (*shin-Nichi Beijin*), while the actual report detailed how Hayashi had explained to Roerich that Japan was

working to civilise and bring peace to Manchuria, something that Roerich himself would be able to observe during the five or six months that he intended to stay in Manchuria (*Asahi shinbun* 1934c: 2). While it was not stated in the *Asahi shinbun* story it seems likely that one topic that the two men would have discussed was Roerich's plan to visit Inner Mongolia. This would most likely have occurred because of Hayashi's close association with the Zenrin kyōkai, a Japanese humanitarian organisation active in Inner Mongolia since early 1934, and one of the agencies through which the Japanese military was extending its influence in the region (see Boyd 2011b: 266-88).

Following his meeting with Hayashi at the Army Ministry and with the Cultural Works Bureau of the Japanese Foreign Office, Roerich then passed through Kyoto, where he found time to visit the Otani University library to view the university's Tibetan book collection (White & Maze 1995: 88; Drayer 2005: 293). Having established his diplomatic and academic credentials with the Japanese authorities, the Roerichs, *père et fils*, then departed for Manchukuo.

The decision by the Japanese authorities, in particular the military that essentially controlled Manchukuo, to grant both Roerich and the US Department of Agriculture expedition permission to enter Manchukuo begs the question of why permission was granted. While Manchukuo, despite the Japanese pretence that it was an 'independent' nation, was under Japanese military rule, the military did grant access to Westerners who were perceived as being friendly to Japanese control of the region (Wilson 1995: 350-1). Roerich with his apparent connection to President Roosevelt through Wallace may have been perceived as a potential message bearer by the Japanese authorities and this may explain why Roerich and the expedition were allowed to enter Manchukuo and also able to venture relatively close to the Manchukuo-Soviet border during their fieldwork.

Nicholas Roerich's arrival in Harbin, a comparatively large town in the north of 'Manchukuo' that had a sizable Russian population, 'at the close of May' was noted by the US Consul stationed there, Cabot Coville, in his June 1934 report to Washington on events in Harbin for the previous month. Coville rather caustically noted that the 'Roerichs were preceded from Japan by news items showing the elder Roerich's approval of War Minister Hayashi and the setting forth the need of a world Heart Trust as opposed to a Brain Trust. Harbin lapped this up for several days, then quieted down (Coville 1934a: 776).' From the tone of his report it was apparent that Coville was not overly impressed with either of the Roerichs, father or son.

While the US Consul may not have been impressed with Roerich senior, this did not stop Roerich from seeking publicity for his cause, taking the opportunity to represent his favorite cause by presenting the Manchukuo emperor, Pu-yi, with the Banner of Peace, First Class (Williams 1980: 138). The evident self-promotion that Nicholas Roerich indulged in did not escape the US Consul, who caustically noted in his next report to Washington that 'Publicity seems to be their [the Roerichs] chief stock in trade (Coville 1934b: 802).' Furthermore, the consul also noted that both Nicolas and George Roerich 'travel with French passports (Coville 1934b: 802),' an observation which suggests that Coville was delicately questioning his superiors as to why Nicholas Roerich held the position he did, as head of the Department of Agriculture expedition, or was being afforded the protection of the US government.

Further evidence of Nicholas Roerich's self-promotion was furnished by the other members of the US Department of Agriculture team when they joined the Roerichs in Manchukuo, with the a member of the team, H. G. MacMillan, in late July 1934 sending back to Washington copies of the handbills that Nicholas Roerich circulated as he and George 'travelled conspicuously about Manchukuo accompanied by White Russian friends in Cossack uniform (Isern 1985: 188).' In these handbills it was noted that

Roerich was not only ‘one of the greatest leaders of world culture’ but also ‘one of the greatest leaders of history,’ a man with ‘marvelous equipment to be the leader of an international movement’, and who would ‘translate his dreams into actions (MacMillan quoted in Isern 1985: 188).’ These eloquent declarations no doubt helped to impress the locals, even if the US Consul remained immune to Roerich’s charm.

In addition to finding time to promote his various causes, Nicholas Roerich also made time to meet with his younger brother Vladimir and to ingratiate himself with both the Japanese authorities in Harbin and with the White émigré community courtesy of Vladimir. Vladimir, unlike his brother who had followed the more ‘gentle arts,’ had found his career in the Tsarist Russian Army. Following the October 1917 Revolution, Vladimir joined the White forces and fought alongside the Japanese Expeditionary Army during the 1918-22 Siberian Intervention. The Siberian Intervention had been an attempt by a coalition of Allied Powers, among them the United States and Japan, to overthrow the Bolsheviks and shore up the White Russian government in the Russian Far East (Humphrey 1995: 22-29). More importantly, Vladimir had been no mere underling, but had served as sub-commander for supply and transport for Baron Roman Nicolaus Feodorovich von Ungern-Sternberg (1885-1921), one of the more infamous White Russian commanders (McCannon 2002: 181). Given that the Baron had the reputation for being a particularly harsh commander who was known to execute on the spot subordinates who displeased him (Noskov c1921: 11; Boyd 2010: 365-77), Vladimir was either fortunate to survive or competent when it came to matters of supply and transport.

With Vladimir having served alongside Ungern-Sternberg, it seems probable that he was a person of some importance in the White Russian émigré community in Harbin and associated with Ungern-Sternberg’s former compatriot Grigori Mikhailovich Semenov (1890-1946), another of the notorious White Russian commanders. Following

the Japanese withdrawal from the Russian Far East in November 1922 and the eventual collapse of the White resistance, Semenov had first sought refuge in the United States, but as a consequence of the appalling acts he had committed while ruler of Chita, had been deported, eventually finding sanctuary back in Manchuria (Stephan 1994: 332-3). Once there, Semenov renewed his acquaintance with those officers of the Japanese military with whom he had worked during the Siberian Intervention, eventually carving out a relatively lucrative commercial career with a forest-cutting concession in Inner Mongolia and as an exporter of camel hair, horsetails, wool, hides and skins between Inner Mongolia, Manchuria and Japan (Boyd 2011a: 120-1). In addition, Semenov was possibly involved in a number of Japanese-backed schemes to further the extension of Japanese control over parts of the region, including a 1929 plan, backed by the Japanese Army and the Kokuryūkai (Black Dragon Society), to declare Siberia independent of the Soviet Union (Gaikō shiryōkan 1930). Vladimir's association with Semenov and Semenov's association with the Japanese military would go part of the way to explaining why Nicholas Roerich subsequently acquired several former White Russian officers as an escort party (McCannon 2002: 183). Moreover, it has been suggested that Vladimir had attracted the interest of the Japanese military in Manchuria, who, from the mid-1920s onwards, reading Nicholas Roerich's correspondence to his brother (Znamenski 2011: 217).

After spending almost two months in Harbin, during which time the remainder of the US Department of Agriculture expedition finally arrived, in September 1934 Nicholas Roerich and his son George struck out on their own, while the remainder of the Department of Agriculture expedition set off to Hailar, near the Russian border, to gather seeds. The Roerichs, accompanied by eight Russians dressed in Cossack uniforms, first visited a hot spring close by to Harbin and then found time to visit a Mongolian monastery (Williams 1980: 139; White & Maze 1995: 89-90), activities that

had apparently nothing to do with the search for drought resistant grasses. It seems most likely that the visit to the monastery was in some way connected with Roerich's search for Shambhala. The visit to the hot spring and monastery seems to have taken several weeks, as it was not until October that the two teams, the Roerichs with their White Russian bodyguards and the remainder of the US Department of Agriculture expedition were re-united and reported to be working together in the Khingan Mountain region, in the northwest of Manchukuo (White & Maze 1995: 93).

It was at this point that Nicholas Roerich's Inner Mongolian journey took another turn, one that raises more questions about the purpose of his visit. According to a number of sources, in November 1934, while still in Manchukuo, Roerich telegraphed Henry Wallace and asked him to get War Department authority for the ordinance officer with the United States Army forces in Tientsin to provide the expedition with rifles and ammunition. The commanding officer subsequently received authorization from Washington (White & Maze 1995: 93, 140-2; Williams 1980: 139) but it would be some months before they were to obtain them.

Exactly why Roerich sought to obtain arms and ammunition at this point is unclear, but banditry was rife in parts of China at the time (Billingsley 1988: 15-39), and Roerich may have felt that the expedition needed additional protection. For their own protection, both of the Roerichs carried pistols that they had been allowed to take into Manchukuo with the approval of the Japanese military (Drayer 2005: 294). Given that all kinds of weaponry were comparatively easy to obtain in China in the 1930s, however, it seems odd that the party did not simply obtain the rifles in country rather than Roerich feeling it necessary to obtain them through a US route. Furthermore, as Roerich had traversed the region in 1925-28 and was aware of the need for protection, it seems odd that he had not sought to properly equip the survey team prior to their departure.

While the request for weapons was being sorted out, Roerich appears to have worn out his welcome in Manchukuo. The US Consul General, Walter A. Adams, noted in his December 1934 report to Washington that there was ‘vociferous political opposition’ by the Japanese press in Harbin towards Nicholas Roerich’s presence in the town. Adams also recorded the subsequent departure of both Nicholas and George for Peking on November 24 (Adams 1934: 873-5). More recently, it has been suggested that the Japanese military was largely responsible for the Roerich’s hasty departure. According to Znamenski, Japanese military intelligence believed that that the US government had purposely planted Roerich to disrupt Japanese plans to make Konstantin Rodzaevsky (1907-46), head of the Harbin-based Russian Fascist Party, chief of all Whites, after Roerich spoke harshly about Rodzaevsky, and unleashed a smear campaign in the Harbin press against Roerich (Znamenski 2011: 217).

Despite having been forced to leave Harbin at relatively short notice, the apparent upset does not appear to have tempered Nicholas Roerich’s ability to self-promote. As he passed through Tientsin in late November 1934 on his way to Peking, Roerich found the time to grant the *North China Star*, a Tientsin English-language newspaper, an interview in which he outlined the purpose of the expedition. The reporter was clearly taken with Roerich, describing him as a ‘widely known cultural leader, author, painter and explorer.’ The report detailed how Roerich was on ‘an ambitious program to relieve distress in the drought belt of America through the planting of special grasses which require minimum of natural precipitation to thrive,’ a program that, the story declared, both President Roosevelt and Secretary of Agriculture Wallace supported. Obviously Roerich had been sure to stress that his appointment to lead the expedition had been sanctioned by the highest levels of the US government. Then, in an unusual turn, Roerich discussed how the purpose of the expedition was also to look for medicinal plants as ‘America, but especially Europe, is turning to the study of Tibetan and

Western Chinese medicinal herbs and other matter reputed to possess curative properties.’ The suggestion that the expedition was also involved in the search for medicinal plants was not an objective that appears to have been part of the original US Department of Agriculture plan and this was most likely something that Roerich senior himself had decided the expedition would do. The story went on to briefly mention Roerich’s numerous visits to the Himalayas and Western Tibet before discussing his role as artist and his connection with the Roerich museum in New York, ending that ‘Prof. Roerich and his party expect to pass through Tientsin on the way back to the United States after their stay of an indefinite period in the interior (*North China Star* 1934: 1, 16).’

Then, when the party arrived in Peking in January 1935, it was George’s turn to take the stage and talk up the objective of the expedition. In a speech to the Peking Rotary Club, George Roerich spoke at length about the supposed medicinal properties of Tibetan and Mongolian plants and the suggestion that ‘there were herbs in Mongolia and Tibet which had been used in years gone by for treatment of cancer in its early stages.’ Moreover, George stressed that the purpose of the expedition was twofold; to ‘investigate cold-resisting and drought-resisting plants in Mongolia which could be introduced into the United States’ and to ‘gather information and data on *materia medica* for scientific treatment and study by experts.’ George noted, however, that he himself was far more interested in the second objective and was hopeful of obtaining samples of said plants during their ‘forthcoming expedition to Mongolia (*Peiping Chronicle* 1935: 12).’

In the course of their journey to Peking the party did more than just look for botanical samples. Roerich’s son George also kept a detailed diary during the journey, which seems to have been more of a military journal than just travel notes. George carefully scanned the topography of places the party visited, measured hills and

distances between various sites and towns, noted the major intersections, and provided detailed information about the Japanese military transportation system and the movement of Japanese troops (Znamenski 2011: 213). Exactly why such information was needed by the party, particularly that relating to the Japanese military transportation system and the movement of Japanese troops is unclear, but it further fuels the suspicion that the Roerichs were engaged in espionage for someone.

A gap now occurs in the account of Nicholas Roerich in Inner Mongolia, as Roerich and his party departed Peking to spend the winter somewhere in Tibet, eventually returning to Peking in March 1935 with Tibetan manuscripts and seed specimens (Williams 1980: 139; White & Maze 1995: 140). Exactly where Roerich and his party spent the three months is unknown, but it is probable that they spent it in the Ordos region of Inner Mongolia, located in the southeastern part of Ninghsia province. It was on their return to Peking that the party finally acquired the rifles and ammunition that Nicholas Roerich had requested Wallace obtain for them in November 1934. Now armed, Roerich senior, George and their Cossack bodyguards ventured back into Inner Mongolia, spending the better part of six months roaming the region until September 1935, during which time they ‘terrified some Inner Mongolian villages by riding in armed to the teeth, demanding accommodations, and promising American aid in any future Mongolian uprising (Williams 1980: 140).’

What exactly Nicholas Roerich hoped to achieve may never be accurately known, perhaps, because what he actually wanted was not fully worked out in his own mind or because those who seek to preserve Roerich’s memory as a promoter of world peace would prefer that Nicholas Roerich’s Inner Mongolian expedition remains forgotten. It is possible, however, to speculate on what Roerich hoped to achieve. According to McCannon, in February 1935 Helena Roerich, in a letter to President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, described the creation of a theocratic state that ‘will be a kind of Federation

of countries. Mongolia, China, and the Kalmuks will constitute the counterbalance to Japan (McCannon 2002: 178).’ Who exactly this theocratic state would look to for support was not spelled out, but one would assume that it would be the United States, making it an effective buffer between Soviet Russia and Imperial Japan. This assessment is supported by Alexandre Andreyev who, in his analysis of Roerich’s scheme, suggests that Roerich was attempting to establish a Buddhist confederacy in Asia, centred round Inner Mongolia and Manchuria, that would serve as a buffer with American support (Andreyev 2003: 317). Interestingly, McCannon suggests that Roerich was ‘doubtlessly influenced by the example of the notorious White general Baron Roman von Ungern-Sternberg ... [who] saw himself as the reincarnation of Genghis Khan, [and] whose purpose was to unite all of eastern Eurasia, from the Volga to the Pacific, under a Buddhist theocracy,’ in his plan to establish Shambhala (McCannon 2002: 181).

Nicholas Roerich was not alone in his promotion of Shambhala, as others had also used the concept of Shambhala throughout the period as a means of wooing the local Mongol population for their own ends. Between 1924-8, for example, the Mongolian People’s Revolutionary Party launched a campaign to woo the population of Outer Mongolia from the Church using Lamaist notions of a messianic deliverance. As part of this program, the party promised the achievement of an earthly utopia with the aid of an apocalyptic army from the unearthly kingdom of Shambhala. As Shambhala, a heavenly kingdom, lay somewhere in the undefined north, its lack of precise geographical definition allowed Comintern propagandists to identify Russia as Shambhala to the credulous Mongols (Moses 1972: 100-1).

Unfortunately for the Mongolian People’s Revolutionary Party this ploy was to plague the party in the 1930s, when the same tactic was used to identify not Russia, but Japan as the northern paradise. In 1930, for instance, a rebellion occurred in Western

Mongolia, and the rebels, hoping for aid from outsiders, established contacts with a number of groups, including Chinese warlords in Sinkiang, the Japanese in Manchuria, and the Panchen Lama, the second highest Buddhist leader after the Dalai Lama, who was then resident in Peking (Jagchid & Hyer 1979: 175-88). The rebels hoped for deliverance from their plight by the arrival of the mythical legions of the legendary kingdom of Shambhala, believed by this point to be Japan (Jagchid & Hyer 1979: 127-8).

For their part, the Japanese authorities were quite happy to use the legend of Shambhala to their own advantage. According to Bulag, the creation of Manchukuo in 1932 and the promised deliverance of an independent Mongolian state by the Japanese, intermingled with Japanese expansion and Buddhist Shambhala, or paradise, now espoused by the exiled ninth Panchen Lama, fuelled the belief by the beleaguered Outer Mongolian Buddhists and others that combining forces would enable them to escape from the evil of Communist oppression (Bulag 1998: 14). By 1935 the push by those Outer Mongols opposed to the Mongolian People's Revolutionary Party had reached the point that one group of lamas carried through a 'jud-hural,' or supplication to the King of Shambhala to hasten his early intervention in earthly affairs. As part of this ceremony the lamas painted pictures showing the armies of Shambhala as coming from the rising sun – an indication of the coming Japanese invasion of the Soviet Union and revival of 'Pan-Mongolism (Phillips 1942: 167-8).'

If the establishment of Shambhala was what he had planned, Nicholas Roerich did not implement his plan very effectively, but instead 'engaged in ... confused, grandiose and quite ineffective political machinations (White & Maze 1995: 97).' Reports soon filtered out of the region of Roerich and his Cossack bodyguard, now armed with the rifles supplied by the American military barracks in Tientsin and carrying both the American flag and the Roerich Banner of Peace, were riding around the countryside

apparently intent on stirring up the local population (Williams 1980: 140-2). As fantastic as this might sound, in early April 1935, the American minister in Peking, Nelson Trusler Johnson, forwarded to the US State Department an account of a conversation that he had with Pao Yueh-ch'ing (1896-1939), a close associate of Prince Teh (Boyd 2011a: 152-3, 175-6). In the report, Johnson informed Washington that Pao had told him of how 'Professor Roerich had recently visited the camp of Teh Wang accompanied by his son and four White Russian guards' offering to build relations between the peoples of Mongolia and America (White & Maze 1995: 93). For Roerich to ride around the region dramatically offering American aid to a group that the Japanese military was, at this point in time, trying to bring under more direct control was going to have repercussions, and repercussions it did.

Word of what Roerich was doing in Inner Mongolia finally got back to Henry Wallace in late June 1935, when the *New York Times* ran a story detailing the embarrassment that Roerich was causing to America through his activities in Inner Mongolia as well as noting that Roerich had been run out of Manchuria by the Japanese military because of supposed involvement in White Russian politics (*New York Times* 1935: 15). Nor was this all that the story detailed, relating how 'trouble developed when they [Roerich's party] applied to the Fifteenth United States Infantry at Tientsin for a dozen army rifles and pistols and a considerable stock of ammunition,' a request that was initially refused by the army, but complied with 'upon receipt of instructions from the United States War Department.' These weapons were then, according to the report, used to arm 'White Russian Cossacks, formerly on the staff of Ataman Semenoff' and the expedition then 'proceeded from Kalgan, Chahar Province, to a point about 200 miles north, adjacent to the border of Outer Mongolia' arousing much 'suspicion among Mongolian leaders due to the presence of the White Russian armed Cossack guards (*New York Times* 1935: 15).'

The *New York Times* went on to quote a spokesman from the Roerich Museum in New York, Maurice M. Lichtmann, who swiftly denied any wrongdoing by Roerich, claiming that the party consisted of merely ‘two or three local Chinese scientists, a chauffeur, a Mongol driver and a few Mongol porters’ and that according to the ‘latest communication from Professor Roerich ... he had gone south from Kalgan, the last station on the railroad, into the Gobi Desert (*New York Times* 1935: 15).’ Whether Lichtmann was aware of the fact or not, this last statement was misleading, for if Roerich had gone south he would have been returning to Peking, which lies some one hundred and forty kilometres south of Kalgan, whereas the Gobi Desert lies to the northeast of Kalgan. Presumably, Roerich preferred to keep everyone guessing as to where he was actually going. Why it had taken so long for word of what Roerich was up to in Inner Mongolia to leak out is unclear, but given the ongoing attempts by the Japanese military to gain control of the region the possibility exists that the various US representatives in the region simply chose to ‘sweep’ the Roerich affair under the carpet, hoping that it would go away.

This supposition is partly supported by a lengthy piece that appeared in the *North China Star* in late July 1935 (*North China Star* 1935: 11). The very first sentence of the story declared that Roerich’s journey through North China had been ‘apparently almost completely unnoticed in the Shanghai press,’ before adding that the expedition had ‘caused much embarrassment to American officials in North China (*North China Star* 1935: 11),’ despite the fact that both Roerichs were not actually US citizens, but were travelling on French passports, something that had also been earlier noted by Cabot Coville, the US Consul at Harbin (Coville 1934b: 802). The story further observed that, ‘American officials here have been reticent about discussing the affair (*North China Star* 1935: 11).’ Moreover, in a story that spanned three columns, making it a comparatively major report, the *North China Star* repeated all of the points raised in the

New York Times story that had appeared the previous month, and a copy of which the *North China Star* had obviously obtained, as they referred to the denials by Lichtmann, the spokesman from the Roerich Museum in New York, but dismissed these with the suggestion that Roerich was ‘far better acquainted with Mongol politics than with science’ and that any claim that the Roerichs had already shipped home samples of seeds was patently false given that ‘up to a week ago [American officials] had granted no bill of lading for any materials allegedly sent by the Roerichs (*North China Star* 1935: 11).’

What is apparent is that despite Roerich spending more than ten months in North China and Inner Mongolia, his visit to the region had generated little diplomatic chatter, possibly because, as noted in the *North China Star* story, of the reticence among the US consular offices. Moreover, examination of the available State Department files and United States Army military attaché reports for China released on microfilm in the early 1980s have yielded very little in the way of information about Nicolas Roerich. Apart from the mention of Roerich’s activities in the monthly reports lodged by the US Consul in Harbin in June, July and December 1934, and the report from the American minister in Peking in April 1935, there seems to be no mention of what Roerich was up to in North China and Inner Mongolia during this period contained in any of the available dispatches from the various State Department offices in Peking and Tientsin or from the Peking military attaché. In the June 1934 report by Cabot Coville, the US Consul at Harbin, however, Coville referred to the ‘Department’s instructions of May 7, 1934, and subsequent communications’ in his summary of Nicholas Roerich’s activities (Coville 1934b: 802). While not conclusive, this does suggest that Roerich’s activities were reported, but that these reports did not pass through regular channels. Exactly why this was done is unclear from the information that Coville gives in his report, but it does suggest that there was a degree of sensitivity on the part of US officials in Manchukuo

and North China as to exactly what it was that Nicholas Roerich was doing while travelling around North China and Inner Mongolia.

It is known, however, that the Soviet authorities were concerned enough about what Roerich and his party were up to in Inner Mongolia to formally protest US government support for Roerich. In July 1935, the US Ambassador in Moscow cabled Henry Wallace with the allegation that Nicholas Roerich was a former Tsarist officer who had recruited assistance for his expedition from among the ‘followers of the bandit Semenov,’ an accusation that contained an element of truth if one substituted Vladimir for Nicholas (Rupen 1979: 11). The disquiet that Roerich’s activities in Inner Mongolia were causing the Soviets was also noted in the July 1935 *North China Star* story, where it was stated that ‘circumstances have made Soviet officials keep a wary eye of the exhibition (*sic*) (*North China Star* 1935: 11).’

As Rupen notes, the situation had now reached the point where no one really knew what Roerich had in mind, but that everybody feared the worst, as:

The Japanese suspected the Roerichs of spying for the Russians; the Russians suspected them of spying for Japan and/or the United States; the US State Department complained about the contacts with Manchukuo and the public statements about foreign governments; Henry Wallace came to believe they pursued primarily their own glory and power. The Roerichs pressed constantly towards the border of the MPR and the USSR: to Kanjur, to Barim, to Sunit, to Pailingmiao. The Japanese feared some kind of contact with the Russians (Rupen 1979: 10)

The end result of all of the unfavorable publicity and diplomatic protest was that Wallace withdrew his support for Roerich and his search for drought-resistant grasses in

the Gobi Desert, with at least one source suggesting that it was because of Wallace's 'growing suspicions of Roerich's apparent pro-Japanese activities and contacts to the Japanese War Ministry and Foreign Office' that Wallace cut off personal relations with Roerich (Osterrieder 2007: 25). Wallace subsequently attempted, unsuccessfully as it would eventually transpire, to erase any traces of his connection to Roerich, with the publication of letters between Wallace and Roerich in 1948 effectively ending Wallace's presidential campaign (White & Maze 1995: 64-5). Roerich for his part was untouched by the scandal, departing for India in the autumn of 1935, where he resumed his campaign to promote himself as one of the world's foremost promoters of world peace.

Conclusion

In the aftermath of his Inner Mongolian expedition, Nicholas Roerich withdrew to the house that he and his wife had acquired in the Kulu Valley in Northern India in the 1920s and once there Nicholas Roerich devoted much of his time to painting and advancing himself as a champion of world peace. While the British authorities remained suspicious of him, Roerich was allowed to remain in India, living there until his death in 1949. Moreover, despite all the time and effort that had been expended by the expedition to gather samples of drought resistant Mongolian grasses or potential medicinal herbs that might be transplanted to the American plains, nothing ever seems to have been done with the samples that were actually collected and shipped to the States. The US Department of Agriculture simply filed these away with a note stating 'Trunk-full of drug plant materials. No one knew what to do with them. Trunk is in the attic. They have a list of plants included roots, etc. It's never been opened (Unheaded memo quoted in Isern 1985: 190).'

What Roerich had hoped to achieve during his time in Inner Mongolia will in all likelihood never be known. Moreover, it is extremely unlikely that the Roerich Foundation would wish its namesake's embarrassing journey across Inner Mongolia in the 1930s, at the head of a party of White Russian Cossacks equipped with US rifles seeking to stir up the local Mongol populace, to be thoroughly examined, as it would not gel with the promotion of Nicholas Roerich's peaceful image. It is apparent, however, that Roerich was clearly not the innocent abroad searching for wisdom as his followers describe him. The manner in which Roerich represented himself to the Japanese civilian authorities while in Tokyo and then to the military authorities in Manchukuo, using the letter that he had received from Wallace inviting him to head the US Department of Agriculture expedition to imply that he enjoyed greater authority than he did, suggests an individual who was not shy at misrepresenting himself when it was to his own advantage. Indeed, Roerich's claim to New Yorkers in the 1920s to have been, in an ancient former incarnation, a Chinese emperor, suggest an individual who was more than willing to take advantage of the credulous.

Moreover, from what is known, the distinct possibility remains that Roerich was in the employ of one or other of the powers that Rupen suggests he was spying for. Roerich's ability to gain entry to the Soviet Union in the 1920s and the ease with which he moved between Manchuria and Inner Mongolia in 1934-5, suggest that he had contacts at the highest levels that smoothed the way for him. Roerich clearly had some form of cachet that allowed him to move through a highly contested region in highly unusual circumstances. Exactly who his employers were is puzzling as almost every one of the countries with a stake in events in Inner Mongolia subsequently protested Roerich's journey.

In the end, all that can be stated absolutely is that Nicholas Roerich's 1934-5 travels through Inner Mongolia remain shrouded in mystery. Regardless, however,

whether it was in search of drought-resistant grasses to transplant to the American Great Plains or for the location of that elusive region of Shambhala or to establish a Buddhist confederacy in Asia, centred round Inner Mongolia and Manchuria, Roerich's visit to the region is one of the more fascinating footnotes in Russo-Japanese and US-Japanese relations during the 1930s.

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